

KNOWLEDGE AND PERSISTENCE

Stephen SKERRY

ABSTRACT: States *are* states, in part, because they persist through time. Knowing is one such state, and it often persists beyond the time when evidence is first apprehended. The consequences for epistemology of this persistence are explored, including what are termed ‘unearned knowledge,’ and ‘one-sided knowledge.’ Knowing that you are not dreaming is one (important) example of unearned and one-sided knowing. The author contends that arguments for scepticism and for knowing as a purley mental state are undermined when this persistence is properly understood.

KEYWORDS: dreaming, knowledge, mental states, scepticism, persistence

I know that Barack Obama is President of the United States. By that I mean that I know *right now* that he is the President *right now*. As accomplishments go it’s rather small. Hundreds of millions of people know the same thing and know that most other people know it as well. It’s an odd thing to mention, but only because it’s such common knowledge that Obama is the President. Still, odd or not, I do know it.

How, short of a though going scepticism, could this be thought problematic? One way might be to assume that I just awoke from a normal night’s sleep and ask: What was Obama doing in the middle of last night while I slept? Was he feeling ill? Did he have any sort of health scare? Did he die from a sudden illness? Was there a personal crisis that might make a President suddenly resign? Did he in fact resign? Did the FBI uncover some malfeasance on his part that might make a Congress take immediate action against him? Was he impeached and tried while I slept? Did the Senate remove him from office? Was Joe Biden sworn in as President in the moments just before I woke?

As I sit here now at 9 A.M., having been out of contact with the world since about 10 P.M. last evening, having spoken to no one and having had no phone, internet, TV, or radio communication since then, is there any way I could know whether or not these things occurred? Based on what I already knew before sleeping, I might say that it’s most improbable that events like these occurred. But could I totally rule them out? Do I *know* that they did not occur?

One possible counterargument to my claim to know *right now* that Barack Obama is President of the U.S. *right now* is this: you cannot possibly know *that*, for you have already admitted that you cannot and do not know for sure that he did not resign, or that he did not suddenly die, or that Congress did not legally

remove him from office while you slept, and surely if you do not know those things to be false, then you cannot know that he is (still) President.

Now, as it happens, in my paragraph two back from this I *did not admit* that I know none of these things. In fact I believe that I do know that he did not resign, or die, or get removed from office in the middle of the night. And if asked how I knew these things even while being out of touch with the world I would cite this argument: I know right now that Obama is President right now, and if he is President right now, then it follows that he did not die or resign or get removed during the night. I would admit that I don't know that he didn't get very ill, but would argue that if he did it didn't kill him. I would admit that it's possible that he experienced some personal crisis, but that if so it didn't cause him to resign on the spot. I would admit that Congress might possibly have instigated impeachment and trials against him, but if so these have not yet lead to his removal. *Some* of the things listed before I admit I do not and cannot know. But I maintain that I do know that the ones incompatible with his being President right now did not occur, and that I know this because I know that he is President right now.

We have a bit of a standoff. I say I know he didn't resign because I know that he is President and that he would not be the President if he had resigned. The contrary argument is that there is no way for a sleeping person to know what happened in Washington D.C. (if that's where he was) in the middle of the night and therefore no way to know that Obama did not suddenly resign (or die, etc.), and therefore no way to know *right now* this morning that he is President *right now*. It will further insist that any claim I make to know that Obama did not resign in the night uses circular reasoning since it assumes the very thing (viz: my knowledge that Obama is President right now) that is under debate. The question in the standoff becomes: is there a way to adjudicate this dispute?

This is a paper about the *persistence of knowledge*, about the characteristics of knowledge which allow it to maintain its status as real knowledge over a period of time, and to maintain this status even after the immediate apprehension of the evidence for that knowledge has passed, and to maintain this status of knowledge even over a period of time in which a known proposition *might* change truth value¹ (and so come to be unknown.) In brief, my argument is this: that knowing is a personal *state*, a state of a person, and that states, by their nature, maintain existence over time unless and until undone by internal or external forces, that

¹ Instead of talking about a proposition which changes truth value we might want to talk about a continuous series of propositions, e.g. "he is President right now ... and now ... and now ..." which becomes discontinuous when one member of the series differs in truth value from its near predecessors.

this tendency to hold together over time is what we may call the *persistence of knowledge*, that this persistence is metaphysically required by the concept of knowledge, that, in addition, knowledge holds interest and utility for us as humans in large part because of its recognized persistence, that this persistence leads to knowledge of things which I deem '*unearned knowledge*,' things which, by their nature, can only be defended by circular arguments, that among this 'unearned knowledge' is, for instance, the knowledge that Obama did not resign in the middle of the night and, more generally, that I am not dreaming right now. In this paper the debate about knowledge of Obama will serve as something of a proxy for the age-old debates between sceptics and realists.

