

Lecture 3: The Blumenfelds on the Dreaming Argument

I. The Dreaming Argument (Recap)

Here is David and Jean Beer Blumenfelds' way of glossing the dreaming argument:

the dreaming argument:

- (1) I've had dreams that were qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences. [*premise*]
- (2) Therefore, the qualitative character of my experience doesn't guarantee that I'm not now dreaming. [*follows from 1*]
- (3) If the qualitative character of my experience doesn't guarantee that I'm not now dreaming, then I can't know that I'm not now dreaming. [*premise*]
- (4) Therefore, I can't know that I'm not now dreaming. [*follows from 2, 3*]
- (5) If I can't know that I'm not *now* dreaming, then I can't know that I'm not *always* dreaming. [*premise*]
- (6) Therefore, I can't know that I'm not always dreaming. [*follows from 4, 5*]
- (7) If I can't know that I'm not always dreaming, then I can't know to be true any belief which is based on my experience. [*premise*]
- (8) Therefore, I can't know to be true any belief which is based on my experience. [*follows from 6, 7*]

Some terminology:

The qualitative character of an experience = those distinctive properties of an experience that determine "what it's like" to undergo that experience: the hurtfulness of feeling an aching pain, the penetrating sharpness of hearing a trumpet, the lush redness of seeing a ripe tomato, etc.

Two experiences are *qualitatively indistinguishable* if and only if it is not possible to discern a difference in their qualitative characters.

(The Blumenfelds construe 'experience' broadly, so that it includes one's current recollections of the past.)

If you're worried that (7) doesn't hold for beliefs such as *that I seem to see a blackboard*, *that I exist*, or *that there are physical objects*, replace 'any belief' in (7) and (8) with 'any specific belief about the external world'.

II. Are Dreams and Waking Experiences Really Indistinguishable?

J. L. Austin's objection to (1): We have the phrase 'has a dream-like quality' that we sometimes apply to waking experiences. But if dreams were qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences, then *every* waking experience would have a dream-like quality, and the phrase would be meaningless.

the Blumenfelds' reply: If most but not all dreams are vague and unclear, and most but not all waking experiences are clear and vivid, then we can use the phrase 'has a dream-like quality' to refer to those experiences (both waking and dreaming) that are vague and unclear.

III. Can We Make Judgments While Dreaming?

Anthony Kenny's objection to (3) [*according to the Blumenfelds*]: It is impossible to make judgments (i.e. form beliefs) while dreaming. Therefore I can come to know that I am awake without appealing to the character of my experience; all I need to do is realize that I now judge that I'm awake.

the Blumenfelds' reply: First, it is doubtful that we can't make judgments during sleep. Second, even if we can't make judgments during sleep, we can *seem* to make judgments during sleep, and that is enough to unseat the objection: the mere fact that I seem to judge that I'm awake isn't enough to establish that I am in fact judging that I'm awake.

Here the Blumenfelds are interpreting Kenny as claiming that (3) is false because he can make use of the following inference and on that basis come to know that he is now awake:

- (K1) If I judge *that I am awake*, then I know *that I am awake*.
- (K2) I now judge *that I am awake*.
- (K3) Therefore, I now know *that I am awake*.

Their second reply is that Kenny cannot know (K2), and hence cannot make use of this inference.

However, there are at least two reasons to be suspicious of this interpretation of Kenny:

- First, making Kenny's knowledge that he's awake the result of an inference is to give up on Kenny's idea that he can know he's awake "without appealing to any criterion at all" (p. 238).
- Second, making use of this inference involves knowing its premises and, as a result of following the inference, coming to know its conclusion. But to know the conclusion is to know *that I now know that I am awake*, not to know *that I am awake*.

Thus I think we are better off interpreting Kenny as claiming that (3) is false because the following inference is sound (regardless of whether or not a given person makes use of the inferences in this argument on a given occasion):

- (K4) If I judge *that I am awake*, then I am awake. [*premise*]
- (K5) Therefore, if I judge *that I am awake*, I thereby know *that I am awake* in a way that does not depend on the qualitative character of my experience. [*follows from K4*]
- (K6) I can judge *that I am awake*. [*premise*]
- (K7) Therefore, I can know *that I am awake* in a way that does not depend on the qualitative character of my experience. [*follows from K5, K6*]

At this point, the Blumenfelds could reinstate their second reply by denying that (K5) follows from (K4), because *seeming judgments made while dreaming* are qualitatively indistinguishable from *real judgments made while awake*.

(But is Kenny really saying that when I judge *that I am awake*, I first come to know via introspection *that I judge that I am awake* and then come to know via inference *that I am awake*?)

IV. Is the Dreaming Argument Self-Undermining?

G. E. Moore's objection: If I can't know that I'm not now dreaming, as (4) asserts, then I can't know that my belief that I've had dreams in the past is true, and so in particular I can't know, as (1) asserts, that I've had dreams that were indistinguishable from waking experience. Thus the argument from (1), (2), and (3) to (4) is *self-undermining*: if its conclusion is true, then one is not in a position to know that all of its premises are true.

the Blumenfelds' reply: We concede the point. However, this objection does not work against a variant of the dreaming argument in which we replace (1) with

- (1') It is *logically possible* for there to be dreams that are qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences. [*premise*]

The truth of (4) is no block to our knowledge of the truth of (1'), since we can come to know (1') through reasoning that is available to us as long as we possess the concepts DREAM and EXPERIENCE.