Discerning the Ontology of Dream Characters

from the Standpoint of Co-Creative Dream Theory

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Abstract

It is not uncommon to have dreams with familiar characters who may seem to exhibit

independent agency and personhood, whether the actual persons are alive or dead. Rejecting

outright the possibility of independent agency may align with a materialistic or strictly empirical

worldview, but it doesn't explain away the felt-experience of so many dreamers, who remain

convinced that they have encountered actual persons in their dreams. Discerning the ontological

nature of dream characters, if one is open to the possibility of independent ontology, presents a

daunting challenge, especially if one adopts an either-or approach that allows for the dream

character to be intrapsychically or transpersonally derived, but not both. In this paper, I introduce

an integrated view of dream character ontology based on the co-creative dream paradigm (CDP),

which allows for the possibility that local and nonlocal feeds coalesce as mutable dream imagery

on a continuum of relative influence. This approach allows for a dynamic, reciprocal relationship

between the dream ego and the emergent imagery—whose ontological nature may shift in its

expression from moment to moment—and supports an ethical stance in relation to every dream

character, given that one cannot ascertain, with certainty, its true nature.

Discerning the Ontology of Dream Characters

from the Standpoint of Co-Creative Dream Theory[1]

Introduction

Every experienced dream worker occasionally encounters a dream that includes a

character who conveys an agency and spontaneity that mimics the real person. The dreamer may

feel that the character—alive or dead—was somehow present in the dream. Rejecting outright

the possibility of independent agency may align with a materialistic or strictly empirical

worldview, but it doesn't explain away the felt-experience of so many dreamers, who remain

convinced that they have encountered actual persons in their dreams. As we know, such

convictions are not uncommon, and thus contemporary dream workers would do well to adopt an

approach to such experiences that meaningfully and respectfully aligns with the dreamer's

worldview, regardless of the facts; for such experiences can be vivid and life changing. In her

dissertation study of "visitation" dreams with deceased friends and family members, Shorter

reports:

> The deceased appeared as they did in life rather than as they did when they fell ill. In fact,
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> the deceased often appeared much younger or more healthy than when they died. The
>
> deceased conveyed reassurance to the dreamer. "I am OK and still with you"…The

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[1] Based on the opening keynote address by the author at the Many Worlds of Lucid Dreaming Conference, October,

2021, titled "Dream Encounters: Who, What, Where?"

dreamer is always changed by the experience. There is a resolution of the grieving

process and/or a wider spiritual perspective. (Shorter, 2009)

Such dreams are by no means limited to purported visitations from the dead. Indeed, if

the dream character is a familiar person who is still alive, a dreamer may feel that the encounter

was an actual contact, and may subsequently explore that possibility with the real person.

Having analyzed thousands of dreams during my 40-year career as a psychotherapist

specializing in dream work, I have often faced the challenge of helping clients discern whether a

dream character reveals independent ontology. While many therapists would actively steer a

client away from believing in this possibility, I favor an approach based on the client's own

beliefs, values, and experiences. This postmodern stance avoids making a determination for the

client and possibly undermining the client's sense of meaning. Nonetheless, my own research

and personal experience firmly support the premise that dreaming is a psi-conducive state, and

thus can tap various local and nonlocal "feeds" (Sparrow, 2014a) that the dreaming mind may

render as images. Indeed, the extent of my own experiences led me to research a subset of such

purported visitation dreams (Sparrow, 1994; 1997).

Of course, keeping an open mind about such things can provoke the ire of strict

empiricists. After reading of one of my books (Sparrow, 1997) on Christian religious

experiences, Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan (Sagan & Druyan, 1997) once asserted, "There's not a

skeptical bone in Sparrow's body," and proceeded to dismiss the entirety of my work. I was not

surprised at their assessment, because scientifically oriented individuals often resist the

possibility of a nonmaterial or transpersonal reality. However, the job of disproving transpersonal

reality is more difficult than simply rejecting it as "non-empirical" and thus invalid. It is the

equivalent of saying that all crows are black which, as we know, requires that one have access to the entire population of crows. In contrast, all one has to do to overturn strict materialism is to demonstrate *a single instance* of non-local intelligence manifesting in the dream. If only *one event* is determined to be nonlocal, then the universe is a very different place than the materialist would have us believe.

