

## Chapter 2: Living Awake

*Further into the Night*

*To create Light!*

In the previous chapter I played a devil's advocate by presenting a very skeptical sophist approach. We even ended up doubting our own real existence and assumed our life is but a long dream!

In this chapter I endeavour to prove that your reading of this text is not a dream! I am real and you are really reading something in a real external world. From this chapter onward, we establish a framework for what we can know beyond a shadow of any doubt.

The history of science has shown many scholars who came across 'the dreaming argument', but only those with methodological skepticism discovered the truth and certainty.

### 1. Al-Ghazali

**Al-Ghazali** (also known as Algazel in the west); the most famous Iranian Muslim Sufi of the mid 11th and the early 12th century C.E. is a Muslim example of this intellectual journey in search for truth. He was honored by his appointment as a Professor at the **Nizamiyah University** of Baghdad, which was recognized as one of the most reputable institutions of learning in the golden era of Muslim history.

After a few years, however, at the age of 53 he gave up his academic pursuits and worldly interests in search for truth. This was a process of his mystical transformation and occupied about 10 years of his life.

In his book "*The Rescuer from Delusion*" (*Al-Monqeth Menal-Dhalal*) which is his account of his spiritual journey in search for truth, he states that his journey began with doubting all his sensible and rational knowledge.

He writes: "I could not convince myself that the whole life in this world is not a mere dream. Is it not that the Prophet (of Islam) has said: "*People are asleep, they wake up only when they die.*"? Therefore, what would guarantee that we are not sleepwalkers!

The dreaming argument so much puzzled al-Ghazali that he was bedridden for two months and, according to his autobiography, after three days of seclusion (*I'tekaaf*) in the minaret of Damascus Mosque, his heart was illuminated by a divine light beyond any rationality.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. René Descartes

**René Descartes** was a French philosopher and mathematician of the 17th century. He is sometimes called the father of modern philosophy. Descartes is the most famous western philosopher who was also tussled with 'the dreaming argument'.

In his 'Meditations on First philosophy' Descartes began an intellectual journey. In his quest for truth he determined to hold nothing true until he had established grounds for believing it to be true. Descartes reviewed all his knowledge from sensible and perceptible to rational and traditional sciences. The 'dreaming argument' and skeptical view on existence led him to invalidate all his knowledge.

Descartes' knowledge platforms from sensible to rational collapsed and he was left in suspense in the ocean of doubts and uncertainty. As he was sinking in his whirlpool of doubt, he realized that whatever he doubts, he cannot doubt his doubt. He said to himself: "I doubt myself, my senses, my mind, the world around me and even God, but I cannot doubt that I doubt."

### "I Think, Therefore I Am!"

He immediately concluded that if I doubt, therefore must be (to be able to doubt).

From this single sure fact which was expressed by him in the famous words *Cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am", he managed to build his certainty.

Here is Descartes's argument in a logical order:

I certainly doubt.

Doubting is a thinking function.

Therefore, I am a thinking thing.

If it's true that I think, it must be also true that I exist.

I certainly think, therefore, I certainly exist.

## Avicenna V's Descartes

Descartes's famous saying is one of the most famous philosophical statements in western philosophy, although both Muslim and western philosophers have challenged his argument. In the following, I only

raise and address the most famous rebuttal against him presented by Avicenna.

Abu 'Ali al-Husain Ibn 'Abd-Allah Ibn Hasan Ibn 'Ali Ibn Sina, (which was Europeanized into Avicenna), the genius Iranian Muslim philosopher, mathematician and physician of the late 10th and early 11th Century C.E. has discovered the fallacy of Descartes' famous words of "I think, therefore I am", more than six centuries before the birth of Descartes.

In the third section of his book "Hints & Notices" (*Al-Esharat Wa Tanbeehat*) he argues:

"If anyone claims that 'he thinks therefore he exists', he has fallen into a vicious circle. Because, he is trying to prove his own existence by the means of his own thought. In other words, to accept that you think or you doubt, you already need to have accepted 'you' exist, which is exactly the actual claim."

Therefore, the expression of '*I think, therefore I am*' is not the first platform of knowledge.

The fallacy of Descartes' so-called single sure fact can be discovered by the means of propositional logic utilizing the truth-table method.

The meaning of Descartes' statement in a logical structure is:

All those who think exist.

I think.

I exist.

