

## 5. DREAMING IN DESCARTES A LA WILSON

VIORICA FARKAS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

**ABSTRACT.** Descartes argues that since there are no certain marks to distinguish waking experiences from dreams, we need to justify our belief that waking experiences are veridical experiences of physical objects while dreams are illusions. He resolves this problem by arguing that the absence of marks distinguishing dreams from waking experiences notwithstanding, we are justified in ascribing different cognitive values to waking experiences and dreams. For, our belief in God rules out any other explanation of the agreement of all our faculties in supporting the instinctive belief that waking experiences are caused by physical objects.

Margaret Wilson has argued that the argument contained in some previously neglected passages of the *Meditations* is different from and superior to the dreaming argument that has been traditionally ascribed to Descartes.<sup>1</sup>

If Wilson's interpretation of Descartes' dreaming argument is really superior to the traditional interpretation, it ought to render the central passages in which Descartes talks about dreaming *more* intelligible, and Descartes' overall position *more* consistent. Wilson does not try to show that this is the case. She explicitly disclaims being able to explain everything Descartes says about dreaming. She doesn't show that her reading is compatible with the First Meditation remarks about dreaming and she doesn't think that Descartes offers a satisfactory resolution of the difficulties raised by the dreaming argument as interpreted by her. She claims only that on her reading Descartes' dreaming argument is not subject to some traditional objections.

In this paper I argue that Wilson's interpretation is better than she thinks. Specifically, in sections I-IV, I offer a reading of the First Meditation discussion of dreaming which supports something very close to Wilson's interpretation of Descartes' dreaming argument; in sections V-VII, I argue that the Sixth Meditation contains an internally consistent resolution of the difficulties raised by Descartes' argument from dreaming.<sup>2</sup>

## I

On the traditional argument ascribed to Descartes, one is led to skepticism about the existence of an external world, by being led to doubt the existence of an arbitrary physical object. And one is led to doubt the existence of an arbitrary physical object by realizing that at any one moment one is not absolutely certain that one is not dreaming, and thus one is not absolutely certain about any particular judgement based on the senses.<sup>3</sup> Against this interpretation Wilson suggests that, at his best, Descartes argues that it is the belief that waking experiences afford us knowledge about physical objects while dream experiences don't, that stands in need of justification.

On the basis of passages from the Sixth Meditation and the *Discourse on Method*, Wilson argues that we ought to ascribe the following argument to Descartes:<sup>4,5</sup>

(1) I believe in the past I have dreamed that I was perceiving various physical objects at close range when it was false that I was really perceiving any such objects (when my experience was thoroughly delusory).

(2) If I see no certain marks to distinguish waking experience of physical objects from dream experience when, I believe, I was deceived, I have reason to believe my waking experience too may be deceptive.

(3) I see no such certain marks to distinguish waking experiences from dreams.

(4) Therefore, I have reason to suppose that waking experience too may be deceptive (thoroughly delusory).

(5) But if I have reason to suppose my waking experience may be deceptive (thoroughly delusory), I have reason to doubt the existence of physical objects (for at present we are supposing this experience to be the best foundation for our belief in physical objects). (Wilson 22-23)

Thus on Wilson's view, Descartes' problem is explaining *why we believe* that there is a significant distinction between what is merely dreamed and what is perceived by the senses, if there are no certain marks to distinguish waking experiences from dreams.

It is steps (1)-(4) of the above quoted argument which contain the essence of Wilson's interpretation. It is these steps which are supported by the passages Wilson quotes and it is these steps which she examines in detail. The conclusion in step (5) is not stated perspicuously. The parenthetical qualification "for at present we are supposing . . ." suggests that it means the same as

(5') If we suppose waking sense experiences to be the best foundation for our belief in physical objects, we have reason to doubt the existence of physical objects.

