

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Commentary on Previous *Journal* Article “Near-Death Experiences and Claims of Past-Life Memories”

To the Editor:

I have just read an article that Bruce Greyson (2021) authored in this *Journal*: “Near-Death Experiences and Claims of Past-Life Memories.” Greyson argued that concepts of consciousness and time need to be revised in light of certain aspects of near-death experiences, and he brought in reincarnation cases to help make this point:

Rather than conceptualizing [reincarnation] as a series of incarnations over linear time—the normal perception of time in Earthly life—it may involve incarnations that occur simultaneously in a state of timelessness in which everything is happening all at once—the perception of time that experiencers report during their NDEs. (p. 224)

However, as a longtime student of reincarnation (Matlock, 2019), I question whether the case data support this view.

Greyson’s article included a section headed “Problematic Features of Past-Life Memories” (pp. 218–220). Here, Greyson discussed three kinds of case he considered problematical for reincarnation. The first kind is “*two or more children* who recall the same past life” (Greyson, 2021, p. 218). In illustration, he cited a paper in which Jürgen Keil (2010) said that he encountered such a set of cases in Turkey but added that the previous family accepted only one of the candidates. Keil’s discussion of the cases was seven lines long and included no details. Keil himself refrained from asserting that both claims were genuine. For me, this material is far from acceptable evidence of “two or more children recalling the same past life,” especially when there is only one other comparable set of cases—just as poorly described—in the literature (Stemman, 1988).

Greyson went on to mention that Antonia Mills (1988) had written about Canadian native children who were identified as having been simultaneous reincarnations of the same person. He was careful to note that only one of these children had past-life memories; the identifications of the others were made on the basis of dreams, behaviors, and physical traits. All other purported cases of this kind also lack past-life

memories from multiple individuals (Matlock, 2019, p. 266). As I noted in *Signs of Reincarnation* (Matlock, 2019, pp. 266–269), the absence of memory claims may be highly significant. These cases may have been no more than social constructions, but if indeed they involved reincarnation, the fact that they did not include personal memories may reveal something significant about consciousness and the reincarnation process. However, because these cases did not include memories, I cannot see how they belong under the heading of “two or more children *recalling* the same past life” (italics added).

A second problematical category that Greyson identified consists of cases in which “a child may appear [to] remember the past lives of *two different people who lived at the same time*” (Greyson, 2021, p. 219). He quickly added, “We have a small number of such purported cases from the files at the University of Virginia, but have not published them because the identification of the deceased person alleged to have reincarnated is not well established” (Greyson, 2021, pp. 219–220). Again, in Canada, in Alaska, and in Tibet there are beliefs in what I have called “concurrent reincarnation” (Matlock, 2019, p. 265), but I have seen only a single account—in the anthropological literature on the Tlingit (de Laguna, 1973, pp. 779–780)—and it is strictly anecdotal, without any investigation. If pioneering University of Virginia reincarnation researcher Ian Stevenson studied cases of this sort but did not publish them or even refer to them in his writings, perhaps that was for good cause: “because the identification of the deceased person alleged to have reincarnated is not well established.” For this reason, to avoid readers coming away with the impression that the evidence is stronger than it actually is, I believe the subject is better left unaddressed—or, at most, addressed as a mere unsubstantiated possibility. Until solid reports have been identified, I think it would be much better to stay with Stevenson’s policy and not put out information that calls for clarification now and may need to be retracted later.

In any event, I cannot see that either multiple children simultaneously recalling the same past life, or a single child recalling the past lives of multiple individuals—should such phenomena occur—indicate “incarnations that occur simultaneously in a state of timelessness in which everything is happening all at once” (Greyson, 2021, p. 224). The possibility that consciousness can split to produce multiple individuals reincarnated from the same person, or that different streams of consciousness can merge in the same individual, are issues that have some support in belief systems cross-culturally, and so perhaps should

be considered seriously (Matlock, 2019, pp. 264–270), but they appear to me to have little or no bearing on Greyson’s thesis.

A third problematical area for Greyson was cases in which the reincarnated individual died after the birth of the subject. These cases are problematic only if reincarnation is understood to invariably occur before birth, perhaps at conception. This is a theoretical question, but I cannot see how it can rightly be considered problematic for the concept of reincarnation. Greyson stated that the files at the University of Virginia include records of 37 such cases, although Stevenson published only a few of them. Several others, of varying quality, have appeared elsewhere (Matlock, 2017, 2019).

In discussing cases of this last kind, Greyson misrepresented my position, as stated in *Signs of Reincarnation*—which, curiously, he cited as co-authored with Jeffrey Mishlove, who wrote only the introduction to the book. “One alternative explanation of these ‘anomalous dates’ cases [is that they] are not examples of reincarnation but rather of possession of a child after birth (Matlock & Mishlove, 2019)” (Greyson, 2021, p. 220). Actually, my position is that reincarnation can be considered a type of possession, normally coming before birth, but sometimes after, replacing the personality previously in possession of the body (Matlock, 2019, pp. 174–177). That is why I have termed cases of this kind *replacement reincarnation*. It is Stevenson, not I, who regarded them as possession, as distinct from reincarnation (see, e.g., Stevenson et al., 1989).

Replacement reincarnation cases are problematic for reincarnation only if one assumes that reincarnation must occur at conception. These cases are in no way problematic if reincarnation is understood as a type of possession of the body that may occur after, as well as before, birth. Moreover, again, I cannot see how they suggest “incarnations that occur simultaneously in a state of timelessness in which everything is happening all at once” (Greyson, 2021, p. 224). Some NDErs report having experienced this, but Greyson’s three types of “problematic” reincarnation cases do not suggest it. All can be handled within a linear flow of time, with no more than a revision in how we think of consciousness.

References

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