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Swami Medhananda

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KARMA AND REBIRTH IN HINDUISM

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Karma and Rebirth in Hinduism

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Abstract: This Element provides an argumentative introduction to the doctrines of karma and rebirth in Hinduism. It explains how various Hindu texts, traditions, and figures have understood the philosophical nuances of karma and rebirth. It also acquaints readers with some of the most important academic debates about these doctrines. The Element's primary argumentative aim is to defend the rationality of accepting the truth of karma and rebirth through a critical examination of an array of arguments for and against these doctrines. It concludes by highlighting the relevance of karma and rebirth to contemporary philosophical debates on a variety of issues. This title is also available as open access on Cambridge Core.

Keywords: karma, rebirth, reincarnation, Hinduism, soul

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Introduction

This Element provides an argumentative introduction to the doctrines of karma and rebirth in Hinduism.¹ As far as I am aware, the Element – in both its scope and its argumentative aims – is the first of its kind. It should serve as a handy resource for scholars, teachers, and students in three main respects. It will help them to get a grasp on the philosophical contours and nuances of karma and rebirth in Hinduism. It will acquaint them with some of the most important and current academic debates and controversies about these doctrines. It will also highlight the relevance of karma and rebirth to contemporary discussions in philosophy of religion, theology, and ethics.

For those who find it hard to believe in karma and rebirth, this Element defends the rationality of accepting these doctrines by critically examining an array of arguments for and against karma and rebirth. And for those who already accept – or at least are favorably inclined toward – these doctrines, the Element can serve as an aid to the intellectual and spiritual practice of “faith seeking understanding.” It should help such readers to gain clarity and conviction about karma and rebirth, and it may even lead them to rethink or modify some of their assumptions and beliefs about these doctrines.

The religious traditions of Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism all accept the doctrines of karma and rebirth, even though their respective conceptions of these doctrines often differ in their details. What all these Indian traditions share is the core belief that the moral quality of our actions – good, bad, or otherwise – shapes, at least in part, our future state and circumstances, either later in this life or in a subsequent birth.

This Element specifically focuses on karma and rebirth in Hinduism.² It is important not to make sweeping generalizations about “the” Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth. In fact, as we will see in [Sections 1](#) and [2](#), numerous texts, traditions, and figures within Hinduism have understood karma and rebirth in a variety of ways. Moreover, the doctrines of karma and rebirth in specific Hindu texts or traditions cannot be understood without taking into account the broader philosophical, religious, and spiritual contexts within which these doctrines are embedded.

¹ For the purposes of this Element, “Hindu” traditions encompass all Indian traditions that accept the authority of the Vedas as well as Śaiva and Śākta traditions that trace their authority to Tāntrika scriptures.

² Throughout this Element, the terms “rebirth” and “reincarnation” will be used interchangeably, even though some scholars claim that the latter term has certain metaphysical connotations – such as the existence of an eternal soul – that the former term does not.

In Hinduism, the doctrines of karma and rebirth have always gone hand in hand, even though, in principle, these doctrines are conceptually separable.³ Theoretically, it is possible for there to be rebirth without karma; in such a scenario, rebirth could simply be a brute fact without any kind of moral or spiritual rationale as to why, and under what circumstances, we are reborn. Likewise, it is theoretically possible for there to be karma without rebirth, if all the karmic effects of one's actions were to take place in a single lifetime. In Hindu traditions, however, karma and rebirth are inseparable, since the karmic effects of one's actions *do* often fructify only in a subsequent birth. Moreover, karma furnishes the underlying moral and spiritual rationale for rebirth: the fact, and precise conditions, of our next birth are, at least in part, the karmic effects of what we did in our previous lives.

Sections 3 and 4 discuss respectively arguments for and against karma and rebirth. As we will see, while there is no single “knock-down” argument in support of these doctrines, a reasonably strong case for karma and rebirth can be made by combining multiple mutually supporting arguments. On the other hand, although some of the main arguments against karma and rebirth do have some degree of intuitive plausibility, none of these arguments are “knock-down” arguments, and there are cogent responses to each of them. Taken together, Sections 3 and 4 argue that there is an important asymmetry in the debate between defenders and critics of karma and rebirth. The arguments *for* karma and rebirth, when taken together, have considerable force, while the arguments *against* these doctrines – even when taken collectively – do not pose a pressing concern for defenders of karma and rebirth. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for one to accept the truth of karma and rebirth.

Finally, Section 5 demonstrates the relevance of karma and rebirth to contemporary philosophical debates on a variety of issues, ranging from the problems of evil and moral luck to questions about environmental ethics and the consumption of meat.

1 Karma and Rebirth in the Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad-Gītā*

It is beyond the scope of this Element to address the vexed questions of how and when the doctrines of karma and rebirth originated in India (Halbfass, 2000: 37–63). While scholars like Herman Tull (1989) and Yuvraj Krishan (1989) argue that the karma and rebirth doctrines originated in the context of Vedic ritualism, Johannes Bronkhorst (2011) contends that these doctrines originated in Greater

³ For discussion of the question of the conceptual connections between karma and rebirth, see Burley (2016: 102–103), Halbfass (2000: 203–204), and Creel (1986: 2).

Magadha culture – which was home to Jainism, Buddhism, and Ājīvika – and were later imported into Vedic culture.

Instead of entering into these historical debates, I will discuss briefly some of the earliest Hindu scriptural references to karma and rebirth – namely, in the *Brhadāranyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* (c. 800–500 BCE?)⁴ – and then consider several later references to karma and rebirth in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (c. 400 BCE–200 CE). As we will see, these scriptures did not present karma and rebirth as fully worked out doctrines, but they did affirm that we are reborn and that the circumstances of our next birth are shaped in part by the moral quality of our actions in our previous embodiment.

1.1 Karma and Rebirth in the Upaniṣads

Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 3.2.13 contains the earliest known reference to the doctrine of karma (Killingley, 2018). When Ārtaḥbāga asks Yājñavalkya what happens to a person after death, the *Upaniṣad* tells us that what these two sages discussed and praised was “karma alone.” The *Upaniṣad* then explains this doctrine of karma as follows: “One, indeed, becomes virtuous through good action and vicious through evil action” (*punyo vai punyena karmanā bhavati, pāpaḥ pāpena*). This explanation of karma, however, can be interpreted in two ways (Halbfass, 2000: 47–57; Burley, 2017: 240–241). On the one hand, it could imply a metaphysically retributive explanation of karma, according to which a person’s good actions generate *punya* (merit), which in turn results in good circumstances for that person in the future, while a person’s bad actions generate *pāpa* (demerit), which results in unfavorable circumstances in the future. On the other hand, the statement could be interpreted in terms of character formation: repeated engagement in good actions results in the formation of a good character, while repeated engagement in bad actions results in the formation of a bad character. Since these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, it could also be the case that this statement defines karma in terms of *both* retribution and character formation. As we will see in Section 2, later Hindu texts and figures often characterized karma in terms of both retribution and character formation, and it is not always clear precisely how these two dimensions of karma relate to each other.

Both *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2 and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.3–10 describe two paths – the Northern Path (*devayāna*) and the Southern Path (*pitṛyāna*) – that a soul might take after departing from the physical body. The

⁴ All translations of passages from the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* are from Madhavananda (1934) and Gambhirananda (1983), respectively, though I have sometimes modified their translations.

souls of people who performed certain Vedic rites and/or meditations with faith and austerity take the Northern Path leading finally to the ultimate reality “Brahman” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.2) or the “worlds of Brahman” (*brahmalokāḥ*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.15) and are not reborn again. By contrast, the souls of people who failed to perform those Vedic rites and/or meditations but who engaged in sacrifice (*yajña*), charity (*dāna*), and austerity (*tapas*) take the Southern Path, become “food” for the gods (*devas*), and are reborn here in another human body. Both Upaniṣads also mention an even worse “third” trajectory for the souls of people who engaged neither in Vedic rites or meditations nor in acts of charity, sacrifice, and austerity. These souls are reborn again and again as insects. Significantly, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7 has an additional passage – not found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* – that can be interpreted as affirming a metaphysically retributive conception of karma. According to this passage, those souls following the Southern Path attain “good” (*ramaṇīya*) or “bad” (*kapūya*) next births, depending on whether they had performed “good” (*ramaṇīya*) or “bad” (*kapūya*) deeds in their past life. Good births include birth as a Brāhmin, Kṣatriya, or Vaiśya, while bad births include birth as a dog, pig, or Caṇḍāla (“outcaste,” now referred to as “Dalit”).

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4 describes in some detail what happens to the self (*ātmā*) after death. According to 4.4.2, the self, after death, still has “particular consciousness [*savijñānaḥ*], and goes to the body that is related to that consciousness,” and the self is “followed by knowledge, work, and past experience.” This passage suggests that the self carries with it the latent mental impressions of what it had done in this life and is reborn in a body appropriate to its level of consciousness. The next mantra (4.4.3) uses a vivid metaphor to explain how the self leaves one body and takes up the next: “Just as a leech [*jalāyukā*] supported on a straw goes to the end of it, takes hold of another support and contracts itself, so does the self [*ātmā*] throw this body aside – make it senseless – take hold of another support, and contract itself.” The subsequent mantra (4.4.4) employs another metaphor to suggest that rebirth is the means by which we develop further and evolve: “Just as a goldsmith [*peśaskārī*] takes a little quantity of gold and fashions another – a newer and better – form [*avataraṃ kalyāṇataraṃ rūpaṃ tanute*], so does the self throw this body away, or make it senseless, and make another – a new and better – form suited to the manes or the celestial minstrels, or the gods, or Virāj, or Hiraṇyagarbha, or other beings.”⁵ This passage could be seen as adumbrating evolutionary conceptions of karma and rebirth – espoused, as we will see in [Section 2](#), by

⁵ This is the wording in the Kāṇva, as opposed to the Mādhyandina, recension of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Halbfass, 2000: 54).

modern Hindu thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan – according to which the primary purpose of karma and rebirth is not retribution but our ethical and spiritual development (Halbfass, 2000: 54). *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5, echoing 3.2.13, then explains the workings of karma as follows: “As the self does and acts, so it becomes; by doing good it becomes good, and by doing evil it becomes evil – it becomes virtuous through good acts and vicious through evil acts” (*yathākārī yathācārī tathā bhavati – sādhuḥkārī sādhuḥ bhavati, pāpākārī pāpo bhavati; puṇyaḥ puṇyena karmaṇā bhavati, pāpaḥ pāpena*). This passage, like *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.13, seems to leave open the possibility that karma is a doctrine either of retribution or of character development, or both.

If the leech analogy in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.3 suggests that the self takes up another body immediately after the death of the previous body, 4.4.6 raises two other possible trajectories for the self and also specifies more precisely the nature of the reincarnating entity. Regarding the self that still has desires (*kāmayamānaḥ*) at the time of death, its subsequent trajectory is described as follows: “Being attached, the self, together with the work, attains that result to which its subtle body [*liṅgam*] or mind [*manaḥ*] is attached. Exhausting the results of whatever work it did in this life, it returns from that world to this world for work.” Instead of taking up another body immediately after death, the desirous self first goes to another “world” (*loka*), where it exhausts the results of its actions, and then comes back to this world to take up another body. It is also significant that this passage distinguishes the self (*ātmā* or *puruṣa*) from the subtle body (*liṅgam*) or mind (*manaḥ*) and suggests that the reincarnating entity is the self *in association with* the mind or subtle body.

According to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.6, the self that is “without desires” (*akāmayamānaḥ*) does not reincarnate at all; rather, “being Brahman, it attains Brahman” (*brahmaiva san brahmāpy eti*). This statement indicates that the soteriological goal is to terminate the cycle of rebirth through the attainment of Brahman. Many of the later Hindu philosophical traditions likewise affirm that the ultimate goal is “liberation” (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirth, though these traditions differ as to the primary means of attaining this goal.

1.2 Karma and Rebirth in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*

The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, perhaps the most well known of all Hindu scriptures, is a distinctive synthesis and development of Upaniṣadic teachings that strongly emphasizes desireless action and devotion toward the Supreme Being Kṛṣṇa. The great warrior Arjuna refuses to fight in a just war against the Kauravas,

since he would have to kill many of his own loved ones. In the course of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa, who is Arjuna's friend and charioteer, persuades Arjuna to do his duty as a Kṣatriya (warrior) by means of various arguments. It is in this context that Kṛṣṇa introduces rebirth. In 2.22 of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that the embodied self or soul (*dehī*) continues to exist even after death and takes on another body painlessly, "just as a person casts off his worn-out clothes and puts on new clothes."⁶ Many people think that death entails the cessation of consciousness and, hence, tend to be afraid of their own death or the death of their loved ones. Kṛṣṇa assures such people that consciousness, in fact, persists after death and that the eternal soul of a dead person will be reborn again in another body.

In 6.37–39, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa anxiously what happens to a faithful and sincere spiritual aspirant who engages in spiritual practices – such as Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion) and Karma Yoga (the path of desireless action) – yet fails to attain perfection. Significantly, the doctrines of karma and rebirth play a prominent role in Kṛṣṇa's response to Arjuna:

O Pārtha, there is certainly no ruin for that person here or hereafter. For, no doer of good [*kalyāṇa-kṛt*] comes to woe. Attaining the worlds of those who have accrued *punya* [*punya-kṛtām lokān*], and residing there for countless years, one who has fallen from Yoga [*yoga-bhraṣṭaḥ*] is born in the house of the pious and prosperous. (6.40–41)

Kṛṣṇa reassures Arjuna that there is no wasted effort in spiritual life, since whatever ethical and spiritual progress one makes in this embodiment carries over into the next embodiment. Kṛṣṇa also connects rebirth to karma by noting that the doer of virtuous deeds accrues merit (*punya*), which has a twofold positive consequence: after death, the soul of that person will dwell for countless years in blissful higher realms and then take birth again in a good family. In 6.45, Kṛṣṇa suggests that karma and rebirth, taken together, facilitate our ethical and spiritual development, culminating in the liberative knowledge of God: "The Yogi, striving with assiduity, and purified from sins, having perfected himself in the course of many births [*anekajanmasamsiddhaḥ*], attains the Supreme Goal." Like *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.4, this *Gītā* verse may suggest that the primary aim of karma and rebirth is not reward and punishment but our spiritual evolution (Phillips, 2009: 111). Indeed, *Gītā* 6.45 could also be taken to imply universal liberation – the view that all souls will eventually attain liberation – since we seem to have to take birth again and again until we finally achieve spiritual perfection.

⁶ All translations of verses from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* are my own.

At the same time, some commentators, such as the devotional Vedāntin Madhva (c. 1238–1317), have argued that certain verses in the *Gītā* – especially 16.6 and 16.19–20 – deny universal liberation and suggest instead that some inherently “demonic” (*āśura*) souls are destined for the “lowest state” (*adhamām gatim*) of eternal hell. By contrast, other commentators such as Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) have interpreted these verses less stringently and argued that they are compatible with universal liberation (Aurobindo, [1922–1928] 1997: 473–474).

The *Gītā*’s conception of rebirth, then, is nuanced and multifaceted. For those many people who are afraid that consciousness ceases after death, the doctrine of rebirth is a source of great consolation. For spiritual aspirants, the fact that we are reborn means that spiritual life is a journey across many lifetimes in which the spiritual effort made in one life carries over into the next life until perfection is attained. However, Kṛṣṇa goes on to inform Arjuna in 8.16 that the ultimate goal of our epic spiritual journey is the salvific knowledge of God, resulting in *liberation* from the cycle of rebirth: “There is no rebirth [*punarjanma*], O Kaunteya, for one who attains Me.”

In 15.7–8, Kṛṣṇa clarifies the precise nature of the reincarnating entity by developing the idea of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.6 along theistic and (arguably) panentheistic lines:

It is verily an eternal portion [*aṁśa*] of Me that becomes the *jīva* (individual soul) in this world of *jīvas* and draws [to itself] the [five] sense-organs and the mind, which abide in Nature.

When the Lord [*īśvara*, in the form of the *jīva*,] leaves one body and even when He takes up another body, He goes taking them [the mind and the sense-organs], just as the wind carries off the fragrances from a vase.

Although these cryptic verses are open to various interpretations, one could argue that these verses explain the process of rebirth against the backdrop of a panentheistic metaphysics, according to which Lord Kṛṣṇa Himself manifests as each *jīva* (individual soul). When the *jīva* leaves the gross physical body at the time of death, it draws to itself the mind and senses – comprising the subtle (or subtly physical) body – and takes up another gross physical body. As we will see in [Section 2](#), the view expressed here that the *jīva*, in association with the subtle body, is the reincarnating entity proves to be the view held by all the various philosophical traditions of Vedānta.

2 Nuances of Karma and Rebirth in Classical and Modern Hindu Traditions

While all Hindu conceptions of karma and rebirth have a common core, various thinkers, texts, and traditions within Hinduism have understood the nuances of

these doctrines in different ways. Indeed, entire books have been written on karma and rebirth in classical traditions of Hindu philosophy (Bronkhorst, 2000, 2011; Halbfass, 2000).

2.1 explains the core tenets of karma and rebirth held in common by virtually all Hindu figures and traditions. 2.2, instead of attempting anything like a comprehensive survey, will focus on a few key philosophical questions about karma and rebirth to which different classical Hindu traditions – namely, Vedānta (2.2.1), Sāṃkhya and Yoga (2.2.2), Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika (2.2.3), and Kashmir Shaivism (2.2.4) – provided a variety of answers. Finally, 2.3 discusses how some later Hindu figures, living in India during the period of British colonial rule, understood and sometimes reconceptualized the doctrines of karma and rebirth within a global cosmopolitan milieu.

