

ESSAY

Reflections on the Life and Work of Ian Stevenson

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Ian Stevenson's career must, I think, be adjudged one of the most remarkable of his time—indeed, from certain points of view, one of the most remarkable of any time. I would say this irrespective of whether posterity comes to remember him—and surely he will be remembered—as a trail-blazing scientist who opened up new problems or shed fresh light on old ones or accords him only a passing note in the chequered history of the relations between science and religion (as does Wallace, 2006: 35).

His widely ranging abilities could have brought him success in any one of a number of different fields. It is of interest—and of some significance—that although a good deal of his working life was devoted to medicine and its offshoots, he began university studies as an historian and always retained a strong interest in history. Two extracts from his all-too-short autobiography tell us a lot about him.

The first is a comment on the effect on him of his historical studies: “An awareness from my reading of history of the ephemeral nature of most concepts about the nature of things freed me to challenge received opinions in medicine. For me everything now believed by scientists is open to question, and I am always dismayed to find that many scientists accept current knowledge as forever fixed” (Stevenson, 1990: 1). The second extract is a maxim of Thomas Jefferson, the founder of the University of Virginia, at which Stevenson spent so many years: “Here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it” (Stevenson, 1990: 18).

The attitudes here expressed are reflected in his various changes in career direction. His early postgraduate work in biochemistry (1946–1947) left him dissatisfied with its prevalent part-by-part approach, and he turned, to an extent in consequence of his own clinical observations, to psychosomatic medicine, a more holistically oriented discipline which at the time seemed to be burgeoning strongly. But the field did not burgeon as expected, and Stevenson took up psychiatry as offering “a better opportunity than internal medicine for the

further study of the effects of mental states on bodily ones” (1990: 6). He underwent psychoanalytic training (1951–1958) but found that psychoanalysis, dominant though it then was, offered chiefly a new kind of reductionism, coupled with an uncritical adherence to the peculiar doctrines of its revered founder. In short, it had more of the attributes of a dogmatic religion than of an open-minded, fact-driven scientific quest for answers. More congenial to him was his partly concurrent work (1955–1963) on the therapeutic and biochemical properties and the phenomenological effects of psychedelic drugs, most notably mescaline and LSD. He thought that LSD in particular had therapeutic potential, and was disappointed when its use was suppressed by the authorities, remarking that “Timothy Leary really wrecked things” (Shroder, 1999: 102). And whereas the standard scientific view was that because a small amount of the drug acting on the brain can markedly alter one’s state of consciousness, one’s experiences must be entirely brain-generated, Stevenson felt that this supposition could not fully account for the extraordinary images and feelings released (Stevenson, 1990: 10).

In all this one can see at work both Stevenson’s conviction that currently widespread scientific and medical assumptions should never be regarded as immutable verities and his view that truth supported by fact is to be pursued, however unpalatable the conclusions reached. But it was of course above all in his explorations in psychical research that these heterodox principles found their fullest expression. Stevenson’s interest in this subject, which he attributed to his mother’s influence, seems to have gone back to his boyhood, while his more serious involvement and earliest publications in the area date to the later 1950s, by which time he was already Professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry in the Medical School at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. I shall not attempt to sketch the combination of ability, determination, and deserved good fortune that led to his becoming within a further 10 years Carlson Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the Division of Parapsychology at the same institution.

Although Stevenson’s career several times changed direction, the changes did not involve his simply abandoning one line of work and taking up another. For appreciable periods he worked and published in more than one field. The tenor of his mind was holistic; he sought to establish connections between subject areas rather than to operate within conventional boundaries. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his approach to psychical research, and no further illustration is required than the two monumental volumes of his *Reincarnation and Biology* (1997a).

The last 40 years or so of Stevenson’s life were principally devoted to psychical research and to areas that he thought related to it. Although in this article I shall concentrate mostly on the work for which he is best known—his very extensive studies of children who ostensibly remember previous lives—it should not be forgotten that he did much else besides. He carried out, for instance, significant practical work on cases of spontaneous telepathic

experiences, especially veridical hallucinations (those curious examples of hallucinations that correspond to other events in ways that seem to elude ordinary explanation), on cases of near-death experiences, on examples of cryptomnesia, on cases of apparent xenoglossy, on “maternal impressions,” and on certain types of mediumistic communications. It is worth pausing to ask what qualities and what attitudes he brought to these undertakings or developed because of them.

Stevenson had, of course, a wide knowledge of medicine and its offshoots, between which and psychical research he found many links. He had read quite extensively in the philosophy of mind, was well informed about many different religions and religious sects and their cultural backgrounds, was a keen student of history, was fluent in French and German, and had a general curiosity about many other matters. If one visited him, as I from time to time did, in the apartments in Cambridge where, as a visiting scholar at Darwin College, he spent extended periods preparing the immense volumes just mentioned, one found that, although he was working prodigiously hard and organized his time meticulously, among the books on his shelves (he was a great book collector) he always had several that were unrelated or peripherally related to his main preoccupation, and were there simply for interest or relaxation.

