The Sleep of Reason: Sleep and the Philosophical Soul in Ancient Greece

Freud tracked the psyche along the paths of sleep, following the “royal road” of dreams. For the ancient Greeks, too, the psyche was revealed in sleep, not through the semiotics of dreams but through the peculiar state of being we occupy while asleep. As a “borderland between living and not living” (as Aristotle puts it), sleep offered unique access to the psukhē, that element within the self unassimilable to waking consciousness. This paper examines how Greek philosophers theorized the sleep state and the somnolent psukhē, focusing on Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle. Each of the three attempts to reclaim sleep for waking life and to join the sleeping soul to the philosophical self. But that attempt never fully succeeds. Instead sleep consistently emerges as a philosophical blindspot, a state that—unlike dreams—cannot be spoken by philosophy’s logos nor fully illuminated by philosophical analysis.

In The Interpretation of Dreams Freud tracks the psyche along the paths of sleep, following the “royal road” of dreams. For the ancient Greeks, too, the psyche was revealed at night, not through the semiotics of dreams but, as I will argue, through the peculiar state of sleep itself. As a nightly “rehearsal for death,” sleep confuses the defining Greek binaries of life and death, mortal and immortal. A “privation” of perception, it interrupts our nature as percipient beings.1 In the space of that interruption emerges an element of ourselves not fully assimilable to waking

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consciousness, the mysterious entity the Greeks called the *psukhē*. This paper examines Greek thought on sleep and this somnolent *psukhē*. In particular, it considers how ancient philosophers theorized the sleep state; how they staged sleep as a philosophical problem and attempted to reclaim the sleeping soul as part of a productive—waking—philosophical life.

Sleep is a strange condition, and it appears increasingly strange the more sleepless nights one spends thinking about it. A great deal has been written both in antiquity and modernity about dreams, sleep’s flashy stage-show, but almost nothing about sleep per se. Freud himself was not much interested in sleep. He dismisses it at the opening of *The Interpretation of Dreams* as a matter of mere physiology, and moves swiftly past it to get to dreams and their significance.2 Dreams benefit from a certain semiotic bias: they seem to hold a meaning that we can interpret (hence *The Interpretation of Dreams*). Dreams promise to communicate to us: if the unconscious is structured like a *langue*, as Lacan famously asserted, dreams are its *parole*.3 For the ancient Greeks, too, the dream was literally significant: it was a sign (*sēmeion*) to the dreamer from the gods. That sign was often superficially opaque, but its meaning became legible if you knew how to interpret it, and there was a whole industry of hermeneutics designed to help one do so. Once deciphered, dreams predicted what would happen, what one must do or not do. Resolutely non-psychological (much less psychoanalytic) dreams speak prosaically to the waking self.4

For the Greeks, then, as for Freud, the appeal of dreams is their significance: they are signs that invite interpretation. Sleep, by contrast, seems to offer nothing to interpret. Compared to dreams’ vivid dramas, sleep has no characters and no plot. Nothing happens. Sleep has nothing to say to us, and there seems to be nothing we can say about it. While dreams are, with some translation, accessible to our conscious minds, sleep remains radically opaque to waking life. Who am I when I am asleep? Maurice Blanchot, who has written movingly about sleep, insists on the difference between the “I” of sleep and the “I” of the dream: “The one who dreams turns away from the one who sleeps; the dreamer is not the sleeper. . . . Between the one who sleeps and the one who is the subject of the dream’s plot, there is a

2. Freud 1953: 1–87. “I have had little occasion to deal with the problem of sleep, for that is essentially a problem of physiology, even though one of the characteristics of the state of sleep must be that it brings about modifications in the conditions of functioning of the mental apparatus” (Freud 1953: 6). Those modifications are never examined. Cf. Freud 1953: 526, 542, 554–55, 567–68: sleep enables dreams because it relaxes censorship. On sleep in Freud see Rose 2003: 105–124; Farbman 2008: 23–47; Wortham 2013: 41–50. Of course, much research has been done on sleep from a physiological and neuroscientific perspective (see McNamara 2019 for a relatively accessible survey of the literature), but that is not my focus here.


4. For the art of dream interpretation see esp. Artemidorus’ *Oneirocritica* (Harris-McCoy 2012) and Foucault 1986: 3–36 for the role of this *tekhné* in the cultivation of the ethical subject. For Greek views on dreams, see Kessels 1978; Harris 2009; Oberhelman 2013; and further references in van der Eijk 2005: 169n.3.
fissure, the hint of an interval and a difference of structure.”

For Blanchot, it is the dream that is a mystery. He views sleep as a psychic defense against “the eccentricity of the dream.” Sleep is the sentinel of the waking self; the dreamer is “a stranger.”

But I will propose that for the Greeks, at least, the reverse is true: while the dreamer can be assimilated to the daytime self, the sleeper is the one who is the stranger.

Sleep reveals something within us alien to our rational waking minds. This makes it a challenge to philosophy, as the supreme exercise of the rational waking mind. My paper looks at how three philosophers—Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle—responded to this challenge. Each offered a theory of sleep in its relation to death and to the life of the individual, the human being, or the cosmos. In so doing, each attempted to reclaim sleep for waking existence, to make sleep significant within his specific philosophical system, and to join the sleeping psyche to the waking, philosophical self. But that attempt never fully succeeds. Instead, philosophy consistently posits sleep as its own blindspot. That which cannot be spoken by its logos, a blissful oblivion within its well-examed life, sleep appears as a dark after-image in the eternal daylight of reason. The turn to dreams is just one symptom of philosophy’s aporia in the face of sleep’s opacity. If that turn from sleep to dreams has a legacy in Freud’s Traumdeutung, then returning to the sleep of the Greeks may allow us to ask what we post-Freudians lose by closing our eyes to sleep.

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In devising their theories of sleep the philosophers built on a rich, if not fully articulated, tradition of thought on the topic, one that yoked it insistently to death and the psukhé. Hupnos is usually paired with his brother Thanatos in archaic and classical art and literature. Euphronios’ famous image of the death of Sarpedon (Fig. 1) makes the two gods (Hupnos on the left and Thanatos on the right) virtually identical. The brothers are often shown laying out the bodies of the dead on fifth-century Athenian white-ground lekythoi used in private funerary rituals, a scene presumably designed to console mourners by equating death with the sweet release of sleep. Myth draws a similar connection in the tale of Endymion, the

5. Blanchot 1997: 141. Carson 2005 praises sleep as “a glimpse of something incognito” (20) and explores the “leaky” boundary between sleep and wakefulness in ancient and modern poetry. See also the sensitive study of Calabi 1984, who likewise stresses the continuity between the two states in Greek thought before Aristotle.

6. Blanchot 1997: 144. Farbman 2008: 48–68 offers a lucid analysis of Blanchot’s poetics of sleep. As Nancy 2009: 12 notes, the questions of identity raised by sleep are also dissipated by sleep and can only be asked upon waking: “There is no phenomenology of sleep, for it shows itself only its disappearance” (13). For the practicalities and sociology of sleep, ancient and modern, see, respectively, Strobl 2002 and Williams 2011.

7. As Shapiro 1993: 133 notes, this is practically the only type-scene in which Hupnos figures in the archaic period. Euphronios’ krater was the model for later versions of the scene (133–47).

young hunter to whom the gods granted his wish “to slumber undying and ageless through all time.” Ancient authors were divided, though, on whether this endless slumber was a reward or a punishment. Endymion’s sleep is not exactly death, but it is not exactly life either; the slumbering boy is not divine, but no more is he fully mortal, a creature defined by the ineluctable finality of death. Instead he is suspended forever between mortal and immortal, and his ambiguous status exemplifies the peculiar ontological status of sleep itself: are sleepers alive or dead? Natural philosophers explained sleeping as a minor case of the conditions that cause death, whether that is warming of the chest (for Diogenes), lack of breath and expulsion of heat (for the atomists), or separation of soul from body (for Anaxagoras). For these thinkers sleep reveals “the lesser mysteries of death,” as the comic poet Mnesimachus put it (ὕπνος τὰ μικρὰ τοῦ θανάτου μυστήρια, fr. 11 K-A).

As a daily virtual experience of death and rebirth, sleep afforded unique access to the mysterious life-force that the Greeks called the psukhē, that vital element within the individual that cannot be reduced to his physical body and is not fully extinguished with his death. In Homer, the psukhē (or eidōlon as it is also termed) appears as a ghostly double of the dying hero; breathed out with his final breath, it flutters away to the underworld. We get a glimpse of this ethereal creature in an


10. Gods can sleep (Zeus in Iliad 14 is the prime example) but do so only exceptionally: Montiglio 2016: 19–31. Plato, as we will see, represents Endymion’s condition as an endless death (Phd. 72b7–c3). For Aristotle it is the antithesis of the eternal contemplative life of the gods (Eth. Nic. 10.8.7).

