

Revisiting the Rationality of Reincarnation-Talk

Ankur Barua

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

A survey of the key arguments that have been developed for and against the rationality of belief in reincarnation shows that often the central dispute is not over what the ‘data’ are but how to assess the ‘data’ from specific metaphysical-hermeneutical horizons. By examining some of these arguments formulated by Hindu thinkers as well as their critiques – from the perspectives of metaphysical naturalism and Christian theology – we argue that one of the reasons why these debates remain intractable is that the ‘theory’ is underdetermined by the ‘data’, so that more than one set of the latter can be regarded as adequate explanations of the former.

Keywords: Reincarnation, *karma*, Underdetermination

A survey of the arguments for and against the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation, as they are understood across the Hindu traditions, would reveal that the proponents and the critics often disagree not so much over *what* the ‘evidence’ is, but *how* to incorporate it within their wider conceptual horizons. As we will see in this essay, while one group would regard the absence of a certain kind of ‘data’ as falsifying the doctrines, this evidential gap would not be viewed by the other as a major epistemic defect. Therefore, one of the reasons why debates

for and against the ‘rationality’ of these doctrines continue to be intractable is, to use the vocabulary of philosophy of science, that the *theory* is underdetermined by the *data*, so that there are alternative theoretical frameworks that ‘fit’ the same set of data.

We will explore the question of the rationality of belief in reincarnation through a discussion of the meta-epistemological theme of what makes it *rational* to give assent to a proposition. Without attempting a full-scale analysis of this topic here, we lay out some of the key aspects of the role of rationality in the formation and the regulation of beliefs. Minimally, individuals are rational when they do not violate certain logical principles (primarily the ‘law’ of non-contradiction) and try to fulfill their epistemic responsibilities to seek truth, while maximally individuals are rational only when these responsibilities are successfully discharged.¹ According to the minimalist account, then, any belief will count as rational provided it is non-contradictory and empirical support for it is being sought, while according to the maximalist account, our beliefs are rational only if their truth-status has been validated through formal procedures. A common objection against the former is that it labels as rational all kinds of beliefs that we might wish to keep out, while the latter is often criticized for projecting too idealized a picture of rationality that ignores the context-specific ways in which human beings form their beliefs in concrete locations.² An intermediate position is what some philosophers in the wake of Thomas Kuhn have labelled social evidentialism. According to this standpoint, human beings should be viewed not as singular epistemic subjects who incrementally build up their picture of the world from perspicaciously clear axioms, but rather as socialized into a community of epistemic peers from which they learn the rules of collecting, analyzing, and assessing evidence.³ Since the canonical rules through which we seek evidential grounding for our beliefs are inter-woven with our overarching worldviews, we do not (yet) have access to a God’s-eye point of view from which the rationality or the epistemic merits of our conceptual systems can be decisively settled at one stroke. Thus, for

instance, while both Christians and non-Christians have been reading the synoptic Gospels for roughly two millennia now, they arrive at different conclusions over the possibility of the resurrection of Christ *not* because they have access to different sets of data (they read roughly the same texts, and sometimes in the original languages) but because they disagree over how to read, assess, and evaluate the data.

The meta-epistemological thesis of hermeneutic perspectivism indicated here – that the patterns of formation and regulation of belief are *informed* by distinct perspectives – also helps us to understand why debates over the rationality of belief in reincarnation remain inconclusive, in spite of various arguments launched for and against it over the last two hundred years or so. By surveying the arguments from a range of figures, we shall argue that the fundamental debate across these figures is primarily over *how* to assess the ‘evidence’ that is broadly accepted by all of them. Since the ‘evidence’ is accessible from distinct hermeneutical horizons so that more than one theoretical framework – for instance, metaphysical naturalism, Vedāntic Hinduism, and Christian theology – can assimilate it through explanatory chains, these figures arrive at opposite conclusions. As debates in philosophy of science over the underdetermination of theory by data have indicated, when two or more theories are ‘empirically equivalent’, in the sense that the available data are consistent with these theories, there is no knockdown confirmation or falsification of these theories.¹⁴ If empirical evidence seems to disconfirm a theoretical framework, the apparent disconfirmation can be rebutted by altering certain aspects of this conceptual structure. According to this notion of ‘holist underdetermination’, often labelled the Duhem-Quine thesis, hypotheses must be tested as a group, so that in case of a failed empirical test, it is not immediately obvious which of these hypotheses should be abandoned or revised. That is, the

epistemic support provided by ‘data’ to ‘theory’ is built out of inductive nests of evidence. In a more formulaic manner, the thesis can be set out as follows:

If (theory and background assumptions), then Prediction.

Not-Prediction.

Therefore, Not-(theory and background assumptions).

Therefore, Not-theory *or* Not-background assumptions.

