

A Philosophical/Critical Analysis of the Idea of Reincarnation

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Abstract: *The idea and concept of reincarnation pervades the history of both African and western philosophy and as such the belief in reincarnation had till date exerted great influence on several communities in Africa to the extent that at the birth of a child the next task becomes to find out who reincarnated the baby. Hence there is need to consider or rather examine other philosophical problems peculiar to the belief in reincarnation. One of such problems is that of the justifications for reincarnation, this is important because, the most common criteria that are usually adduced in identifying incarnate persons do not seem to be convincing enough to ascertain the belief in Reincarnation.*

I. Introduction

No line of research has conclusively demonstrated the existence of reincarnation. Skeptics and the scientific community in general consider reincarnation research to be pseudo scientific (Smitt. 241). The belief in reincarnation has been around for quite sometime due to many factors, and appears to be gaining ground both in western and African philosophy. Given this increasing popularity of reincarnation, I believe that there is need for proper examination of the justification for the belief in reincarnation. This is due to the fact that some of such justifications seem to raise doubt in people's mind, and most importantly, such justification can be easily disproved by other disciplines especially the sciences.

For instance, in the present state of psychology and physiology, belief in reincarnation can at any rate, claim no support from science, and such arguments as are possible on the subject point to the probable extinction of personality at death. Reincarnation implies immortality which according to Corliss Lamont, is "The literal survival of the individual human personality or consciousness for an indefinite period after (physical) death, with it's memory and awareness of self identity essentially intact". (Lamont, 22).

Although arguments have been advanced which attempt to prove the indestructibility and hence immortality of the soul. (e.g. plato). The concern of this work is, however, the logical possibility of and evidence for or against the justifications for reincarnation. The arguments analyzed here will be either of a philosophical or empirical (scientific) nature.

Reincarnation implies the survival hypothesis which asserts that the human personality (or soul) will continue to exist in some form or body after the death of the physical body.

Reincarnation is related to the mind-body problem and the problem of personal identity in philosophy. The mind body problem is concerned with how the mind and body are related to each other, many theories have been proposed to solve the mind-body problem. Modern materialism contends that mental states are reducible to physical brain states. Thus if materialism is true, reincarnation is ruled out automatically. Epiphenomenalism which contends that the mind is a separate yet dependent by-product of the brain, has the same implication for reincarnation. A dualism that contends that the mind is a separate, independent entity from the brain is a necessary presupposition for the possibility of reincarnation. Personal identity problems will arise in the context of specific arguments about the logical possibility of reincarnation.

Reincarnation Clarified

Reincarnation is the belief that the soul enters a new (human or animal) body after death. To reincarnate means to being back the soul after death in another body. Here, the soul returns after death to live in a new body. During reincarnation, it is believed that the soul enters into a new human or animal body after death. In some places, it is believed that the soul may reincarnate in the form of an animal and this is why some animals are not killed in some places. This reincarnation is believed to ensure the unending and continuity of the universe which is also dependent on God who is unending.

This doctrine is a central tenet within the majority of Indian religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism; The Buddhist concept of rebirth is also often referred to as reincarnation (Charles et al, 640). The idea was also fundamental to some Greek philosophers as well as other religions, such as Druidism and later on, spiritism, Theosophy and Eckankar. It is also found in many tribal societies around the world, in places such as Siberia, West Africa, North America and Australia (Gananath, 15).

The Greek equivalent metempsychosis roughly corresponds to the common English phrase “transmigration of the soul” and all connotes reincarnation after death as either human or animal, though emphasizing the continuity of the soul, not the flesh. The term has been used by modern philosophers such as Kurt Godel.

The term-reincarnation is from the latin (incarne:”en-flesh”). Literarily it means “re-embodiment”. It is the belief that people live multiple times; that is their soul or essential immaterial nature, returns multiple times to live again (ie re-birth into another body or alleged body), with a higher or lower social-economic status, greater or lesser abilities or talents, and with greater or lesser spiritual or intellectual awareness.

Reincarnation is understood to work or function in a number of ways. However, what this view all have in common is the idea of entering another body. Thus if one continues to be reincarnated, it will be as a human. This is determined by the operation of (one’s) karma. Karma means among other things, actions cause, destiny or fate. It is the universal (spiritual or impersonal law of cause and effect that governs reincarnation. That is, for every action, choice or event that has moral implication or ramifications, there are corresponding consequences- positive or negative karma, as the case may be. It is generally believed to be a universal law from which there is no exception to or escaping from (e.g forgiveness or mercy from). It is often said that it must be completely balanced or “paid off” in this life or subsequent ones. Karma determines his or her status in possible succeeding reincarnation.

