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**“A Transcendental  
Approach to Dream  
Skepticism”**

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## A Transcendental Approach to Dream Skepticism

Simone Nota

### ABSTRACT

How can we know we are not dreaming? In this essay, I tackle this and related questions from a transcendental standpoint, by building a philosophical narrative centred upon three “giants”: Descartes, Kant, and Putnam. From each, I take some ideas and discard some others, with the aim of developing a historically informed, yet original, transcendental approach to dream scepticism. I argue that dreams can be distinguished from objective cognitions, since they do not regularly fulfil the transcendental conditions of such cognitions, e.g. the conditions of linguistic reference. Indeed, drawing on some insights by G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein, I further argue that the formulations of dream scepticism prove nonsensical: they cannot be *linguistically* understood. However, reflection on these skeptical formulations may lead us to a clear *aesthetic* understanding of the transcendental conditions of sense, as well as of the meaning of philosophically problematic words like “dream,” “perception,” and “reality.”

KEYWORDS: *Dream Skepticism, Transcendental Philosophy, Descartes, Kant, Putnam.*

### RESUMEN

¿Cómo podemos saber que no estamos soñando? En este ensayo, abordo ésta y otras cuestiones relacionadas desde un punto de vista trascendental, construyendo una narrativa filosófica centrada en tres “gigantes”: Descartes, Kant y Putnam. De cada uno de ellos tomo algunas ideas y descarto otras, con el fin de desarrollar un enfoque trascendental históricamente informado, aunque original, del escepticismo sobre los sueños. Sostengo que estos pueden distinguirse de las cogniciones objetivas, ya que no suelen cumplir las condiciones trascendentales de tales cogniciones, por ejemplo, las condiciones de la referencia lingüística. De hecho, basándome en algunas ideas de G. E. Moore y Wittgenstein, sostengo además que las formulaciones del escepticismo onírico resultan carentes de sentido: no pueden comprenderse *lingüísticamente*. Sin embargo, la reflexión sobre estas formulaciones escépticas puede llevarnos a una clara comprensión *estética* de las condiciones trascendentales del sentido, así como del significado de palabras filosóficamente problemáticas como “sueño”, “percepción” y “realidad”.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *escepticismo sobre los sueños, filosofía trascendental, Descartes, Kant, Putnam.*

*Life and dreams are leaves of one and the same book. The systematic reading is real life, but when the actual reading hour (the day) has come to an end, and we have the period of recreation, we often continue idly to thumb over the leaves and turn to a page here and there without method or connexion.*

— Schopenhauer

## I. INTRODUCTION

How can we know we are not dreaming? Is there a sure criterion that can allow us to distinguish between oneiric visions and perceptions of reality? Or should we rather concede that what we take to be perceptions, as well as the reality we take ourselves to perceive, might just be dreams? Such are the questions of *dream skepticism*: the skeptical view that we may never *know* whether we are dreaming or not.

In this essay, I will tackle these questions through a philosophical narrative centred upon three “giants”: Descartes, Kant, and Putnam. From each I will take something, and discard something else, with the aim of developing a comprehensive *transcendental approach* to dream skepticism, which identifies the criterion of demarcation between dreams and perceptions of reality in the necessary conditions for the possibility of our objective cognition, or better in their *fulfilment*. I will argue that dreams do not regularly fulfil these transcendental conditions, and thus can be distinguished from representations of the external world (objective cognitions). Exactly for this reason, however, I will also argue by the end of the paper that the seeming hypotheses of dream skepticism turn out to be *nonsensical*: a ladder to be kicked away once we are done with it, ascension upon which can bring us to philosophical understanding.

My discussion is in 4 sections. In § I, I discuss the canonical version of dream skepticism presented by Descartes. After a brief examination of his so-called dream argument, and its development in the evil demon scenario, I will argue that Descartes anticipated the transcendental approach to dream skepticism, identifying in a subject’s existence a necessary condition for the possibility of consciousness and, thereby, of conscious states like dreams.<sup>1</sup> However, Descartes needed the *transcendent* assumption that there is a God to ensure that we do not just dream, but

also represent the external world. He thus falls short of realizing the full potential of a transcendental approach to dream skepticism.

In § II, I will argue that Kant was the first to understand such potential. Kant turned Descartes' table, by arguing that we could not even be conscious of our own mental states if there weren't enduring objects in space that we can perceive. Thus, if in dreams we are conscious of mental imagery, then it is a necessary condition for the possibility of dreaming that *there is* a perceivable external world. However, Kant's solution to dream skepticism relies on his transcendental idealism, that turns perceivable reality into *appearances* connected according to necessary rules (i.e. the categories). Can we keep the same anti-skeptical benefits without having to pay the steep metaphysical price?

In § III, I will search for an answer, by slightly tweaking Putnam's brains in a vat scenario to fit dream skepticism. I will argue that, for Putnam, it is a necessary condition for the possibility of entertaining this scenario that our words (e.g. "vat") refer to objects in the external world (e.g. the vat), and that it is a necessary condition for the possibility of objective reference that there be a perceptual relation between the speakers and the external world. However, *if* we are brains in a vat, we are not perceptually related to an enduring external world, and thus our words "we are brains in a vat" could not mean that we are brains in a vat but, at most, that we are brains in a vat *in the dream-images*. The very attempt to entertain the scenario thus undermines itself. Putnam concludes that we cannot be brains in a vat, and this requires no appeal to Kant's transcendental idealism.

However, Putnam is inferring a metaphysical impossibility from a conceptual one. Drawing on some insights from G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein, I will argue in § IV that this is a blunder. The upshot of the transcendental approach to dream skepticism is not that scenarios like Descartes' evil demon or Putnam's brains in a vat are metaphysically impossible. It is rather that they are *nonsensical*, since their formulation stretches beyond breaking point words like "dream", "perception", and "reality". It links them into strings of signs that cannot be *linguistically* understood, and from which nothing metaphysical follows, since *nothing follows from nonsense*.

