The Case Against Reincarnation

Part 4

In this, the final installment of his authoritative critique of reincarnation, Paul Edwards examines "the interregnum"—that mystical interval separating earthly incarnations—and he reviews Ian Stevenson's controversial studies of Asian children who claim to remember their past lives.

Paul Edwards

The great majority of reincarnationists believe that death is not immediately followed by reincarnation in the new body. In the Bhagavad-Gita the interval is spoken of as an "immensity of years," and in the *Republic* Plato speaks of a thousand-year cycle. In the cultures studied by Ian Stevenson the duration of the interval is much smaller. Among the Tlingits of Alaska, for example, Stevenson found the median interval to be four years, and among his Lebanese cases it was no more than six months. I shall speak of this interval from now on as "the interregnum." Of course the question at once arises as to just where and how people spend the interregnum and, more specifically, what they are like between incarnations.

Human Lives Between Incarnation

There appear to be only two possible answers and neither is very alluring. The first is to say that a person exists as a disembodied or pure mind until he finds or chooses his new body. This is essentially the view of Plato. In more recent times it has been held by J. M. E. McTaggart and C. J. Ducasse, the two most renowned Western philosophers writing in support of reincarnation. Such a position is faced with the difficulties deriving from the body-mind dependence facts noted in the last section. There is also the problem of how a pure mind, devoid of sense organs, could ever locate and choose the mother of the next incarnation. Finally, once a reincarnationist commits himself to the view that for certain periods a person exists without a bodily foundation, his position loses one of its most attractive advantages over the familiar Western forms of belief in survival.

The only alternative to the pure mind seems to be some sort of astral body; and this is in fact the view preferred by most reincarnationists. It is, for example, the position adopted in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead,* one of the sacred books of India, and a work much admired by such diverse figures as C. G. Jung, Paul Tillich, Stanislav Grof, Timothy Leary, and Raymond Moody, Jr., who sees in it an anticipation of his own startling discoveries. The *Tibetan Book* is primarily concerned with descriptions of the intermediate or "Bardo" world, and it offers detailed advice about how a person is to comport himself there. The Bardo body is substantially the same as the astral body we met in an earlier section. In the words of W. Y. Evans-Wentz, the American anthropologist who edited the English language version of the *Tibetan Book,* it is

> formed of matter in an invisible or ethereal-like state [and] is an exact duplicate of the human body, from which it is separated in the process of death. [p. 92]

The Bardo body has two of the supernatural attributes usually associated with astral travel. In the first place it can pass through material objects as if they did not exist. Since it is not "a body of gross matter," it has

> the power to go right through any rock-masses, hills, boulders, earth, houses, and Mt. Meru itself without being impeded. [p. 158]

Second, it can go anywhere instantaneously:

> Thou art able in a moment to traverse the four continents round about Mt. Meru. Or thou canst instantaneously arrive in whatever place thou wishest. [p. 159]

As was the case with George Ritchie's astral body *it* cannot be perceived by live human beings, but at least for a short period after death it can see and hear "all the weeping and wailing of friends and relatives" although "they cannot hear him calling upon them" (p. 132). The Bardo body thus possesses the remarkable ability to see, hear, and obtain other sensory information although it has no physical sense-organs, brain, or nervous system.

The view that during the interregnum we are or have "etheric" or astral bodies has the wholehearted endorsement of Francis Story (1910–1971), who was perhaps the leading apologist for Buddhism writing in recent years. It may be of interest to note that Story was a close friend and associate of Ian Stevenson. He supplied many of Stevenson's cases during the first twelve years of the latter's research and also assisted in their analysis. A number of Stevenson's articles list Story as coauthor. In his article "What Happens Between Incarnations?" to which I will return later on, he flatly asserts that during the interregnum we have a "mentally formed body," which is "of a different substance from the physical body," and which "possibly exists on a slightly different vibrational level" (*Rebirth As Doctrine and Experience,* Sri Lanka, 1975, p. 199). He bases this view on information supplied by mediumistic controls, on the circumstances and contents of out-of-body (OBE) experiences, and above all on the recollections of various people he knew in

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India and Sri Lanka who remembered not only their previous lives on earth but also what went on between incarnations.

It cannot be said that Stevenson has ignored problems connected with the interregnum. He seems convinced not only that they can be disposed of without any serious difficulty but that their solution is apt to produce dramatic changes in some of our basic concepts. Near the end of his article "Research into the Evidence of Man's Survival After Death," which appeared in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* (1977), Stevenson observes that he has not attempted "any description of processes whereby a mind surviving death would persist in another, discarnate realm," adding that "such concepts" (by which he presumably means the "discarnate realm" and the entities residing in it) "require extensive revisions of current ideas about the mind-brain relationship" (p. 167). His position is not substantially different from that of Story or the *Tibetan Book*. In one of his two fullest discussions of this topic he refers to a remark by the Buddha that all speculation about the nature of the intermediate entity is unprofitable, adding that we would do well to follow this injunction. He himself, however, does not do so. For a variety of reasons, some empirical and some philosophical, Stevenson prefers a body to a pure mind as the interim entity. In addition to transmitting memories and also various skills and dispositions to the new body without which we could hardly speak of the same person, the interim entity must also be the bearer of certain purely "physical qualities." What Stevenson has in mind here are diseases from which both the new and the old bodies suffer and above all "birth marks and deformities" on the new body, which "correspond to wounds or injuries" on the earlier one ("Some Questions Related to Cases of the Reincarnation Type," p. 406). Stevenson remarks that the wounds must somehow be "imprinted" on the interregnum body, which acts as a kind of stamp or "template" for the production of birthmarks and deformities on the new body (p. 407).

