

## BOOK REVIEW

**Beyond the Body:**  
**An Investigation of Out-of-the-Body Experiences**  
*by Susan J. Blackmore–Heinemann, 1982*

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Susan Blackmore's *Beyond the Body* is a greatly expanded version of her 1978 pamphlet, "Parapsychology and Out-of-the-Body Experiences," published for the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). As in that earlier work, Dr. Blackmore in the present book examines past and present research on out-of-body experiences (OBEs) in order to compare the merits and weaknesses of the two primary approaches to understanding OBEs: that which says something (the soul, consciousness, the astral body, or whatever) leaves the physical body during an OBE; and that which says nothing leaves the body, the OBE deriving instead from physiological, psychological, or parapsychological processes originating "within" the body. Those looking for new case material, comprehensive case reports, or in-depth analyses of data will not find them here; the book is instead a broad survey intended primarily to introduce readers to the issues and approaches to research on OBEs. For those of us interested in near-death experiences (NDEs), this book serves the invaluable function of reminding us of the context within which the NDE, seemingly a subspecies of the OBE, must be studied. Additionally, however, both for those interested primarily in NDEs and for those whose interests extend more broadly to the fields of psychical research and parapsychology, Blackmore's proposals confront us with important methodological questions about how we may most productively pursue research on OBEs and, by extension, on other apparently paranormal phenomena.

Blackmore begins her book by describing her own remarkable OBE and by outlining the questions it later raised in her mind.

She then gives her definition of the OBE, in which the key word is "experience." Because we thus far have no objective criteria for identifying an OBE, we can only study people's reports of having experienced being out of the body. Thus, "the OBE is not some kind of psychic phenomenon," although "it may turn out to be one associated with ESP and paranormal events" (p. 15). According to Blackmore, the most important advantage of this definition is that it implies no particular interpretation of the OBE.

In order to clear the air of implied interpretations, Blackmore next outlines the doctrine of astral projection, historically "the most influential" theory of the OBE. She also describes the experiences and theories of habitual OBErs such as Oliver Fox, Sylvan Muldoon, Yram (Marcel-Louis Forhan), J.M.H. Whiteman, and Robert Monroe, and she looks at the case collections of Muldoon and Hereward Carrington and of Robert Crookall. The assumptions behind astral projection theory weaken when one sees "how variable the OBE can be" (p. 32) and when one realizes, because of errors in OBErs' reports about the physical world, "that the OBEr is not seeing a complete duplicate of the physical world at that time" (p. 41). Furthermore, the occult theorists' attempts to grapple with these problems have only led to the theory's becoming too "stretchable" and complex to be of much use in a scientific investigation.

Blackmore then turns to cases collected by investigators who have not analyzed them in terms of astral projection theory. Looking first at Hornell Hart's collection of "ESP projection" cases, she criticizes him for "ruling out the majority of cases on the basis of a very shaky criterion" (p. 59), that is, the presence of ESP claims that included veridical information. Because we can never be sure whether or not ESP has occurred in a given situation, Hart's criterion might not be a valid one. Blackmore therefore takes several other collections (those of Celia Green, John C. Poynton, the SPR, and her own) and analyzes several features of them, frequently comparing the results with findings of the astral projection theorists. After a chapter that describes beliefs about the double in other cultures, she also examines the findings of several more systematic surveys. Her conclusion is that these "confirm the findings of the case collections: that few OBEs include all the features of a classical astral projection" (p. 93).

Blackmore next examines several methods purported to induce OBEs, all designed essentially to elicit and control vivid imagery; and then she turns her attention to an important related area, the lucid dream. By describing research, such as Keith Hearne's, on the

lucid dream and the research of Charles Tart, Janet Mitchell, and Karlis Osis on physiology in the OBE, Blackmore shows that OBEs and lucid dreams are phenomenologically similar but physiologically different.

