

## Reincarnation

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**Abstract:** This paper is an introduction to the *Religious Studies* archive on reincarnation. I have selected papers covering issues across three different areas: the philosophy of parapsychology; reincarnation and personal identity; and reincarnation and the problem of evil. I have also included a paper by Roy Perrett that advances two interesting arguments for reincarnation.

### Introduction

Across the globe, reincarnation is one of the more common beliefs about what happens when we die (Burley, 2016: 15–38). However, analytic philosophy has more usually focussed on Christianity when it comes to the philosophy of religion; it is little surprise, then, that the philosophical issues involved in reincarnation have received less interest than one might have hoped (Burley, 2014: 236). Whilst Hick discusses a version of reincarnation (Hick, 1974, 1994), his study is the exception, not the rule. (Indeed, in *Religious Studies* Hick discusses reincarnation only once, as part of a discussion about pluralism (Hick, 1983: 486–487).)

Over the prior fifty five years, *Religious Studies* has reflected this parochial view, with most papers mentioning reincarnation only in passing (see, e.g., Anderson, 1974: 82; Armstrong & Ravindra, 1979: 336; Knox, 1974: 93–94; Quinn, 1978: 354). This archive collects together papers which, with one exception, buck this trend and focus on reincarnation in more detail. Jointly, they cover four areas.

First area: The philosophy of parapsychology. Distanced from a theologically informed treatment of reincarnation, some discussions set aside the soteriological beliefs of existing religions (e.g. the Dharmic religions) and instead truck solely in parapsychological investigations into past lives. Price's 'The Problem of Life After Death' (1968) is representative of this interest in the philosophy of parapsychology—indeed, I've selected it more for that feature than because of its discussion of reincarnation, which is only slight. However, since it is the first paper in *Religious Studies* to discuss reincarnation at all, I have decided that this makes it notable enough for inclusion. It is followed two decades later by Cockburn's 'The Evidence for Reincarnation' (1991), which more thoroughly engages with the epistemological questions surrounding parapsychological research into past lives.

Second area: Personal identity and Reid’s Duplication Problem. Metaphysicians have often obsessed about fission cases and the topic of reincarnation is a springboard to such issues. Not only does Cockburn’s paper touch upon the matter, but there is a series of four papers—by Macintosh (1989; 1992), Noonan (1990), and Daniels (1990)—discussing personal identity and reincarnation. Those papers focus on a problem, stemming from Reid, where multiple people apparently all meet the criteria for having had a previous life as some given person.

Third area: Moral issues and the problem of evil. Using reincarnation as an explanation of our suffering is a common view. For instance, one might believe that suffering is a karmic punishment for what we did in a previous life, or that the suffering of our many lives is a necessary component in our moral education. Filice’s ‘The moral case for reincarnation’ (2006) specifically argues that these sorts of views mean that a theistic theory endorsing reincarnation fares better when it comes to the problem of evil than a theistic theory which does not.

Final area: These archives are a chance to bring to light philosophical arguments that have been neglected. Here, it is my pleasure to present Perrett’s ‘Rebirth’ (1987), which has not received as much exposure as I think it deserves. In particular, I reintroduce an argument for reincarnation based on the idea that in order to have the ability to do anything, we must have existed forever. Whilst I doubt the soundness of that argument, I believe that it deserves more interrogation than it has currently received and am glad to bring it back to our attention.

### **Reincarnation and the Philosophy of Parapsychology**

#### *H. H. Price’s ‘The Problem of Life After Death’*

The earliest mentions of reincarnation in *Religious Studies* approach the subject from a parapsychological angle. H. H. Price—both a previous Wykeham Professor of Logic and previous President of the Society for Psychical Research—presented a paper to The Society for the Study of Theology; his presentation was then published a year later in the third issue of *Religious Studies* (Price, 1968).

It is a very different paper from the contemporary articles that *Religious Studies* publishes, with Price taking for granted that telepathy is an established phenomenon; he writes: ‘We know from other evidence (including experimental evidence) that paranormal cognitive capacities [...] exist in a number of human beings.’ (1968: 452). Price goes on to detail what we know (‘know’) of how ESP functions, before using that understanding to explain psychic mediumship. Never once are the words ‘fake’, ‘fraud’, or ‘cold-reading’ to be found, and I doubt that a paper of this sort would make it past the peer reviewers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, during his discussion, Price off-handedly claims to have introduced a new theory of reincarnation.

