

Harvey Irwin's *Flight of Mind: A Psychological Study of the Out-of-Body Experience*

Reviewed by Susan Blackmore

Among the many recent books on the out-of-body experience (or OBE) *Flight of Mind* provides one of the best reviews of research findings, as well as presenting a new theory to account for them. Irwin, an Australian psychologist, takes a primarily psychological approach and begins by redefining the OBE - as an experience in which "the center of consciousness appears to the experient to occupy temporarily a position which is spatially remote from his/her body". Among the advantages of this helpful definition are that it assumes no theoretical position nor even that the experience has to be visual. Of course, as Irwin makes clear, the notion of a center of consciousness is purely phenomenological and not objective.

In the first of eight chapters Irwin compares the OBE with other phenomena such as dreams and lucid dreams, autoscopy and depersonalization, apparitions and bilocation. Then he considers methods of research; reviewing case collections, surveys, self observations by adepts, and finally experimental investigation. I found his treatment of the literature very thorough and his criticisms mostly apt, but the book is often badly organized and I wished for clearer sections, or summaries at the end of chapters.

Chapter 3 deals with the phenomenology of the OBE; the major surveys and their findings concerning the content of the experience. Irwin also tackles the thorny question of veridicality though he seemed to give almost equivalent status to unchecked claims of veridicality as to experimental tests of OB perception, when their implications and problems are quite different. Crookall's work is dealt with thoroughly, as is the tradition of astral projection. The evidence on the astral body and silver cord are reviewed, suggesting that the cord is not culturally universal. Irwin then discusses psychological processes such as the state of relaxed alertness and clarity which often characterizes the experience. This section does have a summary but I found it confusing in concentrating only on factors such as needs, expectations and imagery.

The analysis of the circumstances of the OBE's occurrence is particularly useful in highlighting the relationship between the OBE and extremes of cortical arousal. Here he does not mention the relevance of cortical arousal for lucid dreams, though there could well be an important connection. He then goes on to discuss diverse methods of inducing OBEs, which is also of relevance to lucid dreams.

Next Irwin considers the type of person who is likely to have an OBE, discussing the incidence of the experience, and giving a useful review of the survey data on the relationship with demographic characteristics, prior knowledge, and personality. He considers physiological studies and the (generally positive) effects of having an OBE on people.

Many theories of the OBE are outlined, including escomatic theories which claim that something actually leaves the body; "field theories" and more recent psychological theories. Irwin notes the deep problems and lack of testability of escomatic theories, and gives useful criticisms of Siegel's physiological approach and

comparisons of the OBE with birth, archetypal imagery, autoscopy and depersonalization. He also criticizes, though perhaps less adequately, Palmer's theory. But the book was apparently written too long ago to include any criticisms of my own psychological theory of the OBE (Blackmore, 1984).

Irwin next reviews research suggesting that the OBE does not just spring from having a vivid imagination. Of all the many aspects of imagery tested, only spatial skills seem to relate to having OBEs. A major finding, to which Irwin has contributed much, is that people who have OBEs have a greater capacity for absorption in inner experience and a need for absorbing experiences.

In the final chapter Irwin proposes his "synesthetic model of the OBE". He argues that the basis of the OBE is a lack of attention to somaesthetic input resulting in a feeling of being disembodied. This may reach consciousness by recoding into an image of a floating self. Then synesthesia, or experiencing of one sensory modality as another, takes over and the basic somaesthetic image is elaborated into a full OBE with visual imagery. I must say I found the theory a little difficult to follow and would have appreciated a concise summary of Irwin's position. Of course the real test lies in future research but although Irwin argues that his theory is highly testable, he provides only very few concrete predictions.

Flight of Mind is an important book for OBE research. It seems to confirm and consolidate the recent trend away from paranormal theories and towards purely psychological ones, without denying the interest of the traditional theories. For those interested in lucid dreams it will also be useful. There is no special section devoted to lucid dreams, but the reader will find throughout the book, useful information on lucid dreaming and imagery, OBE induction, the types of people prone to different experiences and much more besides. Irwin has certainly provided a valuable review of the pertinent literature which will be useful to anyone researching on lucid dreams.

Reference

Blackmore, S.J. (1984). A psychological theory of the out-of-body experience. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 48, 201-218.