Abstract: Ernest Sosa has recently articulated an insightful response to skepticism and, in particular, to the dream argument. The response relies on two independent moves. First, Sosa offers the imagination model of dreaming according to which no assertions are ever made in dreams and no beliefs are involved there. As a result, it is possible to distinguish dreaming from being awake, and the dream argument is blocked. Second, Sosa develops a virtue epistemology according to which in appropriately normal conditions our perceptual beliefs will be apt. Hence, in these conditions, we will have at least animal knowledge, and the conclusion of the dream argument is undermined. In this article, I examine various moves that the skeptic can make to resist Sosa’s challenge, and I contrast the proposal to a neo-Pyrrhonian stance. In the end, there is surprisingly little disagreement about the status of ordinary perceptual beliefs in the two stances.

Keywords: skepticism, dream argument, Pyrrhonism, Ernest Sosa.

Introduction

As part of his defense of a virtue epistemology, Ernest Sosa has developed a sophisticated and elegant response to skepticism (Sosa 2007). He correctly distinguishes the more radical, but also significantly less plausible, form of global skepticism based on evil demons and matrix-type scenarios, on the one hand, from the less extreme, but also significantly more plausible, form of skepticism based on the dream argument, on the other. Sosa then offers different strategies to address these distinct types of skepticism.

In this article, I examine Sosa’s response to skepticism, focusing in particular on his discussion of the dream argument. After reviewing the central features of Sosa’s response, I consider possible moves that a skeptic could make to resist Sosa’s challenge. I conclude the article by examining what would be lost in virtue epistemology if it turned out to be compatible with a particular form of skepticism (a neo-Pyrrhonian stance). In a nutshell: surprisingly little.
Antiskeptical Strategies

According to the dream argument:

(P1) If I know that I have hands, then I know that I’m not dreaming.
(P2) I don’t know that I’m not dreaming.
Therefore, I don’t know that I have hands.

The first premise of the argument indicates that, as a condition for you to know anything about the external world (for example, that you have hands), you would also need to know that you’re not dreaming. After all, if you were dreaming (say, that you have hands), your current experience in the dream would not provide any grounds for your belief that you do have hands. And unless you were able to distinguish waking life from the corresponding dream, you couldn’t claim to know what you take to know about the external world (namely, that you have hands). The difficulty of distinguishing waking life from the corresponding dream emerges from the fact that any criterion that is offered to draw such a distinction may just as well be applied in a dream. In that case, we couldn’t know that the proposed distinction actually works.

To respond to skepticism based on the dream argument, Sosa first develops an alternative understanding of the status of dreams, and he challenges whether we do have beliefs and make assertions while dreaming. According to the traditional conception of dreaming, we do form beliefs and make assertions in dreams. In fact, the reason we are relieved when we wake up from a nightmare, and can happily say, “It was just a dream,” is that we believed what was going on in that dream.

As opposed to the traditional conception, however, Sosa develops the view of dreams as imaginings. When we dream, we are engaged in a “make-believe” process, not unlike the process of watching a film. We are guided by our imagination but have no beliefs about what we are experiencing: we don’t take what we are experiencing to stand for something in reality. If we are able to distinguish between what happens in dreams and what happens in reality, it becomes clear that we don’t have beliefs in dreams. Beliefs are part of our state of being awake—they are formed in reality—and thus they cannot possibly be held in dreams. Since to be able to make an assertion also requires being awake, no assertions are ever made in dreams either. As a result, on Sosa’s account, we can “distinguish” waking life from a corresponding dream despite the lack of any discernible difference of content. What enables us to distinguish the two content-identical states is just the fact that in the dream state we do not 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 states distinguishable” (Sosa 2007, 17–18).
The importance of this move is that, by rejecting the traditional conception of dreaming, Sosa is able to undermine the dream argument. If we have no beliefs in dreams and only have beliefs in reality, we don’t have, in particular, false beliefs when we dream. Moreover, if we are able to distinguish waking life and a corresponding dream, we can presumably know when we are dreaming and when we are not. In fact, on Sosa’s account, a proposition such as \( \text{I am awake} \) has the same status as the \textit{cogito} proposition \( \text{I think} \), in that I cannot fail to believe such propositions as I consider them. As he points out, “On the imagination model of dreaming (I am awake) shares the noted epistemic status of \textit{cogito} propositions. In its case too, believing is the only epistemically undefective option. Both suspending judgment and disbelieving will share the following feature: that I know ahead of time, as I ponder my question, that I am better off epistemically if I take a particular other option, namely the belief option, since only about that option is it obvious to me now that if I take it I will be right” (Sosa 2007, 19). Now, if \( \text{I am awake} \) is true, and it is believed to be so whenever I consider that proposition, I can reject (P2) in the dream argument, at least when I am awake. After all, when I am awake, I know that I am not dreaming. Hence, in the end, dreams offer no challenge to our knowledge claims about the external world.

