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Onset of the Spontaneous Non-Transcendental Out-of-Body Experience: An Orienting Response to Threat

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When a perceived out-of-body experience (OBE) occurs an individual has the impression of consciously existing as an extrapersonal self somewhere out of or away from the physical body. This can consist of the perception of being in either a non-transcendental or transcendental environment. It can also occur spontaneously or it can be self-induced by an act of will. The focus of this article is on the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE in cases where the experient has the impression of consciously existing as an extrapersonal self somewhere within the immediate environment of their physical body. It postulates that such an experience is frequently initiated as an adaptive orienting response to brain-interpreted physiological and/or psychological stress meant to bolster the probability for physical survival and psychological well-being during incidents of threat. The article further briefly discusses inconsistent occurrences, unconscious threat interpretations, threat interpretation mistakes, other types of non-transcendental perceived OBEs, and the possible nature of the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE as consisting of a highly accurate simulated environment meant to recreate one's surroundings in the moment of threat to boost the odds for survival.

Keywords: out-of-body experience, orienting response, stress, danger, threat

The perceived out-of-body experience (OBE) is generally defined as when an experient has the impression of consciously existing as an extrapersonal self somewhere out of or away from the physical body. The definition of the perceived OBE can be quite broad at times in which this presumed extrapersonal self has the perception of being in either a non-transcendental or a transcendental environment. The word *transcendental* as used in this paper is based on the usage of the term by Sabom (1982), referring to a perceived locality that transcends the

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observable physical environment of the Earth. This often tends to be perceived as some otherworldly or unknown place, dimension, or realm away from both the physical body and the Earth (such as an impression of having ventured into heaven or hell) whereas the non-transcendental environment generally refers to an identifiable present location on the Earth (see also King, 2021, 2023). Furthermore, the perceived OBE can be spontaneous or it can be self-induced. The term self-induced means that the experient consciously and deliberately attempts to separate from their body by using various techniques or practices, which often involve altered mental states associated with relaxation or meditation.

The subject of this article is the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE in which the experient has the impression of consciously existing as an extrapersonal self somewhere within the immediate environment of their physical body. The article will postulate that such an experience is often initiated as an adaptive orienting response to brain-interpreted physiological and/or psychological threat or stress in order to bolster the probability for physical survival and psychological well-being.

Although the spontaneous transcendental perceived OBE also frequently occurs during some forms of threat or stress (King, 2023), it is not an orienting response and likely instead has other psychological purposes such as a form of absorption to boost the will to live, survive, and thrive through the psychological impact from its content. However, the spontaneous transcendental perceived OBE is beyond the scope of this particular discussion concerning spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs as an orienting response.

The Spontaneous Non-Transcendental Perceived OBE as an Orienting Response

The spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE can take place during a variety of different physiological and psychological conditions, most frequently occurring during either extremely high or low arousal in relation to a normal waking conscious state (Irwin, 1985, pp. 145–146; King, 2023, p. 75). Furthermore, I suggest that it most often seems to occur when the brain has detected possible danger or stress that might be a threat to the continual survival and well-being of the physical organism. It can even be initiated sometimes during sudden real or presumed threatening circumstances while the body remains physically active (King, 2021, 2022, 2023). The common association of stress with some spontaneous perceived OBEs was also noted by both Green (1968, pp. 9–15) and Olson (1988).

Though conditions such as fear have been associated with the initiation of spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs in some cases, and such an arousal from fear may very well be contributory at times, yet the interpretation of danger and threat by the brain seems to be more encompassing than that. In fact, more and more studies are suggesting that the brain is able to recognize potential

threats without any conscious awareness of the presumed threat at all (Bertini and Làdavas, 2021; LeDoux, 2008; Lojowska et al., 2019; Öhman et al., 2007; Wisman and Shrira, 2015). The onset of spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs might even take place during high degrees of psychological stress without the manifestation of any fear in a normal sense, such as when there is stress associated with overwhelming grief (King, 2022).

It is noteworthy that the presumed extrapersonal self during spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs often has the immediate impression of being in a location where the self can view and observe the physical body and/or the surrounding environment, frequently even with a visuospatial perspective of a 180° inversion when necessary so that the self is facing the perceived physical body, often from an opportune elevated position (Green, 1968, pp. 39–43). Furthermore, the field of perception is sometimes much more broad with many reports of being able to see up to 360° horizontally, at other times more narrowed and focused, and occasionally with a capability to visually zoom in and out on things and/or see through supposedly solid objects (Green, 1968, pp. 81–84; King, 2023; Otis, 1978). The perceived OBE also generally includes vivid clarity even for those who normally have eyesight problems (King, 2023), as well as the ability to see in darkness frequently due to the perception of an infused light (Green, 1968, pp. 77–81; Poynton, 1975, pp. 120–121).

