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THE EVIDENCE FOR REINCARNATION

I

There are significant numbers of well-documented cases of the following general kind. At the age of 3 or 4 a child starts to make claims about his past which clearly do not correspond to anything that has happened in his present life. He claims to remember living in a certain place, doing certain things, being with certain people, and so on. It is then found that these memory claims fit the life of a person who died shortly before the child was born. The accuracy of the memory claims is striking and there seems to be no possible normal explanation of this. The child also has certain character traits, interests and skills which correspond closely to those of the one who died; and, perhaps, a physical characteristic, such as a birthmark or wound, which closely resembles a characteristic of the earlier individual.

Ian Stevenson has documented a vast range of cases of this kind.¹ The following example is typical: ‘On March 15th, 1910, Alexandrina Samona, five-year-old daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Carmelo Samona, of Palermo, Sicily, died of meningitis to the great grief of her parents. ... [W]ithin a year Mrs. Samona [gave] birth to twin girls. One of these proved to bear an extraordinary physical resemblance to the first Alexandrina and was given the same name. Alexandrina II resembled Alexandrina I not only in appearance but also in disposition and likes and dislikes.’ Stevenson then lists a number of close physical similarities and of shared characteristic traits of behaviour. For example: ‘Both liked to put on adult stockings much too large for them and walk around the room in them. Both enjoyed playfully altering people’s names, such as changing Angelina into Angellanna or Angelona, or Caterina into Caterana.’ Most striking of all, however, were the child’s memory claims: ‘When Alexandrina II was eight, her parents told her they planned to take her to visit Monreale and see the sights there. At this Alexandrina II interjected: “But, Mother, I know Monreale, I have seen it already.” Mrs. Samona told the child she had never been to Monreale, but the child replied: “Oh, yes, I went there. Do you not recollect that there was a great church with a very large statue of a man with his arms held open, on the roof? And don’t you remember that we went there with a lady who had horns and that

¹ See, for example, Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (University Press of Virginia, 1974). The following case is taken from his *The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations* (M. C. Peto, 1961) pp. 20–1. The case was originally reported in J. Grant, *Far Memory* (Harper and Bros., 1956).

we met some little red priests in the town?’ At this Mrs. Samona recollected that the last time she went to Monreale she had gone there with Alexandrina I some months before her death. They had taken with them a lady friend who had come to Palermo for a medical consultation as she suffered from disfiguring excrescences on her forehead. As they were going into the church, the Samonas’ party had met a group of young Greek priests with blue robes decorated with red ornamentation.’

Such accounts are striking. It is certainly tempting to think in terms of reincarnation: to identify the child with the one who died. To be confronted in practice with such incidents is, of course, another matter; and how someone copes with such an occurrence will obviously depend on a variety of factors. Nevertheless, we can, I take it, imagine cases in which most would find the urge to identify the child with the earlier individual almost overwhelming. We might think here of those cases in which the parents of a child who has died have another child who, in some ways and to some degree, looks, speaks and acts as if he were the dead child. In some cases of this kind the parents have treated the child, at least in some measures, as if he were the child who died.

What are we to make of this? Stevenson presents us with one common approach to such cases.² According to this approach the parents’ reaction could well be the correct reaction since these similarities are strong evidence that the living child is the very same individual as the one who died. The similarities do not, in themselves, conclusively establish that this is the same person. The hypothesis that this is the same person would, however, provide the best explanation of the similarities, and so should be accepted for that reason.

Such an approach appears to be dependent on a certain view of what a person is. Stevenson makes this point explicit in his definition of ‘reincarnation’:

Reincarnation, briefly defined, includes the idea that men consist of physical bodies and minds. At a person’s death, his physical body perishes, but his mind may persist and later become associated with another physical body in the process called reincarnation. Some persons may find the word ‘mind’ in this definition unclear or otherwise unattractive. They may certainly substitute another word such as ‘soul’ or ‘individuality’. I intend only to indicate a component of human beings not comprised in our present understanding of their physical bodies, which component may persist after physical death.³

If one took the solid, extended human being to be the person, the suggestion that the similarities might be explained by the fact that this is the same person as the one who died would seem to be ruled out.

