

## TOWARD THE OBJECTIVE EXPLORATION OF NON-ORDINARY REALITY

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This is the first time I have given this kind of talk on April Fool's Day, but that makes it all the more interesting. At the end I'll let you decide whether I am just kidding. My primary aim here is to raise interesting questions, not answer them.

I'm going to bring up some methodological issues but focus it around a particular human *story* and the concrete experience behind it. This focus is based on the death, approximately two weeks ago, of an old friend of mine, a quite remarkable person, Robert A. Monroe. He was the author of a book back in 1971 called *Journeys Out of the Body* (Monroe, 1971), which I understand has sold about 10,000 copies a year steadily, ever since it was published. It has affected a lot of people, and he has authored two other books, *Far Journeys* (Monroe, 1985) and *Ultimate Journey* (Monroe, 1994).

*methodological  
issues  
and  
a  
human  
story*

His story, which will be my central theme, is an amazing one. [I have known him well enough that I have no question about his honesty, intelligence, and basic sanity in reporting his quite unusual experiences. Indeed, in ordinary life he was a successful American businessman, the archetype of "normalcy" for our culture. I dedicate this talk to him.

In the spring of 1958, Monroe thought he must have eaten something that didn't agree with him. He had some very strong cramps and burning sensations, but they went away after a few hours. Then he started having periods in which a feeling of "vibration" would come over his body. So, he did the perfectly normal thing: he went

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to his doctor. His doctor, after a thorough examination, said there was nothing wrong with him. A psychologist friend he talked to said something like, "Well, why don't you relax and just experience whatever it is." As he was not a religious person and had no interest in or knowledge of metaphysics, occultism, or the like, this was not an easy suggestion to follow. Since there didn't seem to be anything physically wrong, he finally relaxed and every once in a while, usually when he was lying down, his body would start vibrating, not externally, but feeling as though there were some electrical vibrations and sensations inside.

#### MONROE'S OUT-OF-THE-BODY EXPERIENCE

In the spring of 1958 he had his first out-of-the-body experience, his first aOBE. OOB is the acronym I coined to describe out-of-the-body experiences, not knowing I was creating some terrible semantic karma, because after that people began to tell me about their "Oobies." I never thought it would be pronounced! I discovered last week that the computer industry is now using OOB to refer to the "out-of-the-box experience," that primary experience you have when you bring your system home (and it might or might not function). Symbolically this might be relevant because the human experience is sort of like getting out of the "box" of the body.

#### *Monroe's first OOB*

Anyway, in the spring of 1958 he described his first OOB. He wrote:

If I thought I faced incongruities at this point, it was because [ I did not know what was yet to come. Some four weeks later, when the vibrations came again, I was duly cautious about attempting to move an arm or leg. It was [ate at night, and I was lying in bed before sleep. My wife had fallen asleep beside me. There was a surge that seemed to be in my head, and quickly the condition spread through my body, It all seemed the same. As I lay there trying to decide how to analyze the thing in another way, I just happened to think how nice it would be to take a glider up and fly the next afternoon (my hobby at that time). Without considering any consequences-not knowing there would be any-I thought of the pleasure it would bring.

After a moment, I became aware of something pressing against my shoulder. Half-curious, I reached back and up to feel what it was. My hand encountered a smooth wall. I moved my hand along the wall the length of my arm, and it continued smooth and unbroken.

My senses fully alert, I tried to see in the dim light. It was a wall, and I was lying against it with my shoulder. I immediately reasoned that I had gone to sleep and fallen out of bed. (I had never done so before, but all sorts of strange things were happening, and falling out of bed was quite possible.)

Then I looked again. Something was wrong. This wall had no windows, no furniture against it, no doors. It was not a wall in my bedroom. Yet somehow it was familiar. Identification came instantly. It **wasn't** a wall; it was the ceiling. I was floating against the ceiling, bouncing gently with any movement I made. I rolled in the air, startled, and looked down. There, in the dim light below me, was the bed. There were two figures lying in the bed. To the right was my wife. Beside her was someone else. Both seemed asleep.

This was a strange dream, I thought. I was curious. Whom would I dream to be in bed with my wife? I looked more closely, and the shock was intense. *I* was the someone on the bed!

My reaction was almost instantaneous. Here I was; there was my body. I was dying; this was death, and I wasn't ready to die. Somehow, the vibrations were killing me. Desperately, like a diver, I swooped down to my body and dove in. I then felt the bed and the covers, and when I opened my eyes, I was looking at the room from the perspective of my bed.

