

1.

*Proof of  
Reincarnation?*



The case for “reincarnation” is based on the assumption of the regularity of the universe: if some people now alive have had former lives, then some people in the future will have lives which are now being lived. So in looking for cases indicative of possible reincarnation, we are looking less for evidence of “future lives” than for evidence of “past lives,” which in turn suggests that similar reincarnations may occur in the future. The leading American scholar of this field is without question Dr. Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia Medical School at Charlottesville. As Stevenson has observed, in mediumistic attempts to contact those who have already died, we have the problem of proving that someone who has died is still alive somewhere. On the other hand, “[i]n evaluating apparent memories of former incarnations, the problem consists in judging whether someone clearly living once died. This may prove the easier task, and if pursued with sufficient zeal and success, may contribute decisively to the question of survival.”<sup>1</sup>

Some researchers object to the title “reincarnation,” even if placed in quotation marks, for it seems to presuppose an explanation for the phenomena encountered and is laden with religious nuances. H. N. Banerjee, director of the Department of Parapsychology at the University of Rajasthan at Jaipur, prefers to call such phenomena cases of “extra-cerebral memory” (i.e., memory that does not seem to have come from the

head of the person who reports it).<sup>2</sup> More important than the name we use is the recognition that the phenomena to be considered do not prove reincarnation per se. Its tenability as one hypothesis must be judged after the evidence is carefully weighed and analyzed.

### *Phenomena Not Considered*

To avoid further confusion, let us first itemize several groups of phenomena that are not appropriate evidences of reincarnation or survival, despite their inclusion by some writers: (1) *déjà vu*, (2) autoprecognition, (3) child prodigies, and (4) seance mediumism and spiritualism.

#### *Déjà vu*

At one time or another almost all humans have the uncanny feeling that they have “been in the same situation before,” without being able to pinpoint either the experience or the origin of the feeling. This phenomenon is called *déjà vu*, French for “already seen.” When *déjà vu* persists, the percipient has the distinct impression of knowing what will come next in his or her experience and that the entire sequence of events has been repeated at an earlier time. Some people interpret such *déjà vu* experiences to be intimations of having lived before, or of the myth of the eternal return.<sup>3</sup>

Such interpretations are manifestly illogical and illegitimate. *Déjà vu* experiences are akin to hallucinations in the sense that (a) they are completely private, and (b) they are false impressions. The feeling of having been in the same place or situation before is likely not due to actually having been there before, but rather to some very minor brain dysfunctions. *Déjà vu* experiences are most common among people undergoing severe strain, undernourishment, hormonal imbalances, or physical or mental exhaustion.

To put it simply, *déjà vu* situations could not be hidden memories of past lives, because *déjà vu* (by definition) is the feeling that everything is exactly identical to the way it was at some former time. But it is impossible that every element of any situation could be repeated identically, for

each moment is unique and all things change over time. It is possible that someone could vaguely recognize a place and honestly not remember when or why he or she had been there before. But such a recognition would not be a case of *déjà vu*, lacking the *déjà vu* sense of exactness. Thus the very exactness of the illusion in true *déjà vu* guarantees that it could not be a memory from some previous situation, in this lifetime or in any other.

Similarly, it is entirely conceivable that a person might arrive in a place where he or she had never been before and report a strange familiarity that is entirely unexpected. This person might even recognize foreign idioms or describe correctly some details of the town that had been true of the town in a previous era. It just might be the case that the scene awakened psychometric powers or inspired remembrances that had been suppressed from previous lives. We shall consider some cases of such phenomena a little later. Whatever else these cases may be, they are not cases of *déjà vu*.<sup>4</sup>

For the sake of rigor, let us also avoid further discussion of such “vague familiarities” with locales not already known from this lifetime, because any number of factors besides former lives might also give rise to false feelings of familiarity with a place.

### *Autoprecognition*

Autoprecognition is the psychic ability to foresee what will happen in one’s own life and in no one else’s. Parapsychologists have sometimes argued that autoprecognition might be an indication of having been reincarnated.<sup>5</sup>

The reasoning behind this assertion, however, demands postulation of numerous unprovable assumptions: (1) that the course of the present lifetime was already at least partially predetermined prior to birth, (2) that there was an interim state of personal existence between the previous death and the present life, (3) that the consciousness before birth was able to observe major future events in the life it was about to enter, (4) that living human beings sometimes *recall* elements of the lives they foresaw while disembodied before birth, without recalling the disembodied state itself, and (5) that such people cannot distinguish such recalling from predicting

(i.e., that it feels more like prediction than recollection, even though it is really recollection).