The fallacy of his theorem is that before admitting his thinking, he needs to admit the existence and accuracy of the self-evident arguments of formal logic.

According to the above rebuttal, Descartes' analogy leads to a number of philosophical flaws as follows:

- My existence stems from my thoughts! [False]
- My thoughts exist prior to my existence! [False]
- If that is the case, then my thoughts are independent from my existence. For a priori existent does not depend in its existence on a posterior existent. [False]
- This is an obvious flaw, for unless you exist, your thinking cannot exist.
- I exist in my thoughts, which means again there is no external world beyond my thoughts!
- Therefore, Descartes' analogy is self-destructive and leads again to the dreaming argument!

## Refuting The Rebut

### Refuting The Rebut<sup>2</sup>

The above rebut is based on the assumption that Descartes assumed his thinking exists prior to his own existence, whereas what he actually means is 'if a being thinks, then he must already exist.' Therefore, by his proposition 'I think therefore I exist', he actually means its inverse proposition which is 'my thinking must be based on my prior existence'. This is similar to proving the existence of the Creator by His creation. Obviously, unless there is a creator there cannot be a creation, so how can we prove the existence of the Creator by His creation! This type of argument is called in logic 'demonstration through effect' and is very commonly used in science. For example, a fever indicates there is an infection in the body.

In other words, if you find Descartes' argument convincing, good enough but if you are not convinced with this his argument that's even better! Why? Because that proves you are a 'persuading being' which means you cannot be nothing! Because you are thinking and no matter what you think about, the one who thinks is a thinking '**being**' or as Descartes argument implies 'unless you exist you could not think'.

### Further into the Light

Besides Descartes' argument there are many other ways to refute the dreaming argument. Follow me to take you further into the light of reality.

### A Self-Destructive Argument

The skeptical argument aims at disproving our existence. They don't realize that their argument is self-destructive. In order for the skeptic view to have any share of truth, there has to be a real world, but they deny any real world. So, we simply ask a skeptic; 'Do you really exist'? Surely, a skeptic's answer is negative. Then if you don't exist, then neither does your skeptical view! **Problem solved!**

The same argument could be posed against 'the dreaming argument'. In order for you to dream you must be an existing being to fall asleep and then dream.

### If V's If

There is another fallacy in sophists argument. Sophists have no proof against the existence of reality. They only cast doubt and accuse you that you can't be sure that you exist. Well, you can also in return cast a doubt on their doubt and rebut their 'if' by an opposite 'if'.

They argue that 'you don't know IF you are dreaming'. In return you also argue that 'you don't know IF you are not dreaming'. In a battle between the two 'ifs', the burden of proof rests on the one whose claim stands against common-sense, i.e. skeptics. There is no way a skeptic can prove we are dreaming. All they could do is to doubt it.

## Skeptical View Is Fallacious

Let's put the skeptical view in a logical scale to examine the validity of their argument. Their claim is there is no such thing as an objective reality. Their only reason is some distortions of the senses known as illusions.

In a logical sense this means: Some As equal Bs. Therefore, all As equal Bs!

You can now easily see the fallacy of their argument. Just because our brain sometimes misinterprets sensory stimulation, it does not conclude that it always does the same. Besides, even illusions indicate that there is an external world beyond us although our brain has misinterpreted it.

## Dreams And Illusions Are Indirect Proofs For A Real Life

Skeptics refer to dreams and illusions to doubt the real existence, whereas they are actually among the proofs for the existence of a real world!

**Dreams:** the fact that you know you had a dream shows that you have already experienced the real world which, in comparison, you named the one opposite to a 'dreaming world'!

**Illusions:** Similarly, the fact that we know that there are many optical as well as other types of illusions is enough to prove that there must be a real sight that in comparison, we conclude to be illusions.

Indeed, without having any instinctive and real measurement, how would it be possible for us to distinguish truth from falsehood?!

Have you ever seen anyone forging a \$15 note?! Simply because there is none in reality to counterfeit from. Hence, contrary to sophists' fallacy, we may say all dreams and illusions are indirect proofs of the real world around us.

The fact that we make mistakes in some of our thinking or sighting does not denounce the validity of all our knowledge. In fact, the role of the various types of science from philosophy, logic to physical sciences is to help us realise those mistakes.

Skeptics also argued that whatever you have accepted until now as mostly true has come to you through your senses. But occasionally you have found that your senses have deceived you, and hence it is unwise to completely trust those who have deceived us even once.

