

## Introduction

Throughout recorded history in every culture and period, many persons have believed that they could perceive or influence events at a distance without known physical means of communication or action. These abilities now called paranormal were either rejected by skeptics as “recrudescence of superstition” or accepted by believers as “evidence of the supernatural” without an objective basis for doing so (Barrett, 1911). Scientific investigation of such claims began over a hundred years ago. A number of eminent scientists from various fields, including the physicists Sir William Barrett (1844-1925) and Sir Oliver Lodge (1851-1940), the chemist Sir William Crookes (1832-1919), and the biologist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) gave serious thought to the subject. They felt that the reports of such occurrences had much more to offer than conventional scientists had recognized. After a few unsuccessful attempts to bring these matters to the serious attention of the scientific world, a group of scholars, mostly of Cambridge University, decided to investigate those faculties of man, real or supposed, that appeared inexplicable to science. For this purpose they founded in 1882 the Society for Psychical Research in London, England.

In its first phase, psychical research (which is now often known as parapsychology) was largely conducted by individual investigators. Some of them had academic appointments, but their work in this field was usually carried on outside their regular duties in teaching and research. Gradually however, some faculty members of colleges and universities took up the work more or less on a full-time basis, and for a time during the 1960s and 1970s a considerable amount of research was conducted within universities. However, on the whole, studies of paranormal phenomena have not been either encouraged or supported except in a few universities. Investigations of apparent paranormal events are, nevertheless, in progress in several university departments.

Paranormal phenomena have long presented a serious challenge to science. But scientists even today are trying to understand and come to grips with them. The great and even revolutionary developments in modern science make the previously unthinkable phenomena of parapsychology now appear somewhat less preposterous than they seemed to an earlier generation (Koestler, 1972/1973; Hardy, Harvie and Koestler, 1974). As a result, some scientists of the “official sciences” have started recognizing, although often only implicitly, certain affinities between what they think and do and research in the field of parapsychology.

Parapsychology has two main branches: the study of ostensibly paranormal phenomena that occur spontaneously in everyday life; and the study of whatever phenomena of the kind in question can be elicited under the more controlled conditions of laboratories. (The investigation of the unusual abilities of mediums and sensitives occupies a somewhat intermediate position, half way between spontaneous occurrences and experiments.)

Investigators of the first period in psychical research—up to about 1930—strongly emphasized the study of spontaneous cases. Then from about 1930 to about 1960

experimental research in laboratories received the most attention and spontaneous cases were relatively neglected. During the past three decades, spontaneous cases have again received more attention from parapsychologists.

Among all the different types of spontaneous cases, claimed memories of previous lives received, at least until recently, the least attention of any group of cases. Scientists who became aware of such claims were inclined to attribute them to mental abnormalities, superstitions, or at best to culture-bound beliefs. Persons living in cultures where the belief in reincarnation prevailed, on the other hand, were inclined often to accept the idea of reincarnation solely on the basis of their religious teachings. Thus members of neither group had any incentive to examine seriously and empirically specific claims of memories of previous lives.

It is a major task of scientists to observe events, especially unusual ones, to consider different interpretations for them, and to communicate their observations and findings to other persons who can be shared with other persons who do not have such experiences.

Human beings acquire knowledge in two ways: from their own experiences and from those of others. The first, a universal method of obtaining knowledge, suffices for many persons. What they know derives exclusively from their own experiences. Some persons of this group are uneducated or mentally ill equipped to learn from other persons. But this group also includes persons who possess unusual gifts or powers of self-penetration and who can, from within themselves, acquire profound knowledge of many things. According to some traditions and claims, such persons may even attain knowledge of the highest truths. Members of the other group, who are persons without either the handicaps or the gifts of the first group, derive their knowledge from external sources. This is to say that they benefit from the experiences of other people.

This categorization of knowledge into two types is far from new. In the ancient philosophy of India, the distinction has been made for centuries between direct or primary knowledge (shruti) and indirect knowledge (smriti).

