

# Discerning the ontology of dream characters from the standpoint of Co-Creative dream theory

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**Summary.** It is not uncommon to have dreams with familiar characters who appear to exhibit independent agency and personhood, whether the actual persons are alive or dead. Discerning the ontological nature of dream characters presents a challenge in contemporary dreamwork, especially if one wishes to adopt an inclusive approach that allows for dream characters to be derived from intrapsychic or transpersonal sources. An inclusive model avoids two possible errors inherent in an either-or approach: 1) Believing that a dream character is a “real” person, a dreamer may disavow ownership over unacknowledged or rejected aspects of self; or, 2) Believing that the character originates intrapsychically, the dreamer may assume ownership of qualities and attitudes that are not derived from within. 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 various sources co-inhere as mutable imagery coalescing in real time on a continuum of relative influence. This approach allows for the possibility that a dream character’s ontological status may derive from multiple sources, shifting in degree of representation from moment to moment.

**Keywords:** Dream Characters, Co-Creative Dream Theory

## Introduction

Every experienced dream worker occasionally encounters a dream that includes a character who conveys an agency and spontaneity that mimics a real person. The dreamer may feel that the character—alive or dead—was somehow present in the dream. Rejecting the possibility of independent agency may safeguard the dreamer from projecting personal or intrapsychic attributes onto the presumed “real” person, but it does not explain away the felt-experience of so many dreamers, who remain convinced that they have encountered independent entities in their dreams. While such convictions can never be conclusively established, they are nonetheless compelling and often life-changing. Thus, contemporary dream workers would do well to adopt an approach to such experiences that respectfully aligns with the dreamer’s worldview. 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, 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 dreamer is always changed by the experience. There is a resolution of the grieving process and/or a wider spiritual perspective. (Shorter, 2009)*

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Such dreams are by no means limited to purported visitations from the dead. Indeed, if the dream character is a familiar person who is alive, the dreamer may subsequently explore that possibility with the real person, potentially expanding the depth and dimensions of the relationship.

Having analyzed thousands of dreams during my 40-year career as a psychotherapist specializing in dream work, I often find myself helping clients discern the ontology of a dream character. While many therapists might steer a client away from believing in this possibility, I favor an approach based on the widely accepted premise that dreaming is a psi-conductive state (Krippner, Ullmann, and Vaughn, 2003), and thus can simultaneously tap various personal, intrapsychic, and transpersonal “feeds” (Sparrow, 2014) that the dreaming mind may render as composite, dynamically fluctuating images.

## Dreams as Indeterminate

My purpose in this paper is not so much to offer evidence in support of psychic influences in dreams, but rather to introduce a theoretical framework that accounts for multiple and fluctuating sources of dream character ontology. The theoretical 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 the emergent content. The CDP does not view the dream as created by some unconscious process and then received fully formed and experienced passively by the dream ego during sleep, but rather 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. While it is by no means a new idea that dream images can represent a composite of personal, intrapsychic, and even transpersonal influences, the

CDP allows for a *constantly changing ratio of influences* over the course of the dream, thus permitting a basis for analysis that allows for subjective and objective sources animating the same dream character.

One can argue that contemporary neuroscience supports the CDP. 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. If the sources of a dream are manifold, and the presentation is a “continuously changing state,” then any approach to dream analysis should presumably reflect this dynamic orientation.

The CDP enables us to ask questions regarding “partial” dream character independence—based on a convergence of local and nonlocal feeds that sustain a dynamic, mutable presentation. This complex view of dream imagery makes little sense within a “strictly determined” (Freud, 1913; Kramer, 1993) or presentational (Sparrow, 2020) content paradigm, even if one allows for a synthesis of various sources in the image’s pre-formation, as Jung seemed to intimate when he said that the image...

