The Psychology of Sleep

Bolton Hall

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INTRODUCTION

At the request of the author, I have read this book in proof sheets, and, from the point of view of one interested in psychology, I have suggested many amendments which have all, I think, been adopted.

As will be seen by the intelligent reader, the best sleep involves more than a normal body; it involves healthy thought and the application to our daily lives of the moral principles laid down by our great spiritual teachers.

The cure of sleeplessness has hitherto been left largely to the physician, who is not always a specialist on that subject and who will welcome a treatise that will enable his patient to co-operate with his restorative measures. Mr. Hall has already shown in *Three Acres and Liberty* and in *The Garden Yard* his ability to put into clear, popular language and readable form scientific truths that non-scientific people need to know and wish to learn.

The proper management of our own bodies is even more essential to our happiness and well
-being than the proper management of the land, and I hope that this book will be no less welcome to students and physicians than to the great mass who for lack of knowledge or of attention do not wholly avail themselves of the freely offered gift of sleep.

The book may be useful to many who find it difficult to harmonize their lives with their surroundings, and may bring to many a happier view of the ways of God to man.

Edward Moffat Weyer,

Washington and Jefferson College.

FOREWORD

This book is intended no less for those who do sleep well than for those who do not. It is just as important to be able to teach others to act well as to be able to do so ourselves. To teach we must analyze and comprehend our own action and its motives: for being able to do a thing well is far different from being able to teach it. In order to teach anything we must know how we do it and why others cannot do it. We never know anything thoroughly until we have tried to teach it to another.

Many persons sleep well only because they are still, like little children and animals, in the unreflective stage of life. That is the stage of the Natural Man, and it is good in itself; but later the mental life awakes, when consciousness of one's self begins, and examination of one's own desires develops. If not rightly understood or if not at least accepted, that development brings anxiety, unrest and disturbance of sleep, and breaks the harmony of the whole nature.

The highest stage of development is the spiritual, the all-conscious state which includes and harmonizes the other two. In that we do not
lose the ready, overflowing enjoyment of our bodily exercises and functions; rather they are intensified; the physical and the mental are united in the complete life.

In order to attain this harmony we must examine the means that we and others use to gain rest and peace; some of these are instinctive and some prudential, and we must

perceive why it is that these means work or fail to work in different cases. When, with all our getting, we have gotten this understanding, then, and not till then, all action becomes natural and joyful, for then we understand it all, and follow willingly the leading of the Spirit that is in Man.

Care-charmer Sleep, son of the sable Night,
Brother to Death, in silent darkness born.
Samuel Daniel.

CHAPTER I SLEEP

Sancho Panza says: “Now, blessings light on him who first invented sleep! Sleep which covers a man all over, thoughts and all, like a cloak; and is meat for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, heat for the cold, and cold for the hot. Sleep is the current coin that purchases all the pleasures of the world cheap, and the balance that sets the king and shepherd, the fool and the wise man, even.”—“Don Quixote.”

Sleeping is the one thing that everyone practices almost daily all his life, and that, nevertheless, hardly anyone does as well as when he began. We have improved in our walking, talking, eating, seeing, and in other acts of skill and habit; but, in spite of our experience, few of us have improved in sleeping: the best sleepers only “sleep like a child.” It must be that we do not do it wisely, else we should by this time do it well.

Even the race of mankind as a whole does not seem to be able to use sleep, to summon it, or to control it any better than primitive man did. We talk much of the need of sleep, and sagely discuss its benefits, but we know neither how to use the faculty of sleep to the best advantage nor how to cultivate it.

