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Persons, Plants and Insects: On Surviving Reincarnation

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## Persons, Plants and Insects: On Surviving Reincarnation

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.<sup>1</sup>

When Hume, the eighteenth-century British philosopher, made this confession he did not intend it to be an admission about the peculiar nature of his *own* experience. Apart from an ironic nod to the metaphysicians, whom he conceded might perhaps be constitutionally different from him, he was quite confident in his similarity to all members of his species:

... I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.<sup>2</sup>

Hume's confidence that he can talk about "the rest of mankind" rests upon the fact that he was not rashly extrapolating from one simple report about the nature of his own experience. Rather, he ruled out any possibility of an enduring self on the basis of his theory of mind:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity.<sup>3</sup>

Hume's denial of self was a logical one disguised as an experiential one.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of Hume's theory of mind, personal identity becomes fictitious inasmuch as there is no simple, enduring entity that survives the continuously changing succession of our thoughts. Whatever sense of personhood we have can only arise from "the smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thoughts along a train of connected ideas."<sup>5</sup> Persons become tricks of the imagination.

Hume's claims to universality are certainly not uncommon in philosophical discussions concerning the nature of personal identity.<sup>6</sup> Philosophers, in giving accounts of what makes a person at time  $t_1$  the same person as at time  $t_2$ , see themselves to be giving accounts that are true for all members of the human species. For example, Derek Parfit, a contemporary philosopher, in his influential book *Reasons and Persons*, considers the objection that his account of personal identity may be parochial, applying only to the culture of Modern Europe and America. Some philosophers might be satisfied with such an achievement, which surely would be no mean feat. Parfit, however, finds this possibility disturbing and wants to claim more:

... I believe that I have now considered those views that, in this debate, need to be considered. I may be unaware of some other published view. And I have not considered views held in different ages, or civilizations. This fact suggests a disturbing possibility. I believe that my claims apply to

all people, at all times. It would be disturbing to discover that they are merely part of one line of thought, in the culture of Modern Europe and America. Fortunately, this is not true. I claim that when we ask what persons are, and how they continue to exist, the fundamental question is a choice between two views. On one view, we are separately existing entities, distinct from our brains and bodies and our experiences, and entities whose existence must be all or nothing. The other view is the Reductionist View. And I claim that, of these, the second view is true. . . . Buddha would have agreed. The Reductionist View is not merely part of one cultural tradition. It may be, as I have claimed, the view about all people at all times.<sup>7</sup>

Parfit's claim to universality, and the confidence with which it is made is really quite startling. It becomes even more so if we accept, which Parfit does, the importance that theories of personal identity have in relation to our beliefs concerning ethics and rationality. "I shall claim that, if we change our view about the nature of personal identity, this may alter our beliefs both about what is rational, and about what is morally right and wrong."<sup>8</sup>

Universal claims concerning what is right and wrong, and what is rational, seem therefore but a small step from the claim that a particular theory of personal identity is universally true. How can Parfit be so sure that his views concerning personal identity are true of all people at all times? How can he know that the Buddha would have agreed with him? Unless we believe Parfit to be irresponsible or guilty of some kind of Eurocentric arrogance, we should interpret him as holding the view that the problem of personal identity is not an empirical question, and that it can be resolved purely on the basis of philosophical speculation in the traditional manner of the armchair philosopher. We must also impute to him the view that philosophical speculation can give us access to universal categories of thought which transcend any particular time and culture.

## PHILOSOPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The concept of a person is not a concept that stands still, hospitably waiting an analysis of its necessary and sufficient conditions. . . . "Heroes", "characters", "protagonists", "actors", "agents", "persons", "souls", "selves", "figures", "individuals" are all distinguishable. Each inhabits a different space in fiction and in society. Some current controversies about criteria for personal identity, for characterizing and reidentifying human individuals are impasses because the parties in the dispute have each selected distinct strands in a concept that has undergone dramatic historical changes; each has made his strand serve as the central continuous thread.<sup>9</sup>

No one would dispute that the concept of a person is complex and made up of many strands. There is, however, a dispute over whether or not the concept of a person is truly what has come to be known as a family resemblance term, that is, a concept with no essential core but rather, made up of a family of overlapping similarities with no one property or properties common to them all.<sup>10</sup> Philosophers who address the problem of personal identity tend to be essentialists in that they seek to give some basic definition of what it is to be a person. In the western tradition, the problem of personal identity has become an aspect of the broader mind/body problem. The framework of this larger philosophical puzzle governs the ways in which questions of personal identity are both raised and resolved.<sup>11</sup> It is felt that once we can give an adequate account of the relationship between minds and bodies, we shall then be in a position to give identity conditions for people.

