

EDITORIAL

Why Do Ghosts Wear Clothes?DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2019/1637>

Copyright: Creative Commons CC-BY-NC

In my previous Editorial, I looked briefly at our theoretical options for explaining the most compelling cases of apparitions. And I argued that—at least for most collective cases—our best option might be to regard apparitional figures as objective, localized entities, perhaps continuous with other materialization phenomena. I’d like now to look briefly at a related set of issues, raised by the somewhat notorious question: Why do ghosts wear clothes?

That question is sometimes posed as a glib, skeptical swipe at reports of ghosts or apparitions, who (we’re told) often appear fully (and sometimes elaborately) clad. For example, in cases of apparitions of the dead, the figures are often described as wearing costumes appropriate to the period in which the deceased lived. But despite its customary snarky intention, the question “Why do ghosts wear clothes?” does in fact point to interesting and apparently serious theoretical obstacles for certain accounts of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and (to a lesser extent) some explanations of apparitions.

As far as OBEs are concerned, explanations tend to divide into two broad classes. According to the first, the *externalist hypothesis*, out-of-body consciousness is somehow physically separable from the body; the OBEr’s mind or mental states are somehow detachable from the body and are literally *at* the sites from which the OBEr seems to perceive. According to the second, the *internalist hypothesis*, nothing of that sort happens; the experience of being outside the body is always illusory. In short, internalists contend that the apparent OBE is merely a misleadingly vivid, imagery-rich type of clairvoyance. The internalist can also point to the extensive literature on clairvoyance to remind externalists that we have plenty of evidence of ESP success where it’s clearly preposterous to posit an out-of-body consciousness to do the clairvoyant work—say, for correct identification of cards in a sealed deck or images in a sealed opaque envelope. In these cases, the items available for clairvoyant awareness can’t be viewed from *any* position in space. But then, it’s not necessary to posit a traveling

consciousness in other cases. Internalists can always explain the varying subjective experiences of psychic “percipients” in terms of idiosyncratic manifestations of an ESP ability. (For more on psi and the nature of abilities, see Braude 2014.)

Most OBE-externalists adopt the view that one’s mental capacities can exist only so long as they’re *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 perhaps persist even after bodily death and dissolution), the temptation is to posit some substrate in addition to the normal physical body to explain how that’s 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” (Broad 1962:339). 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 taking the following form: Agent *A* experiences an OBE in which *A* ostensibly “travels” to percipient *B*’s location and is subsequently able to describe features of the state of affairs there that *A* 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 a *telepathic* approach (positing nothing but ESP-interactions either between postmortem and ante-mortem individuals or between ante-mortem individuals), and an *objectivist* account, according to which apparitions are distinct entities (perhaps psychokinetically produced) actually located at the place where they’re perceived. Of course (as I noted last issue), the totality of apparitional cases needn’t be handled by just one approach to apparitions. Some cases may be most neatly explained telepathically, while others—collective apparitions especially—seem to be handled most easily 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 (extended to cover all cases—not just collective apparitions). In my book, *Immortal Remains*, I explained 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. (Braude 2003:266–267)

The case of Miss Johnson illustrates the issue nicely. Early on the morning of January 27, 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 (ASPR) 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. (Dale, White, & Murphy 1962:29)

Martha woke from her dream at 2:10 a.m. (1:10 a.m. in Minnesota). The dream "nagged" her mind for several days, at which point she received a letter from her mother, who wrote that she'd seen Martha. Martha then replied, describing her experience and asking her mother to identify what she'd 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 January 29, 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. (Dale, White, & Murphy 1962:30)

Mrs. Johnson's second letter was written on February 7, 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. (Dale, White, & Murphy 1962:30)

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 the OBE-externalist and to a lesser extent (if at all) for an objectivist explanation of the reciprocal apparition. The clothing and hairstyle of the apparitional figure were not those of the sleeping Miss Johnson. They corresponded, instead, to the way Miss Johnson experienced herself during her OBE. So assuming that telepathic explanations are at least sometimes appropriate, one such explanation comes immediately to mind. Presumably, Miss Johnson's hairstyle and clothing during her OBE are thoroughly subjective constructs, just as they would be if her experience were merely a dream. But then it certainly looks as if Miss Johnson 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, etc.

Of course, an apparitional experience could be a mixture of genuine perception (say, of a spatially located apparitional figure) with a telepathically induced quasi-perception (of the figure's attire, etc.), 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 (along with the OBE-externalist) that a fundamental but detachable part of consciousness (or astral body) was actually present at the remote location.

