

Empirical Evidence for Reincarnation?

Examining Stevenson's 'Most Impressive' Case

LEONARD ANGEL

One of the most influential sources of empirical evidence for reincarnation is *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, by Ian Stevenson (1974). In recent years, my students in various philosophy of religion classes have reminded me of just how influential it has been. Their papers on the afterlife routinely quote authors persuaded by this book that reincarnation or some other paranormal hypothesis is the only plausible explanation of Stevenson's data.

For example, Linda Badham and Paul Badham (1987: 262-263) are struck by "the sheer thoroughness of Stevenson's methods. . . . Every witness was subjected to rigorous questioning, careful notes were taken of what was said, and these were checked against a second inquiry some years later. . . . It is just not plausible to write Stevenson off as being so keen to convince us of the truth of reincarnation that he misrepresents matters to fit his case. . . . He does not try to make weak cases out to be stronger than the evidence warrants." The results, according to the Badhams, are significant. "Stevenson presents a strong case . . . for saying that at least some claimed 'memories of a former life' appear to be evidential for and suggestive of some theory of reincarnation or possession" (p. 269).

Guy Lyon Playfair (1976:165) states that "a study of [the Imad Elawar] case does not seem to lead to any probable explanation other than that of reincarnation." Robert Almeder (1990: 50) concludes that "there is good reason to suppose



Ian Stevenson's conduct of the Imad Elawar investigation, considered among the strongest of his cases, fails on six fundamental grounds.

that the hypothesis of reincarnation is the best explanation of the cases documented by Stevenson." Sylvia Fraser (1992), like Playfair, specifically cites the Imad Elawar case, and endorses Playfair's conclusion. Gunapala Dharmasiri (1989: 41) states that Stevenson "objectively verified [the] claims, and found them true." And there are others in a similar vein.

Oddly enough, despite the length of time since publication of *Twenty Cases*, it is hard to come by detailed examinations of it. Those who endorse Stevenson's work state that they have been persuaded, but do not say more than that. And skeptics tend to dismiss the work without detailed explanation. For example, Paul Kurtz's compendious *Transcendental Temptation* has a subsection "Reincarnation: Past Lives" (Kurtz 1986: 411-414), but there is only the briefest mention of Stevenson's data.

Paul Edwards (1987) has presented general arguments to support the view that the reincarnation hypothesis must be held to be highly improbable. But this seems to sidestep the issue of the specific content of the evidence. This, in effect, is Almeder's (1990:48) rejoinder to Edwards: "Edwards's charge that all this is just too incredible for any rational person to believe is simply a blatant bit of question-begging." John Beloff (1985: 361) makes a similar point. Ian Wilson (1981, 1987) criticizes Stevenson for being too light on the fraud issue. But most reviewers of these materials hold that outright deliberate deception on the part of enough of the participants to warrant dismissing the data is highly unlikely.

Edwards quotes Chari's dismissal of many of the cases as cultural fabrications. But Chari is not the right person to rely on in dismissing the Stevenson cases, for Chari (1978: 315) is persuaded that a combination of

naturalistic *and* paranormal phenomena is indicated by the strongest data. Sarah Thomason (1987) critically scrutinizes later work of Stevenson based on language competences, but not the *Twenty Cases* materials. How difficult is it, then, to account for the specific content of the best of the *Twenty Cases* material on purely naturalistic hypotheses?

It seems important, however belated, to undertake a thorough critical examination of the *Twenty Cases* methods and materials. I propose to begin this task. Further, I suggest that it is possible in a relatively short space to establish the presumptive unreliability of Stevenson's *Twenty Cases* work in general, due to gross failures in his methods of research, write-up of data, and analysis of hypotheses.

Which case shall we review? The Imad Elawar case leaps out at us as especially significant. Stevenson (1974: 371) includes it among his strongest cases. Further, in this case alone among the 20, Stevenson himself recorded the prior-to-verification memories, was present at the initial meetings between the boy who had the past-life memories and the surviving family members of the apparent past life, and conducted the verifications of the memories. "The most impressive in this respect is the case of a Lebanese boy called Imad, for in this case, Stevenson arrived before anyone had tried to verify any of his alleged memories" (Badham and Badham 1987: 261). And, as we've seen, it is singled out by several for special mention as a convincing case. It is perfect for our review.

I'll now try to show that Stevenson's conduct of the Imad Elawar investigation fails on six fundamental points.