Stevenson's philosophical reason is connected with his insistence that "images have extension" and that as such they cannot exist in an unextended Cartesian mind but only "on or in something else that has extension." In a dream—the illustration is mine but I believe it would have Stevenson's approval—objects have shapes and relative sizes and positions. If I dream of Ronald Reagan sitting on a platform next to Nancy Reagan while William Rehnquist is addressing the Daughters of the American Revolution, the dream Ronald Reagan will look taller than the dream Nancy Reagan just as he is in real life, and William Rehnquist will appear in front of the people sitting on the platform. Such reflections lead Stevenson to the notion of mental space, which I will discuss later on. This mental space, incidentally, seems to be identical with the other "dimension of which we are just beginning to form crude ideas," to which Stevenson referred during the BBC debate on Ryall.

Stevenson concedes that this "hypothetical intermediate body" must exist in some state "of which we know almost nothing." He does not seem to regard this ignorance as beyond remedy, and he hints in various places that his research and the research of other parapsychologists may gradually remove it. In any case, even in 1974 he thought he knew quite a few things about the nature of this body. To begin with, it

> must be composed of elements quite different from those with which we are familiar both in our ordinary perceptions and in the abstractions of physicists. [ibid., p. 407]

Because of this difference from our ordinary bodies Stevenson calls it a "nonphysical body." Stevenson believes that it is "composed of some kind of matter," but it "must be matter quite different from what we usually mean by that term." We must also "expect" that the interregnum body "will be subject to quite different 'laws' from those which govern our familiar physical bodies" (ibid.). Stevenson does not speak of an etheric or astral "double," but it is difficult to see how he can avoid believing in something of the same kind, especially when we reflect on the birthmarks of the new body appearing in the same locations as the scars or wounds on the old one.

When I first read the remarks just quoted I could not help wondering where the intermediate body came from. The answer to this question is given in Stevenson's 1980 presidential address to the Parapsychological Association, in which he reveals himself as an out-and-out occultist. The second body, which we have available at death, is nothing other than our mind, which we had or which we were all along. Stevenson is of course a dualist, and he calls himself a "radical interactionist," but no dualistic interactionist known to me among philosophers, of the Cartesian or the Humean variety, has ever identified the mind with a body. We are once again told that images have spatial location. Although he professes himself to be a Humean and to be a Buddhist, or at least to be highly sympathetic to Buddhism, Stevenson works with a picture of the mind as a "container" and an entity with a "structure." Since images have spatial properties, the same must be true of the mind "in" which they exist. The mind is thus "extended." Minds, he writes, "exist in a space that we can call mental space" ("Can We Describe the Mind?" in W. G. Roll and J. Beloff, eds., *Research in Parapsychology 1980,* Metuchen, N.J., 1981, p. 133). There is no need to regard the notion of "mental space" as "illogical" or paradoxical since it is nowhere written that "there can be only one space." Stevenson is convinced that "our mental patterns—not just our memories, but our purposes also—will persist after our deaths" (p. 139). It may be noted in passing that here, for once, Stevenson speaks without any qualification in the first person as a believer in life after death.

Before leaving this topic, I should observe that Stevenson has in no way established what he evidently desires to show, that the mind, i.e., the second body, exists in a space that is just as objective as physical space. The Ronald Reagan of my dreams does not have any more objective existence than something utterly fantastic I may dream about, e.g., his flight to the moon by means of waving his arms. When the Ronald Reagan, the Nancy Reagan, and the William Rehnquist of my dreams disappear, so do their spatial properties and relations. More generally, my dream-space disappears as soon as I stop dreaming. There is also of course no reason for regarding the mind as literally a "container" or having a "structure." On a Humean view, saying that an image is "in the mind" just means that it is one of the "impressions and ideas" whose succession *is* a person's mind. I have already explained why I find Hume's account inadequate, but talking about the mind as a "container" and more generally about a "thing" is not going to remove its inadequacies.

Unfortunately I do not have the space to report the numerous other claims, some of them altogether remarkable, found in Stevenson's presidential address. I should, however, briefly mention that he regards the "attachment" of the mind to the brain as "somewhat variable." The mind becomes "loosened" or "more detached" from the brain during dreams, when it is under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, and also during near-death experiences. He also quite explicitly advocates the view that sense organs are not necessary for what passes as sense perception. In support of this assertion, he refers to certain OBE experiences in the course of which the subjects displayed "paranormal cognition" and, what is particularly relevant to our topic, to "the small number of subjects who claim to remember events that they observed during an intermediate

existence between death and presumed rebirth" (p. 138). Persons belonging to these two groups have had visual experiences or "visionlike experiences" in which neither physical eyes nor "other parts of the body's neural equipment were used" (ibid.). I will discuss Stevenson's view on the memories of life during the interregnum a little later. Here I wish to remark that Stevenson does not produce the slightest evidence that, in dreams, during near-death experiences, or in any of the other states on his list, consciousness is any less dependent on the brain than it is in the course of normal waking life. This contention is indeed a stock-in-trade of occultism, but, to the best of my knowledge, it does not have the endorsement of a single competent brain physiologist.