What had happened? Had I truly almost died? My heart was beating rapidly, but not unusually so. I moved my arms and legs. Everything seemed normal. The vibrations had faded away. I got up and walked around the room, looked out the window, and smoked a cigarette (Monroe, 1971, pp. 27-28).

Again he showed a perfectly appropriate, normal reaction; he went to see a physician. Once again, after thorough physical examination, nothing was found to be wrong with him.

*a  
normal  
reaction*

#### NINE HYPOTHESES

What do we make of the OOBES? I'll draw on thousands of such experiences that I have read and examined over the years, and I'll draw primarily on the "classical" OOBES as a case of being out of your body experientially but with consciousness staying normal, i.e., ordinary, thus ruling out most near-death experiences because they have an altered state of consciousness aspect as well as the OOBES aspect. To stimulate our thinking, I'll look at some nine hypotheses as to how we might explain or think about an OOBES.

#### *First Hypothesis*

The first, of course, is that it is some kind of craziness or mental illness. There is simply no evidence at all, however, that someone having had an OOBES is necessarily psychopathological. We have millions of ordinary people who have had OOBES. Some mentally ill people have them also, but that doesn't make the OOBES inherently pathological.

### *Second Hypothesis*

The second hypothesis we can usually use is that the OOBÉ is just a dream. The problem with this hypothesis is that, phenomenologically, people who had both dreams and OOBÉs say there is no confusing them. They are quite distinct kinds of experiences. The primary difference is that the pattern of consciousness in an OOBÉ is pretty much like ordinary consciousness. If you experienced your mind functioning in a normal waking pattern, but happened to experience yourself as floating near the ceiling, that's what an OOBÉ would feel like generally. Further, there is an experiential, sensory reality to the OOBÉ that generally feels much more intense than a dream, and, further, a person has full reasoning ability during an OOBÉ. They can, for example, float there near the ceiling and go through all sorts of philosophical and scientific arguments about why what they're experiencing *can't* be happening, and yet it keeps right on happening and can be subjected to scrutiny.

a  
distinction  
between  
dreams  
and  
OOBÉs

Experientially, Monroe distinguished sharply between his dreams and OOBÉs. There's a little bit of published work on brain wave patterns to emphasize this distinction also. I was able to work with Monroe (Tart, 1967) and another talented OOBÉ person (Tart, 1968a) in the laboratory and found that the pattern the brain waves showed is like ordinary dreaming in some ways but distinctly different in other ways. There hasn't been a lot of work published on this, so I'm not going to over-generalize this psychophysiological find.

### *Third Hypothesis*

The third hypothesis, then, is that an OOBÉ is some kind of special dream state, such as a *lucid* dream. A lucid dream is an ordinary dream in which there is a sudden shift in consciousness so that you feel as if you have your ordinary pattern of consciousness available. You know your true condition, namely that you're in a dream, that your making all this up somehow, so there's concurrent knowledge that it's a dream, coupled with all your ordinary mental abilities.

Monroe had had some lucid dreams. He distinguished them sharply from his OOBÉs. His primary criterion was that in lucid dreams he could easily change the actions and events of the dream world simply by willing it, whereas in his OOBÉs, he seemed to be in places that had rules of their own; they weren't subject to arbitrary will on his part. I should note as a side theme, given the experience of awakening fully at night yet being elsewhere than in your real physical body, how you interpret the experience probably depends

strongly on your *a priori* beliefs. Thus some OOBEs may be mislabeled lucid dreams and vice versa.

#### *Fourth Hypothesis*

A fourth hypothesis, then, is that the OOB is a special state but is completely subjective. This is certainly true sometimes, for some OOBs. When I was doing hypnosis research years ago, for example, I had a well-trained group of hypnotic subjects to whom I gave suggestions that they have OOBs. They had extremely vivid experiences of being out of their bodies. As part of the experience, however, I told them to float across the hall into the next room and tell me what was in there. Even though they vividly experienced being in that room, their descriptions of what was in that room bore no particular relationship to what was actually there. So an OOB can certainly be experientially real, at least in some cases, without it implying it is objectively real in any sense.

For a long time Monroe wanted to believe that his OOBs were just some kind of special subjective kind of state. That was the only acceptable explanation for a normal, American businessman who valued his sanity—except that his OOBs seemed so damn real! He kept coming back to that. Many people who have OOBs work very hard afterward to explain away the fact that they seem so real, reasoning that since it *can't* be real, the feeling of its immediate reality *must* be some kind of illusion. As a psychologist, I've always been fascinated by the way we try to talk ourselves out of the reality of unusual experiences.

