



Dream, Levitation, and Life after Death

Searching for Connections

Michael Grosso

*Michael Grosso has been active in consciousness research since the 1970s – I first met him in New York in 1984 when he was focusing on the wider implications of NDEs as explained in his brilliant book *The Final Choice*. Even then he was interested in the parapsychology of religion and his most recent book is on *St Joseph of Copertino*, also reviewed in this issue. Here he looks at some wider connections between dreams, life after death and levitation.*

A theory should simplify and connect disparate phenomena – like an apple falling from a tree and a planet revolving around the sun – as Newton did with the hypothesis of gravity. In this brief essay, I want to talk about levitation and life after death in light of the familiar but mysterious world of dreams. The dream is my gravity that connects the disparate. The afterlife and levitation may seem like strange bedfellows, but I will try to connect them via the dreaming mind.

My discussion will stick to phenomenology. Questions of brain function, neuroscience, and physics are outside the scope of these few remarks. I also lay aside questions about dream interpretation. My concern here is with the phenomenon of the dream itself: so-called REM sleep, dream states in their dream space, which is distinct from physical space. This bare fact is my starting-point.

Most of us take our dream life for granted, but Gordon Globus, psychiatrist and philosopher, writes: “Our most creative moments are while dreaming. Even seemingly unimaginative people may experience rich dream lives. There are infinite worlds possible within our dreaming bubble of perception. Dreaming frees us from the actual world to the set of all possible worlds.”¹ Mark Twain, in his biographical *My Platonic Sweetheart*,² says something similar when he says that the dreamer within the most ordinary person is a marvelous creative artist.

I want to show how two apparently very different things, the phenomenon of levitation and the reported evidence for life after death, may be grounded in the common experience of dreaming. I’ve asked whether it makes sense to talk of exploring the “next” world now,³ and recently published a book on psychokinesis, in particular, levitation.⁴ Levitation, a grossly physical anomaly, turns out to be causally linked to extreme states of mind like ecstasy and possession. I wondered about the two controversial ideas, levitation and survival, how they might be related, and if the link was dream reality.

A dream world

It is possible to think of life after death as entering a prolonged dream world, as explained by the philosopher, H.H. Price, in 1953. But now my big leap. I want also to suggest that levitation may be the result of dream space temporarily breaking into waking 3D space, which could explain some of the odd effects eyewitnesses observed in St. Joseph and D.D. Home when they were entranced.

We can begin with dreams and death. Is death a kind of migration to a world of dreams? Price wrote “The Idea of ‘Another World’”⁵ to solve a philosophical problem. We generally have no idea of what a “next” world might be like. There’s no credible conception at hand. Evidence for life after death – some of it impressive – needs a theory of the ‘next’ world to make it intelligible. Without some coherent picture in mind, talk of an ‘afterlife’ is just words. How can it be said that we “live” after our bodies die?

Price’s view is that when we die, or rather when our bodies die, we – our conscious selves – stick around in the form of mental images. These are made of our memories, feelings, and desires. They are shaped by our wills, imagination, and all manner of unconscious forces. Awakening from our former brain-filtered consciousness to a new but roughly similar mind-filtered consciousness, our sense of self, no doubt a bit disoriented, will survive. No longer occupying bodies, the old space and time constraints melt away; our image-constituted existence assumes a mental, dreamlike cast.

Price notes that his idea didn’t originate with himself, citing Whately Carington and C. J. Ducasse as predecessors as well as ideas from Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. In death we shed our bodies and find ourselves existing in a world of mental images. “And a whole world composed of such families of images would make a perfectly good world,” Price observes.

What kind of life can we imagine apart from our present biological substrate? A life of consciousness, he says. The afterlife will be a life of what we are conscious of and it will unfold the way a dream unfolds by means of a purely mental logic. If there is another world, it will be continuous with our present consciousness, though probably intensified and surrealistically transfigured. Extrapolating from dreams known from personal experience, we can form an idea of worlds made of dream images. Bodily death then will consist of an altered state, marked by an end of sensory life and clock time. All that remains from our previous life will be our mental knapsack, our imaginal history and basic mental functions. Price argues that this afterworld need not be solipsistic. With telepathy and telepathic apparitions we should be able to communicate with others and find or create social (or anti-social) groups with realistic, convincing settings. According to Price, if we survive, there will be many afterworlds, each the collective creation of like-minded discarnates.