And at least some of the time it is clear that this is what Wilson intends. But, perhaps because of the pervasive influence of the traditional

interpretation, perhaps because it is easy to lose sight of a parenthetical qualification, Wilson comes to regard the claim that there is reason to doubt the existence of an external world of ordinary physical objects as the final conclusion of Descartes' dreaming argument.<sup>6</sup>

Now, it is natural to assume that it is through the senses that we know of the existence of an external world of physical objects, and thus to infer from (5') that there is reason to doubt the existence of an external world of ordinary physical objects. But it is best to keep these arguments distinct from each other. For one thing, as I will argue, Descartes never uses an argument from dreaming to conclude that we have reason to doubt the existence of an external world of physical objects. For another thing, the novelty of Wilson's contribution consists in drawing attention to the argument for the conclusion that our belief that waking experiences are veridical stands in need of justification. And so for the sake of simplicity, from now on, when talking about Wilson's interpretation of Descartes' dreaming argument, I will be referring to steps (1)-(4) of her argument.

## II

The proponents of the traditional interpretation assume that Descartes' most careful formulation of his argument from dreaming is contained in the First Meditation. This is a plausible assumption. Descartes presents the Sixth Meditation passage Wilson cites as a recapitulation of his argument, the passage from the *Discourse* as a summary of his argument. The only place to look for the argument proper is in the First Meditation. Thus, if correct, Wilson's interpretation ought to be supported by the First Meditation.

In the First Meditation, Descartes sets out to identify those of his beliefs which are certain, which cannot be called into doubt.<sup>7</sup> His first candidates are beliefs about things known through the senses. But almost immediately he notes that not every belief of this kind is certain--the senses deceive us when they are not functioning under optimal conditions. Next, Descartes suggests that when the senses are functioning in their optimal range, under ideal conditions, beliefs about things known through the senses are certain. Thus, his belief in the existence of his chair, the fireplace by his chair, the paper in his hands (and in general, beliefs in the existence of the physical objects in his immediate environment) are certain. At this point, Descartes is suggesting the general foundational principle that, under certain conditions, things known through our senses are indubitable; and, he presents instances of particular beliefs based on this principle. But then, on a moment's reflection, he realizes that he still did not succeed in identifying any indubitable beliefs. If he is dreaming, it need not be true that he is sitting on a chair near the fire, and, he doesn't know that he is not dreaming since "there are no definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep." The argument implicit in this reasoning is analogous to the argument Wilson draws attention to:

### ARGUMENT ONE

(1) I hold that if I dream that certain objects are in my immediate environment, there need not be such objects in my immediate environment; while if I have experiences which I

call seeing or touching certain objects, these objects are in my immediate environment.

(2) But I see now that there are no certain marks distinguishing sense-experiences from dream experiences.

(3) Thus, my conviction that sense experiences are different in kind from dream experiences in that sense experiences afford knowledge of particular physical objects while dream experiences don't, stands in need of justification.

It is important to note that the point of the argument is not to lead us to doubt the existence of physical objects. The conclusion it suggests is that the general principle that we can trust our senses (under certain conditions) is not indubitable. One could also conclude that no sense-based belief about physical objects is indubitable. And if one assumed that beliefs about physical objects have to be based on the senses, one could conclude that the existence of physical objects is not indubitable. But Descartes clearly didn't assume that we know of physical objects through the senses and only through the senses. For he is not at all worried, at this point, about his justification for believing that there are physical objects. Instead he goes on to entertain the possibility that he is dreaming and thus that he has no certain way of hooking on to any *particular* physical object:

Let us say, then, for the sake of argument, that we are sleeping and that such particulars as these are not true: that we open our eyes, move our heads, extend our hands. Perhaps we do not even have these hands, or any such body at all. Nevertheless, it really must be admitted that things seen in sleep are, as it were, like painted images, which could have been produced only in the likeness of true things. Therefore at least these general things (eyes, head, hands, the whole body) are not imaginary things, but are true and exist. (First Meditation, Cress 14, AT VII 19-20, HR I 146)

As the above passage shows, Descartes does not regard the possibility that he is dreaming as a reason to doubt the existence of different *kinds* of physical objects. He claims that he knows that there are hands, for example, because even dreams of hands constitute sufficient evidence for the existence of hands. To say this, he has to be assuming a particular theory about the connection between waking experiences and dreams and about the production of waking experiences. He doesn't spell out the details of this theory, and he discards it almost immediately: painters can "concoct something so utterly novel that its likes have never been seen before." (First Meditation, Cress, 14, AT VIII 20, HR I 146) Dreams of hands need not be copies of anything like hands. But still, even painters are tied to the real world by the colors they use in composing their paintings. Analogously, Descartes thinks, there must be a minimum of truthfulness in any of our experiences:

[O]ne must necessarily admit that at least other things that are even more simple and universal are true, from which, as from true colors, all these things--be they true or false--which in our thought are images of things, are constructed. (First Meditation, Cress 15, AT VII 20, HR I 146)

It is clear that Descartes' position is changing in the course of these passages. What considerations being about this change? And what precisely does the change consist in?