2.1 The Shared Tenets of Karma and Rebirth across Hindu Traditions

According to the Hindu doctrine of karma, we reap what we sow, in the sense that the moral quality of our actions – good, bad, or morally neutral – shapes, at least in part, our future state and circumstances, either later in this life or in a subsequent birth. Most Hindu thinkers have explained the karmic effects of our actions in metaphysical terms. Good (*dhārmika*) actions – done with desire for their karmic results – generate merit (*puṇya*), which results in happiness (*sukham*) and favorable future circumstances for the agent, while bad (*adhārmika*) actions generate demerit (*pāpa*), which results in unhappiness (*duḥkham*) and unfavorable future circumstances for the agent.⁷

However, some Hindu thinkers have also explained the karmic effects of our actions in psychological terms (Phillips, 2009: 79–88). From a psychological standpoint, good actions generate latent mental impressions (*saṃskāras*) that reinforce the tendency to perform good acts in the future, while bad actions generate latent mental impressions that reinforce the tendency to perform bad acts in the future. As a result of this invariable psychological process, any actions one performs repeatedly form eventually into a habit, which plays an important role in shaping one's character. It should be noted that numerous Hindu thinkers take the metaphysical and psychological accounts of karmic results to be complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

⁷ While this account is accepted by all classical Hindu thinkers, some modern Hindus such as Aurobindo argue that this account is too rigid, oversimplified, and insufficiently nuanced (see 2.3.1).

While Buddhist traditions uphold rebirth but deny the existence of an eternal self, most⁸ Hindu traditions hold that the reincarnating entity is an eternal conscious self distinct from the physical body. Moreover, according to the vast majority of Hindu traditions and thinkers, a given soul's karma is beginningless and, hence, there was no point in the past when it first began to accrue karma.⁹ At the time of death, this eternal self leaves the physical body and is eventually reborn in another physical body here on earth. Most (but not all) Hindu traditions hold that between physical embodiments, the soul may, for some time, have positive or negative experiences in another realm – such as a temporary heaven (*svarga*) or a temporary hell or place of purgation (*naraka*) – depending on the karma it had accrued in its last embodiment. It is possible to be reborn on earth not only as a human being but also as nonhuman animals and (according to many Hindu traditions) even as plants.¹⁰ It is also possible to be reborn as a celestial being (*deva*) in another realm. However, all Hindu traditions consider birth as a human to be greater, from a moral and spiritual standpoint, than any other kind of birth (Malkani, 1965: 258). While nonhuman animals and plants are submoral, celestial beings inhabit blissful realms in which they have little incentive or opportunity to evolve morally and spiritually. Hence, birth as a human being is a distinct opportunity to work out one's karma and make moral and spiritual progress.

In most Hindu traditions, the ultimate aim of life is not the accumulation of good karma but liberation (*mokṣa*) from rebirth, which can only be achieved through the *exhaustion* of all karma, both good and bad. As we will see, however, Hindu traditions differ on the question of precisely which spiritual practices lead to liberation and how they do so. Nonetheless, all Hindu traditions hold that actions done with desire (*sakāma*) for their karmic results always have karmic consequences, while good actions done *without* desire (*niṣkāma*) for their karmic results help to purify the mind and exhaust one's karma, thereby bringing one closer to the goal of liberation (Dasgupta, 1922: 92–93).¹¹

⁸ As we will see in 2.2.2, an exception might be Sāṃkhya, which arguably holds that the nonconscious subtle body is the reincarnating entity.

⁹ An exception is the modern Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava figure Prabhupāda, as we will see in 2.3.

¹⁰ As discussed in 2.2.4, an exception is the Kashmiri Śaiva philosopher Abhinavagupta, who seemed to deny that plants have souls.

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that Hindu traditions differ on the question of whether good actions done without desire for their results also generate karmic results in the form of merit (*puṇya*). According to Sadānanda's *Vedāntasāra*, a popular treatise of Advaita Vedānta, good acts done without desire lead primarily to purification of mind but they also have “secondary results” (*avāntaraphalam*) in the form of a karmic reward, such as going to *Pitṛloka* (the realm of ancestors) or *Satyalo* (the realm of celestial beings) after death (Sadānanda, 2006: paras. 13–14). By contrast, Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* 4.7 holds that spiritual practices done without desire for their results are “neither white nor black” actions (*aśuklakṛṣṇa-karma*), in that they generate neither merit nor demerit but lead, instead, to liberation.

2.2 Classical Hindu Traditions

2.2.1 Classical Vedānta

There are numerous schools of classical Vedānta, all of which accept the authority of three foundational scriptures: the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtra* (c. 500–200 BCE?). These schools include Advaita Vedānta (Nondualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (Qualified Nondualism), Mādhva or Dvaita Vedānta (Dualism), and Bhedābheda Vedānta (Difference-and-Nondifference), the last of which encompasses various subschools like Bhāskara's Aupādhika Bhedābheda, Nimbārka's Svābhāvika Bhedābheda, Caitanya's Acintyābheda, and Vallabha's Śuddhādvaita.¹²

With respect to karma and rebirth, all classical schools of Vedānta agree on four key points of doctrine, each of which they trace to passages from the Upaniṣads and particular *sūtras* of the *Brahmasūtra*. First, they all hold that the reincarnating entity is an eternal, conscious, and immaterial individual soul (*jīvātman*) associated with an insentient subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*), which comprises mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), the five organs of knowledge (*jñānendriyas*), the five organs of action (*karmendriyas*), and the five vital forces (*vāyus*) (*Brahmasūtra* 3.1.1–7). At the time of death, the *jīvātman*, along with the subtle body, leaves the gross physical body (*sthūla-śarīra*) and takes birth in other gross physical bodies until it finally attains liberation from rebirth through direct experiential knowledge of the ultimate reality Brahman.

Second, classical Vedāntins hold that the individual soul (*jīvātman*) is intimately related to the ultimate reality Brahman, though they explain this relationship in various ways (Medhananda, 2021a). Advaita Vedānta affirms the absolute identity of the individual soul and Brahman, conceived as nondual and attributeless Pure Consciousness. Devotional schools of Vedānta, by contrast, conceive ultimate reality as a supreme personal Being, typically Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. Hence, these devotional traditions uphold the ideal of an eternal loving relationship between the individual soul and the personal God, such as that of servant and Master (Madhva) or part and Whole (Rāmānuja, c. eleventh century). In spite of these differences, all classical schools of Vedānta agree, in contrast to Sāṃkhya and Yoga, that the individual soul is intimately related to a greater and vaster ultimate reality.

Third, in contrast to Sāṃkhya, classical Vedāntins hold that the omniscient and omnipotent God is the “Supervisor of karma” (*karmādhyakṣaḥ*) (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.11), who dispenses the fruits of our karma. The dialectical context in

¹² For a summary of the main doctrines of these Vedāntic schools, see Maharaj (2020a: 1–8) and Tapasyananda (1990).

which the *Brahmasūtra* introduces this idea is significant. Since Vedāntins hold that God is the creator of the universe, they face a serious objection: isn't God guilty of "partiality and cruelty," since He creates a world in which some experience great joy while others experience terrible suffering and anguish? *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34 responds to this objection by presenting a theodicy grounded in karma: God "takes into account" the law of karma in His creation and governance of the world, so God is neither partial nor cruel, since He merely gives us our due in accordance with the law of karma.

But in what precise sense does God "take into account" the law of karma? Is God always constrained to act in strict accordance with the law of karma? Or is God able to override or suspend the law of karma if and when He chooses? Different classical schools of Vedānta offered divergent answers to these questions. On the one hand, some schools of Vedānta, including Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara (c. eighth c. CE), held that God must always act in strict accordance with the law of karma. While this position does seem to absolve God of partiality and cruelty, it arguably runs the risk of curtailing God's omnipotence (Matilal, 1992: 368–369). On the other hand, the devotional schools of Vedānta hold that God created the law of karma and, hence, is not bound by it and can even mitigate the effects of a person's karma if He so chooses (Tapasyananda, 1990; Buchta, 2016; Nicholson, 2020). However, this position saves God's omnipotence only by reinventing the charge of God's partiality: isn't God partial if He selectively chooses to alleviate the karmic burden of certain people rather than others? Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (c. 1700–1793), a late classical exponent of Caitanya's Acintyaśāstrī Vedānta, bit the bullet on this issue, arguing that God *is* undoubtedly "partial" to His devotees. However, Baladeva went on to argue, in accordance with his school's doctrine of *acintyatā* ("unthinkability"), that God's partiality does not detract from His justice, even though we, with our finite intellects, are unable to grasp the paradox of how a perfectly just God can nonetheless be partial to His devotees (Nicholson, 2020: 238–240).

Fourth, and relatedly, all classical schools of Vedānta distinguished three kinds of karma, understood as the force that is generated by an action and that has the potency to bear karmic fruit (Chatterjee, 1969: 87): (1) *sañcita karma*, karma accrued from previous lives that has not yet begun to bear fruit, (2) *prārabdha karma*, karma accrued from previous lives that has already begun to bear fruit in the present life, and (3) *āgāmi karma*, new karma accrued in the *present* life that will bear fruit in the future (either later in the present life or in a future life). Most classical Vedāntins – including Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, and Madhva – held that when one attains knowledge of Brahman, one's *āgāmi* and *sañcita karma* are destroyed but one's *prārabdha karma* remains (Buchta, 2016: 29).

In spite of these core commonalities, classical schools of Vedānta diverged in their understanding of certain facets of karma and rebirth, including the ontological status of karma and rebirth and the relationship between karma and soteriology. According to Śaṅkara's school of Advaita Vedānta, the sole reality is nondual and attributeless Pure Consciousness, which is our true nature, and everything else – including the personal God, this world of names and forms, and the plurality of individual souls – is true from the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) standpoint but not from the ultimate (*pāramārthika*) standpoint.¹³ Accordingly, Advaita Vedānta holds that karma and rebirth are only empirically true but, from the ultimate standpoint, prove to be illusory. Hence, when we attain liberative knowledge of our true nature as nondual Pure Consciousness, we are liberated not so much from the karmic cycle of rebirth as from the *illusion* that we were ever subject to karma and rebirth in the first place. By contrast, all classical schools of Vedānta *other* than Advaita Vedānta took karma and rebirth to be ultimately, rather than just empirically, true.

While most classical schools of Vedānta took liberation (*mokṣa*) from rebirth – or, in the case of Advaita Vedānta, liberation from the *illusion* of birth and rebirth – to be the highest soteriological goal, the devotional school of Acintyabhedābheda Vedānta held that the highest goal of life is not liberation but *bhakti*, the supreme love of Kṛṣṇa, which nonetheless entails liberation from rebirth as an “incidental byproduct” (Nelson, 2004: 349).

Do all souls eventually attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth? At least two classical schools of Vedānta answered this question in the negative: namely, Mādhva Vedānta and Śuddhādvaita Vedānta. Mādhva Vedānta divides souls into three categories: *muktiyogyas*, *nityasamsārins*, and *tamoyogyas*. While *muktiyogyas* are souls who are capable of attaining liberation, *nityasamsārins* are those who are doomed to transmigrate endlessly without ever attaining liberation, and *tamoyogyas* are souls who are destined for eternal hell (Sarma, 2003: 55–59). Śuddhādvaita Vedānta espouses a somewhat different threefold hierarchy of souls (*jīvas*): *puṣṭi*, *maryādā*, and *pravāha* (Smith, 2011). *Puṣṭi-jīvas* are innately devotional souls who are “chosen” by Kṛṣṇa to attain the highest goal of eternal loving communion with Him – in all His fullness as Sat-Cit-Ānanda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss) – in a transcendental realm. *Maryādā-jīvas* are sincere spiritual aspirants who rely primarily on their own self-effort rather than God's grace. These *maryādā-jīvas*, through the practice either of Vedic ritualism, Yoga, or Advaita Vedānta, are ultimately able to attain, at best, the Akṣara Puruṣa, a lesser emanation of Kṛṣṇa – or, put another way, Sat-Cit-Ānanda, “with the Ānanda aspect considerably concealed” (Tapasyananda, 1990: 225). Finally, the

¹³ See, for instance, Śaṅkara's commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.14, 2.1.22, and 2.1.33.

vast majority of *pravāhī-jīvas* – like the *nityasaṃsārins* in Mādhva Vedānta – are predestined to transmigrate endlessly without any possibility of liberation. However, unlike Mādhva Vedānta, Śuddhādvaita Vedānta does not subscribe to the view that some souls are predestined for eternal hell. It should be noted that both Mādhva Vedānta and Śuddhādvaita Vedānta uphold the doctrine of strong predestination: the hierarchy of souls is rigidly fixed, so it is not possible to move from one category of soul to another.

In contrast to Mādhva Vedānta and Śuddhādvaita Vedānta, most other classical schools of Vedānta seemed to leave open the possibility that all souls may ultimately attain liberation. As far as I am aware, however, no classical school explicitly affirmed universal liberation, the view that all souls will eventually attain liberation. Nonetheless, the doctrines of karma and rebirth – accepted by all classical schools – do arguably make universal liberation much more likely, since we are able to come back in new bodies and make further moral and spiritual progress until we achieve perfection (Gupta and Gallagher, 2023). Moreover, as we will see in 2.3.2, numerous modern Vedāntins have explicitly affirmed universal liberation on the basis of such arguments.

2.2.2 Sāṃkhya and Yoga

Classical Sāṃkhya philosophy is based on a metaphysical dualism of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. *Puruṣa* is the conscious, immaterial, and inactive self, while *prakṛti* is nonconscious, insentient nature. In contrast to Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta that upholds the nonduality of the Self (*ātman*), Sāṃkhya maintains that there are multiple *puruṣas*. According to Sāṃkhya, we suffer because we mistakenly identify ourselves with the body-mind complex, which is actually part of insentient *prakṛti*. So long as we labor under this delusion, we have to take birth again and again in various physical bodies in accordance with our karma. However, when we attain direct spiritual knowledge of our true nature as *puruṣa*, we attain the highest soteriological state of *kaivalya* (Isolation or Aloneness), the recognition that *puruṣa* is completely separate from *prakṛti*, and are thereby permanently liberated from all suffering.

In this context, a key question arises: what is the precise nature of the reincarnating entity? The *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* (c. 300 CE), the earliest extant scripture of Sāṃkhya philosophy, gives a seemingly straightforward answer in verse 40: “the subtle body, which is devoid of experience and endowed with dispositions, transmigrates” (*saṃsarati nirupabhogaṃ bhāvair adbhāvāsitaṃ liṅgam*). According to the traditional commentator Vācaspati Miśra, the subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*) – which consists of intelligent will (*buddhi*), I-sense (*ahaṅkāra*), mind (*manas*), five organs of knowledge (*jñānendriyas*), five

organs of action (*karmendriyas*), and five primary elements (*tanmātras*)¹⁴ – is the reincarnating entity that takes up one body after another until liberation. The subtle body is “devoid of experience” in the sense that it cannot experience anything in the absence of a gross physical body. Moreover, it is endowed with karmic “dispositions” (*bhāvas*) – merit (*punya*) and demerit (*pāpa*), and so on – that determine the nature and circumstances of its present and future births. Hence, in contrast to the Vedāntic view that the reincarnating entity is the individual soul (*jīvātman*) associated with a subtle body, Sāṃkhya holds that the reincarnating entity is the subtle body alone (Halbfass, 2000: 151; Bronkhorst, 2011: 70). Verse 62 of the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* reiterates that *puruṣa* is eternally liberated and, therefore, can never be subject to rebirth or bondage: “No one [i.e., no conscious entity] is bound, liberated, or transmigrates. Rather, it is *prakṛti*, in its various abodes, that transmigrates and is bound and liberated.”

However, the Sāṃkhyan conception of the subtle body as the reincarnating entity raises a host of difficult philosophical questions (Burke, 1988). In the context of Sāṃkhyan metaphysical dualism, the subtle body clearly falls on the side of nonconscious nature (*prakṛti*),¹⁵ and it is difficult to understand how a nonconscious entity like a stone can transmigrate, be subject to bondage, or seek and attain liberation. The standard Sāṃkhyan response to this difficulty is to claim that the conscious *puruṣa* activates or illuminates the nonconscious subtle body and makes it *seem* conscious, even though the subtle body itself lacks consciousness. As verse 20 of the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* puts it, “due to the association of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, the nonconscious subtle body *seems* to be conscious” (*tatsaṃyogād acetanaṃ cetanāvad iva liṅgam*).

But how exactly can *puruṣa* “associate” with *prakṛti*, or “activate” or “illuminate” *prakṛti*, if *puruṣa* is always totally separate from *prakṛti* and does not interact with *prakṛti* in any way? What exactly does “activation” or “illumination” mean, and how is it even possible within the framework of Sāṃkhyan metaphysical dualism? And to whom does the subtle body “seem” to be conscious when it is illuminated by *puruṣa*? There only seem to be two options, neither of which is satisfactory. The subtle body cannot seem conscious to *puruṣa*, since *puruṣa* is eternally liberated and, therefore, never subject to bondage or ignorance. At the same time, the subtle body cannot seem conscious to *itself*, since it is hard to understand how a nonconscious entity can believe or feel that it is conscious. If beliefs and feelings are (plausibly) taken to be first-personal conscious states, then even believing or feeling that one is conscious requires consciousness.

¹⁴ The Vedāntic conception of the subtle body is the same as the Sāṃkhyan conception, except that the five *tanmātras* in the Sāṃkhyan conception are the five *vāyus* in the Vedāntic conception.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Ashton (2020) challenges this widespread assumption, arguing that in the philosophy of the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā*, the reincarnating subtle body is sentient.

