DREAMS, NIGHTMARES, AND A DEFENSE AGAINST ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL[1]

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This paper appeals to the phenomenon of dreaming to provide a novel defense against arguments from evil. The thrust of the argument is as follows: when we wake up after a nightmare, we are often filled entirely with relief, and do not consider ourselves to have actually suffered very much at all; and since it is epistemically possible that this whole life is simply a dream, it follows that it is epistemically possible that in reality there is very little suffering. This epistemic possibility decisively undermines a key premise of both logical and evidential arguments from evil.

> [Kafka] was coming to see me one afternoon . . . and his coming in woke up my father. Instead of apologizing, he said, in an indescribably gentle way, raising a hand as if to calm him and walking softly on tiptoe through the room, "Please look on me as a dream." —Max Brod[2]

> I shall never forget how I was roused one night by the groans of a fellow [Auschwitz] prisoner, who threw himself about in his sleep, obviously having a horrible nightmare. Since I had always been especially sorry for people who suffered from fearful dreams or deliria, I wanted to wake the poor man. Suddenly I drew back the hand which was ready to shake him, frightened at the thing I was about to do. At that moment I became intensely conscious of the fact that no dream, no matter how horrible, could be as bad as the reality of the camp which surrounded us, and to which I was about to recall him. —Viktor Frankl[3]

> Life is a dream. —Yiddish proverb[4]

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[2]Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (USA: Da Capo Press, 1995), 73–74.

[3]Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: Revised and Updated* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 48.

[4]Leah Rachel Yoffie, "Yiddish Proverbs, Sayings, etc., in St. Louis, Mo.," *The Journal of American Folklore* 33 (1920), 161; my translation.

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1. An Alternative Direction in Responding to Arguments From Evil

A fairly generic version of an argument from evil can be formulated as follows:

A1. Horrific suffering occurs (horrific in amount, kind, and intensity[5]).

A2. Without a morally justifying reason, a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being would not allow horrific suffering to occur.

A3. There is (probably) no morally justifying reason for a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being to allow horrific suffering to occur.

AC. By A1, A2, and A3, it follows that there (probably) does not exist a God who is perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient.

Most attempts to overturn arguments from evil of the above kind grant the truth of A1 and A2, and focus their attention on undermining A3—whether in its absolute form (in logical arguments from evil), or its probabilistic form (in evidential arguments from evil). These attempts range from theodicies arguing that A3 is false, to defenses arguing that it is possible (either epistemically or logically) that A3 is false, to skeptical theisms arguing that we oughtn't believe that A3 is true. In contrast to these approaches, I propose to ignore A3, and instead take the far less travelled route of attacking A1—the claim that horrific suffering occurs. I will attempt to undermine A1 in a manner that parallels the proposing of a defense against A3; that is, by claiming that it is epistemically possible that it is false. In other words, I will argue that *for all we know* there is not actually any horrific suffering. In fact, I will suggest that for all we know there is really very little suffering at all.[6]

At first glance, this claim must sound both absurd and offensive. To say that it is possible that there is hardly any suffering must seem both to go against the most basic deliverances of our senses, and to compound the enormous amount of suffering that already exists by refusing to recognize the genuineness of the plight of its victims. I hope, however, to make my argument in a way that respects apparently obvious facts, and in a way which does not belittle the amount of suffering that there genuinely seems to be in the world. Whether I succeed in this endeavor is an open question—but I consider this paper's proposal to have sufficient interest and potential that it is at least worth putting forward for discussion.

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[5]Henceforth I will mostly just say "horrific suffering," and let the context determine in what ways.

[6]As it happens, I think that A3 is true, and that all attempts to claim that God might cause or allow horrific suffering would end up making God into a pitiably tragic figure with morally "dirty hands" (for a discussion along these lines see D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* [London: SCM Press, 2004], 33–44). This paper's attack on A1, however, ought to be of interest regardless of one's position on A3 (though it may be of more *urgent* interest to those who share my attitude regarding morally justifying reasons).

The basic thrust of my argument can be stated very simply. When we wake up after having had a nightmare—no matter how much we may have dreamt that we suffered—we are often filled entirely with relief, and do not consider ourselves to have actually suffered very much at all. And since it is epistemically possible that this whole life is simply a dream, it follows that it is epistemically possible that *in reality* there is very little suffering at all, despite what *seems* so plainly to be the case. In short: for all we know, when we die we are really "waking up," and all the sufferings of this life will seem as utterly insignificant as the sufferings of nightmares often do upon waking.

I find this to be an extraordinarily powerful idea. Consider it this way: if you don't know whether or not you are currently dreaming, then no matter what happens to you, no matter how awful life gets, there is never any need to fall into total despair—because there is always room to hope that it is all just a dream, and that everything is actually completely fine and will soon be revealed to be such. Or consider it this way: if it is epistemically possible that we are currently dreaming, then it is possible that all the heinous genocides of the last hundred years, and the countless genocides of the centuries before that, may not actually have happened—for they may just be figments of a terrible nightmare, soon to pass into nothingness—and this seems like a truly wondrous prospect.[7] Given the significance of these ramifications, it's worth looking into this train of thought in more detail.

In Section 2, I will lay out my argument more rigorously, and try to motivate and defend its premises. In Section 3, I will discuss the nature of the conclusion(s) to which the argument leads. In Section 4, I will make an augmentation to the argument—adding a second stage to the defense, intended to account for the residual suffering involved in the having of nightmares in the first place. In Section 5, I will explain how this defense has the unusual capacity to undermine both logical and evidential arguments from evil. In Section 6, I will discuss some aspects of what it might look like in practical terms to be convinced by this defense and live by it. I will then conclude, in Section 7, by summing up where the paper leaves us.

2. The Argument and its Premises

The argument with which I would like to undermine A1—the claim that horrific suffering occurs—runs as follows:

B1. For any experience that one actually undergoes, it is possible—in a phenomenally indistinguishable manner—to dream that one is undergoing it, including experiences of the very worst sufferings.

[7] In fact, I think that there is an ethical obligation to hope that my argument is right—and indeed to hope that this life really is just a dream—for if there is a possibility that all the horrendous evils of history have not actually happened then surely we are obligated to hope that possibility to be actual (see Robert Merrihew Adams, "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil," *Noûs* 13 [1979], 64–65).

B2. If it is possible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life, then one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake.

B3. From B1 and B2 it follows that one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake, and therefore it is always epistemically possible that one is dreaming.

B4. It is possible for a dream of suffering—even of the very worst sufferings—to entail no actual horrific suffering for the dreamer (or even very little actual suffering at all).

BC. From B3 and B4 it follows that it is epistemically possible that no horrific suffering occurs (or even that very little suffering occurs at all).

In the following three sub-sections I will briefly discuss and motivate the three premises of the above argument: B1, B2, and B4.

2.i. Motivating B1

Dreams are often unlike waking life in many ways—even in their phenomenal aspect. Sometimes they are hazy and patchy, sometimes bizarre, and sometimes even impossible, in ways that waking life is not. But at other times dreams are entirely realistic.

Of course, it seems unlikely that the whole range of actual experience has at some point been dreamt to have been undergone. But given the degree of realism of many dreams that people have, and given the variety of realistic dreams that people have, it seems entirely plausible to conclude that it is possible to dream that one is undergoing any experience that either has or will be undergone by anyone.