It might seem obvious that similarities of the kind of which I have spoken would be strong evidence that the child before us now is the same individual

² One clear statement can be found in his paper ‘The Explanatory Value of the Idea of Reincarnation’, *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, CLXIV, 5 (1977).

³ *Ibid.* pp. 305.

as the one who died: that they would, in this way, give us good reason to identify John(2) with John(1). But what exactly is the reasoning which leads to this conclusion? Perhaps it is something like this: 'It is a very well established empirical truth that, except where there has been deliberate deception of certain kinds, we only find such similarities when we are dealing with a single individual. Since (we can suppose) we have ruled out deception in this case, we can reasonably conclude that these are two stages in the life of a single individual,' On the face of it, however, there is another conclusion that we could draw: namely, that this case shows that the generalization 'Such similarities only occur when we are dealing with a single individual' is false. Indeed, can it not be argued that this is the conclusion we *must* draw? For, given what we normally mean by 'a person', this is clearly *not* the same person as the earlier one.

Now it might be replied: 'It would be quite unreasonable to abandon such a well-confirmed generalization in the face of a very few apparent exceptions.⁴ It would be much more reasonable to conclude that these are not really exceptions at all. Certainly given our normal understanding we could not be dealing with a single individual here: since John(1) was dead before John(2) was born. But the significance of these cases is that they challenge our normal understanding. They give us strong reason to draw a distinction, as Stevenson does, between the bodily being and the real person.' But there is a problem here. For in making this move we appear to undermine the supposed evidence for the generalization which is said to justify it. What we have observed, after all, is surely this: we only find such similarities when we are dealing with a single *human being*. If we need to distinguish between the bodily being and the person we have lost our evidence for the claim that 'Such similarities only occur when we are dealing with a single person'.

Can the argument go through without this self-defeating appeal to our normal understanding of a person as a being of flesh and blood? We might reason in the following way: 'These striking similarities between John(1) and John(2) require some explanation. It will not do to say simply "This kind of thing happens sometimes". We are, at the very least, completely justified in assuming that there is some underlying link between John(1) and John(2) which explains the similarities. The suggestion that John(1)'s mind or soul now inhabits John(2)'s body is the simplest, and so best, hypothesis.' The idea is that this hypothesis removes what would otherwise be a mystery; it fills a gap in our understanding of what is going on here. We have, then, no reason to accept the hypothesis if it would leave us with a gap in our understanding which is as serious as the one it is supposed to fill. Thus, suppose someone argued: 'I agree that the evidence suggests that there is something in common between John(1) and John(2). My suggestion is that the common element is an atom in the left knee.' We have, I take it, no

⁴ Does this mean that the more evidence of this kind we find the less compelling it will be?

reason whatever to accept this suggestion since we have no picture of how *that* would explain the observed similarities. Is the situation any better with the hypothesis that 'the same mind' is present in John(1) and John(2)? Well, it has to be conceded that in this case we do have pictures of how this would explain the similarities. I believe that these *pictures* dissolve on closer inspection. For our present purposes, however, a single, uncontroversial observation is all that I need. It is generally conceded that we do not have, and indeed could not have, any understanding of how a 'non-material mind' could produce changes in a 'material body'. That is not, I think, an objection to this dualist view of persons. It is, however, an objection to the idea that we should accept Stevenson's dualist account of what is going on in these cases on the grounds that it fills a gap in our understanding. For if it fills one explanatory gap – the gap in time between John(1) and John(2) – it opens up another – the gap between the non-material mind and the material body. Since the 'explanation' simply exchanges one mystery for another, we have yet to be given reason to accept it.

One final point on Stevenson's approach. Suppose that we could, with justice, take the strong similarities to be evidence that there was something present in the child now dead which persisted after his death and is now located in the living child; as the particular quirks in the performance of this car might be evidence that the engine it contains is the very same one as that in an earlier vehicle. As this formulation stresses, there is a further step that needs to be taken if we are to speak of 'reincarnation' here. We need to be given some reason for taking this common element to be the person; we need to be given some reason for accepting that if these individuals have this element in common we should think of 'them' as a single person. (Stevenson offers us a number of labels for the supposed common element, adding 'I intend only to indicate a component of human beings not comprised in our present understanding of their physical bodies, which component may persist after physical death'.⁵ My point is that this is not enough if we are to be justified in speaking of 'reincarnation'.)