Suppose he holds that dreams of hands are reasons for believing in the existence of hands because he holds certain beliefs about the connection between waking experiences and dreams to be true. In view of the way in which he has been proceeding, Descartes will next ask "What is the foundational principle on which such beliefs are based?" In the last analysis, the evidence for any theory about the connections between dreams and waking experiences consists of facts to the effect that dreams of hands are similar in content to waking experiences of hands. Facts of this kind we know through memory. Thus whatever Descartes's theory about the connection between dreams and waking experiences, he must think that the theory is justified by the foundational principle that things known through memories of waking and dreaming experiences are indubitable.<sup>8</sup> But now, in view of Argument One, there is an obvious objection to holding that things we know through memory are beyond doubt: there are no definite signs distinguishing remembering from *dreaming* that one remembers. And dreaming that one remembers that there are veridical elements common to waking and dreaming is no reason for supposing that there are such elements. That is, an argument analogous to Argument One discredits reliance on memory:

#### ARGUMENT TWO

(1) I hold that, if I dream that I remember that there exist objects of the same kind as the ones which I take to be in my immediate environment, there need not be such objects in the world; while, if I remember that I have had sense-experiences of physical objects of the same kind as the ones which I take myself to have sense-experiences of now, there are such physical objects in the world.

(2) But there are no certain marks distinguishing memories from dreams of remembering.

(3) Thus my conviction that memories are different in kind from dreams of remembering in that memories afford knowledge of physical objects while dreams of remembering don't, stands in need of justification.

Argument Two is not an argument to the effect that one doesn't know that there are any such things as chairs since one cannot distinguish at any one moment memories of sense-experiences of chairs from mere dreams of remembering. The conclusion of the argument is not that we don't have certain knowledge of the existence of physical objects. The most that one could conclude is that beliefs about physical objects based on memories of the similarities of the content of waking experiences and the content of dreams are not indubitable. And again instead of pursuing the consequences of this result for the status of our belief in the existence of physical objects, Descartes suggests that there are some other things which we must admit to be true:

To this class seems to belong corporeal nature in general, together with its extension; likewise the shape of extended

things, their quantity or size, their number; as well as the place where they exist, the time of their duration, and other such things.

Hence perhaps we do not conclude improperly that . . . arithmetic, geometry, and other such disciplines--which treat of nothing but the simplest and most general things. . . --contain something certain and indubitable. (First Meditation, Cress 15, AT VII 20, HR I 147)

Thus Descartes doesn't just replace one theory of the relationship between waking experiences and dream experiences with another. And he still doesn't go on to worry about the status of our beliefs in physical objects. Instead he shifts again, to a different subject. He is no longer interested in maintaining that there are indubitable things we know from or through memory. Instead he is floating the claim that some beliefs even more general than those we know through memory--e.g., arithmetical beliefs--are indubitable.

### III

Though there is no direct textual support for Argument Two in the First Meditation, room for it is clearly there. There has to be some argument causing the shift to consideration of arithmetical beliefs. He explicitly mentions general beliefs such as that there are human hands. We commonly assume that such beliefs are known by remembering accumulated experiences. And in view of Argument One, the question "What reason do we have to believe that we are not merely dreaming that we remember?" is inevitable and obvious. Not only does Descartes prepare the logical space for Argument Two; his Second Meditation summary of the results of the First Meditation suggests that he thinks of this space as occupied:

I will suppose that all I see is false. I will believe that none of those things that my deceitful memory brings before my eyes ever existed. I thus have no senses: body, shape, extension, movement, and place are all figments of my imagination. (Second Meditation, Cress 17, AT VII 24, HR I 149)

In this passage, Descartes takes himself to have considered memory in the First Meditation. And by juxtaposing as he does, things that we see and things that we remember, he suggests that there are analogous reasons for holding that beliefs based on the senses and beliefs based on memory can be doubted. That is, if we suppose that Argument Two is implicit in Descartes' discussion of dreaming in the First Meditation, we can explain both why Descartes says what he says about memory, and why he doesn't say more about it.

