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# Who am I in Out of Body Experiences? Implications from OBEs for the explanandum of a theory of self-consciousness

# Abstract

Contemporary theories of self-consciousness typically begin by dividing experiences of the self into types, each requiring separate explanation. The stereotypical case of an out of body experience (OBE) may be seen to suggest a distinction between the sense of oneself as an experiencing subject, a mental entity, and a sense of oneself as an embodied person, a bodily entity. Point of view, in the sense of the place from which the subject seems to experience the world, in this case is tied to the sense of oneself as a mental entity and seems to be the ‘real’ self. Closer reading of reports, however, suggests a substantially more complicated picture. For example, the ‘real’ self that is experienced as separate from the body in an OBE is not necessarily experienced as disembodied. Subjects may experience themselves as having two bodies. In cases classed as heautoscopy there is considerable confusion regarding the apparent location of the experiencing subject; is it the ‘real mind’ in the body I seem to be looking out from, or is it in the body that I see? This suggests that visual point of view can dissociate from the experience of one’s own “real mind” or experience of self-identification. I provide a tripartite distinction between the sense of ownership, the sense of embodiment and the sense of subjectivity to better describe these experiences. The phenomenology of OBEs suggests that there are three distinct forms of self-consciousness which need to be explained.

Key words: self-consciousness; out of body experience; OBE; sense of embodiment; sense of ownership; sense of subjectivity

# Introduction

Contemporary theories of self-consciousness typically begin by dividing experiences of the self into types. For example, we commonly distinguish experiences of agency from those of ownership and then seek to provide an explanation of one or other of these. The stereotypical case of an out of body experience (OBE) may be seen to suggest a distinction between the sense of oneself as an experiencing subject, a mental entity, and a sense of oneself as an embodied person, a bodily entity. Point of view, in the sense of the place from which the subject seems to experience the world, is tied to the sense of oneself as a mental entity and seems to be the ‘real’ self. Closer reading of reports, however, suggests a substantially more complicated picture. For example, the ‘real’ self that is experienced as separate from the body in an OBE is not necessarily experienced as disembodied. The subject may, for example, experience themselves as having two bodies. In cases classed as heautoscopy there is considerable confusion regarding the apparent location of the experiencing subject; is it the ‘real mind’ in the body I seem to be looking out from, or is it in the body that I see? This suggests that visual point of view can dissociate from the experience of one’s own “real mind” or experience of self-identification. Accounts of self-consciousness need to be sensitive to the possibilities of body duplication, a form of self-experience that is visual and not based on feature recognition, and a potential dissociation between visual point of view and the experience of oneself as a mental entity. I provide a tripartite distinction between forms of self-consciousness to better describe the phenomenology of OBEs. ‘The sense of embodiment’ refers to the feeling of being an embodied subject, ‘the sense of ownership’ refers to the feeling of owning or possessing a body and finally ‘the sense of subjectivity’ refers to the feeling of being a subject of experience. Self-identification, according to these distinctions, appears tied to the sense of embodiment and the sense of subjectivity, but not the sense of ownership. A consideration of the phenomenology of OBEs thus suggests that there are (at least) three forms of self-consciousness to be explained.

# Out of body experiences and some distinctions in self-consciousness research

OBEs might be used to help define the explanandum of a theory of self-consciousness. For example, as I discuss below, they have been used in an attempt to identify dissociable types of self-experience for explanation. However, as we will see, the reported phenomenologies of OBEs are extremely complex and do not easily support such distinctions. In this section I present some ways in which OBEs have been used to help define the project of the study of self-consciousness, before moving onto complexities in the reported phenomenology that substantially muddy the waters.

OBEs are described and defined in various ways. If we were to rely on definitions and descriptions found in the literature it would be easy to give the impression that OBEs are a fairly clear cut phenomenon on a par with experience induced in psychophysical experiments. If OBEs were such as definitions and introductory descriptions tell us then the implications for self-consciousness would be straightforward. So, a few decades into serious research on OBEs—how are they defined? What are taken to be their essential features?

