

Comments on Heiner Schwenke: Past-Life Experiences: Re-living One's Past Lives or Participation in the Lives of Others

Kommentare zu Heiner Schwenke: Past-Life Experiences: Re-living One's Past Lives or Participation in the Lives of Others

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Personal Survival and Reincarnation

In replying to Heiner Schwenke's reflections, I begin with his comments on the processual soul theory I propose in *Signs of Reincarnation* (Matlock, 2019), not only because I wish to correct his portrayal of my views, but because starting there provides an ideal opening to discuss the problems I have with his presentation of the reincarnation case literature and his reasoning about how best to interpret it.

Schwenke says: "James Matlock, following Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, postulates that there are no persons, but only streams of experiential events. Such a stream may survive the death of the body and reincarnate in another human body (see Matlock, 2019: 36–37, 124, 255, 299, 301)" (p. 372). This, however, is not an accurate representation of my ideas, as can be seen by an inspection of the pages Schwenke cites. On pages 36–37 of *Signs of Reincarnation*, I am concerned with developing operational definitions of reincarnation, transmigration, and metempsychosis, to provide clarity to my discussion. I am not yet at the point of introducing my theory and I see no mention of it on these pages. On page 124, I explain, "I think of consciousness as duplex, consisting of a subconscious along with conscious awareness. I consider the subconscious to be the repository and source of all of our memories, dis-

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positions, desires, drives, and so forth. As I see it, our subconscious gives rise to much of our motivation and creativity and helps to maintain our personalities over time.” Does this sound like I am postulating that there “are no persons, but only streams of experiential events”?

On page 255, I say: “As I envision it, an experiential stream persists with its identity intact until its reincarnation. ... My revised process model acknowledges the discontinuity of conscious awareness across lives while asserting the subconscious continuity of self over successive lives.” Pages 299 and 301 refer to the Glossary at the end of the book, but it is not clear which terms Schwenke means to indicate. On page 299, perhaps it is my definition of Person: “A person is conceived to be composed of both body and mind. Persons are mortal but their personalities may survive their deaths, carried in the subconscious portion of their minds.” The following entry on Personality states: “A person’s personality is constructed from dispositions, memories, emotions, etc., latent in his subconscious and is diathanatic, able to survive death.”

Page 301 also falls in the Glossary. Here I think Schwenke must mean the entry entitled Reincarnation, which term I say is “operationalized as the transfer of the life force or *consciousness* stream of a human being to the body of another human being” (italics in original). “Consciousness” is italicized because it is cross-referenced to an entry on page 292 in which I state that I conceive of consciousness as duplex, encompassing the subconscious or subliminal mind as well as the consciously aware supraliminal mind. I also say that I consider *mind, psyche, spirit,* and *soul* to be roughly equivalent to *consciousness* (on this, see also Matlock, 2019: 124, 247, 303).

Throughout *Signs of Reincarnation*, I am careful to explain what I mean by key terms. Schwenke apparently considers *person* to be unproblematic, but he and I use it in different ways. On page 249 I say: “A person for me is embodied consciousness ... The distinction between the physical and psychological aspects of personhood is crucial. A person’s mind survives death, carrying his sense of self along with the dispositions and memories that undergird his personality, although he as a physical entity ceases to exist when his body dies.” I then discuss the extent to which personality is fixed postmortem. I give examples from mediumistic communications that suggest that personality may continue to develop and also that cognition persists in the postmortem consciousness stream. Earlier in the book (Matlock, 2019: 163–177) I deal with a variety of evidence for discarnate agency during the intermission period between lives in reincarnation cases.

I hope I have made clear that I do not adopt a strictly Whiteheadian process position, that is, I do not affirm that what survives death and reincarnates is merely a stream of experiential events. My theory is an extension of Whitehead’s. Whitehead did not allow for personal survival after death, apparently because he believed that a discarnate mind would not receive stimuli

from external sources, but I point out that a discarnate consciousness could continue to be stimulated through psi (extrasensory perception and psychokinesis). “With this amendment,” I say (Matlock, 2019: 255), “Whitehead’s process metaphysics allows for the survival of personality, discarnate agency, and elective reincarnation.” In the following sentence, I note that this amounts to “personal survival.”

Now, personal survival does not necessarily equate to personal reincarnation, so let us examine how I deal with that issue. I suggest that when reincarnation occurs, supraliminal conscious awareness is “reset” by having to work with a new brain, but that there is continuity at the subliminal or subconscious level and that “the past impresses itself [on the new person] through involuntary memories and unconscious influence on our behavior” (Matlock, 2019: 255). In other words, although we have different physical bodies in each life, our previous personalities continue to exist in our subconscious minds and have an impact on us. We are products not simply of heredity and environment, but of reincarnation too. I return to this conception and restate it a few pages later (Matlock, 2019: 259).

Schwenke seems to think that reincarnation implies a replication of the physical body in the next life. He says (p. 376), “If a person’s physical body were the bearer of their identity, a proof that a person existed previously would have to show that their physical body already existed at that time. Reincarnation would be conceptually impossible because it means a new earthly life in another physical body.” As he goes on, he ignores his qualifier “If” and accepts physical continuity as a requirement for reincarnation, which he therefore deems logically impossible. But as I observe, “People who identify a child as the reincarnation of a deceased person [in my sense] do not mean that he is the same person as before. They recognize that he is a different person, with something of the personality, behavior, or physical features of the previous person” (Matlock, 2019: 251). That is what I tried to capture by presenting the reincarnating personality as having an unconscious influence on the person of the new life.