What kind of considerations would be needed to support such a claim? Well, to accept that this is the same person as the one who died is to accept that certain responses to this person are in place. It is to accept, perhaps, that the particular character of the mother's love for the child – a love which involves the thought of this as 'John' – is not misplaced. It is to accept, perhaps, that the suffering of this individual is not to be seen in quite the light in which we might be initially inclined to see it: for it can be linked with failings in the life of the earlier individual in a way which gives it some moral sense. These are, of course, examples of very different kinds; and different people will be inclined to put the emphasis at different points. The point I want to make, however, is a quite general one about the *kind* of work that

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 305.

is needed here. To show that this is the same individual as the one who died is to show that certain ways of thinking about this individual, certain reactions to him, are in place. The claim that the presence of a particular common element implies that we are dealing with a single person requires, then, a defence which shows that a certain 'ethical' significance is to be attached to that element. Now my point is not that that cannot be done. It is simply to note that it needs to be.

II

I doubt if any of what I have said so far has much to do with the responses of those who are, in practice, confronted with incidents of the kind Stevenson discusses. Might they not treat this as the same person as the one who died while having no thoughts of possible mechanisms linking the one with the other? It is the similarities in themselves which draw this response from them; not the thought of some unobservable common element which *explains* the similarities. This is not to say that they respond to it as John, the dead child, without really thinking that it is him. It is to stress that 'really thinking it is him' need not involve having any hypothesis about mechanisms underlying the observed similarities.

In one sense what I have just said should, I think, be quite uncontroversial: the parents' responses need not be mediated by philosophical reflection of the kind that Stevenson discusses. That, however, is not the end of the matter. For it will be said that we can still ask whether their response is appropriate: whether, that is, this really is or might be their dead child reincarnated. The fact that people do react in a certain way is never sufficient to show that that reaction is *appropriate*. Further, if the understanding presented by Stevenson is ruled out are we not forced to say that the reaction is *not* appropriate; for we do not have the kind of link between John(1) and John(2) which is needed for the idea that they are one and the same person.

Well, what kind of link *is* needed for that idea? There may be nothing in the case as described which forces us to accept that this really is the dead child. But what is there which shows that we would be wrong to accept it? It is true that a central link which normally holds between two stages of what we think of as the life of a single person is absent here: John(1) and John(2) are not linked through the bodily continuity of a human being. It needs to be shown, however, that that – or some other favoured link – is required if the reaction we are concerned with is not to be misplaced.

It has been suggested that this can be shown by an argument along the following lines:⁶ 'If one child with relevant characteristics can emerge it is

⁶ See Bernard Williams, 'Personal Identity and Individuation' and 'Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity', both in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973). In my presentation of the argument I follow Derek Parfit's reading of Williams. See *Reasons and Persons* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984), section 91.

equally conceivable that two should. In the latter circumstances we could not identify both with the original person and would have no grounds for picking out one rather than the other as that person. We would be forced, then, to say that neither of them is him. This shows us something important about the case in which there is in fact only one candidate. If we did treat this as John our doing so would be dependent on the fact that this is the only candidate. That is to say, our treating this as John will be dependent on something which is clearly not a fact about this individual: namely, on the fact that another child with similar characteristics has not turned up. But how an individual is to be thought of and treated cannot depend in this way on what are not facts about *him*. We must conclude that even when there is only one candidate we cannot make the proposed identification.'

The claim that 'how an individual is to be thought of and treated cannot depend in this way on what are not facts about *him*'⁷ sounds very plausible in the abstract. Yet in practice we constantly violate it. Whether or not we give the prize to Smith depends not only on how fast he ran but on whether anyone else ran faster. Whether or not we sentence Jones to imprisonment depends on whether the child he hit in his car while he was drunk dies. How I feel about my second wife may be affected by my discovery that my first wife is not, as I supposed, dead. People's reactions to these examples will vary. I believe, however, that they are enough to show that we need not accept without question that 'how an individual is to be thought of and treated cannot depend on what are not facts about *him*'. We need to be given some reason for accepting that principle.