One might ask: *where* are these worlds? I would reply by asking, where do our nightly dreams occur? Clearly, the dream world is not in physical space. It is in its own space, with its own laws, geometry, and mindscapes. Ditto for all the postmortem spaces. Suppose I dream I'm rowing a boat in the Central Park lake; I hear the splash of oars, orient myself to the tree-lined shore straight ahead and the quaint bridge to my left. I am in a space, but not physical space. The dream space would be nowhere 'near' the physically real space by the lake in Central Park.

We ought not to suppose that the afterworlds we fashion from our memories and desires will be unalloyed bliss. In the absence of restraining physical stimuli, the full range of our inhibited mental life may vent itself. Involuntary upsurges of repressed psychic matter could make the afterlife trip difficult and unpleasant, especially if punishing guilt or rebounding hatred come into play.

Price's main point: after-death survival is intelligible, a referent with structure, but a world radically mind-dependent and dreamlike. We seem to have stipulated a possible gateway to the 'next' world. Our dreaming minds are an experiential link to what we shall gain full access to only after the complete shedding of our bodies.

Let's take this a little further. Price's model for an afterworld may also serve as a model for the spiritual worlds people know from comparative studies of religion and anthropology. Beyond the rare ghostly visitation, we're all in principle open to insights, information, inspiration, experiences that might result from contact with Price's 'next' world, which is by definition a world of the creative imagination.

Experience and tradition show that through dreams, trance, and mystical ecstasy, individuals, by rite, practice, or intuitive leaps, may gain power, knowledge and spiritual insight. The dream then isn't just a way to make sense of the idea of another world; it also provides a way to explore what may await us in the 'next' world.

There are historical accounts of methods for cracking open the secrets of the 'other' world. The healing shrines of the ancient world were centers for dream incubation where one prepared to meet the divine healer, Aesclepius, in a dream.⁶ All focusing meditation techniques approximate sleep in the reduction of sensory intake, in effect, retreating to dreamlike conditions. Psychotherapist Adam Crabtree sees the focusing of consciousness as the key to trance-induction and evolutionary advance.⁷ Dream researcher Robert Van de Castle has written about using lucid dreaming for therapeutic purposes. The lucid or conscious dreamer may learn to confront, interrogate and dialogue with dream figures one encounters.

Related to all this is the idea of dream communities. Psychiatrist Montague Ullman was a pioneer in this area. Members of a group share their dreams and together draw out the insights of value to different members.⁸ Finally, research indicates that the dream is one of the most common vehicles of paranormal experience.⁹ Dreaming is a state that lends itself to creative inspiration and paranormal cognition.¹⁰ Again, the dream is the mental dimension of our selves; but also a vehicle for traveling in that dimension.

Minds and brains

I want to interject a comment on how minds relate to brains. The standard view is that the brain produces and in effect is identical to everything we call mental or conscious. Unfortunately, nobody knows how this actually works, or whether it is even intelligible. I think there is a better model, more compatible with human experience.

The model is as old as Plato and the Upanishads and has a varied history in science, philosophy and religion.¹¹ According to this view, consciousness is a primal fact of nature; not produced by the brain, it uses the brain to ensure biological survival and replication. The full range of our potential consciousness is no doubt vast, but due to biological and cultural constraints, is systematically distracted and constricted.

And yet, in spite of the mass crushing and manipulation of global consciousness, a yearning for more is evident and the voices of people moved by ideals can be heard. And there are stories, the infinite human story. Stories of extreme, perilous situations that bring about life-changing events, often that look like rescues from a mysterious, benign and transcendent source.¹² A nurse recounted to me how driving her car, she stopped for a red light. When the light turned green she was about to hit the gas pedal but was stopped by the appearance of her dead mother in front of the car. She jammed on the brake and a Mack truck ran the red light. The appearance of her mother caused her to hesitate and avoid crashing into a speeding truck. Either the spirit of her mother saved her life or her subliminal mind saw disaster coming and dreamed the right life-saving apparition – a brilliant, unexpected performance!