While there is nothing totally impossible or logically contradictory about such an account in itself, it involves many assumptions that are unsupported even by the descriptions of the people who possess such precognitive faculties. If reincarnation had already been established as fact, then this theory might provide an explanation of some of the cases of apparent autoprecognition now in evidence. However, autoprecognition in itself cannot come close to proving anything like reincarnation.

### *Child Prodigies*

An argument frequently heard in East Indian circles is that child prodigies such as Mozart or Edison must have acquired their talents in previous lifetimes, because such talents are inexplicable simply on the basis of childhood training. Again, it is true that the reincarnation theory might contribute toward an explanation of such phenomena, but in and of themselves child prodigies cannot properly be taken as evidence of reincarnation.

As it stands, most psychologists and psychiatrists feel that the variables of heredity, environment, and “chance” personality development are adequate to explain such prodigies without resort to theories of reincarnation. Mozart, for example, was born into a highly musical family. He was encouraged to listen to, to perform, and to write music by his family and friends, and he was provided with the perfect environment for the cultivation of those talents. Much as we admire his truly unusual abilities, we might attribute them just as reasonably to his family and to circumstances as to a past life.

Of course, if the doctrine of reincarnation were found to be universally true, and if there were a way to determine one’s previous lives, then we might gain a better understanding of the origins of children’s talents and predilections. The presence of unusual talents or abilities might be a secondary sort of confirmation of cases of people thought to be “reborn” for other reasons. Variations among children, however, can be adequately understood without resort to such hypotheses, and therefore cannot stand alone as evidence adequate to demonstrate reincarnation.<sup>6</sup>

### *Mediumism and Spiritualism*

Mediumistic performances have sometimes been interpreted as the temporary takeover of the body of one person by the discarnate spirit of another, who is “waiting in the wings” for reincarnation, as it were. However, the emotionally charged atmosphere of the dimly lit seance hall lends itself to autosuggestion. Careful guesswork on the part of the medium, abetted by overt or subliminal cues from other participants and dramatized by a charismatic subliminal personality, may account for the majority of mediumistic sittings. Some genuinely sensitive mediums may glean information through telepathy from the other sitters or through psychometry from an object belonging to the deceased, and misrepresent this information as coming from the surviving personality.

The theory that mediums communicate with discarnate intelligences becomes even more suspect in light of experiments in which “mediumistic contact” has been made with living or demonstrably fictional characters. The manifest potential for fraud in this business has cast such suspicion on the profession that few parapsychologists now count mediumistic seances among their sources of evidence. Curiously, mediumistic communications have dramatically declined in the post-World War II period, with a few noteworthy exceptions of channeling in recent years. However, most channeling sources claim to be transcendental or extraterrestrial and therefore do not directly relate to the question of human survival of bodily death.<sup>7</sup>

There is a further logical gap between seances and reincarnation theory. Even if it were to be conceded that spiritualism had proven the existence of discarnate spirits in a few instances, it would not necessarily follow that any or all of such spirits would ever again have human bodies—which is just the claim which the reincarnationists wish to defend. In short, even if the phenomena genuinely involved paranormal contact with the dead, mediumistic seances are amenable to too many interpretations other than reincarnation to serve as good evidence for that hypothesis.

It is not our intention to impugn the integrity of mediums, nor to imply that all are hoaxes. However, the difficulty of sorting the meaningful phrases from the reams of trivia; the problems in identification of raps, voices or accents with real, previously living people; the paucity of

high-quality evidence from recent mediums; the logical gap between the mere existence of discarnate spirits and the conclusion that they will again assume human bodies—these are just a few of the reasons why these phenomena cannot be treated as serious evidence for reincarnation.

### *Phenomena Considered*

The major phenomena we shall treat in this chapter are those of spontaneous possession, hypnotic regression, and spontaneous claimed memories of former lives. In each of these cases, we must ascertain that they demonstrate verifiable skills and memories that the agent could not have acquired through normal or even paranormal means in the present lifetime.

Lest it be contended that these three groups of phenomena are of the same caliber as mediumistic possessions, some critical differences between the two must be briefly noted. Most importantly, the typical seance medium has been deliberately hired to produce spirit voices, materializations, or other indications of contact with dead people known to the sitters. Moreover, the typical seance lasts only for an hour or two, while the parts of the medium's discourse that may be used as possible evidence occupy but a few minutes at a time. We must distinguish mediumistic seances from spontaneous cases of possession in which (1) the surrounding people (and often the one possessed) neither desire nor approve of the "intruding consciousness," (2) they have no prior knowledge of the facts related by the possessed, (3) the atmosphere is normal daylight, and (4) the possession lasts over a period of weeks or even years.