The parents speak of and treat this child as John – the child who died. If there had been a further child with similar characteristics things would, at the very least, have been less straightforward. (Which one gets John's teddy?) That thought, however, does not (we can suppose) occur to them; and if it did would no doubt slip quietly into the background leaving their reactions to this child unscathed. Can we not say that it *ought* to occur to them and *ought* to have an impact? That claim, I am suggesting, stands in need of defence.⁸

III

I have spoken of the possible reactions of parents. I have ruled out a familiar defence of the claim that it would be reasonable, in such circumstances, to take this to be the reincarnation of the dead child; or that it would be wrong to do so. Is there, then, no question of *truth* here? Are we to say simply that some people react in this way – take this to be the reincarnation of the dead child – and some do not; and that that is all that there is to be said about

⁷ There are, I believe, awkward questions here about what counts as being a 'fact about him'. But we can sidestep these for the moment for my point will, I think, have been made provided that my examples are analogous in the relevant respect with that with which we are concerned.

⁸ See also R. Herbert, 'Puzzle Cases and Earthquakes', *Analysis*, xxviii 3 (1968).

such cases? Well, I have, so far, been arguing simply that *certain* pictures of how such differences between people are to be resolved are not acceptable. What I have said is quite consistent with the view that there is a correct way of responding to occurrences of the kind Stevenson discusses. It is quite consistent with the suggestion that there is, in a particular case, a correct answer to the question 'Is this really John – our dead child?'. My aim has simply been to cast doubt on certain familiar ways of approaching that question. Our thought is dominated by a certain picture of what it is to try to get things right: a picture which is modelled on our understanding of scientific enquiry. But not all truths are of a kind to be resolved in that way.

Consider a case in which each of the parents responds in a different way. The father insists that this is John, their dead child. The mother, while feeling the pull of this reaction, resists it. How might each try to convince the other of the correctness of their own response? There might, first, be a dispute about just how alike the dead child and this child are: the mother insisting that the father is seeing similarities which simply do not exist; suggesting, perhaps, that it is 'sentimentality', or a 'refusal to let the past go', which is clouding the father's vision. These charges could readily move the dispute to another level: a level at which the emphasis is less on how great are the similarities and more on whether there is an element of 'self-indulgence' in allowing oneself to be moved by this degree of similarity. At another level again, the mother might argue that no matter what the similarities, the father's response is to be resisted. His response involves a failure to face up to what has happened: to the fact that John is dead. It involves being untrue to John: you are allowing yourself consolation where there should be none; you are opening the possibility that a life – John's – which was pure will become tarnished by incidents in this child's life. It involves an unfairness to *this* child: a failure to acknowledge him as an independent individual, and to give him the space in which to develop that he deserves. And so on.

In formulating these arguments I have employed expressions which may seem to beg the question: I have spoken as if this is not John. To the extent that the father is deeply committed to his view of the matter his replies will be formulated in different terms. This might lead one to think that the real issue arises one step before this: that they are going to have to reach agreement on whether or not this is John before they discuss whether, for example, it is unfair to this child to treat him as John. But this, I suspect, would be misleading. For it seems that, in a straightforward sense, all the relevant facts might be in and yet there still be disagreement about whether this is John. There may be no level at which they can approach their disagreement which is more basic than that at which they speak of 'unfairness', 'facing up to the facts', and so on. Resolving the question of whether this is John just is a matter of resolving the question of whether the father's reaction is to be characterized in those terms.

I have spoken of a disagreement between two parents about a particular child. I take it, however, that the considerations, or most of them, which I have suggested might arise there might equally arise within a more abstract discussion of reincarnation: within a context in which what is at issue is whether it is ever correct to speak of a live human being as the reincarnation of one who has died. For example, the mother's worry about the 'unfairness' to this child is mirrored in serious ethical worries which many feel about the doctrine of karma: especially where that doctrine appears to be designed to mitigate our horror at the suffering of young children. Now we might try putting the point that I am making about both the particular and the more abstract disputes in this way: the question of whether we should speak of a live human being as the reincarnation of one who has died is, fundamentally, an ethical one.