Womb Invasions

I have already had my say about the disembodied mind and the astral body. In the present context I am not particularly concerned to show that they do not or cannot exist. Instead I would like to point out that, even if we allow their existence, reincarnation becomes a metaphysical theory as soon as either of these are brought in as the interregnum bearer of memories, skills, or anything else. Hence, contrary to the repeated pronouncements of reincarnationists, the theory cannot serve as the scientific explanation of *any* phenomena. This becomes particularly obvious when we look more closely at the supposed entry of the preexisting soul into the womb of its prospective mother and its "merger" or "fusion" with the physical embryo. When I first read the *Tibetan Book* and similar writings in which there are constant references to the intermediate person's decision to enter a certain woman's womb and then to make every effort to stay there by closing the "door" of the womb, I felt like protesting such crass invasions of privacy. Surely a woman has a right to determine who may and who may not enter her womb. However, on further reflection it was obvious that no violation of First Amendment rights had occurred and that the women whose wombs had supposedly been invaded were really not being victimized at all. For not only does the woman herself feel nothing, but at the time of the supposed entry no outside observer could notice anything either. The invasion of the woman's womb by the reincarnating soul is obviously altogether different from the insertion of a diagnostic or surgical instrument, which is both experienced by her and observed by outsiders. An entry that is not even in principle noticeable is indistinguishable from the absence of an entry. It should be remembered that, if reincarnation is a fact, such womb invasions *are* occurring all the time, along with every pregnancy.

The emptiness of all statements of this kind is also evident from the fact that the reincarnation theory is not of the slightest use to an embryologist. It is of no more use to him than the notion of Karma is to a geologist. A geologist cannot explain or predict earthquakes any better if he believes in the Law of Karma than if he does not. Similarly, an embryologist who believes in womb invasions by preexisting souls cannot explain or predict any embryological facts any better than one who does not.

The aforementioned Francis Story wrote extensively about the relations of Buddhist concepts to modern science, especially genetics. He asserted with some pride that Buddhist notions supplement "the stock of scientific knowledge" without in any way "resorting to the supernatural for an explanation" (op. cit., p. 248). A little reflection, however, shows that the Buddhist notions Story has in mind—the "etheric" body, "thought accretions," and "mental energy potentials"—can no more add to the "stock of scientific knowledge" than any of the supernatural concepts of Christians and Jews. Let us for a moment consider the traditional Christian view that at conception God infuses a soul into the mother's womb that combines with the physical embryo to grow into a full-fledged human being with its physical and psychological attributes. Suppose that in a particular case God forgets to infuse a soul into an embryo but that all biological conditions are exceptionally well fulfilled—the best possible genes are available (genes connected with physical health and strength and with a well-formed brain and nervous system) and along with them the best possible intrauterine environment. Surely, no intelligent and educated Christian, no matter how theologically orthodox he may be, would deny that an embryo with such splendid biological equipment and environment would be born intact physically and mentally; and if this is granted the theory about the divine soul infusion will have been shown to be superfluous, at least for the purpose of scientific explanation. Let us next consider the case in which God does not forget to infuse the soul but in which the biological material or the intrauterine environment or both are seriously defective. As an illustration we may take genes leading to Down's syndrome or mental retardation or endogenous depression, or we may suppose that the pregnant mother is syphilitic or a heroin addict or afflicted with AIDS. Again, no intelligent Christian on earth would deny that in such a case it is likely that the child will be neither physically nor mentally intact in spite of the presence of the divinely created soul.

All these reflections can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the entities, whatever they are called, that, according to reincarnationists, invade the womb of the expecting mother. Whether it is the pure mind of McTaggart and Ducasse, the astral body of Story and the *Tibetan Book,* or Stevenson's spiritual body, it surely makes no difference whatever to what the child will be like at birth. Once this is admitted it is obvious that reincarnationist claims about womb invasions are empirically vacuous and that they cannot possibly fill any gaps or be any supplement to scientific knowledge. It might perhaps be added that at least most Western reincarnationists would concede that biological accounts are quite sufficient to explain the attributes animals have at birth, even those fairly high in the evolutionary scale. If this is granted, it surely becomes extremely implausible to say that we need a different type or kind of account for human beings, since the attributes of human beings are only an extension of those already found in animals.

Reincarnationists constantly engage in pseudoempirical maneuvers. These usually involve the use of a familiar word that in a reincarnationist context cannot have its original sense. I earlier quoted Schopenhauer's remark that each of us is constantly meeting people known from previous lives but that these meetings occur "incognito." Here something odd has happened to the use of "incognito." A person is appearing incognito in the customary sense of this word if he pretends to be somebody other than he is, i.e., if he conceals his true identity. This is a genuine incognito. It is part of the meaning of this word that it is in principle possible to penetrate the disguise and discover the true identity of the individual. Thus, in Gustav Lortzing's opera *Czar and Carpenter,* Peter the Great is working on a wharf in the Dutch town of Saardam under the assumed name of Peter Michaelow. At the end of the opera Peter Michaelow's true identity is revealed; but, even if this had not happened and even if the czar had suffered a brain injury as a result of which he came to believe that he really was Peter Michaelow, it was not *logically* impossible to penetrate his incognito. If, now, it is asserted that all of us are always appearing incognito in this familiar sense of the word, such a statement is simply false. Presumably Schopenhauer did not mean to assert this glaringly false proposition; but, if he did not, what exactly did he assert? As far as I can

see, the incognito Schopenhauer is talking about cannot in principle be penetrated, but an incognito that is logically impenetrable is not an incognito at all. We started with what seems like an exciting and surprisingly empirical assertion, but on reflection it turned out to be quite vacuous.