The theory follows from Price's proposal that someone's memories may survive their destruction, and that these memories may then be accessed by those with psychic ability (with Price arguing that this allows for an explanation of the abilities of psychic mediums without positing life after death). During this discussion, Price says that this theory suggests 'a rather repulsive version of the Reincarnation theory, which I leave you to work out for yourselves' (1968: 456-457). Leaving it as an exercise for the interested reader was probably a bad idea, since I am not absolutely certain what theory Price had in mind. But my presumption is that putative cases of reincarnation are actually cases of an individual instead unconsciously psychically accessing the memories of a dead person and then mistaking them for their own. However, whilst it would be a possible explanation of alleged past life memories, to my mind this is no 'version' of reincarnation theory at all. Nevertheless, I include the paper for historical purposes, mainly as an insight into the practice of our discipline not so many years ago.

(It is worth noting that, the year after Price's paper was published, J. A. Harvie (1969) likewise speaks approvingly of extra-sensory perception, saying that the evidence for it is of 'primordial antiquity'—I'm not entirely sure what that means, but Harvie clearly considers it a stamp of approval. As with Price, Harvie also briefly mentions reincarnation (Harvie, 1969: 218), this time dove-tailing it with an argument I will discuss later: that reincarnation may explain why we suffer the evils that we do, being a karmic punishment for acts committed in previous lives.)

*David Cockburn's 'The Evidence for Reincarnation'*

David Cockburn's paper likewise picks up on themes in the philosophy of parapsychology. The first section of his paper focuses on the research of Ian Stevenson (1974, 1997). Stevenson was the Chair of Virginia's Psychiatry Department and he conducted research into reincarnation, with a specific discussion of children who claimed to have had past lives. Stevenson's work—which was funded by Chester Carlson, the inventor of the xerox—was significant; for instance, Harold Leif—Professor of Psychiatry at Pennsylvania—writes that Stevenson was either 'making a colossal mistake or will be known [...] as the "Galileo of the 20th century"' (Leif, 1977: 171).

Cockburn discusses the epistemological underpinnings of this sort of research, asking whether it justifies believing in reincarnation. (This epistemological matter is also commented on by Macintosh (1989: 155) and, for an in-depth discussion of Buddhism and the epistemology of past-lives, see Hoffman (1985); outside of *Religious Studies*, see Edwards (2001) and Sudduth (2016).)

Cockburn considers the following claim:

**Identification (ID):** *Ceteris paribus*, if agent  $x$  looks, speaks, and acts like agent  $y$  then we are justified in believing that  $x$  and  $y$  are the same agent.

(Cockburn's addition of the *ceteris paribus* clause is implicit, for he explicitly weakens **ID** to exclude cases where there has been 'deliberate deception of certain kinds' (Cockburn, 1991: 201).)

Cockburn takes issue with **ID** on two grounds. One issue is in the same ballpark as that which Price discussed. Even if we take it that there is evidence of the memories of a prior person somehow having been transmitted to a contemporary child, it does not follow that the child is *the same person as* the deceased. What they have in common may instead be the result of an entirely different (albeit still paranormal or supernatural!) process that results in a child having apparently veridical memories, even though the deceased has not *survived as* the child. Whilst Cockburn does not specifically talk about Price's theory—indeed, there's no reason to think that Cockburn was aware of Price's paper—a theory like Price's would be precisely the sort of thing that Cockburn would have in mind.

Cockburn's second issue is that this approach to justifying parapsychological research seems to be trying to capture the idea that reincarnation is the *best explanation* of Stevenson's evidence. But, says Cockburn (1991: 201–202), reincarnation would involve an immaterial mind allowing for the transmission of memories from past lives to the current life. Playing on worries about Cartesian interaction, Cockburn says that we have no idea how an immaterial mind is meant to interact with a physical body. Thus, a theory relying on reincarnation as an explanation is deficient and is not a complete explanation. That in itself is not a huge problem, but it means that we are left comparing the deficient reincarnation theory to a deficient naturalistic theory. Even if the naturalistic explanation has shortcomings, Cockburn worries that, in comparison, it is only as incomplete as the theory of reincarnation.