Schwenke is correct that I regard reincarnation to be a form of possession, though he does not note that our definitions of possession differ. For Schwenke, “There are always *two beings* involved in possession, a host entity, and a possessing person“ (p. 382, his italics). I, however, draw the distinction between “transient or short-term” and “permanent” possession. I define possession not as the displacement of one personality by another but as “the occupation of a body by a spirit“ (Matlock, 2019: 174, 299). This allows me to conceive of reincarnation as a permanent or long-term possession. It also permits reincarnation to occur at any time during gestation (so that there may be cases with intermissions of less than 9 months) or even after birth, when the original possessing spirit leaves the body and is replaced by another which remains in control until the body’s death (what I call “replacement reincarnation”).

Schwenke is greatly troubled by these types of case, which for him constitute “overlapping lives.” The lives overlap because there are two physical bodies in existence at the same time.

In cases with intermissions of less than 9 months, gestation is underway before the previous person dies, and with replacement reincarnation, a person has been born and is living with one personality before the previous person dies. However, from a spiritual point of view there is no overlap, only a sequential possession of a given body. Schwenke says, in regards to replacements, “The soul already attached to the foetus would thus be separated from the body, which means that the foetal person would die if one applied Plato’s definition of death as the separation of soul and body” (p. 383). This appears to assume that Plato was talking not about bodily death, but soul death, or both together, which given the tenor of Plato’s writings, would seem rather unlikely. Plato I think would assume that the spiritual essence of the “foetal person” could not be annihilated, even with the body’s demise.

“The possibility of soul exchange cannot be logically refuted,” Schwenke observes, “but I know of no evidence for it in the accounts of experiences between reincarnations” (p. 383). Here he is showing his less than sure grasp of the reincarnation literature. There are in fact such accounts (Matlock, 2019: 176). Also, there is a case originally reported by Mills (1989), analyzed by me in my first book (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016: 191–195), and described briefly in *Signs of Reincarnation* (Matlock, 2019: 176), that may depict replacement during the gestation period. The subject’s date of birth is not known with certainty, but was most likely three months after the previous person’s murder. This man was shot in the forehead, the bullet exiting by his left ear. The case subject was born with a mark on his forehead and a bony protrusion by his left ear, commemorating the bullet’s entry and exit points. However, the subject also had three smaller birthmarks on the back of his head, unrelated to the previous person, which possibly were connected to a spirit replaced in the subject’s body in utero. Interestingly, the subject’s mother had a normal pregnancy until her last trimester, but suddenly fell ill and remained ill throughout those final three months.

I believe these sorts of physical correspondence have a psychogenic origin; the reincarnating mind is responsible for impressing the marks on its new body (Matlock, 2019: 158–159). Birthmarks and other physical signs figure in many cases, but Schwenke has little to say about them and about behavioral and personality traits shared between the subject and previous person. He writes about what he calls “past life experiences” (PLEs), but the experiences he has in mind are memories and he seems not to appreciate the centrality and importance of other features in solved reincarnation cases. I specify in solved cases, because it is only when a case has been solved (the previous person identified) and one can compare present and previous lives that correspondences of this order become apparent. Subjects also may recognize places and people related to the previous lives and they may interact with people from those lives as the previous person did. When deaths are violent, case subjects may have phobias or display posttraumatic stress symptoms of a kind one would expect of the previous person, had that person lived rather than died. In short, what transfers between lives in reincarnation cases is

much more than memory of people, places, and events: It is a broad spectrum of features that comprise personal identity and justify the term “personal reincarnation” in relation to them.

This makes it especially odd that Schwenke should write that “if one looks for accounts of child PLEs, one will find virtually nothing. Young children make almost exclusively objective-factual statements, like they used to live there-and-there, were called so-and-so, their parents were so-and-so, etc.” (p. 379). He cites a personal communication from Jim Tucker for this statement, but I wonder if something has been misunderstood. Although children often are reported to have said things like this, on the whole it is clear that they are trying to convey images in their minds. Many children are deeply attached to their memories and demand to be taken back to the places they recall having lived; they may deny that their mothers are their “real” mothers; they may invidiously compare their present life circumstances to what they recall of their previous lives. Schwenke also makes too much of children who speak about a previous life in the third person. A few children do this, but they are very much in the minority, and they may demonstrate their identification with the previous persons in other ways.

Schwenke appears to have gone astray by trying to find a common explanation for too broad a set of phenomena. Had he focused on the solved child cases, he would have found much evidence for personal reincarnation, but by including in his survey not only child cases, but unsolved adult cases, and then adding material from regressions under hypnosis, he has received the impression that what is involved here is no more than apparent memory of previous life events. He has missed the strong expressions of identity with the previous persons that are revealed emotionally, behaviorally, and physically in the solved child cases. Whatever the merits of Schwenke’s theory for understanding regression experiences and unsolved adult memory claims, I see no application to the solved child cases with which reincarnation research begins.

There is much else that could be said in response to Schwenke’s article, but I will leave that for other commentators.

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What is Science?

The article of Heiner Schwenke I discuss below consists of an attempt to condense the main contents of his latest book (Schwenke, 2020) into one single paper. These publications are a refreshing contribution to recent discussions about what he calls “past life experiences” (PLEs) and reincarnation. Rather than merely adopting the standard roads of debating the survival/reincarnation hypothesis, the living-agent psi hypothesis, and the physicalist hypotheses usually advanced by skeptics (Nahm, 2021), Schwenke advocates another option: In his view, PLEs can best be explained by “direct participation in the past experiences of others” (Schwenke, 2021: 367). This explanatory model implies survival of death, but not reincarnation. His approach is stimulating and thought-provoking. However, although I liked reading Schwenke’s book and article, and liked being stimulated to question and refine my own views on PLEs, I found several of his arguments unclear and ultimately not convincing. As demonstrated in the following, a major weakness of several of his arguments consists in an inadequate understanding of science and the scientific rationale.

