

SCIENCE, THE SELF, AND SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH: SELECTED WRITINGS OF IAN STEVENSON, edited by Emily Williams Kelly. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. Pp. 415. \$65.00 (hard cover). ISBN: 978-1-4422-2114-7.

Ian Stevenson is best known both within and outside parapsychology for his field studies of what he called cases of the reincarnation type, but these form only a part of his life-long struggle to understand how the mind and body relate to one another. That he left psychiatry for parapsychology is widely appreciated, but probably fewer people know that he specialized in psychosomatic medicine before psychiatry, and doubtless fewer still realize that he started out studying history. This welcome introduction to Stevenson's oeuvre constitutes an intellectual autobiography and is the first work to trace the development of his concerns over his professional life.

Emily Williams Kelly decided against writing a traditional biography of Stevenson in favor of letting him speak in his own words. She is well-positioned for the task she set herself because she was Stevenson's research assistant and later colleague at the University of Virginia from 1978 until his death in 2007. Her close acquaintance with the man and his writings shows in her selection of articles and her comments on them. She has chosen 34 pieces, some journal papers or commentaries, others book chapters. A few are reprinted in full, but most are excerpted to a lesser or greater degree. They are arranged in five sections with introductory remarks by Kelly, who also contributes introductory and closing chapters. The book concludes with a comprehensive (although not definitive, if I may make the distinction) classified bibliography of Stevenson's publications.

Stevenson was born in Montreal, Quebec, in 1918. His father was a Scottish political journalist, his mother an English devotee of Theosophy. In her "General Introduction," Kelly describes Stevenson's early life, his study of history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, and his switch to medicine at McGill University in Montreal. She sketches his medical career in the United States and his growing involvement in psychical research, the term he came to prefer for his branch of parapsychology.

Stevenson himself traces these steps in more detail in the first selection of his writings, a 1989 address entitled "Some of My Journeys in Medicine." At the start of his medical career he did experiments on the oxidation of rat kidneys, an experience that turned him against reductionism. He moved into psychosomatic medicine, but when that field failed to develop into a regular specialty, took up psychiatry. Psychiatry was then (in the 1950s) dominated by psychoanalysis, which was not to his liking. He rejected the Freudian dogma that the human personality becomes fixed in early childhood and faulted Freud's failure to test his ideas about sexuality. He began to read extensively in psychical research, finding in that field a more congenial approach to the human experience.

Stevenson's mother's commitment to Theosophy sometimes has been presumed to have been the source of his interest in reincarnation, but this introductory section makes clear that although Theosophy

had the general effect of acquainting him with a dualistic conception of mind and body and alerting him to the possibility that mental states impacted disease, it had no direct influence on his thinking. Stevenson considered Theosophy to be a religion and it had no more appeal to him than did psychoanalysis. Psychological research, on the other hand, provided a scientific basis for studying relations between the mind and the body that he had not found elsewhere. He was drawn to extrasensory communications and phenomena suggestive of survival and reincarnation because, if these processes could be established, they would demonstrate that human beings were more than their physical bodies. Stevenson came to concentrate on reincarnation because he saw that it posed an especially keen challenge to materialistic assumptions. It also had clear implications for medicine. Reincarnation might help to explain, among other things, the origins of individual differences and why a given person developed a given disease, one of the "leitmotif" questions of his career.

Following the introductory section, the two selections of section 1, "New Ideas in Science," delineate another leitmotif, the resistance of much of institutionalized science to new ideas, an obstacle Stevenson confronted throughout his career. Section 2, "The Nature of Human Personality," comprises ten selections that further explore his dualistic conception of mind/body relations and his holistic approach to medical care. Although the arrangement is not strictly chronological, it nevertheless conveys both the continuities of Stevenson's main interests and the evolution of his thinking about them. Section 3, "Psychical Research—Principles and Methods" consists of three selections, "Changing Factors in the Study of Spontaneous Cases" (1987), a reply to a paper by philosopher Michael Scriven that deals with veridicality (1962), and "Thoughts on the Decline of Major Paranormal Phenomena" (1989). These introduce the reader to spontaneous cases and explain why Stevenson preferred them to laboratory investigations. He believed that factors like emotional rapport play such a significant part in psi functioning that parapsychology would better emulate botany than physics and study phenomena in their natural setting. He granted a place for experimentation but looked forward to a day when parapsychology was better balanced between the lab and the field.

Stevenson believed strongly that the agent played a key role in spontaneous psi events, a point of view perhaps best expressed in a protracted exchange with Louisa Rhine (not included in the book). Rhine (1969, 1970a, 1970b), who made little effort to investigate the thousands of spontaneous cases reported to the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University by percipients, came to the conclusion that the agent had nothing to do with them. Stevenson (1970a, 1970b), on the other hand, insisted that the value of a case was revealed only through investigation and this often showed the attitude of the agent to be crucial. It is a pity that Kelly chose not to include Stevenson's contributions to this exchange (at least in her expository comments), because they do much to clarify his approach to spontaneous cases. Also missing from the book are selections related to Stevenson's research on cases not directly related to survival, such as telepathic impressions, precognitive dreams, and psychokinesis. These show the breadth of his interest in psi and their inclusion would have provided a context for his better-known work on survival phenomena.

Section 4, "Research on the Question of Survival after Death: Reviews and Representative Case Reports" is by far the largest section of the book. It includes 16 selections arranged in nine subsections, "Apparitions," "Deathbed Visions," "Out-of-Body and Near-Death Experiences," "Mediumship," "Cases of the Reincarnation Type," "Cases of the Reincarnation Type with Birthmarks and Birth Defects," "Maternal Impressions," "Possession," and "Xenoglossy." Kelly's selections and comments seem to me appropriate and well-founded. Collectively they give a good sense of the range of Stevenson's engagement with the survival problem. They could have been supplemented, however, by his 1972 paper, "Are Poltergeists Living or are They Dead?," which questions whether RSPK is an adequate explanation for all poltergeist phenomena and deals with agency in a survival context.