It is important to realize what is at stake here. Philosophers who address the issue of

personal identity consider the philosophical question foundational. Recognition is given to persons in the legal, religious, moral, and psychological sense - to name but a few - but the claim is that underlying them all is a common basis, the definition of a person given to us by philosophy. The complexity of a "person" is therefore not to be understood in terms of family resemblances but rather in terms of secondary meanings related in their different ways to an underlying core. Furthermore, as we have seen, this underlying core is claimed to be broader than any one philosophical tradition, in this case that which has come to be known as Anglo-American philosophy. Some attempts have been made to give this claim to universality some empirical basis and by now cross-cultural philosophers are all too familiar with comparisons between David Hume and the Buddhists, the kinship between Parfit and the Buddha being the most recent version of such a comparison.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is all too easy, and tempting given the apparent similarities, to view the whole dialogue between Buddhist and Hindu philosophers over whether or not there is a self as a re-enactment, in a different time and place, of the divide in the western tradition between the Humeans and the Cartesians. Differences are viewed as local variations of a basic theme.

This kind of attitude has become less prevalent in contemporary western philosophy where the trend towards universalization of philosophical themes is being replaced by a self-conscious recognition of their historical contingency. In his book Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Richard Rorty gives a cogent account of the historical genesis, and therefore contingency, of the contemporary mind/body problem. He demonstrates how, even within the western tradition, the particular model of contemporary mind/body dualism is but one chapter in a continuing historical process.<sup>13</sup> This sentiment is echoed by N. J. Allen in his essay, "Category of the person in Mauss":

No doubt, in so far as the philosophers suppose themselves to be working *a priori*, purely by means of reasoning from first principles, they exemplify the characteristic error of non-sociologists who, unaware of the history and pre-history of the fundamental notions with which they operate, naively regard them as natural.<sup>14</sup>

There continues to be much debate and no general consensus concerning the category of the person, to what extent this is a natural category of all human thought.<sup>15</sup> Given the complexity of this term, it is not clear how to demarcate the natural and necessary from the cultural and contingent:

Being embedded in beliefs and institutions of various kinds, the concept of the person is not the sort of entity that is immediately accessible.<sup>16</sup>

In his work on the caste system, the French sociologist Louis Dumont makes an important distinction between the individual in the normative sense and the individual in the empirical sense:

To start with, much imprecision and difficulty arise from failing to distinguish in the individual:

(1) The empirical agent, present in every society, in virtue of which he is the main raw material for any sociology. (2) The rational being and normative subject of institutions.<sup>17</sup>

This is an important distinction for it allows us to maintain a critical distance in cross cultural studies. When dealing with persons (or individuals) we need to be clear to what extent we are incorporating values into that term which may be specific to our society. The philosophical problem of personal identity is not value-neutral. In deciding whether a person at time  $t_1$  is the same person as at time  $t_2$ , we have to make decisions about what we

think is crucial in the identities of persons. Clearly, there is a possibility that this could vary from culture to culture. As we have seen, the philosophical account of personal identity does not fit clearly into either of Dumont's two categories and indeed, seems to conflate the two. On the one hand, we have seen philosophers claim a universality that is more appropriate to the first of Dumont's categories and yet the moral consequences associated with personal identity theories seem more appropriate to the second of his categories. In this paper I wish to examine the assumption of philosophers such as Parfit that their account of personal identity gives us immediate access to some universal and necessary category of personhood. I believe that Parfit presents about as convincing a case as anyone for this view; yet I would still wish to reject it. I would also, by extension, wish to question the universality of the moral and rational consequences associated with any such theory of personal identity. I intend to do this through an examination of notions of personal survival in reincarnation theories as presented in the Indian and Western philosophical traditions. My purpose here echoes that of Steven Collins who argues at the beginning of his book on the Buddhist notion of the person that:

