



The *Cogito*, Dreamt Characters, and Unreal Existence

Michael-John Turp¹

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Abstract

Borges' *The Circular Ruins* tells the story of a magician who turns out to be a character in a dream. Leibowitz (2021) argues that this scenario undermines the rational indubitability of Descartes' *Cogito*. The magician, he argues, is an unreal appearance and therefore does not exist. I argue that Borges drew a distinction between reality and existence and that he was right to do so. There are various senses of reality and the sense in which a dreamt character is unreal poses no threat to their existence or to the indubitability of the *Cogito*. The magician is unreal because he is a mind-dependent, illusory and fake. Nonetheless, he can be certain that he thinks, therefore he is.

1 Introduction: the Sceptical Argument

Descartes' *Cogito* was intended to be a point of certainty that resists all rational doubt. Naturally, philosophers have suggested various possible counterexamples, from suicidal demons to sincere assertions of non-existence.¹ Recently, Leibowitz (2021) has proposed that Borges' short story, *The Circular Ruins*, gives us rational grounds for doubting our existence. We are confronted with the disquieting possibility that, for all we can be sure, we might be a character in someone's dream. If this were the case, Leibowitz argues, we would be mere appearances. Such phantasmic appearances would be unreal and therefore would not exist. There are rational grounds, therefore, for doubting the *Cogito*. *The Circular Ruins* raises important questions concerning reality, existence, and self-knowledge. However, I shall argue that Borges drew a distinction between

¹ See Sorensen (1988, p. 31) on suicidal demons and Billon (2015) on Cotard's Syndrome.

✉ Michael-John Turp
michael-john.turp@canterbury.ac.nz

¹ Department of Philosophy, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand

reality and existence, and rejected any direct inference from unreality to non-existence. At least, there is textual evidence that this is the view of the magician who is the main character in *The Circular Ruins*. More importantly, I shall argue that Borges (or his magician) would be right to reject a direct inference. The term “real” is multiply ambiguous, and the sense in which a character in a dream is unreal poses no threat either to the character’s existence or to the indubitability of the *Cogito*.

Here is Leibowitz’s central argument (with rationales temporarily omitted for clarity of presentation):

1. I cannot rule out the possibility that I am but appearance in a dream of another.
2. If I cannot rule out the possibility that I am but appearance in a dream of another, then I cannot be absolutely certain that “I am, I exist” is true.
3. If I cannot be absolutely certain that “I am, I exist” is true, then “I am, I exist” is not indubitable.
4. Therefore, “I am, I exist” is not indubitable. (2021, p. 9)²

Let us call this the Sceptical Argument. The argument is valid and premise (3) is a truism within Descartes’ project. While (1) might be challenged, let us allow, for the sake of argument, that *The Circular Ruins* illustrates its possibility.³ There is a possible world at which a thinker of the *Cogito* is but an appearance in a dream of another. Why, however, think that (2) is true? After all, it is not generally the case that uncertainty concerning one’s properties is a reason for uncertainty concerning one’s existence. Leibowitz offers the following rationale:

“Intuitively, there is a distinction between appearance and reality and specifically between the mere appearance of an ‘I’ and its reality; an ‘I’ that is mere appearance does not exist.” (2021, p. 9)

The Sceptical Argument, then, depends on a certain view of the relationship between reality and existence. This is what provides the rationale for (2). I shall argue, however, that it is intuitive that an unreal “I” does not exist only given one sense of reality and not the one that is most pertinent to *The Circular Ruins*. I shall make this case first by noting that existence and reality seem to come apart in Borges’ text and, then, following Chalmers, by distinguishing five senses of reality. Finally, I shall consider possible responses and turn to some concerns about the *Cogito* that were already familiar to Descartes.

² While Cabanchik (2017) independently advances a very similar argument, involving the same inference from the unreality of the magician to his non-existence and on to the dubitability of the *Cogito*, I shall focus here on Leibowitz’s more fully developed version.

³ See Leibowitz (2021, pp. 9–12) for further argument in defense of (1).

2 Borges' Magician and Forms of Reality

Let us start with the interpretative question: did Borges intend the story as a counterexample to the *Cogito*?⁴ There is textual evidence that this is not the view of the central character, a magician who we finally discover is a character in someone else's dream. The magician desires to "dream a man ... in minute entirety and impose him on reality." He first dreams up students and then an "unreal son" (*hijo irreal*). The magician knows full well that his son is his own unreal creation. If he viewed unreality as entailing, or equivalent to, non-existence then we might expect him to conclude that his unreal son does not exist. Instead, the magician understands that his son exists, but that his existence is mind-dependent: "the son I have engendered is waiting for me and will not exist if I do not go to him."⁵ His son is not waiting for him in some sort of state of non-existence. This is the son who the magician has already been instructing in the "mysteries of the universe" for 2 years. The implication is that the son exists so long as the magician goes to him.