The Alleged Problem of Overlap Cases

An initial problem of Schwenke’s approach is that he treated a large variety of PLEs of different origin, quality and phenomenology as a single set of experiences that would mutually support his hypothesis of participation in the past experiences of others, thereby rejecting the reincarnation hypothesis. Yet, widely different sets of PLEs might well require different interpretations. In fact, some of Schwenke’s arguments for demonstrating that all PLEs can best be interpreted without reincarnation appear arbitrary. A striking example concerns young children who claim having lived before (cases of the reincarnation type, CORT). Among these cases, Schwenke considers what he calls “overlap cases” a very strong argument against the reincarnation hypothesis. In such overlap cases, the person whose life the child claims to remember has died at a time when the child was already born. Frankly, I don’t understand why these cases should question the reincarnation hypothesis. Numerous reincarnation researchers as well as the Indian population with a belief in reincarnation think that these cases are perfectly reconcilable with

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the concept of reincarnation. In Hindi, there is even the term *parakayapravesh* that describes the act of “entering another body”. It also translates as “possession” and is applicable for overlap cases (Pasricha, 1990).³ Assuming there is something like a “soul” that can migrate from body to body, this process might be quite variable and it might well be of subordinate importance when exactly this soul associates with a new body, or when it enters it. This could take place during gestation, but under certain circumstances also after the birth of another body. Reports about how subjects chose their parents or entered the body or the womb of their future mother, sometimes also fetuses, are well-known in the literature on prebirth-memories and CORT (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016; Ohkado & Ikegawa, 2014; Rivas et al., 2015; Sharma & Tucker, 2004; Tucker, 2021). Similar experiences are reported from out-of-body experiences during near-death experiences (NDEs). They indicate that an NDEr’s awareness along with the ability to perceive the surroundings can temporarily leave and return to their body, even when it is seemingly lifeless. They virtually reincarnate in their own body (Nahm & Weibel, 2020; Rivas et al., 2016). I don’t find it surprising that there are also a few accounts according to which NDErs have described trying to enter the body of a new-born baby or a child who had apparently just died, but gave up on it and returned to their own body again (Brownell, 1981; Shroder, 1999). Had these “souls” successfully entered a different body, this would have resulted in instances of *parakayapravesh*. All these reports form a perfectly natural and continuous spectrum of experiences.

However, Schwenke introduced several “defence strategies” that have purportedly been advanced by authors to avoid the alleged falsification of the reincarnation hypothesis caused by the existence of overlap cases. Curiously, however, the seemingly most important arguments of Schwenke focus on semantic and linguistic problems, and he seems to think that these semantic problems are sufficient to judge upon the best interpretation of the reported experiences. For example, he makes much of the finding that many authors regarded overlap cases as instances of possession-like reincarnation, although they are not reconcilable with the traditional Western and Christian concept of possession (he elaborated his arguments much more extensively in his book). Yet, evaluating phenomena on the grounds of whether your language has an appropriate term for them or not is unacceptable from a scientific perspective. In science, phenomena come first, not the names and concepts that somebody has attached to them. If there is no fitting name in your preferred languages for a given phenomenon, expand the meaning of a related term, find a new one, or use existing terms of other cultures’ languages that fit already. In our context, *parakayapravesh* can account for possession-like reincarnation quite naturally;

3 According to old Sanskrit scripts, *parakayapravesh* originally refers to a yoga practice, the art of entering the body of someone else – even of someone who just died. It belongs to the claimed paranormal “siddhis” of advanced yoga practitioners. This type of possession can be temporary or permanent and the term apparently fits to overlap cases as well (Pasricha, 1990).

it even translates as possession as well. Reincarnation researcher James Matlock coined the term “replacement reincarnation” for overlap cases – a term that also suits quite well (Matlock, 2017).⁴ Clearly, one shouldn’t dismiss any interpretation of given phenomena just because there is no fitting name for it in the vocabulary of one’s favored language.

This leads me to another problem of Schwenke’s arguments that is likewise rooted in an improper understanding of what science is and how it works.

What is Science?

Already in the Abstract of his article, Schwenke rejects “the widespread notion that the occurrence of personal reincarnation can be investigated by scientific means”. Throughout his article and book, he repeated this claim a number of times in varying formulations. However, these claims are evidently wrong. Thousands of pages covering scientific studies on reincarnation have already been published in academic journals and books. I can only imagine that Schwenke actually wanted to say something like this: One cannot *prove* and *disprove* personal reincarnation using scientific means. Putting it this way, I would agree. But obviously, science is not limited to establishing proof or disproof. Science is a multifaceted endeavor that offers numerous different strategies to accommodate for specific research questions and frame conditions in order to enable the formation of appropriate conclusions.

Therefore, Schwenke’s reason for believing that reincarnation cannot be investigated scientifically because consciousness is “beyond the reach of science” and “persons are then beyond the reach of science as well” (Schwenke, 2021: 375) is inapt. The fact that the assumed consciousness of other human beings is accessible to us only in indirect ways doesn’t imply that consciousness- or person-related questions cannot be investigated scientifically. Otherwise, numerous scientific research branches in especially psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and also parapsychology were pointless and doomed to fail from the start. But they aren’t pointless because as soon as one regards an environment as given, numerous facets of this environment, including other seemingly conscious beings and the reincarnation hypothesis, can be investigated scientifically. Performing scientific studies of other supposedly conscious entities is even possible from the perspective of solipsism or in lucid dreams (hey, all you scientists out there: How do you know that you are *not* dreaming right now? Can you prove that you are *not* dreaming?). Schwenke comes close to realizing this when he states that as a solution to the fun-

4 Although Matlock might have a different understanding of a “person” than Schwenke, it is incorrect to state that “James Matlock [...] postulates that there are no persons” (Schwenke, 2021: 372). Compare, for example, the entries on “person” and “personality” in the Glossary of Matlock’s recent book (Matlock, 2019: 298).

damental inaccessibility of consciousness in other beings, “*Science* is left to [...] suppositional reasoning” (Schwenke, 2021: 378, emphasis added).

