Aristotle on Prevision through Dreams

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I aim to investigate Aristotle’s treatment of the problem of divination (μαντική) through dreams, and in particular the notion of prevision (προορᾶν). I approach Aristotle’s discussion of oneiric prevision by paying attention to three questions in order to shed light on the general explanatory agenda in the *De divinatione*.

The first question concerns what views on prevision Aristotle challenges. It is widely recognised that Aristotle opposes the very idea of god-sent prophetic dreams, but it is less clear what conceptions of foresight Aristotle rejects in general. A too narrow focus on the problem of the divine origin of dreams tends to obscure what seems to be the very point in assuming god-sent prophetic dreams in the first place, namely, to explain how we can have knowledge about future events. I shall argue that Aristotle aims to reject certain conceptions of precognition through dreams—and accordingly any conception of divination, in so far as a supernatural element is assumed to account for precognition. The viable answers to this first question will contribute to clarifying what Aristotle understands as the explanandum in the *De divinatione*, and whether Aristotle at some point in the discussion changes the explanandum.

The second question regards an ambiguity in connection with Aristotle’s explanation of prevision in terms of cause (αἴτιον), sign (σημεῖον), and coincidence (σύμπτωμα). Does Aristotle try to explain away prevision (according to the formula ‘demonic possession is nothing but psychiatric illness’), or does he intend to clarify what the empirical phenomenon conceptualised as prevision really is (as in ‘Water is nothing but H₂O’)? In fact Aristotle appears to make use of both models, which tends to confuse the whole issue. The sceptical tone in the *De divinatione* may suggest a categorical eliminativistic approach towards prevision as such, but a transparent distinction between the views Aristotle discards and the explanandum under consideration will be helpful in order to elucidate what otherwise might appear as double bookkeeping.

The third question, finally, is whether Aristotle’s explanation of prevision in terms of cause, sign, and coincidence is intended to be an exhaustive account, or...
if he considers or alludes to additional explanations of prevision somewhere in the text.

I shall argue that Aristotle challenges any view on prevision that either assumes supernatural elements or makes strong knowledge-claims concerning the future (hereafter ‘precognition’ or ‘foreknowledge’). I shall further argue that Aristotle does not present his analysis of oneiric prevision as a naturalistic substitute for a certain conception of prevision, but rather as an explication of what oneiric prevision is, given a rational and credible explanation. If this view is correct, it follows that Aristotle supports a common-sense notion of oneiric prevision that neither relies on supernatural assumptions, nor on strong cognitive claims regarding veridical access to events in the future. Finally, I shall try to show that Aristotle intends his positive account of oneiric prevision to be exhaustive in the sense that he thinks there are no additional credible explanations of prevision over and above dreams construed as causes, signs, or coincidences. Nevertheless, as we shall see, some of the key passages in the text are elusive and difficult to grasp. In any case, the suggested set of questions will be helpful in order to arrive at a coherent interpretation of the text as a whole.

I. The case against god-sent prophetic dreams

Aristotle approaches the problem of divination through dreams by way of two separate but interconnected discussions. The first one explicitly attacks the belief that some dreams have a divine origin. The second one concerns whether a person in sleep may foresee future events through dreams. The case of divination through dreams will include an intervening god or a divine messenger who somehow informs the dreamer of events that will take place in the future. In this particular context it seems plausible to assume that Aristotle’s primary concern is not the divine origin of these dreams per se, but rather the alleged knowledge of

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2 The theme of god-sent dreams, or more generally, divine intervention in dreaming, is easily recognised throughout the De divinatione. Aristotle formulates a set of objections against the very idea of god-sent prophetic dreams: (i) The belief that it is a god who sends dreams is not credible in so far as it lacks rational explanation (462b20-21); (ii) he sends them to random people, not the best and most intelligent, which is absurd (462b21-22); (iii) since other animals dream, dreams cannot be sent by a god (463b12-13); (iv) nature is daemonic not divine (463b14-15): see van der Eijk 1994, 2005, and Gallop 1996 for detailed discussions of this point; (v) if prophetic visions originated from a god we could expect this to happen in day-time to clever people (464a19-22); (vi) ordinary people, (not only exceptionally virtuous people) and those with a particular psychological constitution have previsions (463b15-18).

3 See for instance Plato, Crito 44a5-b5. See also Dodds 1951, 107, who notes that, ‘In a classification which is transmitted by Artemidorus, Macrobius, and other late writers, but whose origin may lie much further back, three such types are distinguished. One is the symbolic dream, which “dresses up in metaphors, like a sort of riddles, a meaning which cannot be understood without an interpretation.” A second is the horama or “vision,” which is a straightforward preënactment of a future event, like those dreams described in the book of the ingenious J.W. Dunne. The third is called a chrematismos or “oracle,” and is to be recognised “when in sleep the dreamer’s parent, or some other respected or impressive personage, perhaps a priest or even a god, reveals without symbolism what will or will not happen, or should or should not be done.”’
future events from dreams (explainable, if at all, only in terms of divine intervention). Aristotle’s rather narrow focus on the divine origin of dreams unfortunately obscures this important point. Let us take a closer look at how Aristotle articulates the problem at hand. Aristotle writes:

As for the divination that takes place during periods of sleep and is said to be based on dreams, it is not easy either to despise it or to believe in it. The fact that all or many people suppose dreams to have some significance inspires belief in it, as deriving from experience. And as regards some matters it is not beyond belief that there should be divination during dreams, because it does make some sense. One might, accordingly, take a similar view of other dreams as well. And yet the fact of seeing no reasonable explanation for its occurrence makes for disbelief. For, apart from its general irrationality, the idea that it is God who sends dreams, and yet that he sends them not to the best and most intelligent, but to random people, is absurd. Yet if the explanation ascribing them to God is ruled out, none of the others appears to be reasonable. For the source of certain people’s prevision of events at the Pillars of Heracles or on the Borysthenes would seem beyond our wit to discover.4

(462b12-26, Gallop trans.)

First, one may note that Aristotle says that ‘it is not beyond belief that there should be divination during dreams, because it does make some sense’. So he seems to be willing to give credence to some alleged cases of divination. But, he soon adds, ‘the fact of seeing no reasonable explanation for its occurrence makes for disbelief’. These preliminary remarks pave the way for Aristotle’s ‘middle way’ between uncritical belief in alleged cases of divination and a straightforward rejection of the very idea of prevision. But in what sense, if any, does Aristotle accept prevision?

It might be tempting to reconstruct the apparent tension as follows. We may read the sympathetic remark about divination as indicating that there are some (perhaps) exceptional circumstances in which the received views of divination make sense. This reading would fit in well with the presupposition that although some dreams may be true, a large class of dreams may be deceptive.5 According

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4 Περὶ δὲ τῆς μαντικῆς τῆς ἐν τοῖς ὑπνοῖς γινομένης καὶ λεγομένης συμβαίνειν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐνυπνίων, οὔτε καταφρονήσας ρήματος οὔτε πεισθῆναι. τὸ μὲν γὰρ πάντας ἢ πολλοὺς ύπολαμβάνειν ἔχει τι σημείος τὸ ἐνυπνία παρέχεται πάσην ὡς ἐξ ἐμπειρίας λεγόμενον, καὶ τὸ περὶ ἐντὸς εἶναι τὴν μαντικὴν ἐν τοῖς ἐνυπνίοις οὐκ ἀπίστον: ἔχει γὰρ τινὰ λόγον· διὸ καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐνυπνίων ὑμῶν ἢ τῆς καθ' ἣν ὁρᾶτον. τοῦ γὰρ μηδεμίαν αἰτίαν εὐλογον ὡς ἄλλη ἀλογία, καὶ τὸ περὶ ἄλλης ἐνυπνίας ἀλογίαν· τοῦτο δὲ ἀπίστευτον ποιεῖ· τὸ τε γὰρ θεοὶ εἶναι τὸν πέμποντα, πρὸς τῇ ἄλλῃ ἀλογίᾳ, καὶ τὸ μὴ τοῖς βελτίστοις καὶ φρονιμοτάτοις ἀλλὰ τοῖς τυχοῦσι πέμπειν ἄτοπον. άφαιρεθείς δὲ τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ αἰτίας ἀλογιμα τῶν ἄλλων εὐλογον εἶναι φαίνεται αἰτία· τοῦ γὰρ περὶ τῶν ἐν Περίδὲ τῆς μαντικῆς τῆς ἐν τοῖς ὑπνοῖς γινομένης καὶ λεγομένης συμβαίνειν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐνυπνίων, οὔτε καταφρονήσας ρήματος οὔτε πεισθῆναι. τὸ μὲν γὰρ πάντας ἢ πολλοὺς ύπολαμβάνειν ἔχει τι σημείος τὸ ἐνυπνία παρέχεται πάσην ὡς ἐξ ἐμπειρίας λεγόμενον, καὶ τὸ περὶ ἐντὸς εἶναι τὴν μαντικὴν ἐν τοῖς ἐνυπνίοις οὐκ ἀπίστον: ἔχει γὰρ τινὰ λόγον· διὸ καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐνυπνίων ὑμῶν ἢ τῆς καθ' ἣν ὁρᾶτον. τοῦ γὰρ μηδεμίαν αἰτίαν εὐλογον ὡς ἄλλη ἀλογία, καὶ τὸ περὶ ἄλλης ἐνυπνίας ἀλογίαν· τοῦτο δὲ ἀπίστευτον ποιεῖ· τὸ τε γὰρ θεοὶ εἶναι τὸν πέμποντα, πρὸς τῇ ἄλλῃ ἀλογίᾳ, καὶ τὸ μὴ τοῖς βελτίστοις καὶ φρονιμοτάτοις ἀλλὰ τοῖς τυχοῦσι πέμπειν ἄτοπον. άφαιρεθείς δὲ τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ αἰτίας ἀλογιμα τῶν ἄλλων εὐλογον εἶναι φαίνεται αἰτία· τοῦ γὰρ περὶ τῶν ἐν χρήσιν τινὲς ύπὲρ τὴν ἡμετέραν εἶναι δόξειν ἄν σύνεσιν εὑρεῖν τὴν ἀρχήν. (The Greek text is based upon Ross 1955.)

