

# Past-Life Experiences: Re-living One's Own Past Lives or Participation in the Lives of Others?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – In past-life experiences (PLEs) subjects identify with a person from the past. PLEs are often considered to be memories of the subjects' past lives, and thus as evidence of reincarnation. In the introductory sections, I argue for the use of a personal concept of reincarnation and reject various non-personal reincarnation concepts on logical-semantic grounds. I proceed to reject the widespread notion that the occurrence of personal reincarnation can be investigated by scientific means. I suggest that memories in the sense of re-experiencing are the primary access to a person's past. The experiential perspective of PLEs often does not fit the assumption that PLEs are such memories. This applies to PLE passages where the subject takes the outside perspective or (sometimes voluntarily) switches between different perspectives. Such passages are neither demarcated from passages experienced from the first-person perspective nor do they seem to differ from the latter phenomenologically or in terms of their closeness to reality. Therefore, I propose that PLEs as a whole are not memories in the sense of re-experiencing, and, consequently, not evidence of reincarnation. The overlap between the lives that seem to be experienced in the PLE and the current lives of the experiencers, (the extent of which has been underestimated) also speaks against the reincarnation interpretation because overlap cases do not seem to differ from non-overlap cases in other respects. As an alternative interpretation, I propose to understand PLEs (if they actually revive an earlier experience and are not due to prior knowledge) not as memories, but as direct participation in the past experiences of others. Examples of direct participation in other people's experiences that are phenomenologically similar to PLEs can be found in the context of life reviews of near-death experiences, telepathic and mediumistic experiences, and animal communication. Four explanations of PLEs as participation in experiences of others are discussed:

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- 1 This contribution is an expanded version of a presentation given by the author on May 18, 2021, at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP). It is based on the author's latest book *Die Leben der Anderen: Reinkarnation als Fehldeutung von Erfahrungen früherer Leben* (The Lives of Others: Reincarnation as a Misinterpretation of Past-Life Experiences) (2020). The author wishes to thank Derek J. G. Williams for English language editing.
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ESP, possession, other kinds of influence of deceased persons on the experiencer, and the expansion of consciousness.

*Keywords:* life after death – reincarnation – memories – experiential perspective – near-death experiences

### **Erfahrungen früherer Leben: Wiedererleben eigener früherer Leben oder Teilnahme an den Leben anderer?**

Bei Erfahrungen früherer Leben (PLEs) identifizieren sich die Subjekte mit einer Person aus der Vergangenheit. PLEs werden oft als Erinnerungen an frühere Leben der Subjekte und damit als Beleg für Reinkarnation angesehen. In den einleitenden Abschnitten argumentiere ich für die Verwendung eines personalen Reinkarnationskonzepts und lehne verschiedene nicht-personale Reinkarnationskonzepte aus logisch-semantic Gründen ab. Wegen der wissenschaftlichen Unerreichbarkeit von Bewusstsein und von Personen als Bewusstseinssubjekten lehne ich überdies die verbreitete Vorstellung ab, die Frage des Vorkommens personaler Reinkarnation könne mit wissenschaftlichen Methoden untersucht werden. Ich schlage vor, dass Erinnerungen im Sinne von Wiedererleben den primären Zugang zur Vergangenheit einer Person darstellen. Die Erlebnisperspektive von PLEs passt oft nicht zu der Annahme, dass PLEs derartige Erinnerungen sind. Dies gilt für PLE-Passagen, in denen das Subjekt die Außenperspektive einnimmt oder (manchmal willkürlich) zwischen verschiedenen Perspektiven wechselt. Solche Passagen lassen sich weder klar von Passagen abgrenzen, die aus der Ich-Perspektive erlebt werden, noch scheinen sie sich von letzteren phänomenologisch oder hinsichtlich ihrer Realitätsnähe zu unterscheiden. Daher schlage ich vor, dass PLEs insgesamt nicht als Erinnerungen im Sinne eines Wiedererlebens und folglich auch nicht als Beleg für Reinkarnation anzusehen sind. Die Überschneidungen der Leben, die in den PLEs erlebt zu werden scheinen, mit den gegenwärtigen Leben der Subjekte (deren Ausmaß unterschätzt wurde) sprechen ebenfalls gegen die Reinkarnationsinterpretation von PLEs, da sich die Überschneidungsfälle ansonsten nicht von den Fällen ohne Überschneidungen der Leben zu unterscheiden scheinen. Als alternative Interpretation schlage ich vor, PLEs (wenn in ihnen tatsächlich ein früheres Erlebnis wiedererlebt wird und sie nicht auf Vorwissen zurückzuführen sind) nicht als Erinnerungen, sondern als direkte Teilhabe an vergangenen Erlebnissen anderer zu verstehen. Beispiele für eine direkte Teilhabe an den Erlebnissen anderer Menschen, die phänomenologisch PLEs ähneln, finden sich im Zusammenhang mit Lebensrückblicken im Kontext von Nahtoderfahrungen, telepathischen und medialen Erlebnissen und Tierkommunikation. Es werden vier Erklärungen für PLEs als Teilhabe an den Erlebnissen anderer diskutiert: ASW, Besessenheit, andere Arten des Einflusses verstorbener Personen auf das Subjekt und Bewusstseinsenerweiterung.

*Keywords:* Leben nach dem Tod – Reinkarnation – Erinnerungen – Erlebnisperspektive – Nahtoderfahrungen

### *Past-Life Experiences*

All over the world, reincarnation is one of the most popular conceptions for what happens after death. In response to the question, “Do you believe in re-incarnation, that is, that we are born into this world again” from the 1990 *World Values Survey*, in each country, an average of one third of respondents answered yes. In populous India, the yes vote was as high as 90% (Inglehart et al., 2004: 344).<sup>3</sup> The belief in some form of reincarnation is or has been a part of many indigenous cultures around the globe, from the Tlingit on the north-west coast of North America, to the Lapps in northern Scandinavia, to the Igbo in Nigeria, to the Trobriand people in the Solomon Sea (Bergunder, 1994: 123–128, 188–190; Klemm, 1844: 77; Matlock, 2019: 53–58; Stevenson, 1966, 1985). It seems to have developed independently in different places, so it is reasonable to assume that reincarnation is based on some form of universal human experience.

Past-life experiences (PLEs) will be the most likely candidate here. In an ideal-typical PLE, the subject experiences themselves in another physical body as a participant in events that seem to take place in a time before their current life. The subject thus identifies with a person from an earlier time.<sup>4</sup> I will call this person the “person of the previous life” (PPL). PLEs can take

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3 The *World Values Survey* of 2000 did not include some populous, high scoring countries from the 1990 wave, like India, Brazil, and Mexico.

