

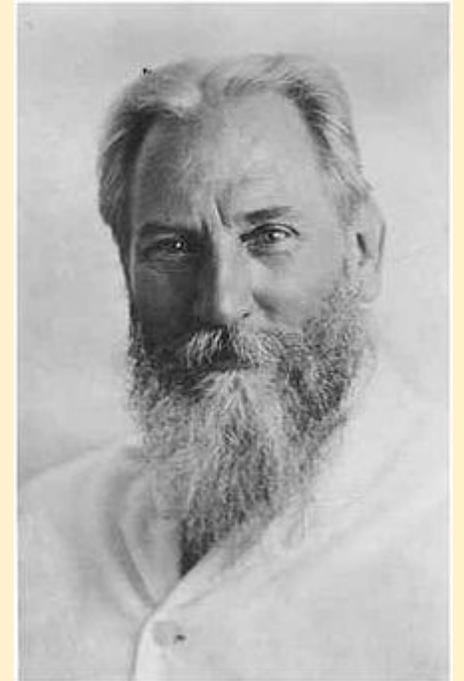
Dreams
What they are and how they are caused
by

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First Edition 1898

Revised Enlarged Third Edition 1903

Fourth Edition 1918



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTORY

Many of the subjects with which our theosophical studies bring us into contact are so far removed from the experiences and interests of everyday life, that while we feel drawn towards them by an attraction which increases in geometrical progression as we come to know more of them and understand them better, we are yet conscious, at the back of our minds, as it were, of a faint sense of unreality, or at least unpracticality, while we are dealing with them. When we read of the formation of the solar system, or even of the rings and rounds of our own planetary chain, we cannot but feel that, interesting though this is as an abstract study, useful as it is in showing us how man has become what we find him to be, it nevertheless associates itself only indirectly with the life we are living here and now.

No such objection as this, however, can be taken to our present subject: all readers of these lines have dreamed — probably many of them are in the habit of dreaming frequently; and they may therefore be interested in an endeavour to account for dream phenomena by the aid of the light thrown upon them by investigation along theosophic lines.



The most convenient method in which we can arrange the various branches of our subject will perhaps be the following: first, to consider rather carefully the mechanism — physical, etheric and astral — by means of which impressions are conveyed to our consciousness; secondly, to see how the consciousness in its turn affects and uses this mechanism; thirdly, to note the condition both of the consciousness and its mechanism during sleep; and fourthly, to enquire how the various kinds of dreams which men experience are thereby produced.

As I am writing in the main for students of theosophy, I shall feel myself at liberty to use, without detailed explanation, the ordinary theosophical terms, with which I may safely assume them to be familiar, since otherwise my little book would far exceed its allotted limits. Should it, however, fall into the hands of any to whom the occasional use of such terms constitutes a difficulty, I can only apologize to them, and refer them for these preliminary explanations to any elementary theosophical work, such as Mrs Besant's "The Ancient Wisdom", or "Man and his Bodies".



