
The Case Against Reincarnation

Part 2

Belief in reincarnation continues to be strong in the United States. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 23 percent of all adults and 28 percent of teenagers claim to believe in life after death. This is the first major critical examination of the claims of reincarnation. The third and final part of the series will be published in the next issue.

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In Part 1 of this article [FI, Fall 1986], I concentrated on pointing out the flaws in the arguments commonly advanced in support of reincarnation and Karma. I now proceed to give reasons why these theories should be rejected. I will begin with Karma. It is clear, for reasons stated earlier, that a rejection of Karma does not by itself require abandonment of belief in reincarnation.

The Pseudo-empirical Nature of the Law of Karma

In all familiar formulations the Law of Karma appears to be an empirical claim. It asserts a causal connection in both directions between two classes of observable phenomena. Suf-

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fering and happiness are, at least in a broad sense, observable, and so are sinful and meritorious actions. There is admittedly some difficulty about getting a consensus as to what counts as sinful and meritorious behavior, but we may here ignore all problems of this kind. Except for its vastly greater significance, the Law of Karma is regarded by its proponents as entirely comparable to "natural" or scientific laws. Karma, writes Annie Besant, is a "natural law" and as such it "is no more sacred than any other natural law" (*Karma Once More*, p. 6). "The sins of the previous life of the Ego," writes Madame Blavatsky, are punished by "this mysterious, inexorable, but in the equity and wisdom of its decrees infallible law" (quoted in R. W. Neufeldt, *Karma and Rebirth*, p. 243).

Now, a little reflection shows that the Law of Karma is not an empirical statement and that it is wholly unlike "natural" laws. To begin with, the Law of Karma has no predictive value whatsoever. A simple example will make this clear. Let us suppose that a plane takes off in which all the crew and passengers are, as far as we can tell, thoroughly decent people. The believer in Karma cannot predict any more or less confidently than the unbeliever that the plane will not crash. The best he can do is offer a statistical prediction based not on Karma but on data concerning the safety of airplanes or, perhaps more specifically, of the kind of plane in which these people are flying. Let us now suppose that a madman or a terrorist planted a time-bomb on the plane and, furthermore, that it is a very efficiently constructed time-bomb. The lunatic, because of his

empirical information, can predict with high probability that the plane is going to crash.

It may be argued that the lack of predictive content of Karma is not a serious matter since some scientific laws, notably Darwin's theory of natural selection, also lack predictive content. I do not think that this comparison is sound, but I will not press the point and will concentrate on a more basic consideration that incorporates whatever is significant in the observation that the Karmic law is devoid of predictive value. Scientific laws and indeed all statements that are not empty are *not* compatible with anything that may happen. All of them exclude some conceivable state of affairs: If such an excluded state of affairs were to obtain, the statement would be false. Just like Boyle's law or the second law of thermodynamics, Darwin's theory of natural selection is *not* compatible with anything.

The Law of Karma on the other hand *is* compatible with anything. The emptiness of the Karmic theory can be seen most clearly if we compare it to another pseudoscientific theory that on analysis turns out to be completely empty. I am thinking of social Darwinism as advocated, for example, by the American sociologist William Graham Sumner. Sumner was a militant opponent of any kind of social legislation that might help the poor, the sick, or even the unemployed, and he justified his stand by reference to the principle that those who are successful have thereby proven their fitness while those who are down-trodden have thereby proven their unfitness and inferiority. The following is a report provided by one of Sumner's admirers of a conversation between Sumner and a student dissenter:

"Professor, don't you believe in any government aid to industries?"

"No! it's root, hog, or die."

"Yes, but hasn't the hog got a right to root?"

"There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living."

"You believe then, Professor, in only one system, the contract-competitive system?"

"That's the only sound economic system. All others are fallacies."

"Well, suppose some professor of political economy came along and took your job away from you. Wouldn't you be sore?"

"Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me." [Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, p. 54.]

There is some evasion in the last statement, in which Sumner talks about his teaching the subject so well that no one else can take the job away from him. Many people who, by all usual standards, are inferior teachers might take his job away from him—by intrigues, by spreading rumors about his private life, or perhaps by such drastic measures as poisoning him. However, what is relevant for our purposes is that Sumner does not know who is fittest until the outcome, until the competition has been resolved. He, Sumner, is the fittest if he keeps his job. If somebody else, X, gets the job in his place, then X has turned out to be the fittest in virtue of his success. It should be remarked parenthetically that in Darwinism or neo-Darwinian

theory, as contrasted with social Darwinism, "fit" can be defined in such a way that it is *not* synonymous with "surviving" or "winning out," so that the statement "the fittest tend to win out in the competition for the means of survival" is a synthetic statement and not a tautology. In social Darwinism, at least in Sumner's version, the statement that the fittest succeed *is* a tautology. Sumner does not define "fittest" or "fit" independently of succeeding. We do *not* have a statement about the connection between two characteristics but two words for the same characteristic. The theory is empty and totally *post hoc*. We know who is fittest only after the issue has been resolved. Sumner's claim is consistent with anything whatever. Sumner himself had no doubt that socialist revolutionaries would never win out; but, if they had, they would automatically have shown themselves to be the fittest.