... philosophical reflection should not proceed in abstraction from intellectual history and anthropology, from the investigation and comparison of cultures. Just as anthropology hopes, by means of the ethnographic study of other societies, eventually to illuminate both the specific nature of our own society and the general nature of all societies, so I think that philosophy should hope eventually to illuminate both the specific nature of its own inherent concerns and presuppositions and perhaps the general nature of human thought (if such exists) by studying the intellectual history of its own, and other traditions.<sup>18</sup>

#### REINCARNATION THEORIES: EAST AND WEST

... the theory of the transmigration of souls is marvellously adapted to explain the seeming chaos of moral inequality, injustice, and manifold evil presented in the world of human life. ... Once admit the theory to be true, and all difficulties in regard to moral justice vanish.<sup>19</sup>  
 ... the *Metempsychosis* is therefore the only system of this kind (that is, the only conception of immortality) that philosophy can hearken to.<sup>20</sup>

Theories of reincarnation are usually associated with the religious traditions of India. Most of the philosophers of India, whether they be Hindu or Buddhist, accepted a world-view which can be mapped out by means of the following three ideas: (1) *saṃsāra*, the round of rebirth, the cycle of temporal existence, usually associated with the experience of suffering; (2) *karma*, a significant action; actions, both good and bad, result in appropriate retribution, a principle which provides fuel for the samsaric process; (3) *mokṣa*, liberation from the plane of existence circumscribed by the *karma/saṃsāra* dyad.

Reincarnation in India is essentially a system which is both retrospective and predictive (to call it an ethical system at this point might be presumptuous). One's present circumstances in life can be attributed to actions performed in previous lives, and one's present actions will themselves in turn determine the status of future births. Advocates of this system point both to its apparent ability to account for the inequalities of existence and to its regulatory function in making us mindful of the inevitable consequences of our present actions. It seems to remove what might otherwise be considered the random, unfair nature of existence replacing it with a system of order and fairness. In India, this triad of ideas forms a view of a person's place in the world which became the *sine qua non* for nearly

all post-Upanisadic religious and philosophical thought (that is, after about 800 B.C.). There are two important considerations to stress here. First of all, it should be seen that reincarnation theories in India do not function as “solutions” to the problem of existence. Rather, they create one of the central problems of both Hinduism and Buddhism, that of endless suffering. Given the essentially miserable nature of all existence, any fate which condemns us to be born into this suffering time and time again becomes an intolerable burden. Hinduism’s *mokṣa* and Buddhism’s *nirvāṇa* offer respective “solutions” in that they offer an escape from an otherwise endless cycle of existence. Secondly, it should be stressed that reincarnation was accepted by both Hindus and Buddhists alike, and hence was not used in evidence over whether or not there exists an enduring self (*ātman*).<sup>21</sup>

Theories of reincarnation have been known in the West at least since the time of Pythagoras. Periodically, many individual philosophers have expressed their admiration for some kind of ethically based reincarnation theory. Unlike in India, however, they have never been incorporated into the mainstream intellectual tradition, no doubt because of the prevalence of Christian theories of resurrection and salvation. Reincarnation theories continue to enjoy a popular appeal in the West.<sup>23</sup> But what is more relevant for this paper though is that cases of reincarnation, whether real or imagined, have become an important aspect of mainstream philosophical discussions concerning personal identity. Certainly since John Locke first imagined a little finger with consciousness, or the possibility of two men sharing one soul, philosophers of personal identity have enlivened the traditional method of “armchair philosophy” with a method that involves the use of weird and wonderful imagined cases. Brains are bisected; Derek Parfit becomes Greta Garbo; two people both claim to be reincarnations of Guy Fawkes, and so on. The rationale behind the use of such “impossible cases” is that they stretch and challenge our concept of personal identity, trying to get us to see what is central to our concept. In contemporary philosophy of mind imagined cases of reincarnation, for example, function as theoretical counterexamples for some personal identity theories. Such discussions, whilst being about competing theories of personal identity, also reveal a common area of agreement within which the debate is conducted. There are certain concepts in any society, those which Geertz calls “experience-near concepts”, which people use so naturally and spontaneously that “they do not, except fleetingly and on occasion, recognize that there are any ‘concepts’ involved at all.”<sup>24</sup> Hence we can learn a great deal about our contemporary notions of personhood by articulating those questions concerning personal identity which are not asked because they lie so deep as to go unnoticed. Similarly, we can do the same in examining related theories in another culture, though here the pitfalls are more numerous since there is the added possibility of misinterpretation. We can also learn a great deal from what we say about each other - in this case I will focus on western critiques of the classical India *karma* theory.