This is correct, and I’d even say: Scientists are typically concerned with “suppositional reasoning” only. Anything else is the exception rather than the rule. This is one reason why in many branches of natural sciences and consciousness studies, one should generally not expect to obtain a scientific “proof” for something. In contrast to mathematics, for example, we typically end up discussing evidence as well as the *plausibility* of explanatory models in these fields of research. This is exactly the way in which past scientific investigations regarding the reincarnation question have been performed. Moreover, this is precisely the approach Schwenke himself adopted throughout his article, and when he concluded after evaluating the available evidence for PLEs that “it is *more plausible* to understand PLEs as participation in the past experiences of others” than as instances of reincarnation (Schwenke, 2021: 384, emphasis added).

But unfortunately, Schwenke’s muddled understanding of what science is renders many of his arguments confusing. Were reincarnation really inaccessible for science, I wonder why he took the trouble to elaborate an alternative interpretation for PLEs including CORT that builds on exactly the same consciousness- and person-related past-life evidence, weighing the pros and cons of different hypotheses. His preferred alternative hypothesis would equally be subjected to the charge that it is scientifically inaccessible. In fact, he seems to admit this when he stated that extrasensory perception, an indispensable prerequisite for all his models of direct participation in the past lives of others, “does not enjoy the advantage of being more accessible to scientific testing than the reincarnation hypothesis” (Schwenke, 2021: 386). If, by contrast, Schwenke thought that his hypothesis is scientifically justified and meaningful because it is the most plausible explanation for the PLE evidence – as mentioned, he even spoke of the “falsification” of the reincarnation hypothesis, and the concepts of hypotheses building and falsification naturally imply a scientific rationale – he must also admit that notions of authors who think that the reincarnation hypothesis is the most plausible explanation for at least some PLEs are likewise scientifically justified and meaningful.

Summing up, Schwenke’s understanding of science needs corrections and refinements to avoid the described confusions and shortcomings of his arguments. Still, I’d like to reiterate that Schwenke’s article and book are an interesting and inspiring read. They contribute to stimulating the debate about reincarnation cases and survival, contain new lines of arguments, and shed new light on some of the traditionally discussed topics.

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The “Reincarnation Interpretation” Still Seems to Be a Likely Possibility

In the intriguing paper titled “Past-Life Experiences: Re-living One’s Own Past Lives or Participation in the Lives of Others?” Heiner Schwenke argues against the reincarnation interpretation of past-life memories subjects often claim to have, on the ground that such memories are not the subjects’ “real memories,” which are characterized as re-experiencing the subjects’ past experiences. Although Schwenke discusses adult reincarnation cases and overlap cases as well as child cases, here, unless unavoidable, I will focus on the last since they have been of central concern in reincarnation research. Furthermore, I do not deal with Schwenke’s important claim that the existence or non-existence of the process of reincarnation cannot be examined scientifically, because such argument should heavily depend on the complicated issue of what science is (Reiss & Sprenger, 2020).

In the article, Schwenke calls into question the reincarnation interpretation by, first, claiming that „[y]oung children make almost exclusively objective-factual statements, like they used to live there-and-there, were called so-and-so, and their parents were so-and-so, etc.,” which only shows that „children can have unusual knowledge of a past life“ (p. 379). He concedes that children might have not just unusual *knowledge*, but real past-life experiences if occasional fragmentary data are taken into consideration, such as adults’ recollections of their childhood past-life experiences, childhood dreams of a previous life, and drawings relating to a previous life.

Then, he points out the fact that past-life memories can be recalled from the outside perspective and can contain a switch of perspective. This is true for older subjects as substantiated by Schwenke by citing Carol Bowman’s hypnotic regression experience (p. 380). However, for young children, it is not clear whether there is evidence for his statement that „it seems that in child PLEs [Past-Life Experiences] both the external perspective and the switch of perspective occur (see, e. g., Bowman, 1997: 11, 15, 19).“ In the cited pages of Bowman (1997), she describes

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her own children's past-life memories, but as far as the present author can see, the descriptions there do not indicate the existence of the external perspective nor the switch of perspective. For the sake of argument, however, let us assume that Schwenke's claim is correct and children's past-life memories may contain the external perspective and the switch of perspective.

According to Schwenke, „an experiential perspective other than *the first-person perspective* may be considered a fairly reliable criterion of sham memories,“ and „a *switch* between the first-person perspective and an outside perspective is an indication of a sham memory“ (p. 378). This leads to the conclusion that past-life memories containing the external perspective and the switch of perspective are not regarded as subjects' real memories. Schwenke goes on to argue that past-life memories recalled from the first-person perspective are not real memories, either, because they are not different from those containing the external perspective and the switch of perspective phenomenologically or in terms of their closeness to reality (p. 380).

Let us examine these two points raised by Schwenke.

Memory as Re-Experience or Memory as Knowledge?

First, actual reports of children with past-life memories contradict Schwenke's claim that “[y]oung children make almost exclusively objective-factual statements” since there are numerous examples in which children appear to re-experience the past experiences when they recall them. It might be the case that reports of children with past-life memories, especially tabulations of their statements (and other features) contained in reports written in the format à la Ian Stevenson, might give an impression that they are just a list of *knowledge* related to children's past lives, but careful reading will reveal that even objective-factual statements of children are often accompanied with features that strongly suggest that they are re-experiencing previous experiences.

