

Why Do Ghosts Wear Clothes?

The question ‘Why do ghosts wear clothes’ is sometimes posed as a sceptical retort to reports of ghosts and apparitions. It is one thing to say that when people die they survive as ‘spirits’, the argument goes, quite another to suppose that their clothes also survive in the spirit world. In fact, ghosts usually appear fully clad, and sometimes elaborately so – for example in costumes appropriate to the period in which they might have lived. But the question does in fact point to interesting and apparently serious theoretical obstacles for certain accounts of apparitions and out-of-body experiences (OBEs).

Introduction

As far as OBEs are concerned, explanations by parapsychologists divide into two broad classes. According to the first, *externalist hypothesis*, out-of-body consciousness is somehow physically separable from the body; the OBEr’s mind or mental states are literally *at* the sites from which the OBEr seems to perceive. According to the second, *internalist hypothesis*, nothing of the sort happens; the experience of being outside the body is always illusory. In short, it is merely a misleadingly vivid, imagery-rich type of clairvoyance.

Most externalists adopt a form of *animism*, according to which one’s mental capacities can exist only so long as they are *grounded in* or *supported by* a kind of underlying substrate. So if our mental capacities and traits can operate apart from the body during an OBE (and persist even after bodily death and dissolution), it would appear that some substrate besides the normal physical body makes that possible. At this point, externalists typically assert that the human mind ‘is essentially and inseparably bound up with some kind of extended quasi-physical vehicle, which is not normally perceptible to the senses of human beings’.^[1] It’s this vehicle that some identify as the *secondary* or *astral body* they experience during OBEs, and which observers at remote locations apparently perceive in so-called [reciprocal cases](#) – that is, cases that typically take the following form: Agent *A* experiences an OBE in which she ostensibly ‘travels’ to percipient *B*’s location and is subsequently able to describe features of the state of affairs there that she could not have known by normal means. *B*, meanwhile, experiences an apparition of *A* at that location. (In a few instances, others on the scene also experience *A*’s apparition.)

As far as explanations of apparitions are concerned, the main contenders are various forms of a *telepathic* theory,^[2] and an *objectivist* account, according to which apparitions are distinct entities (perhaps psychokinetically-produced) actually located at the place where they are perceived. Of course the totality of apparitional cases need not be handled by just one theory of apparitions. Some cases may be most neatly explained telepathically, while others – collective apparitions especially – might be handled best by an objectivist approach.

The Problem of Apparitional Clothing

We may now consider how the old question about why ghosts wear clothes highlights a problem for both the externalist account of OBEs and the objectivist account of apparitions. Stephen Braude explains the problem as follows:

Suppose that, while decked out in my new Armani suit, I try to project myself in an OBE to a friend, who then has an apparition of me in my sartorial splendor. If we explain my friend's ability to describe me accurately by positing a traveling 'secondary body', how do we explain my friend's experience of my new suit? Does my Armani suit also have a double? It seems absurd to think so. But if we can—and indeed, *should*—explain the apparition of my Armani suit without appealing to a secondary or astral suit (e.g., if we explain the apparition of my suit in terms of 'ordinary', non-traveling ESP), it seems far less compelling to explain the apparition of *me* in terms of a detachable part of consciousness or secondary body.^[3]

The following case illustrates the issue nicely. Early on the morning of 27 January 1957, 'Martha Johnson' (a pseudonym) from Plains, Illinois, had a dream in which she traveled to her mother's home, 926 miles away in northern Minnesota. In a statement sent to the American Society for Psychical Research the following May, she wrote,

After a little while I seemed to be alone going through a great blackness. Then all at once way down below me, as though I were at a great height, I could see a small bright oasis of light in the vast sea of darkness. I started on an incline towards it as I knew it was the teacherage (a small house by the school) where my mother lives ... After I entered, I leaned up against the dish cupboard with folded arms, a pose I often assume. I looked at Mother who was bending over something white and doing something with her hands. She did not appear to see me at first, but she finally looked up. I had a sort of pleased feeling and then after standing a second more, I turned and walked about four steps.^[4]

Martha woke from her dream at 2.10 am (1.10 am in Minnesota). The dream 'nagged' her mind for several days, at which point she received a letter from her mother, who wrote that she had seen Martha. Martha then replied, describing her experience and asking her mother to identify what she had been wearing. A second letter from Mrs Johnson answered that question and provided further details about her experience.

