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## Does Anyone Have A Quarter?

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## Chapter 12

### Does Anyone Have a Quarter?

Katie Elson Anderson

The other night, I had a dream that I was watching an episode of SpongeBob SquarePants. The episode began like some episodes begin, with the image of an island and a palm. Cue the French Narrator whose voice sounds like a cross between Jacques Cousteau and the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* character with the “ridiculous French accent”:

“AH, DREAMS. SO fascinating.SO wonderful. Here, we see Bikini Bottom, sleeping and dreaming in a peaceful slumber; home to one of my favorite creatures, SpongeBob SquarePants. Yes, of course he lives in a pineapple.”

But wait, the narrator is suddenly interrupted by a more authentic French voice, the voice of philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650 CE) who suddenly casts doubt and skepticism into this vision of peaceful dreaming with his philosophical dream argument:

“AH DREAMS. SO fascinating.SO doubtful. Here we see Bikini Bottom whose inhabitants believe they are sleeping in a peaceful slumber, but who cannot find definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep.”

What brings the man known as “The Father of Modern Philosophy” here to interrupt the peaceful slumber of Bikini Bottom in order to ask his enduring philosophical question, “Am I

awake or asleep?” Why has the philosopher best known for his proposition “I think therefore I am” appeared to present his arguments from the First Meditation of *Meditations on First Philosophy* in 1641?

The episode “Sleepy Time” is a surrealistic romp through Bikini Bottom’s dreamland that explores the questions of dreams and reality. During the DVD commentary for this episode, SpongeBob himself asks, “who’s to say where reality leaves off and our dreams begin?” This question of where reality and dreams intersect or whether they are even distinguishable has been an ongoing philosophical argument, explored by Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (382-322 BCE), Descartes and many others. During this episode, SpongeBob explores the dreams of his Bikini Bottom neighbors, which in turn allows us to explore the philosophical concepts of skepticism and dreaming.

### **Sleepy Time**

SpongeBob is getting ready for bed. After warning his pet snail Gary to “watch his wandering eye” SpongeBob closes his eyes and a dream cloud appears. The dream is surreal and fantastic, with SpongeBob appearing in pieces, putting himself together and then driving a hotrod alongside a road decorated with larger than life pieces of a Krabby Patty. Anyone coming late to this episode would realize that it was truly a dream sequence because fans of the show know that SpongeBob does not have a driver’s license. In fact, his on-going quest for a driver’s license is a dominant theme throughout the series.

While zooming along, SpongeBob realizes that he doesn’t have said driver’s license. Shortly after, a driver’s license appears, reminding us once again that this is a fantasy. As

SpongeBob admires this long sought after object, he ignores the signs indicating the end of the road and promptly crashes. While soaring through the air, he meets Mrs. Puff, his beleaguered driving instructor. He shows off his driver's license only to have Mrs. Puff tear it up and let him know that he does not have one "even in your dreams Mr. SquarePants." With a tortured yell, SpongeBob continues to soar right out of his dream cloud.

A quick philosophical survey of the dream shows that it has elements of both fantasy (he has a driver's license) and reality (he will *never* get a driver's license). We also see that during this dream, SpongeBob demonstrates a form of consciousness in the realization that he is driving without a driver's license. This consciousness is an important element when exploring the philosophy of dreams.

### **Am I Still Dreaming?**

When SpongeBob pops out of his dream, he finds himself as a smaller version of his larger self who is sleeping in the bed. When he sees himself, he asks the following philosophical questions: "Where am I? Is that me? Or is *this* me? Am I still dreaming?" The answers to these questions however do not appear to be of too much importance to him as he is immediately distracted from these ponderings by Gary's dream cloud.

The question "Am I dreaming?" has been asked and explored by many philosophers. Descartes in particular wrote about the problem of certainty and whether it is possible to tell the difference between dreaming and being awake. Descartes poses this question in his "First Meditation" of *Meditations on First Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> He ponders the fact that he often dreams about

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980)., 57-60.

events that occur in reality, such as sitting by the fire in his bedclothes which is what he is doing while writing these thoughts. Since he has had dreams where he is sitting by a warm fire in his pajamas writing great prose, how can he determine that he is not dreaming while he is in reality writing? The problem that he proposes is that there is no specific way or mark by which dreaming can be determined.

Many of Descartes' writings deal with skepticism and whether one should trust their own senses. These spill over into his thoughts on dreams as he suggests that we can never trust our own senses. If the senses can delude our dreams, senses can also delude our reality. The questions that Descartes raises about dreams are often presented as the Cartesian dream argument or dream problem, which searches for any philosophical proof that at any given moment one is not currently dreaming. Solutions to this problem have been proposed, argued and refuted by philosophers and students of philosophy since the problem was first articulated.