Many other distinguishing factors might be identified, but these four are the most crucial in avoiding the objections that may otherwise be raised against paranormal interpretations of possession cases. This distinction also rules out shamanic possession found in many primitive societies. Shamanic experiences share with mediumism the short duration, emotionally charged atmosphere, sympathetic observers, and possible telepathic or subliminal communication of desired information. However interesting as anthropological studies, such cases have little value as experimental evidence. Let us consider cases of spontaneous possession with these distinctions in mind and these fringe cases excluded.

*Spontaneous Possession with Verifiable Memories and Skills*

Possession is the name for the phenomenon in which persons suddenly and inexplicably lose their normal set of memories, mental dispositions, and skills, and exhibit entirely new and different sets of memories, dispositions, and skills. Cases of possession have been recorded around the globe since ancient times. Many primitive societies have attributed such cases to the occupation of a living body by the spirit of one who had already died, but this presupposes more than has been established. Psychiatrists prefer to consider most cases of possession to be varieties of mental disease, disorientation, and schizophrenia, to be cured by appropriate medical and psychiatric treatment.

The spontaneous cases of particular interest to our study are those in which the new set of suddenly acquired skills and memories is unknown to the person being “possessed” and the secondary personality traits and information are independently verifiable as beyond the ken of the former personality. Several examples of such spontaneous possession with veridical memory should clarify this definition. One of the earliest cases was recorded in detail by Jacob Fromer in 1811. He reported witnessing a Polish Jewess who exhibited the characteristics of a learned German Jewish scholar who had committed suicide:

I had a good place, from which I could see and hear everything. She sat down, languid and exhausted, with haggard, fearful eyes, and from time to time lamented, begging to be taken back to the house because she was afraid of the wonder-rabbi. Her voice, weak and beseeching, inspired sympathy and compassion. Suddenly, she sprang up and made efforts to remain standing.

“*Silentium strictissimum!*”

I could not believe my ears. It was a real man’s voice, harsh and rough, and the onlookers affirmed that it was exactly the voice of the [scholar suicide]. Not one of us knew the meaning of these words. We only knew that it was a strange language, which the sick woman understood as little as ourselves. . . .

Then she pronounced a long, confused discourse with High-German turns of phrase, of which I understood only that it greeted a festive gathering and wished to draw attention to the meaning of the feast.<sup>8</sup>

The account goes on to describe the interactions of the possessed girl with the “wonder-rabbi” who has come to exorcise the spirit. In the process, the spirit describes animal rebirths prior to this possession, and says that he was permitted to enter the girl’s body when she was rapt in lovemaking. The episode concludes in fisticuffs between the rabbi and the girl, who gives up the spirit when she is finally knocked unconscious.

William James, in his *Principles of Psychology*, discusses several prominent cases in America. He cites the case of Mary Reynolds, who awoke one day in 1811 unable to recall anything of her family, surroundings, or even the use of words. Although she still had the body of an adult, she had to be retrained as if a baby. When reeducated in her new personality, her character and disposition were utterly different from her prepossession state. Alternations from one state to the other continued over fifteen or sixteen years, until at the age of thirty-six the second personality completely took over.<sup>9</sup>

The case of Lurancy Vennum/Mary Roff is an even more striking example of possession exhibiting veridical memories. Mary Roff lived from 1847 to 1865, her later years in an asylum. Lurancy Vennum was a girl born to a nearby family in Illinois, in 1864. She exhibited no signs of abnormality until 1877, when she began to suffer spontaneous trances. After one of these trances, she lost all memory of the Vennums (her real family), declared herself to be Mary Roff, and begged to be taken to the Roff’s home. When the Vennums finally consented to let her live with the Roffs, she greeted the Roffs emotionally as her own parents. She also exhibited many of the preferences and memories known only to Mary and the Roffs. To quote James’s account:

The girl, now in her new home, seemed perfectly happy and content, knowing every person and everything that Mary knew when in her original body, twelve to twenty-five years ago; recognizing and calling by name those who were friends and neighbors of the family from 1852 to 1865, when Mary died, calling attention to scores, yes, hundreds of incidents that had transpired during her natural life. . . . The so-called Mary whilst at the Roff’s would sometimes “go back to heaven,” and leave the body in a “quiet trance,” i.e., without the original personality of Lurancy returning.<sup>10</sup>



