

# How to Convince Sleeping Beauty She's Not Dreaming

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You know the story: the much-anticipated princess, Aurora, is born to throngs of celebration. It is hoped that she will grow up to marry the prince of a neighboring kingdom, uniting the two into a single royal bloodline. The sun is shining. People are smiling. The future seems bright ... until Maleficent shows up and casts her dreadful curse: that before the sun sets on Aurora's 16th birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die. Fortunately, one of the good fairies is able to mitigate the curse so that Aurora will not die but merely sleep, and sleep she will until true love's kiss breaks the spell.

And so it comes to pass, despite the king and queen's destruction of all spinning wheels in the kingdom, and the three good fairies' best efforts to hide Aurora away in the forest. The princess is brought back to the palace (perhaps a little prematurely) on the evening of her 16th birthday, lured into a secret room containing a spinning wheel, pricks her finger, and falls into a deep slumber. Luckily, Prince Phillip is able to thwart Maleficent's evil scheme and awaken his Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, so that they can live happily ever after.

A fairytale, quite literally. We don't blink an eye at how exotic the whole thing is. But put yourself in Aurora's shoes for a moment. The whole ending scene probably feels a bit surreal to this young lady, who was raised in the woods by three old women. Until the day before, she didn't know that she was a princess, much less anything about the existence of good fairies and evil sorceresses. Now all of a

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sudden, she finds herself saved from a terrible curse, dancing with a handsome prince in the middle of a palace ballroom! Would we blame her for questioning whether any of the events of the last 24 hours were real, speculating that perhaps it was all just a dream? Indeed, the whole situation gets even more complicated when we remember that Aurora had a dream about Prince Phillip before she ever met him in real life. She sings in the woods:

I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream  
 I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar a gleam  
 And I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem  
 But if I know you, I know what you'll do  
 You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream

What if her dream had started before she pricked her finger, and even before her encounter with Prince Phillip in the woods? Or what if, instead of walking and singing freely with the birds for the past 16 years, Aurora had actually been caught by Maleficent much earlier, and has been lying asleep in a dungeon the whole time? Perhaps her whole life up to this point has only been an elaborate illusion foisted upon her by Maleficent to keep the princess in her power. In short, Aurora might ask, “How do I know I'm not dreaming? How do I know any of this real?”

### **Maleficent, the Evil Genius**

But you don't need to be living in a fairytale to ask yourself such questions. The philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) is famous for showing that these questions are just as pressing for us in real life. In his search for certainty, Descartes found that there is precious little that cannot be doubted, including whether he is in fact awake and not dreaming:

For example, there is the fact that I am here, seated by the fire attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine...? ...At the same time I must remember that...I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things... [I]n dwelling on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.<sup>1</sup>

And just in case you think you do have some way of distinguishing wakefulness from sleep, Descartes has another card to play. What if there were some god-like evil genius who “has employed his whole energies in deceiving me”? He writes:

I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colors, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things.<sup>2</sup>

Sure, we don't believe we are being deceived this way by an evil genius. But isn't it at least possible? And if possible, how can we say we know for sure we aren't? The problem is even worse for Aurora. It's not merely possible that there could be an evil genius in the story; there is one in Maleficent! This kind of observation leads Descartes to doubt whether he can be sure that any of his experiences are of real things beyond his own mind.

But how so? Let's see if we can outline his reasoning step-by-step. The first step is:

I don't know I'm not dreaming.

Remember, Descartes is thinking that it's at least possible all my experiences are a mere dream induced by a Maleficent-like evil genius. Why think that's possible? Possibilities come cheap. Philosophers tell us that to see if something is possible we just have to conceive of a scenario – any scenario – where it happens, and isn't strictly illogical or contradictory. Nearly all Disney movies represent to us mere possibilities. I can conceive of scenarios with genies, wooden puppets coming to life, flying elephants, and mermaids. I can conceive of scenarios with talking animals, insects, toys, robots, and even household objects like clocks and candlesticks. And there certainly seems to be no special problem in conceiving of a scenario where all my experiences are a mere dream induced by a Maleficent-like evil genius. But now the question is: if that's possible, how do I know it's not *really* the case? The question doesn't arise with respect to the other possibilities, because they differ so radically from our everyday experience of the real world. But in the case of being deceived by a Maleficent-like evil genius into dreaming what I think is real, all my experiences would be exactly the same! And if I have no way of telling whether I'm dreaming or not, how can I say I know I'm not dreaming? I guess I can't.

