

REINCARNATION REVISITED RATIONALLY\*

"I have no trouble believing in rebirth,  
it's birth I can't accept."  
– Source not known.

- **Mr. Triple-eye<sup>1</sup>** –: Reincarnation is determined by karman, and karman, to a significant extent, by varṇa or social class. But it is reincarnation that troubles the contemporary rationalist most – or at least so it seems to me. If varṇa were determined only by the work one does or the qualities one possesses, the rationalists ~~will~~ probably not resist it much. That it is said to be determined by birth seems arbitrary and unfair to them. It then disturbs their program of pushing the sugarcane of life through the crusher of reason. Likewise, if one's actions were claimed to determine how one fares in this life, not many voices of protest would be heard from the rationalists, but when actions are viewed as determined by past existences and as determining the future existences, they protest, loud and clear. Reincarnation undermines the ideas of karman and varṇa, the relatively calm ones among them say. ●

**Mr. White-robe** –: We do not like reincarnation because empirical evidence does not bear it out. It is an item that is better consigned to the realm of faith or belief, if not superstition. If the reincarnationist wishes to challenge this view, he must either produce empirical evidence acceptable to us scientists or demonstrate that our other theories would be incoherent unless we made place for reincarnation in our theoretical universe.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: There you go again! You simply assume that your assumptions about doing science are adequate and beyond change. Is this scientific method – as you call it – capable of settling each and every question? Could its acceptability and nature not depend upon the issue being addressed? Are this method and the issue being addressed – whatever it may be – entirely independent of each other *as logical notions*? Must we set aside a certain possibility because one-to-one correlations cannot be established between the presumed

causes and effects, that is, because the possible variables cannot be separated and shown to operate individually in distinct ways, irrespective of the investigators involved? Where does the boundary lie, I mean, the boundary between being scientific because an empirical attestation can be provided – by replicating the conditions that led to a certain claim – and being scientific because the conceptual model erected can account for all or most evidence? Is it justifiable to insist that what the senses of most people grasp is alone true and to deny the possibility that the senses themselves may have varying capabilities depending on the condition of their possessors? Must we set aside the possibility that the dividing line between the senses and the thinking-synthesizing organ (mind, intellect, etc.) may be relative, porous or movable – that, in the case of some individuals, the senses may transcend their usual limitations and become mind or the mind may descend into the senses?

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: You see how the issue of reincarnation leads us right into the heart of philosophy of science or to philosophy of philosophy and forces us to think on the meta-philosophical or metatheoretical plane. Ultimately, it forces us to confront the chicken-and-egg question that may be said to be every thorough-going epistemologist's nightmare: What comes first, the senses delivering reliable or factual information or the conceptual schemes which give us frames of interpretation for what we experience and which include certain criteria, principles, guidelines etc. about what to trust and what not to trust in the sense data? ●

**Mr. White-robe** –: Mr. Orange-robe, please don't get excited! These are just too many questions. We handle one question at a time even when all of them come down to the same thing. But since you have asked so many already, let me ask you one. Wouldn't there be the same implications as you are suggesting in the case of every claim of 'unusual' or 'extra-sensory' perception? Even if we asked questions such as 'Do ghosts exist?', 'Can some persons read the minds of others?' or 'Can X influence Y from a distance without doing any action that those around can perceive?', we would ultimately find ourselves questioning the validity of the scientific method or rational thinking. The reincarnation idea indeed keeps some awfully bad company.

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: The ever-smart Mr. White-robe has caught the fundamental nature of the implication of discussing the reincarnation issue rationally or logically. He is rightly pointing out that there are other issues which put him and Mr. Orange-

robe up against a wall in the same dark alley. It is probably no coincidence but a logical consequence that the thinkers who accept rebirth usually also accept siddhis – those extraordinary capabilities of senses and the body, clairvoyance etc. – and the existence of beings who have such subtle bodies that ordinary human beings cannot perceive them. The notions concerned do seem to form a complex. ●

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: What you are saying then is that science need not investigate assertions such as those of reincarnation. If they are not to be called frivolous, they can at least be declared improper for the scientist because they are untestable – they do not leave open the possibility of being disproved.

