17

*The Implausibility of Astral*

*Bodies and Astral Worlds*

Susan Blackmore

Note: This chapter is reprinted (with slight editing) from Chapter 21 of my 1982 book *Beyond the Body*. Research on out-of-body experiences has progressed enormously in the decades since then. Yet these theoretical arguments are as valid as ever.

Most theories of the out-of-body experience (OBE) either claim that something leaves the physical body, or that it does not. I shall try to assess first of all whether it makes sense to say that something leaves the physical body; for there is no point in delving into the evidence bearing on a theory if the theory itself is inconsistent or incomprehensible. Inevitably I shall be expressing some of my own confusions and facing my own assumptions, but I hope that in the process I shall be able to show just how great are the problems facing some of these theories of the OBE.

**1. Physical Theories (A Physical Double Travels in the Physical World)**

First there is the kind of explanation that suggests that we each have a second physical body that can separate from the usual one. You may immediately dismiss this, saying that the double is nonphysical; but I shall come to that soon. First it is instructive to see why a “physical” theory of the OBE makes little sense, for the same arguments must be raised if anything labeled “nonphysical” should turn out to be this kind of model in disguise.

There are two aspects to consider, one being the status and nature of the double that travels, and the other being the status and nature of the world in which it travels. In this first theory both are material and interact with the normal physical world. To make this theory even worth considering it is necessary to assume that this double is composed of some “finer” or more subtle material that is invisible to the untrained eye.

This kind of idea is sometimes expressed in occult writings. For example the etheric body of the Theosophists described by Annie Besant (1901) or Arthur Powell (1925; 1926) is like this and a similar idea appears in that once so popular book *On the Edge of the Etheric* by Arthur Findlay. He states “We must first of all clearly understand that the etheric world is part of this world. That it is all about us. That it is material, though of a substance too fine for our senses normally to appreciate” (Findlay, 1931, p. 10) and he goes on to describe how the etheric body parts from the physical at death, to continue living without it. Yram also expresses something similar when he talks of the “radio-active essence” (1972, p. 32) or the “ultra-sensitive atoms” (1972, p. 98) of the higher worlds.

Objections to this type of theory are numerous, both logical and empirical. First, what could the double be made of? The possibilities seem to range between a complete solid duplicate of the familiar body, and a kind of misty and insubstantial version. Looking at each in turn we can see that neither is acceptable, though for different reasons.

The idea of a complete duplicate of the body could, at least, be made to make sense. We could imagine a world in which each person had not one body, but two, and the two could separate and travel independently. Of course the second body would need to have a mechanism for moving it about and a perceptual system and a brain for controlling its behavior. It would need to be strong, flexible, and complex. Indeed it would need to be much like our usual body and it would certainly be clearly visible and detectable. I say we could imagine such a world, but clearly the world is not like this.

So couldn’t the double consist of some sort of gas, fog or mist of particles filling, as it were, the spaces between the grosser parts and being invisible to the untrained eye? I would say no, for several reasons. First of all many ideas that seemed quite plausible fifty or one hundred years ago no longer seem so attractive. In 1931 Findlay placed his etheric world in portions of the electromagnetic spectrum not then detectable, but such portions have long since become understood and measurable. Likewise ideas about “finer atoms” filling the “spaces” between the normal ones do not have the same appeal in the light of modern physics. Perhaps it is possible that there is a whole realm of undiscovered and undetected material, but this is unlikely. It is not much of a theory to argue that the double is material, and can do all the things required of it, yet is invisible, undetectable, and consists of some kind of matter we know nothing whatever about. This is just evasion, not theory.

Perhaps more important is the difficulty of seeing how any misty shape, or nebulous entity could perform all that was required of it in an OBE. Would it have muscles, nerves, and a brain? If not, how would it move and think? Would it have eyes, ears or a nose? If not, how could it perceive the physical world? If it obtained information from the world then it would surely be easily detectable; we know that it is not. This problem was pointed out by William Rushton in his letter to the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* in 1976: Rushton, famed for his research on human color vision, was eminently qualified to state the problem of vision by the double:

We know that all information coming to us normally from the outside is caught by the sense organs and encoded by their nerves. And that a tiny damage to the retina (for instance) or its nerves to the brain produces such characteristic deficiencies in the visual sensation that the site of the damage may usually be correctly inferred. What is this OOB eye that can encode the visual scene exactly as does the real eye, with its hundred million photoreceptors and its million signalling optic nerves? Can you imagine anything but a replica of the real eye that could manage to do this? But if this floating replica is to see, it must catch light, and hence cannot be transparent, and so must be visible to people in the vicinity.

