

## The moral case for reincarnation

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**Abstract:** I attempt to show that a cosmic theistic scheme that includes multiple lives as part of a benign plan for the world is likely to be the most moral scheme. It has the best chance of dealing with key aspects of the problem of evil, or of apparent cosmic injustice – particularly when compared to a single-life scheme. Its advantages have to do with the initial disparate condition of children, and with the massive nature of undeserved harm. A multiple-lives scheme is also promising for handling broader meaning of life questions. I end by replying to some common objections to multiple-lives schemes.

### **The moral case for reincarnation**

Seeming chance is all around us. Some of us are born with clear advantages; others are born deprived in any number of ways. Some are struck by sudden cancer, or car crashes; others, in similar circumstances, experience near-misses and continued good fortune. Should we see these advantages and deprivations as distributed merely according to fortune? Many of us hope that this is not the case.

If advantages and deprivations were to depend also on some system of cosmic justice, what form might such a system take? I see two main contenders: ‘one-life theism’, and ‘many-lives theism’.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that the latter is best equipped to provide a moral explanation for life’s apparent fortunes and misfortunes. Given the much wider popularity of one-life theistic views amongst my Western peers in theology and philosophy, I turn first to the reasons for rejecting even the best versions of one-life theistic accounts of cosmic justice. These inadequacies should prompt us to look at many-lives views. I argue that such a look reveals that many-lives schemes provide the best hope for cosmic justice.

### **One-life theism**

Monotheistic one-life religious traditions like Judeo-Christian-Islamic ones have always had natural problems with cosmic fairness – exemplified by,

but not confined to, the puzzle of tragedies suffered by children and other innocents. Thus, these traditions have attempted a long series of ‘theodicies’ (accounts attempting to vindicate divine justice in the face of harm to innocents). From the Book of Job, to the radical Augustinian proposal about evil, to the latest work of Swinburne, great minds have engaged in clever if desperate attempts to resolve the puzzle. My view is that within the belief-parameters of these traditions the puzzle cannot be solved.

The most promising one-life theodicies appeal to a number of well-known and combined factors:

(1) *The free-will defence*: A worthy world must include beings with free will. Free will elevates the status of the agent endowed with it, and it makes possible genuine moral virtues. It does, however, make possible cruel misuses – such cruelties being visited upon both guilty and innocents. Still, the value of free will (and of the moral virtues it enables) is so great as to help outweigh the harms resulting from its likely abuse. A world of conscious beings that could do no wrong might be gentler, but would surely be less noble.

(2) *The medium-for-action defence*: A medium for agency, such as our space-time matter world, necessarily requires knowable and predictable regularities – laws of nature. Any world within which beings can meaningfully act must rest on a bed of regularities.<sup>2</sup> Such laws and regularities will inevitably produce random harm to innocents who, say, out of gravity will fall from heights.<sup>3</sup> The most benevolent of creators cannot produce a system with rules that will not sometimes harm innocents (short of making fully immune creatures – see (4) below).

(3) *The random-rewards defence*: The value of moral behaviour and virtues also depends on actions being done for the right reasons – say, to benefit all affected, and not merely oneself. In order to be done for the right reasons, virtuous behaviour must not be reliably rewarded during the agent’s lifetime, or else agents would quickly learn to choose virtue for selfish reasons (and not, say, out of concern for others). Genuine moral behaviour is, then, practically possible only in a world where bad things sometimes happen to good people, and good things sometimes happen to bad people –this to be determined randomly.<sup>4</sup>

(4) *The vulnerability defence*: Moral behaviour also depends on creatures being susceptible to harm. Moral accomplishments, in a world of creatures immune to harm, would not matter. One’s fellow creatures must be neither self-sufficient nor beyond harm. Susceptibility to harm, in a context of free agents, is bound to result in unfair victims.

(5) *The compensation defence*: The unfair victims of a value-endowed (benevolent), law-abiding, harm-susceptible world that promotes free will and moral virtue, must receive compensation in some everlasting or eternal realm. Admission in this realm would be either direct, as in direct ascendance to a heavenly realm, or indirect, as through an intermediate purgation (and testing?) period prior to this heavenly advancement.<sup>5</sup>

### **Problems with one-life theism**

There are two main reasons for being dissatisfied with even the best combined explanations available to single-life view proponents: the disparate initial condition of children, and the massive and intense nature of the harm visited on innocents.

#### *Concern 1: The disparate initial condition of children*

Children are born with vast disparities in potentials and possibilities. These disparities promise vastly unequal results. Some talented and contextually fortunate young lives are open opportunities for achievement and satisfaction. Other young lives start off deprived and diseased, and promise mainly suffering and early death. These vast disparities cannot be accounted on a single life-scheme, because they are unmerited by both the lucky and the unlucky. They are not the earned products of the agents' free will and moral lapses. This is, after all, the only earthly life children are said to have.<sup>6</sup>

Could the parents be at fault – could the children's calamities, for instance, be the responsibility of the parents who, in misbehaving, transmitted flaws, diseases, deprivations to their children? This is morally unacceptable. First, it is morally odious for children to be expected to carry their parents' debts or sins, since children had no role in acquiring such debts and sins. Second, some children are born handicapped or diseased through no fault of the parents. Third, there are lots of cases where the parents' fortunate position (one that produces a favourable set of worldly conditions for their children) is ill-gotten, and also reverse cases where the parents' misfortunes are undeserved. In such cases inherited advantages and disadvantages would be undeserved.