11. Diogenes DK64 A29; Leucip. DK67 A34; Democr. DK68 A136; Anax. DK59 A103; cf. Emped. DK31 A85. See further Schol. ad Iliad 14.231 for various comparisons of sleep and death.
early-fifth century vase by the Diosphos Painter (Fig. 2). The scene again depicts the death of Sarpedon, but with the novel addition of a little *psukhē* floating above the dead warrior. Hovering between the dead man and the gods, the acrobatic spirit is visually connected to each (the former in his horizontal orientation and naked musculature, the latter in his eye-level placement and striking white shield). That it physically touches Thanatos and the corpse but not Hupnos perhaps indicates a subsidiary role for the latter, as in the Homeric version of the episode.

12. This amphora (*ABL* 239; *ABV* 509, 137) is in New York. A similar image on an amphora in the Louvre (*ABL* 238,133) has the *eidōlon* hovering face down, eye-to-eye with the dead hero; it is naked (though armed) like the warrior and winged like Thanatos and Hupnos. On these images, see Peifer 1989: 194–95, 226–34; Shapiro 1993: 136–37. A late-fifth-century red-figure mug in Liverpool showing the same scene depicts Sarpedon’s *eidōlon* not as a warrior but as a nude beardless man, “a figure very similar to some representations of Sleep himself” (Stafford 2003: 80); discussion of this vase can be found in Robertson 1988.

13. Although Hera advises Zeus to have “Thanatos and painless Hupnos” carry the warrior back to his homeland for burial when “his *psukhē* and his lifespan have left him” (*lli*. 16.453), the moment of the soul’s departure is the τέλος θανάτου (502), as Sarpedon’s *psukhē* is drawn out of him with
But the careful framing of the *eidôlon* between the three suggests that, while Thanatos may call forth the *psukhê*, Hupnos is needed to create the visual field in which it can appear and be figured. The artist Parrhesios reportedly remarked that the *psukhê* is impossible to represent because it has no shape or color or visible properties (Xen. *Mem.* 3.10.3–4). But to the extent that the *psukhê* is visible and representable, sleep helps make it so.

As a living experience of death, sleep afforded a quotidian imagination of the *psukhê* not just as an extreme near-death phenomenon but as part of the everyday/everynight self.14 A literary example of this quotidian psychoanalysis comes in a fragment of a *thrênos*, a funeral lament, by Pindar (fr. 131b S-M):

σῶμα μὲν πάντων ἔπεται θανάτῳ περισθενεὶ,
ζωὸν δ’ ἐτι λείπεται αἰῶνος εἰδολον· τὸ γὰρ ἐστι μόνον ἐκ θεόν· εἰδεὶ δὲ πρισμάτων μελέων, ἀτὰρ εἰδόν·
τεσσιν ἐν πολλοῖς ὄνειροις
δεικνυει τερπνῶν ἐφερποιους χαλεπῶν τε κρίσιν.

The body of all men follows powerful death,
but a still living image (*eidolon*) of a lifetime is left behind, for this alone is from the gods. It sleeps when the limbs are active, but to them as they sleep in many dreams
it reveals the encroaching decision of delights or difficulties.

These lines draw a tight connection between sleep, death, and the *psukhê*, that “still-living *eidôlon* of a lifetime” left behind after the body’s demise. The fragment falls into two halves. The first describes death and opposes the mortal body to the immortal soul, emphasized by the enjambed phrase “from the gods.” The second describes sleep, and sets the sleeping body against the dreaming soul. Contemporary natural philosophers debated whether sleep was a state of the body or of the soul.15 Pindar attributes it to both, but in strict alternation. The soul “sleeps when the limbs are active.” But when they sleep, that *eidôlon* awakes and, true to its divine origins,

14. Scholars who trace the *psukhê*’s evolution from an evanescent life-force of the dying hero (in Homer) to the immortal essence of the living person (in Plato) often locate the pivot between the two in the eschatological theories of Pythagorean mystery cults, with their promise of reincarnation. Not everyone belonged to a mystery cult, though, but everyone sleeps. For this evolutionary narrative see Burnet 1916; Rohde 1925; Snell 1953; Furley 1956; Nussbaum 1972a; Claus 1981; Robb 1986. Holmes 2010: 29–37 offers a critical reassessment of this account.

15. Aetius 5.25 offers a survey of Presocratic views on the question. On the Aetius passage (which is also the source for the citations in n.11 above) see Laks 2015. The Hippocratic *On Regimen* 4.86 imagines body and soul as alternating administrations: when the body is awake, the soul is its servant (*ὑπηρέτουσα*), attending to its perception and motion, and not “in possession of itself” (οὐ γὰρ *ὑπηρετεῖ* αὐτῇ ἑαυτῆς); but when the body sleeps, the soul awakes and “manages its own household” (*διοικεῖ τὸν ἑαυτῆς οἶκον*). The alternating agency of body and soul recalls Pindar, while the diction of mastery and household management anticipates Plato.
reveals the future in prophetic dreams.16 Between life and death, mortality and divinity, the soul in its difference from the body becomes active in sleep. In the fragment’s chiastic structure, sleep marks both the structural inaccessibility of the psukhē to the waking self (“it sleeps”) and a point of contact between the two (“it reveals”). For Pindar, as for Freud, that contact is effected through dreams, which disclose the nocturnal activity of the immortal eidōlon. And yet that dream communication itself gets caught in the chiasmus between sleep and waking, for the recipient of the soul’s revelations is not the waking self but the sleeping limbs (εὐδόντεσσιν). In the dim and dreamy logic of this fragment, sleep closes in around the prophetic promise of dreams, both revealing and concealing the activity of the wakeful soul. If we wish to examine the psukhē, then sleep, not the dream, is our royal road.

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We can start down that road following Heraclitus, a philosopher who has himself been credited with the “discovery” of the soul.17 Like Pindar, Heraclitus links sleep closely to death and the psukhē; but, unlike Pindar, he offers a theoretical account (logos) of their connection, an account both physical and metaphysical. Sleep appears in the opening lines of Heraclitus’ treatise as a guiding metaphor for ignorance and philosophical dullness:

τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦτ’ ἐόντας ἄει ἀξόνετοι γίνονται ἀνθρώποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκούσας καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπείροις ἑοίκασιν, πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέστην καὶ ἔργοι τοιούτων, ὁκοίων ἐγὼ διηγεῦμαι κατὰ φύσιν διαφέρειν ἐκαστὸν καὶ φράζων ὁκοις ἔχει. τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσιν, ὁκοσπερ ὁκόσα εὐδόντες ἐπιλαλθάνονται.

Heraclitus DK22 B1

Of this logos which exists always mortals are always uncomprehending (ἀξόνετοι) both before they have heard it and when they first have heard it. Though all things come about in accordance with this logos, they are like people without experience even when they experience such words and deeds as I expound, distinguishing each thing according to its nature and saying how it is. But other men are not aware of what they do when they are awake, just as they forget what they do when asleep.

Heraclitus begins with the logos that names both the underlying structure of the universe and his own account of it. That he opens his treatise with the word “word” hints at the semiotic nature of his cosmos, which has a logic, order, and significance.

16. See the discussion in Cannatà Fera 1990: 190–94.
The psukhē too has a logos, one said to be unfathomably deep (B45) and always expanding (B115). This cosmic and psychic logos is enigmatic, as is Heraclitus’ logos about it. His description of the Delphic oracle (B93)—“it neither speaks (λέγει), nor conceals (κρύπτει), but signifies (σημαίνει)”—is often taken as a paradigm for Heraclitus’ own dreamlike style. But it also describes his universe, which has a significance and conveys it, obscurely, to us.

What is the place of sleep in this land of logos? Sleep is presented in this opening fragment as a mode of lēthē, forgetfulness or unawareness. In contrast to Heraclitus’ own philosophical “wokeness,” other men are always uncomprehending of the logos that exists always. The adjective Heraclitus uses here, ἀξίωνετοι, alludes via negation to τὸ ξυνόν, Heraclitus’ word for the unity of his universe, in which opposites merge and all things are one. In their lethargy, mortals fail to comprehend their connection (ξυν-) with the cosmic order. As Heraclitus says in fragment B2, “Although the logos is in common (ξυνοῦ), the majority live as if they had their own private thought” (τὸν λόγον δ’ έναν τοὺς ξυνούχοσιν τι πολλοί ὡς θνυντες φρόνησιν). That “as if” is depicted as a waking sleep in fragment B89: “Heraclitus says that the cosmos is one and in common for those who are awake, but each sleeper turns to his own private cosmos” (ὁ Ἱ. φησι τοῖς ἐγκαθιστησάν ένα καὶ κοινὸν κόσμον εἶναι, τὸν δὲ κοιμομένον ἕκαστον εἰς θνυντας ἀποστρέφεσθαι). The philosopher’s task is to rouse mortals from their torpor, to transform their private “idiotic” thought into a ξυνος λόγος, a shared awareness that “all things are one” (B50; cf. B32, B41).