The situation is not as grim for proponents of objectivist accounts of apparitions. In principle, at least, Mrs. Johnson might have psychokinetically created a temporary entity corresponding to the mental images telepathically received from her daughter—that is, rather than keeping the entire

experience “in her head.” And in fact, Miss Johnson herself might have psychokinetically created an entity at her mother’s location. Either of those conjectures might help explain why the dogs were looking where Mrs. Johnson perceived the apparitional figure to be. (Of course, the dogs might also have been telepathically influenced by either Miss or Mrs. Johnson.) At any rate, this case, and others like it, show clearly why an OBE-externalist appeal to *the OBEr’s fundamental but detachable and traveling secondary body* seems less plausible than an explanation entirely in terms of ESP or in terms of PK on the part of either agent (OBEr) or percipient. (Moreover, as I discuss below, if the apparitional figure is a localized entity but its attire, etc., are not, does that mean the apparitional figure/astral body goes forth naked into the world?)

Furthermore, in some reciprocal cases, it’s the percipient, rather than the OBEr, who seems to supply the apparitional clothing, etc. In one such case (summarized in Myers 1903, vol. 1:688–690), the Reverend 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 a.m. When his friend actually 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 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. (Quoted in Myers 1903, vol. 1:689–690)

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 (Myers 1903, vol. 1:697–698). At the time of Mr. 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 put it) "an expression of the percipient's thoughts" and not an astral body perceived normally and visually.

We should note again, however, that the percipient can express those thoughts either by means of a purely subjective hallucination or by psychokinetically creating a temporary, spatially located entity. And as before we can't rule out the possibility that Mr. Godfrey or Mr. Sinclair created a (naked?) entity at the percipient's location. So the Godfrey and Sinclair cases, like that of the Johnsons, create some uncertainty for the interpretation of the apparitional figure. That figure might still be a PK-construct—in fact, by either the percipient or the OBEr/psychic "traveler." But because it's the percipient who seems to supply the apparitional clothing, etc., those cases certainly discourage an OBE-externalist appeal to the *OBEr's* essential but traveling secondary body. In these cases, an explanation in terms of percipient-ESP (with or without additional PK of a localized entity) seems clearly to be more straightforward, and the considerations discussed below about astral nakedness reinforce the point.

Here's the problem. If an apparition's clothing is constructed subjectively in response to telepathic influence, then what (according to OBE externalists or apparition objectivists) would observers perceive if the telepathy were unsuccessful or—as is often noted—deferred to a later time? We should remember that many reports of apparitions (perhaps especially from so-called "crisis" cases) suggest that there may be a period of latency between the "sending" of a telepathic message (attempted communication) and the subsequent telepathic experience of the percipient. In fact, the evidence suggests that the emergence into consciousness of (or the behavioral response to) a telepathic stimulus frequently occurs when that event is convenient or otherwise appropriate relative to ongoing background events or the subject's state of mind.

So if OBE-externalists want to say that only the secondary body—but not clothing, etc.—is genuinely observed by the percipient, and if apparition-objectivists insist that the perceived figure is a genuinely localized PK-construct, 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 or delayed? Would there be, in those cases, perceptions of naked secondary bodies or apparitional figures? In fact, if OBE-externalists contend that our secondary bodies go forth into the world unclad, one would expect to find at least some reports of naked apparitions. For that matter, considering the vagaries of successful ESP and PK, one

might even expect the genuine perception of naked secondary bodies to occur more reliably than the associated quasi-perceptions of their clothing, etc. However, the sizeable 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” (Irwin 1985:229).

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 (e.g., whether or not it has a beard, or long hair). So perhaps this malleability can also extend to the simulation of clothing, etc. However, certain cases make that externalist strategy seem particularly incredible. Consider the following example, cited by Gauld (1982). The two persons in this case had 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. (Gauld 1982:228)

Presumably, positing the existence of a duplicate car is at least as implausible as positing the existence of duplicate clothes. And as Gauld notes, even if the OBE-externalist manages to explain how a secondary body might transform its outer parts into semblances of clothing, etc., it seems excessive to suppose that our subtle bodies might also shape-shift into a half car with a clock showing the correct time. If (as it appears) a telepathic explanation is more compelling in this case, that would seem to weaken considerably the externalist recourse to secondary bodies in other cases. Apparition-objectivists are perhaps somewhat freer to propose that PK-created figures are malleable in their appearance. They’re not committed to the positing of fundamental-but-detachable duplicate or secondary bodies. But again, explanations of these cases entirely in terms of ESP seem appealingly straightforward.

Conclusion

Of course (as I've noted), the variety of OBE accounts and apparitional cases accommodates—in principle at least—a variety of explanatory options. And there's 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.

—STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

References Cited

- Braude, S. E. (2003). *Immortal Remains: The Evidence for Life after Death*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Braude, S. E. (2014). *Crimes of Reason: On Mind, Nature, & the Paranormal*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Broad, C. D. (1962). *Lectures on Psychical Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. [Reprinted by Routledge, 2011]
- Dale, L. A., White, R., & Murphy, G. (1962). A selection of cases from a recent survey of spontaneous ESP phenomena. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 56:3–47.
- Gauld, A. (1982). *Mediumship and Survival: A Century of Investigations*. London: Heinemann.
- Irwin, H. J. (1985). *Flight of Mind: A Psychological Study of the Out-of-Body Experience*. Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow Press.
- Myers, F. W. H. (1903). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. London: Longmans, Green.