

Dream Skepticism and the Conditionality Problem

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Received: 7 January 2010 / Accepted: 23 December 2010 / Published online: 21 January 2011
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Abstract Recently, Ernest Sosa (2007) has proposed two novel solutions to the problem of dream skepticism. In the present paper, I argue that Sosa's first solution falls prey to what I will refer to as the conditionality problem, i.e., the problem of only establishing a conditional—in this case, “if x , then I am awake,” x being a placeholder for a condition incompatible with dreaming—in a context where it also needs to be established that we can know that the antecedent holds, and as such can infer the consequent, i.e., “I am awake.” Sosa's second solution, in terms of so-called reflective knowledge, is shown to land him in the dilemma of either facing yet another conditionality problem, or violating an internalist constraint that he explicitly grants the skeptic with respect to what kind of factors can be legitimately invoked in our account of how we may know the relevant antecedent. For these reasons, I conclude that Sosa has not solved the problem of dream skepticism.

1 Introduction

Say that I form a belief that p . If p is true, my belief is too. But unless the process by which I form the belief in question would have resulted in a true belief even if my situation were slightly different, then my belief is formed in an unsafe manner. Differently put, a belief formed in an unsafe manner might be true but could easily have been false in light of proximate possibilities. Skeptical scenarios threaten the safety of our belief formation by calling our attention to scenarios in which we would have formed beliefs by way of the same processes through which we actually form our beliefs, even if a great majority of our beliefs would have been false in those scenarios. But given that safety is a function of modal proximity, some

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skeptical scenarios are more close to home than others. For example, due to their fantastic nature, scenarios involving brains in vats or Matrix-type deceptions easily invite complaints about irrelevance from those who are not easily swayed by skeptical worries. This, moreover, is exactly what makes one of the most famous skeptical scenarios so ingenious, i.e., the dream scenario. After all, dreaming is something that all of us do most every night, and not seldom vividly, as Descartes stressed in the first chapter of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*:

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by a fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! 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 (Descartes 1984/1641, p. 13, AT 19).

That is what makes it hard to dismiss dream skeptical scenarios as too far-fetched or otherwise irrelevant. While brains in vats and victims of Matrices involve what most of us think of as fairly remote and, thereby, less pertinent possibilities, the same cannot be said about the possibility that we are dreaming. Reflecting on the distinction between what he refers to as hyperbolic and realistic forms of skepticism, Ernest Sosa writes:

Skeptical scenarios are fortunately quite remote; they *might* happen, but not easily. That is why they are dismissed as irrelevant. Of all familiar scenarios, only one cannot be dismissed so easily: the most famous of all, the dream scenario. Unlike those outlandish possibilities, dreaming is a daily part of our lives. The dream argument stands out because the dream possibility is too close to comfort (Sosa 2007, p. 2; emphasis in original).¹

Understood as a threat to the safety of our beliefs, we may outline the relevant skeptical challenge as follows. Say that I form the perceptual belief that there is a table in front of me. As far as dream skepticism is concerned (which is the only challenge to the epistemic status of our beliefs that we will be concerned with here) there are two ways that this belief could have come about. On the one hand, it could have come about as a result of me actually *perceiving* the table in front of me. On the other hand, it could have come about as a result of me merely *dreaming* that there is a table in front of me. Moreover, the possibility that I am merely dreaming even if it seems to me that I am actually perceiving the table is a sufficiently

¹ Henceforth, all page references in the body of the text are to this book, unless otherwise stated.

proximate possibility to threaten the safety of my belief that there is a table in front of me—unless there is some condition in place that rules out that I am dreaming. However, in order to satisfy the skeptic, not just any condition will do. It has to be a condition pertaining to what is *internal* to me. The most straightforward (albeit, as we shall see below, not the only) way to cash out the relevant sense of ‘internal’ is in terms of what I can tell on introspection. Since I cannot tell on introspection that I am not dreaming, the argument goes, I do not *know* that there is a table in front of me.

Its general form, the skeptical challenge at issue may be reconstructed thus:

1. For any proposition p believed as a result of perception, in order to know that p , I have to be able to tell on introspection that I am not dreaming.
2. I cannot tell on introspection that I am not dreaming.
3. I do not know that p .

Needless to say, arguments of this kind have received a tremendous amount of philosophical attention over the course of the history of the subject. In the present paper, I will restrict myself to two recent suggestions, both due to Sosa (2007), as to how we may come to terms with the relevant kind of dream skepticism. Sosa’s first solution attempts to refute (2), although the solution falls prey to what I will refer to as the *conditionality problem*, i.e., the problem of only establishing a conditional—in this case, “if x , then I am awake,” x being a placeholder for a condition incompatible with dreaming—in a context where it also needs to be established that we can know (e.g., on introspection) that the antecedent holds, and as such can infer the consequent, i.e., “I am awake.” The problem re-surfaces under a different guise in relation to Sosa’s second solution, framed in terms of so-called reflective knowledge. This solution attempts to refute (1), but is shown to either (a) fail to establish anything beyond the conditional proposition ‘If x obtains, I am awake,’ in a context where we also need an account of how we can know that x obtains and, hence, infer the unconditional proposition ‘I am awake,’ or (b) violate an internalist constraint that Sosa explicitly grants the skeptic with respect to what kind of factors can be legitimately invoked in our account of how we may know that x obtains. For these reasons, I conclude that Sosa has not solved the problem of dream skepticism.

