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## REBIRTH

### I

Traditional Western conceptions of immortality characteristically presume that we come into existence at a particular time (birth or conception), live out our earthly span and then die. According to some, our death may then be followed by a deathless *post-mortem* existence. In other words, it is assumed that (i) we are born only once and die only once; and (ii) that – at least on some accounts – we are future-sempiternal creatures. The Western secular tradition affirms at least (i); the Western religious tradition – Christianity, Judaism, Islam – generally affirms both (i) and (ii). The Indian tradition, however, typically denies both (i) and (ii). That is, it maintains both that we all have pre-existed beginninglessly, and that we have lived many times before and must live many times again in this world. The Indian picture, then, is that we have died and been reborn innumerable times previous to this life and (failing our undertaking some spiritual discipline) we will be reborn many times in the future. This is sometimes called the Indian belief in reincarnation. The difficulty with this usage is that the term ‘reincarnation’ suggests a belief in an immortal soul that transmigrates or reincarnates. However Buddhism, while affirming rebirth, specifically denies the existence of an eternal soul. Thus the term ‘rebirth’ is preferable for referring to the generally espoused Indian doctrine.

The fact that the doctrine of rebirth is fundamental to Indian religious thought (including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) is of course widely known in the West.<sup>1</sup> However, it is symptomatic of the ethnocentrism of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion that the vast majority of philosophers in this tradition continue to ignore Indian religious concepts and prefer to concentrate almost exclusively on Judaeo-Christian religious notions.<sup>2</sup> A typical example of this parochial trend is provided by Peter

<sup>1</sup> An excellent locus for material on Indian views is Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). The idea of rebirth is, of course, by no means confined to India: compare the selections in Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston, eds., *Reincarnation in World Thought* (New York: Julian Press, 1967). For a recent attempt to rehabilitate reincarnation within Christianity see Geddes MacGregor, *Reincarnation as a Christian Hope* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception is to be found in the recent writings of John Hick: see especially his *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1975), chs. 16–19; *Philosophy of Religion* 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), ch. 10.

Geach who prefaces what is, in certain respects, a quite interesting essay on reincarnation with the following demurrals:

... I shall not try to discuss any Hindu or Buddhist views. This may strike some people as frivolous, in the way that it would be frivolous for somebody writing philosophical theology to discuss the writings of Judge Rutherford rather than of Thomas Aquinas. No doubt Hindu and Buddhist writings about reincarnation are of more inherent interest than *The Search for Bridey Murphy*; but I am wholly incompetent to discuss them; and even if I were myself able to talk about *atman* or *karma*, these are not notions which many of my readers could readily deploy.<sup>1</sup>

The argument is instructive: Geach himself is innocent of Indian views of rebirth; so too are most of his readers; therefore it is better for everyone to remain in this blessed state of innocence. Of course, an unkind critic might suggest that this cognitive innocence is just plain ignorance. Couple this suggestion with the common Indian belief that it is ignorance (*avidyā*) which is the cause of bondage to suffering and we have the beginnings of a case for treating Indian views about rebirth less cavalierly. Anyway, in this paper I propose to take the Indian doctrine of rebirth to be a serious metaphysical hypothesis and to consider critically the question of the philosophical credibility of such a doctrine.

## II

Briefly there are two sorts of arguments that can be offered for the rebirth theory: viz. philosophical arguments and empirical arguments. The first category includes metaphysical, ethical and theological arguments for the thesis; the second category presents the thesis as an explanatory hypothesis that satisfactorily accounts for various empirical phenomena. In practice the two types of argument can be rather difficult to separate. However, it is clear that for the thesis to serve as an adequate explanatory hypothesis it must at least be metaphysically coherent. Hence it is appropriate to begin by considering some metaphysical arguments for the truth of the rebirth thesis.

As I have already indicated, the Indian doctrine of rebirth includes both a belief in post-existence (I will be born again after my death) and a belief in pre-existence (my present life was preceded by a previous existence and so on). These two beliefs are in fact logically distinct. Nevertheless, they are mutually supportive. Hence if I pre-existed in a previous life, then I have survived death once and it is not unreasonable to suppose I might survive death again. Similarly, if I am presently post-existing relative to a previous life, then my previous life might also have involved post-existence relative to a yet earlier life – and so on. Finally, if I will post-exist in a succeeding life, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that I will die in that life and be reborn again. Thus pre-existence and post-existence together make probable

<sup>1</sup> Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 2.

(but do not entail) the Indian doctrine of a beginningless plurality of lives. Moreover, any metaphysical evidence for the truth of post-existence would seem also to favour the truth of pre-existence, and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> (Once again, however, it must be admitted that there seems no straightforward entailment relation involved here.)