The magician is right to resist the move from mind-dependence to non-existence. Mind-dependence is a form of unreality that does not entail non-existence. To the contrary, it seems that an object must exist in order for it to depend, i.e., for its *existence* to depend, on the mind. To illustrate this point, consider the idealist position that reality is fundamentally mental. This seems to be at least epistemically possible. For present purposes, it is hard to see how it could be indubitably refuted at the moment of the *Cogito*. If, however, mind-dependence were a threat to the indubitability of the *Cogito* via the unreality and non-existence of the meditator then the epistemic possibility of idealism would also seem to undermine the *Cogito*. So, either we have a novel and surprising argument against the indubitability of the *Cogito* from idealism or a *reductio* of the inference from the possible mind-dependence of the meditator to the rational dubitability of the *Cogito*. It seems more reasonable to assume the latter. Of course, it might be replied that the particular form of mind-dependence in *The Circular Ruins* leads to an especially troubling form of existence-undermining unreality. We shall return to the story below and consider more carefully the senses in which the magician is unreal and the relationship between his unreality and his supposed non-existence.

The Sceptical Argument depends on the principle that unreality entails non-existence.⁶ However, as already noted, an immediate problem with the move from unreality to non-existence is that "real" and "unreal" are ambiguous. Something can be

⁴ Notice that there is a slightly different interpretative question in the vicinity, namely whether Borges held that the *Cogito* is indubitable. Leibowitz (2021, p. 5) cites a 1981 interview in *El País* in which Borges proclaims that "I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers I have read, all the people I have met, all the women I have loved; all the cities I have visited, all my ancestors." Here, it is not issues particular to *The Circular Ruins*, but the nature of the referent of the 'I' that gives Borges reasons to doubt his existence. I return to the referent of the 'I' in more detail below.

⁵ In the original Spanish "El hijo que he engendrado me espera y no existirá si no voy."

⁶ Here are two examples of Leibowitz apparently relying on this principle: (i) "Alice ... contends that she is real – that she exists" (2021, p. 6) and (ii) "The protagonist ... is 'but appearance' ... In other words, he discovers ... that he *does not exist*" (2021, p. 8).

unreal in one or more senses, while still being real in the sense that it exists. Take the story of Pinocchio who wants to become a “real boy.” His desire to become a real boy is not a desire to exist, perhaps to be promoted from the subsistent realm of Meinongian non-existent objects. No, he exists already. Geppetto brought Pinocchio into existence by carving him from wood. Pinocchio’s unreality has nothing to do with the question of his existence. Similarly, we might imagine Borges’ magician wanting to become a *real* magician, i.e., one who is not a “mere simulacrum” (*de mero simulacro*) and whose existence does not depend on someone else’s dreams. This would be an understandable desire. However, it would no more follow that the magician’s *existence* depended on him becoming a real magician than it follows that Pinocchio’s existence depends on him becoming a real boy.

Leibowitz claims that “there is a natural sense in which something that is only ‘a sort of thing in another’s dream’ ... is *not* real and does *not* exist” (2021, p. 7).⁷ Now, it is true that there is a natural sense in which something that is unreal does not exist. Sometimes to say that something is unreal is indeed to say that it does not exist. The Tooth Fairy for instance. However, this is not the only natural sense of reality and nor is it the most pertinent to Borges’ story. Let us make this point as compelling as possible by putting ourselves in the magician’s shoes. What should the magician conclude about his own reality and existence when he discovers that he is a character in someone else’s dream? Answering this involves spelling out some senses of the term “real.” Here, I will borrow some distinctions from Chalmers’ recent defense of “virtual realism.” In particular, Chalmers distinguishes between five senses of reality, namely: (i) existence, (ii) causal power, (iii) mind-independence, (iv) non-illusoriness, and (v) genuineness (2022, pp. 108–114). There is no suggestion that this list is either exhaustive or definitive.⁸

