

Scipio's Dream

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Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" (Latin, Somnium Scipionis) is from the sixth book of his treatise on the history, laws, and polity of the Roman republic, De re publica. It describes a fictional dream vision of the Roman general Scipio Aemilianus, set two years before he commanded at the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE.

9. When I had arrived in Africa, where I was, as you are aware, military tribune of the fourth legion under the consul Manilius, there was nothing of which I was more earnestly desirous than to see King Massinissa, who, for very just reasons, had been always the especial friend of our family. When I was introduced to him, the old man embraced me, shed tears, and then, looking up to heaven, exclaimed I thank thee, O supreme Sun, and you also, you other celestial beings, that before I departed from this life I behold in my kingdom, and in my palace, P. Cornelius Scipio, by whose mere name I seem to be reanimated; so complete and indelibly is the recollection of that best and most invincible of men, Africanus, imprinted in my mind.

After this, I inquired of him concerning the affairs of his kingdom. He, on the other hand, questioned me about the condition of our commonwealth, and in this mutual interchange of conversation we passed the whole of that day.

10. In the evening, we were entertained in a manner worthy the magnificence of a king, and carried on our discourse for a considerable part of the night. And during all this time the old man spoke of nothing but Africanus, all whose actions, and even remarkable sayings, he remembered distinctly. At last, when we retired to bed, I fell in a more profound sleep than usual, both because I was fatigued with my journey, and because I had sat up the greatest part of the night.

Here I had the following dream, occasioned, as I verily believe, by our preceding conversation--for it frequently happens that the thoughts and discourses which have employed us in the daytime, produce in our sleep an effect somewhat similar to that which Ennius writes happened to him about Homer, of whom, in his waking hours, he used frequently to think and speak.

Africanus, I thought, appeared to me in that shape, with which I was better acquainted from his picture, than from any personal knowledge of him. When I perceived it was he, I confess I trembled with consternation; but he addressed me, saying, Take courage, my Scipio, be not afraid, and carefully remember what I am saying to you.

11. Do you see that city Carthage, which, though brought under the Roman yoke by me, is now renewing former wars, and cannot live in peace? (and he pointed to Carthage from a lofty spot, full of stars, and brilliant and glittering;) to attack

which city you are this day arrived in a station not much superior to that of a private soldier. Before two years, however, are elapsed, you shall be consul, and complete its overthrow; and you shall obtain, by your own merit, the surname of Africanus, which, as yet, belongs to you no otherwise than as derived from me. And when you have destroyed Carthage, and received the honor of a triumph, and been made censor, and, in quality of ambassador, visited Egypt, Syria, Asia, and Greece, you shall be elected a second time consul in your absence, and by utterly destroying Numantia, put an end to a most dangerous war.

But when you have entered the Capitol in your triumphal car, you shall find the Roman commonwealth all in a ferment, through the intrigues of my grandson Tiberius Gracchus.

12. It is on this occasion, my dear Africanus, that you show your country the greatness of your understanding, capacity and prudence. But I see that the destiny, however, of that time is, as it were, uncertain; for when your age shall have accomplished seven times eight revolutions of the sun, and your fatal hours shall be marked out by the natural product of these two numbers, each of which is esteemed a perfect one, but for different reasons,--then shall the whole city have recourse to you alone, and place its hopes in your auspicious name. On you the senate, all good citizens, the allies, the people of Latium, shall cast their eyes; on you the preservation of the state shall entirely depend. In a word, if you escape the impious machinations of your relatives, you will, in the quality of dictator, establish order and tranquility in the commonwealth.

When on this Laelius made an exclamation, and the rest of the company groaned loudly, Scipio, with a gentle smile, said--I entreat you, do not wake me out of my dream, but have patience, and hear the rest.

