

# A Critical Review of Reincarnational Astrology - Glenn Perry

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## A Critical Review of Reincarnational Astrology

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By Glenn Perry

*It is the mark of of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. ~ Aristotle*



One of the more intriguing aspects of natal astrology is the possibility that information about past lives might somehow be implicit in the birth chart. For those who believe in reincarnation, it seems a natural fit—hence, *reincarnational* astrology. The law of karma decrees that each person is born with certain traits and aptitudes that have accrued from previous lifetimes. Karma also holds that each person will experience a specific pattern of fated events that has been earned on the basis of past actions in past lives. Since the birthchart depicts inborn traits and fated events, one might justifiably conclude that the birthchart symbolizes karma.

All of this is certainly possible. However, there are extended arguments that take this possibility to another level. Some astrologers presume that since the birthchart symbolizes one's character and fate in this life, then it must symbolize one's character and fate in a former life as well. Accordingly, interpretations are offered that entail the superimposition of a current life meaning onto a presumed past life, so that the same astrological configuration describes two separate realities: one's current life and one's past life. Other practitioners utilize a form of deductive reasoning to infer plausible precursor (prior life) experiences from current chart configurations. Hard aspects, for example, are interpreted as consequences of misuse or underdevelopment of

those planetary functions in a past life. Still other theories presume that anything in the chart that signifies the past, such as the Moon or South Node, necessarily reflect behavior and experiences from a former incarnation. Despite the complete lack of evidence for such claims, numerous astrological books and computer-generated reports are written from these points of view. Teachers, schools, and training programs are educating astrologers in potentially spurious techniques that allege that past life information can be discerned from the birthchart. While many astrologers admit the speculative nature of their past-life interpretations, others refuse to do so. Instead, they insist that their work is based on established techniques that empirically measure the prior-life dynamics in the birth chart. In the remainder of this article, we'll examine the nature and ethical implications of such claims.

First, however, I would like to state at the outset that I believe in reincarnation and karma. Not only are such doctrines rooted in the rich spiritual traditions of the east, but compelling arguments for reincarnation have been made from investigations into apparent past life memories (Bache, 1994; Cerminera, 1950; Stevenson, 1974; Weiss, 1992). It seems entirely reasonable that the astrological chart reflects karmic patterns that have accrued from past lives—but exactly how? It is one thing to assert this philosophically, it is quite another to claim that one can know the past life logic that lies hidden within the mystery of the chart itself. In the absence of evidence to substantiate the validity of such claims, it could be argued that they not only trivialize the doctrine of reincarnation and karma, they also pose an ethical problem for the field.

## **The Ethical Issue**

On the surface, it may seem that past life claims in astrology merely reflect the metaphysical convictions of the practitioner. Certainly, no one should be rebuked for his or her personal beliefs. Astrology, however, is more than a

belief system; it is a service and a product that is sold. In virtually every ethical code that pertains to counseling, there are sections that prohibit practitioners from making false claims. For example, the ISAR Ethics Code, Section A.6.b., “Accurate Advertising,” states the following:

It is unethical for astrologers to make false, fraudulent, misleading, or deceptive claims that are designed to induce the rendering of professional services. A statement may be misleading or deceptive if it fails to disclose material facts or is intended or is likely to create false or unjustified expectations of favorable results.

Do past life claims create false or unjustified expectations of favorable results? If astrologers make definitive statements about past lives based on the chart, there is the implication that such information is clearly indicated. For example, Forrest (2000) alleges that he can construct a scenario based on the birthchart that symbolically parallels the soul’s prior-life experience. “We can know with great confidence that something like the story we are telling was in fact the experience of this soul in another lifetime” (p. 189). However, is such a statement justified if there is no way that Forrest can corroborate the claim with evidence from an actual past life? Is he deceiving the client into thinking that he knows something that he does not actually know? That he cannot know? If so, then he is creating an unjustified expectation of a favorable result—namely, that the recipient of the reading will gain legitimate information about a past life. The client may consider such information a favorable result and may even appear to benefit from it, but if the interpretation is not credible, is it ethical to advertise and sell such information?

One could argue that on this basis almost anything an astrologer says could be construed as unethical, since we cannot always provide concrete evidence to substantiate the statements that we make. However, there is a categorical difference between statements that an astrologer makes about a current life as opposed to a past life. All statements that pertain to a current life are falsifiable; that is, they relate to traits and experiences that can potentially be shown to be

false. If an astrologer makes a statement about the client's personality, such as "you tend to be impulsive and reckless," the client can confirm or disconfirm the veracity of the interpretation. Such statements can also be confirmed or disconfirmed by external sources, such as friends or relatives or biographers who provide information about the character of the subject. In addition, astrologers make statements about events that the client may have experienced in childhood, or which s/he may experience some years in the future. Again, all such statements are capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed because they relate to past or future experiences *in this life*. Grounding interpretive statements in evidential data is how any discipline builds up a reliable body of knowledge. Although much of what passes for valid knowledge in conventional astrology has not been the product of formal research, it does constitute a body of knowledge that has accumulated over the centuries through observation and correlation; that is, astrologers for millennia have been observing empirical phenomena and correlating these phenomena to astrological factors.

With claims about past lives, however, no such evidence is available to correlate to astrological factors. Certainly one can speculate about possible correlations, such as "South Node in Virgo means you were fussy and critical in a past life," but speculation needs to be differentiated from interpretations that are grounded in actual, verifiable data. Statements like the above are not falsifiable; they are incapable of being disconfirmed since no one can go back to the client's past lives to confirm if such a statement is valid. This insulates the past-life astrologer from any potential criticism of his knowledge claims. In the counseling professions there is an ethical practice called "informed consent", which means that before clients consent to receive (and pay for) a particular service, they should be reasonably informed as to the nature of that service. For example, The Association for Psychological Astrology (APA) Code D.3.b., "Nature of Services," states:

When a consultation is initiated, astrologers inform clients of the purposes, goals, techniques, procedures, limitations, potential risks and

| benefits of services to be performed.

Note especially the word “limitations” with regard to services. It could be argued that a very real limitation of reincarnational astrology is that statements about past lives cannot be confirmed on the basis of actual, observable data. Clients cannot confirm or disconfirm interpretations of this sort since the vast majority of people do not remember past lives. Again, this limitation does not apply to statements about current lives, for even in the absence of substantiating evidence for a particular interpretation there is at least the possibility of acquiring it. With past life statements, this possibility is so remote as to be almost non-existent.

I say almost non-existent, for the possibility to acquire confirmatory data does exist in a certain fashion. Hypnotic-regression techniques of the sort used by psychotherapists Roger Woolger (1987) and Brian Weiss (1992) suggest that individuals are capable under hypnosis of recalling past lives. Such memories are fleeting and fragmentary, to be sure, but sometimes have a quality of real authenticity. Nevertheless, evidence of this sort is extremely dubious, for therapists and clients alike will admit that in most instances it is virtually impossible to differentiate actual memories from waking dreams. In response to the hypnotist’s suggestion that the client “remember” a past-life, the imagination kicks in and suddenly there are images and feelings that take on the quality of a previous incarnation. But is it memory or is it merely the client’s imagination complying with what has been suggested? It is difficult to say. A potentially more fruitful area of research exists in the work of psychiatrist Ian Stevenson (1974), who has collected compelling accounts of children’s memories of past lives. Rigorous, scientific research to substantiate these memories, which includes interviews with family and friends from the prior life, has been undergoing for over thirty years. However, to my knowledge, there has been no attempt to correlate research data with the astrological charts of these unusual children. Until and unless that occurs, the question of how the birthchart reflects karma from previous incarnations must remain unanswered, at least in any definitive sense.

Even if such a study did occur, there is no assurance that it would clearly indicate an astrological connection between the current horoscope and the immediate prior life. We cannot presume that the Universe works in such a linear fashion. Not only may one incarnation be compensatory for another and thus indicated by radically different astrological factors, it is also likely that the horoscope reflects accrued karma from multiple past lives; thus, the immediate prior incarnation is not necessarily going to be reflected in a clear way in the birthchart.

In the absence of confirmatory evidence for past life interpretations, and in accord with the aforementioned ethical codes, astrologers should acknowledge to clients that such interpretations are speculative. Partly this is a question of good versus bad scholarship. But it's more than that. When astrologers set themselves up in practice and implicitly or explicitly claim to be able to provide information of any sort about a client's past life, they are accepting payment for services that have no basis in anything empirical. Given that the claim to know past lives is an extraordinary one (who wouldn't want to know something about their past life?), it has the potential of generating extraordinary interest and substantial profit. Accordingly, it is easily abused.

Astrologers who claim they can tell clients about past lives are in the same position as gypsies who claim they can diagnose and lift curses that derive from unseen entities. In both cases there is (1) an extraordinary knowledge claim of perceived high importance; and (2) an implicit promise to help the client with problems that derive from an unknowable source. Unless there are limits placed on such claims, the potential for abuse is high indeed.