After detailed study and subsequent publicity, this case came to be known as the “Watseka Wonder,” after the Illinois town where it occurred. Philosopher C. J. Ducasse, among others, considered the Roff/Venum case good evidence not only of split personality, but of the survival of memories and character traits after death.<sup>11</sup>

In 1906, a fourteen-year-old schoolboy named Fritz was possessed by a spirit calling itself “Algar,” which showed familiarity with Latin and Armenian. It was eventually ascertained that Fritz had seen some texts of Latin and postcards of Armenia. But this minimal exposure to a foreign language would not explain “Algar’s” abilities to copy its pronunciation and grammatical structures, although this may have served as a point of departure for possession by an intelligence familiar with those languages.<sup>12</sup>

Among the most dramatic of the many cases on record is that of Iris Farczady, a Hungarian lady who awoke one morning in 1935 with the language and manners of a deceased Spanish charwoman. She showed no knowledge of her family, surroundings, or even of Hungarian, but had a full memory-set and language ability in Spanish.<sup>13</sup>

These cases certainly seem difficult to explain without resort to “spiritual entities,” but they are a long way from proving reincarnation. In each case, the person is already an adult when the intruding consciousness, memories, and skills take over. At best, such phenomena might tend to indicate the existence of discarnate consciousnesses temporarily capable of occupying living bodies.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, it is possible that they may be subsumed under some less exotic explanation. (We shall review these hypotheses below under “Objections.”)

### *Hypnotic Age-Regression*

Hypnotic age-regression is a process in which a hypnotist, usually a psychiatrist, asks his patient to recall her childhood, using a hypnotic trance to facilitate exact recall of events which may have caused severe psychological disturbance. On rare occasions, however, the patient has regressed beyond her childhood into prenatal states, and even to the recall of lives prior to the birth of her present body. There is need for verification of the memories reported, but regressions may thus be another source of evidence of rebirth or reincarnation.

The case of Pueblo, Colorado, housewife Virginia Tighe (pseudonym Ruth Simmons) is colorfully depicted in *The Search for Bridey Murphy*.<sup>15</sup> Virginia agreed to participate in hypnotic experiments conducted by a young businessman named Morey Bernstein. After regressing to the age of one year old, she regressed still further to describe a life in Ireland from 1798 to 1864 under the name of “Bridey Murphy.” She demonstrated detailed knowledge of Ireland, its language, customs, and physical objects with which she had no acquaintance in her normal waking life. Sensationalist newspapers were quick either to exaggerate her accounts or to allege that her statements were incompatible with the facts of Ireland and had been gained from Irish people she had known in her youth.

Philosopher C. J. Ducasse went to great lengths to studiously investigate this complex case. He concluded that although not all of the information reported by the “Bridey” personality had been conclusively verified, none had been shown to be historically impossible. Moreover, Bridey did correctly describe many items, such as names of old neighborhoods and the stores in them, which could not be explained by normal means of information acquisition.<sup>16</sup> Curiously enough, in her waking state, Virginia neither cared about nor believed in reincarnation, and she was quite baffled as to what to make of the furor that emerged from her hypnotic age-regressions.

More recently, British psychiatrist Arthur Guirdham collected detailed records on an Englishwoman sent to his hospital who was plagued by recurrent neurotic nightmares of battles and massacres. Investigation revealed that the patient had had memories since her youth that corresponded closely to the history of the Cathars (Albigenses), heretic puritans in thirteenth-century France. It is particularly noteworthy that the language recorded in some of the patient’s diaries is early French, unknown to her in normal life. Guirdham writes:

In 1967, I decided to visit the south of France and investigate. I read the manuscripts of the 13th century. These old manuscripts—available only to scholars who have special permission—showed she was accurate to the last detail. There was no way she could have known about them. Even of the songs she wrote as a child, we found four in the archives. They were correct word for word.

. . . When I first wrote to Prof. DuVerney at Toulouse, he said, "Get in touch with me about anything you want. I'm astonished at your detailed knowledge of Catharism." I couldn't say, "I've got this by copying down the dreams of a woman of 36, . . ." <sup>17</sup>

This case not only roused Dr. Guirdham to extensive travel and study of Catharism, but ultimately convinced him of the truth of reincarnation of at least some people.