13. Now, in order to encourage you, my dear Africanus, continued the shade of my ancestor, to defend the state with the greater cheerfulness, be assured that for all those who have in any way conduced to the preservation, defense, and enlargement of their native country, there is a certain place in heaven, where they shall enjoy an eternity of happiness. For nothing on earth is more agreeable to God, the Supreme Governor of the universe, than the assemblies and societies of men united together by laws, which are called States. It is from heaven their rulers and preservers came, and there they return.

14. Though at these words I was extremely troubled, not so much at the fear of death, as at the perfidy of my own relations; yet I recollected myself enough to inquire, whether he himself, my father Paulus, and others whom we look upon as dead, were really living. Yes, truly, replied he, they all enjoy life who have escaped from the chains of the body as from a prison. But as to what you call life on earth, that is no more than one form

of death. But see, here comes your father Paulus towards you! And as soon as I observed him, my eyes burst out into a flood of tears; but he took me in his arms, and bade me not weep.

15. When my first transports subsided, and I regained the liberty of speech, I addressed my father thus: You best and most venerable of parents, since this, as I am informed by Africanus, is the only substantial life, why do I linger on earth, and not rather hasten to come hither where you are? That, replied he, is impossible; unless that God, whose temples is all that vast expanse you behold, shall free you from the fetters of the body, you can have no admission into this place. Mankind have received their being on this very condition, that they should labor for the preservation of that globe, which is situated, as you see, in the midst of this temple, and is called earth.

Men are likewise endowed with a soul, which is a portion of the eternal fires, which you call stars and constellations; and which, being round, spherical bodies, animated by divine intelligence, perform their cycles and revolutions with amazing rapidity. It is your duty, therefore, my Publius, and that of all who have any veneration for the gods, to preserve this wonderful union of soul and body; nor without the express command of him who gave you a soul, should the least thought be entertained of quitting human life, lest you seem to desert the post assigned to you by God himself.

But rather follow the example of your grandfather here, and of me, your father, in paying a strict regard to justice and piety; which is due in a great degree to parents and relations, but most of all to our country. Such a life as this is the true way to heaven, and to the company of those, who, after having lived on earth and escaped from the body, inhabit the place which you now behold.

16. This was the shining circle, or zone, whose remarkable brightness distinguishes it among the constellations, and which, after the Greeks, you call the Milky Way. From thence, as I took a view of the universe, everything appeared beautiful and admirable; for there, those stars are to be seen that are never visible from our globe, and everything appears of such magnitude as we could not have imagined. The least of all the stars, was that removed furthest from heaven, and situated next to earth; I mean our moon, which shines with a borrowed light. Now the globes of the stars far surpass the magnitude of our earth, which at that distance appeared so exceedingly small, that I could not but be sensibly affected on seeing our whole empire no larger than if we touched the earth with a point.

17. And as long as I continued to observe the earth with great attention, How long, I pray you, said Africanus, will your mind be fixed on that object; why don't you rather take a view of the magnificent temples among which you have arrived? The universe is composed of nine circles, or rather spheres, one of which is the heavenly one, and is exterior to all the rest, which it embraces; being itself the Supreme God, and bounding and containing the whole. In it are fixed those stars which revolve with never-varying courses. Below this are seven other spheres, which revolve in a contrary direction to that of the heavens. One of these is occupied by the globe which on earth

they call Saturn. Next to that is the star of Jupiter, so benign and salutary to mankind. The third in order, is that fiery and terrible planet called Mars. Below this again, almost in the middle region, is the Sun---the leader, governor, the prince of the other luminaries; the soul of the world, which it regulates and illumines, being of such vast size that it pervades and gives light to all places. Then follow Venus and Mercury, which attend, as it were, on the Sun. Lastly, the Moon, which shines only in the reflected beams of the Sun, moves in the lowest sphere of all. Below this, if we except that gift of the gods, the soul, which has been given by the liberality of the gods to the human race, every thing is mortal, and tends to dissolution, but above the moon all is eternal. For the Earth, which is in the ninth globe, and occupies the center, is immovable, and being the lowest, all others gravitate towards it.