Consequently, the potential defeaters of a theory can be rebutted by pointing out that they are grounded in metaphysical perspectives or background assumptions that are distinct from those of the theory itself. Thus J. Prabhu argues that the reason why reincarnation research has not been accepted by the scientific community is because the latter’s horizons are structured by physical naturalism: ‘This is only to be expected, because a reincarnation hypothesis goes against the beliefs of many reared in a materialist or physicalist culture. Within these assumptions, the scope of observation, experiment and reality-testing is going to be restricted, while the limited data uncovered by these methods in turn reinforces these narrow assumptions. This problem of the theory-ladenness of all data and of what counts as evidence is well known from discussions in contemporary philosophy and history of science’.¹⁵ For another example of how ‘background assumptions’ can shape the debate over the rationality of reincarnation, we can turn to Robert Almeder who notes that ‘dogmatic anti-Cartesians’, who understand personal identity exhaustively in terms of bodily continuity and accept physicalist theories of mind, will not accept any evidence as supporting the possibility of *post mortem* survival.¹⁶ That is, some form of Cartesianism or anti-Cartesianism,

whichever we take to be a better explication of our intuitions about personal identity, is related in a 'holistic' manner to our beliefs about the cognitive integrity or inadequacy of the theory of reincarnation.

The Underdetermination Thesis Applied to Reincarnation

A striking feature of the rich traditions of intellectual inquiry in classical Indian thought is the absence of sustained dialectical argumentation about the plausibility or verifiability of the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation. Various soteriological systems such as Vedānta (itself comprising several theistic and trans-theistic strands), Buddhism, Jainism, and others accepted the *karmic* structuring of human experience, and minutely examined the nature of the self. Thus the Vedāntic Hindu systems argue that there is a spiritual core that is reincarnated across numerous life-times till this core attains liberation as it is understood within their specific horizons, while the Buddhist metaphysics of impermanence rejects the notion of a spiritual essence and instead speaks of the rebirths of psychic continua. Notwithstanding this divergence over *what* is involved in the *karmic* processes, none of these groups denied the reality of these transmissions across lives. The belief in the *karmic* configurations of reality operated on these horizons as a 'framework' assumption that ties together the threads of theological anthropology, religious epistemology, and soteriology in overlapping networks of meaning. According to most of their traditional sources, an individual does not work one's way to the belief through a piecemeal accumulation of evidence that is subjected to rigorous processes of empirical verification or falsification. Rather the acceptance, initially on trust (*śraddhā*), of the veridicality of the meta-empirical perception of the sages such as the Buddha, leads the individual who has undergone spiritual regeneration to see the world in the

light of this belief.¹⁷ While the Buddha claims at various places in the Pali Canon the ability to recall past lives,¹⁸ the *Yoga* texts state that the *yogi* can gain knowledge of previous births (*Yogasūtras* III.18).¹⁹ From the perspective of Advaita Vedānta, A. Sharma similarly argues that while empirically we often observe that the virtuous suffer and the wicked prosper, from the vantage-point of ultimate reality the truth is that ‘such injustice is only apparent and not real – that *ultimately* appearances notwithstanding, cosmic justice prevails’.²⁰ That is, belief in the *karmic* regulation of human existence is inter-subjectively rational for those who have access to the texts, traditions, and teachers of the Hindu and the Buddhist life-worlds. This hermeneutic perspectivism is reflected, for instance, by the claim in the *Manusmṛti* (c. 200 CE): ‘By reciting the Vedas constantly, by performing purifications, by engaging in ascetic toil, and by showing no hostility to any creature, he gets to remember his former birth’.²¹

Before we proceed, we need to spell out some of the aspects of the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation as they appear specifically in Hindu conceptual systems. In their minimalist form, the doctrines state that human actions leave behind a certain potency which leads an individual to experience happiness or suffering in future embodiments.²² These actions leave behind certain impressions or form tendencies, which somehow shape the future locations of the transmigrating spiritual self.²³ The medieval text *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (c. 1000 CE) expresses the doctrines in a terse manner: the same individual enjoys the fruits of the same meritorious or demeritorious act in the next world in the same manner and to the same extent according to the manner and the extent to which that act has been performed in this world.²⁴ A crucial implication that modern Hindu figures have often drawn from these doctrines is that human beings should work through their present lives keeping in mind that although ‘we may wait a long time before we reap any harvest, yet we must know that there can be no loss and

unfair return. What we deserve is bound to come to us; and what we do not deserve, even if we try to gain it by some crooked way, will not stay with us'.²⁵ We will discuss three cases where the arguments for or against the coherence of these doctrines are informed at a crucial juncture either by the disputant's location on the Hindu conceptual horizons or by the disputant's rejection of these perspectives.

Memory Recall and Reincarnation

First, consider the so-called memory objection to the belief in reincarnation, namely, that because we do not recall our (putative) past lives, the belief is irrational. As various figures have pointed out, just as we do not claim that our childhood is non-existent simply because we do not remember (some of) our experiences from that stage of our lives, the possibility of past lives cannot be discounted merely by noting that we do not have any memories relating to them. For instance, we may regard memory in dispositional terms as the ability to recall certain events which we do not at present consciously remember, and the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation too speak of dispositions carried across lives which may be activated at a later stage.²⁶ Indeed, the inability to remember past lives is often viewed by Hindu figures not as an objection to but as a support for belief in reincarnation. Thus Swami Paramananda argues that there is a 'great blessing in this forgetfulness, for sometimes our past recollections prove to be most fatal to our progress. They hang over us like dark clouds overshadowing our