**Mr. White-robe** –: That's right. I could also give you another reason for why we do what we do in the way we do. Invitations to determine a first cause are inadmissible. We can take the conceptual schemes and the senses as a given and refuse to decide which of the two came first. We can think of their being in contact as having no beginning – in time or in terms of logical priority within the theory. One need not be held more fundamental than the other in the theory.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: Aha! That means you are arbitrarily limiting investigation. You are offering only a negative defence of what you have already decided, not a refutation of the reincarnation I accept. All you are doing, in fact, is prejudging the issue and giving me evidence of a closed mind. But I will be generous and not accept that. I think you can do better than making a plea for maintaining the status-quo or trusting the scientist, like 'Trust your doctor.' I grant you, though, that you did not express yourself in such nonrational, emotional terms.

**Mr. White-robe** –: That's how things may seem to you, but look at what you are doing to the cause you are championing. In pushing for reincarnation, you are destroying the chances of being able to determine anything as scientific or valid. If you are wise, you will not lift the lid on a can of worms. If you are smart, you will not leave open the doors of cages holding wild animals. You can push the issue of reincarnation only at the expense of not receiving a methodologically sound answer. Forcing it will end up in self-defeat, since you will then have no means left to settle it.

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: Neither gentleman is likely to be able to convince the other of the validity of his position. The debate has moved to the metatheoretical level at which they are questioning each other's very approach to settling the issue. In that sense, reincarnation stands neither proved nor disproved. The time to

write its obituary has not arrived. However, it stands in this conceptual Trisāṅku space, that is, in a conceptual no-man's land along with scientific method – it too has not been disproved or modified to the satisfaction of Mr. Orange-robe – and along with a host of other concepts such as the existence of ghosts. Not a very comforting prospect, is it? Wouldn't it be better if either reincarnation or scientific method were to escape the tongs formed by 'validity' and 'nonvalidity'? ●

**Mr. White-robe** –: So, show me your wares or I will call your bluff.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: No, not on your terms.

[After a long silence]

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: Ok, you have been prevailing in the intellectual world for quite some time now – increasingly, in the last 300 years. Why don't you now retract a little and give me a chance to move beyond this theoretical impasse we seem to have reached. I grant that this would be a less than strictly rational approach. Mind you, not an irrational approach, though. I am proceeding on an impressionistic judgment of the wider situation, not just this concern with scientific method you have – it looks like obsession to me, but let us just call it a concern at this point. I am not asking you to concede my point but to agree, for a while, to be a little less in love with your method. I do not want the usual pronouncements: 'this method alone is your salvation,' 'it stands in no need of modification as far as its foundation is concerned,' 'if you modify it by allowing exceptions to the criterion of testability on empirical evidence, you may consider yourself a person lost on a path that will never intersect with mine.' I will only argue that reincarnation is not such a weak or bad idea.

**Mr. White-robe** –: Ok, but please keep your speeches short.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: You see, the resistance to accepting reincarnation arises primarily from our inability to explain *how* it could take place<sup>2</sup> as distinct from *why* it should take place. The capabilities and inclinations of individuals that we actually see in life are different. A model under which it is claimed that the difference in capabilities and inclinations is caused by what happened in an earlier birth – or a series of earlier births – at least will not be logically inferior to a model which accounts for the difference in terms of heredity and environment. I concede that the former model is not self-sufficient. It appeals to an item, earlier lives, outside of its tested items, the present capabilities and inclinations. But the 'heredity-environment' model which you people prefer must pretend that heredity and environment are clearly separable when it has not been proved that they can indeed be separated.

**Mr. White-robe** –: How so, my dear fellow?

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: It is very difficult to decide what is inherited and what is acquired environmentally. In fact, even the terms 'heredity' and 'environment' cannot be defined without arbitrariness – without prejudging the issue. The best definition would be that what exists at the first moment of conception is heredity and what is faced or created after that moment is environment. But even in this, apart from the difficulty of defining the first moment of conception, we have a problem: the possibility that the inherited could be affected by the environment *as it is inherited* is arbitrarily set aside.