It was indeed remarkable how relaxed he could be, and how much time he had for other people, especially when one considers what a driven person he was, the considerable quantity of his published work, and the potential importance, as he saw it, of the material he was tackling. His approach to the subject was very much fact-oriented. He was, of course, interested, as anyone would be, in possible explanations for the facts, but his prime aim was to collect and present carefully documented first-hand cases in such quantity as would permit interested persons to make up their own minds; and in this it cannot be denied that he succeeded. The cost of his success over the years—for cases were often to be found in rather remote parts of the world—was long periods of arduous and probably lonely travel, through territories in which roads were quite commonly poor, amenities few, and dangers sometimes quite serious. He does not say much about these hazards in his publications, though in conversation with him one occasionally got glimpses. I used sometimes to suggest to him, half jokingly, that he should unbend a little and write something about his more remarkable adventures.¹ He never did; but from Tom Shroder’s book *Old Souls* (1999)—Shroder accompanied him on two of his last trips—one can gain some insight into the problems that he routinely faced and the calmness with which he faced them. Indeed, only someone with strong inner resources, considerable physical stamina, and great determination and perseverance could have done what Stevenson did.

Stevenson was at first (I think one may say with confidence) the only person in the world investigating these cases of ostensible reincarnation on anything like such a scale. But he was acutely aware that a case collection, however large, that is heavily dependent upon the judgement and reliability of a single person

can carry only rather limited weight, and he was correspondingly and rightly anxious to have his work independently repeated and if possible confirmed and enlarged by others. Sometime (I think) just before or just after the second edition of his *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* came out in 1974, he offered to fund me on a visit to India to reinvestigate his cases there with *carte blanche* to act as I thought best and reach whatever conclusions I thought fit. Circumstances did not permit me to take up this offer, but in recent decades a number of other persons (far more suited to the task than I) have carried out some fairly extensive replication studies (cf. Stevenson, 2001: 173–175).

Though Stevenson banged no drum for his own theories, preferring that his readers should make up their own minds on the basis of the evidence and the considerations advanced, he was always sensitive to the possibility that his views might be misrepresented and his findings exaggerated in the interests of sensationalistic journalism or television. He knew what a hindrance this could be to the scientific acceptance of his work. Media persons whom he did not fully trust (and these I am pretty sure constituted the majority) could get pretty short shrift if they approached him. He was apt to be uncharacteristically tetchy about, and I suspect sometimes with, such persons, and occasionally he overdid it and rather brusquely dismissed some individual who regarded himself as having a properly serious interest in the subject, thereby making an unnecessary enemy. But mostly he got it right, and on the whole the small and select group of writers and television program-makers with whom he was prepared to cooperate did well by him. Tom Shroder's book, in particular, presents a very fair picture of Stevenson's work and aims, together with a portrayal of the man himself, to which my instant response was: "That is the Stevenson I know." Quite a few of today's psychical researchers could with advantage emulate Stevenson's cautious selectivity.

Stevenson's views on the aims and proper conduct of his investigations, involving as they did the intensive gathering and assessment of facts prior to any seeking of explanations, the avoidance of expressions of certainty, the careful investigation of possible pitfalls, and a positive aversion to premature popularization of his findings, might be characterized as austere. But his approach was not narrow. He disliked the term "parapsychology," which ties the subject too closely to psychology whilst according it an inferior status, and he preferred to talk more generally of "paranormal" phenomena. He also disliked the increasing tendency of certain parapsychologists to speak as though their own laboratory- (and computer-) oriented approach was the only properly professional and scientific one and to dismiss somewhat contemptuously the field studies of spontaneously occurring phenomena which particularly interested him as merely "anecdotal" and fit only for that antiquated lumber-room with "psychical research" on its door.² Although Stevenson agreed that the experimental method had brought important successes, and although he went on to institute computer analyses of his own case collections, he became increasingly critical of the pretensions of parapsychology and to prefer the broadly based

Society for Scientific Exploration to most parapsychological organizations. He had named his research unit the “Division of Personality Studies”³ to allow it to stay close to medicine and biology, and he thought that most parapsychologists were too isolated. “They were just talking to themselves and not talking to other scientists, and far too inattentive to the fact that the rest of the world wasn’t listening to them. They were too locked into a rather narrow laboratory program” (Stevenson, quoted in Shroder, 1999: 107). He might have added that in the last few years not many findings that are consistently replicable have emerged from this “program” and almost none that have fired the imagination of the outer world. He thought that parapsychologists in general suffer from an excessive tendency to imitate laboratory psychology, while laboratory psychologists themselves have for extended periods tried to imitate the physical sciences. Many parapsychologists are graduates of psychology departments and have been educated in the methods and concepts of laboratory psychology, particularly, nowadays, of cognitive psychology. But these concepts and methods, applied to parapsychology, far from helping to make it into a “proper” science like the “hard” sciences, may be quite inappropriate for the investigation of the most remarkable kinds of alleged paranormal phenomena, especially the “spontaneous” ones in which Stevenson’s own interests particularly lay. As Stevenson points out (1990: 12–13; cf. 2001: 15–16), science can readily provide examples of important phenomena, for instance, the weather, volcanoes, earthquakes, fossils, meteorites, comets, sunspots, and stellar explosions, that simply cannot be generated or properly studied under laboratory conditions. Investigation of such phenomena requires its own special methods and often its own special concepts also.⁴ Even more is this true of spontaneous paranormal phenomena (from the study of which, it should be noted, parapsychology was in considerable part originally derived). There is in most cases no guarantee that the rather modest statistical significances in, say, experiments on ESP or PK that once would not have been, but nowadays are, sufficient to excite the small world of laboratory parapsychology have any useful bearing upon full-blown examples of, say, veridical hallucinations, poltergeists, or children’s apparent recollections of previous existences. And insofar as we have any ideas about the causal factors that may underlie such spontaneous cases, they would seem very difficult to effectively replicate in laboratory situations.

