



## Aquinas on the Impossibility of Sin in Dreams

Jordan McFadden (*Saint Patrick's Pontifical University Maynooth*)

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### Abstract

In this article, I discuss how Aquinas weaves together several sources to argue that dreams can never be sinful, although their causes may be. While asleep, no sin can occur because reason cannot function, and reason cannot function because the senses are impeded. I then consider why his treatment of dreams differs from his typical treatment of the effects of sinful acts, which he generally holds to be culpable even if they are not voluntary in their own right. I argue that the relevant difference is that weakening of reason in sleep, a necessary condition of dreaming, is natural rather than voluntary.

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The morality of dreams has been a topic of interest at least since Plato.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas' treatment of the morality of dreams in particular is of special interest for at least three reasons. First, Aquinas holds that dreams are never sinful, but that their causes may be. This is in contrast to his typical treatment of the effects of sinful acts. Generally speaking, he holds that both the *per se* and *per accidens* effects of sinful acts are culpable.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is not immediately clear why Aquinas treats dreams as an exception. Secondly, Aquinas' explanation of why sin cannot occur in sleep relies on the claim that reason depends on the functioning of the senses, which are inoperative during sleep. Thus, dreams provide an interesting test case of the extent to which the function of reason depends upon the senses according to Aquinas. Finally, Aquinas' treatment of this topic brings together a wide spectrum of sources from his intellectual heritage: Augustine, Aristotle, Gregory the Great, and John Cassian. Thus, it is of interest how he interweaves these varied sources in the treatment of a single topic.

Despite the interest of this topic, it has seldom been discussed, and thus the present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature. I will proceed in three sections. In the first, I will examine Aquinas' sources regarding the morality of dreams: Augustine's

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, IX.571c–572b.

<sup>2</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 73 a. 8 co.: "...propter negligentiam considerandi nocumenta quae consequi possent; ...quia quaecumque per se consequuntur ad peccatum, pertinent quodammodo ad ipsam peccati speciem".

*De Genesi ad litteram* XII.15; Aristotle's *De somno et vigilia* and *De insomniis*; John Cassian's *Conferences* XXII.6; and a letter from Gregory the Great to Augustine of Canterbury, recorded by Bede in *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* XXVII.9. In the second section, I will examine Aquinas' argument that there can be no culpability in sleep. Finally, in the third section, I will consider why Aquinas does not hold dreams to be culpable even when they are caused by a sinful act. I will argue that it is because the loss of reason in sleep is natural rather than voluntary.

## 1. Aquinas' Sources

### 1.1 Augustine on Sin in Dreams

Aquinas repeatedly refers to Augustine as an authority in support of the view that there is no sin in sleep.<sup>3</sup> The passage he refers to is *De Genesi ad litteram* XII.15.<sup>4</sup>

When the mental pictures that occur in (a person's) thoughts while he is speaking are also imprinted on his vision while he is dreaming in such a way that he cannot distinguish between them and the real coupling of bodies, the flesh is at once stirred into movement, and the result is what usually follows upon this movement; and this happens without sin, just as when he was awake he said without sin what he undoubtedly thought about in order to say it.

This passage occurs in a discussion of dreams, including dreams of sexual sin and the nocturnal pollution that often accompanies it. Augustine puts forth in this passage that thoughts that occur in dreams come from waking thoughts of the same object. He explains earlier in the chapter that these waking thoughts can occur for legitimate reasons, such as giving a sermon about chastity. He states that the nocturnal pollution occurs because one cannot distinguish these images from the real things they represent. Later in this chapter, Augustine also notes that although moral activity properly speaking is not possible in sleep, a person's good character can manifest itself

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<sup>3</sup> Several authors have argued Augustine cannot successfully defend this point given other positions he holds. G. Matthews, 'On Being Immoral in a Dream', in: *Philosophy* 56 (1981), 47–54; W. Mann, 'Dreams of Immorality', in: *Philosophy* 58 (1983), 378–385. For Augustine's treatment of sin in dreams, see also S. L. Wei, 'The Absence of Sin in Sexual Dreams in the Writings of Augustine and Cassian', in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 66 (2012), 362–378.

<sup>4</sup> In *IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1 s.c.; *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 s.c.; *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, in: J. Zycha (ed.), *Sancti Aurelii Augustini opera* (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1894), XII.15, p. 400 ll. 19–24: "Porro ipsa phantasia, quae fit in cogitatione sermocinantis, cum ita expressa fuerit in uisione somniantis, ut inter illam et ueram conmixtionem corporum non discernatur, continuo mouetur caro et sequitur, quod eum motum sequi solet, cum hoc tam sine peccato fiat, quam sine peccato a uigilante dicitur, quod ut diceretur sine dubio cogitatum est". Translation taken from Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, in J. Rotelle (ed.), *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 2002), XII.15, 480.

even in dreams. He gives the example of Solomon, who asked for wisdom when God appeared to him in his dream.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.2 Aristotle on Sleep and Dreams

Aquinas also draws upon Aristotle's biology of sleep and dreams. He refers to Aristotle's *De somno et vigilia* as his source; however, he clearly also draws on another work of Aristotle's, *De insomniis*. Since Aquinas draws from both these texts, and the two are closely connected, we will give a brief summary of each, paying particular attention to the details to which Aquinas pays the most attention.<sup>6</sup>