*...is the result of the spontaneous activity of the unconscious on one hand and of momentary conscious situation on the other. The interpretation of its meaning...can start neither from the conscious alone nor from the unconscious alone, but only from their reciprocal relationship (Jung, 2014).*

On the surface, this statement aligns with the central premise of CDP—that dream images coalesce through a real time interaction between conscious and unconscious; but it is not clear whether Jung referred only to an exchange affecting the construction of the image prior to the dream ego’s observation, or an interactive process during the dream ego’s observation of emergent content. By accepting that Jung was leaning toward embracing the CDP, then the categorical distinctions of “personal” and “archetypal” imagery effectively breaks down, allowing one to transcend either-or thinking in discerning dream character ontology.

### Anecdotal Support for the CDP

My own experiences, while admittedly anecdotal, have informed my understanding of the value of the CDP in making sense of ambiguous dream encounters. For instance, when I was 20, I experienced a false awakening dream that even now, 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.

*I see a brightly illuminated sphere descending from the sky and coming to rest in the yard. I am alarmed at first, and so I jump out of bed to run to the bedroom door, but then I see a dark object spinning toward me from the direction of the brilliant orb. It hits the ground at my feet, and a woman appears in its place. She is wearing a blue jump suit and is quite stunning. She smiles and asks me to go get my brother. Relieved that she isn’t interested in me, I go to fetch my brother, who is kneeling tearfully at the foot of my parents’ bed, dressed in a monk’s saffron*

*robe with his head shaved. He rises slowly and accompanies me back to our bedroom where he then climbs through my window into the yard and is taken aboard the craft. Then the woman turns to me and says, “You are not ready yet, but when you are, we will return for you.” She alludes to some tracking device that they have embedded in my wrist. I then stand with my mother beside me, watching the brilliant orb ascend into the sky.*

For many years, I wondered if the dream woman was an actual extraterrestrial, or the expression of my *anima*. Then, about 10 years ago, after meditating in the middle of the night and returning to sleep, I had a false awakening and saw a blonde woman standing beside our bed, 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 having this dream, I have experienced numerous lucid dreams—which often last from 90 minutes to two hours—during which I have seemingly 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. Most of the beings I have met during my “interstellar” lucid dreams have appeared human-like. 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,” alluding to the constructed, co-created nature of the dream imagery.

Sometimes, these experiences 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 for the primitive estuary.

*As I lay on the deck, looking at the Pleiades that appear brightly in the moonless sky, I suddenly feel the waves of energy that have been so familiar over the years as a sign that something momentous is about to happen. Suddenly, I find myself in a lucid dream 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 realize 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.*

### Local or Non-Local?

It is probably true that most of our dream characters either originate in conscious and unconscious personal memories, or they may represent archetypes that are somewhat independent of our personal experience. They may also emulate the relationships we have had, and provide rehearsals for threat and social challenges. Or they may represent aspects of ourselves that we have not fully integrated. Regardless, we are probably correct in assuming that most of these characters reside “locally” within Freud’s unconscious, Jung’s

personal or collective unconscious, or Wilber’s “submergent” and “emergent” unconscious (2007). 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 experienced 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 attack 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 him. I said, “You are only a dream. Go away,” to which he responded by laughing at me and saying, “I want to show you my new knife.” He then started coming at me with the knife. I discovered to my surprise that I, too possessed a knife, and so I fought him hand to hand, finally disarming him.

I thought the dream series would end with his defeat, but 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 freed one of my arms and rubbed his shoulder in an appeal to his mercy. Only then did he finally stop hitting me, and started crying. As his tears fell into my face, he said over and over, “I only want your love.”

One 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, since my old friend was wholly unlike my conscious personality. But was he also, in some sense, the actual person I’d known as my neighbor and friend? If one is open to a reality beyond the empirical world, then one might ask, *Why not both?* But even if we accept the inclusive hypothesis, we would do well to assess the extent to which the character is animated by nonlocal forces, and whether the proportion of objective vs. subjective varies over the course of the dream.