1. In a proper investigation of spontaneous past-life memories of a



child, first and foremost is the need to record and report the "original, prior-to-verification memories" in the form in which they were originally noted. Stevenson presents the original information he received concerning the boy's memories, according to the parents, as follows:

They believed that he was claiming to have been one Mahmoud Bouhamzy of Khriby who had a wife called Jamilah and who had been fatally injured by a truck after a quarrel with its driver. (p. 277)

Stevenson later tabulates 57 items as constituting the original prior-to-verification memories. But the form in which they were originally recorded is not given. Inspection of the items

of the tabulation makes clear the need for a record of just what the parents said, how Stevenson recorded their data prior to verification, and how it was or was not subsequently reorganized for presentation in tabular form. Amazingly enough, the boy's memories are in the end held to be good evidence for reincarnation in spite of the fact that the best past-life candidate Stevenson found was not named Mahmoud Bouhamzy, did not have a wife named Jamilah, and did not die as a result of an accident at all, let alone one that followed a quarrel with the driver. Yet Stevenson does not give sufficient information for the reader to know what exactly the parents or the boy himself said that entitled Stevenson to discount the

original claims as interpreted by the parents and instead present the very different claims given in the tabulation.

2. Any attempts on the part of the investigator to distinguish between what the boy stated and what the informant relatives of the boy interpreted him as stating must be done before efforts at verification. Now consider Stevenson's write-up of the name "Mahmoud" in the tabulation:

2. Mahmoud (name mentioned by Imad). (p. 287)

Under Stevenson's "Comments" we find "Mahmoud Bouhamzy was an uncle of Ibrahim Bouhamzy." (Ibrahim Bouhamzy is the apparent past-life of the boy, according to Stevenson.) Thus it is taken as verified that a name the boy mentioned corresponded to a real person in the past-life's family, as though it is clear that the boy had been mentioning a name by way of referring to that uncle.

What is not mentioned in the tabulation of data is that the original information given by the parents of the boy was that they took their son to be claiming to have been Mahmoud Bouhamzy of Khriby. Presumably Stevenson doesn't mention this in the tabulation because he came to the conclusion that the parents had misunderstood the boy, or drew unwarranted conclusions from what the boy had said. But *when* did he come to that conclusion, and on what basis? There is clear evidence that Stevenson came to that conclusion only after traveling to Khriby with the expectation that the past-life was named "Mahmoud Bouhamzy" and had died as a result of an accident. Stevenson refers to his discovery (in Khriby) that the Mahmoud Bouhamzy who had lived in Khriby was not killed as a result of an accident with a truck as a compli-

cation for interpretation of the data and as "baffling" (p. 280). Thus it is clear that Stevenson's formulation of the data to be verified followed the effort to verify and was not fixed prior to verification.

Examples of this sort of problem abound. The reader who wishes to pursue this can consider item 20, which reads: "A truck ran over a man, broke both his legs, and crushed his trunk" (p. 291). The question is, when did Stevenson formulate the wording "A truck ran over a man" thus leaving open whether the man run over was the past-life or not? The parents certainly took it that Imad thought his past-life was killed as a result of an accident (pp. 303-304). And Stevenson understood right to the end that the boy took it that the past-life had died as a result of the accident (p. 319). Then by what right did he alter the claim. Stevenson has seemingly obfuscated the prior claims and distorted what he understood to be the boy's memories.

3. A third requirement is that data must not be presented in such a way as to obscure alternative hypotheses. Consider the identification of the town of Khriby. In the tabulation we find that the boy is presented as having remembered:

1. His name was Bouhamzy and he lived in the village of Khriby. (p. 287)

In the general account of the events, it is reported that Imad "had given the name of the village (Khriby)" (p. 276). Stevenson apparently made no effort to clarify *when* the boy was supposed to have begun to refer to the name "Khriby." However, we are given to understand that the boy's claims were taken seriously only after "a resident of the village of Khriby, where Imad claimed to have lived,

came to Kornayel, and Imad, seeing him in the street, recognized him in the presence of his paternal grandmother" (p. 276). However, Stevenson does not clarify for us—nor, apparently, did he attempt to clarify for himself—whether or not the identification of the town of the previous life as Khriby by Imad *followed* the "recognition" of the lost friend in the street or *preceded* it. Did people infer from the recognition in the street that Imad's past-life would have been in the town of the person "recognized," which is to say, Khriby? Or did Imad first state that his past-life was in Khriby and then recognize the visitor from Khriby as a neighbor of his past-life? Nothing in the presentation clarifies the point. Thus the tabulation of data creates an unwarranted impression that there was an *original* memory of the boy that the residence of the past-life was a town named "Khriby." A similar question can be raised about the name "Bouhamzy." Stevenson's handling of this sort of issue, indeed, his failure to mention these questions, vividly demonstrates an unfortunate insensitivity to central issues in data-gathering, presentation, and interpretation.

