



The Skeptics SA guide to Reincarnation

Reincarnation is the belief that after death, the ‘spirit’ or some inextinguishable part of each human, survives, and, at some later time is reborn again into either a human, or an animal body. Most believers in reincarnation believe that there is a never-ending cycle of rebirths, which can only be ended by gaining ‘final release’ from the cycle, a process of spiritual progression involving the so-called ‘Law of Karma’ (see Skeptic SA brochure *The Law of Karma*), which claims that those who gain sufficient merit during a number of existences upon Earth may finally break the cycle.

Reincarnation is one of many human theories that attempt to explain the possibility of survival after death, beliefs, which probably evolved from a deep-seated need to believe in some form of transcendental survival. The concept of survival after death was possibly the most important religious idea ever conceived, for from it evolved most other religious concepts. From this emerged the concept of personal guilt and the need for appropriate moral judgment. The idea that, depending upon the type of life that they had lived, each individual would be rewarded or punished after death. Initially, there was a belief that humans lived but one life and then died. Even the Indians, during the Vedic Period, believed that after

death, the righteous spent eternity in the company of the gods, while those who had led an evil life would be thrown into an abyss there to receive eternal punishment at the hands of evil demons. Reincarnation was a later development, and appears to have emerged separately in both the Hellenic and Indian cultures.

Both cultures stressed the importance of former lives in determining whether the soul would return in a human (reward), or animal form, (punishment). In the mystical Greek teachings the belief that human and animal souls could pass into another body, of the same, or of another species, was called Transmigration, or, Metempsychosis, (meta = change, en = in and psukhé = soul). These two terms are similar to, and are often used in place of the term ‘Reincarnation’.

Emerging in Greece around sixth century BCE, it was viewed as a means for the base soul, trapped in a human body, to be released into an otherworldly existence. It incorporated aspects of a common belief in the cycles of the Wheel of Fortune, a concept remarkably similar to that of the Hindus, and represented the belief in continuous cycles of life before the soul could finally achieve final release.

It is often claimed that Pherecydes, (circa 600

BCE) introduced this concept to Greece, and, as the teacher of Pythagoras, passed the idea onto his pupil. Both these claims are completely unsupported by evidence. However, we do know that Pythagoras was one of the principal supporters of Transmigration, which, in ancient times was often called, ‘the doctrine of Pythagoras.’ It seems more likely that the belief is much older. We know that it was a common belief amongst several early European races, including the Celtic and Gaulic tribes. It may have been brought to the Hellenic Peninsula by the early Doric invaders, (approximately 1000 BCE), or, more likely, it may have been part of the rich lore of the original inhabitants of Greece.

While the Hindus believed in a vast cycle of rebirths, the Greeks had a much simpler system. To them, the dead spent nine years in the Underworld being cleansed, then were reborn; after the third death the soul finally reached the Isle of the Blessed. On the other hand, the Hindus conceived a universe of unbounded time, part of a vast cosmic cycle of progression, (in Sanskrit, samsara = ‘passing through intensely’).

Individual souls (jiva), are initially ‘created’ by God, as protoplasmic life; from there they be-

gin their upward progress. While, at this sub-human level, there is automatic progression towards the human level; once that level is attained, (when the soul is deemed to be 'self-conscious') further progress must be earned. Death was merely part of this great eternal cycle; individual bodies had little importance in this scheme, they were merely shed at death while the spirit continued onwards.

Reincarnation appears to have emerged along with the idea of the Law of Karma. While Western science teaches the idea of a universe of physical causation many Eastern religions extended this idea to include the moral and spiritual aspects of the life of each individual, the idea that, As you sow, so shall you reap. Thus, every action of every individual was responsible for shaping their ultimate destiny.

The claimed recall of past lives by a small number of individuals has resulted in claims by many supporters that reincarnation has been 'proved'. The Indian Skeptics investigated several 'classic' reports of reincarnation said to have occurred in India. When they visited villages where the claimed 'reincarnated' individuals were said to have lived, both in their present and former existences, it was found that villagers knew nothing about these people. Neither the individuals involved, nor their families had ever existed. Like Vegetable Lambs and Barnacle Geese they were travellers' tales, totally without substance.

In a 1970 interview by *Newsweek* American housewife Virginia Tighe, (Bridey Murphy), admitted that despite the many claims about Skeptics SA

her experiences, she herself was not a believer in reincarnation. Despite this, the Bridey Murphy case is still cited as 'evidence' of reincarnation. In 1952 Virginia Tighe, when hypnotized by amateur hypnotist, Morey Bernstein, vividly described details of a former existence as an Irish woman, Bridey Murphy, (1798 – 1864). Most of the 'facts' of the claims were only superficially researched before Bernstein rushed into print. Although the evidence appeared sound at first, after intensive research, many discrepancies were found:

- in her 19th century role, she used modern American expressions
- although she provided an exact date and place of birth, no records could be found to substantiate her birth, despite comprehensive records being available
- no family of the name she gave was recorded as living in Cork
- she claimed to have lived in a wooden house, yet timber houses were rare in Ireland
- a church she claimed to attend in the 19th century was founded in 1911
- her 'ability' to speak with an Irish accent was explainable by the fact that her natural parents were part Irish, and Tighe had been involved in amateur theatre, and had learned several Irish monologues

While some geographical details were accurate, it appears these came from a former Irish nursemaid, (or, according to some sources, a neighbour) named Bridie Murphy Corkell, who

had told Virginia many stories about her early life in Ireland. It seems that Tighe's stories, and those of other persons with memories of past-lives, are the result of two unconscious processes, confabulation and cryptomnesia:

- confabulation: a process where we fill in gaps in our memories with manufactured memories, which appear to make sense. As far as the individual is concerned these are factual memories
- cryptomnesia: the recollection of past experiences, usually material or events from books, film or television, which make a lasting impression on our memory. These tend to be items with emotional impact or relate to material that is of personal interest. Although these become 'forgotten', at least on a conscious level, they will often emerge later as our own 'personal' memories or experiences

While the confabulated or cryptomnesiac memories are completely false, they are not deliberate lies. Like deliberately implanted false-memories, as far as the individual is concerned, these are real memories, and the individual is convinced of their reality. As such these 'memories' are often the basis for people believing that they have lived previous lives.

In 1962, after a motor cycle accident, 29 year old Robert G awoke in the Dundee Royal Infirmary, in Scotland, with a distinct memory that he had been a major in the Confederate Army during the American Civil War. He was referred to Dr McHarg, a University of Dundee psychiatrist who diagnosed Cryptomnesia. Despite his diagnosis, McHarg remained

baffled by G's intricate knowledge of the Civil War period, and how he could describe uniforms and weapons in such fine detail. About eighteen months later McHarg discovered that shortly before the accident G read an article about a British group dedicated to maintaining the memory of the old American Confederate states. Further investigation finally revealed that most of the details 'remembered' by Robert had been contained in a 1951 BBC TV rendition of the Civil War story, the *Red Badge of Courage*. It appeared the cryptomnesia memories had originated with both these sources.

Finally, there are three obvious problems with many of the claims made by those claiming to have been reincarnated:

- most of those that recall previous lives claim to have been important and powerful people, kings, queens, generals, etc., few were ever servants or scullery-maids
- it is common to find numerous people who claimed to have been the same person in a past life. Both the actress Ann Miller and Tina Turner claim to have been the Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut in a former life, and there appear to be dozens of Alexanders the Great, Julius Caesars and Napoleons, and there are even several Jesus Christs
- many of the claimants report that in their previous lives they lived in such mythical locations as Atlantis, or Mu, lands known never to have existed.

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