Similar cases of true memory of foreign language (xenoglossy) are to be found in the persons of Edward Ryall, who recalled life in seventeenth-century England with appropriate language,<sup>18</sup> and of Robin Hall, a Californian boy who spoke of a former life in Tibet, using Tibetan words.<sup>19</sup> In other cases known as the Jensen,<sup>20</sup> Rosemary,<sup>21</sup> and Gretchen<sup>22</sup> cases, the subjects spoke in Swedish, Egyptian, and German, respectively, supplying both words and grammatical constructions to which they had had no previous exposure in this lifetime. Such cases of xenoglossy are importantly different from the nonlinguistic babblings of people who rearrange the sounds of their own languages to "speak in tongues," as at religious revival meetings. They are better evidence too than those cases of people who can make sense of what is said to them in foreign tongues they have not learned, but who cannot speak grammatically in the language.

Still other studies have polled subjects who have undergone hypnotic regressions about the nature of their immediately prenatal experiences. They have brought to light many strange reports about disembodied persons choosing the wombs into which they were to be born.<sup>23</sup> Since there is no way to verify such accounts, in the way that we can verify statements about human history or test grammatical structures, these reports will not be treated further here. The important point for our purposes is not the frequency of verifiable regression cases, but rather that such cases exist at all. We shall carefully analyze their implications below.

### *Spontaneous Memories of Former Lives*

Belief in reincarnation seems odd to many Europeans but, in fact, it is so widespread among non-Europeans that Schopenhauer could cynically

declaim: "Were an Asiatic to ask me for a definition of Europe, I should be forced to answer him: it is that part of the world which is haunted by the incredible delusion that man was created out of nothing, and that his present birth is his first entrance into life."<sup>24</sup>

Schopenhauer may have had strong prejudices in favor of a Buddhist worldview, but he is correct in attributing the idea of former lives to the peoples of Asia. However, he was a little too short with his European compatriots, for ever since Plato and Pythagoras the notion of rebirth has had philosophical respectability as an alternative to the Christian views of survival by resurrection.

We may still wonder, however, *why* peoples from vastly disparate cultures should believe in rebirth at all if there were no experiential basis for it. One theory might attribute the growth of parallel mythologies to Jungian archetypes in a collective unconscious. Another might suggest that the primitive mind, yearning for permanence and unable to face its own mortality, modeled its myths of survival on the cycles of seasons and plant life, leading to a cyclic notion of human life as well. An equally plausible suggestion is that even primitive peoples had encountered situations that they interpreted as indicating the reincarnation of those who had formerly died. The cases that shall be treated in this section are of precisely that nature; they lend *prima facie* support to the belief in rebirth.

The best examples of apparent "reincarnation" are those of children who discuss their memories of previous lives, with no prompting from those around them. In many cases these reports are supplemented by peculiar habits, speech patterns, or even physical birthmarks characteristic of the person the child claims to have been in a former life. In some cases, too, the memories of the child correspond to those we would expect of the deceased. We shall confine our attention to some intersubjectively verified cases.

The case of Katsugoro was reported by Professor Lafcadio Hearn, who took great interest in Japanese Buddhism. Katsugoro was born to a Japanese family in 1815. While playing with his sister, at age seven, he asked her where she had lived in her former life. Questioned by his parents and grandmother, he responded that he had remembered everything clearly until he became four years old, but he still could recall the central details:

He had been the son of Kyubei and Shidzu in a town of Hodokubo. Kyubei had died when he was five, and his mother had lived with a man named Hanshiro, after which Katsugoro (then named Tozo) had died of smallpox. Katsugoro's grandmother escorted him to Hodokubo to pay respects to the grave of his "previous father." Katsugoro's report tallied completely with that of the family, and he observed correctly that certain shops had not existed when Tozo was still alive.<sup>25</sup>

The case of Alexandrina is quite similar, except that she was reborn into the same Catholic family. According to the well-attested accounts, Alexandrina Samona died at five years of age in 1910. She appeared to her mother in a dream and promised to be born again, although the mother's recent ovarian operation rendered further childbearing unlikely. Nonetheless, when twins were born late that same year, one so closely resembled her dead sister in birthmarks, habits of play, and likes and dislikes, that she too was named Alexandrina. When told of plans for a trip to Monreale, Alexandrina (II) correctly described a trip that Alexandrina (I) had taken before her birth, to the surprise of her parents.<sup>26</sup>