Philosopher Norman Malcolm (1911-1990), in his book *Dreaming*<sup>2</sup> deals with this dilemma by asserting that it is actually impossible to ask "Am I dreaming?" while in a dream because asking this questions requires a consciousness that does not exist when one is asleep. The absence or presence of this consciousness during ones sleep is a contentious issue in philosophical discussions on dreams. SpongeBob's supposed consciousness of not having a driver's license, his out of body experience and questioning as to who he is and whether he is sleeping contradicts Malcolm's assertions about dreams.

Both Malcolm and Descartes assertions do not seem to take into consideration the possibility of "lucid dreaming."<sup>3</sup> Lucid dreaming occurs when the dreamer is aware he is dreaming and continues to have the dream. The dreamer is able to determine that she is dreaming

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<sup>2</sup>Norman Malcolm, *Dreaming*. (London: Routledge, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Warren, *The Head Trip*, (New York: Random House, 2007), 112-155.

and enjoy the ability of being able to experience things not normally experienced in real life. Malcolm would argue that this isn't possible as this requires consciousness. Descartes would argue that the dreamer cannot actually determine that he is dreaming, thus cannot make the decision to jump out of the water and onto land without knowing whether he will frolic happily on the dry beach or dry up into a shriveled sponge. SpongeBob's ability to determine that he might be dreaming and his decision to continue the dream shows that he is perhaps experiencing such a lucid dream.

### **Mind Your Wandering Eye**

While SpongeBob poses the questions that have occupied the minds of philosophy's great thinkers, he is not deeply concerned with the answers as he dream hops. SpongeBob warns Gary to "watch his wandering eye" before going to bed and cautions him to keep his curiosity at bay. However, during this dream sequence, it is SpongeBob who cannot help but wander into the dreams of Bikini Bottom residents to satisfy his curiosity and quest for knowledge and wonder.

When SpongeBob enters Gary's dream, he is shocked to discover that Gary can talk. In fact, Gary possesses a humanoid form and speaks and reads. Gary is in a large library which one could presume is filled with literature that includes the philosophical classics. On the DVD commentary, the creators ruminate that Gary actually looks like an "an intellectual or a philosopher." SpongeBob has asked the philosophical questions, but it appears that Gary is the one searching for the answers. When SpongeBob expresses shock that Gary can speak and read, Gary explains that one is "not tethered by earthly limitation" in dreams. SpongeBob asks what

that means, thus questioning the nature of dreams, which is an important part in the dream argument discussion.

Gary attempts to explain to SpongeBob that dreams have been thought of as “windows to other realms.” These other realms can be very different, or indistinguishable, from reality. Philosophers have not always agreed upon the true nature of dreams. Philosophers like Descartes believed that dreams are actual experiences within the sleeping state, while others, like Malcolm, don’t view dreams as experiences but rather as illusions and ideas that are described during the waking state. Still other, earlier philosophers discussed dreams in their writings, with Plato speculating on the possibility of the soul traveling in dreams<sup>4</sup>, and Aristotle believing that people make judgments while dreaming.<sup>5</sup> Despite their differences, most philosophers would agree that dreams occur during sleep and can involve images or experiences that aren’t possible when one is awake.

Gary proceeds to quote Emily Dickinson attempting to describe the possibilities of dreams to SpongeBob. Failing again to get through to SpongeBob, Gary finds a limerick with which to educate his owner:

“There once was a man from Peru,  
who dreamt he was eating his shoe,  
he awoke with a fright, in the middle of the night,  
to find that his dream had come true.”

While Gary says condescendingly to SpongeBob that the limerick might be more his style, this limerick actually does address the philosophical question of dreaming versus reality as

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<sup>4</sup> David Gallop, *Aristotle on Sleep and Dreams*, (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1996), 12.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Ayer “Professor Malcolm on Dreams”, in *Philosophical Essays on Dreaming*, ed. Charles E. M. Dunlop, 127-148. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 127-128.

we see the intersection of dreams and reality in the events in the poem. SpongeBob thanks Gary for the information and exits the dream.

This dream provides an interesting insight into the character of Gary and his relationship with SpongeBob. Gary exists in reality as a sea snail that mainly eats, sleeps and mews, but the dream-Gary is a thoughtful, philosophical, intelligent being. It's difficult for audience members to not view Gary differently after having been allowed to "invade the sanctity of his dreams" and learn of his intellectual pursuits. Going forward in the series, the audience knows that despite Gary's inability to speak, there is a lot going on under that shell, even if it is not always obvious that SpongeBob remembers this.

As SpongeBob leaves Gary's dream, he is warned by the mollusk to "watch his wandering eye," invoking SpongeBob's bedtime warning along with Plato's idea of the traveling soul during dreaming. Despite Gary's warning, SpongeBob follows his wandering eye into the dream cloud of his best friend, Patrick Star.