### IV

Given the way Descartes has been proceeding, the next question to ask is "What is the foundational principle on which beliefs of the same kind as those constituting the subject matter of arithmetic are based?" The obvious answer is: these are beliefs based on the general

principle that we can trust our reason. But then, at this point too, we can give an argument analogous to Argument One:

#### ARGUMENT THREE

- (1) Dreaming that I know some belief through reasoning is not sufficient to show that that belief is certain.<sup>9</sup>
- (2) But there are no certain marks distinguishing reasoning from dreaming that one reasons.
- (3) Thus my conviction that there are certain things I know through reasoning, but not through dreams of reasoning, stands in need of justification.

Descartes clearly does not offer this argument. Instead he raises the possibility that we were created to be deceived:

All the same, a certain opinion of long standing has been fixed in my mind, namely that there exists a God who is able to do anything and by whom I, such as I am, have been created. How do I know that he did not bring it about that there be no earth at all, no heavens, no extended thing, no figure, no size, no place, and yet all these things should seem to me to exist precisely as they appear to do now? Moreover--as I judge that others sometimes make mistakes in matters that they believe they know most perfectly--how do I know that I am not deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square or perform an even simpler operation, if such can be imagined? (First Meditation, Cress 15, AT VII 21, HR I 147)<sup>10</sup>

Here Descartes suggests that if we cannot rule out the possibility that we were created to be deceived, it is permissible to doubt the existence of physical objects, the aptness of certain ways of thinking about the world, and our ability to know things through reason.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless there is an important difference between his position and the position of someone who would advance Argument Three. Argument Three doesn't just have the effect of driving us on in search of some other principle that is certain and indubitable. If we couldn't trust our reason, there could be no point in attempting to settle anything by appeal to reason and no conceivable recourse to some other way of justifying beliefs, or to some other justified belief. Not only that, it is paradoxical to *argue* for skepticism about our ability to reason. Skepticism about beliefs we take ourselves to know through reason cannot be a position arrived at as a result of being convinced by an argument. Thus Descartes is right to avoid Argument Three. He could not be required in the interest of consistency to give an argument whose conclusion implies that there is no point in giving arguments.

There are analogous problems with *arguing against* skepticism about reason. Faith in our ability to reason cannot be justified against the skeptic by appeal to reason. Skepticism about reason cannot be engaged through arguments. Nevertheless skepticism is not an obviously unviable position. Thus, given Descartes' determination to check out any principle that seems indubitable to him, after having suggested that beliefs grounded in our reason are indubitable he has to consider the po-

sition of the skeptic about reason. This is why he considers the possibility that we were created to be deceived.

But he never takes the skeptic entirely seriously. He is never tempted to disregard "consonance with reason." He considers skepticism about our ability to reason only because he sees *reasons* for holding that it is possible for it to be true. But he doesn't doubt that these reasons can be dismissed--i.e., that it is possible to arrive at a clear idea of one's creator and explain why we make mistakes in reasoning. He thinks that once these things are done, he has no need to worry any longer about the possibility that the skeptic might be right. Thus he never meets the skeptic in the skeptic's own territory. To do so he would have to give up his reliance on reason, and that he does not do, not even temporarily.<sup>12</sup>

It is debatable whether one can make a valid stand against skepticism about reason in this way (though it seems to me that this is the only way in which one can make any kind of a stand against it). But for the purposes of this paper, we don't have to settle this question. For our purposes it is enough that we can understand Descartes' intentions in the later part of the First Meditation in a way which is perfectly compatible with ascribing Arguments One and Two, but not Argument Three, to him. Argument One and Argument Two are obvious variants of Wilson's argument. Thus Wilson's Dreaming Argument is supported by the First Meditation.

## V

We are left with deciding whether the position we have been attributing to Descartes, is more coherent overall than the position traditionally ascribed to Descartes.

In the Sixth Meditation Descartes dismisses all reasons for doubt uncovered in the First Meditation. In particular he seems to suggest that one can answer the dream argument because there are marks distinguishing waking experiences from dream experiences: waking experiences exhibit spatio-temporal continuity and a certain uniformity--they are connectable and coherent.

