

Austin, Dreams, and Skepticism

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J. L. Austin's attitude towards traditional epistemological problems was largely negative. They arise and are maintained, he charged, by "sleight of hand," "wile," "concealed motives," "seductive fallacies," fixation on a handful of "jejune examples" and a host of small errors, misinterpretations, and mistakes about matters of fact (1962: 3-6, 1979: 87). As these charges indicate, he did not offer a general critical theory of traditional epistemological theorizing or of the intellectual motivations that lead to it. Instead, he subjected individual arguments to piecemeal criticism, patiently showing how things go awry in conception, motivation, argumentation, and plain fact. The work was incremental, but the goal was radical: to reduce large edifices to rubble. As he put it regarding certain sense datum theories, "the right policy is to go back to a much earlier stage, and to dismantle the whole doctrine before it gets off the ground" (1962: 142).

It is often said that Austin's criticisms were linguistic, but this is only partly right. While he occasionally charges traditional epistemologists with misusing crucial words and relying on unregulated and inadequately motivated technical terms, he also charges them with factual errors and with distorting or misunderstanding the procedures involved in epistemically evaluating people's claims and beliefs. For this reason, it is best to see Austin as criticizing traditional epistemological puzzles and projects from the point of view of our ordinary lives (including our best scientific theories and practices). He starts with a commitment to our ordinary ways of using words, our ordinary convictions about

what is the case and what we know or don't know, and our ordinary epistemic practices. None of this is held sacrosanct; reason may emerge to modify some of it. The point, however, is that this *is* our starting point, and a compelling reason to modify it will have to come from or be appropriately related to the materials with which we started.¹ We could consequently summarize Austin's approach like this. Confronted with a surprising epistemological claim ("We never know anything about other people's minds;" "We never directly perceive material objects, but only sense-data") Austin's question is whether, *starting from where we are*, we could reasonably be brought to believe it. What he tries to show is that the arguments that are supposed to do the trick turn out to be hopeless.²

My goal in this paper is to flesh out and provisionally defend this sort of Austinian response to the dream argument for external world skepticism.³ On first encountering this argument, it is natural to reply like this:

Of course I can't know anything about what's going on around me, if I don't even have reason to believe that I'm not dreaming. If I granted that I didn't know or have reason to believe this wasn't a dream, it would be completely unreasonable for me to believe that there is a piece of paper before me right now. But I have good reason to believe that I'm not dreaming; I even know that I'm not. *This* is nothing like a dream.

As I will argue, Austin shows us – at least in outline – how this ordinary, pretheoretical response could succeed. My argument will proceed by stages. I will first explore Austin's arguments about dreaming and our ability to recognize that we are awake (section I). These arguments rely upon contingent, empirical background information and are quite plausible when considered from the vantage point of ordinary life. The crucial philosophical question is how – if at all – Austin's argumentative strategy can be made to seem unsatisfactory. One tempting thought is that it is objectionable to rely upon

empirical background knowledge to explain how one can tell that one is not dreaming. However, Austin provides compelling reasons for thinking this objection fails (section II). It might be thought that the philosophical reflections leading to external world skepticism will reveal a shortcoming in Austin's position, so in section III I will bring Austin's remarks to bear on traditional skeptical concerns. I will argue that if his factual and epistemological claims are correct, then the dream argument for external world skepticism — and, by extension, several other prominent skeptical arguments — won't so much as get off the ground.

I. Austin on dreaming

When we are awake and our faculties are functioning properly, can we tell that we are not asleep and dreaming? Austin's answer is unequivocal.

There are recognized ways of distinguishing between dreaming and waking ... (1979: 87)

I may have the experience ... of dreaming that I am being presented to the Pope. Could it be seriously suggested that having this dream is 'qualitatively indistinguishable' from *actually being* presented to the Pope? Quite obviously not (1962: 48, italics in original).

... we all know that dreams are *throughout unlike* waking experiences (1962: 42, italics in original).

As the lack of qualification in the last passage indicates, Austin's claim is a bold one: no dream is qualitatively indistinguishable from a waking experience had while one's faculties are functioning properly. If that is so, then it should be relatively straightforward to determine that one is not asleep and dreaming. Drawing on what "we all know" about dreams, a person who is awake and whose faculties are functioning properly should be able to infer from what her present experience is like that she is awake, not dreaming. And this has an important explanatory pay-off. We would think it

bizarre for someone to raise the question, “Mightn’t I be dreaming?” in the course of most everyday inquiry, reasoning, or epistemic appraisal. Austin can explain why that is so. If we all recognize that every competent adult in ordinary circumstances can plainly tell that he or she is not dreaming, then there is no point in bringing the issue up. That is why we don’t bother to do so, and why doing so is silly even if knowledge or reasonable belief about the world requires adequate grounds for believing that one is not dreaming.

To see why Austin held this view, a fair bit of reconstruction is required.

In Warnock’s published redaction of *Sense and Sensibilia*, the second claim quoted above is immediately followed by this:

After all, we have the phrase ‘a dream-like quality’; some waking experiences are said to have this dream-like quality ... But of course, if the fact here alleged [that dreams are qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences] *were* a fact, the phrase would be perfectly meaningless... (1962: 49).⁴

On one natural interpretation, the argument here is as follows:

1. Our language contains the phrase, “a dream-like quality,” and this phrase is linguistically meaningful.
2. If we could never distinguish dreams from waking experiences, then this phrase would have no meaning.
3. So, we must be able to distinguish some dreams from waking experiences.
4. We could not do that if dreams and waking experiences were always qualitatively indistinguishable.
5. So dreams and waking experiences must always be qualitatively different.

Quite aside from its commitment to verificationism, however, this argument is patently inadequate: (5) simply doesn’t follow. The verificationist demand regarding the phrase “a dream-like quality” does not require that *all* dreams have a distinctive “feel”

distinguishing them from waking experiences, only that there be a quality that typical or paradigmatic dreams have and that ordinary experiences lack. But for this reason the argument will leave open the possibility that some dreams might be qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences.⁵

It would be a mistake to think that Austin merely intended to establish the weaker claim that *some* or even *most* dreams can be distinguished from waking experiences. For one thing, the weaker claim doesn't do the work the argument would need to do, since it doesn't support his confident claim that it "quite obviously" cannot seriously be suggested that dreaming one is being presented to the Pope is qualitatively indistinguishable from actually being presented to the Pope. Moreover, the weaker claim is irrelevant in the dialectical context. A. J. Ayer had offered a standard argument for sense-data beginning with the premise that "there is no intrinsic difference in kind between those of our perceptions that are veridical in their presentation of material things and those that are delusive" (1940: 5-6). What Ayer clearly meant – and all that he needed for the purposes of his argument – is that *some* "delusive" perceptions do not differ from "veridical" perceptions in what they are like from the relevant person's point of view; that is, that there are *some* cases in which it seems to the perceiver that she is in perceptual contact with objects around her, she isn't, and the situation is qualitatively indistinguishable by her from one in which she is. The suggestion on the table, then, is that some instances of dreaming are cases of this sort. The weaker conclusion yielded by the verificationist argument, that some or even most instances of dreaming *aren't* of this sort, is simply beside the point.⁶

Given the evident failure of the verificationist argument, it is noteworthy that Austin didn't actually think that his claim about dreams needed sophisticated philosophical defense. In his initial characterization of the failings of sense datum theories, he writes, "The fact is ... that the facts of perception, as discovered by, for instance, psychologists but also as noted by common mortals, are much more diverse and complicated than has been allowed for" (1962: 3). His strategy, then, is in part to remind his readers of the relevant facts. He thought that an honest look would reveal that Ayer had simply gotten them wrong. Ayer's argument, he writes, "begins ... with an alleged statement of fact Let us ask whether what is being alleged here is actually true ... Consider a few examples ..." (1962: 48). His example of dreaming that one is being presented to the Pope is offered as one such example. It is thus designed to remind us of the relevant facts, to make vivid that Ayer is denying the "obvious fact that the 'experiences' are *different*" (1962: 50, italics in original). Evidently, Austin intended *the example itself* to do the necessary argumentative work.

Austin's last revision of the lectures later published as *Sense and Sensibilia* was delivered at Berkeley in the fall of 1958. In those lectures the argument from the meaningfulness of the phrase "a dream-like quality" is conspicuously absent. In its place, Austin offers a list of particular ways in which dreams differ from waking experience:

But there are differences, e.g., in temporal and spatial boundaries. And it is like being told a story: one cannot ask for completeness – e.g., what the weather was – if it wasn't given. Also – as another aspect of 'having a dream-like quality' – things HAPPEN to the dreamer, often, rather than his doing these things. And not only is the sensuous balance different (e.g., few smells), but so also is the emotional balance quite different in dreams from that of real life (1958: 8, Lecture VII.7).⁷

What Austin manifestly intended to be offering here are some of those facts that “we all know” about the ways in which dreaming is “*throughout unlike* waking experiences”. In hoping his example would carry conviction, he was banking on – and reminding us of – our knowledge of what dreams are like.⁸

This strand of Austin’s argument is thus ultimately empirical. He appeals to a set of generalizations drawn from a lifetime of experiences with dreaming and with being told things about dreams by other people. And it follows from those generalizations that no dream is qualitatively indistinguishable from veridical waking experiences. This underlying empirical argument is an instance of a style of argument that we all regard as unexceptionable in ordinary life and science. Given a wide enough experience with cats in a sufficient variety of circumstances, one can reasonably conclude that cats don’t talk, that is, that *no* cat will talk. One might go on to allow that it is in some sense conceivable or possible (conceptually possible, logically possible, or whatever) for a cat to talk. But still, one might quite reasonably insist, the data show that it won’t happen. So in arguing as he does here, Austin is taking up a position within our ordinary practices, making use of a type of argument that we would all ordinarily accept without a blink.⁹

Granting that arguments of this sort are sometimes acceptable, two further questions arise. (1) Are dreams the right sort of phenomenon to be treated in this way? (2) Do the facts actually support Austin’s conclusion? These are extremely difficult questions, and I won’t attempt to answer them here. But if the empirical data line up on Austin’s side – as it’s eminently plausible they do – then we can reasonably continue to hold on empirical grounds that dreams differ qualitatively in particular specifiable ways from normal waking experiences.¹⁰

Even granting this empirical background, however, one might have epistemological reservations about Austin's claim that we can tell that we are awake by considering whether our current experience has (or lacks) the relevant features.

First, Austin would have to concede that our judgments about whether we are awake are fallible. He grants that while dreaming we are often incorrectly convinced that we are awake.¹¹ Moreover, on his view error should be possible regarding the presence or absence of the relevant phenomenological features, since he holds that error is generally possible in our judgments about what our current experience is like (1962: 112-13, 1979: 90ff.).¹² And he would have to grant that even if we have determined that our current experience has (or lacks) the relevant features, this would not *entail* that we are not dreaming. However, Austin would not regard these concessions to our fallibility as blocking our ability to know or reasonably believe that we are not dreaming, since he holds in general that our sometimes making mistakes does not preclude our ability to gain knowledge (1979: 98) and that evidence adequate for knowledge need not ensure against "outrages of nature" (1979: 88).¹³ Any fallibilist should be willing to follow him here.