Accordingly, there is a real need to require astrologers to admit that claims about past lives (or stories that allegedly parallel "real" past lives) are speculative.

The linking of astrology to karma and reincarnation seems to have begun with the great English astrologer, Alan Leo (1860-1917), whose *Esoteric Astrology* was the first book to establish a connection between astrology and theosophy. According to Leo,

Esoteric astrology is primarily concerned with the abstract cause, the philosophy of the inner or more subtle point of view; whilst exoteric astrology is consistent with the effect, the practice, and the concrete or outer expression, preferring the more tangible and evident to the speculative and theoretical. (p. xiv)

Leo's astrological foray into occult philosophy was soon taken up by the theosophist, Alice Bailey (1972), who referred to esoteric astrology as "the astrology of the soul." Subsequent esoteric astrologers used the doctrine of karma to explain good and bad planetary aspects, the strength or weakness of planetary sign positions, and how the will of the individual can be brought into alignment with the divine will. In many ways, esoteric astrology was a progenitor of Rudhyar's humanistic (psychological) astrology in that it focused on ways of using astrology to facilitate evolution toward an ideal state. Although Alan Leo did proffer a karmic explanation for the overall structure of the birth-chart, it is noteworthy that he associated esoteric astrology with "the speculative and theoretical." With regard to how the chart of a current incarnation might specifically relate to a previous incarnation, Leo was unequivocal: "Answers obviously cannot be given until horoscopes for successive incarnations have been accumulated and examined, and up to the present this has only been done in one or two cases, too few to justify generalization." He did, however, speculate that as souls evolve from life to life they are likely to have markedly different horoscopes. Each new horoscope would be orchestrated for different experiences and lessons, such that the birthchart of one incarnation is not a reliable index for discerning information about previous incarnations.



Regrettably, Leo's admirable restraint in such matters was not emulated by future generations of esoteric and humanistic astrologers, most of whom seem to reason that anything in the current horoscope must necessarily reflect traits and experiences from previous lives—this, despite the lack of evidence for such an assertion.

For example, Isabel Hickey's (1968) classic text, *Astrology: A Cosmic Science*, is replete with grim indictments such as: "Hasn't been a loving person in past lifetimes, and is often denied the love that he seeks in this lifetime" (for Saturn in Leo, p. 177). People with Venus in Scorpio, "can be cruel or suffer from cruelty because of karma tied to the misuse of the love principle" (p.160). Further travails accrue to Venus square Saturn, which is an aspect that is, "karmic in origin on the debt side of spiritual ledger. Disappointments through love due to selfishness....This causes loneliness and limitation as life advances" (p. 223). And for Mars square Neptune the native is admonished: "Misuse of psychic and spiritual forces in a past life need redeeming in this one" (p. 229).

Since Pluto is associated with death and rebirth, we should not be surprised that it's of particular interest to reincarnational astrologers. Jeffrey Green (1994) is noteworthy in this regard, for he actually provides statistics to support his pronouncements: "About eighty percent of Fourth House Pluto individuals have a series of prior-life experiences in which their emotional needs have not been successfully met by one or both of their parents" (p. 85).

Other astrologers are enamored with the South Node as a prime indicator of karma from past lives. This practice seems to have originated with Martin Schulman's (1975) *Karmic Astrology*. Schulman claims that the South Node is symbolic of the native's past, which includes the very distant past—as in a past life. Accordingly, specific statements are made about previous incarnations. For example, "Nearly all [individuals with South Node in Scorpio] have at one time touched the force of Witchcraft....He has been deeply scarred with the pain of being hurt, and now like a wounded animal can be deadly to anyone who represents the slightest threat" (p. 30-31).

Taking up the banner of the South Node as the sine qua non of reincarnational astrology, contemporary astrologers such as Jan Spiller, Jeff Green, and Steven Forest have followed in Schulman's footsteps with new, ever more spectacular claims. Spiller (1997) relies on the South Node not only to describe one's personality in previous incarnations, but also to reveal specific vocations and pastimes.

For example, Libran South Noders were "housewives, secretaries, counselors, and assistants" (p. 22), whereas Piscean South Noders "have a history of many lifetimes spent in dissolution of the ego—either through meditation and spiritual quests; drug and alcohol abuse; [or] confinement and time to reflect in convents, prisons, or asylums" (p. 237). Spiller says the South Node is responsible for deeply ingrained, habitual behaviors that invariably cause suffering. In fact, following these tendencies "will cause you to lose—every time!" (p. 13). The good news is that the North Node is the antidote to the excesses of the South, and represents the key to resolving past life karma. She reports:

Once you access the underlying formula for uniting and balancing your inner self, it's like a particle of magic. It will work 100% of the time in every situation of your life. (p. 6)

Not to be outdone by Spiller's statistics, Jeff Green (2000) warns ominously that anyone born with Uranus conjunct the South Node has 100% likelihood of a past-life trauma being repeated in the current life (p. 36).

In support of Green's claim that past-life traumas are revealed by the South Node, Steven Forrest (2000) asserts: "In looking at the symbolism of the karmic structures in the birthchart, we can get some exceedingly precise and useful insights into the nature of the past-life story" (p. 170). The sign of the South Node, he says, "gives one direct insight into the psychological attitudes and drives in the karmic patterning," and its house position "gives us insight directly into the behavioral expression and circumstances of the soul in that lifetime" (p. 189). Forrest goes on to describe how the "disorder" of the South

Node can be framed in a past-life story that metaphorically captures the essence of the problem. After interpreting a particular nodal position, he claims:

Everything we are saying could have been the literal, factual truth. Furthermore, we can know with great confidence that something like the story we are telling was in fact the experience of this soul in another lifetime. (p. 189)

However, in the absence of any substantiating evidence that such stories do, in fact, depict or parallel actual past lives, one wonders how Forrest can have “great confidence” in the stories he constructs.

Even more disturbing is the flood of past life astrological reports currently available for purchase. These computer-generated reports are available not only to consumers, but the software can be purchased so that astrologers can sell them firsthand to clients. A cursory review of these reports reveals that most have their own unique theory with regard to how the chart reveals past lives. For example, the Past Lives Report from Matrix Software alleges that its author, Bernie Ashman, “has discovered a technique for creating a past life chart that shows life as a continual evolution.” It’s claimed that Ashman’s “research” has led to techniques that allow him to glimpse patterns and tendencies “from an earlier life” and relate them to the person’s current natal chart.

It turns out that Ashman’s “research” merely entails taking the sign on the cusp of the 12th house and making it the “past lives ascendant,” which is “the way our soul expressed itself in previous incarnations,” he says (p. 29). Also, houses in the Past Life birthchart are counted clockwise rather than the conventional way of counterclockwise. Since the 12th house becomes the Ascendant, the sign on the cusp of the 11th house now begins the 2nd house, and so on, around the chart wheel. The planets remain in the same sign placements, but now occupy different houses. All sign positions are interpreted

from a past lives perspective, such that every planetary sign position now describes how you were rather than how you are.

As an added bonus, Ashman not only interprets the South Node as a past life, he throws in the North Node, too. Trumping his South Node fixated colleagues, Ashman declares that the North Node is “no less connected to past life tendencies than its counterpart the South Node.” According to the Matrix Catalogue description,

The past lives chart reveals the collective energy accumulated over many lifetimes. It is now possible to see the gathering of these tendencies over lifetimes. Viewing the present natal chart through a past life chart perspective is an enormously powerful tool. It becomes clear that each of us is dynamic point of light and energy that is honed and refined lifetime after lifetime. (p. 29)

One might wonder: how does Ashman know the chart as constructed has anything whatsoever to do with a past life? How, in fact, does any astrologer who interprets a chart in terms of a past life know that their interpretations are valid and true? Notwithstanding its Byzantine logic, Ashman’s method is spurious. We’re not talking about a theory grounded in evidence or facts, but something completely made-up.

Ashman’s method for discerning knowledge of past-lives is not unique if by “method” we actually mean an arbitrary set of untested assumptions. The fact that authors of other past life reports utilize entirely different strategies for manufacturing past-life information merely underscores that their interpretations are based on random suppositions. I do not think it’s too far out to say that these reports have as much credibility as a note from the tooth fairy.

## Analyzing The Theory

How do astrologers derive information about past lives from birthcharts? Once the premise of reincarnation is accepted, one simply looks at a configuration and imagines how its standard astrological meaning might relate to a former existence. In other words, imagination substitutes for evidence. Armed with a past-life presupposition, it is not difficult to provide past-life interpretations. The formula is straightforward:

1. Interpret an astrological configuration.
2. Convert this meaning into a past-life meaning.
3. Voila! Instant karmic insight into a past life.

