

ESSAY

Ian Stevenson and Cases of the Reincarnation Type

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Ian Stevenson began studying children who claim to remember previous lives—an endeavor that will surely be remembered as the primary focus of his life’s work—almost by accident. Enjoying a successful mainstream career with some 60 publications in the medical and psychiatric literature to his credit, he had become chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Virginia in 1957. The following year, the American Society for Psychical Research announced a contest in honor of William James for the best essay on “the topic of paranormal mental phenomena and their relationship to the problem of survival of the human personality after bodily death.” Ian, who had said when he interviewed for the chairman position that he had an interest in parapsychology, had been intrigued by the concept of reincarnation and in his readings had come across reports of individuals claiming to have memories of previous lives, or “apparent memories of former incarnations,” as he called them. The reports came from a number of sources, such as books, magazines, and newspapers. Ian analyzed 44 of them as a group in a paper that won the contest and was subsequently published in 1960 (Stevenson, 1960a,b).

He was impressed with the similarities in cases from different countries and different kinds of sources. As he told Tom Shroder years later, “these forty-four cases, when you put them together, it just seemed inescapable to me that there must be something there . . . I couldn’t see how they could all be faked or they could all be a deception” (Shroder, 1999: 103). At the end of the paper, he wrote that more study of the reincarnation hypothesis was justified and he asked people who knew of additional cases of apparent past-life memories to contact him.

At the time, however, he was not planning to investigate cases himself; he was too busy running his department, treating patients, and conducting other research. After the paper was published in 1960, his plans changed when he received a telephone call from Eileen Garrett, the head of the Parapsychology

Foundation. She had learned of a case in India similar to the ones Ian had written about, and she offered to pay his expenses to investigate it. Ian accepted the offer, and by the time of the trip, he had heard about four or five cases in India and two in nearby Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

Once he got to India, he was surprised at how easily cases could be found. He was there for four weeks and saw 25 cases. Likewise, he visited Ceylon for a week and found seven cases. He thus learned that children's claims of past-life memories were much more common than anyone had previously known.

Next came Chester Carlson. Carlson had invented the Xeroxing process that formed the basis for the Xerox Corporation. His wife Dorris had led him to an interest in parapsychology and in research regarding life after death, and after reading Ian's essay, he contacted Ian and offered financial support for studying new cases. Ian initially declined the offer because he was so involved in his other duties, but he eventually agreed to take a donation to purchase a tape recorder for the work.

Soon after returning from India and Ceylon, Ian was contacted by Louisa Rhine, whose husband, J. B. Rhine, was head of the Duke University parapsychology lab. She had received a letter from Alaska about a case involving past-life memories, and she forwarded it to Ian. He then went to Alaska and found a number of cases among the Tlingit tribes there.

Ian was soon hooked, and he began accepting funding support from Chester Carlson. Carlson's donations and eventual bequest made it possible for Ian to create essentially a new field of research. It was one dominated by cases of very young children, as the individuals who claimed memories of previous lives usually began doing so at a very early age, often when they were two or three years old. Many talked about the end of the life, which frequently had ended suddenly or violently. Some claimed to have been deceased family members, but others said they had been strangers in another location and often showed emotional longing for the previous family. Ian discovered that in such a case, people had often gone to the other location and found that someone whose life matched the details given by the child had in fact died.

In 1963 Ian took a sabbatical so that he could write the first of a number of books on the cases he had investigated. He completed the manuscript and returned to work. As the American Society for Psychical Research was preparing to publish it, a man who had assisted Ian as an interpreter in two or three of the cases in India was accused of fraud in other work of his. This caused concern that he had cheated in his interpreting work, and publication was delayed. Ian returned to India to reinvestigate those cases with another interpreter. He found that the interviews had been interpreted correctly, and the cases remained in the book.

Therefore, after some delay, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* was published in 1966 (Stevenson, 1966/1974). The cases in it were ones for which Ian had made painstaking efforts to determine exactly what the various children had said and to verify how well the children's statements matched the lives of

the individuals they were thought to remember. The book consisted of detailed case reports that included lists of every person Ian had interviewed, along with lengthy tables in which each statement the child had made about a previous life was listed along with the informant for that statement and the person or persons who verified that it was correct for the life of the deceased individual. Ian presented the cases in an objective, evenhanded manner, discussing their weaknesses as well as their strengths.

Continuing the Work

Though *Twenty Cases* received a number of positive reviews—the *American Journal of Psychiatry* saying there were “cases recorded in such full detail as to persuade the open mind that reincarnation is a tenable hypothesis to explain them” (Laidlaw, 1967)—much of the scientific community ignored it. This did not deter Ian, and in 1967 he stepped down as chairman of the department to devote himself full time to the research. In so doing, he was allowed to set up a small research division, now known as the Division of Perceptual Studies, in which to study the cases and to conduct other work in parapsychology.