In fact floating eyes are not observed, nor would this be expected, for they only exist in fantasy. (1976, p. 412)

Is his argument as damning as it appears? I think it is. Of course there are counter-arguments. Since OB vision is not that good it might use a simpler eye, or one relying on something other than light. Nevertheless, if it is to perceive the physical world in any way at all it must pick up information from it and that would render it detectable. So the problem only reverts to a more complex kind of detection and most possibilities have been tried and failed. I am also tempted to ask why, if there is such a useful, mobile, light and invisible perceiving double, we should bother with all the paraphernalia of eyes, muscles and nerves? The answer, I would say, is that perception is not possible without some such mechanism.

One last problem with this kind of double is its appearance. If we all have a second body why does it appear to some as a blob or globe, to others as a flare, or light, and to yet others as a duplicate of the physical body? And what about its clothes and carriages, handbags and walking sticks all made of this same strange substance? Sylvan Muldoon and Hereward Carrington (1929) wrestled with this problem and more recently so has Charles Tart (1974).

If the notion of a physical double is problematic, the notion that it travels in the physical world is just as much so. I have discussed the problem of obtaining information from the physical world around, but in addition there is plenty of evidence that suggests that what is seen in an OBE is not the physical world at all.

First there are the types of errors made in OB perception. These tend not to be the sort of errors that might arise from a poor perceptual system, but seem often to be fabricated errors, or additions, as well as omissions. People see chimney pots where there are none, or they see places as they expect them rather than as they are at that time. Then sometimes the OB world is responsive to thought, just as in a dream the scenery can change if the person imagines it changing; and lastly, there is the fact that many OBEs merge into other kinds of experience. The OBEr may find himself seeing places such as never were on earth, or he may meet strange monsters, religious figures or caricature animals. All these features of the OBE make it harder to see the OB world as the physical world at all, and lead one to the conclusion that the OB world is more like a world of thoughts.

Given the nature of the OB world, and the problems presented by seeing how a double could interact with the physical world without being detectable, I can only conclude that this theory must be rejected. The only form in which it could survive would go something like this. There is a second physical body that we all possess but that only some people can see. It can leave the body and travel on its own seeing the world around it, but it cannot be detected because it is made of some kind of matter that is as yet unknown and it travels by some unknown energy and it sees rather poorly using a mechanism about which nothing is known except that it does not use light, or any other readily detectable form of energy.

I would suggest that this theory is of no predictive value whatever and should be dismissed.

**2. Physical Astral World Theory (A Nonphysical Double Travels in the Physical World)**

I have been using the terms “physical” and “nonphysical” as though their meanings were self-evident. In some ways they can be, for it is easy enough, in many contexts, to distinguish the terms “physical” and “mental.” Thoughts, feelings, and ideas may still be referred to as “mental” events by a materialist who believes that they are ultimately totally dependent upon physical events in the body and brain. The dualist, however, believes that mind can exist independently of matter; and when he speaks of mental events or nonphysical events he may be referring to some mental world or substance in which the events take place. Many occultists believe there to be a whole range of nonphysical worlds of differing qualities and they refer not only to physical and mental events, but to spiritual, casual, and astral ones as well.

Many theories have suggested that the double is not physical but nonphysical, even though it travels in the physical world. I have called this a “physical astral world theory” because one form of it is that the astral body is nonphysical, and the astral world includes all the objects of the physical world. So in what sense are these theories using the term nonphysical? If what is meant is “mental” in the sense that thoughts are described as mental, then this sort of theory would make no sense. Thoughts do not travel. If I imagine or dream of going to Peru or plan what to do next weekend, we may say that my thoughts traveled there; but we do not mean that anything is literally in Peru or in the future. So nonphysical must mean more than this.

