

Knowing the World

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Abstract

How do we know the world? Paradigmatic answers to that question include knowing what God reveals to us through divine illumination, knowing what we discover through scientific observation and evidence, and knowing what it calls for by way of behavior. What is it to be in contact with the world? And how do we know a dream? The answers to those questions depend on the paradigm for knowledge that is taken as fundamental. The use of the behavioral paradigm is illustrated in analyzing dreams by René Descartes and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Keywords: knowledge, dreams, Descartes, Wittgenstein

Over the centuries, communities have rejected outdated paradigms and standards for knowing the world, and accepted new paradigms in their place (cf. Kuhn, 1996). One way to see this change in action is to look at the dreams of innovative individuals living in times when an old paradigm is being challenged. By interpreting such dreams, we can see the new possibilities for understanding the world — and for behaving — that are being created.

This paper looks at two such dreams, one from René Descartes (1596-1650) and one from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), and interprets them in light of a small set of concepts from Descriptive Psychology. In order to provide background for understanding the dreams, we start by reviewing the foundations for knowledge that were in question during the dreamers' lifetimes.

Divine Illumination

How do we know the world? For centuries in the Christian world, it was a given that God was the creator of the world, and only He had full, intuitive knowledge of the divine order of things. God's understanding in all its fullness was not open to us while we were alive, but the blessed would share in it when they were united with God after death.

For now we had knowledge obtained by observing the world around us. That knowledge was incomplete and fallible. We could not count on it, because the information that our senses gave us might be illusory, as when an oar appears bent in water. Our perception of the world was “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The standard for true knowledge was knowing how things were in the mind of God. His knowledge was non-sensory, complete, and immutable. Mathematics was taken as a model for God’s knowledge because it was “known to our minds directly” rather than through our senses.

How can things be known to our minds directly? In the 5th century, St. Augustine’s answer was that true knowledge came to us through divine illumination (cf. “Our thoughts come from God.”). Even though that answer “conflates ordinary knowledge in this life ... with the ‘face-to-face’ knowledge of God that is supposed to be reserved for the blessed in the next life”, it was nonetheless accepted (Spade, 2001, p. 95).

In the 13th century, Latin translations of Aristotle became widely available, and an Aristotelian confidence in the senses replaced the old distrust. St. Thomas Aquinas abandoned the Augustinian theory of divine illumination, and affirmed that our God-given powers were sufficient to account for the knowledge that we acquired by these powers.

In the 16th century, the paradigm of divine illumination was given new life by the Protestant Reformation. Some Protestant sects took literally Christ’s promise to his disciples that after His death, “the Spirit of Truth” would come to them and guide them into “all truth” (John 16:13). They encouraged their members to enter into trance-like states in which they would be personally receptive to illumination. To be “filled with enthusiasm” meant to be blessed and inspired by the Holy Spirit (Knox, 1950/1994).

There was an alternative path to divine knowledge, not sanctioned by the Church. Those who were hungry for knowledge – especially scientific knowledge – could turn to the Devil. The legend of Faust, on which Goethe’s play was later based, was known throughout Europe in the 16th century. It is the story of an alchemist who forfeits his soul in exchange for the Devil’s knowledge.

The Devil had a reality and dangerousness that is hard for us to appreciate. One verse of Luther’s mighty hymn, written in 1529, expresses the Devil’s status:

“Our ancient vicious foe
Still seeks to work his woe.
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate
On earth is not his equal.”

In medical practice, devils had pride of place in diagnosis and treatment. Although there was skepticism about diabolically-based diseases throughout the 16th and 17th century, as late as 1724, the conclusion of the faculty at a major medical university was “that attempts of the devil at seducing a person must be accepted [as

real]” (Diethelm, 1970, p. 12).

Even the first great British empiricist, Francis Bacon, treated devils as real. In 1605, in his ground-breaking work *The Advancement of Learning Divine and Human*, Bacon addressed the eligibility of angels and evil spirits for scientific study. Regarding angels, he concluded that “the sober and guarded inquiry, which may arise out of the passages of holy scriptures, or out of the gradations of nature, is not restrained.” Regarding “degenerate and revolted spirits”, he reminded us that while conversing with them or employing them is prohibited, “it is no more unlawful to inquire the nature of evil spirits, than to inquire the force of poisons in nature” (Bacon, 1605/2001, pp. 93-94).

This was the world in which Descartes had his dream in 1619.

Scientific Observation and Evidence

At roughly the same time, Copernicus’s heliocentric formulation of the solar system (published in 1543) was becoming more widely known throughout Europe. It had a world-shattering (“Face in the Wall”) effect on people who took it seriously: If the earth revolves around the sun, what kind of world is this? The Copernican formulation undermined all knowledge that had been accepted as revealed by God, as well as the Aristotelian trust in our senses.