This impression of observing the physical body from a distance is also sometimes accompanied with a great sense of clarity, intensity, swift thinking, objectivity, calmness, analgesia, lack of emotion, and/or impartiality regarding the physical body. I suggest that spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs are possibly an orienting response to the brain's detection of what might be a possible threat, allowing the experient to calmly view the environment and situation in order to analyze the possible threat and so assist in making crucial decisions — either consciously or unconsciously — on how the physical body should react. This does not, however, necessitate that everyone who experiences a spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE will then see it as such an opportunity, especially if they are not consciously aware of any type of threat when looking at the scene from that perspective.

The question now arises as to how the distancing of the perceived OBE is instrumental so as to assist in adapting to a situation where a response to threat is needed? Sometimes, we are not in a position or condition to properly evaluate the threat and maximize our options for an effective flight or fight decision and/or how to best implement such a decision. This orienting response, which is often accompanied with an alteration of time slowing down and a sense of calm detachment, allows for a rapid and clear analysis of options while observing the entire situation from a distance for a more advantageous perspective without being affected by excessive emotion or pain. Two examples from two different participants in my research should make this more apparent. The first example from one of the

participants consists of an occurrence of the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE during a state of heightened arousal in the case of possible danger.

> I was attacked by a bag snatcher at 1 a.m. as I was walking from my car to my place. He ran up behind me, I turned around to face him and then he grabbed my bag. I had the straps he had the bottom part and we pulled on the bag. I then came out of my body and was watching me from the side. My mind or thoughts were in my "astral" body. I was thinking "what is the best thing to do here." I looked up and saw my neighbour looking out her window watching. I thought I have to get a really good look at his face. Then swoosh. . . . I was back in my body and started to scream whilst checking out his face in detail. (King, 2021, p. 22)

Although the above incident consisted of an opportunity to observe the surrounding environment and circumstances from an optimal viewpoint while the physical body was still active, there are other cases in which a state of unconsciousness might ensue in which the physical body is at the particular moment unable to react to the threat and/or in some cases even unaware of the exact circumstances of the danger. In these cases, the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE occurs as an adaptive response that allows the experient to clearly orient themself to the situation and circumstances from an optimal position without distraction from any pain or anxiety so that they can act to counter any possible threat if need be in case they regain consciousness. My second example below from a different participant in my research consists of this type of case.

> I was working nights in a factory to support my university studies. I was on a machine that was heating agricultural knives for forging. I wore rubber-soled shoes, had gloves on and was standing on a pallet when a knife got stuck in a slot. Stupidly, I pushed in down [sic] with a screwdriver and, as it moved into the slot I connected the plus and the minus. The electric shock threw me into the air but I do not recall falling onto concrete. The next thing I remember is observing my body lying motionless in a puddle about three meters away from the machine and where I was standing. I also saw the manager and my fiancé (he should have been on the floor) in the office. Then I came to. I was shaken but felt fine otherwise. (King, 2021, unpublished content)

This orienting response may eventually cease — sometimes within seconds — with either a return to conscious somatic awareness or a loss of all consciousness if physiological sustainability fails, or sometimes transition into an absorption event by a shift to a transcendental perceived OBE in which the impression of seeing the physical body is often no longer part of the perceived OBE, depending upon the conditions and circumstances in each particular case. However, on some occasions, such as during an ongoing stress incident, the impression of observing the physical body can be prolonged for several minutes or longer. The presumed extrapersonal self may even continue to watch as an observer while the physical

body continues to flee, fight, overcome, or become immobile to the stress or threat (King, 2022; see also Noyes and Kletti, 1977a, p. 382).

Inconsistent Occurrence of Spontaneous Non-Transcendental Perceived OBEs

If the onset of a spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE is in fact generally a response to threat as postulated in this paper, a valid question arises as to why then does this only happen to some people sometimes and not to everyone during all conditions of threat or danger. Instead, its occurrence at first appears to be random and only occurs on occasion when we might expect it to be more prevalent. However, the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE may be a protective function that is activated based on distinct variables that may differ from one person to another. For example, the brain of one individual may interpret a serious threat in one situation although another might not under the same exact circumstances.