This leads to us to the second step in Descartes' reasoning:

If I don't know I'm not dreaming, I don't know there is a real world beyond my own mind.

The connection between the first and second steps should be obvious enough. If I don't know I'm not dreaming, how do I know if *any* of my experiences correspond to anything real outside of my own mind? A dream is more than "a wish your heart makes," as Cinderella says. Dreams are mental phenomena, akin to memories or what you might see in your "mind's eye" as you imagine something with your eyes closed, that occurs while you sleep.<sup>3</sup> Some dreams are as bizarre as the stuff of the most exotic fairytales – just think of the White Rabbit, Caterpillar, Mad Hatter, and Queen of Hearts from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. So many nonsensical, bizarre scene changes occur that we aren't really surprised when Alice wakes up under a tree and discovers that it was all a dream. But other dreams are more mundane, such as Dumbo's elephants on parade, Lightning McQueen's dream of racing, and Bruno the dog's dream of chasing Lucifer the cat. And from such dreams we groggily wake up in confusion and come to our senses moments later. Yet sometimes we have dreams more mundane still – ones that are easy to confuse with what's real. Probably most of us have sometimes paused and thought, "Wait, did I dream that, or...?" I'm convinced that my wife dreams of tasking me with certain daily chores and errands, which later, to her disappointment, I do not recall in the slightest (her theory – that I just wasn't listening – is less exotic). In such cases, we find ourselves unsure of what's real and what's not. And if you don't know if something was a dream or not, you don't know if it is something real, beyond your own mind. Now finally we can complete the reasoning. Given the first two steps in Descartes' thinking, his conclusion follows:

So, I don't know that there is a real world beyond my own mind.

There you have it. What is Aurora to make of this argument? Is she doomed to being skeptical of there being a real world for the rest of her life? And for that matter, what are *we* to make of it?

### **Epistemology's Prince Charming**

As you can imagine, epistemologists (philosophers who think about the nature of knowledge) have tried to slay this skeptical dragon for millennia. Perhaps the most infamous knight in philosophical armor

to do so is the Englishman G. E. Moore (1873–1958). Moore's response, which he humbly dubs a *proof*, is disarmingly simple. How can Aurora know there is a real world beyond her own mind? All she has to do is pass what we might call *the Pinocchio test*. The test is easy. When Pinocchio wakes up to find that he has turned into a real boy, he looks at his hands in astonishment and exclaims, "I'm real! I'm a real boy!" The proof was right there before him. His own two hands! So, to pass the Pinocchio test to see if you're real and not just dreaming, Moore would tell Aurora and us to do the same: just take a look at your hands. There is one. And there's another. Voilà! There's the proof that there are at least two real things that exist beyond our mind. Moore's proof goes like this: Here is a hand and here is another; If that's right, then there is a real world beyond my own mind; So, there is a real world beyond my own mind.

Unimpressed? Well, what did you expect? Moore insists that his argument meets the technical standards of a proof. First, the steps or premises are different than the conclusion; so we aren't reasoning in a circle. Second, the conclusion follows logically from the premises. And finally, the main premise – that there really are two hands before me – is not just a mere opinion, but something I can be said to know. That's just a matter of common sense.