4. Tabulation of the data should not hide problems in comments. However, Stevenson fails egregiously on this issue. A typical example: according to item 35, the boy referred to a full well and an empty well at the home of the past-life. This is taken as confirmed by the fact that there were two vats used for storing grape juice. "During the rainy season one of these vats became filled with water, but the other, shallower vat did not, because the water evaporated from it. Thus one would be empty while the other was full" (p. 293). Does a five-year-old Druse village boy not know the difference between a vat and a well?

5. The specific methods of verification should be properly documented. However, Stevenson's method of reporting on his verification standards is certainly inadequate, and there is strong reason to believe that his verification standards themselves are inadequate. For example, we see that Stevenson, on at least some occasions, gathered information by leading questions: "*It occurred to me to ask the next day if Ibrahim had happened to have tuberculosis of the spine.*" Mr. Hafez Bouhamzy then stated that Ibrahim had tuberculosis of the spine" (p. 281; emphasis added). We soon find out that the response thus elicited was contradicted by the brother of Ibrahim Bouhamzy. Thus, Hafez's verifications are of questionable reliability. He seems to have been willing to go along with suggestions. According to the tabulation, however, the verification of data hinges very largely on Hafez's remarks. Hafez Bouhamzy was a verifier of 28 items. All told, Stevenson's failure to document his methods of eliciting verification must count as a serious, even fatal, flaw in his work.

6. Most deeply problematic is the fact that the most challenging rival account of the data to the reincarnation hypothesis has not even been raised, let alone assessed. The appropriate rival account has to do with the statistics of the informational nexus surrounding any "psychically" delivered material.

Consider the names, for instance. Was it likely that there had been references to the name "Bouhamzy" that Imad would have heard prior to using it? (Yes.) Are the first names, "Mahmoud," "Amin," "Said," and so on, common names? (They are.) Was it common for there to be wells in these villages? (Yes.) How common were garages, sheds, gardens, and other items prominent in the tabulation of supposed verifications? (Very

common.) In general, then, how difficult would it be to find someone in any large village in that general vicinity who matched more or less as many features as Ibrahim Bouhamzy is said to have matched, given an equal amount of post-facto reinterpretation and latitude allowed?

The correspondences between Imad Elawar's memories and Ibrahim Bouhamzy of Khriby are hardly impressive when we remember the information accepted originally by Stevenson and other points buried in the comments: The boy seemed to claim he was Mahmoud Bouhamzy, but no Mahmoud Bouhamzy fitting other features could be found. The best candidate according to Stevenson and the family members was Ibrahim Bouhamzy. But Ibrahim Bouhamzy did not have a wife named Jamilah, did not have a daughter named Mehibeh, did not have a brother who was a judge in Tripoli, did not have a son called "Adil," did not have a son called "Talil or Talal," did not have a son called "Salim," did not have a son called "Kemal," did not have an accident in which his legs were broken, did not go to the doctor's place where he had an operation as a result of the accident, nor was any accident connected with Ibrahim the result of a quarrel with the driver of a truck in the accident, nor were people killed in such an accident, nor did Ibrahim die as a result of an accident, nor was the driver of Ibrahim's truck, or any truck, involved with Ibrahim, a Christian, nor did Ibrahim have a hunting dog, nor did Ibrahim have two wells at his house, nor did Ibrahim use a truck to haul stones to his garden (nor was the truck in the accident full of stones), nor was it correct that Ibrahim had enough money and land so as to enable him to have no regular business (Ibrahim used a truck commercially and was a bus driver), nor

was the memory correct that he himself did not drive his truck (since Ibrahim was a truck driver), nor were there two garages in Ibrahim's house, nor was it true that Ibrahim had had one goat (rather, Ibrahim's family had a flock of goats when Ibrahim was young), nor is it true that Ibrahim had a sheep (his family had a flock of sheep when he was young), nor is it true that Ibrahim had five children (Ibrahim never married, and died at the age of 25, after spending the last year in a tuberculosis sanatorium), nor could Ibrahim speak English.