Some take the fairly minimalist view that all that OBEs necessarily involve is an experience in which the ‘self’, ‘subject’ or ‘centre of consciousness’ is experienced as spatially separate from the body (Blackmore, 1984, p. 244, 1986, p. 615; Brugger, Regard, & Landis, 1997, p. 21; Irwin, 2000, p. 1; Murray & Fox, 2006, p. 126; Terhune, 2009, p. 236). Others add more features as essential to OBEs. Sometimes it is deemed necessary that the self seems to be elevated above the body (Blanke & Arzy, 2005, p. 16; Blanke & Castillo, 2007, p. 90; Olaf Blanke, 2012, p. 564; Mohr & Blanke, 2005, p. 184), or that two distinct bodies (seen and felt) are experienced (Blanke, Landis, Spinelli, & Seeck, 2004, p. 1414; Blanke, 2012, p. 564; Lopez & Blanke, 2007; Lopez, Halje, & Blanke, 2008, p. 151; Overney, Arzy, & Blanke, 2009, p. 228). Occasionally it is suggested that OBEs necessarily involve an experience of leaving the body (Devinsky, Feldmann, Burrowes, & Bromfield, 1989, p. 1080). More commonly, but no less problematically, it is suggested that OBEs necessarily involve autoscopy, or seeing one’s own body (Anzellotti et al., 2011, p. 2; Blanke & Dieguez, 2009, p. 303; Devinsky et al., 1989, p. 1080; Ehrsson, 2007, p. 1048; Mohr & Blanke, 2005, p. 189; Zamboni, Budriesi, & Nichelli, 2005, p. 212).

The more features that are added as essential to OBEs, the more controversial the definition becomes. Several studies suggest that OBEs can occur in the absence of autoscopy, with just under half of OBErs (those who have OBEs) reporting autoscopic experience during the OBE (Blackmore, 1984, pp. 231–2; Cheyne & Girard, 2009, p. 205) and as many as a third of subjects reporting no visual experience what-so-ever (Terhune, 2009, p. 238). Similarly, a two thirds majority reports no experience of leaving the body, but instead are suddenly outside (Blackmore, 1984, p. 233). We might then take such statements not as definitions, but rather as short descriptions of prototypical or otherwise interesting cases.

If so, then it may well appear that OBEs support a distinction between two forms of self-consciousness. To describe an OBE, we might say that we typically experience ourselves as both bodily and mental beings; we appear to be (in self-consciousness) embodied persons and subjects of experience. Call these the sense of bodily self and the sense of mental self. Typically, we might think that the subject represented in the sense of being a mental self appears to be located within the bodily person (just behind the eyes perhaps). However, OBEs show that the experienced bodily self and the experienced mental self can appear to be at different locations, suggesting that in self-consciousness they are not essentially tied. Thus OBEs might be taken to suggest a distinction in types of self-consciousness, the sense of a bodily self versus the sense of a mental self, each of these requiring different explanations.

It is unlikely that anyone holds that OBEs demand us making this distinction in any straightforward way, as the description of OBEs given above taken from various definitions is not intended as a comprehensive description of self-consciousness during OBEs. That said; some authors have been quick to speculate on the implications of OBEs for the nature of self-consciousness.

Some suggest that OBEs highlight the existence of the sense of bodily self, especially that the body appears to be oneself or at least a part of oneself (Petkova & Ehrsson, 2008, p. 1). Others take it that OBEs suggest that the body appears not to be oneself but rather something possessed or owned by the subject (Lopez et al., 2008, p. 150) and that (unlike the rubber hand illusion or the delusion of somatoparaphrenia) OBEs show that this ‘sense of ownership’ can be disturbed for the whole body rather than a body part (Lenggenhager, Tadi, Metzinger, & Blanke, 2007; Lopez & Blanke, 2007, p. 150). Regardless of whether the body is taken to be represented in experience as oneself or as an object one owns, several authors agree that OBEs highlight the normal experience of the subject as located within the boundaries of the body (Blanke, 2012, p. 556; Irwin, 2000, p. 2; Lopez et al., 2008, p. 150; Petkova & Ehrsson, 2008, p. 1). A more nuanced argument for the view that OBEs suggest a distinction between two forms of self-consciousness comes from Metzinger.

In several places Metzinger puts OBEs to good philosophical use. *One* of those uses gives us insight into the explanandum of a theory of self-consciousness. To begin to get a grasp on OBEs, consider the following example which Metzinger offers as typical:

I awoke at night – it must have been about 3am – and realized that I was completely unable to move. I was absolutely certain I was not dreaming, as I was enjoying full consciousness. Filled with fear about my condition I only had one goal, namely, being able to move my body again. I concentrated all my will power and tried to roll over to one side: something rolled, but not my body – something that was me, my whole consciousness, including all of its sensations. I rolled onto the floor beside the bed. While this happened, I did not feel bodiless, but as if my body consisted of a substance constituted of a mixture between gaseous and liquid states. To the present day I have never forgotten the combination of amazement and great surprise which gripped me while I felt myself falling onto the floor, but the expected hard bounce never took place. Actually had the movement unfolded in my normal body, my head would have had to collide with the edge of my bedside table. Lying on the floor, I was seized by terrible fear and panic. I knew that I possessed a body, and I only had one great desire – to be able to control it again. With a sudden jolt I regained control, without knowing how I managed to get back to it (Metzinger, 2003, p. 491: translated from Waelti, E., 1983 by Thomas Metzinger).