If he really means all this, we have a number of problems: (1) He would be answering a question--"How are we to distinguish waking experiences from dream experiences?"--which on the above suggested interpretation of the First Meditation he didn't ask. (2) It is not clear why the answer wasn't evident in the First Meditation. (3) The putative answer is obviously unsatisfactory. It is false that coherence and connectability are certain marks distinguishing waking experiences from dreams. To use an example of Wilson's, one could fall asleep in the middle of a conversation and dream a coherent and connected conclusion to the conversation. And finally, (4) the question it answers is illegitimate. It is nonsensical to look for a criterion of distinguishing waking experiences from dreams. Since dreaming that one applies a criterion is not applying a criterion, no criterion could apply indifferently to dreams and to waking experiences.<sup>13</sup>

Wilson, who points out all these problems, shares with advocates of the traditional view of Descartes' solution the belief that Descartes regards coherence and connectability as marks distinguishing waking from dreaming.<sup>14</sup> She differs from them in that she thinks that Descartes continued to hold throughout the *Meditations* that coherence and connectability are not marks which can be used to ascertain whether a certain experience is a waking or a dreaming experience.<sup>15</sup> But, in her view, connectability and coherence are as a matter of fact features distinguishing waking experiences from dreams; and, the fact that waking experiences exhibit these features is the reason for regarding them as veridical.

On Wilson's interpretation, Descartes doesn't have an internally consistent solution. To answer the question "Why wasn't this solution available in the First Meditation?" she suggests that Descartes holds that one needs to perceive clearly and distinctly the coherence and connectability of sense experiences, and one needs to know that clear and distinct perceptions are true. This in itself is problematic. It is concepts and relationships between concepts that Descartes seems to regard as things we can perceive clearly and distinctly, not spatio-temporal relations between sense-perceptions.<sup>16</sup> But that's not all. As Wilson notes, on this view Descartes is committed to holding that one could ascertain that one is awake, by ascertaining that one perceives clearly and distinctly the coherence and connectability of one's experiences. Wilson thinks this is Descartes' problem and not a problem with her interpretation. She thinks one could avoid this commitment by holding only that it would be possible to determine at any one moment whether one was awake if it were possible to restrict oneself at any one moment to affirming only clear and distinct perceptions. She thinks that Descartes does in fact hold this some of the time.<sup>17</sup> In effect she is claiming that Descartes was inconsistent and confused on this point. There are still other problems. Wilson thinks that the answer to the question "Why should we regard waking experiences as veridical when we regard dreams as illusory?" is "Because waking experiences are connectable and coherent." But she does not explain why connectability and coherence is a mark of veridicality or why we are better equipped to ascertain that certain experiences are connectable and coherent than that certain experiences are waking experiences. She could again say that this is not her problem but the total effect of all this is to make one suspect the correctness of her interpretation of Descartes' solution to the difficulties raised by the argument from dreaming.

## VI

All the problems listed at the beginning of the last section stem from the supposition that Descartes' solution consists of discarding his initial assumption that there are no marks distinguishing waking from dreaming. But there is no reason to suppose that Descartes ever discarded that initial assumption. Connectability and coherence are not seen by Descartes as reasons for saying that, on the whole, waking experiences are different from dreaming experiences in being veridical experiences of physical objects. He makes no bones about admitting to Hobbes that one could be dreaming that certain experiences are connected and coherent. Hobbes writes:

I ask whether this is certain, that anyone, dreaming that he doubts whether he is dreaming, cannot dream that his dreams cohere with his ideas of things in a long series of past events. If this is possible, then those things which appear to the dreamer to be actions of his past life, can be counted for true no less than if he were awake. (AT VII 195, HR II 78)

Hobbes' point is just that connectability may be dreamed away. And in effect, Descartes replies--"Of course. No one would deny that!" He writes:

A dreamer cannot connect truly the things he dreams with ideas of past things, even if he dreams that it is possible to connect them. For who denies that a sleeper can be mistaken? But afterwards, when awake, he will easily learn of his error. (AT VII 196, HR II 78, *cf.* Wilson 20)<sup>18</sup>

That is, he does not hold that we are ever in a position to establish with absolute certainty either that certain particular experiences are waking experiences or that certain particular experiences cohere and are connectable with other experiences. His solution consists of showing that we don't need to do either of these things. We are justified in believing that waking experiences tend to be veridical experiences of physical objects because we are led to this belief constantly, through all our God given faculties and inclinations. If in spite of all this, the belief were false, we could never discover this and our trust in a benevolent, non-deceiving God would be misplaced.

