

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SELF-AWARENESS: EXPLORING NORMAN MALCOLM'S VIEWS ON CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PARADOX OF KNOWLEDGE DURING SLEEP

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Abstract: Norman Malcolm, a 20th-century philosopher, is particularly known for his contributions to epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. One of his major concerns in epistemology, particularly in relation to self-awareness and consciousness, revolves around the nature of knowledge about oneself and the paradoxes that arise in understanding the limits and conditions of this knowledge. Among these paradoxes is the intriguing problem of knowledge during sleep, which Malcolm discusses in his work. Malcolm is best known for his contributions to the philosophy of mind, particularly in relation to the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his critique of René Descartes' Cartesian philosophy. In his works, especially his influential book "Knowledge and Certainty" (1973), Malcolm presents a critical examination of Descartes' famous dualism and his foundational approach to knowledge, questioning the basic assumptions of Cartesian epistemology

Key Words: Cartesian Dualism, Consciousness, Awareness, Certainty, Knowledge, Skepticism, Dream, Sleep, Sensation, Impressions, Waking State, Epistemology, Language, Thought, Feeling Perception.

Malcolm's Views on Consciousness and Self-Awareness

Malcolm was interested in questions about the nature of self-knowledge and the boundaries of introspection, and he was greatly affected by Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy. He focused on the paradox of self-awareness—specifically, how we can know ourselves in a way that avoids circularity and paradox.

Malcolm was skeptical of the idea that self-knowledge requires a special kind of internal, privileged access to the self, separate from the ordinary methods of knowing things about the world. He argued against a view that treats self-awareness as something radically different from awareness of other things. Instead, he believed that self-awareness is a kind of "open" awareness—meaning that we come to know ourselves in the same way we know anything else: through observation and reflection.

Malcolm believes that self-awareness arises in the context of our actions and behaviors rather than existing as a separate, private mental state. Our knowledge of ourselves is gained through our experiences, much like our knowledge of the world. This perspective aligns with Wittgenstein's view that many of our concepts, including self-concept, are tied to the ways we use language and engage with the world around us.

The Paradox of Knowledge During Sleep

One of the most interesting issues that Malcolm explores is the paradox of knowing oneself during sleep, a state where conscious awareness seems to be temporarily suspended. The paradox arises from the question of whether we can know ourselves in the same way when we are asleep as we can when we are awake. While awake, we have direct access to our thoughts, perceptions, and emotions, and can reflect on our mental state in real-time. However, when asleep, we do not appear to have this kind of awareness. So, how can we claim to "know" ourselves when we are not conscious in the usual sense?

Malcolm's exploration of this paradox focuses on the distinction between *being aware* and *knowing* something about oneself. He emphasizes that self-knowledge does not rely on continuous awareness of one's mental state. For instance, when we are asleep, we are still the same person, and our previous experiences and knowledge about ourselves are still intact, even if we are not actively reflecting on them. This suggests that our self-knowledge is not entirely dependent on conscious, waking awareness. Instead, it can be thought of as a more general and background form of knowledge, a kind of implicit awareness that does not require constant attention or reflection.

According to Cartesianism, thinking process only can give us the clear and certain idea about our existence. Descartes holds that thinking is the only attribute of our existence. He writes in a letter to Jean De Silhon in May 1637, On the eve of the publication of the 'discourse de la Methode' Descartes sums up his approach as follows; A man who doubts everything material cannot for all that doubt his own existence. From this it follows that he i.e, his soul is a being a substance which is not at all corporeal but whose nature is solely to think (Sa nature nest que de penser) and this is the first thing, one can know with certainty. Descartes makes it rather evident that a person may have a particular thought when he is asleep, or he may come to believe or affirm anything. Descartes asserts that mental processes can occur while you are sound asleep. Even while he is asleep, a man is capable of reasoning, being convinced, and resisting persuasion. According to Descartes, we experience the same types of mental experiences and events while we are asleep as when we are awake; the only distinction is that our minds function less effectively while we are asleep.

Malcolm's Critique of Descartes' Cartesianism

Descartes believed that the dream state was a part of the ongoing mental life. According to his conception, a dream is made up of thoughts and feelings, much like a time of waking life. There are no telltale signs that differentiate waking from sleep. Dream ideas are actual thoughts. Dream emotions are genuine emotions. According to him, there isn't a mark that separates the two propositions. "In my dream last night I was frightened and last night I was frightened".

The criteria we use to determine whether someone is or was half asleep are not the same as those we use to determine whether they are or were asleep. A present tense assertion and a "past tense" criterion are the two types of the former criteria. To ascertain whether someone is sound asleep, we apply the present tense criteria. His eyes are closed, his body is motionless, his respiration is rhythmical, and he is not responding to commands, questions, or moderately intense stimuli. Only when a person is awake can the "past tense" criterion, which is used to assess whether or not they were sound asleep, be satisfied. We must wait till he wakes up before we can determine whether he merely knows what happened in his vicinity while he was asleep; if not, it is certain that he was asleep.