### **You Can Do Anything You Want**

Much of Descartes' dream argument relies on the fact that dreams aren't always so different from reality. As mentioned previously, Descartes contends that it is possible to dream the mundane events such as sitting around in your PJ's. Patrick's dream proves this contention and provides an excellent example of the type of dream Descartes invokes in discussing the difficulty of determining dream from reality.

When SpongeBob enters Patrick's dream cloud, he finds Patrick riding a twenty-five cent kiddie ride. Patrick appears extremely content as SpongeBob asks him whether he realizes that



this is a dream and that he can do anything he wants. Patrick acknowledges that he is aware that this is a dream, and indicates that he knows he can do anything he wants. SpongeBob is in disbelief that this is what Patrick would choose in his dream, and tries to illustrate the power of a dream by becoming as large as a skyscraper and multiplying himself. Patrick however does not appear to be dissuaded from continuing his simple dream. SpongeBob appears to be bored of Patrick's dream and announces that he is leaving. Patrick says goodbye just as the kiddie ride ends. He reaches into his pocket for another quarter to place in the ride, but drops it into a sewer grate. Upon announcing that that was his last quarter, he sits on the ride with a dull stare. Even though he is aware that he is dreaming and that he could produce another quarter or even eliminate the need for more quarters, Patrick simply sits. The creators of the show comment that even Patrick's dreams are lazy. Once again, this dream gives the audience an insight into Patrick's own outlook on life. His dream temperament is similar to that of his usual real-life temperament; a happy, peaceful laziness. In fact, the scene so closely resembles reality that if one did not know that this was a dream sequence, there is nothing about Patrick's behavior, as Descartes would note, to indicate that it was different from reality.

### **No More Messing With People's Dreams**

SpongeBob continues to wander into the dreams of other Bikini Bottom residents. Each of these dreams provides insight and commentary on the characters and their relationship with SpongeBob. The "Sleepy Time" episode provides a nice set up for the rest of the series. The audience has already been introduced to the main characters in previous episodes, but now we get to explore the dreams of the characters in relation to their life's philosophies.

Squidward Tentacles, the pessimistic foil to the optimistic SpongeBob is dreaming that he can actually play clarinet well as he performs a concert for King Neptune. Squidward is often attempting to achieve greatness through various artistic pursuits. It is not surprising that his dream would have him appearing as an undersea Mozart. His relationship with SpongeBob is so contentious that even the appearance of SpongeBob in his dream immediately invokes anger and frustration. These emotions are not unwarranted, as SpongeBob's actions usually lead to problems for Squidward. In reality, SpongeBob often attempts to counter these problems by helping Squidward with well-intentioned but misguided actions, usually making situations worse. The dream episode parallels reality in that SpongeBob's actions (whispering Gary's limerick to King Neptune) meddle with Squidward's ability to perform and result in Squidward breaking his clarinet much to the anger of King Neptune who threatens to cut off Squidward's head. SpongeBob's solution is to become a clarinet himself to replace the broken one. The audience reaction is positive and Squidward gets to keep his head. SpongeBob, however, becomes the main character in Squidward's dream as the fans are more interested in the instrument than the player, proving that even in his dreams Squidward cannot escape SpongeBob's interference with his life.

SpongeBob flees his adoring crowd and moves on to Sandy Cheeks' dream. Sandy, the adventure seeking, adrenaline-loving squirrel from Texas, is para-surfing in her dream. As in real life, Sandy wants to share her love of adventure with SpongeBob and encourages him as they hurl dangerously towards a small target. Also as in real life, SpongeBob's lack of attention to detail proves to be a hindrance to both their safety as he produces a pair of shoes and a parakeet instead of a parachute. Sandy is so busy correcting SpongeBob that she falls into a truck full of clam manure before deploying her own parachute while SpongeBob lands on the target without a

parachute. As with Squidward's dream, SpongeBob's presence in Sandy's dream has changed the course of the dream to be closer to reality of day-to-day life.

Despite his claim that he will not "mess with people's dreams," SpongeBob can't help but wonder what his boss, Mr. Krabs is dreaming. When he arrives at Mr. Krabs' house, SpongeBob mistakenly enters the dream of Pearl, Mr. Krabs' daughter, who is having a tea party and invites SpongeBob to join her, but he declines. His brief time there only shows the audience that this dream is based on the reality that Pearl likes very girly things, including tea parties.

Mr. Krabs' dream is, as SpongeBob hopes "more robust." In a nod to the reality that Mr. Krabs loves and covets money, his dream involves his quest for the great "Moby Dollar," an oversized dollar bill that he fishes from the sea. SpongeBob, as always, is ready and willing to assist his boss in any way possible, helping Mr. Krabs get Moby Dollar into the money net (a giant wallet containing Mr. Krabs' driver's license, which SpongeBob of course, admires). Again, as with previous dreams, reality sneaks in and SpongeBob unintentionally lets Moby Dollar get away. In this dream, as in reality, SpongeBob's supposed good intentions have prevented Mr. Krabs from achieving his constant goal of acquiring more money.