Still, two worries might arise regarding the concession that dreaming often brings an incorrect conviction that one is awake. First, this concession might be thought to be incompatible with one's state *in fact* having features that mark it as a dream. The thought here would be that if dreams have features that distinguish them from waking experiences, then we ought to be able to recognize these features and their significance *while we are dreaming*. However, as Austin repeatedly stresses, the fact that under certain conditions we confuse two things does not show that there are no features that would enable us to distinguish them (1962: 51). The trouble with dreaming is that while

one is dreaming, one is (normally, often) not in a position to appreciate the relevant features.¹⁴

Second, it might be thought that the fact that we regularly get it wrong *when we are dreaming* somehow raises a problem regarding our ability to tell that we are not dreaming *when we are awake*. However, this is not so. In principle, the following situation is perfectly possible: there are two states A (the good state) and B (the bad state); when one is in B, one is unavoidably convinced (incorrectly) that one is in A, but when one is in A, one can tell that one is in A, not in B.¹⁵ For example, someone who is drunk may slur his speech and yet be entirely convinced (incorrigibly so) that he is not doing so. Still, someone who is not drunk and not slurring his words can tell, on the basis of how his speech sounds, that he is not doing so. The difference is simply that in the bad state, he fails to correctly register and appreciate the features that indicate that he is in the bad state, while in the good state he correctly registers and appreciates the presence of the features that indicate that he is in the good state, not the bad one.¹⁶

An objector might claim, however, that even when we are awake, we are not in a position to determine whether our experience has the relevant distinguishing features. For it might be suggested that just as dreams can bring an incorrect conviction that one is awake, they can also involve incorrect convictions about what one's current subjective state is like, with the consequence that even when we are awake we will not be able to determine that our experience has the distinguishing features.

This objection is a version of the objection just canvassed, and so is likewise mistaken in principle. Moreover, even if dreams do sometimes involve incorrect convictions about phenomenology (a doubtful empirical assumption), there is evidence

available – when one is awake and in full possession of one’s faculties – that enables one to determine that one is not dreaming. Consider this difference between dreaming and being awake, a difference perhaps gestured at by Austin’s comment that “it is like being told a story: one cannot ask for completeness – e.g., what the weather was – if it wasn’t given” (1958: 8): dreams do not include anything like a reasonably full “backstory,” an account of one’s recent and more distant history that enables one to make sense – in the way one generally can in waking life – of where one is, why one is there, how one got there, and what one is doing.

This is the feature of dreams that Descartes appealed to at the end of the Sixth Meditation to explain his knowledge that he was not dreaming. Hobbes, like many readers, thought that this appeal failed. He wrote,

My question is whether ... a man could not dream that his dream fits in with his ideas of a long series of past events. If this is possible, then what appear to the dreamer to be actions belonging to his past life could be judged to be true occurrences, just as if he were awake (in Cottingham, et al., 1984: 137).

We must distinguish two issues here, however. Hobbes could be suggesting that one might be having a dream which includes a full complement of relevant dream-generated nonveridical memories, or he could be suggesting that without any such full complement of apparent memories, one might merely be convinced, while dreaming, that one’s current experience fits appropriately with one’s past in a way that renders one’s present intelligible. The latter suggestion is quite plausible. I regularly have dreams of this sort. The former suggestion, however, appears to be eliminable on empirical grounds. My dreams never involve a full complement of apparent memories sufficient to render my apparent current situation and activities intelligible in the way that they generally are

when I am awake, and contemporary research into the neurophysiological side of the matter might help explain why that would be.

Now if it is true that dreams at best involve a streamlined “backstory,” then one can unproblematically determine whether one is awake even if dreams can generate false convictions about one’s current phenomenology. Try to recount or call to mind a reasonably full, rich story about where you are, how you got there, what you are doing there, and the many links features of your situation have to the rest of your life. If you manage to recount or call to mind such a story, then that provides you with good grounds for concluding that you are not dreaming. Might you merely be *dreaming* that you are recounting or calling to mind such a story? No. If you are currently thinking about an appropriately rich history, then your current experience includes a backstory. Might your conviction that you are currently thinking about that history itself only be the product of a dream, and so be misleading? Again, no. For consider how the objection would have to go in detail. “Might I only be dreaming that I am now listening to a song while revising yesterday’s lecture notes and drinking the tea I bought last week – a song that I haven’t heard for several years, that I played regularly ten years ago in graduate school, that I listened to while driving to Lake Superior seventeen years ago on my honeymoon with the person who is still my spouse, who used to like it and who still likes other songs I like, such as ...?” If you manage to ask a question like that then your current state involves thinking about an appropriately rich backstory, and so you are not dreaming.

II. Can it really be this easy?

I have argued on Austin's behalf that if we may freely make use of our empirical background knowledge of what dreams are like, then we can readily determine that we are awake, not dreaming. However, Austin's view might give rise to a vague sense of epistemological unease. How can it be legitimate to make use of empirical background knowledge at this juncture? Isn't that knowledge placed out of play when we consider whether or not we are dreaming? Worries along some such lines can easily tempt us out of our ordinary confidence that we can tell that we are not dreaming. However, as I will argue in this section, if Austin's larger epistemological framework is right, then we shouldn't be too quick to leave our ordinary confidence behind.

First, a few words to orient the discussion. It is often assumed that Austin's main focus in epistemology is the use and meaning of epistemic terms such as "knows." This interpretation is not without some support. In "Other Minds," Austin does describe key aspects of our practice of making knowledge claims, objecting to them, and responding to those objections, and part of his aim appears to be to draw conclusions about the conditions under which a knowledge claim is true. However, it is a mistake to think that his focus is limited to such matters. His target is both broader and more fundamental. Whenever one claims to know something, he says, one is "liable to be taken" to claim that one is able to prove it (1979: 85).¹⁷ Much of his discussion consequently concerns the structure of attempts to establish that something is true by articulating reasons to believe it and responding to objections. This structure will be the focus of my discussion. It is shared by cases in which we attempt to defend a belief by providing reasons in its favor (whether in response to another's queries or in solitary meditation). It is perhaps best characterized as part of the structure of reasoning about what to believe.

Objections involving alternative possibilities

Suppose that someone has offered, or is considering, a set of reasons in defense of a claim. As Austin notes, there are several points at which an objection could in principle be lodged. Objections could be raised regarding (1) the *adequacy* of the offered considerations (assuming they are true), (2) the *truth* of the offered considerations, or (3) the reasoner's *ability to determine* the adequacy or truth of the offered considerations or of the claim in question.¹⁸ In each of these cases, objecting can take the form of offering a suggestion about how the world could be – a particular way in which the evidence could be inadequate, the alleged evidence false, or the person unreliable – and asking what reason the person has for thinking that the world is not that way. An inability to respond adequately to the objection reflects negatively on the person's position.

Austin draws a crucial distinction in this regard. He indicates it as follows.

“Enough is enough: it doesn't mean everything. Enough means enough to show that ...it 'can't' be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing description of it. It does *not* mean, for example, enough to show it isn't a *stuffed* goldfinch” (1979: 84)

Suppose that I have claimed that there is a goldfinch in the garden and have supported my claim by noting that the bird in question has a red head.¹⁹ We all sense that in any ordinary situation, there would be a significant difference between the objection, “But woodpeckers have red heads too. What shows it isn't a woodpecker?” and the objection, “Couldn't it just be stuffed?” The first must be taken seriously. The second is silly and shouldn't be. (For an even clearer example of the latter sort, consider the objection, “But couldn't it be an intergalactic spying device cleverly disguised to look like a goldfinch?”) Objections of the first sort are appropriately countered only by adducing specific

additional evidence that things are not as the objection suggests they might be, “E.g., It can’t be a woodpecker, because ...”. By contrast, objections of the second sort may be summarily dismissed, e.g., by saying, “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no reason to think that it is an intergalactic spying device cleverly disguised to look like a goldfinch!” In order to respond adequately to objections of this latter sort, one doesn’t need to find or adduce additional specific evidence showing that things are not as the objection suggests they might be.

It might be thought that this difference is best explained by the practical context: different possibilities are made relevant to particular episodes of reasoning and inquiry depending on our interests and purposes. In particular, it might be urged that the more concerned we are to attain the truth, and the more we ignore other interests and purposes, the wider we must cast the net of possibilities under consideration.²⁰ Austin at times seems to suggest some such view himself. For instance, he writes (italics indicating the text elided in the previous quote), “Enough means enough to show that (*within reason, and for present intents and purposes*) it ‘can’t’ be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing description of it” (1979: 84, italics added). However, the proposed view fails as a description of our practice. Given things as they are, there is *no* set of purposes and interests that would make it reasonable to seriously consider the suggestion that the thing in the garden might be an intergalactic spying device. No matter what one’s interests and purposes, it would be nothing but nutty to try to capture it and cut it open in search of an alien spying apparatus. Moreover, the suggested interpretation does not seem to capture Austin’s considered view. Regarding our knowledge of other minds, he writes,

These special cases where doubts arise and require resolving, are contrasted with the normal cases which hold the field *unless* there is some suggestion that deceit, &C., is involved, and deceit, moreover, of an intelligible kind in the circumstances, that is, of a kind that can be looked into because motive, &C., is specially suggested (1979: 113).

And again, regarding objections arising from human fallibility, he comments,

being aware that you may be mistaken doesn't mean merely being aware that you are a fallible human being: it means that you have some concrete reason to suppose that you may be mistaken in this case. Just as 'but I may fail' does not mean merely 'but I am a weak human being' ...: it means that there is some concrete reason for me to suppose that I shall break my word (1979: 98).

In both passages, Austin is concerned simply with epistemic reasons for thinking that the suggested possibility obtains. The proposal appears to be that if there is no reason in favor of a suggested possibility, then one may (and should) simply dismiss it, while if there is some reason in its favor, then one may not do so. One's interests or purposes simply don't come into the story in the suggested way. The presence or absence of relevant epistemic reasons is what matters.²¹

As the above passages make clear, on Austin's view the mere fact that a suggested possibility is compatible with one's evidence does not constitute a reason in its favor; a reason is something that is the case and that tells in favor of the suggested possibility. To capture this notion, Austin talks of "specific" and "concrete" reasons. These formulations are also meant to capture an important additional distinction. That human beings are fallible and can make mistakes is not a consideration of the right sort; that one was not wearing one's glasses might well be, as might such considerations as that one frequently makes mistakes about relevantly similar matters in relevantly similar circumstances, that red-headed woodpeckers are not uncommon in the area, or that one's neighbor often puts fake birds in nearby yards. Austin does not provide a theory or

principle to explain this additional distinction, and it is difficult to know how such a theory would best be elaborated. But all that's needed here is that a distinction of this sort is embedded in our practice. (The suggestion that one might have made a mistake, since people do after all sometimes make mistakes, is appropriately met with the rejoinder, "Yes, but what reason is there to think that I have made a mistake *now*?")