Yet for ages men have studied the mystery of sleep. We have acquired many interesting facts concerning its variation, and have formulated a number of theories concerning its cause and advantages; nevertheless, science has given us little real knowledge of sleep, and less

mastery over it.
Mankind has had idols ever since consciousness began. Advancing knowledge has changed the nature and number of the idols, but it has not destroyed them. The idol of the present age is “Science,” and men worship it in the degree that it seems to fit their needs. They forget that Science is merely the knowledge of things and persons, arranged and classified, so as to make it available. In its nature it is fallible, for some new phase discovered to-day may show that yesterday’s conclusion was formed from a theory which itself was based on a mistaken premise. Man has caught a glimpse of something that resembled truth, has stated it, reasoned about it, and finally either established its authority or disproved it utterly through the discovery of the real thing he was seeking. Either result was progress, because man grows, as Browning says, “through catching at mistake as midway help, till he reach fact indeed.” So there is no need to be disturbed by the conflicting opinions of men of science touching the purpose or method of sleep. Even the rejected theories have added to the sum of our knowledge, and the field for investigation is still open to all who are faithful in noting and comparing the manifestations of Nature, which the scientists call phenomena.
Most of what we call science has to do with physical or material things. Consequently, we find scientists dealing mainly with what may be called tangible phenomena, those which may be measured or weighed or held in the hand or, at least, pinned down by pressure of thumb or finger. Material Science’s estimate of man is largely gauged by
“ Things done, that took the eye and had the price;
O’er which, from level stand,
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice.”
This is the almost inevitable result of looking upon life as purely material or physical. We must view life as physical,

but not physical only; as mental, but not mental only; as spiritual, but not spiritual only.

In studying sleep and its attendant phenomena all these things must be taken into consideration. So slight a thing as fancy may profoundly influence our acts; fancies not attributable to any material source, so fleeting and evanescent that the clumsy net of language cannot hold them, may induce sleep or destroy sleep.

A review of the theories and conclusions of physicians, both scientific and unscientific, as well as of others who have found the study of sleep of absorbing importance, will find a place in our examination of this vital function of organisms.

CHAPTER II HOW MUCH SLEEP

Six hours in sleep, in law’s grave study six,
Four spend in prayer, the rest on Nature fix.
(Translation.) Sir Edward Coke.

Man is the highest expression yet discovered of the “living organism,” and sleep has always taken more of his time than any other function. Marie de Manacéïne of St. Petersburg, in her great book called “Sleep,” says: “The weaker the consciousness is, the more easily it is fatigued and in need of sleep; an energetic consciousness, on the contrary, is contented with periods of sleep that are shorter, less deep, and less frequent.” Although the consciousness of the race has developed and strengthened enormously, and is steadily strengthening itself, the old-fashioned idea that one-third of our time should be spent in sleep holds the average mind as strongly as ever. We insist upon it for the young, impress it upon everybody, and look distrustfully upon him who is so daring and unreasonable as to say that he requires less than eight hours of sleep. When an idea is intrenched in the mind it is next to impossible to drive it out by reason or even by repetition.

It is the popular belief that Alfred the Great—who is also Alfred the Wise and Alfred the Good (being dead so long)—divided time into three equal parts, and taught that one part should be given to sleep. If he had said this, it would not follow that it is the last and wisest word on the best way to divide our time, but he did not say it. What he said was that one-third of each day should be given to sleep,

diet and exercise: that is, that a man should devote eight hours to sleeping, eating and whatever form of exercise or recreation he desired.

There is nothing to show that Alfred spent even six hours in sleep, although there is plenty of proof that he recognized the difference between rest and sleep, for he gave the second division of the day—eight hours—to study and to reflection, while the remaining eight hours were to be for business. In those days kings worked hard. Sir Henry Sumner Maine says that the list of places where King John held court shows that even he was as active as any commercial traveler nowadays. (“Early Law and Custom,” p. 183.)

But the superstition that Alfred recommended eight hours for sleep will not down, and no amount of argument or proof will

change the opinion of the average man on this point. “Our forefathers slept eight hours,” they say; “so should we.” We forget that probably the rushlight and the candle had much to do with the long hours of sleep in olden times. As artificial light has improved, sleeping-time has been shortened.

There is an old English quatrain which runs:

“ Nature requires five,
Custom gives seven,
Laziness takes nine
And wickedness eleven.”