A friend of mine experienced a similarly disturbing dream about his girlfriend. As they walked side by side in the dream, he suddenly 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. After-

ward 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 allows for dream characters to be comprised simultaneously of both personal/intrapsychic and transpersonal/independent influences, and—unique to CDP—to a *fluctuating extent*. This paradigm, which was anticipated by Ullman (1969) and articulated more fully by Rossi (1972) posits that the dream rises into our awareness as unformed content or “intrusive novelty” Ullman (1979) and then coalesces under the dream ego’s observation as metaphoric imagery on a mutable interface. The synchronous exchange results in a “mapping” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1986; Ullman, 1969) of metaphoric content 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 moment-to-moment responses to the emergent content.

The CDP thus anticipates how my friend’s affection for his girlfriend may have suddenly commingled with his unresolved issues toward women and caused a sudden shift in the image from lover to dark presence. Indeed, the CDP permits us to understand how dream characters can appear as familiar persons in one moment, and as 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 may conceivably reflect a diversity of presentations somewhat unrelated to the dream ego’s subjective stance by drawing on multiple sources. If you picture this relationship visually, you might imagine the dream observer standing on the “frontside” of the dream interface, and the emergent content on the “backside.” (Web designers will recognize the parallels between the *components* of a webpage that the designer compiles on the “backside” of a web creation program, and the visual *rendering* of the web page on the “frontside.”) While the dream ego draws from a variety of feelings, attitudes and conscious memories during the encounter and projects it onto the interface, the emergent

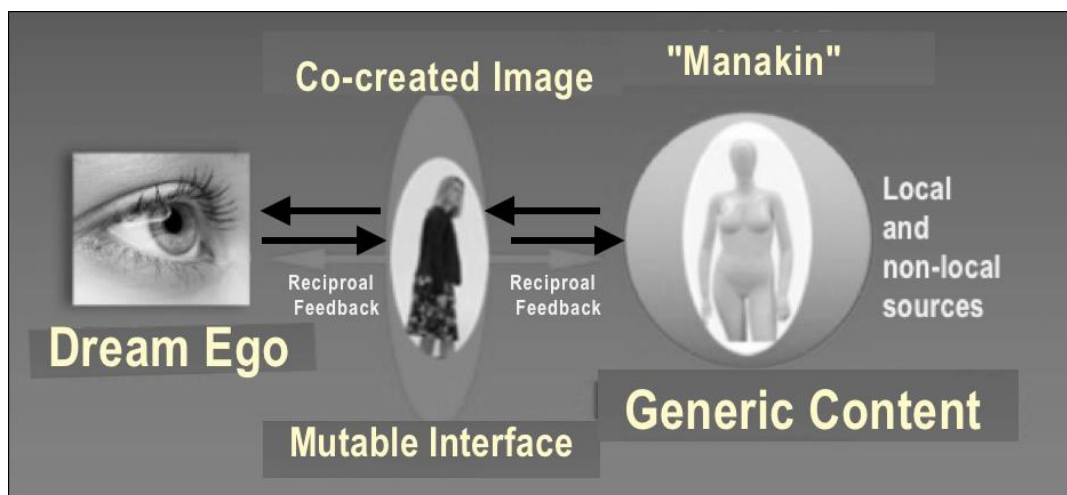


Figure 1. The dream as a mutable interface (Sparrow, 2020).



content potentially partakes of various sources or feeds, as well. Meanwhile, this interactive process proceeds through the course of the dream, co-creating a constantly changeable, if not changing presentation.

The backside content feeds may originate in unconscious influences within us, as well as nonlocal or transpersonal feeds beyond us, depending on what one accepts. If these diverse sources are simultaneously available during the encounter, then the nature of our dream characters encompasses an array of potential influences shape-shifting as mutable imagery through the course of the dream.

One might ask, why wasn't my friend able to experience his girlfriend's love for the duration of the dream? If one accepts, as the CDP suggests, 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 incapacity to maintain a certain *transparency* that would have permitted a sustained experience of her desirable qualities. To his credit, my friend was able to see that his girlfriend's abrupt transformation arose, at least in part, from significant unfinished business with his self-absorbed and domineering mother, for whom he harbored deep resentment. So, whether he could see it at the time, my friend had reason to attribute his girlfriend's dark transformation to a momentary projection of his own fear of being dominated by women.