In the first of her two letters, dated 29 January, Martha's mother wrote,

Did you know you were here for a few seconds? I believe it was Saturday night, 1:10, January 26th, or maybe the 27th. It would have been 10 after two your time ... I looked up and there you were by the cupboard just standing smiling at me. I started to speak and you were gone. I forgot for a minute where I was. I think the dogs saw you too. They got so excited and wanted out—just like they thought you were by the door—sniffed and were so tickled.^[5]

Mrs Johnson's second letter was written on 7 February 1957. She wrote,

I was bending over the ironing board trying to press out a seam... You were standing with your back to the cupboard (the front of it) between the table and

the shelf, you know, just sort of sitting on the edge of the lower part of the cupboard... I looked at the dogs and they were just looking at you. I'm sure they saw you longer than I did ... I turned to go in the bedroom and you must have started to go out the door then. That's when the dogs went wild.

Your hair was combed nice—just back in a pony tail with the pretty roll in front. Your blouse was neat and light—seemed almost white.... You were very *solid*—JUST like in life. Didn't see you from the lower bust down—that I can remember, anyway.^[6]

Martha confirmed in correspondence that during her 'visit' she had indeed experienced her hairstyle and clothing as her mother described.

It should be clear why this case poses a problem for both an externalist account of OBEs and an objectivist explanation of the reciprocal apparition. The clothing and hairstyle of the apparitional figure were not those of the sleeping Martha. They corresponded, instead, to the way Martha experienced herself during her OBE. Assuming that telepathic explanations are at least sometimes appropriate, one such explanation comes immediately to mind. Presumably, Martha's hairstyle and clothing during her OBE are mental constructs, just as they would be if her experience were merely a dream. But then it certainly looks as if Martha telepathically communicated those features of the OBE to her mother, as well as influencing Mrs Johnson to experience her with arms folded, near the cupboard, and so on.

Of course, an apparitional experience could be a mixture of genuine perception (of an apparitional figure) with a telepathically induced quasi-perception (for instance of the figure's attire), just as genuine and quasi-perceptions would combine if I were to hallucinate a hippo in the real corner of the room. But if we must appeal to ESP (telepathic influence) to explain parts of the apparitional experience, then it may simply be gratuitous to suppose that a detachable part of consciousness or astral body was actually present at the remote location.

Furthermore, in some reciprocal cases, it is the percipient, rather than the OBEr, who seems to supply features such as apparitional clothing. In one such case,^[7] the Rev Clarence Godfrey tried to appear to a friend at the foot of her bed. He made the mental effort in the late evening after retiring to bed, and he fell asleep after about eight minutes. He then dreamed that he met his friend the next morning, and she confirmed that he had appeared to her. This dream woke him, and he noticed that his clock showed 3.40 am.

When his friend confirmed the experiment's success the following day, she noted that it occurred at about the time the servant put out all the lamps, which usually took place around 3:45. In her written account, she says that Godfrey 'was dressed in his usual style'. Frank Podmore, an early investigator in the British Society for Psychical Research, recognized the significance of this. He wrote that the apparition's dress

was that ordinarily worn in the day-time by Mr. Godfrey, and that in which the percipient would be accustomed to see him, not the dress which he was

actually wearing at the time. If the apparition is in truth nothing more than an expression of the percipient's thoughts, this is what we should expect to find, and as a matter of fact in the majority of well-evidenced narratives of telepathic hallucination this is what we actually do find. The dress and surroundings of the phantasm represent, not the dress and surroundings of the agent at the moment, but those with which the person is familiar.^[8]

In a similar case, Mr G Sinclair tried mentally to 'visit' his ailing wife, whom he had left back at home while he was traveling.^[9] At the time of Sinclair's attempt, he was undressed and sitting on the edge of his bed. Mrs Sinclair later wrote, 'I saw him as plain as if he had been there in person. I did not see him in his night clothes, but in a suit that hung in the closet at home'. Because the apparitional clothing in these cases seems to be supplied by the percipient's mind, the cases clearly support the view that the apparition itself is likewise (as Podmore puts it) 'an expression of the percipient's thoughts' and not an ordinarily perceived astral body or localized objective entity.