(In contemporary terms, a nonconscious AI robot might say, “I am conscious,” but it can never actually *believe* or *feel* that it is conscious.)

Arguably, then, the metaphysical dualism of classical Sāṃkhya makes it difficult – if not impossible – to provide a coherent account of the reincarnating entity (Burley, 2007: 160). *Puruṣa* cannot reincarnate, since it is eternally free from bondage. On the other hand, *prakṛti*, by itself, cannot reincarnate, since everything within *prakṛti* is strictly nonconscious. As we will see in 2.3.3, the modern Sāṃkhya-Yogin Hariharānanda Āraṇya attempted to resolve this dilemma by arguing that the reincarnating entity is the individual soul (*jīva*) in association with a subtle body. It seems difficult to explain, however, where a reincarnating individual soul fits within the Sāṃkhyan metaphysical scheme of an eternally free *puruṣa* and nonconscious *prakṛti*.

Classical Sāṃkhya philosophers were unanimous in rejecting the doctrine – accepted by Vedāntins – that God doles out to us our karmic dues. According to 5.2 of the late medieval text *Sāṃkhyasūtra*, there is no need to posit a God (*īśvara*) to ensure that we reap the karmic fruits of our actions, since karma itself is sufficient on its own to do so. Unfortunately, Sāṃkhya thinkers did not spell out precisely how the principle of karma can, all by itself, ensure that all living beings get exactly what they deserve (Bronkhorst, 2000: 55–67). In the next few *sūtras*, the text goes on the offensive against theistic conceptions of karma, arguing that the notion of God as the supervisor of karma is implausible for various reasons. For instance, God would be motivated by His own selfish interests, thereby compromising the strict neutrality of the workings of karma (*Sāṃkhyasūtra* 5.3–4). Moreover, the *Sāṃkhyasūtra* (5.10–12) argues that it is impossible to prove the existence of God through any of the means of knowledge like perception, inference, and so on.

Yoga philosophy, the foundational scripture of which is Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* (c. 200 BCE–200 CE?), accepts virtually all of the metaphysical and soteriological doctrines of Sāṃkhya but, unlike Sāṃkhya, prescribes a variety of ethical and meditative practices leading to the common aim of Sāṃkhya and Yoga: namely, knowledge of one’s true nature as the eternally liberated *puruṣa* totally distinct from, and unaffected by, the workings of *prakṛti*.

However, in contrast to Sāṃkhya scriptures,¹⁶ the *Yogasūtra* explicitly accepts the existence of “*īśvara*,” a term interpreted by most traditional commentators and some modern scholars as God or the Supreme Being (Bryant, 2009). *Yogasūtra* 1.24 conceives *īśvara* as a “special” *puruṣa* who is ever

¹⁶ A common misconception about Sāṃkhya is that it is atheistic. In fact, while some later Sāṃkhya texts like the *Sāṃkhyasūtra* (c. 14th c.) are explicitly atheistic, the earlier *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* makes no reference to God anywhere, neither affirming nor denying God’s existence (Nicholson, 2010: 67–83).

perfect and, therefore, never subject to ignorance, karma, or mental afflictions (*kleśas*). The *Yogasūtra* also repeatedly recommends the practice of “*īśvara-praṇidhāna*” – frequently understood as devotional surrender to *īśvara* – as a path to liberative knowledge.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Yoga agrees with Sāṃkhya that *īśvara* plays no role in the process of doling out karmic results.

According to the *Yogasūtra*, all of our actions in this life, whether good or bad, generate latent mental impressions (*saṃskāras*) that (directly or indirectly) make us prone to performing the same actions again. Taken collectively, these *saṃskāras* comprise the *karmāśaya* (“storehouse of karma”), which bears fruit either in the same life or in a future life (*Yogasūtra* 2.12). At the time of death, this *karmāśaya* determines three specific aspects of our next birth: the species into which we are born (*jāti*), our life span (*āyuh*), and the particular mix of pleasure and pain that we will experience (*bhoga*) (*Yogasūtra* 2.13).

According to *Yogasūtra* 3.18, we can gain direct knowledge of our previous births by concentrating intensely on the *saṃskāras* comprising our *karmāśaya*, since each *saṃskāra* produces a memory of the precise action in a past life responsible for that *saṃskāra*, along with a memory of the precise circumstances in which that action took place. As we will see in 3.3, some modern Hindu thinkers like Swami Vivekananda went on to develop *Yogasūtra* 3.18 into a full-blown argument in favor of rebirth: some people have empirically verified the details of their past lives by employing the mental technique explained in 3.18 and in its commentaries.

In his commentary on 3.18, Vyāsa¹⁸ offers a unified and arguably nonmeta-physical account of how *saṃskāras* generate two different kinds of karmic consequences for the agent. In the form of desires (*vāsanās*), *saṃskāras* produce memories of past acts that make us prone to repeating those acts again. In the form of merit (*dharma*) and demerit (*adharma*),¹⁹ *saṃskāras* determine the species into which we are born, our lifespan, and the hedonic quality of our experiences (as specified in *Yogasūtra* 2.13) (Framarin, 2014a; O’Brien-Kop, 2024).

Yoga differs subtly from Sāṃkhya in its conception of the reincarnating entity. While Sāṃkhya holds that the reincarnating entity is the subtle body, Patañjali does not refer explicitly to a subtle body anywhere in the *Yogasūtra*. Moreover, he does not seem to specify anywhere explicitly who or what it is that reincarnates.

¹⁷ See *Yogasūtra* 1.23, 2.1, and 2.32. Larson (2012) defends an alternative, nontheistic interpretation of the *Yogasūtra*.

¹⁸ Philipp Maas (2013) has argued that the traditional commentator Vyāsa was none other than Patañjali himself.

¹⁹ I think Vyāsa here takes the terms *dharma* and *adharma* to be synonyms for *punya* and *pāpa* respectively.

Patañjali's reticence on this issue led some traditional commentators – including Vyāsa and Vācaspati Miśra – to speculate, somewhat beyond the *sūtras* themselves, as to the precise nature of the reincarnating entity. According to Vyāsa's and Vācaspati's commentaries on *Yogasūtra* 4.10, the *citta* – a composite *prākṛtic* entity encompassing what Sāṃkhya refers to as intellect (*buddhi*), “I”-sense (*ahaṅkāra*), and mind (*manas*) – is all-pervasive, and the mental modifications (*vr̥ttis*) of the *citta*, rather than the *citta* itself, expand or contract in accordance with its karma. Hence, instead of positing an intermediate state between births, these Yoga commentators hold that rebirth into another body is immediate. At the moment of death, the *vr̥ttis* of the all-pervasive *citta* immediately assume the shape of the next physical body. Some scholars have inferred from this view that some traditional Yoga commentators like Vyāsa and Vācaspati held that Yoga, in contrast to Sāṃkhya, does not posit a subtle body at all (Whicher, 1997: 55–56; Larson, 2013: 198–199). It could also be argued, however, that the Yogic model of expanding and contracting *vr̥ttis* of the all-pervasive *citta* does not constitute a rejection of a subtle body so much as a redescription of it.

2.2.3 Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika

Like Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Vedānta, the Hindu philosophical traditions of Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika hold that each of us is an eternal, immaterial individual soul (*ātman*) distinct from the body-mind complex. However, while Sāṃkhya and Yoga maintain that the soul (*puruṣa*) is a non-doer (*akartā*) and has, in reality, no connection with nature (*prakṛti*), Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika hold that the *ātman*, when associated with the body-mind complex, is an agent (*kartā*) possessing attributes like desire, aversion, volition, happiness, misery, latent impressions (*saṃskāras*), karmic merit (*dharma*), and karmic demerit (*adharma*) (Dasti, 2014). According to Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, then, it is this individual *ātman* that reincarnates from birth to birth, assuming new bodies in accordance with its karma (usually referred to as “*adṛṣṭa*,” the “unseen” or “invisible” karmic results of one's actions) (Brück, 1993: 92; Phillips, 2009: 114; Dasti, 2014). Unlike Vedānta, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika do not posit a subtle body that is distinct from the individual soul and the gross physical body.

Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika thinkers also actively debated Buddhists on the question of whether there is an eternal self. Buddhist thinkers accepted the doctrines of karma and rebirth while rejecting the notion of an eternal self, claiming instead that the self is momentary and ever in flux. Nyāya thinkers like Vātsyāyana (c. 450 CE) and Uddyotakara (c. seventh c. CE) argued, against the Buddhists, that karma and rebirth entail an eternal self that is the same morally responsible

agent across births (Dasti and Phillips, 2017: 84–85). If, according to the Buddhists, the self is ever changing, then it would not be possible for any of us to reap what we sow, since the person who reaps karmic fruits would be different from the person who had performed the actions resulting in those karmic fruits.²⁰

Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika sided with Vedānta against Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Buddhism in holding that God (*īśvara*) doles out to us our karmic dues. In fact, the Nyāya philosopher Uddyotakara presented a sophisticated argument against the position that karma is sufficient, on its own, to ensure that everyone receives their karmic dues (Bronkhorst, 2000: 30–31). According to Uddyotakara, karma, primordial matter, and atoms “have to be directed by a conscious agent before they can function,” since they are insentient, just as an axe, which is insentient, can cut “only when directed by an axeman” (Dasti and Phillips, 2017: 120–121).

Like Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Vedānta, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika hold that the goal of life is liberation from rebirth and all its attendant suffering. However, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika understanding of the precise nature of liberation differs drastically from other Hindu traditions. While there is some scholarly controversy regarding the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view of liberation (Ram-Prasad, 2001: 77–93), one mainstream understanding is that the liberated self is completely devoid of consciousness, since consciousness “is an accidental attribute of the self, the accident being its relation to the body” (Chatterjee and Datta, 1948: 236). Since the liberated self is disembodied, it is divested not only of all the various conscious states of cognition, feeling, and volition that it had possessed when it was associated with a physical body, but also, more fundamentally, of consciousness *as such*. Some critics have argued that this Nyāya position comes perilously close to materialism, since the “peace of extinguished consciousness” seems difficult to distinguish from the “peace of death” (Radhakrishnan, 1930: 152).

2.2.4 Kashmir Shaivism

According to the Tantric Nondual tradition of Kashmir Shaivism, the sole ultimate reality is Śiva, who is not only the light of awareness (*prakāśa*) but also self-awareness (*vimarśa*). Hence, unlike the attributeless and inactive nondual Brahman of classical Advaita Vedānta, Śiva has the inherent capacity to manifest in and as the world through His infinite creative power (*śakti*). Śiva becomes the individual soul (*puruṣa* or *aṇu*) by playfully subjecting Himself to His own *māyā*, the power of delusion and differentiation, thereby “losing” or

²⁰ For a good discussion of Buddhist responses to such arguments, see Finnigan (2022).

“forgetting” His absolute knowledge, power, and freedom (Singh, 1982: 13).²¹ Due to *māyā*, we are afflicted with three fundamental “impurities” (*malas*): *āṇava-mala*, which makes us feel that we are finite, limited individuals; *māyīya-mala*, which makes us feel that we are separate from everything else; and *kārma-mala*, which makes us feel that we are agents subject to karma and rebirth (Pandey, 1986: 207–208). Accordingly, we are subject to karma and rebirth only so long as we are ignorant of our true nature as Śiva. As Abhinavagupta puts it in *kārikā* 54 of the *Paramārthasāra*, “Those fools who cultivate ignorance [*avidyā*] in the form of ordinary worldly behavior are subject to birth and death, being bound by the fetters of merit [*dharma*] and demerit [*adharma*]” (Bansat-Boudon and Tripathi, 2011: 54).

The highest goal of Kashmir Shaivism, then, is to attain “recognition” (*pratyabhijñā*) of our innate Śivahood through spiritual practice and the grace of Śiva Himself – a liberative recognition that does not so much free us from karma and rebirth as it reveals to us that we (as Śiva) were never subject to karma and rebirth in the first place. Hence, like classical Advaita Vedānta, Kashmir Shaivism holds that karma and rebirth are real only from the empirical standpoint of ignorance, since from the ultimate standpoint, each one of us is the eternally free and blissful Śiva in disguise. However, Kashmir Shaivism, in contrast to Advaita Vedānta, views the world not as an illusory appearance but as a real, playful “manifestation” (*ābhāsa*) of Śiva (Singh, 1982: 6–8).

Like Vedāntins, Kashmir Shaiva philosophers conceive the reincarnating entity as the conscious individual soul (*puruṣa*) associated with an insentient subtle body (*liṅga-śarīra* or *puryaṣṭaka*) (Biernacki, 2023: 71–94). As Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1016) explains, the subtle body is known as the “city of eight” (*puryaṣṭaka*), since it comprises eight components: [1–5] the five vital breaths (*prāṇas*), [6] the five organs of knowledge (*buddhīndriyas*), [7] the five organs of action (*karmendriyas*), and [8] the inner organ (*antaḥkaraṇa*), consisting of the intellect, mind, and “I”-sense (Biernacki, 2023: 86). While most Hindu traditions accept that even plants have souls, Abhinavagupta seems to have held that nonhuman animals down to insects do have souls but that plants do *not* have souls (Halbfass, 2000: 202; Biernacki, 2023: 31).

2.3 Modern Hindu Traditions

Classical Hindu philosophers developed their views and arguments within a narrowly Indian context in which all Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains accepted karma and rebirth. However, the Indian intellectual landscape changed

²¹ “Losing” and “forgetting” are in quotation marks, because Śiva does not actually lose or forget His true nature, but playfully *appears* to have forgotten His true nature.

dramatically with the advent of the British presence in India in the early 1600s, culminating in British colonial rule from 1858 to 1947 (Bhushan and Garfield, 2017). Modern Hindu thinkers were suddenly thrust into a global intellectual arena in which they could no longer take for granted a shared belief in karma and rebirth. In fact, Christian missionaries in India were eager to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to Hinduism by challenging some of the key tenets of Hinduism, including karma and rebirth (Farquhar, 1920: 134–152; Colas and Colas-Chauhan, 2017). In the face of these Christian missionary efforts, as well as recent global philosophical developments and scientific advances, colonial Hindu thinkers felt the need not only to reaffirm but also to justify and sometimes even reconceptualize the doctrines of karma and rebirth in the light of distinctly modern concerns and challenges (Neufeldt, 1986). Some Hindu philosophers also attempted to clarify and develop aspects of karma and rebirth that classical Hindu thinkers had left ambiguous or did not address at all.

2.3.1 Retributive versus Evolutionary Karma

While classical Hindu philosophers tended to conceive karma primarily as a *retributive* principle of reward and punishment, many modern Hindu thinkers defended an *evolutionary* doctrine of karma, according to which the primary purpose of karma and rebirth is not to give us what we deserve but to foster our moral and spiritual growth (Stoeber, 1990). The nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), for instance, taught that God has created this world with the aim of making “saints” out of each of us. “One becomes a saint,” he claims, “by conquering the senses,” and it is precisely through our experiences of the karmic consequences of our actions – in the form of both joy and suffering – that we evolve morally and spiritually until we finally reach the spiritual goal (Gupta, M. [1942] 1992: 98; Gupta, M. [1902–32] 2010: 37). The Advaita Vedāntin monk Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) echoed his guru Ramakrishna in likening this world to “a great gymnasium in which you and I, and millions of souls must come and get exercises, and make ourselves strong and perfect” (Vivekananda, [1957–1997] 2006–2007, 4: 207). Likewise, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), a teacher of Kriya Yoga and founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship, held that “God made this earth not only as a hobby, but also because He wanted to make perfect souls that would evolve back to Him” (1997: 47).

However, the Hindu thinker who articulated and defended an evolutionary conception of karma and rebirth with the greatest sophistication and subtlety was the Integral Advaita Vedāntin²² Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) (Minor,

²² For discussions of how Aurobindo’s Integral Advaita philosophy differs from the classical Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara, see Medhananda (2021b, 2023a) and Banerji (2022).

1986; Medhananda, 2021b, 2023a). He argued that a retributive understanding of karma as a “system of rewards and punishments . . . turns virtue into selfishness, a commercial bargain of self-interest,” since we would only perform virtuous actions for the sake of their karmic fruits in the form of our own future happiness (Aurobindo, [1939–1940] 2006: 844). According to Aurobindo, while the doctrines of karma and rebirth do ensure that “[e]ach being reaps what he sows” (Aurobindo, [1939–1940] 2006: 838), their overarching purpose is to foster our “spiritual evolution” by helping us to manifest our innately divine nature (Aurobindo, [1939–1940] 2006: 823–855). It should be noted that this modern Hindu emphasis on the evolutionary thrust of karma and rebirth need not be seen as a total rupture with the classical Indian past. Indeed, Aurobindo himself viewed his evolutionary conception of karma and rebirth as a further development of evolutionary themes already contained in germ in the ancient Vedic hymns, the *Īśā Upaniṣad* (Aurobindo, [1924] 2011), and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (Aurobindo, [1922–1928] 1997).

2.3.2 Do Karma and Rebirth Entail Universal Liberation?

While none of the classical Hindu traditions explicitly affirmed universal liberation, many modern Hindu thinkers argued that an evolutionary conception of karma and rebirth goes hand in hand with the view that every soul will eventually be liberated, if not in this life then in a future life. By reaping the karmic consequences of our actions, we gradually learn from our mistakes and thereby make moral and spiritual progress. Moreover, the doctrine of rebirth ensures that we get as many chances as we need to get things right: we will be reborn so long as we have not attained the ultimate goal of perfection (Gupta and Gallagher, 2023).

