

The Natural Trajectory of Human Consciousness  
W. W. Chan

# **The Natural Trajectory of Human Consciousness**

**Ten Speculative Stories**

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## Prologue

The world naturally arises from our consciousness. The way we are born is similar to how we wake up from deep sleep. Previously there was only oblivion, and then the world instantly fills up with people and things when we open our eyes. At the end of life, the world will again collapse into nothingness, as is natural. This too is similar to sleep, for do we not lose contact with the world in deep, dreamless sleep?

The question then is this: Will we rise again in another incarnation? Will there be a new day for the dawning of a renewed mind?

It seems pointless to try to manipulate the unfolding between life and death. Our hands are tied. We play a role, but we didn't write the script. Is that not ultimate freedom, to simply live out one's life without expectations of rewards or fear of defeat? How can I—a figment of my own imagination—do otherwise?

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The ancient religions tell us that the concept of self is illusory. They may well have a point. A man or a woman may tirelessly deploy words to try to carve this self out of their streams of consciousness. But it cannot be done. It will all go away when the torrents of words stop.

Yet even in the midst of excitation, there is something inside of us that remains unmoved. It's as though the unmoved is the dreamer. The rest, all feelings and sensations and sense of self, are the stuff of dreams.

## **Dreams of Life and Death**

*Observation: Your life is a dream, yet you have failed to see it as such  
(because you haven't learned to recognize a dream while dreaming).*

In dreams, all the certainty we thought we had quickly falls away, and we are once again at sea. We see what we've failed to notice, or we are brought face-to-face with what we have wished to avoid.

What may we find if we peer behind the veil of dreams?

On one side of the equation we have logic, cause-and-effect, and ample sunlight. On the other, we have love and other entanglements, as well as separations and death. One is linear. The other is alchemy.

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John Lee had this dream awhile back. He was not properly dressed in it. He had on his pants and shoes but only an undershirt with a pajama top over it. And he had just arrived at a police station. There he found himself standing in line for a job application. He saw as he waited how the officer at the counter was rude with the applicants. Most of them got sent away without being given any paperwork. John became concerned with the way he was dressed. He didn't want to give the officer a chance to start in on him, so he took the pajama top off, rolled it up into a ball, and tucked it under his arm, hoping that his undershirt could pass for a T-shirt. When it was his turn, the officer at the counter, as expected, made some snide remarks to him. But instead of deflecting or arguing back, John accepted it all with a smile. Next, the matter of his application came up, and the officer walked away to consult with another person. John was guardedly relieved that he had not been turned away so far. Then the sudden sound of something being dropped, maybe a book or a small box, made him realize he was in a dream.

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Over time John came to acquire an uncanny ability to know when he was in a dream. You would think that this knowledge would somehow affect his dreaming, but it did not.

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He had a dream about a woman whose chest, much like a sponge, had soaked up a green liquid. It just so happened on that same day at his niece's tenth birthday party, a felt-tip pen of a similar color had fallen into a glass of water and turned it green. The woman in the dream looked down and pulled out from her bosom a thread of the brightest green he had ever seen. It appeared that she sold clothes for a living. There were other similar vendors in the background, and they all seemed to be angry at her. Had she cheated them or interfered with their affairs in some way? Some were hiding in an apartment nearby. Just as she arrived at her own place, a man jumped out from a dark corner and nearly collided with her. He then held up two child-size clothes hangers. The woman ignored them and turned to her apartment. From inside, her mother shouted, "Is that you? Is that you?"

John didn't follow the woman in. He was staring at the two clothes hangers. He knew that he was in a dream. Though he had no idea who or what the hangers were for, he was sure a meaning was being conveyed. He was also convinced that if he kept his eyes on them long enough, they might give up their secret. His feeling was that through them, he could get at the relationship between humanity and inanimate objects.

Were the woman and the vendors real in a way that John was not? It was, after all, just a dream to him. Maybe for them it was something more, something permanent, like an actual world that they inhabited, and John had somehow intruded upon them like a ghost? He had moved around them like a ghost;

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observed them from the periphery like a ghost. Was that why they could not see him?

