

Waking Up from the Problem of Evil

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I. Introduction

A fairly nonspecific representation of the argument from evil can be formulated in the following way:

A1: Horrific suffering occurs (horrific in amount, intensity, and kind).

A2: Without a morally justifying reason, a morally perfect, omnipotent, and omniscient being would not allow horrific suffering to occur.

A3: There is (probably) no morally justifying reason for a morally perfect, omnipotent, and omniscient being to allow horrific suffering to occur.

AC: By A1, A2, and A3, it follows that there (probably) does not exist a perfectly benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient being (Citron, 248).

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Most attempts to undermine arguments of this kind focus on undermining A3 since A1 and A2 are generally considered uncontroversial premises. A3 can also be understood in two ways. It can be taken absolutely (as it is done in logical arguments from evil), or it can be taken probabilistically (as is done in evidential arguments from evil). Regardless of how one construes the premise, the method of undermining it is generally the same. In contrast to these approaches, Gabriel Citron ignores A3 and attempts to undermine the truth of A1—the claim that horrific suffering occurs (248). He claims that *for all we know* no actual horrific suffering occurs, and appeals to a certain form of dream skepticism for justification:

When we wake up after having had a nightmare—no matter how much we may have dreamt that we suffered—we are often filled entirely with relief, and do not consider ourselves to have suffered very much at all. And since it is epistemically possible that this life is simply a dream, it follows that *in reality* there is very little suffering at all, despite what plainly *seems* to be the case. (Citron 249)

In this way Citron's response is distinctly medieval. Rather than look for morally justifying reasons that God could have in permitting evil, he attempts to dispute that evil has any being.¹

In this paper I will examine the evidence to which Citron appeals in order to motivate his dream-skepticism, and I will argue that it is insufficient to establish the epistemic possibility that this life could simply be a dream. First, I will present Citron's dream-defense argument, and afterwards I will appeal to the phenomena of lucid dreaming to demonstrate a crucial weakness in his argument.

II. Citron's Dream Defense

The argument by which Citron undermines A1 takes the following form:

¹This of course is quite different from the strategy that the medievalists employed in denying the being of evil. Unlike Augustine and Boethius for example, Citron never characterizes evil in terms of privation.

B1: For any experience that one actually undergoes, it is possible—in a phenomenally indistinguishable manner—to dream that one is undergoing it, including dreams of the very worst sufferings.

B2: If it is possible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life, then one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake.

B3: It follows that one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake, and therefore it is always epistemically possible that one is dreaming.

B4: It is possible for a dream of suffering—even of the very worst kind—to entail no actual horrific suffering for the dreamer.

BC: Therefore, It is epistemically possible that no horrific suffering occurs (Citron 249–50).

What kind of evidence would be required to motivate B1? One must first give an account of what it means to dream of an experience in a way that it is *phenomenally indistinguishable* from ordinary experience. According to Citron, a dream is phenomenally indistinguishable if the dream experiences are the same in kind, intensity, and duration as waking experiences (252). So, to motivate B1 Citron appeals to anecdotal accounts of dream experiences. With respect to kind, dreams are certainly like our waking experiences, and most people have had a dream that resembles their ordinary experiences. In fact, just the other day I dreamt I forgot to change my laundry over to the dryer. But can our dreams really possess sufficient intensity and duration to merit buying into B1? Consider the following account:

A patient . . . dreamt that while crossing the Rocky Mountains he had been attacked by two Mexicans, who, after a long fight succeeded in taking him alive. They told him that unless he revealed the true means of making gold from copper they would submit him to torture. In vain he pleaded ignorance. . . . Pulling off his boots, they held his

naked feet to that fire till he shrieked with agony
and awoke. (Citron, 251)

He also cites a number of other examples where dreamers experienced unbearable or excruciating pain (Citron 251). So it seems given people's actual dream experiences that the second condition, intensity, can be satisfied. However, the third condition—duration—seems like the most difficult to satisfy. Most dreams simply don't span lifetimes. Most dreams are like my dream of forgetting to change the laundry over. They last a relatively short period of time. In response to this, Citron recounts the remarkable experience of a man who dreamt that he lived 100 years as farmer (251). During the dream he could remember specific days in his life, profound experiences, and his attitude toward death with each standing out to him as something that "he experienced in real time, never rushed" (Citron 251). So given that each respective criterion can be satisfied, it is plausible to believe what B1 claims: any experience that anyone actually undergoes, it is possible to dream that one is undergoing it, including experiences of the very worst sufferings.