It is easy to see that the Law of Karma, too, is compatible with anything and hence totally empty. Let us suppose that a horrible criminal like Hitler is finally brought to justice. This of course confirms the principle since the criminal's suffering was the result of his evil deeds. Suppose, however, that a person who, according to all the best available information, is decent and kind comes to a bad end, as the result of being run over by a drunken driver, a judicial frameup, or perhaps because of some dreadful illness. Would this disconfirm the principle? Not at all. It only shows that in a previous life he committed evil deeds of which his present suffering is the just punishment. Let us suppose that we know that the next incarnation of this individual is going to be one long horrendous nightmare of torture and persecution. Would this show that the Law of Karma is not true? Not at all: It would only show that his sins in past lives were so enormous that the disasters of his present life were insufficient punishment.

In 1965 there was an instructive exchange in the *Philosophical Quarterly*, an Indian publication not to be confused with the Scottish journal of the same name, between Professor Warren E. Steinkraus, a liberal Christian with an interest in Oriental philosophy, and Professor G. R. Malkani, a Hindu believer in Karma. Professor Steinkraus expressed his consternation as to how the Law of Karma can be reconciled with the staggering sufferings experienced by a great many people:

The punishments do not fit the crime. Some of the miseries of disease and the excruciating pains of injuries suffered by human beings would not be inflicted by the most vindictive of human judges for the most heinous crimes. [p. 151]

Steinkraus concludes by raising the question:

Can the defender of *Karma* admit that some suffering is outrageously severe or must he say that all suffering is *a priori* just and necessarily deserved merely because it occurs? [p. 151]

Professor Steinkraus was firmly put in his place by Professor Malkani, who, as the editor of the *Philosophical Quarterly*, saw to it that he had the last word. After remarking, quite irrelevantly, that any explanation of evil and injustice in the world must leave God "blameless," Malkani insisted that there are certain ultimate mysteries that we must "not seek to probe

any further." One of these is the question of "what punishment is appropriate for what sin or accumulation of sins." We are not gods and cannot know the answer to the question of why there is "so much punishment and for what." This unavoidable human ignorance is not, it appears, incompatible with total assurance that the world is just and that what may appear to be excessive punishment is not in fact excessive at all:

It should suffice to console us that there is no limit to the enormity of the errors of omission and commission which an individual might have committed in his countless past lives. [p. 45]

It should be emphasized that, when the partisans of Karma "explain" the misfortunes that befall apparently decent human beings by telling us that they sinned in a previous life, their pronouncements are just like Sumner's claims about who is fittest, *totally post hoc*. Sumner could not identify an individual as "the fittest" until he was sure that he had won out, and the Karmic theorists cannot say anything about past misdeeds until suffering and misfortune have befallen a human being. To this it must be added that the "wisdom after the event" possessed by Sumner and by the Karmic believer is radically different from the real wisdom after the event that we often possess as the result of causal investigations. All of us are often wise only after the event, but we are really "wise" if we can offer a retrodictive explanation that is supported by adequate evidence. A plane crashes on takeoff at the Miami airport. It was not predicted, but we find evidence that a certain defect in the engine caused the crash. The Karmic procedure is also *post hoc* but it does not provide any genuine wisdom after the event. After a person who was a fine human being is run over by a drunken driver the Karmic theorist tells us that this happened because of his sin in a previous life. Unlike the investigators of the plane crash, he is *not* wise after the event. For he cannot tell us how and where the person had sinned. He does not have any information corresponding to the information obtained by the crash investigators about the engine defect. He makes a retrodictive claim; but, unlike the retrodictive statement about the cause of the crash, his claim is pure dogmatism.

To avoid unfairness to certain reincarnationists, the remarks above require one qualification. Some Karmic theorists who also believe in Nirvana or a superhuman Absolute Mind maintain that after his last incarnation the individual will be able to review in one glance the infinite number of lives he has lived. Reincarnationists holding this view could consistently allow that *their* Karmic theory is falsifiable by a review that showed the absence of any dependable moral pattern. Their position is thus not compatible with any conceivable state of affairs and hence it is not open to the charge that it is empty. However, one cannot help wondering how a human being could "in one glance" or for that matter in more than one glance survey an infinite number of past lives; and, furthermore, all the pronouncements about misdeeds in past lives are just as *post hoc* and just as much pure *ipse dixit*s as those of Karmic believers who do not allow a final review.

Karmic Administration Problems

Anybody not intimidated by the virulence with which the champions of Karma brush off objections to their theory will want to raise a very simple and, as it seems to me, utterly devastating question about the execution and more generally the "administration" of Karmic ordinances. It should here be emphasized that many of the believers in Karma do not believe in a god and that those who do nevertheless maintain that the Law of Karma operates autonomously. Professor Malkani combines belief in the Karmic law with "the best form of theism," but he does not maintain that God is in any way involved in the administration of Karma. On the inexorable and autonomous operation of Karma Malkani, who here fairly represents the Hindu position, is in complete agreement with the atheist and agnostic supporters of Karma. Karma, he writes, "automatically produces the appropriate results like any other law in the natural domain. Nobody can cheat the law. It is as inexorable as any natural law."