Shanti Devi was born in 1926 in Delhi, and from 1930 she began to relate numerous details of a former life in Mathura, a city some eighty miles away. Out of sheer curiosity, her granduncle and some educated friends began to investigate her statements. Their inquiries brought an unexpected response from one Kedar Nath of Mathura, who confirmed that he had had a wife corresponding to the person Shanti claimed to be. Kedar Nath even came to Delhi to meet Shanti, and she replied correctly to intimate questions about things only his former wife had known. Following this meeting, Shanti asked to be taken to Mathura, where she understood local dialect unintelligible to others from Delhi, identified friends and relations of Kedar Nath without prompting, and pointed out where wells, outhouses, and money caches had formerly been located.<sup>27</sup>

Each of the cases mentioned above strikes the reader by its apparent uniqueness, emerging from local settings in which such inquiries were uncommon and unexpected. More recently, however, scholars have begun to systematically identify and study such cases in which children report memories of former lives. The leading researcher in this field is Dr. Ian

Stevenson of the University of Virginia Medical School at Charlottesville. In the early 1960s, Stevenson began to compile and research cases of claimed memories of previous lives. He devoted particular attention to verifying or falsifying the information provided by the “memories,” and to the physical and behavioral similarities between the living child and the departed person with whom the child identified.

Stevenson’s findings gave the lie to the popular assumption that reincarnation cases are peculiar to Hindu and Buddhist countries of the Indian subcontinent, which have strongly believed in reincarnation since ancient times. Of 1,300 cases in his files in 1974, the United States led with 324, followed by Burma (139), India (135), Turkey (114), Great Britain (111), and so on—showing a large number of such cases from among the modern Western nations.<sup>28</sup>

In 1966, when Stevenson first published *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*,<sup>29</sup> it became for a time the talk of the psychiatric world and remains today a landmark in the scientific study of an unpopular hypothesis. In each of twenty cases, from India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Lebanon, and Alaska, Stevenson identified statements by children about their former lives. He then established that the children had no normal means of obtaining such knowledge and compared the children’s statements to the facts known to the deceased persons with whom the children identified themselves. In a number of cases, the children also were found to have unusual birthmarks, either close to the peculiarities of the person remembered or corresponding to the wounds by which the person had been murdered.

Stevenson also itemized the children’s preferences for certain foods, sports, speech patterns, or other aptitudes untaught by the children’s present environment, which corresponded to those of the deceased. Where possible, Stevenson visited the most promising of these children, escorted them to the villages they claimed to remember, and carefully recorded the number of correct and mistaken statements the children made about things they would have known had they in fact lived there previously. In the 1980s, Stevenson continued to collect cases at the rate of nearly one hundred per year, and his work has been widely discussed in medical as well as parapsychological journals and conferences.<sup>30</sup>

Based on Stevenson's pioneering work, other scholars have been emboldened to publish their own similar studies in this field, including H. N. Banerjee of the University of Rajasthan (Jaipur),<sup>31</sup> Hernani Andrade of the Brazilian Society for Psychical Research,<sup>32</sup> Karl Muller of Switzerland,<sup>33</sup> Resat Bayer of the Turkish Parapsychological Society,<sup>34</sup> and the late K. N. Jayatilleke of the University of Sri Lanka.<sup>35</sup> Although not all reports are as detailed as Stevenson's, they do tend to indicate that such cases are a worldwide phenomenon.

The researchers in this new field generally agree that they have not "proven" reincarnation. Some from Eastern backgrounds assume reincarnation as an article of faith requiring no proof or capable of verification through personal meditations. Others, including Stevenson, feel that the evidence has not yet reached conclusive levels, but that the discovery of "perfect" paradigm cases and the amassing of thousands of similar cases will eventually swing scientific opinion towards acceptance of the reincarnation hypothesis in at least some instances. Finally, some serious researchers are of the opinion that reincarnation is the sort of hypothesis that may never be proved by field work, for alternate interpretations of the data are always possible. Nevertheless, this research is accepted as having at least psychiatric value, and it may provide a better basis upon which educated people may base their personal convictions.

Many personal responses are possible to the question, "What would constitute a really convincing case of reincarnation?" It is well to recall here Michael Scriven's criteria of personal identity: (1) bodily appearance, (2) physical abilities, (3) memory of past experiences, (4) similarity of character, and (5) intelligence, including mental and linguistic abilities.<sup>36</sup>

While no single case to date has exhibited all of these characteristics, it is quite conceivable that some case might eventually do so, and each of these criteria have been met in at least some of the cases studied by Stevenson. The physical discontinuity of corpse and fetus will still prove an intractable obstacle to some materialist philosophers. But for anyone who accepts Scriven's criteria, the discovery of cases displaying all five may constitute a compelling argument for identifying the new children with the former persons, particularly when the children themselves treat their experiences as their own "rebirths."