destiny'.²⁷ There is, however, a crucial dis-analogy: in the case of our childhood, we can turn to our parents and relatives who, *independently of their religious horizons*, will inform us that we indeed existed as children, whereas in the case of reincarnation, we have to appeal to the enlightened sages such as the Buddha or the Hindu *yogis*. Therefore, the metaphysical possibility of the continued existence of an incorporeal self across life-times must be settled before (the priority is logical and not temporal) we begin to assess the evidence for reincarnation. However, *if* this metaphysical possibility can be established on independent grounds, it would enhance the plausibility of the theory of reincarnation, even if we cannot delineate the precise mechanisms of reincarnation. In a broadly neo-Vedantic argument in *An Idealist View of Life*, supplemented with references to Plato, Plotinus, and Kant, and Whitehead, S. Radhakrishnan rejects a psycho-neural identity theory by claiming that we should not confuse an empirical conjunction between a physical brain and cognitive processes with a metaphysical necessity. While we may need brains to think when we are embodied, we should not conclude, according to him, that disembodied thought is metaphysically impossible.²⁹ Thus, having proposed the coherence of the concept of a self that precedes this life and moves on to other bodies after death, Radhakrishnan argues that '[t]he metaphysical question of the continuity of the self is not in any way affected by the discontinuity of memory'.³⁰ That is, Radhakrishnan, whose overall argument in *An Idealist View of Life*, is the metaphysical reality of the dimension of the Spirit which is working in and through matter, does not view the absence of memory-claims as disconfirming the theory of reincarnation. Indeed, he believes that certain undeniable 'facts', such as the remarkable talents and abilities of child prodigies, lend support to the theory, even though we do not have a clear understanding of the processes.³¹

We will note in a subsequent section that Ian Stevenson and his associates have documented cases of children who have reported memories from (putative) previous lives, and argued that such memory-claims are good empirical evidence for reincarnation. For now, consider, in contrast, W. Kaufman's response to a view similar to that of Radhakrishnan developed more recently by M. Chadha and N. Trakakis. Kaufman objects that because of the absence of memory-claims the believer in reincarnation is not able to provide *any* correlations at all between evil acts in the past and sufferings in the present. He presents their second reply to his original article in this manner: 'the dogmatic insistence that one should simply have faith: karma tells us that our present sufferings are correlated with past deeds, and that's the end of the discussion. It should suffice that one knows one is being punished for an unspecified wrong committed at an unspecified past time and place because that is what karma says'.³² Indeed, this is precisely the point that Chadha and Trakakis acknowledge: 'The theory of karma says nothing specific about *when* and *in what form* the rewards and punishments will be meted out; it only states that an agent is bound to enjoy or suffer the results of their behaviour – if not in this life, then at least in some future life'.³³ An individual who has developed a form of yogic insight into past lives would indeed be able to 'see' these *karmic* connections by activating latent memories relating to these lives, and understand how one's sufferings fit into the chain of one's *karmic* consequentiality. However, given that in the present such connections are not perceived, the vital question is: in the absence of such empirical correlations, why believe in the reality of the processes of reincarnation?

R. Perrett provides a helpful analogy: if a motorist were to kill a pedestrian and then incur amnesia, we do not argue that the individual's responsibility for the death is diminished merely by the loss of memory, for all that is needed on the part of the individual is the *belief*

that he or she was responsible for this accident.³⁴ Likewise, even if a specific individual is not herself able to trace her previous lives back into the past, she might accept the testimony of the enlightened sages that the world is indeed structured by *karmic* regulations. Stephen Phillips has recently developed a version of this argument through an appeal to yogic perception as a means of knowledge. He develops a parallelism thesis: just as sense perception has epistemic value in its ordinary operations, yogic perception too can reveal to us features of reality. Only the yogis have the authority to make claims about trans-empirical reality, and the others, who should not dispute the veridicality of yogic perception unless they have specific reasons to doubt it, have to depend on their testimony. Phillips emphasises the fallibilist nature of this appeal to yogic testimony: the parallelism thesis does not imply the truth of yogic claims, for all claims are corrigible. However, we should ‘assume that meditation and other yogic experience has a noetic or cognitive quality, being both taken as informative about some pretty important matters, such as the death-spanning nature of our consciousness, and informative in fact. There is no general reason we should not trust our teacher’s testimony’.³⁵ In short, just as sense perception usually generates knowledge, even though there are cases (such as when we suffer from astigmatic vision) when they lead us astray, yogic perception too is ‘trustworthy by default’, even though it is defeasible.

Post Mortem Existence and Reincarnation

Second, a vital point of contention relates to the plausibility of certain forms of substantial mind-body dualism. For Vedāntic Hindu thinkers, the rationality of the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation is underpinned by the *Upaniṣadic* declarations about the immortal spiritual essence of the human person that is distinct from the mutable corporeal structure. Therefore,

death is viewed, on Vedāntic metaphysical horizons, not as a unique event in the life of an individual but as a transition of the unitary self's assumption of a new set of bodily conditions. In the light of this philosophical-hermeneutical backdrop, Radhakrishnan argues that psychical research provides some support to the theory of an ethereal body. He notes that classical Hindu texts speak of the subtle body which survives the dissolution of the gross body, and which acts as the carrier of an individual's *karmic* dispositions, tendencies, and traits across lives. Given these metaphysical presuppositions, he concludes that when due allowance is made for the possibilities of fraud, error, and coincidences, there is 'enough evidence to justify the belief that apparitions are due to the action of the dead persons whose bodies they represent'.³⁷

