

## **H.H. Price's Model of Disembodied Survival**

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One mode of survival would be survival as a disembodied or discarnate person, the persistence of at least some aspect of one's psychological package (thoughts, feelings, memories, desires) in the absence of any physical or bodily apparatus. One of the common objections to such an account of survival is that it is simply unintelligible or incoherent.

Oxford philosopher H.H. Price (1899-1984) explored the intelligibility and coherence of disembodied survival in two important essays composed in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> In these essays Price's goal was not to prove that disembodied survival is true, but to show that such a thesis satisfies a very important precondition for being true, namely that its an intelligible, conceivable, or internally coherent hypothesis. Since many philosophers who object to disembodied survival do so on the basis of its alleged inconceivability or incoherence, Price's goal was by no means a modest one.

### **I. Two Conceptions of Survival and the Next World**

In "What Kind of a Next World?" Price distinguishes between two conceptions of survival. On the so-called *embodied* conception of survival a person survives death in some physical form. The person has a body of some sort (e.g., a resurrected body or an etheric or astral body composed of higher matter). By contrast, on the *disembodied* conception of survival a person survives death as a purely immaterial substance, soul, or spirit, whose essential attributes are consciousness, thought, memory, desire, and the capacity for emotions. Price notes that this largely Greek philosophical conception of survival was absorbed by the western religious traditions that otherwise emphasize an embodied conception of survival.

Corresponding to these two conceptions of the mode of survival are two different conceptions of the Next World, the world occupied by those who survive death. Here Price addresses what I have designated the environment of survival. Corresponding to the embodied conception of survival is a quasi-physical world, a world composed of matter of some sort. In the case of an astral mode of survival, presumably the next world would be composed of the same stuff as the astral body. (A resurrection world would perhaps be closer to the present physical world in its properties since the resurrection

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<sup>1</sup> Price, "Survival and the Idea of 'Another World'" *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 50, Part 182 (January 1953), pp. 1-25; and "What Kind of Next World?" in *Does Man Survive Death?* ed. Eileen J. Garrett (Helix Press, 1957), pp. 37-44. Both essays have been republished in various anthologies of essays in philosophy of religion. For some critical discussion on Price's model of disembodied survival, see John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), chapter 14; and Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), chapter 4.

body is more similar to our present bodies than it is to an astral body, at least on traditional views of the bodily resurrection in Christianity and Islam). By contrast, when we think of disembodied survival, we must have a *psychological* conception of the Next World itself. It must be a world constituted by images produced by the mind or surviving consciousness.

## **II. Disembodied Survival and the Dream World Analogy**

Price gives the generic idea of an “image world” greater content by arguing that such a world would be analogous to the dream world each of us experiences in the present life during sleep. Just as the quasi-physical world of embodied survival requires an analogy between the present physical world and the Next World, so the psychological conception requires an analogy between features of our present experience and the Next World. These features are located in the dream experience. In our current life, our dreams are built up from data acquired during our waking state. While we may have needed a body to acquire this data during our waking state, in the dream world we do not have a body but we reap the benefits of a huge database of mental images that is responsible for creating a dream world in which we have a broad range of visual, olfactory, tactile, and auditory experiences. Imaging replaces sense perception. The same would be true in the case of disembodied survival. Of course, while a memorial database of images provides the materials for constructing such a world, our desires and feelings play a role in shaping the events of the dream world. Like memories, desires and feelings are mental states.

### ***A. Memories and Desires Shaping the Next World***

In his essay “Survival and the Idea of ‘Another World’”, Price explains the joint contribution of memories and desires as follows:

[The Next World] would be dependent on the memories and desires of the persons experiencing it. Their memories and desires would determine what sort of images they had. If I may put it so, the “stuff” or “material” of such a world would come in the end from one’s memories, and the “form” of it from one’s desires. To use another analogy, memory would provide the pigments, and desire would paint the picture.<sup>2</sup>

People have various kinds of desires though, and our desires change in various ways throughout our lives. So which desires shape the Next World? Sensibly the ones we possess at the time of death, and specifically those desires that are habitual and relatively stable. But we can still distinguish between unsatisfied and repressed desires. In the same article (above), Price explains that desires that are either unsatisfied or repressed in the present life could play a role in shaping the Next World, presumably in much the same way that unsatisfied and repressed desires during our waking state influence the

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<sup>2</sup> Price, “The Idea of ‘Another World’” in *Philosophical Interactions with Parapsychology: the Major Writings of H.H. Price on Parapsychology and Survival*, ed. Frank B. Dilley (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 253.

content of our dreams. While the relevant desires are stable ones, we shouldn't suppose that such desires are immutably fixed. Character is *relatively* fixed, not permanent. The Next World should then be conceived of as capable of development or change overtime. Perhaps new Next World environments grow out of old ones as a person's character develops in different ways in the afterlife.