On this point, we should take issue. First, not everyone thinks Cartesian interaction is as damning a problem as Cockburn suggests, either taking that problem to have been solved or, as Descartes originally treated it, as not being a problem in the first place (see, e.g., Richardson, 1982). Second, even if there is a deficiency, not all deficiencies are on a par. If we were otherwise convinced that reincarnation was the best explanation of the anecdotal evidence, I suggest that nuanced worries about the mechanics of psychophysical laws would be comparatively small fry and no reason to hold off endorsing reincarnation. (Does that mean I think the theory of reincarnation is justified by Stevenson's work? Hardly—though my complaints would focus not on **ID** but on whether the anecdotes were as remarkable as they seemed and/or whether they were the result of confabulation or outright deception.)

## **Reincarnation and Personal Identity**

### *Reid's Duplication Problem*

Cockburn's paper is a 'mixed grill' which discusses three independent issues, of which the philosophy of parapsychology is but one. Cockburn also discusses the ethical issue of attributing past lives to one's children (as well as then toying with a noncognitivist understanding of reincarnation claims). The third and final issue is a discussion of 'Reid's duplication problem'.

Stemming originally from Thomas Reid (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* III.6), and discussed by both Williams (2009: 1–25) and Parfit (1986: 266–273), the problem is posed as a threat to the possibility of reincarnation. Assume, for *reductio*, that someone was once a prior person if only the former meets some condition e.g. having certain psychological features. Reid imagines a case where there are *two* people who both meet that condition. For instance, at world  $w_1$  Ian exhibits the Napoleonesque features that ground his having being Napoleon in a previous life. At  $w_2$ , Keith *also* has those features. Since Keith and Ian are distinct, Keith cannot also be Napoleon; thus, at  $w_2$  we should deny that *either* of them is Napoleon. Assuming that identity cannot be an extrinsic matter—and that Ian's being Napoleon or not depends on nothing to do with anyone else (i.e. it does not depend on facts about Keith)—then, even at  $w_1$ , Ian is not Napoleon. Since Keith, Ian, and Napoleon are just placeholders, when we generalise this problem, we should conclude that reincarnation is impossible.

Cockburn takes issue with the claim that identity cannot be extrinsic. He argues that we consistently violate the claim that how we treat people does not depend on the features and activities of distinct people. For example, we treat Usain Bolt differently from Asafa Powell because Bolt came 1<sup>st</sup> in the 2008 Olympic 100m race whilst Powell came 7<sup>th</sup>; our treatment of Bolt is therefore different from Powell for extrinsic reasons. Writ large, the claim that identity is intrinsic and not extrinsic needs a defence, says Cockburn.

I hesitate to think that this particular line of argument is convincing. Cockburn dwells too much on the claim that 'how we treat people' shouldn't be extrinsic (which, as Cockburn demonstrates, it can!) when the more salient claim is whether numerical identity is extrinsic (which, intuitively, it is not!). Only when speaking loosely should we conflate those claims. Moreover, we should not assume that the only way to justify the latter is to believe that how we treat people in general is never an extrinsic matter; the methodology currently in play (i.e. appealing to intuitions) allows for the sheer intuitive force of identity's non-extrinsic nature to justify the belief that identity isn't extrinsic—nothing about Usain Bolt or Asafa Powell would seem to affect that belief.

#### *The Macintosh-Daniels-Noonan Debate*

Cockburn is not the last to discuss Reid's duplication problem in *Religious Studies*. It is also the subject of a series of papers charting a debate between Macintosh (1989; 1992), Noonan (1990), and Daniels (1990). (It is also, briefly, discussed in Stober (1990: 494–495).)

