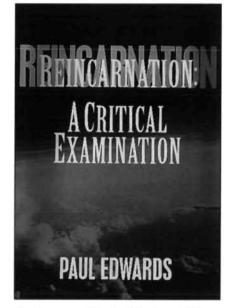
A Cogent Consideration of the Case for Karma (and Reincarnation)

BY BARRY L. BEYERSTEIN

Reincarnation: A Critical Examination. By Paul Edwards. Prometheus Books, 1996. ISBN 1-57392-005-3. 313 pp. Hardcover, \$31.95

ew of us enjoy having the frailties d of our most comforting beliefs revealed, and when the assumptions under scrutiny concern "big ticket" items such as the possibility of an afterlife or the supernatural underpinnings of our moral precepts, a questioning attitude is almost guaranteed to make the bearer about as popular as the proverbial skunk at the garden party. Paul Edwards has risked this fate once again, this time by critically examining certain doctrines, once confined largely to Hindu and Buddhist believers, that have recently gained popularity among the eclectic disciples of New Age spirituality. Interestingly, they have also attracted more than a few Christian adherents who cheerfully overlook the fact that the doctrine of reincarnation contradicts other core tenets of their faith.

Heretofore largely ignored by Western philosophers of any stature, the traditionally associated (but logically independent) doctrines of reincarnation and Karma are thoroughly examined in Paul Edwards' enjoyable and encyclopedic treatise. Edwards proceeds with his usual precision to expose the hidden assumptions, the empirical flaws, and the often unpalatable implications of these teachings that, on the surface, can seem quite appealing. It is always a pleasure to watch an incisive thinker cut right to the heart of an issue and then proceed to lay out its logical consequents in clear and concise prose. It is a double treat if that exposi-



tion is accomplished with wit and flair, as is the case here. One all too rarely gets the bonus of chuckling through a detailed and cogent analysis by an eminent philosopher. Take for instance this example of the twinkle in the scholar's eye that appears on page 18: "It seems ludicrous that something as important as creation of a soul that is going to exist forever should be tied to such accidents as the failure of a birth-control appliance."

The belief that some essence of ourselves survives bodily death is perhaps the most comforting of all spiritual leanings. It has provided reassurance for human beings probably since our ancestors first evolved brains of sufficient complexity to anticipate the future and contemplate their own mortality. The solace provided by any sort of expectation of an afterlife would probably have been sufficient to assure its undiminished popularity all by itself, but, as Edwards points out, the version of immortality preached by most reincarnationists offers yet another enticement. Belief in reincarnation feeds not only the hope for life beyond the grave, but in conjunction with its frequent fellow traveler, the "law" of Karma, it also provides apparent support for another widespread human longing, the desire to believe that we inhabit a just universe.

The warm glow this solution provides for believers diverts their attention from the many inherent conceptual and practical difficulties that Edwards lays bare in this book. For instance, a major difficulty for reincarnationists is what he calls the "modus operandi" problem. For magical thinkers, just imagining something can bring it about. But for the rest of us, there is the inconvenient need for a plausible chain of causal mechanisms before we can grant the likelihood of any given phenomenon. With the many advances in scientific understanding since the formulative days of the reincarnation story, it has become increasingly difficult even to conceive of a reasonable mechanism whereby a bodily attribute

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(such as a birthmark or deformity, which are afforded much attention in reincarnationist circles) or a mental property such as knowledge, a personality trait, or an inclination, could be packaged up at the end of one person's lifetime, held in abeyance in non-physical form between incarnations (the "interregnum problem") and finally implanted in a fetus in its mother's womb in preparation for another revolution of the eternal carousel. It likewise strains credulity to accept the requirement that detailed tallies of every good and bad deed committed by every person who ever lived could be kept somewhere and weighed, let alone harnessed to transgenerational retributive mechanisms as diverse as earthquakes, bacteria, raging bulls, lightning bolts, or a large, ill-tempered bar patron named Bob.