Can the necessary haphazardness built into the system (so as to motivate genuine moral choices) account for these initial inequities? No, because haphazard calamities are meant to apply to agents who are already established. The purpose of randomly distributed calamities is to preclude self-serving 'moral' choice-making. Haphazard deprivations and diseases applied to the beginning conditions of children could not serve to motivate the children's moral choices – they are not yet qualified to make such choices. Nor could calamities befalling children serve as conditions for other adults' moral choices, for such a use of children as means only would be morally indefensible.

Can after-life compensations rectify these initial disparities? I do not believe so. Attempts to compensate the initial unlucky ones in a subsequent divine realm would create further unfairness. Consider some well-known mainline compensation schemes.

(1) The deprived and unrewarded, yet innocent, children are sent directly to a permanent heaven. This, however, would be unfair to those of us who can only attain this heaven through moral tests to which these children are not subject.

Since failure in these tests yields, according to such schemes, eternal punishments, it follows that the seemingly unlucky children who suffer and die early would then become the long-term undeservedly lucky ones.

(2) These children must first pass moral tests in purgatory or some other after-life setting before entering the heavenly realm. This, in turn, would make the scheme equivalent to a two-lives one, thereby betraying the original one-life claim. Besides, a morally indeterminate purgatorial second life might require the same degree of haphazard distributions of initial advantages and of subsequent rewards present in our current life. If so, some of these children would meet with undeserved catastrophes, such as early disability or death, which would pre-empt fair moral testing. We would then need a third life for these, admittedly fewer, children to be given a fair moral test. This smacks of a vicious regress.

(3) All attain heaven directly, the innocents and the guilty. If so, life would be unfair to those morally virtuous ones who prove themselves and at times sacrifice much in life, compared to those selfish and cruel ones who do not. Could we fix this by requiring that the bad ones first undergo a limited period of suffering or purgation in the afterlife (like a temporary hell) before entering heaven? Such a fix would greatly reduce the significance of moral behaviour in this life, contrary to a key presupposition of the system. Moral virtue would be downgraded because it would no longer be required for heaven. In fact, why have this complex scheme with free will, randomness, and undeserved suffering in the first place?

I conclude that the disparate initial condition of children is a deep moral problem for one-life views.

*Concern 2: The massive (and often intense) nature of the harm visited on innocents*

The massive amounts and the intensity of the harm visited on innocents and on decent people can be considered as a separate problem. Suppose we grant that haphazard harm due to human and natural forces is built into an overall desirable system, because required for free will and for moral virtue. Even so, why are there not safety thresholds such that at certain levels of harm to innocents (and to decent ones) the system shuts off or otherwise impedes further abuses. I am, of course, thinking of holocaust-type disasters or massive natural disasters as examples of such levels of harm. I am also thinking of the billions of miserable lives (followed by untimely death) led by sentient food-animals, in a world where humans have other food options. Why does our cosmic system not feature a built-in safety valve triggered by harm that is large-scale, intense, and mostly undeserved?

Perhaps one could view the shortness of life spans as such a safety valve, since no matter how horrible the suffering one incurs, it does come to a foreseeable end. However, life's finiteness is an insufficiently compassionate safety valve. It does not do enough to relieve the decades-long suffering of many innocents. Even more importantly, it does not address the deprivation of life-experiences and

opportunities stolen by unjust and early deaths – at times on massive scales in both human cases and in cases of other sentient animals. Such deprivations surely constitute major harms, even if no actual suffering is involved.

It will not do here to appeal to some principle to the effect that one benefits by being sacrificed for others. Being of use for other beings' learning and virtuous actions may be of great value for the subjects thus used, but only if the sacrifice were freely chosen. In most cases under discussion the massive sacrifices (of suffering and untimely death) are not freely chosen. In such cases it is obscene to suggest that these losses are 'privileges' for the victims, on the principle that it is better to give than to receive.<sup>7</sup> Being forced to give up the unique wonders of this life cannot itself be a value for the victim. That Professor Swinburne – an astute current defender of the one-life Christian scheme – finds it necessary to adopt this unpalatable position surely signals this scheme's moral self-indictment.

I conclude that the lack of a compassionate safety-mechanism, other than death, remains problematic for one-life theism.

### **Advantages of multiple-lives theism**

Compared to one-life theistic schemes, multiple-lives theistic views – ones that include most of the desirable cosmic features listed in connection with one-life schemes – are morally preferable due to obvious reasons:

(1) The initial disparities among children (and of other one-life sentient innocents) can result at least partly from the underlying entities' performances in previous lifetimes. On the most literal interpretation of such schemes those who morally mess up in one life begin another in more difficult initial circumstances. Their greater initial difficulties become, thus, justly incurred. These same difficulties can provide (for the underlying agent) opportunities to appreciate fully, from a recipient or 'victim' perspective, the nature of the moral mess-up. This full appreciation could help in the 'soul-making' maturation process made famous by John Hick. Whether construed as punishments or as learning chances for a soul-entity that has lapsed in that specific area in the past, what counts is the justice of this initial effect.