But this is not the only response Sosa offers to the dream argument. He also develops a virtue epistemology that provides a response to skepticism, without presupposing the imagination model of dreaming. The central idea of Sosa’s epistemological account is that, to amount to knowledge, beliefs need to be \textit{apt}; that is, they are true \textit{because} competent—that is, because they manifest epistemic virtue or competence (Sosa 2007, 23). The dream argument challenges at best the \textit{safety} of our beliefs about the external world, not their \textit{aptness}. As Sosa notes, “Although ordinary perceptual beliefs \textit{are} . . . rendered unsafe [by the dream argument], they can remain apt even so, and hence knowledge of a sort, of the animal sort. What is endangered by the dream possibility is only our perceptual competence or the presence of appropriate conditions for its exercise. But this poses no danger to the aptness of beliefs yielded by perceptual competence in appropriately normal conditions, and only aptness is required for animal knowledge, not safety” (Sosa 2007, 34). In other words, by developing a virtue epistemology that highlights the aptness of our beliefs rather than their safety, Sosa is able to keep perceptual knowledge away from the skeptical challenge. The central idea is that the dream argument doesn’t challenge the “aptness of beliefs

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1 A belief satisfies a safety requirement by having a basis that it would likely have only if it were correct (Sosa 2007, 41).

2 \textit{Animal} knowledge demands \textit{apt} belief without requiring defensibly \textit{apt} belief, that is, without requiring “\textit{apt} belief that the subject aptly believes to be \textit{apt}” (Sosa 2007, 24). Animal knowledge is then contrasted with \textit{reflective} knowledge, which requires defensibly \textit{apt} belief (Sosa 2007, 24).
yielded by perceptual competence in appropriately normal conditions” (Sosa 2007, 34). And the latter beliefs are enough for animal knowledge. So, it’s not relevant whether we are dreaming or not to decide what happens in “appropriately normal conditions.” Only what happens in the latter cases is relevant for animal knowledge.

The Return of the Skeptic

How successful are the strategies that Sosa developed to respond to skepticism? Answering this question is the central task of the present section. I’ll consider each of Sosa’s strategies in turn.

Sosa and the Imagination Model of Dreaming

As we saw, in response to the dream argument, Sosa avoids commitment to the traditional conception of dreaming and replaces this conception with the view of dreaming as imagining. On his view, we form no beliefs and make no assertions in dreams: we are engaged in a process of make-believe. This strategy offers a response to the dream argument—at least to the extent that the argument presupposes that we have beliefs when we dream. In reply, a skeptic can raise two points.

(a) Does the imagination model of dreaming capture the phenomenology of dreaming? That is, while we dream, is it really the case that we form no beliefs? It seems that if I am dreaming that a lion is chasing me, I really believe that I’m being so chased. That’s why I wake up somewhat distressed, but also glad that it was only a dream.