We simply refute their argument in that we don't completely trust our senses. In fact, we know when to trust and when not to.

For instance, we all know the physical explanation of why and how a mirage happens or why a stick looks broken in the water by an optical law of refraction.

## SWS V's REM

Another fallacy in the skeptics' argument is the assumption of similarity between 'sleeping' and 'dreaming'.

According to sleep scientists, our brain generates two main types of sleep when we are asleep; Slow Wave Sleep (SWS), and Rapid Eye Movement (REM). About 80% of our sleeping is of the SWS type which is characterized by brain waves, relaxed muscles and slow deep breathing. This is our deep sleep during which we regenerate our energy.

The second part of our sleeping accounts for REM which is only 20% of our sleeping time during which the length of our dreams can vary from a few seconds to closer to an hour. So, we only dream during the REM. What about the remaining 80% of our sleeping time that goes without dreaming?!

## Scientific Differences Between Awake And Asleep

There are numbers of differences between people who are awake and those asleep:

- Physical responses and sensitivity to pain: when you are asleep, your brain won't have any activity to detecting similar sounds. For example, your mum and sister are talking softly in your bedroom while you are asleep. You would only hear them if you were awake.
- Learning ability: When your physical senses are asleep, your learning ability reduces to nothing. You only learn when you are awake.
- Consciousness and unconsciousness: One of the major differences between our state of wakefulness and sleep is when asleep, we are in the state of unconsciousness. Thus, when you're awake, you know you're awake, but when you aren't, you don't know that you aren't.

## Axiom (Self-Evident Knowledge)

An Axiom or a postulate in mathematics and logic is a statement that is taken to be true, to serve as a starting point for further reasoning. It literally means 'that which commends itself as evident'. Hence an axiom is a 'self-evident knowledge' upon which all other types of knowledge are built. For example, in mathematics,  $2+3=3+2$  is an axiom which needs no proof. Similarly, the statement: 'if equals are added to equals, the wholes are equal', is an example of what is self-evident knowledge.

In order for us to truly answer the question of our existence or any other question about the existing world, we need to know the fundamental human source of knowledge.

All intellectual humans, eastern or western, contemporary or ancient, with the exception of sophists, agree that human knowledge is divided into two categories:

Self-Evident Knowledge: Axiom

Non-Self-Evident Knowledge: Theorem

*Axiom or Self-evident knowledge* is instilled in our nature and is something we are born with. It is a type of knowledge that all healthy humans enjoy and hence is called 'common-sense', meaning a sense that is common among all humans irrespectively. It is a type of knowledge that we accept as true without proof or reasoning. Further, the validity of any other knowledge is scaled by it and its validity does not require any proof, or else this would lead to a vicious circle or infinite series of evidence!

Even Descartes was actually rescued from the whirlpool of doubt by clinging onto his axiom. The examples of axiom are: "No sentence can be true or false at the same time." (the principle of contradiction); "If equals are added to equals, the sums are equal." "The whole is greater than any of its parts."

The most certain human knowledge is mathematics, and pure mathematics begins with axioms from which other theorems are driven. This process is necessary to avoid circularity, or an infinite regression in reasoning, and as such it is impossible to provide any proof for them.

Axiom is called 'self-evident truth' for it does not need any analysis, rather it is the bottom line and foundation for all types of human analysis and acquired knowledge. All what it needs is attention, mental health, and lack of fallacy.

*Non-self-evident knowledge* is a type of knowledge which needs thinking and reasoning, like algebraic equations and many other types of human knowledge.

Common sense is our starting point. The existence of the external world is self-evident and fits with our instinctive beliefs. Rejecting the external existence is inconsistency with our instinctive beliefs.

The axiom is like a computer ROM (Read Only Memory). In order for you to run your PC, your PC needs to have an operating system by which the computer can run. The operating system is what the manufacturer installs in your computer and you are advised not to delete it from your machine, or you cannot run any other application.

The self-evident knowledge, specially the '*impossibility of the conjunction of contradictories*' (the law of contradiction), is the very fundamental human platform for obtaining knowledge without which no human knowledge- even the sophists' claims- would be possible. I will provide you with more explanation in reply to the fallacies of the sophists and skeptics.

If you still find the above explanation a bit too obscure, let me put it like this:

Consider this theorem:

*All Australians are mortal.* We evaluate the truth of this sentence in the following manner:

1)

-All Humans are mortal.