Austin's proposal, then, is this. In a given context the possibilities that could in principle figure in objections to a given claim or argument can be fairly cleanly divided into those that have no epistemic reason in their favor and those that have some reason in their favor, where a reason is something that tells in favor of the obtaining of the suggested possibility and is appropriately specific or concrete. If there is some reason in favor of the suggested possibility, then to respond adequately one must obtain or provide additional reasons that defeat the reason(s) in question. If there is no reason in favor of the suggested possibility, however, then of course one needn't find defeating reasons, since there is no reason to defeat; the possibility hasn't even made it onto the field, as it were. In the latter case, one is already in a position to reject the suggested possibility if one recognizes that there are no reasons in its favor, and explicitly or implicitly indicating this recognition will constitute an adequate response. It is this latter sort of rejection that I have in mind when I talk of "summarily dismissing" a suggested possibility and of "rejecting it out of hand." The difference in required response reflects at bottom a difference in the sort of reasons one must possess, a difference that arises from a difference in the reasons that bear on the issue.

So on Austin's view the evidence necessary to substantiate the claim that there is a goldfinch in the garden must be sufficient to eliminate any "alternative, competing"

possibility – that is, any alternative that has some reason in its favor. What this requires is evidence defeating the reasons in favor of those competing possibilities. Such evidence – even in conjunction with positive evidence that it is a goldfinch – may not be enough to *show* that the bird isn't stuffed. But that doesn't matter, on Austin's view. Since there is no reason in its favor, that latter possibility isn't on the table to begin with. That is why "enough is enough."²²

It should be emphasized that Austin's view is not that one may summarily dismiss an objection if one simply happens to lack any information in its favor. Mere ignorance is not so easily transmuted into epistemic strength. Rather, the proposal is that if one's background information makes it reasonable to conclude that there really is nothing in a suggested possibility's favor, then one may summarily dismiss it even if one lacks additional specific evidence against it. Background ignorance would instead leave one unable to reach a reasonable conclusion about whether or not the suggested possibility may be so dismissed.

It is hard to see how one could be in a position to treat a possibility in this way without also possessing background information that tells against the possibility's obtaining and in favor of some other. This background information may well fall short of what would be required to *show* that the possibility does not obtain. For instance, the facts that no one would have any interest in deceiving me by putting a stuffed facsimile in my backyard, that nothing like that has happened around here before, and that nothing was on the branch five minutes ago all help underwrite my judgment that there is no reason in favor of the possibility that the seeming goldfinch is stuffed. But they hardly suffice to show that this possibility doesn't obtain. (Seeing the bird fly away would do

so, as would cutting it open to reveal the usual mess.) However, knowing that something isn't the case needn't require an ability to *show* that it isn't. So I don't see anything to prevent Austin from holding that someone in such a position could thereby know that the bird isn't stuffed.²³

Given these epistemological views, Austin could hold that *if* we recognize that there is no reason telling in favor of the possibility that we are dreaming, then we are thereby in a position to know that we are not dreaming and can dismiss this possibility out of hand. However, there is no straightforward application of this result. For one thing, it isn't at all obvious whether in ordinary conditions there is any reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming. Moreover, to dismiss the dreaming possibility in this way we would have to rely upon empirical background information. But this returns us to our guiding question: is it epistemically acceptable to rely upon empirical background information at this juncture?

Reliability objections and epistemic priority

In any particular course of reasoning or argumentation certain considerations but not others may be relied upon as premises or inference principles, and some may not be so used until others have been established. For instance, suppose that (1) the fact that I am on the graduate faculty of my university is a good indication that I am entitled to serve on doctoral committees, and (2) the fact that I am entitled to serve on doctoral committees is a good indication that I am on the graduate faculty. If you know both these evidential relationships hold, it doesn't follow that you could equally well appeal to either fact to support the other. If you possess some reason to doubt that I am entitled to serve

on doctoral committees, then unless you have reasons sufficient to overcome the reasons for doubt it would be objectionable for you to reason from the claim that I am entitled to serve on doctoral committees to the conclusion that I am on the graduate faculty of my university. If it is certain that I am on the graduate faculty of my university, then you might be able to appeal to this fact to defeat the reason for doubt, arguing from this basis to the conclusion that I am entitled to serve on doctoral committees. But there may also be cases in which the reason for doubt precludes you from making use of *either* consideration in defense of the other: you would first have to defeat the reason for doubt by making use of some other considerations. To put the point generally, how you may acceptably reason or argue will depend upon the reasons that bear on the case.

Austin was aware of this point. Call the relations involved here *epistemic priority* relations, and the requirements and constraints on reasoning and argumentation that involve such relations *priority requirements* and *priority constraints*. Austin adamantly insisted that the epistemic priority relations and requirements that structure acceptable reasoning or argumentation in particular cases do not reflect a context- or circumstance-independent justificatory order amongst the relevant propositions.

... in general, *any* kind of statement could state evidence for any other kind, if the circumstances were appropriate (1962: 116; cf. 111, 140).

... there *could* be no *general* answer to the questions what is evidence for what, what is certain, what is doubtful, what needs or does not need evidence, can or can't be verified [because these matters all depend on "the circumstances"] (1962: 124).

Austin thus held that there are *no substantive fully circumstance-independent priority requirements* – no requirements stating such things as that in order to reasonably believe anything in a certain class, one must have independent reasons in support of some

particular proposition *p* (or in support of some proposition(s) in some other specified class). In these passages Austin doesn't specify what he means by "the circumstances," and his examples in *Sense and Sensibilia* do not clarify the issue. However, the passages earlier discussed from "Other Minds" indicate that by "the circumstances" Austin meant at least in part the reasons to which the particular course of reasoning or argumentation must be responsive. On Austin's view, epistemic priority requirements are determined at least in part by the reasons that bear on the case on a particular occasion.

One important type of priority requirement arises from considerations that challenge what Austin calls "the reliability of our alleged 'credentials'" (1979: 86), that is, considerations that challenge our possession of relevant authority, competence, or reliability. Suppose, for instance, that some consideration suggests that I did not perform a certain mathematical calculation correctly. In that case, I should not be fully convinced of my answer's truth until I have somehow defeated this reason, perhaps by asking someone else or by double-checking my work. And even if I possess the relevant competencies and in fact committed no errors in performance, I cannot use my answer as a defeating consideration: I cannot argue (irrationally making use of the answer yielded by my calculation), "The correct answer is '7', and that's exactly what I got. So there's no reason to think I made a mistake after all. I performed the calculation correctly." Under these circumstances, a priority requirement is in place: I am not entitled to be convinced of my answer or to make use of it as a premise in further reasoning unless and until I have independent grounds that defeat the evidence that I made a mistake.

Similar requirements can be imposed regarding entire domains of belief. Suppose that I have believed a certain person regarding a great many things. I now discover

evidence that this person is an inveterate liar with a desire to mislead me as much as possible. Under these circumstances, I cannot reasonably believe (on the basis of this person's say-so) any of the things this person tells me unless and until I possess reasons that defeat the evidence that this person is lying to me. Such reasons cannot be provided by things that I believe only on the person's say-so, even if those things are true and their truth decisively indicates that the person wasn't lying. A general priority requirement is thus in place regarding the entire class of things that I have believed on this person's say-so.

What are such priority requirements triggered by: the reasons that are actually present in the case, that the subject takes to be present, that the subject "possesses," or recognizes as reasons, or what? Austin did not write at a level of detail that would enable us to determine how he would have handled this nest of issues. However, this much is clear: if a person *recognizes* that there are reasons of the relevant sort – thus correctly taking there to be such reasons – then a priority requirement of the relevant sort holds.

We can consequently schematize a general priority requirement as follows:

Reliability-related priority requirement: If one recognizes that there is some reason in favor of a possibility P that would undermine one's authority, competence, or reliability regarding a certain domain of beliefs, then one cannot reasonably believe anything in that domain unless one has adequate *independent* grounds for believing that P is not the case, where an *independent* ground is a ground not itself in that domain.

In what follows, my argument will focus on priority relations and requirements that, like this one, relate to the reasons that we recognize. Such requirements can be rendered intelligible by reflecting on the reasons-situation involved in these cases. A pro tanto reason in favor of a consideration challenging one's authority, competence, or reliability in a given domain is *ipso facto* a pro tanto reason against the truth of each of one's beliefs

in the domain. That's why if one recognizes a reason of the former sort, one can't acceptably treat those beliefs as grounds that defeat the pro tanto reason in question: one possesses a pro tanto reason against those beliefs. Independent reasons are consequently required.

Consider, now, the following principle:

If one recognizes that there is no reason in favor of some possibility that would undermine one's authority, competence, or reliability regarding a certain domain, then (other things equal) one may reasonably believe things in that domain even if one lacks adequate independent grounds for believing that the possibility does not obtain, and one may reasonably dismiss as groundless the suggestion that it does obtain.

This principle says that under certain circumstances, one can reasonably believe things in a certain domain even if one does not have independent grounds for believing that one's beliefs in that domain are reliable. One could accept this principle even while granting the commonsense thought that one can't reasonably believe things in the domain unless one also reasonably believes – for any particular possibility that one recognizes would render one's beliefs unreliable in that domain – that that possibility does not obtain.²⁴ But a consequence of this principle would be that one could epistemically depend on considerations in the domain in the course of dismissing the suggestion that the possibility obtains.²⁵

Would Austin have accepted this principle and its consequence? I think so.

Recall that Austin denied that there are any substantive circumstance-independent priority requirements. He consequently would have rejected any principle instantiating the following schema:

If P is a possibility whose obtaining would undermine one's authority, competence, or reliability regarding a certain domain, then in every

possible case one cannot reasonably believe anything in the domain unless one has adequate independent grounds for believing that P does not obtain.

On his view, any given principle along these lines will fail to hold in *some* possible circumstances. And as we just saw, a priority requirement of the relevant sort will hold if one possesses some reason in favor of the possibility in question. So the cases in which such a requirement doesn't hold will be cases in which one does not possess any reason in favor of the possibility in question. Of such cases, the best would be one in which there is no such reason and one recognizes as much. So if, there are some cases in which such a priority requirement doesn't hold, it would seem to be these. And even if there are other conditions that must be met in these cases, it must be possible for those other conditions to be met, so that there are some possible cases in which the priority requirement does not hold. For this reason, Austin should accept the proposed principle and its consequence.

In fact, it's striking how well this view captures the commitments of our ordinary practice. Consider the following hypothesis.

Children of at least one brunet parent are massively bad at evaluating and responding to evidence, both in conscious deliberation and in non-deliberative belief formation, and they also suffer from widespread and significant deficits and distortions in sensory processing (compensated for by "infilling" and confabulation).

This hypothesis is clearly false. As we all recognize, there is nothing whatsoever in its favor. We would all quite appropriately dismiss it out of hand. But if you are like me in having a brunet parent, then in dismissing this hypothesis you would be relying upon considerations about which you would lack reliability,

competence, or authority if the hypothesis were true: you would have no adequate independent grounds for believing that this hypothesis is incorrect. So our response to this hypothesis indicates our commitment to a principle like the one I've articulated on Austin's behalf.²⁶

It might be worried that a principle of the sort under consideration will generate insuperable problems if one's ability to recognize that there are no reasons of the relevant sort depends upon one's having reasonable beliefs in the relevant domain. But this is not so. In the worst case, what would be involved is mutual dependence: one's possession of reasonable beliefs in the relevant domain would require one's recognizing that there is no reason in favor of the relevant possibility, and one's ability to recognize that there is no reason in favor of the possibility would require one's reasonably believing other things in the domain. This sort of mutual epistemic dependence is not inherently problematic. Admittedly, insuperable problems would be generated if one or both of the dependence relations involved a priority relation. But Austin's claim that there are no substantive circumstance-independent epistemic priority relations would lead him to deny that such priority requirements must always be involved. So on his view, there should be no insuperable difficulties along these lines.

