

Aristotle and the Delphic Oracle

What happens in a dream, Aristotle says, is like what happens when you throw a ball. Just as a ball keeps moving when it leaves your hand, so when you see, hear or touch something, there is an after-effect. For a while, after the thing is gone, you feel like you're still seeing, hearing or touching it. When we go to sleep, we feel the after-effects of what's happened to us during the day. A lot of what happens to us during the day isn't big enough or powerful enough for us to notice it. In fact, we are more likely to feel the after-effects of some things than to feel their first-effects. In the daytime, our minds are so busy with everything that's going on that we brush little things aside. A small fire, Aristotle says, pales beside a big blaze.

At night, when the bustle stops, the after-effects of what's been happening to us all day come to the surface, like eddies in a stream, Aristotle says. They have shapes, but repeatedly break up and form into new shapes. When we're asleep, they bubble up in our minds as dreams, changing as quickly and variously as clouds.

Now since everything starts small, diseases and other discomforts are tiny when we first feel them. The first place we feel them, therefore, is going to be in our dreams. The same is true of things we are thinking about doing. Whatever made us think about doing something was small when we first felt it, so we felt it first in our sleep and dreamt of it. There's nothing surprising in this. Dreams can be signs of something that is happening or the first steps in making something happen. It is in this sense, Aristotle tells us, that dreams can be said to predict the future ... but Aristotle adds, if you dream about something and it happens (especially something like a naval battle) that is just a coincidence.¹

One of the most striking of the Delphic Oracle's oracles concerns a naval battle. The Athenians go to the Oracle to find out what to do about the imminent attack of the Persians under Xerxes. The Oracle predicts some very dire stuff but says Athena has been able to intervene a little with Zeus and the Athenians will be saved by a wall of wood. Some of the Athenians think this refers to the old wooden buildings or fort that used to be on the Acropolis, but this interpretation is rejected in favour of another.

¹ Parva Naturalia 459b – 463a

Themistocles persuades the Athenians to interpret the wall of wood as a ship and they abandon their city, taking the women and children to islands off the coast. The men stay on the ships, behind the wall of wood, fight the Battle of Salamis and defeat the mighty Xerxes. Themistocles tricks the Persians into sending their great big slow, poorly-manned navy into a tiny straight, where the quicker, better-manned Greek boats eat them up.

This is like an Aristotelian dream. If the Delphic oracle had actually predicted the battle of Salamis that would have been a coincidence, but everyone knew the Athenians had no chance against the Persians on land and everyone also knew the Athenians were a powerful naval society, so somewhere, in the back of the Athenians' minds there was an inkling of an idea that maybe they might find salvation against the Persians at sea. This inkling was seen in a dream, an oracle. It is in this sense, Aristotle tells us that oracles can predict the future.

It is worth adding that the oracle given by the Delphic Oracle in answer to the people of Athens contains the name "Salamis". It doesn't say the battle is going to happen there, but it virtually does. Of course, this is a little like Hitler knowing the attack on Europe would come from England. Salamis is the first place the Athenians would think of going, but for them to actually have gone, is remarkable. It shows a city of great resolve. A real *polis* to use the word Aristotle would use, a group of families acting in concert, to achieve something they all think is good. Their continued survival as ...

Hey wait a minute. If Xerxes wins, the Athenians would either be killed or become slaves. They don't want this for themselves, their women and their children, but what about their slaves. Were the slaves evacuated from Athens? Would they have been Athenians too: would they have thought their fate would be worse under the Persians than it was under the Athenians?