It is amusing to note that Stevenson had almost certainly more experience of work in the “hard” sciences than have most of the parapsychologists who sniff at the investigation of spontaneous cases as not proper science and that many of the features of his collections of cases of children who ostensibly remember past lives have been extensively replicated in widely separate parts of the world, and by the work of different investigators.

This would seem an appropriate point at which to offer a brief and necessarily inadequate discussion of Stevenson’s own work in psychical research. As I mentioned before, I shall have to confine myself largely to his investigations of cases of ostensible reincarnation, especially in young children. An account of

these can conveniently be taken under two headings: (a) his approach to the investigations and (b) the data he collected and their interpretation.

The former of these need not detain us long. Stevenson's approach to the investigations reflected leading features of his character. He infused the whole enterprise with a moderation of tone that put facts before theories and caution before pronouncements. And he had a keen sense of what would constitute good evidence in such cases, and of the dangers to be guarded against, and to that end developed and refined semi-standardized methods and routines of case investigation and reporting that have been widely adopted, though sometimes modified, by others. They included, of course, detailed interviewing of the ostensibly reincarnated subject (the "present personality") and his or her family and extended family and of the family and friends of the "past personality" and a detailed search for and consideration of possible personal and geographical connections between the two families such as might have resulted in transmission of information between the two.⁵

The second heading, data and their interpretation, covers two main sets of issues, namely, what do we make of certain recurrent cross-cultural features to be found in Stevenson's data, and how, in those same data, may we best explain the present personality's often correct "memories" of the previous personality's life. I shall say something about each of these matters in turn.

Stevenson's collection of personally investigated cases rapidly became far larger than any that had preceded it, and through his own efforts and those of his associates its scope was extended across a considerable variety of cultures and of widely separated geographical locations. It soon became apparent that it presented features that to a greater or lesser extent crossed these cultural and geographical boundaries in somewhat noteworthy ways.⁶ For example, most of the children involved began talking about their previous lives almost as soon as they could speak, and most (not all) lost these memories somewhere between the ages of five and eight; in a high percentage of cases (high, that is, in relation to the norms for their cultures) the previous personality had met a violent and frequently early death; cases were commonest in (but not confined to) regions in which reincarnation is widely believed in; "announcing dreams," in which a mother-to-be has a dream in which she is told that her child will be the reincarnation of some lately deceased person, were to be found in most cultures and probably in all reincarnationist ones; and birthmark cases, in which the present personalities exhibited birthmarks or congenital deformities corresponding to ones borne by or injuries (frequently fatal ones) received by the supposed previous personalities and sometimes recollected by the present ones were similarly to be found in all cultures. In some cases Stevenson's own photographs and measurements of birthmarks matched autopsy sketches and measurements of the fatal wounds (Stevenson, 1997a: 349–508; 1997b: 43–54).

These data about recurrent cross-cultural features (there are other features I could have mentioned) present the theorist with something of a dilemma. It is easy enough at a certain level to think up everyday explanations for the recurrent

features (except, perhaps, for the last-mentioned). But when one comes to the details of the cases it becomes much harder. For instance, one might suppose that the prevalence of cases in which the past personality met an untoward and sticky end could be due to friends and relatives, who long to see him or her again, projecting their wishes upon some hapless but conveniently handy infant. However, what of cases—not hard to find—in which the ostensible rebirth takes place into a family having no knowledge of or connection with the previous personality? On the other hand, if one proposes instead that reincarnation can provide a unitary and more satisfying account of the recurrent cross-cultural features, one still has quite a bit of ad hoc hypothesis-patching ahead of one. For example, Stevenson, arguing from a reincarnationist viewpoint, has to engage in a fair amount of ingenious speculation to account for the apparent fact that certain present personalities may bear birthmarks corresponding to death-wounds that the previous personalities are unlikely to have known about and could never have seen (Stevenson, 1997a: 2078, 2083–2088). It could of course be (I do not say it is likely to be) that really impressive evidence of the kind we have next to discuss might, taken in conjunction with the data on recurrent cross-cultural features, tip the balance in favour of a reincarnationist interpretation.

This brings us to the second issue mentioned above, namely, how are we to interpret the correct “memories”—including not just personal and factual memories, but “behavioural” and emotional ones too—of a previous life shown by so many of Stevenson’s “reincarnated” children? Here I may remark at once that while I do not say (what Stevenson would have been the last person to say) that Stevenson never made mistakes in assessment or reached wrong conclusions, I do very much doubt that any simple ordinary explanation, or set of such explanations, will accommodate all or even many of the cases Stevenson thought worthy of publication. I shall spend a fair amount of rest of the article discussing this question.