The experiences studied by parapsychologists illustrate the distinction between these two types of knowledge well; and this is particularly true of claims to remember a previous life. A person who says that he remembers a previous life rarely has any doubt that he has in fact remembered one. For him, his memories of the previous life are matters of which he claims to have direct, reliable knowledge, and they have the status of certainty, just as memories of childhood have for other persons. Although people sometimes misremember their own childhoods, it is unusual for a person to doubt the accuracy of his childhood memories. It is unusual also for other persons to deny that a person who says he remembers his childhood can actually do so. To challenge another person's memories of his childhood could undermine a person's confidence in the accuracy of his memories of his own childhood. But some persons claim that they can remember their early infancy and these persons, being rather rare, encounter varying degrees of skepticism on the part of other persons. Even rarer are

persons who claim to remember a previous life; and they understandably encounter even more skepticism.

Claims to remember previous lives have been reported under a variety of conditions. Such memories may occur during the normal waking state and also in altered states of consciousness. The latter condition may lead to some difficulty of interpretation. Two conditions that are radically different may resemble each other closely in outward aspects. For example, persons having parapsychological experiences may behave in unusual ways that cause other persons to consider them mentally ill, when they are not. Similarly, some persons who are mentally ill may claim to have paranormal experiences when they do not have them; or they may actually have some paranormal abilities, which are masked by their mental illness. Or a justifiable claim of paranormal powers may be dismissed as only a part of their delusions or hallucinations. Thus confusion can easily occur between the paranormal and the abnormal (or psychopathological). The difference deserves a careful examination of the pertinent phenomena

A scientific study of the evidence for reincarnation consists in examining, to whatever extent this is possible, the claims of persons who say that they have direct knowledge of previous lives and in communicating the findings to others. But the task of the scientist in parapsychology, as in most other branches of science, goes far beyond that of merely reporting observations. Analysis is no less important than observing and recording.

The earliest available reports of rebirth cases appeared sometime in the late nineteenth century. However, up to the 1960s cases were published only in single reports, occasionally in small groups of reports. A major turn was made in the history of parapsychological investigations in the 1960s by Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia. He objectively examined the claims of persons who spontaneously recalled previous lives, subjected his data to group analysis for possible recurrent features in the cases; and weighed individual cases against several plausible hypotheses. He thus brought the phenomenon of reincarnation as a legitimate subject for study in the realm of scientific investigations.

Claims of reincarnation have been reported from numerous cultures, and Stevenson has extended his investigations to many of them, including India. A considerable body of data has been gathered by him enough to begin understanding the similar and different features of such cases in various cultures. In fact,

Stevenson's is the only scientific study available on the subject. His techniques of examining such claims are an important improvement over the methodology that was used previously. I have enumerated his major contributions to the advancement of methodology in Chapter Two on the Review of Previous Work.

I have used the same working definition of reincarnation in the present study which is consistent with that established by Stevenson. I have modified his techniques and have used them in the present investigation according to the objectives described in the chapter on Present Study (Chapter Three). I have made the modifications (described in

Chapter Four) by adding some more tools without distorting or deleting from those used by Stevenson.

I have presented the Results obtained in the present investigation in Chapter Four. The statistical treatment of the data is relevant only to the material collected at this stage. Many inferences cannot be drawn, but the analysis will help in the understanding of the data obtained.

I have discussed the data of individual case reports and features noted in all the cases considered together in Chapter Five. I have discussed the merits and demerits of both normal and paranormal interpretations that may account for the claims of previous life memories. I have included the hypotheses of fantasy, fraud, genetic memory, paramnesia, and cryptomnesia under normal interpretations of the case material. Under paranormal interpretations, I have considered the hypotheses of extrasensory perception and personation, possession, and reincarnation.

It is conjectured that these memories may be a defect rather than a gift to the person who experiences them. An understanding of the phenomenon may contribute to improved knowledge of deviant behavior of children that cannot be explained on the basis of available hypotheses. I have summarized the findings of the present investigation and enumerated the implications of this research in Chapter Six of this book. Most of the work presented in these six chapters, I had submitted in the form of a doctoral thesis to the Bangalore University.

Subsequently, I have continued investigation of cases of the reincarnation type up to the present. Simultaneously, I have also been studying cases of the possession type as well as experiences of persons who come closer to death but do not die because they revive with or without medical intervention. I have summarized my research activities after the submission of the thesis in Chapter Seven, and my current interests for future research, in Chapter Eight

I must add here that I do not pretend to have dealt with all the interpretations finally, or even adequately, in the present study. However, I have discussed the results not in abstraction but with reference to the evidence that is actually available. Information on each case has varied widely among the different details; but I have made every effort to treat each case cited entirely on its merits or demerits without prejudging it.