Out-Of-Body Experiences as Lucid Dreams: A Critique

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In his recent book on lucid dreaming, Stephen LaBerge (1985a) suggests that out-of-body experiences represent a form of lucid dreaming. The only difference between the two experiences, he argues, is the way the subject interprets the experience. LaBerge goes on to show that the type of reasoning and observations that occur during OB states is similar to phenomena arising from lucid dreaming. He also cites the experiences of Oliver Fox (19710, whose OBEs were bound up with experiments and experiences with dreaming awareness.

The idea that OBEs are really lucid dreams gains some support from two recent findings. There are a number of techniques for inducing OBEs that rely on lucid dreaming or dream control (Rogo, 1983), while there exists considerable survey data that people who experience OBEs also experience lucid dreams (Irwin, 1985). Despite these points of evidence, there are a number of reasons for rejecting any theory that equates OBEs with simple lucid dreaming. The most important of these is that OBEs and lucid dreams seem to emerge from different psychophysiological states. Probably the most consistent finding about the lucid dream is that it occurs within the context of normal Stage 1 REM sleep. The only exception to this rule is that some lucid dreams may occur during sleep onset (Dane & Van de Castle, 1985), though it is unclear whether the EEG tracings taken from such "dreams" indicate true sleep or a waking hypnagogic state. So from the standpoint of psychophysiology, lucid dreams do not seem to be unique experiences, but merely a subtype of normal dreaming.

If OBEs are to be explained as simple lucid dreams, it follows that the EEG tracing taken from subjects inducing them should conform to the patterns that accompany dreaming. In an earlier paper (Rogo, 1984, I pointed out that several psychophysiological studies of gifted OBE subjects have in fact been made. The results indicate that OBEs emerge from a wide variety of brain states, with no consistency present between the EEG records from one subject to another.

To date, there have been four studies conducted with subjects capable of inducing OBEs from the sleeping state. The first of these was reported by Tart (1968), working with a gifted subject in California. The EEG tracings that accompanied her sleep OBE revealed no REMS. They did show continuous alphoid waves and poorly defined sleep spindles, but the alphoid activity was so peculiar that an outside judge could not classify it as clear-cut sleeping or waking. So while these results showed some superficial resemblances to dreaming, they seem to be pointing in adifferent direction. Tart (1967) was later able to replicate his research with a second subject, who has now been identified as Robert Monroe, well known as the author of a classic book on his personal OBEs. It would appear

that Monroe's OBEs stem from a poorly defined Stage 1 sleep state, although his REM activity was not as pronounced as might be expected in normal dreaming. Later, however, more EEG tracings were taken from Monroe's sleep induced OBEs at the Topeka Veteran's Administration Hospital (Gabbard & Twemlow, 19813). Researchers there found a strong relationship between Monroe's OBEs and the production of the theta waves. Such a finding is not consistent with the idea that OBEs are any sort of dreams.

In a more recent report, Gabbard and Twemlow (1984) have reported on their work with a second subject. Her complex readings indicate that her OBE occurred in a state resembling Stage 3 sleep, typified by theta and delta activity with a cessation of alpha waves. This subject reported herself to be still awake during the process of leaving the body, although the experimenters try to interpret her experiences as a type of "window in consciousness" during sleep.

The subjective experiential report offered by the second subject tested by Gabbard and Twemlow demonstrates that OBEs do not necessarily occur during clearly-defined sleep. This fact alone should keep us from facilely equating OBEs with lucid dreams. Most deliberately induced waking OBEs occur by way of relaxation exercises or similar procedures that result in reduced cortical (personal communication, 1985) activity (Irwin, 1985: Rogo, 1983). LaBerge (1985b) has suggested that such OBEs can be equated with those lucid "dreams" that sometimes occur during the hypnagogic phase of sleep onset. This is certainly a testable hypothesis, since the hypnagogic stage is typified by a fairly consistent EEG pattern of broken alpha wave activity. However, this is <u>not</u> the pattern we find when we look at the EEG records procured from gifted subjects capable of experiencing waking OBEs.

The most thorough of these studies was a series of experiments undertaken with Keith Harary by researchers at the Psychical Research Foundation (then) in Durham (Hartwell, Janis & Harary, 1975). The EEG tracings taken from several of Harary's OBEs showed no robust changes from his resting base-line EEG. The results were consistent with his entering into a normal, waking, eyes-closed condition. Very similar data were later collected by Osis and Mitchell (1977) with a subject they tested at the American Society for Psychical Research. In both cases the EEG records were typical of an awake and mentally alert state. Both subjects showed a subtle decrease in electrical activity in the left brain hemisphere, but none of these findings support the theory that the subjects were lapsing into a hypnagogic state.

An experiment using volunteer subjects was conducted by Palmer (1979), who introduced them to an OBE- induction procedure in his laboratory. Several of them reported OBEs, but there was no consistent EEG index that related to them.

These various studies reveal that, unlike dreaming, OBEs do not emerge from any discrete state of consciousness as defined psychophysiologically. This is a rather extraordinary

finding, since the phenomenology of the OBE is so self-consistent. Even OBEs reported from sleep tend to differ in content very little from waking OBEs. Yet practically no EEG tracings taken from a gifted OBE subject has ever conformed to a similar data taken from any other subject. There is even some indication that a single subject is capable of inducing OBEs from different brain states, as the research with Robert Monroe suggests. So what are we to conclude from all of this? The polygraph is just about the only objective tool psychology has to explore the exciting in-reods of consciousness. Though perhaps a crude tool, EEG monitoring offers considerable evidence that OBEs cannot be explained as lucid dreams. While LaBerge is correct in pointing out the many similarities between OBEs and lucid dreaming, objective EEG criteria suggest that these resemblances are purely superficial or artifactual. Research to date reveals that, with all their vagaries, OBEs emerge from a group of psychophysiological states distinct from REM sleep and/or lucid dreaming.

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Original source: *Lucidity Letter* 4(2), December, 1985, p. 43.