

Ian Stevenson: A Man from Whom We Should Learn

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Ian Stevenson was one of the most extraordinary individuals, in the best sense of that word, whom I have had the pleasure of knowing. I had the privilege of working at his center for roughly five years (1968–1973) and of knowing him for many more years. I welcome the opportunity to share some impressions of this remarkable man because he is someone whose work we should continue to study and from whose example we should continue to learn.

One way in which Stevenson was extraordinary, although not unique in parapsychology, was his breadth and depth of scholarship, both in parapsychology and outside it, and in the application of those findings and insights to his own research in parapsychology. Based on what he read in contemporary parapsychology journals, he sometimes was dismayed about the apparent ignorance, by too many contemporary parapsychologists, of the contributions to this field by historical figures. He felt that this was unfortunate for the advancement of the field. Of course, he was correct, but I would toss in the caveat that historical myopia (including prejudice against old literature as somehow deficient simply because it is old) often seems also to characterize work in other fields of science, with comparably ill consequences. Parapsychology probably is far from unique in this regard, but Stevenson's concern merits continued attention.

There is another way in which Stevenson was outstanding among contemporary investigators. Based on both his writings and my many interactions with him over the years, I gained the impression that he saw his research mission fundamentally as dedicated to illuminating the nature of the person (as in the concept of "personality"), rather than toward illuminating the nature of mysterious powers (i.e., of psi events), although he surely felt that understanding the latter had its own importance. (I recognize and Stevenson surely did, too, that illuminating the nature of psi function conceivably might illuminate the ultimate nature of the person, but I suggest that his interest in the nature of the person was less focused on this abstract kind of issue than on something more germane to everyday functioning; see comments that follow.) Stevenson contributed in a variety of ways, and very well, to domains related to spontaneous cases of possible psi communication (e.g., a very important work, "Telepathic impressions: A review and report of thirty-five new cases" [Stevenson, 1970]), but if we stop there in thinking of him, we will have stopped very far short of the mark. Of course, there is his monumental work on evidence of possible previous lifetimes (i.e., "reincarnation cases"). His selection of reincarnation as a research

problem might well have been driven fundamentally by its implications, if true, for the nature and development of the individual personality and for that personality's functioning in everyday life. He surely was interested in the abstract question of "survival," but he, I suspect, pursued the reincarnation quest because of its potential to illuminate what happens in the here and now—perhaps to a much greater degree than anything that might come out of other areas of survival research. I suspect that he, as someone with a passion for psychiatry, found this possibility substantially more engaging than simply the relevance of reincarnation evidence to the "survival question" in the abstract (i.e., "Do we survive death at all?"). None of this is to say that he was uninterested in the "survival" question generally, for there is much evidence of such interest on his part—he proposed, for example, tests in which a person would set the combination to a padlock and then after death try to communicate (say, to a medium or in a dream) a mnemonic that would reveal the combination (Stevenson, 1968).

In an early publication on the reincarnation cases (Stevenson, 1960, Part II of a winning essay in a contest in honor of William James), he opined that the study of alleged memories of a previous lifetime might provide a more plausible means of demonstrating survival than could be had through the study of mediumistic communication. This, he suggested, was because the study of possible reincarnation cases involves trying to find evidence that someone presently living had lived before (and died), whereas in efforts to prove survival via mediumistic communications one must try to find evidence that someone who has died is in some sense still living (see Stevenson, 1960: 117, his concluding statement). In his many years of later work on possible reincarnation cases, he was interested not merely in cognitive content (i.e., possible "memories") related to a putative previous lifetime but also, very importantly, in affective, behavioral, and even presently visible physical influences of the supposed previous lifetime (e.g., birthmarks or deformities). Dispositional psychological/behavioral evidence, rather than just supposed cognitive-perceptual memories, presumably held special interest for Stevenson because behavioral/affective inclinations, especially those that manifest in everyday life over a long term, may be less likely to be the result of ordinary psi communication. Of course, they also have special relevance to the development of a view of personality that is informed by survival research, something in which Stevenson, as a psychiatrist, certainly had a strong interest. For him, survival research potentially held real meaning for understanding human personality in the present time. I suggest that it was this broader, closer-to-life picture of the meaning of survival that fired in Stevenson a special enthusiasm and resulted in many years of research on this topic. This was true even though he never claimed that he had anything like definitively shown that the cases he studied were due to reincarnation, although he pointed to a variety of lines of what he regarded as convergent evidence favoring the reincarnation hypothesis over alternative ones. Nonetheless, he always discussed a wide variety of alternate interpretations of the data and frankly, but humbly, noted that in his view the reincarnation inter-

pretation was more plausible for some cases. This brings me to the discussion of Stevenson's character, which is, in many respects, the most important aspect of my commentary.