Naturally, how one responds to the difficulties involved could still remain a matter of free will. Karmic debts can be compatible with free will. The former explain initial circumstances and capacities. The latter, free will, deals with the manner in which these circumstances and capacities are handled – and free choices determine one's future circumstances. No life-long caste system need be justified by the proper reincarnational scheme.

(2) Regarding the more general massive suffering of innocents, here too the context of prior lives may help. Those who look innocent in this life may well be carrying some karmic guilt from prior lives. They may have to shed some of this guilt as adult humans and even as animals. The massive and group nature

of some of this suffering may itself be due to the past group-character of the violations. That is, past violations may have been prompted by some shared group-beliefs and identifications (say, about a racial, ethnic, caste, or national superiority). As for the intensity and long-lasting nature of some of our misfortunes, that might also reflect past chronic and intense cruelty toward others.

I am personally uncomfortable with the measure-for-measure nature of this view. If true, it would operate according to a very crude form of justice. It should perhaps be modified by some principle of personal understanding that would render it less strict and mechanical. Thus, a past-life abuser who now comes to an unusually quick realization regarding the awfulness of the types of abuses he or she committed in past lives might no longer need to ‘keep paying’ for them. It should not surprise us if some such a karmic-forgiveness factor were built-in the system. However, even in its crude measure-for-measure form, this view would be morally preferable to the alternatives: that the suffering is random, and that it is personally undeserved but serves the interests of an overall desirable scheme.

(3) The third moral advantage of multiple-life over single-life schemes has to do with the unfairness of one-shot tests, especially if the stakes are huge. Having more than one chance to master whatever needs to be mastered in this earthly realm is more fair than having a single opportunity – a single opportunity subject to all kinds of possible initial limitations, such as a diseased body or mind.<sup>8</sup> After all, practice, preparation, trials and errors are generally required for worthy and complex accomplishments within life. Why should it be any different when it comes to the accomplishments related to life’s overall purposes?

One could make the case that in some human enterprises one only gets one chance, yet one is still expected to succeed. Marriage may be a partial parallel (as viewed in some traditional societies). Notice, however, that even for marriage we have had some preparation; and when such preparation is not there, as in cases of teen marriages (arranged or chosen), we are quick to make allowances if the marriage turns out to be unsuccessful. How can we blame the individuals who entered such marriages with little preparation or choice? Furthermore, the growing popularity of divorce in cultures where people have this option shows our preference for a multiple-opportunities world.

One could also argue that each of us does indeed get multiple chances to accomplish moral and spiritual goals within a single life. However, this is simply not true for all of us, as shown by young children who never make it to adulthood – through no fault of theirs (at least within their current life).

(4) Perhaps not as narrowly a fairness-related point as the previous three – it would appear that plausible overall goals of earthly living require many lives. The question of life’s meaning, unencumbered by particular religious assumptions, is likely to be answered in one of two ways (assuming there is a meaning): the moralistic and anthropocentric way, as exemplified by John Hick, and the experiential-mastery non-anthropocentric way I would prefer. Hick’s proposal

sees human life as aimed at realizing our full moral-spiritual potential – such as a state of ego-less sharing in the lives of others and of God. A less anthropocentric proposal would see earthly living as aimed at some sort of wider mastery of earthly experience. The world's immense diversity of people, cultures, times, places, animals, flowers, landscapes, climates, and so forth point in the direction of this second proposal. One would think that part of our life's purpose is to experience and appreciate such diversity – and this requires many lives.

In either case – whether achieving moral-spiritual fulfilment or a broader mastery of earthly experience – success cannot generally be achieved in a single life, given the contingencies and calamities impacting many people's lives.<sup>9</sup> The problem of lives truncated at infancy is decisive here.

I must emphasize that the inadequacy of a single life will be most acute – even aside from infant deaths – if the purpose of living were to be mastery of this earthly dimension. For, such mastery would require a broad, deep, and lasting experience of life. Such experience can be attained only if we encounter this rich life from many different perspectives – each of us must live as a man and as a woman, as rich and as poor, as gifted and as deprived, as physically inclined and as musically inclined, in a social context of freedom and in one of oppression, in a desert environment, and in a cold mountain environment, as a shepherd and as a scientist. Only from the combined experience of these first-person perspectives can we get a well-rounded sense of what it is like to be human on earth. We might even have to encounter earthly life from other animals' perspectives to get an adequate sense of what it is like to live on earth (perhaps at a more varied sensory level) as opposed to merely mastering human earthly forms. Once we abandon the narrower moralism of one-life theism (and even of Hick's form of multiple-lives theism) – according to which life's purpose is mainly to demonstrate moral virtue, and hence this world is for humans only – this last interspecies possibility becomes more and more difficult to ignore.