More generally, Metzinger lists the following as the prototypical features of OBEs:

(a) a more or less veridical representation of the bodily self, from an external perspective, which does *not* function as the center of the global model of reality, and (b) a second self-model, which largely integrates proprioceptive perceptions, although, interestingly, weight sensations only to a lesser degree – and which possess special properties of shape and form that may or may not be veridical (Metzinger, 2003, p. 489).

In the prototypical case then an OBE is thought to involve two self-experiences: one of one’s own body seen as if from an external perspective and another separate from the seen body. The subjective point of view seems to the subject to be within this second self. But, we will already notice something strange, the example from Metzinger above doesn’t possess feature (a): a visual experience of the body. Of course, Metzinger provides many examples of reports of OBEs, others of which do have this feature. What we are seeing here, again, is how many reports of OBEs differ from the usual definitions. Similarly, on the latter self-experience Metzinger adds:

The second self-model can be one of a full blown agent, that is, endowed with the characteristic form of phenomenal content generating the subjective experience of agency… or only what Harvey Irwin… has aptly called a “passive generalised somaesthetic image of a static floating self” (Metzinger, 2003, pp. 489–490).

Metzinger here is hinting at the complexity of the experience that will become so important for us below. We will see that there is considerable variation in this experience; here Metzinger is considering a potential experience of agency for this ‘second self’. This complexity leads Metzinger to consider OBEs to be a cluster concept (Metzinger, 2003, p. 502). Here we see another form of self-experience, namely the experience of oneself as the agent of mental actions—what Metzinger elsewhere calls the attentional agent—at play in OBEs.

Despite this complexity, Metzinger views at least prototypical OBEs as experiences in which the self is represented in two different ways. The self is seen as a body from another self where the subjective point of view resides (Metzinger, 2003, p. 495). Peculiar to OBEs, the seen body is represented as one’s own body, apparently without being represented as identical to oneself as agent of action (Metzinger, 2003, p. 502), or we should add, the self as subject of experience. But, Metzinger hastens to add that the body is not seen as identical to the self as a mental agent—Metzinger says “attentional agent”—as the seen body can be represented as an agent of bodily action[[1]](#footnote-2) as suggested by two popular examples:

I was standing before a small audience, not more than ten people, in a well lit college class room, delivering a speech which was so well prepared that I could nearly recite it like a memorized poem. Without prior warning, I suddenly had the clear impression of observing myself from the outside, from a position more than a meter above my head and some what to the side: near the ceiling of the room. This impression probably did not persist for more than 15 seconds, but for that time, it was as though my `body’ was down below the real `me’, continuing to deliver the prepared speech, while `I’ was watching from above (Grusser & Landis, 1991, pp. 298–9).

And Metzinger’s (2003, p. 495) favoured example:

After running approximately 12-13 miles… I started to feel as if I wasn’t looking through my eyes but from somewhere else… I felt as if something was leaving my body, and although I was still running along looking at the scenery, I was looking at myself running as well. My “soul” or whatever, was floating somewhere above my body high enough up to see the tops of the trees and small hills (Alvarado, 2000, p. 184).

Just as the standard definitions of OBEs introduced above, the description of OBE phenomenology given by Metzinger implies that there are two distinct forms of self-consciousness. First is the experience of the self as an attentional agent and subject of experience, in other words as a mental entity. This is distinct from the ways in which one is conscious of one’s body. Here we have seen discussion of bodily self-consciousness consisting of an experience of a sense of agency over bodily actions, an experience of a body as one’s own body which may, or at least in OBEs, may not be the body which houses the mental entity and its subjective point of view. Distinctions such as these are common place in the study of self-consciousness (cf. Campbell, 2002; Carruthers, 2007; Gallagher, 2000) and are supported by a variety of considerations, most powerfully by dissociations in different forms of pathological self-experience. But, how cleanly do OBEs support a species of the view that there is a strong distinction between experience of the self as a bodily being and experience of the self as a mental being?