Philosophical and religious beliefs regarding the existence or non-existence of an unchanging ‘self’, have a direct bearing on how reincarnation is viewed within a given tradition. The Budha lived at a time of great philosophical creativity in India when many conceptions of the nature of life and death were proposed. Some were materialist, holding that there was no existence, where a being is born, lives, dies and then is reborn but in the context of a type of determinism or fatalism in which Karma played no role. Others were “eternalists”, postulating an eternally existent self or soul comparable to that in Judaic monotheism. The atman survives death and reincarnates as another living being, based on its karmic inheritance. This is the idea that has become dominant (with certain modifications) in modern Hinduism.

The Buddhist concept of reincarnation differs from others in that there is no eternal ‘soul’, ‘spirit’ or ‘self’ but only a “stream of consciousness” that links life with life. The actual process of change from one life to the next is called punarbhava, “becoming”, and some English speaking Budhists prefer the term “rebirth” or “re-becoming” to render this term as they take “reincarnation” to imply a fixed entity that is reborn.

II. Some Justifications For Reincarnation

Generally, there are many reasons or occurrences that seem to justify the belief in reincarnation. Some of such reasons or occurrences are as follows:

(1) **Atonement for Past Misdeeds:** It is generally believed among Africans that when one did not do well in his/her first life, he comes back after death to amend the things he must have done wrongly. This is one of the reasons why we hear people talking to the corpses of their friends and relatives to change certain aspects of their life in their next coming. In some religions, it is believed that human soul reincarnate into animal body as a punishment for their sins in their past life.

For instance, the doctrine of karma takes for its genesis the diversity of circumstances in which people find themselves at their birth from causes beyond their control. The theory of karma in Hindu theology, explains the incongruity in the divine dispensation. According to this theory, all that we receive at our birth in the form of happiness or misery, and all the differences in social status that come into our being at birth are the outcome of our deeds in the life before the present life. We take birth after to complete our course on this earth, and what we sow in the one; we must reap in the next life.

2. **Family Resemblance and Behavioral Pattern:** some babies resemble their departed ancestors so much that it may seem obvious that such ancestor reincarnated that particular baby. In some case the baby will have birth marks and scars that are peculiar to that particular ancestor who is believed to have reincarnated the baby. Also, some babies exhibit certain character traits of an ancestor in form of skills and talents and certain behaviors

3. **Memory Transfer or Retro cognition:** Some children can recount the history of an ancestor, his actions and incidents that happened for a long time before their birth. History has it that some incarnate children can find certain things hidden by them in their previous life. In the retro cognition, that may be done by suggestions or spontaneous remembrance of previous existence, without being identified a course to justify such a thing. In the later, remembrance can happen either in the average sleep or while awake, as the studied cases, among others by the professors H.N. Banerjee and Lan Stevenson.

4. **Divination:** This is very common among Africans. In some families, immediately a child is born the parents or any of the child's relation will consult a diviner to ascertain which of the family ancestor has reincarnated. This knowledge of the incarnate person will enable the parents to know how to treat or handle the child. This knowledge also determines the name given to the baby. In all, the belief in reincarnation had till date exerted great influence on several communities in Africa. This is because the Africans believe in the continued existence of the ancestors either in the form of spirit or in the form of incarnate persons in the family. It also confirms the African concept of immortality or life after death because the ancestors are believed to have bonds or relationship with the living and the unborn.

A Critical Analysis of the Idea of Reincarnation

The idea and concept of reincarnation pervades the history of both Africa and Western philosophy. Hence, we shall concentrate attention on other philosophical problems peculiar to the belief in reincarnation. One of such problems is that of "personal identify." The question at stake is how to identify a person who is said to be an incarnate of another person. In other words what are the grounds by which a person now living is judged to be the same person as one who has lived and died in some past generation of ancestors? What are the criteria for identification of incarnate persons. We shall attempt to analysis some of such common criteria of identity, in order to determine their validity or other wise.

The belief in reincarnation upholds that soul of the dead person returns to inhabit a new body. In such cases, it is sometimes claimed that the bodies of such incarnate person bear some marks or scars on the exact spots where the incarnate person had such scars on his body in his previous existence. While in other case, the verbal confessions of the incarnate persons or revelations from witch doctors are accepted as testimonies that attest to the truth of the belief.