Chapter 2

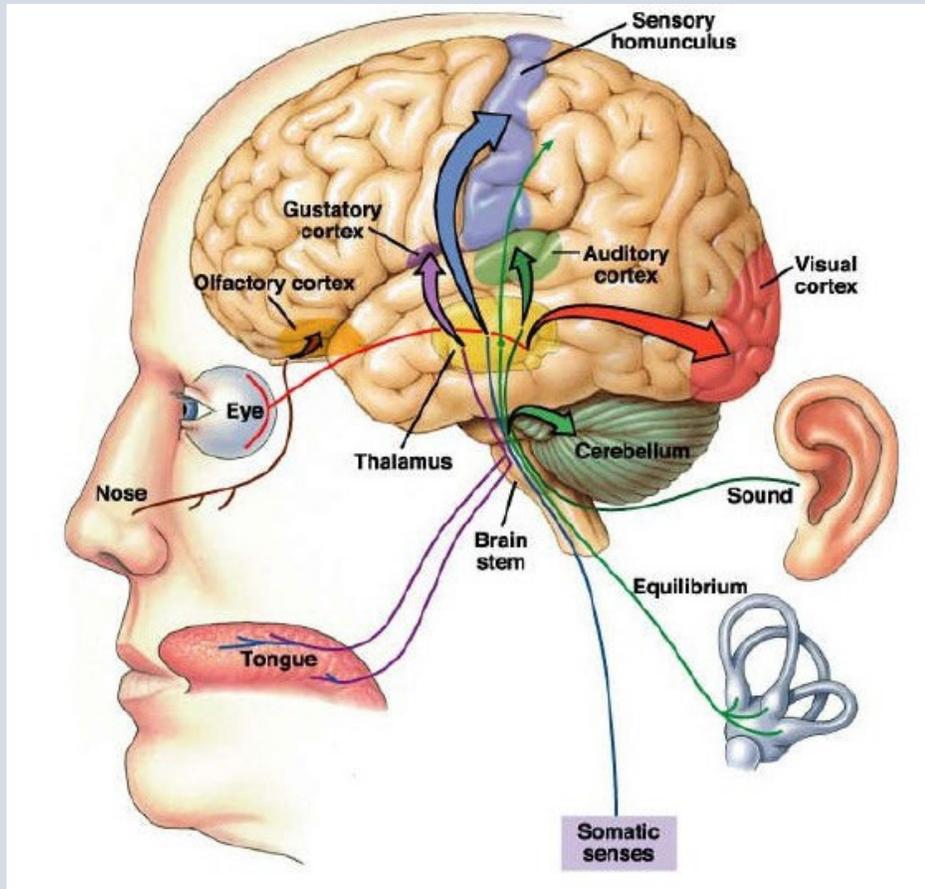
THE MECHANISM

(i) PHYSICAL

First, then, as to the physical part of the mechanism. We have in our bodies a great central axis of nervous matter, ending in the brain, and from this a network of nerve-threads radiates in every direction through the body. It is these nerve-threads, according to modern scientific theory, which by their vibrations convey all impressions from without to the brain, and the latter, upon receipts of these impressions, translates them into sensations or perceptions; so that if I put my hand upon some object and find it to be hot, it is really not my hand that feels, but my brain, which is acting upon information transmitted to it by the vibrations running along its telegraph wires, the nerve-threads.

It is important also to bear in mind that all the nerve-threads of the body are the same in constitution, and that the special bundle of them that we call the optic nerve — which conveys to the brain impressions made upon the retina of the eye, and so enables us to see — differs from the nerve-threads of the hand or foot only in the fact that through long ages of evolution it has been specialized to receive and transmit most readily one particular small set of rapid vibrations which thus become visible to us as light. The same remark holds good with reference to our other sense organs; the auditory, the olfactory, or the gustatory nerves differ from one another and from the rest only in this specialization: they are essentially the same, and they all do their respective work in exactly the same manner, by the transmission of vibrations to the brain.





Now this brain of ours, which is thus the great centre of our nervous system, is very readily affected by slight variations in our general health, and most especially by any which involve a change in the circulation of the blood through it. When the flow of blood through the vessels of the head is normal and regular, the brain (and, therefore, the whole nervous system) is at liberty to function in an orderly and efficient manner; but any alteration in this normal circulation, either as to quantity, quality, or speed, immediately produces a corresponding effect on the brain, and through it on the nerves throughout the body.

If, for example, too much blood is supplied to the brain, congestion of the vessels takes place, and irregularity in its action is at once produced; if too little, the brain (and, therefore, the nervous system) becomes first irritable and then lethargic. The quality of the blood supplied is also of great importance. As it courses through the body it has two principal functions to perform — to supply oxygen and to provide nutrition to the different organs of the body; and if it be unable adequately to fulfill either of these functions, a certain disorganization will follow.

If the supply of oxygen to the brain be deficient, it becomes overcharged with carbon dioxide, and heaviness and lethargy very shortly supervene. A common example of this is the feeling of dullness and sleepiness which frequently overtakes one in a crowded and ill-ventilated room; owing to the exhaustion of the oxygen in the room by the continued respiration of so large a number of people, the brain does not receive its due modicum, and therefore is unable to do its work properly.

Again, the speed with which the blood flows through the vessels affects the action of the brain; if it be too great, it produces fever; if too slow, then again lethargy is caused. It is obvious, therefore, that our brain (through which, be it remembered, all physical impressions must pass) may very easily be disturbed and more or less hindered in the due performance of its functions by causes apparently trivial — causes to which we should probably often pay no attention whatever even during waking hours — of which we should almost certainly be entirely ignorant during sleep.

Before we pass on, one other peculiarity of this physical mechanism must be noted, and that is its remarkable tendency to repeat automatically vibrations to which it is accustomed to respond. It is to this property of the brain that are to be attributed all those bodily habits and tricks of manner which are entirely independent of the will, and are often so difficult to conquer; and, as will presently be seen, it plays an even more important part during sleep than it does in our waking life.