Chapters 13 and 14 deal more directly with the question of survival after death, presenting some of the evidence from apparitions, deathbed visions, and NDEs. Much of the evidence, according to Blackmore, is seriously flawed, and the remainder still does not allow us to choose between the interpretation that the experiences are a preview of death and the interpretation that they can all be accounted for by physiological and psychological processes.

Accordingly, Blackmore looks further at some of those latter processes to see how well they *do* account for OBEs. Theories about depersonalization and doubles seem unhelpful, since the phenomena associated with them are so different from OBEs. On the other hand, OBEs are closely similar to normal mental imagery, differing only in degree and not in kind. Blackmore describes research showing no relationship between imagery skills and the occurrence of an OBE; other research, however, has indicated that absorption, or “the capacity to become absorbed in [one’s] experience” (p. 170), does seem to predict who is more likely to have an OBE. For Blackmore, therefore, “the simplest and most appealing conclusion is that . . . OBEs are based on . . . imagination and hallucination” (p. 172).

The detection, however, of some undeniable paranormal feature in an OBE would require the additional conclusion that OBEs are not based *only* on imagination and hallucination. In four chapters, Blackmore examines research attempting such detection. The first question is whether persons, while having an OBE, occasionally obtain veridical information about the physical world by paranormal means. Blackmore passes swiftly over the anecdotal evidence, citing only the myriad problems associated with such research, and then describes some of the early work with hypnotized subjects on “exteriorization of sensibility,” carried out by researchers such as Colonel Albert de Rochas and Hector Durville. Modern researchers on ESP in the OBE include primarily Tart, Osis, and John Palmer, but despite some isolated intriguing results, most of their work has yielded no evidence that ESP operates in experimentally induced OBEs. Blackmore concludes that “OBE vision, if it occurs, is extremely poor” (p. 199).

The second type of effort to establish the paranormality of the OBE has taken the form of efforts to detect a double or a soul. The older literature includes accounts of an OBEr appearing to someone at a distance. Some early researchers attempted to weigh

the soul by recording the weight of dying persons; others tried photographing the spirit, either as a person was dying or while a person was having an OBE; and still others experimented with an OBER's ability to influence physical objects. More modern experiments have tested the ability of humans, animals, or physical apparatus to detect an OBER purportedly visiting a distant location; but these, as well as the earlier work, Blackmore finds unimpressive.

In the final two chapters, Blackmore summarizes her assessment of the two major theories of the OBE (that something leaves the body and that nothing leaves the body). She dismisses the first with such conclusions as: "perception is not possible without some such mechanism [eyes, muscles, and nerves]" (p. 228); "personality is an aspect of a physical person. It is . . . the brain which thinks and controls actions" (p. 230); and "How can thoughts once created persist independently of the brain?" (p. 234). None of these statements, unfortunately, is accompanied by reference to or discussion of the extensive philosophical literature on the mind-body problem.

The second major theory she describes as one in which "nothing leaves the body in an OBE, and so there is nothing left to survive the death of that body" (p. 237), and she subdivides it into the parapsychological and the psychological approaches. Because she thinks it "possible that all the claims for ESP and PK [psychokinesis] in OBEs are groundless" (p. 242), she believes a psychological approach to the OBE is the most promising. Her own judgment is that the OBE is an altered state of consciousness in which "everything perceived . . . is a product of memory and imagination" (p. 243). Because this premise "leads to many testable predictions," it will hasten the day when we understand the nature of the OBE.

Yet will it hasten the day when we understand psi? I for one doubt it, unless psi is, after all, a delusion that psychological research will reveal unequivocally. Beneath Blackmore's assurances that her definition and approach to OBEs imply no interpretation of them seems to lie the assumption—baldly stated in more than one place—that there is no paranormal component to the OBE whatever.