Norman Malcolm's critique of Descartes, particularly regarding his epistemological assumptions and dualism, focuses on several key points:

1. The Problem of the "I" in Cartesian Thought.

Malcolm takes issue with Descartes' conception of the "I" in the *Cogito* argument. Descartes' notion of the self as an isolated, thinking subject—distinct from the body—rests on the assumption that one can have a kind of absolute certainty about the existence of their thinking self. Malcolm, however, challenges this view by arguing that the concept of the "I" is not something that can be separated from our interaction with the world. The "I" is not an abstract, isolated thinking thing but is intimately connected to the ordinary activities and behaviors of a person in the world. For Malcolm, the Cartesian separation of mind and body is overly simplistic and fails to capture the complexity of human existence. Instead of an isolated "thinking subject," he emphasizes the importance of a more integrated, pragmatic view of the self, grounded in our practices, language, and social context.

2. The Issue of Certainty and Knowledge

Descartes' famous quest for certainty leads him to embrace a form of epistemic foundationalism—seeking an indubitable starting point for knowledge. This leads him to the *Cogito*, a self-evident truth that, according to Descartes, cannot be doubted. Malcolm critiques this approach, arguing that Descartes' notion of certainty is too narrow and artificial. He suggests that human knowledge is not based on an indubitable foundation but is instead contingent on our practices, language, and the shared human context in which we live.

Malcolm was influenced by Wittgenstein's later philosophy, particularly his ideas about the nature of certainty in ordinary language. Wittgenstein argued that certainty is not something that can be attained through a special method of doubt (as Descartes had tried to do) but is instead rooted in the basic, unquestioned assumptions of everyday life. Malcolm extended this insight by suggesting that knowledge does not depend on an absolute, indubitable foundation but on a broader, pragmatic understanding of how we live and interact in the world.

3. Dualism and the Mind-Body Problem

Descartes is famous for his substance dualism, which holds that the mind and body are distinct substances with different properties: the mind is immaterial and thinking, while the body is material and extended in space. For Descartes, the interaction between these two substances presents a challenge, which he attempts to resolve by positing the pineal gland as the point of interaction.

Malcolm was deeply critical of this dualistic view. He argued that Descartes' separation of mind and body is not only philosophically problematic but also lacks empirical support. In contrast to Descartes, Malcolm emphasized the importance of seeing the mind and body as interrelated, rejecting the idea that the mind is a detached, immaterial substance that interacts with a physical body. Instead, Malcolm followed a more holistic view of the person, where mental and physical states are seen as aspects of a single, integrated being. He argued that mental states (thoughts, feelings, perceptions) are not separate from physical states (bodily actions, brain states), but are instead deeply interconnected.

4. Criticism of the Cartesian "Clear and Distinct Ideas"

Descartes maintained that only distinct and unambiguous ideas—ideas that are so self-evident that they cannot be questioned—are the source of truly certain knowledge. However, Malcolm challenged this approach, pointing out that the concept of "clear and distinct" thoughts is problematic in and of itself. He suggested that Descartes' reliance on such ideas ignores the fact that knowledge is typically based on common, everyday experiences and practices, not abstract, "clear and distinct" intuitions. Knowledge, for Malcolm, does not arise from self-evident truths but from the shared practices and social contexts in which we engage.

The two words that Malcolm wanted to compare were (I) I am sound sleeping and (II) I was sound asleep. Malcolm claims that we can determine whether this statement is true if we explain both of the statements. Attempting to use the phrase "I am sound asleep" would be ridiculous. If I were in my bed and someone came to shake me and ask, "Are you asleep?" and I said, "I am sound asleep," it would be funny if someone thought I was saying that and then concluded, "I am sound asleep'.

For example, the assertion "I am sound asleep" would be "self contradictory." I am not getting enough sleep if I am claiming to be. This type of self-contradiction occurs when someone says he is sleeping well, which implies that he is not who he says he is.

According to Malcolm, the proposition "He knows that he is sound asleep" is a severe self-contradictory proposition.

It is impossible for someone who is asleep to know, understand, or be conscious that he is.

Malcolm asserts that a person is not sound asleep if he confirms, questions, doubts, or thinks that he is; additionally, he asserts that a person who is sound asleep cannot be aware that he is. It makes sense that a person is not sound asleep if he is in any level of consciousness. Malcolm contends that this general principle, which can be stated in Cartesian terms as "cogito ergo nondomino," is peculiar in that the proposition "He claims that he is sound asleep" implies that he is not.