The claim that Karma operates autonomously invites the following questions: How, to begin with, are good and bad deeds registered? Is there some cosmic repository like a huge central social security office in which the relevant information is recorded and translated into some kind of "balance"? Next, how and where is it decided what will happen to a person in his next incarnation as a result of the balance of his acts in a given life? How and where, for example, is it decided that in the next life he will become a human being rather than a roach, a man rather than a woman, an American rather than an Indian, white rather than black or yellow, physically well formed rather than crippled, intelligent rather than retarded, sane rather than insane? Finally, there is still the problem of how such decisions are translated into reality. As an illustration I will use a natural disaster, the famous Lisbon earthquake of 1755. A large number of people perished as a result of it. An even larger number were injured and also lost their possessions; and a number of people indirectly benefited because of the death and injury of others. Somebody who does not believe in Karma and who also does not believe that the earthquake was a special intervention on the part of the Deity would of course regard it as a purely natural phenomenon that is entirely explicable in terms of natural, in this instance, geological, causes. The believer in Karma, by contrast, must be prepared to claim that the earthquake was brought about in order to punish or reward the various people who suffered or benefited from the earthquake. How and where were the bad deeds of those killed and injured and the good deeds of those spared registered? How and where were the penalties and rewards decided? And just how did Karma determine the geological conditions whose existence is not disputed as the "natural" or at least the "immediate" cause of the disaster? Surely, if ever intelligent planning was needed, this is a case in point. Let us assume that the chief of a terrorist organization is about to send his forces into a town in which there are 5,000 houses. His instructions are to burn down all but the hundred that belong to secret supporters of his cause. Let us also suppose that these hundred houses are spread all over the town. Such an operation obviously requires

a great deal of careful planning and a high level of intelligence on the part of the planners. Even then it is entirely possible that mistakes will be made so that some houses of the sympathizers will be destroyed while some belonging to the enemy will be spared. The Law of Karma by contrast is infallible. It never punishes the innocent and never spares the guilty; and it does so although it is not an intelligent person or principle. To rephrase our earlier question: Just how did this nonintelligent principle set up the geological forces in the present case so as to achieve the desired results with complete precision?

In this connection even the otherwise so confident Professor Malkani is almost reduced to silence. All he can offer is the following lame response:

Does the law of Karma act upon the forces of nature and bring about cyclones, earthquakes, floods, etc., which in their turn cause wide-spread havoc and destruction of both life and property affecting millions? But if a metaphysical law, like the law of Karma, cannot do that, can it do anything whatsoever? Is it a law only in name? A powerless law is as good as no law. [p. 43]

This bluff and bluster answers nothing. If defenders of Karma cannot do better they should surely adopt the alternative mentioned in a tone of horror at the end of Malkani's outburst and admit that Karma "is as good as no law."

Unlike the more sophisticated champions of Karma, Mrs. Besant saw the need for introducing divine Karmic administrators. In *The Ancient Wisdom*, her best-known work, she first insists that "in no case can a man suffer that which he has not deserved" (p. 293). She then speaks of the "Lords of Karma" who are "great spiritual intelligences" keeping "the karmic records" and adjusting "the complicated workings of karmic law." They know the Karmic record of every man and with their "omniscient wisdom" they "select and combine portions of that record to form a plan of a single life" (pp. 293-294). This means primarily that they select the race, the country, and the parents of the soul or Ego in its next incarnation. Thus an Ego with highly developed musical faculties will be "guided to take its physical body in a musical family"; an Ego of "very evil type" will be guided "to a coarse and vicious family, whose bodies were built of the coarsest combination"; while an Ego who yields to drunkenness will be led to a "family whose nervous systems were weakened by excess," and he will be born from "drunken parents who would supply diseased materials for his physical envelope" (p. 295). It is in this way that the laws of Karma "adjust means to ends," ensure the doing of justice, and see to it that the Ego can carry his "karmic possessions and faculties" into his next life.

This solution of the "administration" problem calls for two comments. In the first place, the lords of Karma have not been seen by anybody recently and, even during the decades when Mrs. Besant flourished, they were, as far as I know, not perceived by anybody other than Mrs. Besant, not even by Madame Blavatsky. Second, Mrs. Besant did not have an adequate grasp of the scope of the problem. To solve it we not only need an explanation of how the lords of Karma secure appropriate bodies for Egos in subsequent incarnations. We

also need to be told how they affect natural objects and forces so as to bring about events like the Lisbon earthquake that in one swoop punish thousands of the wicked and reward large numbers of the good. To this question Mrs. Besant totally failed to address herself.

The Emptiness of Karmic Directives

So, far from providing moral guidance, the doctrine of Karma is bound to lead to perplexity, and it is hence apt to paralyze action. The ordinary person who does not believe in Karma usually has no difficulty in deciding whether it is right to help people who are ill, who have become the victims of accidents, or who are in various other kinds of difficulties. Things are not so easy for the believer in Karma. The suffering individual on his view *deserves* to suffer because he committed evil acts in this or else in a previous life. It is not only not our duty to help him but it would seem on Karmic principles that it is our duty *not* to help him. "It would be impossible," wrote Madame Blavatsky, "either to delay or to hasten the Karma in the fulfillment of justice," and in order to expiate one's sins fully it is necessary "to suffer all the consequences to the bitter end, to exhaust all the defects until they have reached their plenitude" (quoted by Siwek [see Part I], p. 122). Mrs. Besant, who started her career as a radical, apparently had not lost all her humanity after she succeeded Madame Blavatsky as leader of the theosophists. She reports "some members saying: I cannot help this man since what he is suffering is his karma." She thought them cruel and wrong-headed and compared them to somebody who says, "I cannot pick up this child who just fell, since the law of gravitation is opposed to it" (*Popular Lectures on Theosophy*, p. 67).