If we cannot count on knowledge from revelation, and we cannot count on knowledge from our senses, what can we count on? People turned to scientific knowledge for certainty.

The new standard for knowledge was not a matter of knowing how things were in the mind of God. Instead, it was a matter of knowing how things were from the *point of view* of God. From that standpoint, scientific observation would transcend the viewpoint of any particular person, and not be vulnerable to misperceptions, illusions, and personal biases. In time God was dropped from the account, and the standard became how things were from the point of view of an Outside Observer.

The hope for complete and immutable knowledge of the real world was not forsaken. It would be achieved by using the scientific method to discover the truth of things, and then putting all of the results together into one, all-encompassing picture of the real world. It was a given that it was only a matter of time before the picture would be complete.

Scientists working on the Big Picture achieved an extraordinary understanding of the natural world. The picture only had places for things that could be verified on the basis of scientific evidence, so angels, spirits, and other non-material entities were now excluded. (Numbers were an exception.) The devil and his minions were eventually eliminated from medical practice, and evidence-based knowledge became the new standard.

Despite the enormous achievements, some critics condemned the preemptive place given to evidence. In the 19th century, for example, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1849/1955) wrote about “the confusion from which the concept of revelation suffers in our confused age” (p. xvi). He deplored the fact that even the Church treated a revelation as a delusion, unless evidence to the contrary

could be provided. He pointed out that God cannot help his ambassador in the way that a king can. A king can give his ambassador something to present to the authorities, like “his ring, or a letter in his handwriting which everybody recognizes”. But who would accept a letter that has fallen from heaven?

It is nonsense to get *sensible* certitude that an apostle is an apostle... just as it is nonsense to get *sensible* certitude of the fact that God exists, since God indeed is spirit. (p. 24, p. 109)

A person who stands “under the direct outpouring of the Spirit” is called upon to act, not to supply evidence (p. 21).

For most scientists, such criticism was easily dismissed as irrelevant if not nonsensical. Nonetheless, by the turn of the century, there was growing recognition that the Big Picture was a mechanistic, materialistic, and deterministic formulation. It had no place for a wide range of humanly important facts. Novels like Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) vividly portrayed dimensions and aspects of human life that could not be understood within the scientific way of knowing the world.

This was the world in which Ludwig Wittgenstein had his dream in 1920.

An Alternative View

In contrast to the two paradigms we have just reviewed, in Descriptive Psychology we take it that “the most fundamental way of knowing the world is knowing what it calls for by way of behavior” (Ossorio, 2010, p. 226). How is the concept of behavior-based knowledge different from illumination-based or evidence-based knowledge?

It’s not from the standpoint of God or the standpoint of an Outside Observer. It’s from the point of view of a Person in the world.

It’s not something in the Mind of God or in a Big Picture of the world. It’s a Characteristic of a Person. Formally, it is defined as “the structure of facts and concepts that a person has the competence to act on”.

It does not come with a guarantee of being complete, correct, or immutable, either now or in the future. Instead, the structure of facts is always under construction, maintenance, and reconstruction.

The use of this alternative is illustrated in the discussion below, as well as in the interpretation of Descartes’s and Wittgenstein’s dreams.

Contact with the Real World

Our understanding of what it is to be in contact with the real world is different, depending on which way of knowing we take as fundamental. When the standard for knowledge is knowing how things are in the Mind of God, paradigmatically we are in contact with the world when we are in union with God. This is in fact what mystics sometimes report: a profoundly heightened sense of being in touch with the whole world. They describe this as “awakening” to what is real, in contrast to being “asleep” or “half-asleep”.

When the standard for knowledge is knowing how things look to an Outside Observer, paradigmatically we are in contact with the world when we “see things as

they (really) are”. If we think that a person doesn’t have an objective view of things, we might say that the person is “seeing the world through rose-colored glasses”, and exhort him to take off the distorting lenses and see the world as it (really) is.

When the standard is knowing what the world calls for by way of behavior, paradigmatically we are in contact with the world when we spontaneously act on what the situation calls for.¹ If a rattlesnake is poised to strike me, I escape the danger. If someone invites me to go with him, I respond to the invitation. If someone asks me a question, I answer.

When a person’s behavior is *not* appropriate for how things are, we look for what sense the person’s behavior does make. Is the behavior unexpected but in fact reasonable in light of a wider range of circumstances? If not, our explanations take the form of “He didn’t because he couldn’t.” That is, he didn’t [do what the situation called for] because he couldn’t [do what the situation called for] because he lacked the necessary knowledge, motivation, or ability (cf. Ossorio, 1982/1998, p. 116).