Essentially, Judy Hall (2000) advocates this approach for readers who might feel cheated because their particular past-lives aspect was not covered in her book. “Apply your own astrological knowledge,” she says, “and speculate on possibilities” (p. 49). I think this sentence speaks for itself. In short, the vast majority of past-life interpretations simply entail taking a natal configuration and then speculating on how it might describe a behavioral pattern from a past life. There is a hidden irony in this practice, however. Past life interpretations derive from observations of real people in real time who actually have these configurations. To give a simple example, a simple albeit standard natal interpretation of Pluto in the 9th is that it correlates to deep, passionate convictions about matters pertaining to religion, philosophy, and the like. Such an interpretation is not only consistent with the meaning of Pluto and the 9th house; it is also based on observations of individuals who have this natal placement. Past-life interpretations merely involve the superimposition of a current life meaning onto a presumed past life. Thus, the same configuration is claimed to have two identical meanings: (1) it describes behavior in this life, and (2) it describes behavior in a former life.

If the latter premise is true, e.g., Pluto in the 9th means one not only has but also had passionate philosophical convictions, then this would imply that individuals are born with the same configuration life after life since the past-life

interpretation merely duplicates the current life meaning. Moreover, if this holds for all planetary positions in the chart, it suggests one would be born with the same horoscope life after life. But such a position is counter-intuitive if one actually believes in evolution, for it would be redundant for a soul to have the same chart in a past life that they have in this one. Where is the evolution in that?

Accordingly, when astrologers interpret natal configurations as if they are descriptive of past-life tendencies, while also interpreting the same configuration in terms of present-life tendencies, they are actually endorsing a non-evolutionary point of view. It's like saying the ape evolved from the ape. Such an interpretive stance is vacuous and self-contradictory. It is ironic that the major school touting this kind of thinking calls itself "Evolutionary Astrology."

It is certainly plausible that the natal chart is in some way the effect of prior actions in prior lives, but there is no reason to assume that the cause of those effects is going to have the same astrological signature as the effects themselves. Yet, this is what Evolutionary Astrology requires us to believe. If a person is born with Mars conjunct the South Node and square Pluto, and this person has an established propensity for violent outbursts, can we justifiably presume that in a past life this same aspect was in evidence and that it described the same propensity as exists in the current life? According to Forrest (2005), this is how one should interpret such a configuration. Yet, the presumption that the same configuration describes both current life patterns and prior life patterns is just that: an unfounded presumption. There is no actual evidence to support the theory much less the practice.

The claim that the chart reflects karma or "the soul's intentions in this life" simply expresses the metaphysical convictions of the astrologer. I have no problem with this; in fact, it is a position I hold myself. However, such a position does not ensure privileged access to the mysteries of previous incarnations. To make this second and more radical claim, one must combine interpretive skill

with unfettered imagination, but this is hardly a valid methodology for discerning past life information.

In effect, there is a weak and strong version of reincarnational astrology.

*Weak Version: Make a statement about the client's current behavior or life experience and frame it as meaningfully related to the soul's karma or intention for this life. Such an interpretation does not speculate on actual past-life circumstances or actions, but merely presumes that the present is meaningfully connected to the past.*

*Strong Version: Make a statement that refers directly to an attitude, action, or experience in a past life. While the degree of specificity may vary, what distinguishes this type of interpretation from the former is that the astrologer is actually saying something about a past life, and then connecting that statement to a current concern.*

In subsequent sections, we will examine why this second, stronger type of statement is both unethical and indefensible unless the astrologer acknowledges that it is speculative. There is nothing inherently wrong with reincarnational astrology. In fact, I could easily make arguments in favor of it. If there is a problem, it is not with reincarnational astrology per se; it is with dogmatic proclamations of its veracity in the absence of substantiating evidence. Accordingly, the reader should keep in mind that any criticism of reincarnational astrology is directed only at practitioners who refuse to acknowledge the speculative nature of their interpretations.

## **Rules of Evidence**

The primary advantage of scientific inquiry lies with its efficiency. Hypotheses can be tested, retained, or discarded according to their merit. Knowledge thus accumulates that is relatively free from erroneous assumptions. Research is a

kind of corrective procedure, an intellectual screening process that eliminates fallacies, deceptions, and general errors of thinking so that they do not tangle up our accumulating body of knowledge and lead us astray.

Research further assures the growth of knowledge by preventing it from becoming bogged down through allegiance to past authorities. History has demonstrated that many wise, honorable, and intelligent people have simply been wrong in their beliefs. By subjecting beliefs to verification through an appropriate research method, such beliefs can either be confirmed or refuted. The purpose of research is not to prove the ultimate truth or falseness of a given doctrine, but to affect our degree of belief. Such a critical and discriminating approach to knowledge assures that our “truths” will continue to evolve.

Science begins with the perception of a question accompanied by a belief in the possibility of an answer. Once a question is asked, there are three essential steps in scientific research: (1) investigation of pertinent facts, (2) creation of a theory or hypothesis to explain observed regularities in the data, and (3) testing of the hypothesis via the appropriate method. For example, an astrologer may pose the question, what kind of experiences correlate to transiting Pluto conjunct the natal Sun? To answer this question, the astrologer can: (1) investigate the actual experiences of a group of individuals who have had this transit; (2) formulate a hypothesis based on the quality of experience reported; and (3) test the hypothesis by doing structured interviews with twenty subjects who have undergone the transit to see if their actual experience confirms or refutes the hypothesis.

With regard to the first step—investigation of pertinent facts—the researcher gathers factual data in preparation for the formation of a hypothesis, which is still tentative at this stage. Factual data is organized into a series of observation statements that constitute “evidence” in support of the preliminary hypothesis. In the aforementioned study, evidential data can be observations of objective events that appear to correlate to transiting Pluto conjunct the Sun. For example, the transit may correlate to a subject’s encounter with death in



some fashion. A client of mine reported that his wife was diagnosed with leukemia during the period that he was undergoing the transit. For the duration of the transit, which lasted a year due to retrograde movement, he ran a support group for individuals who had all been diagnosed with terminal illnesses.

Evidential data relevant to the transit can also be found in deeply personal, subjective experiences. A person might say, “I had to face parts of myself that I didn’t know were there. I felt like I was dying inside, as if the old me was being destroyed and a new me was being born.” Note that this type of data is grounded in directly apprehended experience, even though it is not empirically observable from an outside vantage point. Such experiences are intrinsically intersubjective, i.e., capable of being shared by many different people. The form, structure, and meaning of the phenomenon—transiting Pluto on the Sun—can be bracketed out from extraneous subjective experiences. It can then be shared and confirmed (or re-buffed) via interpersonal communication.

Accordingly, any interpretation of transiting Pluto on the Sun can be tested by striking it against a community of people who have actually undergone the transit.

Once an appropriate amount of preliminary research has been done, the researcher may formulate a research hypothesis, such as:

Transiting Pluto conjunct the Sun correlates to a) encounters with death, b) experiences involving healing, regeneration, or rebirth, and c) identity crises and transformations—deeply emotional experiences that entail having to face previously unknown or unacceptable parts of the self.

The third step in research—testing—provides a way to reject hypotheses that are potentially erroneous. By interviewing an appropriate number of test subjects who have all experienced the same transit, the hypothesis in question is capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed. The hypothesis is confirmed if it meshes with the structure of meaning experienced by a community of interpreters, i.e., if there is an intersubjective consensus among test subjects.

To be recognized as sound, a research hypothesis must not only account for the data, it must do so in a fashion that is capable of withstanding the fire of intersubjective discourse. For example, the meaning of transiting Pluto on the Sun must not only account for observed regularities among the subjects (similar objective and subjective experiences), it must do so in a way that convinces the community that such regularities cannot be better explained through an alternative hypothesis. In short, acceptance of a theory rests on how well it weathers criticism and whether it has better stood up to testing than its competitors.

Of course, there are very few astrological interpretations—structures of meaning—that have been formally tested in this way. Most interpretations of natal configurations, transits, and progressions are based on a systematic yet informal correlation of astrological variables with observed events. However, as stated previously, the important thing is whether such interpretations can be formally tested. In effect, every astrological interpretation constitutes a potential research hypothesis so long as there is evidence against which the hypothesis can be tested.

### **The Criterion of Falsifiability**

As we have seen, testing provides a potential disproof mechanism and the means by which erroneous hypotheses can be rejected. In his renowned *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Karl Popper (1959) stated that the essential difference between prejudice and theory is that prejudices tend not to be affected by contrary evidence, whereas theoretical concepts remain open to disproof. Popper makes this distinction the prime criterion for distinguishing science from mere speculation. The capacity for disproof is the sine qua non of science: “A system [is] empirical or scientific only if it is capable of being tested by experience” (p. 40).

Popper's criterion of **falsifiability** is the requirement that propositions be made in such a form that they are capable of disproof. To be scientific, a statement must be made in such a way that it can conceivably be disproved. According to Popper, if there is no way to disprove a theory, then there is no way to prove it either. Propositions that do not permit such testing fall into the category of speculation rather than of potentially verifiable scientific statements.

It is difficult to deny that Popper's "supreme rule" of falsifiability provides a sensible way to discriminate between valid theories and mere speculation.

