

BOOK REVIEW

Children Who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation, by Ian Stevenson. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1987, 354 pp. Cloth: \$35.00, Paper: \$14.95.

This is an impressive book for several reasons: It is admirably written in a style that is both scholarly and readable; the work it presents has been thoroughly analyzed; the experience of the author in the field is considerable; and virtually every question, criticism or suggestion that popped into my mind as I read the accounts or pondered the implications for myself appeared by and by in the text. Moreover this book is only one in a long series of books and articles on the subject of reincarnation that Dr. Stevenson has written in his more than 25 years of study. This gave me the reassuring feeling that there was much to back up the material presented. I never had the feeling that data were being overinterpreted or that conclusions were being grasped for.

Stevenson says he is not out to convince the reader of anything, at least in this one book. He states: "I should regard disapprovingly anyone who, solely from reading this book, moved from skepticism—or ignorance—concerning reincarnation to a settled conviction that it occurs." It is this approach that sets the work of Stevenson apart; after 25 years of accumulating the most comprehensive and unique data base on reincarnation, he still views it and presents it in the Baconian tradition: Let the evidence speak for itself. The University of Virginia files now contain over 2000 investigated cases; 65 have been published as detailed case reports.

Concerning motivation for studying such an inherently uncontrollable (in a laboratory sense) phenomenon, I agree with Stevenson that, "It is better to learn what is probable about important matters than to be certain about trivial ones." Life after death is undeniably an important phenomenon! Apparently 67% of the American population at large believes in an afterlife; apparently only 16% of scientists do.

Following the introduction there is a brief chapter giving an overview of the belief in reincarnation. Voltaire wrote, "It is not more surprising to be born twice than once." This is not a majority opinion in western culture, but our general disbelief or ignorance in reincarnation is probably a minority opinion. Evidence indicates that believers in reincarnation possibly outnumber those who do not on a planetary scale. One can approximately make the generalization that most Christians, Jews, Moslems (excluding Shiites), Atheists and Scientists discount reincarnation, whereas most everyone else has some belief in it.

Stevenson states: "When Westerners who have mistakenly thought that only the people of Southeast Asia believe in reincarnation learn for the first time about the belief among other peoples, they are inclined to imagine that these other people must have concepts about reincarnation similar to those of the Hindus and Buddhists. This is wrong." There are in fact many variations on the who, how, when and why of reincarnation, such as the choosing of one's future family or the working of "karma"—not, by the way, a concept universally associated with the idea of reincarnation. Stevenson himself essentially discounts—thankfully—the idea that one might return as an animal, but some of the other possible elements and aspects of reincarnation can actually be addressed, albeit tentatively, in the assembled data base.

Chapter three discusses the various types of evidence for reincarnation: past life readings by "sensitives" of which practically nothing positive can be said; hypnotic regression, which has more pitfalls and is in the end probably no more effective than conscious recall but of which Stevenson states, "Although I am skeptical . . . I do not reject all of them as worthless"; and various other deliberate or accidental revelations stemming from dreams and nightmares, *déjà vu* experiences, illnesses and drugs, mediation, etc., all of which involve adults. However, it is the spontaneous experiences of children which, Stevenson believes, probably do not arise from a lifelong and uninventoriable clutter of obscure facts and fantasies and so have a particularly pristine character. Moreover the overlaying of present life experiences has not yet crowded out all the data from a putative past life. Those are the motivations for his approach.

The next chapter is a summary of 12 cases, none of which are discussed in exhaustive depth as are the published reports and the books of case histories. Kant said, in referring to the cumulative probability of "ghost stories": ". . . although I doubt each one taken by itself, when they are considered as a group I have some belief in them." The same goes for these accounts. Any self-respecting scientist or lawyer could pick any one apart individually, but collectively they present a respectable case. It is also reassuring that Stevenson himself is ever aware of the deficiencies in the data, the alternate explanations, the methodology problems and the like, and makes no bones about saying so time and again.

The following two chapters, five and six, deal with typical case characteristics and methods of analysis. The most fully developed case would have five characteristics: a pre-mortem prediction of rebirth; an "announcing dream" often to an expectant mother that this individual is going to be reborn; a birthmark somehow characteristic of the former personality; statements of fact by the child usually between the ages of, say, 2 to 6 concerning the circumstances of the previous life; and, lastly, behaviour patterns of some sort that match the previous personality. Few cases, of course, show all of these. The principal memories cluster around events near the end of the previous life and usually include death memories, especially in the case of

violent death, which, by the way, appears to be a selection factor favoring conscious recall in that an exceptional percentage of Stevenson's cases involve a past life ending violently.

