INTERPRETING THE CASE OF IMAD ELAWAR

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Ian Stevenson's reincarnation case of Imad Elawar has been rein-
terpreted by W. G. Roll as representing "merged and divided rebirth."
Although this interpretation has been adopted by some other authors,
especially D. Scott Rogo, a close examination of the case shows very
little support for it. Stevenson's original interpretation of the case
as involving two persons with independent memories receives much
stronger support.

Preface

The following paper was written in its original form
five years ago, in response to the treatment of the case of
Imad Elawar by the late D. Scott Rogo in his book on rein-
carnation (Rogo 1985). I had finally seen enough of what I
regarded as egregious misrepresentations of the case, all
stemming from a short paper by W. G. Roll (1967) that had
appeared in _Theta_, which he then edited. I submitted this
paper to _Theta_ and it was accepted for publication there.
In fact, I cited it as _in press_ in _Theta_ in my review
(Matlock 1986) of Rogo's book in the Journal of the Society
for Psychical Research and in a response (Matlock 1988) to
a paper by Rogo (1986) that was printed in JRPR. Mean-
while, the editorship of _Theta_ has changed hands and
orientation, and in view of the great lapse of time since
the original submission, I have withdrawn it from publi-
cation there.

At his request, I sent Rogo a copy of this paper in
1988, and he referred to it in a Letter to the Editor of
JRPR (Rogo 1988) in reply to my article addressed to him.
He wrote that, "When Mr. Matlock kindly sent me his paper
on the case, I found that he merely shows the facts in the
case to be consistent with Stevenson's flawed-memory inter-
pretation. Evidence _consistent_ with a theory is not
evidence _for_ a theory. I could easily write a paper
showing that the facts are simply consistent with Roll's
and my interpretation" (Rogo 1988:174). With the publica-
tion of the paper here, readers will be able to decide for
themselves. It is to be regretted that Mr. Rogo himself
will not be able to respond again.

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The Lebanese case of Imad Elawar, from Ian Stevenson's
(1966, 1974) first collection of reincarnation cases, has
proved to be one of his most troublesome. L. E. Rhine
(1966) considered it, of the 20 in the book, "perhaps the
most complicated and difficult of all to judge" (p. 266).
Gardner Murphy (1973) saw in it "a web of associations as
confused as if they were wandering clouds" (p. 122).
Murphy went on to point out the central difficulty with the

case.   Imad Elawar remembered not   only a non-fatal bus
accident in which his previous personality was involved,
but also a truck accident in which his previous personal-
ity's cousin was killed. Moreover, he seems to some degree
to have confused the two events.

Murphy (1973) found the confusion "odd," but noted that
the memories are "by hypothesis filtered through the mind
of a young child.   It is not Personality 1 that communi-
cates with us; it is the little boy Imad who is making as
much sense as he can out of a man's memories" (p. 126).
Murphy adds that, to Imad, "the fact that there were two
serious accidents may have been far more important than the
details of how they happened and which members of the
Bouhamzy family were involved" (1973, p. 126). Similarly,
Imad never mentioned the first name (Ibrahim) of his previ-
ous personality.   The failure was due perhaps to the fact
that "for the child this name was remote and irrelevant"
(1973, p. 126).

This is close to Stevenson's (1966, 1974) own interpre-
tation of the case.   W. G. Roll (1977a), however, took a
different view.   For him, Imad's memory of an event in
which his previous personality was not directly involved
indicated "merged rebirth."   Further, the fact that a
second child was found with the memories of the cousin who
died in the truck accident suggested to Roll (1982) that
here was "divided as well as merged rebirth" (p. 200).

Roll (1977a, 1977b, 1982, 1984a, 1984b) has cited this
case repeatedly with the same interpretation, despite two
replies from Stevenson (1984; Stevenson, Tart and Grosso,
1980).   In 1979, Michael Grosso cited Roll (1977a) and
echoed his interpretation (Grosso, 1979, p. 377). Now D.
Scott Rogo (1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1987) has carried Roll's
interpretation into the popular literature. "Dr. Stevenson
discovered that two children, at different times, recalled
the same past life," Rogo tells us.   "If that weren't
enough, one of the children seemed to be recalling his
past-life by moulding together information drawn from the
lives of two people who had been relatives" (Rogo, 1987, p.
191).   Rogo, moreover--in portraying Roll's interpretation
as the accepted version of the case--has moved a step
closer to establishing Roll's interpretation as definitive.

Are we to accept the case of Imad Elawar as closed, with
Roll's interpretation as the verdict? Have Stevenson and
Murphy been overruled? Let us review the case.

In 1959, when he was between one and a half and two
years of age, Imad Elawar first spoke the name "Jamileh" (a
pseudonym assigned by Stevenson, 1966, 1974). Thereafter
he frequently spoke this name, and also several others,
among them "Mahmoud."   His former surname he said was
"Bouhamzy," and he had hailed from "Khriby." He described
the house in which he had lived and its environs. He spoke
also of a truck accident in which someone was killed, of an

operation in a hospital, of a bus accident, and of a quarrel with a bus or truck driver.

