

The identity of the dreaming I

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Summary. Several of my dreams happened in settings that were completely different from that of my waking world. That triggered in me the general question of the identity of the dreaming I. In the light of the presented experiences I see this in a different perspective: The “I”, the ego with its ability to act and to perceive, and with its individual perspective, devoid any other attributes is the primary source of everything else, first of all of the body and the sex and secondary of the perceived world which surrounds the body and finally of all material and immaterial attachments and garments, with which it would like to adorn itself. So my final and most important conclusion is to recommend keeping a long term dream journal on a regular basis and, after waking up to ask the question “Who was I in that dream”.

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I am a psychologist, a dreamer and a long term dream journalist¹. Although I have some experience with dreams of clients, my primary source of experience and knowledge are my own dreams. When I began to journal them 30 years ago, my culturally embedded reflex to interpret dreams became dysfunctional because there were far too many dreams, and dream interpretation is quite a time consuming activity. So my intention to interpret became weaker and I simply journaled my dreams and wondered about the funny and strange stuff which I experienced during the night. Slowly I opened up to other questions and approaches to the dream world².

Now, several of my dreams happened in settings that were completely different from that of my waking world. That triggered in me the question: Was I really Christoph in those unfamiliar settings? This led finally to the general question of the identity of the dreaming I. So what is the identity during my waking time? For now it is enough to say that my identity is assigned with a name and a number and is approved by the local authority. It seems to be quite fixed. I can't be one of you, I can't be a professional dancer, living in Australia; and I can't be a sister of a disabled child.

At night this can be quite different. So I would like to recount some of my nightly experiences to illustrate that fact:

In the first dream I saw — from above — a dear and close acquaintance of my mother who was well known in our family as “aunt Giggi”. She was old and lay in her bed and was slowly dying. On a bedside table stood an air humidifier which hummed and glowed in the dim light of a weak lamp. But suddenly I switched the perspective and I was her. I lay in bed, heard the humming of the humidifier from

afar, but from a different angle. I also heard the voice of my mother or the voice of my best friend, talking to me. Then I woke up.

It is sometimes mentioned in dream reports that the dreamer changes the perspective in the dream. He may watch a scene about what happens to a dream figure from above and suddenly he is the figure and experiences the scene from within. Sometimes he may even experience the dream scene both from within and from above. - So this dream is a good introduction to the topic of the changing identity of the dreaming I, because I was suddenly aunt Giggi and I experienced the dream scene from her perspective. When I dreamt that dream I was 52 and, naturally, a man. In this dream I was a woman about 85 years of age.

But now to the next dream: I wanted to leave Iraq, I wanted to escape from the war. First I was at a station and waited for a train. As I stood in a row of waiting people in front of a ticket counter, a man approached me and told me I should follow him; he would bring me to the frontier. We arranged a meeting in the evening at an agreed place. But he did not come. I phoned a number he had given me, but a foreign voice informed me that the man had become ill and could not come. So I tried to cross the border on my own initiative. But the customs officer refused to let me pass because the border was closed. Only a special permit of the ministry of the interior was accepted for crossing the border. I asked another customs officer and wanted to give him a tip. But it was hopeless. I woke up.

Now the setting of this dream was quite unfamiliar to me. I was informed about the war in Iraq and that was all. Maybe that emotional information about the war triggered that dream. The reason I tell you this dream has to do with another interesting observation. Both customs officers looked at me like men look at a young woman. They looked at my breasts! And they treated me like men treat a woman – in this case politely. I did not realize this in the dream, but I did when I woke up and was puzzled and amused at the same time. So obviously I was again a woman in that dream and that was so natural that I did not even recognize it. And surely I did not question my identity during the dream. In

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the dream I was simply me as I usually am. Only the quick glances of the two men and their general behaviour gave me a hint – in hindsight – that something must have been quite different.

The next dream was more of someone else than me. I was in a half observing, half participating position - I had a brother who was very creative but he became a criminal. I tried to keep contact with him but he often tried to avoid me. I found out, though, that he lived alone and played quite an important role in the underworld of the Turkish mafia. I told him many times that he should turn to our family for help but this was in vain. One day he was put in prison, but there he continued his dark path and saw to it that some of the prisoners were poisoned. That deed was the final sentence. He was put into solitary confinement and was muzzled when he yelled. As a last possibility to express himself, his urine ran down his legs and covered the floor. This was the worst for him because, as I knew, he was a very tidy and clean man. Soon he died but I had the opportunity to speak with him shortly before his death. We mused about whether he would come into heaven. But it was clear to both of us that this would not be the case. The wardens did not want to bury him according to the religious laws and put him quickly into the ground of a prison backyard because the body deteriorated quickly. But soon it began to smell awful in the backyard. So they had to dig up what remained of the decayed body and buried it in a wood. But soon the inhabitants of a nearby village complained that since then, animals of that forest and stray dogs began to attack them. So they had to exhume him again and decided to burn the mortal remains. It was only then that the undead spirit of my evil brother kept finally quiet. Deep shame came over my family and me.