Knowledge and Persistence

Knowledge, in my view, may be compared to a store of capital or wealth, something we can draw on as needed and which persists over time despite undergoing fluctuations. Wealth is important to people, in part, because it, and its utility, persist. We do not need to spend each dollar we earn the second it comes into our possession. At least that is true in normal economic times. In an era of hyperinflation such as Germany experienced after the First World War it may be wise to spend right away because the currency devalues so rapidly. In more normal times a currency devalues due to inflation at a slow enough pace that the value of holding capital, and of letting that capital work in our favor, can overbalance this devaluation. So too with knowledge.

It's hard to understand why anyone would value knowledge, or care enough about knowledge even to try to raise the sceptical argument, if knowledge had no persistence. If knowledge, like the Mark in 1923, had a value so evanescent that it became worthless within minutes of our gaining it, then who would care whether we had it or not? I know that my passport is in a certain drawer. I didn't cease knowing this the last time I looked at it and then closed that drawer. It's logically (and even, in *some* sense, epistemically) possible that someone broke into my house last night and stole the passport. If this occurred then I certainly no longer know that it is in that drawer, for knowledge implies truth. But if it remains there and nothing about its position has changed, and nothing about my evidence for its whereabouts has changed, and nothing about the key relationships between its whereabouts and that evidence has changed (all of which I believe to be the case) then it seems to me that I still know that the passport is in that drawer even though it has been a few days since I last saw it there. My knowledge that it is in the drawer *persisted* through time and I value this knowledge precisely because I can count on it when it's needed.

If in the truest sense of ‘knowledge’ I do not know that my passport is in that drawer (even while making all of the assumptions I just made), either because some general sceptical theory is correct or for any other reason, then we ought to take a critical look at the real value of this knowledge concept. We might even consider junking that concept of knowledge as uninteresting and unimportant, and consider replacing it with a concept better suited to the needs of real people. We could do this just as the German nation replaced the Mark of 1923 with the Rentenmark as part of an effort to gain currency stability.

What then goes into the sort of epistemic stability I possess with regard to Obama’s presidency and the location of my passport? What accounts for the fact that knowledge will persist over time? My view is a pretty common view nowadays: that knowing is a *state*. It is not an object, an event or a process,² but a state which people may find themselves in (or not.) In a very general sense, anything which is a ‘state’ must, I believe, meet the following necessary conditions:

1. it must consist of an organization, or integrated whole, of ‘stuff’
2. it must exhibit continuity over time
3. it must have a characteristic manifestations³
4. it must play a predictable role in certain causal and explanatory chains.

Now if this view of a state is accepted then it follows from item 2 that states persist over time. The defining characteristic of a state, however, lies in its organizing principal, in that which causes us to see it as an integrated whole. Thus a state of panic is defined by an organization of mental and (perhaps) physical facts about a person which cause that person to behave in certain ways and which manifest in certain ways, perhaps in a certain facial expressions and other kinds of body language, perhaps in a disposition to make rash or hasty decisions, or in other sorts of physical and mental agitation. And so long as this

² Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), see especially Chap. 1 “A State of Mind.” For the opposing view, more similar to my own, see Elizabeth Fricker, “Is Knowing a State of Mind? The Case Against,” in *Williamson on Knowledge*, ed. Patrick Greenough and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31-59.

³ Although I will not discuss the characteristic manifestation of knowing that p in this paper in any detail, I believe it is, in short, a disposition to assent (or perhaps to assent without qualification), at least internally, to a proposition p when it presents to the mind. I see this manifestation as not being much different, if at all, than the manifestation displayed through the state of belief, and that belief and knowledge may differ, not in this respect, but in lots of other respects.

organization of 'stuff' remains intact, the state of panic persists, and will persist even when the person involved does not experience a feeling of panic, and does not present to the rest of us as 'panicky.'