I do not think that this is a fair analogy and it does not answer the members who refuse to help people in need. The law of gravitation is not a moral law and the fact that the child fell down does not, without bringing in Karmic morality, imply that it is now being punished for an earlier sin. As far as I can see, no prescription of any kind can be derived from the Law of Karma for this situation or for any other; and, if this is so, Karma is completely vacuous as a principle of moral justice. No matter what we do, whether we help the individual or whether we refuse to help him, we will be doing the right thing. If we help him and cut short his suffering, this means that his earlier deed did not require more severe punishment than what he suffered until we brought relief. If on the other hand we ignore him and let him continue in his misery, this shows that his sin was so great as to deserve the total amount of his suffering—what he suffered before we could have intervened as well as what he suffered afterward when we failed to come to his assistance. Believers in Karma constantly and emphatically insist their theory does not imply fatalism, that, quite on the contrary, it is entirely compatible with belief in human freedom, understood as our ability to shape our lives, within limits, in accordance with our desires and choices, and that our efforts frequently do make a great deal of difference to what happens. I see no reason to dispute this claim, but it in no way answers the challenge of vacuousness. The vacuousness, as far as moral

prescriptions are concerned, follows from the Karmic doctrine that the world is just. A Karmic believer's commitment to this proposition is unqualified—it is categorical and not merely hypothetical. He does not maintain that the world would be just if we did certain things: He maintains that the world *is* just regardless of what in fact we do. No matter what happens, whether we help the underdog or not, whether our efforts at making lives less full of suffering and sorrow succeed or not, the ultimate outcome will be just, in the sense that every human being will be getting exactly—no more and no less—what he deserves.

This is as good a place as any to point out that believers in Karma, especially those in the West, are careful not to spell out certain of the implications of their theory that would strike most people as appalling. It follows from their principle that Abraham Lincoln, Jean Jaurès, the two Kennedy brothers, and Martin Luther King got no more than they deserved when they were assassinated. It equally follows that the six million Jews exterminated by the Nazis deserved their fate. I will add one more of the morally outrageous consequences of Karma. Contrary to what almost everybody believed and believes, the seven *Challenger* astronauts who perished earlier this year were entirely responsible for their deaths, and the grief felt by millions of people all over the world was quite out of place. The reckless NASA officials whom the Rogers Commission found to be responsible for the *Challenger* explosion were in fact (not consciously, of course) only executing the ordinances of Karma. The case of the astronauts illustrates particularly well the completely *post hoc* procedure of the Karmic theorists. Is there the slightest empirical evidence that the seven astronauts who died were morally any worse than the astronauts who did not participate in the mission of January 28 and were thus spared? Of course there is no such evidence. The only reason a Karmic theorist would or could give is that they in fact died while the others are alive. Returning to the Jews and their Nazi exterminators, it would seem that, since the Jews deserved extinction, the Nazis were not really criminals and should not have been prosecuted. I assume that Eichmann deserved to be hanged since he *was* hanged, but the many Nazis who escaped deserved to escape. Speaking of executions, the main argument against the death penalty evidently collapses if the Law of Karma is true. For in that case no innocent man can ever be executed. People may indeed be innocent of the crime with which they are charged, but if they are executed this is what they deserved. It makes one dizzy.

“Cosmic” Claims

My discussion of Karma would be incomplete without saying a few words about certain “cosmic” claims found in the writings of reincarnationists. It is commonly asserted that all lawful connections in the universe are really “nothing more” than instances of Karma. Dr. Rayner Johnson, the Christian reincarnationist mentioned earlier, writes that “the Law of Cause and Effect, as we know it in the material world,” is really “nothing more than a special case” of the Law of Karma (*The Imprisoned Splendor*, p. 388). Again, it has been claimed—and perhaps this is what Dr. Johnson had in mind—

that the same tendency to restore balance or equilibrium that appropriate punishments and rewards exemplify is found throughout the universe. Thus in a rather haughty note in the *Aryan Review* of October 1936, in which the editor offers advice to the author of the preceding article, the author being none other than A. J. Ayer, we are assured that “Karma is an undeviating and unerring tendency in the universe to restore equilibrium.” It “operates incessantly” and, what is more, “it operates on all things and beings from the minutest conceivable atom to the highest of human souls.” All such claims are open to the criticism that, if they are interpreted in a fairly straightforward way, they are simply absurd and, if they are interpreted in such a way as to avoid absurdity, they say absolutely nothing. If it is maintained that the lawful behavior of molecules or mountains or planets are instances of rewards and punishments, this is plainly absurd, since molecules, planets, and mountains cannot perform good and evil deeds. If, to avoid this absurdity, “Karma” is taken in a broader sense in which it is simply a synonym for “lawfulness” or “regularity,” then calling the various laws of nature instances of Karma is saying nothing at all. It is plain that we do not understand the regularities of the world any better and nothing whatever has been added to the content of any known law. Calling natural regularities instances of Karma is about as enlightening as describing them as manifestations of the Absolute Mind or as instances of the dialectical interplay of Being and Non-Being.

