

Book Review¹

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ASTRAL PROJECTIONS, by Michael Ross.

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It's a pleasure for me to review the recently published book "Astral Projections", of Michael Ross, a familiar author to the readers, as he published in the JofC, over the years, a number of interesting articles, personal accounts and letters. Ross, an Honours Degree in Mental Philosophy and today a retired teacher of primary aged children, is what we can call a veteran projector, who could live, so far, over 200 out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and many other related psychic phenomena, since a relatively early age. His book is therefore a more than welcome effort on his part and a significant contribution to the development of lucid projectability on this planet.

As Ross explains in the introduction, the book is structured around two main themes. The first one is his longstanding search for an incontrovertible proof of the non-hallucinatory reality of extracorporeal travels; the second one is the desire to bring a testimony of his personal parapsychic history. The result is a highly readable, well thought and enjoyable text, which although does not meet all the scientific conditions to really make a point regarding his "proof quest", certainly will succeed in providing the reader an enriching and lively overview of the multifaceted panorama of parapsychism and multidimensionality, as experienced by the author during a life; all this accompanied by his many personal anecdotes and reflections, which provide much of the charm and authenticity of this autobiographical essay.

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The content of the book is organized in 15 chapters. In the first one, the author describes his first recalled projection, that revolutionized his attitude and beliefs regarding the existence of a soul that can exist independently of the physical body. From the beginning, emphasis is on the importance of having a self-research attitude towards our experiences, by noting down everything important about them, which, to Ross' regret, he didn't on that occasion. The author also explains how certain circumstances, like a mother with parapsychic abilities, his lectures on psychical research and his practice of certain asana of yoga may have been significant factors that have triggered his first lucid OBE.

In the second chapter Ross describes his first interests in the philosophical mind-body problem, and his subsequent strong desire to obtain a definite proof of the existence of the soul (subtle body). He describes an interesting experiment he carried on for two years with the Institute of Psychophysical Research in Oxford, where he had to determine, by means of an OBE, a five-digit number target that was set up at the Institute, but with no success. This probably also, as the author admits, because of his inexperience, lack of training with the techniques allowing to promote lucid OBEs, and a certain lack of enthusiasm (i.e., lack of focus), which is a fundamental ingredient, he explains, in significantly improving psychic abilities and in particular astral projection.

Then, the author goes on describing the failure of distinguished lucid projectors in obtaining unmistakable proofs of the non-illusionary character of the phenomenon, like those performed by Robert Monroe with the American psychologist and parapsychologist Charles T. Tart, or the initial attempts of English psychologist and parapsychologist Susanne Blackmore, that subsequently became a true skeptical concerning the existence of whatever paranormal phenomena. He concludes that there is absolutely no scientifically legitimate proof whatsoever concerning the existence of any psychic ability or foundation whatsoever.

This however is to my opinion a far too negative appraisal of the results that have been obtained by a number of parapsychic researchers over the years, and I think it would have been useful here if the author could have made a conceptual distinction between OBEs and other related (but certainly not equivalent) parapsychic phenomena, like telepathy, clairvoyance (including remote viewing), precognition and telekinesis. In fact, as is well known in modern parapsychological research, it is nearly impossible to experimentally discriminate between, for instance, the reading of a target number obtained by means of a clairvoyant remote viewing mechanism and by an OBE (apart of course from the subjective perception and description of the experience by the experimenter). Also, the author forgets to mention the huge amount of statistical data that, in more than a century of laboratory research, has been collected around the world. Certainly, all these results do not allow one to conclude about the existence of the OBE phenomenon per se, but they certainly provide (in particular through the powerful instrument of meta analysis) a very strong evidence in favor of the reality of psi effects, like clairvoyance, precognition and telekinesis. For a digestible review, see for instance the excellent book of Dean Radin (Radin, 1997), or the more recent one of Charles T. Tart himself (Tart, 2009).

For sake of clarity, I would stress here that, to my view, the proper of science is not the search of absolute proofs (as, strictly speaking, and despite a general belief, science is not about proving anything), but instead of evidences (based on sufficiently stable and reproducible observational facts, i.e., phenomena) and the construction of sound explicative theories allowing to understand those evidences in the ambit of a coherent and consistent worldview; theories that, similarly to biological organisms evolving through a natural selection mechanism, will undergo over time variations by means of a selection mechanism made manifest by our rational and experimental criticisms (falsifiability). That said, I'd like to recall that there has been a quite lively debate with the author, in this journal, on these scientific matters, and in particular on the question of the quest for proof of OBEs and allied phenomena; see

Ross' interesting article (Ross, 2005) and the subsequent correspondence it generated: (Sassoli de Bianchi, 2005), (Bryan, 2005), (Sissing, 2005), (Ross, 2006), (Rouanet, 2006) and (Ross, 2007).