18. When I had recovered myself from the astonishment occasioned by such a wonderful prospect, I thus addressed Africanus Pray what is this sound that strikes my ears in so loud and agreeable a manner? To which he replied It is that which is called the music of the spheres, being produced by their motion and impulse; and being formed by unequal intervals, but such as are divided according to the most just proportion, it produces, by duly tempering acute with grave sounds, various concerts of harmony. For it is impossible that motions so great should be performed without any noise; and it is agreeable to nature that the extremes on one side should produce sharp, and on the other flat sounds. For which reason the sphere of the fixed stars, being the highest, and being carried with a more rapid velocity, moves with a shrill and acute sound; whereas that of the moon, being the lowest, moves with a very flat one. As to the Earth, which makes the ninth sphere, it remains immovably fixed in the middle or lowest part of the universe. But those eight revolving circles, in which both Mercury and Venus are moved with the same celerity, give out sounds that are divided by seven distinct intervals, which is generally the regulating number of all things.

This celestial harmony has been imitated by learned musicians, both on stringed instruments and with the voice, whereby they have opened to themselves a way to return to the celestial regions, as have likewise many others who have employed their sublime genius while on earth in cultivating the divine sciences.

By the amazing noise of this sound, the ears of mankind have been in some degree deafened, and indeed, hearing is the dullest of all the human senses. Thus, the people who dwell near the cataracts of the Nile, which are called Catadupa, are, by the excessive roar which that river makes in precipitating itself from those lofty mountains, entirely deprived of the sense of hearing. And so inconceivably great is this sound which is produced by the rapid motion of the whole universe, that the human ear is no more capable of receiving it, than the eye is able to look steadfastly and directly on the sun, whose beams easily dazzle the strongest sight.

While I was busied in admiring the scene of wonders, I could not help casting my eyes every now and then on the earth.

19. On which Africanus said, I perceive that you are still employed in contemplating the seat and residence of mankind. But if it appears to you so small, as in fact it really is, despise its vanities, and fix your attention for ever on these heavenly objects. Is it possible that you should attain any human applause or glory that is worth the contending for? The earth, you see, is peopled but in a very few places, and those too of small extent; and they appear like so many little spots of green scattered through vast uncultivated deserts. And those who inhabit the earth are not only so remote from each other as to be cut off from all mutual correspondence, but their situation being in oblique or contrary parts of the globe, or perhaps in those diametrically opposite to yours, all expectation of universal fame must fall to the ground.

20. You may likewise observe that the same globe of the earth is girt and surrounded with certain zones, whereof those two that are most remote from each other, and lie under the opposite poles of heaven, are congealed with frost; but that one in the middle, which is far the largest, is scorched with the intense heat of the sun. The other two are habitable, one towards the south---the inhabitants of which are your Antipodes, with whom you have no connection---the other, towards the north, is that which you inhabit, whereof a very small part, as you may see, falls to your share. For the whole extent of what you see, is as it were but a little island, narrow at both ends and wide in the middle, which is surrounded by the sea which on earth you call the great Atlantic ocean, and which, notwithstanding this magnificent name, you see is very insignificant. And even in these cultivated and well-known countries, has yours, or any of our names, ever passed the heights of the Caucasus, or the currents of the Ganges? In what other parts to the north or the south, or where the sun rises and sets, will your names ever be heard? And if we leave these out of the question, how small a space is there left for your glory to spread itself abroad? and how long will it remain in the memory of those whose minds are now full of it?

21. Besides all this, if the progeny of any future generation should wish to transmit to their posterity the praises of any one of us which they have heard from their forefathers, yet the deluges and combustions of the earth which must necessarily happen at their destined periods will prevent our obtaining, not only an eternal, but even a durable glory. And after all, what does it signify, whether those who shall hereafter be born talk of you, when those who have lived before you, whose number was perhaps not less, and whose merit certainly greater, were not so much as acquainted with your name?

