

Regarding reincarnation

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***Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*, Paul Edwards, Prometheus Books, New York, 1996.**

"To explain the unknown by the known is a logical procedure; to explain the known by the unknown is a form of theological lunacy." David Brooks, *The Necessity of Atheism*.

This book sets out to critically examine the various claims associated with the concept of Reincarnation. It appears to have achieved its objectives, although there is little doubt that no matter how much evidence to the contrary, believers will continue to believe in the fanciful creations.

The concept of Reincarnation is quite ancient. It appears to have evolved out of that most ancient of beliefs, upon which all religions were established, the idea of the survival of the soul after death. It seems likely that reincarnation evolved from the idea that humans should have a second chance at rectifying sins committed during their time on Earth. With the original concept, of a single life and death, salvation was not possible. It was widely practiced in Greece amongst certain cults, especially the Brotherhood of Pythagoras, where it was known as Transmigration.

It was to have its greatest influence in the Indian sub-continent, where it became an essential part of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Whereas the Greeks and the Gauls had conceived of several lifetimes before reaching the Isle of the Blessed, the Hindus originated the idea of an endless stream of births, and, as a result, a universe of infinite age, and future.

Edwards examines the "evidence" which is claimed to support Reincarnation in great depth, and concludes that they are lacking in substance. The many "classic" reports are found to be divergent in that there are serious discrepancies between the first time they are reported and when they are repeated years later. He also points out that many of the famous people in the past who are often touted as advocates of these philosophies, based upon statements they made apparently supporting these ideas, either never said what they are claimed to have said, or else, their statements were so ambiguous that they can be interpreted in any way that one desires.

Of special interest was his examination of the infamous Bridey Murphy where American housewife Virginia Tighe, born 1923, reported her former existence as an Irish woman in the 19th century. This case, which is still claimed by many believers in reincar-

nation to be one of the strongest pieces of evidence in support of their beliefs, and features in almost every new book on the subject,

The author completely demolishes the claim that it was a genuine demonstration of the existence of reincarnation by referring to numerous articles which appeared soon after the initial claims were made. The various articles revealed that the details which Tighe provided concerning her former life were easily explained. Her ability to adopt an Irish brogue had probably more to do with the fact that her natural parents were part-Irish, while there were many discrepancies in her accounts, where she used modern American expressions

The idea of reincarnation, especially in the context of the idea of a scheme of cosmic progression is extremely widespread, and finds expression in such diverse religious and quasireligious teachings as Hinduism, Mormonism, Scientology and in many of the New-Age teachings.

To be able therefore, to fully understand the arguments refuting the concept of reincarnation, one must first understand what is involved in the concept of reincarnation, for the fact is that reincarnation has quite different meanings to different groups.

While the basic premise of reincarnation is that after their physical death, some inextinguishable portion of each human being leaves the Earth for a period of time, but that it always returns again to earth, in the physical body of a new being, human or otherwise, where it once again lives its life, and upon its death, once again repeats the same cycle of death and rebirth. Depending upon the particular belief system, this endless repetition of life and death may go on continuously, or according to some faiths, the endless cycle can eventually be broken.

The reincarnation myth is quite common it has emerged in various forms throughout the ages, emerging within a wide diversity of cultures and faiths. The origins of the myth go back a long time in history; among its earliest champions were the ancestors of the present-day Hindus, where for some inexplicable reason it emerged from within a faith which had formerly believed in the idea of a single life and death.

It emerged in the mystical teachings of the Hellenic races, reaching its peak amongst the followers of Pythagoras. Amongst the many mystical ideas of the Greek philosophers was the concept of a universe which was in a permanent state of balance. This idea is reflected in the theory of the four elements or

humours. These four elements were believed to compose all the matter in the universe, including human beings, and it was believed that provided the four humours were in balance, nature and humans would remain in a condition of good health. If there was imbalance, sickness and disorder would result.