## WAYS OF ‘SURVIVING’ REINCARNATION

I intend to consider four different ways in which a person might be reborn. Each case presents a different relationship between successive incarnations and each case raises different questions concerning personal survival and moral responsibility. Whilst my



examples are drawn from both Indian and western literature, in the first instance my focus will be our response to each of the four cases. Finally I will compare our response (which here means a western response) to some classical Indian *karma* theories and conclude by seeing how some of our criticisms of these classical *karma* theories reflect our own concerns and values. The four incarnations I am going to consider are:

- (1) Being reborn as a plant
- (2) Being reborn in an insect's body
- (3) Being reborn as another person
- (4) Being reborn as a hybrid person

As we shall see, these headings themselves incorporate certain presuppositions.

### BEING REBORN AS A PLANT

One day, Common absently kicked a stone by the side of the road. . . The stone was an inconspicuous one, dry as a cinder and about the size of a man's fist, and for same reason he felt like kicking it. And then, that apparently ordinary action came to take on very peculiar overtones in his mind. You know how it is. It happens to us all. You glance cautiously around to see whether anyone is watching. . . .

After some fatuous rationalization, Common aimed a second kick at the stone. . . . And instantly felt an emptiness, a sensation of being swept away. Was my mind always so blank? he wondered, and then it happened: something plant-like began to take hold in his mind. There was no other way to describe it. He had a distressing sense of physically falling - unpleasant yet strangely agreeable. . . . And then things grew stranger still. Common suddenly felt the firm tug of gravity. He felt glued to the spot, as if attached there. He was attached. Looking down he was dismayed to find his feet firmly lodged in the ground - and himself a plant! Transformed into something soft and thin, greenish brown, neither tree nor grass. After that everything went dark.<sup>25</sup>

Marian Ury in his review of Kobo Abe's collection of short stories asks the question, "What would you do, reader, if threatened with metamorphosis into a plant?" Being reborn as a plant is, according to two of Hinduism's greatest legislators, Manu and Yājñavalkya, the fate particularly associated for "the violator of the guru's bed". Both Manu and Yājñavalkya list rebirth as a creeper, shrub or grass as the penalty for this most heinous of crimes. The *Dharmaśāstra* literature (conservative Hindu legislative literature composed from about 200 B.C.-200 A.D. which places special emphasis on the roles and duties associated with the different castes) contains several systems of reincarnation, laying out the penalties associated with different crimes.<sup>26</sup> Some of them are quite comprehensive in nature. Manu, for example, gives an extensive classification of the rebirths associated with different kinds of theft. For stealing a cow, the associated penalty will be rebirth as an iguana; stealing milk will result in rebirth as a crow; and stealing leafy vegetables will result in rebirth as a peacock.<sup>27</sup> Manu lists the penalties for nearly forty types of theft, each type bearing the penalty of rebirth as some kind of animal. Sometimes we can see some connection between the designated rebirth and the type of theft involved. Mostly though, any such connection escapes us.<sup>28</sup> The complexity and exhaustiveness of Manu's classification is somewhat puzzling given the apparent absence of any logic relating the crime to its resulting rebirth.

If we are thinking of the *karma* theory in terms of moral retribution, then the possibility of rebirth as a plant or animal, or even something inanimate<sup>29</sup>, raises same interesting questions. In terms of an individual's future fate, we have to consider what kind of a threat

or punishment rebirth as a plant would constitute, a similar question to that asked by Marian Ury. We must distinguish the case which we are now considering, “being a plant”, from the case of “being a person trapped inside a plant”. I shall deal with the second type of case in the next section. There might be same horror attached to the slow transformation of ourselves into a plant, something like the excerpt from Abe’s short story - to see our fingers slowly turn into leaves, for example, would be unpleasant, probably even more so if our fate was to be a worm or a fly! The end result though would surely be so far removed from whom we feel ourselves to be as to destroy any connection that would make the notion of retribution comprehensible. We would be the plant, whatever that means. For Common, everything went dark, and presumably becoming a plant would be like dying.