5 Cf. Plato’s allusion in Charmides 443b-c. The problem of how to distinguish between true pre-
to this interpretation, Aristotle is merely attacking a subset of alleged cases of prophetic dreams. Since Aristotle explicitly rules out only the notion of god-sent dreams, Aristotle’s approving remark might seem to allow for two other kinds of prophetic dreams, namely, (i) precognition (foreknowledge) without the intervention of a god, or perhaps (ii) an alternative version of supernaturalism. However, even if such interpretations appear to make some sense, they are problematic because it is hard to find anything about precognition in the text apart from the explicit references to god-sent dreams.

I shall argue that Aristotle’s explicit attack on the notion of god-sent prophetic dreams not only targets supernatural interpretations of divination in general, but also challenges the very idea of precognition (veridical information about the future in the present). For the cases in which prevision is said to make sense belong to a particular conception of prevision that has no essential relation to knowledge as such. This claim may seem rather counterintuitive at this stage, but the idea will become clearer as my argument unfolds.

II. Fulfilled dreams: causes, signs, and coincidences

Without any special preliminaries Aristotle proceeds to give an account, presumably of how to understand cases of divination through dreams. He writes:

Well then, it is necessary that the dreams are either causes or signs of things that happen, or else coincidences; either all or some of these, or one only. By cause, I mean, for example, the moon as a cause of the sun’s being eclipsed, or fatigue as a cause of a fever. By a sign, the star’s entry into shadow as a sign of its eclipse, or roughness of the tongue as a sign of someone’s having a fever. And by coincidence, the sun’s being eclipsed when someone is taking a walk, since that is neither a sign nor a cause of its being eclipsed, nor is the eclipse of the walking. Hence no coincidence happens either always or for the most part.7 (462b26-463a3)

So the idea seems to be that fulfilled dreams occur in the form of causes, signs, or

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6 See for instance Kruger 1992, 18 who seems to endorse such a reading. He writes: ‘Aristotle may not completely rule out prophetic dreams, conceding that it is “not incredible” that “divination in dreams should, as regards some subjects, be genuine” (462b), and granting that some dreams may be “daemonic” in origin (463b); but his argument does work largely to deny dreams their divinatory power’.

7 ἀνάγκη δ’ οὖν τὰ ἐνύπνια ἢ αἴτια εἶναι ἢ σημεῖα τῶν γινόμενων ἢ συμπτώματα, ἢ πάντα ἢ ἕνα τούτων ἢ ἐν μόνῳ. λέγω δ’ αἴτιον μὲν οἷόν την σελήνην τοῦ ἐκλείπειν τὸν ἥλιον, καὶ τὸν κόπον τοῦ πυρετοῦ, σημεῖον δὲ τῆς ἐκλείψεως τὸ τὸν ἀστέρα εἰσελθεῖν, τὴν δὲ τραχύτητα τῆς γλώττης τοῦ πυρέττειν, σύμπτωμα δὲ τὸ βαδίζοντος ἐκλείπειν τὸν ἥλιον· οὔτε γὰρ σημεῖον τοῦ ἐκλείπειν τοῦτ’ ἐστιν οὔτ’ αἴτιον, οὔθ’ ἢ ἐκλείψεως τοῦ βαδίζειν· διὸ τῶν συμπτωμάτων οὐδὲν οὔτε ἀεὶ γίνεται, οὔθ’ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολύ.
coincidences. Fulfilled dreams in the form of causes are cases in which a dreamer, in response to a dream, initiates an action that brings about the event dreamt of. The point seems to be that there is a reciprocal relationship between actions performed in waking and actions in dreams (463a21ff.). So prevision by means of dreams may under some circumstances be explained as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. We simply initiate some of the actions we perform in our dreams when we are awake. Similarly, we dream about actions we perform when we are awake.

Further, some dreams are signs in the sense that they provide information about what is more or less likely to happen in the future. Some dreams allow us to identify possible beginnings of certain developments, for instance pathological processes in the body. In addition, Aristotle argues that the state of sleep provides a condition in which there is a magnifying effect of noticed movements, and accordingly this will allow the dreamer to detect conditions that are hidden in waking. For in sleep, ‘even slight movements seem to be big’ (463a10-11). For instance, people tend to experience lightning and thunder when ‘faint echoes are sounding in their ears’ or it may seem ‘that they are walking through fire when a slight warmth is affecting certain parts’ (463a12ff.). Even if Aristotle’s example here concerns a kind of perception during sleep, the magnifying effect is assumed to hold for proper dreams as well (Insomn. 460b32-461a8).

Diseases may have a typical development that is predictable to a certain degree, and may in this sense carry information about the future (Div. 463a17-20, b22-25). Aristotle’s examples of signs in dreams are few and seem to focus solely on states of the body in relation to the subject’s health. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s discussion of extravagant dreams at 463b31ff., at least seems to permit signs signifying events in the environment in addition to states of the subject’s own body.

Finally, Aristotle argues that cases that include a correspondence between dreams and events in the future, will seem to be coincidences especially in cases where the fulfilling event lies outside the dreamers control of initiation, e.g., a naval battle taking place far away (463b1-5). In such cases there seems to be no volitional or cognitive connection between the dream and the fulfilling event. ‘For with these, matters probably stand as they do when a person mentions something, and then finds this very thing coming to pass’ (463b3-5). So the category of coincidence does not require any particular connection between the dream and the fulfilling future event.

III. Precognition explained away

It seems reasonable to assume that Aristotle initially considers explanatory strategies that cover all conceivable cases of foresight. Roughly, two approaches are employed, namely, elimination of dubious cases and elucidation of credible cases. For instance, Aristotle does not aim to explain how a god may intervene in dreaming or convey information about the future, but rather attempts to give a convincing account of the fact that people occasionally have dreams that correspond to events taking place in the future.
Yet Aristotle explicitly argues against certain conceptions of divination, especially the idea that dreams have a divine origin. The arguments presented against the existence of god-sent dreams do not seem to have any immediate bearing on the theme of precognition but rather seem to focus solely on the supernatural element in alleged cases of divination. However, the main rationale behind the introduction of this supernatural element seems to be that divine intervention would explain the way the dreamer receives veridical information about the future. There are two interconnected observations we may consider in order to clarify this point. First, we may note that the fact that some people have dreams that later turn out to match events in the real world in no straightforward way implies the occurrence of veridical cognition (in the present) of the future. Second, the account in terms of cause, sign, and coincidence does not even come close to explaining how alleged cases of veridical precognition through dreams could be possible. This in turn suggests that Aristotle initially does not set out to explain precognition. Given the above considerations, a plausible view seems to be that precognition (as defined above) belongs to the category of phenomena that are considered to lie beyond the scope of rational explanation alongside beliefs that some dreams have a divine origin.

In sum, it seems that there are two distinct but associated assumptions included in the received notion of divination through dreams that Aristotle challenges. Let us take a closer look at these assumptions and spell them out separately.