Included within this general claim is the more specific claim that it is possible to dream that one is undergoing any kind of suffering undergone by people in waking life. Indeed, even this more specific conclusion is directly borne out by actual dream-experience—for both anecdotal and experimental evidence shows that people often have entirely realistic dreams which run the gamut of sufferings, up to and including the truly horrific. It is widely acknowledged that one can dream all kinds of mental anguish, such as intense fear, anger, grief, guilt, and the like.[8] What is somewhat less widely recognized is that the same is true of physical pain. Numerous accounts exist, however, of dreams of terrible physical suffering. Consider, for example, just two of the "torture dreams" published in 1883 by the physician and neurologist William Hammond:

> A patient [of mine] . . . dreamt that while crossing the Rocky Mountains he had been attacked by two Mexicans, who, after a long fight, had succeeded

[8]See, for example, Kathryn Belicki and Marion A. Cuddy, "Nightmares: Facts, Fictions and Future Directions," in *Dream Images: A Call to Mental Arms*, ed. Jayne Gackenbach and Anees A. Sheikh (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, 1991), 99–101.

> in taking him alive. They conveyed him very hurriedly to their camp, which was situated in a deep gorge. Here they told him that, unless he revealed to them the means of making gold from copper, they would submit him to torture. In vain he pleaded ignorance of any such process. Pulling off his boots and stockings, they held his naked feet to the fire till he shrieked with agony, and awoke . . . Another patient . . . [was] subject to . . . dreams in which she was stabbed with daggers, cut with knives, torn with pincers, etc.[9]

More recently, the apparent experience of physical pain in dreams has become a subject of experimental study. Dream reports from these studies have included subjects who dreamt that they were "writhing . . . in agony,"[10] or who dreamed that they were experiencing "unbearable" or "excruciating" pain.[11] One subject reported that "[t]he pain was so intense that I was amazed when I awoke that it existed only in the dream."[12] Thus, given people's actual dream-experiences, it seems that it is possible to dream that one is undergoing any of the whole range of actual experiences, including experiences of the very worst sufferings.

Moreover, actual dream-experience also provides us with examples of dreams of great apparent duration. For—though it seems to be fairly rare—people sometimes have dreams that seem to last for months, years, or even whole lifetimes. I remember an "epic" dream that I had one night as a young teenager, in which I dreamed almost an entire life-narrative. The dream began when I seemed to be in early middle-age, and went on for many years—so many, that I witnessed multiple generations coming onto the scene then passing away. Others have reported similar things, of which the following is a remarkable example:

> I once dreamed I lived for 100 years as a farmer. I remember my whole life. Working in a field somewhere in a fictional location in Europe. Getting married. My wife dying. Adopting a wolf as a pet dog. Hiking through the country. I traveled often on foot for days and weeks away from my home. Going into town. Growing old. Dying. Looking back I can remember specific days in that life. Profound experiences I had. My approach to death. And they each stand out to me as something I experienced in real time, never rushed, but sometimes blurry.[13]

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[9]William A. Hammond, *A Treatise on Insanity in its Medical Relations* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883), 226–227 (and see also 231).

[10]Subject B, in Tore A. Nielsen, Diane L. McGregor, Antonio Zadra, Diann Ilnicki, and Lucie Ouellet, "Pain in Dreams," *Sleep* 16 (1993), 493.

[11]Subjects B and D respectively, in Antonio L. Zadra, Tore A. Nielsen, Anne Germain, Gilles Lavigne, and D. C. Donedri, "The Nature and Prevalence of Pain in Dreams," *Pain Research and Management* 3 (1998), 158.

[12]Ibid., Subject H.

[13]LostMyCannon (online pseudonym), internet comment posted on "Have You Ever Felt a Deep Personal Connection to Someone You Met in a Dream . . . ?," in *Ask Reddit*, at: https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/oc7rc/have_you_ever_felt_a_deep_personal_connection_to/c3g97g3 (retrieved: 3/7/2015); spelling corrected. For a report of a dream of centuries-long apparent duration see Georges Perec, *La Boutique Obscure: 124 Dreams*, trans. Daniel Levin Becker (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012), 194–195. Unfortunately there seems to be no scientific study or collection of "epic" dreams such as these.

The author goes on to recount numerous very specific details of the life that he dreamt. Of course, it may be doubted whether such dreams are really phenomenally indistinguishable from actually living through such long periods—and the mention of "blurry-ness" in the above example encourages such doubts. Perhaps a dream whose narrative covers many years is not as "experience-dense" as many years of actual living. Such dreams may be more like 90-minute films which cover many years'-worth of story: one gets a sense of a long time passing by experiencing only the "highlights."[14] But this need not matter to us, because it is easy to imagine a dream of the apparent duration of a whole life which *is* experience-dense—and this makes it plausible to believe what the premise claims, namely, that for any experience that anyone actually undergoes, it is *possible* to dream that one is undergoing it, including experiences of the very worst suffering (as regards kind, intensity, and even duration).

2.ii. Motivating B2

There are many ways to motivate dream-skepticism. In this paper I take the route that seems strongest to me, though it could undoubtedly be replaced by a variety of others. Premise B2—the claim that if it is possible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life, then one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake—is grounded in two prior assumptions, each of which has a great deal of intuitive plausibility.

The first assumption is some form of internalist principle about evidence, such as: one must be able to be aware of what one's evidence is. Something like this is accepted even by many non-skeptics, and it is not hard to see why. For if part of what it is to be rational is to respect one's evidence, and a necessary condition of respecting one's evidence is being aware of what one's evidence is, it follows that in order to be able to be rational one must be able to be aware of what one's evidence is.[15]

The second prior assumption is some form of underdetermination principle for knowledge, such as: given two incompatible scenarios, if one's evidence does not favor one scenario over the other, then one cannot know that one is the case rather than the other. As above, a form of this principle is accepted as true even by many who do not accept skepticism, and again, it is easy to see why. After all, what could possibly tip the epistemic scales in favor of one scenario rather than another, if not a preponderance of evidence? And if two contrary scenarios are entirely equally backed by evidence, it would be arbitrary to believe one to be the case rather than the other—and arbitrary beliefs cannot count as knowledge.[16]

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[14]For a similar suggestion see Mary Sturt, *The Psychology of Time* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), 115.

[15]This is the argument for the initial plausibility of evidential internalism that is put forward by Timothy Williamson in his *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 164.

[16]See, for example, Stewart Cohen, "Two Kinds of Skeptical Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998), 143–144; and Dylan Dodd, "Evidentialism and Skeptical

Now, when it comes to knowing about the external world, it is hard to think what might count as relevant evidence—given evidential internalism—other than one's phenomenal experiences. But if our phenomenal experiences are equally compatible with both the scenario that one is dreaming and the scenario that one is not, then our phenomenal evidence does not favor either scenario.[17] And given the principle of underdetermination for knowledge, it follows that one cannot know whether or not one is dreaming. Thus, premise B2 can be derived from the combination of these two widely accepted principles.

Of course, there are all manner of ways in which one could deny the two assumptions in which I have shown B2 to be grounded. But the two assumptions are sufficiently plausible in themselves that denying them will usually be motivated largely by the desire to avoid the skeptical conclusions to which they jointly lead. I would suggest, however, that perhaps we should not be so eager to avoid such skeptical conclusions—since not only are they strongly grounded in their own right, but they can also help to provide us with a powerful defense against arguments from evil. In short, perhaps dream-skepticism is not as disastrous a prospect as it is often taken to be.

