



OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCES AND CONFUSION-ISM: A RESPONSE TO WOODHOUSE*

SUSAN BLACKMORE

Department of Psychology, University of the West of England, St Matthias College,
Bristol BS16 2JP, U.K.

There has been much recent research, theorizing, and debate on the fascinating topic of OBEs, yet this paper fails to address the contemporary issues. From beginning to end the author sets up a straw person to demolish, proposes an obvious alternative as though it were new, displays conceptual confusions, a lack of knowledge of the field, and makes several specific errors. I have been asked to comment on this paper but to detail all these problems would be tedious. I shall instead choose one or two illustrative examples from each category. I hope to show that our understanding of OBEs is a great deal more sophisticated than the author appears to realize.

First, the straw person who is easy to knock down, apparently believes that OBEs are "dissociative hallucinations" (pp. 1 and 7) and that "any evidence for actual out-of-body ventures would support ... Cartesian Dualism" (Abstract, p. 1); that "OBEs are little more than nomological quirks" (p. 2); that "OBE subjects suffer from a *deviant personality*" (p. 4), and that "there is something psychologically or neurochemically deviant" about them (p. 6). Such phrases as "it is widely assumed" (p. 9), "it is often assumed" (p. 10), "philosophers and psychologists assume" (p. 7), and even "almost everyone assumes" (p. 1) liberally adorn these statements. Yet as far as I know these things are not widely assumed and the author gives not one reference in support of this straw person or one hint as to who it (or they) may turn out to be.

It has long been clear that there is nothing deviant about OBEs. Indeed the author even cites one paper as evidence. He might also have cited much other research on the personality correlates of OBEs such as Gabbard and Twemlow (1984), Greyson and Stevenson (1980), Kohr (1983), or the detailed theorizing and research on the OBE-prone personality by Ring (1992). (My own research on OBEs in schizophrenics is cited in the text but omitted from the reference list—see Blackmore, 1986.)

Central to the author's argument is the idea that these ubiquitous straw people believe that if evidence of Externalism is found it must somehow support Cartesian dualism. This is clearly untrue. Indeed well over 10 years ago I explored some alternatives (Blackmore, 1982). I compared "something leaves" theories with

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"nothing leaves" theories and in the first category considered three types; those in which a physical double travels in the physical world, those in which a mental double travels in the physical world and those in which a mental double travels in a mental world. I gave examples of each type and some of the arguments used to support or reject them. All are, in some way, dualist but only the last might be considered Cartesian. Irwin (1985, pp. 220-237) similarly provides an extensive discussion and criticism of different "ecsomatic" theories of the OBE and many others give variations on them (e.g., Grosso, 1981; Ring, 1980, p. 221). I suggest that it is widely appreciated that evidence of paranormal events during OBEs would be evidence against a purely imaginal theory of the OBE but could be interpreted as support for many of a variety of dualist and other theories.

This extensive literature on the various theories also makes it seem odd that the author uses the terms "Internalism" and "Externalism." These sound as though they ought to be general philosophical positions but they appear to describe the two main types of theory of the OBE. These are normally referred to as the "ecsomatic" theories on one hand, and the "imaginal" or "psychological" theories on the other (e.g., Green, 1968; Irwin, 1985) and where widely used terms exist it is confusing neither to use them nor explain why they are not used.

The author also reveals many conceptual confusions, for example, in referring to states as being removed from the body or brain and even in the use of the phrase "ostensible OBEs." John Palmer made the crucial point that an OBE is neither actually nor potentially a psychic phenomenon (Palmer, 1978). It is an *experience* and as such is not open to verification. If a person describes an experience of leaving the body this is, by definition, an OBE. This is widely quoted and the general distinction he was trying to make is widely recognized. OBEs are experiences. They may or may not involve something leaving or paranormal events of some kind. Within this framework it makes no sense to talk about "ostensible OBEs" (p. 1) or about "what people take themselves to be experiencing during ... OBEs" (p. 6). What people take themselves to be experiencing is the OBE.