Falsifiability, the capacity for disproof, requires that a theory be subject to testing and that its proponents be willing to admit legitimate disproof.

It cannot be overstated that evidence is the life-blood of any theory. Evidence for or against an astrological hypothesis can come in a variety of forms: observation of behavior, interviews with family and friends, biographies, newspaper reports, magazine articles, employment history, work records, medical records, and artifacts such as writings (letters, articles, books) or works of art. In short, anything a subject has ever said or done that is capable of being recorded may constitute evidence in support of a hypothesis. The more evidence there is for a hypothesis, the greater its degree of confirmation. As we have seen, most astrological hypotheses can be tested by a variety of methods, ranging from quantitative (experimental) methods that utilize statistics, to qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the case study method. Generally speaking, the human sciences—psychology and astrology—are best investigated via qualitative methods. The right qualitative method is whatever is best suited to the questions and subject matter addressed.

As stated, any particular astrological statement constitutes a potential research hypothesis so long as there is evidence against which the hypothesis can be tested. In the absence of evidence that could potentially disprove the hypothesis, it must be relegated to the category of mere speculation—a trivial statement of little significance or value.

## Testing Reincarnational Astrology

With regard to reincarnational astrology, the proposition for testing would be: Past-life information can be ascertained from astrological charts. In order to test this proposition, a more specific question would have to be derived and investigated. For example, does the South Node of the Moon provide information about a subject's past lives? The first step in investigating this question would be to gather preliminary evidence from a past life that is pertinent to the meaning of a particular nodal position. Almost immediately, however, the researcher faces a daunting problem. How can one access evidential data from a subject's past lives if, in fact, there is no evidence? Evolutionary astrologers might answer that they are not attempting to provide specific, concrete information about past lives, such as who the person was, their appearance, career, illnesses, or any other specific data; rather, they are attempting to construct a parable/story that metaphorically depicts the "dynamics" of the past life existence. By "dynamics" is meant the emotional, mental, and behavioral patterns from that life. Despite this caveat, however, Evolutionary Astrology is not exempt from the need for evidence. In distinguishing concrete details from psychological dynamics, the researcher still faces the same problem. To confirm whether the dynamics of past lives is accurately seen and read in the horo-scope, one would need access to actual prior personalities, subject them to some kind of assessment to determine their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and then compare these to what has been predicted from the chart. But how can one do this if one cannot actually observe a prior life personality?

There are several possibilities. The first is to utilize the technique of past-life hypnotic regression. The goal would be to see if evidence can be ascertained from a past life memory that pertains specifically to the research hypothesis. Let's say, for example, that the subject has South Node in Capricorn in the 6th house. With regard to this placement, Forrest (2000) claims there is "a dark

karmic pattern of controlling others through service....keeping others weak, keeping others dependent, through rendering ourselves indispensable” (p. 192). This pattern stems from a past life, says Forrest, because the bottom-line meaning of the South Node is that it represents a deeply ingrained habit on a soul level that is now carrying over into the current life.

In order to test this claim via regression hypnosis, the researcher would need to direct the client to remember a past life and then see what sort of information spontaneously emerges. However, this procedure is unlikely to provide confirmatory data. On the contrary, there is likely to be a plethora of evidence that runs counter to the alleged meaning of South Node in Capricorn in the 6th. According to the literature on past lives therapy, multiple sessions with the same client tend to produce wildly varying stories involving completely different personalities and circumstances (Woolger, 1987; Weiss, 1992).

Whatever might be true of the personality in one incarnation is likely to be contradicted by the personality of another incarnation. Roger Woolger, a Jungian analyst and arguably the world’s foremost authority on regression therapy, writes:

Once we begin to explore a whole series of past lives a very prominent feature stands out: there is a constant process of reversal from one kind of personality to its opposite. There is also a reversal of moral perspective and major themes in the various stories we encounter. So we meet cycles of lives that swing in personality type from concubine to celibate, spendthrift to miser, lord to serf, stay-at-home to adventurer, and so on....Themes and settings, too, undergo momentous reversals, from a Roman proconsul ruling all of Spain to a landless Dutch peasant; from an ostracized slave to a Chinese warlord; from a sexually abused child to a battlefield rapist and mutilator. (p. 218)

Recall that Forrest (2000) declared that the South Node is the summary product of one’s karma deriving from all previous lives, and that it signifies the emotional memories of the soul (p. 196). Since the South Node in Capricorn in

the 6th has a somewhat precise and limited astrological meaning, this suggests that the soul would have a discernable and repetitive pattern in its evolutionary history, e.g., a tendency toward being a driven workaholic. However, if one accepts Woolger's observation that the soul undergoes a continual process of reversal in personality types, themes, and settings, then this would make it virtually impossible for the South Node to reflect a particular type of past-life personality or life circumstance. Reincarnational research suggests that there is no one particular type of personality or life for the soul; rather, our evolutionary trajectory unfolds in accordance with the Jungian principle of enantiodromia—conversion of one personality into its opposite, and back again, so that over a multiplicity of lives and selves we move toward wholeness (Bache; 1994; Cerminera; 1950). Accordingly, past lives therapy is unlikely to provide confirmation that the South Node represents a specific personality style or lifestyle from previous incarnations.

It is possible that the South Node sign and house symbolizes something specific about the most immediate prior-life. This is what Forrest (2000) implies when he says that the sign of the South Node signifies the “psychological attitudes and drives in the karmic patterning,” while the house position shows “the circumstances of the soul in that lifetime” (p. 189). Since he says “in that lifetime,” it's clear he's not talking about the South Node as the summary product of all previous lives, but as signifying the karmic pattern of a specific past life, e.g., he asserts that the South Node in Capricorn in the 6th means that in a previous incarnation the individual controlled others through serving them (p. 192).

Even assuming that this South Node position symbolizes karma from the immediate past life, there are still serious methodological problems in finding evidence to confirm this supposition. The past life researcher must (1) isolate the immediate prior incarnation from all previous lives, and (2) discern evidence that confirms or disconfirms the meaning of South Node in Capricorn in the 6th. As someone who has experienced past-life regression therapy and

who has also utilized this technique with clients, I can attest that this would be extraordinarily difficult for the following reasons.

First, when a subject is under hypnosis, past lives present themselves in a fleeting, fragmentary, and dreamy manner that does not allow for a clear, incisive analysis of a past-life personality. Biographical data of this sort does not generally emerge in a linear, sequential fashion, but tends to be limited to experiences of high emotional significance. It's more like seeing a preview of a movie than the movie itself. Just as a preview is limited to emotionally charged highlights presented in a jumbled, non-linear way, so past life sessions unfold in a similar manner.

Second, the South Node symbolizes but one facet of the current life and is subsumed by the chart as a whole—myriad planetary sign and house positions, aspects, major configurations, dispositorships, and the like. Since this is the case in this life, it would follow that it's also the case in any previous life. Given the tremendous complexity of the astrological chart, which operates on the synergistic principle of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, I would think it unlikely that behavior pertaining to a single, limited configuration like the South Node would spontaneously leap out at the researcher in an unambiguous manner during a past life session.

Third, in order to be taken seriously, past life regression sessions cannot involve the type of questioning that would be necessary to ferret out information pertinent to a research hypothesis. The hypnotherapist must necessarily allow unconscious material to unfold organically, without direction, suggestion, or leading questions, and in accord with whatever is of immediate personal concern to the client. It would be fine for the researcher to ask questions that pertain to what emerges naturally, but to lead the subject into areas that are potentially relevant to a research hypothesis would so contaminate the session that any information so derived would be immediately suspect. In response to such questioning, the unconscious would unavoidably be influenced to produce data that may appear to conform to the research hypothesis.

Such data would be all the more suspect if the meaning of the South Node was first interpreted and then the subject was asked to go into a past life to confirm or disconfirm the interpretation. Imagine the astrologer saying:

Your South Node position means you might have controlled others through service in a past life. Now, I want you to remember a past life. What's happening?

Under such circumstances, it would be impossible to rule out the possibility that the subject merely manufactured the data in compliance with what had been suggested.

Finally, there is the previously mentioned concern that the veracity of past life data is itself difficult to confirm. In some cases, it appears that regression sessions reveal information that pertains to an authentic past life; however, in many other sessions it appears that the subject's unconscious is manufacturing a "waking dream" that metaphorically depicts a particular issue, conflict, or concern relevant to the current life, just as dreams do. The very act of instructing the client to remember a past life, combined with the subject's intention to remember, produces a collusion between hypnotist and client that renders the resulting "memories" suspect. Rather than actually remembering a past life, the subject may merely be hypnotized into believing that s/he is remembering a past life.

In summary, so far as hypnotic regression is concerned, there are at least five problems this technique presents for a researcher who is testing the hypothesis that some part of a birth chart reflects a karmic pattern from an immediate prior life:

1. Information is presented in a jumbled, fleeting, and fragmentary manner that does not allow for a clear, incisive analysis of a personality type.
2. Because the South Node is but one facet of a complex, multidimensional picture (birthchart as a whole), it is not likely to spontaneously present itself in a precise, unambiguous manner.