4 I do not adopt the definition of Mills & Tucker (2014: 305). According to Mills and Tucker, PLEs are “impressions that individuals report in which they have experienced themselves as a particular person with an identity (other than their current life identity) in a previous time or life span.” The bracketed phrase “other than their current life identity” is somewhat surprising because without, the phrase “person with an identity” seems redundant since a person always has an identity. However, with the bracketed phrase “other than their current life identity” the definition is problematic. If “identity” meant personal identity, the definition would be inconsistent because one person cannot take on another personal identity. That would mean that they would become another person. There are other forms of identity that a person can seek, change, lose or even steal, such as psychological, social, or political identities. But this is not what Mills and Tucker are referring to. With the phrase “one’s current life identity,” they apparently suppose exactly one identity per life. However, this limitation does not necessarily apply to psychological, social, or political identities because these can change during a lifetime. Perhaps Mills and Tucker assume that an individual could be several persons. But this would be contrary to ordinary language, where ‘individual’ and ‘person’ are interchangeable. Merriam-Webster defines ‘individual’ as “a single human being” and “a particular person,” and ‘person’ as “human, individual” (Merriam-Webster, n. d.[a, b]). The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘individual’ as “a human being, a person,” and ‘person’ as “individual human being” (OED, September 2021a, b). One could, therefore, replace ‘individual’ with ‘person’ in Mills and Tucker’s definition or vice versa. Their definition would consequently say that in a PLE, a person experiences themselves as another person or an individual experiences themselves as another individual. However, this experience would be illusory since a person cannot be another person, and an individual cannot be another individual. I doubt that Mills & Tucker mean to imply in their definition that PLEs are illusory. Do they perhaps

place in various states of consciousness, such as the normal waking state, meditation, trance, dreams, and during out-of-body and near-death experiences. Spontaneous PLEs seem to be quite rare (see, e. g., Barker & Pasricha, 1979), while induced PLEs during so-called (hypnotic) regressions, in contrast, are frequently reported.

In one example of spontaneous PLE, Edna, a clinical psychologist with a practice in Manhattan, reported that when she looked out the window of a Brooklyn house she visited, she saw two young boys in knickerbockers and an old Ford coming down the street, just like from her childhood. She continued:

I drew back from the window and, looking around the living room, saw that everything had changed. The furniture was different, the TV was gone, and it all seemed newer. I looked down at my dress and saw that it too had changed; it went down to the floor. I walked over to a mirror that was hanging where one of the pictures had been and I looked at myself. It wasn't me who was staring back; it was another face, a woman with reddish hair and very dark eyes. [...] Several days later I was speaking with a man who lives down the block who has lived in the neighbourhood for sixty years. [...] He told me that the house had not been occupied for a number of years. But the last person who had lived there was a man who had inherited the house when his parents had died. I asked him if he remembered what the man's mother had looked like. He described her, and the description was very similar to the face I had seen in the mirror. (Lenz, 1978: 147–148)

The experience convinced Edna that in a previous life she had been the woman in the mirror. Many other experiencers are also under the impression that their PLEs are memories of their own past lives. However, similar experiences seem to exist that are understood by the subjects as direct participation in present or past experiences of other persons. Could PLEs perhaps also be understood as direct participation in the experiences of others, insofar as the experience of a person from the past is actually relived in them?<sup>5</sup> But before I move on to answering this

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use 'person' in the sense of 'role in a play'? But then their usage of 'person' would be metaphorical, for they are not concerned with identities in a play but in life. In my opinion, however, one should not use metaphors in a scientific definition. Although I do not adopt Mills' and Tucker's definition, I suspect my definition has roughly the same extension as theirs.

- 5 Prompted by remarks from a referee I would like to emphasize that my contribution is primarily concerned with the understanding of PLEs and not with so-called Cases of the Reincarnation Type (CORT), which are the main subject of modern reincarnation research. That may sound surprising because, at first glance, the relevant literature gives the impression that PLE – like CORT – is an appropriate label for reincarnation research. Probably the best-known handbook article on this research is entitled "Past-Life Experiences" (Mills & Tucker, 2014). Yet, this article does not describe a single PLE. The same applies analogously to the German-language overview "Spontane Reinkarnationserfahrungen" (spontaneous reincarnation experiences) (Bauer & Keil, 2015). Whatever reasons have led to this mislabelling, the fact remains that modern reincarnation research hardly deals with PLEs because it

question, I would like to try to discuss some conceptual, methodological, and genuinely philosophical issues that reincarnation research may not have sufficiently addressed.

### ***Personal and Non-Personal Reincarnation***

#### *Personal Reincarnation*

Before we examine whether PLEs represent evidence for reincarnation, we must first clarify our understanding of reincarnation. The concepts of reincarnation are manifold, but a personal notion of it prevails. Most typical are statements such as: “In a previous life *I* was a Roman legionnaire” or “In *my* next life *I* want to be a woman.” The underlying idea is that the person remains the same during the course of different reincarnations, just as a person remains the same in the course of their current life as a child, adult, and as an elderly person. A personal understanding of reincarnation underlies the leading surveys on reincarnation belief (see Inglehart et al., 2004: 344; see for other surveys Siegers, 2013). It dominates Western esotericism (see, e.g., Runggaldier, 1996: 171–190) Hinduism (see, e.g., *The Bhagavad-Gita*, 1944/1972: II.13) and also Buddhist folk religion (McClelland, 2010: 51; S. Ye, personal communication, March 3, 2019). It also occurs in indigenous cultures (see, e.g., Radin, 1994; Stevenson, 1986, 1994). Personal reincarnation is the precondition for *retribution* through reincarnation, as taught in ancient Hindu Law Codes (see, e.g., Olivelle, 2004: 233–234; 2009: 105–106) and as praised by Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer, 1844/1909: 459–461). It is also a prerequisite of the notion of personal *development* through reincarnation, as considered by Lessing (1780/1881: § 98; 1784: 38) and advocated by Kardec (1857/1875: xv, 54–55, 63–82).

#### *Personal Reincarnation as an Illusion*

Some approaches talk of reincarnation, but on closer inspection only as an illusion. This is the case, for example, with Advaita Vedanta, the best known of the Hindu philosophical teaching systems, in which the plurality of beings is merely appearance and only Brahman is real (see, e.g., Bartley, n. d.; Bowker, 1997: 22). But if persons are not real, their reincarnation is not real either. Reincarnation is also illusory in Jim Tucker’s conception (see Tucker, 2013: 165–219): The entities that persist in the course of reincarnations – he calls them “dreamers” – are only thoughts of an all-encompassing mind. Thoughts, however, cannot be subjects of consciousness

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focuses on cases of young children. Among these cases, it identifies by far the most and best CORT, but there are almost no accounts of young children’s PLEs (see section “The Experiential Perspective of PLEs” below). PLEs play a very marginal role in CORT-research. Hence one cannot study them by primarily focusing on CORT.

and action, thus they cannot be persons. In Tucker's system, the creatures that walk the earth and are usually called human beings seem to be merely second-level thoughts: they are figures in the dreams of the dreamers.

### *Non-Personal Reincarnation in Indigenous Cultures*

In indigenous cultures, one encounters various notions of reincarnation that are overtly non-personal. This applies, for example, to the belief that a deceased person can reincarnate in several living persons at the same time (multiple reincarnation) (see, e.g., Bergunder, 1994: 366; Mills, 1994: 28–29) or, conversely, that one living person is the reincarnation of several deceased persons (see, e.g., Bergunder, 1994: 366; Matlock, 1993: 61–62). Moreover, there is a belief that one can reincarnate while still alive, or that a deceased person can remain and be responsive in the hereafter while simultaneously reincarnating (see, e.g., Bergunder, 1994: 366). If these concepts were about personal reincarnation, a person would have to be able to split into several persons, or several persons would have to be able to merge into one.