Perhaps the first point that needs to be made in this connection is one made by Stevenson over 40 years ago in response to criticisms by Louisa Rhine (1966). Louisa Rhine had suggested that before claiming that the “past personalities” of his young subjects had been satisfactorily identified, Stevenson should utilize the techniques of statistical investigation proposed by Pratt and Birge (1948; cf. Pratt, 1969) to test the supposition that statements made by mediumistic “communicators” are more applicable to the individual supposedly communicating than to other individuals of similar age and the same background. Stevenson replied: “I submit that in the cases with sufficient detail, the number and specificity of detail in the child’s statements leaves no doubt that a particular person, and only that particular person, can be identified as the [previous] personality” (1967: 150). With this statement, especially in view of subsequent developments and subsequently investigated cases, I find it impossible to disagree. It is not just that one is confronted with examples of children who can apparently correctly remember their alleged past-life names and the names of the towns in which they lived, and give details thereof, and perhaps recognize and name⁷ various

relatives or neighbours, and who in an appreciable percentage of cases exhibit appropriate interests and personality characteristics, or birthmarks corresponding to the verified causes of death of the supposed past personality. Additionally, what Stevenson calls the “specificity” of the details correctly recalled, their peculiar appropriateness to just one person, can be quite startling. Consider the following three examples (a good many others could be cited).

1. Malik (Necip) Ünlütaşkiran (Stevenson, 1997a: 430–455; 1997b: 48–49) was born in Adana, Turkey, in 1951. When he became able to speak (relatively late), he began to insist that his name was really Necip (an insistence before which his parents eventually gave way) and that he had lived in Mersin, about 80 km away. He made a number of statements about this supposed previous life, but not until 1963 was it discovered, through a fortuitous meeting, that they coincided closely with the life of a man named Necip Budak who had lived in Mersin and been murdered there in 1951. Stevenson and a Turkish associate recorded 14 of these statements in 1963–1964. Eleven were correct, one partly correct, one unverified, and one incorrect. Among the correct statements were the forenames of his Mersin wife, mother, and one of his sons, that he was stabbed to death and had been very drunk at the time, and that, also when drunk, he had stabbed his wife in the leg. The latter was confirmed by the lady herself, who showed the scar on her thigh to a female member of Stevenson’s party.

After the two families had met (in 1963), 12 correct recognitions by Necip of persons whom Necip Budak had known or of possessions he had owned were confirmed by the Budak family.

Both families denied any previous knowledge of the other, and Stevenson could not discover any plausible source of transmission of the information from one family to the other.

At birth Necip Ünlütaşkiran had had seven birthmarks, of which three were still visible when Stevenson examined him. Six of these corresponded in position with the knife wounds recorded in Necip Budak’s autopsy report.

2. Swarnlata Mishra (Stevenson, 1974: 67–91), born in Madhya Pradesh, India, in 1948, exhibited from about the age of three and a half memories of an ostensible previous life as Biya from a family named Pathak in Katni, Madhya Pradesh.⁸ When Swarnlata was 10, her father wrote down some of her statements, and the following year H. N. Banerjee, a parapsychologist from the University of Rajasthan, did the same. As a result of Swarnlata’s statements, Banerjee was able to identify a family in Katni corresponding to Swarnlata’s statements, and the two families shortly met up. Stevenson spent four days with them in 1961. He lists 18 statements, of which four were incorrect and the rest correct, made by Swarnlata before the two families met. After the meeting Swarnlata made six further correct statements and 25 correct recognitions of family members, including, despite attempts to mislead her, “her” (that is, Biya’s) husband and two sons, other significant persons, and various items and places. Among her correct statements were the names of her former family,

Pathak, and of their home town, Katni; her own name, Biya; eight statements about the Pathak residence and household sufficiently specific to enable Banerjee to locate it; the name (slightly distorted) of the district of Katni in which that house lay; the fact that Biya had gold fillings in her front teeth; and the fact that her husband had taken 1200 rupees from a box in which Biya had kept money (this had been known only to Biya and to her still-living husband, Chintamani Pandey, who confessed it to one of his sons).

The Pathak family completely accepted Swarnlata as Biya, and affectionate relations developed between her and the “brothers” and “sons” of her supposed previous existence.

At no time did the Mishra and Pathak families live less than 100 miles from each other. Stevenson concluded that though it was possible that some degree of knowledge of the Pathaks by the Mishras could not be ruled out, there was no evidence for it, and that to account for the knowledge shown by Swarnlata, “a rather widespread conspiracy” between the Mishras, the Pathaks, the Pandey, and others would have been required, and that there are very good reasons for doubting this occurred.