The situation becomes even more puzzling when we come to consider how the process would continue from this point. How would the rebirth of the plant be determined? In order for the *karma* theory to make at any sense at this point it might be thought that we would have to develop some notion of a “plant morality”, that there are such things as good actions and bad actions in association with plants. When a reincarnation theory extends to plants and animals, and even in some cases to inanimate objects, it becomes difficult for us to understand. This is because the notion of being morally accountable is so intimately bound up with being a person, and being a person does not seem to extend to being a plant, animal or lump of rock.

#### BEING REBORN IN AN INSECT’S BODY

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin when compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.<sup>30</sup>

Here we seem to be on more familiar ground and one which accords more with a western understanding of *karma* theory. In Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Gregor’s fate might be seen as a suitable fate for certain kinds of crime - being unkind to insects for example? We also see this sentiment echoed in India today in the popular understanding of how *karma* operates.<sup>31</sup> Hence it might be thought a fitting punishment for someone who mistreated their bullocks to be reborn to a life yoked to a cart driven by an unkind master and yet, like Gregor, retaining some psychological continuity with their former incarnation. In this example we seem to be moving closer to an interpretation of the *karma* system which lies at the root of its acceptance. The idea expressed here is that of a suitable punishment being carried out in one life to satisfy a crime committed in a former life, with the two lives being also connected by enough psychological continuity to ensure some kind of personal survival. There are numerous examples in western literature of “people” being trapped in all kinds of bodies, ranging from Kafka’s serious tale to children’s literature. Similarly in India such tales are common, the most well known example being perhaps the *Jataka Tales* which recount the Buddha’s previous incarnations as various animals. In western philosophical literature such examples have been extensively used to test whether or not we are prepared to extend the limits of personhood beyond the human form, and



whether or not we will allow personal identity to survive a total body transformation. Those philosophers who hold some form of personal identity theory which is based on a psychological continuity would probably allow Gregor's survival in his new body. In order to establish that this is a case of "Gregor-in-a-cockroach's-body" it would be enough to establish continuity of character, memory and intentions.

In terms of the forward looking aspect of the *karma* theory there might arise some puzzlement. If we are talking about an individual being trapped in the body of a stone, or a plant, or an animal, then this might satisfy the demand for retribution for some past deed, yet it doesn't help us in determining how present deeds will affect future births. If we are talking about "personal" survival here then we are still talking about human moral agents. Yet here the new body seems to impose impossible limitations on being a human moral agent. Being a cockroach or a stone would be a serious curtailment of our moral life, to say the least. From our point of view, this example, like the last, makes it very hard to say how the status of the next rebirth should be continued.

### ON BECOMING ANOTHER PERSON

At the near end of this spectrum is the normal case in which a future person would be fully continuous with me as I am now, both physically and psychologically. This person would be me in just the way that, in my actual life, it will be me who wakes up tomorrow. At the far end of this spectrum the resulting person would have no continuity with me as I am now, either physically or psychologically. In this case the scientist would destroy my brain and body, and then create out of new organic matter, a perfect replica of someone else. Let us suppose this person be, not Napoleon, but Greta Garbo.<sup>33</sup>

In this example, Parfit imagines himself being slowly turned into Greta Garbo, physically and psychologically, in order to demonstrate the impossibility of being able to say precisely when Parfit ceases to exist and Garbo begins to exist. Western philosophical literature abounds with examples of one person becoming another, again in order to test the limits of personal survival. This case comes closest to what would be the case if reincarnation were true. If I am at present the reincarnation of some past person then this means that I both have a new body and a new set of memories and intentions, and a new character. It is a fact that most people do not remember ever having been anyone else. Does it make sense to talk of being able to survive such a transformation? Sometimes we talk of wishing that we were another person or we wonder what it would be like to be another person. Usually we are thinking about being same kind of "hybrid person", which I shall discuss in the next section. If I wish that I were Greta Garbo then either I'm wishing that I could step into her shoes, taking over her life (myself-as-Garbo) or else my wish seems to collapse into just wishing that there be a Greta Garbo. . . a wish already granted since Garbo already exists (let's assume she is still alive). Some philosophers have wanted to say that there is another alternative, that it is possible to wish or imagine myself as another person:

I believe that whatever we are told about continuity of mental content between two stages of experience, the issue logically remains open whether they have the same subject or not. In addition, it is clearly part of the idea of my identity that I could have led a completely different mental life, from birth. This would have happened, for example, if I had been adopted at birth and brought up in Argentina.<sup>34</sup>

This begins to make less sense when a complete change in mental life is also accompanied by a complete change of physical body. This case begins to weaken our approval of the *karma* theory. To be told that in my next life I am going to be born into a life of suffering is a little like being told that someone else is going to suffer. If I am compassionate, I may feel sorry for that person. I may be especially sorry if it can be demonstrated that their suffering in life is a result of my wrong-doing. If I am a nasty person I may be thankful that I have escaped punishment for my crimes and that someone else will have to pay the price. More troubling, when there is no memory of having performed an action in a previous life, to be punished for it in a following life seems like mere duplication of the original injury, rather than recompense for it. For example, if I was a child abuser in a previous life, then to be reborn to a life in which I in my turn suffer similar abuse, with no knowledge or memory of my former existence seems merely to repeat the original injury and seems to serve no purpose. In terms of the forward looking aspect of the *karma* theory, this third case seems easier to understand than the previous two, since in this case we are at least talking about human agents. We can see how each particular human incarnation may bring with it the possibility of making the best of that opportunity.

### HYBRID PERSONS

The hunter said: A certain king, who was adept at archery, was my friend, and through this association I, too, became a master with the bow, brahmin. At that time, the king went out hunting one day, accompanied by his best warriors and surrounded by his counselors. He shot a good many deer close to a hermitage. I too shot a wicked straight arrow, good brahmin, and it hit a hermit. He fell to the ground and spoke in a resounding voice, "I was innocent of any sin! Who has done this wicked thing?" Still thinking he was a deer, I ran to him and then saw that seer pierced by my straight arrow, that awesomely austere brahmin, who was now breathing his last on the ground. My heart trembled at my vile deed, and I cried out, "I did not know what I was doing! Pray forgive me!" So I spoke to the hermit, but faint with anger the seer replied to me, "Thou shalt be a hunter, cruel man, born from a serf, brahmin!"

The hunter said: When I had been so cursed by that seer, O best of brahmins, I tried to placate the eloquent saint with these words: "I did not know that I was doing this vile deed, hermit! Pray forgive it all, be appeased my lord!"

The seer said: The curse will not be changed; it will doubtless befall as I have said. But my natural kindliness prompts me to do you a favor now. Although born from a serf womb, you shall be a sage of the Law and undoubtedly pay obedience to your father and mother. Through this obedience you shall attain great success. You shall have the memories of your previous birth, and go to heaven. And when the curse has expired, you shall again be a brahmin.

The hunter said: In this manner was I cursed of yore by that seer of awesome heat, but was shown grace by him too, O best of men. I pulled the arrow out of him, brought him to the hermitage, and he failed to die. This tells you all that befell before. I shall go to heaven, best of brahmins.

The brahmin said: These are the vicissitudes, happy as well as unhappy, that man incurs, good sage. Pray have no regrets, for you have accomplished a difficult task, son, as you know your real birth. Your present vile profession is due only to your caste, sage. Suffer it for the time being, then you shall be a brahmin! Even now I doubt not that you are a brahmin.<sup>35</sup>

In our final example we have to consider the case in which rebirth as a human being is accompanied by memories of a previous human existence. Indian epic literature, such as the *Mahābhārata* from which the above example is taken, contains many such instances.

Here there is awareness in one's present existence of one's status in a past life, and, in this case, the individual concerned identifies himself more with his previous existence than with his present existence. He sees himself to be essentially a *brahmin* rather than a *śūdra* (serf). It is interesting to note that the *śūdra*'s ability to remember his previous existence is part of a favor bestowed on him by the seer. His time spent on earth as a *śūdra* is viewed as a deviation from his real identity. This example of what I call a "hybrid person" demonstrates the way in which a reincarnation theory that incorporates full memory of previous lives could be problematic. In India, obtaining a good rebirth is based upon performing the duties associated with one's particular caste. Each person has a clearly defined role in society which would be undermined if everyone could remember who they were in a previous existence. One would suspect that people would see themselves "essentially" as whoever they were in the best of their incarnations. It would lead to a confusion of roles. Memory of a previous life therefore, has to be the exception rather than the rule, even though, from our point of view, it might be thought to be more morally satisfying if one could remember one's former existences.