Considering the criteria for body identity and applying this criterion in identifying the incarnate person would require that the physical characteristics of the living person would correspond to those he had in his previous existence. But this cannot hold since his body in the previous existence has already undergone decomposition and disintegration. This is why it even becomes mysterious to say that we can identify incarnate persons by the marks or scars on their present body which reflect the scars they had in their previous existence.

However, suppose we grant on the other hand that bodily identity holds. How do we establish the truth of the other claim that the soul in person 'A' now living is the soul of an ancestor? Can the same soul dwell in more than one body at the same or different times? And how is it decided which goes with which body? These are fundamental questions about reincarnation that beg for answers. For, we cannot account for the relationship of souls with their incarnate bodies or persons, it would ever become more difficult to account for what makes for the continuity or sameness of persons from one cycle of reincarnation to another. Let us end this analysis of bodily identity in relation to reincarnation by asking ourselves the following questions. If the identity of the incarnate person is not bodily, is there an essential core, a true self, an inner you, a sort of identity of the person which would be the same as you; were your body to have been completely annihilated by any means, in your previous existence? To identify such an inner you with the soul will lead us to problems highlighted above. So, how do we go about it? It seems then that the talk about reincarnation is spurious if we have to go by bodily identity of the incarnate person.

As a follow up to the above questions, let us also consider memory as a possible criterion for the identity of incarnate persons. The thesis here is that in reincarnation, a person can remember events in his past life. Such claim is problematic. First, it is difficult to establish the truth value of such a claim since we can neither confirm nor disprove it. Apart from that, memory may not be a reliable criterion to identify incarnate persons for many other reasons. Consider the case of sophisticated brainwashing. In our contemporary scientific era, a person's memory can be edited, elided and replaced with others. Now, if two people are brainwashed and their memories switched, do they exchange their identity? And should these persons reincarnate, will both of them revert to their previous memories, that is, before their memories were switched? Or will they reincarnate with their acquired memories? If they reincarnate with the acquired memories there will be difficulty in identifying them with their past life.

Reincarnation has been an issue discussed everywhere, especially in Africa. Thus in a critical analysis of the idea of reincarnation, it is convenient to address both the philosophical arguments and the scientific evidence against reincarnation. Logical arguments, if successful, are decisive; thus, not even an appeal to faith could vindicate a belief that is incoherent because no one would understand what it is that one claims to believe.

Reincarnation presupposes that people posses an immaterial nonspatial substance which constitutes the personality. One objection to this view, that human beings are essentially corporeal is stated by Corliss Lamont:

If we carefully examine their accounts, we find that...they actually provide this spirit with a body...(T) their descriptions give to it activities, functions, and environments usually pertaining to earthly existence and natural bodies. The immortal

personality...enjoys and suffers a great many experiences that would simply be impossible without the co-operation of ...the body (Lamont 46).

Even if one conceded the possibility of reincarnation, one would still have to justify the identification of the soul with the new "flesh and blood person. C.D. Broad makes the point:

If I cannot clearly conceive what it would be like to be an unembodied person, I find it almost incredible that the experiences of such a person...could be sufficiently continuous with those had in his lifetime by any deceased human being as to constitute together the experiences of one and the same person (Broad 278).

Many philosophers have argued that the bodily continuity is more essential to personal identity than memory because memory claims can be true or false; thus memory in itself is not enough to make you the same person overtime... bodily continuity, they argue, is required. (Edwards, 48-49).

Another problem for reincarnation in any form is the age regression problems which is stated by W.T. Stace:

When an old man dies, what kind of consciousness is supposed to survive? Is it his consciousness as it was just before death which may perhaps have become imbecile? Or is it the consciousness of his mature middle age? Or is it the infant mind that he had when he was a baby? The point of these questions is not that we do not know the answers...The point is that all possible answers are equally senseless...(w)ill the old man who dies suddenly revert to his middle years after death? And will the infant who dies suddenly become mature (Stace, 60).

The conceptual problems for the justifications of reincarnation make reincarnation a highly implausible possibility. Modern science demonstrates the dependence of consciousness on the brain, verifying that the mind (or soul) must die with the body. This conclusion is emotionally difficult to accept. Nevertheless, we cannot base our beliefs on what we want to be true; the truth can only be found by weighing the evidence for a given idea. In the case of reincarnation, the extinction hypothesis is supported by strong and incontrovertible evidence from the hard experimental data of physiological psychology, whereas the idea of reincarnation is supported at best by weak and questionable anecdotal evidence from parapsychology.