3. Indika Ishwara, one of a pair of male monozygous twins, was born in Sri Lanka in October 1972 (Stevenson, 1997a: 1970–2000; 1997b: 174–177). The family lived in a village near the town of Weligama. At about the age of three Indika began relating ostensible memories of previous incarnations. His memories concerned the life of a boy from the village of Balapitiya (which he named) about 45 km away (as the crow flies). Indika’s father was sufficiently interested by his son’s statements to ask a friend now living near Balapitiya to make enquiries there. This friend soon discovered a boy, Dharshana Samarasekera, who seemed to be unmistakably pinpointed by Indika’s statements. Dharshana had died at the age of 11, probably of viral encephalitis, in January 1968. Dharshana’s father was very interested by Indika’s statements and in June 1976 paid several visits to his home. The result was that a report of the case appeared in a newspaper toward the end of June. This in turn led a Sinhalese associate of Stevenson’s, Godwin Samararatne, to visit both the families involved and collect statements. He also arranged to be present when Indika was taken in early July 1976 to visit Dharshana’s family for the first time. In December 1978, and again in November 1979, Stevenson, Samararatne, and another Sinhalese associate conducted extensive interviews with members of both the Ishwara and the Samarasekera families.

Indika is recorded as having made 36 statements about his alleged previous life before the two families had met. Of these, 31 were correct, two incorrect, two doubtful, and one unverified. Of the correct ones, some would have been applicable to many families in Sri Lanka, but others were quite specific. For instance, although he never gave the name Dharshana, he said that he had been called “Baby Mahattaya” (master or boss), that his older sister was named Malkanthie, that he had an uncle called Premasiri, that he had an uncle on his

father's side who was a *mudalili* (a successful businessman), that he had an aunt who used to cook chilies for him, that the family house was called "Buwan," and that he had "left his foot" (sc. his footprint in wet concrete) there.

When Indika was eventually taken to visit the Dharshana family (July 4, 1976), he seems to have spontaneously recognized several family members. Stevenson, however, had reservations about these recognitions, and also non-recognitions, because of the distractions occasioned by the considerable crowds of sensation-seekers who had come there out of curiosity. But on Indika's second visit, early in 1977, he was observed wandering around outside a neighbouring house in the Samarasekaras' compound, apparently looking for something on the wall of a concrete drain. He then pointed to the words "Dharshana 1965" that had been scratched into the concrete before it had set. No one in Dharshana's family knew about this writing.

The two families had not met prior to June 1976 and lived a long way from each other. Stevenson was unable to find any plausible lines of communication between them.

To return now to Stevenson's claim that identification of the designated past personality "is the least controversial and, in a way, the least important point we have to consider in weighing the best of the reincarnation cases" (1967: 151): It appears to me that even the three case accounts that I have hugely abridged from Stevenson's originals are sufficient to support this claim. Now quite obviously (as Stevenson further remarks) simply establishing the former existence of a person whose life is unmistakably indicated by the statements and activities of some present person does not tell us anything about the source of the present person's information. Before there can be any question of taking such evidence as even *prima facie* support for the hypothesis of reincarnation, a series of preliminary issues have to be addressed:

- (a) Can this evidence be satisfactorily disposed of by any normal, as opposed to paranormal, hypothesis or hypotheses?
- (b) If not, can it be accommodated by some hypothesis less than reincarnation, but still involving some supposed form of paranormal or hitherto unrecognised process?
- (c) If these hypotheses fail, can we find any general scientific or philosophical grounds for dismissing the evidence for reincarnation?

These are large, difficult, and very complex matters concerning which I can offer only a few tentative comments.

(a) The idea of reincarnation provokes very varied, and quite often fairly strong, reactions in quite a few people. Among the greatest enthusiasts are sometimes Westerners converted to the notion rather than individuals from Eastern regions, with which the doctrine is popularly associated. Those who dislike and try to dismiss the idea include adherents of religions which reject it, philosophers and scientists with whose world view it is not consistent, and persons (such as myself) who rate their chances of obtaining a comfortable berth in the

next incarnation as slender and detest the thought of again jumping through hoops that they have jumped through many times before.

With so much emotion involved, it is hardly surprising that many of the arguments put forward in the hope of undermining the alleged evidence (and it is these arguments with which we are here concerned) are merely silly when applied to Stevenson's better cases.⁹ Of course, in the abstract it is easy enough to think up possible normal explanations of apparent evidence for children's memories of past lives—fraud, prior contact or even conspiracy between the two families involved, motivated errors of memory by witnesses, contamination of testimony at the first meetings between the families, knowledge possibly originating from gossip or newspapers, cryptomnesia by the ostensibly reincarnated individual, culturally induced fantasy on the part of parents or child, attempts to exploit a case for gain or fame—and in a smallish number of cases such factors undoubtedly were, or very possibly could have been, at work. I cannot but feel, however, that were the proponents of these notions to try them out (as I have done) against a large number of Stevenson's detailed case reports, they would find the going decidedly difficult. Convincing oneself that one could in such terms dismiss a wide range of these reports would, it seems to me, require the sort of ingenuity and paranoid reasoning by means of which flat-earthers and conspiracy theorists manage to reconcile their favourite hypotheses with any twist that the facts may take or fail to take. It is remarkable, but perhaps not altogether surprising, that several of Stevenson's leading critics seem to have read rather few of his original reports and even rely upon second-hand and often hostile accounts of them. No one who has not carefully studied a good number of the original reports is qualified to offer comments and criticisms.