One vehicle of this transformation, paradoxically, is sleep itself. On the one hand, sleep is a private world that alienates the sleeper from the unity of the cosmos. On the other hand, sleep affords our most profound experience of that unity and hence of the cosmic logos. Fragment B26 reads: “A man kindles a light for himself in the night when his eyes are extinguished. While he is alive, he touches the dead in his sleep; waking, he touches the sleeper” (ἀνθρώπος ἐν εὐφρόνη φῶς ἀπεται ἐμαυτός ἀποθναινον ἀποσβεσθεις ὅψεις, ζών δὲ ἀπεται τεθνητοσ εὕδων, ἀποσβεσθεις ὅψεις, ἐγκατησάν ἀπεται εὕδωντος). The structure of this fragment

18. Kahn 1979: 127–28 sees the logos of the soul as ultimately coincidental with the logos of the universe.

19. The fragment is quoted by Ps.-Plutarch, On Superstition. Only the first clause seems to be Heraclitus’ own words; the second is a paraphrase of B2. Laks and Most 2016 (R56) take the whole quotation as paraphrase. In a series of fragments quoted by Marcus Aurelius, “to act and speak like sleepers” (B73) is to “forget where the road is leading” (B71); for such men “those things which they encounter every day seem to them strangers” (B72). Cf. B75 (from the same source and probably spurious): “I think Heraclitus says that sleepers are laborers and collaborators in what comes to be in the universe” (τοὺς καθεδόντας ὁμία ὁ Ἱ. ἐργάσατο εἰνα λέγει καὶ συνεργούσις τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ γινομένων). Sextus Empiricus (A16) explains the “idiocy” of Heraclitus’ sleeper in physical terms, as a temporary separation of the individual’s mind from the surrounding element, which is rational and divine. But his analysis is anachronistic, as Polito 2003 shows. In addition to the Hellenistic sources Polito identifies, he may have been influenced by Plato’s account at Tim. 45d-46a of sleep as the cutting off of our inner fire from the external fire of the sun.

20. Mansfeld 1967 provides the history of emendation and interpretation of the fragment, which he reads as distinguishing a waking sleep (associated with digestion and evaporation) from dreamless sleep (analogous to death). Cf. Rousseau 1970. Laks 2015: 44 stresses sleep as a simultaneous
is similar to that of Pindar’s *thrēnos*. The first clause seems to describe death. That is how Clement, who quotes the fragment, understands it: ἀποθανόν is his annotation. The second clause describes life (ζών) as an alternation of sleeping and waking. But instead of viewing these states as a binary opposition, this fragment posits a continuum between them. The living man “touches” (ἅπτεται) the dead, his own dead self. Sleep is the condition of that “touch,” which is then carried over into waking life: waking, he touches the sleeper. The language of the fragment, with its balanced clauses, repetitions, and intricate word order, replicates that continuum, weaving life and death, sleeping and waking, into a synthetic state that serves as a virtual definition of ἄνθρωπος.

That state also connects man to the cosmos. The language of kindling and quenching in the fragment, as well as the repeated verb haptetai, link this fragment to B30: “This cosmos, the same of all, no god nor man created, but it always was and is and will be fire ever-living, kindled (ἄπτόμενον) in measure and extinguished in measure” (κόσμον τόνδε, τόν αὐτόν ἀπάντων, οἷς τις θεῶν οὐτε ἄνθρωπον ἐποίησεν, ἀλλ’ ἦν ἀεὶ καὶ ἕστεν καὶ ἔσται πῦρ ἀείων, ἄπτόμενον μέτρα καὶ ἀποσβεβνύμενον μέτρα). This fragment tells of the elemental cycles of becoming that characterize Heraclitus’ material universe: fire becomes sea, sea becomes earth, then back again in a never-ending revolution. This cycle of transformation is manifested in our own lives in the turning of the seasons (B100), the passing of generations (B20, A19), and the alternation of day and night (B6, 94). Waking and sleeping are a quotidian experience of the underlying dynamics of the physical universe.

But just as the cosmos is always changing yet always “the same of all,” sleeping and waking are not opposite states but really just alternating versions of the same state, as fragment B88 asserts: “The same thing within: the living and the dead, what is awake and what is sleeping, the young and the old. For these, changing, are those and those, changing again, are these” (τάτο τ’ ἐνι ζών καὶ τεθνηκός καὶ [το] ἐγρηγορός καὶ καθεδόν καὶ νέον καὶ γηραιόν· τάδε γὰρ μεταπεσόντα ἐκεῖνά ἔστι κάκεινα πάλιν μεταπεσόντα ταῦτα). In sleeping and waking, we experience not just the physical structure of the universe but also its metaphysical consequences: the unity of opposites, the principle that “what differs with itself accords” (διαφερόμενον ἐστὶν ὁμολογεῖ, literally, “speaks the same logos,” B51). This is precisely the logos that mortals are too drowsy to see, the hidden reality of the cosmos.

Again, that reality is paradoxically grasped most fully in sleep, for only sleep allows us to touch death and immortal life. When a man kindles a light for himself in the darkness of death, he joins in the cycle of the fire ever-living and in this way

experience of life and death but reads the fragment as referring to dreams. Likewise Kahn 1979: 214–15, with reference to the Pindar fragment discussed above.

21. The opening as Diels prints it is probably corrupt, and scholars are divided on what to do with τ’ ἐνι. Laks and Most 2016 (D68) print γ’ ἐνι and translate “there is the same within”: see Laks 2015: 43.
gains immortality. This immortal self is what Heraclitus calls the psukhē. Fragment B36 reads: “For souls it is death to become water, for water it is death to become earth; from earth water is born, from water soul” (ψυχήσιν θάνατος ὕδωρ γενέσθαι, ὕδωτι δὲ θάνατος γῆν γενέσθαι, ἐκ γῆς δὲ ὕδωρ γίνεται, ἔξ ὕδατος δὲ ψυχή). The psukhē is that aspect of the self that participates in the cosmic cycle; it is part of the material stuff of the cosmos and undergoes its regular transformations. Cycling perpetually between fire, water, and earth, it is as eternal as the cosmic cycle itself.22 It is this ever-living psukhē that we touch in sleep. In B26, I have been translating the verb haptetai in the first clause as a middle voice: “kindles for himself.” But that usage is unparalleled, and it is equally possible that the verb is passive.23 That would make man himself the light kindled in the dark. In another fragment Heraclitus describes the psukhē as a flash or spark of light (αὐγή, B118).24 Lit up by death, man becomes a psukhē, a literal flash of the cosmic fire. Sleep lets us grasp that spark—haptetai again. By repeating the verb, Heraclitus equates the sleeper’s grasp with the kindled psukhē, conveying the latter’s spark to the sleeper, and from there (via another haptetai) to the waking self. Far from a lethargy that blinds mortals to the reality of the cosmos, sleep affords them experience of that reality and of their own part in it.

Charles Kahn describes this fragment as “the dream experience of the psukhē” and reads it as a descent from waking consciousness into the dim light of dream.25 But Heraclitus never mentions dreams in the extant fragments and the repetition of haptetai suggests a grasp more haptic than visual or cognitive, a physical binding or joining (the root meaning of haptō) of the individual to the universe. That bond never rises to the level of logos, as it might if it were conveyed semiotically through a dream. This leaves sleep and its touch in an uncertain relation to the logos of Heraclitus’ universe, as well as his own dreamlike logos about it. That uncertainty is palpable in fragment B21, one of the most perplexing in the corpus: “Death is whatever we see when awake; whatever we see when sleeping is sleep” (θάνατός ἐστιν ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ὅρεομεν, ὁκόσα δὲ εὐδοντες ὅπνος). This fragment promises a perfect chiasmus between death and life, waking and sleeping. But in place of the traditional association between death and sleep, the first clause surprisingly associates death with waking. Perhaps this can be chalked up to the coincidence of opposites, another way of saying that life and death are one. But even if we can explain the first clause, what about the second? The symmetry promised by the fragment’s chiastic structure is broken with the final word, where

22. That this immortality is not individual (as it will be for Plato) but elemental is suggested by the shift from the plural psukhai at the beginning of the cycle to the singular psukhē at the end: the process transforms individual souls into the elemental stuff, “soul.” See Betegh 2013.
23. In the active haptēs means to fasten or join, as well as to kindle; in the middle it usually means to touch or to grasp, both physically and (by extension) conceptually, and takes a genitive. The construction here, a middle with the accusative, is thus doubly atypical: see Rousseau 1970. Heidegger and Fink 1993: 127–49 worry at some length over the meaning of haptetai in Heraclitus B26.
24. The text of B118 is uncertain. On the fire of the soul see Kahn 1979: 245–54; Betegh 2013.
instead of the expected *bios* as the opposite of *thanatos*, we get *hupnos*. Death is whatever we see when awake, whatever we see when sleeping is . . . sleep.26 In sleep we do not see death. Nor do we see life. We do not even see dreams. Sleep promises to let us touch our cosmic souls, but all it finally delivers is sleep. *Hupnos* folds hypnotically back in on itself, an interpretive black hole.