In *De somno et vigilia*, Aristotle argues that sleep and waking belong to the sensitive part: sleep is the immobility of sense perception while waking is its release (*Somn.* I.454a4–7). It is an affection of the common sense rather than of the particular senses. Evidence for this claim is that all the senses go idle and return to activity simultaneously (*Somn.* II.455a4–455b2). However, sleep is not merely the incapacitation of the senses; if this were the case, sleep would be indistinguishable from other kinds of unconsciousness. Rather, it occurs when the binding of the senses occurs precisely because the common sense has been bound (*Somn.* II.455b2–455b13). Its end is both the preservation of the animal itself and of the waking state in which it exercises its highest functions, sense and intellect (*Somn.* II.455b22–24). In animals having blood, sleep affects the region of the heart, since it is the organ of the common sense (*Somn.* II.456a4–6).

Aristotle then explains in detail the physiological process that causes sleep. Sleep occurs because of an exhalation resulting from digestion (*Somn.* III.456b17–19). Hot matter from food passes via an evaporation into the veins, is converted into blood and carried to the top of the body (*Somn.* III.456a32–b5). At the top of the body, it is cooled by the brain, the coldest part of the body (*Somn.* III.456b21–24; 457b26–31). It then sinks back down the veins to the lower part of the body, where it compacts hot matter remaining below (*Somn.* III.457a33–b1). This compaction of matter touches the heart, the organ of the common sense, thus preventing the common sense from functioning (*Somn.* III.458a25–29). The person awakes when digestion is completed, that is, when the thicker and thinner blood have been separated, the thicker blood in the lower parts of the body and the thinner in the higher parts (*Somn.* III.458a10–15).

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *De Genesi*, XII.15 p. 401 ll. 3–9. For the biblical account of Solomon's reception of wisdom in a dream, see III Kings 3:5–15.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *De Somno et Vigilia* and *De Insomniis*, in: W. D. Ross (ed.), *Parva Naturalia*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955). These texts are difficult, and their interpretations have been debated in the scholarly literature; thus, any summary will inevitably involve some disputed claims. My understanding of these works is indebted to Ross's introduction and commentary. See also J. Wiesner, 'The Unity of the *De Somno* and the Physiological Explanation of Sleep in Aristotle', in: G. E. R. Lloyd, G. E. L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle on the Mind and the Senses*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 241–280; S. Everson, 'The *De Somno* and Aristotle's Explanation of Sleep', in: *The Classical Quarterly* 57 (2007), 502–520; M. Lowe, 'Aristotle's *De Somno* and his Theory of Causes', in: *Phronesis* 23 (1978), 279–291.

In *De Insomniis*, Aristotle argues that dreams belong to the imagination (*Insomn.* I.459a14–22). It is possible for people to see images of things that are not present because the affection (πάθος) caused by a sense object remains in the sense organ even when the object is no longer present (*Insomn.* II.459a24–28). In support of this explanation, Aristotle gives many examples of effects that continue even when they are no longer in contact with their cause, such as projectiles in space (*Insomn.* II.459a28–b1).

Aristotle proceeds to explain how people can be fooled with regard to the images they perceive (*Insomn.* II.460a32–b28). Even waking people can be fooled in this regard. For example, the coward thinks he sees his enemy when he sees a different person who bears a slight resemblance. Waking people are typically able to distinguish between image and reality because the faculty by which the ruling sense judges is different from the faculty by which images appear (*Insomn.* II.460b16–18). Aristotle gives an example of this distinction that also occurs in the *De anima*: the sun appears to be only a foot in diameter, but we judge that it is actually far larger (*Insomn.* II.460b18–20; *De Anima* III.3 428b3–5). Thus, the image forming faculty must differ from the ruling faculty. Deception is possible because an appearance can occur not only when an external object affects the senses, but also when the sensitive faculty is affected as it would be if the sensible object were present. For example, the earth appears to move from the perspective of a person sailing by the coast (*Insomn.* II.460b22–27).

Next Aristotle argues that internal affections caused by previous sense impressions tend to manifest themselves more often while the person is asleep. When one is awake, the internal movements are obscured by sense and intellect the way a small fire is overshadowed by a large one (*Insomn.* III.460b28–461a4). But during sleep, since the external senses are inactive, the internal affections are carried down in the blood to the source of sense perception, i.e. the heart, which perceives them (*Insomn.* III.461a3–8; 461b11–12).

Aristotle then explains the reason for the variation in clarity of dreams. There are no dreams in the very young or after a meal because the movement of vapors is excessive due to the heat generated from the food. He explains this with a metaphor: you cannot see an image reflected in water if the water is greatly disturbed. If there is slightly less disturbance in the water, one can see images but they are distorted. Distorted images of this sort tend to appear in the dreams of the feverish or intoxicated. In animals having blood, as the blood becomes more separated, i.e., as digestion nears its completion, the motion of the vapors becomes calmer and thus the images become clearer. In these cases, the affections that reach the origin of sense make people think they are actually sensing (*Insomn.* III.461a11–30).