2.iii. Motivating B4

Crudely put, the claim of B4 is that having a nightmare needn't be, and often isn't, a significant suffering for the dreamer—even though the nightmare may involve *dreaming* that one is undergoing truly terrible sufferings. This premise comes in two strengths. It claims either that having a nightmare needn't be a *horrific* suffering for the dreamer, or that it needn't be much suffering *at all*. The strength with which B4 is taken will, of course, affect the strength of the conclusion—but both options are sufficient to undermine A1. Which version of B4 is accepted will depend on how powerful one takes the following considerations to be.

The potential suffering involved in dreaming that one is suffering may be divided into two aspects: the suffering involved in the undergoing of the nightmare itself while one is asleep (the intrinsic suffering), and the

Arguments," *Synthese* 189 (2012), 340–341.

[17]Some have suggested that in cases where the phenomenal evidence is compatible with two mutually incompatible scenarios, one scenario might nonetheless be favored by abductive evidence—which is internally accessible. However, while abductive reasoning may often be helpful in differentiating between phenomenally indistinguishable scenarios in everyday life and the sciences, it cannot help against such general skeptical scenarios as the dreaming hypothesis. Firstly, abductivism plausibly rests on a form of induction about the past success of inference to the best explanation—but this kind of inductive argument must assume that one's past experiences have been of the real world, and so would involve illegitimately begging the question against the dream-skeptic (see Richard Fumerton, "Induction and Reasoning to the Best Explanation," *Philosophy of Science* 47 [1980], 589–600). And secondly, even if abductive reasoning were legitimate here, it seems to me that most versions of the dream-scenario will be exactly on a par with most version of the non-dream-scenario as regards their explanatory virtues. For, given that both scenarios grant an external world and both scenarios grant the occurrence of dreams, I do not see where they would differ—when considered in their totalities—in order for one to pull ahead of the other.

suffering involved in any adverse effects that the nightmare may have on the dreamer's life after waking (the consequent suffering).

As regards the consequent suffering, there is no doubt that this can sometimes be severe. Vivid and regular nightmares can have all kinds of negative effects on a dreamer's waking life, not least a fear of going to sleep and resultant insomnia. In less severe cases, profound nightmares can leave the dreamer with an eerie or haunted feeling for a while—whether a morning or a couple of days. However, though such adverse effects on the dreamer's waking life are common, it is also perfectly ordinary for nightmares to have no adverse impact at all on the dreamer's waking life. Studies confirm that while many people report distress upon waking from a nightmare, a significant number of people report no distress at all.[18] One recent survey found that even amongst subjects who had nightmares as frequently as every night, there were nonetheless some who said that they experienced no distress as a result.[19]

In fact, not only do nightmares often have no adverse effects, they sometimes actually have a positive effect. Indeed, it seems that nightmares are able to have a positive waking impact on some dreamers regardless of their degree of intensity.[20] Thus, for example—when coupled with the waking realization that it was "just a dream"—nightmares often bring a flood of relief, gratitude, and even joy; and frequently, the worse the nightmare, the more intense the positive after-effect. Consider the following dream-report, for example:

> I had a dream [that] . . . the children and I had gone camping with some friends. We were camped in such a pretty little glade on the shores of the sound between two hills. It was wooded, and our tents were under the trees. I looked around and thought what a lovely spot it was. I thought I had some washing to do for the baby, so I went to the creek where it broadened out a little. There was a nice clean gravel spot, so I put the baby and the clothes down. I noticed I had forgotten the soap so I started back to the tent. The baby stood near the creek throwing handfuls of pebbles into the water. I got my soap and came back, and my baby was lying face down in the water. I pulled him out but he was dead. I awakened then, sobbing and crying. What a wave of joy went over me when I realized that I was safe in bed and that he was alive.[21]

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[18]See, for example, Hulsey Cason, *The Nightmare Dream* (Princeton: Psychological Review Company, 1935), 11 and 18.

[19]Unpublished data provided to me by Michael Schredl, from his large MADRE study (the main results of which were published as: Michael Schredl, Sabrina Berres, Anna Klingauf, Sabine Schellhaas, and Anja S. Goritz, "The Mannheim Dream Questionnaire (MADRE): Retest Reliability, Age and Gender Effects," *International Journal of Dream Research* 7 [2014] 141–147).

[20]Cognitive behavioral therapy has been able to help people suffering severe distress from regular nightmares to eliminate the distress and to develop an entirely positive reaction to their ongoing nightmares—despite the nightmares remaining consistently of high intensity throughout the process (see, for example, Kathryn Belikci and Denis Belicki, "A Cognitive-Behavioral Strategy for Reducing Distress Associated with Nightmares," *Association for the Study of Dreams Newsletter* 3 [1986], 3–5).

[21]Quoted in Stephen LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1985), 207.

After the "wave of joy" we could well imagine that this mother—rather than being haunted by her nightmare—found that she was overwhelmed with especially warm feelings of love for her baby that day. Thus, far from having an adverse effect on the dreamer's waking life, nightmares can and do sometimes leave dreamers better off than they had previously been.[22]

So much for the consequent aspect of the suffering of a nightmare; what about the intrinsic aspect? Is there negative value simply in living through the dream itself? Certainly we sometimes judge that people suffer in the very having of a nightmare. Consider looking at someone who is tossing and turning in their sleep, groaning, and perhaps even periodically shouting "No!" We might well pity such a person for the nightmare they seem to be having, and even wake them up to spare them further suffering. I am therefore willing to grant that all nightmares involve at least *some* intrinsic suffering. But even if this is so, I think that the suffering in question can be, and often is, very minimal. I will present a number of considerations for increasingly strong conclusions in this direction.

First of all, I hope that everyone will agree at the very least that the actual suffering involved in dreaming that one is undergoing certain sufferings—even in the most lifelike way—will be orders of magnitude less severe than actually undergoing those same sufferings in real life. This is a good first step, but it does not get us as far as I would like—for even if it is true, the actual suffering involved in having a given nightmare might still be horrific, as long as the suffering that was dreamt to have been undergone was sufficiently worse even than that.

Here is a second—stronger—consideration. I pointed out above that it is common for even terrible nightmares to involve little or no consequent suffering. It seems to me, however, that one criterion of horrific suffering is precisely that—if it is remembered—it entails at least some consequent suffering (anxiety, bitterness, brokenness, or any number of other negative after-effects). Thus, if it is possible to undergo a very intense nightmare and then simply to shake it off in the morning without a second thought, it is highly implausible to think that the dreaming of that nightmare was anything like a horrific suffering.[23]

A third approach can lead to an even stronger conclusion. A stark sense of how significant or insignificant we rate the actual suffering involved in a nightmare can be gleaned by considering how much actual suffering one would be willing to undergo to avoid such a dream. If you were told that you could avoid a truly terrible nightmare this evening by having your last year's-worth of work permanently and completely deleted—would you opt for the deletion, or would you prefer the nightmare? What about it if was your last month's work? Or only your last week's? I would not

[22]See also Kathryn Belicki and Marion A. Cuddy, "Nightmares," 103–104.

