

SOME FURTHER PERSPECTIVES ON REINCARNATION RESEARCH:

A Rejoinder to D. Scott Rogo

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The author points out several mistakes and misrepresentations of Rogo (1986) and offers some of his own perspectives on reincarnation research. A model of reincarnation that explains both veridical and fantasy elements of past life memory cases is described. There is great need for more serious research on reincarnation, especially with spontaneous adult and hypnotic regression cases.

I applaud D. Scott Rogo for calling attention to reincarnation research in his recent article in this journal. (Rogo, 1986) I agree with him that reincarnation is under represented in the parapsychological literature. I also agree that the field is vast, and I think the major areas of concern he has identified are indeed major areas of concern. However, I think the perspectives he offers on reincarnation research are more confused than helpful. In this Rejoinder, I will try to explain why I believe this. I will also offer some perspectives of my own, based on research that I hope to report more fully on another occasion.

Rogo's entire discussion is compromised by his almost complete disregard for the relative quality of the studies he comments upon. Unfortunately, much of what must be counted as reincarnation research today has been conducted and reported in popular forms. The problem with these works is not just that they lack proper documentation or scholarly rigor in analysis. Too often they are simply naive in confronting the difficulties of reincarnation research. We cannot avoid the works of Lenz (1979), Dethlefsen (1977), and Steiger and Williams (1969), but we can at least elevate our discussion of them by not pretending that they are on the same level as Stevenson (1974). *forums.*

Rogo recognizes that some accounts of past lives are veridical and others not, but he does not make what I consider to be a much more important distinction--and that is between cases in which the claimed previous personality has been identified (solved cases) and cases in which the identification is absent (unsolved cases). Interestingly, and I think importantly, there are many solved child cases (what Rogo calls cases of "extracerebral memory") than there are solved cases of any other type. I know of only a few solved adult cases (Rogo's "spontaneous past life experiences") and virtually no solved hypnotic regression cases. This is despite the fact that there are on record many more--literally hundreds more--spontaneous adult and hypnotic regression cases than there are spontaneous child cases. *more*

Rogo notes that Stevenson has published "64 or so" child cases, but charges that "these few obviously para-

normal cases have been extracted from a much larger body of data of unconfirmed or dubious quality." (Rogo, 1986, p. 130) I wonder on what basis he is able to make this statement. According to Cook (1986), Stevenson's files are regularly purged of inauthentic or dubious cases. Moreover, Stevenson (1983) has told us that his Asian child cases are more often solved than not. Rather than being a "much larger body," it appears that the unsolved child cases actually are outnumbered.

Rogo goes on to speculate that "Most of the children who claim to recall their "past lives" are probably doing nothing of the kind. They are usually role-playing, engaging in a fantasy process possibly akin to the way children in our own culture invent imaginary playmates, or are possibly lying." (Rogo, 1986, p. 131) Perhaps unsolved cases are largely composed of fantasy, although I would not want to draw this conclusion as firmly as Rogo draws it. Cook, Pasricha, Samararatne, Maung and Stevenson (1983a, 1983b) compared 280 unsolved cases with 576 solved cases from six countries, including the United States. They found that solved and unsolved cases are similar in several important respects. The two types of cases differ, however, in that subjects of unsolved cases ceased talking about the previous life earlier and mentioned the name of the previous personality less often than did subjects of solved cases. These factors would contribute to the solvability of a case, and it may be that lack of veridical information, as much as errors or fantasy elements, is the reason unsolved cases remain unsolved.

In support of his conclusion that the child subjects are "usually role playing," Rogo cites Chari. (1978, 1981) Chari (1978) mentions a case in which veridical information about a past life was given to a child by Lord Hrishna in a vision. This case may suggest to Rogo, as it does to Chari, that the reincarnation cases are mostly fantasies, but in fact this case belongs with mediumistic cases, not, with the spontaneous cases it is supposed to shed light upon. Similarly, although the birthmark cases Chari (1978, 1981) describes will hopefully be explained when we can explain the appearance of birthmarks in reincarnation cases, these are not authentic cases of the reincarnation type. Chari has described only one authentic case in any detail--at the length of two paragraphs. From the account (Chari, 1978) he gives, it appears that this may have been an exceptionally strong case, adding to the small number of cases in which a written record of statements was made before verification was attempted. However, at his own admission, Chari managed to talk the father of the child out of his belief in the genuineness of the case, evidently without trying to verify it in the field. The information Chari gives does not allow us to evaluate the case properly, and we can only wish the father's notebooks had fallen into the hands of a more conscientious investigator. Certainly Chari has not "discovered and described" the "psychodynamics linked to the more common past life 'fantasy' cases" (Rogo, 1986, p. 131), as Rogo would have it. When Rogo turns to what he calls

Krishna

Some Further Perspectives on Reincarnation Research

"anomalous cases" he gets himself into even deeper trouble. He presents the case of Imad Elawar (Stevenson, 1974) as a case "in which two people claimed the same past-life and recall it in extraordinary detail, while one of them seemed to be reborn from two related people!". (Rogo, 1986, p. 132) Rogo does not seem to realize that this account of events is not Stevenson's, but W. G. Roll's. (1977, 1984) Stevenson (1984) in fact has challenged Roll's interpretation, and I (Matlock, in press) have shown it to be without foundation.