On the other hand it must not mean physical in disguise otherwise all the problems previously raised will apply. Let us look at some examples of this sort of theory to try to find out what is meant. Tart (1974; 1978) refers to it as the “natural” explanation. He describes this theory of the OBE as follows:

[I]n effect there is no need to explain it; it is just what it seems to be. Man has a non-physical soul of some sort that is capable, under certain conditions, of leaving the physical body. This soul, as manifested in what we call the second body, is the seat of consciousness. While it is like an ordinary physical body in some ways, it is not subject to most of the physical laws of space and time and so is able to travel about at will. (Tart, 1974, p. 368)

We have already met the “theta aspect” in connection with detection experiments. Robert Morris and colleagues explain that “the OBE may be more than a special psi-conducive state; that it may in fact be evidence of an aspect of the self which is capable of surviving bodily death. For convenience, such a hypothetical aspect of the self will hereafter be referred to as a Theta Aspect (T.A.)” (Morris et al., 1978, p. 2). According to Karlis Osis and Janet Mitchell it is possible that “some part of the personality is temporarily out of the body” (1977, p. 526), and many occult theories involve a nonphysical astral double rather than a physical one.

Do any of these accounts make sense of what could be meant by nonphysical? Osis talks about “some part of personality” separating, but what is personality? The most productive view of it seems to be that it is a way of describing how a person behaves. People react differently to different situations, they hold various opinions, have different ways of expressing themselves, different hopes and fears and interests. All these go to make up personality. Questionnaires have been developed that try to assess such variables and so categorize people in terms of some theory of personality. Although the theories differ they agree on one point. The personality is an aspect of a physical person. It is the body that behaves; the brain that thinks and controls actions and without a body one cannot fill in questionnaires or choose to go to a party instead of staying at home and reading a book. It therefore makes no sense to talk about a “part of personality” separating from the body unless one redefines personality.

Another popular view holds that consciousness separates from the physical body, or becomes located outside of it. But in what sense can consciousness be located anywhere? When I wake up in the morning and become aware of the birds singing outside, the rain dripping from the roof, or the time, is my consciousness “in” any of these? Is it in my head, my ears, or where? I would say that consciousness is not the kind of thing that has a location at all. Without wishing to discuss theories of consciousness, I would argue that if we are going to say that consciousness leaves the body in an OBE then we need to define consciousness in such a way that it has a location and is normally to be found “in the body.” In doing this I think we might find that we were not talking about what we usually mean by consciousness at all.

More generally it has been said that an aspect of the self leaves, but what is the self? Is it a conglomeration of one’s personality, one’s self-image, one’s opinions, ideas, and memories? If so then most, if not all, of it is totally dependent on having a body and therefore cannot, in any meaningful way, be said to leave the body. You may say there is more to the self than this. There is some divine spark, some unchanging inner being or soul. In Tart’s terms there may be a “nonphysical soul of some sort.” But what sort?

The problem seems to me to be this. If the “soul” is to interact with the objects of the physical world so as to perceive them then it should not only be detectable but all the other problems of the previous theory arise. On the other hand, if it does not interact with the physical, then it cannot possibly do what is expected of it on this theory, namely travel in the physical world. I do not think there is any escape from this dilemma. If we do have souls I don’t think they are what travels in an OBE. Moreover, there is already the evidence that what is seen in an OBE is not, in any case, the physical world. So we have ample reason to reject this type of theory and turn to the next.

**3. Mental Astral World Theory**

**(A Nonphysical Double Travels in a Nonphysical, But “Objective,” Astral World)**

The evidence considered so far points to the conclusion that OBEs do not take place in the physical world at all, but in a thought-created or mental world. Each of the next three types of theory starts from this premise, but they are very different and lead to totally different conceptions of the experience.

A “mental world” could mean several things. It could mean the purely private world created by each of us in our thinking. If we mean this then the OBE is essentially an experience of the imagination…. But what else could it mean? One possibility is that there is another world (or worlds) that is mental but is in some sense shared, or objective and in which we can all travel if we attain certain states of consciousness. The important question now becomes whether the OB world is private to each individual, or shared and accessible to all.

