

Morten Tolboll

The Dream Hypothesis and the Brain-in-jar Hypothesis

We almost all have an experience of, how our senses and thoughts can deceive us. Therefore the question about, whether life could be a dream or an illusion, also always has occupied Man.

In the scriptless people's religions, or in the world of the child, the dreams are episodes in the waking condition. To the poets - and in the various wisdomtraditions in Western mysticism and in Eastern philosophy - it is not impossible, that the whole of the waking condition is a dream. As Shakespeare says in his play the Tempest: "We are of the same matter as our dreams; our short life is encircled by a sleep."

The spiritual practice can be said to consist partially of meditation, partially of Dream Yoga. Meditation and Dream Yoga are two sides of the same thing. If you nevertheless should try to discriminate, then you about meditation can say, that the three aspects of meditation are relaxfullness, awareness and heartfullness. These three aspects are trained through supporting exercises such as relaxation, Hara practice, as well as Tonglen practice (see the supporting exercises in my book **Meditation as an Art of Life – a basic reader**).

In Dream Yoga you can say, that the day practice of Dream Yoga consists - besides the continuous exercises of meditation - in understanding the nature of thought distortions; in seeing their illusory nature, in seeing how they create your reality; that is: to realize, that a lot of your waking life also has character of a dream (the night practice of Dream Yoga is about writing your dreams down, and practising in conditions of lucidity, as well as astrality, if such states should occur). – See my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**, and my article **What is Dream Yoga?**

A lot of philosophers within European philosophy have also claimed, that life is a dream, or that the whole world is our own construction, created either by sensation or thinking. The best known examples are probably George Berkeley and René Descartes.

In European philosophy there is namely a strong tradition for only reckoning with two forms of cognition: sensation and thinking. Berkeley reckoned with sensation,

whilst Descartes reckoned with thinking. Berkeley is famous for the sentence *Esse est percipi*, which means that being, or reality, consists in being perceived (to be is to be experienced). The absurdity in Berkeley's assertion is swiftly seen: If a thing, or a human being for that matter, is not being perceived by the senses, then it does not exist. In accordance with Berkeley there therefore does not exist any sense-independent world. He ends in the so-called solipsism. That we will return to.

Descartes was also very dubious concerning how much we can trust our senses. Therefore also he took up the question *Is life a dream?* However his intention with this was in his *Meditations* to develop a confident cognition-argument.

In his *Meditations* Descartes presents the problem approximately like this: I frequently dream during the night, and while I dream, I am convinced, that what I dream is real. But then it always happens, that I wake up and realize, that everything I dreamt was not real, but only an illusion. And then is it I think: is it possible, that what I now, while I am awake, believe is real, also is something, which only is being dreamt by me right now? If it is not the case, how shall I then determinate it?

Precisely because Descartes not even in dreams can doubt, that 2 plus 3 is 5, he leaves the dream-argument in his *Meditations* and goes in tackle with the question, whether he could be cheated by an evil demon concerning all cognition, also the mathematics. This radical skepticism leads him forward to the cogito-argument: *Cogito ergo Sum* (I think, therefore I exist). – Note that Descartes' *philosophical* skepticism not is the same as *scientific* skepticism (about scientific skepticism: read my article **The pseudoscience of New Age and reductionism**)

In modern discussions about the reliability of our cognition you often meet a variation of Descartes' argument of the evil demon. The argument is: some day surgery will have reached so far, that you will be able to operate the brain out of a human being and keep it alive by putting it in a jar with some nutrient substratum. At that time computer research perhaps will have reached so far, that you will be able to connect a computer with such a brain and feed it with all possible data – that is: supply us with an experiential "virtual reality", so that we think that we have a body, that we have a life and walk around in the world believing, that we can perceive our surroundings, whilst we in reality only is a brain laying in a jar. It is this thesis the movie *The Matrix* is based on. It is also a central theme in New Age.

A lot of so-called reductionists believe, that it is possible (again: see my article **The pseudoscience of New Age and reductionism**). There are computer scientists, who believe, that you can understand consciousness as "soft-ware" and the brain as a "hard disc", and that you in a very few years will be able to decode a human being for the whole of its content of consciousness, immediately before it dies, and therewith

ensure its soul an eternal life – admittedly on a discette, but what the hell, it is after all certainly always better than to pass into nothingness, and the discette will after all could be played again and again.

The Brain-in-jar Hypothesis says it in this way: existence, that which I, Morten Tolboll, calls reality, is an illusion, because the fact of the matter is this, that I haven't got any body or any sense organs, but only are my brain, which is in a jar with a nutrient substratum, and which is connected to a computer, which provides me with experiences.

The problem is exactly the same as in Descartes' Dream Hypothesis: existence, that which I, Morten Tolboll, calls reality, is a period, which after its end (that is to say: when I wake up from it) will be realized as illusory, in the same way as I realize a dream as illusory, when I wake up from it. That is to say: that, which I call "reality", is a dream, and that, which I call "dream" (that is: the thing I am dealing with, when I am sleeping) is a dreamt dream.

Both the Brain-in-jar Hypothesis and the Dream Hypothesis are important in the ideology I call The Matrix Conspiracy (see my article **The Matrix Conspiracy**). An important pedagogy of The Matrix Conspiracy is namely subjectivism and relativism, which claim, that there doesn't exist any objective truth. Truth is something we create ourself, either as individuals or as cultures, and since there doesn't exist any objective truth, there doesn't exist any objective scale of truth. Everything is our own thought-construction.