3. Past life regression sessions cannot entail leading questions designed to disclose information pertinent to a research hypothesis.
4. Interpretations of the South Node cannot precede the actual regression session without contaminating the resulting data.
5. It is difficult to differentiate actual past life data from fabrications that derive from the suggestion that the subject is remembering a past life.

All of this makes it extremely unlikely that information derived from regression hypnosis would produce valid, confirmatory data for a past-life astrological hypothesis. This does not mean one should not try, of course, but whatever conclusions might be drawn from such research need to be tempered with full awareness of the tentative, questionable veracity of the data. In fact, several astrologers have written about their experiences using hypnotic regression as a methodological tool with this caveat in mind. Nancy Kahn states that she's been an astrologer and past-life regressionist for 25 years.

I always ran a natal chart for every client that I regressed. I can say with certainty that you cannot know a person's past lifetimes by looking at the birth chart....I believe that the time has come to cease predicting past lifetimes by looking at the birth chart!

Another astrologer and past-life regressionist, Barbara May, writes:

Anything dealing with past lives as far as a natal chart is concerned HAS to be speculative. I speak from authority here, as I doubt anyone in the Western world has the database I have gathered since starting to work with Richard Sutphen in July 1976. One must remain a skeptic when dealing with this sort of information. I've made it clear that anything I say about past lives based on a natal chart is speculative and not to be taken as anything else. People don't realize how flimsy information coming from a state of altered consciousness truly can be.

A second technique for gathering evidence in support of a past-life astrological hypothesis would be the use of trained clairvoyants in collaboration with astrologers and researchers. Evidence derived in this way could potentially confirm a particular hypothesis involving, for example, the South Node in Capricorn in the 6th. To substantiate Forrest's (2000) interpretation of this position, the psychic would have to discern if the individual in an immediate prior life actually did control other people through serving them. For evidence of this sort to be permissible, however, the psychic could not know beforehand the nature of the hypothesis under investigation, since foreknowledge would contaminate the results.

It follows that any alleged psychic confirmation of a past-life interpretation by an astrologer would be highly suspect, since it would be difficult if not impossible for the astrologer to differentiate presuppositions based on the chart from what he or she was picking up psychically. Any astrologer can look at a client's chart, close his eyes, and allow images to form that presumably relate to the client's past life. However, the mere fact that the astrologer already has a chart-based interpretation in mind will unavoidably seed his unconscious with certain expectations. If Jeff Green, for example, knows from observable data that Pluto in the 4th can correlate to trauma in one's family of origin, how can he prevent this information from contaminating his allegedly psychic insights into what this configuration might mean for a client's past life? For this reason, any psychically derived claim made by the astrologer would have to be rendered inadmissible for purposes of research.

It goes without saying that psychically derived information about any event is highly questionable. Research has shown that even well known, credible psychics are more often wrong than right (Hansel, 1980; Rhine, 1957; Wiseman, 1997). To be useful for purposes of astrological research into past lives, the psychic would have to: (1) tune in to the most immediate past life, (2) obtain reliable data pertinent to a research hypothesis involving a predicted characterological disposition and fated circumstance, and (3) achieve this with

no foreknowledge of the hypothesis in question. Given the massive difficulty of such a feat, one would have to expect that this technique is unlikely to produce confirmatory data for a past-life astrological hypothesis.

## **Self-Sealing Doctrines**

It is characteristic of certain arguments that no evidence can possibly refute them. The previous section outlined two methods for acquiring evidence that could potentially confirm (or disconfirm) hypotheses that involve reincarnational astrology—namely, evidence from hypnotic regression and clairvoyance. However, the problems involved in acquiring valid and permissible evidence with these techniques are so substantial as to render them nearly useless. Since there may be no way to prove a past-life astrological hypothesis, there would be no way to disprove it either. Positions that are set up in this way are called self-sealing doctrines.

A self-sealing doctrine is a belief system immunized against contrary evidence. In other words, it is not falsifiable. Fogelin (1987) asserts: A self-sealing position is one that is so constructed that no criticism can possibly be brought against it. This shows its vacuity, and it is precisely for this reason that we reject it. (p. 113)

There are a variety of ways that a doctrine can be immunized against contrary evidence. Arguments for reincarnational astrology provide excellent examples of self-sealing mechanisms. Of these we will examine four:

1. Making ad hominem arguments by which a questioner's integrity or competence is impugned.
2. Resolving the discrepancy between fact and belief by introducing a higher order of explanation into the belief system.

3. Drawing dogmatic conclusions from ambiguous data, i.e., evidence that calls for considerable interpretation is distorted so as to confirm expectations.
4. Employment of idiosyncratic terminology in which conventional meanings of words are changed or distorted.

Making Ad Hominem Arguments: An argument ad hominem literally means an argument against the arguer rather than against his argument or against the conclusion of his argument. For example, when asked how he responds to people who point out the lack of empirical evidence for past life data in the horoscope, Jeff Green retorts: “You’re just talking about people with limited intellects, and because of their insecurity, they need to defend the limitations of that intellect.” Note how this response impugns the critic’s integrity and competence. One might suspect Green’s contempt for scientific reasoning is merely a rationalization that exempts him from having to substantiate what he claims to know.

Another type of ad hominem argument is to accuse the critic of misrepresenting the facts or of not having the right method for discerning the theory’s validity. For example, in response to an article that cited the lack of evidence to substantiate past-life claims in astrology, Steven Forrest writes:

His remarks reflect, I think, his inexperience with these techniques. Over and over again, my experience with clients has reflected that, in working with the nodes of the Moon, we are not “making this stuff up,” as he alleges.

Forrest is arguing that the critic’s failure to discern the truth of Evolutionary Astrology is due not to lack of evidence, but to lack of experience with the right techniques. This defense is subtler than accusing the critic of limited intellectual prowess. The implication is that anyone can prove to himself that the techniques work; one merely needs to apply them. However, this argument is specious since the techniques of Evolutionary Astrology do not in

themselves produce any actual evidence to confirm the theory—a point we will return to soon.

### **Introducing A Higher Order Of Explanation:**

A second mechanism of self-sealing doctrines is to resolve discrepancies between facts and beliefs by introducing a higher order of explanation into the belief system. Many astrologers get defensive when confronted with their lack of scientific reasoning. Words like “science,” “research,” and “evidence” are reacted to as if they were curses leveled at them by an evil coterie of non-believers. A favored tactic for defusing criticism is to introduce a higher order of explanation into the theory—one that is immune from the usual requirements for evidence.

For example, Green (2000) protests that requirements for evidence and research is symptomatic of a vast patriarchal conspiracy that has poisoned western culture and undermined our allegiance to “natural law” for the past 8000 years. People who learn in a patriarchal way tend to rely too much on external authority—science—rather than their own experience. Alternatively, Green claims that his knowledge is “entirely within” and takes place through what he calls direct perception—mystical communion with the object of his knowing. He says that he learned this from the Navajo Indians. “Thank God I was initiated into their religion called peyote. Direct perception” (p. 13-14). Certainly this way of knowing has a long and rich history and should not be dismissed out of hand. Some people view direct experience as irrefutable, a naiveté that exasperates Popper (1959, p. 52). We should be aware that this mode of perception does have a rather spotty record. Two teachers of recent memory, Jim Jones and Marshall Applewhite, both claimed to have direct perception into transcendent mysteries, and both rallied their followers to commit mass suicide resulting in over a thousand dead “true believers”. The annals of psychiatry and criminology include innumerable lesser-known cases of self-deluded individuals who believed they possessed special insight into divine mysteries.

Green (2000) exhorts his followers to not rely on external authority for astrological truths. Yet, ironically Green is asking the astrological community to trust him as an external authority, since the type of knowledge he is professing is not confirmable by anyone else's experience. Green would have us believe that he possesses magical powers to see into the souls of human beings, penetrate the secrets of the Universe, pierce the veil of the unknown, and disclose the karmic debts and past life entanglements that underlay our choice of mates, careers, and virtually everything that makes up one's life. As to how he arrived at his startling conclusions, his methodology is consistent with his insights: he dreamed it.

I want to share something about myself: I've read only about ten books in astrology. It's true. And the way I was taught astrology is through dreams. Dreams....This is exactly how all the Pluto material manifested. (2000, p. 4).

According to Green (1993), "seventy-five to eighty percent" of our behavior is directly conditioned by the evolutionary/karmic past, as symbolized by Pluto (p. 8). I can only surmise that citing exact percentages helps to reinforce an illusion of authoritative, precise knowledge. Since his knowledge claims are not testable and thus not falsifiable, they must be accepted on faith. In effect, what he is saying is, "If I imagine or dream it; it must be so!"