In waking people, the ruling sense judges sense objects to be actually present because the affections reach the source of sense. The ruling sense affirms what it receives from each sense unless a stronger movement contradicts it (*Insomn.* III.461a30–461b7). During sleep, the bulk of the blood goes towards its source and brings the

affections with it (*Insomn.* III.461b11–21). Since the sense organs are impeded, the person is fooled just as one affected by a passion is fooled (*Insomn.* III.461b7–11). Sometimes, the sleeping man realizes he is asleep and thus that the images he perceives are unreal. However, if he does not realize he is asleep, there is nothing to contradict the images that appear to him, and thus he is fooled (*Insomn.* III.462a5–8).

### 1.3 John Cassian on the Causes of Sin in Sleep

In his discussion of the causes of sinful dreams, Aquinas draws on both Cassian and Gregory the Great. Cassian addresses the causes of the nocturnal pollution in *Conferences* XXII.6. In this passage, a senior monk named Theonas, who serves as one of Cassian's mouthpieces in this work, puts forth three causes: gluttony, lack of discipline of one's thoughts, and the intervention of the devil.<sup>7</sup>

Theonas first addresses gluttony. Gluttony causes pollution as an excess of moisture acquired through food must be expelled. He acknowledges that pollution can occur during a fast, but holds that this occurs only due to past gluttony. He also notes that some may fail to experience the pollution in spite of eating excessively, either due to having a particularly balanced body or due to being of advanced age; however, he states that the lack of pollution in these cases is not to be praised.

The second cause is a lack of discipline in the inner life. Through this lack of discipline, the monk allows his thoughts to wander towards sinful things. These thoughts inevitably manifest in shameful images while the person sleeps. Theonas describes this failure to control one's mind as a sort of negligence.

Finally, the third cause is the intervention of the devil. Theonas states that this can occur in spite of the monk's proper practice of abstinence and rigorous fasting. The devil interferes in order to humiliate the monk and prevent him from receiving communion. Later in the chapter, Theonas recounts the story of a monk who regularly had this experience on days he was planning to receive communion and consequently had to abstain from the sacrament. The monk raised this problem with the elder monks, who investigated its possible cause. After eliminating the two other causes, they concluded the repeated pollution must be wholly the work of the devil. They advised the monk to take communion in spite of the pollution, and after he did so the pollution immediately ceased, thus confirming the elders' conclusion.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.4 Gregory the Great on the Causes of Sin in Sleep

Gregory the Great's treatment of the causes of immorality in sleep occurs in a letter to Augustine, Bishop of Canterbury, recorded in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis*

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<sup>7</sup> John Cassian, *Collationes* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004), XXII.3, 616 ll.20–618 ll.29.

<sup>8</sup> Cassian, *Collationes*, XXII.6, 621 ll.24–623 ll.10.



*Anglorum* XXVII.9.<sup>9</sup> Bede reports that Augustine has asked Gregory whether a person can receive communion after “the illusion that tends to occur in dreams”, and if he is a priest, whether he can celebrate the mass.<sup>10</sup> Gregory writes that, according to the Old Testament, a person who has experienced the illusion is unclean and cannot enter the church until evening. However, he acknowledges there may be different interpretations of this text. Thus, in order to answer this question more fully, he puts forth three causes of the illusion: a natural excess or weakness, gluttony, and prior thoughts.

When the illusion occurs from a natural weakness, Gregory claims “the mind unknowingly experienced it but did not bring it about”.<sup>11</sup> This statement seems to imply that the agent is not responsible for the illusion.

Next, Gregory discusses those cases caused by gluttony. He states that the person who experiences the pollution due to gluttony incurs some guilt. He adds a further distinction to this analysis: whether the sleeping mind perceives a shameful image while experiencing the pollution. He states that, as long as the person has not perceived such images, he is allowed to receive communion after an illusion caused by gluttony. Further, he is allowed to celebrate mass under certain circumstances, i.e., if no other priest is available or if the feast day requires his participation.

Finally, Gregory discusses the case of illusions that arise from waking thoughts. He states in this case, “the guilt is clear to the mind”.<sup>12</sup> However, he makes a further three-part distinction: waking thoughts can be mere thoughts, can occur with pleasure, or can occur with the agent’s consent. If the thought remains a mere thought, it is not sinful. Sin begins when the agent experiences pleasure and is completed when the agent consents.

As we will see below, Aquinas takes elements from both Cassian and Gregory’s treatments of the causes of dreams. We will now turn to Aquinas’ treatment of immoral dreams and their causes, beginning with his argument that no sin can occur in dreams.

## 2. Aquinas on the Impossibility of Sin in Dreams

### 2.1 Aquinas’ Argument that No Sin Can Occur in Sleep

Aquinas explicitly argues that there can be no sin in sleep in several places. In both the *Sentences* commentary and the *Secunda Secundae*, he argues this point in order to show that the nocturnal pollution is not sinful in its own right.<sup>13</sup> In *De veritate*, he puts

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<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), XXVII.9.

<sup>10</sup> Bede, *Historia*, XXVII.9, 98: “Si post inlusionem, quae per somnium solet accedere”.

<sup>11</sup> Bede, *Historia*, XXVII.9, 98: “Hanc animus nesciens pertulisse magis dolendum est quam fecisse”.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, *Historia*, XXVII.9, 100: “Patet animus reatus suus”.

<sup>13</sup> In IV *Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1; *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5.

forth the same argument in order to prove no merit can occur in sleep either.<sup>14</sup> His most detailed treatment of this topic occurs in *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8, in which he addresses the question of whether the judgment of reason is impeded when the senses are bound.