I conclude that not only are multiple-lives schemes better equipped to handle the strict justice and inequities issues than are the single-lives ones; they are also better positioned to handle the less human-centred, and more plausible, possibilities regarding life's purpose.

## **Objections**

Naturally, there are many reasonable objections that proponents of the many-lives view need to address. The following are some of these objections.

### ***Objection 1: the infinite regress***

The main appeal of this paper is to the justice of a multiple-lives scheme. The initial inequities of a single life are pushed on the shoulders of the previous

life or lives. How about the initial inequities of these lives? They must in turn be pushed back on the shoulders of previous lives. Yet, no matter how far back the series goes, in order for the whole series of lives to be fair, there must be a first life where all participants begin equitably. However, if at some remote past we started as equals, in the important respects, how do we account for the eschewing inequities?

John Hick, who otherwise ably defends multiple lives, treats this objection as decisive against attempts to use reincarnation schemes as answers to life's initial inequities (and to the 'problem of evil' more generally).<sup>10</sup> However, his capitulation in the face of this objection is surprisingly hasty, given the availability of powerful replies.

We must admit that the serial scheme must have fair foundations. However, these fair foundations could be achieved in a number of ways:

(a) It could be that all soul-entities have an equal beginning, and then by exercising incompatibilist free choices they diverge, leading to moral inequalities which are then passed on to their next lives. Hick seems to underestimate the power of free will here.

(b) It could be that even at the beginning, during the first life, there were some inequalities in traits and circumstances among embodied soul-entities. However, if the method of distribution of these inequalities were completely random (where each gets an equal shot at the most desirable initial traits and circumstances), and if the same inequalities were necessary to get an interesting world going – interesting in either a moral or in some broader sense – then such a beginning might be fair without being equal. The added fact that each soul has many lives through which to 'catch up' – should it start at a disadvantage – further strengthens the 'fairness' of the system.

(c) It could be that there never was a beginning. The series of lives is beginningless. One could then argue that without any initial conditions there could not be any initial unfairness. Since at any point in the series there is opportunity for improvement, whatever local inequities there are in the series of lives will either count little, or will average out over the long haul, or could not be the object of moral complaint since one has had an infinite number of past chances to avoid the current disadvantages.

(d) It could be that what we experience as a series of temporal lives is really taking place 'simultaneously'. The multiple lives are really being lived in a parallel manner, in what is a weird spacious present. Each rich and timeless soul-entity opts to manifest itself as many different physical personalities in different action-settings (which we call space and time, location and century). The variety of these personalities and settings are taken on voluntarily, and are co-ordinated with the choices of personalities and settings of every other soul-entity. The point of all this vast and voluntary undertaking would be to experience physical life from multiple perspectives, perhaps simply to get a multi-sided sense of its

quality, or perhaps to achieve moral/spiritual goals. Here the point is that the lives would be chosen freely by timeless entities, hence whatever overall inequities there might be in the distribution of 'good' or 'bad' lives – if any – will *not* be an unfair imposition on anyone.<sup>11</sup>

*Objection 2: The loss of the special preciousness of life*

It has been said that multiple life-views would dilute the unique felt preciousness of this earthly life. If one lived many lives, perhaps countless ones, the urgency to partake well of earthly experience (to enjoy, to help and share with others, to accomplish in artistic or other areas) would diminish. Perhaps the very value of this life would diminish, since there would be many more lives to be lived besides this one.

We can answer that, even with multiple lives, each of us has only one chance to live this particular life well. I have one chance to be this particular personality in these particular circumstances involving these particular challenges, talents, weaknesses, relationships, socio-cultural conditions, etc. My coming back in some other human form to smell different spring flowers and spy on other varieties of yellow birds in other gardens does not remove much of the uniqueness of my current experiences. Yes, the modes of apprehensions of smell and vision may be much the same (unless one includes other animals in the picture), but their contextually determined contents, intensities, significance can be utterly different. The losses of my loved ones will not be made up by the possibility of my having other loved ones in another life. My chance to add to this particular society will not be made any less urgent by my chances of possibly adding to other societies in future or past contexts.

Psychologically, my belief in multiple lives is unlikely to affect my emotional attachment to my current tasks, commitments, activities, and goals. I could still be totally immersed in my present life. Activities that are interesting are not hurt by there being a series of them, particularly if each member of the series is unpredictable and unique. My having a series of soccer games ahead of me does not affect my nearly complete immersion in this current soccer game. The game itself is immersing, much like life itself is immersing. Yes, there could be dull games or activities, but their dullness is likely to be a function of the intrinsic nature of the activities, not from there being a series of them.

