

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Flight of Mind: A Psychological Study of the Out-of-Body Experience**, by H. J. Irwin Scarecrow Press, 1985, 374 pp. + viii, \$27.50.

Recently published books on out-of-body experiences (OBEs) have presented reviews on the subject (Blackmore, 1982) as well as the results of empirical studies (Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984). The book reviewed here, *Flight of Mind: A Psychological Study of the Out-of-Body Experience*, is both a review of the literature and a presentation of previously unpublished research findings, though more space is given to the first task than to the second. Additionally, a new OBE theory is also presented. Its author, psychologist Harvey J. Irwin, is well known in parapsychology for his cognitive psychological writings on extrasensory perception and psychokinesis (e.g., Irwin, 1979). Together with Susan J. Blackmore, Irwin may be considered as the leading researcher on OBEs, particularly from the psychological perspective. That may be appreciated from his numerous papers on the subject (e.g., Irwin, 1980, 1981, 1986) and from the material presented in *Flight of Mind*.

In the first chapter Irwin reviews the problems of OBE definitions and discusses the variety of the experience. He makes several good points regarding definition issues. As Irwin writes, the definition of the OBE: 1. "must be based on the content of the experience, not on the presumed mode of its induction" (p. 2); 2. "should not make any discriminatory reference to the credibility of the case content" (p. 3); and 3. "should be independent of the OBE's perceptual content" (p. 3). In Irwin's definition an OBE is an experience "in which the center of consciousness appears

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to the experient to occupy temporarily a position which is spatially remote from his/her body" (p. 5).

I have argued elsewhere (Alvarado, 1986) that we should try to develop an empirically derived phenomenologically based definition of the OBE through the use of statistical techniques following the lead of Bruce Greyson (1983) regarding the construction of a near-death experience scale. That will help reduce subjects' and researchers' subjectivity in reporting and selecting experiences, though there may still be problems regarding the initial data base. Additionally, there will be advantages regarding comparisons between studies if we could develop a standard OBE definition, or ways to measure different types of OBEs.

Other topics discussed in the chapter are types of OBEs (e.g., those with naturalistic and supernaturalistic context), and phenomena presumably related to OBEs such as apparitions of the living, autoscapy, lucid dreams, and NDEs.

I must take issue with Irwin's quote from Ernesto Bozzano (p. 22) to the matter that there is a great difference between seeing one's double (autoscapy) and having the feeling of being out of the body and seeing the physical body. Bozzano certainly made such statement. But as can be seen from the source quoted by Irwin (Bozzano, 1938), and more clearly in previous publications (e.g., Bozzano, 1911, 1934/1937), Bozzano considered autoscapy one of several phenomena suggesting the exteriorization of a subtle body from the physical body. Thus, while an important difference regarding the "location" of consciousness was noticed by Bozzano, it should be kept in mind that a broader consideration of his system of thought shows that he considered autoscapy to be explainable on the same ground as OBEs.

In the second chapter Irwin reviews methods used to conduct OBE research. Included here are case collections, surveys, self-observation by OBEs, and experiments. This is an excellent chapter from diverse points of view. It is sensitive to historical perspective, as well as to methodological issues. The advantages and disadvantages of each method are discussed in a balanced way. A lucid, and much needed, critique of the case collections and OBE phenomenological analyses of Robert Crookall is presented on pages 29-34.

The third, fourth, fifth, and seventh chapters constitute a review of OBE survey and experimental studies findings. It is probably the best review of its kind from its detail and comprehensive coverage of relevant material. Among topics discussed are phenomenological aspects of OBEs, circumstances of OBE occurrence, and psychological correlates of the experience. The emphasis of the discussion and interpretation of results follows a psychological perspective. Also, the results of several

of the author's unpublished studies are presented in the discussion. These studies confirm some previously found patterns and extend them to other areas, particularly psychological ones. However, I hope Irwin decides to publish them in full as a formal paper in order to have full methodological details on record.

Returning to problems of OBE definition, it should be pointed out that the results of the studies of spontaneous OBEs surveyed by Irwin should be qualified on the grounds of lack of precision regarding what we are correlating to other variables. The OBE definition (or OBE question) used in most studies generally allows, as Charles Tart (1974) has said, for "several different types of experiences, some of which run along various kinds of continua" (p. 116). It seems to me that because of the way OBE questions are phrased, and considering that most studies do not ask for a written description of the experience nor use personal interviews, we may be including in the studies experiences where the subject perceives his or her environment from a point of view outside of the physical body (OBE) as well as changes in bodily awareness without actual OB sensations. Also, we may be trying to correlate diverse measures (e.g., absorption, imagery control) not to a single experience, but to experiences of different types or levels of complexity. The point here, which I have made elsewhere (Alvarado, 1986, pp. 161-162), is that we should be aware of the implication of these problems regarding the validity and reliability of the correlates found in spontaneous OBE research. Additionally, we should expand our research programs to deal with these issues on an empirical basis.