For instance, consider the case of Sukla, reported in Stevenson (1974a: 52–67). She was born in a village called Kampa in West Bengal in 1954 and made many verified statements and recognitions concerning a woman named Mana, who had lived in a village named Bhatpara eleven miles away from Kampa and had died in 1948. The first of the verified statements made by Sukla was that she had had a daughter named Minu. It is not the case, however, that she made this statement as if she just gave a piece of information concerning her past life. Stevenson (1974a: 52–53) writes: „When she was about a year and a half old and barely able to talk, she was often observed cradling a block of wood or a pillow and addressing it as ‘Minu’. When asked who ‘Minu’ was, Sukla said ‘My daughter.’” Minu was still an infant when Mana died, and the behavior Sukla showed when she mentioned the name of Mana's daughter strongly suggests that she was re-experiencing the experience of holding her daughter in her past life. Sukla's emotional attachment to Minu as reported in Stevenson (1974a: 57) appears to confirm this conjecture:

Particularly impressive to witnesses were the tears with which Sukla greeted Minu [when they first met] and the attention and affection she afterwards lavished on her when they met subsequently. [...] Professor Pal witnessed an example of Sukla's emotional attachment to Minu when Sri Dilip Kumar Pathak told Sukla in Kampa (falsely to test her) that Minu was ill with high fever in Bhatpara. At this Sukla began to weep, and it took some time for her to be reassured that Minu was well. On another occasion, when Minu really was ill and news of this reached Sukla, she became extremely distressed, wept, and demanded to be taken to Bhatpara to see Minu.

Over the three years after she first talked about Minu, Sukla made a number of factual statements related to Mana, but some of them will best be interpreted that she was re-experiencing the relevant experiences as she was talking. For instance, she said her husband and she had once gone to a movie and they afterwards had refreshments. "The occasion was memorable because it was the only time Mana ever went to a movie in her life and she and her husband were afterwards reproached by her stepmother-in-law" (Stevenson, 1974a: 58). Likewise, when Sukla visited the house where Mana had lived and went to the room which had been Mana's bedroom, she said correctly that she had had a brass pitcher in the room. It appears to be highly unlikely that Sukla made these statements merely as factual statement.

There are many other examples like the statements made by Skula and it does not seem to be appropriate to say that children with past-life memories "make almost exclusively objective-factual statements."

The Experiential Perspective

Despite Schwenke's claim concerning the perspective of memory recall, there are numerous studies showing that people are quite flexible in visual perspective when they recall or re-experience events in which they were involved. In Rice and Rubin (2011: 570), which is cited by Schwenke himself, it is shown that in experiments in which subjects were asked to recall 10 or 15 events from their lives such as being in an accident, having conversation, running for exercise, watching news, etc. and describe the perspectives they experienced, as much as 65% were third-person perspectives. In McCarrol and Sutton (2017: 123), another study cited by Schwenke, it is concluded that "[t]he imagery of personal memory involves a plurality of perspectives. In remembering the past, we can adopt a range of viewpoints, internal and external, visual, and non-visual."

Therefore, Schwenke's central argument against the reincarnation interpretation of past-life memories does not seem to hold.

Survival or Super-Psi?

It is somewhat surprising that the paper does not even touch on the “survival hypothesis vs. super-psi (or living-agent psi) hypothesis” debate, especially, (1) Stevenson’s arguments based on xenoglossy cases for the reincarnation interpretation (Stevenson, 1974b; 1984) in terms of Polanyi’s (1958; 1962; 1966) distinction between ‘knowledge *that*’ and ‘knowledge *how*’; and (2) Stephen Braude and Michael Sudduth’s counterarguments based on the manifestation of skills observed in prodigies and savants (Braude, 2003; Sudduth, 2016, among others). The debate is pertinent to Schwenke’s discussion of the nature of past-life memories and, in the opinion of the present author, should be incorporated in the future work by Schwenke.

Conclusion

Although the central arguments of Schwenke against the reincarnation interpretation of past-life memories do not seem to stand as shown above, the article does shed new light on the analysis of the reincarnation phenomena and in that sense, is an important contribution to the field.

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KM WEHRSTEIN⁶

Schwenke's Model and the Reality of Reincarnation Cases

Let me start by disclosing that I am an avowed empiricist. You will rarely catch me debating anything that can be tested. It is from this perspective that I address Dr. Heiner Schwenke's explanation for child cases of the reincarnation type, in a paper that must be commended for its thoroughness and thoughtfulness, however much of it I disagree with. In this commentary, I will get certain secondary disagreements out of the way first, before presenting my central response.

1. The example of a "past-life experience" Schwenke supplies (p. 370) would not be considered a strong reincarnation case, or even a reincarnation case at all, by any professional reincarnation researcher without *much* more evidence. One purported memory somewhat verified in a vague way absolutely does not suffice; we would require not only more memories, better verified, but evidence in other categories. Personally, I thought Edna's experience could be equally well interpreted as a manifestation of haunting. One may well use it to criticize amateur interpretations of experiences such as Edna's, but not academic reincarnation research, assuming that was what Schwenke was attempting.
2. It was odd to read that reincarnation research has neglected the difference between "remembering as re-living" and "remembering as knowledge" (p. 376f.). I wasn't sure why Schwenke had felt the need to invent new terms for episodic memory and for semantic memory or autobiographical impression ("remembering as knowledge" could mean either) when reading the more recent reincarnation research would have let him know that we already have them. "Episodic memory" and "semantic memory" are mainstream memory research terms; "autobiographical impression" was coined by Matlock

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and me in recognition of the fact that past-life memory tends to lack “autobiographical knowledge” (a term coined by Martin Conway, about whom more below). “Autobiographical knowledge” means our full life-story as constructed from our growing collection of episodic memories, and includes key facts we are socially expected to know such as our name, address, date of birth, etc.⁷ In past-life memory, we tend to have only fragments of this, which are referred to as autobiographical impressions. To say reincarnation research has neglected distinctions between types of memory is an injustice.

