

The Quest for Acceptance

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Ian Stevenson's work came to my attention in the early 1970s. During my years as a graduate student at Berkeley in the 1960s, I had developed a strong interest in the approach to meditation through yoga, but had not fully come to grips with the issue of reincarnation so central to Hindu philosophy. I was unsure about the subject and maintained a natural degree of skepticism (which extended to some of the other more mystical aspects of yoga), but took a conscious attitude of wait-and-see, a form of suspending disbelief. Berkeley in that period was a center of interest in Eastern religion, partly under the influence of psychedelic agents that were popular at the time, and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was featured reading. For such an unfathomable subject, I was intrigued by Ian's scientific approach and arranged to meet him on a trip to Charlottesville. By then I was on the faculty in the Section of Biochemistry of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

My first impression of Ian was how dignified and serious he was for someone working on such an unorthodox subject: well-coiffed, meticulously dressed in suit and tie—elegant from head to toe (of his wing-tipped shoes). We exchanged occasional letters over the following years and met once in Ithaca when he was traveling in the region. We began a period of serious collaboration when Ian suggested that I look at material related to sickle cell anemia with respect to reincarnation in equatorial Africa. For many years I had been actively investigating the molecular basis of this genetic disease and with my group at Cornell had recently established the structure of the complex 14-stranded helical cables of the mutant form of hemoglobin responsible for distorting red blood cells into their characteristic sickle shape. I was fascinated by the idea of pursuing how this molecular disease could elicit cultural responses in traditional African societies and followed up on Ian's suggestion to learn more about "repeater children." My reading kindled serious interest, and in the 1980s we made two trips together to Nigeria, with additional stops on the way in Senegal and the Côte d'Ivoire on the second trip.¹ I made a subsequent trip to Africa alone that included a stop in Senegal, where I investigated the case of Tadé Sarr (for a report of this case, see Stevenson, 1997a: vol. 2, pp. 1644–1645).

Our investigations revealed that West African societies had integrated

reincarnation as an active element in their lives, even to a greater degree than some societies traditionally identified with a strong belief in reincarnation such as, for example, the Hindus. Among the Igbos of southeastern Nigeria, parents generally consulted an oracle shortly after the birth of each child to identify which deceased ancestor had reincarnated. Even more interesting was the practice of marking the cadaver of deceased children in order to ascertain if the next child born to the same parents carried the mark, which would be taken as evidence for the reincarnation of a “repeater child.” It was surprising to discover that traditional societies were conducting virtual “experiments” in reincarnation across a wide swath of West Africa. The idea that this practice might provide unique opportunities for reincarnation research heightened our interest. At the time of our travels, Ian’s research was focused to a large extent on birthmarks and birth defects related to purported instances of reincarnation, and our investigations in Africa provided a number of interesting new cases, which he summarized principally in *Reincarnation and Biology* (Stevenson, 1997a), particularly in Volume 2. These major tomes follow upon his many earlier published works covering cases from various parts of the world, most of them based mainly on verbal testimony, but some of which also included birthmarks and birth defects.

Whether or not the cases could be used to substantiate the existence of reincarnation, I found it intriguing from an anthropological point of view that such practices could be so widespread. By adopting this anthropological perspective, I was able to present the essence of the cases of repeater children in West Africa (along with other features of sickle cell anemia, including its molecular basis) without crossing the line into parapsychology, and my book *The Sickled Cell: From Myths to Molecules* was published by Harvard University Press in 1986. We observed the consequences of marking children by amputating the last bone of the left little finger among the Igbos, as well as several other distinctive forms of marking which were observed by us or reported by other witnesses. For example, my own investigations among the Serer ethnic group in Senegal along the coast south of Dakar documented the practice of cutting a notch in an ear (see the case of Tade Sarr in Stevenson, 1997a: vol. 2, pp. 1644–1645).

These and other birth defects that we studied are far more specific and atypical than the forms that have been reported in the medical literature and are difficult to explain by any conventional biological arguments. In some extreme cases discussed in Chapter 20 of *Reincarnation and Biology*, more extensive birth defects were observed on children that corresponded to amputations allegedly carried out on the cadaver of a deceased child. The unforgettable encounter with Cordelia Ekouroume, who lacked portions of many fingers and toes, is documented there (1997a: vol. 2, pp. 1634–1640). These cases bear some resemblance to others from different parts of the world described in Chapter 17, but the African cases have a systematic quality that challenges explanations based on conventional biological mechanisms.

As I look back on these cases and the many others that are thoroughly documented in the two volumes of *Reincarnation and Biology*, I am again struck by the challenges they present for mainstream developmental biology. I also recall the great hope that Ian placed in the publication of these volumes (which he considered to be his masterwork) to attract the attention of establishment scientists. I remember only too well the disappointment that he expressed in our final meetings in Paris when the volumes had been largely ignored. I had moved to Geneva in 1986, but we continued to meet regularly when Ian was in Paris, where he came to conduct bibliographic research at the *Bibliothèque nationale*.