In conclusion, cases two and four seem to accord most with our moral intuitions. The difference between these two cases and cases one and three lies in the presence of memory. Although we might not wish to go as far as John Locke and make moral responsibility utterly contingent on the presence of memory, in reincarnation where there is no spatio-temporal continuity of one body, memory would seem to play a crucial role in being the bearer of moral responsibility. When we come to consider the empirical status of each of the four cases, cases two and four are the exception rather than the rule. As a matter of fact, people do not remember their former lives. The lack of memory might seem to undermine the empirical credibility of reincarnation theories, but what interests me is the effect that the absence of memory has on the notion of moral responsibility. These kinds of criticisms have been voiced by Paul Griffiths in his paper, "Notes Towards A Critique of Buddhist Karma Theory":

We may note that this is a problem of which Buddhists have been, and are, acutely aware. Without memory, continuity of physical identity and continuity of character traits and so on, does it really make sense to talk of 'the same individual' undergoing a multiplicity of lives.<sup>36</sup>

Griffiths, however, notes that reincarnation is less of a problem for Hindu philosophers because they have available to them the notion of the *ātman*, an enduring basis that persists from one life to the next. Supposedly with the introduction of the *ātman*, the doctrine of reincarnation becomes more meaningful. The postulation of an *ātman* to link successive lives together might seem similar to the Cartesian position in Western philosophy. It does not matter if my body changes, it does not matter if I lose all psychological continuity. In some essential sense I will be me. Richard Swinburne, a self-professed Cartesian claims:

... many religions have taken seriously stories of persons passing through the waters of Lethe (a river whose waters made a person forget all of his previous life) and then acquiring a new body. ... Those who hope to survive their death, despite the destruction of their body, will not necessarily be disturbed if they come to believe that they will have no memory of their past life on Earth.<sup>37</sup>

Swinburne, in the Cartesian tradition, maintains that it is possible to personally survive the destruction of both the body and memory. For Swinburne personal identity is something, "evidenced but not constituted by, bodily continuity and memory similar-

ity".<sup>38</sup> For Swinburne, personal identity derives from the simple fact of his own experience, over time, of just being the person he is.

It might seem therefore, that we do have a duplication in Indian philosophy of positions familiar to western philosophers. The situation becomes less clear, however, when we notice the distinction which Indian philosophers make between the *ātman* and the *ahaṁkāra*, literally; 'I-maker'. It is the *ahaṁkāra* that should be more properly identified with what we call the ego, and gives us a sense of our own individuality. It is not at all clear that the *ātman* yields the kind of personal identity that Griffiths attributes to it. The *ātman* is not that consciousness that we have of ourselves as individuals. The problem for both Buddhist and Hindu philosophers was how to preserve an ontological distinction between different sequences of lives, rather than provide them with an experiential unity. Neither Buddhist nor Hindu philosophers argue for an experiential unity binding all the different lives together. Where they disagreed was over the most satisfactory way to ontologically group the different lives together. Hindu philosophers felt they needed an enduring substratum, the *atman*. Buddhist philosophers argued that it was possible to give an ontological unity to the successive series of lives on the basis of causal relations binding events together, both in the context of one life and in the context of many lives. Personal survival is not crucial for the coherence of classical Indian *karma* theories. What is crucial is that same principle be found which sustains an ordered universe in which every action is linked to an appropriate result. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, persons are temporary phases in a larger and more complex system.