Some considerations seem to add weight to this distinction. For example, the seen body seems to be experienced both as the self and as something other than the self during OBEs. In one way, the body seems to not be the self as it is not the object of self-identification. But, on the other hand subjects claim that what they see is their own body even when it does not look like their body—suggesting that the basis subjects have for identifying the body as their own is a feeling of identification and not the recognition of features of the body. This is rather more like normal self-consciousness.

We have already seen that during an OBE subjects claim that they are external to their body, suggesting that they identify with the subjective point of view and not the body during the experience. But what of the body? How do subjects know that the body they see is their own body? It is not so simple as seeing a body which looks like them. Often the seen body is noticeably different from the subject’s real body:

"It was like a dream, but I was awake. Suddenly, I saw myself about five feet in front of me. My double was mowing the lawn, which is what I should have been doing." He has subsequently had approximately 15 autoscopic episodes immediately before complex or secondary generalized tonoclonic seizures and numerous episodes unrelated to other seizure phenomena. His double is always a transparent, full figure that is slightly smaller than life size. It often wears different clothing than the patient and does not share the patient's thoughts or emotions. The double is usually engaged in an activity that the patient feels he should be doing, and he says, "that guy is my guilty conscience”. (Devinsky et al., 1989, p. 1082)

Other subjects report what must be an extremely unsettling experience of an incomplete or changing body. Blanke and colleagues (2002) describe a subject who reported seeing only the lower half of her body. When asked to attend to her legs during the experience (which was being induced using transcranial magnetic stimulation [TMS]) she reported that her legs seemed to change size or move towards her point of view. Despite these appearances subjects seem to be in no doubt that they are looking at their own body.

The foregoing suggests that the own body seen during an OBE is experienced in a manner typical of self-consciousness. Because subjects claim that the seen body is experienced as their body even through substantive variation in the visual appearance of the body we can conclude that subjects experience the seen body as their own body but it is not the case that this is based on the *mere* recognition of the visual features (as may happen when one comes to identify oneself in a photograph one didn’t realise was taken). It is just felt to be one’s own body. In this way this sounds like a normal sense of being a bodily self. However, during an OBE the body experienced in this way is not taken to be the object of self-identification. Self-identity is instead tied to the sense of mental self, i.e. it is the apparently disembodied subject that seems to be the ‘real’ self. This state of affairs can be understood if there are two distinct forms of self-consciousness, the bodily and the mental as suggested above *and* if self-identification is a part of the content of the sense of subjectivity but not, or at least not necessarily, part of the content of the sense of embodiment. If these experiences are taken as veridical, i.e. we actually were two distinct kinds of self, we end up in a position Cheyne and Girard call ‘common sense dualism’ (Cheyne & Girard, 2009, p. 211) in which a person is both body and ‘soul’, but more importantly it is the non-bodily aspect, i.e. the subject or soul, which appears to be essential to the person by being what they identify with. This part may in principle exist in any other body. Such is the view of the person that would be implied if OBEs were veridical representations. Denying that such experiences are veridical again leaves us in a position where we seem to represent ourselves in two dissociable ways.

OBEs thus seem to suggest a distinction between two forms of self-consciousness. Based on these considerations, it seems we have a sense of being a bodily self and a sense of being a mental self. Normally, we experience the mental self as being ‘within’ the bodily self, but in OBEs these two selves are represented as being at different locations. Such a conclusion is positive, as it suggests that there are at least two distinct explananda for a theory of self-consciousness. However, I argue below that this distinction is not well supported by the phenomenology of OBEs and a more complex description of self-consciousness is needed.

# The phenomenology of out of body experiences and the insufficiency of distinctions between a mental and bodily self

In this last section we saw that a brief consideration of OBEs as well as a more nuanced account from Metzinger suggests that there are two distinct explananda for a theory of self-consciousness. In short, we seem to experience ourselves as bodily and as mental beings, the latter being the ‘real’ self. Normally, these two selves are represented as being spatially overlapping—with the location of the subject being within the boundaries of the body. But, in OBEs the two selves are represented as being at different locations. In this section I argue that this ‘double self-consciousness’ implication of OBEs rests on too simple a reading of subjects’ reports. The reason for this is twofold. First, subjects frequently experience not one, but two bodies during an OBE with the subject seeming to be embodied in the second body. A majority of OBEs cannot be characterised as an apparent spatial separation between subject and body. In the final section I propose a tripartite distinction between the experience of being a subject (sense of subjectivity), the sense of being an embodied subject (the sense of embodiment) and the sense of ownership over a body and use this to redescribe the aspects of self-consciousness altered in OBEs. Second, by considering reports of heautoscopy and not just classic OBEs we see that feelings of self-identification are not necessarily tied to the self as a mental entity or sense of subjectivity. In the final section I again apply the distinction between the sense of embodiment and sense of subjectivity to describe these cases. I conclude that OBEs suggest that there are three forms of self-consciousness, not two, which need to be explained.