A state of knowing might consist of an organization of beliefs, mental events, pieces of evidence and facts about the world. I will defer till later in the paper the question of whether the 'stuff' so organized is solely mental, or physical, or mental/physical together with external facts. It is the job of epistemology, at least in part, to decipher as precisely as possible what the organizing principals of knowledge are – how the parts fit together to make up the state of knowing. A primary job is to determine how the ideas of evidence and epistemic justification fit into a presumed organization which constitutes knowing. But whatever details of this we can uncover, we are left with the idea of an organizing principal underneath the concept of knowing, and thus with the idea that knowing is a state which will persist so long as that organization remains intact.

Persistence, of course, does not make a state of knowing, or any other state, eternal. An organization of stuff may fall to pieces either through internal or external causes. In the case of knowing, an external cause might be the arrival of new evidence. If I turn on the news this morning and the headline story is "Obama resigns!" I then have significant new evidence that he is no longer President. By the time I check 2 or 3 networks and a few internet sites it becomes clear that the first headline I heard was not some oddball joke or prank. It is now clear that I no longer know what I previously knew, and it is clear that I didn't know it before I turned on the news (since it had been untrue for a while.)

I also believe that my knowledge may fall to pieces due to simple external changes in facts which present no new evidence to me, but this too I defer to a later section.

More interesting, perhaps, for the issue of knowledge persistence is this idea: that the state of knowing may decay of its own accord through internal causes, that it inherently has an internal, time based instability. Take this case: In the dead of winter, with 2 feet of snow on the ground, I travel back to the neighborhood of my upbringing and notice that the house where I was raised is now painted yellow. I see that it is and I know that it is painted yellow. The next morning I recall the experience and again know that the house in which I was raised is now painted yellow. A day after that I no longer thinking about the experience, but I still know that that house is painted yellow. By the time 6 months have passed, however, it seems clear that I no longer know this. In that period of time too many things might have caused the facts to change – a new

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owner might have repainted, or the house might even have been torn down by then.

It seems in this example as though I am relying on prior knowledge of what it takes in terms of time and environment to repaint a house. We do not repaint with 2 feet of snow on the ground, and it takes more than a few days to repaint a sizeable home. And of course these factors do play into my thinking. But I believe that the state of knowing here runs down or decays of its own accord independent of my knowledge of the practicalities of house painting. If, for instance, I went into a coma the day after seeing the home and woke up 6 months later with a very clear recollection of the experience but believed that it had happened the previous day, would we think then that I still knew that the house of my upbringing was painted yellow? No. Independent of what I experienced or recollected we know that too much time had passed for me still to know the color of that house. The justification I had for the belief about that home has decayed, and has decayed independently of my ability to know the extent of decay.

Justification, and knowledge along with it, comes with a decay model similar to those of radioactive substances, similar to those of purchasing power in an era of inflation. Like radioactive substances different knowledge states decay at different speeds: there is a different 'half-life' for my justification of the claim that a certain house is painted yellow and for my justification of the claim that all men are mortal. Once we know, the knowledge will persist, but its justification is constantly running down as the clock moves, and unless refreshed by new evidence (e.g. new views of the house in each of the next 5 months) that justification will decay to the level where we might still believe, but believe without knowledge. To use yet another metaphor: justification comes with a 'freshness date' and once that date passes, the degree of justification no longer supports knowledge.

Could knowledge be different? Could it exist as a real thing without persistence? I suppose this would mean something like us knowing only for the time period in which we have direct apprehension of the evidence which leads to knowledge. It would mean, for example, that I could know that the house was painted yellow while right in front of it with a clear view, but not know the second I turned my back on the house. I have already argued above that such a concept of knowledge would hold little interest or value in the real world. But independent of the utility of knowledge, can we imagine a world where all knowledge was of this sort? The scenario under discussion is not the sceptical scenario, for under that view of the world we do not get to know that the house is yellow even when we directly perceive it to be yellow. But of course this scenario

is a first cousin, at least, to scepticism. For anyone who believed in it would soon be confronted with questions about how he could know that there was a persistent object which was a house to begin with.

