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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 McCarroll 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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