2 Sosa’s First Solution: Dreaming and Imagining

According to Sosa, one way to block the dream skeptic’s line of reasoning is to endorse the so-called *imagination model of dreaming*, on which dreaming does not involve forming beliefs, but merely consists in imagining or simulating experiences (pp. 7–8). This model of dreaming as imagining is to be contrasted with the view that dreaming is a matter of misleading experiences and the formation of false belief and, as such, more akin to hallucination than to imagination. Sosa refers to this view as the *orthodox* theory of dreaming, and the designation is appropriate. The theory not only seems to be presupposed by many historical treatments of dream skepticism, including Descartes in his *Meditations*, but also finds support in recent

research in dream psychology, where brain scanning studies suggest that similar parts of the brain are activated during hallucinatory perception and in REM sleep.²

However, Sosa's concerns are less with the science of dreaming than with what dreams would have to be like in order to provide a reply to the dream skeptic. Questions could be raised as to whether this is a plausible order of priority, but I will not press him on this point presently. Instead, I will evaluate Sosa's arguments on his own terms, particularly in light of how aforementioned priorities suggest that he takes it that the strongest argument against the imagination model would be an argument to the effect that it does *not* provide a satisfactory reply to the dream skeptic, which is exactly what I will argue is the case below.

Why does Sosa take the imagination model to be a promising account to invoke against the dream skeptic? Because if we do not form beliefs while dreaming, there is only one way that my belief can have come about in the kind of scenario considered above, namely by virtue of me actually perceiving an object. That is, if I form a belief that there is a table in front of me, I am, at the very least, not dreaming (quite independently of whether or not my belief is true). At the same time, Sosa does not deny that we might form beliefs *in* dreams; only that we form beliefs *while* dreaming. Dreaming that I am on a sunny beach in the Caribbean, I might—in the dream—form the belief that the view is gorgeous. However, what Sosa wants to deny is that I, thereby, form the belief that the view is gorgeous *while* dreaming, i.e., while, say, lying in my bed in snowy Massachusetts. In other words, according to Sosa, it does not follow from “*In* my dream, I believe that *p*,” that “*In* actuality—i.e., *while* dreaming—I believe that *p*” (p. 4).

However, according to Sosa, this does not stop us from *assenting* to propositions in dreams (such as the proposition “I’m on a beautiful beach”), where assent is a propositional attitude short of belief. Nor does it necessarily stop us from having phenomenal *experiences* in dreams (such as the experience of being on a beautiful beach). At first glance, the latter might seem to open up for massive irrationality, since it makes possible scenarios in which I have ever so vivid experiences of it being the case that *p*, without forming the belief that *p*. However, Sosa denies that such scenarios imply any form of irrationality and elaborates by way of an analogy with watching a movie, where “we undergo phenomenal experiences without being at fault for failing to take them at face value” since we have “switched off our full cognitive processing for the duration of the film, so as to immerse ourselves willingly in the offline illusion” (p. 8). And, Sosa suggests, the same goes for the “imaginative illusion of the dream” (*ibid*).

So, to recapitulate: *In* dreams, we may form beliefs, assent to propositions, and perhaps even experience things. However, we form no beliefs *while* dreaming. Consequently, every time we actually form a perceptual belief, we are (at the very least) not dreaming. What are the implications of this for the viability of dream skepticism? As Sosa notes, the above picture might, at first glance, just seem to make things worse. After all, while earlier we were worrying about whether we are

² See, e.g., Hobson (1999, p. 5).

really *perceiving*, say, a table, we now also have to worry about whether we are even *thinking* that we are seeing a table—assuming, of course, that we are working with what Sosa calls “the *thicker* notion of thinking” (p. 10). This thicker notion, Sosa suggests, is incompatible with dreaming, and corresponds to thinking *consciously and affirmatively*. According to Sosa, dreaming that one is consciously and affirmatively thinking (i.e., consciously and affirmatively thinking *in a dream*) does not imply actually thinking consciously and affirmatively (i.e., thinking consciously and affirmatively *while* dreaming)—even if there is no subjective difference between the two states for the subject. Sosa writes:

Two states can thus be hard to distinguish subjectively, though in only one is the subject justified in thinking such and such. Of course the two states are constitutively different. One is an apparent state of thinking one thinks, doing so (thinking one thinks) *only in a dream*, so that it is really only a state of *dreaming* that one thinks one thinks. By contrast, the other state is a state of thinking one thinks, doing so (thinking one thinks) *in actuality*. Only the latter yields justification for one’s thought that one thinks. The former not only yields no such justification: in it there *is* no such thought—this despite the fact that, by hypothesis, the two states are indistinguishable, as indistinguishable as is reality from a realistic enough dream (p. 12; emphasis in original).