There is a whole spectrum of experiences that appear as transient openings to Price's postmortem dream-universe. People have sought by prayer, by meditation, and by ritual to engage this hypothetical world of mental images – of saints, daemons, fairies, angels, geniuses, gods, goddesses, and so on. Shamanism, yoga, magic and mysticism are traditions of experimental approach to a place congruent with Price's dream-world space. The classic near-death experience could be described as a portal to this mental, dream-suffused dimension of being, and I think it can be shown that ancient mystery cults like that of Mithra, Eleusis, and Dionysos were methods of exploring the extraordinary mental spaces visited by near-death experiencers.

Price's model makes intelligible the 'next' world'. I extend that model to encompass our whole mental world, a kind of big dream we all participate in, unconsciously present, and superposed on our 'normal' space-time world. By extending our concept of mind beyond the limits of our personal mind-bodies, we make room for a large array of empirical data, paranormal and mystical,

otherwise excluded from our reality map. Where the facts warrant it, we should extend our conception of the boundaries of mental life, and Price's solidly empirical dream-model provides a credible starting-point.

Levitation

To carry this yet further, I want now to suggest that the dream idea of another world might help us make sense of the wonderfully bizarre phenomenon of levitation. I became interested in a famous case of reported levitation, which led me to write a book on the subject.¹³ On a trip to Italy I obtained Domenico Bernini's 1722 biography of Joseph of Copertino, I also read Eric Dingwall's erudite essay on Joseph in *Human Oddities*. Bernini's biography stood out because it was full of eyewitness testimony to the friar's aerial phenomena; by luck I acquired a copy of it in Italy.

Levitation intrigued me because I had interesting flying dreams. It seemed a symbol of free spirit and I confess I

found the image of the flying friar *funny*. But most important, were the reports of supernatural flight true, it would be a whopping counter-example to an assumption held with ironclad conviction by most well-educated people. If levitation is for real, there must be something fundamental that we don't know about physics, about biology, and about the human mind.

So suppose that levitation is a fact of nature.¹⁴ How would that connect with our idea of a 'next' world, a world made of dream space? Consider a composite image of Joseph posing (as it were) in full ecstatic form: he's floating or soaring through the air, the brothers pinch, poke, pluck and jab the friar's body but he feels nothing; mentally, he's somewhere else. If you touch his garment you may pick up a fragrance of unknown provenance on your sleeve, not to be washed out for years; his body and garments are incombustible, hovering in the air over arrays of huge burning candles; the wind on him as he flies has no effect on his garments, all the folds remaining in place like a piece of sculpture; and indeed Joseph's aerial capers have all the earmarks of an exhibition, a super-rational display of the 'impossible'. Now all that I've described is of course unthinkable in everyday life. There is, however, a place where these 'impossible' things are experienced but don't excite too much wonder or perplexity. This place where the 'impossible' is taken in stride is in our dreams. All sorts of impossible things happen in our dreams.

So, if we accept the evidence, Joseph in ecstasy does things in the waking world that we can do only in our dreams. Normally, the two realms exist apart; we carry on either in the waking world or in the dreaming world.¹⁵ Now the key to what may happen in Joseph's presumed anomalous flights I borrow from Bernard Carr, a cosmologist interested in theories of higher space. Carr describes a physical situation where two different dimensions of space are compacted into one dimension, but without loss of information in either. The idea of compacting dimensions of space intrigued me as a painter. It's the sort of move that the Cubists and the Futurists, not to mention the Surrealists, often made in their work.

There might also be a metaphysical application. One could see, and perhaps explain, Joseph's levitations as resulting from the creation of a bubble of compacted dream and 3D space. According to this view, Joseph levitating in sight of witnesses during Mass, is enclosed in a finite bubble of waking-dream space, contiguous with his moving body. The scene has all the apparent properties of objects in physical space; however, seamlessly co-present are effects associated with dream space – i.e. the ability to fly, and all the rest. As far as I can see from the reports, the region of compacted space is transmitted to the extent of Joseph's body, including what touches or is touched by his body.

This is shown in stories of him carrying other living creatures into the air with him. He grabbed the hair of a disturbed man brought by his family to Joseph for treatment. Joseph lifted the man up into the air with him, as he did with a sheep he embraced and a huge wooden cross that he seized. In the new compacted condition, normal reality may shift with dream-mediated alterations of time and space. Einstein proved that the space-time fabric is not absolute but subject to variations of mass and acceleration. Around Joseph, the physics of space and time also seemed to change, but the cause seems to have been ultra-Einsteinian – something, in short, unknown. So is there a physics of dream space?