But sleep is a natural need, and, like any other natural need, varies in degree in different persons. Dogs, cats and other animals generally sleep more than we do, and their young ones sleep still more. Generally speaking, the infant, whose mental powers have barely awakened, who is, so far as we can tell, merely a human animal, needs more sleep than it will ever need again in its existence. In this great need of sleep the human animal resembles other animals.

It frequently happens that, as a man waxes older, he requires less and less sleep than in his growing and most active years. But old people who have outlived their mental life come to a time when they sleep and perform merely the physical functions like the infant; so also
with those whose energy so far exceeds their physical strength that the mere effort of living exhausts them. This condition may be in part due to overstrain of the powers of youth and middle age, but it also follows the fixed idea that years diminish strength and lessen energy. It is easy to fall into this notion, for it accords so well with the general idea that rest must come only after the period of activity, whether that period be a day or a lifetime.

All of us have had periods when we have needed fewer than our average hours of sleep. People who sleep out of doors or in thoroughly ventilated rooms, under warm but light clothing, find that they need less sleep than when they occupy poorly ventilated rooms and wrap themselves in heavy, unhygienic clothing. Fresh discoveries are being made almost daily by those who give intelligent consideration to these things.

Even babies differ in their need of sleep. I know one healthy, happy, beautiful baby who has never slept the average sixteen hours that babies are supposed to need. This child is now between three and four years of age, and has never gone to sleep before nine or half-past nine at night. Her parents had the common idea of long hours of sleep for infants, and the child had a hard struggle for a while to convince them that she had no such need: such struggles are often called “naughtiness.”

She was regularly put to bed at seven o’clock, and all the usual devices for enticing a baby to sleep were practiced. Sometimes she was left severely alone, sometimes she had gentle lullabies sung to her, but, whether alone or in company, this particular baby played and enjoyed herself until between nine and nine-thirty, when she quietly

dropped to sleep. She awoke as early as the average baby wakes, happy and refreshed, and her parents finally learned that there is no sleeping rule that has no exceptions, whether applied to infants or adults.

Drowsiness is a sign that we ought to sleep, just as hunger is a sign that we ought to eat. Natural wakefulness means that we ought not to sleep. The child tries to obey the promptings of nature, but we think these promptings are wrong, if not wicked, and force him into all sorts of bad habits. Says Michelet, “No consecrated absurdity could have stood its ground if the man had not silenced the objections of the child.” We are slowly learning that there is no need or function of the body or of the mind that is exactly the same in all individuals, or that is always the same even in the same individual.

But, in spite of this dawning knowledge, we still view with alarm any disregard of the rule, either in ourselves or another; so true it is, as

Thomas Paine says, that “It is a faculty of the human mind to become what it contemplates.” We have looked upon ourselves as having certain, unvarying, imperative needs until we have almost become subject to them.

CHAPTER III THE TIME OF SLEEP

“ Women, like children, require more sleep normally than men, but ‘Macfarlane states that they can better bear the loss of sleep, and most physicians will agree with him.’”
H. Campbell.

The amount of sleep, like the amount of food, required by an individual varies greatly, depending largely upon the conditions at the time. Edison, for instance, can go days without sleep when engrossed in some invention, and he has been quoted as saying that people sleep too much, four hours daily being quite sufficient.

In answer to my inquiry, Mr. Edison’s secretary wrote, “Mr. Edison directs me to write you that the statement is correct, that for thirty years he did not get four hours of sleep per day.” Evidently, experience taught him that an average of four hours per day, if taken rightly and at the right time, is enough for him. He keeps a couch in his workroom so as to sleep when he is sleepy. He does not need a clock to tell him when to go to bed, any more than you need a thermometer to tell you when to pull up the blankets.