Things that do not make sense

What happens if the situation calls for a person to respond to something that does not make sense? For example, if someone looks at a still life and asks, “How much water is in the pitcher?”, an answer to that “question” cannot be given. A person who has the requisite knowledge, motivation, and competence will recognize that the other person has not succeeded at asking a question. He will treat it as confusion (“Huh?”), or a chance to respond to nonsense with nonsense (“It’s all evaporated by now.”), or in some other way.

As a second example, consider a passage from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*:

‘I set the brake by connecting up rod and lever.’ – Yes, given the whole of the rest of the mechanism. Only in conjunction with that is it a brake-lever, and separated from its support it is not even a lever; it may be anything, or nothing. (1958, §6)

If someone insisted on asking, “What is it?”, Wittgenstein’s response could be a series of “It might be *x*”, “It might be *y*”, “It might be *z*”, “It might be...” until the interlocutor got the point that there is no question of *what it is* without a context. This is one option from the range of behaviors that we have for responding to people who are under the illusion that they are asking a question. The range also includes silence as an option.

The danger of non-questions is that they “seduce us into an illusion of understanding” (Conant, 1991, p. 137). If we fail to reject the question, we may end up talking nonsense, too. Or we may end up walking away in frustration and disgust, like Alice does when she makes her exit from the Mad Hatter’s tea-party.

Things that I don’t think of as possible for me

What happens if the situation calls for me to do something that I don’t think of as possible for me, *but I do it*? For example, imagine a 4-year-old who is very afraid of dogs. If someone asks her to “pet the dog”, she’s apt to look terrified, or confused, or like she just plain doesn’t understand what the person is saying. Pet-

ting a dog is not a possibility for her. One day she sees a small group of kids from the neighborhood in front of her house, and she takes off to join them. Too late, she sees that there is a large, black Labrador retriever in their midst, licking each of the kids' hands to their immense delight. Before our frozen 4-year-old can take another step, the lab comes and gives her a big lick, too. She hesitates, then giggles, and eventually reaches out her hand for another lick.

As Descriptive Psychologists, what do we say about what happened here? If we use the Person Characteristics/Circumstances model (Ossorio, 2006b, pp. 212-229), we can say that these were just the right circumstances for the child to discover that some dogs are not dangerous. She "had it in her" all along to be friends with a dog, and this episode in her life history made that potential actual.

If we use the Relationship/Status model (Ossorio, 2006b, pp. 230-241), we can say that the child's position vis-à-vis the dog changed. The child used to assign all dogs to the status of dangerous, and avoided them accordingly. But she assigned *this* dog to the status of possiblefriend, and actualized the corresponding behavior potential.

If we use the Dramaturgical model (Ossorio, 2006b, pp. 289-308), we might say that by reaching out her hand, she was "casting" the dog as a possiblefriend. When he responded accordingly, i.e., he played the part for which she had "cast" him through her behavior, her play was successful, and her world was changed.

A Structure of Facts and Concepts

Whichever model we use, there has been a change in the child's Knowledge, i.e., in the structure of facts and concepts that the child has the ability to act on. Historically, the definition of Knowledge was "the *set* of conceptual discriminations..." or "the *repertoire* of facts...". But in one of his last talks, Ossorio changed the definition to "the *structure* of facts and concepts...", and noted, "Whenever you're dealing with that particular Person Characteristic, just think 'world'" (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 126).

This structure is analogous to a mathematical coordinate system in its representational power. Just as a Cartesian coordinate system has places for every real number, this system has places for everything that is the case in the real world, i.e., what there is, what goes on, what occurs, and how things are.

By necessity there are many more dimensions in this system than the two or three familiar to us from high school mathematics. Quoting Ossorio (1998), "Personal, interpersonal, and social phenomena require many additional conceptual dimensions in order to delineate the various phenomena adequately. We live in the real world, not an abstract world of time and space." (p. 31)

What is the point of having a structure of facts? The point is to codify our behavioral possibilities and impossibilities. We put the results of our observation and experience of the world into the framework, and draw upon that when we're making our way in the world.

Lest this sound complex, note that by the time normal children are between 3-5 years old, they have put things together in this way. Parents sometimes say, "He

has his own world now” (or “She’s her own person”). We can say that the child has a simple conceptual structure in which everything fits together, and everything is related to everything else. Thus I could say of my young friend, “The dog’s position changed on the danger dimension of her world, and also on the friend dimension. The new place that the dog has in the child’s scheme of things codifies her new possibilities for behavior.”