The Canadian psychologist Melvin Lerner and his colleagues have studied various psychological needs that make the idea of transcendental fairness enforcers such as Karma perennially attractive. Lerner describes a number of payoffs for believing in what he calls the "just world hypothesis," i.e., the soothing notion that, in life, people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Many of us rebel emotionally at the realization—easily prompted by a quick glance at the daily headlinesthat the plums and brickbats of life seem to be somewhat randomly apportioned, morally speaking. Apparently, it is too threatening for a large portion of the populace to admit that, no matter how long and hard one has tried to do the right thing, the driver of that approaching bus could still be just about to doze off. It is this motivation to salvage belief in a hidden hand that metes out deserved rewards and punishments on a cosmic scale that explains the unsavory but widely observed tendency to derogate apparently innocent victims. For example, "She must have dressed or behaved provocatively or she wouldn't have been raped, would she?"

With adult victims of misfortune, it is often sufficient merely to distort our perception of the worthiness of the individual to preserve our belief in a just world, but what of infants afflicted with excruciating and disfiguring diseases, or children orphaned and tortured by the perpetrators of "ethnic cleansing"? How could they possibly have accumulated enough demerits in their short lives to have deserved such a cruel fate? A ready answer, if you can accept it, is supplied by those two objects of Edwards' dissecting scalpel, reincarnation and Karma. Apparently, you can take itaccumulated moral capital, anywaywith you, after all. Herein we have the long-sought excuse for the panorama of gratuitous evil and unearned windfalls we encounter daily. Those kids deserved it all right, but not for what they did in this brief but brutal existence. Rather, they are explating vicious acts in one or more of an infinite series of previous lives. And, incidentally, that Wall Street junk bond dealer does deserve his Rolex, BMW, and yacht after all-he was obviously a somewhat more meritorious character in a previous incarnation.

Neat, huh? Well, yes, sort of and even Edwards admits that this account makes more sense than the traditional Christian explanation that napalmed babies are, for reasons beyond our feeble ken, an unfortunate by-product of Adam and Eve's predilection for apples. But wait! As is so often the case, the large print giveth, but the small print taketh away. The small print, deftly enlarged by Edwards, reveals that the doctrines of Karma and reincarnation, so conducive at first glance, carry with them some truly revolting implications, ones their devotees seem rarely to have noticed. For instance, it follows from these views that I ought not to give a donation for African famine relief because those starving wretches must deserve that fate for having blotted their copybooks last time (or times) around. Helping the afflicted just thwarts their Karma, you see.

Another stumbling block raised by Edwards is the steadily climbing world population. If the souls of every one of today's earthlings necessarily inhabited a body in a previous generation, andalso according to doctrine-no new souls are being created, and there were fewer bodies on the planet then than now, we would seem to be faced with a serious soul deficit. A few reincarnationists have attempted to sidestep this impediment with mind-numbing ad hoc gyrations (upgrading of animal souls, recruiting souls from other planets or dimensions, soul sharing, etc.), but the extremes to which these apologists have gone only underscores, as Edwards notes, how fanciful the whole reincarnationist enterprise really is.

Then we come to perhaps the weightiest, and for me (as a long-time student of brain function), the most engaging objection to reincarnation raised by Edwards. A compelling reason to doubt that a packet of personality traits and abilities could leap from a dying person, into limbo, and thenceforth to a newly conceived embryo, is the evident linkage of all psychological attributes to highly specific structures and functions in individual brains. While modern neuroscience cannot conclusively rule out the possibility that disembodied consciousness could exist, the staggering amount of evidence suggesting that thinking, remembering, and feeling require an intact, functioning brain serves to make the brain-mind link one of the most well-supported postulates to be found anywhere in science. I have presented an overview of that evidence and its implications for a number of occult beliefs, including reincarnation, in a previous issue of this journal (SI, Winter 1988).

While Edwards does not advocate, as I did on that occasion, the most extreme version of the materialist position on the "mind-body problem"—the psychoneural identity hypothesis, which asserts that mental functions are *identical* with states of the brain—he argues that the manifest *dependence* of all mental functions on specific brain functions makes the possibility that personal traits, knowledge, or self-awareness could skip from one incarnation to the next exceedingly remote. Either way, as I noted in the above-mentioned article, if this kind of transmigration of traits and knowledge is possible, my entire chosen field of behavioral neuroscience is essentially a fool's errand. Fortunately, after reading this book, the prudent bettor will probably conclude that the chances of the concept of reincarnation being fatally flawed are substantially greater than the probability that the fundamental tenet of neuroscience (i.e., brain-mind linkage, which, if true, makes reincarnation so improbable) is in substantial danger.