Furthermore, the brains of some people might initiate an observant response as necessary and beneficial and other brains may not, even under identical circumstances and conditions. There are many variables that would likely differ from one person to another, such as threat sensitivity, threat analysis, psychological temperament, physical condition, interpretation of circumstances, and threat response selection. For instance, a study by Fernandes et al. (2013) suggests that people who have a history of exposure to a wider range of violent crimes may be more profoundly affected by threat stimuli directed toward them than those who have had less exposure to violent crimes.

There have been a number of studies that have suggested that some individuals are more prone to having perceived OBEs than others due to varying individual differences (Braithwaite et al., 2013; Gow et al., 2004; Irwin, 2000; Milne et al., 2019; Murray and Fox, 2005; Myers et al., 1983). This may indicate that this response of a spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE during moments of threat may be more accessible and/or more likely for some individuals based on a variety of different factors.

Unconscious Threats and Mistaken Threat Interpretation

It is also important to discuss the occurrence of some spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs that may not be associated with any known identifiable threat. As I have already noted above, many studies postulate that the brain can interpret a possible threat even when we are not consciously aware of that threat. So even if the experient was never aware of a possible threat, it does not necessitate that one did not exist — or that there was not such an interpretation of that possibility by the brain in the moment.

In addition, spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs have also been reported during epileptic seizures (Blanke et al., 2004; Devinsky et al., 1989;

Greyson et al., 2014; Hoepner et al., 2013), dizziness associated with vestibular disorders (Lopez and Elzière, 2018), and laboratory-induced syncope (Lempert et al., 1994a, 1994b); circumstances such as these might also sometimes be interpreted by the brain as threatening. The perceived OBE is also known to sometimes occur during sleep paralysis (Cheyne and Girard, 2009; Denis et al., 2018; Jalal and Ramachandran, 2017), which could be interpreted as a threat if coupled with an awareness of the inability to move; this may especially be the case when sleep paralysis is accompanied by the choking or suffocating sensations and/or some of the terrifying hallucinations that are often reported (Cheyne, 2003; Cheyne et al., 1999; Jalal and Ramachandran, 2017; Molendijk et al., 2017). An interpretation by the brain of a possible threat might also be the case for perceived OBEs that sometimes take place during general anesthesia, especially due to the use of paralytics (King, 2023, pp. 52–54). In addition, spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs might on occasion also occur during dreams associated with threatening elements (King, 2023, p. 73), or perhaps when there are threatening breathing problems such as sleep apnea.

Furthermore, the brain of any particular individual may not always be correct in its interpretation of a threat, so spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs might also occur at times when the brain is mistaken and has reacted to a possible threat where one does not in fact exist. For example, it has been suggested that certain drugs might be contributory in making these types of faulty interpretations such as when having sex under the influence of marijuana or LSD because there is a condition of heightened arousal during such sexual activity that is similar to some incidents of threat or danger, such as assaults (King, 2023, p. 54), for heightened arousal is often associated with activation of the threat response system. As Denefrio and Dennis–Tiwary (2018) wrote, "Metrics of threat sensitivity capture the degree to which an individual shows heightened arousal and preparedness before, during, or following interactions with the aversive stimulus" (p. 1). It seems conceivable that a heightened state of arousal under such conditions mixed with the influence of mind-altering drugs on the brain might in some cases unconsciously activate the onset of a perceived OBE as an orienting response.

It is also perhaps possible that chronic stress in an experient's life might increase the sensitivity of the brain's reaction to other types of stimuli that could be threatening even if they are not so in the moment. The spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE might also possibly manifest during various types of pathological disorders, neurocognitive disturbances, and/or brain process malfunctions.

Other Types of Non-Transcendental Perceived OBEs

The position taken in this paper is that the onset of the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE is generally meant to be an adaptive response to stress when there is a possible threat to life and/or overall well-being. However, there are

also other types of non-transcendental perceived OBEs that may not be activated as an adaptive mechanism per se or related to threat or stress at all.

For example, the self-induced non-transcendental perceived OBE, colloquially referred to as *astral projection*, is initiated by a deliberate effort to separate from the physical body by an act of the conscious will. This can be accomplished by various techniques as discussed by well-known practitioners (Irwin, 1985, pp. 155–169), generally consisting of maintaining a semi-conscious state while placing the self in a condition of lowered or heightened arousal (conditions that are often existent during threat or danger) and exerting a strong desire to have a perceived OBE. Although the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE as a threat response is frequently associated with heightened arousal, situations of lowered arousal often occur during fading somatic consciousness or unconsciousness brought on by various threatening circumstances such as head injuries, physical trauma, excessive fatigue, or interruptions in blood flow. In such a condition, the experient cannot in that moment properly respond to the threat and sometimes cannot even determine the exact specifics of the threat, and so a spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE might occur as an orienting response.