I now turn to the objections to reincarnation itself. Each of those I will discuss seems to me decisive against one or in some instances all versions of the theory. Some of the objections are of great philosophical interest, and these I will discuss most fully. There is, however, one important objection, briefly mentioned at the beginning, which cannot be adequately considered here. This is the objection based on the view that an essential part of what we mean when we say that a person at time T_x is the same as somebody at an earlier time T_1 is that he has the same body. If this view is correct then none of the facts presented by writers like Ian Stevenson, even if they were fully authenticated, could possibly be evidence for reincarnation, though they might call for a revision of other generally accepted beliefs. If Edward Ryall remembered fighting and dying as John Fletcher at the battle of Sedgemoor in 1645 and if it could be shown that there really was a John Fletcher who fought at that battle, that all the events Edward Ryall remembers really occurred, and if we could know that Ryall did not obtain any of his information by normal channels, he would still not be the same person as John Fletcher, simply because the bodies are not identical. We might then abandon the view that people can have accurate first-person recollections only about their own past, but we would not allow the conclusion that the same person lived two lives. An adequate discussion of this objection would involve a consideration of the arguments for and against what I earlier called “corporealism,” and the present article is not the place for this. I will therefore not say anything more about this objection and, although I believe that corporealism is substantially correct, I will proceed on the assumption that it can somehow be answered.

Tertullian's Objection

The first objection is a very simple and obvious one. It has been stated concisely and forcefully by the early church father Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), in Chapter 31 of his *Treatise on the Soul*. “How happens it,” he asks there, “that a man who dies in old age returns to life as an infant?” Whoever continues life in a new body might be expected to “return with the age he had attained at his death, that he might resume the precise life which he had relinquished.” If “souls depart at different ages of human life,” Tertullian continues, “how is it that they come back again at one uniform age?” (A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, p. 211). John Hick, who endorses this objection, points out that babies are not born with adult egos “as they would be if they were direct continuations of egos which had died at the end of a normal lifespan” (*Death and Eternal Life*, p. 363).

Although several of the more scholarly reincarnationists show familiarity with Tertullian's writings I am not aware that any of them has so much as attempted a rebuttal. Hick suggests that it might be possible to build an answer on the distinction between the empirical ego and the metaphysical soul. The empirical ego is what Kant called the “phenomenal” self. It is, in Hick's words, “the conscious, remembering, anticipating, choosing, acting self.” The metaphysical soul on the other hand is an entity “lying behind or beneath or above the conscious self.” Once this distinction is made, the defender of reincarnation could meet Tertullian's objection by maintaining that what survives in a new body is not the empirical ego, which perishes with the death of the old body, but the metaphysical soul that is manifested in successive empirical egos each of which has to begin as a baby. To make this rejoinder more convincing a reincarnationist could refer to the difference between the age of an actor in a play and his age in real life. In a play an actor may age from eighteen to eighty, but although he himself ages between performances, every time he plays the same part he starts once again at the age of eighteen. In much the same way the metaphysical soul grows older with every incarnation although it starts as a baby in all its empirical manifestations. It should be pointed out that this answer to Tertullian is open to Hinduists and other “metaphysical” supporters of reincarnation who believe that what survives is “Atman,” a transcendent principle, but that it is not available to Buddhists or Western sympathizers with Buddhism whose “Anatta” has often been compared to Hume's “bundle of impressions and ideas” and which is in effect the empirical ego.

Everything in this reply hinges on the plausibility and relevance of the distinction between the empirical ego and the metaphysical soul. If the notion of the metaphysical soul is unintelligible, as many philosophers hold, or if it is not unintelligible but if there is no reason to suppose that there are such metaphysical souls, or if there are such souls but if they are not what we refer to by the word *I*, the rejoinder collapses. I will discuss this distinction in some detail in the section on the dependence of the mind on the body. Here I will merely observe that quite plainly we do not mean anything as abstruse as the metaphysical soul when we use the word *I*. Aside from

the body, what we refer to *is* the empirical ego; and it is this empirical ego that reincarnationists like other believers in immortality would like to survive. This is as true of Hinduists as it is of Buddhists, whatever they say in their more “philosophical” moments. As for the analogy with the actor and the part he portrays, it should be remembered that a part or character in a play is not a human being living in the actual world. If it were then it *would* be older at every new performance. The analogy also breaks down at the other end. We have ways of determining the age of an actor, but since it is a transcendent principle that is not accessible to any kind of observation, we have no means of determining the age of the metaphysical soul. In fairness I want to stress that reincarnationists are not responsible for this analogy. It is my work—I introduced it in order to give some semblance of content to the otherwise totally obscure assertion that the metaphysical soul ages from life to life although the empirical ego always starts as a baby.