Dreams as Indeterminate

My purpose in this paper is to introduce a theoretical framework to address the question of dream character ontology for those who are open to the idea of transpersonal sources of our dreams. This framework has been referred to as the co-creative dream paradigm (CDP) (Rossi, 1972), upon which I have developed a structured approach to co-creative dream analysis (Sparrow, 2012; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2019; 2020; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010, 2022). In brief, the CDP views dreams as indeterminate from the outset, and co-created in real time through the interaction between the dream ego and emergent generic content. That is, unlike traditional dream theory, the CDP does not view the dream as created by some unconscious process and then experienced passively by the dream ego during sleep. To the contrary, it views dreams as the dynamic interaction between an actively responding dream ego and an emergent, unformed dream content that can, potentially partake of multiple sources or feeds.

I believe that contemporary neuroscience and quantum mechanics supports the CDP, and may eventually turn more fully to it. In grappling with the "hard problem" of consciousness, the view that consciousness is "isomorphic" with the brain, but not causally derived from it, introduces a non-reductionistic framework that preserves the independence of consciousness, while affirming its relationship to brain function. Further, one can find allusions in the literature

to the interactive nature of the dreaming mind, in particular. Hobson says, intriguingly, that we have to treat the dreaming brain as "a unified system whose complex components dynamically interact so as to produce a continuously changing state" (Hobson, et. al, 2000). Similarly, from the standpoint of the CDP, the dream ego's responses—feelings, thoughts, and actions— dynamically interact with, and impact the imagery, and thus co-determine the resultant dream.

I have discovered that the CDP—as a paradigm (Kuhn, 1962) of dream construction— permits new questions to be asked and solutions new to be found to a variety of questions that have heretofore made little sense within the "presentational" (Sparrow, 2020) or "strictly determined" view of dream construction (Freud, 1913; Kramer, 1993). That is, the traditional psychoanalytic view of the dream treats the imagery—not as a fluctuating, indeterminate manifestation of a dynamic process—but as purposefully obscure symbology created elsewhere to circumvent ego censorship. While individuals may not espouse a belief in the psychoanalytic conceptualization of dream function, the belief in the "fixed" nature of dream images is an unexamined feature of a longstanding Western view of art and dream content alike (Sontag, 1966).

The CDP, in contrast, permits dream analysis to raise questions about the unfolding, reciprocal *relationship* between the dream ego and the dream imagery, and the mutable nature of the dream content. Thus, the CDP enables us to ask questions regarding dream character ontology—specifically pertaining to local and nonlocal "feeds" that create a dynamic, mutable presentation—that make no sense within the "strictly determined" content paradigm fostered by psychoanalysis. Referring specifically to visitation dreams reported by Shorter (2009), McNamara (2021) asserts, "My own feeling is that these dreams hold a key to the functional

nature of the <u>dreaming</u> mind itself." If so, then our exploration into the ontological status of dream characters through the lens of the CDP may help to advance our understanding of a "dynamically interacting" dreaming mind.

On a practical level, the theoretical framework I propose can arguably assist lay and professional dreamworkers in helping their clients a more sophisticated, and arguably more accurate view of dream characters that can transcend the either-or thinking about dream character identity.

Early Experiences

When I was 20, I had a false awakening dream that even now, fifty years later, remains vivid in my memory. At that time, I slept next to my bedroom window so I could see the moon and stars as I would fall asleep. One night I was "awakened" by something outside my window. Outside the window appeared a brightly illuminated sphere descending from the sky and coming to rest in the yard.

I was alarmed, and so I jumped out of bed to run to the bedroom door, when I saw a dark object spinning toward me from the direction of the brilliant orb. It hit the ground at my feet, and a woman appeared in its place. She was wearing a blue jump suit and was quite stunning. She smiled and asked me to go get my brother. Relieved that she wasn't interested in me, I went to get my brother, who was kneeling tearfully at the foot of my parents' bed, dressed in a monk's saffron robe with his head shaved. He rose slowly and accompanied me back to our bedroom where he climbed through my window into the yard and was taken aboard the craft. Then the woman turned to me and said, "You are not ready yet, but when you are, we will return for you."

She alluded to some tracking device that they had embedded in my wrist. I then watched the brilliant orb ascend into the sky.

