

What's Wrong with Reincarnation?

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Amongst the human race there is a pretty strong vote in favour of reincarnation. To begin with it seems to be a recurring, if minor, theme in primal religion. Indeed, close to home for me, Caesar reported it as an element of the religion of the Druids in his *Gallic Wars*. It is, of course, central to the Eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and then later, Sikhism. Possibly through the influence of the East, reincarnation (metempsychosis) was taught by the Orphics, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato and on through the Neo-Platonists and the Manicheans. It is found in the more esoteric schools of Judaism (certain Kabbalists) and Islam (e.g. the Druze sect). Occasionally it has also featured in Christian heretical groups such as the Cathars in thirteenth century France. In Europe, Kant, Goethe, and Schopenhauer flirted with it and, in our own day, it is commonplace amongst those influenced by New Age thought; New Age itself having been influenced by Theosophy and Anthroposophy. In fact I have heard of 'come as you were' fancy dress parties and of latter-day hippies proclaiming that they are 'born again, born again Krishnas'!

Yet the orthodox Christian verdict on reincarnation has been a resounding veto. To sketch out why I will employ the epistemological tools of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

Scripture

Quite simply, massaging texts as one may, the Bible cannot sensibly be made to teach reincarnation, indeed the evidence points the other way (e.g. 'it is appointed for man to die once...' Heb. 9.27).

Nevertheless there are two passages that proponents regularly press into service. Firstly they claim that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of Elijah since Jesus explicitly stated, 'if you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah' (Matt. 11.14). This is in spite of John denying it (Jn. 1.21), the reasoning being that Jesus, as an ascended master, could discern past lives in a way that the person concerned could not. But this won't do. According to Scripture, Elijah never died (2 King. 2.11) and no one confused him with John the Baptist when he appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17). It is much better to understand Jesus' words symbolically. As prophesied to John's father, John would come 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' (Lk. 1.17) in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy (Mal. 4.5).

The second text is more intriguing: John 9.1-3 where the disciples asked if the man born blind had sinned, the implication being to advocates of reincarnation that the disciples assumed that the malady might have been due to a fault in a previous life. Evidently they could be on to something here. There are some references to rebirth in Zoroastrianism and also in Mithraism and other mystery religions which might have seeped into Hellenistic Judaism. But there are two other possibilities. Perhaps, like Origen a little later, through Hellenistic influence they simply believed in the pre-existence of the soul, or again they perhaps believed that a baby could sin in the womb (this is known to have been taught by some rabbis in the second and third century CE). However that may be, the important point is that Jesus failed to endorse any of the above and simply stated that the man had not so sinned.

As has often been observed, the Eastern view of life and history as cyclic is foreign to Scripture where both are seen as part of a linear story. What is more, our destiny is not the

inexorable result of the outworking of personal *karma* according to the Bible but rather God wants to cut away this crippling burden through forgiveness and grace.

Tradition

It has been claimed that some of the Church Fathers believed in reincarnation but this is false. For example, they mistake Origen's belief in the pre-existence of the soul with an endorsement of rebirth while he simply espoused the Platonic notion of a heavenly prior existence of the soul. Indeed he explicitly denounced metempsychosis in his writing as did many other Fathers who were fighting against the heresies of Gnosticism. The reasons they gave are interesting and include: our lack of previous life memories (e.g. Tertullian, Irenaeus), the problem of ongoing identity from one life to another (e.g. Tertullian) and the absurdity of being born an animal (e.g. Gregory of Nyssa). The same issues trouble present day philosophers as we shall see shortly. In the sixth century the Church formally anathematized Origen's view which was described as 'the fabulous pre-existence of souls' and I suppose this would implicitly cover all reincarnationist teachings as well.

Reason

Some criticisms are culture-specific. For instance, there is the problem of how perfect shards (*atman*) of God could ever develop negative karma according to Advaita Hinduism as well as the futility of the whole process whereby the end is merely a return to the beginning – the shards simply reuniting with God (*Brahman*) after myriads of rebirths into suffering; nothing is lost but nothing is gained. Or again there is the problem of ongoing identity in the worldview of Theravada Buddhism with its rejection of a substantial soul. The being who inherits my *karma* shares neither my memories nor any of my essence (soul) since essence itself is illusory. Surely, therefore, according to this worldview there is no hope for me beyond death. Buddhist rebirth becomes a vapid concept.