For Heraclitus, then, sleep is simultaneously the private idiocy that separates us from the true nature of the cosmos and the deathlike state that allows us access to it, that lets us grasp that spark of the ever-living fire that is the *psukhē*. But sleep holds tight its secrets. It might “touch” the truth but will not communicate it even through the ambiguous signification of dreams. Thus Heraclitus’ aphorism about the Delphic oracle—“it neither speaks nor conceals but signifies” (B93)—might be extended: sleep does not speak, conceal, or signify. Indeed, in B21 it paralyzes signification, eluding even Heraclitus’ paradoxical *logos*. This turns sleep itself into a philosophical paradox: our best hope of living access to the cosmic *logos* but itself inaccessible to *logos*, sleep marks both our connection to the ξυνός λόγος of the universe and our essential alienation from it.

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A similar philosophical impasse surrounds sleep in Plato. For Plato, sleep is largely allegorical: he does not analyze the sleep state itself so much as he uses sleep’s association with death and the *psukhē* to articulate his vision of an ever-wakeful philosophical soul. For Plato, as for Heraclitus, sleep denotes intellectual dullness. The pair *onar/hupar*—dreaming/waking—appears frequently to denote Plato’s distinction between the insubstantial world of phenomena and the enduring truth of the Forms. So, he asks in the *Republic*, if a man believes in beautiful things but not in the Beautiful itself, doesn’t he seem to live dreaming not waking? “For isn’t this what dreaming is, if someone, whether asleep or awake, judges something that resembles something else not to be like it but to be the thing it resembles?” (Rep. 476c5–7).27 Most of us sleepwalk through life (Rep. 534c6–d1). In fact, we are not even aware that we are asleep. The *Theaetetus* poses the conundrum (which was later to give Descartes sleepless nights) of how we can prove that we are currently


27. Miller 2015: 40–46 stresses the importance of this passage for Platonic metaphysics but also argues for the instability of its dichotomy between *onar* and *hupar*, given that *hupar* can also mean a sleeping vision (e.g. Od. 19.547). Gallop 1971 provides a helpful survey of the trope of dreaming vs. waking in Plato: his interpretation of the *Republic* as a prophetic dream deconstructs the dichotomy from the side of dreaming, as Miller does from the side of waking. See also Calabi 1984: 25–26, 33–34, who stresses Plato’s ambivalent representation of sleep’s relation to cognition. In the *Timaeus* (45d3–46a2), Plato offers a physiological explanation of sleep as a by-product of night: in the absence of the sun’s external fire, the internal fire of the eye is quenched and “becomes conducive to sleep” (ἐπαγωγὸν ὑπὸν γίγνεται), which comes when the eye’s fire, retained within by the closed eyelids, calms internal movements. As in Heraclitus B89, sleep marks the individual’s separation from the cosmos, but here it is specifically the physical result of that separation.
awake, not asleep and dreaming we are awake (Th. 157e-158e). This question is raised to refute the claim that perception (aisthēsis) is knowledge (epistēmē) and that what appears true to an individual is true for him. When we are asleep our dreams appear real to us, but are not. Just as dream perceptions are false in relation to waking, so waking perceptions are false in relation to the truth, alētheia, of real knowledge (158d). Sleep becomes a paradigm for unreliable perception, idiosyncratic and unstable. We will only be awake and certain that we are awake when we come to know the enduring truth of the Forms.

For the philosopher who equates knowledge with virtue, sleep’s epistemological torpor has an inevitably ethical dimension. The Apology famously depicts Socrates as a gadfly rousing a polis that is “like a great and noble horse made sluggish by its own weight” (Ap. 30e). The Athenians are annoyed at him for waking them from their nap (οἱ νυστάζοντες ἐγειρόμενοι, 31a4), but if they kill him, he says, they will sleep away the rest of their lives (τὸν λοιπὸν βίον καθεύδοντες διατελῶν ἄν, 31a5–6). “Waking” the Athenians means exhorting them to care for their souls, a project Socrates pursues without rest. Indeed, Socrates himself is renowned for not sleeping: at the end of the Symposium, at dawn when all the other guests have long since passed out, he is still up and talking philosophy.

In his vigilance Socrates exemplifies an ideal Plato presents in the Laws:

Laws 808b3–c2

A lot of sleep is not naturally fitting for our bodies or our souls or the practices concerning all these things. For no one who is asleep is worth anything, any more than one who is not alive. But whoever cares most about living and thinking is awake as much as possible, sleeping only as much as is necessary for health, which isn’t much, once he’s gotten into the habit.

Here sleep is moralized as part of a rational and orderly life. Judged by criteria of propriety, utility, and health, sleep is not only the antithesis of a philosophical life (“living and thinking”); it is the antithesis of life itself, “for no one who is asleep is worth anything, any more than one who is not alive.” The sleeper may as well be dead. Accordingly, Plato recommends that masters in the house and rulers in the city sleep as little as possible.

If the Laws coopt sleep for a regime of domestic and civic mastery, the Republic tries to do the same thing for the psychic economy of the individual. As in the city, so in the soul, sleep poses an essentially managerial problem.
If mishandled, it threatens the hegemony of the logistikon, the rational, ruling part within Plato’s tripartite division of the soul. Presocratic philosophers debated whether sleep was a condition of the body or the soul and Pindar, as we saw, attributes it to both in an alternation that makes somatic and psychic activity mutually exclusive. For Plato in the Republic, sleep opens a potential division not just between body and soul but between different parts of the soul. The philosopher must work to overcome that division. Thus, whereas Heraclitus’ sleeper grasped his unity with the cosmos, Plato’s sleeper aims at internal unity, striving to “reach consensus with himself” (eis σύννοιαν αὐτὸς αὐτὸ ἀφικόμενος, 571d8–e1).

Book 9 opens with an etiology of the tyrannical man, who is in waking life what most men are in sleep (574e, 576b). In sleep, while the logistikon dozes, the desiderative part of the soul, the epithumētikon, wakes and runs wild. Casting off shame and thought along with sleep, it does not shrink from having sex with its mother or killing someone (perhaps its father?) (571c3–572b4).29 The Freudian resonances of these Oedipal adventures are striking. Just as for Freud sleep weakens the superego’s censorship, giving free play to the id, so too for Plato the dynamic is one of constraint and release. For Plato, as for Freud, this nocturnal drama is natural and universal: sleep merely makes manifest the lawless desire in each of us, even those who seem most circumspect (572b4–6). But, unlike Freud, Plato responds with an injunction to psychic mastery.29 A “healthy and prudent” man will rouse his logistikon before he goes to bed and calm his epithumētikon so it will not trouble him in the night. Internal governance of the soul is no different from that of the house and city: proper sleep hygiene requires perpetual vigilance of the logistikon over the lower orders.

Thus managed, sleep itself becomes a kind of nocturnal philosophy:

τ’ οὖν δὲ γε, οἶμαι, ὑπερήφανος τις ἐχή αὐτός αὐτοῦ καὶ σωφρόνος, καὶ εἰς τὸν ὕπνον ἐκ τὸ λογιστικόν μὲν ἐγείρας ἐαυτὸν καὶ ἐστίασας λόγων καλῶν καὶ σκέψεων, εἰς σύννοιαν αὐτὸς αὐτὸ ἀφικόμενος, τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν δὲ μήτε ἐνδέια δοῦς μήτε πλησιμονί, ὅπως ἄν κοιμηθῇ καὶ μή παρέχῃ θρύμβον τῷ βελτίστῳ χαῖρον ἤ λυπομένον, ἀλλ’ ἐὰν αὐτό καθ’ αὐτὸ μόνον καθαρόν σκοπεῖν καὶ ὀρέγεσθαι τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι ὣ μὴ οἶδεν, ἢ τι τῶν γεγονότων ἢ ὢντων ἢ καὶ μελλόντων, ὡστούς δὲ καὶ τὸ θυμοειδὲς πράαν καὶ μή τισιν εἰς ὄργας ἐλθὼν κεκινημένῳ τῷ θυμῷ καθεῦδῃ, ἀλλ’ ἣ συχάσας μὲν τὸ δύο ἅδη, τὸ τρίτον δὲ κινήσας ὡ ὃ τὸ φρονεῖν ἔγρηγεναι, οὕτως ἀναπαύει, οὔσθ ότι τῆς τ’ ἀληθείας ἐν τῷ τοιούτῳ μάλιστα ἀπεταί καὶ ἡκιστα παράνομοι τότε αἱ ὄνεις φαντάζονται τῶν ἐννυπῶν.