The final dream that SpongeBob visits is that of Plankton, the tiny scheming villain of Bikini Bottom. Plankton's ultimate goal is to steal a Krabby Patty in order to make his failed restaurant The Chum Bucket successful. His many failed attempts at procuring a Krabby Patty have often been thwarted by either his tiny size or SpongeBob's actions. In his dream, Plankton is a giant, zapping and stomping his way through Bikini Bottom. When he reaches the KrustyKrab, he stomps on it, destroying the restaurant –surprising since normally he is attempting to get an actual Krabby Patty. Gary appears and is at great risk of being stomped on by Plankton, so naturally SpongeBob must rescue him. As Plankton is about to destroy Gary,

SpongeBob turns himself into a pin, deflating Plankton to his usual small size. The tiny Plankton is promptly stepped on by a Bikini Bottom resident, thus ending Plankton's dream turned nightmare.

### **Stay Out Of Our Dreams!**

SpongeBob finally decides to return to his own dream and climbs back into his dream cloud. In his dream cloud is an image of his bed and he hops back in and climbs into the sheets. At this instant, the image in the dream cloud is the exact same image as in reality. His dream is perfectly mimicking reality with both dreamtime and real-life SpongeBob slumbering away. Suddenly, the dream SpongeBob is surrounded by the angry faces of his friends yelling at him. He wakes up, much like the man from Gary's limerick, to find that indeed he is surrounded by the angry faces of his friends whose dreams he visited. His friends implore him to stay out of their dreams because they get enough of him during the day and wish for a peaceful respite from his antics while they sleep. It isn't clear in the scene whether SpongeBob even remembers having been in everyone's dreams. It's not he who relates his dream to his friends, but rather they relate the fact that he was in their dreams to him. Discussions among philosophers regarding dreams have not only surrounded the intersection of waking life and dreaming life but also focused on the acts of the retelling of the dream and remembering the dream. These are also important elements to exploring the nature of dreams.

Under normal dreaming circumstances, people are not held accountable for the actions and choices made during a dream. Even when relating a dream to a friend, generally that friend does not get angry for having been a part of the dream or for the choices made in the dream. In

SpongeBob's case however, he's being held responsible for the actions and events that took place in the dreams of others, not even in his own dreams.

### **Do I Even Care If I'm Dreaming?**

Returning to earlier discussions of Descartes' question of dreaming, we can ask if the events in the episode were dreams or reality. On the surface, it appears that the audience has just witnessed the interactions of the characters in dreamland as SpongeBob's wandering eye brought him through the dream clouds. However, during the final scene, Patrick appears and asks "Does anyone have a quarter?" This question connects the dream world to the current world and causes room for doubting the clear cut lines of dreams and reality.

Doubt is one of the major principles in Descartes' dream argument which questions our own senses and perceptions. In Descartes' "First Mediation," the narrator is so astonished by the realization that he could be dreaming that he becomes skeptical of both dreams and reality. This skepticism is at the heart of the dream problem and the many attempts to solve it. Doubt and skepticism however are not at the heart of SpongeBob. In fact, one could argue that SpongeBob is impervious to Descartes' skepticism as he never doubts or questions his senses throughout the episode; he just continues to follow his philosophical sense of wonder and adventure.

SpongeBob's solution to the dream argument is to ask the question, but not really care about the answer. He asks, "Am I dreaming?" but doesn't wait for the answer and most likely would not change his actions based on that answer. Instead, he continues on in his usual optimistic way regardless of whether he perceives it as dreams or reality.

This episode of my dreams (or was it really a dream?) ends in Gary's dream. Rene Descartes has appeared, looking a little frustrated and harried. He has just encountered SpongeBob and attempted to argue the finer points of dream philosophy. However, as Descartes laments to Gary, SpongeBob did not seem to even understand what it is to doubt or be skeptical. It is impossible for Descartes to understand how someone can seek truth and knowledge without skepticism. Descartes believed that it is necessary to find reason for doubt in order to confirm knowledge. In other words, one must be sure of when they are and aren't dreaming in order to be sure of the reality of being awake. SpongeBob's ability to seek knowledge without doubt has left Descartes baffled. Gary is sympathetic to Descartes' plight and grabs a book from the library shelves and tries to help explain SpongeBob within the context of philosophy through this limerick:

“There once was a sponge from the sea,  
Who asked, am I dreaming? Is that me?  
Not waiting around  
For the answer to be found  
He continued his ways regardless of dream or reality.”