### *Non-Personal Reincarnation in Buddhism*

Buddhism also adheres to non-personal reincarnation. While Buddhist folk religion tends to assume a personal existence and reincarnation, the Buddhist non-self-doctrine (an-attā / anatman) denies the existence of persons. The entity which is usually called a person is merely a temporary assemblage of five aggregates (skandhas) (see Bowker, 1997: 63–64). Therefore, no personal reincarnation is possible; what exactly is reincarnated is controversial (see, e.g., Buswell & Lopez, 2014: 708–709; McClelland, 2010: 50–51).

### *Non-Personal Reincarnation in Reincarnation Research*

In contemporary research on reincarnation, non-personal reincarnation concepts play a somewhat greater role than with the mass of reincarnation believers. I will give two examples. (1) Scott Rogo, inspired by Whately Carington (1892–1947), built on the bundle theory of mind (performed in the Buddhist non-self-doctrine), whose main proponent was David Hume (see Carington, 1945: 96–97; Hume, 1739: 11, 26–31, 35–38, 437, 439). According to this theory, the mind consists only of psychons (i.e., impressions and ideas), held together by associations. A subject does not exist. The non-personal system of psychons may survive the death of the physical body and come into contact with a developing embryo, who is tapping into this network of psychons. Thus, memories and personality traits could be reborn (see Rogo, 1985: 205–206, 215–218). (2) 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).

From a logical-semantic point of view, consciousness (e.g., feeling, sensing, wanting, and thinking) always belongs to a subject. There can be no pain without someone who experiences it (see Frege, 1918/1956). Memories as re-experiencing presuppose a transtemporal subject. Personality traits such as diligence or seriousness also cannot exist without a subject and therefore cannot reincarnate without a subject. Events also cannot reincarnate. This is because the time at which an event takes place is an essential characteristic of that event (see Lorenz, 2005). Therefore, an earlier event cannot be identical with a later event, and thus cannot *be* its reincarnation. Since streams of events contain nothing but events, this reasoning also applies to them.

A concept similar to Rogo's, the thought bundle theory, was later proposed by Jürgen Keil (see Keil, 2010; cf. Nahm & Hassler, 2011). In contrast to Rogo, Keil does not consider his approach a variant of the reincarnation interpretation, but instead as an alternative to it. Keil suggests that in the last phase of a person's life, "thought bundles" are emitted, which "spread" "beyond the boundaries of the dying person" and "independently persist for periods of time." These "free-floating" thought bundles could be "absorbed" by "particularly receptive" young children (Bauer & Keil, 2015: 185, transl. H. S.; Keil, 2010: 96). Keil's conception, however, is semantically unsatisfactory. What are "thoughts" in his concept? If "thoughts" mean the *contents* of thinking, then they can neither exist for "periods of time" nor perform spatial movements ("spread", "float") nor be "absorbed." Nor can they be "bundled" in the literal sense. Contents have, conceptually speaking, no temporal extension and no place in space and cannot act in it. If "thoughts" mean acts of thinking they could have a temporal extension, but not without a subject. Spatial 'floating,' 'attachment,' 'absorbing' or 'bundling' would be just as impossible as with thoughts as contents.

### *Conclusion*

Since the concept of personal reincarnation is the most widespread, and as numerous non-personal reincarnation concepts suffer from semantic shortcomings, I will employ the personal reincarnation concept in the remaining text, unless otherwise stated.

## ***Reincarnation and Science***

### *The Existence of Persons and of Reincarnation Cannot Be Examined by Scientific Means*

Reincarnation research is, in my impression, to a large extent evidence-oriented. The main goal is to find out whether there are (really) cases of reincarnation. I believe, however, that this question cannot be answered by scientific means. One reason for this is that consciousness, a neces-

sary property of persons (see, e.g., Locke, 1700: 189–190), cannot be examined scientifically. According to the methodological guidelines of the modern sciences, every scientific investigation must be carried out by clearly defined, intersubjective methods, the application of which would lead to the same or very similar results for any person. This intersubjective reproducibility of the results is probably the central methodological norm of modern scientific research. It is not limited to the natural sciences. Mathematical proof, philological interpretation and philosophical argumentation can and should be intersubjectively reproducible (see Schwenke 2006: 296–301; 2007: 70–73). However, with intersubjective methods, one can, of course, measure brain states or processes, but not thoughts and feelings of a subject. Consciousness also cannot be calculated from measurement data like elementary particles or planets from distant solar systems. Research must rather *ask* the subjects about their consciousness. The veracity of the subjects' statements cannot be examined with scientific methods.<sup>6</sup> If a subject falsely states that they are in pain or thinking of their dog, although this is not the case, it is not possible to prove the falsity of the subject's statements with scientific methods. One might invoke established psychophysical findings against the subject's statement and claim that it is very unlikely that this person felt pain or thought of a pandemic because other subjects reported feeling pain or thinking of a pandemic while having completely different brain activities. But this does not solve the problem of the scientific inaccessibility of consciousness. Every established connection between brain states on the one hand and consciousness, on the other hand, depends, as far as consciousness is concerned, on trust in the statements of subjects. If one were to doubt the statement of subject A about their consciousness based on an established psychophysical correlation, one would simply trust those subjects whose statements were included in this correlation more than subject A. It is a matter of playing statements against statements, not of findings obtained through an intersubjective method (see in more detail, Schwenke, 2014: 172–178).

Because of the scientific inaccessibility of consciousness, scientists must ask subjects about their consciousness. This coincides with the fact that we generally grant a person a special epistemic authority regarding their own consciousness. If a patient said to the doctor, "I'm in a lot of pain," and the doctor replied, "No, that's not true, I know better than you do," most of us would reject the doctor's reply as absurd.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, asymmetric epistemic access is generally assumed regarding consciousness. On the other hand, epistemic symmetry is postulated when it comes to scientific objects. It is generally assumed by members of the scientific community that

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6 See, e.g., the report of brain researcher and anthropologist Andreas Roepstorff in van Lommel (2010: 180–182), who, as a subject in a psychophysical experiment, did not follow the experimenter's instructions about what to think during the experiment.

7 Even granting the possibility of telepathy it does not mean that others could know *better* than we do what we are presently thinking or feeling.



everyone, be it Albert Einstein himself, has in principle the same epistemic access to scientific objects. This epistemic symmetry rests on the intersubjectivity of scientific methods. Because of epistemic symmetry, no one is granted special epistemic authority regarding scientific objects. If consciousness could be examined by scientific means, other persons could know our thoughts and feelings better than we do, just as they can know more than us about our physical states. So, if one claims a special epistemic authority regarding one's own consciousness and at the same time admits that there should be no epistemic authority regarding scientific objects, one cannot declare one's consciousness to be an object of science without being inconsistent.<sup>8</sup> But if consciousness is considered beyond the reach of science and if consciousness considered a necessary property of persons, persons are then beyond the reach of science as well. If one cannot scientifically find out whether something is a person, then one cannot scientifically find out whether something is the same person as a person from the past. It would follow that the question of personal reincarnation is beyond the reach of science.