(1) The supernatural theme. The dream is the outcome of divine intervention. The additional cognitive feature, however, may be formulated in a variety of ways:

(2) The precognitive theme. The dreamer has a ‘vision of’ a future event, presumably with the same accuracy as an ideal perceptual state, and thereby receives reliable information about what will be the case in the future. Alternatively, the dreamer receives veridical information about the future by means of the appearance of a god who informs the dreamer verbally or otherwise. In order to make the knowledge-claim interesting, we may assume that precognition of the relevant kind entails truth.8

Now a plausible hypothesis at this point is that Aristotle rejects both parallel strands in the received notion of god-sent prophetic dreams. Aristotle will basically explain away divine origins and precognition through the formula ‘alleged cases of divination are nothing but fulfilled dreams in the mode of causes, signs, or coincidences’. If I am right, the idea of god-sent prophetic dreams is not dismissed solely because some alleged cases of divination include a supernatural element, but rather because the supernatural element in combination with presumptions of foreknowledge does not allow intelligible explanation. This means

8 The view defended here, namely, that the notion of foresight endorsed by Aristotle in the De divinatione excludes precognition, has some bearing on the well-known problem of future contingents discussed in the De interpretatione. The relevant conception of foresight (προορᾶν) is compatible with a number of different interpretations of future contingents, e.g., the suggestion that such propositions lack truth value, or temporal necessity, or are undecidable due to epistemic uncertainty. For a helpful logical map of influential interpretations of De interpretatione, see, e.g., Craig 1988.
that precognition resists intelligible explanation, with or without an accompanying presupposition of intervening gods. Merely purging precognition of supernatural elements (i.e., naturalising the notion, as it were) does not automatically improve the prospects of an intelligible explanation.9

IV. The meaning of prevision

Now, if Aristotle accepts some conception of prevision (προοράν), there must be more to prevision than the views that are rejected as non-credible options. A great deal of the text makes good sense, if we assume that Aristotle accepts a deflationary concept of prevision that roughly coincides with the original explanandum implicitly alluded to in the introduction, namely, that people now and then have dreams that later turn out to correspond to occurring events (e.g., 463b16-22). This rather coarse characterisation of prevision emerges out of scattered clues in various parts of the text and takes the shape of a ‘natural’ or common-sense conception of prevision. However, Aristotle’s rather idiosyncratic use of prevision (προοράν) is not explicitly articulated and some of the more alluring clues, as we shall see, will turn out to be red herrings, especially those suggesting prevision to be a brand of cognition.

Yet prevision in the sense of coincidence may appear as rather counterintuitive. For instance Aristotle does not say, as a contemporary sceptic perhaps would have phrased it, that coincidental prevision is not really prevision at all, but rather mere coincidence. On the contrary, Aristotle seems to accept coincidentally fulfilled dreams as proper cases of prevision (463a31-b11). In any case, it is important to notice that accounts that categorically distinguish between cognitive characterisations of prevision and ‘coincidental prevision’ will obscure the key notion of prevision under discussion.

So prevision in the minimal sense simply requires a correspondence between a dream (dream-content) and some future fulfilling event. However, fulfilment by a future event is a requirement for all modes of prevision. It is easy to neglect this point since prevision in the mode of causes and signs may suggest that prevision is determined by some volitional or cognitive attitude prior to a fulfilling event. Further, the expression ‘veridical dreams’ ought to be used with caution in this context (cf. Huby 1979; Gallop 1996), mainly because of its strong connotation of precognition. Aristotle does not use any expression approximately equivalent to ‘veridical dreams’, nor are dreams referred to as true or false in Parva Naturalia.10 Nevertheless, the expression ‘comes to pass’ (ἀποβαίνει) is used when

9 However, there are naturalistic or semi-naturalistic attempts to explain precognition in the medieval Arabic tradition (without necessarily excluding an intervening God). The basic idea comes out as variations on the theme that a pure mental apprehension provides prophetic insights or knowledge about virtually everything. See for instance, Al-Kindī’s account in Adamson and Pormann 2012, 128-131 and Avicenna 1952, vi 30ff. For a straightforward theistic account, see the Arabic translation and adaption of Aristotle’s De divinatione discussed by Hansberger 2008.

10 Cf. EE 1248a34-b1. The few lines referring to divination in the Eudemian Ethics are quite obscure and it is far from evident how they relate to the discussion of prevision in the De divinatione. I suggest a hypothesis for a developmental approach, i.e., that the two works express a conceptual
Aristotle considers a correspondence between a dream and a fulfilling future event. So, even though dreams may be described as ‘veridical’ in the event that dreams become fulfilled, fulfilment still cannot be guaranteed at the time a dream occurs, which the term ‘veridical’ might suggest if used without qualification.

A. The bias to interpret prevision as cognition

There is a persistent tendency among contemporary commentators to focus on cognitive interpretations of prevision, not only in the form of a bias to interpret prevision in terms of precognition, but also in the form of what might be described as a selective focus on cognitive interpretations by and large. There is an obvious explanation for this preference in favour of cognitive interpretations, since Aristotle obviously endorses interpretations of prevision in which there is a prominent element of cognition (i.e., prediction from signs), or an apprehension of some future event (i.e., fulfilment due to cause). Nonetheless, the category of coincidence puts things in the proper perspective. Now, if coincidence is sufficient for prevision, there seems to be no pressing reason why prevision necessarily ought to be specified as a kind of cognition or apprehension of the future.

An example of what might be called a cognitive approach is found in Dodds 1951, who seems to interpret the category of coincidence in a way that distinguishes it from the categories of cause and sign. Note also Dodds’ use of the terms ‘precognition’ and ‘veridical’ in this context. He writes:

Two kinds of dreams he accepts as intelligibly precognitive: dreams conveying foreknowledge of the dreamer’s state of health, which are reasonably explained by the penetration to consciousness of symptoms ignored in waking hours; and those which bring about their own fulfilment by suggesting a course of action to the dreamer. Where dreams outside these classes prove to be veridical, he thinks it is probably coincidence (σύμπτωμα); alternatively, he suggests a theory of wave-borne stimuli, on the analogy of disturbances propagated in water or air.12 (Dodds, 1951, 120)

Dodds’ remarks call for clarification. For instance, does Dodds suggest that the class of dreams that happen to be fulfilled by coincidence are excluded from the category of prevision? Or does he distinguish between prevision and precognition and argue that only a subset of prevision meets the requirement for precognition to a deflationary conception of prevision. For discussions on how the views of divination in the Eudemian Ethics relate to the account given in the De Divinatione, see Huby 1979; van der Eijk 1989; Holowchak 1996.


12 In this context it is also worth noting and keeping in mind for a later discussion that Dodds refers to the ‘wave-borne’ theory (at 463b31ff.) as an alternative to the explanation in terms of cause, sign, and coincidence. Dodds 1951 and 1971 are possibly the sources of similar interpretations of later date, cf. especially Huby 1979 and Gallop 1996.
tion (or some approximation of precognition)? Yet there is no indication that Dodds recognises a distinction between prevision and precognition of the kind suggested in this article. As argued previously, since it is unclear exactly what it is that Aristotle sets out to explain (462b12-20), precognition may seem to be the proper explanandum. After all, Aristotle does seem to attack the notion of god-sent dreams whereas his views on precognition appear more vague. Now, even if there are no explicit references to precognition in Aristotle’s discussion, it seems reasonable to assume that the issue is about in what sense, if any, we can know something about the future by means of dreams. And once this assumption has been made, it will only be natural to explore the viable approximations of precognition, seeing that a strong conception of precognition is ruled out. Unfortunately this strategy leads nowhere, basically because prevision in the Aristotelian sense is not primarily a variety of knowledge. Of course, prevision comprises a minimal cognitive element in the sense that the subject is aware of a dream, but the mere awareness of a dream does not make it a case of prevision.

In sum, the concept of prevision, in the sense endorsed by Aristotle, is more in line with the notion of truth (due to correspondence) rather than cognition, with one important reservation, namely, a conditional time-clause.

B. The temporal factor in prevision

Prevision in the sense in which Aristotle uses the term has nothing veridical about it at the time a dream occurs. For instance, there is no veracity implied in the mere manifestation of a dream or in any accompanying sense of premonition. Nor is there any veracity implied in connection with predictions based on signs, or plans for future action. The term veridical is only applicable after a correspondence between a dream and a fulfilling event has been established. This means that we can have a type of conditional ‘foresight’ at the time we dream, provided that the dream becomes fulfilled in the future. But strictly speaking, we cannot foresee anything at the time we have a dream; a dream can only become a case of prevision retrospectively, when and if a fulfilling event later makes it so (463b22-31).