[23]This point can be strengthened by a thought experiment: it is easy to imagine an episode of horrific suffering ruining someone's life; but it is almost impossible—without building-in an enormous amount of troubled background—to imagine the dreaming of a single nightmare as being able to ruin the dreamer's life.

be willing to lose as much as my last day's work to avoid even a terrible nightmare—and this becomes all the more plausible if one considers a case in which the deal concerns a nightmare which one will not remember the next morning (after all, we are now only concerned with the *intrinsic* suffering involved in bad dreams, rather than their consequent suffering).[24] This "economic" way of considering the matter reveals that for many people the intrinsic suffering involved in nightmares is comparatively very minimal indeed.

It might be objected, however, that even if the kinds of nightmare we usually have do not often involve very much intrinsic suffering, it would be different if *this life* were actually a nightmare. For if this life were a dream, it would be a dream of significantly long apparent duration and great experience-density, as well as being highly coherent and very psychologically involved—and it might be thought that if one had a nightmare like *this* it would indeed be such as to involve a significant amount of intrinsic actual suffering for the unfortunate dreamer. In response, however, I think that the previous argument applies just as well to this kind of nightmare. That is, if the only way to avoid a nightmare of this kind—even a terrible one—were to undergo significant suffering in real life, I doubt that many people would be willing to make the trade (especially if they were not going to remember the nightmare by the morning). Would you allow your actual leg to be cut off, to avoid such a nightmare? What about your little finger? What about being given a serious cut to your little finger? If you would only be willing to suffer a small amount in order to avoid this nightmare, this indicates that even these kinds of nightmare do not involve significant actual suffering.

Thus, it is possible for even the worst nightmares to involve only a fairly insignificant amount of intrinsic suffering, and certainly not to involve any horrific suffering. Either of these claims will suffice for the argument, though I am convinced of the stronger one.

3. The Defense-Scenario(s)

In the previous section I set out my argument that it is epistemically possible that this life is a dream, and that given that even the worst dream need not entail actual horrific suffering for the dreamer (or even much suffering at all), it follows that it is epistemically possible that no horrific suffering occurs (or even that very little suffering occurs at all). This conclusion undermines A1 of the argument from evil set out at the beginning of the paper, namely, the claim that horrific suffering does actually occur. In this section I will sketch out in more detail the nature of the dream-scenario being appealed to in this defense.

[24]The forgetting is not surreptitiously doing all the work here. For if I was told that I could avoid an episode of serious actual suffering—even if it was suffering that I knew I would later completely forget about—I would be willing to pay a much higher price than I would to avoid dreaming that suffering.

It is not uncommon for people to wake up immediately upon dreaming that they have died or been killed. According to the dream-scenario put forward as epistemically possible by this defense, this is precisely what will happen to us when we "die" in this present life: we will wake back into our true lives, and realize that the apparent life that went before was merely a dream.

When I say that this life might be a dream from which we will awake, I do not mean that it must be a dream rooted in the kind of neurophysiological systems and sleep-cycles that our present dreams seem to be grounded in. Rather, I mean that—like our current dreams—this life might turn out to be (a) something that is phenomenally indistinguishable from the living of a real life, but (b) correctly recognized afterwards to have been unreal, and therefore (c) such that its apparent suffering was of very little actual significance. This seems like a plausible rough characterization of dreaming—and it is in this sense that I say that this life may be a dream.

Into what kind of world and life does this defense imagine us reawaking? I would like to leave this as open as possible. Readers can fill it out in their own way—in whatever way they would expect a world created by a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient God to be. If it is thought that such a God would want to create a world in which there is no suffering or adversity at all, then that is the world that can be imagined; and if it is thought that such a God would want to create a world with the opportunity for growth through suffering and triumph over adversity, then that is the world that can be imagined. My defense simply means that the would-be theist is freed from the need to claim that such a God would want to create *this* world as it seems to us now, with its truly horrific amounts, kinds, and intensities of suffering. In short, this defense imagines us waking into the kind of world—whatever it might be like—from which it is granted that no successful argument from evil could be constructed.

So much for the general outline of the dream-scenario. When looked at more specifically, however, the possibility that one is dreaming can be fleshed out in a number of different ways, depending—for example—on how many people are taken to exist in the actual waking world, who they are taken to be, and how their dreams are taken to be interrelated.

At one extreme, the argument raises the epistemic possibility that you are the only person who actually exists, that the whole world is your dream, and that everyone else who seems to exist is merely a character in your dream. On this epistemic possibility the amount of actual suffering is drastically reduced in two ways: firstly, because the vast majority of people in the world do not actually exist so the enormous amount of suffering which they are usually taken to have endured is not actually endured at all; and secondly, because the suffering of the one remaining person who is granted to exist is only a dream of suffering, which therefore need not

involve any actual horrific suffering (or even much actual suffering at all). This can be called "the solipsistic dream-scenario."

At the other extreme, the argument raises the epistemic possibility that many people exist, and that they are all dreaming. This possibility can, in turn, be fleshed out in a range of ways: at one extreme, each person's dream is independent of everyone else's; and at the other extreme, everyone is simultaneously dreaming from their own perspective about a single "shared" dream-world. At this latter extreme all the people[25] who are generally taken to exist do actually exist, and are dreaming a shared "multi-player" dream.[26] These many dreams move in tandem with one another—perhaps by means of some kind of divinely maintained harmony. The scenarios described here range from what can be called "the massively unshared dream-scenario" to "the massively shared dream-scenario" respectively. Both of these kinds of epistemic possibility drastically reduce the amount of actual suffering, because, though these scenarios grant that there will or may be many dreams of truly horrific suffering, their being dreams means that they need not involve any actual horrific suffering (or even much actual suffering at all).

Of course, there are as many possible scenarios as there are possibilities between these various extremes. I take them all to be epistemic possibilities which are equally grounded in the argument of the previous section, and they all undermine A1 of the argument from evil set out at the beginning of the paper. But this does not mean that they are all equally effective as defense-scenarios. The scenario that makes for the best defense will be the one in which there is the least actual suffering. As above, I would like to leave the final choice open so that readers can choose the best in accordance with their own axiological presuppositions. I will, however, briefly mention some of the considerations that may enter into deciding between the different scenarios just sketched.

As far as being a good defense-scenario goes, the solipsistic dream-scenario does not fare all that well, for while it eradicates an enormous amount of suffering on the one hand, it also introduces a new kind of suffering on the other. Namely, it introduces the rather ghoulish prospect of your waking up alone into a solitary world. For most people this would not be the ideal world mentioned above, so this would probably not be the best defense-scenario. Judging between the massively unshared and the massively shared dream-scenarios is a little more tricky. I prefer the massively shared dream-scenario—largely because it is the epistemic possibility least different from how we naturally take the world to be: everyone we take to exist does actually exist; and all the experiences that we take

[25]I have mentioned only humans, but since it is seems likely that many non-human animals dream much as humans do, they could easily be included in this defense as well.