Before children have a world of their own, they operate within the scene/situation of the moment, and their parents provide the overall structure in which all of their activities have a place. But once children have integrated the various scenes/situations of their lives into a simple, coherent world, that serves as the overall context for everything they do. They still naturally operate within situations, but those situations are now part of a larger whole, which becomes increasingly complex and comprehensive.

We might be tempted to ask, “*Where* is this holistic structure?” That’s one of those non-questions we just discussed. Nonsense begins the moment we start to look for the location of a Kubla Khan palace of facts, even one that is under renovation so that the dog can play in the fountain.

Nonetheless, we might insist, “Something *that* important has got to be *somewhere*.” As an antidote, we can point out that the structure of facts has a place in reality as a power of persons. That is to say that it’s a Person Characteristic. It also has a place in reality as an aspect of behavior. That is to say that it’s a parameter of Deliberate Action. But it’s *not* part of the real world in any other way. That’s why logically, categorically, there are no worlds without real persons and real behavior.

But what about this paper I am writing? Or this cup of coffee I am sipping? They better have a place within my structure of facts, or I won’t know how to act effectively in relation to them, i.e., I won’t know what they call for by way of behavior. But like all the things that are present to our senses here and now, they are secondary. What is primary is the concept of a totality in which the paper, the cup of coffee, and everything else that we see around us, has a place.

Knowing the Dream World

How do we know a dream? Not surprisingly, the answer depends on the paradigm for knowledge that is taken as fundamental. If divine illumination is the accepted paradigm, then dreams are one of the means by which God speaks to us directly. As expressed in the book of Job, “in a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men, while they slumber on their beds, then He opens the ears of men, and terrifies them with warnings, that He may turn man aside from his deed...” (Job 33:15-17).

If the accepted paradigm is one of observation and evidence, then dreams suffer the same fate as angels and spirits, revelations and God. No empirical support, no status – at least among observers of the ‘outer’ world.

The idea that we could station ourselves outside the world was applied not only to the ‘outer’ world, however, but also to the ‘inner’ world. For observers of the ‘inner’ world, dreams are a means by which we can understand the dynamics of

the mind. In this model, our knowledge of our dreams is an Observer's knowledge. We 'see' a succession of scenes in our minds, and on awakening, report what we have 'observed'. That report is treated as evidence of what is taking place within us.

When we say that we 'see the dream' in our minds, we are speaking metaphorically. This is easy to see if the metaphor is extended. Nabokov (1981), for example, offers a delightful definition of dreams:

A dream is a show – a theatrical piece staged within the brain in a subdued light before a somewhat muddleheaded audience. The show is generally a very mediocre one, carelessly performed, with amateur actors and haphazard props and a wobbly backdrop... (p. 176).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900/1961) reassures us that: "No matter what impulses from the normally inhibited *Ucs.* may prance upon the stage, we need feel no concern; they remain harmless, since they are unable to set in motion the motor apparatus by which alone they might modify the external world" (p. 568).

Ryle (1949) has shown that talking about dreams in this way is nonsense. It involves a fundamental category mistake. The mind is not a place, "not even a metaphorical 'place'" (p. 51). Just as there is no Kubla Khan palace of facts in the mind, there is no mental stage where unruly impulses and amateur actors prance upon "the ghostly boards" (p. 64). My dreams "are not the sorts of things of which it makes sense to say that they are witnessed or unwitnessed at all, even by me..." (p. 205).

"But doesn't it seem like we're watching a movie when we dream?" Simply think of the last time that you dreamt that you were swimming in the high seas, or thrusting a spade in spring soil, or galloping through waves of grass, or making love. I bet it didn't seem like you were watching a movie.

What is the alternative to talking about dreams as 'inner' observables? In the behavioral paradigm, we know our dreams as their *authors*. Just as we *produce* our behaviors, we *create* our dreams. We start with a dramaturgical pattern, cast characters for the parts, and enact the pattern.

Because we're not engaging in overt behavior when we're dreaming, we're free of the usual reality constraints on casting and implementation. We can cast as arbitrarily as Don Quixote, and have windmills for giants, barbers' basins for helmets, trollops for ladies, etc. As a result, the dream may not appear to make sense on awakening. To interpret it, we drop the casting and implementation details, and look for the (dramaturgical) pattern that we had in mind (cf. Roberts, 1985, 1998; Ossorio, 2010).

What we enact in the dream, whether successful or not, may make a difference in how we take the world to be. A dream may "turn us aside" from a deed that we had been pursuing as a viable option, or it may pave the way for a behavior that we had mistakenly codified as an impossibility. What can be changed – or affirmed – by a dream is our fundamental understanding of the world, i.e., our codification

of our possibilities and impossibilities.