-All Australians are humans.

All Australians are mortal.

The validity of the first premise is also known from another theorem above that which is:

2)

- All animals are mortal.

-All humans are animals.

All humans are mortal.

Similarly, the validity of the first theorem is also known from another theorem above that which is:

3)

All living creatures are mortal.

All animals are living creatures.

All animals are mortal.

The ladder of theorems will continue until you end up at a premise which is self-evident that you do not need any proof for it, or else it will be a vicious circle or infinite series of theorems both of which are impossible.<sup>3</sup>

The Almighty God very often refers man to his gifted self-evident knowledge to prove God's existence to him. God invites us to the notion of belief in Him by simply posing rhetorical questions such as: "where they created by nothing? Or were they themselves the creators? Or did they create the heavens and the earth?"(The Holy Qur'an 52:35-36)

Similarly, when the idolaters asked Prophet Ibrahim (S) if he had broken their idols, he referred them to their common sense by saying: "Nay, this one; the biggest of them (idols) did it. Ask them if they can speak"! So simply he made them realize their false belief. Hence, they shamefully said:

***"Indeed you know well that these idols speak not!"(Holy Quran, 21:62-64)***

## Instinct Knowledge Is What We Are Born With

When we study the biography of most skeptics or sophists, we find that none of them were actually born sophists– believing that nothing exists or if it exists it is not apprehensible, otherwise they wouldn't have sucked the milk from their mothers' breasts!

Have you ever heard or seen any sophist cry when its time to laugh, or uses his hand to watch something with, or hear a voice with his eyes?! Yes, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it is narrated that Pyrrho acted on his own principles to such an extent, that his friends were obliged to accompany him wherever he went, so he might not be run over by carriages or fall down from a cliff! Hence, sophism is madness!

Even if we accept the validity of the narration, on the principle of 'uncertainty', one could have asked Mr. Pyrrho what would guarantee that his friends would be able to save him? What would ascertain him that there is a real carriage to be run by?!

Thus, the fallacy of the sophists arguments is obvious and no doubt all the sophists are realists in their practical life. I would dare any sophist jump down from a cliff if there is no certainty or real life! At the end of the day its only a dream, there is no reality. Don't worry you won't die in real!

As soon as sophists express their opinion, they have unconsciously admitted that they have tongue to talk with, there is someone around them to talk to, and there is a means of communication. These obvious facts are against the so-called principles of the sophists.

## Answers To The Logical Fallacies

Formal logic was founded by Aristotle to form a mathematical basis to discover the fallacy of the sophists' theorems. The fallacy of all the examples mentioned and many other such fallacies can be easily discovered by a logician.

In the following I will just show you the fallacy of the first example cited before and leave the rest to your interest in logic. But before that remember again, that the fact that you could instinctively tell that those theorems were false (though you couldn't explain it why) is another proof for instinct self-evident knowledge.

In the first example, a sophist fooled us by the means of a conjunction only. Let us revise the theorem again:

*Water is fluid (flowing).*

*Ice is from water.*

☞ *Ice is fluid!*

The fallacy of the theorem is easily discovered when the conjunction 'from' is highlighted in a different colour. Obviously, ice is not water to apply all the characteristics of water on it, rather it is from water.

Let me show you the fallacy of the theorem in a very clear mathematical way:

All A = B

Some C = A

All C = B

Now it's obvious that the theorem is a mere fallacy and there is not truth in it. As a matter of fact, if there were no reality and there was no self-evident knowledge within each and every human, do you think you would be able to unveil the falsehood?

## People Are Asleep!

Finally, the meaning of the famous narration 'people are asleep they only wake up when they die' and subsequent to that, the Rumi's poems, are alien to the sceptical view of the world. 'Sleeping' in this narration is an expression for 'heedlessness from their real prosperity' due to their indulgence in corporeal affairs.

It is interesting to note that the above-mentioned narration is engraved on a gravestone of the late Annemarie Schimmel; the famous German orientalist who died in 2003 in Germany!

1. By quoting the likes of al-Ghazali and Descartes I do not obviously mean that I condon all their thoughts and opinons.
2. To rebut means to try to prove something isn't true, but to refute means to actually prove it isn't.
3. Immanuel Kant: Prolegomena to Any future Metaphysics, Section 45

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