So strictly speaking, Aristotle does not offer a theory of how the future may be

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13 For other accounts that emphasise cognition, see, e.g., Harris 2009.

14 The conditions of fulfilment vary, it seems, depending on whether the dream involves prevision in the mode of signs, on the one hand, or causes or coincidences, on the other. In the case of signs the fulfilling event is either a present hidden state (say, the initial stage of an illness that later becomes manifest) or an occurrence that the sign points towards in the future, not an event that replicates the original dream-content. For instance, if we consider a natural sign like a dark cloud, the fulfilling event is the rainy weather that may follow from a dark sky, not the manifestation of the dark cloud itself. So in the case of fulfilled dreams qua signs there are no strict matches as regards the content of dreams and later fulfilling events. Foreseeing dreams in the mode of causes and coincidences, on the other hand, seem to require fulfilling events that match the description of the original dream. Aristotle does not elaborate on how strict the correspondence ought to be in order to meet the criteria for proper fulfilment.
foreseen rather his account explains how the future was foreseen in retrospect.\(^{15}\)

C. The contingent relation between dreams and fulfilling events

One may further note Aristotle’s insistence that there is no necessary connection between the having of a dream and its fulfilment in the future, and this holds regardless of whether the dream is fulfilled in the form of causes, signs, or by coincidences. Aristotle writes:

That many dreams are not fulfilled is in no way surprising. The same holds for many signs of bodily events or of the weather, e.g. of rain or wind. For if another movement should take place, prevailing over the one from which (when it was going to happen) the sign occurred, then the latter movement does not occur. And many well-made plans for actions needing to be carried out have been undone because of other causes that prevailed. For, in general, not everything that was going to happen actually does happen; nor is what will be the same as what is going to be. But even so, one should say that there are causes of a certain kind, from which no fulfilment ensued, and these things are natural signs of certain things that failed to occur.\(^{16}\)

This passage lends further support to the claim that dreams may turn out to be authentic cases of prevision, but only after a fulfilling event has occurred. However, this does not rule out the possibility that dreams provide more or less reliable information about what is likely to happen in the future, or that dreams may serve as motivations for future actions. Yet, ‘foresee’ (προορᾶν) is a success-verb like ‘perceive’ or ‘remember’, which requires (the uncertain) occurrence of a future matching event.

In light of Aristotle’s point that fulfilment in the mode of cause, sign and coin-

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\(^{15}\) Without a distinction between prevision and precognition of the proposed kind, one is likely to fall into the trap of a false dichotomy in which Aristotle either seems to eliminate prevision altogether or attempts to explain precognition. Cf. Harris 2009, 255-256 who writes: ‘Without much warning, we seem after all to be in a world in which dreams really do have some predictive potential. …We are faced with a dilemma. We can either agree with the commentators who claim that Aristotle is simply speaking about people who seem to have veridical dreams, fortuitously. Or we can accept what the text seems to say, namely that some correct dream predictions are not entirely coincidental. It should be obvious that he latter view is preferable.’ Note Harris’ emphasis on predictive dreams, which is symptomatic for a cognitive approach to prevision, since prediction is one of the few features one can cling to if one aims at a cognitive account of foresight. However, it should be noted that even if prevision requires fulfilment, dreams qua signs are signs even if they are not fulfilled (463b22-31). Cf. the section on cognitive interpretations.

\(^{16}\) ὅτι δ’ οὐκ ἀποβαίνει πολλὰ τῶν ἐνυπνίων, οὐδὲν ἄτοπον· οὐδὲ γὰρ τῶν ἐν τοῖς σώμασι σημείων καὶ τῶν ὑδάτων, οἷον τὰς ἐν νυγήν εἰς κύκλωμα, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ναυτικών καὶ τῶν πνευμάτων (ἀν γὰρ ἄλλη κυριωτέρα ταύτης συμβῇ κίνησις, ἂρ’ ἣς μελλόντης ἐγένετο τὸ σημεῖον, οὐ γίνεται), καὶ πολλὰ βουλευθέντα καλὸν τῶν πραγμάτων δεόντων διελθὴ δι’ ἄλλας κυριωτέρας ἀρχῆς. δόλος γὰρ οὐ πάν γίνεται τὸ μέλλησαν, οὐδὲ τὸ αὐτὸ τὸ σέσῇν καὶ τὸ μέλλον· ἄλλ’ ὅμως ἀρχὰς γέ τινας λεκτέον εἶναι ἄρ’ ὅν οὐκ ἐπετελέσθη, καὶ σημεία πέφυκε ταῦτα τινῶν οὐ γενομένων.
cidence is contingent in every case, it seems to follow that there can be no definite knowledge in the present about what will be the case in the future. It may therefore seem confusing when Aristotle refers to experiences ‘from which people have previsions of what is going to happen’ at 464a18-19. In this particular case, however, Aristotle is likely to assume a hypothetical conjecture that the fulfilling event will occur, in order to bring home the point, which is not, as we shall see, about prevision at all, but about how a certain type of experience emerges that may provide the raw-material for prevision.

To sum up the discussed interpretations of premonitory dreams:

(1) **Precognition.** This variety of prophetic dreams entails veridical information about the future in the present (a view that presumably is strongly associated with the idea of god-sent dreams).

(2) **Cognitive or volitional acts towards the future.** Other interpretations determine prevision as a state or attitude, prior to fulfilment, but with considerably softer knowledge-claims. For instance, dreams may motivate particular actions in waking as well as prediction from signs about what is likely to happen.

(3) **Prevision (προοράν) in the sense endorsed by Aristotle.** Prevision is determined by the occurrence of a corresponding fulfilling future event. Accordingly, there is no prevision at the time a dream occurs, only in retrospect and this applies to all the specified modes of prevision, i.e., causes, signs, and coincidences. The particular mode of prevision merely adds how a certain event was foreseen.17

V. Does Aristotle consider additional explanations of premonitory dreams?

Aristotle’s explanation of prevision at 462b12ff. in terms of cause, sign, and coincidence suggests that he regards the explanation to be exhaustive. The very formulation used, ‘it is necessary that the dreams are either causes or signs of things that happen, or else coincidences’ (462b26-28), makes it likely that Aristotle intends to specify all the viable ‘naturalistic’ options.

I shall take a closer look at two discussions that allegedly include evidence that Aristotle alludes to or considers alternative explanations of prevision. The selected views will be presented as a challenge to the hypothesis of explanatory completeness as regards Aristotle’s account in terms of cause, sign, and coincidence, and may be articulated as two distinct types of objections. For instance, one may argue that (1) Aristotle attempts to explain precognition, which in turn suggests a different or, at any rate, an additional explanandum in relation to prevision understood as the awareness of a given dream (or some experiential equivalent) before a corresponding event occurs. It may also be argued that (2) 17 van der Eijk 2005 supports a similar interpretation of prevision to the one defended here. He summarises: ‘Prophecy in sleep is a matter of luck and belongs to the domain of chance: it escapes human control, and its correctness can only be established afterwards, when the event that was foreseen has actually taken place. Mantic knowledge is not knowledge in the strict sense (for many dreams do not come true, 463b22-31), and the insights gained by it, if correct, are at best “accidental insights”, which only concern the “that”, not the “because”: they only point to the existence or occurrence of something without providing an explanation for this’ (van der Eijk 2005, 204).
Aristotle introduces an additional deflationary category of prevision in addition to cause, sign and coincidence (i.e., explanans of a novel type), with reference to the particular psychology of the melancholics. I shall assess the two types of objections separately.