Rep. 571d6–572b1

28. Plato does not call these activities dreams here, but that he is thinking of dreams becomes clear at 572a8–b1 (αἱ ὄνεις φαντάζονται τῶν ἐννυπῶν); cf. 574d9–e3 (ἄναρ . . . ἐν ὕπνοις; ἄναρ ὑπάρ), 576b5 (οἷον ὄναρ διαθλῆσθαι).

29. Other points of comparison are noted by Price 1990: 262; cf. Ferrari 2007: 176–78, 188. As Ferrari emphasizes (192–93), the desire of the logistikon is not merely internal rule but wisdom, and this passage is a key pivot from the former to the latter.
I think that, when a healthy and prudent man goes to sleep having roused his logistikion and feasted it on noble arguments and speculations, and having reached consensus with himself, he makes sure his epithumētikon is neither hungry nor full so that it will sleep the night and not bother the better part with its pleasure or pain, but will allow it, alone and pure in itself (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μόνον καθαρόν), to investigate (σκοπεῖν) and reach for (ὁρέγεσθαι) the perception of what it does not know, past, present or future; when in the same way he has also calmed the spirited part, not going to bed in anger and with an agitated spirit, but having quieted these two parts and aroused the third, the part that contains thinking, and thus takes his rest, you know that in this state especially he grasps the truth (τῆς τ’ ἀληθείας . . . μάλιστα ἀπετεῖα) and then the visions of dreams that appear to him are least lawless.

This somnolent philosophy recalls Heraclitus’ sleeping grasp on the cosmic order. Plato uses the same haptic language—the logistikion reaches for (ὁρέγεσθαι) perception, the sleeper grasps (ἀπετεῖα) the truth—and the contemplation of past, present, and future evokes the eternal cycling of Heraclitus’ cosmos. But Plato’s sleeper, unsurprisingly, practices a markedly Platonic philosophy: αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ is diction Plato uses for the essence or Form of a thing; skopein is one of his key terms for the philosophical inquiry of the dialogues. More specifically, this sleeping philosophy recalls the emergence of the philosopher from the cave in Republic Book 7. Phantasmata, used for dreams at the end of this passage, there designate the false appearances of the cave (510a1, 516b5, 532c1); after making the ascent, the philosopher will contemplate the sun not through the phantasmata of reflected images, but “itself in itself” (αὐτὸν καθ’ αὑτὸν, 516b5). The philosopher who lives in the sunlight of Truth is said to “dwell in the pure” (ἐν τῷ καθαρῷ, 520d8). The alētheia for which the sleeper reaches, then, is the philosophical truth of this dialogue and of Platonic philosophy as a whole.

This truth is grasped especially (μάλιστα) in sleep. Plato does not explain how this works, but the final clause of the passage might imply that, with lawless dreams curtailed, truth will come in peaceful dreams. The earlier reference to “the perception of what it does not know, past, present, or future,” may allude to prophetic dreams, and Plato may be suggesting that truth comes to the sleeper as a divine message, like the lady in white who appears to the sleeping Socrates at

30. αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό: Prm. 130b8 “some form in itself (τι εἶδος αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό) of the just and the beautiful and the good and all such things.” Cf. Phd. 100b6. See also Rep. 358a6, b5, d2 (of the treatise’s inquiry into justice in itself), 476b11 (of the philosophers who can see Beauty in itself). Skopein is ubiquitous. Gallop 1971: 195 remarks on the “striking affinities between the dreamer and the philosopher” in this passage.

31. Phantasmata is also used more generally of doxa and mimēseis opposed to truth (584a9, 598b3, 599a2). Cf. Phaedo 79d, where a similar collocation of terms describes the activity of the soul once freed from the body (Ὅταν δὲ γε αὐτή καθ’ αὐτήν σκοπεῖ, ἐκείνη οὖσα εἰς τὸ καθαρόν, 79d1–2; cf. 66a1–2).
the opening of the *Crito* to tell him the date of his death. If so, sleep is not in itself the experience of truth, as it was for Heraclitus. Instead sleep provides the arena in which struggles for psychic mastery play out and in which, after criminal dreams are crucified, a victorious logistikōn can enjoy its well-earned rest in peaceful contemplation of the True.

Plato thus appropriates sleep for philosophy by virtually eliminating sleep: like the ideal lawmaker, the philosophical soul barely sleeps. It also barely dies. We read in the *Laws* passage that the sleeper is no better than a corpse. Thanatos is accordingly banned along with Hupnōs from the wakeful life of philosophy. In the *Phaedo* Socrates deploys a strained analogy to sleep as an argument for reincarnation of the soul: just as we fall asleep and then wake up, the psukhē must die and be reborn (71c–d). This analogy recalls Pindar’s alternating slumber of body and soul, as well as the Heraclitean psukhē’s transformations in the elemental cycle of death and generation. But Socrates unbalances those writers’ symmetry and alternation: for him, the body is always dying, but the imperishable soul lives on, ever to be reborn anew. In this sense, the philosophical soul never really dies; for it, sleep is just a prelude to waking and death just a momentary pause in the eternal life of the spirit.

Yet Plato produces this endless daylight of philosophy only by positing a black hole of radical unconsciousness oddly alluring to philosophy itself. One argument for reincarnation is the horrifying alternative, which Socrates poses early in the *Phaedo* only to swiftly reject. What would happen if the living were not born from the psukhai of the dead? If that were true, every living soul would end up dead. “It would be as if there were sleeping but no corresponding waking-up from sleep to balance it out, so that in the end it would all make Endymion seem like nonsense and he would be unremarkable because everything else would be in the same condition as he, that is, asleep” (ἀλλ’ οὖν εἰ τὸ καταδιορθάσει μὲν εἰς, τὸ δ’ ἀνεγείρεσθαι μὴ ἀνταποδοῖ σε ἵνα γιγνόμενον ἐκ τοῦ καθεύδοντος, οἴσθ’ ὅτι τελευτῶντα πάντ’ <ἀν> λήρων τὸν Ἐνδυμίωνα ἀποδείξειν καὶ σωμάτων ἐν φυτώντα διὰ τὸ καὶ τάλλα πάντα ταῦτα ἐκεῖνον πεπονθέναι, καθεύδειν, 72b7–c3). In place of the soul’s eternal return, Socrates imagines a one-way trip where everything alive ends up irreversibly and eternally dead. This morbid fantasy justifies the conclusion “that things really do come back to life and that the living come from the dead” (72d7–e1), but it does so only by conjuring a nightmare image of global narcosis, sleep without end.

This dark night of the soul recurs in the *Apology*, but now—surprisingly—in the form of a wish-fulfillment dream. That text ends with another analogy of death to sleep. Alongside the traditional mythic imagination of death (which Socrates

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32. Thus Adams 1929 ad 572a1, who sees in this passage an allusion to “the widespread popular view that the soul during sleep is freed from the trammels of the body, foresees the future, and has access to a region of truth denied, with few exceptions, to the waking mind.” He cites Pindar fr. 131b S-M as a parallel.
relishes for the chance to interrogate the wise shades in Hades), Socrates offers an alternative vision of thanatos:

καὶ εἴπε ὅτι μηδὲναίσθησις ἔστιν ἀλλʼ οὗν ὑπνοὺς ἑπειδὴν τις καθεύδουν μηδὲν ὅναρ μηδὲν ὑπάρχει, θαυμάσσων κέρδος ἂν εἰπή ὁ θάνατος — ἐγὼ γὰρ ἂν οἶμαι, εἰ τίνα εἰκλεξάμενον δεότα τινὰ τῶν νύκτα ἐν ἢ οὔτω κατεδαρθέν ὡστε μηδὲν ὅναρ ἢ ἰδεῖν, καὶ τὰς ἄλλας νύκτας τε καὶ ἡμέρας τὰς τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἐαυτοῦ ἀντικαταρθέντα ταύτη τῇ νυκτὶ δεότα σκεφτωμένον εἰσεῖν τόσας ἢμεῖν καὶ ἢδον ἡμέρας καὶ νύκτας ταύτης τῆς νυκτὸς βεβίωκεν ἐν τῷ ἐαυτοῦ βίῳ, οἴμαι ἂν μὴ ὅτι ἰδιώτην τινά, ἀλλὰ τὸν μέγαν βασιλέα εὐφανεῖότες ἂν εὐρείην αὐτῶν ταύτας πρῶς τὰς ἄλλας ἡμέρας καὶ νύκτας—εἰ σοῦ τουῦτον ὁ θάνατος ἔστιν, κέρδος ἢγογε λέγον· καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲν πλεῖον ὁ πᾶς χρόνος φαίνεται οὔτω δὴ εἶναι ἢ μιὰ νύξ.