The evidence, such as it is, is exhaustively examined by Edwards. Much of it comes from seemingly credible witnesses who claim to have seen the projected "astral bodies" of others at the time of the latter's death, or from children who seem remarkably precocious, or who "remember" people, places or events that they seem unlikely to have known about if they had not actually experienced them in a previous life. Edwards shows that the empirical evidence, like the supporting arguments put forth by past-life explorers such as Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Stanislav Grof, Raymond Moody, and Ian Stevenson are far less compelling than the tabloid headlines would have you believe. As with most anecdotal evidence of this sort, examination reveals that tales retold by the faithful have a way of becoming tidier and more convincing as they pass from mouth to mouth.

As Leonard Angel showed in these pages some time ago (SI, Fall 1994), careful reading of the acknowledged "best cases" for reincarnation, e.g., several from the parapsychologist Ian Stevenson, reveals significant internal inconsistencies in the accounts that throw them into doubt, even before the evidence itself is examined. Edwards notes similar problems in the evidential base and has taken the trouble to trace many other "best" cases back as close to their sources as possible. Along the way, we are treated to some hilarious examples of gullibility among those seized by the will to believe. In attacking the famous "Bridey Murphy" case, supposedly one of the strongest in the reincarnationists' arsenal, Edwards does skeptics the additional service of pointing out that some of the rebuttals that skeptics like to tout (myself among them, until I read this chapter) were themselves the products of journalistic excess and thus not to be relied upon. Edwards finds much else, however, to discredit the evidence for Virginia Tighe's prior existence as Bridey Murphy. In the process, he supplies trenchant critiques of the use of hypnosis and related techniques to "reveal" memories of past lives. Suffice it to say that, overall, the empirical case for reincarnation fares no better than the conceptual, logical, and moral ones.

Skeptics who follow my recommendation and read Reincarnation: A Critical Framination will derive much ammuni-



Incredible Stories: Fortean Mystery Mongering JOE NICKELL

The World's Most Incredible Stories: The Best of Fortean Times. Selected and edited by Adam Sisman. Barnes and Noble, New York, 1998. ISBN 0-7607-0893-2. 192 pp. Hardcover, £20.

ystery mongering sells. Why else would Barnes and Noble issue a 1998 edition of The World's Most Incredible Stories: The Best of Fortean Times? The book's title is guite correct; many of the stories therein are in fact incredible, as in "not credible," which is what we have come to expect from Fortean Times magazine. Originally published in London in 1992, the collection of oddities, anomalies, and occult claims is (as its subtitle indicates) in the tradition of Charles Fort, Fort (1874-1932) loved to challenge "orthodox" scientists with things they supposedly could not explain, like rains of fish or frogs.

In the introduction to Incredible Stories, Lyall Watson paints a typically Fortean, typically disparaging view of science: an endeavor that "claims to be objective" but is "inherently conservative and resistant to change," even a fun-

damentally "political process" that "depends on personal preference, upon the votes of a scientific jury-every member of which would be disqualified from any normal inquiry on the basis of blatant conflict of interest."

tion for arguing not only with reincarna-

tionists but with "near-death experience"

afficionados and afterlife enthusiasts of

other stripes as well. They will be treated

to a good read in the process-H. L.

Mencken's essays spring immediately to

mind in this regard. Reincarnation is a

useful adjunct to Edwards' earlier edited

volume, Immortality (Macmillan, 1992)

and to another work that both he and I

admire, Susan Blackmore's Dying to Live

(Prometheus, 1993). Skeptics familiar

with these works will enter debates well

prepared. They should be warned, how-

ever, that if the logic and evidence con-

tained therein were the final determi-

nants of belief, fuzzy but comforting

notions like reincarnation and Karma

would never have gained their substan-

tial cultural toehold in the first place.

To Watson what is needed is "a truly impartial investigator-a sort of scientific ombudsman-to provide the voice of reason, to speak out for curious individuals against the vested interests of those in authority." Fort fits the bill, says Watson, who seems to speak for Forteans rience from all over the world, just waiting to be examined. The problem is that reports of it are, by their very nature,

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everywhere when he states, ". . . I know that there is a vast field of unusual expe-