The self-induced perceived OBE, however, is probably not an adaptive response to threat, but instead occurs with a strong desire of the will during self-facilitated lowered or heightened arousal states that enable the practitioner to access that adaptive mechanism that is normally initiated during threat. In other words, rather than the unconscious directly activating the onset of the perceived OBE during threat, it is the conscious will that instead directs the unconscious while the body is in a similar condition of atypical arousal even though no need to react to stress is present.

The perceived OBE state is probably not the preferred condition of the organism during such non-threatening conditions as exist during self-induced perceived OBEs, so this may be why there is generally a struggle to remain in that state for any length of time — even though some regular practitioners have been able to overcome this on some occasions to a degree (Fox, 1962/1979; Monroe, 1977). One of the limitations of most perceived OBE research in exploring this matter further is that it has not generally distinguished spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBEs from those that are deliberately self-induced by practitioners.

This ability of the conscious will to induce a perceived OBE also opens up the possibility that perhaps this mechanism might in some instances be improperly activated spontaneously by other strong desires such as when in situations in which the experient either yearns to be somewhere else or to be away from a certain place when they are prevented in some way from being so. Perhaps in such cases, like during self-induced perceived OBEs, it is the strong conscious will to be away from a certain undesirable condition that gains access to the same adaptive mechanism even though there is not any real threat and so no real adaptive need.

For example, a perceived OBE can occur while feeling bored in a classroom or lecture hall when one does not really want to be there (King, 2023), even when there is no threat, and so it might perhaps not be an adaptive orienting response. On the other hand, although Thackray (1981) found that boredom by itself does not produce stress, he also indicated that boredom associated with a high necessity to pay attention might cause a substantial amount of stress. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that being forced to be somewhere where one does not want to be at the moment could result in various levels of additional stress as well. So, there is still the possibility that stress in such a case can result in a perceived OBE as an orienting response.

The Nature of the Spontaneous Non-Transcendental Perceived OBE

It is important to point out that if the onset of the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE is in fact a response to threat that allows for an orienting perception of the present environment, this does not in itself necessitate that the perceived OBE consists of a genuine separation from the physical body. However, if it is not a genuine separation, it does perhaps suggest that there is an attempt to purposefully and accurately visually reconstruct the experient's circumstances and surroundings as they exist in the moment by means of a simulated environment in order to increase the probability of survival and/or well-being. Though offering a different approach to explaining perceived OBEs, Gabbard and Twemlow (1984) also postulated that perceived OBEs might consist of internal images of environmental approximations formulated by the brain (p. 238). Additionally, after decades of reflection on his own research and that of others, Tart (1998) also concluded that at least some perceived OBEs consist of a simulated environment. Even if they are only a simulation of the fluctuating environment in the moment, they may possibly indicate some type of enhanced perception processes coming into play. For example, even when the eyes are closed, variations of light seen through the eyelids and/or nonvisual light receptors, different types of external tactile sensations on the skin, various audible sounds, and specific smells coupled with memories and existing knowledge may all still be processed by the brain in formulating convincing imagery; in some perceived OBEs, such as during observed somatic continuance, the eyes often even remain open together with other functioning senses as the experient persists in sitting, standing, moving, or performing various activities (Alvarado, 2016; Green, 1968, pp. 44–45; King, 2022; Zingrone et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the brain is quite capable of producing an autoscopic hallucination of the self — sometimes even moving in synchronicity with the actual body — with a visuospatial perspective of that hallucination as distant from the ego's self-location in the physical body (Blanke and Mohr, 2005; Brugger et al., 1997).

There are also numerous self-reports of seeing self-inclusive scenes of the past or a conceivable future from a third-person perspective as an observer during real or presumed life-threatening incidents (Katz et al., 2017; King, 2021, pp. 18–21; 2023, pp. 37–41; Noyes and Kletti, 1977a, pp. 376–378; 1977b). This can even consist of re-experiencing a past memory from a first-person perspective followed by a transition to a third-person observation of that same self-inclusive past event (e.g., Noyes and Kletti, 1977a, pp. 377–378).