Aquinas puts forth the same argument in all four of these texts. However, *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 is the most detailed and is enhanced by Aquinas' incorporation of Aristotle's biological theory of sleep and dreams. Thus, we will first discuss Aquinas' discussion in *In IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1 as representative of his more condensed treatments and then examine *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 in order to see the additions he makes to his argument in light of Aristotle's biology of sleep.

In *In IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1, Aquinas addresses whether the nocturnal pollution is sinful. In the *sed contra*, he quotes Augustine's claim, discussed above, that things done in dreams are not sinful.

In the response, he gives an argument to support Augustine's claim. He first states that, according to Augustine, sin is in the will. However, the motion of the will requires the judgment of reason, since all motion of the will is towards the apparent good, something about which the intellect must judge. Aquinas then proceeds to argue the judgment of reason cannot occur in sleep.<sup>15</sup>

For perfect judgment cannot be had of some thought (*cognitione*) without resolution to the principle from whence the thought originated. In the same way, it is evident that cognition of a conclusion originated from the principles; thus right judgment of the conclusion cannot be had without tracing (*resolvendo*) to indemonstrable principles. Therefore since every thought of our intellect originates from sense, there cannot be right judgment unless it is traced back (*reducatur*) to sense. And therefore the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 6 that just as the indemonstrable principles, which are known by intellect, are the extremes to which thinking is traced, so likewise the singular principles that are known by sense.

Aquinas argues that there cannot be judgment without tracing back to the principles from which the judgment originated. We can clarify this statement by considering Aquinas' treatment of judgment as one of two kinds of reasoning in *STh* I, q. 79 a. 8. The first is the path of inquiry or discovery (*via inquisitionis vel inventionis*), in which reason moves from first principles to new information understood discursively. The

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<sup>14</sup> *De Ver.* q. 28 a. 3 ad 6.

<sup>15</sup> *In IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1, p. 386: "Judicium enim perfectum haberi non potest de aliqua cognitione, nisi per resolutionem ad principium unde cognitio ortum habet; sicut patet quod cognitio conclusionum ortum habet a principiis; unde iudicium rectum de conclusione haberi non potest nisi resolvendo ad principia indemonstrabilia. Cum ergo omnis cognitio intellectus nostri a sensu oriatur, non potest esse iudicium rectum nisi reducatur ad sensum. Et ideo philosophus dicit in 6 *Ethic.*, quod sicut principia indemonstrabilia, quorum est intellectus, sunt extrema, scilicet resolutionis, ita et singularia, quorum est sensus".

second is the path of judgment (*via iudicii*), in which reason returns by retracing (*redit resolvendo*) newly discovered information back to the first principles in order to examine the former in light of the latter.<sup>16</sup> In the text under present consideration, Aquinas states that sense information is one of those first principles in light of which newly discovered information must be examined. He supports this position with his oft-cited claim that all intellectual knowledge originates in the senses.

Aquinas proceeds to further support the idea that sense is a principle of through to which all judgment must be traced by referring to Aristotle's claim that there are two types of the habit of understanding (*intellectus*).<sup>17</sup> On one hand, there is understanding that grasps indemonstrable, a-priori principles. On the other hand, there is understanding that grasps basic sense information, such as "this is bread."<sup>18</sup> Neither type of principle can be supported by argumentation but must be grasped immediately by their respective types of intellect.

In order to see the importance of knowledge of the sensibles for judgment, let us consider an example from literature. Don Quixote deludedly perceives windmills as giants and judges that, since defending the weak is noble and chivalrous, and warding off attacking giants is defending the weak, he should attack the giants. Even if we grant that his logic is valid, his judgment is not sound precisely because of a basic error in the given sense information: before him are not giants, but windmills. Like the half-mad Quixote, the sleeping human being often takes imagined entities to be real and thus is unable to make a free judgment.

Aquinas concludes the argument by reiterating the connection among the functioning of the senses, free judgment, and responsibility. Since the senses do not function while sleeping, no free judgment can occur, and so neither can any free motion of the appetitive part, i.e. the will. Thus, there is neither sin nor merit in sleep.

However, in the third and fourth objections, Aquinas acknowledges that reason does function to some extent in sleep, as we know from experience that people sometimes syllogize in their sleep and sometimes even dissent from temptation in a dream.<sup>19</sup> In response to these arguments, he notes that the senses, and therefore reason, can be bound to a greater or lesser extent by sleep.<sup>20</sup> However, since the senses are always at least partially bound while asleep, the judgment of reason always is mixed with some error, and hence cannot be fully free. Without the free judgment of reason, there can be no free choice, and hence no merit or demerit. As we will see, Aquinas develops this argument in more detail in *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8. In our examination of this text, we will see how his incorporation of Aristotle's biological treatment of sleep and dreams allows him to give a more complete response.

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<sup>16</sup> *STh* I, q. 79 a. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, VI.1143a35–b5.

<sup>18</sup> See *STh* II-II q. 49 a. 2 for Aquinas' treatment of the understanding that is of the last principle grasped by sense. The example "this is bread" is taken from *STh* I-II, q. 14 a. 6 co.

<sup>19</sup> *In IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1 obj. 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> *In IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 1 ad 3-4.