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#### Notes

1. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*; 300.
2. Ibid, 300.
3. Ibid, 301.
4. See Stroud (1977) Chapter Six for a good examination of the relationship between Hume's theory of mind and his explanation of personal identity. The Buddhists too, who might be said to hold some kind of No-Self theory (*anātmavāda*), also ruled out the possibility of an enduring Self (*ātman*) on logical grounds. They argued for the momentariness of all existence based on their understanding of causal efficacy. Because all existence is momentary, this ruled out the possibility of the existence of any enduring entity, including the *ātman*. A well known version of this argument is presented by the eleventh century Buddhist philosopher Jñānaśrīmitra in his text, the *Kṣārabhaṅgādhyāya*.
5. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*; 308.
6. This seems to be characteristic of all the well known philosophers in the western tradition who have contributed to the debate on personal identity - Locke, Hume, Butler, Reid, and in contemporary debate Perry, Shoemaker, Swinburne, Parfit, Lewis and Wiggins.
7. Parfit (1986): 273. By the Reductionist view, Parfit means just the opposite of the Non-Reductionist view namely, that we are not something over and above our brains, bodies and experiences.
8. Ibid, 306.

9. Amélie Rorty (1976).
10. The idea of a "family resemblance" term was introduced into philosophical discourse by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 67. He first introduced the term in order to explain the meaning of the word "game". There are many kinds of games and when we examine all the different kinds Wittgenstein says, "the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing. . ." Wittgenstein was concerned to point out there needn't be something which they all have in common. Perry in his introduction to *Personal Identity*, compares the problem of personal identity to explaining the nature of a baseball game to a friend. This is interesting in the light of Wittgenstein's comments concerning "games". It would put the problem in a different light if Perry had compared the problem of personal identity to explaining the nature of a "game" to someone unfamiliar with that term. In choosing the analogy of a specific game such as baseball, Perry is already setting up the problem of personal identity in such a way as to reduce its meaning to a single strand.
11. For example, see Shoemaker (1984), 69-70 where he says: "The problem of personal identity can be viewed as an aspect of the 'mind-body problem'. . . .Puzzlement about the nature of mental states is bound to give rise to puzzlement about the nature of persons, the pre-eminent subjects of such states. And this in turn manifests itself in puzzlement about personal identity -for a central part of understanding the nature of a kind of thing (like person) is understanding the identity conditions of things of that sort. The considerations that make it seem that mental states cannot be physical states also make it seem that persons cannot simply be physical bodies, and that personal identity must consist in something other than bodily identity."
12. For example, see Lesser's paper, "East and Western Empiricism and the No-Self Theory".
13. See Richard Rorty (1979), especially Chapter One; 49-50.  
 "...there had been no term, even of philosophical art, in the Greek and medieval traditions co-extensive with the Descartes-Locke use of "idea". Nor had there been a the conception of the human mind as an inner space in which both pains and clear and distinct ideas passed in review before a single eye."
14. Allen in Carrithers M., Collins S., and Lukes S. ( 1985); 30.
15. Chomsky, for example, has proposed that the concept of a person is an innate and natural category of all human thought.
16. Allen, *Ibid*, 31.
17. Dumont (1986), 9.
18. Collins (1982), 1.
19. Alger in Ducasse (1961), 209.
20. Hume in Ducasse (1961), 216.
21. Parfit claims that were there good empirical evidence for reincarnation he would see this as offering evidence for the existence of some kind of an enduring immaterial soul. See Parfit (1986), 227.
22. See Ducasse (1961) Chapter Twenty for a comprehensive list of thinkers in the West who have supported some kind of reincarnation-theory.
23. E.g., in the popular literature of Shirley Maclaine.
24. Geertz ( 1983); 58
25. Kobo Abe (1991)
26. See Rocher in O'Flaherty ed. (1980); 61-89
27. See Rocher *Ibid*, 71-72.

28. This might well of course be due to the fact that we do not yet know how to read Manu.
29. According to Manu, this is the result of performing wicked bodily actions; see Rocher *Ibid*, 63.
30. Kafka (1952); 19
31. For example, this is how it is depicted in Indian poster art. See attached illustration.
32. Is interesting to see that in the *Jataka Tales* the Buddha behaves with a morality that is still essentially human. For example, as an elephant, he offers up his tusks in an act of unselfishness, in a manner quite unlike a real elephant.
33. Parfit (1986); 236-237
34. Nagel (1986); 38
35. *Mahābhārata* 3(37) 205 21-3(37) 206 12 in van Buitenen's translation; 636, Vol. 2.
36. Griffiths (1982); 284.
37. Swinburne (1984), 25.
38. *Ibid*, 42.

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