It seems to me that a tendency to think that knowledge only pertains when evidence good enough for knowledge is itself directly perceived and experienced (either through vision, memory, reasoning, etc.) results from a confusion between the perceptual or reasoning events which lead us into a state of knowledge and the knowledge itself, a confusion between the *events* that spawn a state and the *state* itself. But events and states are 2 different things. All states are distinguishable from their precipitating and constitutive events. I may be thrown into a state of panic when I see from bank statements that my business partner has systematically stolen all of our assets. The state of panic might persist for weeks or months and certainly it persists over periods where I am not thinking about the theft, am not feeling agitated or panicky and do not present to the world that way. The state of panic which persists in me over time is not the same thing as the event of my feeling panic at one or another time. People observing me over time may detect my state of panic and are not confused by my failure to manifest symptoms of panic at each and every moment.

I do not claim that all states outlast their associated events. Dream states, for instance, seem to me to be strictly concurrent with the event of dreaming. As a state it decays very rapidly. A state of freshness in baked goods is thought of in reference to the time since the baking process (as a series of events) completed. But some baked goods decay out of freshness much more rapidly than others which might have been designed via the recipe for a more gentle and extended decay.

Asking “Can knowledge be the same thing without persistence?” is like asking “Can freshness be the same thing without persistence?” or “Can being wealthy be the same thing without persistence?” All three of these states are distinct from their originating, formative events, and all three are distinct from the events through which the states manifest themselves. Is freshness in a brownie the same thing if we insist the only truly fresh brownie is one direct from the oven? One can imagine this sort of usage but can also see that it is pointless. And it’s pointless because someone who thought freshness was a strict function of time since baking ended would thereby have shown he did not really understand what we mean by ‘fresh.’ We can imagine the usage but it is not our usage.

My conclusion is that knowing is a state that exhibits continuity over time, a continuity which is independent of formative events and manifesting events. I say, therefore, that knowing requires persistence. My view is that I went to bed

last night knowing that Obama was President, woke up this morning knowing that he was President and therefore knew at each intervening moment, i.e. the moments when I was fast asleep, that he was President. To deny this line of reasoning is either to say I didn't know to begin with (e.g. last night and so forth for all the prior nights) that he was President, or that I lost that knowledge overnight, or that I knew it last night and this morning but not in between those times. The first view, which is the sceptical view, is at least coherent; we can follow the line of thought. But the latter two views I see less charitably. To think that I lost the knowledge forever merely by going to sleep is a non sequitur on par with "You lost the knowledge when you stubbed your toe" and deserves no more consideration. And to think that I lost the knowledge during sleep but regained it upon awakening is to beg the question of how I got the knowledge back. Remembering that I knew it last night won't do it, and remembering that he *was* President last night won't do it, remembering any state of affairs from last night won't do it. Because the question is not what was true last night but what is true now – i.e. is he really the President right now? Without continuity of a state of knowledge over time to bolster it, there could be no explanation of how or why I would know right now that he is President right now. To deny knowledge persistence and continuity over time is to embrace scepticism.

State continuity and persistence lead back to the questions I began with. Assuming that I knew continuously from last night to this morning that Obama is President right now, some surprising conclusions can be reached:

1. I do know right now that Obama did not resign (or die, etc.) in the middle of the night
2. I know plenty of things, the Obama case among them, while I am sleeping and dreaming
3. I know right now that I am not dreaming
4. Knowing cannot be a purely mental state, i.e. it is either non-mental or hybrid.
5. Dialectical circles are benign and inevitable. We must learn to embrace them.

Unearned Knowledge

A store of wealth can generate what is called 'unearned income' in the form of capital gains and dividends. I will call the kind of knowledge I have of Obama's non-resignation 'unearned knowledge' because I see it as being of a similar or related sort. It's a gain or dividend that accrues to me because I did earn other knowledge (through experience for instance) and stored that knowledge up in a

persistent state. My stock in company X goes up and I experience a capital gain without having contributed any direct labor to the generation of my new income. I can point to no labor which would justify this money belonging to me as opposed, say, to its remaining with company X. My knowledge that Obama is President stays intact overnight and I experience the gain of knowing he did not resign in the night without having any direct evidence for my new knowledge. I can point to no direct evidence against the contrary proposition that he did resign. If company X begins to do poorly, upsetting its prior track record of stable gains, then it will declare no dividend. If a question about whether Obama did resign is seriously broached (perhaps because a new visitor this morning heard a rumor), this may upset my previously stable view of the world and my dividend of unearned knowledge might disappear. And I would have nothing right now to contribute on the question of whether he had resigned. After all I was asleep and out of touch with the world.