To sum up: Consider a proposition P and a set of propositions β that are related as follows:

1. The truth of certain propositions in β decisively indicate the falsity of P .
- and
2. If one possesses some reason in favor of the truth of P , then one would possess grounds for a legitimate challenge to one's authority, competence, or reliability regarding propositions in β .

On Austin's view, the priority relations and requirements that apply when P and β are related in this way will depend upon the actual circumstances – in particular, upon the reasons bearing on whether P is the case. If one believes the relevant propositions in β in a way that would be undercut if one recognizes some reason in favor of the truth of P, and if one recognizes some reason in favor of the truth of P, then one cannot treat any considerations in β as evidence for anything else unless one has some reasons that defeat one's evidence that P, and such reasons cannot be provided by any of one's beliefs in β . By contrast, however, if one recognizes that there is no reason in favor of P's being the case, then – assuming all other relevant requirements are met – one can perfectly well rely upon considerations in β in the course of dismissing the suggestion that P is the case.

The proposition *I am dreaming now* and the class of propositions typified by *I am sitting writing at my desk* are related in the way specified above. Coming to believe something as a result of a dream is not a reliable way of forming beliefs, since most of the beliefs that arise during dreams are false. So if one recognizes some reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming, this will ground a reliability-based objection to a wide class of beliefs: one will not be able to acceptably utilize any beliefs in that class to provide evidence that one is not dreaming, and without adequate independent reasons for thinking that one is not dreaming, one would not be entitled to rely upon any of those beliefs for the purposes of further reasoning. By contrast, however, if one recognizes that nothing tells in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming, then on Austin's view one may dismiss that possibility out of hand — even if one could not be in a position to do so without relying upon background beliefs in the relevant class. And in that case there would be no objection in principle to relying upon empirical claims about what dreams

are like, so Austin's account of how we can distinguish waking from dreaming would be epistemically unobjectionable.

Reducing the Worry to Rubble

Here is the only plausible argument I know for the claim that there are ordinarily reasons in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming.

People including myself sometimes have very lifelike dreams, dreams which at the time seem very much like waking experiences. During such dreams people are often convinced that they are awake and not dreaming. Right now I am in a state very much like a waking experience and am convinced that I am awake, not dreaming. Given these considerations, my situation regarding the question of whether I am dreaming now is analogous to that of someone whose neighbor is an ornithological taxidermist with a penchant for practical jokes. Just as this birdwatcher has some reason in support of the possibility that the thing he observes on the branch might merely be stuffed, I have some reason in favor of the possibility that I am dreaming right now. It's not a very strong reason, not the sort I would have if I seemed to myself to have awakened in the middle of the night in an extremely unusual, strange, and unexpected situation. But it is some reason nonetheless. Hence, for creatures like us, in the world as it currently is, there is always some pro tanto reason in favor of the possibility that one is asleep and dreaming.

If this argument fails, then Austin would see no obstacle to relying upon considerations about the world in dismissing the possibility that we are dreaming. Unfortunately, Austin didn't write enough for us to determine whether he would reject this argument. Given his views about human fallibility, he would presumably say that the mere fact that people can on occasion arrive at incorrect convictions while dreaming isn't by itself a reason in favor of the possibility that one is making such an error now. However, this doesn't decide the issue, since he also holds that the fact that other similar-looking, red-headed birds, easily mistaken for goldfinches, frequent the locale is a reason in favor of the possibility that the bird in the garden is not a goldfinch. In principle he could treat the considerations about

dreams analogously. Surprisingly enough, however, little turns on the issue. Even if this argument succeeds, Austin's explanation of how we can tell we're not dreaming still works.

Austin would clearly be in trouble if he endorsed all of the following:

1. There is some pro tanto reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming.
2. Consequently, in order to establish that one is not dreaming, one may not make use of any considerations in a certain excluded class, where "making use of" includes treating something as a ground for thinking that a certain consideration is good evidence that one is not dreaming.
3. The claim that dreams have certain features and lack others is a consideration in the excluded class.
4. That dreams have certain features and lack others is a ground for treating the presence of certain features in one's current experience as conclusive evidence that one is not dreaming.

The conjunction of these claims obviously precludes Austin's view. However, he would deny claim (3), and he provides a principled reason for doing so.

As Austin notes, a charge that one's evidence is inadequate must be supported by some specification of the possibility one's evidence putatively fails to rule out.

If you say 'That's not enough,' then you must have in mind some more or less definite lack. ... If there is no definite lack, which you are at least prepared to specify on being pressed, then it's silly (outrageous) just to go on saying 'That's not enough' (1979: 84).

However, not just any specification will do.

The doubt or question 'But is it a *real* one?' has always (*must* have) a special basis, there must be some 'reason for suggesting' that it isn't real, in the sense of some specific way, or limited number of ways, in which it is suggested that this experience or item may be phoney. Sometimes (usually) the context makes it clear what the suggestion is ... If the context doesn't make it clear, then I am entitled to ask 'How do you mean? Do you mean it may be stuffed or what? *What are you suggesting* (1979: 87)?

That is, in the right sort of situation, one can quite appropriately respond to an objection by requesting a further specification of the suggested possibility that figures in it. The appropriateness of this response arises from the fact that different subpossibilities contained in the suggestion may require very different forms of rejection. Depending upon the circumstances and the relevant subpossibility, one may be able to respond simply by noting that there is no reason to think that it obtains, or one may be required to offer specific evidence to defeat some reason for thinking that it obtains. Moreover, different defeating considerations may be relevant, depending upon what exactly the possibility in question is. If one's background information makes it appropriate to discriminate subcases within the suggested possibility and to handle different subcases differently, then further clarification or specification of the suggestion is legitimately demanded.

Given this point, here's why Austin would deny claim (3). Suppose that he possesses the relevant empirical background information about people and dreams and grants that there's always some pro tanto reason in favor of the possibility that he's dreaming. What exactly has he granted? He should begin by distinguishing subcases in a way that is appropriately sensitive to his background information, as follows. "On the one hand, if the suggestion is that I am in a state occurring during sleep that involves lifelike phenomenological states, generates mostly false beliefs including an incorrect conviction that one is awake and perceiving the world, and is *phenomenologically indistinguishable from paradigmatic waking experiences*, then there is no reason to suspect that I am in the suggested state. On the other hand, perhaps the suggestion is that I am in a state occurring during sleep that involves lifelike phenomenological states,

generates mostly false beliefs including an incorrect conviction that one is awake and perceiving the world, and *differs phenomenologically from normal waking states in certain specified respects X, Y, and Z*. In that case, there is some reason in favor of the suggestion.” According to Austin’s view, the first subcase can reasonably be dismissed out of hand. What of the second subcase? We’ve granted that a priority requirement is in place regarding this possibility, so Austin cannot rely upon certain considerations in order to defeat it. Notice, however, that this process of distinguishing subcases in response to background information has the consequence that empirical information is contained in the very specification of the subcase itself: it is characterized as one which phenomenologically differs in certain specified respects from paradigmatic waking experiences. This means that this information is freely available to Austin in his reasoning, and that’s the denial of claim (3). So he can reason as follows. “Can I tell that I am not in a state that phenomenologically differs in respects X, Y, and Z from normal waking experiences? Yes. My current experience has/lacks the relevant features.”

In essence, what we have here is a point about relations amongst reasons. If Austin is attempting to establish that he is not dreaming, he should begin by adducing the total relevant evidence.

- A. Fact: People are not infrequently in a state that:
 - (i) is lifelike
 - (ii) involves a conviction that one is awake and perceiving the world
 - (iii) takes place during sleep
 - (iv) leads to many incorrect convictions about how things are in the world, including an incorrect conviction that one is awake and perceiving the world.
- B. Fact: This state has phenomenological features that differ in respects X, Y, and Z from the phenomenological features characterizing standard cases of waking experience.

C. Fact: I am now in a lifelike phenomenological state, convinced that I am awake and perceiving the world.

D. Fact: There is no relevantly similar state, phenomenologically identical to standard cases of waking experience, that people are not infrequently in.

From this evidence he can appropriately reason as follows.

1. There is no reason in favor of the possibility that I am in a non-waking state that is phenomenologically identical to standard waking experience.
2. There is some reason in favor of the possibility that I am now in a state that has features (i) – (iv) above and differs phenomenologically from standard waking experience in respects X, Y, and Z.
3. So, given this evidence so far, I might be in a state having features (i) – (iv) and differing phenomenologically from standard waking experience in respects X, Y, Z.
4. However, my current state does not differ from standard waking experience in respects X, Y, Z, because it has such & such phenomenological features.
5. So, I am not in a state that has features (i) – (iv) and differs phenomenologically from standard waking experience in respects X, Y, Z.
6. So, since both suggestions have been defeated, I conclude that I am not dreaming now.

Suppose that he now considers the following objection. “This argument, starting with step 2, depends upon claim (B) above — that is, upon the claim that the relevant state differs from standard waking experience in respects X, Y, Z — but that claim is no longer available once you recognize the reason in favor of the possibility that you are in a state that has features (i) – (iv).” Here’s how he should respond. “If that claim is unavailable at that stage in the reasoning, it will have to be because the evidence that I have calls it into doubt by providing some reason against it. That’s why, for instance, the claim that I am standing giving a lecture wouldn’t be available to me at this juncture: since I have some reason in favor of the possibility that I am in the described misleading state, if am

convinced that I am standing giving a lecture then there is some reason to suspect that I am *not* standing giving a lecture. But my evidence, (A) – (D) above, doesn't support the suggestion that the relevant state – the one that there is some reason to suspect that I am in – is phenomenologically indistinguishable from standard waking experience. It provides reason in favor of the possibility that I am in a state that *does* differ phenomenologically in certain respects from standard waking experience. And so I can determine that I am not in that state by checking whether my current experience has the relevant features.”

Suppose the objector now insists that considerations (A) and (C), taken by themselves, provide some reason in favor of the possibility that he is in a misleading non-waking state *without* specifying it as a state that differs phenomenologically from standard waking experience, and so they preclude him from relying on the fact that the state in question differs phenomenologically from standard waking experience. Austin has a straightforward rejoinder. The objector is simply ignoring some of the relevant facts. To determine what actually has some reason in its favor, you have to look at all of the relevant evidence. The total evidence is such that there is some *pro tanto* reason in favor of the possibility that one is in a state having features (i) – (iv) and differing in certain phenomenological respects from standard waking experience; moreover, the total evidence is such that this reason is defeated. That is what one sees when one insists on taking all of the relevant evidence into account. Of course, if you deprive yourself of certain background information at the outset, then this response will be unavailable. But we've been given no reason to do that.

