

Out-of-the-Body Experiences

Implications for a Theory of Psychosis

Charles McCreery, DPhil

Formerly Lecturer in Experimental Psychology
Magdalen College, Oxford

Oxford Forum



© Copyright Charles McCreery 2020

Introduction and acknowledgements

The ideas in this book arose out of doctoral research I carried out in the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, between the years 1986 and 1992. The long delay in the book's completion and publication results from the fact that I have been unable to obtain funding since the completion of the research to continue my work in this area. I have therefore been obliged to work on this book only intermittently, and at the personal expense of myself and my colleagues at Oxford Forum.

It is to be hoped that despite the long delay between conception and completion the book may serve to attract attention to research by my colleagues and myself in this area, and may provoke someone to support its continuation. To this end the Director of Oxford Forum, Dr Celia Green, has added an appeal for financial support which I include below.

The first chapter of this book presents examples of various types of hallucination in the sane, including false awakenings and apparitional experiences as well as out-of-the-body experiences. This is in order to present the concept of the *metachoric* experience, originated by Dr Green, and defined as one in which the subject's entire perceptual field is temporarily replaced with a hallucinatory one.

The ideas presented in the rest of the book arose from the conjunction in my mind of three separate observations. (1) As an undergraduate I had read Ian Oswald's 1962 book *Sleeping and Waking*, which contains the paradoxical observation that sleep can supervene on extreme arousal. (2) I had read the book *Flight of Mind* by Australian psychologist Harvey Irwin, published in 1985, in which he noted that out-of-the-body experiences tend to occur at either extreme of the arousal spectrum, i.e. under conditions of either extreme arousal, or in conditions of relaxation and de-arousal. (3) The third observation was one

I only became aware of on reading a paper by Stevens and Darbyshire (1958), recommended to me by my supervisor for the doctorate, Professor Gordon Claridge. This paper contained the apparently paradoxical observation that schizophrenic patients could be ‘aroused’ from a condition of catatonic stupor by the administration of sedative rather than stimulant drugs.

Chapters 2 to 7 present a theory of out-of-the body experiences. Under this theory, OBEs represent a manifestation of sleep, not only in the case of experiences occurring under conditions of de-arousal, but also in the case of experiences occurring under conditions of great stress, such as medical operations and accidents. Both of these are conditions under which ‘micro-sleeps’, as Oswald (1962) termed them, can interpolate themselves into waking consciousness.

The first account of the theory of psychosis presented in the final two chapters was given in an anthology, *Schizotypy: Implications for Illness and Health*, published in 1997.¹ Earlier observers had remarked on the similarity of waking hallucinations and other manifestations of psychosis to experiences during sleep, but without being able to propose a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon. The present theory explains the similarity as follows: the phenomena of active psychotic episodes, represent, like OBEs, the intrusion of sleep processes into waking life, but only at the upper end of the arousal spectrum. This would explain the paradoxical finding of Stevens and Darbyshire mentioned above.

Under the present theory, some of the phenomena of psychosis, such as hallucinations, and flattened or inappropriate affect, may be regarded as primary, inasmuch as they are also characteristic of the dreams of normal sleep occurring at night. Others, such as persistent delusions, may be secondary, in

that they result from attempts to make sense of the primary symptoms following their ending.

I should like to acknowledge the help and support of four colleagues at Oxford Forum in various aspects of the writing and production of this book: Dr Celia Green, Christine Fulcher, Dr Fabian Wadel and Andrew Legge.

I should also like to thank the several hundred subjects who took part in the various phases of my doctoral project. The great majority of these, including all those who took part in the questionnaire study, received no financial recompense at all, and the 40 who took part in the experimental phase received only travel expenses.

¹ McCreery 1997, in Claridge (ed.) 1997.