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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).<sup>3</sup> 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;

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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).<sup>4</sup> 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-

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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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