Now: Although I was twice in Turkey in waking life I swear that I do not have a brother and surely not a brother who was in the Turkish mafia. In this case I have to emphasize that I am a citizen of Switzerland when I am awake, and my only sibling is a three years older sister – but obviously in my dream life it was quite different. So who was I in that dream? Although I was in the observing perspective and experienced what happened to another dream figure, I interacted with that dream person who was definitely related to me – he was my brother. And finally I felt the deep shame that came over our family because of my evil brother. So I was not an anonymous observer but had the implicit identity of a Turkish man who had a brother and who was a member of a larger family which cultivated the ideas of family honour and religious beliefs of heaven and hell. But awake, I do not share beliefs of heaven and hell at all. Although I was brought up in a protestant Christian family, this distinction was known to me but has never been an important factor in my religious education.

Next dream: Together with a companion I was on the road with a truck. The two of us took turns driving the rusty vehicle. The region was a desert area near a bare mountain range, I believe in North Africa, maybe Libya or Algeria. We lost our way because there were no road signs and when it became dark we found out that we must have entered a prohibited area, a military zone, because a battery of heavy canons began to fire nearby. We were terrified and stopped our car. My comrade sounded the horn

as much as he could and turned all the lights on. Soon a cross-country vehicle approached us and we were arrested. The treatment of the officer was very unfriendly and the dream turned more and more into a Kafkaesque scene. We managed to escape and fled with the truck in the early morning. But we passed a very barren and negative landscape with a few small villages of low clay buildings. The few people we found there were hostile and were not willing to either sell us water or gasoline or give us shelter. So we had to continue our lost way to an unknown destination. Finally I woke up.

Also here I have to state that I never was in North Africa, except 10 days in Marrakesh. Again Libya was at that time in the news, because one son of Muammar al Gadhafi behaved badly in Geneva and was arrested because of that. This in turn caused severe diplomatic disturbances which cumulated in Gadhafi's demand to divide Switzerland and to incorporate the remaining parts into the neighbour countries. Then, I never drove a truck, indeed I was never in a cabin of a large truck and surely I was never a professional truck driver. So was I Christoph in this dream, although it was quite evident and unquestionable that I was me, as always? The change in my identity here is not explicit but again implicit because the setting of the dream is completely unfamiliar to me.

The next dream is a pretty quiet dream where not much happened. It was a long and stable lucid dream. When I became lucid in the dream I tried to fly up to the roof of a house nearby, but did not succeed. Nevertheless I was sure that I was in a dream. Near the house I found a small entrance which led to a very long tunnel that passed under a mountain. Despite being a bit frightened I continued my journey through the dark, driven by my curiosity. Finally I arrived at the end of the tunnel and entered a huge city which was constructed as one big building with countless majestic pillars and domes. I did not know where I was and was looking for somebody to ask. I approached someone I considered to be a female with long, dark, silky hair. As she lifted her head I looked into a very strange face, half Asiatic, half saurian. I tried to communicate with her, but we could not understand each other, although she seemed to be friendly. Then I continued my journey and after some time I left the marvellous town and walked on a country path. There nothing interesting could be seen and my walk became a bit boring. I did not know where to go and tried to switch back to my body in the bed – but I could not! The lucid dream was indeed very stable and I was fixed in that world. First I was startled by the fact but I realized that I did not need to be afraid because the experience was not dangerous or frightening at all. In fact my journey was quite peaceful. So I continued my walk and I felt my walking body well. On my back I felt a strange caressing feeling which I could not classify at first, but then considering this foreign fact, I realized that I must have a sauron body myself with a shield on my back like a turtle. This shield was not a burden, nor was it restricting my walking movement. No, it caused a caressing feeling. Realizing that, I woke up, being again a human – a very amazed human.

This dream is self-explanatory considering the explicit identity of the dreaming I. I would like to emphasize the fact that I had a different body.

Occasionally I experience that a lucid dream collapses. Then I “sit” in the black or lit void and scratch with a non-existing finger my non existing head because I do not know what to do. In this situation which is devoid of any characteristics – no space, no colour, no forms, no body – nothing, only the “I” exists, as usual, and a sense of duration. The state of the “I” there is somewhat indifferent which might have caused the dream to collapse. Then, I usually wait until a new dream unfolds or, if it lasts too long, I fall asleep or I wake myself up to write down the dream before I forget it.

This situation is interesting because the identity of the “I” still exists in spite of the fact that nothing else is there. But this identity has nearly no characteristics and surely no body. This state is not a mystical state, it feels quite ordinary, but as much as I know from more skilled lucid dreamers, the void is the launching pad for mystical experiences.