A. The theory of nocturnal long-distance quasi-perception

At 463b31ff. Aristotle introduces a discussion that has struck many commentators as quite puzzling. The passage in question deserves to be quoted in full. Aristotle writes:

As for dreams that do not contain causes of the kind we have described, but outlandish ones, either in time or place or magnitude, or in none of those ways, but where those experiencing the dreams still have no causal initiatives within themselves, the following account (unless the prevision is due to coincidence) would seem preferable to that of Democritus, who attributes it to images and emanations. When something has moved a portion of water or air, and this in turn has moved another, then even when the initial impulse has ceased, it results in a similar sort of movement continuing up to a certain point, although the original mover is not present. In this way it is possible that some sort of movement and perception reaches the souls of dreamers, coming from the objects whence Democritus derives his images and emanations. And wherever they arrive they may be more perceptible at night, because those carried by day are more easily dissipated (the air being less disturbed at night, because of the nights being calmer); and thus they produce perception in the body because of sleep, people asleep being more sensitive to even slight internal movements than those awake. It would be these movements that cause appearances (phantasmata) from which people have previsions of what is going to happen, even on matters of the sort mentioned above.18

First, when Aristotle refers to dreams with ‘origins’ (ἀρχαί) that are extravagant

18 περὶ δὲ τῶν μὴ τοιαύτας ἐγκάλων ἄρχα ἐνυπνίων οἷας ἐκπεμηκέν ἄλλ᾽ υπερορίας ᾧ τοῖς χρόνοις ᾧ τοῖς τόποις ᾧ τοῖς μεγέθεσιν, ᾧ τούτων μὲν μηδὲν, μὴ μέντοι ἔκες ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐχόντων τὰς ἄρχας τῶν ἰδόντων τὸ ἐνύπνιον, εἰ μὴ γίνεται τὸ προορᾶν ἀπὸ συμπτώματος, τοιύντι ἄν ἐν μᾶλλον ἄν ὀσπερ λέγει Δημόκριτος εἴδωλα καὶ ἀπορροιαῖ αἰτιώμενος, ὀσπερ γὰρ ὅταν κινήση τι τὸ ὕδωρ ἢ τὸν ἀέρα, τοῦθ᾽ ἔτερον έκκλησία, καὶ παυσαμένου εἴκειν συμβαινεῖ τὴν τοιαύτην κίνησιν προέρχεται μέχρι τινός, τοῦ κινήσαντος οὐ πάροντος, οὕτως οὐδὲν κωλύει κίνησιν τινα καὶ αἴσθησιν ἀφυκνείσθαι πρὸς τὰς ψυχὰς τὰς ἐνυπνιαζούσας (ἀφ᾽ ἔν τοι αἰσθήσεις τὰ εἴδωλα ποιεῖ καὶ τὰς ἀπορροιαῖς), καὶ ὅσιος δὴ ἔτυχεν ἀφικνουμένα μᾶλλον αἰσθητίς εἶναι νόκτωρ διὰ τὸ μεθ᾽ ἡμέραν φερομένας διαλύσθαι μᾶλλον (ἀπαραχωδόστερος γὰρ ὁ ἄρτος τῆς νυκτὸς διὰ τὸ γνησιεύειν ἀπὸ τὰς νύκτας), καὶ ἐν τῷ σώματι ποιεῖν αἴσθησιν διὰ τὸν ὕπνον, διὰ τὸ καὶ τῶν μικρῶν κινήσεων τὸν ἐντός αἰσθήνεσθαι καθευδοντας μᾶλλον ἢ ἄγυργοροτάς. οὕτα δ᾽ αἱ κινήσεις φαντάσματα ποιοῦσιν, ἐξ ὅν προορᾶσι τὰ μᾶλλοντα καὶ περὶ τῶν τοιούτων.
in place, time, and magnitude, he is likely to refer to the contents of such dreams. ‘Origins’ are here understood as ‘beginnings’ of future (possible) fulfilments. And as we shall see, in the case of ‘origins extravagant in space’, Aristotle will consider a scenario in which the content of a ‘dream’ has its origin in some remote place beyond the range of ordinary sensory perception. ‘Extravagance in magnitude’ probably refers to events that lie beyond an individual’s power to realise, for instance, the occurrence of a thunderstorm. ‘Origins extravagant in time’ possibly means that the ‘foreseen’ scene is (supposedly) fulfilled by an event in the remote future.

Since Aristotle is ruling out prevision in the mode of cause (self-fulfilment) as well as coincidence, one may get the impression that Aristotle is preparing to introduce a novel explanans into the discussion. However, a close look at the text reveals that the only categories that are explicitly ruled out are fulfilment due to cause and coincidence, which at least leaves room for the category of signs as a possible option. Now even if we assume that prevision in the mode of signs is a plausible interpretation of how the dreams with extravagant origins should be classified, it is not obvious how predictions based on signs will work in the various types of extravagant scenarios. In order to understand the passage better we may consider each of the types of extravagant factors separately.

First, an interpretation in terms of signs will work quite well in connection with events that are extravagant in magnitude, i.e., happenings that are beyond human agency to control. For example, we may consider a dream in which smoke is coming out of a crater. From this sort of dream we may predict that a particular volcano is about to erupt. Second, the case concerning remote places will not provide any special difficulty, since the theory that Aristotle is about to introduce is especially well designed to handle distances in space. The really difficult case to explain seems to be temporally extravagant positions. Now, if we consider relatively short time spans between the dream and some fulfilling event, the interpretation in terms of signs is quite intelligible. But how can any manifest sign in the present tell us what is likely to happen in years from now, or in the next millennium? Unfortunately we receive no additional clarification of how
signs are able to carry information that connects events over large time-spans.

Next Aristotle presents his theory of nocturnal long-distance quasi-perception, which is said to be preferable to Democritus’ atomist theory regarding the transmission of εἴδωλα. The sketched theory includes a wave-like propagation of movements during night and allows for something akin to ‘veridical perception’. The theory illuminates how a subject could be aware of events far off, for instance, at the Pillars of Heracles. People are assumed to be more sensitive when asleep than when awake, and are therefore able to pick up such movements during night (cf. Insomn. 460b28-461a8), and the calmer conditions of the night prevent these movements from being scattered (‘the air being less disturbed at night’).

Now, after introducing this theory of quasi-dreaming Aristotle concludes, ‘It would be these movements that cause appearances from which people have previsions of what is going to happen’ (Div. 464a18-19). At this point, it may appear as Aristotle is saying that this particular class of experiences provide privileged visions of the future. But he is not. The most reasonable interpretation seems to be that Aristotle aims to explain the almost incredible case in which people have previsions of things occurring in distant places (remember the allusion to prevision about things taking place at the Pillars of Heracles in the introduction) or of things that would be beyond the powers of anyone to bring about. Note that there is nothing in the relevant passage that suggests that Aristotle intends to give an explanation of how ‘genuine’ precognition is possible.

Note also that that the account provides an explanation of how a sign can convey information about, or point towards, future events in the environment. Aristotle’s earlier discussion of signs in connection with regular dreams exclusively concerns signs of a particular kind, namely, ‘those of illness and other affection imminent in our bodies’ (462b30-32; 463a18-20). The account involving extravag-

22 It is difficult to understand how the subject becomes aware of these movements. Aristotle does not present an account of how a subject picks up such stimuli. In the De insomniis it is argued that external perception is disabled during sleep. However, this claim is later modified at 462a19-21 where Aristotle considers a case of faint and indistinct awareness of present external objects. It remains unclear how the awareness of external dreams relates to other cases of ‘perception’ that occasionally may occur in sleep (cf. van der Eijk 2005).

23 One might wonder why the account of extravagant dreams enters the discussion in the first place. The proposed theory appears somewhat excessive given the constraints of natural explanation that Aristotle usually embraces. However, it seems to me that the theory is introduced as a complementary hypothetical excursion in order to handle extraordinary circumstances, e.g., ‘dreams’ about things taking place far away. The proposed theory demonstrates what a naturalistic theory could explain given a modification of the account as regards ordinary dreams. And of course, Aristotle is showing off, by offering an account that explains what Aristotle earlier in the introduction alluded to as virtually impossible to understand (462b25-26).
agent dreams escapes the constraints of the official theory of dreams, and more intuitively permits access to states of the external world, not just states of our own bodies.

So in what ways could Aristotle’s supplementary theory of dreaming challenge the assumption of explanatory completeness as regards the categories cause, sign, and coincidence? One might acknowledge that the account at 463b31ff., in a certain sense, is a kind of alternative explanation of prevision, since it does not concern dreams strictly speaking. But it is important to note that this account does not provide any novel element specifying the relation between experiential content (i.e., a dream or some atypical equivalent) and some fulfilling event in the future. In short, there seems to be no additional explanation of what prevision is at 463b31ff., but rather an explanation of the emergence of dream-like phenomena that may provide an opportunity for prevision.