Entire Eastern disciplines, of the Hindu and Buddhist varieties, are premised precisely upon the intrinsic allurements of the experiences of this life (and of the emotional absorption constituted by this particular personality-ego). The fact that adherents of Hindu and Buddhist disciplines generally accept reincarnation does not seem to make their goal of detachment or non-immersion in this particular life any easier than is the case for individuals with one-life beliefs. Nor is it the case that respect for life (as shown by, say, general non-violence) has been more pronounced in the West than in Eastern contexts where multiple-lives beliefs prevail.<sup>12</sup>

*Objection 3: The diminished urgency of social action*

It is sometimes claimed that since a multiple-lives view makes the initial natural and social inequalities deserved, these are not unjust, and consequently current participants have a diminished obligation to work to ameliorate these inequalities. In the extreme, the misfortune of being born an outcaste in India, or in desperately poor and violent circumstances anywhere, is simply the working out of past misdeeds. So why work to eradicate these conditions?

The obvious answer is that even if these initial misfortunes were deserved, they are still evils (because suffering is an evil), and as such they pose a challenge and a duty on those in positions to help. If the latter fail to feel compassion for those who suffer (even if that suffering is self-earned) and fail to act on their behalf, then they themselves are manifesting the kind of moral callousness that might produce further future evil conditions. This complex world may pose different sorts of challenges for the different but interconnected individuals in the same system. Some may have to deal mainly with physical difficulties linked to danger and deprivation. Some may have to deal with subtler difficulties linked with intellectual and moral laziness. Failures and opportunities may also come in many varieties. Failure to help those in physical need can remain a moral failure in a system of multiple lives in which free will plays a key role.

Will work to abolish desperate poverty and violent environments interfere with the victims' need to 'work out' their 'bad karma' by suffering these calamities? Here we enter rather speculative territory. In theory, this interference might occur, if we had the absolute power to remove these evil circumstances at once, as with the push of a magic button. But, in theory again, the world may work in such a way that our attempts at immediate eradication of the evil conditions would find resistance – perhaps just enough resistance to produce improvements in the lot of the 'victims' while not removing the needed difficulties these must face so as to learn tough lessons (or 'working out their karma'). This would simultaneously satisfy everyone's needs, opportunities, and obligations.

Thus, a person's attempt to save a child from an orphaned, poor, and violent environment may succeed or partly succeed or fail, depending on the needs of all the individuals involved. Since in practice one does not generally know what some of these needs may be, but does know that the person is in desperate straits, the helping agent may be morally required to do what he or she can, and let the underlying needs and forces do the rest in producing the full outcome. Failure to help would presume the knowledge that the other person does not 'really' need the help. Who among us can claim such knowledge? For all one knows, the person in desperate circumstances only 'needs' a brief period in these circumstances, and has chosen these nasty circumstance partly to provide someone like me with a second chance to demonstrate the charity that he or she has failed to demonstrate in the past!

In short, while in theory social action risks interfering with the karmic purgation-learning needs of those who are currently destitute, in practice we can discount such a concern given our lack of specific knowledge of the hidden factors involved, and given our clear knowledge that helping those in desperate need is a moral obligation.

*Objection 4: The cross-lives identity problems*

Many philosophers have objected to the metaphysics of self behind multiple-lives views. If my past or future lives circumstances are so utterly different, and if there is no memory connections between my present personality and past and future ones, what is the point of considering these other ones *me*? How can the existence of these other people count as my survival, or as my past existence? Even if there seemed to be memory connections, what possible underlying entity would these connections presuppose? A soul? What is that?

We cannot do justice to all the issues involved here. Nor, perhaps, should we try, since the main objective of this paper is to make a moral – not a metaphysical – defence of multiple-lives schemes. Moreover, my main intended audience – those who are committed to some form of post-life survival, but undecided between one-life theism and many-lives theism – cannot deny the possibility of one’s identity being carried by some non-physical entity. Whether our destiny is heaven or another physical life, it is not one’s current body that would carry one beyond death. I am, of course, assuming that the possibility of bodily resurrection is wildly far-fetched (Why would one need one’s body to continue existing in some non-physical realm? Which stage of one’s body would be resurrected? Since the same physical elements will have contributed to the composition of many other bodies that are also to be resurrected, who will inherit these elements? Moreover, as William Hasker has argued, bodily resurrection accounts face identity questions that may have to rely on soul-answers.<sup>13</sup> Without a bridging non-physical bearer of selfhood the resurrected body might be no different than a replica of the dead body.)

Still, perhaps for the sake of more sceptical readers, it may pay to say something about the metaphysical possibility of post-life schemes, and multiple-life ones specifically. For if these schemes were demonstrably impossible, then there would be no point in musings regarding which of them is fair. To consider this possibility, we can ask the following: what would have to be the case for the reality of cross-lives identity?

