



## DOES AWARENESS REQUIRE A LOCATION?: A RESPONSE TO WOODHOUSE\*

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I must commend Mark Woodhouse for going boldly where few have gone before, by taking seriously the substantial body of evidence for out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and by recognizing that this phenomenon merits philosophical examination. And I think he argues both correctly and convincingly that OBEs cannot easily be accommodated within orthodox neuropsychology. However, I'm not entirely in sympathy with Woodhouse's overall approach to the topic of OBEs, and I find certain of his remarks to be rather contentious and perplexing.

Woodhouse argues that subjects of OBEs really leave and move independently of their bodies in some sense of the terms "leave" and "move" that is not wholly metaphorical. However, he never really explains what that non-metaphorical sense is. In fact, Woodhouse seems somewhat ambivalent about how to use such terms. At times, he encases them in worrisome scare quotes; but on other occasions he drops the quotes without explaining why the terms are no longer to be understood metaphorically.

My principal concerns, however, are of a different sort. They center around Woodhouse's apparent reluctance to countenance the possibility of paranormal phenomena beyond the quite limited class of OBEs. Of course, Woodhouse may in fact be sympathetic or open to other bodies of parapsychological evidence as well. But he discusses OBEs as if they can be evaluated in isolation from the rest of that evidence. For example, when discussing the interesting experiment of Osis and McCormick (1980), Woodhouse observes, correctly, that the physical effects on the strain gauge could be explained, at least in principle, in terms of psychokinesis (PK), presumably on the part of the subject. But he passes quickly over that suggestion, and he does not consider the equally relevant hypothesis of possible ESP on the part of the subject in accounting for the information correctly gathered about the locations visited while ostensibly out of the body. Perhaps Woodhouse simply wanted to show that one can speculate philosophically about OBEs without introducing additional controversial issues about the paranormal. But if so, his strategy turns out to be inappropriately modest. Since OBEs are presumably a small subset of an extensive and varied class of ostensibly paranormal phenomena, the explanation of OBEs cannot be so easily divorced from broader speculations about

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the paranormal generally. And once that point is grasped, it will be clear that explanations of OBEs cannot be divided so neatly into those of the Internalist and the Externalist.

Woodhouse finds the externalist position compelling primarily because of the accuracy of some OBE reports and the associated physical effects in the Osiris and McCormick experiment. The problem, however, is that the parapsychological literature chronicles many similar sorts of accurate reports and physical effects (many of which I'd say have been satisfactorily authenticated), and all of which occur in the absence of OBEs (Braude, 1979, 1991). And in those cases, there is no reason to think that subjects actually leave and move independently of their bodies. The most one can infer from the usual evidence for ESP and PK is that there are various sorts of (possibly primitive and unanalyzable) causal connections between persons and remote states of affairs. But in that case, a suitably conservative interpretation of veridical OBEs would be to treat them as a particularly vivid (or imagery-rich) form of "humdrum" ESP, occasionally accompanied by some PK. At the very least, that interpretation (let us call it the *psi* interpretation or *psi* hypothesis) merits serious consideration.

However, the *psi* hypothesis does not seem to fit neatly into Woodhouse's Internalist-Externalist dichotomy. Since it does not treat OBEs as forms of dissociative hallucinations (but rather occasionally veridical ESP-mediated experiences caused by states outside the subject's body), it is not an Internalist hypothesis in the sense explained by Woodhouse. And since it does not take subjects to be actually leaving their bodies, it doesn't count as an Externalist hypothesis either.

At this point, it might help to review a few theoretical points about ESP. Whatever one might think about the quality of the evidence, ESP, if it occurs, would be at least a two-stage process. First, there would be a stimulus or interaction stage, and then there would be a response or manifestation stage. The first stage, presumably, would consist of some sort of causal interaction between a person's mental states and those of the subject (in the case of telepathy), or between a remote non-mental state of affairs and the subject's mental states (in the case of clairvoyance). Parapsychologists have long recognized that it is during the second stage that the forms of ESP would take on the idiosyncratic characteristics of the person having the experience. In fact, the experience itself might even be deferred until a time when it is psychologically convenient for the interaction to bubble up, as it were, into consciousness. And when that happens, there would be numerous opportunities for the subject to impose his or her own cognitive or psychological stamp (or "psychic signature") on the form of that experience—for example, the way in which information might be symbolically transformed by or overlaid with the subject's own conceptual grid and personal needs and concerns. For example, in one well-known parapsychology experiment a target picture of an old rabbi was apparently converted by a Protestant subject into Christian or secular imagery (Braude, 1979, p. 138). It is also at this stage that subjects can apparently impose distorted perspectives on information that in other respects seems accurate. For example, if the ESP target is a picture of a man in front of a row of trees, the subject might have an image of a man behind the trees (or behind bars). Granted, there