At that point, Ian had collected hundreds of cases, with his investigations taking him all over the world. *Twenty Cases* alone involved cases in India, Ceylon, Brazil, Alaska, and Lebanon. The cases were easiest to find in areas with a general belief in reincarnation, and with the help of assistants in those places, Ian went wherever he needed to go for the research, sometimes traveling over 50,000 miles a year. He published individual reports of some of the cases in journals and then began a book series of cases from particular areas. He titled it *Cases of the Reincarnation Type* and published four volumes through the University Press of Virginia from 1975 to 1983 (Stevenson, 1975, 1977a, 1980, 1983b). Of the first volume, the reviewer in *JAMA*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, stated: “In regard to reincarnation he has painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases from India, cases in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds.” The reviewer added: “He has placed on record a large amount of data that cannot be ignored” (King, 1975).

The data were in fact ignored by most in mainstream science, with some notable exceptions. One was Eugene Brody, the editor of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. He published one of Ian’s papers in 1977, “The Explanatory Value of the Idea of Reincarnation” (Stevenson, 1977b), that led to more than 1,000 requests for reprints from scientists all over the world (Stevenson, 1990b: 17). Later in 1977 Brody devoted most of one issue of the journal to Ian’s work. He included a paper by Ian and commentaries from several others. One commentary was by psychiatrist Harold Lief, whose frequently quoted observation of Ian was that “either he is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known . . . as ‘the Galileo of the 20th century’” (Lief, 1977: 171).

One criticism of Ian’s work was that the cases he was reporting had all occurred in places with a general belief in reincarnation. Thus it was thought that

families eager to find cases of rebirth were producing the cases, either purposely or accidentally. Ian addressed this in 1983 with a paper about a series of 79 American cases (Stevenson, 1983a). He compared them to cases from India and found that, though few of the American children had made verifiable statements about a previous life, they resembled the Indian cases in many ways, including the age at which the children first spoke about the previous life, the content of the statements they made, and their related behaviors. He noted that many of the cases had taken place in families without a belief in reincarnation.

Years later Ian published a book of cases from Europe (Stevenson, 2003). He had also planned one of American cases but did not complete it before his death. Nonetheless, he documented in the other publications that young children's claims to remember previous lives were not purely a cultural phenomenon, as they occurred in Western countries without a general belief in reincarnation and in families without such a belief.

Marked for Life

An aspect of the cases that interested Ian greatly was the frequent presence in the children of birthmarks and birth defects that appeared to match wounds, usually fatal ones, suffered by the deceased individuals whose lives they were said to remember. Ian worked on a book of such cases, but his wish for careful documentation combined with a growing collection of cases caused the book to take longer and longer to complete. (At one point, a letter was found at the Division in which Ian had written that he planned to publish a book of birthmark cases the following year—nearly 20 years before he actually completed the book.)

Finally, in 1997 Ian published *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (Stevenson, 1997a), a massive 2,268-page, two-volume work that included reports and photographs of 225 cases involving birthmarks or birth defects. Many of them were not the usual blemishes, either. They were often dramatic and sometimes bizarre lesions, such as malformed digits or missing limbs, misshapen heads, and odd markings. In all of the cases, the defects matched wounds suffered by the previous individual. Ian showed his customary determination in investigating the cases, getting autopsy or police reports when they were available, or eyewitness testimony of the corpse when they were not, to verify that the marks and defects he was seeing actually did match the wounds the previous person had received.

Ian wrote a synopsis, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*, that contained color photographs of some of the marks and defects along with far fewer pages than the two-volume set (Stevenson, 1997b). Cases with such lesions continued to be found, and several of us, led by Ian, later published a paper of additional birthmark/birth defect cases that included two American cases (Pasricha et al., 2005).

Behaving Strangely

Another area that interested Ian was the behavior of these children. He wrote a paper about phobias that many of the children showed, usually related to the mode of death from the life they claimed to remember (Stevenson, 1990a). He reported that 36% of the children in a series of 387 cases showed such fears. They occurred when the children were very young, sometimes before they had made their claims about the previous life. For example, he described a girl in Sri Lanka who as a baby resisted baths so much that three adults had to hold her down to give her one. By the age of six months, she also showed a marked phobia of buses and then later described the life of a girl in another village who had been walking along a narrow road between flooded paddy fields when she stepped back to avoid a bus going by, fell into the flood water, and drowned. He noted that the phobias tended to recede as the children stopped talking about the previous life but that this was not always the case.