Memories of the Interregnum

Are there any ostensible memories about the interregnum and, if so, do they throw any light on what life there is like? Chiefly because of lack of space, I will here ignore the memories of hypnotic subjects as reported by Helen Wambach, the futurologist and mass-regressionist mentioned earlier. I will also reluctantly omit any detailed account of the recollections of Bridey Murphy. I will only mention that Bridey distinctly recalled carrying on conversations although she had neither a mouth nor vocal chords, which must have been an altogether remarkable feat but quite in keeping with occultist notions of seeing without eyes and thinking without a brain. I will here confine myself to the views of Story and Stevenson. On this subject Story expresses himself with far more caution. Story ends his article "What Happens Between Incarnations?" on an entirely skeptical note. After relating a number of cases from his own collection in which the subjects had the most detailed memories of their interregnum existence (all of them, I should explain, being about concrete and physical meetings with human guides right here on earth), Story concedes that "there is nothing evidential" in his reports and that "they are purely on an anecdotal level," adding that "we have no means of checking up on them as we have checked on the memories of previous earthly lives such as I have helped Dr. Ian Stevenson collect" (p. 199). Even those who do not share Story's high opinion of the evidential value of the latter kind of case will readily see the enormous difference between ostensible memories of *earthly* happenings in a certain place at a specified time and ostensible memories of existence in an unobservable realm whose inhabitants live either as pure minds or as "spiritual" bodies and whose activities cannot in principle be observed by anybody on earth.

It is not clear that Stevenson appreciates this enormous difference. We already noted that in his presidential address he referred to interregnum memories as evidence for the view that seeing can take place without physical eyes or any neural equipment. (Stevenson never explains whether he believes in astral or nonphysical sense-organs and nervous systems.) Earlier in the same address he admitted that such memories "*rarely* contain anything verifiable," which is not surprising since "the events narrated are *not always* referrable to the world of physical objects and living persons" (p. 132, my emphasis). I must protest that for the reasons just indicated such memories can *never* contain anything verifiable and that they *cannot* be "referrable" to the world of physical objects and living persons. In any event Stevenson thinks that in certain cases of this kind we should "listen respectfully" to what is claimed. He reasons that if the recollections of a person about a previous life on earth turn out to be "authentic," then there is a good chance that his ostensible memories about experiences during the interregnum are also substantially correct.

I do not imagine any reader will be surprised to hear that the experiences that are recalled usually correspond closely either to the habits of the "previous personalities" or to expectations about the content of the afterlife based on the local religious and cultural traditions. Tlingits in Alaska tell of a ride across a lake in a canoe right after death and a subsequent return trip across the same lake just before rebirth. Indians, on the other hand, recall meetings with Krishna or Lakshmi. In Burma and Thailand such reports are much more frequent than elsewhere. Stevenson describes some recurrent themes in these reports. Quite commonly a meeting is recalled with a sage dressed in white who acts as a friend and guide and helps the interim entity in the search for new parents. There are also frequent descriptions of a fruit offered just before the new incarnation. This is the "fruit of forgetfulness," and those who eat it later remember nothing either about earlier lives or about the interregnum. The subjects who do remember the interregnum claim that they disobeyed the order to eat the fruit. I assume that, because of their notorious gluttony, Westerners almost never refuse the fruit of forgetfulness.

I am sure that most sane and sober people, including, I would hope, a number of believers in reincarnation, will have no hesitation in explaining these interregnum memories as cultural artifacts that cannot be taken seriously as evidence for anything except the way in which a person's education and indoctrination shape his religious and metaphysical beliefs and various associated experiences. Stevenson is not at all prepared to accept such an explanation. "The merits of such claims," he writes, "have to be judged separately in each case" (p. 413). Unfortunately, he omits telling us by what criteria they are to be judged or how we could ever overcome the evidential difficulties resulting from the total unobservability of the interregnum world. It is noteworthy that Stevenson speaks in generalities. Does he seriously believe that during the interregnum some of the Thais and Burmese are offered either physical or astral apples whose consumption by their astral bodies produces forgetfulness? If he does not seriously believe this, why is he so reluctant to admit that these recollections are illusions?

What Stevenson has never seen or what he has tried not to see is the intrinsic absurdity of the entire notion of an interregnum existence. He has rejected the notion that human beings could exist as pure minds and choose their next parents in such a state, but he has not seen that the alternative of an astral or spiritual body fares no better. How, to raise one of the more troublesome questions, are the scars and deformities of a dead *physical* body transferred to a spiritual body, and how does the spiritual body in turn transmit them to the new physical body? Merely raising such questions opens up a can of worms. The reincarnationist's tribulation is most obvious in the case of such clearly physical characteristics, but it equally applies to anything and everything that is supposedly transmitted via the intermediate body. We have here the problem or rather the absurdity of what might be called "world-crossings," an instance of which we met once before in connection with the *physical* uniform worn by George Ritchie's *astral* body.