In other words, on the “thicker” notion of thinking, thinking involves conscious affirmation. Again, the notion is not thicker in the sense that consciously and affirmatively thinking needs to be in any way subjectively different from merely dreaming that one is consciously and affirmatively thinking. Rather, it is thicker in the sense that consciously and affirmatively thinking implies forming beliefs. And since forming beliefs (according to Sosa) is incompatible with dreaming, consciously affirming propositions, thereby, implies being awake (pp. 12–13).

In other words, we get the following:

- (4) Anytime I consciously and affirmatively think that p , I am awake;
- (5) I consciously and affirmatively think that p ;
- (6) I am awake.

This, Sosa claims, “disposes of the threat posed by dreams to the safety of our belief” (p. 13).

3 The Conditionality Problem

Does the above line of reasoning, thereby, also dispose of the threat from dream skepticism? As the challenge was laid out above, we need to be able to tell on introspection that we are not dreaming in order to dispose of the threat of dream skepticism. It is not sufficient that we can show that (6) holds and we, consequently, are not dreaming *if* (4) and (5) hold. This is an instance of what I will refer to as the conditionality problem, i.e., the problem of only establishing a conditional in a context where the relevant challenge requires that it also be established that we can

know (in this case, on introspection) that the antecedent holds and, thereby, infer the consequent.³

Being fully aware of this problem, Sosa notes the following: The claim “I am awake” shares a feature with the *cogito* in that it cannot be affirmed falsely. As such, Sosa suggests, it must have an “equally high epistemic status” (p. 17). Moreover, while awake, it is possible to *distinguish* between being awake and dreaming, i.e., between being in a position to affirm the self-justifying claim “I am awake” and not being in a position to do so. Notice that this is not to suggest that we may also tell on introspection that we are dreaming while dreaming. Indeed, this asymmetry is not unique to dreaming. As Sosa notes, one may distinguish being alive from being dead when one is alive, even if one cannot do so when one is dead, and similarly for being conscious and unconscious, respectively.⁴

As such, Sosa attempts to block the skeptic’s move to (3) by denying (2), i.e., the claim that we cannot tell on introspection that we are not dreaming, despite there being no discernible difference in content. Sosa elaborates:

What enables us to distinguish the two content-identical states [i.e., the state of being awake and the corresponding dream state] is just the fact that in the dream state we don’t affirm *anything*—not that we are veridically perceiving an external world, nor that we are not—whereas in waking life we do knowingly perceive our surroundings. *This* by our lights suffices to make the two distinguishable (pp. 17–18; emphasis in original).

It is somewhat unclear what Sosa means by “knowingly perceive our surrounding” here. On the one hand, he could mean that we *know* that we perceive our surrounding. But surely that cannot be it, since it would not so much provide us with a way to tell that we are not dreaming as it would simply beg the question against the skeptic. On the other hand, Sosa might mean that, since we cannot affirm the claim that we are awake falsely while awake, we know that we are perceiving our surrounding every time we ponder whether we are awake (given that pondering implies forming beliefs). However, the conditionality problem resurfaces: In order to respond to the skeptic, it is not sufficient to establish the conditional claim “*If I ponder the question whether I am awake, then I am awake*”; in order to infer the consequent, I must also be able to tell (and on introspection, no less) *that* I am actually pondering the question (i.e., that the antecedent is true), as opposed to merely dreaming that I am.

Again, it is not that Sosa is unaware of this problem. It is just that his response is somewhat puzzling:

Should one think that for all we know our current conscious life is nothing but a dream? Given our conception of dreams, how could one even sensibly

³ Cf. Stroud (1989, p. 47), who discusses a similar problem, albeit specifically in relation to the issue of externalism about knowledge. In §5, I will return to the relation between externalism and the conditionality problem. However, as I hope to show in the present section, the problem is not restricted to the issue of externalism, since one may be susceptible to the problem even if one is not committed to externalism.

⁴ Cf. Williams (1978).

entertain that possibility? If one *is* only dreaming, then one cannot be pondering any such question as whether one might be only dreaming, and one could not possibly assent to any answer, whether affirmative or negative. Knowing this, how could one sensibly deliberate on whether one might be dreaming? On our conception of dreams, one is automatically, rationally *committed* to supposing that one is *not* just dreaming, whenever one inquires at all. It is hard to imagine a better answer to the dream skeptic (p. 20; emphasis in original).

How so? Sosa asks us to consider three possible options on the question whether *p*: namely, the option of believing, disbelieving, or suspending belief. What he suggests is that, in cases where we let *p* stand for a *cogito* proposition, disbelieving is defective, since self-defeating. Moreover, suspending belief is also defective, since “I know, about a particular alternative option, that I am epistemically better off if I take that option, since I will thereby avail myself of a correct answer to my question, which I fail to do if I only suspend judgment” (p. 19). This leaves us with only one option—the only non-defective option, according to Sosa—which is to believe the proposition, because that option is “the only one about which I know ahead of time that my taking it will obviously imply that I am epistemically right in so doing” (p. 19).