Ian also wrote about the children's play (Stevenson, 2000c). He reported that in a series of 278 cases, almost a quarter of the children engaged in play seemingly related to the lives they described that was unusual in their families and had no known role model. This often involved the previous person's occupation, such as a boy who became so wrapped up in his play as a biscuit shopkeeper that he fell behind in school and a girl in India who described a life as a sweepress and who not only enjoyed sweeping but also happily cleaned up the stools of her younger brothers when they defecated in the house, undoubtedly to the surprise of her Brahmin parents.

Ian explored unusual behaviors in a series of Burmese children who reported lives as Japanese soldiers killed in Burma during World War II (Stevenson & Keil, 2005). Many of them showed behaviors that were unusual in Burma but typical of the Japanese. These included such items as wanting to wear Japanese attire—trousers, belt, and boots—rather than the Burmese *longyi*, wanting to eat raw or partially cooked fish instead of the spicy Burmese food, and personality features such as industriousness and, consistent with the occupying soldiers, cruelty and harshness. Ian thought this was one of the most important papers he had written for some years because it explored a possible third component in the development of personality, a theme he had addressed before (Stevenson, 1977b, 2000b). He pointed out that not all unusual behavior can be explained by genetics and environmental influences, alone or together, and suggested that some aspects of the deceased individuals' personalities had been transferred to the children in a way that could not be explained by conventional means.

Assessing the Work

When I met Ian in 1996, he was energetically continuing his work and directing the Division. Despite my lack of research experience, he was always supportive of my early efforts in the field, as he had been with many

others. We investigated three American cases together. He was unfailingly polite to the families in a very dignified way, but he also remained critical-minded. Of the three cases, he was quite impressed by one, and we published a report of it in the paper of birthmark cases noted above (Pasricha et al., 2005). He judged one of the other cases to be unsolved (that is, we did not find a deceased individual whose life matched the statements the child had made) and the third to be almost certainly the result of wishful thinking on the mother's part.

He demonstrated a similarly cautious attitude toward the overall phenomenon of young children's claims of past-life memories. He wrote that no single case offered evidence that compelled a belief in reincarnation, and he was adamant that the term "proof" not be used for the evidence he had accumulated or even hoped to find. Nonetheless, although he emphasized that other explanations were possible, he wrote that he considered reincarnation to be the best explanation for the stronger cases that he had investigated—including ones in which the two families involved were previously unknown to each other and for which a written record of the child's statements was made before they were verified and cases in which a medical record documented a close correspondence between a child's birthmarks or birth defects and wounds on the body of the previous individual (Stevenson, 2000a).

That assessment seems fair. I reviewed many of Ian's cases as I was preparing to write a book about the work, studying not just his lengthy case reports but his field notes as well. I could see the limitations of the cases—the way that memories could vary in some of them across witnesses and even across interviews with the same witness. I also saw, however, how resolute Ian was to establish the facts. Many of the files contained lists of questions that he sent his assistants after he had talked with families. These led to further work, sometimes to answer minor and seemingly unimportant details that were unclear. This happened repeatedly in some instances, and Ian himself interviewed some witnesses a number of times over a matter of years. He did all of this to make sure that he had determined as accurately as humanly possible what had happened in each case.

In the end, as he wrote, he produced data that allow those who find reincarnation a congenial concept to believe in it on the basis of evidence rather than purely on the basis of faith (Stevenson, 1980, 1990b). That group, however, was not the one he was most interested in reaching. He once said—with a smile—that he would die a failure because he had not achieved his primary goal of getting mainstream science to seriously consider reincarnation as a possibility. Such a goal, in retrospect, may have been quixotic, particularly to be attained in a relatively short time, but as with Galileo, science's ultimate judgment on his work may come long after the end of his life. The numerous researchers contributing to this issue who were inspired and supported by Ian, and who attempt to model their own efforts by the standard he set, also demonstrate that he did not die a failure.

Toward the End

Ian's passion for the work never abated. He was well into his eighties before he retired, and he might never have done so except for his wish to devote more time to his wife Margaret, whom he clearly adored. (In fact, he might never have taken a vacation either except for that wish.) He continued to write after retirement and even took one final "final trip" to India. Margaret said at one point that she did not mind his taking the research trips, but she wished he would stop referring to each one as his last. He was pleased that other researchers, with his encouragement, had become interested in the cases and had made significant contributions (e.g., Mills, Haraldsson, & Keil, 1994).

Ian's final paper was a wonderful summary of his career in parapsychology that he wrote for this journal (Stevenson, 2006). Even after he finished it, he continued to discuss papers he wanted to write but eventually lost the physical energy to complete. There were more books to be written as well, as a life of 88 years was not long enough to exhaust his productivity. Ian finished his last published paper with words that, though not referring specifically to his 40 years of research on children's past-life memories, might well have applied to them: "Let no one think that I know the answer. I am still seeking."

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