To his credit, my friend was able to see his part in the dream's downturn. But it would have been tempting to disregard his co-creative role. Rejecting the possibility of dream character independence justifies a dreamer's fears and grievances, and supports the dream ego's right to treat virtual strangers without applying normal ethical standards. While treating dream characters as products of our own unconscious may be true most of the time, *any* instance of apparent independence should prompt us to treat *all* of our dream characters potentially as *persons*; for, if we cannot ultimately discern a dream character's true nature, far better to allow for the possibility of personhood. 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 has prompted some lucid dreamers to argue that treating our dream characters as "property" fails to translate into 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).

### Just Ask the Dream!

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

*...I am flying through the "lucid void" 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, the dream ego's subjectivity can impede or facilitate the imagery's capacity to mediate non-local sources. To illustrate, I was in a lucid dream not long ago, feeling alone and depressed, and encountered a deceased psychotherapy client.

*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 the path, feeling increasingly isolated and depressed, a former 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 different than before. They seem animated and aware of me, and they acknowledge me in passing.*

Interestingly, the dream ego and the dreamscape went through a dramatic change apparently facilitated by Frances' appearance, who remained unchanging throughout the dream. Indeed, she was the only stable element in the dream! Given her relative consistency as a dream character, one might ask, Did Frances manifest in my dream to help lift me out of my depression? Of course, it is impossible to know for sure, but significantly, a year prior to this dream, I received a phone call from her surviving husband. Since Frances had met and married him after we had terminated therapy, I had never met him. He seemed uneasy, and I wondered why he had called. He finally admitted 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. 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 persisted in saying "no," and she eventually stopped trying to convince me. In retrospect, the support she offered me in the above dream seemed to express a genuine love, as well as an acceptance of our need to continue our respective journeys apart.

The importance of accepting that at least some dream characters possess partial independence 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 pro-

vide 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 only extensions of ourselves, archetypal patterns embodied as characters, or virtual emulations of current relationships, then we are ultimately alone in our dreams.

## Two Levels of Assessment—Similarity and Dissimilarity

*Similarity as a Criterion of Independence.* In trying to determine if a dream character partakes, at least in part, of a separate identity, there are two obvious levels of assessment that I have found useful in practice. If a figure is familiar to the dreamer, one might ask, Is the character’s behavior *similar enough* to what the dreamer know about the real person? If there are minor discrepancies between the known person and the dream presentation, the dreamer might dismiss these discrepancies if the character is similar enough to the real person to convince us that it is 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.

As we know, dream encounters may convey previously unknown, but verifiable information that can further support the hypothesis of (at least partial) independence. For instance, I recently decided to try to contact a man, whom I’d recently met at a conference, in a lucid dream. Sensing that thereafter we would be lifelong friends, I set a conscious intention to contact R. in my dreams. That night, I had the following experience:

*I am lucid and flying above a river surrounded by wilderness. I begin to lose altitude, and eventually I plunge into the clear, swift water. As I float downstream, I suddenly feel hands on my shoulders. I turn around to see R. in the river with me! We are happy to see each other. We swim to the side of the river, and walk upstream down a well-trodden path. We come to an ancestral log home, and enter it together. The building is full of people milling about and visiting, a multigenerational family gathering. Old men are sitting around a wood stove, and children are playing everywhere. R. introduces me to an elderly man by the name of G. We visit, and then I return to my bed.*

When I told R. about the dream, he was shocked when hearing the man’s name. It happened to be his father’s name! While such “evidence” falls short of scientific data, it certainly had the effect of confirming our mutual conviction that actual contact had been made.