_Ap. 40c9–c4_

If it is no perception at all but like sleep when one is sleeping and sees nothing, not even a dream, death would be a marvelous boon. For I think that if someone had to select that night on which he slept (κατεδαρθεὶς) so soundly as to not even see a dream, and setting all the other nights and days of his life against this night he had to say, upon examination, how many days and nights he had lived in his entire life better and more sweetly than this night, I think even the King of Persia himself, to say nothing of some private citizen, would find these days and nights easy to count in comparison to the others. If death is like this, then I say it is a boon, for in this case all time appears to be nothing more than a single night.

In the _Theaetetus_ sleep served as the paradigm of false perception and proof that perception (_αισθησις_ς) is not knowledge. In the _Republic_ sleep allowed the _logistik_ον to reach for a perception (_αισθάνεσθαι_) of new knowledge. Here sleep is imagined as a total absence of perception (_μηδὲναίσθησις_). Far from the _Republic_’s promise of knowledge past, present, and future—much less the endless cycles of Heraclitus’ ever-living fire—here sleep shrinks eternity into a single pitch-black night. This anesthesia is antithetical to philosophy, the negation of both perception and thought. As in Heraclitus B21, the only thing this sleep can see is sleep. Yet this senseless coma is figured not only as the sweetest death but even as the sweetest life. It eclipses not just all other nights

33. Greek had a word for this kind of anaesthetic state: _kôma_, which Hesychius defines as an “oblivious sleep; the descent of deep sleep” (insula _κοπανός_, καταφορὰ ἑνναυο βαθέος, K4825). But _kôma_ seems to have been an exclusively poetic word and is never used by the philosophers. See Wiesmann 1972.

34. In _Physics_ 4.11 Aristotle refers to the story of men who fell asleep in the _heroon_ in Sardinia who when they wake do not believe that time has passed because they have not perceived it passing: “On waking, they join the later ‘now’ to the former ‘now’ and make them one, extracting the intervening time on account of lack of perception (ἐναυοσθησία)’ (218b24–27).
but all other days. Upon examination (σκεψάμενον) the best life appears to be the anaesthetic sleep of death.

This is a shocking claim from the philosopher who declared the unexamined life not worth living (Ap. 38a5–6). The verb καταδαρθάνειν, rare in Plato, ties this passage to the Phaedo’s morbid world of Endymions (72b8). Is this endless coma a dream or a nightmare? Plato labors to recuperate sleep for a philosophical life. In so doing he all but erases both sleep and death: the logistikon never really sleeps, just as the pure soul never really dies. But there is something in sleep that resists his efforts. Indeed, sleep is posited as the limit of those efforts, the welcome laying down of the burden of philosophical existence. In the Apology’s dreamless night, the dark release of oblivion appears like a shadow in the eternal sunshine of philosophy’s spotless mind. Empty and endless, its sweet lure of unconsciousness beckons even the philosopher.

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If the Apology imagines the anaesthetic lure of sleep as a negation of the philosophical life, Aristotle will try to reclaim sleep for aisthēsis, philosophy, and life. Diogenes Laertius (5.16) reports that Aristotle would lie in bed with a bronze ball in his hand, which would drop into a pot if he dozed off and wake him up. This left him more time to contemplate (among other things) sleep, on which he wrote three short treatises collected in the Parva Naturalia. For Aristotle, as we might expect, sleep poses questions of definition and teleology:

πρῶτον μὲν οὖν ἐπειδῆ ἔλγομεν τὴν φύσιν ἑνεκά του ποιεῖν, τούτο δὲ ἁγαθὸν τι, τὴν δ’ ἀνάπαυσιν παντὶ τῷ περικότι κινεῖσθαι, μὴ δυναμένῳ δ’ ἤει καὶ συνεχῶς κινεῖσθαι μεθ’ ἡδονῆς, ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι καὶ ὠφέλμον, τὸ δὲ ὑπὸν αὐτῇ τῇ ἄλλῃ προσάπτουσι τὴν μεταφορὰν ταύτην ὡς ἀναπαύει ὀντί—όστε σωτηρίας ἑνεκά τῶν ᾑρῶν ὑπάρχει. ἢ δ’ ἐγγυήρος τέλος· τὸ γὰρ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν πάσι τέλος ὁὶς ὑπάρχει θύτερον αὐτῶν. βέλτιστα γὰρ ταύτα, τὸ δὲ τέλος βέλτιστον. ὀστὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἑκάστῳ τῶν ᾑρῶν ὑπάρχειν τὸν ὑπὸν.36

de Somn. 455b16–26

First, then, since we say that nature acts for the sake of something, and that this something is some good, and that rest is necessary and beneficial

35. Apart from Ap. 40d3 and Phd. 71d2, 72b8, the verb occurs only at Symp. 223c1 and d7 of everyone falling asleep except Socrates. There, too, there is an infernal tenor to the word: Socrates alone ascends to the light of day.

36. Following Gallop 1996’s choice of the MSS’ reading ὀστὲ (“hence”) over ἕτι δὲ (“besides”) in 455b25 (the latter printed by Ross 1955). This passage appears to be discontinuous with what precedes and may be part of a prior or later version of the treatise: see Lowe 1978, followed by Gallop 1996: 127, 134; contra, Ross 1955: 260; Woods 1992: 180–81; Everson 2007. One objection to the passage is that it seems to promise to align sleep with Aristotle’s four causes, but it is hard to reconcile with that schema. As Gallop 1996: 134 notes, waking is the final cause of sleep but also its opposite and therefore cannot function as its formal cause; cf. Lowe 1978. Its material cause also raises difficulties: Code 2015.
for everything that moves by nature but is not able to move eternally and continuously with pleasure, and we apply this metaphor to sleep in literal truth, since it is a rest, we conclude that sleep exists for the sake of the preservation of the animal. Waking, by contrast, is the telos. For perceiving and thinking are the telos for all animals to which either appertains. For these are best, and the telos is what is best. Thus it is necessary that every animal sleep.

No mere metaphor, as it was for Plato, sleep for Aristotle is an affection of the perceptive soul: rocks (which do not have souls) and plants (which do not have perceptive souls) do not sleep. The animal (both human and nonhuman) is defined by perception: waking is thus our natural state. But we cannot be in that state perpetually; the animal needs a rest from perceiving. Sleep is literally that rest. Sleep thus exists “for the sake of the preservation of the animal” (455b22; cf. 458a31–32). It serves the telos of the waking state of thinking and perceiving and is “necessary and beneficial” for that telos. Aristotle breaks from the tradition that associates sleep with death: he examines it as an essential feature of animal life. In this he anticipates Blanchot, for whom “we sleep in accord with the general law which makes our daytime activity depend on our nightly repose. . . . Sleeping is the clear action which promises us to the day.”

But if sleep serves the telos of waking for Aristotle, it does so via an odd negation of that telos. Sleep is a pause or cessation (ἀνάπαυσις) of the characteristic activities of the animal. It is a negative condition that “preserves” the positive condition of which it is the negation. This negation is built into Aristotle’s basic definition of sleep as “a certain privation (sterēsis) of wakefulness” (φαίνεται στέρησίς τις ὁ ὕπνος τῆς ἐγρηγόρσεως, 453b26–27). More specifically, sleep is a privation of perception, “like a binding or immobility” of the perceptual capacity of the soul. This makes sleep a peculiar state for creatures defined precisely by perception (454b24–25). It is hard to think of parallels where a privation of a condition is the preservation of that condition and exists for its sake; it would be like saying that blindness exists for the sake of vision.

37. Gallop 1996 ad loc. Μεταφοράν is insecure, and the sense of αὐτῇ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ is uncertain. “The literal truth” is Gallop’s translation.
38. Calabi 1984: 42.
39. Blanchot 1982: 264: “according to this convention it is agreed that, far from being a dangerous, bewitching force, sleep will become domesticated and serve as the instrument of our power to act.”
40. See Gallop 1996: 120 ad loc. on the meaning of στέρησις. Blanchot 1982: 265 hints at a similar paradox in arguing against Bergson’s understanding of sleep as disinterestedness: “Perhaps sleep is inattention to the world, but this negation of the world conserves us for the world and affirms the world.”
41. οἷον δεσμός τις καὶ ἀκινησία, 454b10–11; cf. 454b25–27. Sleep is a binding, in particular, of the “common sense” that coordinates the specific senses, registers qualities (like motion and magnitude) shared by specific sense objects, and allows us to be aware of our sense perceptions. On the common sense see de Somn. 455a4–b13; Kahn 1966; Wijsenbeek-Wijler 1978: 181–85; Modrak 1987: 62–76, 134–44.
or deafness for the sake of hearing.42 The anaesthetic sleep that for Plato figures a dream of death is for Aristotle a functional aspect of animal life, but a perplexing one. It is “necessary and beneficial” to the waking, percipient animal, but not easy to differentiate from malign conditions like unconsciousness, fainting, or epileptic seizures (455b4–6, 456b12–15, 457a7–9, 457b25–26). And even as it is conducive to health, sleep indicates an internal deficiency in the nature of the animal, its incapacity to be continuously active (ἀδυναμία, 454a26–32). Sleep thus marks a kind of intermittency in our phusis, a literal pause in our being. If the animal is defined by perception, what is a sleeping animal?