For many years, I wondered if the dream woman's promise would one day come true. About 10 years ago, after meditating in the middle of the night and returning to sleep, I was awakened by a presence in my bedroom. There, standing beside our bed was a woman dressed in a blue jumpsuit. I asked her who she was, and she told me her name. Then I asked her where she was from, and she named a particular star system. Then I asked why she had come to our world. She said, "We've come to help make sure that machines do not take over your planet." I asked her if I could join her and visit her world. She smiled and said, "Not yet. You've got too much to do here."

Since the woman's appearance, I have (perhaps in defiance of the woman's refusal to let me join her) visited many apparent worlds during my lucid dreams—which often last from 90 minutes to two hours—and have apparently communed with various cultures in a variety of planetary systems. I have on virtually every occasion been welcomed as a friend, and have engaged them on topics as diverse as overcoming warfare and discovering common metrics that we can use in discussing our respective worlds. Although I have encountered beings who appeared to me as green quadrupeds, most of the beings I have met during my interstellar lucid dreams have appeared human. I once asked one of them, "Why do you appear to me as human?" The man responded, "We appear as you need us to appear to you, from top to bottom." And then he added, "The humanoid form is common in the universe."

I have not always expected, nor sought such experiences. Sometimes, they have surprised me by their abruptness and authority. For instance, when I was 46, I went out on the Lower

Laguna Madre of south Texas to sleep alone on my flyfishing skiff. I have done this many times

as a part of my love of the primitive estuary, and to be positioned to flyfish at sunrise.

As I lay on the deck, looking at the Pleiades that appear brightly in the moonless

sky, I suddenly feel the waves and hissing sound that has been so familiar over the years

as a sign that something momentous is about to happen. Suddenly, I find myself aboard a

large open work boat in full daylight with a dozen men, all dressed in work clothes. I can

see watercraft passing by all around, engineered to express a delicate beauty. Everything

is bright and entirely vivid and colorful. I wonder if the men can see me, and I wonder

where I have been taken. Suddenly I realizea that I am "on" another planet, and the sun

overhead is a different star. Suddenly, I am back lying on the deck of my skiff, feeling the

energetic waves diminishing.

Are They Real?

Such experiences raise the question of who and what we encounter in our lucid dreams.

Anyone who has experienced frequent lucid dreams has, on occasion run into characters who

seem fully conscious, and who act and speak in surprising ways as if to indicate their

independence from us.

Local or Non-Local?

It is probably true that most of our dream characters are rooted in past personal

memories. They may recapitulate the relationships we have had, or still have, and/or may

represent aspects of ourselves that we have not fully integrated. However, these dream characters

are not, ultimately, independent persons. In fact, we are probably correct in assuming that most

of these characters reside "locally" within Freud's unconscious, Jung's personal unconscious, or Wilber's "submergent" unconscious (2007)—all of which describe the repressed, unintegrated mass of unconscious memory that awaits our recovery and integration. Through dialogue and engagement, we can resolve longstanding intrapsychic conflicts, thereby enriching ourselves with qualities that we may have heretofore disavowed; but sometimes, it seems undeniable that the characters in our dreams also embody nonlocal or transpersonal influences, as well. In effect, they seem to be real persons, too.

In one dream series, for example, I faced an ordeal that lasted for many months through a half dozen dreams. A deceased childhood friend started appearing in my dreams a year after he died, and he would chase me and assault me whenever he managed to catch up with me. At first, I ran from him, but could not seem to elude him. Then, in one memorable dream, I became lucid and tried to dismiss. I said, "You are only a dream. Please go away," to which he responded by laughing at me before attacking me with a knife. I discovered my own knife, and so I fought him hand to hand, finally disarming him, but even that success wasn't the end of the story. Shortly afterward, in another dream he attacked and threw me to the ground where he proceeded to beat my face with his fists. I was sure he was going to kill me, but as a last ditch effort, I was able to free one of my arms and rub his shoulder in a silent appeal. Only then did he finally stop hitting me, and he started crying. As his tears fell into my face, he said, "I only want your love."

We might ask, Did my old friend represent a part of myself—that is, my Jungian shadow, or my rejected self? That made sense to me. But was he also, in some sense, the actual person I'd known as my neighbor and friend? If you are open to a reality beyond the empirical world, then one might ask, *Why not both*?