Imagine in the Saga of the Black Lab if our young heroine had stood, alone and frozen, merely watching the other kids. But that night in a dream, she bravely approached a giant beast, who bestowed upon her a hug with its huge paws. The dream would be sufficient to mark a change in her world, because it affirms that she could relate to the black Lab in a new way.

Whether a change occurs in an actual situation or in a dream, the behavioral follow-through is what serves as evidence that it has taken place. For a moment, you can almost hear the sigh of relief: “Ahhhh... evidence.” And then the recoil: “Wait a minute. Are you saying that the subsequent behavior is *evidence* that a hypothetical ‘inner’ change occurred in a dream?”

We’re not talking about hypothetical ‘inner’ changes. What we’re talking about is behavior. Any behavior that calls for knowledge that a person doesn’t have is *not* possible for that person. But if a person acquires the requisite knowledge, i.e., the relevant facts are now available to him as part of the structure of facts and concepts that he has the ability to act on, then (tautologically) he can engage in the range of behaviors that call for that knowledge, given the relevant motivation and motivational priority. These are logical connections, not hypothetical ones.

Whether or not a dream in fact makes a difference to a person is a matter of choice and sensitivity, not necessity. A person always has the option to reject the reality of a dream: “It was only a dream.” “I’d never really do that.” “It must have been the anchovies.” And of course a person may be troubled by a dream, but be unable to interpret it.

Dream Interpretation

There is a long tradition in dream interpretation, dating back to antiquity, of dividing a dream into objects, looking at the meaning of each of the individual objects, and then putting the pieces together to form an interpretation. For example, in the dream of Descartes discussed below, there is a “melon from a foreign land”. It is an object that has long tantalized interpreters of the dream, and much has been written about its possible sexual, archetypal, and historical significance, e.g., Franz (1970/1998), Cole (1992), Rodis-Lewis (1998). In the traditional approach, the meaning of the melon is essential for an interpretation.

In contrast, in the behavioral model, the dream world divides into situations, not things (*pace* Wittgenstein). The emphasis is on the behavioral patterns that are occurring (or not occurring) in the circumstances portrayed in the dream, and pattern recognition is essential for interpretation. The melon is a detail that can be dropped.

In seeing patterns, we draw on the forms of representation codified in the Person Concept, e.g., the emotion formulas (Ossorio, 2006b), all of the images and heuristics in *Clinical Topics* (Ossorio, 1976/2013), the maxims in *Place* (Ossorio, 1982/1998), and so forth. Mastery of these forms give us the conceptual and technical resources to recognize a wide range of human patterns and dilemmas in our lives and in our dreams.

The Invitation

From the time he was 10 years old, René Descartes attended a Jesuit college that allowed students only minimal contact with the outside world. After graduation at age 18, he went on to earn a law degree. But instead of practicing law, he joined the army as a gentleman soldier. He was returning from leave when “the onset of winter detained him in quarters where, finding no conversation to divert him and fortunately having no cares or passions to trouble him, he stayed all day shut up alone in a stove-heated room where he was completely free to converse with himself about his own thoughts” (Descartes, 1637/1985, p. 116).

There he had the following dream.²

Some ghosts presented themselves to him and so frightened him that, believing he was walking in the streets, he had to lean to his left side in order to be able to advance to the place where he wanted to go, because he felt a great weakness on his right side, such that he could not hold himself upright. Being ashamed to walk in this way, he made an effort to straighten up, but he felt an impetuous wind, which carrying him off in a sort of a whirlwind, made him make 3-4 turns on his left foot. Even that wasn't what frightened him most. The difficulty of having to drag himself made him believe that he'd fall at each step.

Having noticed a school open on his route, he entered to find a retreat and a remedy for his trouble. He tried to reach the Church of the school, where his first thought was to go to make his prayer, but having noticed that he had passed an acquaintance without acknowledging him, he wanted to turn back in his steps in order to treat him with civility.

He was violently pushed back by the wind blowing against the Church. At the same time he saw in the middle of the school courtyard another person who called him by name in terms that were civil and obliging and told him that, if he wanted to go with him to find Monsieur N., he had something to give him. Descartes imagined that it was a melon from a foreign land.

What surprised him even more was to see that those who were gathering around that person in order to foster him were upright and firm on their feet, although he was still crooked and wobbly on the very same terrain. The wind, which had thought to tumble him several times, was now much diminished.

The dream divides naturally into four situations, corresponding to the four paragraphs used above.

Situation 1: It's a dangerous world.