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: He has got a point there. Why should the parents' attitudes and physical conditions not affect conception? Must conception be a purely biological phenomenon having no psychological aspect to it? Would saying 'yes' to this question not imply acceptance of the mind-body dualism? Anyway, let me rejoin the conversation. ●

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: How far would a strict separation of mind and body agree with the empirical evidence we have from other investigations? Is it justifiable to accept a separate mind – under any name – although it cannot be separated for any testing? How far would it agree with your larger scientific model that seems to point toward the interchangeability of matter and non-matter?

**Mr. White-robe** –: Hmm.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: I have also got another question for you. The inherited is assumed to be an unchanging entity – albeit for a few moments. If it can change subsequently, would it not make sense to assume that it is always in a state of change? This way, even your ultimate theoretical definition of heredity and environment forces us to make several assumptions that come across as arbitrary and do not agree with the indications we have from other investigations carried out in your science. It seems better to conclude that "heredity" and "environment" are simply two labels that are convenient in scientific discussion at a certain – lower – level. Ultimately, it is preferable to think of a continuum in which this moment's heredity becomes, in part, the next moment's environment.

**Mr. White-robe** –: I see how it is with the 'how' of the reincarnation process that we have a problem. The details of the process defy attempts at a logical construction. How an item leaving a body – as accompaniment or part of life or life force – could enter another body, invisibly, does not lend itself to a verifiable step-by-step conceptualization. Call it visualization or concretization, if you like.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: The difficulty is definitely there, and the reaction of disbelief generated by it is understandable. However, we should realise at the same time that the situation is not unusual. Just as we cannot deny the occurrence of birth because we cannot locate the triggering of life in space – despite knowing the material bases required for such a triggering, we cannot deny the possibility of some invisible item going to another body – maybe, with stops in between – just because we are not able to chart or pinpoint its movement. The independent existence of the item is not proved just as that of life is not proved. Life can be inferred from the signs shown by the body. So also can the karman factor from the differences in capabilities and inclinations. Incompleteness of the explanatory models is common to both the situations. Both can be fundamental mysteries. We do not have to accept one as genuine and unavoidable and reject the other as imaginary and unnecessary.

**Mr. White-robe** –: Yes, but we do not imagine specific things just because we cannot as yet fully explain how life originates. We simply accept the limitations of our knowledge. That's it.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: I will give you another parallel: our notion of biological inheritance. We cannot be said to have satisfactorily explained how a certain piece of information, knowledge or tendency gets into a gene – or whatever locus you may presume – in the first place. If we do not feel any difficulty in making the assumption that a certain characteristic was introduced in a certain physical entity – however limited the characteristic may be and however minute the entity may be, even when we do not know how exactly it got there – because the effects justify the assumption, can we not extend the same mode of logic to observed differences among individuals and the assumption of karmic effects? Will there be a difference in the logical quality of the two models that we can convincingly establish? Do both not involve some kind of unseen factor?

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: Aha! He is coming to my favourite *adrṣṭa*, but, maybe, he has *Nyāya-sūtra-bhāṣya* 3.1.18–26 or *Yoga-sūtra-bhāṣya* 2.9 in mind. The latter seems specifically relevant. It points out that there is a self-preservation instinct – *abhiniveśa* – in every being.<sup>3</sup> Even an ant immediately after birth avoids a streak of water which can drown it. This avoiding is an effect. In scientific thinking, it must have a cause. In this case, the cause can minimally be only in the form of (a) an earlier experience of suffering from water or (b) somehow learning that water can be dangerous to oneself. Since the ant in our example faces water *immediately after its birth*, it can have neither (a) nor (b) in its present life.

Then, if the cause-and-effect model we follow in our scientific thinking is to be preserved, we must conclude that the ant came to be associated with (a) or (b) sometime before the present life began. But enough of my soliloquy! Let me see where their *vāda* is at present! I seem to have guessed correctly where they were heading. ●

**Mr. White-robe** –: You see the antiwater instinct is in the genes of the ant, which it gets from its parents. It proves biological inheritance, not the necessity of presupposing an earlier life.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: But then you are simply withholding or postponing the answer. The question that I asked you can be asked even in the case of the parents of the ant.

**Mr. White-robe** –: Well, we still have the option of holding that the instinct is beginningless.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: Yes, you do have that option, but then we will be back where we were a few minutes ago. You remind me of something that happened when I used to own a car. You see, I took this car to a servicing facility. It had two rules posted for its mechanics. Rule 1: The boss is always right. Rule 2: When in doubt, follow rule 1. Anyway, let me give you another fact to consider. Reincarnation has been accepted by all religions of Indian origin for many centuries. It has not been repudiated even by the saints ...