This sort of unearned knowledge displays a curious asymmetry, a one-sidedness. Clearly if Obama had resigned in the middle of last night there would be no way for me to know this. If p = Obama resigned in the middle of the night, then I am saying:

- a. If p then I don't know p
- b. If $\sim p$ then I do know $\sim p$

This seems to me far different than ordinary cases of, say, perceptual knowledge. In a typical case of perceptual knowledge I might be looking at a yellow house and know that it is painted yellow. But if the same house had been painted blue then I would know by sight that the house was not painted yellow. If q = the house is painted yellow, then I would say:

- a. If q then I know q
- b. If $\sim q$ then I know $\sim q$

Perception allows me to discriminate the alternatives. Not so in unearned knowledge of the one-sided.

Knowledge and Dreaming

I believe that another case of the unearned, one-sided kind is my knowledge that I am not currently dreaming. I mentioned above my belief that I know plenty of things even while I am asleep and dreaming. To deny this is to deny the continuity over time of the knowledge state, to deny the persistence of knowledge. I think this conclusion is fully consistent with and reinforced by

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considerations of natural usage. Consider the following conversation among friends:

Bill: Does Fred know that Julie got the promotion? He was awfully anxious about it.

Jane: He does.

Bill: Are you sure? Do you know it for a fact?

Jane: I was there when Julie told him in person. Fred was very excited for her.

Bill: But I mean: does he know it now?

Jane: Why wouldn't he?

Bill: Possibly Fred has retired for the evening and is asleep. Ever think of that?

Jane: So what?

Bill: He might now even be dreaming of a conversation with Julie about promotions.

Jane: Oh, look at the time!

It's easy to see in this fanciful conversation that Bill has gone way off the tracks. His questioning of whether Fred knows a thing right now has led him to wonder if Fred has been robbed of his knowledge by falling asleep. And he might as well have asked Jane to consider the possibility that Fred no longer knew about Julie's promotion because, as far as either of them knew, Fred had recently stubbed his toe.

What is true about sleep, as far as I can see, is that it robs us of the ability to know of events whose temporal span is strictly included in the span of time when we are fully asleep. So, in the age-old example, a sleeping person dreams of a door slamming triggered by the sound of an actual door slamming, but he does not know that any door slammed.⁴ True enough. Sleeping clearly shuts down a lot of our epistemic toolkit, and that kit will produce no new results for me (at least knowledge results) while the system is in the off mode.

But I think the conversation between Bill and Jane shows that we all know an awful lot of things while we are sleeping (and perhaps dreaming of whatever.) To cite 4 examples of what I knew while I slept last night: I knew that Obama was

⁴ Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) Stroud uses this and many other entertaining sceptical scenarios such as the one where a person is trapped in a room with TVs bringing him apparent news which he will never have a chance of evaluating against reality. Stroud's book remains the best survey of scepticism I know of. Unfortunately I disagree with almost all of his conclusions.

President; I knew that my passport was in that drawer; I knew that that house was painted yellow and I knew that all men are mortal. Unless we retreat all the way back to a general scepticism in which I cannot ever know any of these things, then this seems to me unavoidably true.

But of course dreaming is special. It's one-sided. One thing I can *never* know is that I am dreaming. For either I am not dreaming and therefore cannot know I am, or I am dreaming and therefore cannot know I am. I can never know that I am dreaming while I am dreaming. First my falling asleep puts my epistemic tools in the off mode. I may already know some things (I hope) before I sleep, but I won't be learning much of anything new for the next 6 to 8 hours. Then the dream state takes these tools and disorders them in a way that seems to turn them back on. The dream state puts the hammers where the wrenches are supposed to be and the screwdrivers where the levels are usually held. It then commences building. Vivid dream imagery may convince me, in some sense, that I am driving nails with a wrench or leveling a shelf with a screwdriver. But no new real work or knowledge grain results. I maintain what I knew but do not extend knowledge in any way – not even to the fact of my being in the dream state.