In any case, the doctrine of pre-existence is certainly part of the Indian view of rebirth and so it is important to examine arguments for the truth of the doctrine. Now most Indian philosophers have believed (as most Indians still do) that we all have pre-existed beginninglessly. Indeed, since only the defunct Cārvāka school maintained otherwise, classical Indian philosophy displays a relative paucity of arguments for this thesis when compared with the extensive body of discussion it offers about the nature of what it is that has pre-existed.<sup>2</sup> Thus there are some empirical arguments adduced, like the Naiyāyika appeal to the inborn inclination of infants to suckle and their fears and joys.<sup>3</sup> These, however, may be unconvincing in the light of modern biological theory. There are also certain theological arguments related to the efficacy of the thesis in explaining away the problem of evil.<sup>4</sup> But these require for their plausibility prior commitment to a theistic point of view. More interesting philosophically are certain metaphysical arguments that purport to establish the pre-existence thesis. I want to examine critically two such attempts: one by the eighth century Indian Buddhist philosopher Śāntarākṣita and one by an outstanding modern Western interpreter of Indian philosophy, Karl H. Potter.

Śāntarākṣita's argument (glossed by his pupil Kamalaśīla) appears in his remarkable polemical compendium, the *Tattvasaṅgraha* (ślokas 1857–1964).<sup>5</sup> The chapter in question is devoted to a refutation of the views of the materialist Lokāyatās. It is important to understand, however, that this argument for pre-existence is not an argument for the pre-existence of a soul, i.e. an enduring substantial entity underlying change. Indeed, as a Buddhist Śāntarākṣita is committed to the denial of any such entity. Rather he assumes a particular Buddhist account of a person as a series of causally efficient point-instants. According to some Buddhist philosophers this person-series includes both mental and physical events or states. Hence for them a person

<sup>1</sup> Similar conclusions are urged in J. M. E. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), ch. 4; *The Nature of Existence*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), ch. 63. However, much of McTaggart's argumentation concerning pre-existence and post-existence is inextricably connected with the special peculiarities of his own metaphysical system.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of some of these arguments see Ninian Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), ch. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Nyāyasūtra* III. 1. 18, 21. There is a brief discussion of these arguments in Karl H. Potter, ed., *Indian Metaphysics and Epistemology: The Tradition of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika up to Gaṅgeśa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 35–7.

<sup>4</sup> On these sorts of arguments see Arthur L. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), part III.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Tattvasaṅgraha of Śāntarākṣita with the Commentary of Kamalaśīla*, vol. 2, trans. Gangānatha Jha (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1939), pp. 887–935. This seems to be the unspecified source for the 'Buddhist Idealist' argument cited in Smart, pp. 160–1.

is a two-strand causal series comprising both a chain of physical events and a chain of mental events. The two chains are related co-ordinately (*sādrśya*) but not causally: a view similar to the theory of psycho-physical parallelism in Western philosophy.<sup>1</sup> However, Śāntarakṣita seems to favour an idealist account at various points, in which case the person is presumably to be identified with the chain of mental events. Either way, the argument is an argument for the pre-existence of the consciousness series.

The argument rests upon two principles. The first is the principle of universal causation, i.e. that every event has a cause. The second is a principle to the effect that not every mental event is totally caused by physical events. Or more exactly, that there are some mental events which have no physical events in their casual ancestry (allowing here for the possibility of indirect causation). Call this the 'mental cause principle'. (Note that this formulation of the mental cause principle is compatible with either a realist or an idealist ontology.) These two principles can then be used to generate the following argument. For consider the first member of the chain of cognitions. Or more precisely, consider the first mental state in the life of an individual that is not totally caused by physical states. It must have as at least its part-cause a mental state occurring before the birth (or conception) of the individual. Thus pre-existence is established. Moreover, since this argument can be repeated for any previous life, the beginninglessness of the causal series of cognitions is established. Finally, since there is a previous birth, it is also reasonable to assume a future birth. After all, the cognition at the moment of death in this life is presumably causally efficacious in precisely the same way that the last cognition of the previous life was.

There are various ways to try to block the regress this argument trades upon. One is to invoke the hypothesis of the existence of God. That is, we might argue that the first non-physically caused mental state in the life of an individual was caused by a divine mental state. The individual is not, then, beginningless. Moreover, the existence of the consciousness series is thus dependent upon God's existence, i.e. He is the creator. However, the regress will apply in the case of God, for the chain of divine mental states is indeed beginningless (God is eternal).

As a Buddhist Śāntarakṣita is unwilling to admit the theistic hypothesis and elsewhere in his work he argues independently against the existence of God. However, even if the theistic hypothesis can be ruled out on other grounds, there remains another possibility. The theistic hypothesis presupposes the truth of a more general principle, viz. that the first non-physically caused mental state in the life of an individual could have been caused by a mental state of some other individual. But if we admit this principle, then

<sup>1</sup> This sort of view can be found in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*: compare Karl H. Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 130–7; Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word 'Dharma'* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1923).

we do not need to insist that it is God's mental states which cause the initial mental states of other individuals. Rather, any individual's mental states could cause another's initial mental state. Thus what the regress will now show is the beginninglessness of causally efficient mental states, not the beginninglessness of any particular chain of such states. That is, the existence of conscious beings (conceived of here as causal series) could well be beginningless without this necessitating that any particular conscious being is beginningless. To block this possibility Śāntarakṣita would have to deny the general principle that a person's initial mental state could be directly caused by the mental state of another. Now there seems no *logical* difficulty with such a possibility: telepathy is presumably a putative example of such a phenomenon and that seems at least a coherent hypothesis. Hence the principle will have to be rejected on empirical grounds. That is, it will be maintained that while such causal interactions may be logically possible, it is contingently the case that no such interactions take place in our world. The plausibility of this empirical claim will then be as strong as the case against the existence of the relevant parapsychological phenomena. Assuming this to be still an open question, I leave the matter there.