Edison is not alone in his views on sleep. He made extensive experiments with the two hundred workers in his own factory which convinced him and most of them that the majority slept much too long. The hands seem to have entered willingly into the trials: perhaps their personal regard for him influenced their conclusions. Napoleon

Bonaparte and Frederick of Prussia were both satisfied with four hours of sleep,
[1]
while Bishop Taylor was of opinion that three hours was sufficient for any man's needs, and Richard Baxter, who wrote "The Saints' Rest," thought four hours the proper measure.

Paul Leicester Ford, who was never a strong person, once told me that he found four hours' sleep enough for all purposes. He did not wish to be understood as saying that four hours' rest was enough, but four hours' sleep. He was one of the few who understood the difference between sleep and rest. He frequently rested; his favorite practice being to lie back in a big armchair with a book, and forget the surrounding conditions. The book created a different set of sensations, which, combined with the pause in physical activity, brought a sense of rest to the frail body. He frequently got his four hours of sleep curled up in the big chair, and was then able to go on with the work which in a few short years made him famous. The wife of the late George T. Angell of Boston testifies that for years he seldom slept four hours a night, having found that, for him, more was unnecessary; but, of course, it does not follow that no more is necessary for anyone.

These are not unusual instances, but rather typical cases. History and biography are full of such; each of us can probably mention one or more persons among his own acquaintance who can do well with less than the usual eight hours of sleep, but we have looked upon them as exceptions and perhaps have prophesied that they will feel the evil results later, if not now. We usually select ourselves as the standard for all other persons, or perhaps it is more correct to say that we are prone to select one stage of our own development as a standard, and try to compel even our growing self to conform to that stage. When the crab

outgrows his shell it sloughs off, and, so far as we know, he offers no objection, but takes the new shell, which answers his needs better. But we, who consider ourselves infinitely superior to the crab, try to compel ourselves to keep within the bounds of old thoughts, early habits, and outgrown customs after we no longer need them. When we are unfortunate enough to succeed, we rejoice at our cramped souls as the Chinese woman prides herself upon her crushed, cramped, misshapen foot.

The amount of sleep that suited you last year may not suit you to-day. You may really be getting better sleep and so needing less of it: or you may have to make up by quantity for a poorer quality. The test is that, if you are sleepy in waking hours, you need better sleep or more of it. If you are wakeful in sleeping hours, you need less sleep or else you are not getting the right kind. Good sleep is a habit, a natural habit as distinguished from an acquired habit, and when we learn to take it naturally, and in natural amount, we get a great deal more from it. It is fair to assume that purely natural habits, which continue from age to age through all stages of human progress, are essential to human welfare. Otherwise they would drop away from us as many useless physical parts have dropped. If you stop to think of this, you know that it is so; the man in the street and the girl at the ribbon counter do not know, so there is more excuse for them if they misunderstand. It may be that they usually sleep better than you do, and so do not need to know it.

CHAPTER IV WHAT SLEEP MAY MEAN

O Sleep, we are beholden to thee, Sleep,
Thou bearest angels to us in the night,
Saints out of heaven with palms.
Jean Ingelow.

We know so little about sleep, positively, that anyone may assume one thing or another about it, so long as what he assumes accords with what we do know positively.

It has been surmised that, during sleep, the subconscious mind is busy with the day's impressions of the objective mind,
[2]

fitting and relating them to past experiences, the sum of which makes up the man himself. The subconscious mind is, in a sense, man's attitude to life. It receives suggestions more easily than the objective mind receives them, and has more effect upon man's understanding of life. If our last conscious thought is a loving thought toward all living things, we have aided the latent mind in its effort to get in tune with the infinite harmony of life. Alice Herring Christopher,
the metaphysician, once told me that every night as she drops off to sleep she says to herself that she is going to have a lovely time, and as a consequence she does; and that, on waking, she tries to realize how delightful her sleep has been.

There is an old saying that, when a baby smiles in its sleep, it is because the angels are whispering to it, and, if we kept ourselves in communion with the substance of things, “angels” might bring us sweet messages, too. They surely will, if we drop to sleep as lovingly and peacefully as a little child.