I know that every sense more frequently indicates what is true than what is false regarding those things that concern the advantage of the body, and I can almost always use more than one sense in order to examine the same thing. Furthermore, I can use memory, which connects present things with preceding ones, plus the intellect, which now has examined all the causes of error. I should no longer fear lest those things that are daily shown me by the senses, are false; rather, the hyperbolic doubts of the last few days ought to be rejected as worthy of derision--especially the principle doubt regarding sleep, which I did not distinguish from being awake. . . . Nor ought I to have even a little doubt regarding the truth of these things, if, having mustered all the senses, memory, and intellect in order to examine them, nothing is announced to me by one of those sources that conflicts with the others. For from the fact that God is no deceiver, it follows that I am in no way deceived in these matters. (Sixth Meditation, Cress 55-56 AT VII 89-90, HR I 198-99)

Once we discover and understand the consequences of belief in God, we can know that waking experiences tend to be veridical experiences of physical objects even though we have to admit that any particular sequence of experiences could turn out to be a sequence of dreaming experiences.<sup>19</sup>

Let  $p$  be the proposition that waking experiences are different in principle from dream experiences in being veridical experiences of physical objects. The fact that there are no certain marks distinguishing waking experiences from dream experiences appears to be a reason for holding that we are not justified in believing  $p$ . Descartes' solution consists of showing that it isn't really a reason. The belief that  $p$  does not need to be justified by appeal to marks distinguishing waking experiences from dreams.<sup>20</sup> Given that we have a natural impulse to believe that waking experiences are veridical, and given that this belief is supported by the agreement of the senses, memory, and reason, a believer knows that waking experiences are by and large veridical because he knows that no other possibility could be compatible with the existence of God.

Descartes' treatment of the solution to the argument from dreaming in the *Discourse* and in the *Principles* is consistent with the above suggested interpretation. In the *Discourse* he writes:

. . . after knowledge of God and of our soul has rendered us certain of this rule [that all our clear and distinct ideas are of real things and come from God] it is quite easy to know that the reveries that we imagine while asleep, should not at all make us doubt about the truth of the thoughts that we have while awake. (AT VI 38-39, HR I 104-06, cf. Wilson 24)

There is no mention here of coherence and connectability. But the interesting thing is that while in the *Principles* too, Descartes insists that solution depends on knowing that our clear and distinct perceptions are true, he also claims that this solution is worked out in detail in the *Meditations*.<sup>21</sup> Incredible as this may seem, Descartes is not being inconsistent. In his view, the key to the solution is that we know that we can trust our reason. For the particular reasoning which constitutes the solution to the dreaming argument would be useless if we did not know that we can trust our reason.

## VII

But if connectability and coherence are not reasons for, and are not seen by Descartes as reasons for saying that, on the whole, waking experiences are different from dreaming experiences in being veridical experiences of physical objects, why does he speak of coherence and connectability? Why does he say, in the passage omitted in the quote from the Sixth Meditation above:

I now notice that a very great difference exists between these two; dreams are never joined with all the other actions of life by the memory, as is the case with those actions that occur when one is awake. For surely, if someone, while I am awake, suddenly appears to me, and then immediately disappears, as happens in dreams, so that I see neither where he came from or where he went, it is not without reason that I would judge him to be a ghost or a phantom conjured up in my brain, rather than a true man. But when these things happen, regarding which I notice distinctly where they come from, where they are now, and

when they come to me, and I connect the perception of them without any interruption with the rest of my life, obviously I am certain that these perceptions have occurred not in sleep but in a waking state. (My emphases, Sixth Meditation, Cress 55-56, AT VII 89-90, HR I 199)

He is *not* claiming that coherence and connectability are certain marks distinguishing waking experiences from dream experiences. He couldn't be claiming that since he points out that we do as a matter of fact hold that *some* of our waking experiences--e.g., hallucinations--cannot be connected and don't cohere with the rest of our experiences.