The approach that one takes to research depends on the questions one wishes to answer and is entirely an individual choice. If one is primarily interested in OBEs (and NDEs) as an aspect of human behavior, then concentrating on the psychological processes manifesting under these conditions may be sufficient. Some persons may assume that OBEs (or NDEs) are purely psychological phenomena and will find in support of their assumption that the experiences obey certain psychological principles. Others may assume that OBEs

and NDEs point to a realm of human existence beyond the physical world, and they too will think they have found support for this in their psychological studies of the aftereffects or therapeutic effects of OBEs and NDEs. Like the astral projection theory of which she complains, the psychological theory Blackmore proposes can also be stretched to accommodate any aspect of OBEs, since OBEs occur in the context of human behavior and will therefore conform to some laws of human behavior, regardless of their own intrinsic nature.

If, however, one is interested in learning about psi and paranormal processes, rather than the OBE *per se*, a purely psychological study will only obscure and mask the phenomena one wishes to understand. As Blackmore constantly reminds us, ESP may be defined negatively and thus frustrate our efforts to make falsifiable predictions for our research, but parapsychology and psychical research need *not* be defined negatively. They are the study of the relationship between the mind and the body, specifically whether the functioning of the mind ever exceeds the limits normally placed on it by the body. They necessarily require an understanding of those normal limits (and hence of psychological processes), but if one allows, as Blackmore has done, the question of paranormal functioning to become "incidental to the theory" one is studying (p. 251), one has abdicated one's claim to be studying psi. If, in our eagerness to study, for example, the psychological concomitants of an OBE or the psychological repercussions of an NDE, we fail to look for or examine evidence of extrasensory functioning, then we have crossed the boundary separating parapsychology from psychology and have returned to the domain of the latter.

Blackmore asserts, in her criticism of Hart, that the weakness of an approach that examines only cases associated with claims of veridical ESP is that it defines the sample "on the basis of a very shaky criterion" and may in the process exclude genuine OBEs from study. If one is interested in the OBE only as a psychological experience, this criticism is valid, but if one is interested in the OBE as a context within which psi effects may occur, it is not. Hart used as his criterion that which defines psychical research as a field: instances in which we have evidence (in this case, a report of the details made before verification of them) that the mind seems to have exceeded its normal physiological and psychological limits. This criterion requires no definition of ESP, negative or otherwise, and all of the cases need not, in the end, be attributable to ESP. Some or all of the cases may be due to chance, some or all to faulty perception or reporting, or some or all to ESP. As Blackmore herself

explains, an experience becomes psychic “only in relation to other external circumstances . . . such as when a dream comes true” (p. 15). These external circumstances are not a *sufficient* condition for our judging an event to be paranormal, but they are a *necessary* condition, and so it is only by segregating and examining cases on the basis of this criterion that we can begin to tackle the question of paranormality.

Blackmore admits that she finds “the evidence for paranormal events during the OBE limited and unconvincing” (p. 242), and I admit to sharing her skepticism. Furthermore, I can only support wholeheartedly her desire to strip away from OBE research all the theoretical assumptions, biases, and speculations that have accumulated around it, particularly in the guise of astral projection theory. I would even add to her criticisms of past research the warning that much of NDE research appears to me to be taking the same course of allowing assumptions and speculation to far outstrip the data we have. Nevertheless, there is the danger that in sweeping away the old biases, we only replace them with new ones. In places Blackmore’s presentation of the data reflects a tendency toward such biases. A few examples may illustrate this.

First, in discussing the errors in what people claim to have seen out of the body, she remarks that “People . . . see places as they expect them rather than as they are at that time” (p. 228). Although this may be true in many instances, it is not always true; Blackmore herself earlier cited (pp. 57-58, 126) two cases in which the OBEr apparently saw unexpected details. In another place she explains, quite rightly, that “No one knows for sure how memory is stored” (p. 235), but in the next paragraph, she rejects certain theories about the OBE because “Information to be stored [in memory] has to be coded into the form of variations in some physical system.” In still another place, she supports her preference for a physiological explanation of conscious experiences under anaesthesia with the observation that “with the improved techniques of anaesthesia available today conscious experiences during an operation seem to be extremely rare” (pp. 48-49), a statement that may surprise NDE researchers. Unfortunately, she provides no supporting material for this assertion.