Another friend of mine, who has the faculty of wearing herself out with the excitement of each day’s experiences, is learning to offset this unnecessary drain upon her strength by suggesting to herself each night, “I shall wake rested and refreshed in the morning.” By this means she is gaining in nervous poise, and averting the numerous “break-downs” from which she used to suffer. Having made this much progress,—which brings her “not far from the kingdom,”—it only remains for her to make the full claim for the fulfillment of the promise, “Ye shall find rest to your souls,” to secure it.

For the most part, men still regard sleep as a symbol of death, that time when we shall know nothing of what goes on about us; when, according to general belief, we no longer grow

or enjoy. We exclaim with Hesiod, “Sleep—the Brother of Death and the Son of Night!” But the new idea of sleep as a growing time is overcoming that old idea of sleep as death, and is beginning to rob even the great change itself of its terrors. We are beginning to see that sleep does not interfere with the activity of the mind, but simply gives it an opportunity to digest and absorb impressions. In the same way it may be that death does not interfere with the activity of the real man, but may afford him an opportunity to get the full meaning of the experiences he had while sojourning in the objective world.

As it is not conceivable that life began with our individual appearance in this world, so it is not likely that it will end when our individual consciousness ceases. The sum of what we have learned and of what we have done must go on, else

all the learning and the doing would be for naught. So this thing which was “I”—and will continue to be the sum of that “I,” no matter whether I am conscious of it or not—will use and absorb all that has been thought or done in the body, and accept or reject its results.

It will all count in that next experience, and help us to be, as Browning says:

“ Fearless and unperplexed
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armor to endue.”

The sum of our experiences added to the sum of all that have gone before will help us to understand life better when and wherever we are again conscious of it, just as the experiences of each day help us to live the next day better. In the active, waking world the perceptive mind receives impressions which the reflective mind stores up and brings to bear upon our daily life and thought, thus developing greater consciousness in the individual; so the interruption of all physical activity may be necessary to the further development of the real and intangible man.

As one awakes each morning from a night’s sleep a new man, physically and mentally, although not necessarily aware of any change, so may our awakening be from the last sleep that men call death. It may be that we shall arise to new experiences, or perhaps to further development in a world that we cannot touch with our hands. But in either case we may not doubt that the awakening will be good, for all life is good. For, after all, we should know none of the joys of living if we had not tried them. Life is consciousness, and hardly one of us would prefer never to have lived; to have had no share in that which has meant man ; the growth and culmination of unnumbered centuries. Life is one, a whole, and the “slings and arrows” of daily worries and toil are only an unimportant part of it. And, if it

is so good that we wish to stay here and hope to enjoy it, if we can see how it has steadily improved and beautified in the ages that have passed, we cannot fail to see that all it may yet become will also be good.

CHAPTER V HOW TO GO TO SLEEP

Sleep sweetly, tender heart in peace!
Tennyson.

Man craves sleep. If we know of a friend who is suffering in body or mind we wish him sleep; mothers soothe their pain-racked or terrified children to sleep with every gentle art known to them; if, for any reason, man is out of harmony with his life as he sees it, he instinctively turns to “Nature’s sweet restorer.” It is a sovereign balm for many ills, yet we seldom recognize wherein its virtue lies. During his waking hours man is frequently at odds with his surroundings. He is out of tune with the real things of life and is apt to mistake the material side of his life for the whole of his being. But when sleeping he is less hampered with the impressions of the workaday world, less resistant, and, therefore, more harmonious. It is in this mental relaxation that the true benefit of sleep consists.

We have as yet no conception of the immense import of suggestion to ourselves or others as a cure for body or mind. Suggestions may
often be made to a person sound asleep, but they are most effective just at the time when the reason and the will are losing control of the mind, although consciousness has not yet lost its grip.

Accordingly it helps our growth to relax the whole nature before going to sleep and to drop into the mind the thought of peace and harmony; the assurance that all is and must