It might be thought that while these rejoinders are conversationally or dialectically appropriate, an underlying epistemological problem remains arising from the structure of the relevant epistemic priority requirements. In particular, it might be suggested that even if we take all of the relevant reasons into account, and even if we grant that what they support is only the possibility that one is in a state that differs phenomenologically from standard waking experiences, still the resulting epistemic priority requirement will preclude Austin from relying on the empirical claim that the states in question differ phenomenologically. However, this is not so.

A priority requirement tracks underlying rational relations amongst propositions in the circumstances. In the present case, what it captures is the fact that a reason in favor of the possibility that one is in a certain sort of misleading state that frequently gives rise to false convictions about the world also provides reason against each of a wide range of one's convictions. That is why each of these considerations is placed "out of bounds" by the priority requirement. The crucial question, then, is what the relevant reasons in the circumstances provide reason for or against.

Use " \emptyset " as a label for the type of state that there is some reason to suspect one is in. And grant, as this objection does, that the relevant considerations only provide pro tanto reason in favor of the possibility that one is in a misleading state of a type that involves features (i) – (iv) above and differs phenomenologically in certain specified respects from standard waking experiences. Now consider this proposition: *States of type \emptyset differ phenomenologically from standard waking experiences in the specified ways.* Suppose that you believe this proposition. Conjoin the fact, that you believe this proposition, with the fact, that there is some reason in favor of the possibility that you are

in a state of a type \emptyset that involves features (i) – (iv) and differs phenomenologically in the specified ways. Do these two considerations, taken together, constitute a reason in favor of the possibility that it is *not* the case that states of type \emptyset differ phenomenologically from standard waking experiences in the specified ways? Obviously not. If what has reason in its favor were in fact the case, it would be *true* that states of type \emptyset differ phenomenologically from standard waking experiences in the specified respects. So the reasons in favor of the possibility that one is in a state of type \emptyset do not provide reason against the claim that states of type \emptyset phenomenologically differ in the specified respects from standard waking states. They do not provide such reason even when conjoined with the fact that one believes that states of type \emptyset and standard waking experiences so differ.

For this reason, we must reject the overhasty assumption that the priority requirement generated in these circumstances will place Austin's claim about dreams (that is, the claim about "states of type \emptyset ") out of bounds. Properly formulated, the relevant priority requirement runs as follows, letting " β " be the name for the set of propositions that have some pro tanto reason against them because there is pro tanto reason in favor of the possibility that one is in a state of a type that involves features (i) – (iv) and differs phenomenologically in certain specified respects from standard waking experiences:

In order to warrantably believe any of the propositions in β , one must have independent evidence (not consisting of considerations in β) adequate to defeat the reasons in favor of the possibility that one is in a state of a type characterized by features (i) – (iv) and differing phenomenologically in the specified respects from standard waking experience.

This requirement precludes most considerations about the world from constituting the needed defeating reasons, but it allows phenomenological considerations of the sort Austin appeals to. It does not preclude relying on the empirical fact that the state in question differs phenomenologically in certain specified respects from standard waking experiences, because that fact is not in class β (as defined above). And for this reason, it would be a mistake to think that by placing most of one's beliefs about the world out of play, the reasons for doubt would also remove the claim that dreams differ in certain respects from waking experiences. What there is reason to doubt – and so what is taken out of play – are the claims about which one would be unreliable if the possibility that has some reason in its favor were actual. Those do not include the claim about dreams. That's what the priority requirement, properly formulated, reflects.²⁷

We began with the charge that if in ordinary circumstances there is pro tanto reason in favor of the possibility that we are dreaming, then the resulting priority requirement precludes Austin's empirical claim that dreams differ from waking experiences. We saw that Austin can avoid this charge by making obviously acceptable dialectical moves, namely, by demanding appropriately precise specifications of the suggested possibilities and insisting on taking appropriate account of all of the relevant evidence. We can now see that the appropriateness of these responses reflects the underlying facts regarding what has pro tanto reasons in its favor, what doesn't, and what evidential relations obtain in the circumstances. The dialectical moves amount to a demand that the objections and priority demands be formulated in a way that correctly reflects the actual reasons and priority relations that obtain in the circumstances.

It might be worried that Austin's response involves circular reasoning, in the following sense: once he's in doubt about whether he is dreaming, he won't be able to tell whether he is not dreaming unless he already believes that he isn't. But that is not so. At the stage in his deliberation at which he recognizes that there is some *pro tanto* reason in favor of the possibility that he is dreaming, he can suspend his initial confidence that he is not dreaming. He will still be able to make use of the claim that dreams differ in certain phenomenological respects from waking experiences, for the reasons just described.

Suppose, then, that it is asked, "But how could Austin respond to the suggestion that he is just dreaming that dreams phenomenologically differ in certain specified respects from waking experiences?" The Austinian answer is simply this: "I'm not just dreaming that dreams differ phenomenologically in those ways from waking experiences; my current experience is nothing like a dream." That's the right response, on Austin's view, because (a) it does not appeal to any of the considerations that would be placed out of bounds by relevant reasons for doubt, (b) it appeals to something that *is* good evidence that one is not dreaming, and (c) even if there is always some reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming, there is no reason in favor of the possibility that one is wrong in thinking that dreams and standard waking experiences differ in those ways.

Here's one final expression of uneasiness: "this last response is objectionably question-begging because it assumes that dreams and waking experiences differ in certain respects." But there is no ground for objection here. As we've seen, even if there is always some *pro tanto* reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming, that reason does not call into doubt the claim that dreams and waking experiences differ in certain

respects. And if one recognizes that there is no reason in favor of the possibility that one is merely dreaming that dreams and waking experiences differ in certain respects, then on Austin's view one may summarily reject it. This procedure is no more objectionably question-begging than our confident dismissal of the preposterous hypothesis, discussed earlier, regarding the children of brunets.

I conclude that if Austin's larger epistemological framework and empirical assumptions are correct, then so is his account of how we can tell we aren't dreaming.

III. The dream argument for external world skepticism: demolishing the doctrine

Global arguments for external world skepticism appeal to general principles or requirements relating to knowledge, warranted belief, or some other status to show that we cannot have knowledge or possess any beliefs with the relevant status regarding the world around us. One important family of such arguments deploy hypotheses to the effect that one might just be dreaming, a brain in a vat, or the victim of a deceptive evil demon. They maintain that one cannot know or have good reason to believe that such conditions do not obtain, and that because this is so, one cannot know or have good reason to believe anything about the world. Such arguments have garnered a great deal of attention over the last forty years or so. If the epistemological framework developed so far is correct, however, then Austin showed us how to counter them.

To have any hope of succeeding, a global skeptical argument must accomplish at least the following two things:

- (1) It must tie (a) one's ability to have knowledge or good reasons for beliefs in the target class to (b) one's possession of adequate evidence that one is not in a certain hypothesized state.

(2) It must preclude one from deploying considerations in the target class as evidence that one is not in the hypothesized state. That is, it must require *independent* grounds for thinking that one is not in that state.

Requirement (2) is crucial. Requirement (1), taken by itself, could be satisfied by knowledge in the target class, if by knowing certain things in that class one *ipso facto* possesses adequate evidence that one is not in the hypothesized state. So, for example, for all (1) accomplishes, one could (with G. E. Moore) reply to arguments for external world skepticism by pointing out that one is standing giving a lecture (and so not dreaming), that there are no deceptive evil demons, and that technology does not currently exist to create brains in vats. The argument for external world skepticism must preclude one from appealing to empirical considerations about the world in this way. This is what satisfying requirement (2) would accomplish. A key question, then, that any compelling skeptical argument must answer is this: why can't one deploy empirical considerations about the world to dismiss the suggested possibility?

It might be thought that appealing to empirical considerations about the world in this way would simply beg the question, since the skeptic claims that one doesn't know or reasonably believe anything about the world. However, this account of the situation badly underestimates the challenge facing skeptical arguments. We confront skeptical arguments from an initial position in which we take ourselves to know and have excellent reasons for all sorts of claims about the world and so regard ourselves as free to make use of these claims for the purposes of reasoning and inquiry. The skeptical argument must somehow convince us, from that starting point, that we don't actually know or reasonably believe anything about the world. Starting where we do in confronting the argument, we quite reasonably take ourselves to be entitled to make use of empirical considerations

about the world. Somehow, the early stages of the argument must *bring us to see* that we can't do that. The crucial question for any skeptical argument, then, is how this is to be accomplished.²⁸

In one of the most thoughtful and sensitive depictions of skepticism available, Barry Stroud offers an argument for external world skepticism that aims to respond to this concern (1984, chapter 1). His argument is built around the commonsensical claim that “knowing that one is not dreaming is a condition of knowing something [anything] about the world around us” (1984: 19, *passim*), or as he also puts it, that “we must know we are not dreaming if we are to know anything about the world around us” (30). Stroud argues that once we accept this requirement, we are forced to conclude that we cannot know that we are not dreaming: the requirement precludes its own satisfaction (19 – 23). His reasoning seems to be as follows. The requirement applies to *every* piece of knowledge “that goes beyond one’s sensory experience” (22). Since the qualitative features of one’s current experience are neutral on the issue (any qualitative feature of waking experience can equally well be dreamed (18)), any evidence that one might appeal to in order to establish that one is not dreaming will itself have to “go beyond one’s sensory experience” to involve claims about the world around us. Likewise, the very claim that one is not dreaming is something that “goes beyond one’s sensory experience.” The requirement accordingly applies to one’s knowledge of all these things as well. Consequently, Stroud concludes, one cannot satisfy the requirement. In order to know the things that are supposed to provide evidence that one is not dreaming, one will have to know that one is not dreaming. And to know that one is not dreaming, one will have to know that one is not dreaming. But this is impossible (22-23).

Taken literally, this argument fails. Stroud's requirement, as he formulates it, only says that a necessary condition of knowing things about the world (things that "go beyond one's sensory experience") is that one know that one is not dreaming. If we apply that condition to one's knowledge that one is not dreaming, we get this:

A necessary condition of knowing that you are not dreaming is that you know that you are not dreaming.

This requirement is a trivial logical truth with no skeptical upshot. More generally, Stroud's requirement – when taken literally – yields at most that if you know anything about the world, you must also know that you are not dreaming. But that requirement doesn't have the consequence that you cannot know that you are not dreaming, since it leaves open the possibility that the dependence relations run both ways and that things one knows about the world come into the story of how one knows one isn't dreaming.

What Stroud's argument needs is a requirement stating a *precondition* or a priority relation, a relation of asymmetric epistemic dependence. To put it formally, the requirement will have to be formulable using an irreflexive relational predicate such that the two demands

$$aRb \text{ and } bRa$$

are not co-satisfiable when a is not identical with b . In what follows I will use the phrase, "antecedently know," to formulate this logical or structural feature of the requirement.

The requirement would then read as follows:

In order to know any proposition about the world, one must antecedently know that one is not dreaming.

Only a requirement with this structure will preclude the possibility that one knows that one is not dreaming wholly or in part by virtue of knowing things about the world.²⁹

Now Stroud traces the skeptic's requirement to a more general principle purportedly generated by the concept of knowledge and implicit in our ordinary epistemic practices. According to this more general principle, in order to know any proposition p , one must know the falsity of all propositions q that one knows to be incompatible with one's knowing p (1984: 29-30). To generate a requirement with the right sort of structure, however, this principle likewise must be read as having a priority structure, as follows:

In order to know any proposition p , one must antecedently know the falsity of all propositions q that one knows to be incompatible with one's knowing p .