One of my favorite examples of such an intrinsically absurd world-crossing or mixing of "planes" (to use a favorite occultist term) comes from a chapter entitled "I Was Waiting to Be Born Again" in Richard Webb's *These Came Back* (New York, 1974). Ivonne, a commercial artist living in Hollywood, is relating what is supposed to be a set of spontaneous memories:

> There I was, sitting on this fence waiting to be born again. . . . I was born into this body on a ranch in Las Cruces, New Mexico. . . . I was a girl, and I knew I would go into the body of the child that would be born in that ranchhouse, so I was waiting. I would walk around the place, sit on the fence, go into the house and see how things were coming along with my new mother. I picked my parents. . . . It wasn't a dream. . . . While I was sitting around waiting to be born, I had on some kind of loose robelike garment. . . . It was gray-white in color. . . . As far as getting hungry, I knew I wasn't in a physical body and food wasn't important to me. . . . I knew I couldn't be seen by my new folks or any of the people who came to visit. . . . They were solid; I wasn't. . . . When I was about to be born . . . my dad hitched up the team, put my

> mother in the wagon and off they went . . . to my grandparents' place. . . . I went along, too. Not in the wagon, but staying above it, around it. . . . All I remember of the birth was that I was outside my grandparents' house, just sort of hanging around. Then everything seemed to grow hazy and dim—and then suddenly it was just as though the lights went out. That was the end—and the beginning. [pp. 116–118]

The incoherence of this story is obvious: How does a nonphysical body sit on a fence, how does it walk around, and how does it wear a robelike garment? Stevenson would probably smile at the absurdity of this "recollection," but his own position is no better. He avoids such obvious nonsense only by being vague and elusive on questions of detail. The imprinting of scars on and by his spiritual body is the same incoherent world-crossing as the sitting on a physical fence or the wearing of a robe by an astral body. I would invert Stevenson's remark that we should listen attentively to a subject's recollections of his interim existence if his memories of his earlier lives on earth are (supposedly) authentic: If he has *any* ostensible recollections of an interim existence at all, this is sufficient to undermine the trustworthiness of his other reincarnation memories.

Stevenson and His Children

I said earlier that I cannot adequately deal with Stevenson's evidence derived from the recollections of children until certain general objections to reincarnation are spelled out. What I had primarily in mind were Tertullian's argument, the population objection, the difficulties connected with the interregnum (and the choice of parents), and above all the dependence of consciousness on the brain. What these objections enable us to see is that somebody who opts for reincarnation is committed to a host of collateral assumptions, the most important of which I will now enumerate. When a human being dies he continues to exist not on the earth but in a region we know not where as a "pure" disembodied mind or else as an astral or some other kind of "nonphysical" body; although deprived of his brain he retains memories of life on earth as well as some of his characteristic skills and traits; after a period varying from a few months to hundreds of years, this pure mind or nonphysical body, which lacks not only a brain but also any physical sense-organs, picks out a suitable woman on earth as its mother in the next incarnation, invades this woman's womb at the moment of conception of a new embryo, and unites with it to form a full-fledged human being; although the person who died may have been an adult and indeed quite old, when he is reborn he begins a new life with the intellectual and emotional attitudes of a baby; finally, many of the people born in this way did not previously live on the earth, but (depending on which version of reincarnation one subscribes to) in other planes or on other planets from which they migrate (invisibly of course), most of them preferring to enter the wombs of mothers in poor and overpopulated countries where their lives are likely to be wretched. The collateral assumptions listed so far are implied by practically all forms of reincarnationism, but in Stevenson's case there is the additional implication that the memories and skills that the entity took over from the person who died and that are transmitted to the new regular body appear there for a relatively short time during childhood to disappear forever after.

If Stevenson's reports are evidence for reincarnation they must also be evidence for the collateral assumptions just mentioned. These assumptions are surely fantastic if not indeed pure nonsense; and, even in the absence of a demonstration of specific flaws, a rational person will conclude either that Stevenson's reports are seriously defective or that his alleged facts can be explained without bringing in reincarnation. An acceptance of the collateral assumptions would, to borrow a phrase from Kierkegaard, amount to the "crucifixion" of our understanding.

So much for the general objections. Detailed criticisms of Stevenson's investigations are not wanting, but they are not nearly as well known as Stevenson's own work. I will very briefly summarize some of the criticisms offered by Ian Wilson, Professor C. T. K. Chari, and D. Scott Rogo. Ian Wilson has emphasized that Stevenson generally dismisses on the flimsiest grounds the possibility of fraud on the part of the children, their parents, and other interested parties. Stevenson maintains that no motive for fraud exists, when such motives are only too evident. Wilson has pointed out that several of the children remembered belonging to a higher caste in their previous lives and seem to have been motivated by a wish for better living conditions. In one case, for example, a boy asked for one-third of the land of his past-life father, showing no interest in his previous incarnation when this former "father" lost his fortune and became poorer than his father in the present life. Wilson also calls attention to the fact that Stevenson invariably tells us exceedingly little about the character and background of the parents, who are usually vital informants. In many cases, too, there was or easily could have been contact between the parents and persons connected with the "previous personality" about whose life the child had accurate recollections (*Mind Out of Time,* op. cit., pp. 58–60).

