

Article

# The Reality and the Verifiability of Reincarnation

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**Abstract:** We investigate the topic of reincarnation by revisiting a recent debate from the pages of the journal *Philosophy East and West* between Whitley Kaufman, who presents five moral objections to karma and reincarnation as an explanation for human suffering, and Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, who seek to respond to Kaufman's critiques. Our discussion of four of the problems analysed in their exchange will suggest that while the rejoinders of Chadha and Trakakis to Kaufman consist of plausible logical possibilities which successfully rebut some of his criticisms, the scenarios that they sketch are grounded in specific metaphysical theses about the nature of the human person and the structure of reality. The cogency of the responses that Chadha and Trakakis formulate is integrally related to the acceptance of these metaphysical presuppositions which need to be highlighted more clearly as we seek to understand what is at stake in the dispute.

**Keywords:** reincarnation; karma; verifiability

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## 1. Introduction

A conceptual survey of the source-texts and the extensive commentaries of classical Vedantic systems indicate that while they all point to liberation from the *karmic* cycles of reincarnation (*saṃsāra*) as the highest goal of human existence, they rarely take up the reality and the dynamics of reincarnation as topics for extensive discussion. The classic debates, for instance, between Advaitins and Viśiṣṭādvaitins are centred around the question of *who* or *what* seeks liberation from *saṃsāra* (according to the former, an individual self who is ultimately metaphysically insubstantial, and according to the latter, an individual self who is real and metaphysically dependent on the personal Lord). However, the great masters such as Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and others do not extensively discuss the *how* of the *karmic* processes of reincarnation which is said to guide the quest for liberation that stretches across aeons (*yuga*) of cosmological time. The non-Vedantic Hindu systems such as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika too, all with their distinctive conceptions of *mokṣa*, often presuppose the reality of reincarnation in sketching out their soteriological understandings. Thus, while classical Hindu thought is characterised by vigorous philosophical disputes over questions relating to the nature of the self, consciousness, the structure of logical reasoning, the status of universals, moral action, and others, the reality and the dynamics of reincarnation do not usually receive a systematic presentation, conceptual analysis, and rational defence through dialogical engagements with a doctrinal opponent (*pūrvapakṣa*). These themes, however, have become a matter of intense debate within contemporary circles of Hindu modernity, and more widely in some western philosophical circles, as reincarnation increasingly receives greater attention. An enormous base of literature has accumulated over the last five decades or so, which approaches reincarnation from the varied perspectives of the locations of the belief in Indic religions, theosophy, and New Age spirituality, and also the academic disciplines of (para-)psychology, psychotherapy, quantum physics, and others.

Our aim in this essay is not to provide a comprehensive survey of the diverse historical locations and the conceptual formulations of beliefs relating to reincarnation. We will specifically investigate the topic of reincarnation by revisiting a recent debate from the pages of the journal *Philosophy East and West* between Kaufman (2005, 2007), who presents five moral objections to *karma* and reincarnation

as an explanation for human suffering, and [Chadha and Trakakis \(2007\)](#), who seek to respond to Kaufman's critiques. Our discussion of four of the problems analysed in their exchange will suggest that while the rejoinders of Chadha and Trakakis to Kaufman consist of plausible logical possibilities which successfully rebut some of his criticisms, the scenarios that they sketch are grounded in specific metaphysical theses about the nature of the human person and the structure of reality. The cogency of the responses that Chadha and Trakakis formulate is integrally related to the acceptance of these metaphysical presuppositions which need to be highlighted more clearly as we seek to understand what is at stake in the dispute. This analysis of metaphysical foundations will not, of course, lead to a conclusive resolution of their debates. At one level, it is asking too much of any philosophical discussion that the disputants arrive at a consensus, and this cognitive failure can be seen as another instance of the 'rather depressing general truth' noted by [Van Inwagen \(2006, p. 2\)](#) that 'no philosophical argument that has ever been devised for any substantive thesis is capable of lending the same sort of support to its conclusion that scientific arguments often lend to theirs'. However, at another level, to understand *why* two parties arrive at divergent conclusions in a philosophical dispute we often have to sketch the distinctive metaphysical backgrounds against which their arguments are formulated.