I will leave (i) existence until the end but take the others in turn. Regarding (ii), the magician seems to have causal powers to the extent that he can affect the dream-world, say by creating his students and unreal son, giving lectures, directing his own thoughts, giving orders, etc. It is true that he is initially deceived concerning the grounds, nature, and extent of his causal powers. But, then, the metaphysics of causation is generally puzzling and such concerns do not generally imperil the *Cogito*. I have already discussed (iii) mind-independence. What is true of the magician’s son is also true of the magician (and there are hints in the story that the magician too might be dreamt within a dream). The fact of his mind-dependence might be why the magician’s understanding that he is dreamt comes “with relief, with humiliation, with terror.”⁹ Despite the magician’s mind-dependence,

⁷ *The Circular Ruins* is a variation on the famous “butterfly dream” in which Zhuangzi wonders whether he is a man who dreamt that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that it is a man. Han also argues that Zhuangzi’s doubt constitutes a counterexample to the *Cogito* on the grounds that the doubt “is first and foremost ... about the reality of the dreaming subject, i.e., the existence of the one who doubts” (2010, p. 157). Again, the inference from unreality to non-existence is too quick.

⁸ See, for example, Tavinor (2021) for more senses of real (and also challenges to Chalmers’ virtual realism).

⁹ Aside from the rather obvious point that it is hard to see how the magician could experience these emotions if he did not exist, it is also unclear, for Epicurean reasons, that these responses would be reasonable.

however, he can be certain that he is a thinking thing. This is for the familiar Cartesian reason that doubt is an instance of thought and, so, to doubt one's mind-independence is to think and to think is to exist. (iv) and (v) concern non-illusoriness and genuineness, and, in each case, there are reasons to think that magician fails the test of reality. He is not, as he appears to himself earlier in the story, a real magician made of flesh and bone (as he discovers by "walking on fire without burning himself"). This is why his causal powers are not what he imagined them to be. They are (perhaps) limited to the stuff of dreams. The magician's own conclusion at the end of the story is that he is "an illusion" (*una apariencia*). Moreover, it seems clear that the magician is not entirely genuine. This is how the magician sees his unreal son—whom he hopes will not discover that he is a "mere simulacrum." When the magician discovers that he is dreamt he might then conclude that he too is a mere simulacrum. In sum, the magician might conclude that he is causally efficacious, mind-dependent, illusory, and not genuine. Should he then conclude that he is unreal in the sense that he does not exist? To the contrary, it seems reasonable for him to conclude that he must exist in order to have these properties.

3 Existence and the Limits of the *Cogito*

Premise 2 of the Sceptical Argument depends on the claim that the magician is unreal and therefore does not exist. Unpacking this more carefully, however, we arrive at the less compelling claim that the magician is mind-dependent, illusory, etc., and therefore does not exist. Are there other grounds for supporting premise 2? One possible answer is that the "I" of the *Cogito* fails to refer when asserted by the magician. Even if the dreamt magician exists, the flesh and blood magician does not. Thus, when the magician asserts "*I think, therefore I am*," there is a reasonable doubt concerning the referent of the "I." If the "I" refers to a flesh and blood magician then the *Cogito* could be falsely asserted. If the magician recognizes that the *Cogito* could be falsely asserted then it is not indubitable.

At least in the context of Descartes' *Meditations*, this worry can be headed off by recognizing that the content of the "I" of the *Cogito* is remarkably thin.¹⁰ Shortly after arriving at the conclusion "I am, I exist" Descartes writes "I know that I exist; the question is, what is this 'I' that I know?" (AT VII.27/CSM II.18). He concedes that he might still be dreaming that his body exists (AT VII.28/CSM II.19). Again, he writes in his *First Replies* to Johannes Caterus that when he questioned his nature and origins following the *Cogito* "I was asking about myself not in so far as I consist of mind and body, but only and precisely in so far as I am a thinking thing." (AT VII.107/CSM II.77). Thus, for Descartes at this stage in his inquiry, the meditator's nature is entirely uncertain beyond the fact that a thinker of the *Cogito* is necessarily a thing that thinks. Descartes has not yet demonstrated, to his own satisfaction, that God exists and is no deceiver. The existence of the external world remains in doubt. He might yet be dreaming or deceived by an Evil

¹⁰ In Russell's terms, it is known by acquaintance rather than by description. See further Donnellan (1990, pp. 109–112).

Demon. Thus, the indubitability of the *Cogito* is compatible with the meditator being radically deceived concerning his own nature. He might be unreal in various ways. He might, for all he knows, be a magician in a dream.