I certainly won't be the first to claim that radical skeptical scenarios are nonsensical. Yet the original contribution of the paper will lie in its final argument, to the effect that the formulations of dream skepticism are examples of *creative nonsense*, which can be *aesthetically* understood, and reflection on which can lead us to a recognition of the transcendental

conditions of sense – and thereby to clarity on concepts such as <dream>, <perception>, and <reality>.

## I. DESCARTES

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes famously presented a battery of skeptical arguments aimed at calling into doubt most of what we take ourselves to know. For example, we believe we know that there is an external world (external, that is, to our subjective mental states), and that we experience such a world most of the time, as waking beings. Right now, say, I firmly believe that *there is* a laptop on which I am typing these very words, and that I am (veridically) *perceiving* it. But could I not, in fact, be dreaming? This is the thrust of Descartes' so-called dream argument.

The natural reaction to this sort of argument is to object that there is a qualitative difference between dream-states and waking-states, like perceptions. I seem to have a distinct sense of *reality* when I stretch out my hands toward my keyboard and its *hard* keys, feeling their *resistance* to my touch, and hearing their distinctive *click*. Except, as Descartes noted, some dreams *feel real*. Perhaps I am now enjoying one of those “realistic” dreams. Perhaps I am just *dreaming* the hardness of the keys, their resistance to my touch, and the distinctive sound they make when pressed.

The qualitative or phenomenological criterion for sorting out dreams from waking-states, such as perceptions, thus seems like a non-starter. Indeed, after ruling it out, Descartes goes as far as writing:

As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep. [*Meditations*, I, p. 13]

But is this not too quick? In effect, an objector might well disagree by saying something like: “I readily grant you, Descartes, that there are some realistic dreams. But dreams are mental states that are *reproductive* by nature. In dreams, we imaginatively<sup>2</sup> reassemble items that we have previously perceived, such as colours, shapes, sounds, and tactile sensations. For surely, we can't conjure up dreams out of nothing!” The objector here is claiming that there is another demarcating criterion between dreams and waking states like perceptions: the former are parasitic upon the latter, since only perceptions give us the *materials* out of which

dreams are constructed: colours, shapes, sounds, tactile sensations, etc. To paraphrase Shakespeare, “dreams are such stuff as perceptions are made on”.<sup>3</sup>

Now, to this sort of objection, Descartes also has an answer: *extending the scope of his dream hypothesis from a local to a global one*. After all, could it not be that what we take to be the materials of our perceptions, and even the external objects we take ourselves to perceive, are just the items of a colossal dream, conjured up by some powerful deceiver? This is the thrust of Descartes’ evil demon scenario:

I will suppose therefore that [...] some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely *the delusions of dreams* [*Judificationes somniourum*] which [the demon] has devised to ensnare me [*Meditations*, I, p. 15; my emphasis].

Here, Descartes is suggesting that what we take to be our perceptions of reality, as well as the reality we take ourselves to perceive, might be nothing but an oneiric play orchestrated by the evil demon. And how can we ever be sure we are not in that predicament [AT X, p. 511<sup>4</sup>]?

Pondering questions such as these, it seems that not even the demarcating criterion whereby dreams are materially parasitic upon perceptions, and hence upon the reality perceived, works out. As a result, we are tempted to conclude that we can never rule out the hypothesis that “it is all a dream”, thereby resigning ourselves to the possibility that we cannot *know* what we ordinarily take ourselves to know: that our perceptions, as well as the reality perceived, are *not* “the delusions of dreams”. However, Descartes has an indirect path to avoid this skeptical conclusion – one which, as I will argue below, anticipates Kant’s transcendental approach to dream skepticism.

In effect, Descartes is not a dream skeptic himself, but rather someone who makes methodological use of the explosive doubts of dream skepticism, with the aim of arriving at an unshakable foundation: an item of knowledge so certain that not even the evil demon scenario might undermine. This item of knowledge, of course, is Descartes’ *cogito*, often expressed by the formula *I think, therefore I am*. Rivers of ink have been spilt on the *cogito*, and I won’t add much here. I will only briefly discuss it in the framework of our discussion on dreaming and the transcendental approach to dream skepticism.

Descartes has quite a *broad* conception of thinking, that includes most conscious mental states and/or attitudes such as doubting, intending, affirming, negating, wanting, *imagining*, and feeling [*Meditations*, II, p. 19; and III, p. 24] Further, like some contemporary philosophers, Descartes links dream states to our *imagination* [*ibid.*; cf. footnote 2], which is “a special mode of thinking” [*Meditations*, VI, p. 54]. This would mean that imaginative dream-states are forms of (conscious experience like) thinking for Descartes. If so, we can propose a dream-version of his cogito: *somnio, ergo sum* – I dream, therefore I am.<sup>5</sup> Or rather: *insofar as I dream*, I am. This second formulation is more accurate, since it is faithful to the conditional or *hypothetical* character that Descartes envisioned for the cogito [*Meditations*, II, p. 17<sup>6</sup>], which would extend to the dream-cogito: *if I dream, I must also exist.*<sup>7</sup>

Now, the evil demon scenario works exactly under the *hypothesis* that I am dreaming. But if I am dreaming, I also *am* (the conscious being who is dreaming).<sup>8</sup> To put it otherwise, the evil demon can make me dream up all sorts of non-existent things. But insofar as I dream at all, my own existence is not dreamt, for it is rather necessary for the possibility of my dreams. Thus, we can also rewrite the dream-version of the cogito as the following modally modified conditional:

The dream-cogito: *Necessarily, if I dream, then I am.*

In recognizing a subject’s existence as a necessary condition for the possibility of conscious states like dreams, Descartes anticipated Kant’s transcendentalism to a significant extent. In fact, as insightfully noted by Barry Stroud [(2011), pp. 127-8], Descartes’ strategy was to extend the certainty of the cogito to anything that can be seen to be a necessary condition of *its* possibility, in a regressive *chain of necessary conditions*. Applied to the *dream-cogito*, this means that anything that can be seen to be necessary for the possibility of my existence, which, in turn, is necessary for the possibility of my dreams, will be as invulnerable to doubt as the dream-cogito itself.