are problems in such cases of distinguishing partial hits from misses. But what matters is that ESP experiences may be a cognitive stew of accurate information and confounding material supplied by the subject. Moreover, the subject's contribution to the stew may be to alter or provide the visual perspective from which the information is represented.

Parapsychologists have also recognized that some ESP subjects experience more vivid imagery than others, and that for some, ostensible ESP experiences are not rich at all in visual imagery; instead, clairvoyant or telepathic interactions may manifest as inexplicable or incongruous desires to act (e.g., "I must phone so-and-so"). So there is good reason to think that if ESP occurs at all, its manifestations would be as idiosyncratically varied as other sorts of mental states, and in particular that some may be richer and more detailed in imagery than others.

But in that case, one would think that OBEs could easily be interpreted as imagery-rich manifestations of ongoing ESP, and that for some the information gathered is accurate and apparently perspective-specific, just as it seems to be in apparent cases of ESP not accompanied by OBEs. But then it is far from clear that even veridical ESP (or OBE) experiences require the subject actually to leave the body. For example, in the original remote viewing experiments at SRI (see, e.g., Targ & Puthoff, 1977; Targ, Puthoff, & May, 1979), their star subject, Pat Price, often gave quite accurate descriptions of locations being visited by an outbound experimenter. But Price tended to describe those sites from perspectives quite different from those of the outbound experimenter. In fact, he often described them as if he were looking at them from the air (quite high up), and then zooming down toward the target. Now granted, if a person were to have a normal visual perception of the location from that perspective, the person would actually have to be located far above the target. But it does not clearly follow from this that one must in some sense be similarly situated in order to have similarly perspectival ESP of the target site. More generally, it is not clear why paranormal and normal forms of information-acquisition would have to be formally similar.

To take another example, consider the disanalogies between ESP of card faces in a sealed deck and visual perception of those card faces. Visual perception of, say, the 10th card down is physically impossible so long as the deck is sealed. There is no location from which one could see the card. But that has apparently never been a barrier to correctly identifying cards in ESP tests. Moreover, if ESP of the card depended on some sort of emanations from the card (as visual perception requires the reflection of light rays from the object perceived), it seems impossible to explain the selectivity of ESP—for example, the ability to identify correctly specific cards in the deck. As C. D. Broad recognized (Broad, 1953), the relevant emanations from the face of the card would be part of a much larger package of emanations: from the back of the card, from all the other cards in the deck, from every object in the room, and (as far as we know) from everything in the universe. Similar problems arise in the case of subjects who can correctly identify target pictures in sealed envelopes. So, assuming the integrity of at least the better evidence for ESP, there is no reason to suppose that the familiar prerequisites for accurate visual perception have analogs in the case of ESP. But then there is no reason to suppose that veridical OBE reports require the subject to be located (or "located") in anything like the

way an ordinary perceiver would need to be situated in order to issue the same veridical report. Hence, Woodhouse seems to err in asserting that “in the case of Tanous’s alleged ventures ... a correct call depended upon being exactly in the right place for the optical illusion to take shape” (p. 9). That is a prerequisite only for normal visual perception of the target.

Now once we grant that OBEs, like forms of ESP and PK generally, may be explained by the psi hypothesis (rather than by Woodhouse’s Internalist or Externalist hypotheses), the implications of OBEs for the topic of dualism become somewhat cloudy. Woodhouse writes: “Obviously, if one can perceive, feel, hear, and otherwise move around independently of one’s body, we imply the existence of at least two things—a mind and a body” (p. 10). But one need not interpret any form of ESP as requiring the subject to leave and move around independently of his or her body. As we noted, they presuppose nothing more than currently inexplicable and possibly unanalyzable causal links between agents and the world. And in that case, the occurrence of OBEs, like ordinary cognitive phenomena such as memory and volition, would seem at most to support a form of Functional Dualism.