Another confusion comes in the discussion of neurophysiological explanations of the OBE (pp. 5-6). The author seems to think that everyone else labors under false assumptions and tries to set them right by arguing that such explanations "tell us only that if one has an OBE then certain states of the brain have been activated" (p. 6). But even this is not so. A correlation found or suggested between a brain state and an experience need not suggest a one-to-one relationship. The various neurophysiological theories all take somewhat different approaches but a common one is to try to understand the triggers that might lead to an OBE. Some might be psychological and some pharmacological, they might all converge on one physiological state or there might be multiple states that can underlie a common experience. These possibilities have been extensively discussed (e.g., Blackmore, 1993; Saavedra-Aguilar & Gomez-Jeria, 1989). The possibility that certain brain states provide a trigger for the release of the soul has even been considered (Morse, Venecia, & Milstein, 1989). If there are several possible triggers the occurrence of an OBE would not make it certain that any particular one had been activated.

In a related point, a confusion over the role of the endorphins is also revealed (p. 3) and I refer readers to further detailed discussions of this (Carr, 1982; Morse

et al., 1989; Saavedra-Aguilar & Gomez-Jeria, 1989). Further confusion is apparent in the unjustified distinction between NDEs and "pure OBEs" (p. 5) (see, e.g., Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; Owens, Cook, & Stevenson, 1990, for further consideration of this problem). Lack of knowledge is revealed in the dismissal of the psychological theories of the OBE. The criticisms are really not fair and this is hard for the reader to judge when the main psychological theories (e.g., Blackmore, 1984; Irwin, 1985; Palmer, 1978) are not described or apparently understood.

This paper is largely a philosophical discussion. However, the author does at one point claim that "The results from the most carefully designed of these experiments appear to support Externalism" (p. 8). However, he cites only one experiment by Osis and McCormick (1980) and I suggest that such an empirical claim should be backed by a review of the literature and arguments to show that this was really among the "most carefully designed." Admittedly this was an ingenious experiment but there are numerous others and extensive discussion of their faults and implications have been published (see Alvarado, 1982, for a review).

Finally, there are several simple errors of fact. For example, I have never carried out EEG research. That attributed to me on pp. 4-5 is probably referring to that of Tart (1968). The statement "No OBE experiencer has ever described himself or herself as a dimensionless point" (p. 11) is blatantly false. Such OBEs are termed "asomatic" as opposed to "parasomatic" (Green, 1968) and the differences between them and proportions of each type found in different conditions have been widely discussed (e.g., Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980).

This paper fails to address the contemporary issues in OBE research. The central question of whether anything leaves the body or not has been extensively dealt with. It is my personal opinion that the weight of evidence is against it (Blackmore, 1982). The interesting questions for any psychological theory now include why the OBE seems so real, how information from memory, imagination, and the remaining senses is incorporated into the new viewpoint and what are the various triggers for the experience. My own theory (Blackmore, 1984) provides answers to these questions. I have proposed that OBEs occur when a person's normal sensory-based model of reality breaks down and, in an attempt to reconstruct it, is replaced by one from memory and imagination. If the new model is constructed in a bird's eye view, as many memory images are, an OBE takes place. The experience seems perfectly real because it is real in exactly the same sense as anything ever is real. That is, it is the best model the system has got at the time. Any information which is not specific as to viewpoint can be incorporated easily while incompatible information will end the experience. Triggers for the OBE will include anything that breaks down the normal model of reality. Predictions from this theory include the imagery skills and cognitive styles of OBErs and have been generally confirmed (Blackmore, 1987; Irwin, 1986).

Other recent work concerns the functions served by OBEs (Irwin, 1981), the relationship between OBEs and other altered states such as NDEs (Blackmore, 1993), UFO encounters (Ring, 1992), and lucid dreams (Gackenbach & LaBerge, 1986) and the personality of OBErs as discussed above. This paper does not address any of this recent research.

If it really were widely held that evidence for out-of-body excursions were

evidence for Cartesian Dualism then the author would have been right to point out the error. However, it is not so. I hope that my brief pointers to the literature are sufficient to show the interested reader that the arguments presented here largely miss the current issues in the study of the OBE.

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