

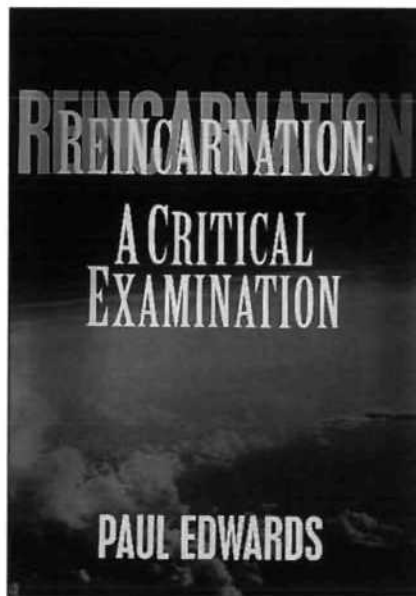
A Cogent Consideration of the Case for Karma (and Reincarnation)

BY BARRY L. BEYERSTEIN

Reincarnation: A Critical Examination. By Paul Edwards. Prometheus Books, 1996.
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Few of us enjoy having the frailties 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 headlines—that 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 it—accumulated *moral* capital, anyway—with 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 expiating 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, and—also 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 exceed-

