

Phenomenology: Personal and Theoretical Considerations Out-of-Body Epistemology

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“This is Major Tom to ground control: I'm stepping through the door and I'm floating in a most peculiar way and the stars look very different today...” (David Bowie)

One of the most boring questions to be asked in the context of out-of-body-experiences (OBE) and lucid dreams (LD) is: "Are these experiences real?" This question is boring, because it is undecidable and therefore meaningless from a scientific point of view. The properties this question asks for, i.e. 'reality' or, one level deeper: 'objectivity', are not accessible to intersubjective verification: There is no experiment and no testing method by which we could find out if something is 'real'. 'Real' is a metaphysical predicate. It does not appear in scientific sentences.

The following question which comes to mind in face of the literature on OBEs is already more interesting: "Why do all authors and researchers in this field seem to very clearly belong to one of the two camps of either separationists or reductionists and why are they fighting each other tooth and nail?" The reason for this can only be that most of us are primarily interested in psychological profit when dealing with OBEs and not in understanding. We are looking for scientific proofs to support our intuitions or the things we have always wanted to believe.

Some are hoping to find a scientific proof for the existence of a soul or an unchangeable, imperishable core of the human being (which is nonsense, because a second or 'astral' body would, if it existed, be a conceivably bad aspirant for a component of ourselves, which were independent of time and space). Their main motives may be the fear of death and the search for a guarantee of meaning.

Others have always known that all this is 'only in the brain' - perhaps because materialism or some misunderstood rationalism plays the role of a substitute for religion in their psychological economy. This idea, that thoughts, feelings and OBEs should be 'only in the brain' is, of course, nonsense too - or rather an inadmissible jump across descriptive levels with an exchange of logical subjects. It is *persons* which can have feelings and OBEs - not brains!

I certainly do not want to moralize. Nothing is wrong with dealing with OBEs and altered states of consciousness for the sole purpose of psychological profit. However, this will rarely further our understanding.

At this point we come to the first really interesting question. I would phrase it: "Where does one see the actual epistemological challenge of OBEs? What is the core of the methodological problem posed by these experiences?"

As we saw above it can not be the question of reality or objectivity. In trying to understand the OBE, the issue can only be one of intersubjective verification. One of the

mistakes in research on OBEs is in trying to look for intersubjectivity only on the level of normal waking consciousness, the 'in-the-body' state. The essential epistemological problem consists, to my mind, in establishing intersubjectivity on the level of the out-of-body- state. That may sound like philosophy in the bad sense of the word, but it isn't - because it has direct practical implications. We must at last penetrate into the area of collective OBEs. A serious and respectable science must not confine itself to only operating from waking consciousness. It has to expand that kind of activity which is its essence - the production and testing of intersubjectively verifiable sentences - into the field of altered states of consciousness (cf., Tart, 1972).

Models of Reality and Their Content

There is another point that looks pretty trivial from a philosophical point of view. Not only in science do we never deal with 'reality', also in our own experiencing we are never confronted with 'real properties', but with what philosophers like to call 'phenomenal qualities'. On the level of experience we are only inhabiting a phenomenal body - when in the out-of-body state penetrating the walls of the neighboring house in an etheric double and watching our neighbor having a shower as well as when meeting him/her in the supermarket the next day and ...nodding to him/her. Out of a set of sensory input our brain constructs a body image which represents shape, position, weight, size and solidity of the body. In the waking state only a small portion of the overall amount of properties of our body finds its way into the self-perception of our phenomenal body. That is, we don't feel anything of the activity of our liver or our marrow, just as we are aware of the activity of our brain only on the symbolic level, but never on the signal or neuronal level. Recently the phenomenal body life has been spoken about by Tholey (Tholey, in preparation) or and about models of it by Blackmore (Blackmore 1982; 1984; 1986; in preparation).

What many do not understand is that you have said almost nothing with the hypothesis that OBEs are just a model of reality and of our self. On the level of our own experience we are always and only moving in mental space, no matter whether we do so by using the model "Waking State" or the model "Out-of-Body-Experience" (Attention; This does not imply idealism!) LaBerge has made this point clear: "Where 'we' are when we experience anything at all -- OBEs included -- is in mental space (LaBerge 1985; p.220-221)." But LaBerge's claim "The mind is not merely its own place, the mind is its only place." (loc.cit.) go a bit too far (Attention: This implies idealism!).

The crucial point is to find out the epistemic content of the mental models of reality in question by asking: "How high is the content of intersubjectively verifiable information of the model?" Thus the model "Dreamless Sleep" is a model without any content, the model "Non-Lucid Dream" would be a model with content but with very low or no epistemic value and the model "Waking State" would be characterized by a comparably high amount of intersubjectively verifiable information - although it still

usually represents far less than 1% of the information potentially accessible to us in a given situation.