Occultists have suggested that there is a shared thought world and there are many other versions of this kind of theory. The pertinent features are that there is a nonphysical OB world that is accessible by thought, that it is manipulable by thought, and is the product of more than just one individual’s mind.

Tart, as one of his five theories of the OBE, suggests what he calls the “mentally-manipulatable-state explanation.” He raises here the familiar problem of, as he puts it “where the pajamas come from” (Tart, 1974, p. 369). That is, that if the OBE involves the separation of a “spirit” or “soul” we have to include the possibility of spiritual dinner jackets and tie pins. Of course any theory that postulates a “thought-created” world solves this problem. Tart therefore suggested that a nonphysical second body travels in a nonphysical world that is capable of being manipulated or changed by “the conscious and non-conscious thoughts and desires of the person whose second body is in that space” (1974, p. 369).

In 1951 Muldoon and Carrington had come to a similar conclusion. Muldoon states “one thing is clear to me—the clothing of the phantom is *created*, and is not a counterpart of the physical clothing” (Muldoon & Carrington, 1929, p. 283). Not through logical argument, but through his observations he came to the conclusion that “Thought creates in the astral, …. In fact the whole astral world is governed by thought” (Muldoon & Carrington, 1929, p. 284). But he did not mean it was a private world of thoughts.

Also relevant here is the occult notion of thought forms. Theosophists Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater describe the creation of thought forms in the mental and astral planes. All physical objects are supposed to have their astral counterparts and so when traveling in the astral one sees a mixture of the astral forms of physical things and thought created, or purely astral, entities.

There are other versions of a similar idea. For example Michael Whiteman questions the “one-space theory” of OBEs (1975, pp. 120–122), and John C. Poynton follows him suggesting “what is described is not the physical world as actualized by the senses of the physical body, but a copy, more or less exact, of the physical world” (1975, p. 408). D. Scott Rogo (1978) suggests that the OBE takes place in a nonphysical duplicate world that is just as “real” to the OBEr as our world is to us. He adds that the OBEr might even be able to manipulate “our” world by manipulating his. This is just the kind of principle that underlies some forms of magical operation. By creating solid enough thought forms one can influence the physical plane and so work magic.

So we can see that there are many versions of this type of theory, but does it make sense? Is it the kind of explanation that allows us to relax and conclude that the problems of the OBE are solved? I think not, and for several reasons.

Oliver Fox (1962) mentions one, that we should not be able to see our own physical bodies if we are seeing “astral counterparts.” Rogo (1978) gets around this by saying that we might be seeing both the physical and astral together, but of course this reintroduces all the problems of how we could possibly see the physical world at all.

Tart (1978) mentions another. He points out that there is little independent evidence for this manipulable world, psychic ether or whatever; that we are explaining one unknown by invoking another. Perhaps this is admissible. After all science often proceeds by inventing new “unknowns.” However, those unknowns must be preferable for some reason to the previous ones and must make sense. I would suggest that the idea of a shared thought world, attractive as it is, and as much as I would like to believe in it, makes no sense.

To see why it makes no sense we must first consider just what it entails, and to do this we must see through the various versions to the key features. First, the thought world contains the thoughts of many individuals that join together to form a public, or at least partially objective, world. Second, the thoughts in this world have to persist for some time. It is no good if they disappear when the person who created them stops thinking about them. And third, these thoughts must be accessible to other people who have OBEs. In other words there has to be interaction between the stored thoughts and new ones. The problems therefore seem to be how the different thoughts are combined in the first place, how they are stored, and how they interact with new thoughts.

First, how could the thoughts be combined together to create an astral world? None of the theories specifies this but we may explore some possibilities. Let us suppose that there is on the astral—so to speak—a version of my house and that anyone who has an OBE may see it if he travels to the right “place.” We know that this house will appear much like the real thing but it may have some differences such as having one chimney instead of two, square walls instead of slightly wonky ones, or face due south instead of slightly east of south. This astral version is supposed to have arisen from many thought forms, but how? Why do all the thoughts about my house get combined and not get muddled up with those about my neighbor’s house? Do my own thoughts have more effect on the astral form because I live here and know my house better than anyone else does? Do more frequent thoughts have a greater effect and does something like clarity of thought help? If I tried very hard to imagine my house with a pink rose growing over it instead of a wistaria would people who saw it on the astral see one, the other or both?