This last aspect of Moore's proof is what makes it so memorable, but also hated among philosophers. Philosophers have a well-earned reputation for being abstract and aloof from the ordinary and mundane, finding delight instead in the inner citadel of the mind. The ancient philosopher Thales (c. 625–c. 545 BCE), preoccupied philosophizing about the heavens, allegedly wandered straight into a well. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) wrote thousands of mind-numbing pages exploring what we can know by reason alone apart from experience. And legend has it that Descartes locked himself in a Dutch oven until he could think of at least one thing he could be absolutely certain of. Indeed, some of the intellectual castle-building efforts of philosophers wind up resembling the imaginary worlds of Disney more than our own. But Moore, while not incapable of esoteric theorizing himself, nonetheless kept his theorizing grounded in common sense.

But what, exactly, is common sense anyway? Philosophically speaking, it is more than commonly held beliefs that are sensible. The belief that the Earth is round is commonly held and sensible, but it's not a common-sense belief by Moore's lights. Common sense beliefs are beliefs so obvious and self-evident that we simply find ourselves with them, often without even realizing it. In "A Defense of Common

Sense,”<sup>4</sup> Moore lists a host of examples by no means limited to the following:

- I exist and have a body
- Other people like me exist
- Material objects exist
- Space and time are real.
- I (and others) know these things.

Of course, Moore is well aware that certain philosophers have denied such beliefs. Leibniz (1646–1716), for instance, denied that space is real. Idealists deny the existence of material objects. Moore’s teacher John McTaggart (1866–1925) famously denied the reality of time. Contemporary philosopher Peter Unger has denied that people exist, including himself! And of course a radical skeptic would deny that we know all of the above. Moore won’t have any of this. Moore allows that the correct analysis of what these statements ultimately mean may be subject to debate, but to one who straightforwardly denies that we know them, Moore has “nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I do know them, with certainty.”<sup>5</sup> They are proper starting points of *what* we know, even if we don’t know *how* we know them.

### **The Flight of Phillip’s Sword**

Moore’s emphasis on common sense isn’t a cop out; it is part of a strategy for handling pesky philosophical arguments for bizarre, counterintuitive conclusions like “I don’t know there is a real world beyond my own mind.” It’s easy to confuse not knowing how to answer such arguments with being irrational for resisting the conclusion. But that is a mistake.

Let me illustrate with a different example. Maleficent, in the form of a fire-breathing dragon, has Prince Phillip balancing on the edge of a fiery precipice. A good fairy comes to his aid, telling him to hurl the sword. “Oh sword of truth, fly swift and sure, that evil die and good endure!” Just as Phillip readies himself for the throw, suppose Maleficent interrupts with one last attempt at deception:

- MALEFICENT:        You fool! It’s impossible to kill me that way!  
 PRINCE PHILLIP:    Impossible? Whatever do you mean?  
 MALEFICENT:        Well, it is impossible to traverse an infinite. No matter how far you get, there’s always infinity to go. But if it is impossible to traverse an infinite, then motion is impossible! For between any two points A and B there are infinitely many

intervals: before your sword can reach  $\frac{1}{2}$  way between you and me, it must reach  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way. But before it can reach  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way, it must reach  $\frac{1}{8}$  of the way. And before  $\frac{1}{8}$ ,  $\frac{1}{16}$ . And so on, *to infinity*. But since it's impossible to traverse the infinite, and there are infinitely many intervals between you and me, your sword can never reach me!

Maleficent, being the evil genius she is, is using the ancient philosopher Zeno's (c. 490–c. 430 BCE) argument against the possibility of motion:

It is impossible to traverse an infinite.  
 If it is impossible to traverse an infinite, then motion is impossible.  
 So, motion is impossible.

Now, even supposing Prince Phillip doesn't know how to answer Maleficent's argument, would he be unreasonable in continuing to believe that motion is possible – that his sword could “fly swift and sure” to hit its mark? No! The reasonable thing to do would be to simply reject the main premise of her argument (namely, that it is impossible to traverse an infinite) even if he doesn't know what's wrong with it. But why so? Because he can be more certain that motion is possible than its being impossible to traverse an infinite. So he reasons as follows:

Motion *is* possible.  
 If it is impossible to traverse the infinite, then motion is impossible.  
 So, it is not impossible to traverse the infinite.