Evolution and the Recency of Life

The next two objections are based on scientific findings that were of course not available to the individuals who first thought up the idea of reincarnation. Confining ourselves for the moment to the version that maintains that human beings can be incarnated only in human bodies, it seems clear that such a theory is inconsistent with evolution. In the first place, evolution teaches that the human race descends from nonhuman species and that there was a time when human bodies did not exist. The reincarnationist, however, is committed to an infinite series of past incarnations in *human* bodies. Furthermore, as we observed a little while ago, whatever believers in reincarnation may say in their more theoretical moments, in practice they refer to the empirical ego when they use the word *soul*, and the empirical ego is the most highly developed form of consciousness. Now, evolution teaches that our consciousness developed gradually along with the development of the brain and the nervous system. The reincarnationist is committed to holding that no *such* development occurred since it is the same soul that migrated from body to body. He may indeed concede that there has been *some* development—that some souls have gradually grown kinder and wiser and better informed. However, this is not the kind of development postulated by evolutionary theory. It may be thought that the wilder form of reincarnation that holds that human souls may have been incarnated in animal bodies escapes this objection. This is not so. Reincarnationists defending this version do *not* teach that the sequence of bodies in which a soul is incarnated is in any way parallel to the sequence postulated by evolutionists. A human being, as we saw, can become a dog or a gnat and, at the other end, the soul may most recently have been in the body of a nightingale or a beaver.

In any event, both versions are defeated by what science has discovered about the relative recency of life. It is now generally accepted that for many billions of years after the Big Bang the universe contained no life at all. Reincarnation in all forms postulates a series of incarnations stretching back into the past without limit; and this is clearly inconsistent with the

facts. Pythagoras and the founders of Eastern religions can hardly be blamed for not knowing these facts, but this does not make the objection any less cogent. As for contemporary Western believers, I have already noted that they usually are not the least bit interested in the findings of science.

It should be pointed out that in reincarnationist publications of the twentieth century, especially those by theosophists, the word *evolution* is constantly used in a highly eulogistic fashion. It is suggested that reincarnation is not only consistent with evolution but that it is in fact its completion and logical extension into the spiritual realm. In every reincarnation we are slightly better and wiser than in the one before and eventually we will attain perfection. Whatever may be thought about such a view, it clearly has nothing to do with evolution as this term is understood in biology. Let us grant for the sake of argument that the human race will develop into a "higher" species, whatever that may mean, and this higher species into a still higher one, and so on. Such a development in no way implies that the bodies of the members of those higher species are inhabited by souls that once lived in human bodies.

The Population Problem

The next objection is based on the well-established fact that the human population of the earth has shown enormous increases throughout recorded history. In an article published in the July–August 1981 issue of *BioScience*, Professor Arthur H. Westing of Amherst summarized the best available information about the number of human beings alive at various times. At the time at which he wrote, the population was estimated at 4.4 billion. In 1945 it had been 2.3 billion, in 1850 1 billion, in 1650 500 million, at the time of Christ 200 million, and in 8000 B.C.E., approximately 5 million. Among other interesting calculations Professor Westing estimated that the 1981 population of 4.4 billion amounted to 9 percent of all human beings who ever lived and that it was greater than the number of people who lived through the entire Paleolithic age, a period accounting for 86 percent of the duration of human life. It should be added that in spite of famines and wars the same trend has continued since 1981. According to figures supplied by the United Nations the earth's population reached 4.8 billion at the end of 1985, and just a few weeks prior to my writing these words, on July 7, 1986, it passed the 5-billion mark. If current trends continue the total human population will be 10 billion by the year 2016.

These facts are incompatible with the less fanciful version of the reincarnation theory according to which human souls can occupy only human bodies. As we saw earlier, reincarnationism is opposed to any doctrine of "special creation" of souls. It denies that "new souls" are ever added to the world. All souls have always existed. Every birth is a *rebirth*—the rebirth of a soul that has already existed. All this clearly rules out any population increase. Reincarnationists who maintain that some souls are eventually allowed to give up their earthly existence and merge into the Absolute or Nirvana are committed to the view that in the long run the population must *decrease*. Other reincarnationists imply that the total human population is stationary. In either case, whether committed to

a stationary or decreasing population, reincarnationism appears to be refuted by the population statistics.

It is noteworthy that this argument has hardly ever been explicitly discussed by any of the academically respectable reincarnationists. I suspect that the reason for this is the great difficulty of finding an answer that would strike a sober person as even remotely credible. The less inhibited reincarnationists, however, have attacked the population argument with relish. Morey Bernstein, the author of *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, has an easy answer. We can dispose of the objection by bringing in the population of the astral world.

The total number of entities both in this and the afterworld can remain the same while the balance shifts between the numbers of entities on earth and the number in the unseen world. [p. 259]

If we refer to the human population on earth by the letter *e* and to the population of the astral or unseen world by the letter *u* we can answer the objection by simply maintaining that, although neither *e* nor *u* are constant, the total of $e + u$ never varies.