### *Objections to the Phenomena as Evidence of Survival*

For religious as well as philosophical reasons, many people cannot accept the above cases as genuine instances of reincarnation. Their objections include (1) sheer refusal to accept the evidence, (2) theoretical objections to the consequences of the reincarnation theory, (3) the possibility of knowledge-acquisition by other normal means, and (4) explanations of the phenomena through other known but inexplicable psychic powers, not to include reincarnation. Any thoroughgoing interpretation of the data needs to consider each of these possible alternatives. In order for the reincarnation hypothesis to remain the strongest choice, it must be shown that there are at least some cases to which none of the above objections apply. Let us examine the objections and responses to them in the order just outlined.

#### *Refusal to Accept the Evidence*

Refusal to accept the evidence for memories of previous lives may assume several guises. It may be claimed, for example, that many of the supposed memories are nothing more than “scattered shots”<sup>37</sup>—a combination of guesswork, imagination, wishful thinking, and a child’s desire to please an investigator. By this theory, the similarity of the child’s comments to the actual facts later uncovered are pure coincidence, however improbable. For every child whose memory “matches” the facts, it suggests that there must be millions of children claiming memories that do not correspond to any facts at all. (This argument is analogous to the claim that correct guesses in the Duke University telepathy experiments were nothing more than improbable chance coincidences.)

The response to this objection is fairly straightforward. The correspondences produced in the statements of many of the children studied are of the probabilities, not of one in millions, but of one in trillions of trillions. Moreover, the way the children report their memories does not resemble guesswork at all. They do not venture, “Am I right about this? How about that?” but rather assert, “The old schoolhouse used to be here, where I was taught this Japanese song by Mr. Nakano.” Most of their statements show the same level of confidence as their statements about other memories of their present lives. In short, guesswork alone is inadequate to account for the specificity, unique correspondence, and accuracy of many of these



children. Nor, of course, could it account for birthmarks, habits, and predilections.

A more strident claim is that the investigator, parents, or both have deliberately distorted the facts to perpetrate a hoax in the name of empirical research. Ruth Reyna is one fanatic opponent to reports of natural memories of former lives. She has collected “refutations” of the reincarnation theory from many sources, which unfortunately she cannot always name. One of her nameless sources asserts:

I was really shocked by the method of questioning. Almost all the questions were leading questions whereby he was trying to elicit the answer he wanted. . . . An impartial probe was made impossible because of the enthusiasm of the boy’s father, who had fully tutored everyone around, including the boy. I found it absolutely useless to make any investigation. . . .<sup>38</sup>

Reyna then goes on to say that the most prolific researcher of claims of rebirth is Dr. Ian Stevenson, and that his book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, published in 1966, “stands as the most revealing document of both chicanery and naïveté—chicanery on the part of relatives of the claimants, and naïveté on the part of the investigator.”<sup>39</sup> Reyna does not say specifically in what respects Stevenson is naïve, but leaves us with just this general ad hominem character blast.

However, attestations to the scrupulous care of the investigators are not lacking on the other side. Banerjee himself (the one accused in Reyna’s nameless letters?) rejects the uncritical attitudes of less careful investigators.<sup>40</sup> Many acquaintances of Stevenson, including those who share neither his enthusiasm nor belief in reincarnation, attest to his thoroughness and impeccable integrity. Harold Lief, M.D., who worked with Stevenson on earlier projects, calls him “methodical and thorough in his data collection and lucid in their analyses and presentation.”<sup>41</sup> Montague Ullman, M.D., calls Stevenson’s studies “models of investigative field work,”<sup>42</sup> and UCLA psychiatrist Thelma Moss praises his “meticulous diligence.”<sup>43</sup> Jacobson goes to great length to show that in relation to Stevenson’s cases, “the hoax hypothesis is very poorly founded.”<sup>44</sup> Stevenson has personally revisited many of his cases during his thirty years of research to observe

personality development and check for signs of fraud or collusion. He is the first to admit that some cases may be tainted by the unconscious or conscious desires of his respondents. But it is unthinkable that all fourteen hundred cases now studied by independent researchers are entirely mistaken. Can we imagine that in all these hundreds of cases the local folk deliberately perpetrated a plan to hoodwink dozens of different investigators into accepting bizarre hypotheses?