A good friend of mine experienced a similarly disturbing dream about his girlfriend. As they walked side by side, he became lucid. He turned and looked into her eyes and felt an exquisite, timeless love. But then her face assumed a dark, threatening look, and she said in a low, monotonous voice, "*Sleep, sleep*." He awakened in fear, feeling that she was trying to get control of him. Afterward he asked me, "Do you think it was really her? Or some aspect of myself?" After 40 years of working with dreams, I am convinced that the best answer for my friend was "both."

The Importance of the Co-Creative Paradigm

I believe that such ambiguous encounters with dream characters provide justification for the introduction of the CDP, which, I believe, can uniquely explain our dreaming experience in ways that allow dream characters to be comprised simultaneously of both personal/intrapsychic and transpersonal/independent influences. The CDP treats dreams as comprised of three aspects, not one—1) a responsive (minimally in most cases) dream ego or observer, 2) emergent unformed content, such as an unclothed manakin, and 3) an interactive field or interface between dream observer and the content which vectors or coalesces the relationship in the form of metaphoric imagery. This paradigm was anticipated by Montague Ullman (1969) and reflects the influence of quantum physics. It posits that the dream rises into our awareness, first as unformed content—referred to as "intrusive novelty" by Ullman (1979)—and then coalesces under the dream ego's observation as metaphoric imagery on a mutable interface. The synchronous exchange that ensues effectively co-creates the dream, resulting in a "mapping" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1986; Ullman, 1969) of metaphoric content on the dream interface to express the

unfolding encounter between observer and observed. The resultant dream narrative is, therefore, one of many possible outcomes contingent on the dreamer's responses to the emergent content.

Figure 1. The dream as a mutable interface
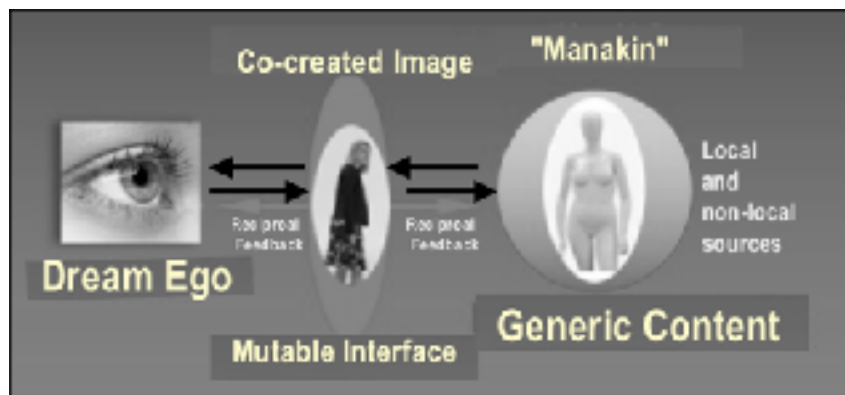
The CDP anticipates the fluctuating appearance of a dream character as a function of the various influences that give rise to its appearance. Just as my friend's alarm over his girlfriend's dramatic change could have been attributed to his unresolved issues toward her or women in general, our understanding of dream content helps us to further understand how dream characters can appear as familiar persons in one moment, and like strangers in the next. While the dream ego can mediate or distort the incoming content from one moment to the next, the emergent content also reflects a diversity of presentations somewhat unrelated to the dream ego's subjective stance, thus partly autonomous. If you picture this relationship visually, you might imagine the dream observer standing on one side of the dream interface, and the emergent content on the other. While the dream ego draws from a variety of feelings, attitudes and

conscious memories during the encounter and projects it on the screen, the emergent content partakes of various sources or feeds, as well.

These feeds may originate in unconscious influences "within" us, as well as nonlocal or transpersonal feeds "beyond" us. If these diverse sources are simultaneously available during the encounter, then the nature of our dream characters encompasses an entire gamut of influences shape-shifting its way as imagery through the course of the dream.