[26]For interesting preliminary evidence that people do sometimes seem to share dreams, see, for example, Linda Lane Magallón, *Mutual Dreaming: When Two or More People Share the Same Dream* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997). However, if the idea of dreams being literally *shared* is taken to be objectionable, one can just as well think of them as distinct but parallel.

ourselves to be sharing, we are sharing (though rather differently from how we usually think we are). Against this option it might be objected that suffering undergone in shared dreams—involving the dream-selves of other actual people—is somehow more real, and therefore more significant, than regular dream-suffering in unshared dreams. I am not entirely convinced that this is the case,[27] but anyone who is can easily opt for the massively unshared dream-scenario instead. Indeed, this latter scenario is most similar to our current way of dreaming: many people dream simultaneous but independent dreams which are populated largely with imaginary dream-characters who do not match up with anyone in the actual world.

Thus, at the end of this section, readers should be in a position to pick the dream-scenario that they consider to involve the least actual suffering, which can serve them as the defense-scenario whose epistemic possibility was argued for in the previous section.

4. Accounting for the Residual Suffering

The previous sections have been sufficient to undermine premise A1 of the opening argument from evil—that horrific suffering occurs—by arguing that it is epistemically possible that this life is a dream. However, even if this life is a dream, we would not thereby have done away with absolutely all suffering, for the dream-scenario itself involves some suffering in certain residual amounts. If this is to be a complete defense, therefore, I will need to account for and justify this residual suffering.

There are two ways in which the dream-scenario may be thought to involve actual suffering. Firstly, in the undergoing of the dream itself, and secondly, in waking up from the dream—paralleling the distinction I drew in Section 2.iii. I will deal with the second of these first.

It might be worried that although the aim of the dream-scenario is to eliminate the apparently negative aspects of people's lives, the possibility that this life is a dream is not sufficiently discriminating, for it ends up undermining the good as well as the bad. Thus, there is a risk that people will feel cheated—upon awaking—when they realize that whatever good things their life had seemed to contain were never actually real. Fortunately, however, I do not think that this is a danger. Of course, it may seem to a person *now* that it would be terrible if all this were to be revealed to have been unreal. But the relevant fact is that this is hardly ever how anyone actually feels after they have woken up, looking back on the previous night's dream from the vantage point of their actual life. Consider

[27] Against the idea that suffering in shared dreams is more significant than suffering in unshared ones, consider the following case. One night I dream that I viciously attack you, and on the same night you have an exactly parallel dream in which you are viciously attacked by me. Imagine that we talk the next day and realize that we seem to have shared the same dream. Though we might find this to be rather spooky, it would be strange for me to feel guilty, for you to judge me badly, or for you to feel any the more hurt by the dream due to the fact that it was shared. Perhaps if the dream is massively shared things would be different.

how strange it would be, for example, to come across someone who was deeply and genuinely grieving for a dream-relationship or a dream-achievement that they had lost some months earlier when they woke up from the dream in question. This simply does not happen to normal and healthy people—and certainly not to people whose waking lives are rich and fulfilled, as the dream-scenario supposes that the lives into which we will reawake will be.

Thus I do not think that waking from this dream-life will involve any suffering. But I have already granted that undergoing dreams of suffering does intrinsically involve a minimal amount of actual suffering—and this needs to be accounted for. After all, why would a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient God complicate the otherwise untroubled lives of his creatures with dreams—and often nightmares—which seem to last a lifetime?

Even if one would not have wanted to justify truly horrific sufferings by appealing to morally justifying reasons as to why God would allow them, when it comes to much lesser sufferings most people agree that it is morally acceptable to behave in a calculating fashion if necessary—a fact that is borne out by common everyday moral judgements. Thus—since I argued in Section 2.iii that the actual suffering involved in having a nightmare need not be horrific (and may well not be very significant at all)—I propose to account for the residual suffering involved in my defense by appealing to morally justifying reasons which God might have for causing or allowing it.

As it happens, numerous candidate reasons are readily available—for we need merely plunder the store of defenses which would be more controversial when applied to horrific sufferings, but which should not be controversial at all when applied to lesser ones. Consider, for example, some of Leibniz's notorious suggestions:

> Use has ever been made of comparisons taken from the pleasures of the senses when these are mingled with that which borders on pain, to prove that there is something of like nature in intellectual pleasures. A little acid, sharpness or bitterness is often more pleasing than sugar; shadows enhance colours; and even a dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony. We wish to be terrified by rope-dancers on the point of falling and we wish that tragedies shall well-nigh cause us to weep. Do men relish health enough, or thank God enough for it, without having ever been sick? And is it not most often necessary that a little evil render the good more discernible, that is to say, greater?[28]

The suffering involved in nightmares—even truly horrific ones—can be so minimal that they can sometimes be worth going through just for the experience and the variety that they lend to a life. This might be the variety that they add through the thrill of the fear or anxiety in themselves,

[28]G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Haggard (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1996), 130.

or it may be the variety that they add through the experiences that elicit the fear and anxiety—the chases, the monsters, the misdeeds, and the like. I have sometimes woken up from nightmares, and tried to go back to sleep with the specific hope of re-entering the nightmare, just to see what happens next, or to experience the extreme scenario fully to the end. After all, pleasure, happiness, and serenity, are not the only states that we value—we also value richness and variety of experience, tension, and sometimes even terror. I would never apply these ideas to actual horrors—but it is quite different to apply them merely to the experience of dreaming horrors. In short, I would consider my life the poorer if I had never had a nightmare. And if you asked me now whether I would opt—if I could—never to have a nightmare again, I would not take that option.[29] This is analogous to our seeking out experiences of pity, fear, and sorrow in the watching or reading of tragedies, and our seeking out experiences of fear, anxiety, and disgust in the watching or reading of horror films and books.[30]

Leibniz mentions more than merely variety and richness of experience, however. He also talks of appreciating the good by experiencing the bad. And this, it seems to me, gets closer to the real value of undergoing a seemingly life-long dream at some point within an otherwise good life. If we imagine that the life to which we will return—after waking up from the dream of our current life—is a utopian existence with neither suffering nor wrongdoing, then God may well want us to appreciate the value and the fragility of what we have on both those counts. He may therefore want us to be "re-born" into that idyll out of a dream of great suffering and wrongdoing. On waking from such a dream, we will undoubtedly be enormously relieved at not actually having suffered what we dreamt we had, and not actually having done what we dreamt we had—and we will thereby gain a profound appreciation for both our happiness and our innocence. Appreciation for the good that one has, after all, is an additional good in its own right—both in that it is a virtue (i.e., a fitting response to the good that one has), and in that it adds to the pleasure that one takes in the good that one has.[31]

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[29]It is not a problem that a person suffering from recurrent horrific nightmares which cause them terrible insomnia, for example, *would* wish their nightmares away; for I needn't claim that everyone would always have the reaction that I have described, but rather merely that it is a possible and plausible reaction. Moreover, my defense-scenario involves the having of only a single, one-off nightmare.

[30]See Aaron Smuts, "The Paradox of Painful Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41 (2007), 71–74.

[31]On this defense, then, God is a temporary "deceiver." But he is a benevolent one: briefly immersing us in deceptively realistic dreams, so as to help us fully appreciate and value our actual lives. Moreover—as Descartes pointed out—everyone grants that God causes or allows us to be deceived sometimes, for everyone grants that we dream (see René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in his *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 14). Finally, what is surely the main point: a brief deception is far more easily justified than complicity in the horrors we witness daily in the world as it seems to be.