We will now turn to Aquinas' most detailed treatment of this topic, *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8. In this article, he addresses the question "whether the judgment of reason is impeded when the senses are bound". In the *sed contra*, he gives a terse argument that reason's judgment cannot operate when the senses do not.<sup>21</sup>

As Augustine says in *De Genesi ad litteram* 12, illicit things that occur while sleeping are not imputed as sins. But this would not be the case if the sleeping person had free use of reason and intellect. Therefore, the use of reason is impeded by the binding of the senses.

As in the *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas refers to Augustine's claim that there is no sin in sleep. He does not attempt to defend this point here but rather uses it as a premise in his initial argument that reason cannot operate when the senses are bound. Since illicit things done in sleep are not sins, Aquinas argues, the sleeping person does not have the use of reason and intellect. We can make this argument clearer by stating Aquinas' presuppositions: Sin requires the judgment of reason. Therefore, if one can sin, one has the judgment of reason. One cannot sin in sleep, according to Augustine. Therefore, one does not have the judgment of reason in sleep. In sleep the senses are bound. Therefore, reason cannot function when the senses are bound.

There are two things to note about this argument. First, the move from the lack of responsibility to the lack of the judgment of reason is only valid insofar as the judgment of reason is both necessary and sufficient for responsibility; if the judgment of reason is merely necessary, but not sufficient, for responsibility, Aquinas would be guilty of the fallacy of denying the antecedent. Thus, Aquinas here implies that the judgment of reason is both necessary and sufficient for responsibility. Secondly, even if we presuppose that both sense and intellect are bound during sleep, Aquinas still needs to prove that the binding of sense is the cause of the binding of reason. The binding of both sense and intellect in sleep might merely be correlated; one need not be the cause of the other. Thus, in the body of the article, Aquinas argues that the sleeping person does not have the complete use of reason precisely because the senses are inoperative.<sup>22</sup>

As has been said, the proper object proportioned to our intellect is the nature of a sensible thing. But perfect judgment of a thing cannot be made unless everything that pertains to that thing is known, and especially if one does not know the terminus and end of the judgment. But in *De caelo* 3 the Philosopher says, "just as the end of productive knowledge is the work, so the end of natural

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<sup>21</sup> *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 s.c.: "Sed contra est quod in dormiendo ea quae contra licitos mores contingunt, non imputantur ad peccatum; ut Augustinus in XII *super Gen. ad litt.* dicit. Hoc autem non esset si homo in dormiendo liberum usum rationis et intellectus haberet. Ergo impeditur rationis usus per ligamentum sensus".

<sup>22</sup> *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 co.

knowledge (*naturalis scientiae*) is that which principally appears to the senses". For a craftsman only seeks to have cognition of knives for the sake of his work, so that he might make this particular knife; similarly, a natural scientist only seeks to have cognition of the nature of a rock or of a horse in order to know the natures of those things that appear to the senses. But it is evident that the craftsman could not make a perfect judgment about a knife if he did not know what a knife is for; and, similarly, no perfect judgment of natural knowledge can be made about natural things if one does not know the sensibles. But all that we know in our present state we have cognition of in relation to natural sensible things. Thus, it is impossible for us to have perfect judgment of the intellect given the binding of the sense power, through which we have cognition of sensible things.

Aquinas argues that one can only make a perfect judgment about something if he knows everything pertaining to the judgment, especially the end of the judgment. He then argues that understanding that which is given to the senses is the end of what he calls "natural knowledge", i.e. knowledge of the natures of sensible objects. Thus, natural knowledge requires knowledge of that which is given to the senses. Further, he argues, everything a human person knows in the present life he knows by reference to this natural knowledge. Therefore, perfect judgment cannot be made about anything without knowledge of sensible objects.

In defense of the claim that that which is known through the senses is the end of natural knowledge, Aquinas refers to a passage from Aristotle's *De caelo*. In this passage, Aristotle criticizes proponents of a certain view for adhering to principles that lead to consequences that clearly contradict the phenomena, i.e., that which is known through the senses. Against this view, Aristotle argues that principles (ἀρχαί) need to be judged from their results, especially their end (τέλος). This brings him to the analogy Aquinas quotes: just as the end of productive knowledge is the work (ἔργον), the end of natural philosophy (φυσικῆς) it is the phenomena given to the senses.<sup>23</sup>

Aquinas proceeds to flesh out this analogy. He gives examples of both types of knowledge: knowledge of a rock or a horse as natural knowledge, and knife-making as productive knowledge. Since the end of knife-making is to make a functioning knife, the knife-maker could not make a knife properly if he did not know the purpose of a knife. Similarly, since the end of natural knowledge is that which is known through the senses, the natural scientist can only make a proper judgment about a rock or a horse if he knows the relevant sense information. Thus, Aquinas concludes that knowledge of sensible things is necessary for natural knowledge.

He then argues that all human knowledge in the present state of life is in relation to this natural knowledge. He puts forth this claim in the previous article of

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *De caelo*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), III.7 306a15–16.

this question, *STh* I, q. 84 a. 7. Here, he states that the proper object of the human intellect is a nature insofar as it exists in an individual corporeal thing. Thus, all human knowledge in the present life is in relation to these enmattered natures.