One might ask, why did the woman in my friend's dream transform into an ominous figure? If we believe, as the CDP purports, that the dreamer's subjective state constantly impacts and alters the dream imagery—and vice versa in a reciprocal exchange—then the answer lies, at least in part, in the dreamer's inability to maintain an open, fearless view of his partner that permitted the deepest experience of her "objective" or soulful presence. Thus, rather than seeing the ominous behavior as an objective feature of his girlfriend, we would encourage the dreamer to see it as a distortion that arose, at least in part, due to some fear or reaction unrelated to the actual person. Of course, she might also possess such qualities; but to infer a dark intention without examining the dreamer's assumptions, experiences, fears, and past traumas supports a self-serving view of our dream characters that relieves us of personal responsibility. Avoiding this age-old error of disowning our own psychic content and projecting our "shadow" onto others is the main reason that dream workers and lucid dreamers have understandably steered away from treating dream content as ontologically independent, instead favoring a "parts of self" viewpoint. But the belief that the dream is entirely local, or self-generated, keeps us from having to allow for the partial independence, or sentience, of a dream character.

It would be tempting to debate this question, as if a one-sided "yes" or "no" can ever encompass the dimesionality of our experience. In 2011, Stephen LaBerge and I debated this question during a lucid dreaming pre-conference at the Science and Duality (SAND) conference. LaBerge argued that the contents of our dreams should *not* be regarded as possessing independent agency, whereas I argued that at least some of our experiences suggest otherwise. We did not reach agreement, perhaps because these postions represent the classical philosophical positions of realism and idealism, which are, according to some philosophers, incommensurate. Even so, I believe that the CDP enables a reconciliation of these classical positions by allowing for the integration of subjective (intrapsychic) and objective (transpersonal) aspects of our immediate experience.

This debate naturally segues into a consideration of dream ethics. After all, rejecting the possibility of dream character independence implicitly ratifies a dreamer's claim to treat them without regard to normal ethical standards—a position which logically follows from a "parts of self" view of our dream characters. The attitude of, "It's my dream and I can do what I want with it," seems reasonable on the surface, given the personal and private nature of dreaming, but it hasn't prevented some lucid dreamers from pointing out that treating our dream characters as "property" may not translate into fostering healthy waking relationships. This controversy erupted into a heated debate in 1988, documented in a series of open letters and responses in the *Lucidity Letter* (*7,* 1). This is an ageless debate, which ultimately comes down to one's belief and paradigm.

The denial of occasional dream content independence coincides with the philosophical position of solipsism, or radical idealism, which purports that nothing can be said to exist

independent of the observer. This viewpoint runs through Vedanta Hinduism and New Age philosophy alike, and appeals to those who believe that the world is a product of our own creation. However, the problem with "You create your own reality" soon confronts us when we must face the gritty ethical considerations that accompany living in a very real-acting world. My Vedanta professor at the University of Texas once lectured eloquently on the non-verifiability of the physical world only to face a mentally disturbed student, who knocked Dr. Rao to the ground as he left the lecture hall. The student asserted, "Dr. Rao, this fist is real."

One White Crow is Enough

As I have suggested, while it might be rare that dream characters exhibit independent agency, *any* instance of apparent independence should prompt us to treat *all* of our dream characters potentially as *persons*. If we cannot ultimately discern their true nature, best to allow for the possibility of personhood. Doing so puts us in alignment with the best practices of science, since scientists often reject hallowed premises on the basis of a single anamoly that disproves the rule. Indeed, Thomas Kuhn argues in his seminal classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) that the anomalous exception to the rule is almost always the catalyst of dramatic "paradigm shifts" in the field of science. When the scientific community is no longer able to deny unexplained anomalies, nor explain them within the prevailing worldview, the entire structure of knowledge eventually collapses and another theory is born.

By acknowledging the occasional exception to the "parts of self" view of dream characters, one obviously runs the risk of conferring agency and personhood upon wholly self-created dream characters. But even if most dream content derives from personal, intra-psychic

feeds, treating our dream characters as persons is a proposition that can protect the occasional

dream visitor from harm, as well as further our interpersonal and spiritual development as we

endeavor to treat our dream characters as persons.

From the standpoint of the CDP, my friend's inability to experience his girlfriend's true

nature was perhaps distorted by his own experiences with her in specific, or with women in

general. Interestingly, he discovered later that he had significant unfinished business with his

self-absorbed and neglectful mother, for whom he harbored deep resentment: It took a midlife

crisis, an extramarital affair, and sober self-discovery to understand and resolve this issue. So,

whether he could see it at the time, my friend had reason to attribute his girlfriend's dark

transformation to a projection of his own fears of being dominated by women, regardless of his

girlfriend's own issues.