Is dreaming these experiences really *necessary* for this appreciation? Could a profound appreciation not simply be implanted in us? Some degree of appreciation could indeed be natural or innate; but I don't think that one can compare an intellectual appreciation for how different things could have been, with one that is able to conjure up images and "experiences" of the alternative, as we can do from a dream. Just recall the dream-report of the mother, quoted in Section 2.iii, who was so overwhelmed with joy and relief after waking up from having dreamt the death of her young son. The visceral gratitude that I imagine she felt with her whole being, for the gift of her son still being alive, surely derived in large part from the life-like vividness of the dream-experience of his death.

At this point it may be objected that if nightmares of suffering and wrongdoing are so valuable to our "post-waking" lives, then shouldn't everyone's life be a nightmare? If suffering and wrongdoing are so important for attaining full appreciation of the world into which we will awake, isn't the fact that plenty of people seem to have wonderful lives and commit little wrongdoing actually fodder for a strangely inverted argument from evil: God seems not to have given everyone the "privilege" of having undergone a nightmare. This could be called "the challenge of the uneven distribution of kinds of life" which dogs many defenses and theodicies.

The most interesting response to this challenge is modelled on the fact that we often have multiple dreams in a night. Similarly, perhaps each person—before "waking" back into their actual life—dreams multiple lives. In this way, perhaps everyone ends up seeming to have experienced lives representative of all the most significant varieties.[32]

Interestingly, this could be seen as a non-metaphysical analogue of some theories of reincarnation. Indeed a similar idea—involving the notion of recollecting multiple past lives—is important in traditional understandings of the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment. A first-century biography of the Buddha describes the first stage of this process as involving the Buddha's recalling the entire "series of his former births":

> [I]n this way he recalled thousands of births,
> as if he were living through them again.
> After recalling births and deaths
> in all the various rebirth states,
> that man . . . then
> felt compassion toward all beings.[33]

[32]A simpler—but less interesting—response could be made by committing to one of the dream-scenarios on which our dreams are not shared. In that case no-one would be in a position to know what kinds of dreams the other dreamers are having, so this kind of objection would not get off the ground.

[33]Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: New York University Press & JJC Foundation, 2008), 402.

The Buddha's recollection of his past lives fostered compassion in him precisely by virtue of the strong first-personal appreciation of those multiple perspectives—which is closely analogous to the role that I suggest multiple dream-lives could play for us. Thus, perhaps we wake into our true lives having "lived through" a number of dream-lives—some of suffering and some of joy, some of innocence and some of guilt, and some of various mixtures and degrees of these qualities—thereby all the richer and better equipped for a true and deep appreciation of the happiness and innocence of the actual life that we have been given.[34]

5. The Power of the Defense

Usually when a defensive scenario is put forward as a mere epistemic possibility, it can be effective only against logical arguments from evil (which conclude that God does not exist). To be effective against evidential arguments (which conclude that it is improbable that God exists), the scenario would need to be put forward as positively *probable*.[35] It is important to note, however, that—despite appealing to a mere epistemic possibility—this paper's dream-based defense is actually effective against both logical and evidential arguments from evil.

The reason that my defense has such power is because it undermines a premise which both logical and evidential arguments take to be absolutely—rather than merely probably—true. Logical and evidential arguments tend to differ over whether it is certain or merely probable that God has no justifying reason for allowing suffering (i.e., they differ over the strength of A3); but they agree that it is certain that horrific suffering occurs (i.e., A1). So if I succeed in showing that it is epistemically possible that A1 is false, this will automatically infect any conclusion that is derived from A1, entailing that it is epistemically possible that any such conclusion is false. Thus, if logical arguments from evil—basing themselves on A1—conclude that God does not exist, my defense will show that actually it is epistemically possible that God does exist; and if evidential arguments from evil—equally basing themselves on A1—conclude that it is improbable that God exists, my defense will show that it is actually epistemically possible that it is not improbable that God exists. This is immediately devastating to logical arguments from evil—for the claim that it is epistemically possible that God exists thoroughly undermines the logical argument's conclusion that God certainly does not exist.

But advocates of evidential arguments might think that they are not so easily dismissed—for they may respond to my defense by suggesting a

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[34]On the massively shared dream-scenario, everyone living multiple dream-lives would also solve the problem of how we would react to the person who had dreamt that s/he was Adolf Hitler, or the person who had dreamt that s/he was serial killer Myra Hindley—for perhaps we have all been Hitler and Hindley.

[35]See Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, at: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/ evil/, Sec. 4.

reprised version of their argument. They can grant that my defensive scenario—that this life is a dream—is epistemically possible, but insist that it is a very remote and improbable possibility. They may therefore claim that though it is true that it is epistemically possible that it is not improbable that God exists, it is actually improbable that it is not improbable that God exists. Put more simply, evidential arguments from evil can retreat to the claim that it is probable that God probably doesn't exist. This is, of course, a weaker conclusion than usually proposed by evidential arguments—but nonetheless one that could still imply that it would be irrational to believe that God exists.[36]

However, I do not think that this reprised version of the evidential argument is actually available—for it is based on a false premise. In order to attain the adapted conclusion, it had to be claimed that the defensive scenario that I have put forward was—despite being epistemically possible—nonetheless a remote and improbable possibility. This might be a legitimate response to many defensive scenarios, but it is inapplicable to my particular proposed scenario, for it makes no sense to speak of it being either epistemically probable or improbable that this life is a dream. After all, if there are no phenomenal marks that differentiate in any way between waking life and life-like dreaming, then there is nothing that could possibly ground degrees of epistemic probability one way or the other.[37] Thus the defensive scenario that we are dreaming is neither a strong nor a weak possibility—rather, it is an epistemic possibility that by its nature cannot be placed anywhere on a scale of likelihood or probability. We should, perhaps, call it a "*pure* epistemic possibility," instead of a "mere" one (for the latter might misleadingly imply that it is an epistemic possibility of very low probability). Since it cannot be said that it is epistemically improbable that this life is a dream, the reprised version of the evidential argument from evil put forward above is not actually available—so the defense turns out to be just as devastating to evidential arguments as it is to logical ones. For the claim that it is epistemically possible that it is not improbable that God exists thoroughly undermines the original evidential argument's conclusion that it is certainly improbable that God exists. My defense, thus, has the unusual ability to undermine both logical and evidential arguments from evil by means of an epistemic possibility.

6. Living the Defense

In this section I will round off the paper by discussing some aspects of what I think it would look like in practical terms if one was convinced by this defense and took it to heart. I will begin by discussing the believability of the defense in the first place, and then move onto the kind of life that its adoption could foster.

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[36]This would depend on the various precise degrees of improbability.

[37]Recall that I argued in footnote 17 that abductive reasoning is not available to those confronted by dream-skepticism.

6.i. Is the Dream-Scenario Genuinely Entertainable?

In the preceding sections I have argued that it is a pure epistemic possibility that this life is a dream and that there is no actual horrific suffering (or even not much suffering at all). It may be challenged, however, that regardless of how sound my arguments may have been, it is nonetheless simply not psychologically possible to genuinely entertain the possibility that our lives are mere dreams. Perhaps, as Hume thought, we are simply unable to treat such skeptical hypotheses as *live*—i.e., resonant and existentially relevant—possibilities.[38]

This may indeed be true for some people—but (a) for many people the dream-scenario *is* a live epistemic possibility, and (b) it can easily become so for others. I will briefly discuss each of these responses in turn.

