

Ian Stevenson: Founder of the Scientific Investigation of Human Reincarnation

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One may confidently expect that, in years to come, Ian Stevenson will be recognized as one of the most illustrious personalities in the history of Mr. Jefferson's university. He has earned this distinction through laying the foundation for the scientific study of human reincarnation. How long it will be before this discipline, as well as the fact of at least occasional human reincarnation, becomes widely accepted with a soundly established methodology, we do not know, but there can be no reasonable doubt that this acceptance will occur, with recognition of Ian Stevenson's seminal role herein. It was he who pioneered virtually all investigative methods in this new science, and, with an unmatched knowledge of the pertinent facts, he identified many of the questions still to be answered.

Most important among future areas for research is likely to be the frequency of the occurrence of reincarnation: Is human reincarnation almost universal, as accepted in Buddhism and Hinduism, ceasing only with final deliverance, with "enlightenment," the cessation of "samsara"? If not, how might it depend on variables such as age at death, mode of death, culture, geographical location, beliefs, or personal effort? Further, is there any reasonable indication from memories of other lives for reincarnation in other locations than earth? And what evidence, if any, may be explored to account for the discrepancy between numbers of deceased humans and new births, especially the historically recent explosive increase in numbers of humans so that almost as many humans are alive now than ever lived before? Exploration of these and related questions will continue for a long time to come. One important aid herein is likely to be the investigation of cases involving birthmarks and birth defects, as also pioneered by Ian Stevenson. In addition, the condition of the personality between incarnations, the effect of a past life and its various circumstances on the new personality, and a host of additional subjects worthy of detailed research will presumably be similarly investigated.

Ian Stevenson has made seminal contributions to most of the above questions,

but he shied away from speculation and the seemingly outlandish. This certainly was wise, since it will require steadfast clinging to fact and shunning of speculation to retain scientific integrity. Almost certainly it was this consideration that prompted him to refuse to assert that his research had documented the existence of reincarnation as an at least occasional occurrence, and to refuse saying that he himself believed so. Rather, he acknowledged no more than that the evidence amassed by him and others was “suggestive” of reincarnation. This was the one issue regarding which I fundamentally disagreed with him: True, certainty always eludes humans except as established per definition, and so we cannot be certain that reincarnation ever occurs; but neither can we be certain of Newton’s laws or relativity theory or Darwinian evolution. Yet the statistical probability that reincarnation does in fact occur, at least occasionally, is so overwhelming, established by thousands of already documented cases of remembered lives, and strongly buttressed by the incidence of birthmarks in conjunction with many of his well-documented cases, that cumulatively the supporting evidence is not inferior to that for most if not all branches of science, whether physics, cosmology, or Darwinian evolution.

Indeed, all human knowledge is burdened with a degree of uncertainty, but in the hard sciences we are accustomed to accepting odds once they go into the millions and billions, let alone astronomically large numbers, without saying that such and such evidence is “suggestive of,” say, relativity theory or the Big Bang. And there is no logical reason to act otherwise in regard to the evidence for reincarnation, simply because reincarnation counters age-old Western religious beliefs and cannot be reduced to mathematical formulae with testable numerical predictions. I argued many times with Ian Stevenson that, as a result of his undue reticence, readers of his publications are led to believe that he himself harbored genuine doubts about the results of his own research, thereby inviting the doubt of others and preventing that research from being widely accepted.

No, contrary to such an appearance, Ian Stevenson’s pioneering work has laid as secure a foundation for human reincarnation as may be claimed by almost every other well-recognized science. Although a flawlessly proven case does not exist, his documentation has statistically proven, to stupendous odds and beyond any reasonable doubt, that at least some humans have been reincarnated, his own refusal to make such a claim notwithstanding.

Most importantly, also, Ian Stevenson has inspired many of the present highly gifted and dedicated reincarnation researchers to continue his work and to expand the structure of reincarnation science, so that it will live on and gradually win over the universal acceptance that I believe to be inevitable. Thereby Ian Stevenson’s place as one of the great personalities in the history of the University of Virginia will be secured, and while we have reason to mourn his departure, we have much more reason yet to celebrate his wonderful life and achievements.