Substantially the same answer is offered by numerous theosophists. Writing thirty years before Bernstein, Irving C. Cooper, my favorite theosophist, some of whose fascinating ideas I mentioned earlier, also maintains that every increase in the human population on earth can be explained as due to a corresponding decrease in the number of inhabitants of the astral plane. Cooper takes note of the fear in some quarters that the constant increase in the earth's population will eventually deplete the astral plane. He therefore assures his readers that no such dire fate is in store for the astral world. It can absorb mass emigrations without serious damage, much as a giant corporation can easily absorb losses by a subsidiary here and there. In view of "the length of period between incarnations," which Cooper evidently considers very great, "the population of the unseen world at any time must be many times that of the earth" (op. cit., p. 57).

V. F. Gunaratna, a Buddhist philosopher whose slender volume *Rebirth Explained* (1971) comes recommended by the Venerable Narada Mahathera as the "profound treatise" of a "learned writer," fully endorses the Bernstein-Cooper view that we must not focus our attention exclusively on the earth and should remember that there are "countless other world systems of which the Buddhist texts speak." We must also remember that, just as human beings may turn into animals or gods, so earlier incarnations of a human being may well have been on a nonhuman plane. "An animal or a celestial being can be reborn as a human being" (p. 80). If, as before, we represent the human population on the earth as *e* and if we refer to the animal population by the letter *a* and to the totality of gods by *g*, reincarnationism is not committed to the view that *e* is unchanging. It is committed to the very different proposition that $e + a + g$ is the same at all times. The facts of population growth do not in any way conflict with this broader view.

Another Buddhist writer who has dealt with the population argument is K. N. Jayatilleke, who until his death in 1970 was professor of philosophy at the University of Ceylon. Jayatilleke

held an M.A. from Cambridge and a Ph.D. from the University of London. Although he professed himself an admirer of A. J. Ayer and regarded himself as an empiricist, he swallowed even the most extravagant of claims made by and on behalf of Edgar Cayce and he fully endorsed the Bridey Murphy case as evidence for reincarnation. Jayatilleke has a twofold answer to the population argument. Like Gunaratna, he appeals to the possibility that human beings were animals in previous incarnations. To this he adds that we must not rule out the possibility of the transmigration of souls from other planets. The Buddhist view of the cosmos holds that there are "hundreds of thousands of galaxies spread out in space" and that they include "thousands of inhabited spheres." It is entirely possible that some of the population increase on the earth is the result of invasions of human embryos by souls from these spheres. If, as before, we represent the human population of the earth as e , the animal population as a , and the souls living in human or nonhuman form on other planets as p , the unchanging totality is not e but $e + a + p$.

The second component of Jayatilleke's rejoinder has the wholehearted endorsement of Professor Geddes MacGregor, who is perhaps the most distinguished Christian theologian writing in defense of reincarnation at the present time. Holding degrees from Oxford, the Sorbonne, and Edinburgh, he is a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature and taught for many years in the philosophy department of the University of Southern California. MacGregor admits that in Tertullian's time bringing up the population increase was "pardonable." However, now that we "know of the vastness of the galaxies and of the extreme likelihood that there are millions of inhabited planets besides our own," the objection no longer has "any force at all" (*Reincarnation As a Christian Hope*, p. 47).

The sufficient answer to all these rejoinders is that they involve what I call "noxious" *ad hoc* assumptions. Not all *ad hoc* assumptions are automatically objectionable, and it will be worthwhile to explain the distinction between those that are and those that are not. The difference is essentially the same as the one between the two kinds of *post hoc* pronouncements noted earlier when discussing Karmic assertions about sins committed in past lives. All of us constantly make perfectly reasonable *ad hoc* assumptions in everyday life and occasionally *ad hoc* assumptions have proved highly fruitful in the history of science. The discovery of the planet Neptune provides a particularly instructive illustration of a reasonable and successful *ad hoc* assumption. Full details can be found in most histories of astronomy, but for our purposes the following brief summary will suffice. By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries Newtonian celestial mechanics enabled astronomers to calculate the orbits of most of the planets with very great accuracy. The orbits of two planets, however, those of Uranus and Mercury, defied all their calculations. To explain the discrepancy between the calculated and the observed orbits of Uranus, two astronomers, John Adams (1819-1892) and Urbain Leverrier (1811-1877), postulated the existence of a new planet having a certain size, shape, mass, and position in the sky. This was an *ad hoc* hypothesis in the sense that it was not based on any direct

evidence and that its purpose was to "save" the Newtonian theory, i.e., to retain it in spite of observations that seemed to contradict it. In 1846 Leverrier requested the Berlin astronomer Johann Galle to carry out the appropriate telescopic observations, and the result was the discovery of Neptune, one of the so-called giant planets with a mean diameter of approximately 28,000 miles and a mass of 17.2 times that of Earth. The Adams-Leverrier hypothesis of a new planet was not "noxiously" *ad hoc* for two reasons: the theory that it was meant to save was itself powerfully supported by a vast array of observations and, although *ad hoc*, it was independently testable.

By contrast, the various rejoinders to the population argument are "noxiously" *ad hoc* because reincarnationism, unlike Newtonian mechanics, is not a theory for which there is powerful observational evidence—in fact of course there is none—and because the assumptions that are introduced are either, like mass immigrations from the astral world or from "other planes," not even in principle testable or, as in the case of population reductions on other planets, so vague as not to be testable in practice. It is perhaps of some interest to note that Leverrier later postulated the existence of a further planet he called Vulcan to explain the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury. However, astronomers have never been able to observe such a planet and the Vulcan hypothesis is now dis-

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credited. In the sense in which I am using the word here, the Vulcan hypothesis, although it turned out to be false, was not noxious because, like the Neptune hypothesis, its purpose was to save an empirically well-supported theory and because it was independently testable.