As an initial example of how the disagreements between Kaufman, on the one hand, and Chadha and Trakakis, on the other hand, often turn around the axes of deeply contested metaphysical views, consider Kaufman's discussion of the death problem, which is the problem of explaining 'the paradigmatic case of innocent suffering: death itself' ([Kaufman 2005, p. 23](#)). Kaufman responds to his critics' charge that he has failed to appreciate the Hindu and Buddhist view that human existence is saturated with suffering with the assertion that for 'any reasonable person this claim is patently false. As anyone can attest, life is not merely suffering and pain, but full of happiness and pleasure as well (are they denying that pleasure and joy even exist?)' ([Kaufman 2007, p. 558](#)). In their earlier response to Kaufman, Chadha and Trakakis had drawn on the verse in the *Yoga-sūtras*, which states that for the discriminating individual 'all is nothing but pain', in their presentation of the 'bleak view' of the human condition in the classical Indic sources. Therefore, they conclude that the pursuit of worldly happiness 'will inevitably lead one into deeper trouble, since all life is suffering...Kaufman, then, does not pay sufficient attention to the theoretical background of the theory of karma and rebirth, and as a result fails to appreciate the way in which life and death are evaluated by the karma theorist' ([Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 545](#)). Kaufman's parenthetical remark indicates why the dispute here involves a fundamental metaphysical point: 'are they denying that pleasure and joy even exist?' While the classical systems of Yoga and Buddhism do not, in fact, deny that human beings occasionally experience happiness, they claim that even such moments, *because* all is impermanent, are suffused with suffering. They argue that people who claim to have found some amount of happiness (though not entirely unmixed with pain) and view the whole as positively good are in a state of spiritual ignorance. The metaphysical assumption that lies at the basis of this evaluative thesis can be phrased in this manner: that which is impermanent or subject to transmutation is deficient in worth, and the supreme end is an incomparably valuable state which cannot be lost or superseded. As Keith Yandell has pointed out: 'There is a tendency in Indian metaphysics (as well as elsewhere) to think in terms of what exists permanently or everlastingly as really existing and of what exists only for a time as existing defectively or not at all' ([Yandell 2001, p. 173](#)). Since the phenomenal world, according to Yoga and Buddhism, is transient, it cannot be the source of genuine satisfaction, even if it is the milieu of intermittent joys and pleasures. Our discussion of the exchange between Kaufman, and Chadha and Trakakis, on four problems, namely, the memory problem, the proportionality problem, the free will problem, and the verifiability problem, will indicate that the shape of their arguments and their counter-arguments is informed precisely by such metaphysical presuppositions. While we discuss these four problems in the same order in which they appear in Kaufman's original essay, we will see that the fourth problem relating to verifiability is the conceptual heart of the argumentative exchange. The memory problem, the proportionality problem, and the free will problem all lead to,

from three different but overlapping perspectives, the question of whether we have any rational means or procedures of verifying the theory of karma and reincarnation.

## 2. The Memory Problem

A recurring objection to belief in reincarnation in the literature is that since individuals do not usually recall their putative past lives, they cannot be held as morally culpable in this life for alleged crimes that they do not remember. Mariasusai Dhavamony (Dhavamony 1991, p. 162) argues that the 'doctrine cannot be reconciled with the fact that there is no continuity of consciousness of people between their past and present lives. Justice requires that the same conscious person who sinned must be punished for his or her own crime and no other'. Therefore, the processes of karma and reincarnation cannot serve as an instrument for moral education, since we do not know what our past errors are for which we are presently said to be undergoing suffering. Thus, Kaufman notes that 'the rebirth theory fails to respect the moral agency of the sinner in that it is apparently indifferent to whether or not he understands that what he has done is wrong' (Kaufman 2005, p. 20). At least three types of responses have been offered in defence of reincarnation. The first relates to a metaphysical point: even though we do not (usually) have such powers of recall, this epistemic inaccessibility does not in itself disprove the metaphysical reality of a reincarnating self. This point is tersely stated by S. Radhakrishnan: 'The metaphysical question of the continuity of the self is not in any way affected by the discontinuity of the memory' (Radhakrishnan 1988, p. 237). Just as merely because we do not remember parts of our early childhood, we do not conclude that those stages did not exist, the fact that most of us do not (claim to) have memories of another life does not conclusively demonstrate the falsity of reincarnation. The second is to claim that the (general) absence of recall is, in fact, beneficial to our moral progress, and is an integral aspect of the mechanism of reincarnation. If our mind was overburdened with memories of past transgressions, we would not be able to keep our attention focussed on the path ahead that leads to moral improvement. Therefore, there is a 'great blessing in this forgetfulness, for sometimes our past recollections prove to be most fatal to our progress. They hang over us like dark clouds overshadowing our destiny' (Paramananda 1961, p. 94). Swami Satprakashananda brings together these responses when he argues: 'We do not have the recollection of our childhood days even. Does it mean we did not exist as children? We are liable to forget early periods of this very life. No wonder we do not remember our former life or lives. And it is a great blessing we do not. Otherwise our present existence would have been complicated to the extreme' (Satprakashananda 1984, p. 5).

Chadha and Trakakis pursue aspects of these responses to argue, against Kaufman, that the conscious memory of past errors is not a necessary condition for an individual to acknowledge them as their own. They give the example of a drunk driver who kills a pedestrian, and then falls into a coma after colliding with a pole. Though on recovering consciousness, the driver does not have any awareness of the accident, a court of law would reasonably charge the driver as guilty. Likewise, even though we do not remember the specific details of past mistakes, the theory of karma requires us to acknowledge them (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 536). As a response to Kaufman's charge that the doctrine of karma leaves no conceptual space for the vocabulary of moral improvement, Chadha and Trakakis rightly argue that individuals can accept that certain forms of punishment have been justly inflicted on them, and utilise these punitive measures as contexts for moral growth, even if they are currently unable to spell out the precise details of their errors. Thus, the driver can state: 'Even though I do not remember being involved with the accident, I vicariously repent for the errors of the *I* on that occasion, and I resolve never again to drink before driving'. However, another look at the scenario involving the driver indicates a crucial disanalogy. A driver who believes the statements offered by the court regarding the accident does so on the grounds of the belief that the legal authorities are not being deceptive and have reliable access to the truth of the matter. The basic point is whether, to sustain the analogy, we have such credible grounds for the belief that even though we do not remember past mistakes from a supposedly previous life, we did, in fact, commit them (Perrett 1987, p. 56).

The same disanalogy applies to the example relating to our childhood: we believe, on the grounds of the testimony of our parents whom we regard as reliable witnesses, that we existed during the childhood years of which we have no conscious memory. Once again, the vital point is this: given that we are not able to specify any correlations between our present suffering and past mistakes, whether there are any trustworthy witnesses whose reports regarding a reincarnating self are veridical.