Of course, this does not exhaust the range of escape routes from Śāntarakṣita's regress argument. As I have already indicated, the argument rests upon two principles: the principle of universal causation and the mental-cause principle. Hence the denial of one or both of these principles will disarm the argument. Now some would be willing to deny the first principle and maintain that certain events are uncaused. Data from quantum mechanics is sometimes used to support such a position. However, the correct interpretation of this data is highly controversial philosophically. At the very least, it is unclear that the instance of uncaused subatomic events (if they indeed occur) would in any way undermine the causal principle construed as a thesis about macroscopic events. If we then assume that mental events are macroscopic events, the regress argument is untouched.

Another way of denying the causal principle is to opt for contra-causal libertarianism and maintain that certain events are indeed uncaused; most importantly, free human actions. This move can then block the regress by maintaining that the first non-physically caused mental event in the life of an individual need not be mentally caused. Instead it could be uncaused, as are all free mental acts. Of course, libertarianism has its own problems. First, it owes us an account of how such uncaused events can be *actions* done under an agent's control. Secondly, if free acts are uncaused events then how can such events be rendered explicable without appealing to causal explanations? Now it may be that libertarianism is able to present a consistent story about these matters. However, I shall assume for the moment that the principle of universal causation is better entrenched than the libertarian view of acts that are uncaused events.

One final point about the principle of universal causation. I formulated the principle of universal causation as the principle that every event has a cause. But it might be objected that Śāntarākṣita's regress argument seems rather to require a principle to the effect that every event has a prior cause. And such a principle is surely false, for a cause and its effect might be simultaneous (as a train's motion is simultaneous with the motion of its carriages that it causes). Now it does seem reasonable to concede that sometimes causes and effects can be contemporaneous; but this admission need not touch Śāntarākṣita's argument. For either the first non-physically caused mental event of this life is caused by a prior mental event, or else it is caused by a contemporaneous mental event. On the first option, of course, we have the regress underway. On the second option, however, we are no better off. For what is the cause of the mental event that is the contemporaneous cause of the first non-physically caused mental event of this life? Given that it is not physically caused, then its cause must be either a prior mental event, or else another contemporaneous mental event. In the first case we have the infinite temporal regress underway; in the second case we can ask the same question once again about the cause of that contemporaneous cause. So either we have an infinite temporal regress, or (implausibly) we have an infinity of contemporaneous causes and effects at the beginning of the causal series of each person's mental events.

What about the mental-cause principle then? Materialism, of course, denies this principle; so too does epiphenomenalism. Acceptance of the principle apparently commits us either to idealism or to dualism (i.e. interactionist dualism or parallelism). The standard Indian objection to the strong materialist claim that identifies the mental and the physical is a familiar one, resting upon what Western philosophers sometimes parochially call 'Leibniz's Law'. That is, it is maintained that mental states have properties not shared by physical states and hence cannot be identical with physical states. Unfortunately, the objection is inconclusive since it is usually subjective phenomenal properties that are appealed to and Leibniz's Law is notoriously unreliable in intentional contexts. In any case, the Indian materialists (the Cārvākas or Lokāyatas) generally conceded that consciousness possesses properties which seem peculiar to itself. But these properties, it was asserted, are supervenient upon physical states. Consciousness, then, is an emergent characteristic of the physical states formed by combinations of material elements. Just as, for example, the red colour of *pān* is an emergent property of the ingredients (betel, areca nut, lime), none of which is individually red coloured; so too consciousness is an emergent property of the unconscious material elements.

Putting aside for the moment the opaqueness of the whole notion of emergent properties, Śāntarākṣita has a twofold reply to the Lokāyata view. Firstly, he argues that the materialist claim that the mental is always causally

dependent upon the physical is not conclusively established. This is because we cannot apply the customary method of agreement and difference to support the existence of such a universal causal law. Thus in the case of other people, we never have direct access to their mental states to establish the necessary positive and negative concomitance. In our own case, on the other hand, although we can observe the concomitance of some mental and bodily states, we obviously cannot do this for the *first* mental event of our present life. Hence there is no proof that the two sets of phenomena are causally related in the way the materialist claims. Secondly, it seems that there is in fact evidence to suggest that some mental states are not totally physically caused. In dreams or imaginings, for example, the mind can apparently work independently of external physical stimuli. Perhaps, then, some mental states could even occur independently of *any* physical cause.