The problem is that Descartes falls short of fully realizing the potential of the *transcendental* approach to dream skepticism, for he ultimately resorts to transcendent assumptions. To see this, consider the following. Having countenanced the seeming possibility that (our perception of) the external world might just be a dream, Descartes now needs to rule out its actuality, to maintain that we *do* perceive and sometimes even know the external world. Given the method outlined above, he can



only ever do that by inferring from the *internal* awareness of the cogito to the *external* existence of the world. But how can Descartes bridge the *gap* between internal and external?<sup>9</sup>

It is at this point that Descartes plays the transcendent God card. Or rather, by playing this card, Descartes mixes up the transcendent and the *transcendental*: a category mistake that Kant would have later found unforgivable [A296/B352; *Prolegomena*, 4:374n]. In effect, Descartes' idea is that it is a necessary condition of my existence, and hence of my thinking (imagining, dreaming, etc.), that there be a God who created me [*Meditations*, III, p. 31-35<sup>10</sup>]. This God is benevolent, and not at all malicious [*Meditations*, IV, p. 37]. He wouldn't want me to be mistaken all the time. Thus, *He* – God – would guarantee the truth of the belief that there is an external world that I perceive [*Meditations*, VI, p. 55]. *He* would guarantee that I am not dreaming right now (as I type these words, utterly convinced that I am doing so in reality). *He* would guarantee that my experience, and the reality I take myself to experience, are not just dreams. In a way, Descartes thus makes God's benevolence into the *ultimate* criterion of demarcation between dreams and (perceptions of) reality.<sup>11</sup>

Pace Descartes, however, a benevolent God's existence is not certain at all. Thus, we now need to turn to a full-fledged transcendental — as opposed to transcendent — approach to dream skepticism. Enter Kant.

## II. KANT

Kant saw the potential of Descartes' strategy. Indeed, Kant never dreams of challenging Descartes' *cogito*. He never calls into question the certainty of my conscious mental states, and thereby my existence, as a condition of the enjoyment of conscious mental states. "For I am indeed conscious [...] of my representations; thus, these exist, and I myself, who has these representations" [A370]. To put it in Kant's own jargon, I indubitably have an *inner experience* of myself and my representations.

That would be an agreeable starting point for a dream skeptic or even for someone who, like Descartes, employs dream skepticism methodologically. These philosophers never doubt that we have "inner" experiences such as dreams. Only, they want to insinuate the doubt that this is all we have – that there is no "outer" perception, and no external world to be perceived. The whole point of Descartes' evil demon hypothesis is exactly to insinuate this doubt. According to it, we cannot *know* whether what we take to be (our perception of) reality is just a dream. To free

himself from this doubt, Descartes had to call on God, as a necessary condition for the possibility of the existence of myself and my mental states – indeed, as a guarantor of the *truth* of the belief that there is a perceivable external world. But this, as we have seen, is a conflation of the transcendental and the transcendent.

Now, Kant wants to bring Descartes' strategy a step further, liberating it from the transcendent residue. The trick is to find a necessary condition for the possibility of the awareness of my mental states, and of the existence of myself who enjoys them – one that ensures that there is a perceivable external world *without slipping back into transcendent assumptions*, such as that of God's existence. If this can be done, then it can be argued on purely transcendental grounds that it isn't "all a dream". But can it be done?

To answer the question, we need to piece together different parts of Kant's first *Critique*, especially the first analogy, the refutation of idealism, and the fourth paralogism. At all these junctures of the *Critique*, Kant is concerned with the awareness of my representations, and specifically of their *change*. For example, I am aware of change of appearances [A182-9/B224-232], whenever I experience a colour-change – say, the change undergone by a banana when it turns from green to yellow. Granted, I could just be *dreaming* this colour change [cf. Sacks (2006), § V]; but even if I were dreaming, I would nonetheless be aware of the change. For the dream skeptic's sake, let us suppose that I am indeed dreaming.

Now, according to the *dream-cogito*, if I am dreaming, I exist as the conscious being who dreams. As a result, insofar as I am dreaming a change of appearances, then I am also conscious of my existence. Indeed, I am conscious of my existence as *determined in time* [B275], since I am experiencing the *change of my own representations* (here, dream-images). But to experience such a change *as* change, there must be something fixed, stable, or *enduring* [ibid.], against the background of which the change is *intelligible*. This enduring "something" *cannot* be found within the empirical (temporally determined) consciousness of myself, for there one just finds the ever-changing representations of a self who likewise changes in time [ibid; cf. Bxxxix-Bxl, fn.]. Thus, if there wasn't something enduring *in the external world* (i.e. in space), that I previously *perceived*, I could not so much as dream a change of appearances (e.g. the banana turning from green to yellow). Or so Kant argues.

To put it more simply, Kant argues that there could not even be "inner" experiences such as dreams, if there weren't also "outer" perceptions of *reality* [see Bxl, fn.]. Indeed, for Kant, it is a necessary condition for the possibility of dreams that there *be* perceivable enduring objects [cf. A377].

In this view, dreams are parasitic upon perceptions of reality after all. Not, however, merely in a material sense, but also in a *formal* sense. For Kant's point is that I could not even enjoy a dream, if the external world did not contain objects that exhibit a certain *form, order, or regularity*, which comes down to the necessary conditions for the possibility of their experience.

In the case at hand, the existence of *enduring spatiotemporal objects* in reality – objects that do not, say, appear and disappear randomly – is a necessary or formal<sup>12</sup> condition for the possibility of my experience of change. This formal feature of reality and its experience, in turn, is necessary if I am to dream (of changes etc.), imaginatively<sup>13</sup> reproducing something that I earlier perceived [cf. B278], or that, at any rate, is *perceivable*. In this sense, Kant can write that “without perception [of reality] even fictions and dreams are not possible” [A377].