What kind of evidence would be required to motivate B2? Citron appeals to two principles: (1) evidential internalism and (2) epistemological underdeterminism (252). By (1) Citron means the following: one must be aware of what one's evidence is. If part of what it means to be rational is to respect one's evidence, and a necessary condition of respecting one's evidence is knowing what one's evidence is, it follows that in order to be rational, one must know what one's evidence is (Williamson, 164). By (2) Citron means the following: given two incompatible scenarios A and B, if one's evidence does not favor one above the other, then one cannot know which of A or B is the case (Citron 252). When it comes to knowing about the external world, all we have to point to as evidence is our phenomenal experience. But if our phenomenal evidence is compatible with either scenario—that we are dreaming and that we are not dreaming—then our phenomenal evidence does not favor either scenario. An epistemological underdetermination obtains, and it follows that we can't be sure we're not dreaming (Citron 253).

Since B3 follows straightforwardly from B1 and B2, all that remains is to account for B4. Recall that B4 claims that it is possible for a dream of suffering—even of the very worst kind—to entail no

actual horrific suffering for the dreamer. *Prima Facie* this seems problematic. After all, most people have had the experience of waking up from a horrible nightmare feeling frightened and anxious. Moreover, frequent nightmares in addition to the intrinsic suffering of the nightmare can have a serious degree of consequent suffering—suffering that occurs after waking up from the dream. For example, regular nightmares in children can result in insomnia and fear of falling asleep (Citron 254). But one must keep in mind the weakness of the claim. Citron's claim is not that nightmares or dreams of suffering *never* entail actual horrific suffering, but simply that *it is possible* that they do not. This also is apparent from people's actual dream experiences. Citron recounts the experience of a mother who dreamed that her daughter had fallen into a river and drowned due to the mother's negligence. The severity of the grief woke the mother up and upon realizing it had been a dream stated that "a wave of joy went over [her]" (Citron 254). Now the loss of a child is no trivial amount of suffering. So if it is possible in so extreme a case of suffering as this to feel relief after having dreamed the suffering, it seems plausible that such could be the case for other dreams of suffering as well (Citron 256).

With this in place it is clear how these considerations work to undermine arguments from evil. The only thing that arguments from evil can appeal to in justifying the existence of evil is our experience of evil; but if we cannot be sure on the grounds of our experience alone that the evil we are experiencing is real, it follows that it is possible that there is no evil at all (Citron 264). Now if Citron succeeds in showing that it is possible for A1 to be false, it follows that it is possible for any propositions derived from A1 to be false. This is why his defense works so well against both the logical and evidential arguments from evil. Both of these arguments share an unqualified commitment to the existence of evil and suffering. In light of this, the question of if God does (or probably does) have a morally justifying reason for allowing evil is appropriate only if their actually is *real* suffering. But this is something that we just can't know. As a result, arguments from evil lose their status as decisive considerations against theistic claims.

III. The Problem with Citron's Defense

Given the weakness of the thesis that Citron presents, it is hard to take issue with much of what he says. For example, B4 is only committed to the possibility that dreams of suffering entail no real suffering, and this is obviously true. Moreover, B2 is quite uncontroversial. If our dream experience is really phenomenally indistinguishable from waking experience, it seems inevitable that an epistemic underdetermination will obtain. B3—the claim that if one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake, it is therefore always epistemically possible that one is dreaming—follows directly from B1 and B2, and BC follows directly from B3 and B4. The only real place to maneuver here is to push back against B1—the claim that dreams are phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life. Citron's argument is clearly valid, so if there are to be problems at all with his argument, they must be found in the support he gives for B1.

Recall that for Citron two experiences are *phenomenally identical* if they are the same with respect to kind, intensity, and duration. What I aim to show is that the phenomenal qualities of dreams are not, in fact, identical to those found in waking experience. Lucid dream states (states that are possible for anyone to experience) allow the dreamer by means of the phenomenal qualities of the dream to know that they are dreaming. This gives rise to a means of distinguishing between dreaming and waking experience. The upshot is that our phenomenal evidence can favor one scenario above the other (that we are dreaming or that we are in the real world). B1, therefore, is false, B2 becomes vacuously true, and we are left with little room to doubt that actual horrific suffering occurs.