Now we have heard of different changes of the identity of the dreaming I, some of them are quite obvious, some of them have such an unfamiliar setting that we can conclude implicitly that the identity of the dreamer must be somewhat different. Considering these facts I came to the conclusion that I should divide the identity of a person into two parts: a primary identity and a secondary identity.

The primary identity is foundational and is that what we perceive from within and all the time. It is the “I am” the “I am”. This “I” has basic qualities which are: consciousness, awareness, perception and action. It has an individual perspective, which is unique, but which is also limited by this individual point of view. Because our primary identity is so unchangeable we tend to overlook the fact that part of the identity which I call the secondary identity has changed.

We attach the secondary attributes of the identity to this primary identity. But those are not intrinsic because in dreams we cannot only change the age or the profession; no, we can change the body, the sex and the relatives. We can even leave our human shape and identify with another living form. Naturally, similar to waking life, the marital state, the acquaintances and friends can be exchanged in dreams.

So at daytime we have a more or less fixed identity and we can't escape that, nor can we expand it very much. We have some kind of variation by the roles we play in different situations. For example, the role we play in our families, at our working place, with our friends, etc. Also our identity may change somewhat over the course of a lifetime.

At night our identity is more flexible; the spectrum of variation is broader and goes far beyond the changing of roles. Interestingly, those different dream identities usually have only one role, probably because the duration of this identification is relatively short and contains only one or two episodes of the life of that identity.

Now, I would like to go back to our daytime identity: this is not as restricted as I described before because we humans have invented possibilities for broadening the spectrum of identities. In novels, computer games and movies we can identify with a hero and can forget –for a time – our limitation in a fixed identity. This fixation is a limitation, it is felt as a limitation by the waking I because it knows from night time a much greater freedom. Indeed I think that this conscious or unconscious yearning for a variation of identity has triggered those cultural developments.

Before, I assumed that other people also have such dreams of a changed identity, but is this really so? – I think

so, because – at least at day time – I am not an extra-terrestrial, but a human. So there is likelihood that other humans may have similar experiences. But we cannot be sure in that respect because this question has never been investigated with a larger population. Schredl and co-workers investigated common dream themes³ and there the change of sex, age or body appears towards the middle or end of a long list of dream themes. So the conclusion might be that also other people experience changes of identity, but not many and not often. This investigation, however, was based on a questionnaire which is not a very precise instrument because the answers are based on rough estimations. One of the very big problems in this respect is that our culture does not hold dreaming in high esteem. So very, very few people keep a dream journal on a regular basis and without that we do not have a clearer picture of what happens in our dreams.

Another problem may be that younger people may have fewer dreams in which they change their identity. Inge Strauch and Barbara Meier found out that all people dream of unfamiliar settings, but the frequency increases with age⁴. So younger people dream more of known surroundings and known people while elderly persons find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings more often and are confronted with strangers. This agrees with what I find in my dream diary. I suspect that the unfamiliar dream settings correlate strongly with the variability of identity: If one dreams of an unfamiliar setting it is likely that the secondary identity of the perceiving “I” is also changed and unfamiliar.

Then, the next problem is that we tend, throughout both day and night, to be aware of things outside us, we are not very self-aware. We do in fact never ask ourselves: who am I right now, because we take it for granted that we are always the same – and rightly so because our primary identity does not change! I am always I! But this blinds us to the fact that this I may have quite different secondary characteristics which may include a different sex and a different body and different relatives.

We may ask also the question if there is an explanation of this fact. Yes I think so. As we know the dream world, as similar it looks like the waking world, is subjugated to different laws – psychological laws. And one of these psychological laws is not space, or time or gravity but association. And associations can jump quite easily from one theme to another, from one scene to another. So the dream world is quite malleable, and also the secondary identity is subjugated to that law. Identification with other persons and life forms are quite easy and effortless, indeed quite automatic because the fixation to our rigid waking identity is relaxed.

But here I would like to focus shortly on the primary identity, the self-explanatory “I am I”. Lately the theory of Thomas Metzinger about the “ego-tunnel”⁵ came up, in which this self-explanatory “I” is labelled as some kind of an illusion created by the brain, which is considered as the source of the ego. Mater is supposed to be the creator of it.

In the light of the presented experiences I see this in a different perspective: The “I”, the ego with its ability to act and to perceive, and with its individual perspective, devoid any other attributes is the primary source of everything else, first of all of the body and the sex and secondary of the perceived world which surrounds the body and finally of all material and immaterial attachments and garments, with which it would like to adorn itself.

So my final and most important conclusion is to recommend keeping a long term dream journal on a regular basis and, after waking up to ask the question “Who was I in that dream”.

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