Macintosh (1989) kicks off the debate by presenting his own understanding of the duplication problem. As we shall see below, the specifics of Macintosh's argument prove

to be a sticking point. For now, let me give one interpretation of what Macintosh says the problem is: if the Necessity of Identity is true (i.e.  $x=y \supset$  necessarily  $x=y$ ), this then conflicts with thinking that Ian is (contingently) identical to Napoleon at  $w_1$  and (contingently) distinct to Napoleon at  $w_2$ . Conclusion: Ian is not identical to Napoleon at any world (and, thus, reincarnation is impossible).

The nub of Macintosh's paper revolves around his proof of the Necessity of Identity, which follows from three assumptions: Leibniz's Law ( $y=z \supset \forall X(Xy \leftrightarrow Xz)$ ); necessitation ( $\phi$  is a theorem  $\supset$  necessarily  $\phi$ ); and the reflexivity of identity ( $\forall x(x=x)$ ). Given the reflexivity of identity, it's a theorem that  $a=a$ ; given necessitation, necessarily  $a=a$ ; given Leibniz's Law, if  $a=b$  then, since  $a$  has the property of being necessarily identical to  $a$ ,  $b$  is necessarily identical to  $a$ . QED.

Macintosh discusses whether this argument works given 'relativized identity'. Given relativized identity, we deny that claims of the form 'x is the same as y' are cromulent, demanding instead that identity claims are of the form 'x is *the same F* as y'. Were identity relativized, it would be infelicitous to say that Napoleon and Ian are identical; rather, we should say that Napoleon and Ian are the same person. The objection to Reid's problem is then that the argument for Necessity of Identity is no longer sound, since the reflexivity of identity is false. This is because, assuming that identity is relativized, the natural interpretation of the reflexivity of identity becomes:

$$\forall X \forall y (y \text{ is the same } X \text{ as } y)$$

and that principle is demonstrably false (because, e.g., I am not the same armchair as myself, nor the same submarine as myself etc.). So, it looks as if those who accept relativized identity can escape Reid's duplication problem for reincarnation.

Macintosh's paper is primarily a rebuttal of this line of thinking. Macintosh introduces a new family of equivalence relations—what he calls ' $R_F$ ' relations—which then play the role of non-relativized identity in the Reid duplication problem. Thus, concludes Macintosh, even those who buy into relativized identity *are* confronted by the Reid duplication problem, and should not believe in reincarnation.

Macintosh comes under fire from both Daniels and Noonan. However, whilst Macintosh's paper focusses on a somewhat nuanced issue in the logic of identity, Daniels and Noonan's replies do not. (And if their broadsides against Macintosh therefore strike you as a bit unfair, don't worry—Macintosh agrees (1992: 236)!)

Daniels (1990) criticizes Macintosh for moving from an epistemological claim—that we do not have *evidence* for favouring one of Ian and Keith being Napoleon—to a purely metaphysical claim—that there is no fact of the matter about which is identical to Napoleon. As Macintosh later acknowledges (1992: 247–249), Daniels seems to be correct in this regard. However, it's less of a problem than you might at first believe. To see why, disambiguate three different versions of Reid's problem.

The *epistemological problem* stipulates that (i) there's a world at which we lack evidence about who of Ian and Keith is identical to Napoleon. The move is then to say that this possibility rules out that (ii) we can know that Ian is identical to Napoleon *at any world*. But claim (ii) simply does not follow from (i). As Daniels argues (1990: 502), there are possible worlds where all sorts of epistemological obstacles crop up that stop me knowing things that I apparently actually know. For instance, at some worlds I am dreaming everything around me, but this mere possibility does not entail that I actually know nothing of what I see in front of me. Similarly, perhaps at some worlds I am unsure as to whether Ian is Napoleon, but that needn't bear on whether I am irrational to believe it at the actual world. The epistemological problem therefore falls at the first hurdle.

The *metaphysical problem* stipulates that (i') there is a world at which the facts that ground personal identity fail to select between Ian and Keith as having once been Napoleon. Given the Necessity of Identity, it follows that (ii') those facts likewise fail to ground Ian having had a past life at  $w_1$ . Daniels' objection to the epistemological problem is obviously irrelevant to this metaphysical version.