In the first paragraph/situation, Descartes is beset by forces outside of his control: ghosts present themselves, and a whirlwind makes him go round in circles. Weak from fear, he cannot hold himself upright. He is afraid of falling at every step.

Situation 2: Something counts more than safety.

The second situation offers protection from the ghosts and shelter from the wind. But something counts more with Descartes than sanctuary. (Cf. “A person will not choose less behavior potential over more.”)

Situation 3: A new possibility presents itself.

The forces outside of his control are now stronger — a violent wind pushes him back. At the same time, a man appears and invites him to go with him to receive a gift.³ Descartes considers the offer.

Situation 4: The world is different from what I had taken it to be.

People gather around the inviter to support him. They stand without difficulty, while Descartes is wobbly. He is surprised that the world is different for them, but it is now different for him, too. The forces outside of his control have diminished.

The Inviter

In appreciating the significance of the dream, it may be helpful to see the pattern implemented with different details. Imagine, for example, that someone grew up in a tough, inner city neighborhood, and heard all his life about the dangers of dealing with gangs. Now he is on his own, and has the following dream:

As he is walking in the street, some gang members approach him. He is so frightened that he is barely able to keep walking. He reaches a place that offers protection, but wants to take care of something else. Two thugs block his path. At the same time, a smooth talker addresses him by name, promising that if he goes with him, there will be something in it for him. There are people gathering around the smooth talker. They are not afraid. He wakes up.

If we drop the details of this “dream”, we find that the dreamer is portraying three possibilities for behavior: (1) to operate from fear, (2) to retreat to a safe place, or (3) to accept an invitation from a smooth talker. Who is the smooth talker? For someone who knows about inner city gangs, there is no question about who he is. If the dreamer has been approached by gang members, and then stopped by two thugs on the street, the inviter is a spokesman for a gang.

We see these same possibilities in the dream of Descartes:

- Weak and afraid, he can struggle against malevolent ghosts and violent winds.
- He can retreat to familiar ground, seeking sanctuary in the Church.
- He can accept the invitation to go along with the man in the courtyard.

Who is the man in the courtyard? For someone who knows about evil spirits and evil winds, there is no question. He is an agent of the Devil.

That is exactly how Descartes experienced it. He reported that when he woke up, he was afraid that the dream was “the operation of some evil genie who would have liked to seduce him”. He made his prayer to God for “protection against the bad effects of the dream”, and lay awake for almost two hours, thinking about good

and evil. He finally fell back to sleep, but woke up almost immediately with an ocular migraine (Descartes, 1691/1965).

In 1619, there was nothing unusual about Descartes dreaming/thinking he had received a proposition from the Devil. As everyone knew then, the Devil did that kind of thing. And there was nothing unusual about Descartes being afraid and praying for protection. The Devil exacted a high price from those who accepted his offers. He possessed bodies, made them feverish, swollen, convulsive, and ultimately, took the immortal souls of his victims.

What is extraordinary is the possibility that Descartes affirms in the final situation of his dream — some people interact with the Devil without fear. If some people can gather around the Devil and be “firm and upright”, maybe Descartes can, too. *Maybe dealing with the Devil is not dangerous.* Considering that possibility is what changes Descartes’s world.

A Genie of Uncertain Status

Having seen the pattern of the dream, the next step is to ask, “How does this pattern apply to Descartes’s actual life situation?”

According to Descartes (1637/1985), when he spent the day of the dream thinking, one of the things he thought about was the uncertainty of knowledge. He had seen the diversity of customs of men, and the diversity of opinions of philosophers, and concluded that much of what we take to be true is a matter of “custom and example, rather than any certain knowledge” (p. 119). Not wanting to live his life relying upon principles he had accepted without question in his youth, he resolved to examine all the opinions he had previously accepted as true, and to uproot from his mind all those that were false.

We could take his dream as an instance of acting on that resolution. In his youth, he would certainly have taken it on faith that the Devil was dangerous. All of the trusted sources in his world would have affirmed that fact. But did he have evidence of the Devil’s dangerousness? Or was it just customary to avoid him?

If we understand the dream in that context, Descartes’s reaction on awakening gives us an indication of the courage he brought to his chosen task. It was not an idle intellectual exercise to question the givens of his world. It was a fear-inspiring, migraine-inducing project.

There is an additional fact about Descartes’s life situation that is worth noting. At the end of his account of the dream, Descartes (1691/1965) adds that “the Genie who excited in him the enthusiasm from which he had felt his brain heated up for several days, predicted to him these dreams before he went to bed. The human spirit had absolutely no role in it.”