**Mr. White-robe** –: By whom? I thought we were speaking about ants.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: by the *sants*. This is a designation commonly used in many languages of India. If I were to explain it simply, I would say that the *sants* are like saints. What I was saying was this. Reincarnation has not been repudiated even by the saints born in low castes, who had much to gain for themselves and their social groups by repudiating it. The mystics of other religious traditions are also not known to have rejected the possibility of reincarnation. In fact, many, if not most, of them seem to state or indicate its acceptance. You see, a reasonably large number of individuals who have tried very hard either to overcome ordinary likes and dislikes or to go beyond the ordinarily accepted limitations of the senses has spoken in favour of reincarnation for no selfish reason, as far as we can see.

**Mr. White-robe** –: Wait a minute! Did you mention individuals who have tried to go beyond the limitations of senses? I do not care how many of them have given a berth to rebirth in their thinking – have accepted reincarnation. As long as the acceptance of the idea is not universal, it is not good enough for me.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: You mean I should trust the scientists more, because they aim at determining things objectively but not trust those who have cultivated restraint and have nothing like a university position to gain by saying what they say? There is a clear difference in the physical and mental preparations of the two groups. Is it not possible that because of this difference one group may be able to have the kind of empirical or direct sensory evidence that the other cannot have? In other words, could it not be the case that what the resistance to acceptance of reincarnation really reveals is the limitations of laboratory-based science?<sup>4</sup>

**Mr. White-robe** –: My dear fellow, what I am suggesting is that because the minds of the mystics are different or have become different due to their practice, what they perceive cannot constitute empirical evidence in the usual sense. An aberration has occurred.

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: An interesting tack. Can you define an aberration, particularly self-induced aberration?

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: We have again come back to the point that what most people perceive is considered normal. But how many does it take to make 'most'? Isn't Mr. White-robe, in effect, invoking probability, while not permitting Mr. Orange-robe to use it? To be able to reject the validity of certain experiences, he actually needs a situation in which there is no possibility of exception; he needs to prove that all persons perceive things to the same extent. But he is simply assuming that to be the case. ●

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: Don't the capacities of the mind change even in 'normal' life? Does one not teach oneself to perceive something that one could not perceive before? Where does such expansion of the mental capability cease to be normal and become an aberration not to be trusted? What are the criteria for determining that a stage of aberration has been reached?

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: We again seem to have come to a point where the possibility of dialogue ends and the two gentlemen are embracing two sides of the same 'dead-end' situation; one side is exclusion of certain experiences from inquiry, that is, limitation of inquiry; the other is removing the limit. The first is arbitrary. The second takes away the tools of verification. It throws away the baby with the bath water. I am reminded of the time I went to Kashi. When I was in its old part,

no matter which lane I took, I ended up at the Viśva-natha temple. ●

**Mr. Orange-robe** –: Are not your own experiments, particularly in physics, taking you to a stage where the limitations of evidence offered by the senses and of the deductions based on sense data are becoming evident? Have not the frontiers of what seemed real and possible been frequently pushed ahead from gross to atomic, from atomic to subparticle etc.? Surely, the paradigms have not remained the same. Have there not been at least a few accounts of remembering past lives that can be said to be worthy of serious consideration because they were collected as objectively and in as controlled a manner as was possible by researchers who do not seem to be given to making sensational claims?<sup>5</sup> More importantly, is there not a pattern emerging from these accounts? Past lives are generally recalled by children and only up to a certain age. The recall involves emotional relationships. The lives recalled frequently seem to have ended in an intense state of the mind due, for example, to drowning, unexpected murder, etc.<sup>6</sup> In addition, *some* accounts of near-death experiences and narrations made under hypnosis seem to offer at least indirect support to the possibility of reincarnation. Add to this the déjà vu experience and the behaviour resulting from it. Now, I admit that none of the phenomena mentioned here is in itself an undeniable proof of reincarnation. In the case of all of them the usual expectation of proof is not met. One is forced to settle for something less than rigorous. But the phenomena, at least in the present state of our knowledge, are independent of each other and so are their accounts. Several of them suggest that a transcendence of how the mind and the senses usually operate occurs. Also, how far likely is it that there will be agreement, based purely on chance, between the way ordinary human beings like children, persons under hypnosis and persons practically dead, on the one hand, think about certain unusual experiences of theirs and, on the other hand, the way mystics, yogins, gyanis, or sants of different times and places who can be said to have willed a change think about their extraordinary experiences? Would the inferences of earlier lives by all of these be due to the suggestions they received from their cultures, teachers, or therapists? Aren't the people involved too different to have their reaction explained through one single explanation, the explanation through suggestion?<sup>7</sup>

