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Do butterflies dream?

If people never dreamed, would it make a difference to how they picture reality? Or themselves?

Philosophers would certainly lose the most natural way of introducing skepticism. The Chinese Taoist, Chuang Tzu (369 B. C. - ?), dreamt he was a butterfly. When he awoke he wondered whether he was a man who dreamt he was butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming he is a man. Any experience can be explained as either a faithful representation of the world or as a mere figment of a sleeper's imagination.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) tried to put science on a foundation of absolute certainty by devising a test for whether he was dreaming. In his last of the "Meditations on First Philosophy" Descartes suggests that he cannot be dreaming if he has a "clear and distinct idea" of being awake. Descartes' reasoning was that he had earlier proved in his third meditation that God exists (without the premise that he was awake) and that God would not have created the world in which even responsible

thinkers were doomed to err. For if God created a world in which logically innocent people made mistakes, then their errors would be God's fault. Since God's goodness precludes Him from being a deceiver, the methodologically scrupulous are infallible. Ironically, Descartes "clear and distinct idea" test was inspired by a dream (while in military service on November 10, 1619 in Ulm, Germany) in which God revealed the treasure chest of knowledge.

I have never had a dream directly about God. My dreams are generally nightmares about lecturing mishaps. For instance, in one dream a perceptive student asks "Professor Sorensen, why are you dressed in pajamas?".

Sometimes these anxiety dreams are more erudite. When I first lectured on my hero, David Hume (1711-1776), I was nervous about whether I correctly interpreted his subtle objection to the following argument:

1. If there are miracles, then God exists.
2. There are miracles.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Hume balked at premise 2 but not on the grounds that it is false. His complaint was that no one can rationally believe premise 2. Miracles are intrinsically incredible. A breach of a natural law is as improbable as the law is probable. Consequently, we should always bet on the lesser miracle that the evidence for the miracle is misleading.

Ever the over-preparer, I summarized Hume's reasoning in a detailed hand-out. After distributing it to the class, I discovered a typo. Instead of saying "You CANNOT know that there are miracles" the hand-out read "You CAN know that there are miracles". I told everybody to correct the error by writing NOT after CAN. We all did so.

Ten seconds later, the NOT disappeared from each person's page! The class let out a collective gasp. Resolving not to panic, I announced in a business-like tone: "That correction did not take. Please write NOT again."

I mentally counted down: "10, 9, 8, 7 6 5, 4, 3 2 1. Aha, still there! I wonder what the scientific . . . explanation was for, er," I had counted too fast: the NOT made another majestic exit.

There were now thirty pairs of eyes focused on me. The brains behind those eyes were not

impressed with David Hume. Nor were they impressed with me. Could my hero have led me into a worse pedagogical debacle?

I attempted a cheerful face and squeaked "Gee whiz, isn't that strange! I wonder what would happen if we wrote in NOT again?" The students mercilessly complied.

Yes, the NOT again evaporated. As did my composure. The students began to laugh at me. Softly at first, then louder and louder. My voice cracking, I once again asked them to insert the NOT. This merely amplified their swirling derision. I could hardly hear myself think! Blood rushed to my cheeks. My mouth ran dry. I racked my brains for the most probable hypothesis. Finally, I stammered "I must be dreaming!".

And I was.