And finally, does the physical house itself have any effect, independent of people’s thoughts about it?

I am not suggesting that such questions are unanswerable, only that they are a genuine problem. Partial answers can found in the occult literature. The principle “like attracts like” is central. Similar thoughts, emotions and ideas attract each other and so come together in the astral. But what determines similarity? Is my image of my house more similar to my husband’s image of it or to my neighbor’s? Hundreds of dimensions of similarity could be involved but how do some come to be more important? I would suggest that the very arbitrariness of any decision of this kind shows up the shaky foundations of the whole notion.

The second problem concerns storage. How can thoughts once created persist independently of the brain? The idea that thoughts can do this has been a cornerstone of many occult theories, but also parapsychologists have used a similar idea to try to explain ESP. If one person’s thoughts or ideas persist in some way after that person has stopped thinking about them, and if other people can tap this store of ideas then clearly one person can tap another person’s thoughts. Telepathy is not only possible but is then seen as the more general form of memory.

When I first became interested in parapsychology this was the idea that attracted me. It seemed to explain so much so simply. I even believed it was new, but I soon learned otherwise. It appeared in one form in 1939 when H. H. Price, an Oxford philosopher and member of the Society for Psychical Research, described his “Psychic Ether Hypothesis.” He suggested that thoughts, images, or ideas are created by mental acts, but then tend to persist independently of the person who initiated them. These images can affect the contents of any mind and so telepathy can occur and an “ether of images” or “psychic ether” is created. By association with places or buildings the ether can also be responsible for hauntings (Price, 1939).

In the 1940s Whateley Carington carried out numerous experiments that led him to his “association theory of telepathy” (1945). If two ideas or images are associated in the mind of one person that association is not private to that individual but persists and can be used by others. A related idea is W. G. Roll’s notion of the “psi field” (1964). Every physical object has an associated psi field to which people may respond. In his more recent theory of “psi structures,” Roll has extended this idea (1979).

These are just some of the theories that have related ESP and memory and since then the relationship between the two has been extensively studied (see Blackmore, 1980; Rao, Morrison, & Davis, 1977; Roll, 1966). But this idea has exciting implications for memory as well as for ESP. No one knows for sure how memory is stored. There have been electrical, chemical, structural, and holographic models of memory storage but none is universally accepted. Could it be that none of these is right and that memory is stored psychically? I used to think so, but my confidence has been forcibly diminished by several years of research into ESP and memory and a good deal of thinking about the problems involved (Blackmore, 1979).

As far as storage is concerned, the major question is the substrate on which the information is coded. Information to be stored has to be coded into the form of variations in some physical system. We store music in the form of the structure on the surface of records, or magnetic patterns on tape. In computers memory is coded into binary digits and stored on tape, magnetic discs or even punched cards. Because the disc, tape or record is stable for fairly long periods of time the information is retained. But what is to take on this role in the astral? Do we imagine the information being stored as variations in some nonphysical substance? If so we have to remember what this substance must do. It has to interact with the brain so that information processed there can be stored. It must be capable of being altered by the incoming information, and must retain the information essentially without loss until required. It must retain it in such a way that the right bits of information can be retrieved by the right people (and occasionally by the wrong people). This is surely a tall order for a nonphysical substance that is invisible, apparently everywhere, and yet quite undetected as yet.

All this might, with some stretching of the imagination, be possible, but the final problem is one that, I think, provides the worst hurdle for any theory of this kind. That is, how is the information retrieved when wanted? Or if we are talking about the OBE, how do people manage to observe the astral world of thoughts?