It might be helpful to take a closer look at how some authors approach Aristotle’s discussion at 463b31ff. Here are a few samples from the literature that exhibit a more or less apparent tendency to interpret the text as an attempt to explain precognition. First Huby 1979, 55:

> At the end of the work he still considers it possible that some dreams are genuinely veridical and paranormal and says he has a better theory than that of Democritus—which was one of *eidola* streaming off from objects—and develops what amounts to a wave theory of extra-sensory perception. Like later theories of the same kind, it does not explain everything, and in particular is no help towards understanding precognition, but for us the important point is that it is intended as a natural, scientific explanation which will replace the traditional supernatural one.24

And Gallop 1996, 167 writes in the same vein:

> The theory is hard to understand in connection with occurrences in the remote future. For how is it supposed to account for prevision of events that have not yet occurred? If the impulses proceed, as Aristotle says (a11), from the objects ‘whence Democritus derives his ‘‘images’’ and ‘‘emanations’’’, i.e. from material objects in their present or previous state, how do they enable the dreamer to foresee the remote future? The theory is, in fact, better suited to telepathy than to precognition, as is the hypothesis of special rapport between distant friends

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24 It seems harmless enough to describe the theory of external dreams, in one tone of voice, as a paranormal theory and yet as a naturalistic and rational account since no supernatural element is involved. However, it is misleading to present the theory as a paranormal account of precognition (or prevision in the deflationary sense of prevision specified in this article). Instead, there is an account (paranormal or not) of how a certain type of experience emerges, in addition to regular dreams, which may provide opportunities for prevision. Nevertheless, even if the account in some sense qualifies as a naturalistic explanation, it lacks the common-sense of Aristotle’s official analysis of prevision in terms of cause, sign, and coincidence.
Aristotle’s initial question as to whether and how certain people could genuinely foresee the future (462b24-26, cf. 453b20-22) remains virtually untouched-

Holowchak 2002, 49 reveals that he has similar expectations regarding the explanandum in this context:

Last, Aristotle acknowledges that some dreams are even genuinely prophetic. In On Prophesy during Sleep, he states that there are certain extravagant dreams, whose origin is not in the dreamer, that are fulfilled by future events. These he provisionally dismisses as coincidental at 463b1-23, only to reexamine the issue beginning at 464a1. Here he grudgingly concedes that certain abnormal humans have a nature that enables them to take in and see the images of things yet to be.

The point is not that the authors above agree that there is an account of precognition at 463b31ff. In fact, Huby and Gallop point out that there is no intelligible account of precognition in the relevant passage. Yet, the quoted authors seem to expect the explanandum to be precognition. However, Aristotle does not aim to explain precognition, and if I am right there is no particular reason that he should.

B. The ecстатics

Aristotle makes the following remark immediately after having introduced the additional type of dream:

This would also explain why this affection happens to random subjects and not to the most intelligent. For if the sender were God, it would happen in the day-time and to clever people. But on our account, one would expect it to be random subjects who have prevision. For the mind of such a person is not reflective, but is deserted as it were, and completely vacant. Thus, once set in motion, it is led on according to the direction of its moving impulse. The reason why some insane people have prevision is that their own movements do not block the access of other but get beaten off. Hence they are especially sensitive to alien movements.25 (464a19-27)

Aristotle’s general remark about the sleepers’ mind being vacant should perhaps be taken to mean that they have a reduced amount of cognitive activity due to the state of sleep (cf. Insomn. 458b7-9; 460b32-461a8), which in turn implies that the occurrence of prevision has nothing to do with intelligence but happens to random people. As argued in the De insomniis, the state of sleep incapacitates external perception and restrains intellectual activity, which also explains the low

25 καὶ διὰ ταῦτα συμβαίνει τὸ πάθος τοῦτο τοῖς τυχοῦσι καὶ οὐ τοῖς φρονιμωτάτοις. μεθ’ ἡμέρας 
καὶ διὰ ταῦτα συμβαίνει τὸ πάθος τοῦτο τοῖς τυχοῦσι καὶ οὐ τοῖς φρονιμωτάτοις. μεθ’ ἡμέρας 
ταῖς ἐκστασιν· εἰ δὲ γὰρ ἐνεργεῖται καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τοῖς σοφοῖς, εἰ δὲ τοῖς ἐκστατικοῖς. 
μεθ’ ἡμέρας τινῶν τοιούτων ὃς ἐνεργεῖται καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τοῖς σοφοῖς, εἰ τοῖς ἐκστατικοῖς.
degree of inhibitory influence on incoming movements (cf. Segev 2012). Aristotle then refers to the ecstatics (ἐκστατικοί) and tells us why people of this category are exceptionally good at picking up external movements. Their own movements (presumably their own internally generated regular dreams) do not block incoming external movements from becoming conscious. The very point of these remarks seems to relate to the previous discussion of extravagant dreams. Some people have a special disposition, i.e., an extraordinary sensitivity to pick up external stimuli during sleep. Such people have a special gift for prevision, in the sense of having access to an additional type of experience that later might be fulfilled by a future event. Some people have, as it were, a more extensive set of experiences from which they can have foresight. ‘Alien movements’ should in this context not be understood as something opposed to ‘familiar movements’ (familiar experiential content). They are alien simply in virtue of having an external source, in the way the theory suggests.

C. Euthuoneiric dreams

Next, Aristotle makes some different but related points, presumably about regular dreams as well as about the external type of dream discussed previously. Aristotle writes:

The fact that it is certain people who have direct dream-vision, and that familiar friends have prevision especially about each other, is due to their being specially concerned on each other’s behalf. For just as they are quickest to recognize and perceive one another at a distance, so too with their movements. For the movements of those familiar to them are correspondingly more familiar.

The remark is supposed to explain why some dreamers have euthuoneiric dreams (εὐθυονειρία, approximately ‘undistorted dreams’) but also why euthuoneiric dream-content manifests itself in the case of a certain type of content rather than others. We dream about things that concern us, which means that we are more familiar.

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26 Aristotle does not elaborate on how incoming stimuli compete with ‘movements’ that are internally generated (presumably regular dreams).

27 τὸ δέ τινας εὐθυονειρίους εἶναι καὶ τὸ τούς γνωρίμους περί τὸν γνωρίμον μάλιστα προοραν συμβαίνει διὰ τὸ μάλιστα τοὺς γνωρίμους ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων φροντίζειν· ὥσπερ γὰρ πόρρω ἄντων τάχιστα γνωρίζοισι καὶ αἰσθάνονται, οὕτω καὶ τῶν κινήσεων· αἱ γὰρ τῶν γνωρίμων γνωριμώτεραι.

28 For instances of εὐθυονειρία in the text, see Div. 463a25; 464b7 (εὐθυόνειροι 463b16; 464a27). Cf. the cognate εὐθυόνειρος, in EE 1248a40. Εὐθυονειρία is translated as ‘vivid dreams’ by Hett 1957 and Beare 1984, ‘direct dream-vision’ by Gallop 1996, and ‘clear dreams’ by van der Eijk 2005. See also Harris 2009, who proposes ‘understandable dreams’. The term is absent in the De somno and the De insomniis, which suggests that its use has special bearing on the theme of prevision. Aristotle is likely to mean something richer than any of the presented alternatives, along the lines of ‘realistic’ (‘faithful’, ‘mundane’), in the sense that euthuoneiric dreams are (i) clear (sharp, easily identifiable), (ii) that the gestalts discernable in dreams are complete or cohesive, e.g., they do not appear as fragments, and (iii) that dream-content appears in the guise of plain objects (i.e., not fantastic or deformed etc.). The general idea seems to be that euthuoneiric dreams are faithful to how things are when perceived, which involves important features in addition to ‘clarity’ and ‘vivacity’.
likely to have undistorted dreams about things that occupy our minds. It seems that it is not just our concern for various matters but also our familiarity with them that explain the quality and kind of dreams we are likely to have. Aristotle draws attention to the fact that close friends are good at identifying each other quickly at large distances despite poor conditions for optimal perception. Accordingly there is a similar enhancing factor operating in the apprehension of dreams.

The general point seems to be that people tend to have euthuoneiric dreams about things they care about or are familiar with from previous experiences. However, it is not obvious how euthuoneiric dreams relate to the main theme of foresight. Things become clearer if we assume that the discussion on euthuoneiric dreams aims to highlight a category of dreams that have a fair chance to match a mundane event in the world (a hint is given at 463a24-29). Accordingly, distorted dreams (e.g., dreams about flying pigs, mythological creatures, or obscure dream-content in general) will have a very low probability of fulfilment.

D. The melancholics

Melancholic people, however, do seem to have a special connection to prevision in one particular sense. Aristotle notes that it would appear odd to assume that plain folk have foreseeing dreams if such dreams have a divine origin. Foresight rather seems to follow naturally from the psychological constitution of certain categories of people (talkative and melancholic people).