The above dream indicates that the dream interface may mediate contacts *with* other entities, while other dreams may presumably mediate information *about* actual persons. Along those lines, I had the occasion to incubate a dream for a friend, who had suffered from lifelong depression. She asked me if I could try to have a dream that would help her.

After meditating for 45 minutes at 4:00 am, I went back to bed with the intention of helping my friend. Almost immediately, I became fully conscious in a lucid dream:

*I am sitting on the floor in the lotus position. A spinning mandala or yantra is centered beneath me. A cloud of black shimmering light appears and temporarily overwhelms me with ecstasy. As I emerge from the experience, a woman dressed in black stands before me, and beckons for me to follow her. We go into another room where elderly women are weaving. An old woman says, “Tell your friend to work with shapes of red.” I am grateful for the advice, even though I don’t understand it. I reach to touch her arm in gratitude, but she pulls away.*

When I told my friend about the dream, she was deeply moved, because it somehow made sense to her. She commenced to use the old woman’s words as a metaphor for understanding various possible courses of action that might relieve her lifelong depression. While the dream did not involve an encounter with her, it did seem to convey information *about and for* her.

*Dissimilarity as a Criterion of Independence.* In the case of encountering an unknown person—such as the extraterrestrial woman who stood beside my bed—we would have no one to compare her with. Instead, we might assess the degree of *difference* between the character and ourselves, or the extent to which the character seems autonomous and surprising. 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 psychologically, if not also ontologically independent from us. A strange woman dressed in blue saying that she’s come to save the world from machines certainly satisfies the principle of dissimilarity.

## 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 relationships (Tarnas, 2006) that offer us the challenges we need for personal growth and integration. We find this appreciation of internal division in the psychology of Jung, in particular, who often extolled the benefits of tolerating the “tension of opposites” as a path to individuation. While we may all arrive at a state of completeness at some future endpoint as some spiritual traditions contend, experiencing ourselves as separate from some of our dream characters, at least partially, 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.

## Research Implications

As a paradigm for dream construction and analysis (Kuhn, 1962), CDP permits new questions to be asked and solutions eventually new to be found to a variety of questions

that have heretofore made little sense within the “strictly determined” (Freud, 1913; Kramer, 1993) or presentational view (Sparrow, 2020) of dream construction. Indeed, the CDP 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. Some of the questions that may eventually engage researchers are: 1) What is the ratio of various sources that contribute to the emergent dream content? 2) Do the dream ego’s responses and concurrent content changes demonstrate “true” circular causality? 3) Does the ratio of influences shift over the course of the dream? 4) What is the impact of dreamer subjectivity—feelings, beliefs, assumptions—on emergent content? 5) Do certain dream ego states have more impact on the dream imagery? 6) Are certain sources of dream content more stable and resistant to dreamer subjectivity changes? 7) Do certain content sources have a greater determining influence on the dream imagery?

Such questions become meaningful, perhaps for the first time, through the paradigmatic lens of the CDP (Kuhn, 1962). While the answers may currently seem out of reach of empirical research, they nonetheless have relevance in the context of lay dreamwork and psychotherapy, where such discriminations may have significant consequences.

### 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 experienced 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 again 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..

Obviously, I did not travel to another planet in these three dreams, but instead experienced an internally constructed dream reality. While we might dismiss the experience as not real, or only a dream, the CDP permits us to entertain a complex “both-and” view of dreamscapes and characters. Rather than seeing them as only subjective, or as only “real,” we can instead see them as a synthesis of sources, fluctuating in their ontology through the course of the dream.

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 partake of nonlocal sources, or at least act “as if” they might be independent, we acknowledge that we may live in an animated universe, populated by beings whose nonphysical aspects are “mapped” as mutable imagery in our dreams. In conclusion, the co-creative paradigm allows for the possibility of partial dream character independence, while safeguarding us from the hazards of either-or thinking.

### Note

The article is based on the keynote address by the author at the Many Worlds of Lucid Dreaming Conference, October, 2021, titled “Dream Encounters: Who, What, Where?”

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