Section 5, "Implications," is considerably weaker than the sections that have preceded it, as if Kelly has become concerned about the length of the book and wishes to bring it quickly to a close. One of Stevenson's most important statements about the implications of his reincarnation research, "The Explanatory Value of the Idea of Reincarnation," which received over 1,000 requests for reprints when it appeared

in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* in 1977, is excerpted to the extent of three paragraphs. In the following selection, Stevenson's insightful reflection on schizophrenia treatment and outcome in Asia (1979) is abbreviated to a single paragraph. Another selection receives a longer excerpt, and the last selection, "Assumptions of Religion and Psychiatry," is reproduced in full. The placement of this last piece is odd, because it was originally published in 1955, before Stevenson took up psychical research. Its point is that contemplative religion provides avenues to personal change that complement those of psychiatry. It is essentially an attack on Freud's view of religion as an infantile delusion. "The Phenomenon of Claimed Memories of Previous Lives: Possible Interpretations and Importance," published in *Medical Hypotheses* in 2000 (but not included in the book), represents Stevenson's reflections on the implications of his later work and would have been a more fitting closing selection.

In her concluding chapter, "Toward a Tertium Quid," Kelly identifies the goal toward which Stevenson was striving as the common ground between science and religion. I see the point she is after, but I am not sure that that is the best way to read Stevenson. He strikes me as a committed empiricist concerned above all with challenging the reductionistic, materialistic view of the relationship of mind to body. Stevenson wrote little about religion, and although he expressed appreciation more than once for William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, I cannot see that he connected mystical experience directly to his own work. I fear that Kelly's reading will feed the suspicion of some in the mainstream that parapsychologists are covertly religious believers seeking to impose their perspective on the world. But Kelly knew Stevenson much better than I did, and I don't want to belabor this point.

A secondary burden of this final chapter is an appraisal of Stevenson's reception by mainstream psychiatry and science, to which he spoke constantly, but which rarely listened to or heard what he was trying to tell them. In broad strokes, Kelly shows that mainstream attitudes have softened in the last ten to fifteen years. She notes that astronomer and science writer Carl Sagan, a lifelong skeptic of paranormal claims, in his last book (1996) identified Stevenson's research as one of three areas of potential significance (the others were psi tests with random number generators and under mild sensory deprivation, i.e., the ganzfeld).

Kelly barely mentions (and then only obliquely alludes to) the fact that for most of his career in parapsychology, the majority of parapsychologists had little time for Stevenson. This was due in part to his having entered the field at a point when J. B. Rhine's experimental paradigm was dominant, especially in the United States, and spontaneous case and survival investigations were downplayed or dismissed as misguided. Stevenson was a charter member of the Parapsychological Association (formed in 1957) and served as its President in 1968 and 1980, but resigned in the mid 1980s and began to call himself a psychical researcher to distinguish his methods and interests from those of the experimentalists. Stevenson's double isolation (from mainstream psychiatry and science, and from parapsychology) for much of his professional life is an important part of his story. The resistance from mainstream science, which is committed to a materialistic world view, is easier to understand and to justify than is the resistance from experimental psi research. Psi implies a dualistic interaction between mind and body, and that dualism opens the door to the survival of consciousness after death. The hostility of many parapsychologists—more in the past assuredly than today—to the notion of survival in general and to Stevenson's work in particular is a conundrum that historians will long puzzle over.

The bibliography of Stevenson's publications that comprises the Appendix is divided between his contributions to psychiatry and psychical research, with the latter subdivided by topic. Kelly includes all of Stevenson's books, journal papers, incidental pieces, and abstracts of conference presentations, but omits his book reviews and only selectively includes his journal correspondence. The bibliography goes a long way in making up for subjects (such as Stevenson's psi studies) slighted elsewhere in the book, but the decision not to include more of his correspondence is unfortunate. The reply to Scriven and the comments on schizophrenia in Asia included as readings first appeared in correspondence, and other correspondence is listed in the bibliography as well—all of it addressed to mainstream authors, most of it originally published in mainstream journals. But while these letters are included, correspondence with

colleagues in parapsychology and members of the skeptical community are not. I have in mind responses to Leonard Angel (Stevenson, 1995), C. T. K. Chari (Stevenson, 1962, 1973, 1986c), Renée Haynes (Stevenson, 1979), L. E. Rhine (Stevenson, 1967), D. Scott Rogo (Stevenson, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1987), and Ian Wilson (Stevenson, 1988). These show Stevenson replying to criticisms and their omission cuts the reader off from learning about how he handled the many controversies his work engendered.

I can only speculate about the reasons for these and the other omissions described above. I assume that Kelly is conversant with the relevant materials and that she chose to leave them out. Perhaps she did so for want of space, but at 415 pages the book does not seem to me overly long and could have been extended for another 30 pages or so to accommodate additional pieces, longer excerpts and more detailed discussions. Several of the omissions deal with parapsychological issues in a less than superficial way, and this suggests another possibility. Kelly may have decided that they got too much “in the weeds” for the general reader (for whom I think the book is primarily intended) or that they introduced details that would detract from her main message. I don’t believe that they would have done so, but the concern is legitimate. In any event, in the end, we must ask how detrimental the omissions and other deficiencies are to the book, and here I must answer that for the general reader looking for an introduction to Stevenson’s life and work, they will likely make little difference. For the parapsychologist they are more consequential, but on balance, the book’s strengths outweigh its weaknesses and I can recommend it without reservation to all readers of this journal.

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