Elsewhere, in commenting on the finding that OBErs have scored higher than average on tests of absorption, she says “This makes sense from a psychological point of view because in an OBE one needs to become involved in the new perspective to the exclusion of the usual view” (pp. 170-171); it also, however, makes equal sense from a parapsychological, astral projection, or almost any other point of view. The finding may tell us a great deal about the conditions

necessary for the experience to occur, but it tells us little about the nature of the experience and nothing whatever about whether paranormal events might be associated with the experience.

Two final examples are her comments that “if the OBE is basically an hallucination and nothing leaves the body, then paranormal events ought not necessarily to be associated with it” (p. 176) and that “nothing leaves the body in an OBE and so there is nothing to survive” (p. 251). The second parts of these two statements do not seem to me to follow logically from the first. Furthermore, in making such statements, Blackmore seems to have forgotten her own assurances that the OBE need not itself be a paranormal state while still allowing for paranormal phenomena to occur in it and that the psychological approach she proposes “says nothing about survival” (p. 251).

Perhaps the most disturbing indication of her thinking occurs in the following passage, which I quote at length, partly because I admit to being unsure of her full meaning:

I think that we may never have to answer the question [of whether there is or is not a paranormal aspect to the OBE] even though it is theoretically a most important one . . . A purely psychological theory of the OBE cannot directly account for paranormal phenomena and *if they occur they demand explanation* [italics added]. But I don't think that in the end we shall need to answer it. . . . One theory . . . will begin to seem more productive than others . . . [and] stimulate research. . . . We shall no longer ask whether there is ESP in the OBE or not because it will seem obvious. My guess is that it will be the psychological theories which will take on this role [of stimulating research] and that *the question of paranormal phenomena will quietly be dropped* [italics added] (p. 243).

Among the many questions that this passage raises for me, the most prominent is: how will it “become obvious” whether ESP does or does not occur in the OBE? And what is it that will be obvious, if we “never have to answer the question” itself? Blackmore may be advocating an indirect approach to ESP in the OBE; if so, she may be on the right track. Like an afterimage on the periphery of one's field of vision, psi phenomena may elude one's direct glance. If so, a more global approach in which one is alert for, but does not concentrate on, ESP may be more productive than the more direct approaches that have thus far proved so unsatisfactory.

What Blackmore seems to be describing in the above passage, however, is the social process in science by which some research topics are pursued and others are “quietly dropped.” The surviving topics persist, not necessarily because they are the best or the strong-

est, but, as Blackmore put it, because they “stimulate research” and “lead to many testable predictions” (p. 250). Yet readily produced predictions are not necessarily about important issues; the more easily they are produced, the more likely it seems that they have skirted the important (and difficult) questions—such as whether or not paranormal cognition occurs in an OBE. Will a psychological approach to the OBE contribute importantly to parapsychology? Or, as I fear, will it only give persons less sympathetic to parapsychology than Blackmore the rationale for allowing the study of paranormal claims to fall through the cracks and disappear from scientific scrutiny?

I would be unfair if I allowed my remarks about my disagreements with Blackmore’s approach to obscure the fact that her book is a useful and important one. Few people know the literature of this aspect of parapsychology as well as she does, and, although I thought her treatment of some issues (such as purported ESP) was too glibly superficial, she does touch on most of the major research and issues. A few (probably typographical) reference errors and errors in detail creep in. (For example, she says [p. 46] that 350 cases of apparitions, telepathy, and clairvoyance are reported in *Phantasms of the Living*; the actual number is twice that.) In general, however, she has produced a survey of OBE research that is both readable and scholarly. My regret is that she seems to have allowed the context of psi (the OBE) to become the issue and the issue (psi) to become lost. In so doing, she has not helped to break the impasse between those who think that something leaves the body during an OBE and those who do not; she has only taken sides.

#### REFERENCES

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