Price's argument for the coherence of disembodied survival now takes shape. We can conceive of the dream world as a place where conscious experiences take place, where our mental life persists with perceptions, desires, thoughts, intentions, despite our not having a body *in* the dream world. But since disembodied survival would be relevantly similar to our dream world experiences, we can also conceive of disembodied survival. The coherence or conceivability of what is currently part of our human experience provides the basis for the coherence or conceivability of our continued existence beyond death in the absence of any sort of body.

### ***B. Price's Main Claims about the Next World***

The analogy between the dream world and the Next World allows Price to make several more interesting claims about the nature of the Next World and the immaterial persons who occupy it.

1. Images have spatial relations to each other, though not to the physical world. So we should expect the Next World to involve spatial relations between image-objects, in much the same way that image-objects in one's dreams have spatial relations.
2. Images evoke the same emotional responses from persons as objects and events in the physical world. One only needs to have a nightmare (or its opposite) to be struck with this fact. So we should expect that the Next World to be the kind of world that can stimulate genuine and intense feelings in those who have survived death.
3. The dream world has its own set of psychological laws. Many things are possible in the dream world that are not possible in the physical world since these worlds are governed by a different set of laws. In much the same way, the laws that govern the Next World would be distinct from the laws that govern the pre-mortem physical world. This permits us to maintain that the Next World may be a place where previously unrealized and unrealized desires are satisfied.
4. In the dream world we *perceive* ourselves to have a body and this - along with the spatial relations between objects in such a world - makes such a world seem physical. So also we should expect the Next World to be one in which individuals utilize images of their own body (acquired before death) to perceive themselves as embodied.

With respect to the last point, Price wrote:

[The Next World] might well contain a vivid and persistent image of one's own body. The surviving personality, according to this conception of survival, is in actual fact an immaterial entity. But if one habitually *thinks* of oneself as embodied (as one well might, at least for a considerable time) an image of one's own body might be as it were the persistent center of one's image world, much as the perceived physical body is the persistent center of one's perceptible world in this present life.<sup>3</sup>

### III. The Communal and Semi-Public Nature of the Next World

But if the Next World is analogous to the dream world would there not be a separate and wholly private Next World for each person who survives death? Each disembodied person would have his or her own Next World fashioned by his or her own stock of memories and set of desires, in much the same way that each of person passes into his or her own private dream world during sleep. If this is correct, then each disembodied person exists alone in the Next World.

On the contrary, Price argues that the Next World, as he has outlined it, could be communal. Since the Next World is constructed from mental images, it would be possible in principle for disembodied persons to communicate with each other by way of *telepathic apparitions*. A telepathic apparition is an image-representation of one's body transmitted to the mind of another person.<sup>4</sup> Even if we supposed that telepathy is not a genuine mode of communication between persons at present, there's no reason to suppose that it *could not* be one in the afterlife. Just as a disembodied person perceives herself as having a body in the Next World, such perceptions could be telepathically transferred or transmitted to the consciousness of other persons in the afterlife. Depending on the scope of what is telepathically transferred a person could perceive the other person in the other person's environment or in her own environment. In either case, the Next World is at least a potentially communal world.

The generic idea of a communal world can be developed in different ways. Price suggests that people with similar desires and images would be predisposed toward telepathically communicate with each other in an automatic manner. The idea here is that like-minded people would generate a common image world, which includes images of their own bodies. As Price explains it in "The Idea of 'Another World'"

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<sup>3</sup> Price, "What Kind of a Next World?" in *Philosophical Interactions with Parapsychology*, p. 267.