What are we to make of this Genie, who has been an embarrassment to Cartesian scholars for centuries? In the past century, he has been treated as an hallucination of the sane (Medlicott, 1958, p. 666), taken as evidence of a nervous breakdown (Gaukroger, 1995, pp. 109-110), dismissed as difficult to understand (Rodis-Lewis, 1998, p. 43), and invoked to discredit Descartes (Maritain, 1946). Maritain, a French Catholic philosopher, scoffed: “The historians of rationalism

ought to settle for us once and for all, the identity of this Genius. Could it be by any chance, cousin to the *Mischievous Genius of the Meditations?*” (p. 11).

We can understand him as a “companion of uncertain status” (Roberts, 1991, 2006). The conditions were ideal for having such a companion. Descartes was not living in the mechanistic, materialistic real world that evolved from his philosophy. Instead, there was cultural support in the early 17th century for angels and demons, as well as social practices for dealing with them. Moreover, Descartes had a place in his world for someone who would inspire him, a place that was empty after a serious quarrel with his mentor (Curley, 2006, p. 722). Like Carl Jung after his break with Freud, Descartes may have found that having a fellow ‘genius’ to talk with — even one whose status was uncertain — represented a significant gain in behavioral potential.⁴

If such a companion “presented himself” in his winter quarters, Descartes would have needed to decide how to treat him. Was it dangerous to interact with him? Could he hold his own with him? What status should he give him? His dream may have been responsive to these sorts of questions.

If we treat the Genie as a companion of uncertain status, then we can respond to Maritain’s challenge, once and for all. The Genie of the stove-heated room is *not* a cousin of the Evil Demon of the *Meditations*. He is a brother. Both are the progeny of a singular thinker who changed our world.

Of course, in 1619, Descartes did not see the Genie — or his dream — as his own creation. He understood them in light of the divine illumination model. But not long after, he examined and rejected that model. As one of his biographers notes, “A few years later, once he had developed his critical mind, he returned to the interpretation of dreams, seeing them as a function of pure coincidence...It was the superstitious who judged there was something divine about them” (Rodis-Lewis, 1998, p. 43).

The Prayer Rug

Almost three hundred years after the birth of Descartes, Ludwig Wittgenstein was born to a wealthy Viennese family. With the resources and freedom to pursue any vocation he wanted, he first studied engineering, then aeronautics, and then the philosophy of mathematics. On the advice of Gottlob Frege, the great German logician and mathematician, he went to Cambridge in 1911 to work with Bertrand Russell, who gave him a place as a protégé and collaborator.

Wittgenstein returned to Austria at the start of World War I and served with distinction in the Austrian Army. While on extended leave from the army, he completed the manuscript for the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It was dedicated to Frege and Russell, but neither man understood the work. Four publishers rejected it. Unable to get it published unless he included a misleading introduction by Russell, Wittgenstein became suicidally depressed (Monk, 1990, p. 184).

Later that year, he had the following dream.⁵

I was a priest. In the front hall of my house there was an altar; to the right of the altar a stairway led off. It was a grand stairway

carpeted in red, rather like that at the Alleegasse [the family home]. At the foot of the altar, and partly covering it, was an oriental carpet. And certain other religious objects and regalia were placed on and beside the altar. One of these was a rod of precious metal. But a theft had occurred. A thief entered from the left and stole the rod. This had to be reported to the police, who sent a representative who wanted a description of the rod. For instance, of what sort of metal was it made? I could not say; I could not even say whether it was of silver or of gold. The police officer questioned whether the rod had ever existed in the first place.

I then began to examine the other parts and fittings of the altar and noticed that the carpet was a prayer rug. My eyes began to focus on the border of the rug. The border was lighter in colour than the beautiful centre. In a curious way it seemed to be faded. It was, nonetheless, still strong and firm. (Monk, 1990, p. 199)

The dream divides naturally into three situations, corresponding to the three paragraphs above.

Situation 1: “This is the cat that ate the mouse that ate the cheese...”

There is no action in the first paragraph of the dream. Instead, Wittgenstein carefully and precisely establishes the context of the rod and the carpet. With apologies to Mother Goose, we can say that this is the rod that’s part of the altar that’s beside the grand stairway that’s in the front hallway that’s in the house where Ludwig lives. It’s the same for the carpet: this is the carpet that’s part of the altar that’s beside the grand stairway...

Situation 2: Taken out of context, something may be anything, or nothing.

A rod has been stolen — separated — from that setting. Wittgenstein is unable to say anything about it, and the police officer questions whether it ever existed. The rod could be anything, or nothing.

Situation 3: Seen in context, something has integrity and significance.

Wittgenstein examines the carpet in its place in the whole. He sees its significance — it is a prayer rug — and then focuses on its border, which is faded. He affirms that it is “still strong and firm.”