It might be argued that, even though we may form beliefs in a dream, we have no corresponding beliefs in reality. While dreaming that I am being chased by the lion—and believing, in the dream, that I’m being so chased—I have no corresponding belief in reality—I’m just comfortably sleeping in my bed (Sosa 2007, 3–4). But this means that the imagination model of dreaming can only get off the ground by distinguishing what happens “in my dream” from what happens “while I dream.” And in fact Sosa acknowledges this point: “My exposition relies heavily on distinguishing between two expressions: ‘in my dream’ and ‘while I dream.’ From the fact that in my dream something happens it does not follow that it happens while I dream. From the fact that in my dream I am chased by a lion it does not follow that while I dream I am chased” (Sosa 2007, 4). The distinction between what goes on “in my dream” and what goes on “while I dream” corresponds, of course, to the distinction between what happens in my dream and what happens in reality (while I dream). But whether such a distinction can be successfully drawn in the first place is something that the dream argument questions. After all, if we are given a criterion to distinguish dreaming from being awake, to know that the criterion has been successfully applied we need to know that we are not dreaming. (The
first premise in the dream argument states that a necessary condition for any knowledge claim is that we know that we are not dreaming.) And, in turn, to know that we are not dreaming, we need to know that the criterion to distinguish dreaming from being awake has been successfully applied. We end up with a circle.

Sosa could try to break the circle by noting that as long as an epistemic agent is awake, the proposition (I am awake) will be true of her, and she would correctly believe it to be true. But this presupposes that somehow the epistemic agent is awake, and hence somehow managed to distinguish dreaming from being awake. But by which criterion did she accomplish that? Sosa is exactly right in noting that if I am awake, the proposition (I am awake) will be true, and I should believe it. But to respond to the dream argument, I’d need to assert the antecedent of this conditional. The trouble is that, for all I know, I might assert (I am awake) in my dream, in which case I still wouldn’t have succeeded in distinguishing dreaming from being awake.

In order to avoid this possibility, Sosa insisted that, on the imagination model of dreaming, no assertions are ever made in dreams, and ultimately no beliefs are involved there either. But here we return to the issue of the phenomenology of dreaming. It seems difficult to reconcile the claim that no assertion or beliefs are involved in a dream with the fact that dreams do seem to move us, bother us, and in some cases frighten us. We form these genuine mental states in response to dreams—as we dream. Without our believing (even though perhaps falsely) that we are experiencing these things in our dreams, it’s hard to understand how we can form such response to dreams.

In response, Sosa could press on with the analogy suggested by the imagination model between dreaming and watching a movie. When watching a film, say, about a visit to the savannas of Africa to study lions, we do bring to the film various beliefs about lions and how they behave. We still believe that they can be dangerous. We withhold belief, however, about the events that unfold in the film. We don’t take the lions in the film to be really in front of us. Despite that, we can be scared that one of them is about to attack one of the characters in the film. So, despite not believing that the lions are literally in front of us, we do form emotional responses to their actions. Similarly, in a dream, we may well bring some beliefs to the dream (say, about how lions behave and respond to perceived threat). Some of these beliefs may well be invoked in explaining why we get scared in dreams. The analogy of movies and dreams works very well in this context.

The difficulty here is that the central feature of the imagination model of dreaming is to insist that we don’t have or form beliefs in dreams. After all, if we do have such beliefs, we can be deceived by a dream, since we experience things in the dream; but in this case, we cannot block the dream argument. After all, it’s then no longer clear that we could distinguish dreaming from being awake: we have beliefs in both cases. Ultimately, for
the imagination model to work as a response to skepticism, it’s important that no belief is involved in dreaming. But if no belief is involved in dreaming, the model doesn’t seem to get right the phenomenology of dreaming and our emotional response to dreams. So, the imagination model may need some additional, independent support and motivation before it can be used as an alternative view to the traditional conception of dreaming.