<sup>4</sup> This could work in two different ways. Person A could send a thought to person B and person B constructs the appropriate image, perhaps with certain features drawn from B's own stock of images (presumably of person A). Alternatively, person A could send the image itself to B, leaving little or nothing to B's own subjective construction. We should also recognize the distinction between a telepathic apparition of A where the image sent to B is "A in A's environment" and a telepathic apparition of A where the image sent to B just is "A" who appears in B's environment.

If this is right, an image-world such as the one I am describing would not be the product of one single mind only, nor would it be purely private. It would be the joint-product of a group of telepathically interacting minds and public to all of them.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps people who were close in their pre-mortem life will continue their relationships in the Next World by way of telepathically based apparitional communications. Personal relationships might dictate the pool of afterlife communicators. So, for example, children and their parents, or close friends, would continue their relationships in the afterlife. This might be an automatic process or something intentionally chosen.

As Price notes, the communal nature of the Next World is consistent with there being many such worlds, but none of them would be wholly private and subjective. Interestingly enough, developed in a certain direction, we might suppose that, initially at any rate, it might be difficult for a deceased person to know that he has died. His world might initially appear to be quite continuous with the physical world in which he died. He would after all perceive himself having a body. Image-objects would seem to be physical objects with spatial relations. The psychological laws that govern the Next World might imply initial interactions with the environment that mirrored interaction with physical objects in one's pre-mortem life. Just as it is difficult to realize that one is dreaming while one is dreaming, knowing that one has died might be just as difficult.<sup>6</sup>

#### **IV. Final Observations on Price's Model**

##### **1. Dependence of Imaging on a Functioning Brain**

Price recognizes that a fairly basic objection to his model is that neither memories nor desires can exist without a functioning brain, so Price's dream world analogy is unsound, for while we dream our images are being produced by brain functions. Price's response here is fairly straightforward. He's not arguing for the truth of disembodied survival. He's arguing only for its conceivability. No empirical or factual claim is relevant to the conceptual question of the internal coherence of a hypothesis or theory. If consciousness or mental states depend on a functioning brain, then Price's model would not be *true*, but it could still be coherent. We must remember the dialectical context of Price's argument. It is directed to those who deny the truth of disembodied survival *because* they think the idea isn't as much as conceivable or coherent. To undermine this argument against the truth of disembodied survival is not to provide an argument *for* the truth of disembodied survival.

##### **2. Interaction between Next World and the Present World**

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<sup>5</sup> Price, *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>6</sup> This idea is nicely utilized in the film *The Sixth Sense* (1999) starring Bruce Willis. See also my comments below in text concerning a model of disembodied survival in which there is interaction between the Next World and the present world.

In the essays cited, Price does not discuss the possibility of interaction between the Next World and the present physical world. It is possible of course to extend Price's model so that disembodied persons interact with embodied persons and the environment of their pre-mortem physical world. This idea is central to alleged mediumistic communications with and apparitional experiences of the dead, ideas I'll explore in greater detail in later chapters. For the moment we can note that there is no obvious reason why a disembodied person who has the power to telepathically communicate with other disembodied minds couldn't also telepathically communicate with embodied minds. A deceased person could appear to an embodied person in the form of a telepathically induced apparitional experience. She could also "read the thoughts" of an embodied person. So Price's basic model could be developed into a more sophisticated model of interaction between an image Next World and a physical present world.

### 3. Temporal Duration of the Next World in Price's Model

Price's model of disembodied survival does not imply that disembodied survival is the final state of human persons. This is a very important point, since it provides the basis for combining disembodied survival with either reincarnation or bodily resurrection. Price himself draws attention to similarities between the disembodied conception of the Next World and the Bardo world in Mahayana Buddhism. From that perspective, we could view Price's image world as a temporary world to be followed by another embodied existence. This could be a cyclic process governed by karma and thereby constitute a variant on the synthesis of reincarnation and disembodied survival. But a Christian thinker could also incorporate Price's model into a larger eschatology in which bodily resurrection represents the human person's final state. Our memories and desires contribute to the formation of a temporary afterlife, eventually to be followed by a reuniting of our consciousness with a body on the final Day of Judgment. Indeed, there is nothing in principle preventing the temporary Next World from being a place of punishment for some, a place of reward for others, and a purgatorial existence for yet others. Our memories and desires could contribute to a wide variety of Next Worlds, ranging from a temporary heaven to a temporary hell.