*Monroe's  
initial  
belief  
about  
OOBs*

#### *Fifth Hypothesis*

So let's look as a fifth hypothesis, then, that in an OOB, the mind is somehow literally *out* of the body and is located somewhere else in the physical world from where the physical body is. This is a traditional explanation in terms of human history, in that people who have had OOBs usually say, "Yes, my mind went out of my body. It was someplace else." This was the "common sense" explanation before we developed belief systems that ruled out that obvious interpretation of experience. This kind of experience is also the basis of a belief in a soul. People have a direct experience of mind *being*, existing outside the body.

Could the OOB possibly be objectively real? Let me mention another experience of Monroe's:

Sept. 10, 1958 Afternoon. Again, I floated upward, with the intent of visiting Dr. Bradshaw and his wife. Realizing that Dr. Bradshaw was ill

in bed with a cold, I thought I would visit him in the bedroom which was a room I had not seen in his house, and if I could describe it later, could thus document my visit. ... Then I came upon Dr. and Mrs. Bradshaw. They were outside the house, and for a moment I was confused, as I had reached them before I got to the house. I didn't understand this because Dr. Bradshaw was supposed to be in bed. Dr. Bradshaw *was* dressed in light overcoat and hat, his wife in a dark coat and all dark clothes. They were coming toward me, so I stopped. They seemed in good spirits and walked past me unseeing, in the direction of a smaller building, like a garage, Brad trailing behind as they walked.

I floated around in front of them, waving, trying to get their attention without result. Then, without turning his head, I thought I heard Dr. Bradshaw say to me, "Well, I see you don't need help any more." Thinking I had made contact, I dove back into the ground (1), and returned to the office, rotated into the body, and opened my eyes. Everything was just as I had left it. The vibration was still present, but I felt I had enough for one day.

We phoned Dr. and Mrs. Bradshaw that evening. I made no statement other than to ask where they were between four and five that afternoon. . . . Mrs. Bradshaw ... stated that roughly at four twenty-five they were walking out of the house toward the garage. She was going to the post office, and Dr. Bradshaw had decided that perhaps some fresh air might help him and had dressed and gone along.... I had come back from my trip to them at approximately four twenty-seven, I asked what they were wearing. Mrs. Bradshaw stated she was wearing black slacks and a red sweater which was covered with it black car coat. Dr. Bradshaw was wearing a light hat and a light-colored topcoat. However neither "saw" me in any way, or were aware of my presence. Dr. Bradshaw had no memory of saying anything to me. The great point is that I had expected to find him in bed, and I didn't (Monroe, 1971, pp, 46-47).

*no  
way  
for  
Monroe  
to  
check  
validity*

Monroe had a lot of experiences like this over the years, although they were greatly outnumbered by the experiences where he seemed to be in the physical world while out of the body, but there was simply no way of checking its validity. An example is finding yourself on an unknown street corner **in** the middle of the night, for a minute, and then it's over-an event very difficult to validate. In any case, Monroe came to believe that, sometimes at least, he was literally out of his body and mentally/perceptually located at some other location in the physical world. He could verify his perceptions against a later physical check of that location.

Yet Monroe also frequently had incorrect elements as part of his perception. During the above OOB, for example, he distinctly heard his friend, Dr. Bradshaw, tell him that he realized that he was perceived as present in an out-of-the-body fashion. But Dr. Bradshaw had no memory of this whatsoever. So, even in cases where sometimes there's striking correspondence with the physical world, you can also have things that don't match.

I once did a long-distance study with Monroe (Tart, 1967), telling him that at some random time in the next eight hours I would mentally try to help him visit my home across the country, in an *DOBE*, and that he should write an account of any experience he had. His account of the experience was totally wrong in terms of the description of my home, which he had never seen. His timing was within the minute of the random time that came up for feeling his visit there. I hardly know what to make of that. Similarly, in the laboratory studies I was able to do with him, he couldn't quite do the definitive sorts of things involving cognizing some target in the physical world that he couldn't see through nonnal channels, and yet he correctly reported unexpected elements. These results were hard to dismiss and yet too limited to prove anything conclusively.

*Monroe  
in  
the  
laboratory  
studies*

### *Sixth Hypothesis*

A sixth hypothesis is that OOBEs are just subjective; it's just chance correspondences with the physical world that create a false impression that the mind was actually "out." That may certainly be the case sometimes. You can have purely subjective OOBEs, as I illustrated in describing my hypnotic OOBEs above. As I have said, though, Monroe had many evidential OOBEs over the years that convinced him that sometimes he actually was at the out-of-body location. There are many cases of spontaneous OOBEs with other people that are like that.

