

# ON DREAMS\*

## *De Insomnis*

### 1

#### *To Which Part of the Soul Does Dreaming Belong?*

Next we must inquire about the dream, and, first, to which of the parts of the soul it appears to belong, that is, whether this affection belongs to the understanding part or to the perceptual one; for it is only by way of these capacities in us that we know things. 458<sup>b</sup>1

Since the use of sight is seeing, and that of the sense of hearing is hearing, and, in general, that of perception is perceiving, and since there are objects that are common to the perceptual modalities, such as shape, magnitude, and the others of this sort,<sup>1</sup> and since all animals are incapable of seeing when their eyes are closed and while asleep, and similarly also with the other perceptual modalities, it is clear that we do not perceive anything during sleep. Therefore, it is not with perception, at any rate, that we perceive dreams. 5

But neither is it with belief; for [in belief] we assert not only that the approaching thing is a human being or a horse but also that it is white or beautiful—things of which belief could not assert anything, either truly or falsely, without perception. But in sleep it happens that the soul does this, for [in a dream] we equally believe that we see that the approaching thing is a man and that it is white. 10

Further, alongside a dream we think something else, just as we do in waking when we perceive something. For often we also think something about what we are perceiving; and in this same way in sleep too we sometimes think other things alongside the [dream] appearances. This should become evident to anyone who directs his thought [to a dream] and tries to remember it on arising. In fact, some people have seen dreams of this sort—for example, those who [while dreaming] believe that they can arrange the things presented to them in accord with a mnemonic precept. For it happens to them that they put some other appearance in that place before their minds alongside the dream one. It is clear, then, that not every appearance in sleep is a dream, and that what we think is something we believe by the capacity of belief. 15 20 25

From all these considerations this much at least is clear, that the same [part] by which we are deceived when awake and sick is also the one that produces the affection during sleep. Even to those who are healthy and who know [that it is not the case]

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\* Translated by Klaus Corcilius. Text: J. Winzenrieth (Paris, 2023).

1. Accepting the seclusion of ἢ τὰ ἴδια οἷον χρώμα ψόφος χυμός (“or the special objects such as color, sound, flavor”).

30 the sun still seems to be a foot across. But whether the imaginative part of the soul  
 is the same as, or distinct from, the perceptual part, nonetheless [dreaming] will not  
 occur without seeing or perceiving something. For to mis-see or to mis-hear involves  
 seeing and hearing something true, though it is not what the person thinks. But it is  
 459<sup>a</sup>1 assumed that in sleep one neither sees, nor hears, nor perceives anything at all. Is it  
 true, then, that one sees nothing, but not true that perception is not at all affected,  
 and that instead it is possible that sight undergoes a certain affection, and also the  
 5 other perceptual modalities, and that each of them somehow impinges on percep-  
 tion, just as when one is awake, but not in the same way as when one is awake? And  
 sometimes the belief says that it is false, as in people who are awake, while at other  
 times it is held back and follows along with the appearance.

10 That this affection we call “dreaming,” then, does not belong either to the part that  
 forms beliefs nor to the thinking part is evident. But nor does it belong simply to the  
 perceptual part, for then it would simply be seeing or hearing. But how and in which  
 way [it does so], then, must be investigated.

15 Let it be assumed, the precise thing that is also evident, that it is an affection of  
 the perceptual part, if indeed sleep is too. For it is not the case that sleep belongs to  
 one sort of animal and dreaming to another, rather, they belong to the same one. But  
 20 since we have spoken about imagination in the *De Anima*,<sup>2</sup> and since the imaginative  
 part is the same as the perceptual part, though the being for imagination and the  
 being for perception are distinct, and since imagination is a movement occurring  
 due to active perception, and since a dream seems to be a sort of appearance (for we  
 call an appearance during sleep a “dream,” either unconditionally or one that comes  
 about in a certain way), it is evident that dreaming belongs to the perceptual part, but  
 that it belongs to it insofar as it is imaginative.

## 2

### *The Subject of Dreaming*

25 We will be best able to get a theoretical grasp on what a dream is, and how it comes  
 about, from what happens in connection with it. For the perceptual objects corre-  
 sponding to each perceptual organ produce perception in us, and the affection that  
 results from them is present in the perceptual organs not only when the perceptual  
 modalities are active, but also after the perceptual objects have gone away. In such  
 cases the affection seems to be much the same as in the case of things in spatial move-  
 30 ment. For in the case of things in spatial movement too, the movement continues  
 even though there is no longer contact with what moved them; for the mover moved  
 a certain portion of air, and this, since it was moved, in turn moved another portion;  
 and in this way, then, movement in both air and in liquids is produced, until it comes

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2. 3.3.

to a stop. Likewise, one must suppose this to be so in the case of alteration too. For what is heated by something hot heats what is next to it, and this passes it on until it reaches the starting-point. So it is necessary that this also happens in perceiving, since active perception is a sort of alteration. That is why the affection is not only in the perceptual organs while they are perceiving, but also when they have ceased to do so, and this both deep inside and on the surface.<sup>3</sup>