In fact it is by our knowledge of episodic memories that we know Schwenke’s claim that they are rare in child cases is incorrect; perhaps he is misattributing scant descriptions to lack of episodic memories rather than the natural lack of descriptive verbal skill in young children. Virtually every child case contains at least one clearly episodic-memory-based account: the most recent death. (Examples: Tucker, 2016, case of James Leininger; Stevenson, 1980: 236–259, case of Cevriye Bayri; Mills, 1989: 158; case of Toran Singh: 156–171.)

3. After I read the lengthy logic chain ending with the conclusion that reincarnation cannot be studied scientifically (p. 374), I had to wonder why Schwenke did not stop writing there, as anything more in a scientific journal would be meaningless if this were true, and why he was proposing an hypothesis to explain past-life experiences, since he had just admitted it was untestable. As arguments go, this seems a little dangerous to itself; if we cannot test or even study reincarnation, it is just as irrefutable as his model.

I was even more surprised to read later, “Scientific methods cannot determine whether a subject knows something” (p. 386). Now I am a more practical than philosophical person. I think, and I am sure Schwenke would agree despite his more philosophical bent, that if for some reason he or I had to undergo neurosurgery, we would very much prefer the neurosurgeon to have been tested scientifically many times on his knowledge of neurosurgical technique, and passed them all. I think I need not add more.

Here now is my central response: Science, unlike logic, mathematics or law, does not deal in proof; it concerns itself instead with theories that become established as the evidence supporting them builds and they are seen to enable accurate predictions. Thus reincarnation researchers do not claim to prove reincarnation, or try to; to test it as a theory we attempt to unearth phenomena for which all other explanations are impossible or highly unlikely. An explanation proffered for a phenomenon must explain all its features to be even considered, let alone accepted, as valid, and the typical strong reincarnation case cannot be plausibly explained by any known explanation other than reincarnation.

⁷ To gain good understanding of the relationship between episodic memories and autobiographical knowledge, I recommend Conway, 2005, p. 609, Table 5.

Some aspects of reincarnation cases that Schwenke's notion of psychic transference of information do not explain that I can think of in short order are:

- The declarations of the children themselves, including descriptions of intermission (life between life) memories connecting the previous death with the start of the current life. Is it likely they are all lying or deluded, when psychological testing has suggested they are psychologically normal and in fact unusually intelligent? (Haraldsson, 1997; Tucker & Nidiffer, 2014)
- Intermission memories that connect the previous incarnation's death and the child's birth and have veridical elements from the time in between. (Example: Stevenson, 1975: 328–329, case of Veer Singh.)
- The tendency of children who return to places frequented by their past incarnations to notice aspects that have changed since the past incarnations lived there. (Example: Shroder, 1999: locations 2923–2935, case of Sunita Chandak.)
- Announcing dreams of a mother (or other person) matched later by the child's memories, i. e. a deceased person tells a woman in a dream that he or she will be born to her, and her next child has memories and behavioural correspondences matching the life of the same deceased person. (Example, in which the pregnant woman considered abortion until a deceased relative told her "Keep that child!" in a dream and the child's memories and behaviours matched the deceased relative: Stevenson, 2003: 152, Samuel Helander. Full case 152–158.)
- The consistent tendencies of some objective facts in reincarnation, such as typical age of first past-life-related utterances and tendency for past-life memories to fade at age 5–8, to be universal, while others, such as intermission length and prevalence of sex-change cases to vary by culture (Matlock, 2017.)
- The fact that children with past-life memories are born subsequent to the deaths of the person whose lives they recall, with rare exceptions. "Overlap cases", by which Schwenke means "anomalous-date cases" (Stevenson's term) or "replacement cases" (Matlock's), are a handful among thousands and some of them may well be artifacts of birth-record or death-record errors, as uncertainty about their records shows.
- Birthmarks that correspond with past-life injuries, unless memories from deceased people that produce psychosomatic marks are entering the child's mind *in utero*. (There is no question that past-life-related birthmarks are psychosomatic; they could not otherwise exist.)

To these I would add on a scale broader than individual cases:

- The fact that, after innumerable incidences of, in Schwenke's words, "some form of universal human experience" on which "it is reasonable to assume that reincarnation is based" (p. 369), cultures worldwide have interpreted them as reincarnation rather than Schwenke's model. It is hard to imagine that so many people have been wrong.

If past-life experiences were psychically drawn from deceased people otherwise unconnected to the subject, one would expect that the timing of these occurrences would be fairly random. There is no reason a child would not freely receive scenes and verifiable facts from two or more people who had lived simultaneously, or at the same time as the child but without the typical signs of replacement cases (the apparent physical death and departure of the previous soul, and absence of all its memories after the replacement) occurring. But we do not see such cases.

There is one feature of reincarnation cases that Schwenke's model fails to explain which I only touched on in the first point of my list above: people who remember past lives remember themselves as having lived them. It is well-documented in reincarnation literature that children identify with their previous incarnations to the point of insisting that they are still named as they were before, wanting to be with their "real" (meaning previous) families, demanding to be taken to their "real" home, and/or having identity crises. (Example: Lönnerstrand, 1998: case of Shanti Devi.) Schwenke contends "one person cannot take on another personal identity," (footnote 4) but here are children who apparently have two identities, both of which (unlike alters in dissociative identity disorder cases) are confirmed by known facts as genuine and separate persons, by the dictionary definition of "person", one of whom is known to be deceased. How this is possible I will explore below.

Schwenke's discussion of the words "person" and "identity" in footnote 4 and elsewhere invokes my favorite subtopics within reincarnation: the relationship of identity to memory and the concept of identity across lives. (I concur with Schwenke that impersonal models of reincarnation have little strength, as the data shows all manner of personal aspects.)