In the sixth chapter Irwin reviews explanations for OBEs, though he admits that "few are formulated in sufficient detail to warrant being called theories" (p. 219). Irwin considers mainly the "ecsomatic theories," postulating "a transitory separation of a nonphysical element of existence from the physical body" (p. 219), and the "imaginal theories," seeking to explain the OBE "fundamentally as an imaginal or hallucinatory experience" (p. 237). The first group of concepts includes the ideas of Robert Crookall and J. H. M. Whiteman, the second psychological concepts such as those of Jan Ehrenwald and John Palmer. Omission of Susan J. Blackmore's (1984) theory suggests that perhaps this book was in press when Blackmore's paper was published, although a more detailed discussion of her previously published ideas should have been presented (see Blackmore, 1978, pp. 26-31, 1982, pp. 242-252).

From the historical point of view, I wish Irwin had considered in this chapter the psychological and parapsychological ideas of Edmund Gurney (Gurney et al., 1886, Vol. 1, p. 288, Vol. 2, p. 153) and the ecsomatic concepts of Ernesto Bozzano (e.g., 1934/1937) and Frederic W. H. Myers

(1886). But it must be recognized that the discussion presented in this chapter is most comprehensive, including most of the relevant material on the topic.

In chapter eight Irwin presents a new psychological OBE theory. Irwin conceptualizes the sensation of being out of the body as the effect of an interaction between absorption or attentional processes and loss of somatic processes awareness. Sensations of disconnection to the body may be experienced during attenuation of sensory input and somatic signals. This feeling of disconnection from the body is considered to be affected by a preconscious cognitive recoding process. This process involves "the transformation of the abstract, nonverbal idea of disembodied consciousness into a passive, generalized somaesthetic image of a static floating self" (p. 310). The somaesthetic image is considered to be affected by further cognitive processes, that of synesthesia. Synesthesia is defined by Irwin as "the transformation of a (perceptual or imaginal) experience from one sensory mode to another" (p. 310). As he further writes:

A major postulate of the present theory is that many features of the OBE are the product of synesthetic transformation of the basic somaesthetic image of the disembodied self. The most common form of this transformation is that to a visual image. . . . But the same process is posited to apply in OB sensations in any of the other sensory modalities. In other words, it is argued that the perceptual-like content of the OBE is a cross-modal experiencing of the original somaesthetic image. . . . Generally the process of cross-modal encoding will entail the retrieval of information from memory and its modification in terms of the perspective implied by an exteriorized viewpoint. (pp. 310–311)

Some of the ideas about the role of sensory input and cognitive processes are similar to those of previous OBE theories (Blackmore, 1984; Palmer, 1978). The concept of synesthesia had been mentioned before in connection with OBEs (see Irwin's book on page 98), and hallucinations (e.g., Parrish, 1894/1897, pp. 221–229), but Irwin's discussion is the first detailed and systematic one to use the concept.

The theory, as Irwin argues, has some empirical basis, though direct tests of it are needed. An important aspect of the theory is that it not only tries to explain why the OBE occurs, but it also tries to explain diverse aspects of OBE phenomenology. I have only two complaints about its presentation. First, while it is emphasized that the theory is testable, and that it "offers explicit predictions" (p. 321) on certain of its aspects, Irwin does not present specific hypotheses to help guide future research. Admittedly, some possibilities are mentioned during the dis-

discussion of the theory, while others are obvious or may be inferred, but it would have been helpful to have them more clearly outlined.

Second, I wish Irwin had presented more information on synesthesia itself before trying to use the concept in his theory. A review of the literature on the topic would have been helpful in this regard. Without it those uninformed about this phenomenon may find it difficult to avoid the impression that the author is trying to relate a little understood psychological anomaly (OBEs) to another of similar status (synesthesia).

In my opinion, *Flight of Mind* is the best book-length review on the subject of OBEs. Theories, techniques, and research findings are discussed in a well-organized and lucid style. At the same time, the author has offered diverse useful criticism of research and concepts. It is to be hoped that the new OBE theory he presents may generate research that, regardless of its findings, will increase our understanding of OBEs.

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