

FLIGHT OF MIND: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE by  
H. J. Irwin. Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey, 1985. 374 pp. £27.50.

There seem to be more and more books about the out-of-body experience (or OBE) published in the past few years. This experience, once the sole province of psychical research, and considered to be strange, mystical or even paranormal, is now receiving the serious treatment it deserves, and Irwin's book contributes much to the growing sophistication of approach.

Irwin, an Australian psychologist, manages to combine a primarily psychological approach with a fair treatment of paranormal claims and even the most extraordinary of theories.

He begins by redefining the OBE. Like others before, he argues for an atheoretical definition; one which does not presuppose that anything leaves the body or that any particular kind of explanation is required. He proposes to define it as an experience in which 'the center of consciousness appears to the experient to occupy temporarily a position which is spatially remote from his/her body'. I found this a very helpful definition which I shall use myself. It is better than my own previous definitions in that it does not assume that the experience has to include visual perceptual-like qualities. Of course it must be realized, and Irwin makes this clear, that the notion of a center of consciousness is purely phenomenological. One cannot expect objectively to find a 'center of consciousness'.

In the first of eight chapters Irwin gives examples of OBEs and compares the experience with other phenomena such as bilocation, apparitions, dreams and lucid dreams, autoscapy and depersonalization.

Next he proceeds to the methods of research, reviewing what has been learned from case collections, surveys, self observations by adepts, and finally

experimental investigation. My criticism of this section would be much the same as of later sections. The book is packed with information and spiced with useful and interesting criticisms of techniques, methods and findings, but it is hard to follow. I get the impression that the book will be used primarily for research rather than for reading right through and for that purpose it is not structured tightly enough. I found it hard, when I wanted to relocate some particular criticisms, to find my way around. I think that Irwin could have helped future researchers by **organizing his** wealth of material more clearly; perhaps by giving smaller subsections or **indicating** more clearly when topics are to be treated in several places.

Chapter 3 considers the phenomenology of the OBE. Here Irwin describes the major surveys which have been done and then proceeds to the details they elucidated, such as the nature of the onset and termination of the OBE, the content of the experience, and **other features such as** the tunnel experience. He makes some interesting comments about the mixtures of sensory modalities which are reported and about the wide range of perceptual vividness.

He also tackles the thorny question of veridicality. I felt he did not deal with this issue as clearly as with others. Claims of veridicality from surveys are treated alongside experimental tests of OB perception, when their value and relevance are quite different. He also notes the view of many psychologists, that supernaturalistic OBEs are instances of extreme deviations from reality, adding that 'such an approach is too presumptuous to be pursued further'. (p. 107) Here I think he has missed the opportunity to consider very pertinent issues. If there is a continuum from realistic OBEs to extremely bizarre ones, it is not surprising that the two ends are treated differently, and by different researchers from different disciplines. Indeed it is partly the variability of OBEs which has made them so difficult to understand. A really effective approach to the OBE must be able to cope with all of these and not dismiss any approach so scathingly.

Irwin has some very useful comments to make on Crookall's work and the tradition of astral projection. He reviews the evidence on the astral body and silver cord and especially that which suggests that the cord is not culturally universal. He then goes on to discuss the psychological processes operating during the OBE, such as the state of relaxed alertness and clarity which often characterizes the experience. This section deals with many issues and I was relieved to see a summary at the end. However, I found it confusing that the summary did not list the phenomenological features surveyed, but the factors which might affect them, such as needs, expectations and imagery.

The fourth chapter deals with the circumstances of the OBE's occurrence and is particularly useful in its analysis of the relationship between the OBE and the level of cortical arousal. Irwin suggests that extremes of cortical arousal are fundamental to the occurrence of the OBE and that the other crucial factor is attentional. This leads effectively on to the discussion of traditional methods of inducing OBEs and those used for experimental induction.

Next Irwin considers the type of person who is likely to have an OBE, discussing the incidence of the experience, and giving a useful review of the survey data on the relationship with demographic characteristics, prior knowledge, and personality. Next he considers physiological studies and the (generally positive) effects of having an OBE on people.

Theories of the OBE are tackled next, from the eviscerating theories which hold that something actually leaves the body, to 'field theories' and the more recent psychological theories. All are given clear and fair treatment. The very deep problems and lack of testability of the eviscerating theories lead Irwin to reject them as providing no hope for scientific progress. He gives a useful criticism of Siegel's physiological approach and then of more psychological approaches such as those comparing the OBE with birth, archetypal imagery, autoscrying and depersonalization and Palmer's psychological theory. I was sorry that the book was apparently written too long ago to include any criticisms of my own psychological theory of the OBE (Blackmore 1984a) or indeed to include my survey data (Blackmore 1984b). The factors stressed by Irwin, such as the role of imagery, extremes of cortical arousal, and inattention to somatic processes are all incorporated into my theory and I would very much like to have seen them compared.

The penultimate chapter concerns imagery skills, attentional processes and needs. Irwin reviews the rapidly increasing body of literature which suggests that the OBE does not spring from having a vivid imagination. Of all the many aspects of imagery tested, only spatial skills seem to relate to having OBEs. A major finding, and Irwin has contributed much to this, is that capacity for absorption in inner experience is helpful for having an OBE and that people who have OBEs have a need for absorbing experiences.

In the final chapter Irwin proposes his 'synesthetic model of the OBE'. He argues that the basis of the OBE is a somaesthetic image of being disembodied. That is, the person loses touch with bodily sensations and feels himself to be disembodied. This feeling may reach consciousness by recoding from an abstract, non-verbal idea of disembodied consciousness into an image of a floating self. Then synesthesia, or experiencing of one sensory modality as another, takes over. By this means the basic somaesthetic image may be elaborated into a full OBE with visual imagery.

I welcome Irwin's theory as a much needed synthesis of existing work, and as providing hope for future research. However, I must add that I found it difficult to understand and it is nowhere clearly summarized for the reader who may find it hard to follow. I constantly wondered whether Irwin was doing anything more than putting together his empirical findings and making them the basis for a redescription of the OBE. Of course the test of its value will lie in future research and Irwin argues that his theory not only accounts for existing findings, but also makes clear predictions. He does briefly describe the kinds of people who should have OBEs and the induction procedures which should be most effective, but given the importance of testability I would have liked to see more detailed suggestions here.

I would add one final point. Irwin's theory, like other recent psychological theories, treats the OBE as natural rather than supernatural, and has little room for psi. In fact Irwin argues that ESP may be incorporated into the OBE by synesthetic mapping, making it an integral part of the experience. Nevertheless, he points out that the claimed veridicality of OBE content is probably exaggerated and his book seems to confirm the recent trend away from paranormal interpretations. I think the consensus now must be that the OBE is more of a psychological phenomenon than the psychic or paranormal event it



was traditionally held to be. This may not please all psychical researchers, but I think it is more important to see that this new approach is better in all respects. At last we seem to be making progress in understanding the OBE and in finding testable predictions which can actually be confirmed. Irwin's theory is only one such approach, and it is yet to be tested. Nevertheless his contribution to research and theorising on the topic has been wide and deep and this new book is a welcome summary of his approach.

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