Did the inanimate objects he saw in the dream, such as the hangers the man was brandishing, exist in his own world as well? Was that why there was an eerie familiarity? Could he have seen the same hangers before in his ordinary world?

It was possible that people were ghosts in worlds not intrinsically theirs, while certain inanimate objects were “different” in that they were unchanged in dreams as well as in ordinary awareness. Maybe the objects were shared between worlds. Maybe they even pulled us in and out of these worlds. It was possible that John did not put himself in this dream, but rather he was pulled into the dream by the green felt-tip pen falling into the water. The dreaming only came afterward to help his mind cope with the rapid change of scenery.

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A killer stretched himself out naked on a table. He had a small water bottle that he squeezed to send a stream of water toward his navel.

A woman called Teresa tried to get her money back from a government employee who had been scamming the system.



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This was how John's dreams were: stacked together, one atop several others. An invisible thread seemed to tie them together. He thought of the intervals between dreams as dry land. But he was nearly always wet.

Tim the electrician was the one who had stolen from Teresa, but he said he would not return any of the money.

John scowled and told him to please do the right thing.

Tim said, "Why don't you go see your mother instead?"

So he did. As soon as he got into her apartment, his mother started to complain about how the water they had given her (in a small glass tube) was too cold. What? How could they have been so careless? He became agitated. His mother said he would have to drive two hours to a warehouse to rectify this, which did not seem at all reasonable to him.

As he walked out of her place, he saw several caregivers playing cards in the hallway. One of them even glared at him from behind his cards. So he went back inside to tell her the people were right there, and all she had to do was go out and talk to them. But his mother was concerned about protocol and refused.

This only exacerbated things. He began to raise his voice. He shouted for her to understand his predicament. He even drummed on her arm with his fist. Still she refused to understand. Or maybe she was incapable of doing so. She said he could drive there and back quickly.

"Quickly?"

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Had she considered that he was pressed for time, that he too had a life of his own that he tried to live?

At that point he got so furious that he started to gnaw on her fingers. But instead of getting upset with him for that, she began to pack away her things, including a pillow and two feather dusters. He had stopped talking by then. He realized that the more he talked, the more his power would dissipate. *This is important*, he said to himself. Being aware that he was dreaming had its advantage. He could make mental notes of what he saw and heard, so he would be able to remember them when he woke up. Talking had always gotten him in trouble. But it's worse in dreams. Power would literally leak from his body as he talked.

Could it be that his mother was also like an inanimate object? Was that why she was immovable as well as implacable? Did she stay constant in all the various dreams and worlds? Who else was dreaming about her? Could it be that she was a mother to someone else? Was she kinder or less demanding with the others? Or was she worse? Could she be a mother in one realm and a hen in another? Or maybe she was a rock and therefore had no feelings for John or for what he might be going through. Were people cold and indifferent because they were rocks somewhere else? Was someone cautious and timid because he or she was actually a fragile flower on another plane?

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Were there many others like his mother who could move between worlds with apparent ease?

John saw it clearly now. Or at least his speculation was pointing him in a certain direction. There were people among us who were like inanimate objects. They had amassed great powers from being vested in different worlds, though they were not all necessarily cold and unmoved like his mother. If we occupied a three-dimensional reality, then these people would be in the fourth dimension. They were at least one level higher than the rest of us, to be able to navigate the way they do. John was happy that his awareness had allowed him to see that. It would've been confusing not to know that.

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When he woke up from a dream, he no longer assumed that it was over. Though he was out of it, the dream could go on without him. It could have its own independent world. The people in the dream, including his mother, could go on in that world. The dream did not have to collapse just because he had left it.

Our world is the same way, is it not? It will not collapse or disappear just because a man or a woman has died. And one can't help but note the similarities. Could our own ordinary world be itself a dream? Could one die and wake up in another dream? Such a speculative notion as that ought to have repulsed him, but

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it had not. It seemed his perspective and feelings had altered after his wife left him. Hadn't he used to say to his wife that "life is but a dream?" Now that he lived alone, that hackneyed refrain had become so much more poignant.