To recap, according to Kant, my dreams are possible only if my perceptions of the external world are possible, and these in turn are possible only if there are enduring spatiotemporal objects, i.e. *substances*, that I can perceive. But we can work our way back through the chain of necessary conditions even more. For, given Kant's transcendental deduction [see A95-130 and B129-169], perceivable reality would itself be impossible without a *transcendental* subject who synthesizes appearances in the concept <object>, according to *absolutely a priori* rules, namely categories such as <substance>. And it is exactly this rule-governed synthesis or connection, Kant believes, that provides the *transcendental criterion* for distinguishing between dreams and *objective* cognitions like perceptions:

The difference between truth and dream [...] is not decided through the quality of the representations [e.g. how real they feel] but through their connection according to the rules that determine the combination of representations in the concept of an object, and how far they can or cannot stand together in one experience. [*Prolog*, 4:290]

The idea here is that one can distinguish dreams – which for Kant are “deceptive representations, to which objects do not correspond” [A376] – from *objective* cognitions, since in the latter appearances are always systematically connected according to transcendental rules (the categories) into one coherent experience. The criterion of demarcation between dreams and perceptions of objective reality – indeed, the very criterion of *objectivity* – thus becomes this systematic unification of appearances according to universal rules [A451/B479]. “Object [...] is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united” [B137].

To put it otherwise, we can *in principle* distinguish dreams from (perceptions of) reality, since reality and our perception of it exhibit an *unfailing regularity* that dreams do not. Sure, some dreams are realistic or “phenomenologically smooth” [cf. Wright (1991), p. 106]: they are *actually* indistinguishable from (perceptions of) reality. But Kant’s point is one about *possibility*. In general, it is *possible* for us to distinguish dreams and (perceptions of) reality, only because it is *possible* that regularity breaks down *in dreams* – e.g. that items start to appear and disappear intermittently, or events sprout out of nowhere, without a previous cause. The problem of the *individual* dream that is “phenomenologically smooth” does not bother Kant, who is satisfied with a *general* criterion of demarcation, which serves us perfectly well in ordinary circumstances to sort out dreams from (perceptions of) reality [*Prol*, 4:337].<sup>14</sup>

One might protest that dream skeptics, or even philosophers who like Descartes make a methodological use of dream skepticism, are not interested in “ordinary circumstances”. The evil demon scenario, for one, has nothing ordinary. But even though Kant could concede that I may not *actually* know whether I am in this scenario right now, his point would be that it must be *possible* for me to know, otherwise the scenario would not make sense at all.<sup>15</sup> For how could I suppose to be in such a dream scenario, if it were impossible for me to know the difference between dreams and (perceptions of) reality, and so to know what a *dream scenario* is? I must then have a *criterion* that makes it possible for me to demarcate between dreams and (perceptions of) reality, and this criterion exactly lies in the regular *fulfilment of the transcendental conditions*, and more precisely in my rule-governed connection of appearances in the concept of an object.

In fact, Kant’s view not only solves the problem of demarcation between dreams and (perceptions of) reality, but also the problem of the alleged gap between “inner” and “outer”. Descartes believed that there was an *inferential* step from the inner awareness of my mental states (e.g. appearances) to the existence of *objects* in the external world. But on his inferentialist view, the inner-outer gap proved to be unbridgeable without the transcendent hypothesis of a benevolent God. If, however, an object *just is* a manifold of appearances connected in my (transcendental) consciousness according to rules, then no inference from “inner” to “outer” is needed, since external objects would be ordered arrays of representations, of which I am *immediately* or *non-inferentially* aware no less than I am aware of my own mental states. Indeed, at *the transcendental level*, external objects *are* mental states for Kant, only ordered in space, rather than simply in time:

External things (bodies) are merely appearances, hence also nothing other than a species of my representations [...] [But being my representations,] external things exist as well as myself, and indeed both exist on the *immediate* testimony of my self-consciousness, only with this difference: the representation of my Self, as the thinking subject, is related merely to inner sense [whose form is time], but the representations that designate extended beings are also related to outer sense [whose form is space]. I am no more necessitated to draw inferences in respect of the reality of external objects than I am in regard to the reality of the objects of my inner sense (my thoughts), for in both cases they are nothing but representations, the immediate perception (consciousness) of which is at the same time a sufficient proof of their reality. [A370-1]

Every outer perception therefore immediately proves something real in space, or rather is itself the real. [A375]

But now, if we are immediately or non-inferentially aware that *there is* a perceivable external world, then the hypothesis that “it is all a dream” just crumbles, and without appeal to a transcendent God.

With his philosophy, Kant thus offers a *transcendental* solution to both the demarcation problem and the gap problem, and thereby to the main philosophical puzzles posed by dream skepticism. There is, however, a price to pay. And the price, of course, is Kant’s transcendental idealism, namely the doctrine that the objects of our perception are to be regarded as “*mere representations* and not things in themselves, and accordingly that space and time are forms of our intuitions” that determine the (outer or inner) way in which we represent [A369; my emphasis].

It is safe to say that not everyone will be willing to pay such a hefty metaphysical price, namely that of transforming perceivable reality into a rule-governed spatiotemporal system of interconnected *representations* [cf. Stroud (1994), p. 235; and (2011), p. 135]. Indeed, the price seems too high even to quell the dream skeptic’s doubts. Thus, the question arises: Could we keep the anti-skeptical benefits of Kant’s transcendental approach, without the metaphysical lumber of his idealism?<sup>16</sup> Enter Putnam.

### III. PUTNAM

Putnam is famous for having entertained the 20th-century version of Descartes’ evil demon scenario, namely the brains in a vat scenario:

imagine that a human being (you can imagine this to be yourself) has been subjected to an operation by an evil scientist. The person's brain (your brain) has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc; but really all the person (you) is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses travelling from the computer to the nerve endings [RTH, pp. 5-6].