Ramakrishna, for instance, linked karma and rebirth to universal liberation by employing a metaphor in which different mealtimes correspond to varying numbers of embodiments prior to liberation: “All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening: but none will go without food” (Gupta, M. [1942] 1992: 818; Gupta, M. [1902–1932] 2010: 879; Maharaj, 2018a: 263–264). Other modern Hindu thinkers who explicitly linked an evolutionary conception of karma and rebirth to universal liberation include Vivekananda ([1957–97] 2006–2007, 3: 375), Aurobindo ([1939–1940] 2006: 119; Medhananda, 2021b, 2023), Yogananda (1997: 58), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) (Maharaj, 2020b), and Satischandra Chatterjee (1969: 80–81).

2.3.3 What Is the Reincarnating Entity?

Some modern Hindu thinkers, within their respective philosophical traditions, proposed original answers to the question of the precise nature of the reincarnating entity. For instance, Swami Hariharānanda Āraṇya (1869–1947), a modern scholarly monk in the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition, explicitly acknowledged the difficulty raised by Sāṃkhya's metaphysical dualism: namely, that neither the ever-free *puruṣa* nor the nonconscious *prakṛti* can be the reincarnating entity ([1911] 2002: 927). As we have seen in 1.2.2, classical Sāṃkhya holds that the reincarnating entity is the subtle body (*liṅgaśarīra*), while many classical Yoga philosophers hold that the reincarnating entity is not the subtle body but the all-pervasive mind (*citta*). The problem, as Hariharānanda recognized, is that both the Sāṃkhyan *liṅgaśarīra* and the Yogic *citta* fall squarely on the side of nonconscious *prakṛti*, and it is difficult to conceive how something nonconscious can be reborn and bound or liberated.

According to Hariharānanda, the reincarnating entity is neither *puruṣa* nor *prakṛti* but the eternal individual soul (*jīva*), which is “born of the union” (*saṃyoga-bhūta*) of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* ([1932] 2015: 85). Specifically, the *jīva* is the union of the nonconscious subtle body with the consciousness of *puruṣa*. His appeal to the concept of a reincarnating *jīva* is strikingly original within the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition since, as far as I am aware, it is not found in any classical Sāṃkhya or Yoga texts, though the notion of a reincarnating *jīva* is, of course, found in Vedāntic traditions. However, Hariharānanda's account of the reincarnating *jīva* raises new problems in its own right. Where exactly does this *jīva* fit within the Sāṃkhyan metaphysical framework of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*? Sāṃkhyan metaphysics, after all, seems to rule out the possibility that *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* can ever be united. Hariharānanda's ingenious answer to this question, as far as I can tell, is that the reincarnating *jīva* is a kind of phantom entity that has no real existence. Accordingly, Hariharānanda even echoes Śaṅkara in providing a phenomenological – rather than philosophical – answer to the question of who exactly is in bondage: “Who attains liberation? That very one who feels suffering is the one who attains liberation from suffering. My experience is that ‘I suffer’; therefore, *I* am the one who attains liberation” ([1911] 2002: 927).²³ When the suffering “I” attains liberation, this liberated “I” is no longer the “I” of the *jīva* but the “I” of the eternally free *puruṣa*. Interestingly, then, Hariharānanda's view comes remarkably close to the illusionistic position of Śaṅkara's classical Advaita Vedānta, which holds that there *is* no reincarnating entity from the ultimate standpoint.

²³ The parallel here with Śaṅkara's answer to the question of who is liberated is striking (Ingalls, 1953).

Aurobindo, meanwhile, conceived the reincarnating entity neither as the *jīva* nor as the subtle body but as the “psychic being,” the eternal soul that is “a portion of the Divine” ([1927–1950] 2012: 61). In accordance with his evolutionary approach to karma and rebirth, Aurobindo claims that the reincarnating entity is an evolving soul that develops and grows Godward through its various experiences and embodiments. He claims that at the time of death, the psychic being “chooses” the circumstances of its next birth, based on its past karma and the particular moral and spiritual lessons that need to be learned ([1927–1950] 2012: 539). After departing from the physical body, the psychic being eventually also sheds its mental and vital coverings before reaching its “resting place” ([1927–1950] 2012: 544) in the “psychic world” ([1927–1950] 2012: 535), where it assimilates the essence of all its experiences during the previous embodiment and prepares for the next one. For Aurobindo, our first significant spiritual experience is “psychic awakening,” the realization of our deeper soul-personality that uses the body, mind, and vital as instruments for its progressive growth and manifestation ([1914–1948] 1999).

2.3.4 Is There Group Karma?

All classical and most modern Hindu thinkers held that karma pertains strictly to the individual soul. However, some have argued that a strictly individualistic conception of karma makes it difficult, if not impossible, to explain mass tragedies (Krishan, 1989: 179–180). Proponents of individualistic karma could rebut this objection by arguing that each of the people adversely affected in a mass tragedy individually deserved their suffering due to that person’s own past actions – a fact that explains why even in a mass tragedy, individual victims suffer to varying degrees (Krishan, 1989: 184).

Nonetheless, some modern Hindu thinkers have found this line of reasoning implausible, contending that a better way to account for mass calamities is to posit the notion of group or collective karma. Ananda Coomaraswamy, for instance, argued that the karma doctrine “holds as much for groups and communities as for individuals” (1928: 232), since “[n]o man lives to himself alone, but we may regard the whole creation . . . as sharing a common karma, to which every individual contributes for good or ill” (1928: 231). Likewise, Aurobindo posited the existence of a “group-soul,” which serves as the metaphysical ground for a “group karma,” karma that belongs not to a particular individual but to a larger group of individuals ([1910–1950] 1998: 362).

2.3.5 Is the Soul’s Karma Beginningless?

Within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition of Vedānta, the ISKCON founder Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977) boldly rejected the orthodox Hindu view that the

soul's karma and bondage are beginningless. According to Prabhupāda, souls here on earth were originally liberated and perfect souls dwelling in the supreme transcendental realm of Goloka in blissful communion with their beloved Kṛṣṇa, but they “fell” from Goloka at some point in the past due to their sinful desire to experience this material world and its enjoyments, thereby initiating their karmic bondage (Prabhupāda, 1998: 779–780). Although the matter remains controversial, there is considerable textual evidence that his Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava predecessors like Jīva Gosvāmī (1513–1598), Viśvanātha Cakravartin (1626–1708), Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa, and even Caitanya himself (1486–1534) held the more orthodox view that our karmic bondage is beginningless (Dāsa and Dāsa, 1994).²⁴

One of the most serious problems facing Prabhupāda's doctrine of the soul's “fall” from Goloka is the difficulty of explaining why any soul, without moral vices and with perfect devotion to God, would willingly *choose* to leave the supremely perfect and blissful Goloka for this incomparably inferior material world. One possibility is that souls in Goloka come to earth out of sheer curiosity to experience another world (Gupta, 2022), though it could be argued that such a self-destructive “curiosity” is still a vice or imperfection, since it suggests a lack of perfect contentment in Goloka, which a perfect devotee of Krishna should not, or cannot, have.

2.3.6 *Is Karma Compatible with Free Will?*

A recurring question in modern Hindu discussions of karma is whether karma is compatible with some degree of free will. All the modern Hindu thinkers I will discuss in this subsection subscribed to what contemporary philosophers call “incompatibilism,” the view that free will is logically incompatible with determinism. As far as I am aware, none of these Hindu figures attempted to defend the “compatibilist” view that free will is compatible with thoroughgoing karmic determinism – along the lines of the kind of compatibilist conceptions of free will favored by so many recent analytic philosophers (McKenna, 2024).

Many modern Hindu figures held the view that karma is compatible with limited, but not unfettered, free will. For instance, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Prabhupāda (1976) held that human beings have a “little independence,” since we are “part and parcel” of God. Similarly, Paramahansa Yogananda (2010: 165) claimed that God has endowed human beings with some degree of free will, and it is consequently up to us to make the “right use of man's God-given will.”

²⁴ For the dissenting view that Prabhupāda's view is continuous with traditional Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, see ISKCON GBC Press (1996).

Numerous modern champions of classical Advaita Vedānta – including Radhakrishnan (1908), T.M.P. Mahadevan (1911–1983) (Mahadevan, 1962), and M. Hiriyanna (1871–1950) (Hiriyanna, 1949: 46–50) – also held that we have limited free will. Radhakrishnan (1908: 425), for instance, claimed that the law of karma explains why we are born with certain “tendencies” that we are “tempted” to follow, but we are nonetheless free, in the present, not to succumb to these innate tendencies and to rise above them instead. A primary motivation for this position is that a strictly deterministic conception of karma makes it difficult to explain how it is possible for us to be morally responsible for our actions.

In contrast to the view that karma is compatible with limited free will, several twentieth-century saints in the tradition of classical Advaita Vedānta upheld more thoroughly deterministic conceptions of karma. For instance, when a visitor asked Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981), “Is there no such thing as free will? Am I not free to desire?” Nisargadatta gave the following emphatic reply: “Oh no, you are compelled to desire. In Hinduism the very idea of free will is nonexistent, so there is no word for it. Will is commitment, fixation, bondage” (Frydman, 1973: 356). Likewise, Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) claimed that absolutely every action – down to “taking a cup of water” – is “predetermined” by one’s karma (Mudaliar, 2002: 91–92) and that even though ordinary people *think* they have free will, even that feeling of free will is, in fact, an illusion, just another link in the deterministic causal chain of karma (Maharshi, 2006: 31). At the same time, Ramana remarked that “a man is always free not to identify himself with the body” (Mudaliar, 2002: 92), which suggests that the *mental* act of disidentifying with the physical body is a free act. However, Ramana’s position remains vague and calls for further elaboration and justification (Sharma, 1984: 619). Did Ramana hold that only our physical acts, but not our mental acts, are karmically predetermined? He gave no clear answer to this question. Moreover, if he held that only one particular mental act – namely, the act of disidentifying with one’s body – is exempt from karmic predetermination, then his position seems ad hoc.

Vivekananda was arguably more consistent than Ramana in holding that the law of karma completely determines not only all of our physical actions but also all our feelings and mental states without exception (Medhananda, 2026). As Vivekananda put it, “Everything that I do or think or feel, every part of my conduct or behaviour, my every movement – all is caused and therefore not free. This regulation of our life and mind – that is the law of Karma” ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 8: 245). He defined free will as a will that “is not caused by anything” ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 8: 245), by which I take him to mean that free will is a self-determined will – a will that is determined only by itself. Since Vivekananda held that our will can never be self-determined, he concluded that

free will is a “misnomer” ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 8: 14). Nonetheless, he held that a thoroughgoing karmic determinism is compatible with the *feeling*, though not the reality, of moral responsibility. At the same time, he claimed that we *do* have free will from the highest spiritual standpoint. According to Vivekananda, “The meaning of God is entirely free will. . . . He is infinite by His very nature; He is free” ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 2: 465). He also upheld the panentheistic view that “[e]verything that you see, feel, or hear, the whole universe . . . is the Lord Himself” (Vivekananda, [1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 2: 207). Hence, when we attain the highest spiritual realization that we ourselves are manifestations of God, God’s Free Will becomes our own and karmic determinism gives way to divine freedom.²⁵

The Sāṃkhya-Yogin Hariharānanda Āraṇya, building on Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* 2.13, held that while our past karma determines three major life-parameters – namely, the species into which we are born (*jāti*), our life span (*āyuh*), and the particular mix of pleasure and pain that we will experience (*bhoga*) – the doctrine of karma still leaves considerable scope for free will. He distinguished two kinds of karma: *puruṣakāra*, which he defines as “acts done by an individual out of his own free will,” and *adr̥ṣṭaphala-karma*, “acts done by an individual either unconsciously or being under the complete control of some dominant organ or some exciting cause” (Hariharānanda Āraṇya, 1983: 425). In the context of *puruṣakāra*, Hariharānanda defined “free will” in terms of what contemporary philosophers call “leeway-based freedom,” the view that free will is “primarily a matter of having alternative possibilities” (Timpe, 2017: 214). As Hariharānanda puts it, “The act which an individual may or may not perform at a particular moment is *puruṣakāra*” (Hariharānanda Āraṇya, 1983: 425). He holds that while “many of our mental activities” are free acts (*puruṣakāra*), most of the actions of nonhuman animals are not free, since they “fall under the category of *adr̥ṣṭaphala-karma*” (Hariharānanda Āraṇya, 1983: 425).

While Vivekananda defined free will as a self-determined will, I believe all the other modern Hindu thinkers discussed in 2.3.6 either explicitly (in the case of Hariharānanda) or implicitly defined free will as a leeway-based freedom, the freedom to have done otherwise.

2.3.7 Is It Possible to Regress from a Human to a Nonhuman Birth?

Classical Hindu scriptures and figures typically held that it is possible, or even likely, that the soul of a human being who behaves very unethically will be

²⁵ Vivekananda’s views were strongly influenced by his guru Ramakrishna’s teachings on free will, discussed in Maharaj (2018b). Aurobindo ([1910–1950] 1998: 337, [1914–1948] 1999: 60) also held a very similar position on free will.

reborn as a nonhuman animal or even as a plant.²⁶ However, modern Hindu figures hold a range of views on this issue. On the one hand, Vivekananda ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 5: 316) and Prabhupāda (Baird, 1986: 285) support the classical view that regression from a human to a nonhuman birth is possible and not all that rare. On the other hand, the Advaita Vedāntin Swami Abhedananda (1866–1939) – like Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna – outright denies that regression from a human to a nonhuman birth is possible (1902: 96–99). The positions of Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo are nuanced. Radhakrishnan maintains that the soul almost never regresses from a human to a nonhuman birth, but he does not rule out the possibility of retrograde rebirth (Minor, 1986: 30–34). According to Aurobindo, while the “soul does not go back to the [nonhuman] animal condition . . . a part of the vital personality may disjoin itself and join an animal birth to work out its animal propensities there” ([1927–1950] 2012: 534).

Section 3 will discuss how classical and modern Hindu thinkers defended the doctrines of karma and rebirth.

3 Arguments in Support of Karma and Rebirth

In the historical context of precolonial and medieval India, Hindu thinkers had to defend the doctrines of karma and rebirth on two fronts (Halbfass, 2000: 184–209; Kutznetsova, Ganeri, Ram-Prasad, 2012; Watson, 2017; Finnigan, 2022). Buddhists accepted karma and rebirth but denied the existence of an eternal soul. In opposition to Buddhists, classical Hindu philosophers not only defended the reality of an eternal soul but also went on the offensive by arguing that karma and rebirth presuppose an enduring, morally responsible self that accrues karma and remains stable across multiple physical embodiments (Phillips, 2009: chap. 4; Dasti and Phillips, 2017: 83–88). In contrast to Buddhists, Cārvāka materialists not only rejected all transcendental realities such as God and an eternal soul but also denied karma, rebirth, and the very possibility of liberation (Gokhale, 2015: 140–143). Against these materialists, classical Hindu thinkers argued for the existence of an eternal soul as well as a morally and spiritually structured world in which karma and rebirth play a prominent role.

As discussed in 2.3, modern Hindu thinkers, during the period of British colonial rule in India, operated in a global cosmopolitan milieu in which they had to defend the doctrines of karma and rebirth in the face of recent scientific developments and vigorous challenges from Christian missionaries. Accordingly, these colonial Hindu figures further developed classical

²⁶ See, for instance, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7 and *Manusmṛti* 12.9.

arguments in support of karma and rebirth and sometimes presented new arguments not found in the classical literature.

This section discusses six of the most important arguments in favor of karma and/or rebirth advanced by classical and modern Hindu thinkers and also by some recent scientists and philosophers. I take these arguments to be mutually supportive ones that make a cumulative case for the plausibility of karma and rebirth. I will also consider how skeptics of karma and rebirth have challenged, or could challenge, some of these arguments. I contend that proponents of karma and rebirth have plenty of resources at their disposal to meet these skeptical challenges.

3.1 The Argument from Innate Aptitudes and Dispositions

One of the main arguments for karma and rebirth in classical Indian philosophy is the *Argument from Innate Aptitudes and Dispositions*. The Yoga philosopher Vyāsa, commenting on *Yogasūtra* 2.9, argues that every living being has the innate desire to continue to exist and not to die – a desire that could only stem from a previous experience of the terror of death. Hence, our innate desire to live on “demonstrates the experience of a previous birth” in which we experienced death. The Nyāya philosopher Udayana (c. tenth c.) presented another form of the *Argument from Innate Aptitudes and Dispositions* (Phillips, 2009: 136 and 299 n. 40). A newborn baby desiring milk reaches for the breast of its mother. Effort requires desire or aversion, and desire requires recognition (*pratisandhāna*) of how the desired object is to be acquired. In the case of a newborn, it is not possible that such recognition is caused by memory of an experience of having milk at its mother’s breast. Therefore, in the case of a newborn, such recognition must have been caused by a latent mental impression (*saṃskāra*), formed by the experience of having milk at its mother’s breast in a previous birth. Therefore, karma and rebirth are true.

While classical Hindu thinkers framed the *Argument from Innate Aptitudes and Dispositions* in terms of a universally innate disposition, some modern Hindu philosophers like Sri Aurobindo ([1910–1950] 1998: 264) and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1932: 288–289) have presented a version of the same argument by appealing to the exceptional abilities of rare child geniuses. Their argument runs as follows. Scientists have not yet been able to explain adequately the phenomenon of child genius either in terms of genetics or environmental influence, or both. For instance, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed his first piece of published music at age five. The phenomenon of child prodigies, which remains mysterious from a scientific standpoint, can be readily explained

by the doctrines of karma and rebirth: the extraordinary aptitudes of child prodigies were acquired and developed in their previous life or lives.

