

Themes in the Philosophy of Mind – 3

Hand-out

An *out-of-body experience* (OBE) is an experience in which a person has a “somaesthetic sense of being located outside” (Alvarado, 2000, p. 184) of her physical body (cf. Irwin, 1994), even though sometimes she may otherwise feel as though she were in her “ordinary state of consciousness” (Tart, 1998, p. 77). The prevalence of OBEs is about 10% in the general population, 25% among college students, 42% for people with schizophrenia, 44% among marijuana users, 48% for those belonging to parapsychology groups, and 88% among fantasy-prone individuals (Alvarado, 2000). Moore and I found figures of 23% and 31% in our 1986 and 1996 surveys (Barušs, 1990; Barušs & Moore, 1998). Furthermore, there is a tendency for those reporting having had OBEs to report having had more than one (Alvarado, 2000).

The following example is a report of an out-of-body experience that was written by one of my students.

There have been a few incidents in the past in which I have awoken in the middle of the night and been unable to move. It is as though my mind is wide awake, perhaps more so than usual, and yet my body is in a coma. This can be very scary and yet exhilarating at the same time. One time in particular stands out. One I will never forget. I awoke in this state one night, only I wasn't in my bedroom. I was looking down at my sleeping boyfriend in his apartment. I could see everything clearly and knew without a doubt that I was not dreaming. I saw his dog in the corner and the pile of clothes next to the bed. I knew I was there and yet my body was asleep at my house. I awoke moments later and called my boyfriend. I immediately began to describe his bedroom in detail—the red shirt I had bought him crumpled next to his pillow, the position of the dog, the half drunk glass of water on the night stand—details that I never would have known had I not been there. And they were all true. We were both terrified and yet had never felt closer. I had had an out-of-body experience, where my mind journeyed to its own destination and my body was left behind.

If it is possible that we really can leave our bodies while we are alive, then it is plausible that that may also be what happens when we die. That's the relevance of research concerning OBEs to the survival hypothesis, which is the hypothesis "that a disembodied consciousness or some such discarnate element of human personality might survive bodily death at least for a time" (Irwin, 1994, p. 183).

Imants Barušs, *Alterations of Consciousness*, American Psychological Association, 2003, p. 212-13.

Consider an analogy. We normally assume that how well a car goes is crucially dependent on the state of the engine. Suppose, however, that we were presented with startling evidence strongly suggesting that the performance of a car could be affected by influences of a kind that are totally alien to contemporary science. Would such a discovery do anything at all to suggest that my car is not that familiar thing with four wheels, a roof, and so on? Would it support the idea that it is possible for my car to live on after the disintegration of the extended, tangible thing parked outside? This, I take it, is obvious nonsense.

Now on the face of it, it is the same with people. It is one thing to ask what a person's states are *dependent on*. That is a question for science. It is quite another to ask what those states are states *of*; to ask, that is, what it is that thinks, sees, is happy or sad and so on. Whether the answer to the first question is 'the brain' or something quite different is totally irrelevant to the second question. Neither way will it affect the suggestion that it is the human being that thinks, sees and so on.

David Cockburn, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind – Souls, Science and Human Beings*, Palgrave, 2001, p. 16.

The Strange Case of the Spiritual Sneakers

[...] In April 1977 a migrant worker named Maria from Washington State suffered a severe heart attack and was rushed into Harborview Medical Centre. After three days in hospital Maria went into cardiac arrest, but was quickly resuscitated. Later that day she met with her social worker, Kimberly Clark, and explained that something deeply strange had happened during the second heart attack.

Maria had undergone a classic out-of-body experience. As the medical staff worked to save her life, she found herself floating out of her body and looking down on the scene seeing a paper chart spewing out from a machine monitoring her vital signs. A few moments later she found herself outside the hospital looking at the surrounding roads, car parks and the outside of the building.

Maria told Clark that she had seen information that she could not have known from her bed, providing descriptions of the entrance to the emergency ward and the road around the hospital building. Although the information was

correct, Clark was initially sceptical, assuming that Maria had unconsciously picked up the information when she had been admitted to the hospital. However, it was Maria's next revelation that made Clark question her own scepticism. Maria said that at one point on her ethereal journey she had drifted over to the north side of the building, and that an unusual object on the outside of a third floor window ledge had caught her attention. Using her mind power to zoom in, Maria saw that the object was actually a tennis shoe, and a little more zooming revealed that the shoe was well worn and the laces were tucked under the heel. Maria asked Clark if she would mind seeing if the tennis shoe actually existed.

Clark walked outside the building and looked around, but couldn't spot anything unusual. Then she went up to the rooms in the north wing of the building and looked out of the windows. Apparently this was easier said than done, with the narrow windows meaning that she had to press her face against the glass to see onto the ledges. After much face pushing Clark was amazed to see that there was indeed an old tennis shoe sitting on one of the ledges.

'Fifteen-love' to the believers.

As Clark reached out onto the ledge and retrieved the shoe she noticed that it was indeed well worn and that the laces were tucked under the heel.

'Thirty-love'.

Moreover, Clark noticed that the position of the laces would only have been apparent to someone viewing the tennis shoe from outside the building.

'Forty-love'.

Clark published Maria's remarkable story in 1985 and since then the case has been cited in endless books, magazine articles and websites as watertight evidence that the spirit can leave the body.

In 1996 sceptic scientists Hayden Ebborn, Sean Mulligan and Barry Beyerstein from Simon Fraser University in Canada decided to investigate the story. Two of the trio visited Harborview Medical Centre, interviewed Clark and located the window ledge that Maria had apparently seen all of those years before. They placed one of their own running shoes on the ledge, closed the window and stood back. Contrary to Clark's comments, they did not need to push their faces against the glass to see the shoe. In fact, the shoe was easily visible from within the room and could even have been spotted by a patient lying in a bed.

'Forty-fifteen'.

Next, the sceptics wandered outside the building and noticed that their experimental running shoe was surprisingly easy to spot from the hospital grounds. In fact, when they returned to the hospital one week later the shoe had been removed, further undermining the notion that it was difficult to spot.

'Forty-thirty'.

Ebborn, Mulligan and Beyerstein believe that Maria may have overheard a comment about the shoe while sedated or half-asleep during her three days

in hospital, and then incorporated this information into her out-of-body experience. They also point out that Clark didn't publish her description of the incident until seven years after it happened, and thus there was plenty of time for it to have become exaggerated in the telling and retelling. Given that key aspects of the story were highly questionable, the trio thought that there was little reason to believe other aspects of the case, such as Maria saying that the shoe was well-worn prior to its discovery, and the lace being trapped under its heel.

'Deuce'.

Just a few hours at the hospital revealed that the report of Maria's infamous experience was not all that it was cracked up to be. Despite this, the story has been endlessly repeated by writers who either couldn't be bothered to check the facts, or were unwilling to present their readers with the more sceptical side of the story. Those who believed in the existence of the soul were going to have to come up with more compelling and water-tight evidence.

'New balls please.'

Richard Wiseman, *Paranormality*, Macmillan, 2011, p. 37-39.