We can easily tweak this fictional scenario into one fit for dream skepticism. Instead of hallucinatory experiences that are phenomenologically indistinguishable from perceptions of the external world, we can imagine the evil scientist programming the super-computer to cause a constant REM state in the brain in a vat, which results in a colossal dream that is likewise phenomenologically smooth. If the brain in a vat is more than one – if there are multiple brains in a vat – then the dream will be a *collective* one of the sort experienced by the protagonists of the movie *Inception*.

Like Descartes' evil demon scenario, Putnam's (tweaked) brains in a vat scenario triggers the question: How can we know that we are not in this predicament [ibid.]? And like Kant's, Putnam's answer hinges on *the preconditions of objective cognition*. Indeed, Putnam wants to check whether *the brains in a vat hypothesis* fulfils certain transcendental conditions, namely those of objective *reference*. More specifically, he wants to check whether the words employed to articulate the brains in a vat scenario can so much as refer to reality, thereby describing a scenario that is *really possible* and in which we may find ourselves. It is in this sense that Putnam writes:

my procedure has a close relation to what Kant called a 'transcendental' investigation; for it is an investigation [...] of the preconditions of reference and hence of thought - preconditions built into the nature of our minds themselves, though not (as Kant hoped) wholly independent of empirical assumptions. [RTH, p. 16]

The last part of the passage is important, since Putnam wants to derive his anti-skeptical conclusion – that we *cannot be* brains in a vat – starting from premises that are not entirely independent of empirical assumptions. This procedure is still *a priori*, only “not in [Kant's] old ‘absolute’ sense” [ibid.], but rather in a *relativized* sense of the phrase, that points to conditions that are necessary for the possibility of objectivity, while not being wholly independent of experiences [cf. Reichenbach (1965), Ch. V]. Yet

what are these assumptions or premises from which one could derive relatively *a priori* the conclusion that we cannot be brains in a vat?

The main one is this: “the mind has no access to external things or properties except apart from that provided by the senses” [RTH, p. 16]. Among other things, Putnam is thus assuming that it is a necessary condition for the possibility of reference to external objects that we are in a causal relation with some such objects [ibid.],<sup>17</sup> of the sort that obtains in *perception* [ibid., p. 11]. But once we countenance this condition, Putnam argues, we can reason (relatively) *a priori* to the conclusion that we cannot be brains in a vat. How does the argument exactly work?

Well, except for their connection to the vat, the brains at stake are not in a causal relation to much, and sure enough they do not *perceive* anything, lacking senses as they do. For example, although a brain in a vat might have the dream-experience of a tree-image, it cannot perceive a *tree*, since it is not in *direct* causal contact with trees in the external world. (Even if it were in distant causal relations with trees, the brain in a vat could not be sensitive to their continued existence, which is necessary for perceiving external *objects*.) Indeed, Putnam goes as far as imagining a scenario in which there are no trees in the external world [RTH, p. 12]. In this scenario, the brain in a vat could continue to enjoy its dreamy tree-*images*. More than that, during its dream experience, the dreaming brain (or person) could say “there is a tree in front of me” [RTH, p. 13]. But the word “tree”, as deployed by a brain in a vat, could not *refer* to trees, since we are now under the hypothesis that there are no trees in the external world, but only, say, vats and brains [ibid.].

This failure of reference to external objects is the kernel of Putnam’s argument. The strategy is to extend the reasoning from the word “tree” to all other words that brains in a vat could utter in their dream, including the word “vat”. Thus, *if* we are brains in a vat, then we could not think or say that we are, since the word “vat” in the sentence “we are brains in a vat” could not refer to the *real* vat, which the brains in a vat do *not* perceive, but at best to a vat-*image* that is part of the colossal dream caused by the super-computer [RTH, pp. 14-5]. Indeed, the words “we are brains in a vat”, if uttered in the colossal dream, would not mean what we initially supposed they could mean, namely that we *really* are brains in a vat; rather, they would mean that we are brains in a vat *in the dream*. But then, *if* we are brains in a vat, nothing counts as thinking or saying that we *really* are brains in a vat. Indeed, the very attempt to entertain this dream skeptical scenario leads – Putnam argues – to a conceptual impossibility [RTH, p. 16].

The (tweaked) argument shows once again that the difference between dreams and perceptions of reality is not to be cashed out in qualitative or phenomenological terms, since our sleepy brains in a vat would experience dreams that are phenomenologically indistinguishable from perceptions of reality. Rather, the difference is a *transcendental* one. Dreams do not fulfil the necessary conditions for the possibility of reference to *objects*. These conditions, Putnam believes in agreement with Kant, are ultimately *conceptual*, and not just phenomenological [RTH, pp. 17-21]. For only the regularity of concepts can allow us to stably refer to an external reality. However, differently from Kant, Putnam does not believe that concepts are mental representations. They are, he tells us, “*signs* used in a certain way” [RTH, p. 18], namely according to rules, and the criterion of their possession is our *ability* to employ the signs in the appropriate circumstances [RTH, pp. 19-20].

Notice that, while relying on the transcendental method, Putnam’s argument does not rely on Kant’s transcendental idealism. Put otherwise, for both Kant and Putnam, the criterion of demarcation between dreams and (perception of) reality would be transcendental: fulfilment of the necessary conditions for the possibility of objective cognition, such as the conditions of reference to external objects. But external objects, for Putnam as opposed to Kant, are not appearances ordered by mental concepts – though they are objects *we humans* can refer to and think about, given our perceptual capacities *and* conceptual repertoires [see RTH, pp. 52-5].<sup>18</sup> Our perceptions are *always* already infused with our concepts [see RTH, pp. 137-8], in such a way that we can refer to external objects. There’s no need to bridge any inner-outer gap, i.e. to crawl our way out from the dreamy images of the Cartesian type of mind. Indeed, that is just a “disastrous” philosophical picture for Putnam [see (1987), pp. 6-7].