Imad uttered these things in the fragments typical of a child his age, but his family, in an effort to make sense of them, strung them together in a certain way. They believed he was claiming to have been Mahmoud Bouhamzy of Khriby, who had died of injuries after having been run over by a truck following a quarrel with its driver. They thought he had been a wealthy sheikh with a wife named Jamileh, and they assumed that others of the names Imad had mentioned had been those of his sons.

When the case came to Stevenson's attention in 1964, Imad was five years old. He was still speaking of the previous life, but no effort had been made to verify his statements. Stevenson took down the testimony of Imad's family (who reported to him their interpretations of Imad's statements as if Imad himself had so expressed them), as well as new statements made by Imad himself. Proceeding to Khriby, he set to the task of verification.

Only gradually did the errors of interpretation become apparent. There were in Khriby several families by the name Bouhamzy, and there was among them a Mahmoud. But this man was still living, and his house did not resemble the house Imad had described as his previous one. The search for a better match led to an Ibrahim Bouhamzy. Ibrahim had died unmarried, at 26, of tuberculosis. But he had had a lover named Jamileh. And he had had a cousin, Said Bouhamzy, who had died in the hospital after having been run over by a truck—an accident that had made a great impression on Ibrahim.

From the start of the investigation in Khriby, Stevenson had known of a related case. A few months after Said Bouhamzy's death there was born a child who in subsequent years claimed to remember people and incidents from Said's life, including the fatal truck accident. All of Said's family and the entire town of Khriby had come to accept the child's claim. Stevenson met and interviewed this person, Sleimann Bouhamzy, now grown into manhood, and living in Syria. Stevenson accepted Sleimann's statements as referring to Said, who had been run over by the truck. He concluded that Imad had been talking about Ibrahim, who had been involved in a non-fatal bus accident, but who had heard about the truck accident, and been much affected by it. All but four (unverified) statements of Imad, when freed from the interpretations imposed by his family, fit perfectly with the life of Ibrahim.

Before continuing, it might be useful to address a question first raised by L. E. Rhine. She charged that Ibrahim had been identified as the past personality "only when the assumption was made that some of the wrong impressions the parents of the child had formed from his remembered sayings were their own mistaken inferences and

not necessarily mistakes the child had made" (1966, p. 266). This is, as Stevenson (1967) pointed out in his reply, incorrect. There are tabulated altogether 73 statements and identifications Imad had made concerning the previous life. Four of these remain formally unverified. Six others were found to be wrong. Of the 63 remaining, only 11 were misinterpreted in some way by the family. Even when the two items that refer to Said's accident and its aftermath are removed, we have a total of 50 statements and recognitions that refer unequivocally to the life of Ibrahim Bouhamzy. These alone are detailed and specific enough to permit identification.

Both Imad and Sleimann had phobias concerning motor vehicles, although Sleimann's was the more generalized and the more intense. Imad was afraid of large trucks and buses, although this fear faded by age 4 or 5. Sleimann had a marked fear of motor vehicles of all kinds, and as a child would not even go near an automobile. He kept this fear into his teens. Sleimann had, in addition, an even stronger phobia of blood and cotton bandages. He once fainted when he visited a friend in a hospital and saw him swathed in white bandages. These different phobias, it will have been noted, are consistent with the different experiences of Ibrahim and Said Bouhamzy. Ibrahim had suffered a non-fatal bus accident and known a cousin to die in a truck accident. Said, on the other hand, had been the cousin to die, and moreover had spent some time in the hospital swathed in white cotton bandages before his death (Stevenson, 1974, p. 307).

Roll (1982) described this case as showing that "events from the lives of two cousins were remembered by the same rebirth subject in the emotionally charged way typical of rebirth memories. The memories of one of the cousins also emerged in a second child, indicating divided as well as merged rebirth" (p. 200). As noted, this interpretation has been adopted also by Grosso (1979; Stevenson, Tart and Grosso, 1980) and by Rogo (1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1987).

Merged rebirth would presume that the memories of two individuals in some way joined post-mortem and then emerged in a single mind. Divided rebirth would presume that these joined memories emerged not just in one, but in two minds. But what evidence is there that these things occurred?

There are some indications that Imad was confused about which of his memories referred to Ibrahim and which to Said. Roll (1977a, p. 1) points out that Imad, when asked how many children he had had, held up five fingers. Said had had five sons. But Said had also had two daughters, and Ibrahim had had at least one (illegitimate) child (Stevenson, 1974, p. 296). Ibrahim, Stevenson reports, had been fond of Said's sons (1974, p. 296), and in his mind Imad could have confused them with his own. Or Ibrahim could have had other children whose existence was kept secret from his fellow villagers, who were at any rate

scandalized by his extramarital relations with Jamileh (Stevenson, 1974, p. 302).