The debate now turns on the metaphysical point whether, in fact, reincarnation is a reality. The third response to the memory problem (we noted two earlier) is that some spiritual adepts, who have undergone specific disciplines (*sādhana*), are able to access their past lives, the implicit claim being that there really are such prenatal existences (Abhedananda 1964, p. 29). Thus, the Buddha claims at various places in the Pali Canon the ability to recall past lives (for instance, *Majjhima Nikāya* I.248). The *Manusmṛti* (c. 200 CE) states in this vein: ‘By reciting the Vedas constantly, by performing purifications, by engaging in ascetic toil, and by showing no hostility to any creature, he gets to remember his former birth’. We may regard memories as certain capacities or dispositions which are carried over across lives, and which link together multiple existences. Even though there are at present no conscious memories of previous lives, as individuals advance spiritually, they become capable of retrieving these deep memories from (subconscious) mental streams. Kaufman, however, discounts all such claims of putative pre-existence: ‘I am unaware of a single verified historical example of anyone having a memory of one’s deeds in a past life presented as explanation for present suffering’ (Kaufman 2007, p. 557). The dispute between Kaufman, and Chadha and Trakakis, is therefore not simply over whether the theory of reincarnation is free from logical inconsistencies and moral objections, but whether reincarnation has, *in fact*, taken place.

The acceptance of the theory of karma, which ‘says nothing specific about *when* and *in what form* the rewards and punishments will be meted out’ (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 537), then, rests ultimately on trust. The argument will then run as follows: we believe that we are involved in cycles of reincarnation directed towards spiritual perfection, even though we have no knowledge regarding the ‘how’ of the underlying mechanisms, *because* we trust in (the omniscience of) figures such as the Buddha, the Hindu *yogis*, and so on. Stephen Phillips argues, in this connection, that just as sense perception has epistemic value in its ordinary operations, yogic perception too can reveal to us features of reality. We should not dispute the veridicality of yogic perception unless we have specific reasons to doubt its deliverances. Therefore, we should ‘assume that meditation and other yogic experience has a noetic or cognitive quality, being both taken as informative about some pretty important matters, such as the death-spanning nature of our consciousness, and informative in fact. There is no general reason we should not trust our teacher’s testimony’ (Phillips 2009, p. 134). As debates in (Christian) philosophy of religion over the relation between ‘faith’ and ‘reason’ indicate, what is one’s person’s trust is another person’s dogma. Thus, we find Chadha and Trakakis speaking of hope in the moral processes of reincarnation: ‘The hope that a just punishment will be meted out the criminal at some future time is sufficient to sustain our faith in the legal system as a means of moral education, and a similar hope motivates the belief that the law of karma can allow for the moral development of the individual’ (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 537). Grounding the belief in justice on scripture, A. Sharma similarly writes that though the virtuous often suffer and the wicked prosper, Advaita Vedanta ‘maintains that such injustice is only apparent and not real—that *ultimately* appearances notwithstanding, cosmic justice prevails’ (Sharma 1990, p. 234). We are therefore enjoined by Swami Paramananda to ‘work diligently and prayerfully and always remember that in this universe there is no such thing as chance or injustice’ (Paramananda 1961, p. 56). For Kaufman, in contrast, it is precisely such affirmations of trust and hope, even when no karmic correlations across reincarnations have been or can be specified, that seem to involve a doctrinaire stance. He argues that the response of Chadha and Trakakis to the memory problem is ‘simply the dogmatic insistence that one should simply have faith: karma tells us that our present sufferings are correlated with past deeds, and that’s the end of the discussion. It should suffice that one knows one is being punished for an unspecified

wrong committed at an unspecified time and place, because that is what karma says' (Kaufman 2007, p. 557).

### 3. The Proportionality Problem

While the theory of karma and reincarnation states that there are necessary connections between moral acts and their deserts (in the form of rewards or punishments), the severity of the suffering that many people undergo seems grossly disproportionate to any evil that they may have committed. Regarding the sufferings of the inmates of Auschwitz, the agony of millions who have died of starvation and various incurable diseases, and so on, the proportionality principle would require that to undergo such horrendous torment in this life, they would have been viciously evil people in past lives. And herein lies the problem, according to Kaufman, for it is 'hard to see what sort of sins the sufferers could have committed to deserve such horrible punishment' (Kaufman 2005, p. 21).