This is not to say that Stevenson did not from time to time assess a case too generously, or fail to search for flaws where flaws there might have been. He would probably in retrospect have said so himself; indeed, he sometimes did. But he quite certainly knew, or had learned, more about the evidential pitfalls confronting his kind of researches, and did more to spell them out and confront them, than anyone had before him, and no one who has investigated cases with him, as I occasionally did, would be likely to accuse him of credulity. His own findings tell heavily against the more obvious, and hence most frequently canvassed, counter-explanations. The proposal, for example, that children who ostensibly remember previous lives are merely enacting culturally driven fantasies is vulnerable to problems as to the source of the often quite specific "memories" produced by the present personality, to problems over the fact that cases have increasingly been discovered from cultures in which reincarnation is not a widespread religious belief, and to problems over the fact that even in cultures in which reincarnation is widely accepted parents have frequently, albeit unsuccessfully, tried to suppress their offspring's apparent memories of a previous existence. The common claim that witnesses' recollections of what the child or subject in question actually said or did are liable to become grossly warped by the passage of time and the pressure of suggestions is not so strongly

supported as some maintain by certain psychological experiments on eyewitness testimony. The conditions are not the same—the child’s statements can be startlingly meaningful to the witnesses, and the child may tend to repeat them over and over again—and Stevenson’s own investigations (Stevenson, 1968; cf. Keil & Stevenson, 1999; Schouten & Stevenson, 1998; Stevenson, 2001: 154–158) have suggested that, as with so-called “flashbulb” memories, witnesses may recall such statements very well even after considerable periods of time (this has been my experience also). The proposal that relevant information may have been accidentally or deliberately passed from one family to the other is in a substantial minority of cases rendered highly implausible by the considerable distances separating them and by the scarcity of potential connections between them. In rather over one percent of cases an independent investigator was able to record what the present personality had said about the life of his or her ostensible previous personality before the two families involved had been in contact. Uncongenial though I find the prospect of reincarnation, I can see nothing to be gained by taking refuge in criticisms, such as the above, of the evidence allegedly favouring it.¹⁰

(b) This brings us to the question of whether the alleged evidence for reincarnation can be accommodated by some form of hypothesis less or other than reincarnation, but still involving some supposed form of paranormal process. The obvious candidate here is telepathy between the present personality and still-living persons who knew the past personality. But as Stevenson points out (e.g., 1974: 343–348; 2001: 159–161), his child subjects rarely give any evidence of telepathic gifts apart from the past-life recollections that telepathy is supposed to explain. He also notes the intense identification with the past personality shown by so many of these subjects and the fact that present personalities not infrequently exhibit emotions, interests (including religious ones), skills, social attitudes, and character traits appropriate to the past ones. There are, he remarks, no grounds for supposing that telepathy can, in effect, “reproduce . . . an entire personality transferred to another physical body” (2001: 160). Hypotheses more exotic even than telepathy—for instance, possession, obsession—would be just as problematic as reincarnation.

(c) Are there then general scientific or philosophical reasons why we should reject any putative evidence for reincarnation *ab initio*? Such reasons have certainly been advanced. For instance, there is a great deal of evidence which suggests that events in one’s mind are causally tied to events in one’s brain and therefore cannot continue when one’s brain has ceased to exist. These neuroscientific findings have in turn had considerable influence on the predominantly materialist tendencies of modern philosophy of mind. Other relevant strands in current philosophy of mind have to do with questions of personal identity. Some philosophers have claimed that one can only talk of identifying and re-identifying any object (including a human being) as the same individual again if one can, or could in principle, assign it a continuous spatiotemporal track between one’s various encounters with it. Obviously, the argument goes, one

cannot do this in cases of alleged reincarnation, and so one can never justifiably identify the reincarnated with the original person. Other philosophers contend that one's "self" is a fiction, a narrative one tells about oneself, conditioned by the social context in which one lives. The author of the narrative, however, is regarded as somehow part of the story, its radiant point, and does not exist outside it.¹¹

These are huge issues and cannot be tackled now, except insofar as they will shortly and briefly crop up in connection with Stevenson's own world-view. But there is a related issue that merits notice. What we have here are two bodies of evidence and theory (or at any rate speculation), the one to do with evidence for reincarnation, and the other to do with evidence for the dependence of mind on brain, which though clearly separable, are so related that *prima facie* (and I emphasize *prima facie*) they cannot both be simultaneously accepted. Kindred situations are not unknown elsewhere in science. For instance, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries there was a sharp division between geologists and astronomers, whose respective best estimates of the age of the earth and the age of the sun made the former considerably older than the latter. But one must not assume in such cases that the evidence presented by one or the other party (depending on which turned out to have been "right") must have been "bad" evidence. There are criteria for assessing evidence, in a given context, as "good" evidence or otherwise, and they do not include a necessary link to the side that in the end (if indeed there is an "end") proved to have been "right."¹² In the case of the relative ages of the earth and the sun the dispute was resolved by the introduction of a previously unknown or imperfectly understood factor, namely radioactivity. Perhaps a previously unknown factor may intervene in the reincarnation/brain function case currently under discussion. I cannot see this happening any time soon, but in the meanwhile, simply rejecting ostensible evidence for reincarnation as necessarily being bad evidence because apparently irreconcilable with presently accepted neuroscience amounts to ducking out of a genuine problem; namely, what are we to say about this in fact really rather impressive evidence, even if we reject the possibility that it indicates actual reincarnation? The distinguished philosopher Paul Edwards (1996: 256) has a really astounding proposal as to what a rational person should think about Stevenson's work. Is it more likely, he asks,

that there are astral bodies, that they invade the wombs of prospective mothers, and that the children can remember events from a previous life although the brains of the previous persons have long been dead, or that Stevenson's children, their parents, or some of the other witnesses and informants are, intentionally or unintentionally, not telling the truth: that they are lying, or that their very fallible memories or powers of observations have led them to make false statements or bogus identifications?

