

TOWARD THE OBJECTIVE EXPLORATION OF NON-ORDINARY REALITY

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This is the first time I have given this kind of talk on April Fool's Day, but that makes it all the more interesting. At the end I'll let you decide whether I am just kidding. My primary aim here is to raise interesting questions, not answer them.

I'm going to bring up some methodological issues but focus it around a particular human story and the concrete experience behind it. This focus is based on the death, approximately two weeks ago, of an old friend of mine, a quite remarkable person, Robert A. Monroe. He was the author of a book back in 1971 called *Journeys Out of the Body* (Monroe, 1971), which I understand has sold about 10,000 copies a year steadily, ever since it was published. It has affected a lot of people, and he has authored two other books, *Far Journeys* (Monroe, 1985) and *Ultimate Journey* (Monroe, 1994).

*methodological
issues
and
a
human
story*

His story, which will be my central theme, is an amazing one. I have known him well enough that I have no question about his honesty, intelligence, and basic sanity in reporting his quite unusual experiences. Indeed, in ordinary life he was a successful American businessman, the archetype of "normalcy" for our culture. I dedicate this talk to him.

In the spring of 1958, Monroe thought he must have eaten something that didn't agree with him. He had some very strong cramps and burning sensations, but they went away after a few hours. Then he started having periods in which a feeling of "vibration" would come over his body. So, he did the perfectly normal thing: he went

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Then I looked again. Something was wrong. This wall had no windows, no furniture against it, no doors. It was not a wall in my bedroom. Yet somehow it was familiar. Identification came instantly. It wasn't a wall; it was the ceiling. I was floating against the ceiling, bouncing gently with any movement I made. I rolled in the air, startled, and looked down. There, in the dim light below me, was the bed. There were two figures lying in the bed. To the right was my wife. Beside her was someone else. Both seemed asleep.

This was a strange dream, I thought. I was curious. Whom would I dream to be in bed with my wife? I looked more closely, and the shock was intense. *I* was the someone on the bed!

My reaction was almost instantaneous. Here I was; there was my body. I was dying; this was death, and I wasn't ready to die. Somehow, the vibrations were killing me. Desperately, like a diver, I swooped down to my body and dove in. I then felt the bed and the covers, and when I opened my eyes, I was looking at the room from the perspective of my bed.

What had happened? Had I truly almost died? My heart was beating rapidly, but not unusually so. I moved my arms and legs. Everything seemed normal. The vibrations had faded away. I got up and walked around the room, looked out the window, and smoked a cigarette (Monroe, 1971, pp. 27-28).

Again he showed a perfectly appropriate, normal reaction; he went to see a physician. Once again, after thorough physical examination, nothing was found to be wrong with him.

*a
normal
reaction*

NINE HYPOTHESES

What do we make of the OOB? I'll draw on thousands of such experiences that I have read and examined over the years, and I'll draw primarily on the "classical" OOB as a case of being out of your body experientially but with consciousness staying normal, i.e., ordinary, thus ruling out most near-death experiences because they have an altered state of consciousness aspect as well as the OOB aspect. To stimulate our thinking, I'll look at some nine hypotheses as to how we might explain or think about an OOB.

First Hypothesis

The first, of course, is that it is some kind of craziness or mental illness. There is simply no evidence at all, however, that someone having had an OOB is necessarily psychopathological. We have millions of ordinary people who have had OOBs. Some mentally ill people have them also, but that doesn't make the OOB inherently pathological.

strongly on your *a priori* beliefs. Thus some OOBEs may be mislabeled lucid dreams and vice versa.

Fourth Hypothesis

A fourth hypothesis, then, is that the OOBEE is a special state but is completely subjective. This is certainly true sometimes, for some OOBEEs. When I was doing hypnosis research years ago, for example, I had a well-trained group of hypnotic subjects to whom I gave suggestions that they have OOBEEs. They had extremely vivid experiences of being out of their bodies. As part of the experience, however, I told them to float across the hall into the next room and tell me what was in there. Even though they vividly experienced being in that room, their descriptions of what was in that room bore no particular relationship to what was actually there. So an OOBEE can certainly be experientially real, at least in some cases, without it implying it is objectively real in any sense.

For a long time Monroe wanted to believe that his OOBEEs were just some kind of special subjective kind of state. That was the only acceptable explanation for a normal, American businessman who valued his sanity—except that his OOBEEs seemed so damn real! He kept coming back to that. Many people who have OOBEEs work very hard afterwards to explain away the fact that they seem so real, reasoning that since it *can't* be real, the feeling of its immediate reality *must* be some kind of illusion. As a psychologist, I've always been fascinated by the way we try to talk ourselves out of the reality of unusual experiences.

*Monroe's
initial
belief
about
OOBEEs*

Fifth Hypothesis

So let's look as a fifth hypothesis, then, that in an OOBEE, the mind is somehow literally *out* of the body and is located somewhere else in the physical world from where the physical body is. This is a traditional explanation in terms of human history, in that people who have had OOBEEs usually say, "Yes, my mind went out of my body. It was someplace else." This was the "common sense" explanation before we developed belief systems that ruled out that obvious interpretation of experience. This kind of experience is also the basis of a belief in a soul. People have a direct experience of mind *being*, existing outside the body.