One requirement is that there be one underlying entity that takes on the many personality-forms. This would require what philosophers call a substance-as-substratum metaphysics. Such a metaphysics, though hotly debated, is not an impossibility. It is one model accounting, for instance, for the mysterious fact that we can be the same individual despite the constant ordinary changes in physical make-up, mental contents, and even in large-scale personality traits. Something

carries one's own sense of same-self from day to day, decade to decade, and from hardened criminal to born-again missionary. One's overall physical pattern or body is unlikely to play this role, for one retains one's sense of same-self even with major bodily losses (one could even imagine a complete body-transplant). One can also retain one's body and lose one's same-self sense – as happens in some Alzheimer's patients. So, it is not out of the question that even within a single life something other than the physical body is the ultimate carrier of consciousness and of a valid same-self sense.<sup>14</sup> If so, there is then nothing impossible about this non-physical carrier continuing through a new physical vehicle.<sup>15</sup>

How could one tell whether the current self had lived before, and which lives it had led? For this purpose some memory connections between the individuals in multiple-lives schemes are necessary. The connections, however, need not be constant and conscious.<sup>16</sup> So long as I (my underlying entity) can at times recall and be recalled by other personalities, and so long as this happens from a first-person point of view (as in experiencing a past person's deeds as if I were him or her), I will have reasons to think that I live multiple lives, and ways to identify such lives. Such cross-lives recollections could take place in between lives – during, say, a rest and review phase. They could also occasionally occur within a life.

Could either of these possibilities – recollections in between lives, or within a life – take place? I do not see why not. Indeed, there seems to be anecdotal empirical evidence of first-person past-lives recollections. The psychologist Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia has devoted nearly forty years of research to scientific corroboration or dismissal of past-life recollections claims (mostly by children).<sup>17</sup> He claims that reincarnation is the most likely explanation of the detailed seeming-memories he has investigated. A recent dispassionate assessment of much of this research, by the philosopher Robert Almeder, concludes that the evidence it provides for reincarnation is at least as strong as that provided by fossils for the past existence of dinosaurs.<sup>18</sup> Like fossil evidence it cannot be duplicated in laboratory conditions; but, again, like fossil evidence outside the laboratory, the more we look for accurate past-lives recollections the more we tend to find.

Psychotherapy seems to be an area where such evidence appears to pop up. Many psychotherapists who use hypnosis as a therapy tool seem to produce past-lives recollections.<sup>19</sup> I do not claim that this empirical evidence alone demonstrates reincarnation. I do think that it counts in favour of reincarnation, and at a minimum should count as *prima facie* data against impossibility claims.

***Objection 5: Responsibility-attributions to trans-lives selves?***

Since I base my position on this paper on common-sense moral concepts such as fairness, innocence, merit, and responsibility, and since such terms have their natural home in a context of single lives, can they justifiably be applied

to trans-lives selves or souls or underlying entities (or, worse, to the series of personalities in a multiple lives-scheme)? How can the trans-lives self *be* responsible, innocent, deserving, if it is not what acts and suffers in any given life? Each local personality is what acts and suffers. Does the one-life religious scheme not have an advantage here, since its after-life personality is the same personality as the earthly one?

Perhaps the one-life scheme does have an advantage here. However, this advantage can be mitigated by the following considerations.

It may indeed be the trans-lives substantial self previously mentioned (and not the series of personalities, except in a loose sense that refers really to this self) that acts, suffers, and experiences during each of its lives. It could do so, however, by being different personalities (linked by memories and causally). This multiple role-playing by a single entity is different in degree, but not in kind, from the many phases and roles each of us experiences during a single life journey. We play the roles of child, teenager, adult, old person, and of student, son, teacher, dancer, tennis player, and so forth. The personality traits we display in each of these phases and roles can differ dramatically. Yet, there may be a unique sense of ‘me-ness’ – as individual as one’s fingerprint – displayed in each of these roles. However, a similarly unique sense of ‘me-ness’ may be displayed by the trans-lives self through each of its roles. The way in which my trans-lives self lives the life of monk or of a single mother may display this self’s unique metaphysical ‘print’. At the very least, I see no reason for rejecting such a possibility out of hand.

There are, of course, disanalogies between these two complexes. The one-life husband is aware of being the tennis player and of having been the young child. The one-life husband experiences continuity between his life phases, and among his roles. In contrast, my current personality is not ordinarily aware of having been, say, a woman in eighteenth-century Cuba. The latter woman is a complete stranger to ‘me’. If I had been her, at some point I became me through a radical and abrupt change.

Again, the differences can be softened by noting that the current me can also repress past phases of itself (because they are too painful), and treat these as if they were a stranger’s life-phases. In more extreme cases yet, the current me can disavow and disown current aspects of ‘itself’ with which it alternates for control of this one body (multiple personality cases). Lack of awareness of these ‘other’ aspects of my current personality do not make the rejected aspects *really* non-me. It is the same substantial self that has been these past repressed personae, and is the multiple-personality personae. After all, successful post-therapy integration makes this oneness retrospectively clear, whereas it was far from clear earlier (during the living phases). Similarly, there could be a ‘final’ integration of the many-lives personalities into that of the one trans-lives self that would make it ‘retrospectively’ clear that the many personalities ‘had been’ aspects of one underlying self or soul.

Another way of seeing that current awareness of past deeds is unnecessary for current responsibility for past deeds is to imagine the type of case suggested by Professor Barrett: I cause an accident that both kills another person and results in my loss of memory of the accident. Surely the new and amnesiac me would still be accountable for the earlier tragedy!<sup>20</sup>

What of the continuity disanalogy between different phases of a single life and phases across lives? Clearly we must point out that not all single-life passages from one role to another, one phase to another, are gradual. Some ‘Sartrean’ transformations from, say, mild accountant to world adventurer, from sinner to born-again missionary, can be radical and abrupt. Again, multiple-personality cases provide extreme examples of such abrupt passages.

