

An emperor in parapsychology

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Professor Ian Stevenson, who was a pioneer in research into 'past lives' passed away peacefully on 8th February 2007. He died from bronchopneumonia, having suffered from bronchial defects since childhood. Dr. Stevenson believed that a person's cause of death might be traced to his previous life, and speculated that his own bronchial defects might have a past life aetiology.

Dr Stevenson published a detailed essay on children remembering previous lives in 1960, which caught the attention of Chester Carlson. Carlson was the inventor of the Photostat machine. He financed Stevenson's researches since he believed that he got the inspiration for his invention paranormally. Stevenson travelled an average of 55,000 miles every year, becoming the author of 200 papers and nine books. His interests spread to apparitions, poltergeists, and mediumship, near-death experiences and deathbed observations. Earlier publications included two books on psychiatric interviewing and diagnosis. Even his staunchest critics have respect for his scientific methodology and scientific honesty. Stevenson had a towering personality. His book, 'Reincarnation and Biology' is a classic study of parapsychology, heralding a paradigmatic shift from physics to biology. ¹

The phenomenon of children remembering previous lives has existed throughout the centuries, particularly in the Orient. The Mughal Emperor Akbar was the first to have been documented to study such a case. Dr Ian Stevenson's investigatory studies have become a benchmark in this challenging research field.

Even though there are different types of evidence to support belief in reincarnation, children's memories about previous lives have more scientific credibility. Most of these cases have the following pattern. ²

A child, usually at the age of two or three, begins talking persistently of things, places and people about which the parents are thoroughly ignorant. The child may even behave quite differently from his brothers or sisters. This will appear very strange in terms of the circumstances of his upbringing. Finally, the child himself may relate all this to a previous life he claims to remember having led, sometimes in neighbouring places or in a distant place.

This is very trying for the parents who, along with friends of the family, start to enquire about persons presumed to be dead to whom the child's statements might apply. Finally, they find a family that appears to fit the basis of the statements. Once contact is made with this new family, they get additional information. Some of this information verifies and some contradicts the child's statements. At the end of the inquiry, the child may be taken to the family he claims was his original family. This family may belong to a superior or inferior social stratum.

As time goes on, both the families make arrangements for a reunion.

The child takes his parents and others through complicated streets and alleys. He may show somnambulist precision. He leads the group directly to the place where he claims to have lived or worked in his former life. He then greets various persons who have come to witness this reunion. He calls them by their name and behaves appropriately. The child likes and dislikes special idiomatic phrases; nicknames and names for objects in his alleged previous life are recollected.

All these cases have some common ingredients. There are repeated statements of a young child's identification with a deceased person. These children who remember past lives offer information about this person in the form of memories of people known to him. They ask to return to their previous homes and present familiar behaviour in the apparently strange environment. They address the alleged relatives with appropriate emotional responses. Most of these memories vanish between the ages of seven and nine. All these could suggest some continuity of personality hidden in the subliminal self.

Different Interpretations

There is always the chance of fraud in such cases. The parents of some of these children have been alleged to make money out of them. They train them to enact the drama of reincarnation. But in the most historical cases, there is sufficient evidence to rule out fraud. There is also the possibility of unconscious fraud. The child may be referring to someone he read or heard about, identifying himself with this person. The parents may have unconsciously added more to the tale as they retold it. Jurgen Keil refers to these types of cases as unintentional information transfer (as compared to normal information transfer).³ The present author has examined such a case of unintentional information transfer in Kerala (South India).

Psychologists now refer to the concept of 'racial memory'. But this idea cannot account for the apparent memories of former lives. These children are almost never descendants of the individuals they claim to be, usually belonging to another family in another town.

Another possibility is that the child may have received information about the deceased person's life through extrasensory perception. Relatives still mourning the deceased might unconsciously be sending thoughts, which are picked telepathically by the youngsters. The observation that these children do not show any unusual paranormal ability in other situations is a counter-argument against the telepathic hypothesis.

Professor Chari advocates a spiritist interpretation to explain previous life memories. This postulates that discarnate spirits from the non-physical realm are influencing these children by transmitting their terrestrial memories to the children.⁴ If that was the case, the children would have been influenced by several deceased personalities and the subjects would not have been able to stick to one previous life narration alone. It can also be argued that if previous life memories were spiritist in origin, more than one child would be claiming the identity of a single discarnate personality and this has not happened.

Children have not claimed the lives of more than one deceased personality living in the same period of time. Nor have they claimed the memories of living ones. It is also of note that during the Near Death

Experience (NDE) stage, no panoramic review of a former life is described in the NDEs of cultures believing in reincarnation.

The apparent memories for most of the subjects occur during a normal state of consciousness. Some mediums who have had experiences with communications from ostensibly discarnate personalities (and also apparent memories of former incarnations) claim to distinguish between these kinds of experiences. In mediumistic experiences, the communicators do not confine their information to one person.

With these arguments, Dr. Stevenson rules out the possibility of communication from surviving personality.⁶ He also argues against the hypothesis of possession because no transformation of personality occurs in these cases.