22. Especially since not one of those who shall hear of us is able to retain in his memory the transactions of a single year. The bulk of mankind, indeed, measure their year by the return of the sun, which is only one star. But, when all the stars shall have returned to the place whence they set out, and after long periods shall again exhibit the same aspect of the whole heavens, that is what ought properly to be called the revolution of a year, though I scarcely dare attempt to enumerate the vast multitude of ages contained in it. For as the sun in old time was eclipsed, and seemed to be extinguished, at the time when the soul of Romulus penetrated into these eternal mansions, so, when all the constellations and stars shall revert to their

primary position, and the sun shall at the same point and time be again eclipsed, then you may consider that the grand year is completed. Be assured, however, that the twentieth part of it is not yet elapsed.

23. Why, if you have no hopes of returning to this place, where great and good men enjoy all that their souls can wish for, of what value, pray, is all that human glory, which can hardly endure for a small portion of one year?

If, then, you wish to elevate your views to the contemplation of this eternal seat of splendor, you will not be satisfied with the praises of your fellow-mortals, nor with any human rewards that your exploits can obtain; but Virtue herself must point out to you the true and only object worthy of your pursuit. Leave to others to speak of you as they may, for speak they will. Their discourses will be confined to the narrow limits of the countries you see, nor will their duration be very extensive, for they will perish like those who utter them, and will be no more remembered by their posterity.

24. When he had ceased to speak in this manner, I said Oh, Africanus, if indeed the door of heaven is open to those who have deserved well of their country, although, indeed, from my childhood, I have always followed yours and my father's steps, and have not neglected to imitate your glory, still I will from henceforth strive to follow them more closely.

Follow them, then, said he, and consider your body only, not yourself, as mortal. For it is not your outward form which constitutes your being, but your mind; not that substance which is palpable to the senses, but your spiritual nature. Know, then, that you are a god---for a god it must be which flourishes, and feels, and recollects, and foresees, and governs, regulates and moves the body over which it is set, as the Supreme Ruler does the world which is subject to him. For as that Eternal Being moves whatever is mortal in this world, so the immortal mind of man moves the frail body with which it is connected.

25. For whatever is always moving must be eternal, but that which derives its motion from a power which is foreign to itself, when that motion ceases must itself lose its animation. That alone, then, which moves itself can never cease to be moved, because it can never desert itself. Moreover, it must be the source, and origin, and principle of motion in all the rest. There can be nothing prior to a principle, for all things must originate from it, and it cannot itself derive its existence from any other source, for if it did it would no longer be a principle. And if it had no beginning it can have no end, for a beginning that is put an end to will neither be renewed by any other cause, nor will it produce anything else of itself. All things, therefore, must originate from one source. Thus it follows, that motion must have its source in something which is moved by itself, and which can neither have a beginning nor an end. Otherwise all the heavens and all nature must perish, for it is impossible that they can of themselves acquire any power of producing motion in themselves.

26. As, therefore, it is plain that what is moved by itself must be eternal, who will deny that this is the general condition and nature of minds? For, as everything is inanimate which is moved by an impulse exterior to itself, so what is animated is

moved by an interior impulse of its own; for this is the peculiar nature and power of mind. And if that alone has the power of self-motion it can neither have had a beginning, nor can it have an end.

Do you, therefore, exercise this mind of yours in the best pursuits. And the best pursuits are those which consist in promoting the good of your country. Such employments will speed the flight of your mind to this its proper abode; and its flight will be still more rapid, if, even while it is enclosed in the body, it will look abroad, and disengage itself as much as

possible from its bodily dwelling, by the contemplation of things which are external to itself.

This it should do to the utmost of its power. For the minds of those who have given themselves up to the pleasures of the body, paying as it were a servile obedience to their lustful impulses, have violated the laws of God and man; and therefore, when they are separated from their bodies, flutter continually round the earth on which they lived, and are not allowed to return to this celestial region, till they have been purified by the revolution of many ages.

Thus saying he vanished, and I awoke from my dream.