In contrast, Paul Edwards, who rejects substantial dualism and accepts a form of psycho-neural identity in the philosophy of mind, argues that people who believe in reincarnation suffer from deep cognitive inadequacies. The theory is not based on any observational evidence and seeks to exploit gaps in the scientific explanations for phenomena such as child prodigies, the experience of *déjà vu*, and so on. One of his primary objections is that believers in reincarnation are unable to state the mechanics of a reincarnating self, so that they are led to 'absurdities' about the astral bodies of the departed in the interregnum between two embodiments.³⁸ Radhakrishnan himself addressed this issue, and acknowledged the difficulty of spelling out the mechanism through which the self finds a new embodiment. However, he arrived at a diametrically opposed conclusion that we noted earlier: 'The mechanism of rebirth is difficult to know ... But simply because we do not understand the process we cannot deny the facts'.³⁹ Providing some metaphorical elaboration, he argued that we may view the self as moving with the 'finer vehicle' of the subtle body, which attracts to itself the

physical elements that form the gross body. Through this ‘psychic gravitation’ the self finds its appropriate environment. The ‘deciding factor’ in this process is the self, which is reborn in certain families which embody the qualities that the self seeks to develop, and not the parents of the body.⁴⁰ We see that while Edwards argues that the empirical unavailability of ‘facts’ relating to the interregnum between two lives demonstrates the cognitive inadequacy of the theory of reincarnation, Radhakrishnan claims that this empirical inaccessibility does not violate the theory’s cognitive integrity. Phillips addresses these conceptual gaps from a slightly different angle by taking up one of Edwards’ objections – the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation cannot explain the increase in the human population. Phillips replies that regarding the question of where the extra selves come from, we may argue ‘that the other world or worlds, or, as in Vedanta, planes of being, in which we live, have the resources, and we do not presume to know the details. All Yoga theories of reincarnation assert an other-worlds hypothesis, and we have no extraterrestrial population counts’.⁴¹ Once again, Phillips, who shares with Radhakrishnan a metaphysical horizon of empirical selves progressing or regressing through cycles of reincarnation, does not view the lack of precise details of these *karmic* processes as undermining the cognitive adequacy of the theory of reincarnation.

Universal Justice and Reincarnation

The arguments from the above two sections can be summarised in the following manner. For Hindu believers in *karma* who accept *that* reincarnation takes place, the key challenge is to explain the *how* of reincarnation.⁴² Now from the premise that there are no memories relating to (putative) previous lives, critics of the doctrine conclude that this lack shows that there are no *karmic* processes regulating multiple lives, while its defenders conclude that the relevant

memories can be activated in appropriate circumstances. The disputes between defenders and critics of the theory of reincarnation can be traced back to their divergent metaphysical horizons: the former sometimes accept some form of metaphysical naturalism, and the latter a version of body and spirit distinction grounded in *Upaniṣadic* texts or *Yoga*-related cosmologies. For a third instance of a divergence that is informed by different metaphysical perspectives, let us turn to the moral arguments that have been developed in defence of *karma* and reincarnation.

A common argument is that the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation help to make sense of the various forms of inequality that we see in the world, and also show people the way to overcome their numerous ills and ultimately gain liberation. Indeed, the doctrines can provide us deep consolation by reminding us that our present sufferings are not inflicted upon us arbitrarily but are the fulfillment of ‘just laws’.⁴³ All individuals must receive adequate opportunities to overcome the impediments which are structured by their *karmic* inheritances, a perfection which cannot always be completed within the space of a single lifetime.⁴⁴ Therefore, there can be no eternal perdition: since action and reaction must be equal, there cannot be infinite punishments for finite human errors. As Swami Paramananda puts it: ‘Could an all-wise, all-loving Providence condemn any child of His to everlasting suffering? He grants us another life, another opportunity, another advantage, that we may still prove our worth and work out our salvation’.⁴⁵ Further, the doctrines have a ‘scientific’ foundation in that they are said to be simply an extension to the spiritual planes of the natural causation that scientists accept in their dealings with physical reality.⁴⁶ Just as the Newtonian law of gravitational attraction applies objectively to all natural entities, we may speak, according to figures such as Swami Paramananda, of moral causation that connects, at the spiritual level,

empirical selves on their journey towards the transcendent. In other words, we can consider the principle of *karma* as the ‘moral law’ of cause and effect which applies the principle of natural causation to the moral and spiritual spheres, so that one’s moral nature is shaped by one’s own actions and not by fate or chance. Since natural causation is ‘enfolded’ in this manner by moral causation, the invocation of *karmic* explanations is meant not to deny natural chains of causality but to make sense of why some evil befalls *this* and not *that* person.

Modern Hindu commentators on the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation often present them with the ‘evolutionary’ vocabulary of a self which has a *karmic* history as well as a future that the self is now shaping through its actions. According to Sri Aurobindo, *karma* shapes ‘the whole nature and eventuality of these repeated existences. There is nothing here to depreciate the importance of the present life. On the contrary the doctrine gives it immense vistas and enormously enhances the value of effort and action’.⁴⁷ Echoing these themes, Radhakrishnan argues that if human souls are created by God with varied natures, human existence would be structured by ‘caprice and cruelty’. The God who places human beings in diverse circumstances and judges them depending on their ability to negotiate these circumstances is ‘a strangely whimsical deity who enjoys our adventures’.⁴⁸ Instead, the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation state that the fulfilment of human individuality involves not ‘blind rushes to the goal’ but a gradual perfectionism that can require a thousand years or more.⁴⁹ In a more recent elaboration of this argument, J. Prabhu states that the body is the externalisation of the self (*ātman*), and the moral stage where the self, in association with the moral and psychological dispositions of the individual, undergoes its spiritual evolution. He notes that his primary emphasis is on the moral significance of reincarnation and not the