Given that one knows that dreaming is not a way of coming to know things about the world, this principle generates the requirement needed for the skeptical argument (viz., that to know any p about the world, one must antecedently know that one is not dreaming). And this principle quickly generates the desired result that one cannot know that one is not dreaming. Let p = "I am not dreaming". One thing incompatible with knowing that one is not dreaming is that one be dreaming, since one cannot know things that are false. So, substituting "I am not dreaming" for p and "I am dreaming" for q , we get:

In order to know that I am not dreaming, I must antecedently know that it is false that I am dreaming.

Or:

In order to know that I am not dreaming, I must antecedently know that I am not dreaming.

This demand is obviously unsatisfiable, giving us the result Stroud sought.

Unfortunately, the general priority principle fueling this argument generates skeptical results all too easily and without bringing the skeptic's distinctive hypotheses into play. Suppose, for instance, that I am looking at what is plainly a chicken. According to the principle, in order to know that it is a chicken, I must antecedently know that it is not a cow (since its being a cow would be incompatible with my knowing that it is a chicken). So let $p = \text{"It is not a cow"}$. One thing incompatible with my knowing that it is not a cow is that it *is* a cow, since one cannot know things that are false. So, substituting "It is not a cow" for p and "It is a cow" for q , we get:

In order to know that it is not a cow, I must antecedently know that it is not a cow.

This demand is unsatisfiable. So if this principle is correct, I cannot know that it is not a cow. But the principle demanded that in order to know that it is a chicken, I must antecedently know that it is not a cow. So, I cannot know that it is a chicken, either. An analogous argument can be run for any putative item of knowledge you like. The consequence is an extremely easy argument for a general, sweeping skepticism about anything whatsoever. This skeptical argument is *too* easy, however. The fault lies squarely with the principle.³⁰

A convincing skeptical argument wouldn't need a fully general principle, however; a plausible principle applying to the particular skeptical hypothesis would do the trick. So let's consider an argument based simply on a priority version of Stroud's requirement that in order to know what's going on in the world around you, you must know that you are not dreaming.

1. For any proposition p that one could come to believe falsely as the result of a dream, one cannot now know or reasonably believe it unless one has adequate independent reasons for believing that one is not now

dreaming. (An independent reason for believing that one is not now dreaming would be a consideration which is neither p itself nor the claim that one is not dreaming, and which is not something else that one could come to believe merely as the result of a dream.)

2. Anything that one can do or experience during waking life can also be dreamed about.³¹

3. So (by 2) any consideration that one might appeal to as a reason for believing that one is not now dreaming will either be neutral on the question or will fall under the principle (1). In the latter case, in order to know or reasonably believe it, one will need an adequate independent reason for believing that one is not now dreaming.

4. Consequently (by 3), one cannot have an adequate independent reason for believing that one is not dreaming.

5. So, one cannot now know or even reasonably believe anything that one could come to believe merely as the result of a dream.

This, I believe, is the most plausible version of Stroud's dream argument for external world skepticism. But despite its plausibility, Austin would regard it as a failure.

There are two ways of reading the argument. Either premise (1) is offered as a conceptual truth holding independently of the actual empirical circumstances and premise (2) is treated merely as a claim about conceptual, metaphysical, or "logical" possibility, or premise (1) is treated as a circumstance-relative priority requirement. On the first reading, the first two premises amount to this. (For clarity, I have reversed their order.

The rest of the argument, appropriately modified, will proceed pretty much as before.)

2*. There is a possible state which perfectly mimics standard waking experience and generates convictions about the world which are generally false.

1*. For any proposition that one could come to believe merely as the result of being in that state, one cannot now know or even reasonably believe it unless one has adequate independent reason for believing that one is not now in that state.

Suppose that premise (2*) is true. Even so, Austin would reject premise (1*). Whether an epistemic priority requirement like (1*) holds will depend, he'll say, upon the circumstances; it is not a purely conceptual matter. We won't have reason to accept it unless there is some reason in favor of the suggestion that we might be in such a state. But as things are, there is no reason in favor of that suggestion. So we can reasonably reject requirement (1*), and thus can reasonably reject this argument.

On the alternative reading of the argument, premise (1) is offered as a circumstance-relative priority requirement that happens to hold in circumstances such as ours. Now as we have seen, Austin could grant that there is a circumstance-relative priority requirement in place to the effect (more or less) that in order to know or reasonably believe things about the world, one must have adequate independent reason to believe that one is not dreaming. This is because Austin could grant that even in ordinary circumstances there is some reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming. But as we have also seen, an adequate specification of the state in question will involve empirical claims which enable us to satisfy this requirement. So while we should grant there is a way of interpreting or refining premise (1) on which Austin would perhaps find it acceptable, on that understanding of the argument step (3) won't follow. This is because Austin would regard premise (2) – the claim that anything that one can do or experience during waking life can also be dreamed about – as either irrelevant or false. He would regard it as irrelevant if it is interpreted merely as a claim about “logical,” conceptual, or metaphysical possibility, since on Austin's view the mere “logical,” conceptual, or metaphysical possibility of a dream that perfectly mimics waking experience is not a reason in favor of one's being in such a state and consequently has no

significance for the question of what constitutes a good reason for believing that one is not dreaming. And he would regard premise (2) as false if it is treated as an empirical claim about what human dream experience is actually like, since on his view standard waking experiences differ in certain phenomenological respects from dreams. In short, for the argument to be successful by Austin's lights, it would have to be the case that: (A) an appropriate priority relation holds because there is some reason in favor of the possibility that one is dreaming, *and* (B) dreams are phenomenologically indistinguishable from waking experiences. But Austin would deny this conjunction. From his point of view, any plausibility the skeptical argument has is nothing but sleight of hand.

In the epistemological imagination, skepticism is a circumstance-independent problem. The skeptical result is supposed to follow from the mere concepts (or essences) of knowledge or reasonable or justified belief and the mere conceptual, metaphysical, or "logical" possibility that one is in a state qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experience that generates convictions that generally diverge from how things really are in the world. For skepticism to arise in this way, the concept (or perhaps essence) of knowledge (or of reasonable or justified belief) would have to generate or involve a circumstance-independent priority requirement concerning the possibility in question. For Austin, however, there are no substantive circumstance-independent priority requirements to do the trick.

On Austin's view, then, skepticism is a contingent, ineliminably empirical matter. A successful skeptical argument would have to rest upon empirical background assumptions that both gave us reason to accept an appropriate priority requirement and

had the consequence that we cannot satisfy it. The argument would have to appeal to a hypothesis which has some reason in its favor, which generates a priority requirement in relation to our beliefs about the world, and which (given that priority requirement) we cannot determine is not the case. As things are no such skeptical hypothesis arises. The dream argument can be rejected in the ways I have just sketched, and Austin's view allows an even quicker rejection of arguments appealing to the possibilities that we are brains in vats or victims of a deceiving evil demon. To put it succinctly, there are no deceiving evil demons, and at present we have not yet created brains in vats.³²

This approach to arguments for external world skepticism assumes that only an appropriately structured epistemic priority requirement will preclude Austin's reliance on empirical background information. However, a number of epistemologists have suggested that there is a traditional epistemological project or question that, properly understood, puts all empirical claims about the world out of bounds (Stroud 2002, McGinn 1989, M. Williams 1996, Bonjour 2003).³³ Once that is accomplished, it might be suggested, some requirement such as Stroud's requirement – now understood as *not* involving a priority claim – could do the needed work in generating the skeptical result, because from the perspective generated by the guiding question or project, one lacks any means of determining that one is not dreaming.

Stroud, for instance, suggests that the traditional epistemologist wants to explain how anyone knows or justifiably believes anything about the world at all. The generality of this question, he claims, precludes one from appealing to any empirical background information about the world to provide the explanation (2002: 120). A similar result

arguably follows from Laurence Bonjour's question whether I have good reasons – and if so, what they are – for any of my empirical beliefs about the world. If one seriously attempts to answer that question, Bonjour claims, then one must put all empirical background information “off the table” and show, from that perspective, how one has good grounds for believing anything about the world (2003).

Austin would have reason to refuse to pursue any such project. On his view, the following are all circumstance-dependent matters, determined in part by contingent, empirical facts about the world: (1) what constitutes empirical evidence or reason for what, (2) which possibilities or objections have reason in their favor and which don't, (3) what is required in order to defeat the possibilities that have some reason in their favor, and (4) what priority requirements or constraints obtain regarding a particular claim. The circumstance-dependency of these matters has the consequence that if one is precluded from relying upon any empirical claims about the world, then one simply cannot determine what one has good reason to believe about the world or explain how one knows what one knows about the world: the resources necessary to identify one's epistemic position relative to any particular claim about the world will have been made unavailable. So if Austin is right about the circumstance-dependence of these matters, then he can help himself to a line of thought that I have developed elsewhere on which it looks quite reasonable to reject a project like Stroud's or Bonjour's. He can point out that the project must fail for the purely structural reason just noted, that its failure would reveal nothing about the epistemic status of any of our beliefs about the world, and that there would be another perfectly good way of figuring out what we know or have good

reason to believe – namely, by relying on our background information about the world. From this perspective, the project appears to be nothing more than a waste of time.³⁴

This perspective sheds light on Austin’s over-riding methodological assumption that epistemological reflection must begin from where we are, with the claims to which we are currently committed. On Austin’s view, any episode of inquiry, justification, or epistemic assessment must begin with a body of empirical background beliefs in place in order for the episode to proceed at all, since without them one cannot so much as determine what is a reason for what, which objections are to be taken seriously and which aren’t, etc. Any of these background materials can come under scrutiny or under fire in the course of the episode. But the objections will have to arise and be rebutted in ways that are appropriately related to that background information.

The response to skepticism explored here depends upon several of Austin’s characteristic theses. These are, among others:

1. There are no substantive circumstance-independent epistemic priority requirements.
2. Whether an epistemic priority requirement holds is a function of the reasons in the particular situation. In particular, if a certain possibility would undercut one’s reliability regarding a certain class of beliefs, one may rely upon beliefs in that class in dismissing the suggestion that the possibility obtains, provided one recognizes that the possibility has no reason in its favor.
3. The mere fact that a certain state or scenario is a “logical,” conceptual or metaphysical possibility and is logically, conceptually, or metaphysically compatible with one’s current information is not a reason in favor of its obtaining.
4. Dreams differ in certain specifiable ways from waking experiences, so that we can tell on phenomenological grounds that we are not dreaming.

A thorough treatment of skepticism would have to examine and defend each of these claims. If they are right, however, then Austin has shown us how to put the dream argument to rest.³⁵

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¹ As Austin put it, ordinary language is not the last word, but it is the first (1979: 185).

² On this understanding of Austin's approach, Stroud's (1984, chapter 2) Grice-inspired objection is beside the point. Austin's primary method is not, as Stroud would have it, describing facts about what we say when as data for a conclusion regarding what knowledge requires. Rather, he is standing within our practice, articulating epistemic principles and factual claims to which he is committed. For someone taking that approach, the ultimate question would be whether he can find reason to think that those principles or claims are incorrect. Stroud offers him no such reason. Of course, a further question could be asked: "This is what I am committed to, and I have found no reason to think it incorrect – but is it correct?" Perhaps the deepest split between Austin and more traditional epistemologists such as Stroud concerns their approach to this question. I will not broach these difficult issues here. My concern is rather to get the main lines of Austin's position clearly in view.