Imad Elawar recalled many details of a life of a certain Ibrahim Bouamzy, but he also recalled a truck accident that had befallen Ibrahim's cousin and good friend Said. Ibrahim had not been a witness to Said's accident, but he had known about it, and it had made a deep impression on him. To a small extent Imad seems to have confused the memory of this event from Said's life with memories he had of Ibrahim's life, but we are not justified therefore in assuming that Imad is heir to memories of both Ibrahim and Said. Imad recalled nothing that would not have been known to Ibrahim. A person with Said's memories turned up as well. This person recalled the truck accident, but also many other details from Said's life that had no part in Ibrahim's memories. Except for the events surrounding the accident, in fact, the memories of Imad and the other subject were entirely different. I can find no warrant for concluding that what Rogo describes occurred in this case.

In discussing hypnotic age regression cases, Rogo describes one of the Jane Evans lives reported by Iverson. (1976) This choice of illustration is unfortunate, because Wilson (1982) has demonstrated the cryptomnesiac base of one of the lives in the Jane Evans series, and has questioned the validity of others. Moreover, as Gauld remarks in commenting on the central detail of the life Rogo describes, "The only evidence that the crypt really exists is, however, a secondhand statement to the effect that an unknown workman discovered what might have been a crypt below the chancel. It was immediately blocked up again before it could be properly examined." (Gauld, 1982, p. 166)

In discussing the case of George Field (Steiger & Williams, 1969), Rogo says that when he was quizzed by the Jefferson, North Carolina town historian, the regressed Field's responses "revealed that he was perfectly familiar with the people and layout of the town during the Civil War years." (Rogo, 1986, p. 134) This is somewhat of an exaggeration, since the regressed Field recognized only some of the names presented to him. Moreover, his recognition of Jefferson was mostly negative--that is, he was confused by the Jefferson he saw, so we may conclude that he expected the town to have a different appearance. Having made this case thus seem stronger than it is, Rogo omits mention of its most striking feature--the use of snuff by the hypnotized Field. This is one of the best examples of a remembered skill in the regression literature, and it is a pity Rogo does not recognize it as such.

Rogo's major point in his summary discussion seems to be that reincarnation may be a different sort of process than it is generally conceived to be in the West. With this I very much agree. We are only beginning to see our way to an empirically-based understanding of reincarnation (through the reports of past life memories) but what we are learning is suggesting that our traditional ideas of reincarnation are much in need of revision. For example, very little evidence for karma in the retributive sense has emerged, nor is there any real evidence for previous lives in subhuman forms.

Rogo believes we have much to learn from "anomalous cases." Again, I agree that rare or unusual cases can teach us a great deal. But what does Rogo mean by "anomalous cases"? I have dealt with one that he cites, the case of Imad Elawar. Rogo may continue to champion Roll's (1977, 1984) interpretation of this case if he wishes, but he should at least present this as an alternative interpretation, and not as the accepted view of the case. Rogo's comments on this case are not the only instance in which he is given to mistake and misrepresentation, as I have shown. In his concluding paragraph, Rogo acknowledges that many existing theories of reincarnation are "totally speculative." May I suggest that reincarnation research would be better served if the authors of these theories (including Rogo) would stay closer to the facts at hand.

Rogo identifies four areas of reincarnation research. I propose that we think instead of two types of case--spontaneous and hypnotic regression. Spontaneous cases may be viewed broadly as the reports of children or of adults, and hypnotic regression cases as either involving or not involving therapy. (This second-level breakdown returns us to Rogo's four areas of research.)

The advantage to grouping the spontaneous reports of children and adults together is that we can then begin to see the relations between them. At first, of course, the two types of case appear to be very different, and they have been considered as different by most other commentators, including Rogo. (1985,² 1986)

As Rogo points out, children may give much more than statements about a previous life as evidence that they lived before as certain persons. They may exhibit behaviors in line with the previous personality of the case and they may have phobias of things associated with the previous personality's death. The subjects may even have birthmarks that resemble in size, shape and position death-wounds or other marks on the previous personality's body. The circumstances under which children speak about previous lives vary widely, but many, of the memories arise spontaneously, without apparent stimulus. Typically, children begin speaking about previous lives between ages 2 and 5 and cease speaking about those lives between ages 5 and 8, when the memories fade.