Sosa wants to claim that the proposition “I am awake” shares this feature, and that the only non-defective epistemic attitude to take towards it is that of belief. But if we accept Sosa’s view of dreams as not involving any beliefs, what we will know ahead of time is that, *if* I am consciously and affirmatively thinking, then I am awake. However, since we cannot tell *when* we are actually consciously and affirmatively thinking rather than merely dreaming that we are (i.e., consciously and affirmatively thinking *in a dream*), what we do *not* know ahead of time is that we are, in fact, consciously and affirmatively thinking.⁵ Another way to bring out this point is to consider, again, the *cogito*, as utilized by Descartes. Pondering the possibility of a deceiver of supreme power and cunning, Descartes concludes that “this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (1984/1641, p. 17, AT VII 25). In other words, whenever the proposition that I exist is considered, it is true. So, consider the following:

- (7) Anytime I am thinking, I exist;
- (8) I am thinking;
- (9) Hence, I exist.

⁵ Cf. Jonathan Ichikawa (2008), who endorses Sosa’s imagination model of dreaming, while arguing (in my view, correctly) that the imagination model, rather than providing a solution to the problem of dream skepticism, makes the problem even more daunting. As such, Ichikawa takes the relevant anti-skeptical project to be that of explaining how we can know the difference between believing and imagining. Ichikawa’s approach is refreshing in its clear view of the implications, although I take it that there is still legitimate room for wondering whether the imagination model is a plausible model in the first place, particularly in light of empirical research on dreaming (e.g., Hobson 1999). However, as made clear earlier, I will not pursue this point further presently, but instead be concerned with evaluating the prospects of Sosa’s solutions on his own terms.

More than this, Descartes assumes that we can know the premises. More specifically, according to Descartes, I know (in the sense of having *scientia*) that p in so far as I can clearly and distinctly perceive that p is true. Furthermore, he takes it that he can clearly and distinctly perceive not only that the conditional proposition that whenever the proposition that he exists is conceived in thought, it is true that he exists, but also that he is thinking. Assuming transmission of knowledge under known entailment, we get the following:

- (10) I know that, anytime I am thinking, I exist;
- (11) I know that I am thinking;
- (12) Hence, I know that I exist.

The problem with Sosa's argument is that, given that we may assent to propositions in dreams, without, thereby, actually believing the propositions, the fact that it *seems* to us that we are believing something does not imply that we are *actually* believing anything (as opposed to it merely seeming to us that we are). Consequently, although Sosa might have given us reason to accept argument (4)–(6)—an argument that, as we have seen, is unsuccessful as a response to the skeptic in light of the conditionality problem—he has not provided us with any reason to accept the following argument:

- (13) I know that, anytime I am consciously and affirmatively thinking that p , I am awake;
- (14) I know introspectively that I am consciously and affirmatively thinking that p ;
- (15) Hence, I know that I am awake.

For this reason, I conclude that Sosa's account in terms of the imagination model of dreaming does not solve the problem of dream skeptic.

4 Sosa's Second Solution: Animal and Reflective Knowledge

As it happens, Sosa offers yet another argument against the dream skeptic that does not rely upon the imagination model of dreams, but rather is supposed to flow from his virtue epistemology. On this argument, Sosa grants that skepticism might very well threaten the safety of our beliefs in virtue of the modal proximity of skeptical dream scenarios, but denies that safety is necessary for knowledge. If safety is not necessary for knowledge, we no longer need to worry about the proximate possibility of dreaming nor, consequently, about not being able to tell on introspection that we are not dreaming. As such, Sosa's second solution attempts to block the skeptic's inference to (3) by rejecting (1). In fact, the solution takes two forms, corresponding to two different kinds of knowledge.

In its first form, Sosa's argument against (1) consists in defending an account of knowledge as *aptly* formed belief. Aptly formed belief is belief that not only is *accurate* (i.e., true), but accurate as a consequence of being *adroit*, i.e., the manifestation of an epistemic skill or competence on part of the believer. Sosa starts out by noting that neither aptness nor safety entails the other. For one thing, a

performance might be apt but unsafe, as when the blood content of an ingested drug might too easily have been slightly higher, or the surrounding conditions easily have been less favorable, and, as such, influenced what was, in fact, a skillful performance yielding an accurate result. For another, a performance might be inapt though safe, as when a protecting angel ensures accurate belief-formation, either directly or by making sure that the surrounding conditions always are sufficiently favorable, and the performance, hence, might be ever so accurate (indeed, perhaps even *guaranteed* to be accurate) but not accurate *because* adroit (and, as such, not apt) (pp. 28–29).

Here, Sosa claims, we have found the beginning of a reply to the dream skeptic:

Sleep might render one's conditions abnormal and inadequate for the exercise of perceptual faculties. The proximate possibility that one is now asleep and dreaming might thus render fragile both one's competence and also, jointly or alternatively, the conditions appropriate for its exercise. That is how the possibility that one is asleep and dreaming might endanger our ordinary perceptual beliefs. But this is just one more case where safety is compromised while aptness remains intact. [...] However unsafe a performer's competence may be and however unsafe may be the conditions appropriate for its exercise, if a performance does succeed through the exercise of that competence in its proper conditions, then it is an apt performance, one creditable to the performer (pp. 30–31).