Note, however, that this introduces a higher order of explanation into the theory. So called "direct perception" trumps the need for communal or consensual proof of true seeing. Since few if any astrologers are capable of the stupendous leaps of knowing that enable Green to peer into the souls of human beings and perceive their evolutionary/karmic past, he is exempt from having to substantiate his claims with evidence. Lack of evidence is not a fault of the theory; it is the regrettable but unavoidable consequence of others not being able to duplicate Green's powers of perception.

Forrest (2000) defends Green's claims by declaring that astrology, "needs its mystics, needs its visionaries" (p. 12). He's shocked that Green's statements

trouble some astrologers, and he argues that Green is not like Jim Jones because “anybody who looks at his work can check it out...and see that it does work” (p. 13). In other words, Forrest implies that Green is not a crank because his claims can be tested. The point, however, is that his claims cannot be tested, and that’s the problem with not admitting their speculative nature. For example, in an interview with *The Mountain Astrologer*, Green contends that an applying square from Venus to Pluto signifies that the soul is just beginning an evolutionary journey with regard to this planetary duo. He alleges that this aspect...

will set in motion a series of lifetimes in which the soul will experience intense abandonment, have loss and betrayal issues through the misapplication of trust vis-à-vis others, and/or set in motion a series of lives in which they use others relative to their own needs.

By any standard, this is a rather ominous prediction. Whatever difficulties the client might suffer in this life are dwarfed by the prospect of intense abandonment that will extend over an entire series of lifetimes. Yet, upon hearing this, Forrest exclaims how he gets “all excited” when he hears Jeff speak and that he’ll “see if it works”. One can only wonder how Forrest will test Green’s dire predictions about his client’s future lifetimes. Since it’s unlikely that Forrest or anyone could set up a study to test Green’s prediction, it is immunized against any possibility of disproof; thus, it’s a self-sealing doctrine. In other places, Forrest (2000) introduces his own version of a higher order of explanation. Forrest constructs stories about his client’s past lives based on the South Node’s sign, house and aspects. These stories allegedly capture the metaphorical truth of the person’s past life. The good news is that the story doesn’t have to be true to be true.

The point is that truth is different than mere facts, higher than facts. And, through the symbolism of the Moon’s Nodes, we can tell a story that parallels the actual karmic tale of the individual. It parallels it, like a

parable. It tells everything you need to know, except we might have your gender wrong or the century wrong or the continent wrong....From the soul's point of view, that stuff doesn't matter so much anyway. (p. 171)

If the truths of Forrest's past-life stories are not contingent upon facts—in fact, they are “higher” than facts—then there are no facts that can refute them. Accordingly, the claim is not falsifiable. There is no way to disconfirm his theory either with facts or the absence of them. “We are trying to write a novel that conveys the truth, if not the facts,” claims Forrest. “We are directly accessing the emotional memories of this soul” (p. 195). Here again, however, since the truth of Evolutionary Astrology is impervious to facts, it is a self-sealing doctrine.

### **Drawing Dogmatic Conclusions From Ambiguous Data:**

A third mechanism of the self-sealing doctrine is to draw dogmatic conclusions from data that are inherently ambiguous. Rather than acknowledge the uncertain meaning of particular facts, their significance is stretched or distorted so as to confirm one's presuppositions. Here we finally address the alleged “evidence” that reincarnational astrologers utilize to justify their theories. In this regard, I will again focus on Green and Forrest's work, as they have at least attempted to defend their theories through various writings.

A good example of drawing dogmatic conclusions from ambiguous data is Green's account of a case involving a six-year old boy who refused to be toilet trained. Green cites this case in response to criticisms made in an article that questioned the veracity of past-life claims in astrology. He asserts that “specific methodologies exist within astrology [that] empirically measure the prior-life dynamics within a birth chart.” Moreover, these prior-life dynamics “can be tested”. As an example, he cites the aforementioned case involving a bedwetting boy.

According to Green, the parents were frustrated because conventional treatments had failed to help the child, although no explanation is given as to what these treatments were. Green comes to the rescue by interpreting the “prior-life dynamics” of the boy's birthchart: “It was very clear that the child



came into this life with an extreme fear of loss, abandonment, and betrayal,” says Green. He concludes that the boy is compensating for a fear of abandonment by refusing to be toilet trained. The parents are advised to whisper every night in the boy’s ear that he is loved and they will never abandon him. Apparently, the boy got better. Green ends his defense of Evolutionary Astrology by asserting:

I would argue that these parents did, in fact, find it useful to understand the prior-life dynamics that were the cause of this problem and to follow the nontraditional treatment that allowed the child to heal and to move on from the prior-life traumas.

While Green’s “nontraditional treatment” may well have been effective, it could be argued that this had nothing to do with his astrological claim that the child was suffering from a past-life trauma. Efficacy of treatment is often unrelated to underlying theory. It has been well established that a practitioner’s faith in his/her technique has a powerful impact on its effectiveness, which is why competing brands of therapy can claim equal success. Also, assuring a child that s/he is loved could be an antidote for all sorts of problems caused by all sorts of conditions.

The psychological basis for the boy’s condition could actually be explained by a number of alternative hypotheses, e.g., a maturational lag interacting with maladaptive toilet training practices, or a lack of inner security due to destabilizing disruptions in the home environment such as frequent moves, parents fighting, alcoholism, threats from the birth of siblings, and so on (Schaefer & Milman, 1981). In the absence of biographical data, it’s impossible to know what might have contributed to the boy’s bedwetting. It is perhaps not surprising that the parent’s took to Green’s diagnosis of a prior-life trauma, since it relieves them of any guilt they might feel for their child’s problem. As Green offers no information about the astrological factors that were allegedly involved, it is difficult to comment on this matter. It’s conceivable that some part of the birthchart suggested abandonment issues that underlay the

child's problems with bed-wetting, e.g., Moon conjunct Venus in Cancer in the 8th opposing Neptune in Capricorn in the 2nd. While such a configuration might relate to a past-life trauma, there is no way of knowing for sure; thus, it's speculative. Past-life hypotheses are actually superfluous since we do not even know the boy's current life history. If the child's symptoms were relieved by seeding his unconscious with assurances that he will always be loved, that outcome is fortunate but it does not constitute evidence for Green's hypothesis of a past-life trauma. To assume otherwise is to draw dogmatic conclusions from ambiguous data.

Steven Forrest offers another example of this sort of reasoning. When questioned by an interviewer about the lack of empirical evidence to substantiate past life claims in astrology, Forrest responds: "I have so much evidence. I don't need any more evidence." But what is this evidence? Forrest offers the following:

I feel fully capable of proving the relevance of the "karmic story" to present psychological dynamics. Reincarnation itself is the major "assumption" made in this work. Once that is assumed, then it follows logically that the present birthchart would be a reflection of prior life dynamics and issues. The South Node of the moon represents something brought in from the "past" (i.e., karma). We essentially read the Node as we would a planet, modifying and developing its meaning through the usual parameters—aspects, sign, house, ruler, and so forth. The only exotic part is reincarnation. The rest is logic and the application of the same principles that work elsewhere in astrology. Within the rather strict confines created by this methodology, we "create a story" that we claim parallels the actual "true" story of the prior life. Then [we] apply the usual test: does it work? Does it help the client? The emotional and cathartic impact of the information generated by this approach has transformed my entire approach to working with clients. I frankly don't view it as "speculative" at all...since it stands the ultimate test: helping people change. The only fair "test," in my view, is the

relevance of the past life information to the present life dynamics. When it passes that test and enhances the client's understanding and resolution to grow, I'm not particularly bothered if there's some dissonance between my work and the belief systems characteristic of the current mainstream.

I've quoted Forrest at some length here because I think these passages nicely summarize the essence of Evolutionary Astrology while also providing a good example of drawing dogmatic conclusions from ambiguous data. In this case, the "data" is the client's response to the past-life story. Note, however, that "data" in this sense does not conform to the conventional meaning of data, i.e., evidence pertinent to a research hypothesis. Relevant data for reincarnational astrology would be observations of actual past-life behavior. Yet, the key passage citing evidence in Forrest's account is:

Within the rather strict confines created by this methodology, we "create a story" that we claim parallels the actual "true" story of the prior life. Then [we] apply the usual test: does it work? Does it help the client?

In the foregoing statement, there is an implied research hypothesis—namely, that a past-life story created from analysis of the South Node parallels the actual "true" story of the prior life. Forrest then claims this hypothesis can be tested by assessing whether the past-life story "helps the client." But such a test is misleading because the only data pertinent to this hypothesis would be actual evidence from a prior life. The client's response to the interpretation is irrelevant since, like Green's case involving the bedwetting boy, efficacy of the treatment is not evidence for the validity of the underlying theory. Yet, Forrest assumes that if the client is "helped," i.e., has some sort of emotional/cathartic response to the story, this is evidence that his theory is confirmed. As he says, "I have so much evidence. I don't need any more evidence." But if there is a more plausible explanation for the client's response to the story, then Forrest may be guilty of drawing a dogmatic conclusion from ambiguous data.