In chapter seven the author considers various alternative explanations to reincarnation which might serve to explain his collected data. Yes, he has been hoaxed in a few cases, but the time involved, motivation for profit of some kind thereby, degree of conspiracy necessary among large numbers of individuals and the like argue against this explanation in most cases. Could it be that children have picked up information from their parents or other sources without even being aware of it? Yes, it could be, in some instances, but there are many others where no reasonable, normal channels of communication could have conveyed the reported and subsequently verified information. What about extrasensory perception? Two factors argue against this: First, the children studied usually do not show any other evidence of psychic proclivity, and secondly, it is not just a matter of conveyed information about another personality, but of manifestations of behavioural attributes reminiscent of that person.

A number of cultures include belief in reincarnation, but there is by no means uniformity of opinion concerning the details. The Druses of Lebanon do not believe that a soul can exist apart from a body for even an instant, and so reincarnation for them must take place instantaneously after death, which of course fixes a rigid interval between death and rebirth. They also do not believe that sex can change between lifetimes. Most other "reincarnational cultures" do not believe in any fixed interval, do believe in a discarnate realm, and do allow for a succession of lives as both male and female. Stevenson's cases, in fact, show interesting trends in the area of sex and sex-change. First of all, out of a series of 1095 cases, 62% of the subjects were male. Secondly, girls who remember previous lives as males outnumber the reverse situation by three to one. It is not at all clear what this means, but the author presents a good discussion of how cultural beliefs are likely to provide strong selection effects in reported cases, to the extent of suppressing entirely whatever the culture is not prepared to believe.

The explanatory value of reincarnation in the arena of human behaviour is obvious: Phobias, unusual aptitudes, obsessions, sexual attitudes are all examples of characteristics perhaps better understood in terms of the concrete circumstances of a previous life than by the sometimes convoluted logic of psychoanalysis. It is a fair proposal to make that in addition to genetics and environment, the third factor of past life experiences shapes the human personality.

The author himself admonishes that "it would be rash to generalize from so few cases," but this is in fact what the final two chapters do, and Stevenson does this with all the appropriate caveats constantly stated. To be truthful most readers would be dissatisfied if the author did not try to draw inferences; who would not be curious about what to expect when we die? As I stated at the outset, it is the fact that these tentative conclusions and

generalizations are based on much more than just the 12 cases presented in this book that makes me give serious consideration to the outlined possibilities. A number of questions and speculations are thoughtfully presented to bring the book to a conclusion; some examples follow.

There is little evidence to suggest rebirth as other than a human, although just from numerical arguments it is plausible that over the course of evolution consciousness could evolve from the animal realm into the human. More than one life is sometimes remembered, and so it makes sense to think of a succession of lives as the process. There is no evidence that suicide leads to a judgmental punishment; it merely carries the irresolution over into another life. The process of obtaining a new life is anything but random, and so it should not be surprising to find oneself involved with some of the same personalities, as from a previous life, although in altered relationships. The idea of reward or punishment would appear to be more a matter of carrying over attributes and attitudes that will help or hinder in a subsequent life. These and other possibilities are discussed in a sensible and always carefully qualified way.

Most scientists deny the possibility that the question of survival after death can be addressed scientifically, and yet studies such as this, along with investigations of near-death experiences, are showing that there are ways to do just that. Dr. Stevenson's work since the early 1960's has succeeded in transforming the concept of reincarnation from a religious notion into a field of scientific inquiry. Stevenson states over and over that the evidence he is gathering must speak for itself. "Reincarnation is the last interpretation we should accept for the cases, and we should adopt it only after we have eliminated all the alternative explanations"; "I do not think any single (case) offers compelling evidence of reincarnation"; "I am not claiming that it is the only possible interpretation for these cases, just that it seems the best one among all those that I have mentioned."

Our own wishes are perhaps the greatest pitfall to research of this sort, for who does not wish to believe that this one life is not the totality of what we may have, but lest we discount everything on account of our wishes, it is appropriate to remind ourselves that it is equally wrong to assume that what we desire must, since we desire it, therefore be false. Stevenson poses the question to the reader as well as it can be put: "After you have read my detailed case reports, I do not think you will say there is *no* evidence for reincarnation, although you may certainly find it unconvincing. If you reach that point, I think it is fair to ask you: 'What evidence, if you had it, *would* convince you of reincarnation?'"

I highly recommend this book.

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