In addition, an imaginary OBE from an elevated floating position with a third-person perspective of a dream environment inclusive with one's own dead body can occur during a waking dream under hypnotism when a pseudo-death takes place (Schenk, 1999). Furthermore, there are some substantial reports of hallucinations of being out of the body in which a simulated environment is seen — that includes a false perception of one's presumed physical body — as if that perceived OBE were real when in fact it clearly was not (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995, pp. 198–199; King, 2023). Therefore, the capability of the brain to formulate a very convincing simulated environment complete with a third-person perception of an unreal self — even viewing it from an elevated perspective — is quite apparent at this point in the research.

It needs to be further pointed out that most people who watch television have stored memories of seeing various aspects of life from an irregular elevated view that are possibly available to cognitive processes in creating such a simulated environment; for the high-angle shot is extremely common in television shows and movies, which includes observations of operating rooms, vehicle movements or accidents, roofs of buildings, and much more from such an elevated perspective. Furthermore, such real-life incidents of viewing people, vehicles, and architecture from an elevated perspective are common for many in modern life, including visual perception from planes, cliffs, upper-story windows or balconies, stairs, escalators, bridges, amusement park rides, bleachers, ladders, trees, and much more. It should also be noted that people can sometimes fly in dreams (Schredl, 2011; Schredl and Piel, 2007), which include this type of high-angle perception in some of those dreams, providing support for the suggestion that cognitive processes are capable of creating perspectives of viewing a simulated environment from an elevated perspective.

If the perceived OBE is a simulated recreation by the brain of the fluctuating physical environment in the moment, this would provide a possible explanation for at least some of the claims in reports of veridical perception (Cook et al., 1998; Holden, 2009; Ring and Lawrence, 1993; Sabom, 1998, pp. 37–51, 184–191). Furthermore, it would offer a reasonable explanation for perceived OBEs with visual content reported by those who were congenitally blind (Ring and Cooper, 1999) because they can at least sometimes experience visual imagery while dreaming (Bértolo et al., 2003; Lopes da Silva, 2003; Vitali et al., 2022). It would also explain the improved visual clarity during the perceived OBE for those who normally

have eyesight problems (King, 2023) while also accounting for the 360° view that is sometimes reported (King, 2023; Otis, 1978) — which is a cognitive capability of imagination and visualization that apparently can in some instances occur in the simulated visual environment of the perceived OBE.

Such an explanation would also resolve the problems of incorrect visual perceptions and/or the lack of audible environmental sounds during some perceived OBEs (Green, 1968, pp. 67, 71–84, 155–156; Irwin, 1985, pp. 225–231; King, 2023), which might be due to hindrances or limitations of the individual brain in recreating the surrounding environment that may occur in the moment for each particular case. On the other hand, some incorrect perceptions during perceived OBEs, such as occasional missing/disappearing roofs on dwellings and vehicles, or altered visuospatial perceptions of the environment (Green, 1968, pp. 39–43; King, 2023), may even be deliberate to allow for a clear observation of the presumed physical body from an optimal elevated position. Additionally, it would explain why the majority of perceived OBEs that appear to take place at some distant location on the Earth away from the vicinity of the physical body include inaccurate perceptions (Monroe, 1977, p. 9; see also Tart, 1998).

Furthermore, if this simulated environment is deliberately formulated to be as close to reality as possible and it is coupled with a normal waking-like awareness consisting of lucid clarity during its occurrence with the ego boundary intact, it is understandable why it all seems so real to the experient (see Gabbard and Twemlow, 1984, pp. 18–26, 94–119, 128, 182). Such vivid perception and the associated mental processes of the brain might even be possible during times when the individual may be presumed dead because there have been some recent studies suggesting that individuals may experience an end-of-life electrical surge in the brain after the complete loss of any measurable blood pressure, which might possibly be a last gasp survival mechanism (Chawla et al., 2009, 2017; Vicente et al., 2022; see also Xu et al., 2023). It does need to be pointed out, however, that this simulated-environment model is still hypothetical and there may be other more reasonable explanations for perceived OBEs offered as research continues.

Final Thoughts

This paper has suggested that the primary causation for the onset of the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE may be a reaction in the moment to stress that is interpreted by the brain as a presumed threat to the survival and/or overall well-being of the physical organism, generally functioning — at least at first — as a purposeful orienting response. Such an explanation can accommodate both opponents and proponents of interpreting the perceived OBE as a genuine spatial detachment from the physical body because it allows for either interpretation. However, because the explanation portrays the onset of the spontaneous non-transcendental perceived OBE as a purposeful orienting response to possible

threats, it further postulates that the phenomenon is critical at times to the survival and/or well-being of the human species, providing a logical reason for its occurrence. It is my hope that this postulation can be explored and examined in future research, and if further supported by such research, better understood.

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