³ As found, e.g., in Descartes' "First Meditation" (1984: 13) and more recently elaborated by Barry Stroud (1984 chapter 1).

⁴ In the earlier paper "Other Minds," the first passage quoted above is followed by a similar comment. The full passage reads, "There are recognized ways of distinguishing between dreaming and waking (how otherwise should we know how to use and to contrast the words?)" (1979: 87).

⁵ This failing is pointed out by Blumenfeld and Blumenfeld (1978: 238). It arises even if we interpret the argument as appealing instead to the weaker, non-verificationist idea that if there were never an aspect of dream experience that differed from waking experience, then there would be no *point* to the phrase "a dream-like quality."

⁶ This interpretation might be challenged on the ground that Austin later grants that there may be some cases in which "veridical perceptions" and "delusive perceptions" are qualitatively indistinguishable, arguing that even this concession wouldn't require us to grant that we always perceive sense-data (since there is no reason why there shouldn't be cases in which perceiving one sort of thing is exactly like perceiving another (1962: 52)). However, the discussion of dreams appears at a moment in the text when the thesis of qualitative indistinguishability is itself under attack, and Austin's point there is that the example of dreams cannot be used to support this premise of the argument from illusion.

⁷ From notes taken at University of California, Berkeley, by R. Lawrence and W. Hayes. These notes – covering in detail the entirety of the twenty-nine lectures Austin delivered at Berkeley – were kindly brought to my attention by Wallace Matson, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at UC Berkeley. (Matson was present at the lectures and supplemented the Lawrence and Hayes typescript with his own notes.) I am in possession of a copy of the Lawrence and Hayes typescript and will gladly make it available to other researchers. I do not know whether other copies are in existence, as I have not had a chance to explore the Oxford Austin archives. According to Matson, the Lawrence and Hayes notes were at Warnock's disposal when the published edition of *Sense and Sensibilia* was prepared. I do not know Warnock's reasons for not including this passage in the published edition.

⁸ Given the obvious failure of the argument in the published version of *Sense and Sensibilia* and its replacement in the Lawrence and Hayes notes by a set of empirical generalizations in support of the example, I'm inclined to think that the text of *Sense and Sensibilia* would look quite different had Austin lived to rework this material for publication. Archival work needs to be done to determine whether Austin had abandoned the problematic argument by the time he prepared the Berkeley lectures. It is noteworthy, however, that the verificationist themes that sometimes sound in the published version of *Sense and Sensibilia* are largely missing from the Berkeley typescript.

⁹ Of course, some philosophers have purported to raise doubts about whether such arguments actually support their conclusions, or to have provided arguments that such arguments are not reasonable, etc. These arguments, and possible Austinian responses to them, are beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Here are just a few relevant phenomenological features. Dreams are characterized by reduced visual acuity and reduced content in the non-visual sensory modalities (including physical sensations such as itches and tickles). One's ability to direct and focus one's attention is considerably hampered. The affective tone of dreaming differs sharply from that of waking life, as Austin notes. And dreams exhibit distinctive features in their formal structure, including incongruities (strange, unusual, or impossible combinations of elements), indeterminacies of identity and persistence conditions, and fundamental discontinuities in apparent space and time, as well as in the identities of objects and persons. (Hobson (1988) provides extensive analysis of the phenomenology of dreaming as well as an attempt to link it with the known facts about the neurophysiological side of things circa the late 1980s.)

Contemporary neurophysiology appears to support generalizing from these considerations. In fact, correlations between the phenomenology of dreams and neurophysiological functions are so tight that one researcher has urged using subjective dream reports as clinical diagnostic indicators of certain neuropathologies (Solms, 1997).

Researchers distinguish dreams, which are correlated with REM-sleep, from hypnagogic or hypnopompic imagery which can occur as one is falling asleep or awakening. (The latter imagery is extremely fragmentary, consisting mainly of shapes, colors, and sensations of movement and touch.) REM-sleep itself is a highly unified state of the brain, induced by distinctive changes in the brainstem and characterized by a number of significant differences from the brain's waking state. It involves a drastic shift in the relative proportions of the neurotransmitters norepinephrine, serotonin, and acetylcholine; a shift which, if produced pharmacologically in a waking person would result in artificially-induced psychosis (Hobson, 1999). (Hobson, et al. (1998: R3 – R7) provide a detailed discussion of the neuromodulatory control of the onset of REM sleep. Hobson himself goes so far as to suggest that during REM-sleep, the brain is in a psychotic state.) During REM-sleep, blood flow to several parts of the brain is sharply reduced; in particular, blood flow to the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex – an area widely accepted to be implicated in the planning of voluntary activity and in less well-defined functions termed “executive functions” and “reality checking” – is reduced roughly by half, in effect shutting this area down to a level adequate only for the preservation of the tissues involved. (The relevant imaging studies are surveyed by Hobson, et al. (1998). These findings dovetail with Solms' (1997: 222-3) observation that lesions in this region

appear to have no essential effect upon dreaming.) The activity of several important brain structures shifts during REM-sleep as well. The hippocampus — widely accepted to be implicated in the functioning of memory — shows a higher level of activity and appears to function in a way fundamentally different from the awake state (Stickgold, et al. 2001). Finally, during REM-sleep the brain processes signals which appear to be randomly generated by the brainstem and fed to the visual, motor, and emotional systems without any “control” from the systems of the prefrontal cortex (Hobson, et al, 1998: R11). Computer models show that under these conditions patterns of neuron firing will shift in sudden and unpredictable ways (Stickgold (2001), citing Collins, et al., 1995: 236-38). Given the extremely strong correlation between dreaming and REM-sleep and the well-established ways in which brain states can affect what one’s experience is like, it is reasonable to take the brain’s state during REM-sleep as constraining – and as helping to explain – what dreams are like. And given the extremely strong correlation between dreaming and REM-sleep, it strongly appears that dreams are the right sort of thing to be treated via an argument such as Austin’s.

Would Austin be open to this appeal to science? It seems so. He himself appeals to psychology (1962: 3, 53), and the Lawrence/Hayes notes contain this: “Insofar as some people (psychologists) ARE now paying attention to the phenomena of perception, they are discovering that there are many MORE ‘qualitative differences’ than one ordinarily pays attention to (e.g., the work at Cornell)” (1958: 9, Lecture VIII.1). But he didn’t *need* science to license his claim about dreams; ordinary experience was enough to make it reasonable.

¹¹ In the Berkeley notes he comments, regarding delirium tremens, “What produces the conviction is that the sufferer takes it for granted, in some odd sense (as in dreams), that this is a real experience” (1958: 8, Lecture VII.6). And the supplementary notes include this: “It is characteristic of dreams that *at the time* one thinks they are actual” (p. 8a note 2a). In this regard, Austin differs from thinkers such as Ernest Sosa (2005) who hold that while dreaming, one does not judge or believe, and is not convinced, that one is awake (and indeed, that while dreaming a dreamer does not judge or believe, and is not convinced, of the truth of the content of the dream).

¹² This concession strongly suggests that Austin is committed to the possibility of one’s current state having phenomenal features that one fails to recognize even when considering whether they are present. This possibility is crucial if we are to make sense of the idea that dreams have phenomenological features that distinguish them from waking experiences even though we often fail to recognize them or their significance while we are dreaming. (I am grateful to Fred Schmitt for highlighting the importance of this issue for the Austinian position.)

¹³ In Leite (2004a) I offer an Austin-inspired defense of a fallibilist view that I take to be similar to Austin’s.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that with training some people appear to be able to learn to appreciate them, at least on occasion. A key step in learning to “lucid dream” is learning to “reality check” by considering – while dreaming – whether one’s state has certain phenomenological features that mark it as a dream.

¹⁵ This general point has recently been stressed by Williamson (2000). Bernard Williams (1978) makes the point with regard to dreaming in particular.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that Austin's position on this issue entails denial of Robert Nozick's (1981) so-called "sensitivity requirement". Nozick famously maintained that one doesn't know that *p* unless the following condition is met: if *p* were false, one wouldn't believe that *p*. Austin's position requires denial of this requirement, since he holds that one can know that one is not dreaming *even though* if one were dreaming, one would still believe that one was not dreaming. (Nozick's requirement is vulnerable to straightforward counterexamples (Sosa 2002, Leite (2004b).) Where Austin differs from contemporary opponents of the sensitivity requirement (such as Sosa) who argue that we can know we are not dreaming (Sosa 2005) is that Austin thinks that when we are awake and in full possession of our faculties, we have *good empirical evidence* that we are awake, not dreaming.

¹⁷ Austin allows, however, that there can be cases in which someone knows that something is the case but can't prove that it is (1979: 86).

¹⁸ Austin's categories here are only roughly characterized. He identifies objections of the first sort in terms of cases in which one might respond, "But that doesn't prove it!" The second he calls "challenging our facts;" the third, challenging "the reliability of our alleged 'credentials'" (1979: 84, 86).

¹⁹ Austin's familiar example involves a European goldfinch, not an American one.

²⁰ Stroud (1984, chapter 2) suggests a view along these lines.

²¹ A subtle issue arises here regarding talk of "epistemic reasons:" our ordinary discourse in this regard involves a variety of related locutions. Austin himself uses a variety of expressions, and it is not at all apparent whether he means to distinguish them. As my preferred idiom, I will talk of there being or not being some reason in favor of a certain possibility (or in favor of the truth of a certain proposition). I will also occasionally use the word "evidence" to do the same work. My talk of possibilities, propositions, and the like – that is, the things that can on occasion have reasons in their favor – is similarly idiomatic rather than technical. Nothing more is needed in this context.

²² What of the phrase "within reason and for present intents and purposes" in the sentence "Enough means enough to show that (*within reason and for present intents and purposes*) it 'can't' be anything else" (italics added)? I read this phrase as calling attention to the importance of the actual circumstances in which the particular course of reasoning is placed. Austin is here emphasizing that what will count as adequate grounds for the purpose of *this* course of reasoning – given the reasons that bear on the issue here and now – may not count as adequate grounds elsewhere. That was a view which he clearly held, and he could have held it even without thinking that practical considerations played any role in this regard.

²³ An interpretive digression. Austin is not entirely clear about our epistemic relation to possibilities that we recognize to have no reason in their favor. This has led some interpreters to read him as offering an early version of a "relevant alternatives" theory of knowledge something like those later championed by Dretske (1970, 1981) and Nozick (1981). The broad idea here would be that if there is no reason in favor of a possibility and we recognize that this is so but lack any further specific evidence against the possibility, then we are entitled to assume that the possibility does not obtain — we can reasonably ignore it, fail to investigate it, act and believe as if it doesn't obtain, and know

other things that entail its non-obtaining — but may lack sufficient reason to believe that it doesn't obtain and may not know that it doesn't.