Could the OOBEE possibly be objectively real? Let me mention another experience of Monroe's:

Sept. 10, 1958 Afternoon. Again, I floated upward, with the intent of visiting Dr. Bradshaw and his wife. Realizing that Dr. Bradshaw was ill

I once did a long-distance study with Monroe (Tart, 1967), telling him that at some random time in the next eight hours I would mentally try to help him visit my home across the country, in an OOB, and that he should write an account of any experience he had. His account of the experience was totally wrong in terms of the description of my home, which he had never seen. His timing was within the minute of the random time that came up for feeling his visit there. I hardly know what to make of that. Similarly, in the laboratory studies I was able to do with him, he couldn't quite do the definitive sorts of things involving cognizing some target in the physical world that he couldn't see through normal channels, and yet he correctly reported unexpected elements. These results were hard to dismiss and yet too limited to prove anything conclusively.

*Monroe
in
the
laboratory
studies*

Sixth Hypothesis

A sixth hypothesis is that OOBs are just subjective; it's just chance correspondences with the physical world that create a false impression that the mind was actually "out." That may certainly be the case sometimes. You can have purely subjective OOBs, as I illustrated in describing my hypnotic OOBs above. As I have said, though, Monroe had many evidential OOBs over the years that convinced him that sometimes he actually was at the out-of-body location. There are many cases of spontaneous OOBs with other people that are like that.

To give you an example that made a great impression on me, some years ago (Tart, 1968) I met a young woman who had had OOBs spontaneously all of her life since childhood. She had thought they were a normal part of sleep, that you go to sleep, you dream, you float near the ceiling, look at your boring body lying asleep in bed for a minute, dream, get up, and go to school. I was able to have her spend some time in the laboratory where I measured her brain wave and other physiological activity. Also, after she was in bed, I would put a five-digit random number on a shelf up near the ceiling and tell her that if she happened to float out, "Please memorize the number, wake up, and tell me about it."

Miss Z, as I called her, had several OOBs over her four nights in the laboratory but usually reported that she had not been able to control her position and so had not been able to see the target number. On the one occasion she said she had been able to float up and see the number, she correctly told me that the number was 25132. To guess a five-digit number correctly on the first try has one hundred thousand to one odds against chance. There aren't a lot of parapsychological studies with this kind of level of results, but, on the other hand, studying OOBs is not exactly a national priority.

started to turn and recognized that my physical was not “turning” with me. I moved slowly; after a moment I was “face down,” or in direct opposition to the placement of my physical body. The moment I reached this 180° position . . . there was a hole. That’s the only way to describe it. To my senses, it seemed to be a hole in a wall which was about two feet thick and stretched endlessly in all directions. . . . The periphery of the hole was just precisely the shape of my physical body. . . . I moved cautiously through the hole, holding on to its side . . . (Monroe, 1971, 86-87).

During the next couple of years, over a dozen times, Monroe went through that hole. To him it was a repeatable experiment. He waited for the vibrations, did the action that created the feeling of rotating 180°, a hole would appear, and he would go through it. The place he went to had recognizably similar and stable characteristics each time. He called it, “Locale III.” He could wander around there, invisible to the inhabitants of that world. Remember, to Monroe, the reality of Locale III would be like what any of us could experience by stepping out of a hotel for a few minutes, wandering around, looking at some things, and coming back. If we went out again, and looked at the same area, it would be pretty much the same place. That’s what it was like for Monroe.

*Monroe's
Locale III*

He reported that Locale III had a lot of stable characteristics that were similar to those of our own, ordinary world. It was a physical matter world. There were trees, houses, people, artifacts, all the appurtenances of a reasonably civilized society. There were homes, families, businesses; people worked for a living; there were roads; vehicles traveled on the roads, and so forth. And yet it also had quite stable characteristics which were not similar to our world. For instance, he saw nothing that would suggest any kind of electrical devices. No telephones, no electric lights, no TV. He saw no internal combustion devices, nothing that looked like it ran on gasoline or oil or anything like that. But there was mechanical power in use. For example, he reported:

. . . Careful examination of one of the locomotives that pulled a string of old-fashioned looking passenger cars showed it to be driven by a steam engine. The cars appeared to be made of wood, the locomotive of metal, but of a different shape than our now obsolete types. The track gauge was much smaller than our standard track spacing, smaller than our narrow-gauge mountain railways.

I observed the servicing of one of the locomotives in detail. Neither wood nor coal was used as a thermal source to produce steam. Instead, large, vatlike containers were carefully slid from under the boiler, detached, and rolled by small cart into a building with massive thick walls. The containers had pipelike protuberances extending from the top. Men, working behind shields, performed the removal, casually cautious, and did not relax their automatic vigilance until the containers were safely in the building and the door closed. The containers were

the manufacturer of the bio-computer pre-load this stuff in Read Only Memory, to use a modern analogy for it? Could there be nonphysical worlds that exist somewhere else in some kind of objective sense?

I have done a lot of thinking about it over the years, but I am not going to say much about it because I am more interested in arousing curiosity. I'll just briefly mention two lines of thought. First, how can we train talented people to independently try to explore the world of nonphysical reality? Clearly, subjective biases and the ability of consciousness to fabricate in order to reinforce biases and beliefs can produce similar subjective experiences. But we know a little bit about trying to reduce the kind of bias that can occur. Second, what is the nature of human consciousness that can have OOBES? So, I invite you to take the interesting route, as the physicists say. How do we study such experiences? What can we make of them? How can we distinguish between the strengths of the various kinds of hypotheses I have suggested, for describing OOBES and similar experiences?

*an
invitation*

NOTE

'OOBE is now generally shortened to OBE in the parapsychological literature, on the theory that the "of" in Out-of-the-Body Experience would generally not be capitalized.

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