Consequently, if knowledge is simply aptly formed belief, the proximity of the possibility of sleep might render our beliefs (or rather their formation) ever so unsafe, without, thereby, undercutting the possibility of them constituting knowledge.

At the same time, Sosa acknowledges that some forms of unsafety *do* seem to rob us of knowledge, at least of a certain kind. This brings us to the second form of the argument. Using Sosa's own example, consider a surface that looks red in ostensibly normal conditions. Then, assume that the surface is a kaleidoscope surface, controlled by a jokester who also controls an ambient light that might easily have presented a person perceiving the surface with a red-light-on-white-surface combination, rather than the actual white-light-on-red-surface combination. Given the ease with which the jokester, thereby, could have presented the perceiver with a deceptive combination, does he still know that the surface is red? Sosa feels inclined to say 'no'—clearly, a problem for his solution to the skeptical problem. Or, Sosa claims, there is, at the very least, a *sense* in which the kaleidoscope perceiver lacks knowledge. More specifically, Sosa suggests that we need to make a distinction between two types of knowledge, namely *animal* knowledge, which is simply aptly formed belief, and *reflective* knowledge, which is aptly formed belief that is aptly noted. Utilizing this distinction, Sosa then wants to say that a perceiver in the kaleidoscope case has animal knowledge, given that (a) his perceptual faculties are working properly and (b) his belief that the surface is red is accurate *due to* his perceptual faculties working properly. However, he does not have reflective knowledge, since he does not aptly believe that his perceptual beliefs are aptly formed.

If the dream scenario is relevantly analogous to the kaleidoscope scenario, it seems that we should draw a similar conclusion in the former case: Although our perceptual beliefs may be aptly formed and, as such, constitute animal knowledge, we have to surrender to the skeptic the idea that our beliefs constitute reflective knowledge. This, however, is not the conclusion that Sosa wants to draw. In order to explain how the two cases are relevantly different, he starts out by qualifying somewhat his account of reflective knowledge, in order to explain how we may have such knowledge even given the proximity of dream scenarios, and our inability to distinguish dreaming from being awake on introspection. The following picture transpires.

In some cases of believing, there are two levels of epistemic competence involved. On the one hand, there is the *object-level competence*, e.g., the competence that takes you from perceptual inputs to perceptual beliefs. On the other hand, there is also the second-order competence involved in reflecting and checking on such an object-level competence. Let us follow Sosa in referring to this second-order competence as a *meta-awareness*. Talking about an “awareness” is slightly misleading, however, since it seems to imply that the subject is required to *consciously* reflect on her object-level competence. Indeed, this reading is invited already by Sosa referring to the kind of knowledge in question as “reflective,” and moreover by how he in some of his earlier writings suggests that such knowledge not so much consists in aptness twice over, as in an “*awareness* of how one knows, in a way that precludes the unreliability of one’s faculties” (Sosa 1997, p. 427; emphasis added).

However, in laying out his solution to dream skepticism, Sosa makes clear that the kind of meta-awareness he has in mind in many cases simply involves “a default competence of taking it for granted that conditions are appropriately normal, absent some specific sign to the contrary” (p. 111). In other words, the meta-awareness in question does not necessarily (and perhaps not even most often) involve consciously reflecting on the object-level competence.⁶ Nor does it require that the subject be able to tell on introspection that she is not dreaming, contrary to (1). What is required is merely that the meta-belief be *accurate* (in taking it that the object-level belief in question was aptly formed) as well as *apt*. According to Sosa, this aptness amounts to a competence enabling the believer to size up the appropriateness of the conditions appropriate for its exercise (p. 108). However, the problem with the kaleidoscope perceiver is that the conditions *are* appropriate. For this reason, Sosa suggests that a “meta-apprehension will be apt and thus knowledge only if its *correctness* is attributable to a meta-competence,” which amounts to requiring that the meta-competence “*must not* be excessively liable to yield a falsehood when exercised in its appropriate conditions” (p. 109; emphasis in original).

⁶ At the same time, it would be an exaggeration to say that Sosa is perfectly consistent on this point. In the chapter immediately following the one in which he claims that a disposition to assent is sufficient for reflective knowledge, he suggests that “One’s belief amounts to reflective knowledge only if one can *say* that one does know, not just arbitrarily, but with adequate justification” (Sosa 2007, p. 117; emphasis added).

In other words, reflective knowledge requires that

- (i) the object belief is *apt*, in that it is accurate by virtue of the fact that it derives from a competence that tends to yield true belief under normal circumstances, and
- (ii) the object belief is *aptly noted* by a meta-belief, in the specific sense that the latter is accurate (in noting that the object belief is, in fact, apt) by virtue of the fact that it derives from a meta-competence that is exercised under appropriate conditions and does, under those conditions, not issue false meta-beliefs too easily.

According to Sosa, the kaleidoscope perceiver lacks reflective knowledge because his meta-competence either is (a) exercised in its normal conditions, but might too easily have been false due to the jokester, or (b) *not* exercised in its appropriate conditions, since the mere presence of the jokester spoils the conditions. In either case, (ii) is not met, and the kaleidoscope perceiver “does not *aptly* presume his object-level perceptual belief to be apt” (p. 110; emphasis in original).