Other criticisms are more generic. Let me mention seven of them:

1. How can simple life-forms such as beetles or indeed trees make mistakes leading to bad *karma*? Beetles may even lack consciousness, much less free-will. I once met a *guru* who claimed when in deep meditation to be able to review all his past lives since he was a stone but how can a stone be good/bad, or alive/dead come to that?!
2. For *karma* to be educational one would need to remember and thus be able to learn from mistakes made in previous lives but we have no such recall.
3. There is the problem of identity. If my memories are not transferred to the new self, and character disposition is so vague and general a notion, what actually of me is reborn?
4. General free-will vitiates the outworking of *karma*. Just as I am free to help or harm others, so they are free regarding their treatment of me. My good *karma* may entail that I should have a happy life but someone may nevertheless choose to persecute and harm me.
5. Given the experience of progressively more lives one would expect the human race to be improving morally overall but such evidence is surely lacking.
6. Genetics seems to point away from reincarnation. Lamarck was wrong in suggesting that events and developments in this life could be passed on to the next. If I cut off a finger my child will not be born with four digits. If I do a languages degree my child will not be born with an unusual propensity for language learning. Genetics insists that the information flow is always one way only – from the genes to the organism. But reincarnation assumes that information travels via *karma* from the life-choices of the

organism (person) to something like the genes of the reincarnated self. If biology teaches that this cannot happen between me and my child, *a fortiori* it cannot occur between me and some non-related future self.

7. Then there are moral problems. There is a Hindu proverb, 'One man is borne aloft in a litter, four men sweat at the pole. What can this be, other than the fruit of ancient deeds?' which suggests that the rich are morally superior to the poor whose poverty is their own fault. This seems to both undercut the moral imperative for social action and also vindicates the rich who are, in actual fact, often manifestly less moral than the poor. A further moral problem is that the belief in reincarnation results in the devaluation of life. This is exemplified in the *Bhagavad Gita* where Arjuna is reassured by Krishna that he need not worry about killing his relatives in battle since they will simply be born again in another body.

Experience

Although most of us have no recall of past lives some people claim to remember them either under hypnosis or spontaneously.

(a) Hypnotic Regression

Such cases involve a hypnotist putting his patient into a trance and then regressing them back through childhood and then apparently beyond to a previous life or lives. The results are dramatic with the patient not only describing in detail what seems to be happening but also reliving it with attendant emotions. Many experts are skeptical however, for the following reasons:

1. Except in very rare cases, patients under hypnosis think and speak in their native, everyday language not that of the recalled person who may well have been living in a different country where a different language was spoken, and yet language is so integral to who we are, to our very identity, that one would not expect this.
2. Anyone who has seen a hypnotist entertainer will know that patients under hypnosis are very prone to living out fantasies at the suggestions of the hypnotist who may, even unconsciously, be feeding them with cues. The fantasy theory may explain why so many patients claim to have been famous people and even why it is possible to lead them to hypnotic **progression** so that they can apparently describe **future** lives (for examples type in 'hypnotic progression' into YouTube).
3. Cryptomnesia also seems to have a part to play whereby the patient draws upon information that they have previously perhaps read or seen on TV and since forgotten until put into the trance state. This information can sometimes be false. For example, one patient apparently recalled being a Viking with his winged helmet which owes more to Asterix than genuine Viking attire!

(b) Spontaneous memory

In the last century, in books such as *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia; 1974) I. Stevenson investigated a number of children who claimed to remember previous lives and the results seemed impressive as details were followed up and were apparently corroborated. However, again some scholars have raised a number of concerns:

1. Examples all came from cultures with a strong prior belief in reincarnation which may have affected the results. For example, interviews were done through a local

translator who might have wished to persuade the Westerner to believe. Then again, the child would have gained kudos in her culture by claiming such memories. Perhaps also there was the hope of gaining Western money by playing along with the researcher.

2. If we are all supposed to have reincarnated, why cannot the rest of us from secular, Christian or Muslim cultures remember previous lives?
3. Amongst groups that do believe in reincarnation and boast many examples of recall there are some interesting anomalies. For example, frequency of memories of previous lives as the opposite sex differ dramatically. For the Tlingits and the Druzes it is 0% but for the Kutchin of N.W. Canada it is 50%, and 28% for the Burmese. Then whereas instances of recalled reincarnation into the same family is common in Burma and amongst the Eskimos, it is very rare in other cultures. Also gaps between incarnations differ markedly: four months average for the Haida of Alaska and British Columbia, yet forty eight months for the Tling people. In each case the testimonials mirror the expectations and beliefs of their particular societies which make their voracity suspect.

Nevertheless, having acknowledged all of the above points, there still remain some few extraordinary cases which are very difficult to explain away. However, other paranormal possibilities present themselves so that one is still not bound to accept the reincarnation hypothesis.

Some philosophers have speculated that a dead person may leave behind a 'psychic husk' (C. D. Broad) or 'flickering thoughts and sense impressions' (C.T.K. Chari) which could be picked up by a living person either unwittingly or by trained spiritualist mediums. This is analogous to the view that a ghostly apparition is not really a visitation of the dead person but rather an 'impression' on the atmosphere rather like moving images of a dead film-star on the cinema screen. In each of these cases the dead subject is elsewhere but they have left, at least temporary, traces behind.

Alternatively, some contend that occasionally an actual dead spirit may communicate with the living just as Samuel did through the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28). Putative cases of reincarnation could then be explained in terms of spirit possession rather than rebirth. Thus the Christian can continue to maintain that the case for reincarnation is unproven and runs contrary to Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

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