The either-or dichotomy between the first half of this sentence, which sets forth speculations presumed to be Stevenson's, and the second, which propounds criticisms (favoured by Edwards) of Stevenson's evidence, is entirely false.

Stevenson devoted a considerable part of his life to locating and investigating evidence that was, so far as he could tell (and I think he was generally right), not vitiated by those sorts of evidential failures. With him it was always evidence before anything else. And these criticisms cannot cope with that evidence. Even if the speculations are misconceived (I am not here saying that they are or are not), the evidence still remains and requires a proper explanation.

It is time to draw a few threads together. Throughout his career in psychical research Stevenson had to contend with a *Zeitgeist*, more particularly an academic *Zeitgeist*, largely hostile to his work. It is a testimony to his qualities of mind and character that he was able to achieve as much, and gain as much recognition, as he did. He undoubtedly came to regard reincarnation as, at any rate, highly likely. To Tom Shroder he remarked (Shroder, 1999, p. 210) that he had gone through every other possible way of looking at the findings and by elimination had concluded that reincarnation must be the explanation. But he was well aware of the difficulties.

He knew, of course, about the copious data linking mental functioning to brain functioning, but he rejected mind-brain identity theories on fairly well-known grounds. Instead he adopted a view (similar to the positions of C. D. Broad, H. H. Price, and J. R. Smythies) according to which each person's mental phenomena inhabit a space of their own in which they (particularly mental images) have spatial extension. Each person possesses such a mental space, the contents of which can interact with his brain and also perhaps with the mental spaces of other persons. To this way of thinking, minds, being in mental space, can survive the dissolution of their corresponding brains in ordinary physical space (Stevenson, 1981; 1997a: 2070–2074; 2001: 223–227). I confess to some difficulty in making sense of such theories, but cannot pause to discuss them here.

To handle the question of how the memories, personality traits, etc., of a dying or deceased person can be transferred from the past personality to the present one, Stevenson (1997a: 2083–2092, 2103–2104; 1997b: 183–186) developed the notion of a “psychophore” (“soul-bearer”), a kind of vehicle which passes from the one to the other.¹³ Of the nature of psychophores he confesses himself unable to offer any suggestions, although for their mode of action, particularly in producing birthmarks and congenital malformations corresponding to injuries inflicted on the previous personality, he has some ingenious analogies. On the whole, however, “psychophore” seems to be simply a dummy concept filling (pending further information) a vital gap in an explanatory system. The introduction of such dummy concepts may not always or often be illuminating, but it is hardly illegitimate. A parallel might be the status of the concept of a “virus” prior to 1943, when viruses were first observed by means of the electron microscope. For my part I cannot doubt that there is in Stevenson's best cases *some* connection between the past and the present personalities, not reducible to the lingering effects of the deeds of the past personalities, or to memories of those personalities still in the minds of living persons, or to records

of them still extant and available, or to ESP (telepathy, clairvoyance) directed on all or any of these. Whether this connection, which so far as the evidence goes is at best a rare and partial one, should be regarded as an occasional and so far inexplicable freak of nature, or whether it may signify a true and full “personal identity” between past and present personalities with all the implications that might carry, are further and far more difficult questions.

Without doubt Stevenson thought that the spread of a belief in reincarnation (always, of course, if supported by scientific evidence), though it might not make us more moral,¹⁴ would add to the sum of human happiness by alleviating the fear of death. He seemed slightly puzzled by my reservations on the question. He also thought that experiences in past lives could have medical and psychiatric relevance to problems in present lives and (in a way one of his most remarkable achievements) had articles on this possibility published in medical journals. Nonetheless I should suppose that however important he found such considerations, the main reason for his interest in the evidence for reincarnation was a deep and abiding curiosity about the nature of the universe we live in and about whether or not it is, as Frederic Myers, and later on Einstein, put it, ultimately “friendly” toward us.

To return to Stevenson the man: It is hard to write about someone one counted as a friend for 40 years or more. He was a quiet but dryly humorous, gentle but firm individual, not greatly given to talking or writing about himself. He sometimes seemed to have Buddhist sympathies—he told me, with a certain regret, that he had once been constrained to shoot a rattlesnake and considered this action “unbuddhistic,” and he mentions in his autobiography (Stevenson, 1990: 2) how he hated killing “harmless rats” for his early biochemical research. But I never discovered whether he had religious beliefs that could be put even approximately into any conventional category. He had, in his quiet way, a gift for friendship, and maintained contact over the years not just with fellow scholars and academics but with all kinds of people he had met and been helped by in the course of his extensive travels. To persons in distress or trouble of mind his calmness, patience, perceptiveness, common sense, and kindness could be an invaluable source of help and reassurance. On happier occasions his warm friendliness and range of unusual information made him the most pleasant of hosts and conversationalists.