In virtue of what original claims, then, does Stevenson allow himself and the family to zero in on Ibrahim Bouhamzy? There were three informants who said Ibrahim had a mistress named Jamilah, and three who gave "discrepant testimony." Jamilah was beautiful, and Imad said Jamilah was beautiful. Jamilah wore red and dressed well; Ibrahim was a "friend" of the famous Druse politician Kemal Joubblatt; he had a farm; there was a sort of entrance with a round opening; Ibrahim was fond of hunting; Ibrahim had a hidden gun; Ibrahim once beat a dog; there was a slope near Ibrahim's house; Ibrahim had been rebuilding his garden; Ibrahim had a small yellow automobile, a bus, and a truck (although they were owned by the family and not, as Imad had suggested, by the past-life as an individual). That seems to be the sum total of the correspondences remaining from the original prior-to-verification memories. (That the garden had cherry and apple trees cannot be taken to verify the memory that "the new garden had cherry and apple trees" since Stevenson did not claim to establish when these trees were planted.)

All these correspondences are easily accounted for on naturalistic lines. Given all the failures, the

uncertainties, the unexplored contrary possibilities, and the evident unreliability of the supposed verifications, the case seems particularly unimpressive. Most important is this: the boy seemed to have in mind that in his past-life he was an important family man, wealthy enough not to have to work, with a beautiful wife and five children, moving in important circles, who met with a tragic accident in which his legs were broken, from which he died. This just doesn't seem to be Ibrahim Bouhamzy, a truck driver who used his family's cars, and died unmarried, and probably childless, at 25 of tuberculosis. It's only the way in which the information is misleadingly tabulated that leads people to miss the problems. Once we factor in what Persi Diaconis (1978) calls the problems in confirming data with "multiple end points," we see just how weak the Imad Elawar case is.

By far the majority of the details of the original claims attributed by the parents to their son were failures, but discounted on some ground or other. One can't help but wonder what the boy would have done if he had been led to some other village altogether. (For clear evidence of the boy's malleability, see p. 312.) All in all the truly relevant rival hypothesis to reincarnation is that of a distorted impression of the significance of the data. Yet Stevenson never even considered it.

Conclusions: In sum, Stevenson does not skillfully record, present, or analyze his own data. If a case regarded by Stevenson to be among the strongest of his cases—the only case of the 20 that had its purported verifications conducted by Stevenson himself—falls apart under scrutiny as badly as the Imad Elawar case does, it is reasonable to conclude that the other cases, in which data were first gathered by untrained observers, are

even less reliable than this one.

References

- Almeder, Robert. 1990. "On Reincarnation." In *What Survives?* ed. by Gary Doore, 34-50. Los Angeles: Tarcher.
- Badham, Paul, and Linda Badham. 1987. *Immortality or Extinction?* Savage, Md.: Barnes & Noble. (As excerpted in *Philosophical Thinking*, ed. by Ralph Clark, West Publ. Co., St. Paul, Minn., 1987. Page references are to the Clark anthology. No date is given for the original source in the Clark anthology.)
- Beloff, John. 1985. "What Is Your Counter-Explanation? A Plea to Skeptics to Think Again." In *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, ed. by Paul Kurtz, 359-377. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Beyerstein, Barry. 1987-88. The brain and consciousness, *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, 12: 163-173, Winter. Reprinted in *The Hundredth Monkey*, ed. by Kendrick Frazier, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1991.
- Chari. 1978. "Reincarnation and Research: Method and Interpretation." In *The Signet Handbook of Parapsychology*, ed. by Martin Ebon, 313-324. New York: Signet.
- Dharmasiri, Gunapala. 1989. *Buddhist Ethics*. Antioch: Golden Leaves.
- Diaconis, Persi. 1978. Statistical problems in ESP research. *Science*, 201: 131-136.
- Edwards, Paul. 1986-1987. The case against reincarnation, Parts 1-3. *Free Inquiry*, 6(4): 24-34; 7(1):38-43, 46-48; 7(2): 38-43, 46-49.
- Fraser, Sylvia. 1992. *The Book of Strange*. Toronto: Doubleday.
- Kurtz, Paul. 1986. *The Transcendental Temptation*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Playfair, Guy Lyon. 1976. *The Indefinite Boundary*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Stevenson, Ian. 1974. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Thomason, Sarah. 1987. Past tongues remembered. *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, 11:367-375, Spring.
- Wilson, Ian. 1981. *Mind Out of Time*. Cited by Paul Edwards, 1986-1987.
- . 1987. *The After-Death Experience*. New York: William Morrow.

Leonard Angel is in the Arts & Humanities Department, Douglas College, P.O. Box 2503, New Westminster, B.C. V3L 5B2, Canada.