

“Je suis une Cartésienne”? Dream and reality in an Annie Saumont fiction

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Abstract. I consider the question of whether Annie Saumont is simply a disciple of Descartes in her fiction “You Should Have Changed at Dol.” Other interpretations are available according to which her commitments are more qualified.

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What to make of Annie Saumont’s story “You Should Have Changed at Dol?” Is it just sending out a message “To any foreigners attempting the task: this is what a proper French philosophical fiction actually looks like”? It may seem very Cartesian, at first read, but I think there is room for another interpretation.

I attribute the following theses to Descartes:

(Indistinguishable thesis) For any perceptual experience had while awake, there could be a dream experience which is indistinguishable from it in feel.

(Narrative coherence test) The way for a person to determine whether an experience of theirs is from a dream is whether they can only include it in a coherent narrative of their life by treating it as a dream experience.

Descartes commits himself to the first thesis in the first meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. His appeal to dreams to doubt his beliefs requires that any perceptual experience – any sensory experience of perceiving – can occur in a dream, or an experience with an identical feel from within can. The second thesis is one he asserts towards the end of the sixth and final meditation. He writes:

For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are. If, while I am awake, anyone were suddenly to appear to me and then disappear immediately, as happens in sleep, so that I could not see where he had come from or where he had gone to, it would not be unreasonable for me to judge that he was a ghost, or a vision created in my brain, rather than a real man. But when I distinctly see where things come from and where and when they come to me, and when I connect my perceptions of them with the whole of the rest of my life without a break, then I am quite certain that when I encounter these things I am not asleep but awake.

The second thesis requires clarification regarding what “coherent” means. I am going to skip past this daunting task and point out how Saumont’s story is consistent with rejecting these theses, on any worthwhile clarification.

The narrator takes sleeping pills, making Saumont’s story consistent with the following thesis:

(On-drugs-indistinguishable thesis) For any perceptual experience had while awake, there could be a dream experience which is indistinguishable from it in feel, if one is taking certain drugs or medication.

This thesis is more qualified than the plain indistinguishable thesis, though it does not rule the plain one out (or endorse it). It is the most obvious way in which Saumont’s story is not necessarily Cartesian.

The dream experience in the story happens indoors on a train. The narrator has an experience of observing troubling events from the past and actually pulls the

emergency cord. Towards the end of the story, she is outside and the seagulls above make “an enormous din.” (2008: 24) When contemplating how Cartesian the story is, there is a question of whether it is much easier to have an experience one has trouble distinguishing from reality when indoors, or specifically indoors and on a train. The story is consistent with the following thesis:

(Indoors-indistinguishable thesis) Only for some perceptual experiences had while indoors could there be dream experiences which are indistinguishable from them in feel.

When travelling, the insides of trains seem to be more dream-like places to me, I should say.

In Descartes’ text, no explicit role is accorded to other minds, but the judgments of others regarding what is dream and what is not play an important role in the Saumont story. After pulling the emergency cord, the narrator is accused of interfering with the functioning of the train without good reason. And here is a quotation from when she is later in court:

If in danger pull the cord. I thought I was in danger. The judge puts a question. What kind of danger? Insistent, can you be precise? I shout that they were certainly intending to throw him out of the carriage door. Who? The boy. What are you talking about, says the judge. I mumble, No it was in my dream. The judge stares at me, You must learn to be wary of dreams. (2008: 22)

The judge’s “What are you talking about?” seems to influence her at this point to conclude “No, it was in my dream.” While reflecting, I think it is natural to interpret the story as expressing a commitment to this thesis:

(Other minds thesis) The judgments of others, and some acceptance of those judgments, are necessary if one is to distinguish dream experience from reality.

But there are enough other things going on in the story that it is unclear whether it should be read as committed to this or some more qualified thesis, according to which judgments by others are necessary for this end in more specific conditions, such as when taking certain pills. (Also one might speculate that she would have come to the conclusion that events with the boy were in a dream anyway and the judge's forceful question merely leads her to arrive at the conclusion more quickly.)

Finally, there is the role of a naturalistic worldview: a worldview which denies the existence of supernatural entities. The narrator does not appear to believe in ghosts. She "finds" a cause for her dream experience:

In 1944 there was an attack between Dol and Saint-Malo. They were intending to bomb the track during the night. A delay caused the tragedy. The little morning train was blown to bits, reduced to ashes in the fire. I was the victim of a hallucination, I must have read that article in my first year at uni in the course of some academic work on the destruction of the City of Saint-Malo—five hundred cubic metres of rubble in the war in 1940. (2008: 21)

Without certain background assumptions, she would have reason to take herself as seeing ghosts rather than having a vivid dream caused by an article she had read. From his example, Descartes seems to think that identifying causes has a role to play in determining what is dream and what is not, but he does not consider to what extent this is affected by one's conception of what there is. (By the way, why the change of dates in the quotation?)

Saumont's story seems consistent with the two theses from Descartes identified and shares common ground with his earlier text, in treating themes of dreams and ghosts and methods of distinguishing what is real and what not. But her story is also consistent with other theses, mostly more qualified or restricted ones. And it raises complicated questions of how the task of distinguishing dream from waking experience relates to one's total system of beliefs, notably whether one believes in the supernatural.

References

Descartes, R. (translated and edited by J. Cottingham) 1996. *Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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