In this connection one of the findings by William G. Roll deserves to be mentioned. Roll, who is a professor of psychology at West Georgia College, a lay Zen monk, and a leading figure in American parapsychology, appears to be an admirer of Stevenson's research. Nevertheless he cannot refrain from calling attention to certain grounds for skepticism. In his extremely erudite article "The Changing Perspectives on Life after Death," in *Advances in Parapsychological Research,* edited by Stanley Krippner (vol. 3, New York, 1982), Roll notes that only in seven of Stevenson's cases were the child's statements about a previous life recorded prior to the attempts at verification. Stevenson has himself admitted that where this is not done subsequent developments may lead to embellishments of what the child is supposed to have said. Yet, in all these seven cases, the child lived "within the geographical or social circumference of the previous personality." The "close connection" between the children and the surviving friends and relatives of the previous personality "raises questions of sensory cues" (p. 199), by which Roll of course means "normal sources of information." He charitably "assumes" that Stevenson's investigations have ruled out such normal channels. Skeptics will not be ready to grant this, and the lack of confirmation of Stevenson's results, which I will describe later, tends to confirm their doubts.

One of the skeptics is Professor Chari, an Indian philosopher, now retired from Madras Christian University, who is not a Western materialist or positivist but a Hindu and a well-known parapsychologist. Professor Chari does not reject reincarnation, but he believes that Stevenson is incredibly naive and that his reports have no evidential value.

In a number of articles Chari has given us some insight into the way Indian cases "suggestive of reincarnation" are manufactured. He points out that cases of the kind Stevenson has collected occur mostly in cultures in which there is a deeply ingrained belief in reincarnation and, what is equally significant, the *type* of reincarnation claimed fits in with the peculiar form of reincarnation belief prevalent in a given area. Stevenson cannot deny these facts and counters that, while cultural factors influence the details, they do not "generate" the cases themselves. Chari insists that they *are* cultural artifacts, pure and simple. "A reincarnationist fantasy

in the small Asian child," he writes, "starts typically in play or a gamelike situation" ("Reincarnation Research: Method and Interpretation," in M. Ebon, ed., *Signet Handbook of Parapsychology,* p. 319). It is then promoted (or retarded) by the conscious or unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and responses of parents, guardians, and interested bystanders. Chari calls this fantasy the Asian counterpart of the "imaginary playmate" or "fictitious companion" that has been disclosed in many Western studies of childhood. He offers the guess that we have here "two ways of a child's reaching out to the world: one by *having* an idealized object (the imaginary playmate) and the other by *being* an idealized object (an earlier life on earth)" (p. 320).

Chari describes several cases he has studied that were generated in this way. In one case, which is far more fanciful than any of those studied by Stevenson and in which reincarnationist claims were nevertheless fully "verified," a little girl had "visions" of the Lord Krishna, who disclosed certain details of her earlier life. Here there was not even any recall on the part of the girl, and in the beginning no "proofs" were available. However, after the girl's grandmother expressed some doubts, "reincarnationist proofs" satisfying all parties were promptly provided. "The socio-cultural influence," Chari concludes, "generates the whole plot, the presence or absence of personal recall, and much else besides" (p. 321). Chari adds that he must "lament the generally lax standards in India. Few bother about rigorous proofs of rebirth which is a cultural commitment (*pace,* Stevenson) even without proofs."

In any critical reader of Stevenson's books and articles the question almost irresistibly arises why the kind of case that seems to occur with such frequency in India and other countries in which reincarnation is part of the accepted religion does not also occur in the West. Stevenson has dealt with this question in his introduction to Ryall's book and in the article "Some Questions Related to Cases of the Reincarnation Type" (1974), to which I have referred on several occasions. In the former discussion Stevenson tells us that he values the publication of Ryall's book not only because of its "intrinsic merit" but also because its publication may give courage "to other persons who feel inclined to expose what seemed to them memories of previous lives, but fear unpleasant consequences if they do so" (p. 29). Cases like Ryall's will end "the long night of suppression of reincarnation cases in the West," a "night" that has lasted "more than fourteen centuries." In the more extended discussion in his 1974 article Stevenson first flatly denies that cases of the type featured in his books do not occur in the West. He asserts that he "now" has forty cases of children in the continental United States. He admits, however, that such cases are *reported* much less frequently in cultures where the population does not believe in reincarnation, but he strongly emphasizes that this admission applies only to reported cases. We have no valid information, he writes, "about the *actual* incidence of cases," and he once again expresses his suspicion that many parents refrain from reporting signs of reincarnation behavior on the part of their children for fear of ostracism and ridicule (p. 396, Stevenson's italics).

Stevenson mentioned his forty Western cases over twelve years ago, and a book about them was promised at that time. To the best of my knowledge not one of these cases has been published, and I cannot help suspecting that the reason has to do with the higher critical standards in the West. For one thing, we do not here have a host of witnesses with an ardent belief in reincarnation who will manufacture the necessary "proofs"; and, if any such proofs were manufactured, we have numerous skeptics right on the spot who would subject them to a much more elaborate and searching scrutiny than any undertaken by Stevenson, Story, and their associates. Stevenson's remarks about the probable occurrence of reincarnation cases among Western children will come as a total surprise to child psychologists and teachers in the West, who would presumably notice such claims and behavior. Several of my closest friends were kindergarten teachers for extended periods, and they never noticed any such thing. I knew the great and unforgettable A. S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill. Neill was the last man on earth to ridicule a child for saying strange things or behaving in an unusual way and yet, in the fifty-four years he headed the school, he did not once come across a Stevensonian case. I don't doubt that if Summerhill had been in a certain region of India or Thailand or Alaska a number of children with the appropriate reincarnation behavior would have been noticed. As far as I can tell, "the long night of suppression" Stevenson talks about exists only in his imagination.