The bottom line is that, for Putnam, insofar as we refer to any *object*, we cannot so much as think that we are brains in a vat. Therefore, he concludes, we cannot really be brains in a vat.

#### IV. A (MOOREAN-WITTGENSTEINIAN) TRANSCENDENTAL APPROACH TO DREAM SKEPTICISM

Are we to stop at Putnam, or could the transcendental approach to dream skepticism still evolve? We have seen how Putnam’s transcendental argument leads him to recognize that we cannot even *think* that we are brains in a vat. However, from the *conceptual* impossibility of thinking



that we are brains in a vat, Putnam wants to draw the *metaphysical* conclusion that we cannot really be brains in a vat. (To put it in a Cartesian first-personal formula: *I cannot think I am a brain in a vat, therefore I am not a brain in a vat.*) But this, I believe, is a blunder.

To see this, consider that the brains in a vat scenario is not logically contradictory *per se*. It tells us that, if I am a brain in a vat, I cannot think or say that I am a brain in a vat. But that's not because there is something inherently contradictory in the concept <brain in a vat> (as there is in the phrase "married bachelor"). In fact, I can easily say "Putnam's brain is in a vat", and this is a perfectly meaningful proposition that refers to Putnam's brain, claiming something false about it, namely that it is in a vat (connected to a super-computer, etc.). What causes the philosophical puzzle is not the concept of <brain in a vat>, but rather the first-personal (singular or plural) formulations, namely "I am a brain in a vat" or "we are brains in a vat". (Or for that matter, "I am deceived by an evil demon" or "we are deceived by an evil demon").

These formulations lead to a *performative* contradiction,<sup>19</sup> which is best described in terms of G. E. Moore's paradox: "I do not believe that *p*, but *p*". It is perfectly possible to believe that something is not the case, when it is really the case. For example, Jones can believe it is not raining, when in fact it is raining. However, barring cases of lying and self-correction, nothing counts *for me* as asserting that "I do not believe that *p*, but *p*", since "in the immense majority of cases in which a person says a thing assertively, he does believe the proposition [*p*] which his words express" [MP, p. 210; cf. pp. 208-9]. Applied to the puzzles of dream skepticism, this means: nothing counts for me as thinking or saying with conviction that "I believe I am not a brain in a vat, but I am a brain in a vat dreaming that...", or "I believe I am not deceived by an evil demon, but there is an evil demon who is making me dream that...", or, more generally, "I believe I am not dreaming, but I am dreaming". All these formulations, which are implicit or explicit in the scenarios of dream skepticism, are not logical contradictions, but *nonsense*.

More precisely, the formulations of dream skepticism generate an *illusion of sense*. I am – or we are – under the impression that they make sense, but if we investigate the transcendental conditions of sense, including the necessary conditions of reference, we come to see they do not fulfil them. For example, it is necessary for the possibility of linguistic reference that *there is* an external world of enduring objects to which we may stably refer; yet if so, I cannot consistently suppose that "the external world is just a dream".

The formulations of dream skepticism thus melt into our hands. Not, however, because they are logical contradictions such as “Putnam’s brain is and is not in a vat at the same time”. Rather, because they are *nonsensical* pseudo-propositions. They seem to articulate genuine hypotheses, but in fact there is nothing they articulate, since they pragmatically<sup>20</sup> violate the transcendental rules which are necessary to say anything with sense at all. In short, these formulations reveal themselves to be “nonsensical hypotheses” [cf. Ramsey (1990), p. 6], characterized by a *sheer lack of sense* [cf. A. W. Moore (1997), p. 198].

I believe that, in his *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein realized something similar:

The argument “I may be dreaming” is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning. [OC, § 383]

If Wittgenstein is right, formulations like “I may be dreaming” lack sense. Again, not because they are logically contradictory, for there is no logical contradiction in the proposition “Wittgenstein is dreaming”. Rather, because they are *incoherent* when put forward in the first-person. The seeming “hypotheses” behind these formulations, when one “attempts” to entertain them, reveal themselves to conflict with the necessary conditions for the meaningfulness of our words (including their *public* rule-governed use, which only admits *external* criteria). They reveal themselves to be *nonsense*. And if they are nonsense, then *nothing can be inferred from nonsense*, especially not the *metaphysical* conclusion that I cannot be in a life-long dream, deceived by an evil demon or scientist, etc.

Where does this leave us? It may seem that the transcendental approach to dream skepticism ultimately destroys much of what we hold to be of value in the philosophy of dreams. Indeed, at this point, it may seem we should resign ourselves to the so-called “resolute” path, declaring that all we are left with are nonsensical strings of signs that we cannot *understand* in any way at all, which at best may bring us to realize their own nonsensicality.<sup>21</sup> In this way, we would have to concede that much of our training as philosophers (all those first-year classes on Descartes!) is “mere nonsense” whose *only* purpose is to ultimately be recognized as such: gibberish that cannot be understood.

I think this is rather a depressing outcome and that we should do anything we can to avoid it. Not just because it threatens our training as philosophers, but because it threatens the very idea of *understanding*. In

effect, in claiming that nonsense cannot be understood, “resolute” philosophers surreptitiously assume that understanding is mostly *propositional* understanding, downplaying forms of understanding that cannot be reduced to (our comprehension of) propositions. For example, we *aesthetically* understand works of art. Indeed, insofar as they are made up of dream-images, there is a good claim that we *aesthetically* understand dreams.