There is also something disingenuous in the appeal to the possible decrease in the number of animals (and gods) that is supposed to occur simultaneously with the increase in the human population. Let us suppose that we could obtain an absolutely reliable census of the animal and god populations of the universe during the period between 1900 and 1950 and that it revealed no such decrease as is required by the answer of the reincarnationists. I very much doubt that they would then abandon their belief. As for the constant influx of souls from other galaxies postulated by Professor MacGregor, would he abandon reincarnation if he could be shown that there is no life elsewhere in the universe, something that more and more astronomers have come to believe in recent years? In an article published in 1974 Ian Stevenson concedes that if "the recent increase in the world's population" continues, it would "bring difficulties for the reincarnation hypothesis." He adds that these difficulties "have not reached us yet" ("Some Questions Related to Cases of the Reincarnation Type," *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1974, p. 400). Stevenson omits to tell us how great the population increase has to be before the difficulties do reach us. However, it is worth pointing out that since 1974 the increases have continued at an enormously accelerated pace and yet, so far from abandoning his belief or flirtation with reincarnation, Stevenson has become an ever more convinced and forthright supporter.

I have left to the end the rejoinder by Dr. Bruce Goldberg, the futurologist from Baltimore. Dr. Goldberg is up to form and, with his usual confidence, offers a theory that is as bold as it is ingenious. There is no reason to suppose that the same soul cannot occupy "more than one body at a time." If we modestly assume that one soul occupies three bodies, the population problem can easily be disposed of:

If one soul occupied three bodies in the year 300 B.C., for example, and if each of these sub-souls occupied three additional bodies each, it would not be difficult to see how one soul could occupy one and a half million bodies in a matter of thirteen lifetimes. [op. cit., p. 181]

Unfortunately this soul-fission theory does not solve the problem. In the first place, the logic of personal identity makes it impossible for a person to occupy more than one body. If two bodies, B_1 and B_2 , were to behave in exceedingly similar ways and if we had reason to believe that their sensations, feelings, and thoughts were qualitatively similar in all respects, we would still not describe them as the bodies of the same person. If, for example, B_1 were Ronald Reagan's body, we would not say that Ronald Reagan also inhabited B_2 but rather that the mind associated with B_2 is Ronald Reagan's double. I do not wish to lay too much stress on this consideration here because to defend it fully would require a long discussion and also because some

competent philosophers would not agree that a person cannot be in several bodies at the same time. However, allowing such multiple occupations as *logical* possibilities, the actual facts clearly defeat Dr. Goldberg's rejoinder. "Goldberg's Law," as we may call his fission theory, is presumably not confined to the future but has always operated in the past. If this is so, we should not find five billion separate souls but a handful, perhaps a few hundred souls, each occupying millions of bodies. Yet that is not at all what we find. There are not, sad to say, millions of Ronald Reagans, William Rehnquists, or, for that matter, Bruce Goldbergs.

The population difficulties can be avoided by somebody who is prepared to offer a drastically modified version of reincarnationism. Professor Ducasse never discusses the population objection, but at the end of his article "Life After Death Conceived As Reincarnation" he refers to such a revised position. Speaking of the Bridey Murphy case (of which he was a vigorous champion) and the spontaneous recollections of earlier lives by certain children, he observes that, if these cases are as strong as their supporters maintain, they are evidence for the view that "reincarnation, whether general or not, occurs at least sometimes." Ducasse leaves this question open; but, according to Stevenson, some Turkish believers are quite definite that only those who die a violent death are reborn ("Characteristics of Cases of the Reincarnation Type in Turkey and Their Comparison with Cases in Two Other Cultures," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 1970, p. 4). Somebody who holds the view that reincarnation occurs but that it is not general could quite consistently admit the population growth without invoking any of the noxious *ad hoc* assumptions. He would maintain that, while the origin of some human beings has to be explained in terms of the transmigration of souls, the origin of many (perhaps most) human beings is of a natural kind. By this I mean that the latter sub-class of the human race is *entirely* the result of biological reproduction. Such a position could then also explain population growth in the usual way, by references to biological and social factors.

There is something appealing about the modesty of this revised position, but it is easy to see why it has not commended itself to most believers in reincarnation. It does seem more than an *a priori* prejudice to hold that all human beings have the same kind of origin: they are either all the result of a divine infusion of a soul into an embryo or they are all the result of transmigration or they are all produced in a purely biological fashion. Furthermore, many of the arguments for reincarnation, if they were valid, would show that *all* human beings are the reincarnation of previously existing souls. Finally, somebody taking this position is faced with the unenviable task of supplying criteria allowing us to tell who among human beings is naturally produced and who is the result of reincarnation.

Part 3 of this series will discuss the two most basic objections to reincarnation—the status of a person between incarnations and the dependence of consciousness on the brain. It will also deal with the notion of the astral bodies, which is closely tied to most forms of reincarnation. ●