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On Prophesying by Dreams

[De Divinatione per Somnum]

Aristotle

Translated by: J.I. Beare

As to the divination which takes place in sleep, and is said to be based on dreams, we cannot lightly either dismiss it with contempt or give it implicit confidence. The fact that all persons, or many, suppose dreams to possess a special significance, tends to inspire us with belief in it [such divination], as founded on the testimony of experience; and indeed that divination in dreams should, as regards some subjects, be genuine, is not incredible, for it has a show of reason; from which one might form a like opinion also respecting all other dreams. Yet the fact of our seeing no probable cause to account for such divination tends to inspire us with distrust. For, in addition to its further unreasonableness, it is absurd to combine the idea that the sender of such dreams should be God with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely commonplace persons. If, however, we abstract from the causality of God, none of the other causes assigned appears probable. For that certain persons should have foresight in dreams concerning things destined to take place at the Pillars of Hercules, or on the banks of the Borysthenes, seems to be something to discover the explanation of which surpasses the wit of man. Well then, the dreams in question must be regarded either as causes, or as tokens, of the events, or else as coincidences; either as all, or some, of these, or as one only. I use the word 'cause' in the sense in which the moon is [the cause] of an eclipse of the sun, or in which fatigue is [a cause] of fever; 'token' [in the sense in which] the entrance of a star [into the shadow] is a token of the eclipse, or [in which] roughness of the tongue [is a token] of fever; while by 'coincidence' I mean, for example, the occurrence of an eclipse of the sun while some one is taking a walk; for the walking is neither a token nor a cause of the eclipse, nor the eclipse [a cause or token] of the walking. For this reason no coincidence takes place according to a universal or general rule. Are we then to say that some dreams are causes, others tokens, e.g. of events taking place in the bodily organism? At all events, even scientific physicians tell us that one should pay diligent attention to dreams, and to hold this view is reasonable also for those who are not practitioners, but speculative philosophers. For the movements which occur in the daytime [within the body] are, unless very great and violent, lost sight of in contrast with the waking movements, which are more impressive. In sleep the opposite takes place, for then even trifling movements seem considerable. This is plain in what often happens during sleep; for example, dreamers fancy that they are affected by thunder and lightning, when in fact there are only faint ringings in their ears; or that they are enjoying honey or other sweet savours, when only a tiny drop of phlegm is flowing down [the oesophagus]; or that they are walking through fire, and feeling intense heat, when there is only a slight warmth affecting certain parts of the body. When they are awakened, these things appear to them in this their true character. But since the beginnings of all events are small, so, it is clear, are those also of the diseases or other affections about to occur in our bodies. In conclusion, it is manifest that these beginnings must be more evident in sleeping than in

waking moments.

Nay, indeed, it is not improbable that some of the presentations which come before the mind in sleep may even be causes of the actions cognate to each of them. For as when we are about to act [in waking hours], or are engaged in any course of action, or have already performed certain actions, we often find ourselves concerned with these actions, or performing them, in a vivid dream; the cause whereof is that the dream-movement has had a way paved for it from the original movements set up in the daytime; exactly so, but conversely, it must happen that the movements set up first in sleep should also prove to be starting-points of actions to be performed in the daytime, since the recurrence by day of the thought of these actions also has had its way paved for it in the images before the mind at night. Thus then it is quite conceivable that some dreams may be tokens and causes [of future events].

Most [so-called prophetic] dreams are, however, to be classed as mere coincidences, especially all such as are extravagant, and those in the fulfilment of which the dreamers have no initiative, such as in the case of a sea-fight, or of things taking place far away. As regards these it is natural that the fact should stand as it does whenever a person, on mentioning something, finds the very thing mentioned come to pass. Why, indeed, should this not happen also in sleep? The probability is, rather, that many such things should happen. As, then, one's mentioning a particular person is neither token nor cause of this person's presenting himself, so, in the parallel instance, the dream is, to him who has seen it, neither token nor cause of its [so-called] fulfilment, but a mere coincidence. Hence the fact that many dreams have no 'fulfilment', for coincidence do not occur according to any universal or general law.

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On the whole, forasmuch as certain of the lower animals also dream, it may be concluded that dreams are not sent by God, nor are they designed for this purpose [to reveal the future]. They have a divine aspect, however, for Nature [their cause] is divinely planned, though not itself divine. A special proof [of their not being sent by God] is this: the power of foreseeing the future and of having vivid dreams is found in persons of inferior type, which implies that God does not send their dreams; but merely that all those whose physical temperament is, as it were, garrulous and excitable, see sights of all descriptions; for, inasmuch as they experience many movements of every kind, they just chance to have visions resembling objective facts, their luck in these matters being merely like that of persons who play at even and odd. For the principle which is expressed in the gambler's maxim: 'If you make many throws your luck must change,' holds in their case also.