Now the whole question of the relation of the mental and the physical is, of course, a deep and tangled one; one I do not intend to pursue any further here. All I want to claim here and now is that if we concede Śāntarakṣita his mental-cause principle (as many philosophers would) and also his principle of universal causation (as again many philosophers would), then his argument is apparently sound – though, as was pointed out, he has to deny direct causal relations between minds. The argument shows, then, at least the possibility of pre-existence (and with it, rebirth). Indeed, depending upon the strength of one's commitments to the premises of the argument, it can surely make the notion of pre-existence (and rebirth) extremely plausible. This, I take it, should be a surprising conclusion to those Western philosophers who might be sympathetic to the principles that generate Śāntarakṣita's argument.

### III

Karl Potter's argument is rather different from Śāntarakṣita's.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Śāntarakṣita's is an argument for the pre-existence of the consciousness series, Potter's is an argument for the beginningless pre-existence of the morally responsible agent. It involves no detailed account of the nature of such a beginningless agent and certainly does not involve any overt commitment to dualism or idealism. Nevertheless, there is a certain family resemblance between the two arguments at least insofar as both are infinite regress arguments.

Briefly the argument is as follows. Suppose we analyse 'A has the ability to  $\phi$ ' as roughly something like 'A is in a condition such that, given opportunity, if he tries to  $\phi$  then he succeeds a certain percentage of the

<sup>1</sup> Karl H. Potter, 'Pre-existence' in P. T. Raju and Alburey Castell, eds., *East-West Studies on the Problem of the Self* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), pp. 193–207. This paper was originally presented in 1965 and Potter briefly reiterates the argument in order to build upon it in his 'Freedom and Determinism from an Indian Perspective', *Philosophy East and West*, xvii (1967), 113–24 (especially pp. 114–16). The argument has an ancestral connection with one offered in John Wisdom, *Problems of Mind and Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), pp. 123–6.

time'.<sup>1</sup> Now consider a particular case: 'Smith has the ability to raise-his-arm-at- $t_2$ ' will thus be analysed as something like 'There is a condition C such that if at  $t_n$  Smith is in C and, given opportunity, tries to raise his arm, then he succeeds in raising his arm at  $t_{n+1}$  a certain percentage of the time; and Smith is in C at  $t_1$ '. But if Smith has the ability to raise his arm at  $t_2$  then it must also be true that he has the ability to try to raise his arm at  $t_1$ . However, trying to raise his arm is itself another action and hence Smith's ability to perform this action is open to a parallel analysis to that given to 'Smith has the ability to raise-his-arm-at- $t_2$ '. That is: 'There is a condition C' such that if at  $t_{n-1}$  Smith is in C' and, given opportunity, tries to try-at- $t_n$ -to-raise-his-arm-at- $t_{n+1}$ , then he succeeds in trying-at- $t_n$ -to-raise-his-arm-at- $t_{n+1}$  a certain percentage of the time; and Smith is in C' at  $t_0$ '.

Obviously we can now generate a regress. Moreover, given that Smith's responsibility for raising his arm requires that he has the ability to raise his arm, then his responsibility for trying to raise his arm requires that he has the ability to try to raise his arm. Thus if the ability to try to  $\phi$  is a prerequisite for attributing responsibility to someone for  $\phi$ -ing, the agent must be beginningless. Otherwise there is some action of the agent which he is unable to try to perform and yet his ability to perform it is a necessary condition of his being responsible for his performance of  $\phi$ . That is, if the agent is not beginningless he cannot be responsible for any of his actions.

Note that the argument is for the thesis that the agent must have the ability to perform an infinite number of actions in order to perform any action at all. But the analysis does not require that an action must be preceded by another action; only that an action must be preceded by the agent's *ability* to perform another action. In other words, the regress involved here is not the regress that the notion of basic actions is supposed to block. What the argument is supposed to show, then, is that an agent can never come into existence, but must have existed beginninglessly. For suppose that there was a first event in an agent's history. In that case that first event is not an action since there is no prior condition the agent was in (as required by the analysis of 'having the ability to act' assumed here). But then neither can any subsequent event be an action of that agent either, for no subsequent event could be preceded by the appropriate conditions. Thus the agent never acts, or has always had the ability to act. If the agent is acting now, he must be beginningless.

Naturally some will be disposed to regard this conclusion as a *reductio* of the presupposed analysis of ability or of the sort of account of responsibility that utilizes it. However, it does seem that a similar argument could be generated from any conditional analysis of ability. That is, any analysis that

<sup>1</sup> Such an analysis is offered in Arnold S. Kaufman, 'Ability', *Journal of Philosophy*, LX (1963), 537-51.



explicates ability in terms of a subjunctive conditional of some form.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the critic might also welcome this more general conclusion, in which case he presumably owes us an alternative and superior account of ability. Be that as it may, there does remain one possible attempt to avoid the conclusion of the regress argument while accepting the general sort of account of ability. The argument, it will be remembered, assumes that having the ability is causally relevant to an agent's performing an action. The regress then generated presupposes that the ability to perform the act involves the existence of a condition of the agent prior to the performance of the act. But this surely need not be the case. For given that the idea is that the appropriate condition is causally relevant, then (as we earlier remarked) a cause need not temporally precede its effect; it might be contemporaneous with its effect. Could, then, an ability to perform an action come into existence contemporaneously with the performance of the action? And would this prevent the regress argument that implies the beginninglessness of the agent?