Here is proof: quite ordinary people have powers of prevision and direct dream-vision, as if it were not God who sends dreams, but as if those whose nature is garrulous, as it were, or atrabilious see visions of all kinds. For it is because they experience many movements of every kind that they just happen to

Faithful or undistorted dreams, according to this interpretation, will basically carry the content and quality of the original sense-impression (αἴσθημα) that is reactivated in the state of sleep. The preference for 'clear dreams' as an appropriate translation of εὐθυονειρία may possibly derive from a too literal reading of Aristotle’s analogy of distorted dreams as similar to blurred reflected images in disturbed water (464b5-10). For a connected discussion on distorted dreams, see esp. Insomn. 461a8-25. However, assuming that ‘euthuoneiric dreams’ approximately means something along the lines of ‘undistorted dreams’, this category of dreams would provide apt material for future fulfilments. Accordingly, dreams that display indistinct, unrealistic, or otherwise distorted dream-content are not likely to become fulfilled by a real-world future event. See also the note on ‘interpreters of dreams’ in the closing section of the article. For discussions of εὐθυονειρία, see in particular van der Eijk 1994, 28, 30f., 332; 2005, 139-160; and Gallop 1996, 41, 168, 184.

It is here unclear whether Aristotle refers to the kind of atypical dream that originates from an external source or ordinary dreams. The former category will presumably have an euthuoneiric appearance in the sense that such dreams depict how things are (in quality, structure and content), provided that the movements do not reach the subject in a corrupt way. The external type of dream also explains how a subject can have dreams about things not previously experienced, although the factors of personal concern and familiarity will make the subject prone to make a certain selection among movements.
encounter sights resembling real events, being fortunate in those, like certain people who play at odds and evens. For, as the saying goes, ‘if you make many throws, you will throw differently on different occasions’. That is what happens in their case also.\(^{30}\) (463b15-22)

This passage suggests that occurrences of fulfilled dreams are in a large class of cases nothing but lucky coincidences. The probability of having foreseeing dreams simply increases with the number of occurring dreams, provided there is variation in dream-content (‘visions of all kinds’). Aristotle’s analogy with gambling is illuminating but can also be misleading. The argument may suggest that melancholic people are luckier than ‘ordinary’ people. However, we would not consider an individual lucky, who now and then comes across a winning hand of cards but who loses most games. In any event, perhaps a more modest conclusion is reasonable, namely, that melancholic people have a larger share of coincidentally fulfilled dreams (as well as unfulfilled dreams), than the average dreamer. However, it is doubtful whether Aristotle holds that melancholic people in general have coincidental dream-fulfilment more often than ordinary people. Distortions of the kind that corrupt euthuoneiric dreams are expected to occur especially among the melancholics (Insomn. 461a8-25).

Now, if the occurrence of euthuoneiric dreams is a prerequisite for prevision in general, it seems to follow that the melancholics are worse off than those who enjoy euthuoneiric dreams more frequently. Note, however, that the euthuoneiric quality of dreams is an important factor that partly explains the melancholics’ capacity for foresight in this example. In order to make this account add up neatly with other remarks about distorted dreams, I shall suppose that Aristotle considers various kinds of mental disturbances among the melancholics. The exemplified case suggests a particular disposition that does not corrupt euthuoneiric dreams as such, but rather disturbs the coherence or unity of an ongoing dream-sequence. So, the melancholics have a disposition to have distorted dreams in various forms as regards dream-content, as well as disturbances in the process of dreaming (cf. Insomn. 461a8-25; Div. 464a27-b16). This particular example illustrates a case in which a rapid succession of dreams occurs without accompanying distortions of content (e.g., blurry, incomplete, or re-arranged contents). In sum, Aristotle’s main point is that people with certain mindsets are prone to have coincidentally fulfilled dreams.

By contrast, Wijsenbeek-Wijler 1976 argues that Aristotle introduces an additional ‘natural’ explanation of prevision in addition to the categories of cause, sign and coincidence.

Wijsenbeek-Wijler’s interpretation relies on the assumption that Aristotle

\(^{30}\) σημεῖον δέ· πάνυ γάρ εὐτελεῖς ἄνθρωποι προορατικοί εἰσι καὶ εὐθυόνειροι, ὡς οὐ θεοῦ πέμποντος, ἀλλ’ ὅσοι ὄσπερ ἂν εἰ λάλοις ἢ φύσις ἐστί καὶ μελαγχολική, παντοδαπὰς ὑπερὶς ὀρθόν: διὰ γὰρ τὸ πολλὰ καὶ παντοδαπὰ κινεῖσθαι ἐπιτυγχάνουσιν ὁμοίος θεωρήμασιν, ἐπιτυχεῖς οὖν ἐν τούτοις ὄσπερ ἐνοι ἁρτιαζόντες· ὄσπερ γάρ καὶ λέγεται ἃν πολλὰ βάλλης, ἄλλοτ’ ἄλλοιον βαλεῖς’, καὶ ἐπὶ τούτων τούτο συμβαίνει.
rejects all the previous explanatory options when discussing extravagant dreams, which motivates Wijsenbeek-Wijler to look for any hint in the text that may account for the assumed case of prevision allegedly alluded to at 463b31-464a19. Wijsenbeek-Wijler finds an explanatory factor in Aristotle’s discussion of the special mental constitution of the melancholics, but adds that this type of prevision is without any real significance.\textsuperscript{31} She writes:

On the other hand Aristotle denies any real significance to these dreams, while on the other their coming true is not due to coincidence. The explanation must be the same as he gives presently for the occurrence of the same kind of foretelling dreams in the case of unbalanced people, particularly melancholics, namely that owing to their impressionability and impetuosity, they have a certain knack for arriving at the right conclusion of events to come (which will eventually be impressions), without actually experiencing them. (Wijsenbeek-Wijler 1976, 243-244)

Her contention is perhaps more clearly stated in the summary: ‘Divination by dreams is mainly due to coincidence, but there are cases where it is due to the mental state of the dreamer’ (247). This is an unfortunate interpretation, mainly because it cannot provide what it promises, since Aristotle’s discussion of the melancholics, in this context, does not offer an additional category of prevision.

Immediately after having discussed the likely content of euthuoneiric dreams, Aristotle returns to the characteristic mindset of the melancholics. Aristotle writes:

Again, atrabilious people, because of their intensity are good guessers, shooting, as it were, from a distance. Because of their mutability, the succeeding fancy (phantazetai) comes quickly before them. For just as even madmen utter or mentally rehearse things associated by assonance, e.g. ‘Aphrodite’, ‘-phrodite’, as in the poems of Philaenias, so do these people string a series onwards. And again, because of their intensity, one movement does not get knocked out of them by another.\textsuperscript{32}

(464a32-b5)

At first glance it may appear as if Aristotle is reiterating the argument at 463b18-22, that the frequency and variation of dreams may result in lucky hits, which at least makes good sense of the remark that melancholic people are good

\textsuperscript{31} It is not obvious what ‘significance’ is supposed to mean in this context. ‘Significance’ possibly means something in line with ‘precognition’ or ‘foreknowledge’ (as characterised in this article).

\textsuperscript{32} οἱ δὲ μελαγχολικοὶ διὰ τὸ σφοδρόν, ὅσπερ βάλλοντες πόρρωθεν, εὔστοχοι εἰσιν, καὶ διὰ τὸ μεταβλητικὸν ταχὺ τὸ ἐχόμενον φαντάζεται αὐτοῖς· ὅσπερ γὰρ τὰ Φιλαινίδος ποιήματα καὶ οἱ ἐμμανεῖς ἐχόμενα τοῦ ὁμοίου λέγουσι καὶ διανοοῦνται, οἷον Ἀφροδίτην φροδίτην, καὶ οὕτω συνείρουσιν εἰς τὸ πρόσω. ἔτι δὲ διὰ τὴν σφοδρότητα οὐκ ἐκκρούεται αὐτῶν ἢ κίνησις ὧρ’ ἐτέρας κινήσεως.
guessers. I suspect, however, that Aristotle is up to something else. A more plausible interpretation connects the relevant passage to the previous discussion of euthuoneiric dreams as opposed to indistinct (or fragmentary) dreams. On this view, the argument aims to show how certain types of intense mental activity may ‘patch up’ the euthuoneiric quality of a scattered dream. The argument is then not about prevision in any straightforward sense at all, but rather concerns important prerequisites for the likelihood of matches with real-world events in the future.