In any event Stevenson concedes that "suppression" does not tell the whole story and that "other factors may come into play." At this stage we are treated to one of his extravaganzas. Stevenson evidently lives in a cloud-cuckoo-land, and he regards the wildest and most fanciful assumptions, many of which are of questionable conceptual coherence, as being on an equal footing with straightforward empirical hypotheses. He resorts to such extravaganzas whenever the specter of cultural factors accounting for reincarnation beliefs raises its menacing head. If, he reasons, Westerners do in fact reincarnate they would almost certainly not have believed in reincarnation in their previous lives, which, Stevenson assumes, were also in the West. This lack of belief in reincarnation would have two effects on the reincarnated Westerner. In the first place, disbelief in reincarnation naturally includes a denial that anybody can remember an earlier life, and "this could act as a powerful

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suggestion inhibiting the carry-over of actual memories from one life to another" (p. 396). Nevertheless, memories of a previous life may "break through" the "negative suggestion" stemming from disbelief. This brings us to the second inhibiting factor. Because of his disbelief (and I suppose his ignorance), a Westerner is clearly at a grave disadvantage in such a situation compared with a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Druse. All of them have "frameworks of belief" that make their memories intelligible. This is true even of children in the East. In India, for example, children are exposed to the teaching of reincarnation at a very early age. By the time, therefore, they have memories of previous lives, between the ages of three and five, Hindu and Buddhist children "can accept the memories for what they seem to be instead of rejecting them as alien and unlikely to be true" (p. 397). It may nevertheless happen that even in the East parents have omitted telling a child about reincarnation. In the East this would not be fatal. For in his previous life the child was in all likelihood a believer in reincarnation, and hence he may remember not only events of the previous life but also enough of his previous belief-system to accept the memories as "natural." If I had more space I would present a number of similar extravaganzas. Stevenson usually writes in the third person in such contexts, telling us merely that this is how a believer in reincarnation could account for the facts in question, but there is little doubt that *he* is such a believer and that he himself accepts the reincarnationist explanations.

The Case of Dr. Barker

I now come to two of the disturbing facts to which Rogo called attention in chapter 4 of his *Search for Yesterday* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1985). Both relate to "replications" of Stevenson's investigations, something that Stevenson claims to welcome. I will first relate the story of Dr. David Read Barker's negative findings. Barker has a Ph.D. in anthropology and did the research for his doctoral dissertation in India. Stevenson hired Barker to assist him in the analysis of some of his cases and also to undertake investigations of other cases in conjunction with Satwant Pasricha, a true and tried believer and disciple. Barker could not find a single case in which there was convincing evidence of the presence of a paranormal process. According to Rogo's account Barker told him in August 1978 that Stevenson was pressuring him to keep silent about his results. Whether or not Barker was in fact under pressure to keep silent, he did go into print on the subject on two separate occasions. One of these was a letter in the *Journal of Parapsychology* (1979, pp. 268–269). The other was a joint publication with Pasricha dealing with the case of Rakesh Gaur in the *European Journal of Parapsychology* in 1981. In the letter, Barker described the Gaur case as "the most authentic, evidential and thoroughly investigated" of fifty-nine cases he had studied with Pasricha, and he concludes that it is "best interpreted as a result of Indian social psychology rather than parapsychology."

The 1981 article consists of three parts. The first is a report of interviews conducted by both authors, and this is followed by two separate evaluations. Rakesh Gaur was born in 1969 and claimed to recall his life and death as Bithal Das in the town of Tonk. The major portions of the report deal with the journey by Rakesh, accompanied by his father, who was an enthusiastic champion of the case, to Tonk to make the appropriate identifications. Pasricha was greatly impressed by the evidential value of the case. Despite undeniable "discrepancies in the testimonies of the informants" she concluded that "Rakesh had somehow obtained his information about Bithal Das through some paranormal process" (pp. 405–406). In his section, Barker offered detailed reasons for the skeptical conclusion he had already mentioned earlier in his letter. Anybody sufficiently interested should read all three parts of the article. I have no doubt that, unless one is already a passionate believer in reincarnation, one will find Barker's conclusion vastly more reasonable. I should add that Pasricha strikes me as a person of truly staggering credulity, almost reaching the world-champion level of Dr. Kübler-Ross, who incidentally has recently become a great Stevenson fan. The "identifications" performed by Rakesh remind one of nothing more than the identification scenes in *The Return of Martin Guerre* in which the charming imposter Pensette is "recognized" by most of the townspeople as the missing Martin Guerre and in turn "recognizes" them, on the whole more successfully, after they have introduced themselves. The entire 1981 article is highly instructive because it clearly illustrates Chari's view that the kind of case investigated by Stevenson is a cultural artifact and nothing else. Pasricha writes like a slightly more uninhibited double of Stevenson, and the shortcomings of his "methodology" are transparently obvious here.

Since the publication of Rogo's book Stevenson has denied ever exerting any pressure on Barker. He also downgrades the extent of Barker's investigative activities (*Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* January 1986, p. 237). The October 1986 issue of the same periodical contains a further exchange between Rogo and Stevenson. Rogo reaffirms all his original charges. Barker, he writes, asserted that "he had *three* negative reports on reincarnation cases in the works, but Stevenson was trying to prevent him from publishing *any* of them" (p. 470, Rogo's italics). Rogo again reports Barker as claiming that legal threats were part of Stevenson's pressure. For his part Stevenson again flatly denies that he ever tried to interfere with Barker's freedom to express his views. In a further rejoinder, which has not been published but which he is circulating to interested parties, Rogo remarks that Stevenson has a habit of using legal threats and informs his readers that he has filed details of four such incidents with the editors of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research.* At this stage it is Rogo's word against Stevenson's, and I can only express the hope that it will be possible to locate Barker and urge him to publish his own account in a neutral forum. I understand that he was so shaken by the entire episode that he has left the field of parapsychology.