Chadha and Trakakis rightly claim that the karmic theory is not presented as a predictive tool regarding the timing and the form of rewards and punishments, for only an enlightened one such as the Buddha is supposed to know the detailed workings of the karmic mechanisms. However, there are indeed some scriptural layers which are quite forthright in detailing connections between past error and present misery. According to the *Manusmṛiti* 12.55–68, a Brahmin who steals becomes in a subsequent life a spider, snake, or vicious ghoul, while stealers of specific objects attain specific rebirths: by stealing grain one becomes a rat, by stealing deer a wolf, by stealing a horse a tiger, and so on (Olivelle 2004, p. 215). The voluminous *Purāṇas* do not hesitate, on occasion, to lay down such chains of consequentiality. For instance, the *Varāha Purāṇa* 203.13–18 says that people who deal in the flesh of animals suffer torments in hell, take birth as human beings with mutilated limbs, and suffer from various physical and mental ailments (Iyer 1985, Part II, pp. 623–24). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* VI.1.45 even provides a terse formula which highlights the presupposition of universal justice in the theory of karma and reincarnation: the same person enjoys the fruits of the same meritorious or demeritorious act in the next world in the same manner and to the same extent according to the manner and extent to which that act has been performed in this world (Tagare 1976, Part II, p. 779). The negative formulation of this principle of proportionality—no aggregation of finite human errors can be commensurate with everlasting punishment—is often employed in Hindu rejections of the possibility of eternal damnation: 'Even if we have made innumerable mistakes, we cannot suffer eternally, because for a finite action there cannot be an infinite punishment, since action and reaction must always be equal' (Paramananda 1961, p. 52). Swami Nikhilananda argues in a similar manner that '[t]o believe in the eternal punishment of the soul for a mistake of a few years is to go against the dictate of reason' (Nikhilananda 1968, p. 23). Interestingly, from a Christian standpoint, G. MacGregor uses this principle to argue for the compatibility of Christian soteriology and belief in karma and reincarnation. Pointing out that different individuals receive different sets of chances to respond to God in their widely different spans of earthly life, MacGregor argues: 'The notion that each is to be judged for all eternity on the basis of such disparate opportunities is totally incompatible with the concept of a beneficent and almighty God...The doctrine of transmigration fits perfectly as a Christian interpretation of Purgatory' (MacGregor 1991, pp. 94–95). The positive formulation of the principle—infinite perfection cannot be attained in the short span of just one lifetime—is developed by S. Radhakrishnan in this way: 'The self aims at fulfilment of function or development of individuality...We cannot in one life exercise all the powers we possess or exhaust all the values we strain after...There are no blind rushes to the goal. The children of a God in whose eyes a thousand years are as a day need not be disheartened if the goal of perfection is not attained in one life' (Radhakrishnan 1988, p. 229).

Therefore, given the correlation from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, we could assume that individuals who have suffered horribly in this lifetime had been the equivalents of Hitler, Stalin, and others in their previous existences. Kaufman, however, objects precisely to such proposed correlations: 'People who suffer terribly really must have been horribly sadistic, brutal, and Nazi-like in past lives. But this is just my point: such a claim is highly dubious. Even a superficial knowledge of

history and of human nature makes it simply implausible that so many people could have been so evil' (Kaufman 2007, p. 557). The disagreement at this stage between Kaufman, and Chadha and Trakakis is, then, an evaluative-metaphysical dispute about the depths of human depravity. Since for every St Francis there is at least one (if not more) Nero, and for every Hitler at least one (if not more) Bartolomé de las Casas, a mere tabulation of Altruists versus Sadists down the centuries will not yield a conclusive answer to the question as to whether human beings are fundamentally good or fundamentally evil. Kaufman rightly cautions us that an '*a priori* conviction that karma is true can lead one into a distorted conception of reality' (Kaufman 2007, p. 557), to which one should add that an '*a priori* conviction that karma is false can also lead one into a distorted conception of reality'. Thus, the disagreement is over *who*, among the disputations, has the right 'conception of reality'. Consider, for instance, a theological scenario in which human beings are thoroughly depraved, and God, the dispenser of cosmic justice, inflicts punishments on them. These torments seem, from a human perspective, cruelly disproportionate, but from the eternal vantage-point of God, in whom there is no iniquity, they are exactly proportionate. While this possibility saves the theory of karma and reincarnation from the moral objections relating to the proportionality problem, it raises the metaphysical question of whether we actually inhabit this theological scenario. *If* we have reasons, independently of the dispute at hand, to believe that our world is indeed similar to the moral cosmos sketched above, there is ultimately no disproportion between present sufferings, however horrendous they may be, and past actions, however horrifically evil they might have been.

#### 4. The Free Will Problem

The longest section of Kaufman's original article is devoted to various morally objectionable consequences that he claims are consequences of the theory of karma and reincarnation. At the heart of these objections lies the following dilemma: either the theory is a 'complete and closed account of evil and suffering or it is not'. If it is the former, we seem to have a form of strong causal determinism, according to which the present state of the universe is exhaustively explained in terms of its precedent states (which include human actions), so that while the theory can console us that there is no unmerited suffering, it is, in effect, a form of fatalism which denies free moral agency. If it is the latter, it loses its comprehensiveness as a systematic theoretical account of each and every particular instance of suffering that an individual undergoes (Kaufman 2005, pp. 26–27). This dilemma is spelled out in concrete terms through the case of a terrorist who is considering whether or not to detonate a bomb in a civilian area. If karma operates in rigidly deterministic fashion, then it is not up to the terrorist to do whatever that is, in fact, done, for whether or not people are killed is an eventuality that is determined by their karmic merits or demerits. If the bomb is indeed detonated, leading to civilian casualties, the terrorist can 'justify them to himself by saying he is merely an agent for karma, carrying out the necessary punishments for these "wicked" people' (Kaufman 2005, p. 25). However, if karma does not constrain human action in this ineluctably deterministic manner, so that it is up to the terrorist whether or not to detonate the bomb, we admit 'the genuine possibility of gratuitous evil, innocent suffering—just what the theory was designed to deny'. That is, if the terrorist, who exercises free agency in the matter of whether or not to detonate the bomb, does detonate it, he would inflict undeserved and random suffering on those who are killed.