That many dreams have no fulfilment is not strange, for it is so too with many bodily tokens and weather-signs, e.g. those of rain or wind. For if another movement occurs more influential than that from which, while [the event to which it pointed was] still future, the given token was derived, the event [to which such token pointed] does not take place. So, of the things which ought to be accomplished by human agency, many, though well-planned are by the operation of other principles more powerful [than man's agency] brought to nought. For, speaking generally, that which was about to happen is not in every case what now is happening, nor is that which shall hereafter be identical with that which is now going to be. Still, however, we must hold that the beginnings from which, as we said, no consummation follows, are real beginnings, and these constitute natural tokens of certain events, even though the events do not come to pass.

As for [prophetic] dreams which involve not such beginnings [sc. of future events] as we have here described, but such as are extravagant in times, or places, or magnitudes; or those involving beginnings which are not extravagant in any of these respects, while yet the persons who see the dream hold not in their own hands the beginnings [of the event to which it points]: unless the foresight which such dreams give is the result of pure coincidence, the following would be a better explanation of it than that proposed by Democritus, who alleges 'images' and 'emanations' as its cause. As, when something has caused motion in water or air, this [the portion of water or air], and, though the cause has ceased to operate, such motion propagates itself to a certain point, though there the prime movement is not present; just so it may well be that a movement and a consequent sense-perception should reach sleeping souls from the objects from which Democritus represents 'images' and 'emanations' coming; that such movements, in whatever way they arrive, should be more perceptible at night [than by day], because when proceeding thus in the daytime they are more liable to dissolution (since at night the air is less disturbed, there being then less wind); and that they shall be perceived within the body owing to sleep, since persons are more sensitive even to slight sensory movements when asleep than when awake. It is these movements then that cause 'presentations', as a result of which sleepers foresee the future even relatively to such events as those referred to above. These considerations also explain why this experience befalls commonplace persons and not the most intelligent. For it would have regularly occurred both in the daytime and to the wise had it been God who sent it; but, as we have explained the matter, it is quite natural that commonplace persons should be those who have foresight [in dreams]. For the mind of such persons is not given to thinking, but, as it were, derelict, or totally vacant, and, when once set moving, is borne passively on in the direction taken by that which moves it. With regard to the fact that some persons who are liable to derangement have this foresight, its explanation is that their normal mental movements do not impede [the alien movements], but are beaten off by the latter. Therefore it is that they have an especially keen perception of the alien movements.

That certain persons in particular should have vivid dreams, e.g. that familiar friends should thus have foresight in a special degree respecting one another, is due to the fact that

such friends are most solicitous on one another's behalf. For as acquaintances in particular recognize and perceive one another a long way off, so also they do as regards the sensory movements respecting one another; for sensory movements which refer to persons familiarly known are themselves more familiar. Atrabilious persons, owing to their impetuosity, are, when they, as it were, shoot from a distance, expert at hitting; while, owing to their mutability, the series of movements deploys quickly before their minds. For even as the insane recite, or con over in thought, the poems of Philaegides, e.g. the Aphrodite, whose parts succeed in order of similitude, just so do they [the 'atrabilious'] go on and on stringing sensory movements together. Moreover, owing to their aforesaid impetuosity, one movement within them is not liable to be knocked out of its course by some other movement.

The most skilful interpreter of dreams is he who has the faculty of observing resemblances. Any one may interpret dreams which are vivid and plain. But, speaking of 'resemblances', I mean that dream presentations are analogous to the forms reflected in water, as indeed we have already stated. In the latter case, if the motion in the water be great, the reflexion has no resemblance to its original, nor do the forms resemble the real objects. Skilful, indeed, would he be in interpreting such reflexions who could rapidly discern, and at a glance comprehend, the scattered and distorted fragments of such forms, so as to perceive that one of them represents a man, or a horse, Or anything whatever. Accordingly, in the other case also, in a similar way, some such thing as this [blurred image] is all that a dream amounts to; for the internal movement effaces the clearness of the dream.

The questions, therefore, which we proposed as to the nature of sleep and the dream, and the cause to which each of them is due, and also as to divination as a result of dreams, in every form of it, have now been discussed.