However, the ordinary perceiver is not in the same boat as the kaleidoscope perceiver, despite the proximity of dream scenarios. Unlike the kaleidoscope perceiver, “the ordinary believer can aptly apprehend the aptness of his object-level perceptual belief” because “he can get it right in so presuming through a meta-competence exercised in its appropriately normal conditions” where the “relevant meta-competence is a default competence of taking it for granted that conditions are appropriately normal, absent some specific sign to the contrary” (p. 111). In fact, according to Sosa, there *are* signs to the contrary in our dreams, unlike how it is for the misled kaleidoscope perceiver—signs that we would pick up on, where we only using the same meta-competence while dreaming as we do while awake.⁷ But, Sosa asks, “Do we retain when dreaming our normal competence to tell when we are awake?” “No,” he answers, since “sleep would seem to deprive us of normal competence to discern features of our experiences that would show to someone awake that it was just a dream” (p. 37). Paradoxically enough, this turns out to be exactly why dream scenarios do not threaten the safety of the relevant meta-competence, despite their modal proximity. Granted, were we to exercise the relevant competence in dream scenarios, we would pick up on cues suggesting that we are dreaming, but “[w]hen asleep and dreaming we exercise no such competence” (p. 111). In other words, the relevant meta-competency is safe from dream skepticism in the sense of not generating false belief about the relevant object-level beliefs in the skeptical scenarios at issue, for the simple reason that our meta-competency is not generating *any* beliefs (let alone any *false* beliefs) in dream scenarios. Hence, Sosa concludes, “in ordinary perception we acquire both perceptual apt belief, or animal knowledge, and perceptual apt belief aptly presumed apt, or reflective knowledge” (*ibid.*).

⁷ Cf. Descartes (1984/1641, pp. 61–62, AT 89–90).

5 Internalism and the Conditionality Problem Revisited

If Sosa is right, we may know things, both in the sense of having animal knowledge (i.e., apt belief) and reflective knowledge (i.e., apt belief aptly noted), despite the fact that we cannot tell on introspection that we are not dreaming. At the same time, it is not obvious that Sosa, thereby, has solved the problem posed by the skeptic, as Sosa himself understands it. Introducing the premises of his discussion of skepticism right before presenting his second solution, he writes:

The radical skeptic claims, about some epistemologically crucial beliefs, that they have no basis they would lack if false. If you were deceived based on radically misleading experience, for example, you would still believe that you were *not* so deceived, and there need be no basis that you now have for that belief which you would then lack. In so reasoning, the skeptic restricts us to bases for belief that are purely internal and psychological, by contrast with those that are external. Otherwise, his main premise would collapse. If we allow external bases, then the brain in a vat will no doubt lack some basis that sustains our ordinary belief that we are normally embodied. The skeptic's internalist assumption has of course been challenged in recent years, but here I will grant it for the sake of the argument (pp. 26–27).

This gets back to an issue that was touched upon already in §1 above, to the effect that the skeptic requests a reply in terms of factors that are, in some relevant sense, internal to the subject. More specifically, I take the upshot of this dialectical declaration on Sosa's part to be the following: One way of coming to terms with skepticism is to home in on some external factor that differentiates us from people in skeptical scenarios, and then let that factor explain why we, unlike people in skeptical scenarios, can know things about the extra-mental world. For example (and as hinted at by Sosa in the quote above), in the case of a brain in a vat, we could call attention to the fact that the normal perceiver meets a relevant externalist requirement on knowledge—say, by virtue of the fact that her beliefs are formed in ways that are causally sensitive to variances in the world—while the brain in the vat does not. Similarly, one could call attention to the fact that someone dreaming, unlike a responsible perceiver that is awake, is not forming perceptual beliefs as a result of perception of the extra-mental world, but (as far as the non-dreaming world is concerned) highly deceptive appearances due to her consciousness being temporarily disengaged from reality.

As Sosa notes, however, such accounts would not necessarily impress the skeptic, who would surely reply: “But how do you *know* that these external factors, in fact, obtain?” And in so far as we, like Sosa, at all feel the pull of that question, we grant the skeptic a certain internalist constraint, to the effect that the factors invoked in an account of the bases of belief that turn true belief into knowledge need to be “purely internal and psychological” (p. 27), as Sosa puts it, in order to qualify as bases relevant to the skeptical challenge. (The qualification in terms of *true* belief is important; few people would want to argue that facts about truth are purely internal and psychological facts.)

This internalist constraint can be cashed out in two ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as requiring that the bases be psychological states or processes (reading “internal” and “psychological” as being synonymous). Let us refer to this as *the psychologistic reading*. On the other hand, the constraint can be understood as requiring that the bases be psychological states or processes that are introspectively accessible (reading “internal” and “psychological” as *not* being synonymous). Let us refer to this as *the introspectionist reading*. The latter reading makes most sense as an interpretation of the constraint Sosa is getting at if the two terms—i.e., internal and psychological—are read alongside the two specifications in the sentence preceding the two terms’ occurrence, to the effect that radically misleading experiences involve (a) believing that you are not deceived (since there is no *introspective* difference), and (b) there being no basis that you now have which you would lack if you were deceived (since there is no *psychological* difference).