It seems that there is such an escape route, though how attractive it would be is unclear. Let's suppose there is an event E which is the first event in an agent's history. For that event to be an action performed by the agent there would also have to be another event E', the agent's ability to try to bring about E. (This will be an event insofar as, on the account of ability assumed here, it involves the occurrence of an appropriate condition of the agent.) And this in turn means that there must be a third event E'' (the agent's ability to try to try to bring about E) – and so on. But now suppose that we allow E, E', E'', etc., to be all contemporaneous. In this case we can then avoid the temporal regress to the beginninglessness of the agent. However, if we do this then we have to accept that the first action which the agent performed involved the simultaneous occurrence of an infinite number of causally implicated contemporaneous events. (Not all of these events, of course, are other actions.) Hence the regress that implies the beginninglessness of the agent can be evaded in this way, but at a cost. One consequence of this escape route is that the agent's performance of his first action also supposedly involves the simultaneous occurrence of an infinity of other contemporaneous events, all of which are causally implicated in the occurrence of that first action.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to see that this is much more plausible than the beginninglessness of the agent.

Anyway, rather than press the matter any further here let us look instead at exactly what the argument would establish if it were indeed sound. The thesis it purports to establish is the beginninglessness of an agent. By itself,

<sup>1</sup> On such analyses and their difficulties see Lawrence H. Davis, *Theory of Action* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), ch. 3.

<sup>2</sup> A similar difficulty for Chisholm's account of agent causalism is pointed out in Graham Oddie, 'Control' in R. G. Durrant, ed., *Essays in Honour of Gwen Taylor* (Dunedin: Philosophy Department, University of Otago, 1982), pp. 198–9.

however, this thesis entails no detailed theory about the number or nature of such agents. Nevertheless an important point about Indian views of rebirth is brought out by the argument. For (as Potter points out) it is the active factors of personality that all Indian philosophers regard as that which has beginningless existence; i.e. our powers of choice and discrimination, our abilities. Hence I propose a minimal account of the beginningless agent by characterizing an agent as a locus of (basic) actions and abilities.<sup>1</sup> Such a definition seems required both philosophically and exegetically. Philosophically it is necessary to identify the agent with the locus of actions and abilities if we are to avoid the problem of how otherwise to connect an agent and his abilities on the one side with his actions on the other. Between an agent and his basic actions there is no gap to bridge. Exegetically the proposal accords well with the doctrine of karma, a doctrine crucially intertwined with the Indian belief in rebirth. This is the doctrine that our actions have causal consequences which determine our subsequent situations. Thus my present circumstances are the effect of my previous deeds, just as my future circumstances will be determined by my present actions. (The term 'karma' derives from the Sanskrit root *kr*, to act.)

Consider in this regard the following passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (iv. 4. 5):

According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.

But people say: 'A person is made [not of acts, but] of desires only.' [In reply to this I say:] As is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs; what action (*karma*) he performs, [into that does he become changed].<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this quotation, of course, is a succinct statement of the doctrine of karma. However, at the same time it is highly suggestive for our purposes in that it apparently identifies the agent with his actions. Then, in reply to an objection, it broadens this account to include the causal components of his actions, i.e. his desires and resolutions (or perhaps 'volitions' since the Sanskrit *kratuḥ* may be translated as 'will' as well as 'resolve'). This surely amounts to much the same as the suggestion that an agent is the locus of basic actions and abilities (insofar as these latter are causal components of his basic actions).

Now it might seem simpler here to drop the use of the term 'locus' and simply identify the agent with the set of his actions, or even just with the set

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the suggestion in Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) that the limits of my self are defined by my repertoire of basic actions. Danto, however, identifies basic actions with physiological processes and hence identifies agents with their bodily processes. The account I am proposing is neutral with regard to the question of whether there are irreducibly mental basic acts.

<sup>2</sup> *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, trans. Robert Ernest Hume, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 140.

of desires that cause the actions.<sup>1</sup> However, there are two objections to such a proposal: one philosophical and one exegetical. The philosophical objection is that it is unclear how we are to individuate agents on such an account. For it seems possible that there could be two exactly similar desire-sets characterizing two distinct agents. And yet on this account such agents would have to be identical. The exegetical objection is that such an account is too nominalistic to be an acceptable exposition of the general Indian view. Desires and actions are apparently properties of an agent, and many Indian philosophers wish to insist upon a distinction between properties and property-possessors.

My use of the term 'locus' was suggested by the Sanskrit philosophical terms *āśraya* and *adhiṣṭhāna*, both of which are often translated as 'locus'. Roughly speaking, in Indian philosophy an *āśraya* or *adhiṣṭhāna* is that which things reside 'in' or 'on' or 'at'. It is not necessarily conceived of as spatio-temporal; (it certainly is not so conceived in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, for example). However, spatio-temporal difference implies difference of loci. The locus of a property or object X is that in which X resides. Thus on realist accounts the relation of a property to its locus is the relation of a universal to the particular it characterizes, or the relation between a property and the substance it is 'in'.