## The subject can seem to be embodied during an OBE

The first challenge to the arguments that OBEs imply a simple bodily self versus mental self distinction comes from the fact that subjects often describe OBEs in which the subject continues to be experienced as embodied. In these cases the subject does not appear embodied in the seen body, but rather in a second illusory body. We even saw above that some take this as defining of OBEs, thus ignoring cases where the subject does seem to be completely disembodied—as, e.g., just a point (of view) in space. In other words OBE subjects often report seeing their body from within another version of their own body. Such cases cannot be easily described as involving a split in the spatial location of the body and subject as they involve duplication of the body.

Here is one example where the subject reports being in a partial second body:

…the next thing I knew I was floating just below the ceiling. I could see myself lying there. I wasn't scared; it was too interesting. I saw myself jerking and overheard my boss telling someone to "punch the time-card out" and that she was going with me to the hospital. Next thing, I was in space and could see Earth. *I felt a hand on my left shoulder*, and when I went to turn around, I couldn't. Then, I looked down *and I had no legs*; I just saw stars. I stayed there for a while until some inner voice told me to go back to the body. I didn't want to go because it was gorgeous up there, it was warm—not like heat, but security. Next thing, I woke up in the emergency room (Devinsky et al., 1989, p. 1082 empasis added).

More strongly than this single example Cheyne and Girard (2009, p. 205) found that anomalous bodily sensations such as floating, falling or motor actions strongly predicted the occurrence of out of body feelings (i.e. feelings of being separate from the body without necessarily seeing the body—what I have been calling OBEs). In other words those who experienced such sensations were more likely to report OBEs than those who did not. This suggests that OBEs commonly involve bodily sensations.

Blackmore (1984) also found that OBErs often experience themselves as embodied in an illusory body during OBEs. Using a direct questionnaire Blackmore found that as many as 69% of subjects reported that there seemed to be a whole other body—shaped as their body is usually shaped—floating above the seen body (Blackmore, 1984, p. 232).

It does seem then that OBErs do often experience themselves as looking out from a second illusory body. They do not experience themselves as disembodied subjects. To use OBEs to support a simple distinction between consciousness of a bodily self and consciousness of a mental self therefore leaves many, even most, OBEs undescribed. Below I suggest that changes to self-consciousness in OBEs are better understood if we propose a three-way distinction between forms of self-consciousness. Before getting there, however, I discuss a different challenge to the view that OBEs evidence a simple two way distinction.

## Sense of self-Identity is not always tied to the sense of subjectivity

In considering the argument for a double self-consciousness description of the phenomenology of OBEs it was suggested that to make sense of subjects’ reports we ought to posit that subjects always feel that their self-identity is tied more strongly to their mental self than their bodily self.[[2]](#footnote-3) The mental self with a point of view seems to be the real or essential self. Here I use a class of experiences very closely related to OBEs to challenge this description of subjects’ phenomenology.

In cases of heautoscopy subjects seem to see themselves not from an external perspective nor as-if in a mirror but as though their entire self has been duplicated (Blanke, 2012, p. 562; Brugger, 2002, p. 182). Unlike the classic OBE, subjects experience two bodies both of which are identified with the self. From within the real body resides the subject’s point of view, but they also experience something akin to depersonalisation for this body often described using metaphors of ‘hollowness’ or ‘lightness’ (Brugger, 2002, p. 182; see also Devinsky et al., 1989 for more reports). As in OBEs the subject identifies with the seen body even when it appears visually dissimilar to the subject’s real body as it is at the time of the experience (as above) (Brugger, Blanke, Regard, Bradford, & Landis, 2006, p. 42). Occasionally this involves the experience of more than one seen self (see Brugger et al., 2006 for review and discussion of a complex case). Importantly, during heautoscopy subjects are confused about the location of the ‘real’ self despite the fact that the subjective point of view is located within the real body.