### *The Existence of Persons is Essential in the Everyday Lifeworld and Science Practice*

Despite its scientific inaccessibility, the existence of persons as subjects of consciousness and action is an essential part of everyday human life. It is hardly possible to deny the existence of persons without becoming inconsistent in one's belief system. The act of denial even seems to contradict the content of denial: Those who deny something attribute a belief to themselves, and beings who attribute beliefs to themselves may well be regarded as persons.

Scientific practice also cannot do without the concept of persons as subjects of consciousness and intentional action. For example, scientific discourse is only possible when the participants are able to steer their discourse actions, such as speaking and writing, by their intentions. If their actions were determined only by physiological mechanisms, there would be no rational discourse (see Popper, 1981: 59, 75–81).

The *transtemporality* of persons is also a prerequisite of human everyday practice, and of science practice as well. We unquestionably ascribe a past and a future to ourselves and others. The scientist also does so via CVs and funding applications.

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8 I refer to the last argument I have put forward as an *argumentum ad hominem*, following John Locke and Henry Johnstone. Locke understood its meaning to be “to press a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions” (Locke, 1700: 416 [4, 17, 21]). Johnstone similarly wrote that to argue *ad hominem* is to ask someone to choose between two or more incompatible principles or concessions to which that person has committed themselves (see Johnstone, 1991: 426). I use the *argumentum ad hominem* not only against particular opponents but also against any representative of a particular belief that is incompatible with at least one other belief with which they are most likely to agree (at least implicitly) in their life practice.

Personal reincarnation presupposes the transtemporality of persons. How is the transtemporal existence and the identity of persons recognized? 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.

If consciousness is an essential feature of persons, as we have said, and if a subject has privileged epistemic access to their consciousness, then a subject would know best if they are a person. This is quite obvious for subjects in a waking coma (see, e.g., Tavalaro & Tayson, 1998) or during cardiac arrest (see, e.g., Greyson, 2021; van Lommel et al., 2001). But if a being knows best if itself is a person, it also seems to know best if it is identical to a particular person from the past.<sup>9</sup>

### *Memories as the Primary Access to a Person's Past*

#### *Memory as Re-Experience vs. Memory as Knowledge*

Such privileged personal knowledge of one's own past identity seems to arise from memories.<sup>10</sup> With memories we have to distinguish between two forms in particular: remembering as re-experiencing a previous experience and remembering as knowledge (see, e.g., Gardiner & Richardson-Klavehn, 2000). If PLEs are regarded as re-experiencing or re-living the experiences of one's own previous life, only the first form of memory applies, because remembering as knowledge does not by itself include any form of experience. Reincarnation research has undoubtedly neglected the distinction between memory as re-experience and memory as knowledge. Since PLEs are experiences, they could be understood as memories in which one's own past experiences are re-experienced, but not as memories that consist merely in knowledge of the past.

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9 That would contradict the view that physical, that is, intersubjectively accessible, features are the best evidence for reincarnation.

10 See already Reid (1785: 318): "How do you know; what evidence have you, that there is such a permanent self which has a claim to all the thoughts, actions, and feeling, which you call yours? To this I answer, that the proper evidence I have of all this is remembrance." See also Crone (2016: 136–143). Philosophical reflections on the presuppositions of perceiving and thinking repeatedly concluded that a supra-temporal or transtemporal subject of perceiving and thinking must be assumed (see, e.g., Teichmüller, 1882: 204–206; 1889: 169–171). However, such reflections cannot provide knowledge about the concrete past of a particular person. Since one referee brought Kant into play here, apparently with a view toward Kant's concept of a transcendental subject, I would like to emphasize that it would be entirely incompatible with Kant's system to regard the transcendental subject as a real entity, such as a transtemporal person (see, e.g., Sturma, 2015).

As a source of knowledge of one's past existence, re-experiencing past experiences is superior to memory as mere knowledge. For only oneself can re-live experiences one had in the past. Although re-living past experiences is not knowledge *eo ipso*, it can form the basis for knowledge of the past. Memory as mere knowledge of a person's past, by contrast, does not presuppose that one was that person. Even if one has knowledge about a person from the past that one could not have acquired by normal means, it does not follow that one is identical with that person.

### *Sham Memories*

Memory is often associated with illusion and falsehood. If we will consider memory as knowledge, strictly speaking, it cannot be false, because knowledge cannot be false. However, memory research often talks of false memories. Here the concept of memory is weak and more like a belief, hence it can be true or false. Memory as re-experience, like all experience, cannot be true or false. But there can be memory-like experiences, which lead to false beliefs about the past. I refer to these as sham memories. First, there are sham memories of *fictitious* events that lead to the conviction that one is re-living a real event. The error concerns the *reality* of the event experienced. Second, there are sham memories of *real* events. The event actually took place, but the subject did not experience it all, or they did not experience it as it appeared in the memory-like experience. Here, the error concerns the question of *re-experiencing*. PLEs can be considered a re-experiencing, only if they are reliable in both respects.

Sham memories of fictitious events are widely recognized. They can even be deliberately evoked in experiments. Sham memories that arise from suggestive interviews with alleged crime victims are notorious (see, e.g., Loftus, 1997). Sham memories of real events receive far less attention. I will provide an example from the neurologist Oliver Sacks. In an autobiographical book, he described two memory-like experiences of two bombings of London (see Sacks, 2001: 23). However, as Sacks was later informed by his older brother Michael, he was not present at the second bombing: "You never saw it. You weren't there," Michael told him. He had only read a gripping description by his eldest brother David, which was apparently the basis for his sham memory (see Sacks, 2013). This question also arises in realistic PLEs: Had the subjects actually been 'there'?

On phenomenological grounds, Sacks found it impossible to distinguish his sham memory from his authentic one. The sham memory seemed as "clear," "vivid, detailed, and concrete" as the authentic one (Sacks, 2013). Reliable phenomenological criteria of authentic memories do not seem to exist, otherwise subjects would easily be able to distinguish sham memories induced by suggestion from authentic ones, but this is certainly not the case (see, e.g., Otgaar et al., 2021). The sense of familiarity which often accompanies PLEs (see, e.g., Moody, 1991: 41)

cannot serve as a reliable criterion either, otherwise Sacks would have recognized that he never saw the second bombing. The first-person perspective also occurs in memory-like experiences subjects have due to suggested memories of fictitious events (see, e. g., Shaw & Porter, 2015, 2018).

On the other hand, an experiential perspective *other than the first-person perspective* may be considered a fairly reliable criterion of sham memories. Unless the original event was perceived from a point outside the physical body, which is possible but highly unlikely, memories from a perspective other than the first-person perspective mean to “remember experiences, you never actually had” (Rowlands, 2016: 46; see also Vendler, 1979: 169; Wollheim, 1984: 103–104) because the vantage point of the original experience was not the same as in the memory-like experience. Even more so, a *switch* between the first-person perspective and an outside perspective is an indication of a sham memory. It seems completely out of the question that experiences in which subjects can *switch at will* between different experiential perspectives (see, e. g., Akhtar et al., 2017; McCarroll & Sutton, 2017; Rice & Rubin, 2009; Rice & Rubin, 2011) are genuine memories in the sense of re-experiencing, because that would mean that past experiences are subject to our current volition.