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It seemed the electricity had gone out in the neighborhood. John was alone in his apartment, in the pitch-black, getting dressed. *Why do I have to go out now?* he said to himself. *It's probably just as dark outside. I could use a few more hours of sleep.* He wished that he had a lantern with him; some small light. And then he realized there was a light he had not noticed before. Not far away but up close. Could it be that he was emitting light? How was that possible? Unless this was from the electricity that naturally surged up and down one's body and nerves. Or was it caused by some errant neurons in his head? He must be dreaming this. If this were real life and he was in the dark, why didn't he go look for the breaker switch? There was a flashlight under the sink. Why didn't he go get that? It was irrational that he should stand rooted to the floor like this. But this wasn't a dream. It didn't feel like one despite the overflowing irrationality.

*I see*, he finally said to himself as he nodded in the dark. He saw what was actually happening. If this were his normal reality, then somehow it had been contaminated by a dream. It could be that someone who didn't belong here had

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dreamed himself here and had afterward left in haste. Who was it? Who had been here but no longer was? He thought of the people who had died or had simply left. He thought about his deceased father. Could it be his unhappy Uncle Trevor? Then it dawned on him who it was. It was his wife, Jenny. The woman had left him after their falling out. It was truly regrettable, in retrospect. He could not even clearly remember the chain of events that had led to it. He was alone now. It seemed he was the only one who belonged here in this sagging reality.

Had Jenny been thinking of him then? Had she been dreaming of the life they once had together? Maybe their relationship was not altogether beyond salvage. Maybe there was something that he could still do. But first he had to find Jenny and try to get her back in his life. But would she do that? Or more accurately, why would she do that when things had obviously soured? Not to any grievous extent, he hoped. Not unsalvageable.

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He and Jenny were getting ready to go to a movie. Though they were no longer a couple in real life, in this dream they were.

At some point he had to go to relieve himself. He used his foot to push open the door to a washroom, but he did not go in. When asked by others as to why,

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John said he didn't need to anymore, which was a lie. He was, in fact, afraid of the empty washroom, which felt as though it had evil lurking within.

He even went to the women's side, thinking that it would feel less ominous there. But it was the same over there, equally empty and malevolent.

Next he was going up a flight of stairs. His wife was ahead of him. The stairs kept getting steeper and narrower, and he was at risk of falling off. Still that did not deter him from adjusting the wristwatch he had on. He was also holding an iron discus, which further threatened to tip him over. But he did not let that discus go for fear of it hitting someone below him.

Finally he sat down next to his wife to watch the rest of the movie with her, even though he was still bothered by the wristwatch. It was a new watch but had been cheaply painted in silver and gold, and he feared that Jenny had quietly despised it all along.

What was projected on the big screen was similar to Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. At least it evoked a similar feeling of sadness and sacrifice. But there was no butterfly here, only a larva—which looked rather like a worm.

His friend Hugo played a role in the movie, which had been shot somewhere in South America. John wanted to point him out to Jenny. The blond one standing next to the tree. That's Hugo. The larva was hanging from a tree branch. Its singing was about to reach a crescendo. All the time the larvae on the leaves nearby were egging it on toward a kind of swan song.

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John didn't want it to end. He knew that even though this was only a dream, his heart was invested in it. Even if the scenery was dreamy, with Jenny impossibly next to him, his emotions were real and unadulterated. It was so hard to feel these emotions when they were filtered through the brain. In here everything was direct, unapologetic. In that other world of wakefulness spun by the brain, there was always the endless rationalizing and hairsplitting. The brain was always mitigating, diluting, inserting, and meddling. In the so-called real world, all he and Jenny could do was bicker. He had told her more than once how she needed to change. His brain told him she was sometimes lost. But it failed to register for him how he himself was perpetually lost.

Was our so-called reality actually unreal in that we had to conduct ourselves cut off from our deepest feelings? How could it be real when we could not even feel ourselves?