Let us try to look at three logical problems, which the Dream Hypothesis runs into: The infinite regress, the solipsism, as well as the polarization-problem.

First the infinite regress:

I presuppose, that I - with the assertion about, that what, I now call reality, is a dream - believe, that it in principle is possible, that I wake up from it and realize, that it only was a dream. In that case I shall after all find myself situated in a new reality, which relate itself to what I now call reality, as this relate itself to my nightly dreams. This "new reality" you could then term "the R-reality".

When I wake up to the R-reality, I realize, that what, I till then called reality, only was a dream. But using the Dream Hypothesis (whatever argument I might have for it) I must already now conclude, that the R-reality also could be a dream, which I, if I some day wake up from it, shows itself to be contained in a R-R-R-reality – and in this way I can keep on.

If I say, that reality is a dream, and therefore ought to be called "dreamt reality", yes then I can not find any argument against, that it is a "dreamt dreamt reality" or a "dreamt dreamt dreamt reality" etc., indefinitely.

If you then take the solipsism:

Solipsism (of lat. *Solus ipse*, I alone), is the opinion, that I alone, and my states of consciousness, exist, or that I, and my states of consciousness, are the only things, which really can be realized. Everything else, for example other people's consciousnesses and material things, which are claimed to be outside my consciousness, are problematic things.

The Dream Hypothesis can for example only be stated in first person. There are not two persons who can agree about it, because all other persons than the person, which put forward the Dream Hypothesis, *ex hypothesi* are dream phenomena in his dream. When I – in first person – analyzes the eventual arguments *against* the Dream Hypothesis, I realize, that I don't need to take them seriously, because they *ex hypothesi* only are dream phenomena, which can't be compelling. But at the same time I realize, that all my arguments *for* the Dream Hypothesis for the same reason nor can be considered compelling. I have ended up in a self-contradiction.

And if you then finally take the polarization-problem:

Reality seems to be an Otherness, which determines and defines the world – that is: a negation-principle. Any concept, any thing, is defined by its negation; that is to say: what it not is. A dream can in other words only be defined from what it not is. It is for example not reality. This logic seems to be impossible to get around. How can you altogether assert that life, or reality, is a dream, unless you know what a dream not is?

The Brain-in-jar Hypothesis runs into exactly the same logical problems.

To the common consciousness, or the common cognition - that is to say: sensation and thinking - life could very well be thought to be a dream. The wholeness could possible be sleeping. You could here very well imagine the validity of the above problems, but you end up in the three logical problems. It is precisely these logical anomalies, paradoxes and problems, which create Samsara's wheel of eternal repeating up-cycles which is followed by eternal repeating down-cycles and vice versa (for example life and death, success and fiasco, joy and sorrow) – as well as the ignorance and the suffering when you are caught into this wheel, for example in the experience of nightmare and anxiety. All Jorge Luis Borges' small stories are about these logical and philosophical problems. His stories are filled with mirrors, masks, endless series and regresses, labyrinths, doppelgängers, time, solipsisms and dreams

(I have examined these logical and philosophical problems in my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**, especially in the thought distortion I call *Endless split of the thought*).

As mentioned there is also within the wisdom traditions a lot of talk about, that life is a dream. The Chinese philosopher Chuang Tsi wrote for example:

"One time I dreamt, that I was a butter-fly. Pleased with my fortune I flew around and wasn't thinking about anything else than being a butter-fly. About Chuang Tsi's existence I suspected nothing. Then suddenly I awoke, and it stood clear to me, that I was Chuang Tsi. But now I just don't know, whether I was Chuang Tsi, which dreamt that I was a butter-fly, or whether I am a butter-fly, which dreams, that it is Chuang Tsi. There is necessarily a difference in being Chuang Tsi and in being a butter-fly."

At first Chuang Tsi's text seems to be even more radical than Descartes. But what you can say, is, that there is a radical difference between Chuang Tsi and Descartes. Descartes and Berkeley reckoned namely, as before mentioned, only with two forms of cognition, sensation and thinking.

Chuang Tsi, as well as Medieval philosophers and a lot of Catholic philosophers in the present day, however speak about revelation as a third cognition-form. Some of our temporal existentialists speak about a type of being-cognition, which neither is due to sensation or thinking. And finally a couple of European mystics, as for example Plotin, Meister Eckhart and William Blake, have spoke about an occult cognition of God and higher powers, which reaches far beyond the areas of sensation and thinking. You could term it the wholeness-cognition. And in the East (for example Chuang Tsi) such a third cognition is well known (see my article **Paranormal phenomena seen in connection with mystical experiences**).

To this third form of cognition, life is *not* a dream, but the Good, the True and the Beautiful itself – reality. The path to this can be described as in the education novel: at home – the homeless - home. In the start, at home (if you not, through meditation and Dream Yoga, are working with the third cognition-form), the wholeness is sleeping. If you however start to work with this cognition, the education journey out in the world begins. The wholeness starts to dream. But the more realization trained, the more you realize the illusory aspect of the dream of the wholeness, and then the journey home starts. The wholeness begins to wake up, for finally, in the revelation, to be completely awake.

The truth in this awakeness - and which of course also is there hidden, both when the wholeness is dreaming and sleeping - is precisely the instance which creates the

logical, and insoluble problems with theories which only work with two forms of cognition, sensation and thinking.

This truth is reality, or the Otherness.

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