Interestingly, Macintosh's original exposition of the problem takes neither of these routes (1989: 158–159). Rather, Macintosh presents the *hybrid problem*. The hybrid problem stipulates that there is a world at which (i'') there is no evidence for which of Ian/Keith was once Napoleon, and then concludes that (ii'') there is no *fact of the matter* of which of Ian/Keith is identical to Napoleon. Daniels doesn't explicitly distinguish between the hybrid problem and the epistemological problem. Presumably, he believes that his objections to the epistemological problem are relevant to this hybrid problem. He also specifically criticizes it because we should not 'accept that epistemological concerns, e.g. evidence and establishing, have to do with a thing's possibility' (Daniels, 1990: 501).

Macintosh openly admits that Daniels is correct and that the ink on the page tells against him. But, equally, it is a somewhat uncharitable complaint. In Macintosh's reply (1992: 248–249), whilst he makes some modicum of effort to continue to defend an epistemic version of the problem, he quickly shifts to concentrating only on the metaphysical reading. Since Daniels's complaints do not seem to apply to that problem, the overall conclusion of Macintosh's original paper still stands.

Like Daniels, Noonan sets aside discussing Macintosh's response to the issue of relativized identity in favour of having a broader discussion about Reid's duplication problem (which he sees as being a metaphysical problem). Noonan takes two popular theories of personal identity and shows how they avoid the metaphysical problem—importantly, he shows that they avoid the problem whilst also committing to the Necessity of Identity.

The first theory is the closest continuer theory (Nozick, 1984; Shoemaker, 1970), which drops the demand that identity cannot be extrinsically determined. Given closest continuer theory, whether an agent is identical to another agent depends upon whether

they are the *closest* match for being that agent; the presence of other agents with different features *can* make the difference as to whether one agent is identical to another. Thus, Keith having certain psychological features can make the difference between Ian being Napoleon or not. More accurately: it is what makes for the difference between *the person we call 'Ian' at  $w_2$*  being Napoleon and *the person we call 'Ian' at  $w_1$*  being Napoleon. Because the Necessity of Identity is true, at  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  the people we call 'Ian' are distinct; at  $w_1$ , Ian is one person (who is Napoleon) and—whilst that person may exist at  $w_2$  (for Napoleon exists at  $w_2$ !)—because closest continuer theory is true, the person we call 'Ian' at  $w_2$  is an entirely different person from the person we call 'Ian' at  $w_1$ .

The second theory Noonan considers is the multiple occupancy theory (Lewis, 1976; Robinson, 1985). According to this view, where we ordinarily believe a person is located there may instead be *multiple* people located there. Whether there is a singular person or multiple people depends upon whether a fission event later takes place. If no such event takes place, then there is but one person in front of us, as common-sense dictates. But if there is a later fission event, then there are instead currently multiple people there; when the fission event occurs, those people 'come apart' and go their separate ways.

That said, reconsider the Ian/Keith case. At  $w_1$ , Ian is identical to the person called 'Napoleon', Keith is not, and there is no multiple occupancy. At  $w_2$ , things are more complicated. At  $w_2$  'Napoleon' is a name with indeterminate reference since there are now two candidates for 'Napoleon', one being Ian and the other being Keith. From 1769 to 1821, both of those people were in the same place at the same time, having the same intrinsic qualities; later, during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, those two people have come apart, and are no longer co-located qualitative duplicates. Since Ian and Keith are distinct at both worlds, the Necessity of Identity is not under threat, and the metaphysical problem is not a convincing argument for the impossibility of reincarnation.

### **Ethics, Evil, and Reincarnation**

*Carlo Filice's 'The moral case for reincarnation'*

That reincarnation plays a role in moral matters, either in explaining the suffering people undergo (as a result of their having done wrong in a previous life) or as playing a role in one's moral education, is hardly a new claim (Burley, 2016: 129–154). Indeed, in an earlier issue of *Religious Studies* the former type of reincarnation—'retributive reincarnation'—has been discussed (and found wanting!) by Stoeber (1990).