In the third chapter Ross mentions some interesting events in his first childhood: the fact that he was born prematurely, an event he believes may have had an effect in enhancing his psychic abilities; that helpers may have assisted him, while still in the incubator, suggesting a receptive nurse to pronounce the right words, to the right person, in the right moment, thus giving to his future life an entire new direction. He goes on by recalling the importance of keeping diaries of dreams, lucid dreams, and projections, and then explains the sense of "being at home" that he was used to experience during his OBEs: an exquisite eeriness he could later on experience while attending in his late teens spiritualist circles, where he could witness many interesting psychic phenomena, like facial ectoplasmic transfigurations, psychometric readings, and so on. Particularly interesting is his observation that a same clairvoyant, who in certain occasions could provide very accurate information about deceased relatives, in others would fail completely. According to Ross, this was probably due to the psychological pressure experienced by the medium trying to meet the audience's expectations, even when the conditions for a reading were not present.

Ross' observation opens to the important theme of trickery, that I think might have deserved a more extensive development from the author, given his interest in the issue of the scientific legitimacy of parapsychic phenomena. In fact, too often the tendency, in scientific circles, is to oversimplify the debate regarding fraud, considering that if a medium is caught in the act of cheating, then all phenomena manifested by the same medium must, necessarily, be the result of counterfeiting. But, as suggested by Ross, human psychology is more complex and articulated than that, and between the black of a systematic fraud and the white of pure authenticity all shades of gray are possible. As an emblematic example, let me cite the well known case of the Italian medium Eusapia Paladino, that despite her great (and difficult to doubt)

parapsychic talents, in many occasions was caught in the act of cheating. But, as psychical researcher and Paladino's expert Hereward Carrington explains in his book about the medium (Carrington, 2010), most of Paladino's frauds were probably unconsciously provoked, when she was in a trance state. Quoting Carrington: "There is a strong impulse to produce phenomena, and, if she is not restrained, she will endeavor to produce them in a perfectly normal manner. But if she *is* restrained, genuine phenomena will result—as repeatedly ascertained".

Ross concludes the chapter emphasizing once more the legitimate request of conventional scientists to have scientific verifiable experimental data. In doing so he cites the well known "one million dollars challenge" offered by the James Randi foundation to anyone who can show, under proper observing conditions, evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event. So far, says Ross, no-one has been capable of being awarded the prize by proving their alleged talents in the psychic field. Let me observe however that the author, with his strong and certainly admirable determination in providing an unmistakable proof that paranormal phenomena are real, is probably placing here too much confidence in James Randi's challenge, and particularly in the faithfulness of Randi himself when confronted by some "challenging challengers". It seems in fact that contenders have been refuted by Randi in the past, based only on his prejudice, as the known case of the "breatharian" Rico Kolodzey seems to demonstrate.

In the fourth chapter we learn about the author's interests in philosophy, that he studied at Aberdeen University; an interest that was mainly motivated by his desire to penetrate the great metaphysical questions, like the "meaning of life", "What are we here for?", "What is our origin?", and, of course, the problem of the existence of the "soul" and the many different ways such a concept can be understood and explained. Ross tells us about the philosophy of idealist Francis Hebert Bradley, emphasizing the limits of language and therefore the impossibility of reducing the true essence of reality into a "ballet of bloodless categories". He also share with the reader his fascination for

great thinkers like Schopenhauer and Hume, despite their disbelief in the human existence beyond the physical body; this not because they were narrow-minded, but because the notion of “life after death”, as ordinarily understood, could not be analytically proven by reason, and probably also, as Ross suggests, because they didn’t personally experience a lucid OBE. Another interesting philosopher Ross tells us about, among others, is Charles Broad, an eccentric lecturer and Don at Trinity College, Cambridge. Contrary to Hume and Schopenhauer, Broad was sympathetic to parapsychism from a philosophical standpoint and was well aware of all the different types of psychic phenomena. Nevertheless, he was pretty much rigorous in his theoretical investigation, observing for instance that the OBE does not necessarily imply after death survival, as one cannot logically exclude that the soul, perhaps, could only function while the physical body is still alive. Ross concludes the chapter by deploring today tendency of modern philosophers to increasingly distancing themselves from the original metaphysical questions, dealing more and more with non-metaphysical topics, like perception and linguistic analysis.