This is evident whenever we perceive something continuously. For when we shift our perception, for example, from the sun to darkness, the affection follows along with it; for it then happens that we see nothing because of the movement due to the light still subsisting in our eyes. And if we look at one color, whether white or green, for a long time, whatever we turn our sight to next appears to be of that same color. And if, after having looked into the sun or into some other bright object, we close our eyes, if we watch closely, the object appears right in front of us wherever our sight happens to look, at first in the same color, then it changes to crimson, next to purple, until it comes to black and disappears. Also, to those who turn their eyes away from moving things, such as rivers, and especially from those that flow fastest, the things that are at rest appear to be moving. Again, people also become deaf from loud sounds, and from strong odors they become bad at smelling similar objects. These things manifestly take place in the way we say.

A sign that the perceptual organs quickly perceive even slight differences is what happens in the case of [bronze] mirrors, which, even when attended to by itself, is something one might investigate and raise puzzles about. At the same time, it is clear from this that just as the organ of sight is affected it also produces an effect. For when menstruating women look into the mirror, in the case of extremely clean mirrors, the surface of the mirror becomes like a bloody cloud; and if the mirror is new, it is not easy to remove this sort of stain, but if it is old, it is easier. The cause, as we said, is that the organ of sight is not only affected by the air but also produces an effect and causes movement, just as bright objects also do; for the organ of sight is a bright and colored object too.

It makes good sense, then, that the eyes during menstruation are in a condition just like any other part of the body; for by nature they are full of blood vessels. That is why when menstruation occurs, due to the disturbance and bloody inflammation, the resulting difference in the eyes is not clear to us, but is still present (for seed and menstrual fluid have the same nature),<sup>4</sup> and the air is moved by them, and it makes the air on the mirror, which is continuous with it, have a certain quality, that is, the same one it itself is affected by, and the air does the same to the surface of the mirror.

Just as with garments, the cleanest mirrors are the quickest to get stained. For what is clean shows exactly whatever it receives, and what is so to the highest degree shows the smallest movements. But bronze, because it is smooth, best perceives any

3. *Somn.* 456<sup>a</sup>20–21.

4. I.e., they are involved in the transmission of form, in the present case that of color.

15 contact (one must understand the contact of the air as a sort of friction and, as it  
 were, a wiping and washing), and because it is clean, contact of whatever intensity is  
 manifest. And cause due to which the stains do not easily go away from new mirrors  
 is that they are clean and smooth. For the stain penetrates such things both in depth  
 20 and all over; in depth because of the cleanness, all over because of the smoothness.  
 But the stain does not remain on the old mirrors because it does not penetrate in the  
 same way but is more superficial.

That movement is also produced due to slight differences, then, and that percep-  
 tion is quick, and that the perceptual organ of colors is not only affected, but also  
 25 produces an effect in return, is evident from these considerations. Evidence for what  
 has been said is provided by the things that happen with wine and in the manufacture  
 of perfumes. For the oil, once prepared, quickly takes on the smell of the objects next  
 to it, and the wine does too. For they take on not only the smells of what is thrown  
 30 into them or mixed with them, but also those of the things that are placed next to the  
 vessels that contain them, or that grow there.

But in relation to the question at the start let one thing be assumed, which is pre-  
 460<sup>b</sup>1 cisely what is evident from what has been said, that even when the external percep-  
 tual object has gone the perceptual affections remain and are themselves perceptual  
 objects; and in addition that we are easily deceived when we are in the grip of feelings,  
 and distinct people in distinct ones—for example, the coward when in the grip of  
 5 fear, and the lover when in the grip of love, so that from a slight similarity the one  
 believes he see his enemies, and the other his beloved. And the more in the grip of a  
 feeling he is, the smaller the similarity due to which [what he sees] will appear so. And  
 in the same way all people become easy to deceive when in the grip of anger and all  
 sorts of appetites, and the more so, the more they are in the grip of the feelings. That  
 10 is also why to those in a fever sometimes animals appear on the walls due to a slight  
 similarity in the composition of the lines there. And these appearances sometimes  
 agree in intensity with the feelings in such a way that when they are not very ill it does  
 not escape their notice that it is false, but when the affection is more severe, they even  
 15 move themselves in connection with these.

The cause of these occurrences is that it is not in virtue of the same capacity that  
 the controlling part judges and that the images come about. A sign of this is that the  
 sun appears a foot across, but often something else speaks against the appearance.  
 And when the fingers are crossed, one object [placed between them] appears to be  
 20 two [to the sense of touch]; but we nonetheless deny that it is two; for another  
 [perceptual modality] is more controlling than touch, namely, sight. But if there was  
 only touch, we would also have judged the one object to be two. The cause of our  
 being deceived is that things of any sort whatever appear not only when the object  
 of perception causes movement, but also when perception itself is moved as if due to  
 25 a perceptual object. I mean, for example, that the earth seems to be moving to those  
 who sail, though their sight is moved by something else.