Now in proposing an account of an agent as a locus of basic actions and abilities I have deliberately left open the question of what sort of an account is to be given of the relation between properties and their loci. Hence the minimal definition offered should be unexceptionable to almost all Indian philosophers. Where they differ is in what further account of properties and property-possessors they maintain. Hindu philosophers, for example, tend to favour some sort of realist or conceptualist account which understands the loci to be substances (material or immaterial). On the other hand, nominalist Buddhist philosophers, working with an event ontology, eliminate property-possessors in favour of bundles of properties or property-instances. However, these are further metaphysical questions which need not prevent all of these philosophers agreeing that an agent is a locus of basic actions and abilities.

But even if the exegetical problem is met by my account, what about the individuation problem? There certainly is a philosophical problem here. However, this is not a particular problem for the proposed account of an agent. It is just a special case of a general metaphysical problem about properties and property-possessors. If we understand loci to be substantial property-possessors then we have to be able to individuate substances. But if an agent is a substance, then how do we individuate substances as distinct from the properties they possess? On the other hand, if we reject substances as the Buddhists do, then there are no individuals to be identified as agents

<sup>1</sup> For the suggestion that the self is simply a set of actual or potential desires (needs, wants, and interests) see Herman, pp. 192–5.

but only causally related patterns of events. Agents (like all 'entities') are analysed as processes, patterns of events. But then the problem is how to individuate such processes. Either way, there is no special problem about the individuation of agents. Whatever general metaphysical account is to be given of the relation of a property to its locus will be used to deal with the individuation problem about agents. Similarly, whatever general account is given of identity preservation through change of properties will also be used to deal with the problem of what preserves identity of the agent through time and change (including rebirth). On these general metaphysical questions Indian philosophers (like their Western counterparts) take various positions so that it cannot be said that there is one general Indian account of these matters.

## IV

The obvious objection at this point is that even if we can concede the metaphysical coherence of the notion of a beginningless agent conceived of as a locus of basic actions and abilities, yet such a concept of an agent is clearly not identical with the concept of a person. Hence pre-existence and rebirth so conceived do not really involve any sort of personal continuance. And this, of course, is true insofar as it goes. Indeed it is precisely what we would expect, given any knowledge of the Indian context of the doctrine of rebirth. Thus it is part of the Indian view that we can be reborn not just as humans, but as gods, demons, animals and even plants. It is hard to see that any account of *personal* identity could embrace such successive rebirths. Moreover, the Indian religio-philosophical tradition is deeply opposed to a concern with what most Westerners would consider ordinary human personality, regarding such a concern as a source of bondage to suffering. The eschatologies of Indian religions generally present a picture of final release wherein the agent so blessed is a very different sort of being from our ordinary conception of a person. And this in turn is one instance of the radically different conception of the nature and value of the individual person in Indian thought as compared with that familiar to us from, for example, the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

However, these remarks just seem to invite further objections. At least three questions naturally come to mind. Firstly, if there is no sense of strong personal identity across lives, then surely the theory is entirely void of any genuine personal significance? Secondly, if my rebirth is not the same person as me, then why should I concern myself with his fate? Thirdly, if he is not the same person as me, then how can he justly incur the karmic consequences of *my* actions (as the doctrine of karma maintains).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of these sorts of objections in relation to Theravāda Buddhism see Peter Forrest, 'Reincarnation Without Survival of Memory or Character', *Philosophy East and West*, xxviii (1978), 91-7.

The first problem, then, is whether the doctrine of rebirth is essentially vacuous in personal terms, even though it might be a metaphysical possibility. In this connection consider, for instance, the argument from the fact that we do not normally remember our putative previous lives. Now clearly the truth of this claim cannot in itself rule out the possibility of our pre-existence: I do not remember what I ate for lunch three weeks ago, but this does not entail that I did not have lunch then. Rather, the point seems to be that in the absence of memory the past lives would form only a disconnected series with no sense of personal continuity between them. The connections between lives would then be too weak to make the idea of rebirth of any real interest personally. In his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (section 34) Leibniz put the point thus:

Suppose that some individual could suddenly become King of China on condition, however, of forgetting what he had been, as though being born again, would it not amount to the same practically, or as far as the effects could be perceived, as if the individual were annihilated, and a King of China were the same instant created in his place? The individual would have no reason to desire this.<sup>1</sup>

In reply to this argument we might begin by pointing out that there is at least one sense of memory which is not explicitly excluded in Leibniz's scenario. For example, I remember how to tie shoelaces without remembering when and where I learnt to do this. Thus it is possible that memories as abilities or capacities might link lives in a fashion that is of some personal relevance without there being conscious memories of the experiences of these previous lives. And in fact the doctrine of karma does maintain that certain dispositions of the sort alluded to here carry across lives. The second point that needs to be made is that some people do claim to remember their previous lives. In the Indian tradition such an ability is thought to be typical of saints and *yogins*. (The Buddhist tradition, for instance, very early linked the acquisition of the ability to recall former births with the actual enlightenment experience of Gautama Buddha.)<sup>2</sup> Moreover, claimed memories of former lives are by no means limited to saints. Occasionally even ordinary people maintain that they have memories of at least fragments of previous lives; such memories including subsequently confirmed data which would seem to have not been available to them in any usual way.<sup>3</sup> Although such cases may not be frequent and well documented enough to be conclusive evidence for rebirth, they are nevertheless strongly suggestive of rebirth.