The average interval between death and rebirth in the published cases of Stevenson is two years, even though there are reports of trans-century cases of reincarnation. Most of the reincarnations take place in the same geographical area but there are also international cases. The social circumstances are variable and do not follow a set pattern.

'Deja vu,' hypnotic past life regression, flashbacks occurring in drug induced mental states and recurrent dreams starting from childhood, offer other probable but weaker evidences for reincarnation. Dr Stevenson is sceptical about the research usefulness of hypnotic past life regression (PLR)⁷, but gives some credit to PLR when there is responsive xenoglossy, in which the subject is capable of to and fro communication in a foreign language.⁸

Birth Marks and Birth Defects

In his recent publication, Dr. Stevenson has opened his bulky file of cases where reincarnated persons have birth marks and birth defects corresponding to the wounds of the deceased person.⁹ About 35% of children who claim to remember previous lives have birth-marks and birth defects that they attribute to wounds on a person whose life the child remembers. Dr. Stevenson's research team has investigated the cases of 210 such children. Photographs of birthmarks and illustrations of the weapons form part of the evidence in this explorative research. The birth marks were usually areas of hairless, puckered skin, some were areas of increased pigmentation and some were areas of little or no pigmentation. The birth defects were nearly always of rare types.

In cases in which a deceased person was identified, the details of whose life unmistakably matched the child's statements, a close correspondence was nearly always found between the birthmarks and birth defects on the child and wounds on the deceased person. In 43 of 49 cases in which a medical document was obtained, it confirmed the correspondence between wounds and birthmarks or birth defects. Dr. Stevenson argues in favor of a paranormal origin for these birth manifestations, excluding reasons for maternal impressions as causative factors. Currently, the objective evidence in favor of the hypothesis of reincarnation is the presence of birthmarks and birth defects corresponding to the wounds of the deceased persons. Pasricha in her report of ten such cases, after discussing the alternative explanations of chance, maternal impressions, super-psi and possession, proposes that the hypothesis of reincarnation may best explain

these cases.¹⁰

The simplest normal explanation for this phenomenon might appear to be chance. But the multiplicity of the birthmarks corresponding to the wounds of the deceased person whose life the subject remembers, and the unusual nature of the birthmarks cannot be explained away as a mere coincidence. The skin of a normal sized adult would comprise 160 squares each ten centimeters sq. Locating the skin marks within such a grid, the odds against chance of a single birthmark corresponding in location with a single wound is 1/160. But the chance explanation becomes much weaker in which more than one wound and birthmark correspond. For example Stevenson has eighteen cases in which a child claims to remember being shot by a bullet, and has two birth marks which are found to correspond to bullet wounds of entry (small) and exit wound (larger). Here again a pattern of birthmarks matches the pattern of wounding of the deceased. These cases constitute the strongest evidence. When two birthmarks thus correspond with two wounds, the odds against chance increase to 1/60 into 1/160 or 1/25000. An extreme case is Necip of Turkey who had seven birth Marks, six of which correspond to wounds described in a medical document.⁸ In this case the odds against chance coincidence are truly astronomical.

Of the paranormal explanations, the hypothesis of maternal impressions is the strongest theory.¹¹ According to this hypothesis, shock or strong psychological impression in pregnant women can produce a mark or other defects in her baby. Again, this hypothesis is valid only in cases where the two families knew each other. In majority of the cases, they were strangers. Above all else, the cognitive and behavioral memories point towards the hypothesis of reincarnation if the informants are reliable.

Reincarnation and Mind Brain Relationship

Medical scientists can safely leave the discussion of the soul to the theology and confine themselves to the mind and its relation to the brain. Neurophysiology has failed to explain the mind. If reincarnation is true, one has to accept a dualistic model of the mind.

The human mind consists of a complex non-atomic energy system incorporated within an atomic system. This is an assertion. If the mind consists of a non-physical component, fundamental questions need to be answered as to how physical sensations are converted into non-physical form. This is a hypothesis. The two do not sit well together. The mechanism of synaesthesia, where sensory stimuli from one modality are perceived in another modality, may contain the secret to unlock the conversion of energy from the atomic to the non-atomic and sub-atomic levels.