What then is explained by appeal to coherence and connectability? Descartes has just said that we can rest assured on the basis of our belief in God that waking experiences tend to be veridical. He holds this even though, he also holds that there are no certain marks distinguishing waking experiences from dreams. But a theoretical assurance that there is in principle a difference between waking experiences and dreaming experiences would be useless if it had no practical consequences enabling us to decide at least that a particular experience is probably a waking experience. Coherence and connectability are important because they are symptoms of the agreement of our different senses, memory, and intellect; symptoms, which we as a matter of fact appeal to in deciding for practical purposes that a particular experience is (probably) a veridical waking experience.

This view of the role of coherence and connectability is supported by Descartes' reply to Hobbes' objection that an atheist can establish that his experiences are connected and coherent. Hobbes objects:

by the author's assertions all certainty and truth of knowledge depends solely on the knowledge of the true God. But then either the atheist cannot infer that he is awake from his memory of his previous life, or one can know that one is awake without knowledge of the true God. (AT VII 195, HR II 78)

Descartes replies:

the atheist can truly infer that he is awake from his memory of his previous life; but he cannot know this sign to be sufficient for being certain that he is not mistaken, unless he knows that he was created by the non-deceiving God. (My translation, AT VII 195, HR II 78)

That is, in Descartes view, the atheist can indeed use the practical method we all use for establishing that he is awake. But just as a theoretical distinction with no practical consequences would be useless, a practical method which has no theoretical underpinnings is useless. The atheist cannot overcome the difficulties presented by the fact that there are no certain marks distinguishing waking experiences from dreams. He cannot justify his practice.

Hume's dictum that Descartes is a skeptic in spite of himself, has been generally accepted. I have been arguing that at least as far as the dreaming argument is concerned, that view is due to misinterpreting Descartes.<sup>22</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> M.D. Wilson, *Descartes* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). All further references to Wilson in the text are references to this work.

<sup>2</sup> In writing this paper, I was motivated to a large extent by disagreement with "Descartes, Dreaming and Professor Wilson", by Ermanno Ben-civenga (*Journal of Philosophy*, January 1983, 75-85) which argues that Wilson's interpretation of the dream argument makes Descartes' overall position less defensible and thus that Wilson's Descartes is more inconsistent and more confused than the Descartes of the traditional interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> See Wilson, p. 18 for a formulation of this argument. Wilson ascribes this argument to H.G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), Norman Malcolm, *Dreaming* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) and G.E. Moore "Certainty", in *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), reprinted in Willis Doney, ed., *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> The passages in question read as follows:

To those [considerations of sensory illusion] I have recently added two other grounds of doubt of the highest generality: the first is that I believed that I never experienced anything while awake that I could not think that I sometimes also experienced in sleep; and since I do not believe that those things which I seem to experience in sleep come to me from objects outside me, I do not see why I should any more believe this of those that I seem to experience while awake. (Sixth Meditation, Wilson 24, Cress 48, AT VII 77, HR I 189)

and

one can . . . imagine, being asleep, that one has another body, and that one sees other stars, and another earth, without any of this being the case. For how does one know that the thoughts that come in dreams are false rather than the others, given that often they are not less vivid and definite? . . . But after the knowledge of God and of the soul . . . has rendered us certain . . . [that all that is in us of reality and truth proceeds from God] it is quite easy to know that the reveries that we imagine while asleep, should not at all make us doubt about the truth of the thoughts that we have while awake. (*Discourse on Method*, Wilson 24, AT VI 38-39, HR I 104-105)

In the parentheses following the quoted passages I have adopted the usual convention of referring to *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1911) as HR. I refer to this work because it is the most complete, easily available edition of Descartes' works in En-

glish. But my quotations are from Wilson's translation of *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1897-1913) in her book, from the Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1979) translation of the *Meditations*, and when neither of these are available, from my own translation of Adam and Tannery (AT).

<sup>5</sup> Some of these texts are also mentioned by Frankfurt, *op. cit.*, 52. He even mentions a passage in the same vein not mentioned by Wilson, from *The Search After Truth* (AT X 511, HR I 314).