<sup>1</sup> *Leibniz Selections*, Philip P. Wiener ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 340.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *Majjhima Nikāya*, i. 248; *Samyutta Nikāya*, ii. 213. There are numerous other references in the Pāli Canon to the ability of an adept to recall past lives: see *Digha Nikāya*, i. 81; *Majjhima Nikāya*, i. 482, ii. 31, iii. 99, etc.

<sup>3</sup> On such cases the careful researches of Professor Ian Stevenson should be consulted: see his *The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations* (Tadworth: M. C. Peto, 1961); *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974); *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*, vols. I–III (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975–9).

Furthermore, they serve to undermine the claim that the rebirth doctrine is entirely vacuous in personal terms.

These remarks, however, are inconclusive as they stand. In the first place, while it is surely possible that certain dispositions can carry across lives (our genetic inheritance would instance this); yet this degree of psychological continuity may be felt to be too weak to count as *rebirth*. It seems we require some element of memory for the doctrine to have any real personal significance. Of course, the requirement that we actually remember our previous lives is too strong. To preserve the theory from personal vacuity perhaps all we need is the requirement of latent memories. That is, if memory of any given life may be regained at some later point in the series of lives, then this possibility will provide sufficient continuity to hold the series together and hence guarantee the non-vacuity of the concept.<sup>1</sup>

But this suggestion is likely to be judged unsatisfactory for the following reason. The thesis is that the psychological continuity required to make the notion of rebirth non-vacuous can be explicated in terms of actual or latent memories. There is, however, an obvious and fundamental difference between *really* remembering and *seeming* to remember. I can only have real memories of my previous life if I am the same person as the person whose life I remember. But the account of rebirth under discussion supposedly does not insist that I am in any strong sense the *same person* as the person whose life I remember and whom I claim to be a rebirth of.

To meet this objection we need to prise memories (latent or otherwise) away from actual past experiences of those who remember. This can be done by taking over a suggestion of Derek Parfit's and introducing a new notion of memory which he calls *q-memory*:

I am *q*-remembering an event if (1) I have a belief about a past experience which seems in itself like a memory belief, (2) someone did have such an experience, and (3) my belief is dependent upon this experience in the same way (whatever that is) in which a memory of an experience is dependent upon it.<sup>2</sup>

Memories, then, are just *q*-memories of one's own experiences. The concept of *q*-memories is the wider concept; the class of memories is a subset of the class of *q*-memories. If we drop the narrower concept of memory in favour of the wider concept of *q*-memory, then we can explicate the memory condition that provides the psychological continuity across the series of lives in terms of latent *q*-memory. The account so modified is not then open to the objection that it requires a stronger sense of personal identity than it is willing to admit.

The view outlined so far, then, does provide for a sense of continuity which would guarantee the non-vacuity of the doctrine of rebirth in personal terms

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. J. Ducasse, *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life After Death* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1961), p. 225.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review*, 8 (1971), 15.

without insisting upon strict identity across lives. This seems to capture the general Indian view. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, this view is expressed by the claim that the reborn person is ‘neither the same nor another’ (*na ca so na ca añño*) in relation to the deceased whose karma he inherits. Thus the well known exchange in the *Milanda-pañha* (II, 2, 1):

The king asked: ‘When someone is reborn, Venerable Nagasena, is he the same as the one who just died, or is he another?’ The Elder replied: ‘He is neither the same nor another.’<sup>1</sup>

Insofar, however, as the reborn person is the karmic heir of the deceased, linked to him by both causally induced dispositions and latent *q*-memories, it is appropriate to regard them as the same agent, even if they are not strictly the same person.<sup>2</sup>

v

Two further objections to the theory of rebirth were mentioned earlier. They can be conveniently grouped together in that they both concern the moral dimensions of the theory. The first is expressed in the question: ‘If my rebirth is not strictly speaking the same person as myself, then why should I concern myself with his fate?’ The answer is that there is a moral obligation towards one’s karmic heir. Not only is there a general presumption that we are morally obliged to consider the interests of future generations, but there is a ‘self-referentially altruistic’ argument for particularly concerning oneself with the fate of one’s karmic heir. For it is generally felt that one has a particular obligation to those closest to oneself (relatives, friends, etc.) and on this theory one’s karmic heir is the very closest of surviving relations. Moreover, if we assume that people are most easily motivated by egoistic concerns, then the more closely we identify with our karmic heirs, the easier it will be to fulfil our moral responsibilities to them. Hence regarding one’s karmic heir as the closest moral equivalent to oneself will make it easier to fulfil one’s moral obligations.