Anzelotti and colleagues describe a heautoscopic subject as follows:

She reported to experience daily symptoms consisting of seeing the image of her entire body as in a mirror or from an external point of view. She saw herself not from an elevated visuo-spatial perspective, as in out of body experience, but in front of her in normal size and colour without a definable facial expression. The patient could not clearly define her localization in space. She reported unclear changes in the awareness of her body describing herself as projected out of her body with a feeling of dissociation of mind and body for a few seconds (Anzellotti et al., 2011, p. 3).

Importantly for my purposes here in describing the mental self:

She reported to have access to the autoscopic body’s thoughts, words and actions and that the experience of bilocation was petrifying and shocking (Anzellotti et al., 2011, p. 3).

Here we see that the patient, like others during heautoscopy (Blanke, 2012, p. 562), seemed unsure as to her ‘real’ location, stating that she appeared to be in two places at once (Anzellotti et al., 2011, p. 7). Interestingly, however, this subject appears to experience both herself and her mind, her thoughts and the like, as located at two places. As such, it is still possible to interpret this report using the assumption that self-identity is always tied to the mental self. If the mental self seems located at two places at once, then the subject’s ‘real’ identity will seem similarly split. Such a description does not, however, cover all cases reported in the literature.

Todd (1955) provides us with reports from subjects in which feelings of identity are not necessarily tied to the subject’s experience of a mental self:

Quite suddenly every-thing seems strange, and people's voices become very faint. I feel that my head is dividing into two. The second head seems to flow off my normal head, and to take up a position a little behind and to the right of it. This 'astral' head appears in the form of a vague, misty shape with a black outline. I feel that it is the detached head that contains my mind (Todd, 1955, p. 702).

For this subject their ‘astral’ head seems to contain their mind, but the subject is not reporting that they are located in their mind. Similarly:

I become aware of an invisible double stationed a yard away on my left. This shadowy double seems to contain my mind (Todd, 1955, p. 703).

Cases such as these challenge the assumption needed above that experience of self-identification (the ‘real self’) is felt to go with the location of the subject’s mind. Indeed such reports are difficult to make sense of within a double self-consciousness description. In the next section I propose a tripartite distinction between types of self-consciousness that will help us more accurately redescribe such experiences.

# Toward a more complex view of the phenomenology of self-consciousness

To describe the phenomenology of self during OBEs it seems insufficient to posit two forms of self-consciousness. There are more alterations to self-consciousness during OBEs and the related experience of heautoscopy than can be described as experiencing oneself as a mental entity with a point of view (the ‘real self’) as external to one’s body. Here I posit three forms of self-consciousness which will help us more accurately describe the unusual self-experiences during OBEs.

More recently Metzinger, in collaboration with Blanke has attempted a similar project in attempting to develop a more nuanced description of self-consciousness. Helpfully they introduced the term “self-identification” to refer to that aspect of self-consciousness in which the subject feels that they identify with the body (be it real or illusory) (Blanke & Metzinger, 2009, p. 10). So far I have been approximating this usage, although ultimately I wish to remain open to the possibility that self-identification can be tied either or both of the self as body and the self as subject. Blanke and Metzinger further distinguish between self-location and the ‘weak’ first person perspective. The sense in which this first person perspective is weak is in its “purely geometric” (Blanke & Metzinger, 2009, p. 7 and 8) nature. This notion thus refers to the representation of the spatial location of the origin of an egocentric reference frame, i.e. the point in space from which the world seems to be perceived (Blanke & Metzinger, 2009, p. 7). Typically this weak first person perspective is represented as within the self-location which is a volume of space typically the body.

Although this pushes beyond Metzinger’s earlier proposal and well beyond a simple bodily versus mental self distinction, this set of distinctions appears inadequate for describing OBEs in two ways. First is the tying of self-location and self-identification to the body and volumes of space Blanke and Metzinger lack the tools to describe those OBEs in which the subject seems to be located at a point in space and not a second illusory body. An adaptation of their view may be able to deal with this by, for example, allowing that self-identification be tied to the first person perspective which whilst spatially localised is not spatially extended. The second, and more important, problem for Blanke and Metzinger is the inability to distinguish ways in which one can self-consciously experience one’s own body[[3]](#footnote-4). By distinguishing different manners in which we can be self-conscious of our own bodies as well as the experience of the self as subject we can get a better grip on OBEs. Let me turn to that now.