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John kept going back to his dreams to try to get things right. He wanted to tell Jenny that he had been cold and distant, and that he had been wrongly seduced by words like *strength* and *restraint*. So abstract were these words that he had been lost in them. Only in the dream world did his blind eyes open. How could he have asked her to deny her own emotions? To abandon her feelings for his cold words?

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In these other worlds that we called dreams, logic was not absent but had simply taken on a different form. Dreams had their own rules and tempo of unfolding. There were many unexpected things. Unexpected, that is, from the standpoint of wakefulness. They had a high degree of fluidity, made so by the ebb and flow of feelings.

Once John found himself sitting at his desk, his actual desk in ordinary awareness. *Have I fallen asleep again in the office?* This multidimensional desk of his actually felt more real in the dream. As usual, he was hard at work. He was trying to get some events to align and some numbers to match. It seemed they had moved his desk to a washroom on the sixth floor outside of a stall. And then the manager came in with a client. John could not tell if either of them had hailed from the higher dimensions and were naturally at ease here. He tried not to get distracted, but he was naked. Nothing out of the ordinary considering he was relegated to the washroom, but he thought the two men might take exception to his nakedness, and he began to feel uneasy. At one point he got up and went to a corner of the tiled wall and began picking at it. He tried to insert his fingers at the foot of the wall. He was somehow convinced that he could get past the wall to get at what was behind it.



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“Jenny?”

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It was while he was riding a train through a neon-filled night scene that he realized he had not had a falling out with Jenny at all. What had driven them apart was death. He had died. And now he was riding in a train through death. How could he have been so wrong? What had gotten into him that he should think that he had had a falling out with her? It was strange, yet it made a sort of sense. How else could he have bounced between dreams the way he did, and with a penetrating awareness he had not previously had while alive?

Soon after getting off the train, he went to a bar full of people. He sat down at a table with some familiar faces. One of them was Jimmy West. Everyone at the table were all quite drunk. John felt uncomfortable being there, and he talked about how noisy the place was. It seemed that being seated next to Jimmy, who was happily married, had made him feel self-conscious. But the bar was their favorite haunt, and he didn't want to hurt their feelings, so he stayed. Jimmy had had eight drinks. Another person, nine. How many more did they need to have?

After the bar, he went on to visit a number of other locales. These places were futuristic, and they were clean in a sterile way. Even so, he could not help but suspect that decay was hidden under the surface. At one point on a giant screen,

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he saw men urinate into the mouths of animals that had been laid down on their backs, and it disgusted him. Why would people want to watch this? Feeling shaken, he took the stairs down to a place that he thought no one had visited for a long time. But he was wrong. It turned out to be a brightly lit restaurant. An old waiter came forward with his crew to greet him. He began to jab John in the neck with his fingers, and he did so repeatedly until he passed out.

While down on the floor, John realized that they were going to make a grim-faced server out of him: one of those entities who entertained the dead. *That's what I am going to be next. I am to be recycled in hell*, he thought. But he was not displeased. An entertainer was only a few steps removed from an alchemist. It was good enough for him. At any rate, such was his fate. That's all he had to work with. Dreams upon dreams and within dreams. More dreams than he could shake a stick at. He no longer knew who he truly was. To say that he was a dreamer was meaningless. It would merely be a label to describe the activities he was engaged in.

All he knew was that as he hopped from dream to dream, he had never been as close to his own consciousness. Was there no death after all? Instead of dying do we merely go from one set of circumstances to another? Were we destined to be exiled between dreams? Was life itself also a dream, albeit a long one? Are we trapped in dreams?

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In a way perhaps we are, yet John was not troubled by that. It seemed natural. The mind did not die. It kept coming back to dreams of life again, as though life itself were the mirror that it had needed to gaze upon in order to see and feel again. It could no more refrain from doing that than the moon could resist the night sky. Time and time again, season after season, consciousness remains, awaiting yet another reality to dawn.

And Jenny was never far away. Not anymore. Not with the way things were, with linearity vastly undermined.

He saw now what he had needed to see. “This is how I get from point A to point B to Jenny.”

Mental borders, it appeared, had been pushed back far enough to allow for even the possibility of reunion.