But now, nonsense can conjure up all sorts of images. It may make us *daydream* of evil demons and brains attached to supercomputers. Even “resolute” philosophers would agree on this much [cf. Diamond (2000), p. 159]. If so, however, even nonsense may be aesthetically understood. By “aesthetic understanding” I mean a *non-propositional understanding* associated with sensibility, images, and *feelings*. This does *not* mean that aesthetic understanding has no link whatsoever to thoughts or propositions. For example, it may take a “very great deal of thought” to really understand a Jackson Pollock’s painting [Bell, (1987), p. 237]. But when we finally do, our understanding is not itself expressible by a thought or proposition [ibid.], i.e. it is non-propositional.

Notably, something that is understood aesthetically may be deeply *significant* for us – it may have *non-propositional meaning*.<sup>22</sup> Think not only of works of art, but also of sunsets and life-changing choices. Their meaningfulness can hardly be captured by propositions. Indeed, strange as it may sound, even nonsense may be *significant* for us, especially if is artistically crafted. (Resolute readers of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* spend much of their lives grappling with its nonsensical formulations; if they did not acknowledge that these formulations are *in some way* meaningful, then they should concede that much of their lives is meaningless).

It is then perfectly possible to hold that formulations like “I am right now dreaming”, or “I am deceived by an evil demon”, or “we are brains in a vat”, are pieces of *creative nonsense*, as Kant would have put it [see CP], § 46], that may be deeply significant for us. Such creative formulations are crafted in such a way that reflection upon them may lead us to see that they do not fulfil the transcendental rules of sense. But exactly for this reason, they can help us attain a clear *aesthetic* understanding of the transcendental rules of sense. (Sometimes, we truly understand a rule only by *feeling* that it has been violated, as in the case where, to make us understand that we ought to keep quiet in a cemetery, someone *screams* “YOU MUST NOT SCREAM HERE!”).

In my view, then, the formulations of dream skepticism are *not just* “mere nonsense” that, at best, can lead us to recognize its own nonsensi-

cality. Rather, these formulations are deeply significant methodological tools, that may lead us to recognize the transcendental conditions of sense, by way of reflection on concepts like <dream>, <perception>, <reality>, and on the criteria of linguistic meaningfulness of the correspondent words. These conditions and criteria need not be *absolutely a priori*, as Kant wanted. They could develop organically with empirical assumptions and research. But that does *not* mean they are themselves empirical [cf. OC, § 98]. They are *transcendental*. For they *must* be fulfilled, *if we are to make sense at all*. And the formulations of dream skepticism do not fulfil them.

Of course, we could not see this in the beginning. *Only upon reflection*, it turns out that the formulations of dream skepticism stretch the concepts above *beyond breaking point* – beyond, that is, the transcendental limits of sense, where nonsense awaits [TLP, Preface]. But exactly the experience of this *break* – which coincides with the break of the illusion of sense – may lead us to a clear recognition of the transcendental limits of sense. It is, indeed, a philosophically transformative experience.

Thus, engagement with the formulations of dream skepticism is a deeply significant philosophical exercise, even though we must *ultimately* dispense with these formulations, throwing them away as the (in)famous ladder upon which one has climbed.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have engaged with the philosophical puzzles of dream skepticism from a transcendental vantage point. In developing a comprehensive transcendental approach to dream skepticism, we have ascended a ladder of philosophical giants – Descartes, Kant, and Putnam – taking something from each rung and leaving something else behind. From Descartes, we took the idea of investigating the necessary conditions of dreaming, discarding the view that the ultimate such condition is a benevolent God. From Kant, we took the idea that the demarcating criterion between dreams and perception of reality lies in the regular fulfilment of the transcendental conditions of objective cognition, discarding his transcendental idealism. From Putnam, we took the idea of focusing on the case of linguistic reference, and more generally on the conditions of linguistic sense, discarding his metaphysical conclusion that we cannot be in a colossal dream. In fact, by the end of our philosophical narrative, and with the help of two more giants, namely Moore

and Wittgenstein, we climbed our way beyond Putnam's stance, coming to recognize that the formulations of dream skepticism are nonsensical, since they violate the transcendental conditions or rules of sense. However, the philosophical value of these formulations lies precisely in the violation of these rules, which, insofar as it is recognized through painstaking philosophical reflection, can lead us to a clear *aesthetic* understanding of the rules themselves – rules that govern the meaningful employment of our words, including the words “dream”, “perception”, and “reality”.<sup>23</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will assume that dreams are conscious experiences – or, to use a familiar formula, that there is something it's like to dream [cf. Sprigge (1971), pp. 166-8; and Nagel (1974), p. 441]. This is the received view of dreaming. The view has been challenged, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by Norman Malcolm [(1956)] and Daniel Dennett [(1976)]. However, first, their criticism did not shake the consensus on the experiential assumption, which instead, as argued by Jennifer Windt, is methodologically necessary to make progress in our investigations on dreams [Windt (2015), Ch. 3; cf. p. 42]. And second, the three main “giants” of our narrative, namely Descartes, Kant, and Putnam, all work with the assumption that dreams are conscious experiences [cf. Dennett (1976), p. 151, including fn. 1].

<sup>2</sup> An imagination model of dreaming was common in early modern philosophy, as attested for example by the case of Hume, according to whom dream-states are imaginative states in which we compound “materials afforded us by the senses and experience” [Hume (2007) Section II, §§ 4-5 and Section III, § 1]. Descartes himself links imagination and dreaming [*Meditations*, I, p. 13]. Today, the imagination model of dreaming is enjoying a renaissance [cf. Ichikawa (2008)].

<sup>3</sup> The original quote appears in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on” [Shakespeare (2006), Act 4, Scene 1, p. 107].

<sup>4</sup> “How can you be certain that your life is not a continuous dream [...]?” (my translation from French).

<sup>5</sup> Descartes is very close to saying this himself. Compare [*Meditations*, V, p. 49].

<sup>6</sup> “[I]his proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true, whenever it is put forward by me or conceived by my mind”. Indeed, our second formulation also

highlights the *performative* character of the cogito, discussed by Hintikka [1962]. I return to performativity in the last section, discussing performative contradictions.