Let's examine this more closely. In Evolutionary Astrology, the practitioner makes up a past-life story on the basis of what is observed in the chart, beginning with the South Node. After analyzing its sign, house, aspects, and ruler, a great deal of information is synthesized into a single, coherent story that eventually encompasses most of the horoscope. It should come as no surprise that the client feels an emotional resonance with the constructed scenario, for it is based on the current-life chart. After all, this is what a horoscope depicts: a story replete with specific characters (planets) performing roles (signs) in relationship to other characters (aspects) in various life-contexts (houses).

In effect, the chart symbolizes the story of the current life, but it can do so in a variety of ways depending upon the individual's level of integration and maturity. As people develop and evolve over the course of their lives, they live out their charts on different levels such that the same chart can symbolize multiple story possibilities. The story as lived and told by the client is merely one possibility that reflects the symbolism of the chart; many other stories would fit the chart just as well. This is why the fictional works of an author tend to repeat specific themes and plots, for such stories are metaphorical equivalents of the author's character structure as reflected in his horoscope. In this sense, all fictional work is inescapably autobiographical. George Lucas created the character Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, which is reputedly autobiographical, but Lucas doesn't think he was Luke in another life—except, perhaps, in the life of his imagination. The point here is that fictional stories are metaphors of the author's psychic structure and therefore of the author's astrological chart, which symbolizes that structure.

Stories that evolutionary astrologers construct about their client's past lives are analogous to the stories that authors of fiction create, since in both cases the guiding template is the subject's horoscope. Such stories quite likely do depict the psychodynamics of the current life as symbolized by the client's birthchart. If the astrologer is skilled, the client is naturally going to resonate to the story of his life re-told from a different perspective, e.g., someone with Saturn conjunct

the South Node in Gemini in the 9th house might be told, “You were a 12th century monk in medieval England responsible for translating scripture into Latin...” As Forrest declares, the astrologer may have the gender wrong or the century wrong or the continent wrong, but it doesn’t really matter. Such a story can be meaningful not because it parallels the client’s past life, but because it parallels the client’s current life—like a parable—and thus has great explanatory and emotional power. It can objectify psychological issues and themes in a manner that affords real insight.

Psychotherapists utilize this technique, too, even though they do not have the advantage of astrological charts to guide them in the retelling of their client’s stories. Narrative therapy, for example, is based on the idea that every life is a story, but that too often clients construct self-narratives that are full of blame, guilt, and hopelessness. Such stories limit their understanding of the past and close off possibilities for the future. By helping client’s re-author their lives from a new, fresh perspective, they can be liberated from grim, problem-saturated narratives and actualize new stories of courage, fulfillment, and unfolding potential (Aftel, 1996; Freedman & Combs, 1996). In the book, *Constructing Therapeutic Narratives*, the first paragraph says it all:

Why is narrative so crucial to psychotherapy? Because our clients come to us with powerful stories about themselves, characterized by bleak self-portrayals, inexorable plots, narrow themes, and demoralizing meanings. How can we compete with such stories that are not only well-rehearsed but also backed by mountains of selective negative evidence – stories so persuasive that the client does not view them as stories at all, but as slices of life? We must build, together with the client, stories that are no less compelling. We must pitch portrayal against portrayal, plot against plot, theme against theme, and meaning against meaning. It will not do, however, simply to write a new story in opposition to the old one. To succeed, the new story must be close enough to the client’s experience so that she may view it as her story; on the other hand, it

must be different enough from the old story, so as to allow for new meanings and options to be perceived. (Omer & Alon, 1997, p. ix)

I submit this is exactly what evolutionary astrologers are doing with the following caveat: Evolutionary Astrology entails an interpretive sleight of hand that deceives the client (and perhaps the practitioner) into believing that the made-up story parallels a real past life. It is far more likely that the story actually symbolizes a fictitious parallel life—a life that parallels in meaning and quality the current life of the individual. Whether you put this story in the past, or the present, or in the future a la Star Wars, doesn't really matter so long as it accurately re-symbolizes the client's real life story.

If our research hypothesis were changed to say, “a parallel-life story can be constructed from the birthchart that is relevant to the client's psychodynamics and that helps to objectify the client's psychological issues,” then the client's response to this hypothesis would constitute evidential data. In other words, if all Forrest claimed was that his past-life stories were relevant to the client's present psycho-dynamics, then this would be easy to prove. For if the astrologer were skilled, then it's likely that such a story would be meaningful and helpful to the client. However, for Forrest to go further and claim that the helpfulness of the story constitutes evidence that it parallels a “real” past life is unwarranted. Such a conclusion is based on evidence that is not merely ambiguous, but irrelevant. If the client is helped this merely confirms that fictional stories derived from the birthchart can be helpful. To say anymore than this is to stretch the significance of the client's response for the sake of confirming the presuppositions of Evolutionary Astrology.

One might anticipate that evolutionary astrologers will argue that their stories work precisely because the South Node symbolizes karma from past lives. Yet, it cannot be overstated that all one can actually know about the South Node is that it appears to correlate to a deeply ingrained, inborn pattern of feeling and behavior, just as the Sun, Moon, and Ascendant correspond to deeply ingrained, inborn patterns. This is all that we can actually observe. Over time, one might notice a shift in behavior from what is more familiar (South Node) to

what is less familiar (North Node), and back and forth, until the polarity is maximally integrated over the course of the life. Astrologers can embellish this simple observation with all sorts of esoteric meanings and karmic entailments, but it doesn't change the fact that all we can know is what we can observe. To claim any more than this is to draw a dogmatic conclusion from ambiguous data.

### **Idiosyncratic Terminology:**

A fourth mechanism of the self-sealing doctrine is employment of idiosyncratic terminology in which conventional meanings of words are changed or distorted. For example, in the context of defending a truth claim, the word "methodology" refers to the specific research method that is utilized in testing a hypothesis, e.g., the experimental method. However, when Green writes that there are "specific methodologies that exist within astrology which do, in fact, empirically measure the prior-life dynamics within the birth chart," and that such claims "can be tested," his methodology has nothing to do with research or testing. What he is actually referring to are the specific techniques that evolutionary astrologers use to derive alleged past-life information from the chart—analysis of the South Node's sign, house, aspects, and so on. This is not a "research method" at all; it is simply an idiosyncratic method of natal chart interpretation. As such, it offers no actual means for testing the claim that prior-life dynamics can be discerned from an astrological chart. Because a method of interpretation is not a method of research, Forrest and Green's use of the word "methodologies" in the context of arguing the validity of their theory is idiosyncratic and thus misleading.

In other writings, Forrest and Green explain how prior-life material tends to repeat itself in the present-life context and that, "It is observable and verifiable." Forrest claims that whereas conventional psychology is limited to observing the current life-span, Evolutionary Astrology enables the practitioner to perceive "the childhood of the soul." "Otherwise," he says, "our ideas and procedures are identical to those of psychologists—and equally verifiable." Again, however, such a statement is misleading, for the common meaning of

the phrase “observable and verifiable” refers to evidential data that can be observed and consensually validated.

For example, if someone puts forward a research hypothesis that the South Node symbolizes a specific past-life behavioral pattern, then evidential data pertinent to this hypothesis would be observations of a subject’s past-life behavior. “Verifiable” means that subsequent researchers can observe the same data. However, when Forrest and Green use this phrase they are merely referring to the client’s current-life response to their interpretations. If the client resonates with their past-life story, then this is taken as observable and verifiable evidence of the client’s past life. However, this is like saying that evidence for a diagnosis of leukemia is the client’s emotional response to the diagnosis. If the client is alarmed, the diagnosis is confirmed.

Similarly, the phrase “empirically measure” normally refers to being able to quantify a particular datum such as how many times a person commits a specific behavioral act. However, when Green and Forrest say they can empirically measure the prior-life dynamics within a birth chart, what they actually mean is that they can analyze a birthchart in terms of their techniques, e.g., they can measure the degree of exactitude involving an applying square from Venus to Pluto. Used in this way, the phrase “empirically measure” is vacuous.

Finally, the phrase “testable and repeatable” means that a given hypothesis can be tested against the available evidence, and that such a test is repeatable. If a test were repeated with the same positive outcome, this would constitute a higher degree of confirmation for the hypothesis. Again, however, what Green and Forrest mean by these terms is completely at odds with conventional usage. “Testable” in their world simply refers to whether the client feels “helped” by the interpretation, and “repeatable” means that they can perform the same test with another client. In this context, the words “testable” and “repeatable” are rendered trivial and meaningless.

In short, Forrest and Green’s idiosyncratic use of research terminology is but a linguistic sleight of hand that gives the false impression that their theory is



falsifiable, i.e., in accord with acceptable scientific procedures for determining validity. Upon closer examination it turns out to be smoke and mirrors. Their methodology is tautological in that it presumes the truth of the theory it claims to prove. I think it would be fair to say that Forrest and Green's verbal legerdemain is probably unintentional, more due to a lack of familiarity with research protocols than an actual intent to deceive. Whether they are intentionally hoodwinking the astrological community or merely deceiving themselves, the end result is the same: their theory is vacuous.