Dreaming is a mental state, and knowledge is a state of some sort. They can coexist, as with my knowledge of Obama persisting through a period of dreaming. But they do not always mix well. In fact, the dream state creates its own interesting blind spot in my knowledge. Williamson's well known argument against luminosity,⁵ against the idea that I am always in a position to know I am in a mental state when I am in that state, strikes me as sound and convincing. But here's a much simpler route to the same goal: If dreaming is a mental state, then luminosity is obviously false since the dream state is not merely one I might at times not know I am in (when I am) it is one which I *never know* I'm in when I'm in it. Dreaming creates an epistemic blind spot similar in kind to the blind spot I have with regard to every proposition of the form 'p and I do not know p' which for a limitless collection of p substitutes is both true and unknowable by me. My dreaming is a mental state which, by its nature, has its own "but I don't know that" built in. It provides us with the ultimate epistemic blind spot, for while in many cases of p my blind spot with respect to 'p and I don't know that p' is removable by the process of coming to know p, there is no process or learning I

⁵ Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, see Chap. 4 "Anti-Luminosity." Although I generally agree with the findings of that chapter of KAIL I must specifically dissent from section 4.7 "Scientific Tests" in which Williamson turns mental states so far from the light of luminosity that I am tempted to call the mental states he speaks of there "dark matter."

could experience which would allow me to come to know that I was dreaming *right now*.

But if it's impossible to know that one is dreaming, how can we ever come to know the opposite? How do I know I am not dreaming, i.e. that I am not in the blind spot, right now? I believe that the argument for this is simple and clear and has nothing to do with perception or knowledge of an 'external world.' Here it is:

1. I have spent the last 10 minutes trying to find a way to prove I am not dreaming.
2. Therefore, I am not dreaming.

My knowledge that I am not dreaming is the unearned byproduct of my knowledge of my own organized consciousness over a time. If I have this sort of consciousness over time then I must not be dreaming. This provides a parallel to the statement: if Obama is President right now he must not have resigned last night. If I plunge into a vivid sleep/dream state, or undergo a psychotic break with reality, or if I go into a deep and complete coma, then this state of organized consciousness will disappear and I will, of course, no longer know that I have had an organized conscious life over time (for it won't be true at those times.) Luckily enough for me none of those things has occurred in the last 10 minutes while I've been thinking about the problem of knowledge and dreaming. I've been trying to the best of my ability to think this thing through. And that's all I need. I cannot be dreaming. For if I had been dreaming then my consciousness would not have the organization that I directly apprehend. Whether that organization itself is apt, whether the arguments I propose are considered sound or silly hardly matters. That organization is there, for good or for ill. And if I were dreaming it wouldn't be. I know this because I know what dreaming is.⁶ Even the worst argument against the dream hypothesis is, as it turns out, a pretty good argument.

Now if someone questions whether I know I have had an organized consciousness around the questions of dreaming and knowledge over the last 10 minutes, I cannot cite the fact that I am not dreaming without in some sense begging the question. If I say I know my consciousness has had a certain organization then I will be asked to show that I did not dream in the last second false memories of having been at work on the philosophical problem over the past

⁶ In a sense I am trying to extend Descartes Cogito argument for his own existence to become an argument for his own non-dreaming existence. I wish he himself had taken this route instead of the more circuitous and, let's face it, far less convincing route through the goodness of God to determine that he was not dreaming. Stroud agrees with Descartes finding that "there are no certain marks or indications" of dreaming vs. non-dreaming, but it seems to me that organized consciousness of one's own thoughts over time do provide the needed mark.

while. And to that I have nothing much to say. At least I have nothing which won't be treated as circular, question-begging reasoning.⁷ But the circle is part of the dialectic, not part of the fact of the matter. I can say that either I have been in a persistent state of knowledge of my conscious thoughts or I haven't. If I have been then I believe it correctly follows that I have not been dreaming. If I have not been doing this, if, for instance, there turned out to be no persistent 'I' to whom a stream of thoughts could attach, or if there is an 'I' but it (or I) have no continuous knowledge state of my own conscious states, then of course it will not follow that I am not dreaming. But this is indeed the retreat to a very full blown scepticism.

I mentioned that my epistemic gear is disordered and untrustworthy when I am in the dream state. I believe things are actually worse than that however. It's not just my epistemic or evidentiary framework which goes out of whack in a dream; it's virtually everything about my mental states which goes haywire (albeit in a pretty benign and natural way – for the most part.) Take for instance belief. Sceptics will often concede that I might believe (as in Descartes example) that “I am here by the fire with a paper in my hands.” They simply argue that unless I can remove the dream possibility (in a non-question begging way) then I do not know this same thing. But beliefs and dreams seem to me not to be like that at all.