### ***Testing the Reincarnation Interpretation of PLEs***

If we want to answer the question as to whether PLEs could be memories, in the sense of a re-experiencing of experiences one previously had, we first have to examine whether an experiential perspective deviating from the first-person perspective or a (volitional) switch of perspective is described in the PLE accounts, and if so, whether these cases are fundamentally different from others in which only the first-person perspective is mentioned.

In addition to phenomenological analysis, an investigation should take place to determine if the reported events are not fictitious, but actually occurred. Since PLEs refer to past lives on earth (and not to past lives in other worlds), one would expect subjects of PLEs to be able to give some correct information about persons and events from the past. If the information given is sufficient to identify the PPL, one would have to check for overlap between the life of the PPL and the life of the subject. If one found overlap cases, one would need to examine whether they were fundamentally different from non-overlap cases.

We have to keep in mind that scientific examination cannot determine whether PLEs are actual memories of the experiencers' past lives. As previously mentioned, consciousness and persons as subjects of consciousness are beyond the reach of intersubjective, scientific methods. This means that one cannot scientifically investigate whether PLEs exist at all, or if persons (as potential subjects of reincarnation) exist. Science is left to the following kind of suppositional reasoning (see Fisher, 1989): Suppose there are PLEs as described by the experiencers, and

suppose there are persons who are subjects of present and previous lives, how well does the hypothesis that PLEs are memories of the experiencers' past lives fit the phenomenological and factual material?

### *The Experiential Perspective of PLEs*

#### *Young Children*

Reincarnation research has focused on cases of young children talking about a previous life. These instances have been reported on since ancient times (see de Groot, 1901: 143). In addition to alleged memories, these cases have more accompanying phenomena than cases of older subjects, such as behaviors and physical characteristics corresponding to the PPL, predictions by the PPL concerning their reincarnation, and apparitions of the PPL to family members before the child's birth or even their conception (see, e. g., Mills & Tucker, 2014; Nahm & Hassler, 2010; Stevenson, 2001: 94–128). Strikingly, while young children often speak of a past life by the age of two, they often stop doing so by the age of 5–7, and also no longer seem to identify with the past life person (see Mills & Tucker, 2014; Stevenson, 1980b: 326–327; but see Haraldsson, 2008; Haraldsson & Abu-Izzedin, 2012; Stevenson, 1975: 106, 143, 172, 202, 239, 335; 1980a: 50–51, 74, 115–116, 157, 173–174, 234–235, 259, 298; 1983: 138, 171, 251–252).

Young children make more verifiably correct statements about past lives than do older subjects, and cryptomnesia can be more easily ruled out in their cases. That is probably why reincarnation research deals almost exclusively with cases of young children. However, 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, and their parents were so-and-so, etc. (J. Tucker, personal communication, March 6, 2018). It seems clear that children can have unusual *knowledge* of a past life. But do they also have PLEs? Occasional fragmentary accounts by slightly older children (see, e. g. Bowman, 1997: 11, 15, 19), adults' recollections of their childhood PLEs (see, e. g. Shroder, 1999: 56, 123; Stevenson, 1983: 138), childhood dreams of a previous life (see, e. g. Leininger & Leininger, 2009: 3–5, 10–12, 46, 55, 57–58, 62–65, 69–70, 77–79, 81; Stevenson, 1980a: 165, 169; Tucker, 2013: 96, 112) and drawings relating to a previous life (see, e. g. Kean, 2016: 150–151; Leininger & Leininger, 2009: 114–145; Stevenson, 2003: 114–126) indicate that the answer to this question is yes. For sound phenomenological analysis, the existing material is much too poor, but it seems that in child PLEs both the external perspective and the switch of perspective do occur (see, e. g., Bowman, 1997: 11, 15, 19).

### *Older Subjects*

Numerous older subjects, on the other hand, have given detailed descriptions of their PLEs that provide clues to the experiential perspective. Both in spontaneous and induced experiences, the outside perspective and a – sometimes arbitrary - switch of perspective seem to occur (see, e. g., Bowman, 1997: 25; Buhlman, 1996: 49–51; Delanne, 1924/2019: 246, 292; Goldberg, 1997: 13, 24; Lenz, 1978: 29, 31, 38–39, 56, 62–64, 67–69, 75–77, 118, 120, 132, 134; Moody, 1991: 20, 22–24, 27, 29, 44, 78–79, 93; Schmidt, 1962: 36, 263–264; Stevenson, 2003: 170, 189, 191–192, 199–200, 206, 213, 220; Weiss, 1998: 116). Raymond Moody lists multi-perspectivity as a typical feature of PLEs (see Moody, 1991: 43).

In one example, author and regression therapist, Carol Bowman, underwent a hypnotic regression herself. In her account, she describes a PLE in which she identified with a man:

I could “see” through this man’s eyes, I could “hear” through his ears, I could feel love swelling his heart, and I knew what he was thinking. Even more amazing, I could easily shift my perspective from that of an observer, to being in the body of the character I saw – or be in both places at once. I could jump out of my body and observe myself from any angle of the room. In this altered state I possessed a surreal omniscience. I had access to everything this man knew, understood, and remembered, plus I enjoyed a broader overview, and understanding of the patterns in his life beyond what even he knew. (Bowman, 1997: 39)

We see here that Bowman not only experiences an external perspective on the PPL, but can also switch her perspective at will, which is a clear sign that she does not describe a memory in the sense of re-experiencing. An outside perspective and a switch in perspective are also reported in solved cases.<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist nun Pratomwan Inthanu (b. 1944) had a PLE while in deep meditation at the age of twenty (see Stevenson, 1983: 141–142). The experience seemed to have been entirely from the outside perspective. A switch of perspective is described, for example, by Police Captain Robert Snow who, out of sceptical curiosity, underwent a hypnotic regression (see Snow, 1999: 61–62). PLE passages experienced from the outside perspective and PLE passages containing a switch of perspective are not demarcated from passages experienced from the first-person perspective. Apart from the experiential perspective, they do not differ from passages from the first-person perspective, either phenomenologically or in terms of their closeness to reality. These findings seem to suggest that all PLE, even those from the first-person perspective, are not memories in the sense-of re-experiencing, and thus they are not evidence of reincarnation.

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11 In reincarnation research, solved cases are those PLE cases in which the PPL could be determined (and prior knowledge of the subjects could be ruled out).

### *The Problem of Overlapping Lives*

The reincarnation interpretation of PLEs faces a second problem: the overlap between the lives of the subject of the PLE and the PPL. If the subject and the PPL were the same person, this would *inter alia* mean that a person could split into two persons, which is obviously absurd. It would then be logically possible, e. g., to surprise oneself with a gift or to become one's own mother.

