Letters to the Editor

On the importance of 19th century dream research: Progress in dream research between Aristotle’s work on dreaming and the discovery of REM sleep

To the Editor:

Barbera’s [1] review about the development of dream theories in Greek and Roman philosophy is well researched and enjoyable to read, but its conclusion seems somewhat surprising and unsubstantiated. In particular, we disagree with the closing statement that little progress was made in the understanding of dreaming between Aristotle’s writings and the discovery of REM sleep in the 1960s.

Of course, the discovery of REM sleep was arguably the most significant advancement in dream research to this day. Nonetheless, considerable progress was made during the 18th and 19th centuries. Whereas the specific phenomenology of dreaming was not extensively discussed by Greek and Roman authors, the focus of contemporary dream research on the analysis of subjective dream content and the systematic use of dream reports was already anticipated by 19th century researchers. For example, Mary Calkins [2] was the first to attempt a statistical analysis of dream reports, and Alfred Maury [3] used systematic awakenings to elicit dream reports and investigate the influence of external stimuli on dreams. Other researchers focused on the physiology of dreaming, for instance, by observing that lesions in the occipito-temporal area may cause a virtually complete cessation of dreaming [4] or even by associating dreaming with periods of eye movement activity in sleep [5]. At the same time, even today, many studies based on home dream diaries provide new and important insights without referring to sleep stages and thus rely on essentially the same methodology as 19th century researchers. For example, Mary Calkins [2] was the first to attempt a statistical analysis of dream reports, and Alfred Maury [3] used systematic awakenings to elicit dream reports and investigate the influence of external stimuli on dreams. Other researchers focused on the physiology of dreaming, for instance, by observing that lesions in the occipito-temporal area may cause a virtually complete cessation of dreaming [4] or even by associating dreaming with periods of eye movement activity in sleep [5]. At the same time, even today, many studies based on home dream diaries provide new and important insights without referring to sleep stages and thus rely on essentially the same methodology as 19th century dream research. Finally, it should be pointed out that dreaming was an important topic of investigation not only in antiquity, but throughout the history of philosophy [6]. While many of the questions discussed by Greek and Roman authors anticipated later dream theories, their answers often differed from those given by medieval and modern philosophers – and in important ways.

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