This view of dreamer bias and its distorting impact on the emergent content holds the

dreamer accountable for achieving and sustaining a certain "transparency" if he/she hopes to

experience a clear connection with the emergent dream content, regardless of its origin or

character. This view is articulated in the Tibetan texts that were brought to the West first of all by

Evans-Wentz in his *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines,* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* both

of which state that the highest state of consciousness is always available to us in dreams and in

the after-death *bardo* state alike, but that our karmic attachments and fears effectively obscure

our clear view of the the Light with images of our fears and attachments. According to this

ancient tradition, our unresolved karma arises to evoke further illusion, and to convince us to

turn away from the greater truth.

The Dream Itself May Be Our Best Evidence

On occasion, I have asked dream characters about their ontology. For instance, in one experience, a woman appeared and offered to guide me through the experience.

> *…I am flying through the darkness or void, feeling a familiar warm wind, and I feel someone's hand on my shoulder. I take the hand and pull the person around to where I can see her/him. As I do, a woman appears in the darkness, and a brilliant scene unfolds all around us. We fly down and sit together on a bench among people who are strolling in a park-like wooded area. As we sit together, I decide to inquire about her nature. I ask, "Are you my anima?" She smiles patiently, as if the question is limiting. She replies, "Kind of." Then I ask, "Are you a part of me?" With a kind, but somewhat pained expression, she says, "Kind of."*

Such responses, however unacceptable they might be from an empirical point of view, provide phenomenological support for saying "yes" *and* "no" to the question of dream character independence. In addition, such dreams intimate the dream ego's fluctuating transparency, and show us how the dream ego's subjectivity can impact the imagery's capacity to mediate non-local features of the dream's characters. To illustrate the dream ego's fluctuating transparency, I was in a lucid dream not long ago, feeling alone and depressed.

> *Aware that I am dreaming, I walk along a woodland path. Each person I encounter seems flat, and the environment appears dull and lifeless. As I continue along a woodland path, feeling increasingly isolated in the dream, a former psychotherapy client, who has since died, appears and greets me. Frances puts her arm around me and leads me to a place where we sit down and meditate for a few minutes. When I open my eyes,*

my mood has turned positive, and the world has transformed. I feel hopeful again, and the world is intensely colorful and luminous. I say goodbye to her and continue along the woodland path. The people around me seem suddenly animated and aware of me, and they acknowledge me in passing.

Did Frances actually manifest in my dream to help me? Perhaps so. Significantly, a year prior to this dream, I received a phone call from her surviving husband. I had never met him since Frances had met and married him after we had terminated therapy. He seemed uneasy, even suspicious, and I wondered why he had called. He finally confessed that he felt he'd never fully known Frances, because she had kept things from him. Hoping to get to know her better, he decided to engage in the risky business of going through her private journals. He was disturbed to find numerous entries referring to me that apparently revealed a deep emotional attachment to me. He said, "It seems that she may have been in love with you." His conclusion shocked me, since I had never felt anything other than a close mutual respect between us.

Whether or not her husband's fear exaggerated her emotional attachment, a series of dreams followed our single conversation. In the dreams, Frances would appear and consistently express her love for me. It was if the phone call opened me to the possibility of her affection. In each dream, I knew she was dead, and urged her to move on. But she kept returning, each time more insistent that we should essentially become married in spirit. I found this unsettling but somehow appealing, as well. I was divorced at the time, and discouraged by the difficulty of real-world relationships. Nonetheless, I persisted in saying "no," and she eventually stopped appearing in my dreams. In retrospect, the support she offered seemed to express a genuine love, as well as an acceptance of our need to continue our respective journeys apart.

The importance of viewing at least some dream characters as possessing partial independence—mediated or distorted by the dream ego's fluctuating transparency—preserves the idea that dreams enable us to enter into what Tarnas (2006) refers to as a "true relationship," which he defines as a reciprocal exchange between freely choosing, autonomous entities. Without independent volition, our dream characters are relegated to the role of functionaries who cannot provide the dynamic open-ended exchanges through which self-awareness and growth can occur. Certainly, a role-play or a virtual emulation with non-sentient characters can provide rehearsal for real life, much in the way that the Gestalt "empty chair" technique can help us resolve unfinished business; but such exchanges cannot be considered a true relationship with an "other" who has the power to challenge us, to reject us, or to love us. Ultimately, if our dream characters are wholly extensions of ourselves, then we are ultimately alone in our dreams.