The idea of a dream of sound sleep does not lend itself to philosophical skepticism. According to the skeptic's theory, it is impossible to determine whether we are awake or sleeping at the moment of a sensation, thought, or emotion. It is wrong to say that a person cannot determine if he is awake or if he is sleeping and dreaming. Because it suggests that one may believe he was asleep but actually be awake, which is conceivable and that one could believe he was asleep but actually be awake. It is also wrong to say that a man can determine if he is sleeping or not. Since this would suggest that he had a criterion to test in order to determine the issue, this theory is ridiculous because he couldn't even employ a criterion unless he was asleep, therefore nothing could change the result of applying it. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that we can discern if someone is awake or asleep, dreaming, or both.

According to Malcolm, it is incorrect to state that a man who is sound asleep may exhibit signs or evidence that a particular thought was going through his mind and that he is feeling the same sensation. He was at least somewhat awake if there was any indication of this. We may conclude that a man was not in sound sleep if he were to wake up from what appeared to be sound sleep and indicate that while he was lying there, a certain thought had occurred to him. He might have been asserting about his waking state or about his dream from the previous night.

Malcolm claims that even though a dream happened while you were asleep, there is no way to know when it happened or how long it lasted. It is impossible to determine when he dreamed while he was asleep. As stated in the question, when did his panic strike or when did this headache start last night? Since a dream is not an actual occurrence, it cannot occur while you are asleep. One can argue that someone who claims to have had a dream is using the past tense since he is narrating an event that happened to him while he was asleep, such as his dream. The argument is based on the notion that his report matches his dream in the same manner that my account of yesterday's events does. This is incorrect. Supporting that his dream was different from what he reported is pointless unless it implies that he may alter, add to, or contradict what he reported. Nobody is aware of the implications of confirming his report. While real-life events can be confirmed, dreams cannot.

One would assume that a man's description of his dream is connected to his dream in the same way that my description of yesterday's events is connected to them. One is in our terrible situation, where it would seem that we might not remember that we dream such and such, but rather that we might be

deceived repeatedly. It's possible that we constantly live with the delusion that we've had a dream, one that awakens us if the dream report is externally connected to the dream.

In general, and in contrast to Descartes, the claim that a particular individual experienced a variety of thoughts, sensations, impressions, or feelings in his dream the previous night does not imply that he experienced those thoughts, sensations, impressions, or feelings the night before in the sense of the subsequent claim.

Norman Malcolm asserts that a person who is sound asleep cannot be incorrectly believed to be awake, nor can he recognise that he is sleeping. A person who is half asleep may confuse the sights and noises he hears in his dreams for actual sights and sounds, although this is not necessary for the concept of half sleep to occur. There isn't any space left for sceptic enquiries like "How can I tell if I'm awake or asleep?" because asking that question is ridiculous. I'm not sleeping well. b) How can I tell if I'm mostly or completely awake? The same cannot be said for this, and c) how can I tell whether I am experiencing hallucinations? The questions a) and c) has a very different status is in itself a point of considerable interest.

Malcolm disagreed with the Cartesian concept of a dream state. Descartes notes in the first meditation that there are no telltale signs that differentiate awake from sleep. Malcolm claims that although Leibnitz's and Russell's theories of inconsistency and Descartes' criterion are equivalent, this kind of principle is not a principle at all. Malcolm asserts that a person may be tricked into dreaming while sound asleep if they are unable to think.

Malcolm's philosophy emphasizes the difficulty of knowing ourselves or our mental states directly, especially in the case of sleep. Unlike Descartes' idea of indubitable self-awareness in thinking, sleep introduces a challenge to such certainty, since we lack the conscious awareness of ourselves while we sleep. This lack of awareness during sleep raises interesting philosophical questions about the nature of the self, knowledge, and consciousness that Malcolm engages with in his broader work.

Malcolm's thoughts on self-awareness, consciousness, and knowledge during sleep remain relevant today, especially in debates about the nature of consciousness and the limits of introspective knowledge. His views present an alternative to the Cartesian notion of self-knowledge as a kind of immediate, self-transparent awareness. Rather, he emphasizes the role of external behaviors and language in shaping our self-concept, suggesting that self-awareness is not just an internal, mental state but is also something that emerges from our interactions with the world.

Relevance to Contemporary Epistemology and Philosophy of mind.

Norman Malcolm's epistemological investigations into the nature of self-awareness and knowledge during sleep challenge traditional views that self-knowledge is dependent on continuous conscious reflection. His rejection of a dichotomy between "knowing" and "being aware" of oneself offers an interesting perspective on how we come to know ourselves, even in states like sleep where direct conscious awareness is absent. His work thus provides valuable insights into the complex nature of consciousness and the ways in which we can understand knowledge—both of the self and of the world—without relying solely on introspective or reflective consciousness.

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