It must be reemphasized that Stevenson is not the only researcher to arrive with such cases and conclusions. Banerjee has checked some of the very same cases Stevenson had studied, arriving independently at very similar conclusions. Leading doctors and parapsychologists have found strong cases in Turkey, Lebanon, Brazil, and Europe.<sup>45</sup> These are hardly cultures that traditionally favor belief in reincarnation. Each researcher has risked his professional reputation by publishing accounts that contradict the expectations and religious commitments of the scientific community in the West (and of such readers as Ms. Reyna).

There are many cases in which the information reported by the children as memories of past lives was unknown to anyone they knew in their present lives. It could not have been conveyed to them by their families or friends. The alleged desire of the parents for local notoriety is conspicuously lacking in most cases, nor could it constitute a motive for trumping up memories of past lives where none existed.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, there are many instances in which the family and surrounding people disbelieved, rather than encouraged, the children's discussion of past lives, and yet the children persisted in their assertions. Considering the number and care of the researchers and their independent corroborations, the fraud hypothesis must be discarded as inadequate to account for the whole of the data.

### *Objections to Population Increase and Lack of Memories*

Theoretical objections attempt to reject the evidence of reincarnation purely on the grounds of its logical consequences. A review of those objections and answers may be appropriate here in the context of evaluating the results of empirical research.

The claim is often heard that reincarnation is incompatible with the

theory of evolution, for the number of humans on the planet is steadily increasing. However, this objection might be answered in any of a number of ways, for example, (1) that nonhumans may be reborn as humans, (2) that disembodied souls have awaited embodiment, (3) that new souls evolve as the number of humans increases, or even (4) that beings are reborn from other solar systems in which the population is decreasing. We need not resolve such questions here, but simply point out that the population question alone is not a sound basis on which to object to rebirth.

Another major theoretical objection in the light of empirical findings asks why so few children remember past lives. If rebirth is a fact, should we not all expect to remember past lives? Here too, several answers are forthcoming:

1. Few people have good memories of events that happened only a few years before, especially if their minds are occupied and their environments stimulating. How much less should we expect people to remember events previous even to their own childhood!

2. Memories of previous lives may have been suppressed and forgotten, either because they themselves were traumatic or because the death and birth processes were traumatic. Discouragement of such talk by parents and companions may also account for the low instance of children reporting on their previous lives in detail.

3. Alternatively, it is possible that we can all remember former lives through yogic or Buddhist meditation and right living. These particular children may have been karmically gifted in such a way as to remember their past lives without such training in this life.

4. Finally, it is logically possible that not all people are reborn—there are many types of experience possible after death, and rebirth might be a relatively rare sort.

Thus the fact that few children remember previous lives does not preclude the possibility that reincarnation may be the correct interpretation of some cases, although not of every one.

The difference between the intellectual structures of dying persons and those of newborn infants does seem to pose a problem in identifying the

two, for no newborn babe has begun to speak, write, gesture, or in any other way communicate that it had any more than the most rudimentary consciousness. Jean Piaget, Bruno Bettelheim, and many other psychologists have attempted to trace the mental development of infants. There is widespread agreement that the newborn cannot even distinguish object from object, color from color, or self from other, let alone make the kinds of logical and axiological distinctions most mature people learn to make before they die. How can the infant's mind be anything like a dying person's?

The first and most obvious answer to this query might be that the physical (neural, cortical) apparatus of the newborn infant is simply unable to comprehend or express the full range of psychic energies that are "transmitted" from dying person to fetus. Not only have the muscles of the body not been trained to move, but the greater portion of the brain has not been taught to sort and label experience as its first few years of education will train it to do. This need not imply that a consciousness from a former person did not contact or influence the fetal brain, but only that the former consciousness was unable to function fully through the infantile brain.

Second, it might be argued that the incredible trauma of coming from an essentially submarine fetal environment into a waking, walking world of objects would be enough to virtually obliterate the memories and dispositions of most individuals, as often happens in traumatic accidents. Westerners generally take as evidence against the theory of rebirth the fact that very few children seem to remember their previous lives. On the other hand, even a few documentable cases might indicate the plausibility of the rebirth theory.

What we are seeking is not proof that everyone had former human lives and can remember them, but rather indications that at least some people had previous lives, and evidence which is most plausibly accounted for by such a theory. Then the question of whether rebirth theory in fact accounts for observed data better than other theories becomes an empirically testable one. There may be many psychological reasons for personally adopting or rejecting the theory of karma and rebirth (for example, the oft-cited allegation that it leads to an attitude of resignation and stagnation), but these personal feelings clearly have no bearing on the nature of reality.