Consider first the “sense of embodiment”. There are a few features of this experience. Most definitively it is the experience of oneself as an embodied subject, i.e. the feeling that one’s body is oneself. In the first person it is the feeling that I am this thing, this body, in the world (Carruthers, 2008, p. 1303). This feeling also extends to particular body parts, for example the feeling that my hand is a part of me (Carruthers, 2013, p. 35). Importantly, this experience involves the representation of oneself as a(n) (embodied) self, it is not the experience of one’s body as an object to be attributed to oneself (Carruthers, 2009, p. 130).

This latter experience I will call the “sense of ownership”. Rather than being an experience of the body as the thing which is *me*, it is the experience of the body as *mine* (Carruthers, 2009, p. 130). A sense of ownership represents the owned object, i.e. the seen body, as an object external to the self to whom it is self-attributed.[[4]](#footnote-5) It is unlikely that this is based on visual recognition of the body alone as we saw above subjects may identify with the seen body even if it does not look like their own, e.g. it may appear to be only the lower half of a body or have limbs which change size (Blanke et al., 2002). If we are to admit a distinction between a sense of ownership and a sense of embodiment then it raises a question. Who is the self to which the body represented in the sense of ownership is attributed? The answer is the self as something akin to the “mental self” considered in double self-consciousness approaches to OBEs.

Here it is useful to consider a third form of self-consciousness which I will call the “sense of subjectivity”. This is the experience of oneself as a subject of experience, that is, as a self to whom experience occurs (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2005; Zahavi, 2003, p. 57). The subject is experienced as, at least in principle, separable from the body.[[5]](#footnote-6) To be a subject of experience is to be a mental entity, so to experience oneself as a subject implies that one experiences oneself as something which has a mind, that is, something that has perceptions, thoughts, plans etc., which are not, or at least not in the same way, accessible by others (Strawson, 1997, p. 407).

Both the sense of embodiment and the sense of subjectivity represent the self *qua* a self. The sense of ownership, however, seems to represent the self in a different way. In experiencing a sense of ownership I do not experience my body as myself, but rather as an object which is attributed to me. This difference may lead us to suggest that the sense of ownership is not a ‘proper’ form of self-consciousness (Carruthers, 2009, p. 130). There is a sense in which this is true, but as we will see, both ways of representing the self (*qua* self and *qua* object) are needed to help describe self-experience in OBEs.

These distinctions between types of experience will help us better describe the phenomenology of OBEs and avoid the shortcomings of a description using a simpler distinction between experience of a bodily and a mental self. Two problems with the double self-consciousness description of the phenomenology of OBEs were discussed above. First are cases of OBEs in which the self, separated from the seen body, is felt to be embodied in a second illusory body. Second were cases of heautoscopy which suggest that the apparent mental self is not always tied to experiences of self-identification. That is, it is not always experienced as the ‘real’ self. Using the three-way distinction introduced above I suggest that OBEs come in two different types when the nature of self-consciousness during the experience is considered. Let me take each in turn, before moving onto heautoscopy.

Above we saw that when asked directly 69% of OBErs experience themselves as a second body spatially separate from their real body (Blackmore, 1984, p. 232). Such subjects, in cases where they see their body, experience their body as their own, but clearly they do not feel embodied in it. Using the distinctions introduced here, this first type of OBEs can be described as experiences in which the body as represented in the sense of ownership is i) visually hallucinated when it is seen, but always ii) represented as spatially separate from the body as represented in the sense of embodiment. The self and body represented in the sense of embodiment seems to, as is the usual case, contain the subject represented in the sense of subjectivity. The striking alteration to self-consciousness which needs to be explained in this case is the misrepresentation of the location of the body in the sense of embodiment.

The distinction between the sense of ownership and the sense of embodiment suggests a distinction between two kinds of body experience. To further elaborate this first type of OBE, it is important to note that each of these body experiences can misrepresent the body in ways not limited to its spatial location. Recall Blanke and colleagues’ (2002) subject who reported seeing her limbs change size when she attended to them. On this framework, such a case is thought to involve changes in the body as represented in the sense of ownership, which is the body seen in OBEs. The body can also be misrepresented in the sense of embodiment during OBEs. Recall, for example, Devinsky and colleagues’ (1989) subject above who seemed to experience only a partial second body.

