

# Reincarnation

P H I L M O L É

**R**eincarnation is the belief that the souls of human beings inhabit a succession of physical bodies during their existence. According to this doctrine, physical death is a transitional period in which a soul ends its lifetime in one body and prepares to begin a new life in another body.

The concept of reincarnation existed to a limited extent in ancient Greek and Egyptian cultures, but it did not become an essential component of a philosophical system until the development of Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Many historians of religion trace the first fully articulated reincarnation doctrines to the *sramanas*, or wandering ascetics, present in India and South Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. (Smart 1998, 56). Emphasis on the ascetics and their teachings of *samsara*, or rebirth, entered the philosophies of Buddhist and Jainist religious movements. The influence of these religions integrated reincarnation into the priestly religion that eventually became Hinduism, especially after the composition of some of the later philosophical documents known as the Upanishads (Olivelle 1998, xxxiii). The concept is now widespread throughout South Asia, and reincarnation is integral to classic Eastern religious texts such as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Reincarnation is sometimes but not always associated with the concept of karma, or the spiritual effect of past actions. The reincarna-

tionist who believes in karma considers the experiences of this lifetime to be the result of actions from previous lifetimes. In classic Hindu tradition, a person strives to free him- or herself from the restraints of past actions through meditation and self-denial. Liberation from the effects of karma will lead to personal salvation and escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth (Flood 1996, 76).

Although Western supporters of reincarnation frequently cite historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Voltaire, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, David Hume, and Thomas Henry Huxley as fellow believers, very few distinguished Western thinkers have accepted the idea. Franklin, Voltaire, Hume, and Huxley were skeptical of the existence of a soul independent of the human body, and belief in a soul is a prerequisite for belief in reincarnation. Goethe seemingly expressed sympathy for reincarnation in some of his writings, but he also expressed contrary opinions on many occasions and cannot properly be considered a believer. Arthur Schopenhauer, the prominent German philosopher and scholar of Eastern philosophies, was one of the few notable supporters of reincarnation in the West. Still, the truth of a doctrine cannot be determined by simply listing its most famous supporters, and proponents of reincarnation often resort to such lists when their philosophical arguments are weakest.

Since the late nineteenth century, reincarnation has earned fairly significant popular

acceptance as a component of alternative religious movements. Edgar Cayce, the infamous “sleeping prophet” who attracted attention for his reputed clairvoyant abilities, included reincarnation on the long list of paranormal phenomena in which he passionately believed. Reincarnation also earned the support of Madame Helena Blavatsky, the founder of a fringe religion known as Theosophy. An eclectic mixture of mystical traditions from all over the world, Theosophy taught that consciousness pervades all matter in the universe. Blavatsky and her followers embraced reincarnation as an important argument against contemporary materialist philosophies that questioned the existence of souls and other supernatural entities (Washington 1998, 45). Despite numerous factual and philosophical errors in the writings of Cayce and Blavatsky, both figures continue to be important influences on contemporary reincarnationists such as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Raymond Moody.

Reincarnationists cite various types of evidence as “proof” of their belief. A common argument involves cases of alleged child prodigies who show an unusual amount of talent or intellectual ability at a very early age. One of the most frequently cited examples is William Hamilton (1805–1865), who acquired vast mathematical expertise and the ability to speak thirteen languages before his adolescence. Other common examples include composers such as Felix Mendelssohn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Franz Schubert, who produced sophisticated music while very young (Edwards 1996, 48–49). Supporters of reincarnation claim that traditional genetic and cultural explanations of human learning abilities cannot account for the talents of these prodigies, especially since they often display abilities absent in both parents. However, this claim has serious shortcomings. First, the premise of the genetic argument rests on the false assumption that all features of an off-

spring must be present in one or both parents if they were acquired through normal heredity. In reality, many genes are recessive and can be passed from parents to children without being activated. Genes also do not function independently but are stimulated or repressed by environmental influences. As studies of identical twins have shown, people with the same sets of genes can develop talents to very different degrees if they are raised in different environments (Segal 1999, 314).