The identification of overlapping lives is only possible if one can determine the PPL. There are about 1,700 such solved cases in the collection of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. However, these cases mainly involve young children who have not given accounts of PLEs, but in whom PLEs are only suspected because of their statements about a previous life. That diminishes the value of these cases for our question. Nevertheless, I will have to use them because there are very few solved cases from older subjects who have provided accounts of PLEs. Stevenson checked cases of young children who talked of a previous life where the PPL had, according to his informants, died *after* the birth of the child. He found definitive evidence of overlapping lives in ten cases (see Stevenson, 2001: 127). However, since he did not also check cases where the time of death reported to him was shortly *before* the birth of the child, he may have systematically underestimated the number of overlap cases. Jürgen Keil claimed to have come across 30–50 cases where the PPL apparently died after the birth of the new life (see Keil, 2010). Keil also believes that such cases tend to be reported less because of the belief in the child's environment that a child must be born after the death of the previous incarnation in order to be considered its reincarnation. Even among the few solved, convincing cases of subjects who had a PLE at a later age, there is one case in which the PPL died only five weeks after the subject of the PLE was born (see Stevenson, 2003: 220).

In addition, there are numerous cases in which the children who would later on talk of a previous life were at least in advanced stages of pregnancy when the PPLs died. In the third volume of his *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*, in which Stevenson presents twelve solved, strong cases, three of the subjects (Faruk Faris Andary, Zouheir Chaar, Nasır Toksöz), i. e., a quarter of these flagship cases, were (probably) born on the same day the PPL died (see Stevenson, 1980a: 77–80, 92–93, 98–101, 324, 327). Two other subjects (Erkan Kiliç, Süleyman Zeytun) were born only a few days later, and a sixth subject (Necati Çaylak) only a month after the death of the PPL (see Stevenson, 1980a: 269, 272–273, 299, 305). Stevenson also reported that eleven of 225 children with unusual physical characteristics that corresponded with characteristics of the PPL were in at least the sixth month of pregnancy when the PPL died; three of them were born within three days of the death of the PPL (see Stevenson, 1997a: 1095).<sup>12</sup> From Stevenson's

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12 The Thai boy Juta whose case was researched by Jim Tucker, was already a few months old when the PPL died. Only some more months later, he developed marks on the skin that matched skin lesions of

statistics on the interval between the death of the PPL and the birth of the child who talked of a previous life (Stevenson, 1986), it can be concluded that a substantial proportion of the PPL life did not die until the new life was already in the sixth month of pregnancy or later. By the sixth month of pregnancy, foetal learning of smells, tastes, voices, and melodies already begins (for a review, see Hepper & Shahidullah, 1994). The foetus can already survive outside the womb (see, e.g., Ahmad et al, 2017; Rysavy et al., 2019).

The overlap cases are not discernibly different from the non-overlap cases in terms of phenomenology and historical confirmation, at least if the overlap is not more than a few years. To save the reincarnation interpretation from the challenge of overlap cases, a considerable argumentative effort has been expended. I will briefly discuss six defence strategies here.

1. Birthdate as a demarcation criterion: Stevenson suggests that if the PPL dies after the birth of the child, it is not a case of reincarnation but of possession (Stevenson, 1980b: 376). However, the time of birth can be influenced and even precisely determined by medical decisions, e.g., for a C-section. Advances in neonatology mean that premature babies are now viable as early as 22 weeks' gestation (see, e.g., Ahmad et al., 2017; Rysavy et al., 2019). It seems absurd that medical decisions and medical progress would have any bearing on whether a child is possessed or a reincarnation. Stevenson's argument seems to be primarily about excluding cases that do not fit the reincarnation interpretation by an ad hoc criterion (see Chalmers, 2013: 70–73; Popper, 1959: 82–83) to avoid falsification of the reincarnation hypothesis. Since overlap cases do not recognizably differ from non-overlap cases, it seems inappropriate to explain the former in a fundamentally different way from the latter. Similar cases demand similar explanations.

2. Reincarnation as a form of possession: When the date of birth is enough to decide whether a case is a reincarnation or a possession, then both concepts must be very similar. Accordingly, Stevenson says cases of reincarnation are cases of “complete permanent possession” (Stevenson, 1980b: 376). Matlock consistently subsumes reincarnation under possession (see Matlock, 2019: 174). However, it is semantically problematic to declare reincarnation as a case of possession. There are always *two beings* involved in possession: a host person and a possessing entity. Conceptually, possession can be ended by expelling the possessing entity; the host person is then cured and can live on (on earth). Reincarnation, on the other hand, involves only *one person* who connects to a new physical body. If they were expelled, the organism would die. There is no semantic continuum between the two concepts, as Stevenson suggests when he writes that the difference between reincarnation and possession “lies in the extent of displacement of the primary personality” (Stevenson, 1980b: 374).

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the PPL (see Tucker, 2013: 23–25). His case disproves Stevenson's claim that such “birthmarks” “must be present at birth” (Stevenson, 1997b: 112; see also 1980b: 381–382).



3. Reincarnation through soul replacement: Stevenson, and in particular, Matlock suggest that in overlap cases the original soul might be replaced by another (see Matlock, 2019: 175–177, 302; Stevenson, 1980b: 2). 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 to be the separation of soul and body (Plato, ca. 380 BCE/1955: 67d). The possibility of soul exchange cannot be logically refuted, but I know of no evidence for it in the accounts of experiences between reincarnations. The detailed report by the Buddhist abbot Chaokhun Rajsuthajarn (1908–1976) of his alleged reincarnation in a new-born does not contain a single trace of such a replacement process (see Stevenson, 1983: 177–178). Nor did Rajsuthajarn himself believe that he replaced a spirit person when reincarnating. He believed that the new-born was without any spirit before he entered it (see Stevenson, 1983: 188).

4. Foetus-without-soul: The idea articulated by Rajsuthajarn that a foetus (or even a baby) could exist without a personal soul so that a reincarnating person could enter the body at advanced gestation (or even after birth) without having to expel another being, was advocated by Helen Wambach on the basis of her mass regressions, and later by Bowman and Matlock (see Bowman, 2002: 177–181; Matlock, 2017; Matlock, 2019: 175; Wambach, 1979: 98–121). However, the foetus-without-soul conception contradicts findings on foetal mental development and its continuity with infant development, e.g., in relation to the recognition and preference of voices, the learning of melodies, and the development of taste preferences (see, e.g., DeCasper & Spence, 1986; Granier-Deferre et al., 2011; Lee & Kisilevsky, 2014; Menella et al., 2001; Partanen et al., 2013, 2015; Shahidulla & Hepper, 1992). In overlap cases, one would have to postulate exceptions to this continuity between foetus and infant. However, since overlap cases are not recognizably different from non-overlap cases, this strategy would again have the flavor of an ad hoc hypothesis that only serves to avoid a falsification of the reincarnation interpretation.