In Chapter 5 we learn that the author, from early childhood, was able to perceive dead people, like a psychotic post mortem lady still dressed in Victorian style, that he could see with extreme clarity at the age of three. The chapter continues with an interesting digression on the importance of cultivating the “sense of self”, be it in the sense of the “self identity” highlighted by Carl Jung, or the act of “self remembering” described by Ouspensky, the disciple of Gurdjeff. This to emphasize, once more, the importance of the attributes of memory and self-awareness when adventuring in a spiritual path.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the description of a number of renowned astral projectors, many of whom Ross met personally, and their explanations regarding some of the countless phenomena one can experience in relation to OBE, like for instance “dual consciousness”, “astral addiction” and “inner guides”. Regarding inner guides, or helpers, he mentions the puzzling character of Rebazar Tarz, one of the most

prominent inner guides in the so-called Eckankar system. Interestingly, a character reminiscent of him was also met by the lucid projector William Bulhman, as described in his book “Adventures Beyond the Body”, and Ross himself once met an extraphysical being whose appearance was identical to the descriptions and pictures of Rebazar Tarz. This allows him, once more, to warn the reader about possible interferences of our subconscious in creating, by means of imagination, things or beings that aren’t necessarily there. The chapter also mentions other pioneer projectors, like Robert Monroe, Sylvan Muldoon, Vee Van Dam, Robert Bruce and Waldo Vieira. Ross also discusses, at some length, the well known problem of “change of priorities” when one finds itself in a projected state, expressing his puzzlement about the fact that talented projectors, like Muldoon, did not attempt the simple target experiment that could have revolutionized, according to him, psychic research.

Chapter 7 is of a much more intimate nature. It describes one of the most beautiful experiences of the author’s life, as it regards to astral projection, although it originated from a tragic episode: the suicide of his son. Ross informs us about the warnings that he and his wife received prior to the suicide, in the form of symbolic precognitive dreams, and the visions of the condition of their son after his physical death. He then describes in detail the long-awaited astral meeting with him, that was facilitated by the presence of an accompanying extraphysical helper. One important aspect of Ross’ text is that he always tries to unite the evocative force of his narrative with the desire to inform and instruct the reader about multidimensionality. In the present case, he wonders about the true role of helpers during our projections, emphasizing that, according to many authors, it would be extremely common that extraphysical guiding entities accompany most projections, although that wasn’t his usual perception. He also informs the reader about the major role played by emotions and emotional responses in the development of astral projections. This he could clearly experience when he met his son in the extraphysical domain, as the strong emotions generated by the encounter caused him to abruptly return to his soma. Another interesting

issue raised by Ross in this chapter is his tunnel vision (a phenomenon he could experience many times) and its possible interpretation.

Tunnel visions, also known as tunnel effects, or extraphysical openings, are well known phenomena in Projectiology, most probably caused by the experienced passage of the consciousness from one existential dimension to another. Ross advances, as a possible explanation, that this interdimensional effect could result from the passage of the consciousness through one of its chakras, and that different perceptions could arise according to the specific chakra involved. This is an interesting topic, that would have certainly deserved a closer examination, seeing that there is a rather extensive occult literature talking about the different effects produced by the exteriorization of the consciousness throughout the different chakras, as regards the state of consciousness they would promote and, consequently, the levels of extraphysical reality they would allow to visit. No need to say, this is a controversial subject, seeing that, apparently, the psychosoma can detach from the physical body in a number of different ways, not necessarily related to the chakral structure. More research is thus needed to elucidate this topic, particularly regarding the foundation of certain occult affirmations and their confrontation with what is so far known in Projectiology about the “takeoff” stage, as explained for instance in Vieira’s reference book on the subject (Vieira, 2002). I believe the author is well qualified to undertake such a further investigation, seeing his rather extensive knowledge of the occult literature on the subject and his multiple personal experiences with the “tunnel effect” phenomenon.

Chapter 8 is fully dedicated to Jane Roberts and the voluminous “Seth Material” she has been channeling for more than two decades. Ross is here interested about what Seth, the alleged extraphysical consciousness that spoke through Roberts, has to say about the OBE, and he offers to the reader a valuable and thought provoking selection of quotes, where, among many other themes, Roberts/Seth tries to elucidate the reasons

why OBEs' memories are so difficult to download into our physical brain, and therefore recalled.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the author's encounter with the Ekankar's movement and Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society. Here the warning is about not falling in the temptation of taking the too easy path, for what concerns the Ekankar system, and not to be stifled by too obscure teachings, as regards some of the occult theories of Steiner. Chapter 10 and 11, on the other hand, are dedicated to the work of Gurdjeff and his disciple Ouspensky, and Ouspensky's disciple Rodney Collin. Here Ross intelligently comment the thought provoking teachings of these remarkable (although controversial) individuals, to emphasize once more that spiritual progress doesn't come easily and without a dedicated effort, and that we need to free ourselves from our robotic and unconscious behaviors to strengthen and develop our subtle bodies, which are the siege of our more permanent "I". In his experience, this problem of lack of growth and development of our subtle vehicles can be found in the difficulty often observed by those practicing astral projection in controlling their psychosoma to any great extent, as it was his case when, for a lack of control of his emotional body, he could not extend the extraphysical visit to his son.