Firstly, there are many people who, far from finding the dream-scenario un-entertainable, actually have a deep hunch or sense that it is *true*. Nietzsche, for example, noted that:

> Philosophical natures . . . have a presentiment that hidden beneath the reality in which we live and have our being there also lies a second, quite different reality; in other words, this reality too is a semblance. Indeed Schopenhauer actually states[39] that the mark of a person's capacity for philosophy is the gift for feeling occasionally as if people and all things were mere phantoms or dream-image.[40]

Indeed, the belief that this life is a dream has emerged again and again, in many places and in many eras, whether in hazy presentiments or in fully-fledged theories. It is well known that the trope of life as a dream is very common in both Buddhist and Hindu thought, and countless examples could be cited from those traditions.[41] What is less well known, however—and a true sign of its ubiquity—is the fact that the idea also makes recurrent appearances in the Abrahamic traditions. I have picked two very different examples, to illustrate the variety available. Thus Rúmi, the thirteenth-century Muslim poet, wrote:

> [T]his world, which is only a dream,
>
> Seems to the sleeper as a thing enduring for ever.
>
> But when the morn of the last day shall dawn,

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[38]See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 174.

[39]Nietzsche is perhaps referring to Arthur Schopenhauer, *Aus Arthur Schopenhauer's handschriftlichem Nachlass: Abhandlungen, Anmerkungen, Aphorismen und Fragmente*, ed. Julius Frauenstädt (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1864), 295.

[40]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, in his *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15. It is interesting that the ability to lucid dream—i.e., to be aware, while dreaming, that one is dreaming—tends to make the possibility that this life is a dream seem particularly live (see Celia Green and Charles McCreery, *Lucid Dreaming: The Paradox of Consciousness During Sleep* [London: Routledge, 1994], 147).

[41]For many such examples see Timothy Conway, "This Is All a Dream," at: http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/support-files/this_is_all_a_dream.pdf (retrieved: 8/19/2014).

> The sleeper will escape from the cloud of illusion;
> Laughter will overpower him at his own fancied griefs
> When he beholds his abiding home and place.[42]

And Gedaliah Silverstone, an early twentieth-century Jewish preacher, wrote:

> Are not all the days that man lives upon the earth merely a dream—just that due to his great distractedness man does not sense it [to be so]? . . . Yes . . . [and] the meaning of the dream will only become known to you when they cover your eyes with earth—and the meaning will be that none of this ever happened, because the world that you saw was a world of illusion and insubstantiality.[43]

Probably an important contributory factor to the dream-scenario being such a historically live epistemic possibility—so much more so than any other skeptical hypothesis—is the fact that almost everyone has actually had the experience of being fooled by dreams: of waking up and realizing that what we had been absolutely convinced was real, was actually not. These experiences almost inevitably prompt the suspicion that we might currently be dreaming, thereby giving dream-skepticism far greater natural purchase than other skeptical possibilities for which there is usually no analogous lived exemplar.[44]

Secondly, even if one does not naturally find the dream-scenario powerfully resonant, it is possible to develop a greater sense of liveness for the possibility. One way to make the possibility that we are currently dreaming seem more resonant is to turn one's attention to particular dream-phenomena, such as the phenomenon of false-awakenings. Consider the following remarkable account of a dream experienced by the French zoologist, Yves Delage:

> One night, I was woken by urgent knocking at the door of my room. I got up and asked: "Who is there?" "Monsieur," came the answer in the voice of Marty (the laboratory caretaker), "it is Madame H——" (someone who was really living in the town at that time and was among my acquaintances), "who is asking you to come immediately to her house to see Mademoiselle P——" (someone who was really part of Madame H's household and who was also known to me), "who has suddenly fallen ill." "Just give me time to dress," I said, "and I will run." I dressed hurriedly, but before going out

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[42]Maulána Jalálu-'d-dín Muhammad Rúmi, *Masnavi I Ma'navi: The Spiritual Couplets*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trübner & Co, 1898), 217.

[43]Gedaliah Silverstone, *Sefer Drushim Lehagid: Drushim Yekarim leYamim Nora'im u'le'chol haShannah Kulah* [Hebrew] (Washington: 1930/31) 25–26; my translation.

[44]Compare dream-skepticism to, for example, the skeptical hypothesis that the world came into being just a moment ago with all the apparent characteristics of age. This latter hypothesis is just as much a pure epistemic possibility as the dream-hypothesis, but nonetheless it is far less live and resonant: it is not a belief that has flourished in any historical era, it does not form the core of any religion, and people do not seem to have strong presentiments of its truth. This is presumably because it does not have a lived analogue in the way that dream-skepticism does in our daily dreaming-and-waking cycle.

> I went into my dressing-room to wipe my face with a damp sponge. The sensation of cold water woke me and I realised that I had dreamt all the foregoing events and that no one had come to ask for me. So I went back and to sleep. But a little later, the same knocking came again at my door. "What, Monsieur, aren't you coming then?" "Good heavens! So it really is true, I thought I had dreamt it." "Not at all. Hurry up. They are all waiting for you." "All right, I will run." Again I dressed myself, again in my dressing-room I wiped my face with cold water, and again the sensation of the cold water woke me and made me understand that I had been deceived by a repetition of my dream. I went back to bed and went to sleep again. The same scene re-enacted itself almost identically twice more. In the morning, when I really awoke, I could see from the full water jug, the empty bowl, and the dry sponge, that all this had been really a dream. . . . This whole series of actions, reasonings and thoughts had been nothing but a dream repeated four times in succession with no break in my sleep.[45]

For me, the simple act of reading this account manages to make the possibility that I might currently be dreaming seem very real.

Another way to allow the dream-possibility to get a live foothold in one's mind is simply to pause periodically to consider that it might be the case. If one takes on the practice of saying "But perhaps this is just a dream" whenever something important happens—or maybe first thing in the morning and last thing at night—it is very likely that one's attitude towards the possibility will develop in unforeseen ways.[46] I envisage this as an exercise of the imagination along the lines of the "philosophico-spiritual exercises" which Pierre Hadot has discussed.[47] Namely, by means of consciously directing our attention and imagination in certain ways, we can come to change our attitudes towards things. Reminding oneself regularly that there is no phenomenal marker that could distinguish waking life from dream, and that it is therefore a pure epistemic possibility that this life is a dream, can be just one such spiritual exercise, which could transform what was previously not a seriously entertainable possibility into a genuinely live one.

6.ii. Living the Defense

The dream-scenario, then, is genuinely entertainable—but what might the practical ramifications be of truly considering the possibility that this life is a dream to be on an equal epistemic footing with the possibility that life is not a dream? There are two principal ramifications which I wish to discuss—one arising from each of the live possibilities held in tension. By taking it to be a live possibility that this life is a dream, I suggest that a certain degree of tranquility can arise; and by simultaneously taking it to be a

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[45]Quoted in Celia Green and Charles McCreery, *Lucid Dreaming*, 66.

[46]For a thought of a similar form but in a different context, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought: Diaries 1930–1932, 1936–1937," in his *Public and Private Occasions*, trans. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 169.

[47]See, for example, Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The* Meditations *of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 47–48.

live possibility that this life is not a dream, I suggest that a sturdy sense of moral responsibility and engagement can be retained. I will discuss each of these ramifications in turn.