A theory that accommodates the hypothesis of reincarnation is C.D. Broad's 'compound theory'. According to him, the mind is not a single substance. It is a compound of two substances and neither of them by itself has the characteristic of the mind. These two substances are the 'psychic factor' and the 'bodily factor', as he called them in 1925. He later called the former the 'psi-component'. Following the death of the physical body of a person, the psi-component may continue an unembodied existence for a time. It may then become associated with another physical body before birth. It follows from this hypothesis that certain aspects of the psi-component may

influence the personality of the new human being, his mental contents, behaviour and even physical body. Dr. Stevenson has coined the term 'psychophore' which means soul bearer, the canvas where memories are collected.¹²

The present tendency among medical scientists to use genetics and environmental influences to explain human behaviour and various medical conditions is under attack from parapsychology.¹³ Psychiatric disorders need particular mention in this respect. In general psychiatric disorders have no objective indicators and their investigations contain potential errors when genetic theories are adhered closely to. The idea of reincarnation offers supplementary knowledge without replacing the knowledge gained through studies of genetics and environmental influences.¹⁴ Parapsychology is not an adversary of medical sciences but offers a third or extra explanation to solve some of the puzzles in psychology, and medicine.¹⁵

Stevenson's research works have been useful in dealing with some of the myths surrounding reincarnation. He has given more insight into the age-old Indian concept of retributive karma and modified it as developmental karma or even as collective karma. The concept of 'clinical reincarnation' is his great contribution to medical sciences.¹⁶ Stevenson did not promote universal reincarnation but was inclined to believe in accidental reincarnation. This goes well with the concept of reincarnation in the ancient Vedas which states 'Those who leave the world in darkness return, and those who leave in light never return' (Bhagavat Gita, 8:25-26).

Unfortunately the Vedic concept of reincarnation came to be exploited to cement the caste hierarchy of India and Hindus have been forced to believe that the enlightened get into the higher caste in the cycle of rebirth. Such a view contradicts Jesus' beatitudes, in which the poor are more spiritually enlightened and promised eternal life. Incidentally, Stevenson did not find any evidence for transmigration to and from the animal kingdom.

To see karma fatalistically is a negative philosophy. Dr Venkoba Rao has attempted to explain karma differently using the analogy of the archer with the bows and arrows.¹⁷ The archer has no control on the arrows that have been already discharged, but can control the arrow set on the bow ready to be discharged and those still in the quiver. Humans have control on most of their actions and only a few are predetermined in a previous life.

Stevenson did not want his research to be associated with any religion. Asked about the usefulness of eliciting previous life memories artificially, he stated, 'To paraphrase from Jesus Christ, sufficient unto one life is the evil thereof'. I had thirty years of postal correspondence with Stevenson and his papers on apparitions have been highly helpful for my studies of Marian apparitional experiences, but Stevenson always admitted his ignorance on Mary's appearances, and was humble enough not to comment on their authenticity.

One thing certain about parapsychological interpretations is their uncertainty.¹⁸ Psychological superficiality, circular logic and lack of deeper understanding of the culture that Stevenson investigated, are some of the arguments against his investigations. Telepathy from living agents and spiritist interpretations are two salient alternative paranormal interpretations that can also be considered. Even though Stevenson has discussed in detail all the alternative explanations of reincarnation cases, it is to be pointed out that he

paid less attention to the spiritist hypothesis. In general, oriental religions have a mediumistic inclination, and this would support the spiritist view of reincarnation-type cases and the high prevalence of reported cases in the East.

If that is the case, reincarnation may be a faulty interpretation of what are spiritist phenomena. Possibly children are more vulnerable to spiritist influences and that having recently passed through the spiritual dimension, reincarnated children are more susceptible to spirit attachment. (The Ogbongees of the Igbo tribe of Nigeria believe in such a coexistence of spirit attachment and reincarnation, and Stevenson has discussed such cases in detail.^{19,20}) If Stevenson's cases do not prove reincarnation and spiritistic interpretation is proven to be true, these reincarnation-type cases still would indirectly offer a strong evidence for a spiritistic realm and post-mortem existence, and children remembering previous lives will continue to be a fascinating paranormal phenomenon.

In summary, Stevenson's painstaking research has made the idea of reincarnation a respectable research topic and subject to the scrutiny of scientific empiricism. Stevenson himself has stated, 'I have no preferred interpretation for all cases, and I do not think any single one of them offers compelling evidence of reincarnation. Yet I can say that I think reincarnation is, for some cases, the best interpretation. I am not claiming that it is the only possible interpretation for these cases, just that it seems to be the best one among all those that I have interpreted.'⁹

Stevenson wrote to me once ' My aim has never been to prove reincarnation, but only to find and report whatever evidence there is that makes it seem possible'.

To end on a biographical note, Dr Ian Pretyman Stevenson was born on 31st October 1918 in Montreal. His mother was interested in Theosophy and had a huge collection of books on the subject, which was a source of inspiration for his interest in psychical studies in later life. Dr Stevenson studied medicine at St Andrews University in Scotland, transferring his studies to Canada due to the outbreak of the Second World War. He graduated in medicine from McGill University and later migrated to USA. After his internship he specialised in psychiatry, also training as a psychoanalyst. However, he lost confidence in psychoanalysis and even referred to Sigmund Freud as a 'proverbial naked emperor'.

Only time will tell whether or not Ian Stevenson was himself a clothed emperor. Freed from the dogmatism of Freud, the mystical speculations of Carl Jung, and the paternalism of Alfred Adler, Dr. Stevenson introduced a new school of thinking and will be regarded as the first cartographer of the new science-landscape. Scientists who seek truth and not proof alone to support their observations are also theologians, and Stevenson was one among them.

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