

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.

References

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