While that captures something of the spirit of my view, however, there are dangers here. For one thing, this formulation might suggest that I have a clear picture of how an argument here might develop and be resolved. But while I am inclined to say that the argument is almost bound to have a strong ethical dimension my confidence goes little further than that. My central aim is simply to break the hold of certain familiar pictures of the way in which serious argument about such an issue must go. For example, one might think that we can and should try to resolve the 'metaphysical' question of whether reincarnation is conceivable *before* considering the question of whether these terms – those involved in the doctrine of karma – are acceptable ones in which to make moral sense of the suffering of young children. And my aim is simply to suggest that we should not take it to be obvious that these questions are related in *that* way.

Another danger here derives from the fact that, for many, the 'ethical' is virtually defined in part as an area in which rational resolution of differences is impossible. Now I am certainly in no position to claim that given sufficient time, good will and clear thinking, agreement on such an issue is inevitable. Equally, however, I am not, and I doubt if anyone else is either, in a position to insist that such differences cannot be rationally resolved. In suggesting that the argument is bound to have an ethical dimension I am not, then, ruling out the possibility that we are dealing with a question to which there are true or false answers; I am not ruling out the possibility that, for example, further thought would reveal that it is simply wrong, whatever the similarities, to identify a live human being with one who has died.

Some will still feel, however, that the way in which I am presenting these issues is such that the notions of 'truth' and 'falsity' do not, in any rich sense, have application here. Thus, some may feel that if this kind of thing is 'all' that the dispute between the parents amounts to then it is quite misleading to suggest that they are disagreeing about whether this is the reincarnation of their dead child: disagreeing about whether this is John. They are, rather, disagreeing about whether they should *think* of this as John. Now, it would

be worth asking just what distinction is supposed to be marked by the use of those different phrases. The case is, after all, quite different from that in which, for example, they are both quite clear that this is not John, but they recognize that it would make their lives a good bit more comfortable if they could bring themselves to think of it as John; and so adopt a, more or less conscious, policy to bring this about. For, in contrast to this, there is a clear sense in which, in the case I am speaking of, the parents are attempting to arrive at the *truth about the child*. In any case, whatever is supposed to be the significance here of the contrast between asking ‘whether this is John’ and asking ‘whether we should think of this as John’ the same contrast is going to emerge at some stage however one thinks of reincarnation. For my point about the ethical character of the dispute here is completely parallel to a point which I made in my discussion of Stevenson’s approach. I stressed that even if we did think in terms of some underlying common element which explains the similarities between these individuals we would still need to show that the presence of the common element justifies the claim that we are dealing with a single person: to show, that is, what significance is to be attached to the presence of that element.

One might formulate the central point of my paper in this way: there is no such thing as first establishing, as a truth in pure philosophy, that talk of reincarnation makes ‘metaphysical’ sense – that a person is a being of a kind such that a doctrine of reincarnation could be true – and then moving on to the question of whether it makes ‘ethical’ or ‘religious’ sense. To think of this individual as the reincarnation of one who has died is, or at the very least centrally involves, having a certain attitude towards this individual; and while I have said nothing about the individual’s thought of *himself* as one who has lived before or will live again, an analogous point, I believe, arises in that context. To get clear about just what those who speak in terms of ‘reincarnation’ believe one must, then, look at the attitudes with which that talk is linked. And any further enquiry into the question of whether such a doctrine is, or could conceivably be, true will, at the very least, centrally involve an ‘ethical’ investigation of those attitudes: of the way of life in which the doctrine has its place.

Many are suspicious when a philosopher writing about reincarnation is clearly totally ignorant of the religious traditions in which a doctrine of reincarnation has a central place. The present paper is, no doubt, a case in point. My hope is that there is at least one thing that a philosopher suffering from such ignorance can usefully do. That is, try to show that the suspicion is well grounded.

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