There are many things that Stevenson's life and work can convey to us that should be take-home messages when we think of and honor him and his work. Please permit me to mention a few, not in any special order:

1. He was an individual of outstanding intellectual honesty, which he greatly valued in others too. Although he personally favored certain interpretations of his data, he did not, as I just noted, overstate his preferred interpretation by claiming that he had ruled out beyond all reasonable doubt any of the many alternate hypotheses that he discussed. Nor did he state or imply that those who disagreed with him were foolish or intellectually dishonest. I suggest that this fairness of spirit and conservatism of statement went a long way toward his being able to present his findings and preferred hypotheses even in a variety of nonparapsychological outlets. I many times saw him look for—and report when he found it—evidence that went contrary to what seemed to be his personal inclinations. In subsequent discussion of it he did not “gild the lily.”
2. I worked at his center for five years, and I can say honestly that in addition to his intellectual honesty, he was very honest personally. He greatly valued truthfulness and was not afraid to tell the truth, even when telling it might not be easy.
3. He was uncommonly bold in the areas he was willing personally to investigate and in the audiences to whom he was willing to present his evidence. For example, it requires outstanding courage to claim, especially in certain nonparapsychological publications or meetings, to have evidence suggesting memories of past lifetimes or other kinds of evidence suggesting reincarnation, and Stevenson had all the courage needed to present his evidence and ideas, usually to a scientific audience, but sometimes to a broader one. He had great curiosity about strange events and did not hesitate to study them. Dramatic incidents or reports that some parapsychologists might hesitate to investigate seemed deeply exciting to him, and *not* investigating them—or, at least, not encouraging others to do so—would have been unthinkable to him.
4. Stevenson presumably would have scored very high on the personality trait of conscientiousness. He very much desired to do tasks carefully, fully, and properly, and he would recruit others in areas that went beyond his knowledge or skills. Most of my work at the University of Virginia was on my own projects, but I collaborated with him on several projects and heard him report his research on many occasions. Based on these experiences, I never had reason to believe that he would even think of doing less than his best on any task, be it planning, investigating, or reporting. I always was confident in working with him that he would, to

- the best of his ability, carefully monitor both himself and anyone else involved with the project.
5. A word that could accurately characterize Stevenson is *professionalism*. He exemplified all the qualities of professionalism, including conscientiousness (already noted), high standards of professional ethics, and proper social conduct, including fairness and kindness in his dealings with people. He was at one time much involved with developing ethics guidelines for the Parapsychological Association, but, most importantly, he himself exemplified those high standards of professional conduct. He was always very careful in his thinking, writing, speaking, and acting, and he taught his co-workers the importance of these virtues. He often gave practical advice. For example, he noted the importance of “always leaving a paper trail” to document what one did and did not do or say, not leaving things to the vagaries of memory or bias. He sometimes dispensed sage advice on grant getting. He clearly felt a sense of responsibility to himself, to his colleagues, and to his professional disciplines.
 6. He may be deemed a superb role model for persons planning to do work in unorthodox areas such as parapsychology, because *before* he became deeply involved with parapsychology he had already earned a high regard for himself in psychiatry, his profession of training and practice. He had, for example, published a well-respected textbook on psychiatric interviewing (Stevenson, 1960/1971), and he was at one time Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. It is extremely wise to establish a very solid reputation in a socio-scientifically more acceptable and traditional area before embarking on parapsychological research and publication. There are reasons for this that are beyond the scope of the present discussion, but there have been other examples of this in the field, both historically and today. What is more, the knowledge derived from other scientific fields can enhance one’s later psi research. Stevenson’s ability to present his work in non-parapsychological journals and meetings undoubtedly was enhanced by his solid reputation in psychiatry and his holding a tenured position in that field.
 7. Last, but not least, please do not forget that Stevenson also was able to continue with his work in unorthodox domains because (a) he had a home for it at a respected university and medical school and (b) the funding for it was largely raised by him. I believe he was successful in the latter regard at least in part because of being in such a setting, because of his personal character and accomplishments in psychiatry and in parapsychology, and because he cultivated support by being unafraid to address bold, but potentially very important issues. I must say also that he knew much about how to treat people, including potential donors. That included cultivating donors by being respectful, truthful, and honest in his dealings with them. He also had many traditional grant-getting skills, and that is something

that can be fostered by contact with grant-getting colleagues, usually after having established a home in a grant-getting institution.

Stevenson was an individual who stood out in parapsychology on account of his boldness, courage, and—even by that field's standards—unorthodox hypotheses. He also stood out because of his success in gaining support. He exemplified in his personal and professional life many qualities that are fundamental and important in any field of science. In my view, he exemplified a professional high road that we too seldom see in any field. By his everyday words and deeds he showed that intellectual boldness can successfully be melded with professional ethics, scientific carefulness, and social responsibility in public discourse. In remembering him, we would do very well to emulate his professionalism, conscientiousness, hard work, and honesty.

It is sad to say goodbye to such an individual, but it is gratifying and edifying to contemplate his example.

References

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