When the Greek philosophers looked at the world they saw disharmony, where the wealthy and powerful took advantage of the poor. On the Earth there was apparently no remedy for the poor; lacking power they were subject to the disorder of war and pillage inflicted upon them by the powerful warlords. It was natural to assume, then, that in a balanced universe those who suffered during their lifetime must be compensated and those who caused suffering must be punished. In a world where the pre-Christian concept of Heaven and Hell had not yet developed there evolved a belief in transmigration, the idea that after death the spirit would return in another body. Those who had been the victims in their previous life received human bodies, while those who had inflicted pain and suffering upon others came back as animals, of a type befitting their punishment. There appears to be a similar belief amongst the many believers in reincarnation, and this seems to have been the origins of the "law of Karma" that if humans are resurrected to another life-time, their station in the new life must depend upon their the quality of their former life !

As the author points out quite clearly there is no such thing as a "law" of Karma, unlike most natural, or scientific laws, it cannot be applied to predict possible eventualities. He compares it to the pseudo-scientific Social Darwinism. It is an empty theory which seems to be based more upon a human need for some form of eternal justice, a means whereby those who appear to have escaped punishment upon earth are subject to a higher form of justice. Such an idea is hardly exclusive to Eastern religions, indeed it is an integral part of most religions, past and present.

An important aspect of many forms of the reincarnation belief is the theory of advancement, the idea that each time a human soul returns to Earth, the physical individual into which it returns is given the opportunity to advance itself, so that like ascending the rungs of an infinitely high ladder, each life enables it to move one or two rungs higher towards its final goal.

This final goal for most of the believers in reincarnation is a release from the recurring cycle of birth and death; to the Buddhists it is Nirvana, a state of nothingness, while to the Mormons and the Scientologists, it is to reach the state of a god. The idea of a universe populated with numerous gods who were once human is not new, it found its origins in Gnosticism, and other mystical teachings of the past. Realistically, such an idea, along with reincarnation itself, appears to be nothing more than a wish-fulfilment principle, essentially the idea that the universe was created to accommodate the wishes of

individual humans. Unfortunately, the more we learn about the principles behind the operation of the universe the more we realize that it is not constrained by such puny motivations.

The author makes a convincing argument against the various claims for reincarnation, exposing them as nothing more than shams. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the so-called "evidence" in support of reincarnation has been debunked time-and-time again, one still hears those who refuse to disbelieve trotting out the same tired arguments in support of reincarnation. This book is useful as a source of material to point out to them that the material which they use as evidence, such as the Bridey Murphy story, has been exposed as nothing more than a sham.



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cedures. "Without their support and participation" Sarah comments "Anne Hamilton-Byrne would never have become what she is today. It was their names that gave her the credibility and social power she needed ... They looked respectable, therefore people thought they must be respectable."

When reading Sarah's book I found I could cope tolerably well with her descriptions of incessant beatings and humiliations; but when she came to describe the aftermath of the raid and her efforts to overcome her self-doubts, depression and fear of inadequacy, it became impossible to be objective or detached. No-one should be put in a position where he or she has to write a first-hand account like this but it needed to be done and has been written well. It has the ring of painful sincerity and a dogged concern for compassion, decency and honesty.

As far as Sarah is concerned, the worst thing The Family did to the children - as it had the most lasting effect - was the withholding of love. "I believe to deny a child love is to deny its existence as a human being." Elsewhere she says 'Destroying life and liveliness in people is perhaps the true definition of evil'.

Thanks to a combination of luck, the help of loyal, perceptive friends and her innate intelligence and stubborn courage, Sarah has survived The Family's efforts to suborn her to its designs and she is well on the way to being something that the Master could only bluster about - a real healer.

Dr Sarah Hamilton-Byrne has rendered a valuable public service by shedding a bright light on the dark secrets of The Family and by exposing it for the cruel, parasitic monstrosity it was.

Editor's note:

Readers who attended the Australian Skeptics 1995 Convention in Melbourne would have had the privilege of hearing Dr Sarah Hamilton-Byrne speaking about her horrifying childhood experiences. It was a presentation not to be forgotten.