One possible objection to this argument is that skills don't seem to carry over from one life to the next. Mozart, for instance, was not born with the knowledge of musical composition; his father Leopold, a professional musician himself, *taught* his son musical composition from an early age. The philosopher C.J. Ducasse (1961) rebuts this objection by distinguishing between first-order "skills" and second-order "aptitudes." Skills like riding a bicycle or playing the piano are acquired during the course of our life; we are not *born* with skills. But successfully learning any first-order skill presupposes a second-order aptitude for acquiring that skill. Aptitudes, as Ducasse puts it, are "the capacities . . . to acquire under suitable circumstances various kinds of more determinate capacities such as skills, habits, or knowledge constitute" (1961: 122). With this distinction between aptitude and skill in place, he suggests that child prodigies may not be born with particular skills but with extraordinary *aptitudes* for acquiring such skills – aptitudes that were themselves acquired and cultivated in a previous life. Mozart, then, cultivated his extraordinary innate aptitude for music into specific musical skills.

An obvious modern scientific objection to the *Argument from Innate Aptitudes and Dispositions* is that physical hereditary transmission is sufficient to explain innate aptitudes and dispositions, rendering superfluous the assumption that they are latent mental impressions formed in a previous birth. According to this objection, the newborn's recognition that reaching for its mother's breast will satisfy its desire for milk was inherited from its ancestors. Likewise, Mozart's extraordinary musical aptitude was inherited from *his* ancestors.

Some modern Hindu thinkers have explicitly addressed this objection. Vivekananda, for instance, offers a twofold response to this objection ([2006–2007] 1957–97, v. 4: 270–71). He claims that hereditary transmission is perfectly compatible with rebirth, since the individual soul, in light of its past karma, takes into account hereditary qualities when it selects the particular body in which it will be reborn. As he puts it, "We, by our past actions, conform ourselves to a certain birth in a certain body, and the only suitable material for that body comes from the parents who have made themselves fit to have that soul as their offspring" ([2006–2007] 1957–97, v. 2: 222; see also McTaggart, 1906: 125).

Vivekananda also argues that while physical qualities and tendencies may be explained in terms of hereditary transmission, it is not at all clear that "mental experience can be recorded in matters" ([2006–2007] 1957–97, v. 2: 222). In other words, while it might be plausible for physical traits and propensities – such

as one's height or predisposition toward a particular physical disease – to be transmitted to one's offspring through physical genes, it is not at all obvious that mental qualities and predispositions, like intelligence or a predisposition toward depression, can be transmitted hereditarily.

This response was certainly a reasonable one to make in the 1890s, since the field of genetics only began to develop in the first decade of the twentieth century. Since the 1960s, behavioral genetics has become a major research field. However, according to critics like Jay Joseph (2014: 154), the attempt to identify the genetic basis of intelligence, physical illnesses, psychological disorders, and personality traits “has turned out to be a spectacular failure.” As Joseph puts it, “sustained worldwide research, carried out during the past three decades, has failed to uncover the genes that behavioral genetic researchers believe underlie IQ, personality, and the major psychiatric disorders” (2014: 154–155). This failure, which has been dubbed the “missing heritability” problem, remains a major topic of debate among scientists (Krimsky and Gruber, 2013; Matthews and Turkheimer, 2022). Indeed, Ted Christopher (2017) has argued that this “missing heritability” problem – coupled with the recent empirical evidence for rebirth presented by Ian Stevenson, Jim Tucker, and others, which will be discussed in 3.2 – lend considerable support to the theory of rebirth.

Against proponents of rebirth like Vivekananda and Christopher, one might defend a form of promissory note materialism: while behavioral geneticists have not yet discovered the precise genetic bases of various innate tendencies, personality traits, disorders, diseases, and so on, it is reasonable to believe that they will do so eventually. In response, proponents of rebirth might argue that the palpable failure of behavioral genetics to make any appreciable progress in this endeavor in the past few decades makes it more reasonable to believe that the missing heritability problem is an insuperable one. Moreover, even if the missing heritability problem is solved at some point in the future, the possibility that karma and rebirth are still true cannot be ruled out, since these doctrines are compatible with hereditary transmission.

3.2 The Argument from Verified Reports of Past Life Memories

Another argument for rebirth is the *Argument from Verified Reports of Past Life Memories*. Sometimes, people report having memories of details from their past life, including what town or village they lived in, the names of their family members, their occupation, hobbies, traumatic events, and so forth. In some of these cases, other people have verified the relevant details and ruled out the possibility that this information could have been obtained through normal

means. These verified details of people's reported past-life memories, some have argued, constitute significant empirical evidence in favor of rebirth. Reported memories of past lives, it should be noted, are of two kinds – either spontaneous or nonspontaneous. While spontaneous memories of past lives come unsolicited and without any effort, nonspontaneous memories of past lives are the result of hypnosis²⁷ or the conscious practice of a specific technique like *śamya* (yogic concentration), which will be discussed in 3.3.

Ian Stevenson (1966, 1997, 2003) and Jim Tucker (2005, 2013) have conducted extensive and careful investigations of numerous cases of spontaneous memories of a past life – usually those of young children. While Stevenson focused primarily on cases in Asian countries like India and Sri Lanka, Tucker has investigated numerous cases in the United States as well, where belief in rebirth is much less prevalent than in Asian countries. As Stevenson and Tucker acknowledge, the evidential value of these cases varies widely, but in the strongest cases, the child in question mentioned specific details about his or her past life that were later verified by others and that the child could not have learned by any normal means.

For instance, an American named James Leininger, at age two, had repeated nightmares of a plane crashing, shouting “Airplane crash on fire!” and told his parents that he was, in his previous life, a World War II fighter pilot whose name was “James” and whose plane was shot down by the Japanese, that his aircraft carrier was called “Natoma,” and that he had a friend named Jack Larsen. His father Bruce later verified all of these claims, finding that they corresponded to James Huston, a fighter pilot killed in the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II, whose plane took off from an aircraft carrier called the “USS *Natoma Bay*.” His father also verified that Jack Larsen was another pilot based at USS *Natoma Bay* (Tucker, 2016). Tucker concludes, on the basis of the available evidence, that the most plausible explanation of the facts is that James Leininger is the reincarnation of the World War II fighter pilot James Huston (Tucker, 2016: 206).

In some cases of people who claim to remember events from a past life, they seem to exhibit xenoglossy, the ability to speak a real language – often with great fluency and accuracy – which they had not learned at any point in their present lifetime but which they claimed to have spoken in their previous life (Stevenson and Pasricha, 1980; Stevenson, 1984; Anālayo, 2018). Stevenson, who conducted extensive research on such cases, distinguishes recitative from responsive xenoglossy. Recitative xenoglossy is the “repetition, as if by rote, of

²⁷ See Weiss (1988) for an interesting case of indirectly verified past-life memories while under hypnosis.

phrases and sometimes longer passages in a foreign language,” whereas responsive xenoglossy is the ability to converse in a foreign language and to provide intelligible responses to questions posed in that language (Stevenson and Pasricha, 1980: 332).

A striking case of apparently responsive xenoglossy is that of an Indian woman named Uttara Huddar (1941–2018), who was born and raised in Maharashtra and who spoke the local language Marathi (Stevenson and Pasricha, 1980). At the age of thirty-two, a new personality took over, and she started to identify as “Sharada,” an early nineteenth-century Bengali woman she claimed to have been in her previous birth. As Sharada, she was not able to recognize Uttara’s parents or friends, she recalled various details from her previous birth (including the names of numerous family members) that were verified by Stevenson, and she did not seem to know or understand Marathi, Hindi, or English (which were languages known by Uttara), but she did speak and converse in typically early nineteenth-century Bengali (a language never learned by Uttara) with native fluency and accuracy. On the basis of such evidence, Stevenson concluded that the most plausible explanation of the known facts is that Uttara was Sharada in a previous life.

Some have argued that such verified cases of people claiming to remember their past life constitute substantial empirical evidence in favor of rebirth (Almeder, 1992; Tucker, 2005, 2013; Anālayo, 2018). By contrast, skeptics like Paul Edwards (1996) and Ian Wilson (1981) claim that there are more reasonable explanations of these people’s alleged “memories” of a past life that do not presuppose rebirth, including the possibility that the person learned these details through normal means and later forgot this fact – a phenomenon known as “cryptomnesia” (Edwards, 1996: 71) – or that it was a hoax on the part of the person’s family in order to get publicity and/or money.

Even with respect to cases in which the possibility of fraud or cryptomnesia is ruled out entirely, many skeptics of rebirth are still unlikely to be convinced, in part because the doctrine of rebirth is part of a broader metaphysical worldview that skeptics are likely to reject (Aurobindo, [1910–1950] 1998: 261; Burley, 2016; Barua, 2017). For instance, Edwards, as a metaphysical naturalist, finds it impossible to accept the “collateral assumptions” entailed by belief in rebirth, including the assumption that consciousness is not a product of the brain and that it survives the death of the physical body (Edwards, 1996: 255–256).

However, Stevenson himself is quite cautious in drawing conclusions from even his best cases. While Stevenson (1966) acknowledges that these cases *may* be explained without assuming rebirth, he claims that *it would not be unreasonable* for someone to conclude that these cases are best explained by accepting the truth of rebirth, along with all the relevant collateral assumptions, no matter

how “fantastic” they might seem. Arguably, then, Edwards begs the question when he dismisses the evidential validity of Stevenson’s cases on the basis of the “fantastic” nature of the collateral assumptions (Almeder, 1997: 34–35).

3.3 The Argument from Latent Mental Impressions

A third argument in favor of rebirth is the *Argument from Latent Mental Impressions*. A number of people claim to have practiced a specific mental technique for acquiring knowledge of their past lives – a technique that, in principle, can be practiced by anyone. In his commentary on Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* 3.18, Vivekananda explains the precise yogic method by which we can attain this knowledge. The *sūtra* is “*saṃskārasākṣātkaraṇāt pūrvajātiññānam*,” which he translates as: “By perceiving the impressions [*saṃskāras*], (comes) the knowledge of past life” (*CW* 1: 276). On the basis of his own spiritual practices, Vivekananda explains this *sūtra* as follows:

Each experience that we have, comes in the form of a wave in the Chitta [mind], and this subsides and becomes finer and finer, but is never lost. It remains there in minute form, and if we can bring this wave up again, it becomes memory. So, if the Yogi can make a *Samyama* on these past impressions in the mind, he will begin to remember all his past lives. (*CW* 1: 276)

Since our unconscious contains the latent impressions (*saṃskāras*) of everything we have done and thought not only in this life but also in our past lives, we can gain knowledge of our past lives through the technique of “*saṃyama*” taught in the *Yogasūtra*, which seems to involve concentrating intensely on the latent mental impressions stored in our unconscious (Bryant, 2009: 344).

The *Argument from Latent Mental Impressions*, then, runs as follows. Numerous yogis and spiritual adepts claim to have obtained knowledge of their own past lives by concentrating on the latent mental impressions stored in their unconscious. If we are able to learn, and successfully practice, this special technique of *saṃyama*, then we, too, will be able to gain knowledge of our past lives. A major difference between this argument and the *Argument from Verified Reports of Past Life Memories*, discussed in 3.2, is that third-person verification of another person’s past-life memory claims plays a central role in the latter but no role in the former.

Of course, a skeptic of rebirth might argue that mystics’ reported memories of their past lives are either consciously fabricated or the result of an overactive imagination. However, proponents of rebirth would respond that it is presumptuous and dogmatic for skeptics to dismiss past-life memory claims without first attempting to learn and practice the technique of *saṃyama*, thereby verifying

for themselves whether this technique results in past-life memories. Moreover, the *Argument from Spiritual Experience*, which will be discussed in 3.4, defends the rationality of accepting the testimony of credible mystics.

3.4 The Argument from Mystical Testimony

Many people throughout the world claim to have had mystical knowledge of their own past lives or the past lives of other people, as well as of various supersensuous realities, including God, an eternal immaterial soul, and nonphysical realms like heaven. If such putative mystical experiences have epistemic value, then they constitute strong evidence for mainstream Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth, which presuppose the existence of a reincarnating soul, a Supreme Being who doles out to us our karmic dues, and various nonphysical realms that souls can inhabit between earthly embodiments.

Of course, this is a big “if,” and it is significant that many Hindu thinkers and contemporary philosophers have provided sophisticated arguments for the epistemic value of putative mystical experiences, based on a parallelism between sense perception and supersensuous perception. Vivekananda, for instance, argues as follows:

What is the proof of God? Direct perception, *pratyakṣa*. The proof of this wall is that I perceive it. God has been perceived that way by thousands before, and will be perceived by all who want to perceive Him. But this perception is no sense-perception at all; it is supersensuous, superconscious . . . ([2006–2007] 1957–97, v. 1: 415)

We ordinarily take our sensory perceptions to be proof that what we perceive actually exists. As Vivekananda puts it, “The proof of this wall is that I perceive it.” This everyday behavior is justified, he claims, on the basis of a general epistemic principle, which he formulates as follows: “whatever we see and feel, is proof, if there has been nothing to delude the senses” ([2006–2007] 1957–97, v. 1: 204). Let us call this the Principle of Perceptual Proof (hereafter “PP”). Vivekananda also holds that direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) encompasses both sense perception and supersensuous perception.

Vivekananda further develops this argument by defending another epistemic principle: the testimony of a credible person (an *āpta*) about her perception of some entity constitutes “proof” for others that that entity exists ([2006–2007] 1957–97, v. 1: 205). Let us call this the Principle of Testimonial Proof (hereafter “TP”). Crucially, he includes credible yogis under the category of an *āpta*. Vivekananda argues that both PP and TP are uncontroversial principles of rationality that are indispensable in everyday life. After all, it is a mark of rational behavior to take our sense perceptions as evidence that what we

perceive actually exists. For instance, if I am crossing the street and I see a car rushing toward me, it is reasonable for me to believe that there is a car about to hit me and, therefore, to act on this belief by getting out of the way. Likewise, it is equally rational for people to believe the perceptual testimony of others. For instance, if a trustworthy person tells me that it is raining outside, it is reasonable for me to believe that it is raining on the basis of this person's testimony. According to Vivekananda, if we accept PP and TP, then the testimony of credible mystics who claim to have direct experiential knowledge of supersensuous entities constitutes evidence even for nonmystics that those supersensuous entities exist (Medhananda, 2022: 162–231).

Taking Vivekananda's lead, recent philosophers have attempted to justify the epistemic value of mystical experience on the basis of a parallelism between mystical experience and sense experience (Davis, 1989; Alston, 1991; Gellman, 1997; Swinburne, 2004: 293–327; Kwan, 2009). Moreover, contemporary epistemologists continue to defend epistemic principles akin to Vivekananda's PP (Pryor, 2000; Huemer, 2001: 98–118; Swinburne, 2004: 303–322; Kwan, 2009) and TP (Coady, 1992; Burge, 1993; Strawson, 1994). In fact, the contemporary philosopher Stephen Phillips (2009: 131–139) has specifically defended karma and rebirth on the basis of a version of the *Argument from Mystical Testimony*.

On the other hand, some contemporary philosophers have challenged the epistemic value of putative mystical experiences on numerous grounds (Gale, 1991: 302–343; Fales, 1996). Since space here is limited and many such objections have been discussed and rebutted in detail elsewhere (Medhananda, 2022: 197–231; Davis, 1989: 115–238; Phillips, 2009: 131–139), I will only discuss one of the most common objections – the crosscheckability objection. At the core of Vivekananda-style arguments for the epistemic value of mystical experience and testimony is the claim that sense perception and supersensuous perception are similar in key respects. Some philosophers have challenged this parallelism thesis by arguing that sense experiences, in contrast to mystical experiences, can be crosschecked (Gale, 1991: 302–343; Fales, 1996). For instance, if I claim to see an oak tree a short distance away from me, someone standing next to me can crosscheck my claim by seeing whether there really is an oak tree in front of me. Let us call this the “other perceivers” test. Some philosophers argue that one reason why sense experiences have epistemic value, while mystical experiences do not, is that the former, but not the latter, can be crosschecked by means of direct procedures such as the “other perceivers” test (Fales 1996; Gale, 1991: 302–43). As Fales puts it, “When St. Teresa is receiving an inner locution, we can't call on St. John of the Cross to contemplate and independently confirm the message Teresa says God is sending. St. John of the Cross-Check he's not” (1996: 34).

There are two lines of response to this crosscheckability objection. First, there *are* some rare cases in which one mystic claims to have directly cross-checked another mystic's spiritual experience (Maharaj, 2018: 219–231). For instance, in 1864, Ramakrishna had a spiritual experience in which he was playing with Rāmlālā, the infant form of the Hindu god Rāma, and a monk named Jaṭādhāri served, as it were, as Ramakrishna's "St. John of the Cross-checks" by experientially verifying, at that very moment, that Ramakrishna was interacting with Rāmlālā in exactly the way Ramakrishna had described (Maharaj, 2018: 222–223). Arguably, then, Ramakrishna's mystical experience of Rāmlālā meets even the stringent standard for an "other perceivers" test.

Second, there are plenty of *other* crosschecking procedures for verifying the veridicality of mystical experiences, though these procedures usually differ from the kind of crosschecks used to verify sense experiences. Some common mystical checking procedures include, for instance, seeing whether the putative mystic has been morally and spiritually transformed by her mystical experience and determining whether the mystic's experientially based claims accord with the teachings of the religious scriptures accepted in her tradition. While Fales acknowledges these kinds of mystical crosschecking procedures, he argues that all such mystical crosschecks lack "epistemic bite," since they are markedly inferior to the more "direct and independent" checking procedures for sensory experiences (1996: 34).