The other objection, it will be recalled, was to do with the apparent injustice of someone not identical with me incurring the karmic consequences of *my* actions. Strictly speaking, this is not an objection to the theory of rebirth but to the doctrine of karma. However, since the two doctrines are closely intertwined in the Indian tradition, it is appropriate to say something about this charge. In the first place the objection presupposes the truth of a retributivist account of just punishment. That is, it is assumed that it is only just for me to suffer the karmic consequences of a person’s actions if I am

<sup>1</sup> Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), pp. 149–150.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Mahābhārata*, XII, 218 (220), 35 where there is a criticism (apparently directed at the Buddhist view) of the idea that karma should fall to the lot of other than the doer of the deed. Of course, the Buddhist would concede this but deny that ‘same doer or agent’ is equivalent to ‘same person’. Moreover, he would point out that his Hindu opponents must also admit this non-equivalence. Where they differ is on the question of whether ‘*a* is the same (agent) as *b*’ involves absolute or only relative identity.

that very same person. But on alternative deterrence or reformatory theories of punishment it may be justifiable in certain circumstances to punish someone for an action he did not commit. Secondly, if we conceive of the 'law of karma' as involving the claim that 'justice is done', then what we have is an implicit theory of justice according to which one's responsibility for actions does not necessarily involve one's strict identity with the person who performed these actions. That is, ' $x$  is right to hold  $y$  responsible' is the primitive relation and ' $A$  has the karma of having done  $b$ ' entails ' $A$  is rightly held responsible for having done  $b$ '.<sup>1</sup> Such a theory may seem more plausible if we recall that it is certainly a psychological fact that people can feel responsible or be held by others to be responsible for deeds not committed by them. Thus the guilt of some whites over their ancestors' treatment of black slaves, or the way in which some blacks hold all whites to be responsible for past mistreatments of blacks. (This example is, of course, only supposed to show that the idea that one person can be responsible for the actions of another person is not so alien a notion as all that. It is not claimed that this proves that such ascriptions are in fact just.)

Finally, it is sometimes objected that the moral intelligibility of the doctrine that my present circumstances are the result of actions in a previous life requires that we remember such lives. Otherwise there can be no sense in which someone can be held responsible for an action of which he knows nothing and which occurred before he was born. Hick suggests that this argument can be met by invoking the possibility of latent memories which at some later time are recovered and hence link together the series of lives and deeds in a morally intelligible way.<sup>2</sup> However, even without appealing to Hick's rejoinder, the objection surely will not do. Suppose that as the result of an accident caused by himself a man both kills a pedestrian and also incurs amnesia so that he can remember neither the accident nor the circumstances leading to it. His responsibility for the accident is certainly not diminished by his present circumstances. Nor need he *remember* his actions to feel responsible; all he needs for that is the *belief* that he was responsible for the accident. Thus neither responsibility nor the feeling of being responsible require memory (latent or actual).

#### IV

To sum up then. I have argued for the metaphysical coherence of the general Indian account of rebirth. To this end two arguments for pre-existence were

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Forrest, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> *Death and Eternal Life*, p. 354. However, Hick is much more impressed by the argument that the doctrine of karma cannot satisfactorily explain away the problem of suffering (including the inequality of human birth and circumstances) because it involves an infinite regress of explanations which ultimately leaves the phenomenon unexplained: see *Death and Eternal Life*, pp. 308–9; *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 141–2. This argument seems to me unsatisfactory, based as it is upon a confusion about the nature of explanation and explanatory ultimates. For criticism see my 'Karma and the Problem of Suffering' *Sophia*, xxiv, No. 1 (1985), 4–10.



considered. The first of these was for the pre-existence (and, by analogy, post-existence) of the consciousness series. Given certain qualifications, the argument was found to be sound. The second argument for the pre-existence of the agent was also found to be plausible (given, once again, certain qualifications). However, neither argument establishes the pre-existence or post-existence of *persons* (unless one is unwisely willing simply to identify these with the consciousness series of the first argument). But this is to be expected when we remember the rather different conception of the nature and value of personal existence operating in the Indian context. Nevertheless the notion of the pre-existence and post-existence of the beginningless agent (conceived of as a locus of actions and abilities) was argued to be not only a metaphysically coherent view, but also one which would be non-vacuous in terms of personal significance.

Of course, the Indians consider the doctrine of rebirth to be more than just a metaphysically coherent theory. Typically they regard the existence of the beginningless cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) to be a disagreeable fact. The eschatological goal of the Indian religio-philosophical tradition is complete freedom (*mokṣa*) from this cycle. In keeping with our general account of the agent as a locus of actions and abilities, complete freedom in this tradition is conceived of as a state of non-action wherein those abilities which individuate the agent are nevertheless retained.<sup>1</sup> The agent in such a state does not necessarily cease to exist, even though such an agent is no longer aware of himself *as* an individual. Once again the basic conception of the nature and value of personal existence presupposed here is very different from the traditional Western view and hence so too is the treatment of the notion of immortality. Of course, there still remains the philosophical matter of the nature and value of this Indian goal of complete freedom. But that is another question.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Potter, 'Pre-existence', p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, however, I have discussed some aspects of this question: see my 'Regarding Immortality', *Religious Studies*, xxii (1986), 219–33; 'Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Problems of Immortality', *Philosophy East and West*, xxxv (1985), 333–50.