Though the texts are not probative, Austin says things strongly suggesting that he would reject such a view. For instance, in his discussion of Warnock's interpretation of Berkeley, he writes,

Although Warnock insists that neither he nor Berkeley has any intention of casting doubt on the judgments we ordinarily make, of arguing for any brand of philosophical skepticism ... To say, as Warnock does, that we are making assumptions and taking things for granted *whenever* we make an ordinary assertion, is of course to make ordinary assertions look somehow chancy, and it's no good his saying that he and Berkeley don't mean to do that (1962: 138).

Austin strongly suggests here that he doesn't regard ordinary assertions as always being chancy in the way that they would be if we were always merely assuming and taking for granted that the skeptical possibilities do not obtain. It might be replied that we are making assumptions that we are *entitled* to make. But that would still leave our ordinary judgments looking "chancy", only a chance that we are entitled to take. Austin's thought is rather that we are not taking a chance *at all*, and for that thought to make sense, he must have thought that we know the skeptical possibilities not to obtain.

Mark Kaplan offers a sophisticated version of this interpretive line that evades this objection [REF—THIS VOLUME]. On Kaplan's reading, Austin holds that certain of our beliefs have a special status: all the entitlements of knowledge but without the obligations. We therefore neither know nor don't know that we are not brains in vats or deceived by an evil demon, or even that the seeming zebras in a pen at the zoo are not cleverly painted mules (though we do know that we have hands, are standing at the zoo, and seeing zebras in a pen), but we have precisely the entitlements regarding belief and practical reasoning that are involved in knowledge. Our ordinary judgments are thus no longer left looking "chancy".

Given the epistemological framework I have offered, this interpretation loses much of its philosophical motivation. If one recognizes that there is no reason in favor of the possibility that one is confronting cleverly painted mules, then one *is* in a position to satisfactorily defend one's attitude towards that possibility: one may summarily dismiss it on the ground that it has no reasons in its favor. One can thus fulfill the relevant epistemic obligation. I fail to see why we should not grant that under such circumstances, one knows that the possibility does not obtain. If the creature in a pen looks like a zebra, the pen is labeled "zebra," and one knows that this is a reputable zoo dedicated to a scientific and educational mission and with no reason to deceive, then I see no reason not to grant that one knows that the animals in the pen are not merely cleverly painted mules. (I will discuss an Austinian response to the standard global skeptical hypotheses in section III.)

In "Other Minds" Austin makes one comment that can appear to support an interpretation along Kaplan's lines:

Knowing it's a 'real' goldfinch isn't in question in the ordinary case when I say I know it's a goldfinch: reasonable precautions only are taken. But when it *is* called in question, in *special* cases, then I make sure it's a real

goldfinch in ways essentially similar to those in which I made sure it was a goldfinch ... (1979: 88).

This passage supports the interpretation if we read “isn’t in question in the ordinary case” as meaning that in the ordinary case, asking whether we know or don’t know that the goldfinch is real (isn’t a dream, hallucination, or stuffed) is the wrong sort of question: we neither know it nor don’t it, but we are fully entitled to it. However, this passage is not decisive, since another reason why something might not be in question is because it is obviously the case. Reasonable precautions are those aimed at eliminating those possibilities that have some reason in their favor. Since the possibility that the bird is not real (is, e.g., stuffed) has no reason in its favor, it would be unreasonable to call my knowledge into question on the ground that the bird might not be real after all. This interpretation is supported by the contrast between the two sentences in the quoted passage. As the second sentence makes clear, the intended contrast is between cases in which one’s possession of knowledge is *called* into question and cases in which it is not. This strongly suggests that in the ordinary case in which I know it’s a goldfinch, I know it’s a *real* goldfinch as well – my possession of knowledge that it’s real isn’t called into question because there is no reason to challenge it.

²⁴ There is no incompatibility between the commonsensical thought and Austin’s view that there are no circumstance-independent priority requirements, because the commonsense thought does not demand that in every case one must have independent reason to believe the relevant propositions. It just says that one must reasonably believe the relevant propositions. This does not generate a circumstance-independent priority requirement. The mistake in thinking otherwise arises from assuming that for a belief to be reasonable because one knows other things that constitute reasons in its favor, one must be able to arrive at it, or establish its truth, via an unproblematic inference from those reasons.

²⁵ If we combine these elements, here is what we get. The commonsensical thought has the consequence that inference from premises in the relevant class cannot yield reasonable belief that one is not unreliable in the suggested way, because the inference could not do so unless one reasonably believes the premises, which in turn (given the commonsensical thought) would require that one already reasonably believe that the possibility does not obtain. (This consequence is supported by perfectly ordinary examples.) Combining the commonsensical thought with Austin’s view of priority requirements yields the following. If one recognizes that *p* would undercut one’s reliability regarding class of beliefs β , then

- (1) one cannot reason from considerations in β (believed in the relevant way) to the conclusion that *p* does not obtain and thereby establish or gain knowledge or reasonable belief that *p* does not obtain, but
- (2) if there is no reason in favor of *p*, and if one recognizes that this is so, then one can acceptably dismiss the suggestion that *p* on the ground that there is no reason in its favor – even if one has no adequate independent grounds against *p* and so thereby epistemically depends upon considerations in class β .

This combination of views would seem a non-starter if dismissing an objection that *p* just amounted to establishing that *p* is not the case by inferring not-*p* from some premises in a way that could enable one thereby to come to know that not-*p*. But there is reason to

draw a distinction here. In the latter case, one is arriving at knowledge that not-p for the first time or exhibiting an inference through which one could acquire such knowledge, whereas in dismissing the possibility that p one may be deploying knowledge that not-p that one already possesses – not reasoning or arguing to the conclusion that not-p, but rather dismissing p as something already established or known not to be the case. How, in this instance, would one know that there is no reason in p’s favor and that p is not the case? One would know it in part in virtue of knowing a bunch of things in class β . (This answer will be unavailable if one makes the mistake of thinking that if one knows p in part in virtue of knowing a bunch of other things, it must be possible in principle to arrive at that knowledge that p for the first time by inference from previous knowledge of the other things.)

²⁶ I discuss this example at greater length in my “Taking Skepticism Seriously” {MS – CITATION NEEDED}.

²⁷ One structural concern remains. Whenever there is some reason in favor of a possibility characterized as \emptyset , there will also be some reason in favor of a possibility characterized using a less precise specification, $\emptyset-$, that is entailed by \emptyset . So, consider this specification of the possibility that one is dreaming: “one is in a state occurring during sleep that involves very lifelike phenomenological states and generates mostly false beliefs about the world as well as an incorrect conviction that one is awake and perceiving the world.” This specification simply leaves out any information about whether the state differs phenomenologically from normal waking states. However, the reasons in favor of the more precisely specified possibility distinguished above are also reasons in favor of the suggestion that one is in this less finely specified state. So even when we include all of the relevant evidence in our description of the circumstances, there is still some reason to suspect that one is in a misleading non-waking state not specified as one that differs phenomenologically from standard waking experience. This would seem to mean that there is also a priority requirement in place regarding *this* possibility so specified, and it would seem that this priority requirement precludes one from relying upon the background empirical information about dreams that licenses treating phenomenological considerations as adequate evidence that one is not dreaming. It consequently still appears that Austin’s argument fails.

However, this is not so, as we can see when we take seriously the way in which priority requirements are related to the underlying relations amongst reasons. We are supposing that there is some pro tanto reason to suspect that one is in a misleading non-waking state that differs in certain specified phenomenological respects from standard waking states. There is no reason at all to suspect that one is in a misleading non-waking state that is phenomenologically indistinguishable from standard waking states. In these circumstances, there is reason to suspect that one is in a misleading non-waking state (where the specification simply says nothing at all about whether the state in question differs phenomenologically from standard waking states). But there is reason to suspect this only in virtue of there being reason to suspect that one is in a misleading non-waking state that differs phenomenologically from standard waking states. Consequently, nothing more is needed to defeat the former than is needed to defeat the latter; a more demanding priority requirement is not created.

²⁸ Standard attempts to delineate a “skeptical paradox” do not answer this question. Consider, for instance, the influential “Argument from Ignorance” (DeRose, 1995), where “O” represents an ordinary claim about the world and “H” a skeptical hypothesis:

1. In order to know O, I must know that not-H.
2. I do not (or cannot) know that not-H.
3. So I do not (or cannot) know that O.

This argument simply asserts in premise (2) that one does not know that one is not dreaming, deceived by an evil demon, or a brain in a vat. But even if premise (1) is true, there is no reason why, if O were adequate evidence that not-H, one couldn’t know that not-H in virtue of knowing O. For instance, premise (1), taken by itself, does nothing to preclude a Moore-type response that grants, e.g., that I couldn’t know that I am at a computer writing a paper if I didn’t also know that I wasn’t dreaming, but claims that since I am at a computer writing a paper, I’m manifestly not dreaming. The crucial work in the argument thus takes place off the page; something unmentioned is being assumed to preclude one from satisfying premise (1) *by knowing all sorts of things about the world*. A similar problem plagues reconstructions of skeptical reasoning that deploy the principle that knowledge is closed under known entailments. (For discussion of the relation of closure principles to skeptical argumentation, see my 2004b.)

²⁹ There are interesting issues of detail regarding two possible ways of understanding this requirement. On one reading, the requirement states that for any given p about the world, one cannot know that p unless one antecedently knows -- that is, antecedently to knowing that p -- that one is not dreaming. On the second reading, it states that in order to know any proposition p about the world at all, one must antecedently know -- that is, antecedently to knowing any propositions about the world at all -- that one is not dreaming. Assuming that the *know antecedently* relation is transitive, either reading will have the desired consequence in the skeptical argument.

³⁰ The implausibility of this principle has also been noted by Pryor (2000) and Byrne (2004). I first articulated the problem in my undergraduate senior honors thesis (UC Berkeley, 1992). Austin may help us understand what is wrong with the principle, since on his view epistemic priority relations depend on the circumstances. So even if something roughly like Stroud’s more general principle is right, it will have to be formulated so as to be appropriately sensitive to the factors that determine the actual structure of priority relations in particular cases. Once it is formulated in this way, it won’t underwrite the dreaming argument for skepticism in the way Stroud envisages.

³¹ Stroud explicitly appeals to a premise along these lines (1984: 18, 22).

³² I say “at present” to emphasize that given Austin’s framework, we could someday find ourselves facing skeptical problems of our own making if technologies for creating nonveridical experiences through brain stimulation become sufficiently advanced while being unscrupulously deployed.

³³ There is disagreement among Stroud, McGinn, and Williams about whether the result is properly understood as somehow casting doubt upon the truth of our ordinary claims to knowledge about the external world. Bonjour is less pessimistic than the others. He holds that the project can be completed completely satisfactorily.

³⁴ For detailed elaboration and defense of this line of argument, see my (2005).

³⁵ I first explored several of this paper’s central lines of thought in my University of California, Berkeley, senior thesis and Harvard University PhD dissertation (2000). At the time, I understood myself to be broadly inspired by Austin, but it was not until Wallace Matson pointed out the relevant passages in the Lawrence and Hayes notes that I realized that the position I had arrived at independently could be drawn out of Austin’s writings. I develop what I regard as the next stage of this work in “Taking Skepticism Seriously” {MS – CITATION NEEDED}.

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