Again the occult dictum “like attracts like” has been held responsible. Taking again the example of “my house” the theory is that if a person thinks about “my house,” the thought will draw him to other thoughts that are similar. But how? Is the “thought” of me enough or must he say “Take me to her house”? Does he perhaps need the address, or the post code? Is a very good image of the house necessary before he is likely to succeed? Apparently not, since people claim to have seen places on the astral that they have never physically seen. Is clarity important, or vividness of the image and can any of these be measured? Again these questions might be answerable but any answers seem largely arbitrary.

The problem is essentially one of coding. We know that when a person remembers something he has first processed the incoming information, thought about it, structured it, and turned it into a manageable form using some sort of code. We presume that it persists in this form until needed when he can use the same coding system to retrieve it and use it. Even if we don’t understand the details of how this works, there is in principle no problem for one person because he uses the same system both in storing the material and retrieving it. But if thoughts are stored in the astral world then we have to say that one person can store them there and another get them out. And that other person may have entirely different ways of coding information. So how can these thoughts in the astral possibly make sense to him? I personally can find no reasonable way of tackling this problem and it is largely this that forces me to conclude that such theories do not make sense.

I have now considered all of the types of theory that suggest that something leaves the body in an OBE, and found none satisfactory.

***References***

Besant, A. (1901). *Man and his bodies*. Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House.

Blackmore, S. J. (1979). Is ESP perceiving or remembering? *Parapsychology Review*, 10(4), 23–27.

———. (1980). Correlations between ESP and memory. *European Journal of Parapsychology*, 3, 127–147.

Carington, W. (1945). *Telepathy: An outline of its facts, theory and implications*. London: Methuen.

Findlay, A. (1931). *On the edge of the etheric:* *Being an investigation of psychic phenomena, based on a series of sittings with Mr. John C. Sloan, the Glasgow trance and direct voice medium*. London: Psychic Press Ltd.

Fox, O. (1962). *Astral projection*. New York: University Books Inc.

Morris, R. L. Harary, S. B., Janis, J., Hartwell, J., & Roll, W. G. (1978). Studies of communication during out-of-body experiences. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 72, 1–22.

Muldoon, S., & Carrington, H. (1929). *The projection of the astral body*. London: Rider & Co.

———. (1951). *The phenomena of astral projection*. London: Rider & Co.

Osis, K., & Mitchell, J. L. (1977). Physiological correlates of reported out-of-body experiences. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 49, 525–536.

Powell, A. E. (1926). *The astral body*. London: Theosophical Publishing House.

———. (1929). *The etheric double*. London: Theosophical Publishing House.

Poynton, J. C. (1975). Results of an out-of-the-body survey. In J. C. Poynton (Ed.), *Parapsychology in South Africa* (pp. 109–123). Johannesburg: South African Society for Psychical Research.

Price, H. H. (1939). Hauntings and the “psychic ether” hypothesis. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 45, 307–343.

Rao, K. R., Morrison, M., & Davis, J. W. (1977). Paired-associates recall and ESP: A study of memory and psi-missing. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 41, 165–189.

Rogo, D. S. (1978). The out-of-body experience: Some personal views and reflections. In D. S. Rogo (Ed.), *Mind beyond the body: The mystery of ESP projection* (pp. 349–362). New York: Penguin Books.

Roll, W. G. (1966). ESP and memory. *International Journal of Neuropsychiatry*, 2, 505–521.

———. (1979). Psi, memory, and matter. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 43, 59–60 abstract.

Rushton, W. A. H. (1976). Letter to the editor. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 48, 412–413.

Tart, C. T. (1974). Out-of-the-body experiences. In E. D. Mitchell, & J. W. White (Eds.), *Psychic Exploration:* *A challenge for science* (pp. 349–373). New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

———. (1978). Paranormal theories about the out-of-body experience. In D. S. Rogo (Ed.), *Mind beyond the body: The mystery of ESP projection* (pp. 338–345). New York: Penguin Books.

Whiteman, J. H. M. (1975). The scientific evaluation of out-of-the-body experiences. In J. C. Poynton (Ed.), *Parapsychology in South Africa* (pp. 95–108). Johannesburg: South African Society for Psychical Research.

Yram. (1972). *Practical astral projection*. New York: Samuel Weiser.