The Human Context

The contrast between the second and third paragraphs of the dream is obvious. If something is taken out of context, like the rod, we cannot say what it is. If something is seen in place, like the carpet, we can appreciate its significance. That is also true of the dream itself. To fully understand it, we need to know the relevant facts of Wittgenstein’s life situation. Where was the contrast salient in his life?

An understanding of the structure and treatment of his work, the *Tractatus*, provides an answer. Conant (1991) explains the structure of the book:

The Preface and the concluding sections of the *Tractatus* form the *frame* of the text. It is there that Wittgenstein provides us with instructions for how to read what we find in the *body* of the text. In the Preface, Wittgenstein tells us that the idea that we can form thoughts about the limits of thought is *simply nonsense*... In the body of the text, we are offered (what appears to be) a doctrine about “the limits of thought”... At the conclusion of the book, we are told that the author’s elucidations have succeeded only if we recognize what we find in the body of the text to be (simply) non-sense. (p. 159).

The book’s treatment is well-known: Wittgenstein’s instructions were simply ignored. They were treated as puzzling, but irrelevant, and the body was confiscated for purposes very different from those Wittgenstein had in mind.

Thus, the *Tractatus* is what had been taken out of context in his life. For Wittgenstein, only in conjunction with his methodology — of using the statements as a stairway to get beyond nonsense — was it a valuable book. Separated from that strategy, it could be anything, or nothing.

If we understand the dream in this way, then the body of the *Tractatus* corresponds to the beautiful centre of the prayer rug, and the preface and concluding sections are the border. They seem to be faded because they have been ignored.

The dream ends with an affirmation of the integrity of the *Tractatus*. The frame may be faded, but, “nonetheless, [it is] still strong and firm.” This is also an affirmation of Wittgenstein’s way of knowing the world. In contrast to the context-free, person-free model of scientific knowing, his way of knowing involves appreciating the human — and religious — context in which everything has a place.

The hope implicit in the dream — that his book would eventually be seen and treated as what it was — was fulfilled almost 70 years later, when Diamond (1988/1991) published her influential paper, “Throwing away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*”.

Conclusion

How do we know the world? Paradigmatic answers to that question include knowing what God reveals to us through divine illumination, knowing what we discover through scientific observation and evidence, and knowing what it calls for by way of behavior. Those paradigms apply not only to the world as a whole, but also to parts or aspects of it.

Therefore, we can ask, “What is the most fundamental way of knowing baseball?” Ask any baseball player. It’s knowing how to play the game.

“What’s the most fundamental way of knowing another person?” It’s knowing what is called for behaviorally in relation to that person.

“What’s the most fundamental way of knowing a revelation?” It’s knowing what God has called upon us to do.

“What’s the most fundamental way of knowing a dream?” It’s appreciating its

behavioral significance for our lives.

Author Note

Debra Biasca, Instructor at the University of Colorado, provided an initial translation of Descartes's dream for me. James F. Gaines, Professor of Modern Foreign Languages at the University of Mary Washington, and an expert in 17th century French literature, helped with specific translation questions.

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Footnotes

¹Behaviors are not only evoked by circumstances; they are also generated by me. See the discussion in Ossorio (2010).

²The dream analyzed here is the first of three “dreams” that Descartes recorded from the same night. The second “dream” is recognized today as an ocular migraine, and the third is a long, repetitious dream. In the third, Descartes affirms that he can hold his own with the Devil, without weakness or wobbliness. Originally recorded by Descartes in a notebook, the dreams were preserved by Adrien Baillet, Descartes’s first biographer, who reproduced them in his *La vie de monsieur Des-Cartes* (1691). Baillet’s account was in turn included by Adam & Tannery (1965) in their definitive *Œuvres de Descartes*. This reference is given as Descartes (1691/1965).

³For those who find the melon irresistible, the most sensible comment that I read was from a historian. He noted that a well-known proverb of the time stated, “Friends are like melons. You’ve got to try fifty before you get a good one.” (Cole, 1992, p. 143) If that proverb is relevant, Descartes is saying to himself, “The odds aren’t good on this deal,” which fits with the overall pattern of diminishing the Devil’s status.

⁴Carl Jung had a guiding spirit Philemon, who first appeared to him after his break from Freud in 1913. Jung (1965) states that Philemon “seemed to me quite real, as if he were a living personality. I went walking up and down the garden with him, and he conveyed to me many an illuminating idea” (pp. 183-184).

⁵Wittgenstein’s dream is quoted by Bartley (1985, p. 29) and reproduced in a footnote by Monk (1990, p. 199).