To give you an example that made a great impression on me, some years ago (Tart, 1968) I met a young woman who had had OOBEs spontaneously all of her life since childhood. She had thought they were a normal part of sleep, that you go to sleep, you dream, you float near the ceiling, look at your boring body lying asleep in bed for a minute, dream, get up, and go to school. I was able to have her spend some time in the laboratory where I measured her brain wave and other physiological activity. Also, after she was in bed, I would put a five-digit random number on a shelf up near the ceiling and tell her that if she happened to float out, "Please memorize the number, wake up, and tell me about it."

Miss Z, as I called her, had several OOBEs over her four nights in the laboratory but usually reported that she had not been able to control her position and so had not been able to see the target number. On the one occasion she said she had been able to float up and see the number, she correctly told me that the number was 25132. To guess a five-digit number correctly on the first try has one hundred thousand to one odds against chance. There aren't a lot of parapsychological studies with this kind of level of results, but, on the other hand, studying OOBEs is not exactly a national priority.

### *Seventh Hypothesis*

A seventh hypothesis is that the "out of the body" is just subjective, the experiencer's mind is still "in" her brain conjuring up an illusion of being "out," but occasionally there's some unwitting ESP involved in the OOB, and the hallucinatory details happen to correspond to the physical world. This criticism has been made of my study with Miss Z. People would ask, "Did you know the number?" and when I would reply "Yes," they say, "Oh, it was just telepathy." The experimental methodology is not advanced enough to rule out mere telepathy at this point!

*questions  
coming  
out of  
computer  
generated  
virtual  
reality*

So it is possible to conceptualize OOBs as "it is still all in your head," as **it** were, but that sometimes there are extrasensory elements that make that otherwise illusory construction of being "out" work well. This raises interesting psychological and philosophical questions about how you ever decide "where" you are located, questions which will become especially interesting with the rapid advances of computer-generated virtual reality. In virtual reality, you can have the very real experience of being someplace else from where your physical body is, a fascinating phenomenon I have discussed elsewhere (Tart, 1991).

### *Eighth Hypothesis*

Two more hypotheses may be considered. Number eight is that in some OOBs, the person is really "out" but selectively tuned to perceive both physical and perhaps "nonphysical reality." This experience is associated with a curious phenomena such as Monroe (and others) have experienced, namely visiting someone while out of the body and correctly describing the physical location that was unknown to the visitor, while having his experience of the person visited communicating back to him. Later, however, in ordinary consciousness, the person says, "Why, you must be crazy! Yes, I was at that location during that time, but no, I had no awareness of you being there." This kind of experience was very frustrating to Monroe and raised the questions, "Was he crazy? Were they crazy? What was going on?"

Finally, just to make things a little more complicated: some of Monroe's OOBs seemed to take him to a nonphysical reality that seemed to have an independent existence. So, for instance in late 1958, he writes:

11/5/58 Afternoon. The vibrations came quickly and easily.... I tried to lift out the physical with no result. Whatever thought or combination I tried, I remained confined right where I was. I then remembered the rotating trick, which operates just as if you are turning over in bed. I

started to turn and recognized that my physical was not "turning" with me. I moved slowly; after a moment I was "face down," or in direct opposition to the placement of my physical body. The moment [reached this 180° position ... there was a hole. That's the only way to describe it. To my senses, it seemed to be a hole in a wall which was about two feet thick and stretched endlessly in all directions. . . . The periphery of the hole was just precisely the shape of my physical body. . . . I moved cautiously through the hole, holding on to its side ... (Monroe, 1971, 86-87).

During the next couple of years, over a dozen times, Monroe went through that hole. To him it was a repeatable experiment. He waited for the vibrations, did the action that created the feeling of rotating 180°, a hole would appear, and he would go through it. The place he went to had recognizably similar and stable characteristics each time. He called it, "Locale IIL" He could wander around there, invisible to the inhabitants of that world. Remember, to Monroe, the reality of Locale III would be like what any of us could experience by stepping out of a hotel for a few minutes, wandering around, looking at some things, and coming back. If we went out again, and looked at the same area, it would be pretty much the same place. That's what it was like for Monroe.