Another possible confusion in Imad's mind concerns the bus and truck accidents and the quarrel with a bus or truck driver. The truck accident we know occurred to Said, and the bus accident to Ibrahim. Imad spoke often of a quarrel with a driver (more often in fact than of the accidents themselves) and his family concluded that he was saying that he had been struck down and run over by a truck after a quarrel with its driver. Some of the witnesses to Said's accident were of the opinion that this had occurred, although Said on his deathbed absolved the driver of any blame, and in court the man was found guilty only of negligence (Stevenson, 1974, p. 304). The quarrel perhaps was associated instead with the bus accident in which Ibrahim was involved. Ibrahim had a fiery temperment, and had been involved in many altercations, in one of which he even shot a man (Stevenson, 1974, p. 304). Perhaps Imad, like his family, associated the quarrel with the wrong accident. Or perhaps, as Stevenson suggests (1974, p. 304), the mistake was Ibrahim's. Ibrahim, based on an awareness of his own propensities, may have joined others in Khriby in assuming that a quarrel preceded the accident, and this assumption may have carried over into Imad's mind.

Finally, as a child Imad frequently expressed surprise and pleasure at being able to walk. He once asked his mother whether she had had an operation that had made her so she could walk again. His family looked upon these utterances as confirming their belief that Imad had died after having been run over by the truck. The victim's lower body had been crushed, and so, they thought, Imad was expressing delight at having the use of his legs returned. But Imad spent the last six months of his life in the hospital, bedridden with tuberculosis. Possibly it was that experience that Imad recalled.

If so, it is strange that he should have inquired of his mother about an operation. Said, not Ibrahim, had had the operations. On this point, more clearly than on any other, one can see a possible blending of memories.

Imad also mentioned the names of two persons known to be friends of Said, but who could not be shown conclusively to be acquainted with Ibrahim. However, since Ibrahim and Said were close friends, it is certainly possible that Ibrahim had known them as well.

These are the points on which some confusion may have occurred in Imad's mind regarding whose life his memories referred to. It is difficult to see how these possible confusions can be brought to support the notion of blended rebirth, however. It seems much more likely that Imad's memories were entirely those of Ibrahim, although some of these memories referred to incidents in the life of Said, and in his child's mind Imad may have become confused over

which were which. This conclusion is suggested by Stevenson himself (1974, p. 303), and it is the conclusion reached also by Murphy (1973).

There seems even less reason to read the case as one of divided rebirth. Divided rebirth would imply the same set of memories (and presumable also the accompanying behaviors) emerging in two persons. But this is not at all what we find. The names of Said's seven children were almost the first words Sleimann spoke. Imad, when asked how many children he had, held up five fingers. Sleimann recalled Said's fatal accident, and he recalled being in the hospital afterwards. Imad recalled these events as well, and his description of the truck accident was certainly vivid enough to make his family believe it had befallen him. Yet although Imad had a phobia of motor vehicles, it was neither as generalized nor as intense as Sleimann's phobia of the same. And Imad did not take from the hospital the phobia about blood and bandages that Sleimann did.

The differences between the memories and behaviors reported for Sleimann and for Imad will have been noticed. But the differences at these points of connection are not the only ones. Imad recalled incidents and recognized persons and places peculiar to Ibrahim's experience. He shared Ibrahim's fondness for hunting (Stevenson, 1974, p. 304), and he showed traces of the same belligerence that Ibrahim had shown (Stevenson, 1974, p. 305). There were a variety of other appropriate behaviors as well, all of them missing from Said's repertory.

For his part, Sleimann recalled a trip on horseback from Lebanon to Syria to visit his sister, an incident which played no part in Imad's memories. When he first visited Khriby as a child, Sleimann not only found his way unaided to Said's former home, while there he recognized many persons and possessions, and called for others. He even "adopted a paternal attitude toward Said's sons, who at that time were much older than he" (Stevenson, 1974, p. 307).

Rather than merged or divided rebirth, it would seem that we are confronted here with the memories of two persons, unacquainted in the present, who, as relatives, had known each other intimately in previous lives. Naturally there are points of intersection in these memories, as the two individuals recall incidents or circumstances known to both of their previous personalities. In this the case resembles those of Ismail Altinkilic and Cevriye Bayri (Stevenson, 1980), who independently recalled lives in which they had been husband and wife. The case of Imad Elawar is complicated by an evident confusion on Imad's part about which of some of the incidents he recalled occurred to Ibrahim, and which to Said, but this need not stand in the way of our own clarity of thought. There seems no good reason for supposing that

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the confusion arose anywhere but in Imad's child's mind.

Many of these points have already been made by Stevenson, in his original report of the case (1966, 1974), and in his criticisms of Roll's interpretation of it (1984; Stevenson, Tart, and Grosso, 1980). Nevertheless, it is Roll's interpretation that has been adopted by others. Roge (1987) mistakenly attributes it to Stevenson, and does not even discuss alternatives in his book-length study of reincarnation reports (Rogo, 1985, see pp. 63-64). In view of this circumstance, it cannot have hurt to repeat the analysis, and its conclusion, here. Merged and divided rebirth conceivably may occur. But a careful reading of the report (Stevenson, 1966, 1974) does not support the view that they occurred in the case of Imad Elawar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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