Sleep serves and preserves the telos of activity and perception, then, but only through the deprivation of activity and perception, a temporary suspension of the inmanent teleology of the animal. For the human animal, moreover, sleep would seem to be not just a suspension but in fact a regression. In De Anima Aristotle defines the psukhē as the actualization of a body that has life in potentiality (de An. 412a19–21). The human animal is actualized not just in the nutritive soul (like plants) or the perceptive soul (like animals), but in the rational soul. Our ultimate telos, as laid out in that treatise, is not merely aisthēsis but knowledge and, at the highest level, theōría (contemplation). Aristotle explains this by way of an analogy to sleep. Waking, he says, is like contemplation; sleeping is like having knowledge without exercising it (412a23–26). A life of contemplation would be perfect bliss, a godlike existence Aristotle contrasts to the sleep of Endymion.43 As a privation not just of knowledge but even of perception, actual sleep seems to be a move in the wrong direction, a temporary reversion to a lower order—that of the irrational animal or even the insensible plant. Sleep would thus seem to be not just a suspension but a regular reversal of the immanent impulse that drives us to our telos, full actualization of the intelligent soul in the activity of contemplation.

Aristotle is not unaware of these aporiai. In fact he raises them explicitly in On the Generation of Animals 5.1 in the course of an inquiry into which state comes first in animals, sleeping or waking. The priority of sleep is argued by the fact that “the change from non-existence to existence takes place through the intermediate state” (ἔτι δὲ διὰ τὸ τὴν μετάβασιν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ εἶναι εἰς τὸ εἶναι διὰ τοῦ μεταξὺ γίγνεσθαι). Sleep is that intermediate state, “like a borderland between living and not living” (οἷον τοῦ ζῆν καὶ τοῦ μὴ ζῆν μεθόριον). The sleeper, accordingly, “seems to be neither entirely non-existent nor entirely existent, since living pertains in particular to waking

42. Cf. Arist. Metaph. 5.22. As Gallop 1996: 190 notes, the qualification (στέρησις τις) suggests that sleep does not fit neatly into the categories of privation enumerated there. Sleep is often understood as a primary actuality (it is compared to having knowledge but not using it at de An. 412a25–26; cf. Gen. an. 735a9–11): e.g., Sprague 1977; van der Eijk 2005: 177. But the language of privation seems quite distinct from the language of potentiality involved in the primary actuality.

43. Eth. Nic. 1178b7–23: θεωρητικὴ ἐνεργεία is the most perfect happiness. The gods do not engage in praxis but they are alive and active (ζῆν, ἐνεργεῖν) “for they do not sleep like Endymion.” Their energeia therefore must be theoretical and theoretical energeia must be the most perfect kind. The sleep of Endymion is the opposite not just of the perfect activity but (like sleep in Plato’s Laws) of activity and life tout court. Cf. Metaph. 1074b17–18.
on account of perception” (καὶ οὔτε μὴ ἔνναι παντελῶς ὁ καθεύδων οὔτε εἴναι. τῷ γὰρ ἐγρηγορέναι τὸ ζῆν μάλιστ’ ὑπάρχει διὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν, 778b27–33). If for the animal living is perceiving, as Aristotle argues at length in De Anima, the sleeping animal cannot be said to be fully alive. It is at best only potentially alive, like the embryo that possesses life but does not yet exercise it.44 Not only is it uncertain whether the sleeping animal is alive, it is not even clear that it is an animal. An animal properly becomes an animal only when it acquires sensation; before that time “animals live the life of a plant” (τὰ ζῶα φυτῶν ζῶν, Gen. an. 779a1–2; cf. Eth. Eud. 1216a3–9). This vegetative state cannot rightly be called sleep since plants do not sleep, but “it should be considered similar to sleep” (ἀλλ’ ὀμοιον ὄνομ τὸ νομίζειν, Gen. an. 778b34–35).

From both a developmental and a taxonomic perspective, then, sleep introduces serious ambiguities into the condition of the living animal: asleep, it is neither fully living nor fully animal.

In On Sleep and Wakefulness Aristotle does not take up the real perplexity of this borderland condition nor pursue its implications for his larger theorization of the human animal and its soul. Instead, the treatise explains sleep as a relatively straightforward physiological process of cooling that follows when heat generated by nutrition rises as far as it can toward the head then flows back downward (456a30–b28, 457a33–b6, 458a25–32). Then Aristotle will turn his attention to dreams, which are the subject of the next two treatises, On Dreams and On Divination in Dreams. Dreams are puzzling because they are “a sort of sense perception” (ἀἴσθημα τρόπον τινά, de Somn. 456a26) within sleep’s general aesthetic sterēsis. The dream thus poses an intriguing contradiction: the perceptions of a state of non-perception.45

Aristotle resolves the contradiction by explaining dreams as deferred perceptions, a lingering after-image of daytime sense impressions. It is like when you go from sunlight into darkness, he says, and cannot see the darkness because of the after-image of the light (de Insomm. 459b7–11). During the day these perceptual after-effects are obscured by more vivid thoughts and perceptions, but at night, when there are fewer stimuli, they are more apparent to us (460b28–461a8; cf. Div. somn. 463a7–10). The key passage (de Insomm. 461b21–30) is difficult and the text uncertain, but the general gist is clear. During the day I saw Koriskos: the man produced an impression on my mind; my subsequent dream of Koriskos is like a visual echo of that initial impression. When we are awake the “ruling part” (τὸ κύριον) of our mind evaluates our perceptions and infers the presence of a man from our sense-impression of him (cf. 460b16–18). But at night that “judging part” (τὸ ἐπικρίνον) is “held in check” (κατέχεται, cf. 461b6); as a result we mistake


45. Gallop 1996: 20–21: “If dreaming is taken to be a mode of perceptual awareness during sleep, yet sleep is defined as a state of perceptual incapacitation, the very notion of a dream seems threatened by self-contradiction.” Gallop feels that this contradiction is never resolved (Gallop 1996: 25, 28); cf. Woods 1992: 182–84. Van der Eijk 2005: 186, by contrast, thinks Aristotle avoids contradiction by differentiating strictly between the active perception of waking and reactivated perceptions during sleep.
Aristotle’s theorization of sleep here approaches Plato’s in Republic 9. Dreams arise from a lapse in the vigilance of the judging and ruling part of the mind. Plato, as we saw, stages sleep as a drama of mastery: the logistikon must reassert its hegemony over the lawless desires through the practice of nocturnal philosophy. Aristotle deploys the same idiom of power: sleep has a force (δύναμις) that operates when τὸ κύριον, the governing faculty, is restrained (κατέχηται). But for him the threat to reason’s rule is not bestial desires but a narcosis that makes us forget we are dreaming.47 When we are awake “the judging and ruling” part differentiates the real man Koriskos from our impression of him and infers the presence of the former from the latter. But in sleep, we fail to distinguish the thing’s lingering impression from immediate perception of the thing itself. “And such is the power of sleep,” he concludes, “that it makes us unaware of this” (καὶ τοσαύτη τοῦ ὑπνοῦ ἡ δύναμις ὥστε ποιεῖν τὸν ἱανθάνειν, 461b29–30). This is a version of the problem Plato broached in the Theaetetus, that in sleep our dream images seem so real to us that we question reality itself. Likewise for Aristotle, sleep ensnares us in a ἐλθη that leaves us unable to differentiate dreams from reality. The sleeper forgets he is asleep. He thinks he is alert and perceiving real objects when he is really just sensing their dreamy after-effect.

This sleeper might well be forgiven for mistaking his sleep for waking, since Aristotle insistently links the two. Dreams are ultimately a version—albeit delayed, degraded, and distorted—of waking mental activity. In fact, in the very next section, right after acknowledging the oblivious force of hupnos (461b30–462a8), Aristotle goes on to say that the error can be avoided if one perceives that he is asleep and if “something in him” (τι ἐν συναρτεῖ) tells him that what he is seeing appears to be Koriskos but is not actually Koriskos in the flesh (462a4–5). “For often when we are sleeping something in the soul tells us that what is appearing is a dream” (πολλάκις γὰρ καθεύδοντος λέγει τι ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ὅτι ἐνύπνιον τὸ φανόμενον, 462a5–7). What is this mysterious “something” in the sleeping soul that alerts us that we are asleep and therefore dreaming? It is as if there is something vigilant within sleep, some part of the waking self that remains eternally active—even though we were told that animals cannot be eternally active—and foregoes the necessary and beneficial “rest” of perception so as to impose order on the disordering perceptions of sleep. This psychic “something” perceives and communicates (λέγει): it possesses logos, both speech and reason, and conveys them to the sleeper from the wakeful depths of his sleeping soul.