Moreover, “perceive,” “feel,” “hear,” and “move” are terms that we strictly speaking understand only with respect to what bodies do. But it is not clear that these terms should have been used, from the start, in connection with OBEs, no matter how conventionally perspectival OBE imagery may be. Perhaps the term “aware” is more metaphysically neutral in this context. Certainly, it seems more circumspect to say that during OBEs and other forms of ESP subjects may be aware of remote states of affairs. In that case, however, it may seem less tempting to understand “aware” as synonymous with a disjunction of such ordinary perception terms as “perceive,” “hear,” “feel,” etc. After all, what is at issue in the case of ESP is precisely whether there are forms of awareness which are not forms of perception (as ordinarily understood, with respect to bodily processes). Indeed, Woodhouse’s easy recourse to ordinary perception terms might even be question-begging.

Furthermore, Woodhouse’s adherence to his externalist thesis, while seeming to be quite bold in some respects, is surprisingly conservative (if not quaint) in another. Once we grant that the internalist thesis cannot explain OBEs, perhaps the most appealing feature of Woodhouse’s brand of externalism is that it resists what some have regarded as the most disturbing implication of ESP and PK generally—namely, the occurrence of action at a distance. For those who recoil at the prospect of action at a distance, Woodhouse’s Externalism would presumably seem attractive, even though it posits a form of leaving and moving independently of the body that never rises above the metaphorical. But whatever Woodhouse means by saying that one leaves one’s body during an OBE, that process would presumably assure the desired spatio-temporal contiguity of cause and effect. Hence, Woodhouse would explain the perspectival nature of OBE veridical experiences in roughly the same way we explain the perspectival nature of video broadcasts. Instead of the “eye” of a video camera, Woodhouse posits something in a person that actually leaves one’s body and performs the remote sorts of seeing.

But I would suggest that there is no reason, quite apart from the evidence for ESP and PK, to insist on the spatio-temporal contiguity of cause and effect. For one

thing, since the ordinary phenomena of memory cannot be explained satisfactorily in terms of memory traces (whose function is to provide a spatio-temporal link between the thing remembered and the act of remembering), there is an ample supply of normal cognitive phenomena to buttress the rejection of spatio-temporal contiguity. (For criticisms of memory trace theory, see Braude, 1979; Bursen, 1978; Heil, 1978; Malcolm, 1977.) And for another, there are good reasons for thinking that causal explanations can assume a wide variety of forms, many of which do not presuppose spatio-temporal contiguity of cause and effect, and no one of which is inherently fundamental or preferred over the others (see, e.g., Scriven, 1975).

Finally, I was disappointed by Woodhouse's answer to the question: Why can't Tanous always produce significant results? Woodhouse notes that Tanous's performance might not "conform to commonsense expectations" (p. 9), and he mentions that Tanous's explanation was that he had trouble controlling his "position" while out of the body. Now I agree with Woodhouse that we should take seriously reports by gifted subjects that what they are attempting seems difficult. But Woodhouse apparently thinks that our commonsense expectation is that if Tanous can identify the optical illusion at all during an OBE, he should be able to do it all the time. But what is commonsensical about that? First of all, I would suggest that our ordinary intuitions are often quite unreliable generally, and they certainly are in the case of paranormal phenomena where the extent of our ignorance is overwhelming. Assuming that ESP and PK occur, we have no robust idea of what conditions are favorable or unfavorable to their occurrence, or (for that matter) how they fit at all into the overall scheme of things. Moreover, most (if not all) of our capacities are situation-sensitive; the manner and degree to which they are expressed depends on many contextual factors. That is why even great athletes do not always perform flawlessly, why virtuoso musicians sometimes make mistakes, and it is certainly why ordinary perceivers often make mistakes as well. But in that case, if we have any commonsense expectations of Tanous's ability in the Osis and McCormick experiment, I would have thought that we would expect him *not* to perform flawlessly, especially in a task he had never attempted before.

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