empirical evidence, and calls his argument a Kantian ‘transcendental deduction based on a phenomenological analysis of our moral experience’.⁵⁰ Pointing out that we sometimes encounter in ourselves a skill that we cannot explain by our prior experiences, he argues that while this ‘evidence’ does not necessarily lead to the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation, the belief in a previous life ‘is a reasonable one, especially when placed in the context of a more comprehensive belief in a moral universe. There is then no bitterness about life, but rather a calm acceptance of what it has to offer, of joy or of sorrow, aware that both are given us to draw the soul upwards toward God’.⁵¹ Therefore, the principle of *karma* is not primarily retributive but one of continuity and spiritual growth through which an individual moves away from ignorance about the nature of reality.

Once again, to see that the conclusion for *karma* and reincarnation does not follow with deductive necessity from these considerations about cosmic justice and moral progress, we may consider a Christian theological reflection on the problem of evil. A.G. Hogg (who was one of Radhakrishnan’s teachers at Madras Christian College) put forward the following contrast between Hindu and Christian approaches to the question of reconciling ‘unmerited’ suffering with belief in a benevolent creator. Both views agree, he noted, that there is ultimately no problem in this matter, but the former believes this to be the case on the basis of the law of *karma* and reincarnation, while the latter claims that ‘it is right that there should be undeserved suffering.’⁵² Hogg sought to defend the Christian position, firstly, by arguing that in a world that runs, under divine providence, in accordance with natural laws, there will be instances when certain actions of human beings lead to the (undeserved) suffering of their fellow-creatures, and, secondly, that it is only when the crucified Christ meets us that we become aware that we share a common humanity so that through a radical *metanoia* we begin

to renounce the self-centredness that leads us to seek our personal good. Christ's redeeming love produces in the heart the realisation that all human beings are mutually implicated in one another's sinful actions so that oftentimes the innocent suffer with the guilty. Though the New Testament does provide some response to the question of suffering, believing that it is caused by sin, Christian theologians have not developed, according to Hogg, any systematic theory for the question of the 'distribution of suffering' among human beings. The ultimate reason for this, Hogg believed, is the conviction that in the midst of all worldly travails Christ, who suffered more than anyone else, is present to those who are in agony, and that as the loving God he did not want to remain extraneous to their struggles on earth.⁵³

For another specific example of how it is possible to re-articulate a similar aggregate of data from a divergent theological perspective, we may turn to the following argument developed by Phillips to defend the possibility of reincarnation.

1. If God is X (Brahman, or omnibenevolent and so on), then life would be meaningful.
2. Life would not be meaningful without enduring individuality.
3. Enduring individuality in our world needs the mechanism of reincarnation.
4. God is X.

Therefore, reincarnation is real.⁵⁴

The key premise here is the third. A Roman Catholic theologian such as J. DiNoia could accept the first, the second, and the fourth, replace 'reincarnation' with 'purgatory in *another* world' in the third, and arrive at the conclusion: 'Therefore, purgatory is real'.⁵⁵

Consequently, the key question is *why* from a Hindu perspective one accepts the possibility of reincarnation and not, say, the Christian doctrine of the atonement or purgatory, and classically the answer has been that it is reincarnation, and not the latter, that the enlightened sages have claimed to be the truth about the nature of reality.

Cosmic Necessity and Reincarnation

A crucial debate internal to the Hindu traditions relates to whether *karmic* processes operate through a form of iron-like necessity or whether they can be suspended through divine help. For an instance of the former view, we may turn to the twelfth-century Nyāya philosopher Udayana who states that even the Lord cannot go against the operation of the *karmas* of individuals.⁵⁷ Several modern Hindu figures, pursuing this line, have rejected certain ‘vicarious’ accounts of the Christian doctrine of the atonement. Regarding the view that Christ had redeemed the world through his sacrificial death, Gandhi wrote that while metaphorically there might be some truth in it, he was not willing to accept it as literally true.⁵⁸ As he explained: ‘I do not believe in the doctrine of appropriation of another’s merit. His sacrifice is a type and an example for us’.⁵⁹ Therefore, according to Gandhi Jesus ‘atoned’ for the sins of humanity in the sense that he was an example for those who accepted his teachings, and who had to try to improve themselves.⁶⁰

However, several theistic strands, epic narratives, and ritual practices of the Hindu universes often speak in terms of *karmic* transfers across individuals, and between individuals and the personal Lord. First, people can, according to the *Mahābhārata*, wash away sins (*pāpa*) through austerities, sacrifices, and gifts, provided these are not committed again.⁶¹ The *Garuḍa-Purāṇa* notes a second mechanism for *karmic* annulment: even if the evil deeds of a

person are as massive as the mountains, these are destroyed entirely by remembering Viṣṇu.⁶² In some of the streams of Hindu devotionalism, it is the grace (*prasāda*) of the Lord Viṣṇu that is the sole means of liberation from the world. All that is required on the part of the self is that the self does not prevent the liberation that the Lord offers through the divine initiative, and that the self makes the request for liberation.⁶³ Third, an important aspect of traditional Hindu ritualism is certain kinds of penances (*prāyaścitta*) such as Vedic recitation which are said to cleanse particular kinds of sin (*pāpa*).⁶⁴ Fourth, occasionally heroic individuals in the mythic narratives can transfer their own *karmic* ‘merits’ to others. Thus in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*, the king Hariścandra tells the god Indra that he will not go to heaven (*svarga*) unless the inhabitants of his city, who have incurred various types of sins, also proceed there. He tells Indra that whatever are his merits through alms, sacrifices, and prayers should be common to him and to his citizens. Thereafter, all the people with their children, servants, and wives ascend to heaven along with the king.⁶⁵