As we saw in the introduction, the way you get the requirement that we be able to tell on introspection that we are not dreaming in order to have perceptual knowledge is by way of the introspectionist reading. Given his concern for being able to distinguish being awake from dreaming in the first solution, Sosa seems to be working with this reading when developing that solution. However, in his second solution, Sosa seems to be working with a psychologistic rather than introspectionist reading. This would, at the very least, make sense of how he in relation to that solution is less concerned with abilities to distinguish dreaming from being awake on introspection, and more with the presence of a default competence that enables us to assume that the relevant conditions are appropriately normal, unless it picks up on signs to the contrary (a matter not so much of *introspection* as of the *psychological*). Consequently, I will commit Sosa to the psychologistic interpretation of the relevant internalist constraint for the remainder of the discussion. (Moreover, if it can be shown that his solution fails on this weaker, psychologistic reading, that would amount to showing that his solution also fails on the stronger, introspectionist reading.)

In light of this, let us consider the bases that Sosa invokes in his account of reflective knowledge. Remember, such knowledge involved apt belief aptly noted. More specifically, Sosa took it to involve an object belief that is *apt*, in that it is accurate by virtue of the fact that it derives from a competence that yields true belief under normal circumstances, as well as *aptly noted* by a meta-belief that is accurate (in noting that the object belief is, in fact, apt) by virtue of the fact that it derives from a meta-competence that is exercised under appropriate conditions and does, under those conditions, not issue false meta-beliefs too easily (pp. 108–109). In other words, the bases that turn accurate belief into reflective knowledge are constituted by certain mental (but not necessarily conscious) competencies, endowed with epistemically beneficial properties. It seems fair to say that the competencies in question will correspond to purely psychological states or processes. However, it is not so obvious that the same can be said about the relevant *properties* of those states and processes. More specifically, facts about whether or not a competence is exercised under normal or appropriate circumstances are not purely psychological facts; they are facts pertaining to the combination of psychological facts about the internal workings of competencies *and*

external facts about the environment in which the competencies are (typically) being exercised. Similarly, facts about whether or not a competence issues false beliefs too easily under normal or appropriate conditions are not purely psychological facts; they are facts pertaining to the combination of psychological facts about the internal workings of the competencies *and* external facts about the relative success of such competencies in certain environments.

This lands Sosa in a dilemma. Either he does what the above dialectical declaration suggests that he does *not* want to do, namely reject the internalist constraint (even on its weaker, psychologistic reading) and maintain that we may respond to the skeptic in terms of factors that are not internal—albeit at the expense of no longer saying anything that would impress the skeptic. Or the conditionality problem re-surfaces, albeit in a somewhat different guise. Remember, the conditionality problem was the problem of an argument only demonstrating a conditional claim in a context where it also needs to be established that we can know (although, given the psychologistic reading, not necessarily on introspection) that the antecedent holds, and as such, infer the consequent. Since the bases invoked in Sosa's account of reflective knowledge are not purely psychological factors, it is perfectly appropriate for the skeptic to respond as follows. It is one thing to establish the conditional proposition 'If factor *x* is present, I am awake,' where '*x*' designates a factor that is *not* purely psychological, such as that my beliefs are aptly formed and, thereby, accurate in virtue of a competence that is exercised in its proper conditions. However, it is quite another thing to account for how we can know the antecedent, i.e., that *x* obtains, where what it is to have the relevant kind of knowledge (unlike Sosa's account of reflective knowledge) is to be spelled out in terms of purely psychological factors. After all, this is exactly the kind of challenge that we invite if we agree to the skeptic's internalist constraint.⁸

At this point, Sosa might attempt to save his solution by opting for a content externalist account of the relevant psychological facts, which would eliminate the distinction utilized here between (purely) psychological and environmental facts. However, such a move suffers from two problems. First, while a content externalist reading of 'psychological' would enable Sosa to maintain that his solution, in fact, satisfies the relevant constraint, he would also leave legitimate room for the skeptic to, in turn, raise the issue that this is *not* how the constraint is to be understood. To re-define the constraint along content externalist lines and, in effect, invoke an

⁸ Perhaps Sosa could attempt a combination of components from his two solutions, by suggesting that (a) in dreams, we form no beliefs (as per his first solution), (b) the internalist constraint is to be understood in psychologistic rather than introspectionist terms (as per his second solution), and (c) there, hence, is a great doxastic difference between me and my deceived, dreaming counterpart. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this possibility.) As such, the argument (like Sosa's second solution) rejects (1) of the skeptical argument. But it is less clear that it answers the skeptic, at least as far as Sosa's project is concerned. Remember, Sosa does not just want to say that the skeptic is wrong in suggesting that we do not know things, but also that the skeptic is wrong because we know things in a manner that is best accounted for in virtue theoretic terms. And while we might be able to account for a *difference* between me and my deceived counterpart in purely psychological terms in the manner outlined above, it is far less clear that we can do the same for the kind of difference that has me (as opposed to my counterpart) come out as a *knower* as a result of employing my virtues or competencies, given that the relevant properties of those virtues cannot be spelled out in purely psychological terms, for reasons discussed above.

understanding of what it is for something to be psychological that is very different and far wider in scope than what the skeptic, most likely, has in mind when requiring that she be responded to in terms of factors that are internal to the subject, is not to reply to the skeptic; it is to re-define her challenge in terms she has no reason to accept.