(b) Suppose, however, that the dream argument is offered by a Pyrrhonian (or a neo-Pyrrhonian) philosopher, someone who is not committed to defending the claim that knowledge is impossible. The neo-Pyrrhonist’s move consists in invoking the dream argument as a challenge to those who claim to know something about the empirical world. On this understanding of skepticism, the skeptic is not committed to the traditional conception of dreaming. In fact, the neo-Pyrrhonian skeptic would not defend any particular conception of dreams: a philosophical analysis of the nature of dreaming is something the neo-Pyrrhonian skeptic would simply suspend judgment about. Whatever conception of dreams one has, the neo-Pyrrhonian skeptic would raise the objection about whether we know what we claim to know, given that we might be dreaming. Whether we form beliefs or not in our dreams, as long as the phenomenology of dreaming is preserved we can be deceived by such dreams. And this is enough to challenge the knowledge claims made by the dogmatists. On this understanding of the dream argument, no particular conception of dreaming needs to be presupposed for the argument to go through.

Sosa’s Response Based on a Virtue Epistemology

What about Sosa’s response to skepticism based on a virtue epistemology? The skeptic would also raise some doubts here. After all, the account ultimately presupposes that if we are “in appropriately normal conditions” (Sosa 2007, 34) our perceptual beliefs will be apt. But in order to be in such conditions we would need, in particular, to be awake. And so, in order to assert the resulting knowledge claim (that our perceptual beliefs are apt), we would have to assert that we are awake. But to be able to do that, as a response to the dream argument, we would need to provide a criterion to distinguish dreaming from being awake. The imagination model offers such a criterion, but as the skeptic noted above, it’s not clear that the criterion succeeds. In any case, the virtue-epistemological story is supposed to provide an independent response to the dream argument. And so, it should not rely on the imagination model.

Sosa will insist here that as long as the appropriately normal conditions are met, we will form apt beliefs and will have animal knowledge.

3 To defend the view that knowledge is impossible is to articulate, in fact, a form of dogmatism—in the sense that it involves knowledge of something, namely, the impossibility of knowledge.
There’s no need for asserting any knowledge claim. (That’s the point of distinguishing animal from reflective knowledge in the first place!) Now, even if we do obtain knowledge in such case, the resulting animal knowledge (not being reflective knowledge) seems to be compatible with a neo-Pyrrhonian stance, where one simply follows the appearances. There is a cup in front of me, and in appropriately normal conditions I form the apt belief that there is a cup in front of me. Not even a neo-Pyrrhonian skeptic would deny that. If animal knowledge is compatible with the sort of knowledge that a neo-Pyrrhonian can endorse, is this strong enough for Sosa’s purposes?

Conclusion

Let me close by briefly addressing this last question. Does Sosa really need to respond to skepticism? What would be lost in virtue epistemology if the resulting epistemological account turned out to be compatible with skepticism—particularly with a neo-Pyrrhonian stance? The answer, I think, is: very little.

We may be able to form apt beliefs by adopting a neo-Pyrrhonian stance. When a neo-Pyrrhonist follows the appearances, that’s what he is doing, although he wouldn’t describe the process in such a philosophically loaded way. The neo-Pyrrhonian has beliefs—just as the original Pyrrhonists have (Sextus Empiricus 2000)—albeit of a weaker sort. These are not beliefs about the nature of things, about the underlying nature of the things beyond the phenomena. These are only beliefs about what appears to the neo-Pyrrhonian; beliefs that are formed in pretty much the way that beliefs that become animal knowledge are formed. Our ordinary beliefs may not be held as infallible, but a virtue epistemology need not be committed to infallible beliefs and infallible knowledge claims.4 As a result, most of our ordinary beliefs can be preserved. Being a virtue epistemologist and a neo-Pyrrhonist need not be in conflict in the end.

4 Perhaps even reflective knowledge—in a weak, non-dogmatic sense—can be maintained in a neo-Pyrrhonian picture. The neo-Pyrrhonian may reflect on how his beliefs that form animal knowledge are formed, and determine how their aptness is established. As long as this process is conducted in a non-dogmatic way—that is, without being committed to establishing the underlying nature of the objects under study—the neo-Pyrrhonian can accommodate even this aspect of Sosa’s proposal. This is, of course, a much more controversial claim.
Acknowledgments
My thanks go to Ernie Sosa for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

References