*Monroe's  
Locale III*

He reported that Locale III had a lot of stable characteristics that were similar to those of our own, ordinary world. **It** was a physical matter world. There were trees, houses, people, artifacts, all the appurtenances of a reasonably civilized society. There were homes, families, businesses; people worked for a living; there were roads; vehicles traveled on the roads, and so forth. And yet it also had quite stable characteristics which were not similar to our world. For instance, he saw nothing that would suggest any kind of electrical devices. No telephones, no electric lights, no TV. He saw no internal combustion devices, nothing that looked like it ran on gasoline or oil or anything like that. But there was mechanical power in use. For example, he reported:

... Careful examination of one of the locomotives that pulled a string of old-fashioned looking passenger cars showed it to be driven by a steam engine. The cars appeared to be made of wood, the locomotive of metal, but of a different shape than our now obsolete types. The track gauge was much smaller than our standard track spacing, smaller than our narrow-gauge mountain railways.

I observed the servicing of one of the locomotives in detail. Neither wood nor coal was used as a thermal source to produce steam. Instead, large, vatlike containers were carefully slid from under the boiler, detached, and rolled by small cart into a building with massive thick walls. The containers had pipelike protuberances extending from the top. Men, working behind shields, performed the removal, casually cautious, and did not relax their automatic vigilance until the containers were safely in the building and the door closed. The containers wen:

"hot," either through heat or radiation. The actions of the technicians all seemed to indicate the latter.

The streets and roads are different, again principally in size. The "lane" on which vehicles travel is nearly twice as wide as ours. Their version of our automobile is much larger. Even the smallest has a single bench seat that will hold five or six people abreast. ... Wheels are used, but without inflated tires. ... Motive power is contained somewhere in the rear. Their movement is not very fast, at something like 15 to 20 miles per hour. Traffic is not heavy ... " (Monroe, 1971, 94-95).

### *Ninth Hypothesis*

What does this mean? Do we need a ninth hypothesis that there is at least one world that is objectively real in its own right, that appears physical in some ways but is accessible only by OOB? Or are there worlds that are "nonphysical," whatever that means, but that objectively exist and are accessible by OOB?

*experiences  
felt  
as  
real,  
clear,  
rational  
as  
sensory  
experience*

Now, it would be easy at this point to say, "April Fool!" but I'm quite serious about this material. I stress again that I have no doubt about Monroe's veracity, cautiousness, and carefulness in trying to describe his experiences as exactly as they happened. Perhaps he was "crazy" in some sense, but if so, most of us might be much more "sane" if we were more like him. These OOBs did not feel at all dreamlike to him. They did not feel like imagination or feel unreal in any sense. These were experiences which were as real to him (and to thousands of other people who have experienced this at least occasionally) as our sensory experience feels now. Remember that, in general, his consciousness felt as clear and as rational, as able to reason, to observe, and the like, as our consciousness feels right now.

The conventional response to OOB reports is that they can't be real. "Let's dismiss them. This is merely one person's subjectivity, and the author must be some kind of nut to present this stuff seriously." But I think it is more interesting to have a response that a physicist friend of mine did when he heard Monroe speak on this many years ago. He said to himself and to me, "This is crazy, but if even a small part of this is true, *this is really interesting.*" Physicists have known for years that creative advances have come from ignoring the "impossibility" of some idea and simply working with it because the "impossible" solutions are intellectually interesting.

I invite you to take the attitude that his OOB material is interesting. Given this, what sort of things could we think about? Are things like OOBs and the concept of other worlds within the realm of scientific and philosophical investigation? Is this some kind of subjective but archetypal domain built into the human brain? Does

the manufacturer of the bio-computer pre-load this stuff in Read Only Memory, to use a modern analogy for it? Could there be nonphysical worlds that exist somewhere else in some kind of objective sense?

I have done a lot of thinking about it over the years, but I am not going to say much about it because I am more interested in arousing curiosity. I'll just briefly mention two lines of thought. First, how can we train talented people to independently try to explore the world of nonphysical reality? Clearly, subjective biases and the ability of consciousness to fabricate in order to reinforce biases and beliefs can produce similar subjective experiences. But we know a little bit about trying to reduce the kind of bias that can occur. Second, what is the nature of human consciousness that can have OOBEs? So, I invite you to take the interesting route, as the physicists say. How do we study such experiences? What can we make of them? How can we distinguish between the strengths of the various kinds of hypotheses I have suggested, for describing OOBEs and similar experiences?

*an  
invitation*

#### NOTE

IOOBE is now generally shortened to OBE in the parapsychological literature, on the theory that the "of" in Out-of-the-Body Experience would generally not be capitalized,

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