The response of Chadha and Trakakis to Kaufman on this point rightly notes that the traditional presentations of the karma and reincarnation presuppose a libertarian, or at least a compatibilist, account of free will, so that even though one's character and dispositions have a causal history, these antecedents do not undermine one's free agency (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 548). As Swami Paramananda points out: 'We have brought our ideas, our instincts, our good feelings and also our obstacles with us. But that does not mean that since this life is the product of Karma, its conditions are inevitable. No matter what we have brought, we can adjust and readjust and remould' (Paramananda 1961, p. 38). That is, persons are not simply congeries of events within karmic chains, but they can exercise some measure of agency over these causal sequences. The epic narratives, for

instance, often speak of individuals washing away their sins (*punāti pāpam*) through means such as austerities, sacrifices, and gifts (*Mahābhārata* 12.36.1) (Dutt 1997, vol. VI, p. 48). The *Garuḍa Purāṇa* I.230.42 states more assertively that even if the evil deeds of a person are as massive as the mountains, these are destroyed entirely by remembering Viṣṇu (Shastri 1980, Part II, p. 682).

Thus, revisiting the scenario involving the terrorist, the karma theorist can argue that the terrorist exercises genuine moral agency in deciding whether or not to detonate the bomb that will kill, say, 100 individuals. If he does detonate the bomb, he freely ‘collapses’ to a singular event the complexly-ramified (and possibly overlapping) karmic chains of the 100 individuals who would then receive their moral deserts. He cannot shirk moral responsibility by claiming that ‘karma acted through him’, for he retains some measure of free agency. While a fatalistic reading of the theory can support a form of amoralism, A. Sharma points out that the Hindu scriptures, in fact, instruct us to help others and avoid hurting them: ‘The *same* doctrine of karma and rebirth, which holds us accountable for what happens to us, also urges us to perform good karma rather than bad karma and unattached karma rather than attached karma. Thus, just as doctors go about treating diseases that patients have brought upon themselves, those who subscribe to the doctrine of karma and rebirth are also under an ethical obligation “to help reduce the pain and misery in the world”’ (Sharma 2008, p. 573). If, on the other hand, the terrorist does not detonate the bomb, the theoretical claim that all moral actions have necessary consequences, does not, however, lose its systematicity. All that would follow is that on this particular occasion, these 100 individuals did not receive the moral deserts of their karmic actions, but they will on a subsequent occasion through possibly other instrumental means and other causal pathways.

For concrete instances of how the belief in the causal efficacy of karma can be combined with the belief in karmic instruments, we may turn to U. Sharma’s fieldwork in a village in Himachal Pradesh in 1966 and 1967 which indicates that the theory of karma is not the only explanatory tool that is used to rationalise the occurrence of suffering. A common way of accounting for misfortune such as chronic ailment is not directly through karma but through the sorcery practised by another person or the anger (*khota*) of a deity or a spirit. Sharma notes that it would seem that it is logically inconsistent to claim that karma accounts for the differential distribution of good and bad fortune and that a particular misfortune is to be explained through sorcery. When this question was put to the villagers, they replied that the latter type of explanations does not negate the efficacy of karma which works instrumentally through human instruments. If one is said to suffer from illness because of the malice of kinspeople, this is an explanation in terms of immediate causes, for if the individual had good karma they would not have succumbed to the sorcery practised upon them. Therefore, the principle of karma, Sharma notes, is ‘logically prior to all other possible explanations in the sense that the latter can be reduced to or made compatible with the *karma* doctrine in the final analysis. Secondly, whilst the *karma* principle need not be the theory which the villager turns to first of all in his search for a meaning for the misfortune he suffers, it is generally the last which he will abandon’ (Sharma 1973, p. 358).

The case of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus provides a parallel from Christian doctrine. If Judas were not free (in a libertarian or compatibilist sense) to abandon Jesus, and was predestined to do so in a strong sense, it would (seem to) be unjust on God’s part if Judas were to be positively damned. If, on the other hand, Judas was truly free in the matter, and he chose not to betray Jesus, there would have been no crucifixion and resurrection, and hence no salvation for humanity. A possible resolution is, once again, through the horns of this dilemma. Judas did have free will, but even if he had not betrayed Jesus, God would have found ways other than the passion of the Son for the divine work of redemption of humanity. The point of this speculative exercise is not to settle an exceedingly fine dispute in the history of Christian doctrine but to indicate that the defender of karma and reincarnation can analogously claim that even if the terrorist did not detonate the bomb, God, here viewed as the governor of the karmic order, can work with the complexly-intertwined karmic chains of individuals to ensure that specific individuals receive their own moral deserts at some point or the other.

Once again, however, while such a theological scenario might rebut the criticisms of Kaufman, it has to bear a heavy metaphysical load. To begin with, we face the daunting task in the metaphysics of free will of defending an event-causal or agent-causal libertarian account, or a compatibilist account which is distinct from the thesis of causal determinism. Next, we have to operate within a theological universe where God works with and through the karmic chains, in this case of the 101 individuals, to ensure that every moral action has necessary consequences and there is no instance of undeserved suffering. While these interconnections are mind-bogglingly complex from a human perspective, God will, of course, comprehend them in their entirety at a single divine glance. Even if, as in the case of Buddhism, one removes God from the horizon, one still needs a gigantically complex crisscrossing network (*indrajāla*) of interdependent karmic chains, which is accessible not to unenlightened individuals but only to the Buddha and the highest level Bodhisattvas.

### 5. The Verifiability Problem

If we treat karma and reincarnation as an explanatory account, it seems to be consistent with both the presence and the absence of specific instances of suffering. Thus, to return to the terrorist and the undetonated bomb, if the terrorist had detonated it, the subsequent death of the 100 individuals would be explained by stating that their karmic fruits had ripened, whereas if he had not detonated it, their survival would be explained by stating that their karmic residues had not yet fructified. Karma, treated as a hypothesis, is therefore unverifiable because it has no predictive power, and in fact '[t]here is...not a single verified example in recorded history of a successful prediction being made on the basis of karmic causation' (Kaufman 2007, p. 559).