### **The Inescapable Ambiguity of Meaning**

Another problem involving the construction of past-life scenarios has to do with the inescapable ambiguity of astrological meanings. Anyone who does astrology long enough comes to realize that a given configuration can manifest in any number of ways depending upon how it is situated in the chart as a whole. Chart meanings also vary in conformity to the person's overall maturity, psychological integration, and degree of self-actualization. However, there is no way of discerning a client's level of realization merely from the chart. One must talk to the person.

The situation is compounded by the fact that people change. What a configuration means at one stage of life may be completely different at a later stage. How much a person transforms and evolves over time is indeterminate; thus, it cannot be predicted. Again, the only way to know at what level a person is living his or her chart is to conduct an interview. At a minimum the astrologer should determine the client's current symptoms and concerns, mental status, family background, personal strengths, and any vulnerabilities such as a history of violence or childhood abuse. None of this can be known with certainty from the chart alone.

If astrologers cannot know how clients are living their charts in this life (i.e., without dialogue), it is even more questionable to assume that they can know how a chart reflects a past life. Stories about past lives may be constructed in accordance with well-defined rules of chart interpretation, but this is swinging in the dark if the astrologer cannot interview the past-life personality.

Let's assume a client has Venus square Neptune and she reports a gamut of unfortunate life experiences that this aspect sometimes connotes—lovers that deceive, indiscriminate affairs, idealization of the beloved followed by disillusionment, tragic loss of love, unconscious guilt that leads to self-sabotage in relationships, a compulsion to rescue lovers from self-destructive behaviors, and so on. How can one relate this pattern in a meaningful way to our client's past lives? There are a variety of past life scenarios that one could make up about the aspect, each based on different psychological dynamics. For example, the current life difficulty might be the continuation of an old habit that the client has yet to resolve. Perhaps in a previous life she was a nun and believed that carnal love was sinful and that one should sacrifice human intimacies for love of Christ alone. Her current life merely continues a pattern of Venusian guilt and sacrifice that was established in a previous incarnation. Thus, she chooses lovers that shun commitment because unconsciously she feels sinful if she derives pleasure from a human relationship.

Or perhaps the aspect reflects the tragic and traumatic loss of one's beloved in a prior life, a loss from which she never recovered. If Venus is in the 1st house, perhaps the lover was killed in a duel with a rival suitor and so our client carries a vestige of guilt from that life. If her grief over this loss is frozen, she may need to repeat the scenario over and over until she releases it. Thus, in the present incarnation, she is stuck in a belief that "love leads to loss" and she atones for her unconscious guilt by choosing men who abandon her.

Or, is the aspect a consequence of some action in a past life that led to others experiencing loss and tragedy in love? Perhaps she was a man in a previous incarnation that repeatedly cheated on his wife and ultimately abandoned his family for a life of unbounded and indiscriminate pleasure—consorting with prostitutes and satisfying his physical appetites without restraint. Now, in this life, our client is learning what it is like to be deceived and abandoned by lovers who cannot be trusted.

In each past life story the aspect takes on an entirely different meaning and conceivably would lead to the astrologer offering radically different advice. If

she was the nun then she needs to stop feeling guilty about wanting human relationship; if she was the woman whose lover was killed then she needs to release her grief and guilt over that loss; and if she was the man who betrayed his wife then she needs to recognize the compassion already learned in this life and forgive her past life excesses.

Each story (and many others) could be equally relevant to the woman's presenting problem. But which past-life story will the astrologer tell? Obviously, whichever story is chosen will have less to do with the client than with the astrologer. In other words, in the absence of any actual data about the client's past-life, the astrologer has no choice but to make up a scenario that fits the aspect. But this scenario issues from the astrologer's mind; thus, it is more a statement about the astrologer than the client.

The point is that anyone who knows astrology can look at a chart and make up a plausible story about what might have happened in a previous life. Because astrology is a symbolic language, it is easy to project meanings that spring entirely from the astrologer's imagination. Regardless of which story is told, the client may identify with it and actually feel helped. Jung defined neurosis as suffering yet to find its meaning. Because client's hunger for meaning, they are apt to feel helped and even relieved by stories that place their suffering in a plausible context. Again, however, efficacy of treatment—client relief—is not evidence of a theory's validity. One can easily see how a client's feeling of relief can be motivated by a need for meaning that is independent of the form in which that meaning arrives.

Unfortunately, fabricated stories about past lives may not always lead to relief, especially when astrologers allege that clients did or experienced something negative in a past life. Such claims can induce fear and guilt. A client might disclose, for example, that she has a history of sexual abuse beginning with her father. Desperate to say something meaningful, the astrologer thoroughly examines her chart and trumpets: "Oh, you have Saturn in the 8th house square Mars in the 10th. This means you misused sexual power in a past life and that's why you are the victim of it in this incarnation." Okay, that's

plausible; it might be true. But not only is such information not useful (it's blaming the victim), it is also misleading because the astrologer's pronouncement implies there is some kind of cosmic proof that underlies the veracity of the statement. The client is defenseless because she has no way of confirming whether or not the interpretation is true. If she is vulnerable to guilt, which is usually the case with victims of sexual molestation, then she is apt to accept the interpretation uncritically—to her own detriment.

In fact, any number of stories could be invented that are equally plausible.

Reading past lives into horoscopes is a form of a priori reasoning and gives a false impression that astrology provides its practitioners with categorical knowledge of the mysteries of individual existence.

The commercialization of reincarnation through the sale of astrological readings, books, and computer-generated reports casts a tawdry shadow over the entire field. The law of karma is at the core of virtually every spiritual tradition that has exerted influence throughout recorded history and is arguably the deepest, most profound of all moral teachings. Likewise, the doctrine of reincarnation refers to the immortality of the human soul and outlines the means by which the psyche finds its way home—reunited with the source of its own being. For astrologers to commercialize these sacred doctrines for personal profit through a pretense of transcendental knowledge is ethically indefensible. Merely believing in reincarnation does not entitle one to make up stories of past lives and then sell this information to the gullible masses. Such a practice exploits the credulity of clients by fraudulently portraying the astrologer as having knowledge not actually possessed.

For an astrological hypothesis to be testable and thus substantiated it must be capable of disproof on the basis of evidence; otherwise, it falls into the category of mere speculation. Speculative doctrines often masquerade as established truths. Proponents of reincarnational astrology utilize mechanisms that are self-sealing rather than admit the doctrine's questionable veracity. A self-sealing doctrine is a belief system immunized against contrary evidence so that that no criticism can possibly be brought against it.

Acceptance of falsifiability as a criterion of astrological theory would go far toward promoting constructive dialogue within the field. Avoiding intellectual isolation and fragmentation is important for any academic discipline. It is especially desirable for a field like astrology, which must try to contain the conflicting claims of many schools, some of which are unwilling to hear any criticism. Astrology cannot proceed as a real profession if we do not remain open to refutation. The whole enterprise of scholarly research is dedicated to the proposition that one can change people's minds by presenting good evidence. It may not be easy to get reincarnational astrologers to look at their models critically, but if we don't try then we are neglecting an essential task. The point is we can't have it both ways; we can't whine about astrology being discredited and simultaneously defend our right to dogmatically proclaim "truths" without a shred of evidence to back them up.

The assertions of reincarnational astrology are presently unverifiable, and there is little reason to expect this will change in the future. Accordingly, if reincarnational astrology is ever to emerge from its current phase of untested evangelism, then it must be willing to subject itself to critical analysis.

Otherwise, it will remain an embarrassment to the field and an easy target for our detractors. If it was only an embarrassment, that would be one thing, but the problem is more serious: reincarnational astrology borders on the unethical. So long as astrologers charge a fee for past-life interpretations without admitting that their interpretations are speculative, they are in violation of ethical norms that hold in virtually every field of counseling.

Again, the problem is not with reincarnational astrology itself; it is with the failure to acknowledge the speculative nature of past-life interpretations. I hope this point is clear. There is nothing unethical about speculating on possible karmic meanings of chart configurations. Viewing the chart from a karmic perspective places the client's trials and travails in a context that is meaningful and empowering. The advantages of this model go beyond approaches that are limited to a one-life perspective. However, when astrologers become so enamored with their theory that they can no longer distinguish what is

imagined from what is real, fact from fiction, inspired speculation from established truth, they have barricaded themselves in a solipsistic cocoon of delusional omniscience.

The best remedy against the seductive but ultimately false security of self-sealing doctrines is critical thinking, without which astrology will remain forever in danger of contamination by noxious and spurious claims. False prophets abound in fields situated in the heavenly realms. And true believers are their life-blood. Every individual astrologer needs to take special pains not to become either one—neither a false prophet, nor a true believer.

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