Unlike Cartesian skepticism which had largely epistemic motivations, Pyrrhonian skepticism was undertaken with practical ends in mind—namely, the attainment of tranquility. Crudely put, the Pyrrhic idea is that if one cannot know what is happening, or whether what is happening is good or bad, then it is irrational to get upset or unsettled by it. Total skepticism therefore allows for untroubled tranquility.[48]

The dream-skepticism of my defense is similar to Cartesian skepticism in that I proposed it with the epistemic aim of engaging with certain theoretical arguments about God's existence; but it is also similar to Pyrrhonian skepticism in that I embrace the practical fruits that entertaining my defense-scenario can yield. For I think that entertaining the possibility that this life is merely a dream can lead to a certain degree of tranquility in the face of life's hardships and sufferings—or at least temper their sting somewhat and ward off despair. Thus, in the midst of suffering, one could remind oneself: "People have dreams like this all the time, and in those cases everything is completely fine despite the apparent awfulness of the suffering—for all I know this is just a dream." Taking this to heart would perhaps allow for a certain detachment from the pain, for a distancing from the epicenter of the suffering.[49] Using the dream-scenario in this way is part of what I had in mind in the previous sub-section when I said that regularly entertaining the idea that life is a dream could be a philosophico-spiritual exercise which could help to change one's attitude to things. That this idea could play this role is not a new insight—as the Hindu sage, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, taught: "Treating everything as a dream liberates."[50]

But, of course, treating everything as a dream can be dangerous. As well as detaching people from the pain in their lives, could it not equally detach them from their sense of moral responsibility? After all, it is reasonable to think that in a dream one bears no moral responsibility at all—for it is not at all obvious that your dream-self (or "dream-avatar") is actually *you* in a morally relevant sense; and even if it is you, it is not at all obvious

[48]See, for example, the Aristocles fragment in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol I, trans. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14–15.

[49]For fascinating examples of people who have put this into practice in their dreams and in their waking lives, see C. E. Green, *Lucid Dreams* (Oxford: Institute of Psychophysical Research, 1968), 46–49.

[50]Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*, trans. Maurice Frydman, ed. Sudhakar S. Dikshit (Mumbai: Chetana Pvt, 2009), 181. Thus, unlike Alvin Plantinga, I do not see there being a sharp division between responding to the "theoretical problem of evil" and responding to the "pastoral problem of evil" (see his *God, Freedom, and Evil* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977], 28–29 and 63–64). I think that it is a sign of the seriousness of a response to the theoretical problem of evil that it could also help to ease the pastoral problem, and I think that my defense fulfils this condition.

that your dream-actions count as *free* in a morally relevant sense; and even if they do, the actions that you take do not have any actual consequences (or, at least, not very significant ones), as they are merely dream-actions.[51] One might worry, therefore, that taking the dream-scenario seriously could lead to moral anarchy and tragedy.

But this would be to utterly misunderstand what it is to take this defense's dream-scenario seriously. Doing so does not mean being convinced that this life is indeed a dream, but rather, being convinced that—as far as we know—this life could equally be or not be a dream. Therefore, while the live possibility that this life is a dream might help to temper one's suffering and ward-off despair, the equally live possibility that this life is not a dream should ensure that one retains a sense of moral responsibility. For as long as it is a live epistemic possibility that our actions are of moral significance we are surely morally bound to treat them as such. Or, in other words: all the while that it seems to you—or even seems possible to you—that moral distinctions are relevant, you ought[52] to behave in accordance with the dictates of morality.

As can be attested by the history of stoic and quietistic systems, it is very difficult to strike a practical balance between tranquility and equanimity on the one hand, and morality and engagedness on the other. The reason that my defense is able to achieve this rare feat is precisely because it is put forward as a defense rather than a theodicy. Unlike most proponents of defenses against arguments from evil, then, I do not wish that my position were stronger than it is—it is precisely because my position deals in epistemic possibilities rather than certainties that it is able to straddle the seemingly mutually exclusive stances of equanimity and engagedness.[53]

7. Conclusion

Imagine an ideal world, inhabited by people living wholly good lives—lives rich with virtue, relationship, meaning, and achievement. Perhaps they also dream wonderful dreams. One night, however, they undergo

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[51]See Gareth B. Matthews in his "On Being Immoral in a Dream," *Philosophy* 56 (1981), 48–49.

[52]Of course, this "morally bound" and "ought" will only have any significance if it is the case that this life is not a dream—but that is fine.

[53]This puts me in a position to respond to the worry that this paper cuts off its nose to spite its face. The concern is that it is self-defeating to bring in dream-skepticism in order to refute arguments from evil, because even if the skepticism saves belief in God from the argument from evil, belief in God will simply then fall foul of the skepticism itself, so nothing will have been gained. This is not quite right, however, because arguments from evil are far more radically anti-theistic than skepticism is—for arguments from evil try to prove that one ought actively to believe that there is *no* God, while skepticism merely wants to stop you from believing that there *is* a God. Thus, even if skepticism does have an unsettling effect on belief in God, the skeptical defense-scenario will still result in a net gain by succeeding in undermining arguments from evil. And as I have just shown, there is actually significant practical benefit to a position which rests just with the epistemic possibilities that this life is a dream and that God exists—and if that is the case, then the skeptical commitments of my defense needn't be considered a disadvantage at all.

this dream—a seemingly life-long dream full of moral failure and infused with harrowing pain and suffering. Morning comes and they wake up. Initial disorientation soon gives way to a flood of relief: it was *just a dream*—the pain is not real, the injustice and suffering never happened, the brokenness is healed, the guilt is gone! As they begin to go about their daily business, they find themselves filled with a newfound gratitude and appreciation for everything that they have. The goodness, wholeness, and happiness that they had previously considered to be just the natural way of things, is now something to be wondered at—for the life-like dream that they just experienced showed them how very easily things could have been otherwise. Their lives are just as idyllic as before, but they have traded some of their innocence for depth. In this paper I have argued that it is epistemically possible that you are one of those people, that you are currently somewhere in the middle of that dark dream, and that you will soon wake up.

This idea first occurred me on a recent Day of Atonement, when I read the line of the liturgy which envisages a time when "all evil will disappear like smoke."[54] It struck me that this is a perfect description of what happens when we wake up from a nightmare: the terrible sufferings which had beset us and which had seemed so real, simply dissipate in the light of day, vanishing into nothingness and insignificance. For all we know—I thought—this is exactly what will happen with all our suffering. And since this is epistemically possible, it follows that—contrary to the claims of arguments from evil—it is epistemically possible that there is a God.

This defense thus helps to clear away the significant obstacle to belief in God posed by arguments from evil. But what next? Some might want to supplement this negative achievement with positive considerations or arguments for God's existence. As I mentioned at the end of the previous section, however, I prefer to leave it as it is—a defense of the possibility of hope: hope that God exists, hope that goodness is not alien to the world, and hope that injustice and suffering do not have the final word, or perhaps much of a word at all. After all, the psalmist commended no more than this when he said: "*Hope to the Lord, be strong and your heart will be given courage—and hope to the Lord!*"[55]

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[54]*The Koren Yom Kippur Maḥzor*, trans. Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2011), 592; translation amended.

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