From this proper object of human knowledge, Aquinas argues for the necessity of the sense power for knowledge. In order to understand enmattered natures correctly, one must understand them as enmattered. All things existing in matter are individuals; therefore, one must also understand their nature as individual. Thus, they must be understood with the involvement of the sense power, since it is proper to the sensory power to understand material individuals. Specifically, Aquinas argues, the intellect must turn to the phantasms, i.e., likenesses of sensible things that exist in the imagination and through which we know the sensible objects they represent, in order to understand universal natures as they exist in the particular.<sup>24</sup>

However, even granted that the use of some sense power is necessary for perfect judgment, one might wonder why the use of the imagination is not sufficient. A waking person can sin by considering sinful thoughts in their imagination. Since the imagination apparently functions when one dreams, it is unclear why the use of this power is not sufficient for culpability. Aquinas addresses this problem in the response to the second objection of *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8. In the second objection, he notes that sometimes people who are sleeping reason syllogistically. However, the sensory power is impeded during sleep. Thus, he concludes, it must be the case that reason can operate even when the senses do not.<sup>25</sup>

As in the *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas responds to this argument by conceding that reason is impeded during sleep to a greater or lesser degree. Although it is never fully free, it is partially operative at times. He refers to *De somno et vigilia* as his source again, although he in fact draws on *De insomniis*. Drawing on this work, Aquinas states that the sense power is impeded during sleep due to the presence of vapors and fumes. The senses are bound to a greater or lesser extent according to how much these vapors move. Following Aristotle, he describes several degrees of vapor motion and consequent degrees to which the sense power can function. If the vapors move violently, both the senses and imagination are completely bound, and no dreams appear. This tends to occur after heavy eating or drinking. If the vapors are somewhat less active, one experiences disordered and chaotic phantasms. This tends to happen in the feverish. If there is even less movement of vapors, one will have well-ordered phantasms. This tends to occur near waking and in people who are sober and have a strong imagination. In the case of the fewest vapors.<sup>26</sup>

Not only does the imagination remain free, but even the common sense is partially free, so that a human being sometimes judges in sleep that what he

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<sup>24</sup> *STh* I, q. 84 a. 7 co., ad 2.

<sup>25</sup> *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 obj. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *STh* I, q. 84 a. 8 ad 2. See also *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5 obj., ad 2 for the same argument and a more condensed response.

sees are dreams, almost discerning between things and their likenesses. But to some extent the common sense remains bound; and therefore, even if it distinguishes certain likenesses from the things themselves, it is nonetheless always deceived about something. Thus, according to the way in which the sensory power and imagination are freed during sleep, the intellect's judgment may be freed, but not entirely. Thus, those who reason syllogistically while sleeping always recognize, when they awake, that they have made some error.

In this response, Aquinas names two sense powers in particular: the imagination and the common sense. Like Aristotle, he holds that dreams belong to the faculty of imagination. However, the functioning of the imagination is not sufficient for the dreamer to realize that the phantasms are, in fact, phantasms, and not the things which they represent. Because she does not have the use of the common sense, the origin and end of the external senses, the dreamer takes the phantasms to be the things themselves, and hence her reasoning is flawed.<sup>27</sup> The waking person who sins by pondering sinful thoughts, by contrast, does not mistake phantasms for reality, and hence is not misled in their judgment. Like Augustine, Aquinas takes the dreamer's mistake of appearance for reality to be fundamental to the absence of responsibility.

In sum, the *Summa* treatment of the possibility of sin in sleep enhances the *Sentences* treatment by incorporating Aristotle's biological theory of sleep as described in *De somno et vigilia* and *De insomniis* in order to defend his claim that people do not have the use of reason in sleep. In particular, he uses Aristotle's theory to account for the fact that people sometimes reason in dreams while still maintaining this judgment is not wholly free and hence insufficient for responsibility. We will now turn to Aquinas' treatment of the causes of dreams, in which he attempts to account for the intuition that dreams have some connection to the dreamer's character.

## 2.2 The Causes of Sin in Sleep and Their Moral Status

Aquinas addresses the causes of nocturnal pollution in three texts: *In IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 2, *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5, and *STh* III, q. 80 a. 7. I will begin by discussing the early *Sentences* treatment. Then, I will discuss the two *Summa* texts, in which he streamlines his treatment of the causes of dreams. Since these two later treatments largely overlap, I will only discuss *STh* III q. 80 a. 7 in its entirety, supplementing it with details from *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5 when they are relevant.

In *IV Sent.* d. 9 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 2, Aquinas considers whether the nocturnal pollution prevents one from receiving communion. In this text, he argues that three things are necessary for the reception of the Eucharist: purity of conscience, which is taken away by sin; an upright and devoted mind; and bodily cleanliness. Aquinas argues the

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<sup>27</sup> On the function of the common sense, see *STh* I, q. 84 a. 4 ad 1; ad 2; *In De An.* II.13 ll. 94–105; III.2 ll. 175–178; *De Sensu* XVIII ll.130–140.

nocturnal pollution can potentially take away one, two, or all three of these; however, only sinfulness is relevant to our present discussion.

Aquinas then considers the causes of dreams. He makes a threefold division of such causes: extrinsic spiritual, i.e. those things revealed to us by spiritual substances; intrinsic spiritual, i.e. phantasms left over from prior thoughts; and intrinsic bodily, i.e., material change, such as when sweet phlegm runs over the tongue and causes someone to dream he is eating sweets. He notes that some causes are subject to the will while others are not. As we can see in this threefold division of causes, Aquinas takes elements from both Cassian and Gregory's list of causes.