Chadha and Trakakis respond that while some of us may not have verified the karma theory *in practice*, the theory could still be verifiable *in principle*. For instance, we could be transported, in principle, to a higher form of consciousness where we witness our previous lives unfold in accordance with karmic mechanisms, so that the theory is verified. Alternatively, we could envisage, in principle, a form of 'eschatological falsification' where we enjoy the beatific vision of (the Christian) God who demonstrates the falsity of belief in reincarnation (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, pp. 549–50). While these logical possibilities rebut the charge that the theory is empirically vacuous, for we can indeed specify what kind of empirical content would verify it or falsify it, they do not give us substantive grounds for accepting the theory in the here and now. Those of us who have not yet received the miraculous transportation to super-consciousness, or attained the post-mortem beatific vision would seem to have no bases for believing the theory. Likewise, the analogy that Chadha and Trakakis develop regarding the causal relation between smoking and lung cancer, and karmic causation does not take us far. They claim that because of the presence of multiple factors, we cannot offer precise predictions in the following format: if P smokes  $x$  number of cigarettes, P will suffer from cancer of severity  $y$  after  $z$  years. Yet, 'a general, law-like statement of the form 'Heavy smoking tends to cause lung cancer' remains indisputable' (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 550). However, no such incontestable nomic statements such as, for instance, 'Being benevolent towards human beings tends to cause rebirth in families who live near the forest', have been formulated and tested in the case of karmic causation. We could seek to reduce the degree of the disanalogy between the two cases by suggesting that just as in the case of smoking and lung cancer, even though we have not ourselves conclusively verified this empirical conjunction, we accept it to be true because of the cognitive authority of medical experts, doctors, and epidemiologists. Likewise, even though we have not ourselves verified the theory of karma, we accept it to be true on the testimony of spiritual virtuosi such as Hindu yogis and Tibetan Buddhist lamas, who claim to have supra-empirical powers to recall past lives.

An alternative route would be to straightforwardly deny that the belief in karma requires robust evidentiary foundations. For instance, A.R. Wadia argues, on the one hand, that the doctrine 'has to be accepted as a dogma which has not been proved and cannot be proved'. However, this failure does not imply, according to Wadia, that the doctrine is 'necessarily irrational', for it contains a rational core which is that human beings are born into a world that has been constructed out of their past

karma (Wadia 1965, p. 149). A. Sharma argues in this vein that ‘while it might not be possible to prove the doctrine [of karma and rebirth] with absolute certainty, it seems to be equally the case that the doctrine cannot with absolute certainty be established as demonstrably false. As in the case of the existence of God it seems to be a doctrine about which reasonable persons might reasonably differ’ (Sharma 1990, p. 232). More recently, M. Burley notes that the belief in karma is not based on empirical evidence, and that ‘it has arisen, and persisted, in human communities independently of anything that would be recognized as data comparable to that which supports the connection between smoking and lung cancer’. While this belief indeed plays explanatory roles in the lives of people who accept it, it is not typically regarded as subject to empirical verification or falsification (Burley 2013, p. 156). Consequently, the disagreement over karma cannot be ‘resolved by rational deliberation alone...but only by one or other party in the debate undergoing a change of perspective so transformative that it would amount to a change in form of life’ (Burley 2013, p. 159). Because the parties to the debate share different frameworks and are applying different pictures, the debate continues to be intractable, and its resolution in the life of an individual would be akin to her undergoing a religious conversion. Burley argues that ‘[t]his is not to say that participation in argument and the accumulation of evidence cannot play their part in precipitating such a conversion, but it is to suggest that such factors are unlikely to be decisive independently of more general shifts in an individual’s worldview, which shifts are apt to be tied to broader cultural changes’ (Burley 2013, p. 163).

## 6. The Reality of Reincarnation

Our discussion in preceding sections indicates that the responses of Chadha and Trakakis, which successfully rebut some of Kaufman’s critiques, are freighted with specific metaphysical presuppositions. Chadha and Trakakis themselves highlight this point when they charge that Kaufman’s methodology is faulty—instead of locating the doctrine within the dense metaphysical contexts that are sketched out in the scriptural texts, he operates in an ahistorical fashion with an idealised and simplified account: ‘By not giving sufficient attention to the ways in which the doctrine of karma has been interpreted, developed, and expanded, particularly in the original sources, Kaufman regularly neglects and misunderstands important aspects of the doctrine’ (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 535). While Kaufman sets up the doctrine of karma as a ‘complete, systematic theory of the origins and explanation of human suffering’ (Kaufman 2005, p. 18), the notion of karma is not presented in the classical Hindu sources as an account of the origins of evil (unlike the Genesis narrative), nor is it offered as a comprehensive explanation of the presence of suffering. The theory provides only an imprecise outline with ‘few details’ about ‘the inner workings or mechanics of the karmic process’ (Chadha and Trakakis 2007, p. 534).