IV. Lucid Dreaming

A lucid dream is a dream in which the dreamer is aware that he or she is dreaming, and she can often consciously influence the dream's content (Stumbrys Erlacher 191). Typically, upon recognizing that she is dreaming, the dreamer will attempt feats that are impossible during waking life such as flying or walking through walls (Stumbrys Erlacher 195). Interestingly, this is not an

uncommon experience. It is reported that roughly half of the general population has experienced at least one lucid dream in their life, and roughly one fifth of the population have them regularly (at least once a month) (Stumbrys Erlacher 191). Most often lucid dreaming occurs naturally, but it is also possible to learn how to lucid dream through various induction methods (LaBerge 143–66). This raises the question, “what is it about a dream that allows the lucid dreamer to recognize it as such?” *Prima facie* it seems that there must be some quality of the dream, some phenomenal aspect of the experience that the lucid dreamer recognizes as a distinguishing feature. In fact, the most popular technique for inducing lucid dreams relies explicitly on this assumption.

This technique is known as the *reality test*. Lucidity most often occurs when the dreamer recognizes something anomalous—some inconsistency, bizarreness, or lack of supervenience—in their dreams (LaBerge 121). A reality test then is designed to bring the anomalousness of the dream to the attention of the dreamer thereby inducing a lucid state. There are many different kinds of reality tests ranging from attempting to fly to attempting to see if writing on an object persists after the dreamer diverts his attention away (Turner). According to Stephen LaBerge, the latter has never failed to induce a lucid dream since the writing is always different when looking back at the object (123). Reality tests (and lucid dreaming for that matter) presuppose some phenomenal difference between dreaming and waking experience. How then should we characterize this difference? It’s not clear how it ought to be characterized, but it is clear from the experience of lucid dreaming that the bizarreness of the dream or some inconsistency with waking experience brings the individual to an awareness of this difference.

At this point Citron could respond by saying that I have misunderstood what he means by *phenomenally indistinguishable*. Two experiences are phenomenally indistinguishable if they are identical with respect to kind, intensity, and duration; but perhaps I have construed *kind* too broadly. Perhaps in the case of a dream where I could fly or the words on a page change between passing glances, we would say that I am having an experience of a different kind than my ordinary experience. If we take kind to mean something stricter, such as *identical with respect to what is possible*, then bizarreness

and anomalousness could not point to what would be considered a legitimate distinguishing characteristic. Presumably this would restrict the class of dreams to only those that reflect our ordinary experience in a complete way.

Citron seems to have this sort of thing in mind given the examples of dreams that he cites throughout his paper. None of the dreams he includes have bizarre or anomalous features. Certainly some of the experiences are out of the ordinary of what the dreamer experiences (Citron 250–51), but none are foreign to the extent of including circumstances that could not obtain in waking life. However, if we are to take kind in the narrower sense then it is impossible to consider *any* dream phenomenally identical with waking experience. No dream is identical with respect to what is possible in waking life for all dreams necessarily admit possibilities that waking experience does not. Suppose that a couple goes out to dinner at their favorite restaurant, and after ordering their food they begin to have a conversation with one another about their day. In waking experience, it will never be possible for either the man or the woman to spontaneously develop additional eyes and ears. However, in one's dreams such is always a live possibility² (Fox 35–36).

Moreover, neither bizarreness nor instability is a necessary condition for inducing a lucid state. A dreamer can recognize she is dreaming even if the dream contains nothing that is inconsistent with waking life. While the method of reality-checking may be an indirect means of dream-state recognition, it is possible to recognize one is dreaming without it being pointed to by bizarreness. In most accounts of lucid dreaming, the dreamers report simply being certain that they are dreaming (Hurd 304–15) or they just remember that they are dreaming (LaBerge 126–28). So even if we restrict the available dreams to those that reflect ordinary experience in every way and if we suppose that these dreams entail no bizarre or unstable elements, it is still possible to induce a lucid state. Therefore, it is still

²This example is an adaptation of a dream scenario introduced by Oliver Fox in “Astral Projection.”

possible for the dreamer under these circumstances to distinguish between dreaming and waking experience.³

Furthermore, it is possible from within a dream not only to be aware that one is dreaming but also to be aware of events transpiring in waking reality. In the following example, a man recounts a lucid dream wherein he was one of the three magi traveling to visit the Christ child, and in the middle of his dream he became aware of his wife's advances toward him.