Aquinas also follows Gregory in further distinguishing between pollution that occurs with imagination and that which occurs without imagination. The former case, he states, is twofold: sometimes in the dream the person consents to the shameful images, while sometimes he dissents yet still experiences pollution. When it occurs without imagination, Aquinas claims, this is a sign the pollution is from an intrinsic bodily cause. As we have seen, Gregory himself suggests pollution without images is less sinful than that which occurs with images. However, Aquinas draws the further conclusion that these instances are likely from a bodily cause.

Aquinas then considers whether there is sin in the various causes. Regarding the intrinsic spiritual cause, i.e. prior thoughts, he notes that this can occur without sin, with venial sin, or with mortal sin. It occurs without sin when the thought remains merely a thought and does not cause pleasure, such as when one thinks of shameful things for the sake of debating. These thoughts are venially sinful when they cause pleasure but consent is withheld. Finally, the sin is mortal when the agent gives his consent. Here, Aquinas follows Gregory in his threefold division of thoughts and their relative sinfulness.

He then considers the external spiritual cause, i.e. the action of a spiritual substance. He states that when this regularly occurs on days one is required to receive communion, it is a sign that the devil is trying to prevent one from receiving the sacrament. In defense of this claim, he recounts Cassian's story of the monk who had this experience, and who, once he took communion in spite of the illusion, was relieved of this problem.<sup>28</sup>

Aquinas considers the possibility that the pollution occurs due to an excess of food or drink, a cause both Cassian and Gregory list. Although he does not say so explicitly, he apparently associates gluttony with the intrinsic bodily cause.<sup>29</sup> He states that the judgment is the same in this case regarding that for pollution from proceeding shameful thoughts. Presumably, he means that, like shameful thoughts, it can occur with varying degrees of sin, although it is difficult to imagine how gluttony could occur without any sin at all. He also states that mortal sin is more likely to occur in

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<sup>28</sup> Cassian, *Collationes*, XXII.6, p. 621 ll.24–623 ll.10.

<sup>29</sup> He does make this point explicit in his two other treatments of this topic, *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5 and III, q. 80 a. 7.



thoughts than in gluttony on account of the tendency of people to consent to impure thoughts.

Finally, he mentions two further cases. One is pollution that occurs purely from a disposition of nature. He states that this is not a sign of sin. Secondly, he mentions the possibility the illusion can occur due to someone going to sleep lacking devotion. He states that the same judgment applies to lack of devotion as to prior thoughts, again presumably meaning that it can occur with varying degrees of sinfulness.

Thus, we see here that Aquinas takes elements from both Gregory and Cassian's treatment of the causes of pollution. Furthermore, he brings a further degree of philosophical organization to the list of causes by designating three categories: internal spiritual, external spiritual, and internal bodily. We will now turn to his later treatment of this topic, in which he puts forth a more streamlined treatment of the causes.

In *STh* III, q. 80 a. 7, Aquinas considers "whether one is prevented from receiving communion due to the nocturnal pollution". He condenses the three considerations given in the *Sentences* treatment of this topic to two: mortal sin and a sense of propriety. Once again, in order to investigate the sinfulness of the causes, he makes a threefold division: the cause of pollution can be external spiritual, internal spiritual, or internal bodily. Here, he explicitly states that each kind of cause can occur without sin, with venial sin, or with mortal sin. He proceeds to examine each kind of cause in order to explain in which cases they are venially sinful, in which they are mortally sinful, and in which they are sinless.

Illusions caused by demons can occur from a lack of striving fervently to receive, which can be either a venial or mortal sin. This presumably includes the case of lacking devotion when going to sleep, mentioned in the *Sentences* treatment. In *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5, he associates negligence to protect oneself against the devil with a line from *Te lucis ante terminum*, the hymn assigned to night prayer in the Roman Breviary: "Restrain our enemy so that our bodies may not be polluted".<sup>30</sup> Aquinas also mentions that this cause can occur purely from the malice of the demons, and not from any fault on the part of the agent. He once again recounts Cassian's anecdote in support of this point.

Next, Aquinas discusses the internal spiritual cause, i.e. prior thoughts. He makes the same threefold division as in the *Sentences Commentary*: if the thoughts occur without pleasure, they are not sinful. However, if the agent takes pleasure in the thoughts, this is a venial sin, and if he consents to the pleasure, this is a mortal sin.

Finally, he discusses the bodily cause. He states that this cause can occur without sin, i.e., when the pollution occurs entirely due to a bodily weakness or excess of nature. Although Aquinas provides some details of the biological theory behind this claim, these are not relevant to our investigation; the salient point is that the pollution can occur due to a purely material cause that is beyond the agent's control

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<sup>30</sup> "Hostemque nostrum comprime, ne pollutantur corpora". Cited in *STh* II-II, q. 154 a. 5 co.

and hence not sinful. However, the bodily cause can be sinful when the bodily excess occurs from excessive consumption of food or drink, which can be either venially or mortally sinful. As in the *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas states that thoughts are more likely to be mortal sins than gluttony on account of the tendency of human beings to consent to the pleasure in such thoughts. In defense of this point, he refers to Gregory's claim that one should abstain from receiving the Eucharist when the pollution occurs due to evil thoughts but not when it occurs due to gluttony.