In considering the terms "person" and "identity", however, we must remember that they and their dictionary definitions are in the language of a non-reincarnationist culture.⁸ The definitions do not acknowledge or encompass its existence and thus do not suffice for effective discussion of reincarnation theory. Dictionary definitions of "person" clearly describe an incarnate human only (and in fact that is how Matlock actually uses the term in a reincarnation context; Matlock, 2019: 249). Standard definitions of "identity" relating to persons also refer to the identity of an incarnate human only, and such identity is defined very much socially and hence physically as I will show below.

8 I am assuming that since this is true in English it is also true in German.

In his work, leading mainstream memory researcher Martin Conway refers to the “self-memory system” (Conway, 2005), a term which inherently recognizes the inextricability of identity and memory. A person with complete amnesia may have an identity to others who know his name, can look at his birth certificate and other documents, etc., but he has none in his own mind other than that of his first-person viewpoint (a concept to which I will return); he knows he is “me” but not who “me” is, because the other aspect of identity is knowledge of himself and his life, and knowledge is memory. He cannot tell you his name, the names of his relatives, his address, his date of birth, his occupation, his accomplishments, his life story, what he looks like (unless he uses a mirror) or any of the other markers by which we generally define “who he is.” Thus he is identity-less.

Note that cases of dissociative identity disorder, better known as multiple personality, are characterized by memory abnormalities such as amnesia of the main personality for times in which an alter controlled the body, and the full set of the patient’s memories being divided up between the personalities. (Prince, 1906; Hyslop & Prince, 1916.)

Identity is very much socially and therefore physically defined (as incarnate sociality is conducted almost entirely via physical sensory apparatus and physical actions, the only exceptions being psi interactions). Again, others identify a person by their name, appearance, voice, photo identification, etc., all via sensory faculties and hence physically. The nature of our body as perceived by others (male or female, young or old, attractive or repulsive) does much to define our identity both in our own minds and those of others. In fact, our identity is very much given to us by others, including the central identifier of name (our parents and ancestors), language and customs (our culture), occupation (our employers) and, in part, reputation (all who know us, though we can control this to some degree). All this happens via the sensory faculties except during our relatively rare psychic connections. For this reason, I am inclined to call this identity social identity; certainly standard definitions of that term do not extend outside one incarnation.

The aspect of identity that persists across lives can only be “named” from the outside by tracking the series of lives one soul has lived, or at least relating one to another; but the reincarnation data shows that certain features of identity such as behavioral tendencies (including personality traits) and even physical signs such as birthmarks that resemble scars of past-life wounds, racially-specific physical traits and individual facial features can persist across lives (Stevenson wrote the definitive work on physical signs: 1997.)

From the inside, the reincarnation data show that personal viewpoint and sense of identity have a non-physical continuity from life to life, as this is what the children and the few adults whose cases have been published tell us. People who have remembered past lives well enough to think of themselves as series of lives do not stop thinking of themselves as people, of course, and will refer to themselves as such even when talking about matters that span lives. Here “person”

actually means “soul”, not the combination of body and soul during one life as per the dictionary, because bodies change while souls persist. Likewise “identity” means one’s first-person viewpoint plus that which is remembered about oneself, which can encompass the current social identity entire and previous social identities in a fragmented way only, usually, due to lack of autobiographical knowledge. “Will” (not his real name) is, and knows he is, the soul in his current body who was in the body of Nazi death-camp supervisor Wilhelm Emmerich from 1916 to 1944 and in the body of German WWI soldier Wilhelm Schmidt from 1894 to 1915 (Wehrstein, 2019 and 2021). This concept of identity might have been best and most succinctly expressed by General George Patton in a poem about his claimed past-life memories: “Many names but always me” (Patton, 1922). It is through identity being composed of memory that Shanti Devi can have two social identities in one mind, by the fact of living her current life while remembering her past one.

I hope this commentary has served to correct some misconceptions about reincarnation research, and helped redeem the field in Schwenke’s eyes.

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DIETER HASSLER⁹

Ist die Reinkarnationshypothese widerlegt?

Gerhard Mayer hat mich gebeten, meine Gedanken zu dem Artikel dieser Ausgabe „Past-Life Experiences: Re-living One’s Own Past Lives or Participation in the Lives of Others?“ von Heiner Schwenke aufzuschreiben. Das will ich gerne tun, denn ich finde es erfreulich, dass – selten genug – ein deutscher Philosoph das Thema „Reinkarnation“ aufgreift und sich dabei als profunder Kenner des reichhaltigen Materials an Erfahrungswissen ausweist und sich auf dieses in seiner Argumentation stützt.

Mein Kommentar zu den beiden Hauptthemen des Artikels von Heiner Schwenke:

Erfahrungen aus früheren Leben

Um zu validen Aussagen darüber kommen zu können, ob es für den Gedanken der Wiedergeburt eine reale Basis gibt, muss m. E. das ganze Paket der vielfältigen Erfahrungen, die dazu beitragen können, betrachtet und geprüft werden, welche der Alternativerklärungen sich mit den Daten der vorgefundenen Phänomene am besten deckt (Hassler, 2011, 2015, 2015a, 2020, 2021). Aus Platzgründen ist dies in einem Zeitschriftenartikel nur unzureichend unterzubringen. Folgerichtig greift sich Heiner Schwenke nur einen kleinen Teilbereich aus besagtem umfangreichem Paket heraus, nämlich „Erfahrungen aus früheren Leben (PLEs)“. Diese schränkt er allerdings weiter ein auf Erinnerungen im Sinne von Wiedererleben und behauptet, ohne dies näher zu begründen, sie seien der primäre Zugang zur Vergangenheit eines Menschen (S. 367). Eine weitere Einschränkung folgt auf Wiedererleben in der „Ich-Perspektive“. Wahrnehmungen in der Außenperspektive und solche, die zwischen Außenperspektive und

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Innensicht wechseln können, werden ebenso ausgeschlossen. Was bleibt, sagt der Autor (S. 380), ist nicht vom ausgeschlossenen Teil zu unterscheiden, woraus er schließt, dass die Erfahrungen aus früheren Leben insgesamt keine Erinnerungen im Sinne von Wiedererleben sind und folglich auch kein Beweis für Reinkarnation.