<sup>7</sup> As rightly noted by Bernard Williams, “Descartes regards the connection between thinking and existing as a *necessary connection*” [Williams (2005), p. 74; my emphasis].

<sup>8</sup> Descartes writes in fact: “I undoubtedly exist, if [the demon] is deceiving me” [*Meditations*, II, p. 17].

<sup>9</sup> This is what James Conant calls a “Cartesian gap”, that threatens to leave one “sealed inside her own mind, unable to claw her way back out to an unobstructed glimpse of the external world” [Conant (2012), p. 19].

<sup>10</sup> Descartes arrives at this conclusion through an examination of his *idea* of God, but I have cut to the chase for reasons of space.

<sup>11</sup> In the sixth meditation, Descartes proposes a different criterion, namely that “dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are” [*Meditations*, VI, p. 61]. Clearly, however, this criterion presupposes that there is an external world in which to act, which in turn, for Descartes, presupposes that there is a benevolent God: “from the fact that God is not a deceiver it follows that in cases like these [*viz.* where the actions of life are linked seamlessly by memory] I am completely free from error” [*Meditations*, VI, p. 62].

<sup>12</sup> On the connection between necessity and formality, see A. W. Moore (1997), p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> Like Descartes, Kant links dreams with the imagination [B278; A376].

<sup>14</sup> Compare Chalmers: “most dream experiences are unstable and fragmented, and my [objective] experiences aren’t like that” [Chalmers, (2023), p. 453].

<sup>15</sup> Kant holds that the hypothesis that “this life is [...] like a dream” is a “problematic judgement”, “which [...] cannot be refuted, though of course [it] cannot be proved by anything” [A780-1/B808-9]. This means that, for Kant, scenarios like Descartes’ evil demon one *make sense* – though they should only be employed as methodological tools in philosophical disputes, to be “abandon[ed] as soon as [one] has finished off the dogmatic self-conceit of his opponent” [ibid.]. By the end of the paper, I will argue against Kant that similar “hypotheses” are nonsensical, but I will retain Kant’s insight that they can act as methodological tools.

<sup>16</sup> This question can be raised since there is a significant distinction to be made between transcendentalism and transcendental *idealism* – one championed by Peter Strawson [(1959), (1966)], who argued transcendentially but abhorred transcendental idealism. For another take on this distinction, see also Ameriks [(2015), p. 36].

<sup>17</sup> This is a *general* condition, without which we could not refer to an external world *at all*. But it is not on that account a condition that requires us to be in causal relations with *particular* objects in the external world, in order to refer to them. Thus, Putnam holds that we could refer to extraterrestrials, whether we causally interacted with them or not [RTH, p. 52].

<sup>18</sup> That Putnam's view does not rely on Kant's transcendental idealism does not mean that it is not inspired by it, or that it may not be characterized as a form of transcendental idealism in *more general* terms [cf. Strawson (1997)]. For reasons of space, however, I won't be concerned with this issue here.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase "performative contradiction" was coined by Habermas (1990), who took the lead from Apel's (Hintikka-inspired) discussion of Descartes' *cogito* proof [Apel (1975), esp. pp. 264-5; cf. footnote 6 above]. Significantly, Apel links performative contradictions to a "transcendental-pragmatic reflection-insight" [ibid.].

<sup>20</sup> Here, "pragmatically" stands opposed to "logically". Indeed, what I have earlier called "performative contradictions", as opposed to logical ones, have been investigated by Mackie (1964) under the rubric of "pragmatic self-refutation", which concerns the *mode* in which a proposition is put forward (e.g. assertively and in the first person), as opposed to "absolute [viz. logical] self-refutation", which concerns the proposition itself. In the *transcendental-pragmatic* self-refutation examined above, one's attempt to say assertively that "the external world is just a dream" reveals itself to be the *illusion* of an attempt, since it *conflicts* with the necessary conditions for the possibility of language, and thus of any assertion. (Mackie also discusses a third form of self-refutation, namely "operational self-refutation", but this could still fall within the domain of "pragmatic self-refutation", qua *extreme* case of the latter; cf. Mackie (1964), p. 197.

<sup>21</sup> I am here alluding to the "resolute" interpretation of Wittgenstein, and of nonsense more generally, championed by Cora Diamond [e.g. (1988)] and James Conant [e.g. (2002)].

<sup>22</sup> For the view that significance has a non-propositional character, see Parret (1979).

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Jim Levine, whose 'Philosophy of Language' seminar at Trinity College inspired many of the ideas in this essay, as well as Bruno Cortesi, for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

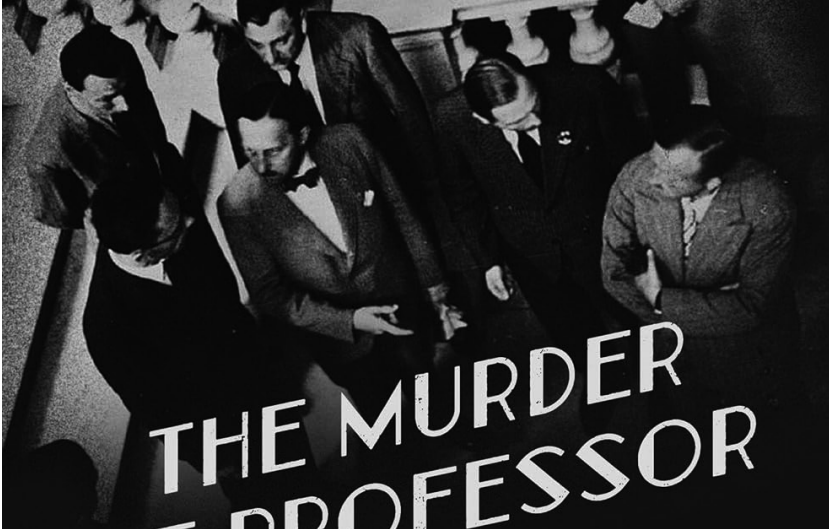
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