



THE BUTTERFLY DREAM

THE PHILOSOPHY

There is a view in philosophy known as epistemological scepticism in which it is held that we cannot know anything for certain. There are a number of arguments for why this is the case that have issued from sceptical voices over the thousands of years this has been debated. One of these arguments is known as the 'dreaming argument' and was most famously formulated by Rene Descartes in his Meditations. The idea is that if I believe that my dreams are real while I am experiencing them then how can I tell that what I am now experiencing is really real and not just a dream? This is an idea that some children think of themselves, independently of doing philosophy, and so that makes the question an interesting and relevant one for children to do in a philosophy session. However, one needs to be very careful about how it is approached and for this reason I have put this session together to make the introduction of this idea gentle and unthreatening. I have used, not Descartes, but instead an ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher called Chuang Tzu for my example of the dreaming argument. Strictly speaking it is not a formal argument but it presents the idea clearly and in an appropriate way. I continue to keep this story, and the ensuing discussion, in the third person, i.e. about Chuang Tzu rather than about the children so as to maintain an unthreatening atmosphere. So, when I anchor them back to the Task Question I always say: "so how can Chuang Tzu know which is dreaming: him or the butterfly?" They of course may make the connection to themselves, and that's fine, but I do not pursue the discussion framed in this way.

THE STIMULUS

Chuang Tzu was a philosopher in ancient China, who, one night went to sleep and dreamed that he was a butterfly. He dreamt that he was flying around from flower to flower and while he was dreaming he felt free, blown about by the breeze hither and thither. He was quite sure that he was a butterfly. But when he awoke he realised that he had just been dreaming, and that he was really Chuang Tzu dreaming he was a butterfly. But then Chuang Tzu asked himself the following question: "was I Chuang Tzu dreaming I was a butterfly or am I now really a butterfly dreaming that I am Chuang Tzu?"

Follow the story with some Comprehension Time: get the children to explain the story and the question to each other. You could draw a diagram to help them understand. Then set the question as a Task Question.

In answer to the second Task Question Descartes thought that there was only one thing of this sort: that we exist. Even if we are wrong about everything else we cannot be wrong about the fact that we exist. He argued for this with the most famous argument in history: cogito ergo sum ('I think therefore I am'). I find that children sometimes argue similarly: One Year 5 girl said that we cannot be wrong about the fact that we exist; some other children said to her that we may be dead and now in the afterlife, to which she replied: "yes, but if we are then we still exist in the afterlife." A Year 6 boy in another class said: "If we can think, we are definitely conscious." Fittingly Cartesian (this is the adjective version of Descartes' name).

Tasks Questions:

- ✓ Was he Chuang Tzu dreaming he was a butterfly or is he now really a butterfly dreaming that he is Chuang Tzu?
- ✓ Is there something that we can know 100% for certain?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ How would he be able to tell?
- ✓ How do we know that we know something?