In the second type of OBE, subjects report not that they experience two bodies separated in space, but rather that they are a point in space from which they see the world which is separate from their body. When asked directly 12% of Blackmore’s (1984, p. 232) subjects report such experiences. Using the distinction introduced above we can redescribe this unusual form of self-consciousness. In this case I propose that subjects experience the self as represented in the sense of subjectivity as spatially separate from the body as represented in the sense of ownership (which may or may not be visually hallucinated). Unlike the first type of OBE these cases do not seem to involve misrepresentation of the sense of embodiment but rather its absence. The striking self-experiences which need to be explained here are why the self/subject as represented in the sense of subjectivity is represented as outside of the body as represented in the sense of ownership and why the sense of embodiment is lost.

Finally then, let us turn to heautoscopy. Can the proposed tripartite distinction help us describe self-consciousness during these experiences? In particular, can we make sense of the apparent bilocation of the ‘real’ self or sense of self-identification? To answer this, consider first another question: which forms of self-consciousness should experiences of self-identification be tied to? It should, I suggest, be tied to both the sense of subjectivity and the sense of embodiment as these experiences represent the self *qua* self. In contrast, the sense of ownership represents the body *qua* object and so should not be expected to also represent self-identity. In the case of OBEs the ‘real’ self seems to be the self represented in both the sense of embodiment and the sense of subjectivity. In the first type of OBEs those selves seem to spatially overlap, as in normal experience. In the second type the sense of embodiment is apparently absent and so self-identification is attached to the sense of subjectivity alone.

If the self as represented in the sense of embodiment should ever be represented as spatially distant from the self represented in the sense of subjectivity then an experience of bilocation should occur. This seems to be what happens during heautoscopy. Consider again the reports of heautoscopy quoted above. In both cases, it is the double (i.e. the autoscopic or hallucinated) body which ‘seems to contain the real mind’. As the sense of subjectivity involves experience of a minded subject we may suppose that subjects experience a sense of subjectivity for the seen body. They experience their real body then as represented in the sense of embodiment. This experience of detachment from the real body is likely due to the separation of the sense of subjectivity from the body represented in the sense of embodiment. The strikingly unusual feature of self-consciousness which needs explaining here is why the self/subject represented in the sense of subjectivity seems to be spatially distinct from the self/body represented in the sense of embodiment.

On consideration self-consciousness during an OBE seems better described by a tripartite distinction between the sense of embodiment, the sense of subjectivity and the sense of ownership than by a distinction between experience of a bodily and a mental self. Two of these experiences, the sense of embodiment and the sense of subjectivity, represent the self *qua* self, whereas the other, the sense of ownership, represents the body *qua* object which is self-attributed. Analysis of the phenomenology of self-consciousness during OBEs thus suggests that there are three forms of self-consciousness which need to be explained. This analysis has also provided instances of abnormal alternations to these forms of self-consciousness which need to be explained.

# Conclusion

OBEs provide a striking set of unusual experiences of the self which should be accounted for by a theory of self-consciousness. More than this, OBEs have been used to propose distinctions between forms of self-consciousness, generally between experience of a mental and experience of a bodily self. I have argued that the phenomenology of OBEs does not straightforwardly support this distinction. However, by proposing a tripartite distinction between the sense of embodiment, the sense of ownership and the sense of subjectivity, a more accurate description of the phenomenology of OBEs can be given. A consideration of OBEs thus suggests that a theory of self-consciousness should explain at least these three forms of self-consciousness.

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1. Although it is important to note that the vast majority of OBEs occur whilst the body is at rest (Blackmore, 1984, p. 230; Zingrone, Alvarado, & Cardeña, 2010) and are common during sleep paralysis (Girard & Cheyne, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. I suspect but will not here attempt to prove that the idea that the self as a mental entity is the ‘real’ self is highly culturally dependent. Despite the occasional assertion that the real self universally seems to be the thinking thing residing in the body—à la common sense dualism (and somewhat reminiscent of Descartes res cogitans) (Blanke, 2012, p. 556; Metzinger, 2005), some field work which suggests that those raised in cultures not heavily influenced by West Asian Monotheism identify less strongly with the subject and more strongly with the body seen e.g. Roseman (1990) and Rosaldo (1984). Here I focus on the simpler argument that a necessary link between identity and mind does not allow for an adequate description of heautoscopy. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. My thanks go to an anonymous referee for this phrasing. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This ‘sense of ownership’ is not to be confused with Gallagher’s (2000) ‘sense of ownership’ which represents the self as a thing which is undergoing a movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. As in footnote 2, I suspect that there will be cultural variation in this experience, but that does not make the experience any less real for those who have it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)