

Language in Dreams: A Threat to Linguistic Antiskepticism

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Some of the presumably powerful modern arguments against external world skepticism refer to the linguistic senselessness of skeptical doubts. For example, Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*: 'If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.' (OC, 114) Arguments of that kind put forward that when a skeptic expresses her doubts, suggesting the possibility of being a brain in a vat, being manipulated by an evil demon, or being asleep and dreaming, she is committing a certain linguistic fallacy. Hence, the skeptical hypothesis is self-refuting and external world skepticism as a whole inconceivable. However, this conclusion is rather surprising. Have the prominent skeptics like Descartes in the long history of external world skepticism never noticed that their skeptical ideas are mere nonsense, and why do we seem to understand skeptical scenarios so easily? Obviously, there has to be a non-trivial presupposition behind the argument. As a matter of fact, it is crucial for the linguistic antiskeptic to tie the meaning of words to the external world. It is because the skeptic cuts off the links to reality that she deprives her hypothesis of meaning. But why could the language not preserve a certain independence from the outer world? If it could, then the skeptical hypothesis might still be meaningful. In what follows I discuss possible amendments for the skeptical position. I focus on the dream argument and investigate the possibility of a language in a dream. From my point of view, the skeptic might circumvent the linguistic critique with some rather strong auxiliary assumptions. Despite being rather fantastic, these assumptions bear no internal contradiction.

To begin with, I distinguish between three different versions of the dream argument for the sake of clarity: a strongly solipsistic, a moderately solipsistic, and an everyday version. The first one emphasizes that the dreamer had no contact to the external world at all, and that she has thus to create her mental content by herself. The second version describes the dreamer as someone, who had a reliable contact to the real world in the past, but at some point was completely encapsulated into her dream. Because of the former contact to the external world the assumption of an autonomous creation of mental content can be avoided. The moderately solipsistic dreamer can simply form her mental content from her former real world experiences. The third scenario provides the dreamer with a reliable periodic contact to the external world alternating with periods of dreaming. As in the second scenario the assumption of autonomous creation can be spared.

Now, taking the strongly solipsistic scenario it was granted that the dreamer can invent her own fictitious world. Consequently, the dreamer might also create a dream language therein. Yet this assumption is counterintuitive. We need our language among other things to represent entities and to communicate ideas to other people. But the strongly solipsistic dreamer has no such impediments. She can conceive of dinosaurs without using any representatives and think of a communication with her imagined fellow humans as unintermediate. Thus, the invention of a language would be idle. However, such objections need not bother a skeptic. The assumption of an autonomous creation of mental content might be simply extended to a version where the dreamer has a represent-

ing language and conceives of the dreamed people as independent from herself.

Yet the strongly solipsistic dreamer has to face the problem of having a private language. Since it is situated in the context of a dream and is originated solely from the dreamer, the dreamer might never be sure of the meaning of her dreamed language. Here the problem appears to be that the dreamer has no contact to the outer world in order to secure the meaning of her language. This drawback might be soothed by tying the dream language more to the external world.

Accordingly, since the dreamer of the second scenario had reliable contact to the external world, she is acquainted with external objects and with language as a representing and intermediating means. So, there is no need to assume an autonomous creativity for the dreamer. However, the language of such a dreamer is still private. Even if it stems from the dreamers former contact to the real world, there is still no independent authority in the context of the dream that might assure the meaning of a dreamed word. So, the dreamer could dream of a chair and dream to utter 'chair' to point at it, but she would have no assurance whether the word 'chair' is representing the entity she dreams of.

Similarly, the dreamer of the everyday version of the dream argument does not need to be capable of inventing mental content autonomously. Because of her periodic contact to the external world the meaning of her language is solidified. Yet even here the dreamer has no independent assurance of the meaning of her dreamed words. So, finally, it seems that the verdict of being a private language prevails and that a dream language is impossible.

However, from my point of view, there are still two moves for a skeptic to escape the fatal verdict. She might put more weight on the everyday experience of speaking in dreams. Accordingly, many people would be reluctant to deny the significance of what was said in their dreams. Therefore, the skeptic might argue that the periodic contact to the external world might sufficiently assure the dreamer in her usage of words for carrying them over into her dream world.

Secondly, suppose the dreamer's language is coincidentally in a perfect correlation with her dream world, i.e. every time the dreamer dreams of a certain situation and utters a sentence in that dream, this sentence is perfectly appropriate. This assumption makes the language of the dreamer reliable by hypothesis. However, one can argue that despite the assumed reliability of her language the dreamer has no *justification* for its reliability. This lack of justification is sufficient to deny the status of a proper language. But, from my point of view, in terms of linguistic practice there is no conceivable difference between a world with a perfectly parallel language and a world where the meaning can be additionally justified by relying on other persons. Suppose that the dreamer dreams of a chair and of how she describes it to some other person in her dream. Now, how does the dreamer realize that her usage of words is not justified? In the real world the speaker simply relies on the feedback from her listener

and adjusts her speech to the reaction she receives. But for the dreamer the situation is practically the same. Since the listeners in the dream are part of the dream world and their linguistic practice is thus perfectly parallel to the dream world by hypothesis, the dreamer cannot recognize that the meaning of her words lacks justification. So even if the dreamed language would be a private language in the sense of being encapsulated into a solitary mind, there is no possibility to reveal it to the dreamer in that skeptical scenario.

To sum up, different dream scenarios have differently strong assumptions to ground the possibility of a language in a dream. The gravest problem for such languages is that of being a private language. But according to the two counterarguments above, this problem is not as fatal as it might seem. A skeptic might still argue that as a dreamer she might have had reliable contact to the external world, getting properly acquainted with its objects and language and thereafter being in a dream where her language could be in an absolute concord with the dream world. In the end, her hypothesis of being possibly in a dream will still remain meaningful, linguistically at least.