

Reason vs. superstition the real culture clash

Has your mind ever left your body? Have you ever felt your consciousness set itself free? Maybe you were in a hospital bed, maybe you were experiencing a moment of spiritual ecstasy, maybe you were just nodding off to sleep. (I've been a lucid dreamer since childhood, look it up on Wikipedia if you're curious).

Maybe you haven't personally had an out of body experience, but you've read about them and find the stories compelling. Lots of people who've had out of body experiences believe they are powerful evidence for the supernatural.

Unfortunately, they are wrong. It turns out it's all in your mind.

Last week's issue of Science reported the first known successful experiments to induce out of body experiences in healthy subjects. Volunteers were hooked up to virtual reality displays, and with appropriate stimulation reported the sensation of the virtual body being their own. For those of us who care about the brain works (which should be everybody), this is pretty exciting stuff.

This is the latest in an enormous body of evidence that out of body experiences, far from being encounters with some sort of higher astral plane, are natural phenomena originating in the brain. Yet another superstition bites the dust.

I've been doing this long enough to know what the replies from the New Agers and True Believers will be:

1) "Maybe some OBE's are completely natural, but that doesn't mean they all are." This is the Faith Healing Argument. Those of us active in skepticism and critical thinking circles worked hard at exposing fraudulent faith healers, showing the public their tricks and sending them to jail. Believers in faith healing will often thank us for exposing the deceivers so that the "genuine" healers can continue their good work.

This completely misses the point of what we do. The overwhelming evidence of our work is that all faith healers are deceptive and fraudulent. There is nothing there beyond the power of suggestion, belief and placebo. Similarly, the overwhelming evidence of brain science is that all OBEs originate within the mind. Believers in both faith healing and out of body experiences need to tell the world exactly what could change their



OPINION

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minds. If they can't, they should come clean and say so.

2) "Barry, Barry, Barry, people need a little mystery. Why do you insist on sucking all the fun out of life?" This one I've never really understood. What exactly is fun about ignorance? And as for needing mystery, how about the mystery of the human mind? How about the gazillion scientific questions we don't yet have answers for? How about the Big Questions of Life? Why, when faced with all these, must we hang on to superstition and folly?

3) Finally, the question most of you are asking: "Who cares about out of body experiences? Don't you have anything better to write about?" This is the toughest question of all.

Yes, on some level there are more burning issues of our time. But on another level, there aren't.

Much is being made today of a "clash of civilizations." Civilizations are now indeed clashing, but the clash isn't between religions or countries. It is between reason and unreason, between an evolving belief system that accepts the world as we find it, and a fundamentalist one that denies it.

The degree to which a culture will survive and prosper within the coming years will be determined by how it responds to humanity's carefully gathered evidence that the universe is billions of years old, that human beings have emerged through a long, gradual process of evolutionary descent with modification, that we have an innate nature shaped by that process, and that what we used to think were supernatural phenomena have completely natural causes. That is not a statement of faith. It is a summary of the credible evidence.

The essence of intellectual honesty, and indeed of Western civilization, is a willingness to alter belief when the evidence says we should. If we lose that, we lose everything. Our stubborn insistence that things like out of body experiences are supernatural is a part of our primitive heritage we must eventually leave behind. It's a kind of insanity. A hundred years from now, if we still believe we can go outside our bodies, then we will indeed be out of our minds.

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