Before leaving this topic we should consider another issue. If an apparition's clothing is constructed subjectively in response to telepathic influence, then what (according to externalists or objectivists) would observers perceive if the telepathy were unsuccessful or – as is often noted – deferred to a later time? If externalists want to say that only the secondary body is genuinely perceived, are we to suppose that this body is unclad and that the clothing is supplied telepathically? What would happen, from that point of view, if the telepathy were unsuccessful? Would there be, in those cases, perceptions of naked secondary bodies? In fact, if externalists contend that our secondary bodies go forth into the world unclad, one would expect at least some reports of naked apparitions. Given the vagaries of successful ESP and PK, one would expect the genuine perception of naked secondary bodies to occur more reliably than the associated quasi-perceptions of their clothing. But the extensive literature on apparitions contains almost no reports of naked human figures. According to Irwin, 'in Crookall's extensive case collection only four such cases occur and in some of these the astral body quickly became clothed'.^[10]

At this point, OBE externalists might argue that one's secondary body has a certain degree of malleability, so that it can alter its age, size, and other features (such as whether or not it has a beard or long hair). So perhaps this malleability can also extend to the simulation of clothing. However, certain cases make this externalist strategy seem particularly incredible. Consider the following example,^[11] in which two persons agreed to experiment with producing OBE apparitions.

JAKOB: The day after our decision I drove my daughter to her job, the time was 6 P.M. I was suddenly reminded of this agreement with Eva. Then I transported myself astrally to her home and found her sitting on the sofa, reading something. I made her notice my presence by calling her name and showing her that I was driving my car. She looked up and saw me. After that I left her and was back in the car which I had been driving all the while without any special awareness of the driving.

EVA: I was sitting alone in the room in an easy chair. ... Suddenly I saw Jakob sitting in front of me in the car, saw about half the car as if I were in it with him. He sat at the wheel: I only saw the upper part of his body. I also saw the clock in the car, I think it was a couple of minutes before six. The car was not headed towards our house but in another direction.^[12]

Presumably, positing the existence of a duplicate car is even less plausible than positing the existence of duplicate clothes. And as Alan Gauld notes, even if the externalist manages to explain how a secondary body might transform its outer parts into semblances of clothing, it seems excessive to suppose that our subtle bodies might also shape-shift into a half car with a clock showing the correct time. A telepathic explanation is obviously most compelling in this case, and that seems to weaken considerably the externalist recourse to secondary bodies in other reciprocal cases.

Conclusion

Of course the variety of OBE accounts and apparitional cases accommodates – in principle at least – a variety of explanatory options. And there is no reason to insist that all cases must be explained along the same general lines. Nevertheless, the problem of apparitional clothing serves as a useful reminder that some popular externalist accounts of OBEs might be considerably more simplistic than is usually appreciated.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Broad (1962), 339.
2. ^ See the discussion in the *Encyclopedia* entry on Apparitions.
3. ^ Braude (2003), 266-67.
4. ^ Dale, White, & Murphy (1962), 29.
5. ^ Dale, White, & Murphy (1962), 30.
6. ^ Dale, White, & Murphy (1962), 30.
7. ^ Summarized in Myers (1903), vol. 1, 688-90.
8. ^ Quoted in Myers (1903), vol. 1, 689-90.
9. ^ Myers (1903), vol. 1, 697-98.
10. ^ Irwin (1985), 229.
11. ^ Cited in Gauld (1982).
12. ^ Gauld (1982), 228.

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