Second, even if we find a skeptic that would accept such a re-defined constraint, a move to externalism would raise a more specific problem for Sosa, in rendering the entire conceptual battery unique to his solution largely redundant. As he himself notes about his proposed solution, its attraction lies exactly in that it does *not* depend on content externalism (p. 27). Indeed, if re-defined along content externalist lines, the solution would no longer be relevantly different from Hilary Putnam's (1981) externalist solution to brain-in-vat-skepticism. Whether Putnam's is a plausible solution to skepticism is a question that goes beyond the topic of the current investigation. Suffice to note that the move in question would make Sosa's interesting and novel solutions mere footnotes of Putnam—a Pyrrhic victory indeed.

This brings us back to the dilemma that faces Sosa's theory, i.e., that of either violating the internalist constraint and, thereby, failing to say anything that is likely to impress the skeptic, or falling prey to a conditionality problem. As for the latter horn, we saw above that Sosa addressed a similar worry in relation to his first solution in terms of dreaming as imagining. Not so in relation to his second solution. In fact, in order to find a passage relevant to the present charge, we need to go back to Sosa's "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles" (1997), where Sosa responds to a similar problem raised by Barry Stroud (1989):

If our perceivers believe (*a*) that their perceptions, if reliable, yields them knowledge, and (*b*) that their perception is reliable, then why are they restricted to affirming only the conditional, *a*, and not its antecedent, *b*? Why must they wonder whether they understand their relevant knowledge? Indeed, to the extent that they are really convinced of both *a* and *b*, it would seem that, far from being logically constrained *to* wondering whether they know, they are, on the contrary, logically constrained *from* so wondering. After all, first, if you are really certain that *p*, then you cannot well consider whether you know it without thinking that you do. Moreover, second, is it not incoherent to be convinced that *p* and yet wonder whether *p*? (Sosa 1997, p. 428; emphasis in original)

Stroud is right in pushing Sosa on this point. Moreover, the charge deserves reiteration and re-elaboration, since it indicates a problem that extends *beyond* the framework of externalist and internalist responses to the skeptic that defines Sosa and Stroud's interaction, as demonstrated above (in §3) by the fact that the conditionality problem surfaces even without any commitment to externalism. As such, I hope to have shown that the problem runs deeper than Stroud's criticism would have one suspect. This is not to deny that Sosa may be right in claiming that being convinced of the truth of the antecedent might be, in some sense, incompatible with wondering whether it is true. (Recall G. E. Moore's related point about claiming both that one believes that *p* and that *p* is false.) But that is, at best, a psychological point, and, as such, not one that the skeptic needs to deny.

After all, the skeptic does not call into question that we typically are really *convinced* of the fact that our perceptual faculties are reliable, that they are being exercised under appropriately normal conditions, and so on. What she asks us to provide is a story about how we can *know* that this is so.

This brings us back to the point made earlier to the effect that Sosa's solution in terms of reflective knowledge ultimately either violates the very internalist constraint that he decides to grant the skeptic, or suffers from a conditionality problem.⁹ Surely, this does not imply that we cannot have reflective knowledge to the effect that our beliefs are apt—at least not according to Sosa. On his account, what is required for knowing this reflectively is apt belief aptly noted. However, as argued above, the factors determining whether or not an apt belief is aptly noted are not purely psychological. This is exactly the way it should be according to a great many epistemologists. But it is a non-starter if we want to answer the skeptic on her own terms—which as we have seen is exactly what Sosa set out to do.

Acknowledgments The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Hilary Kornblith, Louise Antony, and two anonymous referees for this journal for valuable feedback on previous versions of this paper. Research underlying the present paper was conducted with generous support from the Fornander Foundation and the Hagendahl Commemoration Fund.

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⁹ This is neither to suggest that rejecting the internalist constraint is necessary for responding to the skeptic, nor that it is sufficient. As for the necessity claim, what I have argued here is that Sosa fails to avoid the problem when staying true to the constraint, not that no theory could both meet the constraint and avoid the conditionality problem. (That such a theory is forthcoming seems doubtful, but I have no argument to show that this would be impossible *in principle*, which is why I am staying clear of the necessity claim.) Rejecting the constraint also would not be sufficient for avoiding the conditionality problem, since you would (at the very least) also need a plausible account of how we may know something—perhaps in accordance with some relevantly sophisticated externalist analysis of knowledge—pertaining not only to the relevant conditional but also to its antecedent. That said, I think there is a real question as to whether you have really answered the *skeptic* rather than changed the subject if you reject the internalist constraint. And as we have seen, Sosa seems to agree.