Do I actually *believe* while in Descartes dream scenario that I am there before the fire? I certainly concede that there is some similarity between what happens then and what happens when I believe something, but it is a very limited similarity. Suppose that I have one of those crazy dreams where I am flying beside an airliner looking in the window at some passenger I know. Do I for a few seconds *believe* that I am in flight? Do I *believe* at those times that I can fly? Or I dream, very vividly and very convincingly, of a meaningful conversation with a departed loved one. Do I, for those moments in the dream, actually *believe* that I spoke to a dead person? I think the answers are obvious: we simply do not attribute beliefs that way. We do not say “For a few minutes there you believed you could fly” or “At 3:16 A.M. you formed the belief that you were speaking with your uncle, someone you know to be dead.” In recognition of the dreamers disordered epistemic and mental framework during the dream state we specifically do not describe him as forming beliefs during the dream. We say “He just dreamt

⁷ W. V. Quine, *The Roots of Reference* (LaSalle: Open Court Publishing, 1974), 2. Quine has the wonderful comment “This fear of circularity is a case of needless logical timidity, even granted the project of substantiating our knowledge of the external world.” See also Stroud, *Philosophical Scepticism*, 209 ff. Stroud's chapter on Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized” has a fair discussion of this point.

that” and that covers it. If it were somehow to turn out that I was dreaming right now, then I would lack even the ability to form the belief I now have about sitting by a fire.

I can now refine the argument against dreaming:

1. I *believe* I have spent the last 10 minutes trying to find a way to prove that I am not dreaming.
2. Therefore, I am not dreaming.

When people say: “Well dreams may not cover the sceptical basis we need to establish, so let’s invent the possibility of evil geniuses or brains in a jar;” I believe they are tacitly admitting what we all know. We know enough about dreams to say this isn’t one of them. That’s because we’re all, to some extent at least, our own experts on the phenomenology of dreaming. We’ve all had the experience. So the sceptic retreats to a brain in a jar, which all of us hope and trust we have not experienced, which all of us hope and trust never to become expert in. But what of it? If mad scientists are manipulating my mental states so as to induce in me the sensations that would be produced by sitting near a fire with papers in my hands,⁸ do we then say that I have come to *believe* I am near a fire? Look at it from the mad scientist’s point of view. When he knocks off work and gets together with the other mad scientists for drinks at night, does he describe me as *believing* that I am seated near a fire? I doubt it. To that mad scientist I have the status of a rat in a mental-sensation induced maze. And if, as we would hope, there later comes a time when good scientists free my brain from the jar and reunite it with the proper body (currently in use by Daniel Craig) and I once again become a real actor on the stage of life, would I then reminisce about the bad old days and say “That’s when I used to believe I was out of shape; I now see that I am extremely fit and significantly younger than I used to think.” No, because these are not even real beliefs.⁹

Knowledge and Mental States

Finally, and as to the deferred question of what kind of ‘stuff’ the state of knowing consists of, I propose to dispute the Williamson thesis that knowing is a *purely* mental state. The persistence of knowledge convinces me that that cannot be the case. Consider two worlds in which I awake: one (the actual world) in which

⁸ Someone might say: that seems like a lot of trouble to go to just to fool the likes of me.

⁹ It seems to me that believing as a state, and certainly knowing as a state, require a sort of *agency* on the part of the believer/knower which is absent in virtually all the traditional sceptical scenarios. This is one reason so many of us find it difficult to accept the sceptical arguments even when we can see nothing wrong in the logic.

Obama last night proceeded with his life in the more or less expected way, one in which he didn't die or resign or get tossed from office. In that world he continues this morning as President and I continue to know now that he is President now because my previous knowledge state persisted through the night. In the second world everything is exactly the same as in the first until 3 a.m. this morning, at which point Obama resigns and Biden is sworn in as the new President. As I awake in that world I could not possibly know that Obama is President this morning, because he isn't.¹⁰

Either I knew last night at 10 p.m. that he was President or I didn't know that. But if I did know it then I must have known it equally in both worlds since they had not yet diverged. If I did know it in the 2nd world but woke up not knowing it, then we would all agree that I had undergone a state change from knowledge to non-knowledge at some point in the night (maybe, but not necessarily, right at 3 a.m.) And now the argument is simple: there is no reason at all to think of or describe that state change as *a change in a purely mental state*. The state that changed is my knowledge state; the states that are unchanged include all of my mental states. The causes and explanation of the state change have no reference whatsoever to my mental life, and indeed the causes have no resonance whatsoever in my mental life either while I am laying there asleep or at the time I awake. For purposes of this example, and on the assumption that I was in a deep sleep with no dreams, we might even imagine my entire mental life as being in a steady, unchanging state in the night.

