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## 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

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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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