5. The overlap of lives is an illusion: For Bruce Goldberg, an overlap of lives does not pose a problem. In reference to quantum physics, he argues that “ultimately, all time is simultaneous” (Goldberg, 1997: 134, see also p. 99). Therefore, a soul can connect with two bodies at the same time. However, scientists must respect the time order of the everyday human lifeworld when conducting their experiments (see similarly, Janich, 2018). This means, *inter alia*, that they must carry out their experimental procedures in the prescribed temporal sequence. Therefore, it would probably be inconsistent to declare the time order of the everyday life-world illusory by invoking science's results.

6. Abandonment of a personal concept of reincarnation: If not persons, but only memories, character traits, or patterns of behavior were to reincarnate, then it would not be necessary for the former life to have already ended at the beginning of the new life. Rogo (1985: 217) and Matlock (2019: 174) emphasize this advantage of their non-personal reincarnation models. However, as I argued above, their models seem to be logically and semantically untenable.

### *Experiences of Participation in the Experience of Others*

Since both the experiential perspective and overlap cases speak against the reincarnation interpretation of PLEs, it seems advisable to the search for an alternative interpretation of PLEs. To the extent that PLEs do indeed revive a person's experience from an earlier time (and prior knowledge of the subject can be ruled out), I think it is more plausible to understand PLEs as participation in the past experiences of others. There are indeed experiences phenomenologically similar to PLEs that are usually interpreted as participation in foreign experiences.

#### *In Life Reviews During a Near-Death Experience*

Particularly impressive for the subjects is presumed participation in the experience of others during a life review in the context of near-death experiences. The subjects seem to share experiences of humans (and other living beings) with whom they had contact during their life. For example, Tom Sawyer (1945–2007) beat up a man at the age of 19 and experienced the event from the victim's perspective during his near-death experience 14 years later. In this is well-known case, Sawyer recalls:

I also experienced seeing Tom Sawyer's fist come directly into my face. And I felt the indignation, the rage, the embarrassment, the frustration, the physical pain. I felt my teeth going through my lower lip – in other words, I was in that man's eyes. I was in that man's body, I experienced everything of that interrelationship between Tom Sawyer and that man that day. (Farr, 1993: 33)

The adoption of the experiential perspective of others during the life review is often so impressive for the subjects that they change their ethical attitude towards their fellow humans following the near-death experience (see Ring & Elsaesser-Valarino, 2006: 169–198). Subjects are convinced that they are truly participating in the experiences of others (e.g., Nicolay, 2017: 189). They articulate a stronger sense of connectedness with others; the Other seems to be “a part” of them (Moody, 1988: 42).

Experiencers also report various experiential perspectives during the life review: the first-person perspective, the perspective of other people or beings involved in the event (see, e.g., Farr, 1993: 30; Nicolay, 2017: 187–189), an uninvolved observer's perspective (see, e.g. Farr, 1993: 30; Moody, 1975: 67; Noyes & Kletti, 1977: 188; Ring & Elsaesser-Valarino, 2006: 158–159), God's perspective (see, e.g., Fanning, s.d.; Farr, 1993: 31), a switch between perspectives during the experience (see, e.g., Ring & Elsaesser-Valarino, 2006: 158–159), and several simultaneous perspectives (see, e.g., Fanning, s. d.).

### *In Telepathic Experiences*

There are also similarities between PLEs and telepathic experiences. In parapsychology, telepathy is defined as “the paranormal acquisition of information about the thoughts, feelings, or activity of another conscious being” (Glossary, 1991: 439). According to this definition, telepathy has nothing to do with experiencing, because information and experiencing are two completely different categories. Information can be true or false, whereas experiencing cannot. Experiencing, on the other hand, can have a temporal duration and intensity, whereas information cannot. In connection with the label ‘telepathy’, however, a kind of co-experiencing of other people’s experiences is sometimes reported. This can go as far as the impression of taking over the visual perspective of another person. Gerda Walther describes two such episodes (see Walther, 1931: 440–441; 1955: 64–66). Unlike near-death experiences, such telepathic experiences often take place in normal consciousness and refer not to the past, but to the current experience of another person. In the context of telepathy, the occurrence of corresponding behaviors and physical features is also reported, similar to, though not as strong as, between subjects of PLEs and the PPL (see, e.g., Playfair, 2012: 37, 39, 41, 141–142). Since PLEs and their accompanying phenomena are generally seen as particularly strong in young children, it is worth noting that telepathic phenomena seem to be more pronounced in young children than in older subjects (see Spinelli, 1978; cf. Schwarz, 1971).

### *In Mediumistic Experiences and Animal Communication*

In mediumistic experiences, subjects often have the impression that they perceive scenes from the past of a deceased person from that person’s perspective. James van Praagh, for example, reported seeing all the scenes in a particular communicator’s past environment from a quite low vantage point. He gave the name of the communicator who was identified as a deceased dog (see van Praagh, 1997: 134). According to David Fontana, inexperienced people can easily get the idea from mediumistic experiences that they are experiencing scenes from their own past lives (see Fontana, 2005: 441). Individuals who identify themselves as mediums usually do not draw this conclusion, probably because they ascribe to themselves many such experiences in relation to the lives of numerous deceased persons whose life dates overlap. From so-called animal communication with this world’s animals, it is also reported that the subjects experience the experiential perspective of the animal, including the visual perspective (see, e.g., Kinkade, 2006: 42).

### ***Conclusion***

From a phenomenological point of view, realistic PLEs could be understood as one or several forms of participation in the experiences of others, where scenes from their lives are shared

from the first-person perspective or other perspectives or shifting perspectives. If we accept this possibility, the problem of overlapping lives disappears. As a precondition to this interpretation, separation of the subjects' worlds of experience is not thought of as strictly as is generally assumed in the epistemological modern European tradition (see Schwenke, 2014: 198–203, 270–271; cf. Luhmann et al., 2021; Taylor, 2007: 35–43; 134–142, 300–307).

### *Explanations*

It may seem unsatisfactory to leave it at this and not offer an explanation of how the putative participation in the experience of others might come about in the case of PLEs. However, we are entering the realm of almost pure speculation when it comes to this question, even if we restrict ourselves to suppositional reasoning based on an analysis of experiential accounts. This is because the accounts provide very few clues on the origin of PLEs. Nevertheless, I will briefly discuss four possible explanations. I suspect that one explanation alone cannot cover the variety of cases.