Two Levels of Assessment—Similarity and Difference

In trying to determine if a dream character has a separate identity—or "is real" to put it simply--there are two obvious levels of assessment that we can apply. If a figure is familiar to us, we might ask, Does the character's behavior *similar enough* to what we know about the real person? If his hair is blond instead of black in the dream, or if the dream character speaks with a Mexican accent, we might interpret these discrepancies as mere perceptual distortions if the character is similar enough to the real person to convince us that it's really the person we know. Such an assessment is similar to the "Turing Test," originally called the "imitation test" (Turing, 1950) that mathematician Alan Turing devised as a framework for assessing if a computer could be considered conscious: If a machine's responses are indistinguishable from the real person, then we can presume it is conscious. However, in the case of a stranger—such as the

extraterrestrial woman who stood beside my bed—we would have no one to compare her with.

Instead, we can assess the degree of *difference* between the character and ourselves. We can

apply what New Testament scholars refer to as the "principle of dissimilarity" that they have

used to determine if Jesus' purported words are likely to be his, or later writers. To the degree

that his purported words *differed* from established customs or doctrine, and risked provoking the

status quo, the *more likely* the words were his own according to this principle. Similarly, the

degree to which an unfamiliar dream character deviates from our values or expectations, perhaps

the *more likely* the character is logically independent from us.

A Curse or a Blessing?

In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, it says, "When the One becomes two, what will you

do?" Division and duality is often seen as a curse—a fall from grace and an illusion that prevents

us from experiencing our true natures. However, from another standpoint, division or "twoness"

is the necessary crucible wherein consciousness is created. A premature flight to a tenuous union

may deprive us of "real fists" that offer us the challenges we need for deep integration. We find

this appreciation of internal division in the philosophy of Hegel, the psychology of Jung, and the

poetry of Rilke. While we may all arrive at a state of completeness at some future endpoint as

some spiritual traditions contend, experiencing ourselves as separate from our dream characters

creates what I have referred to (Sparrow, 2014a) as a functional or provisional dualism that

promotes awareness, dialogue and integration until the tension of otherness is no longer

necessary for our development.

Perhaps We Are Not Alone

Three years ago, I had three lucid dreams within a few months that included details that were puzzling to me. In the first, I found myself on another planet with a woman whose adult daughter asked me to be her teacher. I explained that I was from another world, and they said that wasn't a problem. As I left them, and followed a man to a portal from which I could return to earth, I asked him, "How is it living here?" He said, "It's fine. The sun never sets." I found his answer startling, obviously symbolic, it seemed. A few weeks later, I dreamed lucidly that I was visiting another world, and as I was preparing to return home. I asked another man in parting, "Do you know of earth?" He nodded. I then asked, "How far is it from here?" He replied, "52 moons." I found that puzzling. Then, a few weeks later, I was again on another world, flying beside an old woman and a boy, who were my escorts. We landed atop a mountain where I could see three suns in the sky. Again, I was puzzled. All of this seemed meaningless, until I read that Proxima Centauri—the closest star to our solar system—has a planet, Proxima B, that is four light years from earth (52 lunar cycles equals four years), and has one side that always faces its sun. Further, if one were to stand on the surface of Proxima B, one would see three stars-- Proxima Centauri and the binary star Alpha Centauri. Was this sheer coincidence? There's no way to know for sure.

When Newton finally solved the problem of planetary motion and dispelled the ancient view that the planets reveal the movements of the gods, we were suddenly alone in a mechanistic universe (Tarnas, 1993). Being a religious man, Newton never intended to deprive humanity of an animated universe, but that was the effect of his brilliant discovery. After all, whenever we reduce the appearance of life to a process devoid of mystery, we lose the dimension of relationship that we yearn for. By accepting that some of our dream visitors come from

elsewhere, or at least acting "as if" they might be, we acknowledge that we may live in an

animated universe, populated by beings who offer us something that we cannot create on our

own—true relationships that confirm that we are not alone.

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Figure 1. The dream as a mutable interface (Sparrow, 2020)