

Lecture 4: More on the Dreaming Argument

the dreaming argument (Blumenfelds' version):

- (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*]

I. No Need for a Guarantee?

an objection to (3) via an appeal to probabilities: Even if my current experiences don't *guarantee* that I'm not now dreaming, as long as they make it *highly probable* that I'm not now dreaming, that's enough for me to be able to know that I'm not now dreaming.

This response turns on accepting the following thesis:

fallibilism: I can know P even if my justification for believing P does not guarantee that P is true.

the Blumenfelds' reply: How can the objector establish that it's highly probable that she's not now dreaming?

Only by appealing to her past experiences and how in the past, whenever she has had the sorts of experiences that she is now having, more often than not she turned out to be awake. However, by conceding that she might now be dreaming, the objector is barring herself from relying on the data of the past, since all of her memory impressions of how things were in the past might be merely *dreamed* impressions of how they were.

(Note that the Blumenfelds are assuming here that in order for me to be able to know that I'm not now dreaming, it's not enough that *my current experiences in fact make it highly probable that I'm not now dreaming*; in addition, I must be able to know this fact about probabilities.)

II. Now but Not Always?

Williams' objection to (5): Williams points out that there is a difference between the following two claims:

- (a) On every occasion, I can't know that it's not the case that: I'm dreaming.
- (b) I can't know that it's not the case that: on every occasion, I'm dreaming.

Compare:

- (a') For every newborn baby, I can't know that it's not the case that: that baby will live longer than average.
- (b') I can't know that it's not the case that: every baby will live longer than average.

Thus Williams concludes that (5) rests on the false assumption that (b) follows from (a).

the Blumenfelds' reply to Williams: Even if (b) doesn't follow from (a) as a matter of pure logic, it might follow in *this particular instance* because of the specific nature of dreaming. Suppose we grant (4). Then how could I know that I'm not always dreaming? This knowledge could come in two varieties:

a posteriori knowledge: Knowledge at least partly based in experience.

a priori knowledge: Knowledge that is not at all based in experience (and hence is "based on pure reason alone").

If (4) is true, then it seems I can't have *a posteriori* knowledge that I haven't always been dreaming, for the type of reasons discussed in the reply to the appeal to probabilities. So the challenge is to produce an *a priori* grounds for the conclusion I haven't always been dreaming.

Austin's objection to (5): Austin rises to that challenge: he insists that I can know *a priori* that I'm not always dreaming, since the supposition that I've always been dreaming is incoherent.

- (i) It makes sense to talk of deception only if it's possible to recognize cases of deception.
- (ii) It's possible to recognize cases of deception only if there is a background of general non-deception.
- (iii) So, it makes sense to talk of deception only if some experiences are non-deceptive.

the Blumenfelds' reply to Austin: Claim (i) is equivalent to the claim *that it makes sense to say that someone is in error only if it is possible to detect that she is in error*, which is an instance of the *verification principle*, a much maligned tenet of the now-defunct philosophical movement known as 'logical positivism'.

Ryle's objection to (5): Ryle provides a related reason to think that I can know *a priori* that I haven't always been dreaming. He argues that in order for counterfeit coins to exist, real coins must exist as well. The implication is that, in a similar way, in order for illusory experiences to exist, some experiences must be *veridical* (that is, must represent the world as it really is).

the Blumenfelds' reply to Ryle: First, even if we accept the point about counterfeit coins, at most the analogy would seem to establish that *someone's* experiences *somewhere* must be veridical, not that some of *my* experiences must be veridical. (Even if some coins somewhere must be real ones, all of *my* coins might be counterfeit.)

Second, it's not even clear that the point about counterfeit coins holds. The Blumenfelds describe a case in which (allegedly) there exist counterfeit coins but no real ones:

"Just as the first money is about to be printed, a band of criminals seizes the presses and issues its own currency, which is a facsimile of the original design. Later, when the shady origins of the currency are exposed, the community forever drops the institution of money. In such a situation, it would appear that all the money that has ever existed has been counterfeit" (p. 247).

III. A Limit to Inquiry?

Slote's objection to (3): Slote gives us a reason to prefer the external-world hypothesis over various skeptical hypotheses without relying on the qualitative character of our experience to rule out those skeptical hypotheses: skeptical hypotheses are (supposedly) "inquiry-limiting hypotheses," and it is (supposedly) unreasonable from the scientific point of view to accept inquiry-limiting hypotheses.

An hypothesis is *inquiry limiting* if and only if accepting it "ensures the impossibility of [one's] coming to have rationally justified or warranted belief (consistent with [one's] other beliefs) in more and more true explanations of various aspects of or facts about the phenomena in question" (p. 250).

the Blumenfelds' reply: At most this gives us *pragmatic reason* to reject the skeptical hypotheses; however, what we want—and what seems relevant to knowledge—is having *epistemic reason* to reject those hypotheses.

Roughly:

One has *epistemic reason* to believe P insofar as one has good evidence for P.

One has *pragmatic reason* to believe P insofar as believing P would serve one's interests.

It may be *pragmatically reasonable* to reject skeptical hypotheses insofar as rejecting them serves our interests as scientists and truth-seekers in discovering more truths about the world. But this doesn't show that it is *epistemically reasonable* to reject such hypotheses.

(Also, it's not even clear that skeptical hypotheses *are* inquiry-limiting hypotheses, in the relevant sense. Can't we, for example, amass more and more justified beliefs about the nature of the illusory world the evil demon is causing us to perceive?)