Es zeigt sich exemplarisch, was schon lange bekannt ist: Dass umso weniger an Argumentation für die Reinkarnationshypothese übrig bleibt, je schmaler der Ausschnitt aus dem großen Erfahrungspool gewählt wird. Somit wird einseitig gegen die These der Wiedergeburt argumentiert. An keiner Stelle wird gesagt, unter welchen Umständen die Reinkarnationshypothese akzeptiert werden kann.

Da Erinnerungen im Sinne von Wiedererleben fast nur in Rückführungen Erwachsener in ihre früheren Leben vorkommen, fallen auf diese Weise die ohnehin nur wenigen erfolgreich nachgeprüften Fälle aus Rückführungen unter den Tisch (Hassler, 2015).

Ich bin mir sicher, dass Heiner Schwenke zu einer anderen Beurteilung gekommen wäre, basierte sie nicht nur auf theoretisch-philosophischen Überlegungen, sondern auf eigener Erfahrung von gelungenen und erfolgreich nachgeprüften Rückführungen, wie z. B. bei dem amerikanischen Handelsvertreter Bruce Kelly, der sich als U-Boot-Matrose James Johnston erlebte (Hassler, 2015: 318–326 oder Hassler, 2021), oder Ivy, die als Prostituierte im Buffalo der „roaring twenties“ lebte und starb (Hassler, 2015: 263–278).

Zeitlich überlappende Leben von früherer und heutiger Person

Bleiben noch die viel zahlreicheren und überzeugenderen Fälle von kleinen Kindern, die behaupten, sich an ein früheres Leben erinnern zu können, mit ihren vielfältigen Erscheinungsformen (Hassler, 2011). Unter diesen gibt es eine sehr kleine Zahl von Ausnahmefällen, in denen die „frühere Person“ erst nach der heutigen gestorben ist. Stevenson bezeichnet diese als „anormale Fälle“ und zählt ca. 10 unter seinen insgesamt knapp 3.000 Fällen (Hassler, 2011: 226). In zwei gut dokumentierten Fällen (Jasbir in Stevenson, 1976: 51 und Sumitra Singh in Stevenson, 1989 und in deutsch in Hassler, 2011: 421) trat eine markante Persönlichkeitsänderung in der Folge einer schweren Erkrankung auf, die beinahe zum Tode geführt hätte. Stevenson löst sich hier von der Deutung durch Reinkarnation und legt als Erklärung eine dauerhafte Besetzung nahe oder alternativ ein „walk-in“ als einvernehmlichen Seelenaustausch. In anderen Fällen mögen andere Erklärungen besser passen. Darauf möchte ich hier nicht näher eingehen.

Auf solch individuelle Erklärungen dieser Fälle möchte Heiner Schwenke sich jedoch nicht einlassen. Er behauptet (S. 382): „Da sich Überschneidungsfälle nicht von Nicht-Überschneidungsfällen unterscheiden, erscheint es unangemessen, die ersteren grundlegend anders zu

erklären als letztere. Ähnliche Fälle erfordern ähnliche Erklärungen“. Es muss also in Überschneidungsfällen die gleiche Erklärung wie in normalen Fällen gelten, was mit der Reinkarnationshypothese offensichtlich unvereinbar ist, wenn man, wie der Autor, nicht akzeptieren will, dass eine Seele gleichzeitig in zwei Körpern wohnen kann. Somit kann man also auch in den Kinderfällen durch Aufstellen der Maxime gleicher Erklärungen für ähnliche Fälle die Reinkarnation als Erklärung ad acta legen.

Als Ausweg bietet der Autor an, Erfahrungen aus früheren Leben (PLEs) als Teilhabe an den vergangenen Erfahrungen anderer zu verstehen (S. 384). Diese Vorstellung diskutiere ich in Band 1 meiner Trilogie unter dem Stichwort „Umsessenheit“ und führe Gründe dafür an, sie als Alternative zur Reinkarnationshypothese zu verwerfen (Hassler, 2011: 368). Hauptargumente sind u. a.: Das Kind müsste den Fremdeinfluss bemerken und dies äußern, und ein Wechsel der Persönlichkeit müsste spürbar werden, was jedoch nicht berichtet wird. Zudem kann nicht erklärt werden, welche verstorbene Person unter Abertausenden ausgewählt wird.

Greifen wir Heiner Schwenkes Idee doch noch einmal auf, und gehen wir von nachgeprüften und gelösten Fällen aus. Folglich gibt es eine Person, auf die alle Merkmale oder eine Untermenge davon, wie Erinnerungen, Verhaltensweisen, Charakterzüge, Ursachen für Phobien, Alpträume, Muttermale etc. der heutigen Person passen und die erst nach der Geburt der heutigen Person gestorben ist. Erklären wir diese Merkmale gemäß dem Vorschlag als Teilhabe an den vergangenen Erfahrungen anderer, so bedeutet das, es müsste eine weitere Person gegeben haben, auf welche die gleichen Merkmale zutreffen, die jedoch schon früher – ohne zeitliche Überlappung – gelebt haben muss. Ist es realistisch anzunehmen, dass zwei so identische Personen – vielleicht noch am gleichen Ort, wenn dieser angegeben wurde – zeitversetzt zueinander leben? Gäbe es diese zwei Personen wirklich, so wäre das eine neuartige, spezielle Art von Reinkarnation.

Leider verzichtet der Autor auf solche Überlegungen. Es ist zu vermuten, dass es ihm vorrangig darum geht, die Reinkarnationshypothese zu verwerfen.

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