And the deciding factor between Maleficent's argument and his own is...common sense. Moore writes: “The only way...of deciding between my opponent's argument and mine, as to which is better, is by deciding which premise is known to be true.”<sup>6</sup> And clearly we know to be true that motion is possible. That is a common sense belief if anything is. Moore continues:

I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favor either of the proposition that we do not know [some proposition of common sense], or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point, rest upon some premise which is, beyond comparison, less certain than is the proposition which it is designed to attack.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, if you're confronted with an argument against something as commonsensical as “there is a real world beyond my own mind,” or “motion is possible,” the main premises in those arguments

will invariably be less certain than the commonsense beliefs themselves. Because I am more certain that there is a real world beyond my own mind than I am that I don't know I'm not dreaming, the Moorean shift (as it is sometimes called) in response to the radical skeptic would be:

I *do* know there is a real world beyond my own mind  
If I don't know I'm not dreaming, I don't know there is a real world  
beyond my own mind.

And how do I know that there is a real world beyond my own mind? Passing the Pinocchio test. "Here is a hand, and here is another." Common sense. We can thus conclude:

So, I do know I'm not dreaming.

If nothing else, the Moorean shift is a way to keep us safe from falling victim to what I call *the madman fallacy*, inspired by G. K. Chesterton's (1874–1936) observation that "if you argue with a madman, it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by the things that go with good judgment."<sup>8</sup> The madman fallacy, then, is dumbfounding an interlocutor by saying something that goes against basic good sense. When an annoyed Simba asks the crazy Rafiki the meaning of his seemingly nonsensical chant "Asante sana squash banana, wewe nugu mimi hapana" and is told "It means you're a baboon, and I'm not!", we might say Rafiki stumped poor Simba with the madman fallacy. And we can definitely say you've been duped by the madman fallacy, if you have nothing to say to someone who insists you don't know you're not dreaming. Just hold up your two hands and say, "Look, I'm more certain that there's a real world beyond my mind than that I don't know I'm not dreaming."

### **Visions Are *Often* all they Seem**

If you're still unsatisfied with Moore's common sense response to the problem of skepticism, maybe we can push it a bit further by directly attacking the first step in the argument for skepticism, that I don't know I'm not dreaming. Recall that in response to someone who denies that we *know* common sense beliefs, Moore has "nothing better

to say than that it seems to me that I do know them, with certainty.”<sup>9</sup> Moore’s use of the word “seems” here is important. Contrary to Aurora’s lyric “visions are seldom all they seem,” how things seem or appear to us is good reason to believe that’s how things in fact are. Of course, it’s *possible* I’m merely dreaming what I think is real, but until I have reason to think I *am* dreaming, I can continue believing I’m not. There appear to be two hands before me; so, there probably are two hands before me, because if there weren’t, how things appear would likely be different.

The problem in the present context is that the possibility of a dream-inducing Maleficent-like evil genius guarantees that how things appear would be no different, whether I’m dreaming or not. But maybe there *is* a difference: does it not appear to me that there is a difference between dreaming and wakefulness? The very fact that I am aware of such a distinction at all suggests the distinction is real. If our whole lives were merely a dream, how could we even be aware of such a distinction as that between dreaming and wakefulness? To say I merely dreamed of the distinction does nothing to discredit its legitimacy: I have the idea of a mental state called “dreaming,” and I also have the idea of a different mental state, one that is not dreaming. The distinction is as conceptually solid as any other between two distinct things. But then how do I get the idea of wakefulness in the first place other than from a state of wakefulness? It would be like having the idea of a color without ever having seen that color.

So the fact that it appears to me that there is a distinction between dreaming and wakefulness justifies my belief that there is something that induces non-dreaming states – that is, a world beyond my own mind. But does it justify the belief that I am not dreaming *now*? Well, I don’t see how it could *seem* to me that there is a distinction between two mental states without having actually experienced those different states, because “seemings” just are mental states. I must know what it’s like to dream, and know what it’s like to be awake. So, contrary to what Descartes says, I must be able to tell the difference *somehow*, even if I can’t articulate *exactly* how.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, when I am awake, it never seems to me that I’m dreaming; but it does sometimes seem to me that I’m dreaming when I’m dreaming!<sup>11</sup> So I have good reason to believe that it is false that if I were dreaming, things wouldn’t seem different to me. And since it seems to me *now* that I am awake and not dreaming, I am justified in believing I am awake and not dreaming.