Extra dimensions

Bernard Carr, in a statement of his views, titled "Hyperspatial Models of Matter and Mind", writes that central to the new paradigm he is proposing "is the invocation of extra dimensions beyond the familiar ones of space and time."¹⁶ Joseph aloft and dancing in the air to the beat of the shepherd's horn and drum seems like an impossible marriage of dream and reality. Carr argues for a five-dimensional map of the reality

we inhabit. The extra dimension can be none other than the dimension of mind, mind, however, with oneiric resonance.

Individuals standing at a distance from the levitating friar are in normal 3D space, observing a scene whose centre is a monk smitten by rapturous desire to unite with the Madonna. What causes these compactions of dream and waking space? Normally we wake, sleep and dream in cycles. A linear procedure, one state follows the other. The only disruptive variable I can pick out as causative is the ecstatic state that seems always to precede the levitation.

So the conjecture here is that somehow the ecstatic state causes the compaction of waking and dream space. Ecstasy entails the displacement of the normal personality, creating the void that allows dream and waking spaces to blend into one surreal space. The anomalies are now free to manifest. According to this view, levitation – perhaps the whole spectrum of what we call psychophysical anomalies – are harbingers, projections, or perhaps incursions from the ‘next’ world, the wider dimension of creative mind that underlies our evolving personalities.

So, to round this off: starting with a review of H.H. Price’s theory of the dream as model for the ‘next’ world, we took two further steps: the first was to suggest that the afterworld dream model serve as model of our subliminal mental world. In fact, matters of historical fact suggest ways in which

humans have learned to engage this other world and its presumptive greater mind. The history of religion might be thought of as the record of humans trying to converse with this dream-formed ‘idea of another world’.

We don’t know the full range of possible dialogue with the mind of Price’s “other world”. Of course, traditional societies have a head-start in this matter and have evolved their myths, rites, and practices for engaging it. Of course, there’s the problem of disenchantment in our techno-physicalist culture: skeptics who dig themselves into graves of meaninglessness and militant atheists locked into their one-dimensional worldviews. What has one to offer those who have lost all sense of the sacred, the poetic, and the authentically mysterious? The notion of a greater or transpersonal mind we can learn to dialogue with – stripped of all dogmatic encrustations – offers a minimalist model of transcendence for people of that description.

My second move was to say that the idea of dream space may shed light on dramatic anomalies like levitation. We already have a clue: our own flying dreams. I think I know what it feels like to levitate from my flying dreams. Waking consciousness is a great mystery, the so-called “hard problem”. But when you consider *dream* consciousness, the problem seems harder but even more interesting. In dreaming consciousness, we see what looks like the stuff of infinite creativity, like an image of eternity’s sunrise.

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- 5 Price, H.H. (1995) The Idea of ‘Another World’. In *Philosophical Interactions With Parapsychology*, pp.237-262. H.H. Price. Edited by Frank B. Dilley.
- 6 Meier, C.A. (1967) *Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy*. Northwestern University Press.
- 7 Adam Crabtree, *Memoir of a Trance Therapist*
- 8 Montague Ullman, ed. (1988) *The Variety of Dream Experience: Expanding Our Ways of Working With Dreams*. New York: Continuum.
- 9 For the connection between dreams and extrasensory perception, see Van de Castle, *Our Dreaming Mind*, Chapter 14. See also Louisa Rhine, ‘Psychological Processes in ESP Experiences.’ *Journal of Parapsychology*, 1962, 26.88-111;172-99. According to Rhine, dreams were the most common vehicle of reported paranormal experience in the cases she collected.
- 10 See *Irreducible Mind*
- 11 See chapters 3 &4 in *Beyond Physicalism*, 2015, Eds. Kelly, Crabtree, Marshall’ Rowman&Littlefield.
- 12 Geiger, J. (2009) *The Third Man Factor: Surviving the Impossible*. New York: Weinstein Books.
- 13 Grosso, M. (2016) *The Man Who Could Fly*
- 14 The case for the reality of Joseph’s levitations is made in chs. 2&3 of *The Man Who Could Fly*.
- 15 See especially Mavromatis, A. (2010) *Hypnagogia: The Unique State of Consciousness Between Wakefulness and Sleep*. London: Thyrsus Press.
- 16 *Beyond Physicalism*, p. 230.