In order to understand the argument better we need to put together three separate pieces: (i) melancholic people are good guessers, they are like shooters from a distance; (ii) due to their intensity and mutability the succeeding phantasmata comes quickly; and (iii) they string together phantasmata in a series according to a specific pattern (Aphrodite, phrodite, etc.). A way to make sense of these remarks is to read them as a description of an inclination characteristic of melancholic people, to retrieve sensory information from fragmentary or otherwise distorted dreams. The suggestion here is that the melancholic mindset has a certain way of compensating for indistinct and scattered dreams. What makes melancholic people good guessers is not that they have a way of guessing what the future will be like, but rather that they are good at guessing what corrupt dream-content represents in its euthuoneiric form. ‘Shooting from a distance’ is an analogy that aims to capture that the initial conditions for a successful hit are poor. The last sentence in the paragraph ties up the loose ends. The chain of linked phantasmata involves a retrieval mechanism that reconstructs the full dream-content of an originally scattered dream-vision. A detail that speaks in favour of this particular interpretation is the emphasis on the fact that ‘one movement does not get knocked out of them by another’.

33 Gallop 1996, 168-169 interprets this passage as a special case of the point made earlier. He writes: ‘Aristotle draws on his earlier suggestion (463b18-22) that such subjects strike lucky more often than most, because of the abnormal frequency of their visions. Owing to their “mutability”, i.e. the rapidity with which their thoughts change (a33-b1), they envisage so many things that some of these are likely to prefigure actual events. They are thus “good guessers” (a33), compared with marksmen who shoot from a distance, unwilling “to wait till the object of their speculation is close at hand” (Beare). Wijsenbeek-Wijler 1976, 245 presents an alternative explanation based on the occurrence of chains of linked phantasmata: ‘with the melancholics, the series of images follow rapidly one upon the other, and from habit they already see the next image in the series as a dream, though no event has as yet occurred to produce this phantasm. Just as this phantasm succeeded another phantasm in a former experience, they follow the same chain of phantasms again, which may indeed turn out to be a future event’. In my view, both interpretations are unlikely, mainly because they deviate from the central theme comprising euthuoneiric dreams and their vital role for prevision. I side with Drossaart Lulofs 1947, lxii as regards the proper explanandum in this context: ‘That atrabilious persons are experts at hitting the true sense of the confused and portentous things they see in their dreams, because they are able to interpret even the slightest scraps of their visions, is explained De div. p. s. 2. 464a 32sqq., nevertheless it is quite in accordance with Ar.’s theory here exposed that their dreams should be “incoherent”’.

34 Here is another interpretation along the lines that Aristotle’s main concern is to do with distorted vs. undistorted dreams. It might be argued that melancholic people have a tendency to produce ambiguous dreams, and in virtue of having such dreams also have a tendency to generate fuzzy pre-
Nonetheless, Aristotle presents the example including patterns of linked *phantasmata* in a slightly misleading manner. It is perhaps easier to see the point if the sequence of activated *phantasmata* is viewed backwards, i.e., -odite, -rodite, -phrodite, Aphrodite.\(^{35}\) In each step, a missing segment is retrieved, and eventually the full content of the dream emerges as the image of a jigsaw puzzle.\(^{36}\) In addition, the offered interpretation agrees with the account of melancholic people given in *De memoria*, where melancholics are said to have a tendency to generate complete names, tunes, and arguments given the occurrence of an initial trigger (*Mem.* 453a20-31).\(^{37}\)

Note also that the suggested interpretation makes good sense in connection with the final paragraph concerning a skilled interpreter of dreams (*Div.* 464b5-16), which continues the discussion of euthuoneiric dreams and indistinct, vague or fragmentary dreams. The psychological temperament of the melancholics is here contrasted to a skilled (τεχνικώτατος) interpreter of dreams. The interpreter of dreams restores distorted dream-content but does it deliberately by means of his skill.\(^{38}\) In fact the whole discussion that unfolds from the theory of extra-

\(^{35}\) Gallop 1996, 169 makes the following interesting observation: ‘B.A. van Groningen (*Mnemosyne* ser 4.i (1948) 107-8) has adduced papyrus evidence of an amulet of charm dating from the sixth century A.D., which includes the name “Aphrodite”, repeated eight times in successively shortened forms, one letter being dropped from the beginnings of the word with each repetition: “Aphroditen, -phroditen, -roditen, -diten, etc”.’

\(^{36}\) This is possibly a sense in which melancholic people have less ‘coherent’ (ξιρόμενα) dreams, see esp. *Insomn.* 461a22. See also the textual considerations as regards the term ξιρόμενα in Drossaart Lulofs 1947, lxii-lxiv. In my view Drossaart Lulofs’ conjecture ξιρόμενα should be read ‘cohesive’. Dreams are cohesive when they are not re-arranged or scattered. Note however that keeping ἔρρωμένα (unhealthy) as the correct reading agrees with the suggested interpretation in so far as unhealthy things are considered as ‘falling apart’ or being damaged in various ways.\(^{37}\)

\(^{37}\) Now we may ask whether this sort of mechanism retrieves euthuoneiric dreams or merely constructs arbitrary ‘clear’, i.e., easily discernable dream-contents. The point about the melancholics being good guessers seems to support the first interpretation, that there is a possibility of guessing wrongly.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) The text reveals no hint that Aristotle is discussing interpretations of dreams *qua* signs. The note concerning the interpreter of dreams is possibly a challenge to the immensely influential oneirocritical tradition, in which the main tasks among dream-interpreters was to provide interpretations of symbolic dreams (cf. n3). By contrast, Aristotle is introducing a wholly new approach to dream-interpretation. The interpreter’s ability to ‘detect similarities’ (464b5-7) probably means that the interpreter is able to trace the origin of a given dream-fragment (or indistinct dream-appearance) to its original sense-impression (αἴσθημα, people with less chaotic mind). So merely apprehending a clear or vivid dream in the form of a well shaped ‘image’ (εἴδωλον) of a centaur (or any other imaginary creature) would not be sufficient for ‘interpretation’. In order to achieve a proper interpretation of a
gant dreams basically concerns euthuoneiric dreams and various forms of disturbed dreams, and does not address the question of prevision in any direct way at all.

So any one who has euthuoneiric dreams or restores the euthuoneiric quality of their own dreams by themselves or with the help of an interpreter will have a fair chance to have foreseeing dreams. But the euthuoneiric quality of dreams, as such, does not provide any knowledge of how the future will turn out.

Conclusion

It has been argued that Aristotle neither explains nor attempts to explain alleged cases of precognitive dreams. Oneiric precognition is most likely explained away together with the notion of god-sent dreams. Nevertheless, Aristotle endorses a deflationary conception of prevision that includes cases in which people have dreams that contingently correspond to events occurring in the future. Aristotle’s explicit explanation in terms of causes, signs, and coincidences is intended to be exhaustive, which means that no additional explanatory category is introduced in the text.

Moreover, in chapter 2 Aristotle considers an additional type of external dream. In this context it may appear as if Aristotle is arguing that ecstatic people have an exceptional capacity for prevision. However, the point is not that the ecstastics have privileged access to the future but rather that such people are especially fit to access externally caused dreams of the discussed type, which in turn may provide an opportunity for prevision in addition to regular dreams. So, in that somewhat misleading sense, one may say that ecstastics have extraordinary powers of prevision. Further, as regards the melancholics, Aristotle makes two separate points. First, that melancholic people may be expected to have coincidentally foreseeing dreams due to their quickness and mutability in dreaming. Second, melancholic people have a disposition that restores corrupt dream-content from fragmentary appearances.

Finally, the example including the interpreter of dreams continues the discussion of re-creation of the euthuoneiric quality of dreams. It is suggested that the euthuoneiric quality of dreams is an important factor in so far as it appears difficult to have foreseeing dreams based on distorted dream-content. Hence, dream

Phenomenally ‘clear’ dream that manifests itself, e.g., as a centaur, the ‘interpreter’ has to be able to identify one fragment as that of a man, and another as that of a horse (i.e., previously perceived real-world objects). A more difficult case would include a dream in which an indistinct or deformed centaur is appearing. If this is right, Aristotle considers two parallel levels of representation, as regards dream-content, and possibly also different criteria for how the two levels of dream-content are determined. From a strictly experiential point of view, the content of a phantasma is whatever the phantasma appears as. By contrast, in the case of ‘interpretation’ the aim is to get behind the distorted level of dream-content in order to reach the dream in its euthuoneiric appearance. In sum, dream-interpretation provides access to a deeper level of undistorted dream-content (the proper significance of the dream, as it were), but does not provide any direct or privileged access to the future. For a more extensive treatment of the cognitive ability involved in ‘seeing resemblances’, see van der Eijk 1994, 326; 2005, 165.
interpretation in the sense advocated by Aristotle does not concern the significance of symbolic dreams nor does the act of interpretation provide any direct access to what the future will be like.\textsuperscript{39}

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