Chapter 12 is about Ross' encounter with the IAC, that he describes as one of the most rewarding experiences he have had in his quest for knowledge of everything pertaining to the out-of-body phenomena. The chapter is very informative regarding the countless activities of the academy and will be very helpful to form the reader an opinion about its functioning and mission. Ross describes, among other things, the amazement of his facial clairvoyance sessions during one of the first Consciousness Development Program courses he attended in London, or the many psychoenergetic phenomena he could experience during the field immersion courses lead by epicenters Wagner Alegretti and Nanci Trivellato, as well as his enrollment in an eight-day, one participant, tailor made VIP workshop, throughout which he could witness an intense

work of healing performed by a team of extraphysical helpers on his body.

Chapter 13 is a short diary of out-of-body experiences, presenting a selection of the author's most typical projections, with a range of different degrees of lucidity, taken from his five thick diaries that he began writing in 1997. Chapter 14, on the other hand, is a selection of some of the many articles Ross wrote over the years, mostly on astral projections, which constitute a nice complement and integration of the many ideas discussed in the previous chapters, although sometimes this produces some inevitable (but after all, useful) repetitions.

Finally, with Chapter 15 the author concludes his work by sharing some afterthoughts regarding the OBE phenomenon. Ross, who a few years ago has been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, wonders about the role of the lack of dopamine in his brain, as promoted by his neurological disorder, in triggering his extracorporeal adventures. The basic question he addresses is the one of the nature of the dualistic interaction between a physical brain and a non-physical (extraphysical) mind. Is it the physical changes, as promoted by the ingestion of physical substances or some kind of medical conditions that are responsible for the OBE, or, the other way around, is it the spiritual-energetic work we perform in order to obtain these experiences that is responsible for the changes in the physiology of our soma, for instance in terms of a reduction in dopamine? The author doesn't provide an answer to this fundamental question, which is of course important to clarify many issues, particularly in relation to the understanding of OBEs by conventional scientists, as the possibility of inducing OBEs by altering the brain functioning is usually considered by academic researchers as a "proof" that the phenomenon is of a purely hallucinatory character.

Ross final question reminds me of an interesting research that was conducted in 2002 by Olaf Blanke and his team (Blanke et al, 2002), where vivid extracorporeal experiences were easily induced in an epileptic patient by electrically stimulating her brain's temporo-parietal junction. Following a review of Olaf's work, that was recently published

in the journal “La Recherche” (Olaf & Lopez, 2010), I wrote a brief letter to the editor emphasizing that, from a logical standpoint, the ability to induce, by whatever physical means, an OBE, doesn’t imply that the exteriorization of the consciousness has to be (or always has to be) an hallucinatory phenomena. In the same letter I asked the authors if, during the repeated induction of the phenomenon in their patient, they ever thought about testing its presumed hallucinatory character, by checking if the individual, when floating up and looking back down at her body on the bed, was able to see with his “extraphysical double” a target that the physical body, because of its physical position, wouldn’t be able to perceive. My letter was after that published (La Recherche, N. 441, May 2010) with a reply from the authors, affirming that although they were aware that the question is of interest for the domain of parapsychology, they didn’t try the experience as their goal was not to investigate subtle bodies, but to study epilepsy. Their response, as understandable as it may be, is to my opinion symptomatic of how modern researchers relate to the “proof” problem that is so dear to Ross: apparently, and for reasons we need not to investigate here, they are not so much interested in the subject, and even when they are in a privileged position to easily perform a critical test, they simply don’t even think about doing it.

So, to Ross’ puzzlement about the fact that talented projectors, like Muldoon, did not attempt the simple target experiment that could have revolutionized psychic research, I can add my own puzzlement about the lack of interest of conventional scientists (that are currently studying the out-of-body experience from a neuroscientific perspective) regarding the fundamental metaphysical questions that are so crucial for a full understanding of human evolution. Let’s hope that the nicely written and well thought book of Michael Ross, together with all books and articles that are increasingly being written by lucid projectors around the world on the subject of multidimensionality, will contribute in providing future researchers with a broader point of view, and the ability to ask the right question at the right time.

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