Past-life memories are also considered evidence for reincarnation. There has been evidence accumulated by parapsychologists where people provide accurate historical details when they describe "memories" of "past lives" while under hypnosis. This evidence, however, is more consistent with an alternative explanation-cryptomnesia. Melvin Harris describes this phenomena:

To understand Cryptomnesia, we must think of the subconscious mind as a vast, muddled storehouse of information. This information comes from books, newspaper and magazines, from lectures, television, and radio; from direct observation and even from overhead scraps of conversation. Under normal circumstances most of this knowledge is not subject to recall, but sometimes these deeply buried memories are spontaneously revived. They may reemerge in a baffling form; since their origins are completely forgotten (Harris, 19).

Hence: There are numerous cases, where information from past-life regressions has been traced back to such mundane causes upon further investigation (Edwards 9). Infact:

In all the (past life) cases so far that have been elicited under hypnosis, either there was no such person as the one described or the character in question could have been known to the informant who...might consciously be quite unaware of the source of this knowledge (Beloff, 262)

Another form of past-life memories does not involve hypnotic regression. "Memories" of previous lives spontaneously occurred during waking life in cases investigated in India by Lan Stevenson. Stevenson collected cases where children generally between two and four years old began talking about their "previous lives and even their previous death (Edward 11). Usually the memories are gone by age eight. In several cases the person the child claimed to be in a previous life did infact exist and many descriptions given were accurate (11) Stevenson dismissed the possibility of fraud because he saw no motive for it. Lan Wilson points out that many children claimed to have belonged to a higher caste, thus a motivation for better living conditions is obvious (Edwards, 12).

The fact that the vast majority of Stevenson's cases come from countries where a religious belief in reincarnation is strong, and rarely elsewhere, seems to indicate that cultural conditioning (rather than reincarnation) generates claims of spontaneous past-life memories. Moreover, reincarnation seems incapable of

explaining spontaneous cases where the child claims to remember the “Former Life” of a person who has died after the child was born (Cook, 129).

While the parapsychological evidence for reincarnation is insufficient, the physiological evidence for extinction is more than sufficient. In the mid-18th century, philosopher David Hume stated the fundamental basis of the empirical argument for annihilation:

The weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigour in manhood, their sympathetic disorder in sickness, their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death (Hume 138).

A severe injury to the head for instance may change an ordinary cheerful man into a sullen and morose one subject to sudden fits of homicidal mania, suppose (he) becomes definitely insane. (and) is convinced he is napoleon, are we to say his real personality is still normal, that his soul is still thinking clearly and healthy, and that as soon as he gets rid of his body by dying he will come to his senses? (Lamont, 100).

Throughout aging, specific mental abilities may be irrevocably lost one-by one.

Yet if instead of the senses being destroyed separately and gradually by disease or accident they are all simultaneously destroyed by death, the dualistic immortalist asks us to believe that they will go on some other state with unimpaired, if not greatly improved, capabilities (Lamont, 102).

III. Conclusion

From all that has been said about the reality of the idea of reincarnation, it is obvious that there are missing links in between the cycles of reincarnation that need to be explained. Reincarnation may have some points in some justifications for reincarnation, but as we have seen in this work, those justification are not convincing enough to make us accept the idea of reincarnation without doubt.

From a philosophical point of view reincarnation poses some interesting problems-What is it that is reincarnated? Can a man’s soul reincarnate a female baby? If yes, then the incarnate baby is no longer them same person. How can one single soul reincarnate many babies? Why is it that most incarnate children of the same ancestor don’t like each other, yet they are assumed to be the same person? These and many more questions point to the fact with clarity that reincarnation is not real, and does not seem to offer an explanation for some strange phenomena such as the ability of some people to regress to a past life under hypnosis.

Reincarnation claims to explain why bad things happen to good people and why good things happen to bad people: they are being rewarded or punished for actions in past lives (karma). But since bad things also happen to bad people, the most reasonable belief is that there is no design to the distribution of good and bad happenings to people.

Lastly, since there is no difference between a baby with a soul that has been around before in other bodies, and a baby with a new or no soul at all, it follows that the idea of an immortal soul adds nothing to our concept of a human being. Applying Occam’s razor, both the idea of reincarnation and the idea of an immortal soul are unnecessary.

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