All in all, the advantages one-life schemes can derive by appeals to alleged problems of merit- and responsibility-attribution and transmission across lives can easily be overstated. Such advantages are, in any case, outweighed by the previous concerns regarding the unfairness of one-life theistic schemes.

***Objection 6: Why are past-lives ‘memories’ rare?***

Alleged episodes of past-life recollection do bring up an additional issue. If we have lived many times in the past, why don’t we regularly recall all our past lives (why do I personally seem to have zero such recollections)? Why are other-lives memories not commonplace?

The natural answer is that other-lives memory would crowd our consciousness in this life. If we regularly recalled having been (or being) lots of other people, we would not experience the intense identification with our current circumstances that make this life so dramatic. We would also not have the experience of a fresh start – we might instead carry with us the weariness and cynicism of another self’s old age. We need to forget who we have been, and who we might be ultimately, for us to fully be immersed into our current role.

However, our opponent would continue, can we really take advantage of lessons learned in past lives without generally having access to them? What is the point of gaining wisdom in any given life, at times through many hardships, if we are going to lose it in the interest of making a fresh start?

We can answer that past-life lessons can be used not as conscious memories but as factors determining the circumstances and challenges one faces in this life. One’s failures in neglecting one’s family duties in the past may explain one’s now carrying complex and heavily felt family burdens, such as the obligation to support aged and sick parents while simultaneously having to care for young children. Alternatively, one’s having succeeded at handling difficult family relations in one life may provide one with stable and healthy family circumstances in this life – so that one can now focus on intellectual, artistic, political, or larger social challenges.

We can further speculate that access to general wisdom, partly acquired through past lives, need not feel subjectively as if it came from past experiences.<sup>21</sup> It is possible, that is, for us to retain the wisdom resulting from past-lives lessons without remembering how this wisdom was acquired. Some young persons can be unaccountably 'wiser than their years'. The striking analogy of child geniuses in other areas, such as young Mozart in music, can serve us well here. Just as such child geniuses could possess advanced skills due to learning in past lives, so can some young people possess a keen sense of what is and what is not genuinely of value – and not attribute this sense to having lived before.

Might one even carry specific skills across one's lives without being aware of their other-life mode of acquisition? Perhaps the otherwise puzzling phenomena of child prodigies (where, say, musical skills are manifest at very young ages) are cases of this sort.

### Conclusion

I have tried to show that a scheme sporting multiple lives as part of a benign plan for the world is likely to be the most moral scheme. It is likely to have the best chance of dealing with the persistent problem of evil, of apparent cosmic injustice – particularly when compared to single-lives schemes. It may also be the most promising scheme for handling broader meaning of life questions. I have also argued that some of the common objections to multiple-lives schemes are less than convincing.<sup>22</sup>

### Notes

1. There have, of course, been other explanatory proposals involving acceptance of personal gods. Among the better known are the dualist ones of the Zoroastrian, Manichean variety. These, however, aim to explain not the ultimate justice of the universe, but rather the source of its injustice. There have been, in addition, non-personal forms of theism that espouse one life and a final union with the impersonal divine source. Perhaps Stoic or Taoist views are examples of such views. I am not sure how these schemes could be taken as providing a justification for seeming undeserved harm.
2. It is quite possible that any system that provides the parameters for creaturely existence would need the underlying regularities – its natural laws – to reside in a bed of quantum-type statistical indeterminacy, so that there are occasional surprises built into the system. Such surprises may be necessary for the sake of renewal, anti-stagnation, creativity, perhaps free will.
3. See C. S. Lewis on this point: C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1962), 31–33.
4. Naturally such random assignments of undeserved good and bad things must not be final.
5. I choose to skip some pertinent but morally indefensible beliefs included within some historical one-life theistic traditions, such as: (a) that the evil pervading the human world is due to the primordial original sin of the first human couple, which results in all subsequent humans being born non-innocent – and indeed with predominantly evil impulses. This belief, however, commits one to accept a morally odious transference of sins and flaws from parents to children and further descendants. (b) That super-human beings, like devils, are being allowed to rain undeserved calamities on innocent humans. This, however, would put humans in too defenceless a position. The fact that other animals are analogously defenceless with respect to humans does not remove the unfairness of such a devils-to-humans relation. The humans-to-animals case is its own moral puzzle looking for a solution – it cannot be a model for solving other moral problems.