Some Further Perspectives on Reincarnation Research

Adult past life memory is quite different. Adult recall typically is much briefer. It comes in flashes, or visions, often in dreams or meditation, and while an initial memory may lead to other related memories, the period during which this occurs is, as protracted as the period during which children speak about previous lives. The generally impoverished nature of adult recall means that adult cases are much less often solved than child cases. *rarely*

In a preliminary study of 88 solved spontaneous cases in which both the age of initial recall and the circumstances of initial recall are given, I found that the overwhelming majority of reports (82, or 93.2%) came from children 5 years of age or younger. Furthermore, in a large percentage (61.3%) of the cases of this subgroup, the initial recall was totally spontaneous--there was no apparent stimulus for it. In the over-5 age group, however, there was not a single instance of initial memories occurring spontaneously in the waking state. On the other hand, there were several cases in which the initial recall came during meditation or in a dream. There were a few cases in which veridical memories first appeared spontaneously after age 5, but in each of these cases there had been at least one spontaneous episode before age 5 as well.³

Bear in mind that the cases in my study were all solved cases, so they have achieved a high level of authenticity. We can place some confidence in the conclusions we draw from them, although we must realize that the sample is small and is limited to cases that have appeared in the literature. My tentative conclusion, however, is that children may remember past lives especially clearly because they are physically and psychically less mature than adults. As the child matures, the memories penetrate with greater difficulty, so that by adulthood such memories are rare, they are constricted in form, and they tend to arise during sleep or meditation, when the mind is relaxed.

This, then, is the general picture of spontaneous recall as I now understand it. Rogo appears to believe that hypnotic regression is equally suited to the exploration of past lives as is the study of cases of spontaneous recall. However, I doubt whether this is true. Although occasional hypnotic regression cases do have veridical elements, as Rogo points out, even the best hypnotic cases do not approach the better spontaneous cases in quality.

I have said that there are virtually no hypnotic cases in which the previous personality has been identified. I am excluding from this statement those cases in which the claimed previous personality was a figure well known to history. Historical figures certainly have the same right as the rest of us to be reincarnated and to have their lives recalled--but it is strange that so many of them should have this satisfaction while it is denied to the rest of us.

Typical of regressions involving lesser figures (but better than most) is the case of Susan Granier, reported by

Stearn (1968). "Granier" described a place in enough detail so that it could be located, and an elderly man who claimed to remember a woman by that name was found. Unfortunately, the man died two years before Stearn reached the scene. Stearn was unable to track Granier or her family through land records or other official documents, and in retrospect we may wonder how much reliance to place on the old gentleman's testimony.

Frequently it happens that some apparently paranormally acquired information is given, but all effort to trace the previous personality reaches a dead end. This phenomenon is encountered again and again in hypnotic cases (the George Field and Jane Evans cases discussed above are other examples), and it appears also in some adult and child spontaneous cases. The common element is intriguing. I have begun to wonder whether in these cases an unconscious mechanism is blocking the pathway to consciousness of the true identity of the previous personality, while however letting some amount of veridical information through.

Hypnotic cases, being induced, might be especially prone to this sort of unconscious blockage. Unconscious blockage might also account for distortions or transformations that make some child cases unsolvable (see Cook et. al. 1983a, 1983b) and it might lead also to some of the effects that Chari (1978, 1981) has observed.

Gardner Murphy (1973) believed that reincarnation research might get us around the impasse in survival research created by the super-ESP idea. I think Murphy may well have been right. The data that have been gathered in favor of reincarnation are actually much clearer and more persuasive than the data from the areas of survival research traditionally pursued by parapsychology. There is a pressing need for more serious investigators and research on reincarnation. We can only answer our present questions with more data, and it is only as we begin to collect more reliable data from reputable researchers that we can begin to lessen our reliance on accounts in the popular literature. Serious work with spontaneous adult and with hypnotic regression cases is especially needed. I join Rogo in urging parapsychologists to take up this work.

NOTES

¹Here Rogo suggests that child cases come exclusively from cultures other than our own--by which he presumably means Western culture--although earlier in his article he shows that he knows this is not true. While most of the cases are indeed from Asian or Middle Eastern countries, several European cases were reported earlier in the century by Delanne (1927) and Shirley (n.d) and in recent years an increasing number of European and American cases have been reported to Stevenson (see Stevenson, 1975).

²See my review (Matlock, 1986) of this book. The review is followed by additional comments from Ian Stevenson (Stevenson, 1986).

Some Further Perspectives on Reincarnation Research

³The age of the subject appears to be an important variable affecting the form and quality of past life memory, but it is not the only variable. Cultural variables are implicated in complex ways I cannot go into here. Other factors include the character of the previous personality, the age of the previous personality at death, and the manner of the previous personality's death. Intervening lives may also affect the quality of memory. These factors are treated in depth in various parts of Stevenson's work, although unfortunately they have not yet been summarized anywhere.

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The Journal of Religion and Psychical Research

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