The implications of this intra-Hindu dispute for our wider theme of the rationality of belief in reincarnation relate to the claim that the doctrines of *karma* and reincarnation fail, in fact, to account for empirical inequalities since the promised ‘explanation’ never arrives. As John Hick put it: ‘For we are no nearer to an ultimate explanation of the circumstances of our present birth when we are told that they are consequences of a previous life if that previous life has in turn to be explained by reference to a yet previous life, and that by reference to another, and so on in an infinite regress ... The solution has not been produced but only postponed to infinity’.⁶⁶ In response to Hick, Perrett argues that the infinite regress that Hick claims to have detected is not vicious, because each occurrence of suffering is in principle causally explicable in terms of the prior deeds of the sufferer.⁶⁷ However, the notion of *karmic* transfer, suspension, or annulment elaborated in the Hindu theistic traditions is in

tension with the view (accepted across large stretches of the Hindu universes) that each individual necessarily has to work out *their karmic* merits and demerits through distinct life-trajectories, so that the sufferings of each individual are causally related only to *their* prior embodiments.

The Varieties of Religious Rationality

From our discussion in the preceding sections, we can see that while both groups of disputants grapple with various layers of ‘evidence’, they draw somewhat opposed conclusions, depending on their divergent locations on distinct metaphysical-hermeneutical horizons. A fundamental problem with viewing moral causation along the lines of universal natural causation is that the latter states that an action has certain consequences simply because the action has been performed, irrespective of the intention of the agent or the moral quality of the action. Further, while natural causation applies to two events that are temporally conjoined, the ‘law’ of *karma* states that the consequences sometimes appear in the distant future.⁶⁸ Because of complexities such as these, Chadha and Trakakis argue that the *karma* theory is not put forward as ‘a *complete* and *systematic* explanation of human suffering’.⁶⁹ Various commentators have therefore noted that the belief in reincarnation might gain support from evidence but is not ‘grounded’ on such evidence. Developing this anti-evidentialist stance, A.R. Wadia states bluntly that the ‘doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation has to be accepted as a dogma which has not been proved and cannot be proved. But it does not follow that it is necessarily irrational. On the contrary, there is a core of rationality in the doctrine ... There is the basic argument that a man [*sic*] is born into the world he has made’.⁷⁰ More recently, A. Sharma has similarly argued that ‘while it might not be possible to prove the doctrine [of *karma* and reincarnation] with absolute certainty, it seems to be equally the

case that the doctrine cannot with absolute certainty be established as demonstrably false. As in the case of the existence of God it seems to be a doctrine about which reasonable persons might reasonably differ'.⁷¹ Similarly, Y. Krishan argues that the doctrine of *karma* is not like a law of the physical sciences which can be experimentally proved, for the doctrine is proposed as an inference to explain various kinds of inequalities and diversities.⁷²

The basic thesis of Wadia, Sharma, and Krishan, which can be read as expressions of the meta-epistemological standpoint of hermeneutic perspectivism, has also been articulated by M. Burley who argues that the belief in retributive *karma* is not based on empirical evidence, and that this belief has survived in numerous cultures *independently* of evidential grounding. Therefore, in response to the claim that would-be believers have an epistemic obligation to seek out reliable evidence before the belief can be considered rational, Burley argues that while this belief does play an explanatory role in the lives of many people, it is not typically treated by them as empirically demonstrable or falsifiable.⁷³ While such evidence would indeed *raise* the epistemic status of the belief, the disagreement cannot be resolved by rational deliberation alone because the parties to the debate share different frameworks and apply different pictures.⁷⁴ In fact, Burley claims that the disagreement can be resolved only through an experience similar to a religious conversion, that is, only 'by one or other party in the debate undergoing a change of perspective so transformative that it would amount to a change in form of life'.⁷⁵

The above discussion therefore yields a set of three positions on a fine-grained continuum regarding the rationality of belief in reincarnation.

Weak Rationality: The belief in reincarnation is rational, because any belief which is not logically contradictory is rational, and there is no intrinsic contradiction in the belief in reincarnation.

Moderate Rationality: The belief in reincarnation is inter-subjectively rational, because the belief can be verified by every individual, *in principle*, through their progressive immersion in the external circuitry of Hindu texts, teachers, and traditions.

Strong Rationality: The belief in reincarnation is rational because the belief is true.