## Happily Ever After

Okay, maybe that last point was a bit trippy. You might be wondering here, “Why should Aurora care so much about knowing she’s not dreaming? She marries her prince, the two kingdoms are united, and they dance the night away. Dream or not, what difference does it make, as long as she lives happily ever after?” This is a good question. And we should ask it of ourselves. Suppose you could have nothing but pleasurable experiences for the rest of your life, only you had the choice between it all being a dream or it being real. Would you choose that? Most of us, I expect, would choose real life, even if our experiences would be no different. In fact, I suspect many of us would choose real life even if that meant experiencing pleasure *and pain*. Why is that?

We’d prefer a real life over an experientially identical dream life, or even a more pleasurable dream life, because there’s more to life than just experience. We want pleasurable experience, yes; but we also want *authenticity*. To paraphrase the philosopher Robert Nozick (1938–2002), I don’t want to just experience myself as a good person – courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, and loving – I want to *be* a good person.<sup>12</sup> Think of Bolt, the dog who believes he’s got superpowers because he was raised on a Hollywood special effects set designed to make it look like he does. There’s something pathetic about that. He’s not *really* a superdog. We wouldn’t want to be Bolt. Each of us wants to be a person whose experiences are backed by reality. That is why Aurora should care. And that is why we should, too. A true “happily ever after” ending will be one where we know our experiences are authentic. Thankfully, to know that, all we need are our own two hands and a little common sense. Of course, a romantic kiss from a significant other will do, too.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Descartes, R. (1970). Meditations on first philosophy. In: *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. I (trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross), 145–146. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
3. *Pace* Norman Malcolm, who denies that dreams are experiences (insofar as all experience is conscious experience). See his “Dreaming and Skepticism,” *The Philosophical Review* 65 (1956), pp. 14–37.
4. Moore, G. E. (1962). *Philosophical Papers*, 32–59. New York: Collier Books.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

6. Ibid., pp. 121–122.
7. Moore, G. E. (1959). *Philosophical Studies*, 227–228. Paterson, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co.
8. Chesterton, G.K. (1986). *Orthodoxy*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* Vol. I, ed. David Dooley, 221. San Francisco: Ignatius.
9. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 43.
10. Here I take no stance on how exactly we might distinguish dreams from reality, which is the subject of an important paper by Macdonald, M. (1953). Sleeping and waking. *Mind* 72: 202–215. One of her observations is that there is no continuity of experience between dreaming and waking, whereas there is always continuity of experience while awake. Descartes himself makes a similar observation in *Meditation VI*, pp. 198–199.
11. As happens in so-called lucid dreams. I had an amusing lucid dream in May 2015. I dreamt that I was a secret agent, and was close to finishing a mission. But then, in the dream, I started thinking about the dream I was having. I was stealthily climbing a stairwell in hot pursuit, but before reaching the top, I paused and thought something like this: “I am enjoying this dream, and the climax is almost here. But it is about time to get up. Should I continue dreaming and finish the mission, or wake up and not finish? I should probably get up, because I already know how it ends.” While I was thinking about the dream and whether to end it, (i) the feeling of being in total control of my decision was palpable, and (ii) I was vaguely aware, though in an inarticulable way, of what was happening (that I was thinking about my dream while still dreaming) and I thought *that* was interesting. Well, I didn’t in fact get up, and the dream continued exactly as I thought it would. And, of course, I remembered all this when I finally got up.
12. Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 43. New York: Basic Books.
13. Many thanks to Elizabeth McIntosh for her help and feedback on this chapter. I could not have written it without consulting her extensive knowledge of Disney films.