Leibowitz anticipates aspects of this response and offers several replies. First, he argues that inferring the magician's existence from the mere fact of his thought "undercuts the distinction between appearance and reality" (2021, p. 12). I have already argued; however, that the distinction between appearance and reality is not the same as the distinction between existence and non-existence, and that unreality in the sense of mind-dependence does not entail non-existence. Instead, appearance and non-existence are distinct forms of unreality. Second, Leibowitz argues that an advocate of the view that the magician's thought guarantees his existence would require "a *different* argument to demonstrate that there is a sense of 'existence' which is guaranteed by mere thought" (p. 12). There is a familiar old concern in the background that Descartes tried to address. In order to know that the *Cogito* is indubitable, we must first understand it. This means, *inter alia*, that we must understand what it is for something to exist. Do we? And is this understanding demon-proof? The following is from the *Principles*:

"When I said that the proposition *I am thinking therefore I exist* is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way, I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are." (*Prin.* 1:10, AT VIIIa.8/CSM I.196)

Descartes continues by saying that the *Cogito* is the first existential truth, i.e., the first truth about what exists, and that "thought," "existence," and "certainty" are "very simple notions." For Descartes, these notions are innate ideas that are ultimately guaranteed by God (AT VII 37–8; CSM II 26). It is far from obvious that Descartes is right about any of this. Existence is not a very simple notion, but a metaphysically perplexing one. For example, there is room for serious debate about whether being an *object* of thought guarantees existence.¹¹ But although these are genuine concerns, they are not particular to *The Circular Ruins*. In the present context, the magician is not only an object of thought but, *ex hypothesi*, a thinker of thoughts. A sense of "existence" that does not follow from having thoughts, being a thought, or even being a "mere thought," would be highly non-standard. Rather than a special sense of "existence," one need have nothing more in mind than the sense expressed by the expression "there is," the existential quantifier (' \exists '), or a slogan such as "to be is to be a value of a bound variable." The magician exists in these ordinary senses, no matter that he is unreal. By contrast, the Sceptical Argument requires a sense of "existence" according to which the magician's unreality is so much as relevant to his existence, i.e., a sense of existence such that unreality entails non-existence in the present case. However, I have argued that there is no reason to think that the properties of the magician that make him unreal—his mind-dependence,

¹¹ See, for example, Crane (2013).

illusoriness, etc.—undermine his existence. To the contrary, they serve to confirm his existence given the reasonable assumption that non-existent objects cannot bear these kinds of properties, or, indeed, any properties at all.¹²

Third, Leibowitz argues that for the *Cogito* to play its role as an Archimedean point in Descartes' project, existence cannot follow from thought too cheaply. In particular, the claim that the magician exists "cannot be an analytic claim about meanings; it must be a substantive claim with *factual content*" (p. 12). There are two points to be made here. First, the *Cogito* might be indubitable *and* unsuited to play the role Descartes envisioned for it. The question of the rational indubitability of the *Cogito* can be separated from the question of its suitability as an Archimedean point. It is a famous complaint that Descartes cannot move beyond the *Cogito* without a questionable proof of God's existence. Perhaps, as Pierre Bourdin once suggested, the *Cogito* is a shipwreck from which there is no surviving timber to be "hung up as an offering at the temple of truth" (AT VII. 471 CSM II. 317). Whatever the merits of this concern, the *Cogito* might still be indubitable. Second, it *is* a substantive, contingent matter of fact that the magician thinks and therefore exists. He might not have been dreamt and he worries about the possibility of his future non-existence. His existence as a thinking thing is a contingent matter of substantive fact that is known with certainty only by the magician himself in the first person and in the present tense. This is the standard structure of the *Cogito*. Whether this serves as an Archimedean point for Descartes' metaphysics is, once more, a separate question.

4 Concluding Remarks

In sum, the Sceptical Argument assumes that unreality implies non-existence. This stands in contrast to Borges' magician who believes that his unreal son exists. He is right, at least, that there are forms of unreality that do not imply non-existence. What about his own situation? Adopting his perspective, it is intuitively clear that he exists despite his unreality. If he is a character in someone else's dream then he is unreal in the sense that he is a mind-dependent, illusory and fake. Yet, these properties do not undermine his existence. Nor do they undermine the first-person, present-tense indubitability of the *Cogito*. The magician thinks, therefore he is. And what goes for the magician goes for us too.

¹² Of course, there are philosophers who reject this common-sense view. See Reicher (2022) for an overview of debates surrounding the metaphysics of non-existent objects.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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