We can see, in the light of our discussion, that Phillips, Wadia, Prabhu, Krishan, Sharma, and Burley are claiming, in effect, that the belief in reincarnation is rational *not* in the sense of ‘strong rationality’ but in that of ‘moderate rationality’. For Radhakrishnan and others, who *already* occupy a specific Hindu horizon, the belief *that* rebirth takes place is not rendered irrational by their inability to explain *how* it takes place. For Edwards and Kaufman, in contrast, who do not indwell Hindu life-worlds, the absence of observable evidence is precisely one of the frayed threads in the web of beliefs centred around reincarnation. We have noted that *karmic* causation, in the view of its defenders, undergirds a sort of metaphysical explanation for the various forms of suffering and inequalities for which scientific explanations are not available.⁷⁶ The opponents of such causation could, of course, either claim that the required scientific explanations are indeed available, or while acknowledging their lack argue that an alternative metaphysical explanation (such as the Christian doctrine of the atonement) is more adequate to these empirical facts of suffering. For an example of how the first move is available to its critics, consider the well-known researches of Ian Stevenson who gathered his information from children between the ages of two and four who displayed skills, unusual abilities, and phobias which could not be

explained in terms of their environment. One kind of cases that he investigated related to children with birthmarks and birth defects that seemed to resemble wounds, often fatal, that were suffered by deceased persons that the children claimed to remember. Stevenson searched out police records, wherever possible, to verify whether the birthmarks matched the wounds the deceased individual had received.⁷⁷ In an interview in 1974 he concluded that for at least some of the cases he had examined reincarnation was ‘the best explanation that we have been able to come up with. There is an impressive body of evidence and it is getting stronger all the time. I think a rational person, if he wants, can believe in reincarnation on the basis of evidence’.⁷⁸ However, his critics, who noted that his readings of the data were shaped by his acceptance of some form of metaphysical mind-body dualism, often claimed that the data could be explained more adequately in terms of false memory, cryptomnesia, telepathy, extrasensory perception, and so on.

An important conclusion follows from this discussion: while often the Hindu apologetic literature portrays the Hindu belief in reincarnation (and Hindu spirituality in general) as rational and Christian theological frameworks as irrational, superstitious, and anti-scientific, this portrayal of a ‘civilizational clash’ between Hinduism and Christianity does not bear close scrutiny. The belief in reincarnation is densely moored in a network of metaphysical-theological doctrines about the nature of the self, the nature of the divine, and the possibility of the self ‘attaining’ the divine. The crux of the matter is not the *dynamics* of reincarnation but the *metaphysics* through which statements about the mechanism of reincarnation are assessed, evaluated, and critiqued. Therefore, here as in many other debates, in the end, metaphysics is unavoidable in dialogical encounters which seek to defend or refute the

distinctive truth-claims that are raised from within Hindu theological universes over the nature of the self and the nature of the ultimate reality.

Notes

¹ For a similar distinction between ‘maximalist’ and ‘minimalist’ accounts of rationality, see William Lucy, *Philosophy of Private Law*.

² M. Stenmark, *Rationality in science, religion, and everyday life*.

³ N. Wolterstorff, “Once Again, Evidentialism—This Time, Social”.

¹⁴ J. Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of Science*, 165.

¹⁵ J. Prabhu, “The Idea of Reincarnation”, 75.

¹⁶ Robert Almeder, “On Reincarnation: A Reply to Hales”, 354.

¹⁷ C. Bartley, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 54.

¹⁸ I.B. Horner (trs.) *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, 302.

¹⁹ G. Feuerstein, *Yogasūtra*, 106

²⁰ Arvind Sharma, “Karma and Reincarnation in Advaita Vedānta”, 234.

²¹ P. Olivelle, *The law code of Manu*, 75–76.

²² S. Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy*, 71.

-
- ²³ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 246.
- ²⁴ *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* VI.1.45. G.V. Tagare (trs.) *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 779.
- ²⁵ Swami Paramananda, *Reincarnation and Immortality*, 54.
- ²⁶ R.W. Perrett, “Rebirth”, 53.
- ²⁷ Swami Paramananda, *Reincarnation and Immortality*, 94.
- ²⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 231.
- ³⁰ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 237.
- ³¹ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 230, 234.
- ³² W. Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics”, 557.
- ³³ M. Chadha and C. Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman”, 537.
- ³⁴ Perrett, “Rebirth”, 56.
- ³⁵ S.H. Phillips, *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth*, 134.
- ³⁷ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 231.
- ³⁸ Paul Edwards, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*.
- ³⁹ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 234.
- ⁴⁰ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 235.
- ⁴¹ Phillips, *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth*, 139.
- ⁴² A. Aklujkar, “Reincarnation Revisited Rationally”, 6.
- ⁴³ Swami Paramananda, *Reincarnation and Immortality*, 96.
- ⁴⁴ Swami Nikhilananda, *Man in Search of Immortality*, 23.
- ⁴⁵ Swami Paramananda, *Reincarnation and Immortality*, 80.
- ⁴⁶ Swami Paramananda, *Reincarnation and Immortality*, 29.
- ⁴⁷ Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 72.
- ⁴⁸ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 230.
- ⁴⁹ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 229.
- ⁵⁰ Prabhu, “The Idea of Reincarnation”, 76.
- ⁵¹ Prabhu, “The Idea of Reincarnation”, 73.
- ⁵² A. G. Hogg, *The Christian message to the Hindu*, 75.
- ⁵³ Hogg, “The God that must needs be Christ Jesus”.
- ⁵⁴ Phillips, *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth*, 137.
- ⁵⁵ J. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Catholic Perspective*.