The crux of the matter, then, is this: given that most of us (who are not, say, Hindu yogis) have not verified, in practice, the theory of karma, are we epistemically entitled in the here and now to hold it to be true? Around a hundred years ago, J.W. Peebles threw down the gauntlet in unequivocal terms by listing twelve reasons for rejecting the belief in reincarnation, the first of which is that it is not based on ‘one sound, solid, demonstrated fact’ (George 1914, p. 102). One response that we have suggested throughout this essay is that we can claim such epistemic entitlements by appealing to the reliable testimony of the spiritual adepts such as the Buddha, who we believe was omniscient and will not mislead us about the ‘solid facts’ of reality. However, this response assumes the falsity of some form of metaphysical naturalism, which states that a complete and exhaustive description of ‘reality’ can be provided in terms of the entities that are studied by the most advanced sciences, such as quantum physics. If metaphysical naturalism were to be true, all theories involving reincarnating non-physical substantial selves (in many forms of Hinduism) and event-continua of mental streams undergoing rebirth (in Buddhism) would be falsified. While towards the beginning of the original essay, Kaufman states that he will not discuss the metaphysical and scientific critiques of karma, because these have been dealt with by other authors (Kaufman 2005, p. 16), it is precisely this question of whether reincarnation *is* real that flows through the argumentative exchanges between Kaufman, and Chadha

and Trakakis as a subterranean current. For instance, to repeat, the analogy developed by Chadha and Trakakis regarding the drunk driver implies that there are, in fact, persons who are reincarnated across lifetimes, even if they cannot (usually) recall their earlier lives. The debate, therefore, turns around the momentous question of whether we have independent reasons, grounded in rational evidentiary considerations, for accepting the reality of reincarnation (Pasricha 1990).

Here we move into deeply disputed areas in epistemology and philosophy of science which have suggested that there is no direct ‘deductive step’ between a ‘physical description’ and a ‘metaphysical explanation’. That is, different individuals can agree on what the indisputable facts are, and yet disagree over how to assess, classify, and evaluate them. For instance, two individuals can agree on the phenomenological contents of their visual fields, and yet view them through divergent conceptual frames. Thus both report seeing a ‘shining ball of fire’ in the night sky, and yet one claims that the celestial object was (merely) a comet and the other, while agreeing with the former, also that it was a divine sign. The distinction between these two levels is highlighted by Y. Krishan: ‘There is a fundamental distinction between causation in the physical world and *kārmic* causation. *Kārmic* causation is a metaphysical explanation of suffering and inequality in life and for which science has so far failed to provide an answer. What is not explainable empirically is sought to be explained metaphysically’ (Krishan 1997, p. 201). That is, while everyday scientific explanations are at hand as to why John had a *toothache*, karmic causation has to be invoked to explain why it was *John* and not Mary who was particularly susceptible on that day to this agony. Or to move to a vaster cosmic background, karmic causation is said to explain the deep levels of inequality that we see among human beings, while also providing them with a mechanism for working their way to their spiritual goal (Nikhilananda 1968, p. 15). That is, to believe in karma and reincarnation is, according to L. Hodgkinson, to inhabit ‘a philosophy of life which answers many otherwise unanswerable questions. If not, you have no good explanation of why things are so monstrously unfair, why people are born into such widely differing circumstances, and why the guilty and the bad are very often not punished while the good seem to suffer’ (Hodgkinson 1989, pp. 152–53).

## 7. Arguing for and against Reincarnation

A basic ‘condition of possibility’ for the reality of karmic causation, which is presupposed in these ‘metaphysical explanations’ of Krishan and Hodgkinson, is that (to focus specifically on a Vedantic Hindu context) there *is* a substantial self which moves through a series of re-embodiments towards liberation. For another instance of how two individuals can agree about the ‘facts’, and yet encapsulate them within divergent conceptual schemes, we can take A. Flew’s response to Plato’s argument that because we have certain concepts that could not have been empirically acquired, all learning is a process of ‘remembering’ the timeless archetypes from a period before our earthly embodiment. From a metaphysical naturalist standpoint, (the early) Flew argues: ‘The moral to be drawn is not, because we can now remember doing something before we were even conceived, therefore, we must have pre-existed, but that, because we did not exist before conception, therefore, we cannot truly be remembering those previous, postulated, cognitive happenings’ (Flew 1991, p. 112).

Let us spell out Plato’s argument in these terms:

Premise 1: If we remember doing things before we were even born, then we must have pre-existed among the archetypes.

Premise 2: We remember doing things before we were even born.

Conclusion: We must have pre-existed among the archetypes.

Flew’s response denies the consequence in Premise 1:

Premise 1: If we remember doing things before we were even born, then we must have pre-existed among the archetypes.

Premise 2\*: We did not pre-exist among the eternal archetypes.

Conclusion: Therefore, we cannot (truly) remember doing things before we were even born.