In sum, we see that Aquinas here simplifies his treatment of the three causes of sinful dreams. Furthermore, he clarifies that each kind of cause can occur without sin, with venial sin, or with mortal sin.

### 3. Sinful Causes Without Sinful Effects

We have seen that Aquinas holds that while dreams cannot be sinful in their own right, their causes can be. In this regard, his treatment of sin in sleep differs importantly from his treatment of other sins. Normally, he holds that both the *per se* and *per accidens* effects of sin are culpable: the former because "whatever follows *per se* from a sin in some way belongs to the species of the sin itself"; the latter because the sinner "neglects to consider the harm that could follow" from his deed.<sup>31</sup>

One suggestion is that dreams differ from most other cases because the dreamer lacks the use of reason while sleeping. However, this is not sufficient for the absence of culpability. In other cases, Aquinas attributes blame to sinful effects that occur when the agent lacks the use of reason. One such case is actions done while inebriated.<sup>32</sup> Aquinas labels such effects "voluntary in cause"—i.e., not voluntary in their own right, yet nonetheless culpable insofar as they are caused by a sinful voluntary act. Another example from Aquinas' corpus is the sin of omission of a monk who fails to rise for morning prayers due to staying up too late the previous night.<sup>33</sup> Although the monk is asleep during the sin of omission, Aquinas nonetheless holds him culpable for the sin of omission insofar as he voluntarily chose the cause of the omission.

In the case of sleep, it is interesting that Aquinas does not call sleep, the means by which one loses the use of reason, the cause of dreams, but rather some voluntary act committed before falling asleep. Nonetheless, falling asleep is at least a necessary condition of dreams, even if not a cause. Likewise, falling asleep is not a voluntary act. Although one can choose to try to sleep, one cannot choose to sleep; sleep itself originates from the vegetative power and does not come under the command of

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<sup>31</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 73 a. 8 co.: "...propter negligentiam considerandi nocumenta quae consequi possent; ...quia quaecumque per se consequuntur ad peccatum, pertinent quodammodo ad ipsam peccati speciem".

<sup>32</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 77 a. 7 co.

<sup>33</sup> *STh* II-II, q. 79 a. 3 ad 3. For a discussion of this text, see M.V. Dougherty, 'Moral Dilemmas and Moral Luck: Reckoning with the Thomistic Ethical Tradition', in: *Proceedings to the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 78 (2005), 239–241.

reason.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, people cannot avoid sleeping at some time, although they have some control over when they sleep. Perhaps Aquinas only holds the agent responsible for what he does without the use of reason when he relinquishes the use of reason voluntarily.

Two texts of Aquinas support this interpretation: *STh* I-II, q. 77 a. 7 and *DM* q. 3 a. 10. Since in both texts Aquinas makes the same point, we will only discuss the former.<sup>35</sup>

Sometimes a certain passion is such that it totally takes away the use of reason, as is evident those who go insane due to love or anger. If such a passion was voluntary from its origin, then the act is imputed as a sin, because it is voluntary in cause, just as was said above regarding inebriation. However if the cause was not voluntary but rather natural, for example from illness or something of this sort, a person falls into a passion that totally removes the use of reason — then the act is rendered totally involuntary and consequently the person is totally excused from sin.

Here, Aquinas names two kinds of causes of the loss of reason: natural and voluntary. These two categories are apparently both exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Voluntary causes, by definition, originate in reason; natural causes do not. Aquinas states that if an agent loses the use of reasons due to natural causes, such as from illness, she is not culpable for acts she does while lacking the use of reason.

To return to the aforementioned example of the monk who fails to rise for morning prayer, both he and person who experiences an immoral dream are asleep at the time of the sin's occurrence. However, the omission in the monk example is not due to sleep as such, but to sleep at a certain time. Although sleep at some time cannot be avoided, sleep at a certain time can. In this case, sleep at the critical time is voluntary and avoidable insofar as the agent does not go to sleep at the proper time because he is engaged in some voluntary act. For this reason, like the drunken and voluntarily insane person, he is held responsible for what he does, or fails to do, when he lacks the use of reason. By contrast, anyone who sleeps might sometimes dream. Dreams are not occasioned by sleep at a particular time, but simply by sleeping. Thus, Aquinas considers the person who experiences an immoral dream to be without sin not only because she lacks the use of reason at the time of the disordered dream, but also because the loss of reason that occurs in sleep cannot be avoided.

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<sup>34</sup> For the claim that acts of the vegetative soul are beyond the command of reason, see *STh* I-II, q. 17 a. 7 co.

<sup>35</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 77 a. 7 co. See also *De Malo* q. 3 a. 10, ll. 69–83.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Following Augustine, Aquinas argues that people are never responsible for immoral dreams. In order to defend this claim, he draws on Aristotle's epistemology and biology of sleep in dreams. However, Aquinas also holds that the causes of dreams can be sinful. In discussing this topic, he draws on both Cassian and Gregory the Great's treatments of the causes of sinful dreams, organizes their lists of causes into three categories, and argues that each category can occur either with or without sin.

The combination of these two claims, namely that dreams are never moral but their causes may be, is unusual, as Aquinas typically holds that the effects of sinful acts are culpable. I have argued that the case of dreams differs from other apparently similar cases because not only does the agent lack the use of reason during sleep, but the loss of reason during sleep is natural, not voluntary, as it originates in the vegetative power rather than reason.