His outward calm was indeed rarely disturbed, even in difficult or tricky situations. He had met with his share of personal sadness and professional difficulties, and was at times depressed that his immense labours had not received more recognition from his fellow scientists. Yet nonetheless he always impressed me as someone who was strengthened by an inner, perhaps not fully formulated, belief in his luck or destiny, a conviction that whatever problems he might encounter he would be allowed to continue his work. Continue it he did on a truly amazing scale. Its continuation has now passed into the hands of others, and we shall wait with interest to see how it develops.

Notes

- ¹ Stevenson once told me the number of convicted or known murderers he had met in the course of his investigations. I cannot remember the exact figure, but I think that at that time it was about eight.
- ² Irwin and Watt (2007: 2) talk of “the days when such interests [sc. ‘field studies’] were known as psychical research, the study of phenomena apparently mediated directly by the mind or ‘soul.’” It was, however, made quite clear in the original list of objects of the Society for Psychical Research (1882) that neither this assumption, nor any other, as to the explanation of the phenomena under investigation was implied by membership of the Society.
- ³ For the first several years of its existence, the research unit was called “The Division of Parapsychology” rather than the name that Stevenson preferred because certain authorities in the University of Virginia insisted on this, presumably to isolate it in the way Stevenson had explicitly wished to avoid. Under a more sympathetic chairman of the Department, the name Stevenson had intended was eventually adopted.
- ⁴ The following remarks by Simon White, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics, are relevant: “Physics and astronomy make progress in very different ways. In physics, controlled experiments rule, but astronomers observe whatever nature shows them. I fear that blindly applying physics-style experimental design to astronomical projects risks costly failure, as well as undermining the methodological basis of astronomy and its attractiveness to young scientists and the public” (*New Scientist*, July 14, 2007, p. 21).
- ⁵ For succinct accounts of Stevenson’s methodology, see Matlock (1990, pp. 194–207, 216–238), Stevenson (2001, pp. 129–145), and Tucker (2005, pp. 17–29).
- ⁶ Stevenson was not, nor would he claim to have been, the first to note some of these characteristics. Some small collections of cases recognizably similar to Stevenson’s can be found in Fielding Hall (1898/1917: 290–308) and Delanne (1924/1927: 304–364). Delanne’s cases run from about 1860 to the First World War and span several continents, including (somewhat unusually) Europe, but the evidential quality is quite variable. Stevenson (2003) includes several of them. Further references to early modern cases will be found in Matlock (1990: 192). The quite numerous reincarnationist beliefs of “primitive” societies recorded by early anthropologists and folklorists (see, e.g., Tylor, 1913, vol. 2: 1–6) contain occasional intimations of the recurrent characteristics we are about to discuss, but they say little about individual cases. So far as I know the earliest individual cases of a “Stevensonian” kind that have found their way into print are some of those culled by De Groot (1901: 143–155; cf. Paton, 1921: 26–27) from Chinese annals and other records of the 3rd to the 10th centuries A.D.
- ⁷ It should be noted here that Stevenson was always rather cautious about evidence from “recognitions” by the present personality of the past personality’s

relatives and friends. In too many (though not all) such cases the arrival of the present personality at the past personality's home drew crowds, the behaviour of which might have given clues to the present personality.

⁸ Swarnlata also claimed some memories from a life in Assam intervening between her life as Biya and her present life, and from this intervening life remembered several songs in the Bengali language, which she would perform with accompanying dances.

⁹ Edwards (1996) offers a valuable and often amusing selection of both bad arguments for and bad arguments against reincarnation.

¹⁰ A useful survey of criticisms of Stevenson's work will be found in Matlock (1990: 239–255).

¹¹ One thinks of Emerson's lines: "They reckon ill who leave me out / When me they flee I am the wings."

¹² It is by no means unknown in science for bad or dubious evidence to be used to support the "right" side and good evidence the "wrong." There are some interesting examples in Collins and Pinch (1993). Another interesting case is that of lunar craters. Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th these were generally assumed by astronomers to be volcanic in origin, and it could not be said that the astronomers' evidence was "bad." Their observations were careful, their drawings and photographs outstanding, and their comparisons with terrestrial features plausible. Only as knowledge of terrestrial meteorite impacts became greater and space vehicles discovered signs of such impacts throughout the solar system was the evidence for the impact theory recognized as being "stronger" than that for the volcanic theory.

¹³ This notion resembles that of a "psi-component" introduced by C. D. Broad (1962: 414–430).

¹⁴ Stevenson told Tom Shroder how an Indian swami deflated him when he expressed the hope that a belief in reincarnation might make people more moral. "There was a long silence, a terrible silence, and finally he said, 'Well, that's very good, but here, reincarnation is a fact, and we have just as many scoundrels and thieves as you do in the West'" (Shroder, 1999: 94).

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