

The Witness and the Identity of the dreaming I

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From time to time it happens that I do not participate in a dream as an actor and participant but as observer and witness. I do not recognize that I have a body or that I am somebody, but I am aware of happenings. Also on my online dream interpretation and counselling service I get questions about that theme, so it is a form of dreaming that is observed by various dreamers. It may be that the dreamer may witness a whole story; usually he or she is emotionally detached, too (in fact the emotional detachment *is* in dreams the detached observing position). It may also be that the dreamer leaves his observation post and identifies with an actor in the story. Usually that happens when the dreamer is emotionally either positively or negatively attracted by the experience of that dream character. However, the opposite can also be observed. Suddenly the dreamer is no longer in the story but observes it from a certain distance. That may be the case when the identification becomes too thrilling and the dreamer wants to shield himself or gain some distance from that experience. Waking up from a bad dream can be considered as a special case of that psychological manoeuvre. (This phenomenon is also observed in waking life when, for example, a driver in a car accident experiences the events from a certain distance, from an out-of-body position.) Finally, it also happens that the dreamer participates in a dream as an actor and at the same time observes the whole scene from a certain remove.

As an example I would like to present a dream of mine as an illustration:

Margaret, the best friend of my mother, who was also one of my good and loved acquaintances, was going to die. From a standpoint above her, I saw her how she laid in the hospital bed. I especially observed a humidifier which stood nearby on a bedside table. It was a quiet atmosphere, only the weak hissing sound of the humidifier filled the room. My mother sat at the side of her bed. Suddenly I was Margaret myself and was lying in the death bed. I heard the voice of my mother (or better of my best friend), who spoke to me. While I was lying silently the dream began to fade and I woke up slowly.

In this dream we see another interesting phenomenon which may be often linked with the observing dreamer: the identification with a known or unknown person which does not match the waking identity. And it happens without any disturbance of the dreamers own integrity and inner identity, even without recognizing the shift of perspective, because it is so natural. This shows that the dreaming I is basically not identified with outer characteristics like sex, age, relatives, acquaintances, surroundings, properties, etc. but with a centre of consciousness or with a field of perception which is attracted by various happenings, in which it is more or less

involved. But basically the dreaming identity is the “I am who I am”, the primary subject without any form.

This basic identification with a formless field of consciousness and a centre of perception causes another problem: Often we do not recognize in our dreams that we have a different identity from time to time because it is so natural and because we do not reflect who and what we are. The experiencing I is not put into question because it is obvious and given and because our awareness is focused on outer experiences. Therefore the waking I can only detect the different identity in hindsight by recognizing the surrounding and the happenings of the dream. If in the dream my brother is a participant of the Turkish mafia then who am I? If a customs officer looks at me like a man looks at a woman, who am I? If the members of my family are black people, who am I? And if these members treat me like a child, am I a Swiss psychologist, married and aged 55? If my profession is a hairdresser, or if it is a psychiatrist in Chile, am I Christoph? This recognized change of identity causes confusion in many dreamers and even in professionals and leads to the conclusion that dreams are nonsense, that the functioning of the dreaming consciousness is partially disabled, compared to waking consciousness with its stable identity, and is therefore inferior. - No, it is different and it is important to recognize the fact and to study it without prejudice.

From our standpoint of waking reality this flexible identity is rather strange, but seen from our dreaming reality this is perfectly normal and usual. And as a side remark, our waking identity is not as stable as we assume. During our everyday we identify with different roles as family members, as professionals, as friends, etc. and we change those roles quite automatically and without realizing it. We love books, stories and movies because we can identify with other characters that enrich our lives. In the internet, the reality of which may be between the dream and the waking worlds (e.g., in Second Life or multi-player games), it is interesting to play other roles with other qualities.

The detached and observing position and the identification with another person show clearly how the dreamer is able to strip himself of his waking identity with its qualities. Obviously the dreaming I is broader and it is able to change its identity easily, thereby showing that it is more flexible than the waking I. The latter is more focused and exclusively concentrated on the other side. And it shows that the identity of the dreaming I is not questioned or unstable, owing to its impressive emphatic qualities, because it's primary identification is not attached to outer characteristics. It shows that in dreams the distinction between subject and object is not as clear as in waking reality because objects can become subjects. These are philosophically quite interesting facts and I hope they will be more discussed. Such a discussion could lead to a revision of the definition of identity in general which, in my eyes, is nowadays somewhat rigid and one-sided.

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