-
- ⁵⁷ G. Chemparathy, *An Indian Rational Theology*, 160.
- ⁵⁸ M. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXIX, 113.
- ⁵⁹ Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. XXV, 85.
- ⁶⁰ Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. LXII, 334.
- ⁶¹ *Mahābhārata* 12.36.1. M.N. Dutt (trs.) *Mahābhārata*, 48.
- ⁶² *Garuḍa-Purāṇa* I.230.42. J.L. Shastri (ed.), *The Garuḍa Purāṇa*, 682.
- ⁶³ P.Y. Mumme, *The Mumukṣuppaṭi of Piḷḷai Lokācārya with Maṇavālamāuni's Commentary*.
- ⁶⁴ Olivelle, *The Law Code of Manu*, 193.
- ⁶⁵ *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* VIII.256–64. F.E. Pargiter (trs.) *The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, 56–58.
- ⁶⁶ J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 309.
- ⁶⁷ R.W. Perrett, “Karma and the Problem of Suffering”, *Sophia* 24 (1985): 4–10.
- ⁶⁸ B.R. Reichenbach, “The Law of Karma and the Principle of Causation”, 399–400.
- ⁶⁹ Chadha and Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman”, 534.
- ⁷⁰ A.R. Wadia, “Philosophical Implications of the Doctrine of Karma”, 149.
- ⁷¹ Sharma, “Karma and Reincarnation in Advaita Vedānta”, 232.
- ⁷² Y. Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), p.566
- ⁷³ M. Burley, “Retributive karma and the problem of blaming the victim”, 156.
- ⁷⁴ Burley, “Retributive karma and the problem of blaming the victim”, 163.
- ⁷⁵ Burley, “Retributive karma and the problem of blaming the victim”, 159.
- ⁷⁶ Y. Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma*, 201.
- ⁷⁷ I. Stevenson, *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects*.
- ⁷⁸ Prabhu, “The Idea of Reincarnation”, 75.

Notes on contributor

Ankur Barua is Lecturer in Hindu Studies, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. His research interests include Vedantic Hinduism and the comparative philosophy of religion.

Bibliography

-
- Aklujkar, A. 'Reincarnation Revisited Rationally', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29 (2001): 3–15.
- Almeder, R. 'On Reincarnation: A Reply to Hales', *Philosophia* 28 (2001): 347–58.
- Bartley, C. *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Burley, M. "Retributive karma and the problem of blaming the victim", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013): 149–65.
- Chadha, M. and N. Trakakis, "Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman", *Philosophy East and West* 57 (2007): 533–56.
- Chemparathy, G. *An Indian Rational Theology*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.
- Dasgupta, S. *History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922.
- DiNoia, J. *The Diversity of Religions: A Catholic Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992.
- Dutt, M.N. (trs.) *Mahābhārata*, vol. VI. Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1997.
- Edwards, P. *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2001.
- Feuerstein, G. *Yogasūtra*. Folkestone: Dawson, 1979.
- Gandhi, M. *Collected Works*, vol. XXXIX. Delhi: Publications Division, 1958.
- Hick, J. *Death and Eternal Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Hogg, A.G. "The God that must needs be Christ Jesus", *International Review of Misisions* 22 (1917): 221–32.
- Hogg, A.G. *The Christian message to the Hindu*. London: SCM, 1947.
- Horner, I.B. (trs.) *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, vol. II. London: Pali Text Society, 1959.
- Kaufman, W. "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics", *Philosophy East and West* 57 (2007): 556–60.
- Krishan, Y. *The Doctrine of Karma*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997.
- Ladyman, J. *Understanding Philosophy of Science*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Lucy, W. *Philosophy of Private Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Mumme, P.Y. *The Mumukṣuppaṭi of Piḷḷai Lokācārya with Maṇavālamāuni's Commentary*. Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1987.
- Olivelle, P. *The law code of Manu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Pargiter, F.E. (trs.) *The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1904.
- Perrett, R.W. "Karma and the Problem of Suffering", *Sophia* 24 (1985): 4–10.
- Perrett, R.W. "Rebirth", *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): 41–57.
- Phillips, S.H. *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

-
- Prabhu, J. "The Idea of Reincarnation." *Death and Afterlife*, edited by S.T. Davis, 65–80. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, vol. I. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *An Idealist View of Life*. London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1988.
- Reichenbach, B.R. "The Law of Karma and the Principle of Causation", *Philosophy East and West* 38 (1988): 399–410.
- Sharma, A. "Karma and Reincarnation in Advaita Vedānta", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 18 (1990): 219–36.
- Shastri, J.L. (ed.), *The Garuḍa Purāṇa*, Part II. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.
- Sri Aurobindo, *The Problem of Rebirth*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1952.
- Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. XIV. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1976.
- Stenmark, M. *Rationality in science, religion, and everyday life*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- Stevenson, I. *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997.
- Swami Nikhilananda, *Man in Search of Immortality*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1968.
- Swami Paramananda, *Reincarnation and Immortality*. Cohasset, Massachusetts: The Vedanta Centre, 1961.
- Tagare, G.V. (trs.) *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Part II. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976.
- van Buitenen, J.A.B. (trs.) *The Mahābhārata*, vol. II. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975.
- Wadia, A.R. "Philosophical Implications of the Doctrine of Karma", *Philosophy East and West* 15 (1965): 145–52.
- Wolterstorff, N. "Once Again, Evidentialism—This Time, Social", *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 53–74