Second, the attempt to explain novel or extraordinary data with theories such as reincarnation is inherently misguided. The fact that scientists currently do not fully understand the cognitive or physiological basis for intellectual talent does not justify paranormal explanations. Since the human mind is extraordinarily complicated and powerful, there is no reason to consider anything other than strictly biological and cultural factors to explain the abilities of child prodigies. The reincarnationist claims are merely “god of the gaps” arguments advanced by those seeking to fill the holes in human knowledge with fantastic and mostly arbitrary explanations. As critics argue, a reincarnationist could just as feasibly apply his or her argument to anyone with any type of special ability, be it Albert Einstein, Paul McCartney, William Faulkner, or a talented teenage track-and-field runner. Generally, skeptics also contend that to suggest talent can only be explained through appeals to the supernatural is both unwarranted and demeaning to human potential.

Strange birthmarks on a person’s body are another commonly cited “proof” of reincarnation. Ian Stephenson, one of the most prominent contemporary reincarnationists, considers birthmarks to be the strongest evidence in favor of the doctrine. He and many of his colleagues find a correspondence between birthmarks on living individuals and wounds or other markings on the bodies of deceased persons, and they claim the similarity of these

marks is too strong to result from chance alone. The only sensible explanation, in their view, is that the deceased person has been reincarnated in a new body, with the previous bodily markings intact. However, most of these alleged cases of physical similarities are based on anecdotal evidence, since it is usually impossible to inspect the body of the deceased person or to analyze a detailed photograph of the body. Many of the alleged correlations are invented retrospectively by family members who already believe in reincarnation. After a child is born, family members believing in reincarnation look for birthmarks on the child and then try to recall a dead friend or relative who had similar marks. This method of selectively reviewing data to verify preconceived ideas virtually guarantees errors in judgment and reasoning. Aside from these difficulties, reincarnationists must also explain how the presumably immaterial soul of a deceased person can transmit physical characteristics to a new body. Since there is no logical way that a nonphysical entity can cause changes on physical bodies, such a transmission of characteristics must be extremely improbable, if not impossible. This *modus operandi* problem of conserving the physical traits of the dead continues to defeat the best arguments of reincarnationists (Edwards 1996, 135).

Another category of evidence used to support reincarnation concerns *déjà vu*, or the inexplicably strong feeling that a current event has been experienced previously. Believers in reincarnation consider *déjà vu* experiences to be spontaneous memories of events from past lives, and they maintain that science will never adequately account for them. Few reincarnationists appear to have actually explored scientific explanations of *déjà vu*, since viable theories have been available since the nineteenth century. Philosopher and psychologist William James, for example, suggested two possible explanations for *déjà vu* in his classic text *Principles of Psychology* (1890). The first explana-

tion involves the inability of a person to distinguish between a current experience that resembles a past experience in some important aspects. The uncanny feeling associated with the *déjà vu* experience fades as soon as the uniqueness of the current experience becomes more apparent. The second explanation is that the two hemispheres of the brain sometimes process sensory information at slightly different rates. A neural short circuit results, causing the general impression of an experience to register in the memory before the conscious mind has fully analyzed it. Modern cognitive researchers have found significant evidence that this theory explains a large number of *déjà vu* experiences. For instance, psychologist Arthur Reber noted that patients with certain types of brain damage frequently have *déjà vu* experiences (Reber 1985, 183). This evidence strongly suggests that these experiences are physiological and psychological phenomena. Cognitive researchers consider *déjà vu* to be fully explicable in scientific terms and do not endorse mystical explanations such as reincarnation.

Since the 1950s, hypnotically induced memories of past lives have been the most widely discussed evidence for reincarnation. The process of using hypnosis to recover alleged memories of previous lives is known as past-life regression. While hypnotized, a subject answers a series of questions and gradually reveals the identity and nature of past lives. This methodology is similar to the techniques used by researchers in the recovered-memory movement, in which therapists apparently retrieve details of long-repressed memories from hypnotized subjects. Past-life regression and other recovered-memory therapists falsely consider human memory to be a faithful record of actual events, requiring only the prompting of a skilled hypnotist to accurately reveal the details of past experiences. But researchers such as Elizabeth Loftus have demonstrated that memories are constructed

rather than simply retrieved, and memories recalled through hypnosis are especially prone to inaccuracies. Suggestive questions asked by the therapist can cause a hypnotic subject to hold distorted or completely false memories of past events (Loftus 1997, 72). In the 1990s, documented cases involving false accusations of sexual and physical abuse resulting from recovered memories further proved the unreliability of hypnotherapy for accurate memory retrieval.