Filice's paper (Filice, 2006) is notable in that he specifically discusses how reincarnation can be used to solve the problem of evil. Filice notes the shortcomings of theistic responses to the problem of evil that do not involve reincarnation. For instance, such responses struggle to explain why children are born into terrible circumstances. Or another example: the scale and intensity of suffering (e.g. of animals raised for food) is



difficult to account for with such responses. Filice argues that reincarnation does better. For instance, we might think that the terrible evils a child or battery hen suffers are the result of immoral actions committed in a previous life. Also, reincarnation avoids treating your life as a 'one-shot' test that results in either an infinite reward or an infinite punishment; given reincarnation, you have *multiple* chances at the test, removing the element of capriciousness from standard theistic soteriology.

The second half of Filice's paper discusses objections to thinking that your prior lives can play this explanatory role in your suffering. Not only does Filice discuss matters of personal identity/survival (Filice, 2006: 55–56), but he also argues against a raft of other objections. I won't recap Filice's discussion of those objections here, instead leaving them to the reader to discover for themselves.

### **Regress Arguments for Reincarnation**

#### *Roy Perrett's 'Rebirth'*

Perrett discusses two arguments for reincarnation that you are unlikely to be familiar with. I find the second argument particularly interesting and I am glad to have the chance, through this archive, to bring it back into the contemporary discussion.

The conclusions of both arguments are the same: that we have always existed. This conclusion is somewhat different from the claim that we will have further lives after we die (for perhaps this is our last incarnation! or perhaps we are confused, non-reincarnating, immortals who have simply forgotten our pasts!) but it is close enough that we can charitably assume that they amount to the same thing.

The first argument takes its lead from Śāntaraḥṣita in the *Tattvasaṅgraha*. It has two premises: (i) that every event has a cause and (ii) that some mental events have no physical cause. Consider the first mental event from your current life not to have a physical cause. Given (i) and (ii), it must therefore have a non-physical cause. A mental event from your previous life would be a perfect candidate for that cause; since the same thinking applies to that previous life, we would arrive at the conclusion that you have existed forever.

An alternative explanation is a non-physical event from someone *else's* life, with the theist's most obvious choice being God. Śāntaraḥṣita, though, denies that God exists. Those attracted to Buddhist-style atheism may find this move attractive; contemporary secular atheists, however, will be less convinced by this argument since secular atheists tend not to believe either of (i) or (ii). However, even if this argument may struggle to find an audience amongst analytic philosophers, Perrett was right to bring it to our attention and it's sad that Śāntaraḥṣita's argument has since received little to no scrutiny in the literature.

Perrett's second argument is more interesting because the audience who will find its premises attractive is much larger than those who will be attracted to Śāntarakṣita's argument. Indeed, the argument itself is a literary analogue for rebirth: Perrett takes his argument from Potter (1968), who in turn is indebted to Wisdom (1934: 123–126). Presenting the argument again here is therefore another rebirth for it, one that might get it more recognition than it received in its earlier incarnations.

The argument goes as follows. Assume:

**The Necessary Counterfactual for Ability (NCA):** For all agents  $\alpha$ , actions  $\phi$ , and times  $t'$ : If  $\alpha$  has the ability to  $\phi$  at  $t'$  then there is some earlier time  $t$  such that, if  $\alpha$  had tried to  $\phi$  at  $t$ , then it would be the case that  $\alpha \phi$ s at  $t'$ .

Assume that some agent, e.g. myself, has the ability to do some given thing, e.g. drink a cup of tea at  $t_3$ . Given **NCA**:

- (1) There is some time,  $t_2$ , such that, had I (at  $t_2$ ) tried to drink the cup of tea, then I would have drunk the cup of tea at  $t_3$ .

Drinking a cup of tea is an action; but so too is *trying to* drink a cup of tea. Moreover, it's an action I am capable of doing! So, given (1) and **NCA**:

- (2) There is some time,  $t_1$ , such that, had I (at  $t_1$ ) tried to try to drink the cup of tea, then I would have tried to drink the cup of tea at  $t_2$ .

By similar reasoning we should accept:

- (3) There is some time,  $t_0$ , such that, had I (at  $t_0$ ) tried to try to try to drink the cup of tea, then I would have tried to try to drink the cup of tea at  $t_1$ .