I often reflected on why his findings remained so far outside the pale of establishment science, generating the sense of frustration that Ian increasingly experienced over the years as he realized that scientific recognition of his work was not forthcoming. Ian tended to blame the scientific community for faint-heartedness, but in the many discussions during our travels and other meetings, I tried to use my knowledge of the scientific community in which I lived and my sympathy and interest for his research to formulate the reasons for the enormous gap—a veritable Grand Canyon—that separated his research and establishment science.

My view was that orthodox science had no way of dealing with his findings, because they could not be connected with the large body of scientific knowledge. Without a new cosmology or theoretical biology that could accommodate the concept of reincarnation in some form, no field of scientific deliberation could seriously enter into studies of the subject. I strongly felt that if reincarnation were to emerge as a natural phenomenon finding its place in our understanding of the Universe, it would not be in opposition to traditional science, but as a complementary feature, an additional perspective on the nature of being. It seemed to me that reincarnation would have an impact on scientific thinking only if it could be integrated into existing biological concepts, with, for example, reincarnating birth defects viewed as an extreme manifestation of psychosomatic medicine.

Ian did express similar views in *Reincarnation and Biology* (1997a) and its synopsis *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (1997b). After drawing attention, in Chapter 26 in particular, to the inadequacy of genetics, Darwinian natural selection, and environmental influences to explain all aspects of human personality, he went on to emphasize that “I do not propose reincarnation as replacing these factors. I regard it as a third factor that may fill some of the gaps in the knowledge we presently have about human personality and ... about the human body also” (1997b: 180–181). In addition, in Chapters 2 and 3 he described various other psychosomatic phenomena that seem related to birthmarks and birth defects in cases of the reincarnation type. Nevertheless, he made little progress toward providing a theory that can link these cases and current scientific knowledge. In particular, his attempt to present a unifying concept in this book by introducing the “psychophore” as the vehicle for reincarnation was of only of marginal value in providing a bridge to conventional science.

I have no illusions that more emphasis on an integrative approach would necessarily have led to better acceptance, particularly since I have only some tentative hypotheses on how such integration might be achieved. Reincarnation from any perspective is a difficult concept, and even the Buddha himself left us utterances on the subject at various times in his life that were not always consistent. Attempting such a global synthesis would inevitably carry problems of its own, as can be seen in the wake of Rupert Sheldrake's *A New Science of Life* (1981). This work advanced the hypothesis that the specific size and shape of living organisms are determined by "morphogenic fields" that are molded by the form and behavior of past organisms of the same species through direct connection ("morphic resonance") across both space and time. Ian sent me this book when it was published, as he viewed it as indirect support for his work, but its general impact on the scientific community was totally negative. The book did obtain a review in *Nature*, but it was roundly criticized under the title "A book for burning?" Sheldrake's position was to replace mechanisms of biology, rather than seeking concepts that could extend the principles of biology in new directions. Body plan development has benefitted from spectacular progress in recent years due to the understanding of homeobox genes, and no serious approach to morphogenesis can ignore these findings. In particular, with respect to birth defects involving fingers or toes, it would be important to compare the anomalies reported for transgenic mice carrying altered *HoxD* genes (e.g., Kmita et al., 2002).

Where reincarnation is concerned, the subject is also confronted with additional barriers related to the conflicts it generates with established religions and the validation it provides to quack "past-life" readers. The history of a subject without these handicaps, the alleged "memory of water" in an article published in *Nature* (in 1988) from the laboratory of Jacques Benveniste in France, demonstrated clearly that an exceptional hypothesis must bring exceptionally strong data in order to be supported. Since the data were not credible, the hypothesis was ridiculed.

It may well be said that Ian was ahead of his time, but the question now is "will his time ever come?" Traditional societies that are propitious for reincarnation research are modernizing rapidly in many parts of the world. The repeater-children phenomenon has continued in some forms among the Igbo, according to a report by Nzewi (2001), but for how long?

In conclusion, some 25 years ago I thought Ian's work had the potential of triggering a major change in the scientific landscape. Such an upheaval has not happened, but perhaps his work will be rediscovered and placed in a new light at a later date. In any case, his lifetime of serious study of reincarnation demonstrates that intelligence, insight, meticulous work, and persistence are not sufficient to bring so hostile a subject in from the cold. It is not enough to demonstrate that reincarnation can exist: A new theoretical framework is also needed to show that reincarnation is possible.

Note

- ¹ For information on the belief in reincarnation in West Africa and the associated cases that Stevenson and I investigated, see Edelstein and Stevenson (1983) and Stevenson (1985, 1986, 1997a: chap. 20).

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