#### *Extrasensory Perception (ESP)*

Extrasensory perception is defined in parapsychology as the paranormal acquisition of information (see Glossary, 1991: 438). The hypothesis that the subject forms PLEs on the basis of ESP was discussed extensively by Stevenson (1980b: 343–373; see also Bauer & Keil, 2015). It faces serious challenges: How can paranormal information acquisition explain a young child not only knowing the name of their deceased great-grandmother, although (apparently) never having heard it before, but claiming that they *are* the great-grandmother (see Tucker, 2005: 45)? How can a two-year-old child produce an intense, coherent experience from information that they cannot understand because it transcends their world of experience, like, e.g., 2-year-old James Leininger's nightmares as a fighter pilot in a crashing plane (see Leininger & Leininger, 2009: 3–5, 10–12, 46, 55, 57–58, 62–65, 69–70, 77–79, 81)? Can ESP give rise to a coherent pattern of behavior, which sometimes can be observed as early as infancy, and almost appears like an imitation of the PPL (see Stevenson, 2001: 159–160)? Can unusual information acquisition explain why very young children crave whisky and cigarettes (see Stevenson, 2001: 118–119; Tucker, 2013: 24–25)? That they do not feel comfortable in their gender (see Pehlivanova et al., 2018)? Can a foetus suffer malformations through paranormal knowledge that correspond to characteristics of the PPL (see Stevenson, 1997a: 1141)? Can paranormal knowledge of the child be responsible for predictions by the PPL on their deathbed, in dreams and apparitions concerning their reincarnation even before the child is conceived? The ESP hypothesis does not enjoy the advantage of being more accessible to scientific testing than the reincarnation hypothesis. Scientific methods cannot determine whether a subject knows something. This is because knowing in the normal sense involves consciousness. Therefore, science cannot find out whether someone has acquired

knowledge in a paranormal way (see also Schwenke, 2005/2006/2007). The semblance of scientifically treating the question of whether someone knows something only arises if one identifies physical signs for knowing something with the knowing itself.

### *Possession in the Ordinary (Strong) Sense*

It was Stevenson in particular who discussed the possession thesis. However, his concept of possession varies. In *Reincarnation and Biology*, he first advocated a strong, narrow concept of possession, according to which “a discarnate personality has occupied or taken possession of a physical body already tenanted by another personality who becomes ejected” (Stevenson, 1997a: 1141). This definition seems close to the ordinary use of ‘possession.’ A few lines later, however, Stevenson writes: “One may conceive possession as complete or partial.” He suggests to “allow that a discarnate personality can take control of a living person’s body to any extent” (Stevenson, 1997a: 1141). Here Stevenson uses a different notion of possession. This is already evident from the fact that the expression ‘eject’, from his first definition, does not allow for degrees. One cannot eject someone or something just a little bit. Stevenson usually does not refer to the normal concept of possession, but a weaker and broader one which is normally not labelled as possession (see, e.g., Palmer, 2014: 85–90). This may be because in typical states of possession in the ordinary sense, the host person has no awareness of the possessing entity, its actions and life history during and after possession, and does not identify with it, as exemplified in the classic case of Lurancy Vennum (see Stevens, 1878). This contrasts with subjects of PLEs (see Tucker, 2005: 46–47). Possession in the ordinary sense does not convey to the host person any participation in the experience of the occupying person. It is therefore unsuitable as an explanation of such participation. However, this does not eliminate the hypothesis of an influence by a deceased person, in which the subjects do not lose awareness of their own life.

### *Other Kinds of Influence by a Deceased (Reincarnation Willing) Person*

Under this label, different approaches are conceivable, which could also be combined. The polymath and seer Emanuel Swedenborg wrote that he knew “from experience” that spirits – for him, these are exclusively deceased humans – could convey their memories to earthly humans so that they believe they are remembering their own past life (Swedenborg, 1758: § 256, transl. H. S.). Swedenborg’s approach probably best suits cases of PLEs without accompanying behavioral and bodily phenomena occurring only once or a few times. That is not uncommon for cases of older subjects and may also occur in young children (see, e.g., Stevenson, 2003: 56, 79). However, it is less suitable in strong cases of young children with marked behavioral and bodily similarities to the PPL. Here, an impregnation hypothesis may be more appropriate. There are some cases in which persons in an out-of-body state during a near-death experience

have apparently felt the urge to enter a new-born in order to reincarnate in the child, such as W. Martin in 1911 (see Cook et al., 1998: 387–388; for the existence of more cases, see Stevenson, 1980a: 12). That also seems to be implicitly suggested in the account of Chaokhun Rajsuthajarn (see Stevenson, 1983: 177). It is conceivable that a deceased person who still believes in reincarnation – Stevenson (1997a: 2074–2079) speaks of “diathanatic” beliefs – might give in to such an urge and impregnate the foetus or young child with their memories, personality traits, and physical characteristics. This would explain why strong cases suggestive of reincarnation in young children occur almost only in regions where belief in reincarnation is strong and widespread. The influence of a deceased reincarnation-willing person would probably have to be thought of as involuntary because it seems hardly plausible that one would want to reincarnate with phobias and physical deformities from a previous life. The idea of impregnating a person with the characteristics of another person is inspired by heart transplantation cases, where transplant receivers, including small children, seem to take on physical characteristics, speech mannerisms and other behaviors, emotions, and knowledge from the donors (see, e. g., Pearsall et al., 2000). An alternative to one-time impregnation would be longer-term contact of a (reincarnation willing) deceased person with the subject below the possession threshold. This ‘obsession’-view was advocated by psychiatrist Carl Wickland (1861–1945). He suggested that a reincarnation-willing deceased person might get “into the magnetic aura” of a child without being able to free themselves from it (Wickland, 1924: 333).<sup>13</sup> The idea of persons without physical bodies might seem incredibly speculative. However, if it were not made, reincarnation would be ruled out from the outset (leaving aside the possibility of reincarnation in zero time). I have argued above that the existence of persons is beyond the reach of scientific methods, whether they have a physical body or not. In this respect, explanations that operate only with persons with a physical body, such as in the ESP hypothesis, are no more scientific than those applied to persons without a physical body.

### *Consciousness Expansion*

Another approach suggests that subjects in altered states of consciousness can have temporary access to a larger consciousness that allows for direct connection to the experience of others.

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13 Stevenson in particular tried to conceptually defuse the problem of overlapping lives. He argued (unsuccessfully in my view) that the thesis of a foreign psychic influence could not explain many aspects of cases suggesting reincarnation as well as the reincarnation hypothesis. See Schwenke (2020: 214–223), where I discuss, among other subjects, the issues of forgetting the previous life, the very different strengths of the cases, the motive of a foreign psychic influence, the fragmented knowledge of the previous life, the lack of knowledge regarding changes between the death of the PPL and the birth of the subject, and dream apparitions of the PPL *after* the birth of the subject.

A recent example of this type of explanation is offered by Pim van Lommel (2009: 333–334). This approach seems to be especially relevant in cases of older PLE subjects, who are in altered states of consciousness more often during their PLEs, than in young children, and particularly the subset of cases where numerous lives are experienced in rapid succession and (virtually) without accompanying phenomena (see, e.g., Buhlman, 1996: 49–51). The question of which past lives are ‘tapped’ in the expanded consciousness could perhaps be answered by a form of resonance theory (see, e.g., Mishlove, 2019; Mishlove & Engen, 2007). It is interesting that in PLEs induced by altered states of consciousness, similar introductory phenomena may occur as in other kinds of mystical experiences, especially in out-of-body experiences, such as intense auditory sensations (e.g., ringing, buzzing, whistling, music), bodily vibrations, and a journey through a tunnel (see, e.g., Lenz, 1978: 27–28, 39–40, 49–52; for such phenomena in out-of-body experiences see Buhlman, 1996: 8–36; Crookall, 1970: 47–48; Fischer, 1976: 44, 193; Lischka, 1979: 107, 109–112; Moody, 1976: 29–30; Ziewe, 2008: 20–21).

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