However, drawing upon the work of William Alston (1991: 209–250), we can defend the epistemic force of such mystical crosschecking procedures against critics like Fales by arguing that their line of reasoning exhibits two vices: "epistemic imperialism" and the "double standard." Fales is guilty of epistemic imperialism, since he makes the unwarranted assumption that claims based on mystical experiences must be subject to the *same kind* of crosschecks used for sense experiences (Alston, 1991: 216). As Alston puts it, "there is no reason to suppose it *appropriate* to require the same checks and tests for them [reports of mystical perception] as for sense-perceptual reports, and every (or at least sufficient) reason to suppose it *inappropriate*" (1991: 216; emphasis in original). Since supersensuous entities like God cannot be perceived by the physical senses, it is unreasonable to suppose that reports of mystical experiences should be subject to checking procedures appropriate to sense experiences. Second, although Fales claims that the "other perceivers" test is "more direct and independent" than the kind of crosschecking procedures frequently employed by mystics, even the "other perceivers" test is epistemically circular, since another observer can only verify a sense-perceptual report – such as my claim that I see an oak tree in front of me – on the basis of *her* own sense experience, which would itself require crosschecking, *ad infinitum*. Therefore, those who

fault mystics for employing crosschecks that are indirect or epistemically unreliable are guilty of a “double standard,” because the crosschecks for verifying sense experiences are just as epistemically circular as mystical crosschecks (Alston, 1991: 249–250).

The Argument from Mystical Testimony, then, makes it reasonable to accept the testimony of credible mystics who claim to have direct experiential knowledge not only of their own past lives and those of others but also of God, an eternal soul, and nonphysical realms. This argument thereby lends direct support to rebirth and *indirect* support to mainstream Hindu conceptions of karma and rebirth, which presuppose the existence of God, a reincarnating soul, and nonphysical realms in which souls reside.

The final two arguments for karma and rebirth that will be discussed presuppose the existence of the theistic God and contend that a multiple-life theistic scheme is more reasonable, and more compatible with God’s love, than a single-life theistic scheme.

3.5 The Theistic Moral Argument

According to the *Theistic Moral Argument*, if we assume the existence of a theistic God, then the doctrines of karma and rebirth are better able than a single-life theistic paradigm to explain the initial disparate condition of children and various instances of human and nonhuman animal suffering (Radhakrishnan, 1932: 289; Filice, 2006). Assuming the existence of a loving, omnipotent, and omniscient God, why, for instance, are some children born into highly favorable circumstances, while other children are “born to suffer, perhaps all their lives” (Vivekananda, [2006–2007] 1957–97: 269)? According to the doctrine of rebirth, the circumstances in which I find myself are, at least in part, the karmic result of my own thoughts and deeds in previous lives. Hence, a young child’s suffering in this life is at least partly the karmic result of what the child had done in its previous life. If we do not accept karma and rebirth, it is difficult to reconcile God’s perfect love with the existence of human inequalities – especially the suffering of very young children who could not possibly have committed any sinful actions in their present life that might account for their current unfortunate circumstances.

In the *Brahmasūtra*, one of the foundational scriptures of Vedānta philosophy, one finds reasoning along these lines. *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34 runs as follows: “*vaiśamyānairghṛṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathā hi darśayati*” (“No partiality and cruelty [can be charged against God] because of [His] taking other factors into consideration. For so the Vedas show”). All traditional Vedāntic commentators – including Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Baladeva, and numerous others – take this *sūtra*

to be a response to the objection that God is (a) cruel, since He permits so much suffering in this world, and (b) partial, since He places some of His creatures in fortunate circumstances and others in unfortunate circumstances. *Sūtra* 2.1.34, according to traditional commentators, refutes this objection by claiming that God places us in varying circumstances by taking “other factors” into account, including the law of *karma*.

3.6 The Multiple Shots Argument

According to the *Multiple Shots Argument*, if we assume the existence of a theistic God, a multiple-life scheme involving the doctrines of karma and rebirth is fairer than a single-life theistic scheme, since multiple lives provide us with multiple opportunities to learn and grow morally and spiritually (Radhakrishnan, 1960: 191; Filice, 2006: 50). On a single-life theistic scheme, the present life is our only opportunity for moral development and spiritual growth, and the stakes could not be greater: if we succeed, we attain a state of limitless fulfilment, whereas if we fail, we are either deprived of this salvific state (possibly for an eternity) or, worse, are condemned to eternal damnation. By contrast, a theistic scheme that presupposes karma and rebirth affords us multiple opportunities to improve ourselves in the course of many lifetimes. On such a multiple-life scheme, even if we do not succeed in attaining the spiritual goal in this life, our karma will carry over into our next life, so we can carry on where we left off in our previous life, continuing to make progress toward the ultimate goal of spiritual fulfilment. As *Bhagavad Gītā* 6.45 puts it, the Yogi attains the supreme goal only after having “perfected himself in the course of many lifetimes.” Many great accomplishments – such as writing a doctoral dissertation, making a scientific breakthrough, or completing a marathon – require a long period of preparation, practice, and trial and error. Accordingly, it stands to reason that a loving God would grant us multiple opportunities to achieve the highest aim of spiritual fulfilment by allowing our spiritual journey to stretch across multiple lifetimes (Filice, 2006: 50).

Although both the *Theistic Moral Argument* and the *Multiple Shots Argument* presuppose the existence of a theistic God, they gain considerable force when combined with the other three arguments for karma and rebirth (3.1–3.3) and the *Argument from Mystical Testimony* (3.4), which defends the existence of a theistic God on the basis of the testimony of credible mystics who claim to have directly perceived God. Moreover, even those who do not believe in a theistic God may find the *Theistic Moral Argument* and the *Multiple Shots Argument* sufficiently persuasive to convince them that *if* a theistic God exists, it is more reasonable to accept karma and rebirth than not to accept them.

Taken together, the six mutually supportive arguments discussed in [Section 3](#) begin to make a powerful case for the rationality of accepting the truth of karma and rebirth. To complete the case, however, we will need to consider some of the main arguments *against* karma and rebirth, which is the topic of [Section 4](#).

4 Arguments against Karma and Rebirth

This section focuses on modern and contemporary arguments against karma and rebirth, many of which may naturally occur to modern educated people who are either skeptical or agnostic about these doctrines. Even many contemporary Hindu believers in karma and rebirth sometimes raise similar doubts as an exercise in “faith seeking understanding,” as a means of bolstering their belief in karma and rebirth through rational deliberation and argument.

In particular, we will consider five of the main objections to karma and rebirth. I will argue that none of these objections are fatal. Although these objections have a certain degree of intuitive plausibility, we will find, on reflection, that there are cogent responses to each of them.

4.1 The Lack-of-Memory Objection

A very common and intuitive objection to the doctrine of rebirth is the following (Edwards, 1996: 233–237). If we have lived before, we should have at least some memories of one or more of our past lives. However, we do not remember anything from our past lives, so the doctrine of rebirth is probably false.

Of course, as we saw in 3.2 and 3.3, even if most people do not have any memories of their previous lives, there is now abundant evidence that numerous people across the world – including ordinary people as well as yogis – claim to have memories of one or more of their past lives, and in certain cases, many details of these memories have been empirically investigated and verified. While Paul Edwards (1996) claimed to find “big holes” in some of the cases in South Asian countries documented by Ian Stevenson, many more recent cases – often involving American children – have been carefully documented by Jim Tucker (2005, 2013), which also deserve serious consideration.

Nonetheless, we can reformulate the objection to take into account these rare cases of reported memories of past lives: according to Hinduism, all human and nonhuman animal souls have had past lives, yet the vast majority of us do not have – or even claim to have – memories of our past lives, so rebirth is probably false.

Proponents of rebirth offer three basic lines of response to this objection. First, they argue that memory is not a reliable indicator of personal continuity, since we typically have no memories of the first six months after our birth, yet

we were obviously the same person then as we are now (Ducasse, 1961, 492; Aurobindo, [1910–1950] 1998: 260–61; Vivekananda, [1957–1997] 2006–2007, v. 2: 218). Hence, the fact that most of us do not have memories of any of our past lives does not, by itself, make it likely that we have not lived before.

Edwards (1996: 235) responds to this rebuttal by arguing that even if we have no memories from the first six months after our birth, we are the same person as we were then because we have “the same body.” By contrast, rebirth, by definition, means that we inhabited a different body in a previous life, so the absence of any memories from our previous life constitutes evidence that rebirth is false.

However, Edwards assumes – without argument – that bodily continuity is sufficient to secure personal identity even in the absence of memory. In fact, there is a vast philosophical literature on the question of personal identity, and the “bodily criterion” view advocated by Edwards – the view that personal identity is secured by bodily identity – is a highly controversial minority position in contemporary metaphysics (Olson, 2019). Edwards provides no arguments in favor of the bodily criterion of personal identity. Moreover, philosophers such as Sydney Shoemaker (1963: 23–24) have argued that the bodily criterion is implausible in light of the “brain transplant” thought-experiment. If person X’s brain is transplanted into another human body, then our intuition is that X remains the same person even though X’s brain is now in a different body. This intuition suggests that the bodily criterion is false. Partly as a result of such thought-experiments, the majority of contemporary philosophers advocate some form of the “psychological continuity” theory of personal identity, according to which having the same mind is a necessary and sufficient condition for being the same person (Olson, 2019). Unlike the bodily criterion theory of personal identity, the psychological continuity theory is logically compatible with the possibility of rebirth (although not all psychological continuity theorists accept rebirth) (Parfit, 1984: 227–228).

Moreover, as Eric Olson (2006: 244) has noted, “the bodily criterion will tell us nothing about our identity through time unless we have at least some idea of what it takes for a person’s body to persist; yet no one has ever produced a serious account of the identity conditions of human bodies.” According to Edwards, even though we have no memories of the first six months of our life, we are the same person as we were then because we had the same body then. But our three-month old body was, in fact, radically different from our present-day body in innumerable respects, including its size, shape, hair, and musculature. Even at the cellular level, many, if not most, of the cells in our three-month-old body were not the same as the cells in our present body. Edwards (1996: 235) claims that having the “same body” is sufficient to secure personal identity in

the absence of memory, yet he does not provide any account of what it takes for a person's body to be the "same" one across time.

Numerous proponents of rebirth have offered a second line of response to the *Lack-of-Memory Objection*: namely, that God has wisely withheld from most of us conscious memory of our previous lives, since having such memories would have added to our psychological and emotional baggage, making it more difficult – if not impossible – to focus on the challenges and opportunities of this life (Barua, 2017).

In response, Whitley Kaufman (2005: 20) argues that "it is hardly plausible to say it is better never or even rarely to remember past deeds or lives," since "acknowledging past mistakes is in general an important (even essential) educating force in our lives." However, while acknowledging, and trying to learn from, our past mistakes in *this* life is no doubt an "educating force," the question at issue is whether having specific knowledge of our past mistakes in our *previous* lives would be beneficial for us. Arguably, having such knowledge would be psychologically overwhelming for us and would pose a major hindrance in our efforts to improve ourselves and live our present life as best we can.

A third line of response to the *Lack-of-Memory Objection* is that even if most of us do not have conscious memories of our past lives, the presence of *latent* memories of our past lives is sufficient to establish our personal identity across embodiments (Perrett, 1987: 54; Filice, 2006: 56). As we saw in 3.3, Patañjali and other Hindu thinkers claim that memories of past lives are latent in each of us in the form of *saṃskāras* (latent mental impressions), and it is possible for anyone to gain knowledge of these past-life *saṃskāras* – thereby bringing unconscious memories of our past lives to consciousness – by concentrating intensely on these past-life *saṃskāras* as prescribed in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* 3.18. Even in the absence of such yogic practice, it is possible that all of us do gain conscious knowledge of our past lives in the period *between* physical embodiments when we are disembodied souls (Filice, 2006: 56) or in our final physical embodiment. Vivekananda, for instance, endorsed the latter view when he claimed that "each one of us will get back this memory [of past lives] in that life in which he will become free" ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 2: 219). While Vivekananda did not provide an explicit argument in favor of this view, he seems to imply that it is safe, and even beneficial, to gain memory of our past lives in our final embodiment, since in our final birth we are sufficiently morally and spiritually evolved to cope with, and assimilate, these past-life memories without getting overwhelmed, bewildered, or disheartened by them.

4.2 The Unfair Punishment and Lack-of-Moral-Education Objections

Whitley Kaufman (2005: 19–21) has raised two distinct moral versions of the *Lack-of-Memory Objection*. According to the law of karma, whatever suffering we experience is due to unethical actions we committed in the past – either earlier in this life or in a past life. However, without any memory of our past lives, there is no way for us to know exactly *what* we did in our past life to deserve our present suffering. Consequently, the law of karma is fundamentally unjust, since “justice demands that one who is being made to suffer for a past crime be made aware of his crime and understand why he is being punished for it” (Kaufman, 2005: 19). Let us call this the *Unfair Punishment Objection*. Kaufman further argues that our lack of memory of our past lives “renders the karmic process essentially useless as a means of moral education,” since “acknowledging past mistakes is in general an important (even essential) educating force in our lives” (Kaufman, 2005: 20). Let us call this the *Lack-of-Moral-Education Objection*.

It should be noted, first, that some of the responses to the *Lack-of-Memory Objection* can also be applied to these two moral objections. In response to the *Unfair Punishment Objection*, it could be argued that the law of karma would be unjust if we could *never* know what we did to deserve our present suffering. However, many theorists of karma and rebirth hold that each one of us *will* eventually know exactly what misdeeds we committed in previous lives to deserve our present suffering, either between physical embodiments or in our final embodiment prior to liberation (Hick, 1994: 354; Filice, 2006: 56; Vivekananda, [1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 2: 219). Moreover, in response to both the *Unfair Punishment Objection* and the *Lack-of-Moral-Education Objection*, it could be argued that God has wisely withheld from us – if only temporarily – the memory of our past misdeeds, since knowledge of all the unwholesome things we did in our past lives could very well hinder our efforts to make moral and spiritual progress in this life (Radhakrishnan, 1932: 299; Aurobindo, [1939–1940] 2006: 851).

Regarding the *Unfair Punishment Objection* in particular, proponents of a retributive view of karma have appealed to variations of the same basic analogy in order to challenge Kaufman’s assumption that punishing someone for a past misdeed is just only if that person is aware of having committed that misdeed (Hick, 1994: 354; Filice, 2006: 58; Chadha and Trakakis, 2007: 536). Filice (2006: 58), for instance, elaborates the analogy as follows: “I cause an accident that both kills another person and results in my loss of memory of the accident. Surely the new and amnesiac me would still be accountable for the earlier tragedy!” The analogy is meant to make plausible the view that I can be morally responsible – and, therefore, justly punished – for a past misdeed, even

though I have no memory of having committed that misdeed. Likewise, according to the law of karma, our present suffering is just retribution for a misdeed we committed either earlier in this life or in a past life, even though – at least in the case of a misdeed committed in a past life – we usually have no memory of having committed that misdeed.

Those who uphold an evolutionary doctrine of karma (discussed in 2.3.1) – such as Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Radhakrishnan – can avail themselves of a unique response to the *Unfair Punishment Objection* that is not available to those who uphold a retributive doctrine of karma. Specifically, evolutionary karma theorists can reject the very premise of the *Unfair Punishment Objection* by arguing that the primary aim of karma and rebirth is not, in fact, reward and punishment but our moral and spiritual growth. For instance, while Aurobindo accepts the basic karmic principle that we reap we sow, he rejects any crude karmic calculus, according to which happiness and prosperity are always the result of good actions in the past, while suffering and misery are always punishment for our past misdeeds. In fact, he argues that “adversity, suffering may often be regarded rather as a reward to virtue than as a punishment for sin, since it turns out to be the greatest help and purifier of the soul struggling to unfold itself” (Aurobindo, [1910–1950] 1998: 267–268). According to the evolutionary doctrine of karma, our present suffering is no doubt the karmic result of something we did in the past, but this suffering is not punishment but an aid to our moral and spiritual development, even though we usually have no clue as to what we did to deserve our current suffering.

Finally, with regard to the *Lack-of-Moral-Education Objection*, one could challenge its underlying assumption that we can learn and grow from our suffering only if we have specific and detailed knowledge of what we did to deserve our suffering. In fact, many Hindu thinkers have argued that it is perfectly sufficient for our moral and spiritual growth to have the *general* belief that our present suffering is the karmic result of something we did in the past, even in the absence of specific knowledge of our misdeeds from past lives (Radhakrishnan, 1932: 298–299; Chadha and Trakakis, 2007: 536). As Vivekananda put it, “When you find yourselves suffering, blame yourselves, and try to do better. . . . Say, ‘This misery that I am suffering is of my own doing, and that very thing proves that it will have to be undone by me alone’” ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 2: 225). Building on Vivekananda’s reasoning, we could concede to Kaufman (2005: 20) that “acknowledging past mistakes is in general an important (even essential) educating force in our lives,” and argue that belief in karma enables us to acknowledge, and take responsibility for, our past misdeeds *even though* we do not know the precise nature of those misdeeds.

4.3 The Blame-the-Victim Objection

Whitley Kaufman (2007: 559–560) raises this objection quite forcefully:

It [the karma doctrine] entails that there is no such thing as innocent suffering, that everyone gets just what he deserves. But then there can be no moral obligation to help others in distress, to protect, to rescue, perform acts of charity, or even to feel compassion for a sufferer. ... [K]arma elevates the ‘blame the victim’ idea into a systematic principle.