<sup>6</sup> See for example the second sentence of the passage: "Descartes takes the Dreaming Argument to establish that there is reason to doubt the world is *anything like* what the senses seem to reveal. In other words, the argument calls into question the existence of *all* 'composites' or ordinary physical objects . . ." (Wilson 18)

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will follow the general practice of not distinguishing between Descartes and the protagonist of the *Meditations*.

<sup>8</sup> One could object here that the principle needs to be qualified, that we need to spell out the conditions under which we can trust our memory since sometimes we misremember. Descartes need not bother with qualifications because no refinement of the principle is immune to the objection that's coming.

<sup>9</sup> I once had a dream in which I "proved" through careful reasoning that it was impossible for a person who was someone's nephew to be a morally responsible person.

<sup>10</sup> On the traditional interpretation of the dreaming argument, using ignorance of our creator to dismiss belief in the existence of physical objects is superfluous. Belief in physical objects went out with the dream argument. On the reading I am suggesting, this is the first time that the issue of the existence of physical objects is considered head-on.

<sup>11</sup> The argument 'We make mistakes in reasoning; hence we should not trust our reason' is not any more persuasive than the argument 'The senses deceive us sometimes; so, we shouldn't trust them.' Descartes clearly didn't set much store by either of those arguments. That we make mistakes in reasoning is relevant chiefly because it is one consideration that can make us wonder about the source of our being.

<sup>12</sup> Here I disagree with Curley and Frankfurt. I develop this view of Descartes' position on skepticism about reason in another paper.

<sup>13</sup> This is a point made by Norman Malcolm, *op. cit.*, and by Margaret McDonald, "Sleeping and Waking", *Mind* LXII, no. 246, 1953, as an objection to Descartes.

<sup>14</sup> She writes

[Descartes sees a problem about] 'marks to distinguish waking from dreaming' as central to the Dreaming Argument. He believes that it makes *sense* to search for such marks, and he believes the Dreaming Argument can be dismissed when he ultimately 'finds' some. Thus, in the First Meditation he inspects his experience, past and present, and concludes

there are no such marks. But, as is by now well enough known, he comes to *retract* the denial at the end of the last (Sixth) Meditation. That is, he comes to affirm that there are certain marks to distinguish waking from dreaming. (Wilson 19)

<sup>15</sup> Wilson holds that:

the point of the observations about connectability in Meditation VI is that there are after all marks present in waking experience that explain why we should rationally regard it as different from the illusions of dreams--i.e., as having some claims to veridicality. The fact one has falsely dreamed he is perceiving physical objects no longer provides a ground for doubt of one's present (waking) belief that one is perceiving physical objects. For one notices that his waking experience has a characteristic one finds to be lacking in the dream experience he dismisses as unreal . . . (Wilson 23)

<sup>16</sup> But there are passages, e.g., Cress 56, AT VII 90, HR I 199 which lend color to Wilson's supposition.

<sup>17</sup> For example in his Letter of September 1, 1965 to Princess Elizabeth. But he is confused in the *Discourse*, and again in the *Principles*. See Wilson 30 and 227 (note 38).

<sup>18</sup> Compare the last sentence of the *Meditations*: ". . . one must believe that that the life of man is vulnerable to errors regarding particular things, and we must acknowledge the infirmity of our nature."

<sup>19</sup> For a vivid illustration of this last point, see R.M. Yost and D. Kalish in "Miss Macdonald on Sleeping and Waking", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1955.

<sup>20</sup> This type of argument that occurs more than once in the *Meditations*. For example, in the Synopsis, Descartes claims that in the Fourth Meditation he has proved that "all that we clearly and distinctly perceive is true". There is no such proof in the Fourth Meditation. But while in the First Meditation, the fact that we make mistakes is seen as a reason for wondering whether our creator wants to deceive us, in the Fourth Meditation Descartes shows that the fact that we make mistakes can be explained in a way which is compatible with the goodness of God.

<sup>21</sup> See the *Principles* I xxx, AT VIII-1 17, HR I 231-32.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Robert M. Adams, Ermanno Bencivenga, E.M. Curley, Terrence D. Parsons, Robert G. Turnbull, Gary Watson, and James Zaiss for helpful criticisms of earlier versions of this paper; and, to Kathleen Sinkovich for help with translating some of the Latin passages.