46. This ruling and judging part is the “common sense”: see Modrak 1987: 138 and n.41 above.
47. As Gallop 1996: 13 observes, Aristotle cannot ultimately subscribe to a psychic division of the sort Plato imagines in Republic 9 because he conceives of sleeping as an affection of the whole organism, not of body or soul alone: see de Somn. 453b24–454a11 and Gallop 1996 ad loc. This is in keeping with the psychophysical nature of Aristotle’s psychology in general, as emphasized by Modrak 1987.
In fact, despite his insistence that dreams are not affections of perception and thought, then, Aristotle concedes to them a form of both activities, and through them insinuates those waking mental activities back into sleep. Not just residual daytime perceptions, dreams become the conduit of new perceptions even in sleep itself, as Aristotle explains at *On Divination in Dreams* 463a10–21 (cf. *de Insomn. 462a15–25*): the same stillness and lack of interfering stimuli that allow the sleeper to experience sense-remnants also cause small disturbances to be magnified such that a faint sound in the ear is thought to be thunder or a slight warmth fire. It seems that we do, after all, have some perceptions in sleep, which dreams amplify. 48 We also seem to have some thoughts, as Aristotle suggests in *On Dreams*: “sometimes we think about something else alongside (παρά) the dream, just as we do when we are perceiving something while we are awake (ἐπί παρά τὸ εὖπνον ἐννοούμεν ἄλλο τι, καθάπερ ἐν τῷ έγρηγορέναι αἰσθανόμενοι τι, 458b15–16). Aristotle differentiates this thought from the dream vision per se, which he insists is not an affection of the judging or thinking capacity any more than it is of the perceptive capacity (459a8–9, 462a27–31). Instead, these thoughts—or “true thoughts,” as Aristotle later terms them (δοσι δὴ ἐν τῷ ὑπνῳ γίνονται ἀληθεῖς ἐννοιαι παρά τὰ φαντάσματα, 462a28–29)—arise alongside the dream vision, prompted by its complex relation to waking perception, as a kind of somnolent cognition. 49

In conceding to dreams a kind of perception and thought, Aristotle evades the question of what becomes of souls defined by these activities when they are in a state defined by their absence. Sleep, I suggested, poses potential challenges for Aristotle’s teleological understanding of our human *phusis*. But instead of addressing these challenges, he focuses on dreams as “a sort of perception” (*de Insomn. 456a26*). In this way, he sneaks the waking mind back into the sleeping *psukhē*, recuperating sleep for the waking self. Aristotle ends *On Dreams* by considering intermediary states between sleeping and waking, drawing a continuum between these two opposite states of which one is the negation or privation of the other. He concludes with the possibility that “when either waking or sleeping is present entirely (ἁπλῶς), the other is present in some way (πῃ)” (462a26–27). 50 Perhaps, as Heraclitus and Plato posited, most

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48. See van der Eijk 2003: 32–39 on the contradiction. This same amplification explains some premonitory dreams: in sleep we are also more sensitive to otherwise imperceptible internal disturbances that mark the onset of disease. Such dreams are “signs” (σημεία, 462b27) which provide useful information to medical practitioners and lay-theorists alike (463a2–7). Cf. Hippoc. *On Regimen* 4.86 and Struck 2016: 104–112 on the parallels with Aristotle. The paradox of sleeping cognition was much debated by medieval philosophers: see Pickavé 2018.

49. Van der Eijk 2005: 176, 186 (= van der Eijk 2003: 33–34) observes that since Aristotle’s *nous* is incorporeal there is no reason, in theory, why we should not be able to think in sleep; given this, he wonders why Aristotle does not offer a fuller discussion of sleep cognition. He concludes that the subject is not treated because “the role of thought in sleep is apparently not essentially different from that in the waking state” (186). Cf. Wijsenbeek-Wijler 1978: 212–14. Struck 2016: 91–170 discusses the thinking Aristotle attributes to divinatory dreams as an example of “a peculiar cognitive capacity built into the rudiments of the human organism” (104) that he terms “surplus knowledge.”

50. Van der Eijk 2005: 185: thus the antithesis between sleeping and waking is not as absolute as Aristotle posits at the opening of *De Somno*. 
of us are a little bit asleep in our waking lives. But we are also a little bit awake in our sleep. Just like when we go from sunlight into darkness (459b9), the faded daylight of dream perceptions blinds us to the darkness of night and its psychic anaesthesia.

For Aristotle, as for Freud after him, it is thus in dreams, not in sleep, that we see the characteristic activity of the human soul. Sleep is a physiological matter explained by heat, blood, and nutriments. But dreams are of a different order. They are not divine—Aristotle rejects the notion of dreams as messages from the gods—but they are daemonic, he says, because nature itself is daemonic (δαιμόνια μέντοι ἕ γὰρ φύσις δαμονία, ἀλλ' οὐ θεία, Div. somn. 463b14–15). For Heraclitus, sleep gave us obscure access to the reality of the cosmos and our place in it. For Aristotle, our connection to that reality—phusis as a whole—comes not in sleep but in dreams and the peculiar perception they entail. As it happens, Freud quotes this line at the very start of The Interpretation of Dreams and cites Aristotle as an early predecessor in what he calls the “psychological study” of dreams. But what Freud really latches onto in Aristotle is the idea that dreams are the mental activity of sleep and a continuation of waking thought. That sleeping thought is distorted, condensed and displaced. It requires interpretation: hence The Interpretation of Dreams, a title Freud justifies in a footnote by reference to Aristotle.

We might thus see with Aristotle a split in the royal road: sleep is a physiological process; it is dreams that are interesting, both to the philosopher and, later, to the psychoanalyst. For both, dreams mark residual effects of wakefulness within sleep, maintaining our connection to our normal waking selves and world. My paper has returned to the road not taken, the path of sleep. I hope to have shown that there is something in sleep that is both philosophically and psychologically

51. Struck 2016: 163 takes “daemonic” to mean “steered by a divine impulse toward actualizing potential toward the good, beneath our self-conscious awareness” (cf. 117–22). For Gallop 1996: 43–48 it indicates that dreams seem like the product of an intelligent agency but are not really so. Van der Eijk 2005: 191 understands daimonia as “beyond human control.”

52. Freud 1953: 2–3. His tendentious gloss there on the “daimonic” nature of dreams assimilates Aristotle’s approach to his own: “Dreams, that is, do not arise from supernatural manifestations but follow the laws of the human spirit, though the latter, it is true, is akin to the divine. Dreams are defined as the mental activity of the sleeper in so far as he is asleep.” He repeats this last phrase in various forms four more times over the course of his career and these passages constitute practically his only references to Aristotle (Freud 1957: 234; 1959: 46n.1; 1961: 209; 1964: 16).

53. “Aristotle’s old definition of the dream as mental life during sleep still holds good. There was a reason for my choosing as the title of my book not The Dream but The Interpretation of Dreams” (Freud 1959: 46n.1). This (unexamined) connection between Aristotle and the hermeneutics of dreams is ironic inasmuch as Aristotle was largely uninterested in the content of dreams, beyond their predicative or diagnostic use (Holowchak 1996). On his theory, dreams no more merit interpretation than does sleep. Moreover, unlike sleep, dreams for Aristotle serve no purpose for the animal, psychological or physical (Gallop 1996: 28–38; van der Eijk 2005: 204).

54. Farbman 2008: 44 observes that for Freud dreams maintain a connection to the world, against the subject’s desire to withdraw completely into the narcissistic closure of sleep; thus the dream “maintains the thread of experience over the radical gap in experience—the interruption in presence to the world—that sleep represents.” Cf. Worham 2013: 47–48. One might compare the Hippocratic On Regimen 4, where dreams are healthy to the precise extent that they mirror waking reality.
interesting, but that something remains inaccessible to both philosophy and psychology. That “something” is not the vigil of the waking self, as Aristotle posited, nor is it Plato’s nocturnal inner philosopher. It does not communicate itself through dreams and is not amenable to logos. Instead it appears in each philosopher as a point of opacity: a privation of our natural being, a narcotic lure away from the immortal life of philosophy, a sleep that is only sleep. “Only deep sleep,” writes Blanchot, “lets us escape what there is in the deep of sleep.”55 These philosophers look into the abyss of sleep, even as they work to escape it, and its blackness leaves its mark on their sunlit world. This obscure after-image may serve to remind us that the eternal wakefulness of reason is, in the end, only a philosopher’s dream.

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