6. John Hick alludes briefly to this issue, which he describes as 'the problem of the inequality and inequity of the circumstances of human existence'. He goes on, as we will see, to reject reincarnation as a solution to this 'problem' even while favouring a multiple-lives scheme much like the present one; John Hick *Death and Eternal Life* (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1976), 389.
7. Richard Swinburne is well-known for advancing the claim that we tend to undervalue wildly the total value of the lives of various victims – humans and animals – by not sufficiently counting how much even involuntary being of use is of value for them. He states that 'the supreme good of being of use is worth paying a lot to get. It is much better if the being-of-use is chosen voluntarily, but it is good even if it is not'; Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 103–104. See also 235–236. I simply do not see how one's involuntary losses being of instrumental value (benefiting others) is directly beneficial to oneself, the victim.
8. This point is made at great length and repeatedly by John Hick in his defence of a 'soul-making' vision of human life – a vision which, he argues, requires multiple lives, since most humans cannot accomplish their full moral-spiritual realization in their present life.
9. See, for instance, Hick *Death and Eternal Life*, 239.
10. See *ibid.*, 309.
11. For a full and complex presentation of such a view, see the series of 'Seth' books produced by the poet-medium Jane Roberts. For instance, see *Seth Speaks: the Eternal Validity of the Soul* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
12. A multiple-lives view need not accept the morally objectionable view, advanced at the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Krishna, that a soldier's killing of the enemies is not so bad since one can only kill their bodies and not their immortal souls. A premature and deliberate truncation of a particular personality-experience could remain – in a multiple-lives context – a major ethical violation, in that it produced an irreplaceable loss (since no other personality-experience will be quite like it, etc.).
13. See William Hasker *Metaphysics: Constructing a Worldview, Contours of Christian Philosophy* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), esp. 76–81. See also his 'Resurrection and mind-body identity: can there be eternal life without a soul?', *Christian Scholar's Review*, 4 (1975), 319–325.
14. Some have argued that even the most ordinary same-self sense is delusional (among them Buddhists). If we were all subject to this delusion, then indeed the basic moral notions of responsibility for past deeds, just and unjust compensations, would have nowhere on which to stand. My paper is assuming that such notions are valid. Thus I must hope that the Buddhist no-self views at issue are false.
15. Current philosophical physicalists, of course, would object on the grounds that there cannot be a non-physical vehicle for consciousness. The brain is the seat of consciousness. They must concede, however, that the program of scientific and philosophic assimilation of consciousness within physical phenomena has proven so far to be unsuccessful, or at least highly disputed. For present purposes, I need only say that my main intended opponents – one-life theists – cannot avail themselves of physicalist arguments, since they too are committed to non-physical post-life continuation of consciousness.
16. The memory connection could be 'latent', as Roy Perrett suggests. See Roy W. Perrett 'Rebirth', *Religious Studies*, 23 (1987), 54.
17. Stevensons's extensive research has been reported in many books and articles. Three of these are: Ian Stevenson *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Charlottesville VA: University Press of Virginia, 1974); *idem Children Who Remember Previous Lives* (Charlottesville VA: University Press of Virginia, 1987); and *idem* & G. Samararatn 'Three new cases of the reincarnation type in Sri Lanka with written records made before verification', *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 2 (1988), 217–238.
18. See Robert F. Almeder *Death and Personal Survival: The Evidence for Life After Death* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992).
19. The popular literature in this area is extensive. I cannot, of course, vouch for its rigour. See Helen Wambach *Reliving Past Lives* (New York NY: Bantam Books, 1978); Dr Edith Fiore *You Have Been Here Before* (New York NY: Ballantine Books, 1978); H. N. Bannerjee *Americans Who Have Been Reincarnated* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1980); Bruce Goldberg *Past Lives, Future Lives* (New York NY: Ballantine Books, 1982); Joel L. Whitton *Life Between Life* (New York NY: Warner Books, 1986); Roger Woolger *Other Lives, Other Selves* (New York NY: Bantam Books, 1988); Brian Weiss *Many Lives, Many Masters* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Raymond Moody *Coming Back: A Psychiatrist Explores Past-Life Journeys* (New York NY: Bantam Books, 1991); Winifred Blake Lucas (ed.) *Regression Therapy: A Handbook for Professionals*, vol. 1, *Past-Life Therapy*, and vol. 2, *Special Instances of Altered State Work*

(Crest Park CA: Deep Forest Press, 1993); Michael Newton *Journey of Souls: Case Studies of Life between Lives* (St Paul MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1994); *idem Destiny of Souls: New Case Studies of Life between Lives* (St Paul MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000); Christopher M. Bache *Lifecycles: Reincarnation and the Web of Life* (New York NY: Paragon House, 1994); Marge Rieder *Mission to Millboro* (Nevada City CA: Blue Dolphin Publications, 1995); *idem Return to Millboro: The Reincarnation Drama Continues* (Nevada City CA: Blue Dolphin Publications, 1995); Jenny Cockell *Across Time and Death: A Mother's Search for her Past-Life Children* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Robert L. Snow *Looking for Carroll Beckwith: The True Story of a Detective's Search for His Past Life* (Emmaus PA: Daybreak Books, 1999); Carol Bowman *Return from Heaven: Beloved Relatives Reincarnated within Your Own Family* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 2001).

20. Perrett 'Rebirth', 56.

21. See *ibid.*, 63.

22. I want to thank both Professor Byrne and two anonymous reviewers for *Religious Studies* whose comments helped to improve this essay significantly.