Response to Guest Editorial

Response to “A New Perspective on the Afterlife Issue”

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ABSTRACT: V. Krishnan argues that the phenomenon of children who claim to remember previous lives indicates that an inanimate recording of a person's mental activity at the time of death persists in the local area after he or she dies. Several areas of empirical evidence conflict with this hypothesis, including long-distance cases in which the family had not been near the area where the previous personality died, cases in which the children have intermission memories of events between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the subject, and cases in which the children have memories of events that occurred long before the previous personality died.

KEY WORDS: reincarnation; survival.

V. Krishnan, in his “New Perspective on the Afterlife Issue,” suggests that the phenomenon of children who claim to remember previous lives, as studied by Ian Stevenson and others, can be best understood as evidence, not of survival, but of an inanimate recording of a person's mental activity that may persist after death. While I welcome the serious thought that he gives to the issue, I do not think that his conclusions are consistent with the facts.

To begin with, he argues that since there are unanswered questions about the genesis, purpose, and composition of a soul, we should conclude that there is no such thing. While he certainly may be right that there is no such thing as a soul, unanswered questions hardly constitute proof or even evidence that there isn't.
With that as a starting point, he then tries to make sense of the evidence of previous life memories. Since he has concluded that there is not an enduring soul, he attempts to determine what else could have produced the memories that the children have demonstrated and decides that there must have been an energetic recording that persisted in the death-related area for some time after the previous personality's death. In support of this concept, he offers the fact that in some of the cases where the subject was born far from the site of death of the previous personality, there has nonetheless been some geographical connection between the two, such as a parent passing through the place of death around the time of conception. There are many strong cases, however, that are exceptions to this. Imad Elawar (Stevenson, 1974), Bishen Chand Kapoor (Stevenson, 1975), Sunita Khandelwal (Stevenson, 1997), Purnima Ekanayake (Haraldsson, 2000), and Ajendra Singh Chauhan (Mills and Lynn, 2000), to name just a few, are examples in which the child's parents had apparently never visited the area where the previous personality died. These strong cases run completely counter to Krishnan's argument, and he does not address them and the many others like them.

Krishnan is right that there is a geographical component to the cases in that, in almost all of them, the subject and previous personality are of the same nationality. Even in cases involving different nationalities, the previous personality has generally died in the subject's country, such as the Burmese children described by Stevenson (2001) who reported memories of lives as Japanese soldiers killed in Burma in World War II. Clearly, the subjects are not distributed randomly throughout the globe to begin their next lives, but the factors that would lead a child to be born in a particular location are unknown at this point. There is no reason to conclude from this, however, that a record stays at the site of the death that can subsequently influence a child's memory and identification.

Krishnan also acknowledges that some of the children have intermission memories of events between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the subject. These would seem to argue against his idea of a mental record separating from the body at death, but he views these memories as near-death experiences (NDEs) that the previous personalities had at the time of death. Later, he ignores these cases altogether in arguing that the element that survives after death, this mental record, cannot be a living, conscious being because the children were not able to sense what was happening around them during the interval between death and rebirth. With rare exception,
however, unconscious patients are not able to sense what is happening around them, but we do not generally think of them as dead. More importantly, numerous cases are exceptions to this, such as the two Krishnan himself cites with intermission memories. Some of the children, such as Bongkuch Promsin (Stevenson, 1983), told of coming to their new family. In that case, the boy said that after he stayed for seven years over the bamboo tree near the spot where the previous personality's body had been left after he was murdered, he tried to go to the previous personality's mother on a rainy day. He said that he got lost in the market instead, saw his future father, and stayed with him during a bus ride to his new family's home. His father had attended a meeting in that area on a rainy day in the month when Bongkuch's mother became pregnant, so along with 29 verified statements about the previous life, there was at least partial verification of the boy's memories of events between lives, which surely cannot be thought of as occurring during an NDE eight years before Bongkuch was born. We do not know why some children have such memories while most do not, but the lack of memories for the discarnate state is certainly not a universal feature of the cases.

Bongkuch's case also points out another fallacy in Krishnan's argument. He uses the unhappiness that some of the children express about their surroundings in their current lives to argue that they must not have survived as conscious beings capable of choosing their future parents. Bongkuch, however, said he chose to follow his future father, and there are a number of other cases that include similar reports. There are also cases with "announcing dreams," where a member of the subject's family, most often the mother, has dreamed before or during the pregnancy that the previous personality either petitioned to be reborn to the subject's parents or announced that he or she was coming to be reborn. Even if these features were not present in a number of cases, it is hard to see how the children's dissatisfaction can constitute evidence that they were not alive between lives, any more than military draftees' complaints about their circumstances would mean that they were not alive when they were inducted.

Krishnan argues that the surviving record includes the mental activity of the previous personality only at the time of death. To support this, he cites Stevenson as saying that "most children recalled only events of the last year, month, and days of the life remembered." Stevenson, however, did not write, and it is not true, that the children only recall events at the end of previous life; he said that the "memories tend to cluster around events of the last year, month, and days of
the life remembered" (Stevenson, 2001, p. 110). As an example, Bishen Chand Kapoor, in recalling the life of a man who died at age 32 in a town 50 kilometers away, gave a number of details about events at the end of that life among his 35 statements verified as correct for the previous personality, but he also accurately reported that the school that the previous personality had attended was near a river and that his 6th grade English teacher had been fat and worn a beard (Stevenson, 1975).

Since there are numerous items of recall that the children give that cannot reasonably be considered to have been thoughts at the moment of death, Krishnan resorts to the idea of a life review at the moment of death. In that case, any memory from any point in the previous personality's life can be credited as being from the moment of death, hardly a convincing argument. A more reasonable assessment is that, while the memories tend to focus on people and places from near the end of the previous personality's life, they can certainly include earlier memories as well.

There is also the issue of birthmarks, which Krishnan touches on. It is hard to imagine how a simple inanimate recording of mental activity could produce birthmarks and birth defects in children that matched wounds suffered by the previous personality, as occurred in 200 cases described by Stevenson (1997). A more reasonable conclusion is that the wound continued to affect a living entity as it moved from one life to the next.

Nonetheless, Krishnan is correct that many cases have a geographical component, most do not have memories from the period between lives, and the memories from the previous life tend to be about people and places from the end of that life. These are only tendencies, however, with numerous exceptions, and, despite Krishnan's reasoning to the contrary, these generalizations should not be taken as absolutes. There is no reason to discount the long-distance cases or ones that include statements about events either early in the previous life or during the time between lives. Krishnan's idea that the previous personality's final thoughts are an inanimate record that exists for a time at the location of that individual's death is simply not consistent with all the evidence and does not provide an adequate explanation for the cases as a whole.

The strongest cases that we have—long-distance cases in which the child made a number of statements about the previous life that were subsequently verified—are ones that Krishnan's hypothesis cannot explain. So where does that leave us? Stevenson has concluded that
“reincarnation is the best—even though not the only—explanation for the stronger cases we have investigated.” (Stevenson, 2001, p. 254). Krishnan’s ideas, though creative, offer nothing that would challenge that assessment.

References