Let us fix the epistemic content of non-lucid dreams at 0 and the epistemic content of the waking state as being of the value 1. Then the reductionist's thesis is: "The epistemic content of the model 'OBE' equals 0" whereas the separationist's thesis is: "The epistemic content of the model 'OBE' equals (at least) 1". My personal opinion is that the epistemic content of the OBE-model ranges somewhere between 1 and 0 and that this specific model of reality presents so many difficulties to us because, contrary to most other models we know, its content varies so much.

If one holds a psychological theory, such as Sue Blackmore's (e.g. Blackmore 1982) to be true, and claims the epistemic content of all OBEs to be zero because all input is generated internally, one finds oneself in an uncomfortable situation. One has to categorically deny all indications of a higher epistemic content of single OBEs in the literature and must be prepared for an enormous discussion of empirical details. It is not my aim to enter into this discussion here, but I do find it quite debatable to proceed in such a way at the present state of investigations.

The thesis that all OBEs always have an epistemic content of 1 seems just as problematical. One classical phenomenon - the so-called "false awakening" - shows very clearly how frequently misrepresentations occur. The phenomenology of OBEs contains enough bizarre elements (especially when looking at transition-phases into other models) to put even tough-minded separationists on the spot.

Another factor adds to the complication, a large amount of the information represented in the reality-model "OBE" does not refer to the world of the waking state, to Robert Monro's "Locale I". Of course we can try to let subjects traveling in the out-of-body-state make verifiable observations within the 'normal' world. But when we are concerned about all those excursions into "heavenly" and "extra-terrestrial" realms - how can we verify the epistemic content of the model when only operating out of the model "Waking State" ourselves? Thus saying that all these experiences in the other "Locales" were mere hallucinations and contained no information whatsoever would be nothing but plain ideological dogmatism.

The solution to this problem can only lie in establishing intersubjectivity on the level of the reality-model "OBE". As mentioned above it has to be determined if these "higher planes" can be perceived by a number of people in the out-of-body-state at the same time and independently of each other. Because even if there was a proof that there is no correct representation of the 'physical' world in this model, it would not follow that its epistemic content is zero relating to the extra-terrestrial locales. For two reasons lucid dreams become interesting at this point.

First, the practical implication from all this is that we should concentrate on the search for the trigger-mechanism of the OBE - so that scientists learn at last to consciously and deliberately step into the mental spaces which they investigate. At the present stage and given our specific hardware-configuration the probability of transition from the model "LD" into the model "OBE" seems to be the highest of all models known to us. A thorough analysis of the factors regulating transition is required.

Secondly the problem of intersubjectivity arises again. Imagine you are having a long and stable LD during which you visit a scientific conference on altered models of reality. When trying to explain to the scientists in the dream that none of them possess a consciousness of their own (cf., Tholey, 1985) and that they are nothing but semiautonomous software- subsystems of yourself, the dreamer, they burst out into a roar of laughter. The scientists in the dream reply that nothing of what you mentally represent within your waking-state-model is intersubjectively verifiable for them - because none of them can wake up with you. Furthermore, they would never consider the simple fact that you can obviously perform miracles in their world to be a proof for the theory that they all merely exist in your consciousness. How could you prove to your dream colleagues (and to yourself) that there exists a model of reality called "waking state" with a considerably higher epistemic content (waking up is no proof!)? How can you prove to yourself that you are not a semi- autonomous software-subsystem within a model of reality of quite low epistemic content right now?

Lucidity and Subjectivity

What actually do we mean by lucidity? From a philosophical point of view it definitely is a quality of consciousness and has nothing to do with the amount of information processed (cf., Tart, 1985; p. 15). We are able to process a maximum of information without becoming lucid towards a model.

I have been talking about the epistemic content of models. In the context of that quality called "lucidity" we deal with its semantic content, with its meaning. One has understood the meaning of a model when one says (or existentially experiences), "Oh, I am not at all 'in reality'! This is all just a model of reality!" In this moment one has become lucid, but there are two types of lucidity:

- a) "L1-lucidity": It consists in realizing that one is in a certain reality-model now. In deep sleep L1-lucidity causes transition into the model "wake sleep" (the yogi's 'jagrata-sushupti'). In a dream, it causes the emergence of a stable subject capable of deliberate action. In waking- state, it means the end of naive realism and an increase in awareness of the 'meditative' kind. During OBEs, L1-lucidity prevents our experiential contents from being transformed into the dream model and also prevents a naive interpretation of the event as "flight of the soul" etc.
- b) "L2-lucidity": It consists of the realization that the perceiving subject (which became L1-lucid) is itself nothing more than a subsystem of the whole model – its self-model. L2-lucidity can only come into being when there is a stable subject which holds itself to be real or "epistemically substantial" in a naive sense.

Two points seem interesting here. One is the model-independence of the quality called "lucidity" while the other is understanding the meaning of L2-lucid models of reality. If the self-model collapses realizing its own emptiness - what is represented by the new "mystical" model (no intersubjectivity)? Is it still a model at all?

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