For a long time I kneel quietly beside the other magi, gazing earnestly at the infant. . . . Now I feel Charlene moving on the waterbed and putting her arms around my body. She is extending an invitation to me and it is completely clear that she is touching my body and is hoping to arouse me from sleep. Still lucid, I gaze with total absorption at the infant Jesus. . . . I feel so solidly established in the lucid state and so transfixed by this vision that I know that Charlene's touching my physical body cannot pull me out of lucidity or out of the dream. . . . Still lucid, and still aware of Charlene persistently caressing my physical body, I now plan my exit from the dream; for I sense that this marvelous scene is coming to its own natural conclusion. . . . And then, with a conscious act of the will and with a deep feeling of reluctance, I choose to leave the lucid dream. I then told Charlene that I just had the most incredible lucid dream and proceeded

³At this point it may be worth asking why we should take this anecdotal evidence seriously. Aren't there obvious problems with making metaphysical claims of this sort on the grounds of something as shaky as *post hoc* testimonials? In fact this is exactly the objection that Norman Malcolm raises in his book *Dreaming*. This is a fair question and I'm afraid I don't have a very good answer. When drawing conclusions about the phenomenal qualities of dreaming, it is not clear what else is available but testimony. The only immediate source of belief we have about the phenomenal character of dreams is our memory. So while the faculty of memory as a source of belief carries with it its own epistemological concerns (Senor), insofar as we accept memory to be a reliable source of belief we can consider these anecdotal experiences as reliable. But since Citron accepts anecdotal evidence in drawing his conclusions about the nature of dreaming, appealing to similar accounts in the context of this paper seems unproblematic.

to tell her the dream in its entirety. As soon as I completed the telling, she also felt overwhelmed by it. (Hurd 306-09)

The striking feature of this account is the parallel experience of the dream events and the waking world events. It is clear from his testimony that he has full awareness that he was dreaming simultaneous with full awareness of what was transpiring in waking reality. Additionally, the wife was present upon his awaking to confirm that she was in fact doing what he thought she was doing while he was dreaming. This experience is significant because it points to the possibility of developing a subjectively symmetric way of distinguishing waking experience from dreaming. A weakness in traditional approaches to meeting dream skepticism is the issue of asymmetry in the way we distinguish between experiences (Ichikawa 521). At best one can only distinguish dreaming from waking experience while one is awake (Sosa 14). But in the case of the man who dreamed he was one of the three wise men, he seems to have access to both sides of the experience simultaneously. In his experience he reports no confusion as to which experience is which; rather he seems psychologically certain of which is which. Given the ability of his wife to confirm that of which he was psychologically certain, it is reasonable to conclude that he was able to meaningfully and correctly distinguish between dreaming and waking experience from within both his dreams and waking experience.

Now a common objection that is often raised about lucid dreaming is that it is not, in fact, dreaming (Hartman 71-79). This objection may be granted without undermining the argument as I have stated it. Lucidity—whether a dream state or not—has as a precondition for the experience, a certain kind of knowledge that is brought about because of the phenomenal aspects of the experience. To say that Lucidity is not a dream state is to say that the content of the knowledge isn't that I'm dreaming but the opposite. If the objection is granted, the desiderata can be obtained just as well. If lucidity is not dreaming, then the content of the knowledge that occasions the experience may be understood as knowledge that one is *not dreaming*. If this is correct, then it is certainly still possible to say that there are means by which one can phenomenally distinguish one's dreams from one's waking life. The only difference is that the

phenomenal difference is presupposed in the waking rather than the dream experience. So, if our dreams are, in fact, phenomenally distinguishable from waking experience, then the epistemological underdeterminism to which Citron appeals never obtains. It follows that B1—the claim that they are phenomenally identical—is false, and Citron fails to have given us any real reason to doubt that the evil and suffering that we experience is real.

V. Conclusion

In his paper, Gabriel Citron employs dream skepticism to undermine what is usually taken to be the uncontroversial premise in arguments from evil; that there really is evil and suffering. However, his argument rests on individuals' inability to phenomenally distinguish their dreams and waking experiences. I have argued that it is possible to phenomenally distinguish dreaming from wakefulness by appealing to the phenomena of lucid dreaming. As a result, Citron's argument fails. Moreover, I've attempted to provide a sketch of how lucid dreaming can provide a means by which to develop a subjectively symmetric distinction between dreaming and waking experience. The upshot is that lucid dreaming presents a way of meeting the skeptics challenges in a more complete way than other traditional responses.

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