Thus, both Plato and Flew can agree on the ‘fact’ that we remember events from a (putative) prenatal existence, and yet arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions from this premise, because their metaphysical worldviews, in which the ‘fact’ is situated, are opposed. Plato affirms, while Flew denies, the reality of an immortal soul that is immaterial and non-physical. Likewise, suppose we have cogent reasons for believing that there are, in fact, no immaterial and substantial selves of the type that is indicated in the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad-gītā* and other scriptural sources. We might reject the notion of an immaterial soul on the grounds that if such a non-physical entity can influence brain events, these interactions would lead to the violation of basic physical laws (Wilson 2015, p. 349). We would in that case be less likely to view favourably the ‘evidence’ for a reincarnating self, and seek alternative explanations for the ‘evidence’ which has been presented. For instance, Paul Edwards, who accepts the psycho-neural identity thesis of the mind-body problem, argues that people who believe in reincarnation suffer from deep cognitive inadequacies. The theory is not based on any observational evidence and seeks to exploits gaps in the scientific explanations for phenomena such as child prodigies, *déjà vu*, and so on (Edwards 2001, p. 279). On the other hand, if we are persuaded by the arguments for a substantial immaterial self, or accept its reality on the basis of scriptural testimony, we are more likely to accept the theory of karma and reincarnation even if we cannot provide a detailed outline of its operation. For instance, Radhakrishnan argues that an ‘empirical conjunction is not a metaphysical necessity’, so that while in our present embodiment our cognitive processes are based on physical brains, we should not conclude that we need brains to think even in a disincarnate state (Radhakrishnan 1988, p. 231). Therefore, while acknowledging that the ‘mechanism of rebirth is difficult to know’, he argues that ‘simply because we do not understand the process we cannot deny the facts’ (Radhakrishnan 1988, p. 234). The cruciality of background worldviews in evaluating ‘evidence’ can be highlighted by contrasting Radhakrishnan’s measured agnosticism with I.H. Smythe’s forthright rejection from a naturalist perspective: ‘The “how” question is one of the most frustrating, though predictable, aspects of investigating karma. The nuts and bolts of the system are never discussed; instead there is a lot of hand-waving and talk of karma and rebirth being at work within the realm of metaphysics (whatever that might mean)’ (Smythe 2015, p. 489).

## 8. Conclusions

Our analysis of the exchange between Kaufman, and Chadha and Trakakis, has highlighted some aspects of the metaphysical scaffolding that supports the logical structures of their arguments. One of the reasons why debates over the reality or otherwise of reincarnation end on a somewhat inconclusive note is because they are informed by deeply contested metaphysical propositions. Perhaps the most well-known line of empirical inquiry regarding ‘the nuts and bolts’ in recent years is the work of I. Stevenson among children between the ages of two and four, who displayed skills, unusual abilities, and phobias which, he claimed, could not be explained in terms of their environment. The children had memories of being individuals in a previous life, and these memories were corroborated by people who had known these individuals. One kind of cases which he investigated involved children with birthmarks and birth defects that seemed to resemble wounds, often fatal, that were suffered by deceased persons that the children claimed to remember. Stevenson searched out police records, wherever possible, to verify whether the birthmarks matched the wounds the deceased individual had received (Stevenson 1997). He argued in an interview in 1974 that for at least some of the cases he had examined reincarnation was ‘the best explanation that we have been able to come up with. There is an impressive body of evidence and it is getting stronger all the time. I think a rational person, if he wants, can believe in reincarnation on the basis of evidence’ (quoted in (Prabhu 1989, p. 75)). However, it is crucial to note that Stevenson (Stevenson 1974) does not claim that the voluminous evidence that he has gathered over several decades demonstrates the reality of reincarnation, only that it is ‘suggestive’ of reincarnation. Such cases have received alternative explanations ranging from unconscious deception, cryptomnesia or hidden memory, paramnesia where memories of this life are misinterpreted as those pertaining to another, altered states of consciousness, inherited memories,

and so on. Again, the argument that reincarnation is the best explanation for the existence of child prodigies can be countered by the response that with the advance of genetic sciences, we will be able to understand more precisely how genetic material shapes human development (Christie-Murray 1981, p. 258).

That is, while the parties to these debates start from the baseline of the same body of ‘facts’, these evidential bases are packaged within distinct, and sometimes radically diverging, worldviews. Consider A. Bodde’s claim at the beginning of his book on karma and reincarnation: ‘Let me point out that I do not think that we can yet prove reincarnation scientifically (and perhaps we never will). However, on the basis of the scientific research and experience available, and by using logical reasoning, we can *make an acceptable case* for the concept of reincarnation and that is plausible’ (Bodde 1999, p. 2). However, his case turns out to depend crucially on the reality of an ‘ethereal sphere’ into which the soul moves, with an ethereal body and ethereal senses, after the dissolution of the physical body (Bodde 1999, p. 15). Bodde’s (implicit) rejection of metaphysical naturalism is reiterated from a different perspective by P. Fenwick and E. Fenwick in these terms: ‘If we want to speculate about the existence of, let alone the survival of, the soul, Western science, which deals only with the objective, external world, can do little to help us. Current Western science does not yet understand consciousness, and until we understand consciousness we can only speculate about reincarnation’ (Fenwick and Fenwick 1999, p. 11). What these statements indicate is that the belief in karma and reincarnation is densely intertwined with various psychological, metaphysical, and eschatological themes, so that different individuals, depending on whether or not they inhabit specific worldviews, will differ in their evaluations of the ‘evidence’ that is being presented for the belief. Consider, for instance, the case of Jane, a three-year-old girl in Tucson, Arizona who begins to claim that she remembers her past lives, and even provides detailed descriptions of the different roles she claims to have inhabited in those lives. Now consider three scenarios: the first, her parents are Conservative Baptists who immediately denounce these claims as the works of the devil; the second, her parents are seekers of alternative spiritualities who are mildly intrigued by these claims; and the third, her parents are white American converts to Hinduism who readily accept the veridicality of these claims. The reason why these sets of parents in alternative universes reach divergent conclusions is because they are ‘embedding’ the truth-claims of Jane within world-systems which are structured by alternative, and sometimes mutually incompatible, metaphysical presuppositions. Thus, if philosophical reasoning and scientific experimentation do support the existence of states of consciousness which cannot be explained entirely in physicalist vocabulary, such evidential backing would remove certain epistemic barriers to the belief in karma and reincarnation, in that it would render the belief at least logically possible. Therefore, the debate between Kaufman, and Chadha and Trakakis is, in the ultimate analysis, one about the basic constituents of the universe that we inhabit.

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