Following Burley (2013), I think that we need to distinguish two forms of the *Blame-the-Victim Objection*:

- (1) The karma doctrine justifies a morally deplorable *complacency and inaction* in the face of another’s suffering and misfortune. If person *A* deserves her present plight, then even if person *B* is in a position to help *A*, *B* should refrain from doing so, since helping *A* would hinder *A*’s ability to work out *A*’s own karma.
- (2) It is *inherently* morally repugnant and offensive to hold the view that *A* *deserves* their present distress, suffering, or misfortune because of some unethical act *A* committed either earlier in this life or in a past life.

Proponents of the karma doctrine can respond to objections (1) and (2) in several ways. There are two mutually supportive lines of response to objection (1). First, one could argue that it is perfectly consistent to hold that *A* deserves their present plight *and* that it is a result of *A*’s *good* karma that *B* is in a position to alleviate *A*’s suffering and to help improve *A*’s situation. In other words, everyone’s karmic deserts are interconnected in highly complex ways that we cannot even begin to understand (Filice, 2006: 54). Hence, if *B* is in a position to alleviate *A*’s suffering, then *B* is never justified in believing that *A* deserves *not* to be helped. Rather, the karma doctrine entails that it is a karmic consequence of *A*’s past actions both that *A* is suffering now *and* that *B* is in a position to alleviate *A*’s suffering. From *B*’s standpoint, then, *A* certainly deserves their suffering, but *A* also deserves – or, at least, *may* also deserve – *B*’s help, so *B* is morally obligated to help alleviate *A*’s suffering. If we assume a theistic conception of karma, then the omniscient God alone has perfect and complete knowledge of the complex workings of karma and how all our karmic deserts are interconnected. By contrast, we, with our finite minds, are never justified in playing God by claiming to know who ought to be helped and under which circumstances. According to the karma doctrine, then, if we are ever in a position to alleviate another’s distress, our default assumption should be that it is the result of the sufferer’s *good* karma that we are in a position to alleviate their suffering and, therefore, we should try to alleviate that person’s suffering.

Second, while the karma doctrine entails that *A* deserves their present suffering, it equally entails that *B* accrues *good* karma by trying to alleviate *A*'s suffering and, hence, that it is in *B*'s own interest to help *A*. Of course, it could be objected that true morality requires that *B* ought to help alleviate *A*'s suffering because it is the right thing to do and *not* because *B* stands to benefit in the long term from helping *A*. In response, one could argue that the karma doctrine operates at different levels. For less morally evolved people, the karma doctrine holds out the incentive of karmic rewards to motivate them to engage in good actions and alleviate the suffering of others. However, more morally and spiritually evolved people would strive to alleviate the suffering of others not because they thereby accrue good karma but because it is the right thing to do. As a result of such desireless charitable service, their minds become purified, thereby bringing them one step closer to liberation.

As for objection (2), proponents of karma could simply bite the bullet, arguing that the fact that some people may be offended by the idea that suffering is always deserved in no way makes this idea less likely to be true. For instance, a thoracic oncologist may offend a lung cancer patient by telling them that their lifelong habit of smoking cigarettes was likely a primary cause of their lung cancer, yet the doctor could still be justified in holding and expressing this belief, and it remains the doctor's duty to treat the patient to the best of their ability (Sharma, 2008).

Proponents of karma could also argue that the alternative to the view that all suffering is deserved is even more morally repugnant. Kaufman (2007: 560), for instance, argues that it is more plausible from a moral standpoint to hold that "there is genuine, undeserved suffering in the world." However, if we assume a theistic worldview (as Kaufman does), this view raises the problem of evil in an acute form: Why does God permit undeserved suffering? If God is omnipotent and omniscient, He is able to prevent all undeserved suffering from occurring. And if God is also perfectly good, He *ought* to prevent all undeserved suffering from occurring. Arguably, then, it is very difficult to reconcile a theistic conception of God with the existence of undeserved suffering. Offensiveness, in other words, cuts both ways. If some critics of the karma doctrine find it morally repugnant to hold that suffering is always deserved, Hindus may find it equally morally repugnant to hold that God permits *undeserved* suffering (an issue we will discuss in more detail in 5.1).

4.4 The Population Explosion Objection

Some philosophers have argued that human population growth is incompatible with rebirth (Edwards, 1996: 226–233). If there is a fixed number of human souls and new souls are not created, then it seems impossible to explain how

there can be as many souls as there currently are people – roughly 8.2 billion – since there were only about 3 billion people in 1960. Where are all these extra souls coming from? We can respond to this objection by noting that most Hindu traditions hold that while the number of souls is fixed, souls can inhabit not only human bodies but also other biological organisms, including nonhuman animals and plants. Moreover, this earth is only one of many planes of existence (*lokas*) in which souls exist. Aurobindo ([1939–1940] 2006: 708), for instance, refers to higher “typal” worlds in which souls reside.

From this perspective, it is easy to explain how the number of total souls can remain constant in spite of the fact that the human population on earth has grown exponentially. The increase in human population can be compensated for by a proportional decrease in the number of souls inhabiting nonhuman organisms on earth and/or by a proportional decrease in the number of souls in nonearthly realms of existence. In other words, if we represent the human population on earth as e , the number of souls residing in nonearthly realms as l , and the number of souls inhabiting nonhuman organisms as a , the Hindu view of rebirth is that the total of $e+l+a$ always remains constant, even though e , l , and a are not constant. Vivekananda ([1957–97] 2006–2007, v. 1: 400), for instance, reconciled rebirth with human population growth along precisely these lines: “It is a significant fact that as the human population is increasing, the animal population is decreasing. The animal souls are all becoming men.”²⁸

However, Paul Edwards (1996: 229–231) argues that this line of response to the population problem is unsatisfactory, since it is based on “noxiously *ad hoc*” assumptions. According to Edwards, the existence of nonearthly realms and the possibility that souls inhabit not only human bodies but also nonhuman organisms are both noxiously *ad hoc* assumptions, since (a) there is no good empirical evidence in support of the theory of rebirth and (b) these assumptions are not “independently testable” (Edwards, 1996: 230).

Regarding (a), Section 3 has shown that there are, in fact, numerous kinds of empirical evidence for karma and rebirth, including (but not limited to) (1) the existence of innate aptitudes and dispositions in humans and other animals that are best explained by karma and rebirth, (2) the testimony of people (usually young children) who claim to remember details from their past life that were subsequently verified by others, and (3) the testimony of spiritual adepts who claim to have gained memories of their past lives through a special yogic technique.

²⁸ Phillips (2009: 105) has made a similar argument more recently. Incidentally, the fact of human population growth also suggests that souls are making moral and spiritual progress, since a human birth is more valuable from a soul-making standpoint than a nonhuman birth.

Although it is undeniable that there are various sources of empirical evidence for karma and rebirth, skeptics like Edwards could argue that the totality of this evidence is not sufficiently strong to justify belief in these doctrines. Even if, for the sake of argument, we concede that the evidence is not sufficient for full-blown belief in karma and rebirth, it *is* nonetheless sufficient to establish, against Edwards, that it is not noxiously ad hoc to account for human population growth by claiming that souls can inhabit nonhuman organisms and reside in nonearthly realms. The empirical evidence for karma and rebirth also seems to be sufficient for intellectual openness to the possibility that these doctrines are true. Arguably, it is sufficient to establish that it is rational for a person to accept these doctrines in a practical sense – that is, to live one’s life *as if* karma and rebirth were true. And surely, the evidence is sufficient to show that it is not *irrational* to do so.

Regarding Edwards’s (b), numerous mystics, as well as many people who claim to have had near-death experiences, report having perceived spiritual beings in nonphysical realms,²⁹ and some mystics also claim to have perceived souls in nonhuman biological organisms.³⁰ Of course, Edwards would likely deny the epistemic value of these putative supernatural experiences themselves, but proponents of karma and rebirth could respond to Edwards by defending the epistemic value of such mystical testimony on the basis of the *Argument from Mystical Testimony* discussed in 3.4.

Since both Edwards’s (a) and (b) are disputable, we have established that it is not noxiously ad hoc for proponents of karma and rebirth to rebut the *Population Explosion Objection* by claiming that souls inhabit nonearthly realms as well as the bodies of nonhuman organisms.

4.5 The Infinite Regress Objection

Proponents of the karma doctrine take as one of its virtues its ability to explain current inequalities among people – such as being born into a rich or poor family, being born healthy or sick, being endowed with certain exceptional abilities or moral and spiritual qualities, and so on – as the karmic result of their own actions in a past life. Some philosophers, however, have argued that

²⁹ Ramakrishna, for instance, claimed to have perceived Vivekananda in the *saptarṣiloka* (Realm of Seven Sages) prior to Vivekananda’s birth on earth (Anonymous, 1989, v. 1: 61). For reports of people who claim to have encountered spiritual beings in higher realms during a near-death experience, see Moody (1975 [2015]) and Alexander (2012).

³⁰ For example, Ramakrishna told his disciple Kali (later Swami Abhedananda) that he experienced the terrible pain of the grass on the lawn outside when a man was trampling over it. Ramakrishna said this while lying on his bed inside, so he could not have seen this man with his physical eyes. Kali was amazed to discover that there actually was a man walking on the lawn and asked him to stop (Chetanananda, 1990: 224–225).

the karma doctrine does not actually provide a satisfactory explanation of current inequalities, since it also holds that souls, as well as the karmic process, are beginningless. If current inequalities are the karmic result of actions in a past life, the inequalities in that *past* life are equally accounted for by appealing to actions in the life before that one, and so on – leading to an infinite regress of explanation (Hick, 1994: 308–309; Kaufman, 2005: 22–23). As a result of this infinite regress, the karma doctrine is unable to provide “an ultimate explanation of the circumstances of our present birth” (Hick, 1994: 309).

We can respond to the *Infinite Regress Objection* by conceding that there is, indeed, an infinite regress of explanation but arguing that this infinite regress is not a vicious one, since “there is no particular instance of suffering that is inexplicable” (Perrett, 1985: 5). Every inequality or instance of suffering is held to be the karmic result of acts performed earlier in the same life or in a previous life. And the inequalities in that *previous* life are explained in the same way, ad infinitum. To explain how I came to exist, I can appeal to particular acts of my parents that led to my conception, but of course, the existence of my parents would need to be explained by appealing to the actions of my grandparents, and so on, ad infinitum. This explanation of my existence, in spite of the fact that it involves an infinite regress, nonetheless, seems to be a satisfactory one. Likewise, the karma doctrine explains a person’s current circumstances in terms of their actions in a past life, and the circumstances of their past life in terms of their actions in the life prior to that one, and so on. Although this explanation involves an infinite regress, it is not a vicious one (Perrett, 1985: 5–6).

However, Kaufman and Hick argue that the karma doctrine does involve a vicious infinite regress, since it fails to provide an “ultimate explanation” of current inequalities. At this point, though, we need to ask: What exactly do they mean by an “ultimate” explanation? Unfortunately, Hick does not specify what he means by “ultimate explanation.” Kaufman, by contrast, suggests that an ultimate explanation of present inequalities would need to answer such questions as “[H]ow did the karmic process begin? What was the first wrong? Who was the original sufferer?” (2005: 22).

Of course, any karma doctrine that presupposes that souls and their karma are beginningless cannot provide an “ultimate” explanation in this sense. After all, what it means for souls and their karma to be beginningless is that the karmic process *has* no beginning and, hence, that there is neither a “first wrong” nor an “original sufferer.” However, Kaufman clearly begs the question in demanding an ultimate explanation of this sort, since any such ultimate explanation entails that karma does, in fact, have a beginning.

Although Hick fails to specify what he means by an “ultimate explanation,” we could speculate that he means something along the lines of an answer to the question, “Why is there suffering at all?” (Perrett, 1985: 6). Of course, there are any number of theodicies – some of which explicitly appeal to the karma doctrine – that aim to answer this ultimate question, but no such theodicy can avoid an infinite regress (Perrett, 1985: 8). For instance, a “soul-making” theodicy like Hick’s own, which holds that God permits suffering in order to foster our moral growth (Hick, [1966] 2010), would still leave unanswered the question of why God Himself exists, and if we take God’s existence to be a brute fact, then we have not, after all, provided an ultimate explanation of why there is suffering at all. We can conclude, therefore, that asking for an ultimate explanation in this sense is unreasonable, since it asks for too much. And if we scale back our explanatory ambitions, then the karma doctrine provides a perfectly satisfactory explanation of why current inequalities exist by appealing to actions in a past life.

Some contemporary philosophers have argued that whether an ontological infinite regress is vicious or benign depends upon whether we are looking for a “global” or “local” explanation (Bliss, 2013; Priest, 2014). An infinite regress is benign if we are asking for a *local* explanation of “an (infinite) collection of particular existence facts: that *this* thing exists, that *that* thing exists, etc.” (Cameron, 2022). An infinite regress is vicious if we are asking for a *global* explanation of the fact “that things exist” at all. Accordingly, the question of whether the karmic explanation of present inequalities in terms of actions in a past life involves a benign or a vicious infinite regress depends upon whether we are satisfied with a local explanation of current inequalities in terms of past events.

As we saw in 2.3.5, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava figure Prabhupāda was an outlier within the Hindu context in holding that souls are eternal but that the karmic process does, in fact, have a beginning. According to Prabhupāda, souls that are now here on earth originally resided in the blissful eternal realm of Goloka with their beloved Krishna until they chose, out of their own free will, to leave Goloka in order to experience earthly enjoyments. The karmic process for these souls began the moment they left Goloka for this earth. Hence, Prabhupāda’s view is arguably not vulnerable to the *Infinite Regress Objection*. However, the cogency of Prabhupāda’s view can still be questioned, since he would need to explain why some souls, and not others, would freely choose to make such a catastrophic mistake of leaving Goloka. Within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, there remains significant controversy regarding how to answer this question and even whether it is answerable at all. No matter what the answer is – be it a sinful tendency or simple curiosity – it seems difficult to grasp how and why

such a sinful tendency or curiosity could even arise in any of the liberated souls residing in Goloka, who are perfectly blissful and, therefore, presumably also perfectly content and rational beings.

4.6 Probing the Limits of Rational Argument and Debate

Some philosophers have contended that arguments for and against karma and rebirth have limited value, since whether or not one accepts these doctrines depends in part on much more fundamental presuppositions about various metaphysical and spiritual matters, such as whether metaphysical naturalism is true and whether there is a God. As Ankur Barua (2017: 12) puts it, “the belief in karma and reincarnation is densely intertwined with various psychological, metaphysical, and eschatological themes, so that different individuals, depending on whether or not they inhabit specific worldviews, will differ in their evaluations of the ‘evidence’ that is being presented for the belief.” Likewise, Mikel Burley (2016) has drawn upon the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein to argue that the belief in karma and rebirth is embedded in “the stream of thought and life” – personal and social practices, everyday rituals, and long-held beliefs and convictions about life here and hereafter – that should not be overlooked.

One could ask, however, to what extent the belief in karma and rebirth is really unique in this respect. It just seems to be the case that philosophical debates about various topics – such as consciousness, the problem of evil, and the existence of God – have been raging throughout the world for centuries, if not millennia, usually without any clear winners. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the inconclusiveness of philosophical debates is that the opposing parties in these debates subscribe to radically incommensurate worldviews to which they are deeply committed. Of course, it is also true that sometimes, particular philosophical arguments *do* persuade people to change their mind about a certain issue. Arguably, however, these cases are so rare in part because changing one’s mind about, say, whether God exists or whether karma and rebirth are true often requires a fundamental revision of one’s broader worldview.

4.7 Conclusion

A critical examination of the arguments for and against karma and rebirth reveals an asymmetry between the dialectical positions of the defender and critic of these doctrines. Section 3 has shown that there is no single “knock-down” argument in favor of karma and rebirth but that a reasonably powerful case can be made for these doctrines when multiple arguments are combined. On the other hand, this section has shown that none of the five major

objections to karma and/or rebirth are “knock-down” ones either and that there are strong responses to each of them. Therefore, even when taken together, these objections pose no pressing challenge for the proponent of karma and rebirth. In this way, there is a significant asymmetry in the dialectical situation, one that favors proponents of karma and rebirth over critics of these doctrines.

Sections 3 and 4 have established, then, that it is not unreasonable for us to accept the truth of karma and rebirth. Or, more modestly, we can live our lives *as if* karma and rebirth were true, without needing to worry whether we are being unreasonable in doing so.

5 The Relevance of Karma and Rebirth to Debates in Contemporary Philosophy

So far, we have discussed some of the earliest Hindu scriptural sources for the doctrines of karma and rebirth (Section 1), the philosophical nuances of these doctrines in various classical and modern Hindu traditions (Section 2), and many of the arguments for and against karma and rebirth (Sections 3 and 4). This final section briefly highlights just some of the many ways that the Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth can factor into major contemporary debates in various fields of philosophy. In particular, we explore how the distinctive ethico-spiritual contours and implications of the karma doctrine can enrich, and fruitfully expand, cutting-edge conversations in global philosophy of religion, metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. In 5.1 and 5.2, we will see how the doctrines of karma and rebirth open up new ways of addressing the problems of evil and moral luck respectively. In 5.3, we discuss the relevance of karma and rebirth to contemporary debates in environmental ethics regarding the merits of moral vegetarianism and the question of whether nonhuman natural entities have intrinsic value.