The most famous case of hypnotically induced past-life regression concerned the case of a young housewife named Virginia Tighe. An amateur hypnotist named Morey Bernstein conducted six hypnotic sessions with Tighe between November 1952 and October 1953 and allegedly regressed her to a previous life as a nineteenth-century Irish woman named Bridey Murphy. While under hypnosis, Tighe described many details of her life as Murphy, including descriptions of her birth in the small town of Cork in 1798, her marriage to a young Protestant man named Joseph MacCarthy, their life together in Belfast, and her death in 1864 (Bernstein 1956, 108–163). She also spoke in an Irish brogue, captured on an audio recording of the sessions that was later released as a best-selling album. Bernstein published a serialized account of the case in the *Denver Post's* Sunday supplement in September 1954 before releasing his book *The Search for Bridey Murphy* in 1956. The book was an enormous success, and public interest in reincarnation in the United States immediately increased. The popularity of Bridey Murphy subsided after a chain of newspapers owned by William Randolph Hearst ran an exposé of the case, claiming to debunk Bernstein's conclusions in *The Search for Bridey Murphy*. Unfortunately, editors at the Hearst papers were motivated by factors other than a fondness for truth. They were mainly interested in discrediting newspapers such as the *Chicago Daily News*, which had obtained the enviable syndi-

cation rights to the Bridey Murphy story. Reporters for Hearst's *Chicago American* unscrupulously fabricated most of the details of their "debunking" and opened the door for later reincarnationists to uphold the validity of the Bridey Murphy case (Gardner 1957, 317–318). Subsequent investigators have shown Tighe's descriptions of persons and places in nineteenth-century Belfast to be incorrect, and many of the supposed anecdotes about Bridey Murphy's life probably resulted from subconscious recollection of stories told by Tighe's Irish friends and neighbors. These investigations have thoroughly disproved the Bridey Murphy case, although ardent reincarnationists still cite it as incontrovertible evidence of their doctrine.

Several important philosophical problems also undermine the theory of reincarnation. The "population growth" objection, first found in *Treatise of the Soul* by the early Christian thinker Tertullian, points to a discrepancy between the number of living souls and the number of souls in early human history. Reincarnationists are committed to the notion that each human soul is eternal and has lived countless lives as it has traveled from one human body to the next. However, the total population of people alive today is now greater than it has been at any previous time in history. In the first century C.E., only 200 million people were living on the planet, whereas there are over 6 billion people alive today. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of people living now could not be reincarnations of people from the past, since the earliest populations of humans were much smaller than the current population. Many souls of the living are simply not accountable through the theory of reincarnation.

Other important objections concern the nature of the soul itself. Many reincarnationists insist that the soul is a replica of a human personality and is capable of learning and changing in analogous ways. However, if the soul

really does change correspondingly with our conscious personality, it follows that any good or bad effects on the personality will also affect the soul. In practice, reincarnationists hold the arbitrary and indefensible belief that only positive changes in a person's personality are transmitted to his or her eternal soul. Few reincarnationists would maintain that brain damage that adversely affects a person's conscious thought and personality also damages the health of his or her soul, but that is exactly what they must maintain if they apply their doctrine consistently. They cannot simultaneously claim that the soul is unchanging and changeable in order to save their theory from its unpleasant consequences. There is also the troubling fact that people do not consciously remember any of the details of past lives. This implies a less-than-perfect continuity between the identities of a soul from one lifetime to the next.

Logical considerations have prevented reincarnation from earning the assent of most people trained in critical thinking. Even some Eastern religious thinkers, such as the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), have considered reincarnation incompatible with a system of rational ethics (Flood 1996, 252–253). However, the doctrine has survived for

millennia, and the appeal of its simplistic view of life is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

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