The Ransom Report

The second of Rogo's revelations is, on the face of it, extremely damaging. According to Rogo, Stevenson hired a lawyer by the name of Champe Ransom in the early 1970s to assist in the analysis of his cases. Ransom adopted the simple and reasonable approach of dividing the statements made by each child into two groups. The first consisted of those that the child could easily have come to know by normal means. The second contained the statements that were candidates for a paranormal explanation. Ransom found that the witnesses on whom Stevenson relied generally agreed in the case of the first group that the statements had in fact been made by the children at the time mentioned in the reports. In the case of the statements belonging to the second group, however, there was no consensus. Here the witnesses were frequently confused both about what was said and, equally important, when it was said. Ransom eventually became skeptical about the entire enterprise and composed a report detailing his objections to Stevenson's methods. Rogo then adds that Stevenson asked Ransom not to circulate or publish his report. Rogo admitted that he had not seen the report himself. I should add that these events preceded the Barker episode and that Barker deliberately employed Ransom's method, which yielded the

same negative results in his investigations.

There can be not doubt that, of all the numerous criticisms contained in Rogo's book, his account of the Ransom episode is by far the most significant. If Rogo's account is substantially accurate the Ransom report would seem to undermine the evidential value of the entire corpus of Stevenson's work. Yet in the January 1986 issue of the *Journal,* Stevenson's comments, which run to six long pages, contain only one paragraph devoted to this event. I reproduce it in full:

> Rogo's suggestion that I tried to stop Champe Ransom from circulating his criticisms is fiction. I have a note and a letter in my files that prove, on the contrary, that I encouraged Ransom to show (with his critique) some comments I had made on them, and Ransom readily agreed to this reasonable request. Rogo, although admitting he has never seen a copy of Ransom's critique but only talked with someone who had read it, nevertheless offers his readers an account of what Ransom said. This account is wrong and once more shows Rogo's imagination in play. [p. 237]

In his October 1986 response Rogo again admits that he has not actually read the Ransom report but asserts that he has spoken to two people who have seen it and who agree about its scope and content. According to Rogo, both considered it devastating. Stevenson once again insists that Rogo has misrepresented Ransom's criticisms. He also asserts that he has no objections to the distribution of Ransom's critique, provided that his reply is distributed with it. He adds that Ransom did publish a severe criticism of experimental parapsychology and remarks that if Ransom's comments were so devastating, it is surprising that he has never tried to publish them also (p. 472).

I can no more confirm Rogo's statements about the Ransom report than his assertions about Barker's treatment. However, as a critical outsider, I cannot help noting the following facts. First of all, the world at large would be entirely ignorant of the existence of the Ransom study if it were not for Rogo's discussion in his book. Stevenson does not deny that Ransom's report was written in the early 1970s; but, as far as I know, it has not been mentioned a single time in his voluminous writings since then. Second, although Stevenson has now twice declared that Rogo's description of the Ransom report is wrong, he has not spelled out in what ways it is wrong. Stevenson's silence makes one wonder whether the report is not extremely damaging even if Rogo's description of it is inaccurate. If I can locate Ransom's address I will send the present series of articles to him and urge him to publish his report so that all of us will at last know what is in it.

Perhaps Dr. Eugene Brody, the editor of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* who thought sufficiently highly of Stevenson's research to open the pages of his journal to two of his articles, can be induced to publish it. If it is not as devastating as Rogo's informants maintain, Stevenson has nothing to fear; and, in any case he will certainly not be prevented from replying to it. I daresay that the Ransom report does not contain any diplomatic secrets. Since Stevenson has access to it, he could tell us about its content in some detail even before Ransom himself is requested to publish it.

Ian Wilson ends his highly critical chapter of Stevenson with the remark that, in spite of all the objections he has raised, "Stevenson may yet prove himself the Galileo of reincarnation" (op. cit., p. 63) I do not see any danger of that. What is unfortunately very likely is that for a long time to come ignorant and superstitious people all over the world will continue to refer to Stevenson as the man who has provided strong scientific evidence, if not indeed conclusive proof, of reincarnation.

Note: In the first of these articles I discussed the case of Edward Ryall, an Englishman who claimed to remember living as John Fletcher in Western Zoyland in the seventeenth century. In citing the evidence demolishing Ryall's claim, I referred to correspondence he had with Michael Green, the Inspector of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings for the Department of Environment in London. In replying to Green's request to mark on a large-scale map the location of his seventeenth-century lands, Ryall placed them on a spot that, according to Green, had been open marshland until 1800. In his abovementioned article in the January 1986 issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* which I had not seen when I wrote the first installment, Ian Stevenson reports that he has obtained a contrary opinion on this subject from Dr. Robert W. Dunning, editor of the *Victoria History of Somerset.* According to Dr. Dunning, it is quite possible that in the last half of the seventeenth century a farm existed at the edge of Western Zoyland at the site indicated by Ryall. In fairness to Ryall and also to Stevenson this opinion should be mentioned, but it is quite insufficient to alter the negative verdict on this case warranted by the total evidence. •

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