5.1 The Problem of Evil

In contemporary philosophy of religion, debates about the problem of evil continue to rage: How, if at all, can we reconcile the existence of an omnipotent and loving God with the existence of so much suffering and evil in the world? For theistic religious believers, the problem of evil is a practical challenge to maintain and deepen their faith in God in the face of often horrific suffering. For critics of theism, by contrast, the problem of evil constitutes a powerful argument against the very existence of the theistic God. This argument from evil against God’s existence runs roughly as follows:

- (1) There exist instances of horrendous moral evil, such as the Nazi Holocaust.
- (2) An omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly loving being would prevent the occurrence of any horrendous moral evil.
- (3) Therefore, there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly loving being.

Philosophers and theologians in various religious traditions have challenged premise (2) by presenting different kinds of theodicy – that is, the project of explaining why God might permit all the instances of horrendous moral evil we see in human history up to the present. Over half a century ago, the Christian philosopher John Hick ([1966] 2010) defended a highly influential “soul-making” theodicy, according to which God created this world not as a hedonistic paradise but as a soul-making arena in which we can grow and evolve into spiritually mature children of God only through the encounter with both good and evil. Hick admits, however, that there are countless cases of “undeserved” suffering – such as the terrible suffering of a two-year old baby with a fatal case of cerebral meningitis – that do not serve, and may even work at cross-purposes with, the soul-making process.³¹ Moreover, in order to account for the obvious fact that most people do not complete the soul-making process during their life on earth, he posits a postmortem state of purgatory in which the soul-making process continues. Hick also rejects the orthodox Christian doctrine of eternal hell in favor of universal salvation.

Some modern Hindu thinkers such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo have defended a sophisticated soul-making theodicy in which the evolutionary doctrines of karma and rebirth, as well as universal liberation, play a crucial role (Maharaj, 2018a: 241–309; Medhananda, 2021b, 2023a). Vivekananda, for instance, characterizes this world as a “great gymnasium in which you and I, and millions of souls must come and get exercises, and make ourselves strong and perfect” ([1957–1997] 2006–2007, v. 4: 207). Through the experience of both good and evil in ourselves and others, we gradually learn to combat our selfish tendencies and cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that bring us closer to God. While Hick’s Christian soul-making theodicy presupposes a one-life-only paradigm, this Hindu theodicy upholds the view that the soul-making process is a journey of many lifetimes. Hence, people who do not complete the soul-making process in this lifetime will be reborn again and again until they do. Moreover, the evolutionary doctrine of karma ensures that there is *no* undeserved suffering, since everyone reaps what they have sown, either earlier in this life or in a previous embodiment. From this Hindu standpoint, the suffering and death of a baby afflicted

³¹ Mizrahi (2014) makes a powerful case for a new problem of evil based on “natural inequality,” the unequal distribution of natural endowments among human beings. The Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth offer unique resources for explaining natural inequality.

with cerebral meningitis were, at least in part, the karmic result of something that baby's soul had done in a past life. Moreover, the baby's suffering and death played an essential role in her soul's soul-making journey by helping to exhaust her unwholesome karma from a previous birth, and the baby's soul will take on new bodies here on earth in order to continue the soul-making process until achieving final liberation. Significantly, the doctrine of universal salvation plays as important a role in this Hindu soul-making theodicy as it does in Hick's theodicy: the infinite good of liberation that awaits all of us outweighs the necessarily finite evil and suffering we experience in the course of our many embodiments. Arguably, then, a Hindu soul-making theodicy based on the evolutionary doctrines of karma, rebirth, and universal liberation shares some of the main advantages of Hick's soul-making theodicy while avoiding the latter's most serious weaknesses (Maharaj, 2018a: 281–309).

5.2 Moral Luck

In 1979, Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams introduced the problem of moral luck,³² which Dana Nelkin (2019) has helpfully summarized as follows:

The problem of moral luck arises because we seem to be committed to the general principle that we are morally assessable only to the extent that what we are assessed for depends on factors under our control (call this the “Control Principle”). At the same time, when it comes to countless particular cases, we morally assess agents for things that depend on factors that are not in their control.

In other words, the problem of moral luck highlights an apparent contradiction at the heart of commonsense morality, which accepts the Control Principle while also holding that we are justified in imputing moral praise or blame to people for actions that were not entirely in their control (Slote, 1992, 1994). We can distinguish three kinds of moral luck: constitutive luck, circumstantial luck, and resultant luck.³³ Constitutive luck is luck in one's having the “inclinations, capacities and temperament” that one does (Statman, 1993: 60). Circumstantial luck is luck in the kind of circumstances in which one finds oneself. Resultant luck is luck in the way one's actions turn out.

To help us understand constitutive and circumstantial luck, let us imagine the following scenario.³⁴ We may know of a psychopathic killer who was born with

³² See Nagel's “Moral Luck” (reprinted in Statman, 1993: 57–72) and Williams's “Moral Luck” (reprinted in Statman, 1993: 35–56).

³³ Nagel proposes a fourth kind of moral luck as well, which he calls “causal luck,” but others have plausibly argued that “circumstantial and constitutive luck seem to cover the same territory” (Latus, 2024).

³⁴ I use Slote's own example of a psychopathic killer (Slote, 1992: 120), modifying it slightly for present purposes.

a genetic propensity for murderous behavior and who was beaten and tortured as a child by his parents. Let us stipulate that it was as a result of this genetic tendency, coupled with the physical and emotional abuse he suffered as a child, that this person went on to become a vicious killer. The murderous tendency with which this killer was born is an instance of constitutive luck, since he did not have any control over the mental and genetic makeup with which he was born. The abuse and torture to which his parents subjected him are an instance of circumstantial luck, since he didn't choose his parents. It seems reasonable and natural to feel and express moral disapproval of his behavior, even though neither his mental makeup nor his childhood circumstances were under his control.

To grasp resultant luck, Andrew Latus (2024) invites us to imagine that “two otherwise conscientious people [let us call them ‘Person A’ and ‘Person B’] have forgotten to have their brakes checked recently and experience brake failure, but only one of whom [Person A] finds a child in the path of his car.” It seems plausible to feel that Person A is more morally blameworthy than Person B, in spite of the fact that both were equally negligent about checking their brakes and Person A had no control over the fact that there was a child in front of his car.

Such cases of moral luck have disturbing and far-reaching consequences. As Dana Nelkin (2019) has noted, strict adherence to the Control Principle “suggests that it is *impossible* to morally assess anyone for anything,” since whatever we might point to as the basis for moral assessment – say, a person's immoral intention or the negative consequences of his actions – can be shown not to have been under that person's control.

Contemporary analytic philosophers have offered various responses to the problem of moral luck, each of which has certain advantages and disadvantages (Nelkin, 2019; Latus, 2024). However, as far as I am aware, none of the major philosophers working on moral luck has considered nonwestern approaches to the problem. The doctrines of karma and rebirth open up an entirely different way of approaching the problem of moral luck (Medhananda, 2023b). Of course, as we saw in Section 2, karma and rebirth take a variety of forms within Hinduism, and each Hindu tradition or figure may adopt a subtly different approach to moral luck (depending, for instance, on how much, if any, free will we have). For present purposes, let us consider a broadly Hindu worldview that accepts karma and rebirth as well as human free will.³⁵

³⁵ For a Hindu position that denies free will but can arguably still handle the moral luck problem, see Medhananda (2023b).

Those who subscribe to this Hindu worldview would fully accept the Control Principle while denying the very existence of all three forms of luck. To see this, let us revisit the example of the psychopathic killer. From a Hindu standpoint, the genetic tendencies and temperament with which we were born are the result of our own volitional behavior in past lives. Hence, the psychopathic killer's genetic tendency to commit violence and murder is not, in fact, a matter of luck. Rather, in his previous life, he had engaged in violent acts, each of which left latent mental impressions (*saṃskāras*) that he was born with in this life.³⁶ Moreover, our behavior in past lives equally determines the circumstances of our present life, including the psychopathic killer's abuse and torture at the hands of his cruel parents. Hence, from a Hindu perspective, we can accept the Control Principle and still unproblematically take the psychopathic killer to be morally blameworthy, since neither constitutive luck nor circumstantial luck played any role in making him the killer that he is.

What about resultant luck? Let us revisit Persons A and B discussed in the other example earlier. From a Hindu standpoint, it was not, in fact, a matter of luck that Person A, and not Person B, found a child in his path and fatally struck him. Rather, there was a child on Person A's path at that exact moment as a joint result of Person A's karma and the child's own karma. Hence, it is reasonable to take Person A to be more morally blameworthy than Person B, since it was Person A's own bad karma – accrued earlier in the current life and/or in a past life – that resulted in the fatal consequences of his failure to check his brakes.

Of course, this Hindu approach to moral luck is only promising if the doctrines of karma and rebirth are plausible. Hence, the arguments both for and against these doctrines – discussed in [Sections 3](#) and [4](#) – would also come into play. However, proponents of karma and rebirth could also go on the offensive by asking contemporary moral philosophers what justification *they* have for presupposing metaphysical naturalism – a doctrine that is no less controversial than those of karma and rebirth. For instance, the problem of moral luck as formulated by Nagel, Williams, and others presupposes a naturalistic worldview according to which a person's genetic makeup, circumstances, and so on are all matters of sheer “luck” rather than, say, facts willed by God or the result of that person's own karma. The fact that metaphysical naturalism is the default assumption among the majority of contemporary moral philosophers does not make it any less controversial. Arguably, then, if we accept karma and rebirth, we can accept the Control Principle without

³⁶ In light of the “missing heritability” problem discussed in 3.1, the Hindu proponent of karma and rebirth can remain noncommittal about whether the killer's innately murderous tendency is a strictly genetic one or a result of *saṃskāras* embedded in the subtle body, or some combination of genes and *saṃskāras*.

running into the problems of moral luck that have occupied the attention of so many contemporary moral philosophers.

5.3 Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics

In recent philosophical discussions, it has often been argued that key doctrines of Hinduism, in contrast to mainstream paradigms of Western thought, provide the spiritual and philosophical basis for animal rights and ecological consciousness (Nelson, 1998a; Chapple and Tucker, 2000). Karma and rebirth are some of the most widely discussed doctrines in this context.

According to numerous scholars, karma and rebirth entail that all natural entities – including not only human beings but also nonhuman animals and plants – have intrinsic value, in the sense that they have value as an end, “independent of the value of further ends to which [they are] a means” (Framarin, 2014b: 218). Karma and rebirth might establish the intrinsic value of nonhuman natural entities for two different reasons. First, karma and rebirth entail that all natural entities – including human beings, nonhuman animals, and plants – have souls and, therefore, are fundamentally the same in kind. We have had many past births already, no doubt some as plants and nonhuman animals. What kind of body a particular soul inhabits depends on its past karma. Since the distinctions among ensouled beings are relatively insignificant, if I take myself and other human beings to have intrinsic value, then it is not reasonable to deny that “other living beings also have intrinsic value” (Framarin, 2014b: 230). Second, according to many versions of the karma doctrine, injuring, killing, or eating nonhuman animals – outside of the context of ritualistic sacrifice – typically has negative karmic consequences. The best explanation of this fact is that all animals have intrinsic value (Framarin, 2014b: 232).

For much of the history of Western thought, speciesism – the view that human beings are the only species that has intrinsic value – has been the dominant paradigm, due primarily to two major thought-currents in Western theology and philosophy. The Judeo-Christian tradition holds that human beings alone were created “in the image of God” and, therefore, have “a right to dominion” over living beings of all other species, including nonhuman animals and plants (Schmidt-Raghuvaran, 1993: 60). Descartes, widely considered the father of modern Western philosophy, held that human beings alone are conscious and capable of rational thought. Accordingly, he took nonhuman animals to be nonconscious “automata” (Regan, 1975: 182–187). Likewise, Kant considered human beings alone to be rational moral agents and, therefore, objects of moral concern as “ends in themselves,” in the sense that they have intrinsic value. By contrast, nonhuman animals, Kant claimed, lack rationality and free will and,

therefore, are merely “a means to an end,” and “that end is man” (quoted in Schmidt-Raghavan, 1993: 60).

In the past few decades, some ethical philosophers have begun to challenge this speciesism latent in so much of Western thought by defending moral vegetarianism, the view that it is morally wrong to eat meat, on the grounds that nonhuman animals should also be regarded as objects of moral concern. Peter Singer, in his pioneering book *Animal Liberation* (1975), argued that all beings possessing sentience – which he defined as the ability to feel pleasure and pain – are objects of moral concern. Subsequently, philosophers have debated the necessary and sufficient criteria for being an object of moral concern and whether nonhuman animals possess these criteria (Regan, 1975).

Indian thinkers in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions provided cogent arguments against speciesism and in favor of moral vegetarianism many hundreds of years before Western philosophers (Halbfass, 2000: 211; Chapple, 2018: 343). The highly influential Hindu treatise *Manusmṛti* (c. 100–300 CE) defends moral vegetarianism by appealing specifically to the doctrines of karma and rebirth (Framarin, 2014c: 77–96). The first argument for moral vegetarianism that can be reconstructed from the *Manusmṛti* is a consequentialist one. The text repeatedly warns that the acts of killing animals and eating meat – outside the context of Vedic sacrifice – have very negative karmic consequences. According to the *Manusmṛti*, a person who kills an animal “frivolously [that is, not as part of a Vedic sacrifice], having died, attains [painful] death in birth after birth just as many times as [there are] hairs on the animal (*paśu*) [that they have killed]” (5.38; quoted in Framarin, 2014c: 78). Likewise, “having eaten meat in violation of the Vedic injunctions, [the person,] [when] dead, is eaten against their will by those [that they have eaten]” (5.33; quoted in Framarin, 2014c: 78). Hence, it is in our own self-interest not to eat meat, since eating meat has severely negative long-term karmic consequences for us in the form of intense suffering in many future embodiments that far outweighs the fleeting short-term pleasure of eating meat.

Christopher Framarin (2014c: 77–96) has also reconstructed from the *Manusmṛti* a more elaborate, nonconsequentialist argument for moral vegetarianism. The argument is contained in germ in 5.49 of the *Manusmṛti*: “Having seen the origin of meat and the binding and slaughter of embodied entities, [a person] turns away from eating all meat.” According to the *Manusmṛti*, all animals and plants have souls (*jīvātmās*) and are, therefore, “internally conscious (*antahsaṃjñā*), and endowed with [the capacity for] pleasure and pain (*sukhaduḥkhasamanvitāḥ*)” (1.48–1.50; quoted in Framarin, 2014c: 85). Moreover, the passage itself states that “pain is bad, and that binding and slaughtering embodied entities causes them pain,” which suggests that “the

value and disvalue of pleasure and pain are at least partly intrinsic” (Framarin, 2014c: 84). If pain has intrinsic disvalue, then the fact that my action might cause pain to an entity constitutes a direct, *prima facie* reason for refraining from performing that action. Therefore, all sentient entities, by virtue of the fact that they are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, have direct moral standing – that is, they are *inherently* worthy of being treated in a moral way (Framarin, 2014c: 84).

However, Framarin (2014c: 162) goes on to note that the *Manusmṛiti*, in accord with common sense, does not ascribe *equal* moral standing to humans, nonhuman animals, and plants.³⁷ This is evident from the fact that the text endorses vegetarianism over a carnivorous diet, thereby implying that plants have less moral standing than animals. Drawing upon Medhātithi’s and Kullūkabhaṭṭa’s commentaries on the *Manusmṛiti*, Framarin (2014c: 163) notes that sentient entities have varying degrees of sensitivity to pain, depending on how much *tamas* (the *guṇa* or “energy” of inertia, lethargy, and dullness) they possess. Since plants have a great deal of *tamas*, they are far less capable of experiencing pain than animals. Moreover, among animals, nonhuman animals have more *tamas* than humans, which means that nonhuman animals are more sensitive to pain than plants are but less sensitive to pain than humans are. Hence, the view implied in the *Manusmṛiti* is that it is morally acceptable to kill and eat plants for food, but not to kill and eat animals for food, because animals have greater direct moral standing than plants in virtue of their greater sensitivity to pain. Two other Hindu texts – namely, the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the epic *Mahābhārata* and the *Yogasūtra* – make similar arguments for the moral standing of animals and plants on the basis of their sentience (Framarin, 2014c: 97–157).

Of course, as we saw in Section 2, while all Hindu traditions accept karma and rebirth, there are fine-grained differences in their understanding of these doctrines, some of which bear directly on issues pertaining to animal rights and environmental ethics. For instance, classical Advaita Vedānta, which holds that nondual Pure Consciousness alone exists, denies the ultimate reality of individual souls and the entire natural world, thereby arguably precluding any possibility of a robust environmental ethics (Nelson, 1998b). By contrast, more world-affirming nondual philosophies – such as Tantra, Kashmir Shaivism, and Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta – could provide a stronger conceptual basis for environmental ethics, since they conceive the world not as an illusion but as a real manifestation of the Divine, and they view individual souls as real manifestations or “portions” of the same Divine (Nelson, 1998b; Maharaj, 2018a: 13–50).

³⁷ As Framarin (2014c: 162) plausibly argues, granting equal moral standing to all lands us in the absurd position of having seriously to consider whether we should, for instance, sacrifice the life of a human being to save that of a plant.

This section has discussed briefly some of the many ways that the Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth are relevant to contemporary philosophical debates. One could also explore, for instance, how karma and rebirth could play an important role in debates about free will (Silvestre, 2017), the ethics of abortion (Lipner, 1989), the nature and origin of consciousness, the question of what secures our personal identity across time (Phillips, 2009: chap. 4), and questions in the philosophy of law concerning the nature of justice and the rationale for punishment and rehabilitation of wrongdoers.

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Global Philosophy of Religion

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