It may be said that I might not have known he was President in either world last night. Maybe so, depending on the case. If Obama resigned at 3 a.m. last night for reasons he had secretly agonized over for the last 3 months, reasons unknown to all the rest of us, then I can agree that maybe none of us knew each morning, etc. etc. But this possibility just shifts the argument back in time to the point when I did lose knowledge because of his secret agonizing: was that a case of a change in one of my purely mental states? And the same argument applies: his secret reasons for considering resignation may have robbed me of knowledge (without my knowledge of course) but they had no resonance at all in my mental life and should not be considered a purely mental change. And if he had never before considered resignation but made a hasty decision based on the arrival of

¹⁰ It should be noted that the view I espouse here is consistent with Williamson's thesis that mental events and states like belief may be 'world involved,' i.e. his externality thesis. It may well be that a person could not believe that some tigers live in Asia if in fact there had never been tigers in the world. This thesis, as Williamson acknowledges, does not imply that knowing as a factive state is also purely mental.

some unexpectedly horrible news, then what is the case for saying I didn't know last night at 10 p.m. that he was President? The mere possibility of horrible news followed by a hasty resignation is always present, but seems to me never to overcome the persistent knowledge I possess from day to day. To think it does or would is to lead us straight back into scepticism.¹¹

I am proposing that there can be no difference in my *purely mental states* across these two worlds if there are no differences in the *purely mental objects, events, processes and relationships* of my life over those two worlds. *Purely mental states* may be nothing more than organizations of the *purely mental* from some such taxonomy of the mental, and with no differences in the stuff to be organized across these worlds there will be no difference in the purely mental states either. It seems plain enough to me that there could be two such worlds with no difference in my procession of mental events (etc.), and therefore in my mental life, and therefore in my mental states. And if my purely mental states are the same in these worlds but I know Obama is President in one but not the other, then none of my purely mental states could be identical to my state of knowing he is President.¹² Any purely mental state I possess must have the cooperation of non-mental facts, such as Obama's non-resignation, in order to constitute knowledge. Knowing, therefore, cannot be purely a mental state.

Conclusion: Knowledge and Scepticism

I conclude that if there is any knowledge at all, and if the logic of knowledge requires persistence, and if persistence requires that there be unearned knowledge, and if unearned knowledge requires there be things known for which there is no non-circular argument, then we shouldn't be surprised to find that in the midst of our enormous store of knowledge there are such unearned, no non-circular defensible, bits of knowledge. My hypothesis is that "I am not dreaming right now" is one such. Here I have a non-circular argument that circularity is bound up in the logic of knowledge.

¹¹ It must be emphasized here that I am not surreptitiously introducing 'luminosity' premises into this argument. I stated earlier in the dream section that I agree heartily with Williamson on the question of luminosity, and, if anything, have staked out an anti-luminosity position to the right of his own. My problem is not that I expect people to be able to know of every change in their mental states, it is in positing a *change* in a purely mental state of mine when there are no grounds for tying the change to anything remotely involving my mental life.

¹² Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 59: "... if knowing p is a mental state, then anyone in exactly the same mental state as someone who knows p also knows p."

I have tried in this paper, not to refute the sceptic, for I agree with the sceptic that there are no non question begging arguments which prove he is in error. But knowing is not the same as proving, and far less is it proving within the very narrow ground rules the sceptic lays down (viz: debating evanescent sense impressions with no circles allowed.) What I have tried is to show is that a very robust set of real world knowledge is possible if one begins from what I believe are fairly uncontroversial assumptions about the metaphysics of knowledge as a state, and states as requiring persistence. What is then said to the sceptic is not “I can prove you are wrong,” but “*This* – e.g. that Obama is President – is what knowledge is like; you have taken it to be some other thing.”