And so on. Perrett takes this regress to justify:

- ( $n$ ) At any past time  $t_n$  there is some action (e.g. trying to try to try to try... to try to drink the cup of tea at  $t_{m>n}$ ) which I have the ability to do.

Assuming that only existing things have abilities, ( $n$ ) entails that I have always existed before the present moment.

I strongly suspect that this argument is unsound (as, I am sure, will most other people!), but I believe it stands up to more scrutiny than you might at first think. One objection, which Perrett does not discuss but which might strike some as obvious, is that time could be continuous. If it were, then intervals of finite length could be openly bounded in the pastwards direction, in which case we would be wrong to believe that the regress justifies ( $n$ ). To see why, consider a more perspicuous rendering of the above premises. Rather than saying that (1) and **NCA** entail (2), we say instead that it entails:

- (2') There is some time,  $t_{1.5}$ , such that, had I (at  $t_{1.5}$ ) tried to try to drink the cup of tea, then I would have tried to drink the cup of tea at  $t_2$ .

Similarly, it is more perspicuous to say that (2') and **NCA** entail:

- (3') There is some time,  $t_{1.25}$ , such that, had I (at  $t_{1.25}$ ) tried to try to try to drink the cup of tea, then I would have tried to try to drink the cup of tea at  $t_{1.5}$ .

And so on. Put like this, the regress clearly wouldn't justify ( $n$ ), instead justifying:

- ( $n'$ ) If at time  $t_n$  I have the ability to do something, then there are an infinite number of instants prior to  $t_n$  at which I have the ability to do something.

As long as time is continuously structured, ( $n'$ ) can be true without me pre-existing my birth. But this objection would then make the doctrine of reincarnation weirdly dependent upon the topology of spacetime. If we believe—as I do (Effingham, 2013)—that the structure of spacetime is contingent, then at worlds where time is discrete (or worlds where individual lives are topologically closed in the pastwards direction), reincarnation is true. Yoking reincarnation to temporal topology in this manner seems just as wild a claim to me as flat-out believing that reincarnation is true, so I doubt that this is how we should reply.

It is better to focus on the obvious culprit, i.e. **NCA**. This is where Perrett focuses his attention. Perrett suggests that some actions could be simultaneous. In that case, **NCA** might be false for, whilst there is an infinite chain of actions ( $\dots\phi_{-1}, \phi_0, \phi_1\dots$ ) culminating in my tea drinking ( $\phi_3$ ), an infinite plurality of them ( $\dots\phi_{n-2}, \phi_{n-1}, \phi_n$ ) all occur at the same time (such that  $\phi_n$  is simultaneously caused by  $\phi_{n-1}$ , which is in turn simultaneously caused by  $\phi_{n-2}$ , and so on). Again, ( $n$ ) would not follow.

Perrett argues against this move, saying '[i]t is hard to see that this is much more plausible than the beginninglessness of the agent' (Perrett, 1987: 49). Here, I worry that Perrett is too dismissive. The objection becomes more palatable if we add that the infinite plurality of actions (i.e.  $\dots\phi_{n-2}, \phi_{n-1}, \phi_n$ ) are all *identical* to one another i.e. they are all the *same* action. If they are the same action, then there need no longer be any problematic simultaneous causation.

That those actions may all be the same action is not altogether implausible, for the types of actions being identified are, e.g., the action of trying to try to try to do something and the action of trying to try to do it. Whilst we might distinguish drinking a cup of tea from trying to drink one—for surely those actions are distinct, given that one can do the latter and still fail to do the former—we might find it less plausible that trying to try to drink a cup of tea is distinct from trying to drink a cup of tea. (Although even here, a debate can be had. I have sometimes gone to bed thinking 'Tomorrow I shall make sure that I at least *try* to go for a jog', which sounds suspiciously close to me lying in bed trying

to try to go for a jog without it being true that I'm lying in bed trying to go for a jog. (With thanks to Iain Law for discussion on this issue.)

This discussion of Perrett's argument has only been brief, and I hope that you enjoy reading the paper as much as I did. Whilst I doubt that the Wisdom-Potter-Perrett argument is to reincarnation what the ontological argument or fine-tuning argument are to theism, I nevertheless genuinely believe that it should be paid more attention.

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