● **Mr. Triple-eye** –: This is getting a bit too heavy even for me now. After teaching all kinds of śāstras and kalās – only Brahmā knows for how long – in many appearances – and, oh, every time that make-up takes such a long time – to be guiding this talk

of science and philosophy is really not my cup of poison. I had better go home. I hope Pārvaṭī has some down-to-earth stories to tell me. If not, there is always some indological mystery to curl up with. But since you, my dear reader companion, insist that I provide some guidance before I leave, here is a list of publications which may have something to do with what you heard just now. Note, however, that the list is not exhaustive. When one preserves knowledge for aeons, the mind acts like a hard disk loaded with complex programs. The recall becomes slow. Anyway, at least this much must have become clear to you. Reincarnation cannot be dismissed as a matter of belief or faith. It is not simply a matter of X wanting to believe in the existence of something and Y not wanting to do so. The belief or disbelief that reincarnation demands ultimately pertains to the very depth of epistemology. It forces even the scientist to make a choice that comes across as arbitrary or as guided by nothing more than individual preference. But now I seem to be starting another session. I must not keep Pārvaṭī waiting too long. Already her mood swings are beginning to match mine. After the Notes you will find the Bibliography I promised in the swing of my mood to compassion. ●

#### NOTES

\* This dialogue essay began as a part of a paper titled "The pandits from a piṇḍa-brahmaṇḍa point of view," which is expected to be published in a volume being edited by Professor Axel Michaels. In trying to determine what made the pandit phenomenon possible and what its chances for survival or re-emergence were, I was led to thinking in a sustained way about the notions of varṇa, karma and rebirth. This necessitated that I clear my thinking regarding the acceptability or probability of reincarnation by writing down my thoughts, the ultimate result of which is the present piece. What I hope minimally is that the clarity I tried to achieve has not, on the contrary, led to a muddling of the issue. If it has, readers should provide the magical collyrium called 'rigorous discussion' that is said to give one a clearer vision.

I wish to thank Professor Albrecht Wezler (University of Hamburg), Ms. Anne MacDonald (University of Vienna), Dr. Vidyut Aklujkar, Ms. Michele Demarais, Mr. Michael Dodson, Mr. Gordan Djurdjevic and Ms. Dragana Djurdjevic (all of University of British Columbia) for reading an earlier draft and suggesting improvements in wording and typing. It is also my pleasure to acknowledge that the essay was conceived and essentially completed while I was a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung in 1998–1999 living in Hamburg.

Subsequent to the completion of the first draft, I returned to Vancouver and began to go through the issues of the local newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun*, that my wife Dr. Vidyut Aklujkar had preserved in a pile for me. In the issue of 28 August 1999 (pages E3–E4), I chanced upon an article on the research of Professor Ian

Stevenson that Tom Shroder had originally written for *The Washington Post*. I knew about Stevenson's work but nothing about him as a person or about the reaction to his research. Shroder's article contained some statements that echoed the thoughts present in my draft. I have now added these statements as notes, although my original intention was to include a few notes as possible, so that very little distraction from the flow of the dialogue would occur.

I have italicized only those non-English words which are mentioned as distinct from used.

<sup>1</sup> If you think that this is I-I-I, Mr. Invisible Intrusive Indologist, who, unobserved, keeps an eye on the parties to the conversation as well as – it is hoped – himself, you may be in for a surprise.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Shroder 1999: E4: "Which is more likely," Edwards [1996: 256] wrote, "that there are astral bodies, that they invade the womb of prospective mothers, and that the children can remember events from a previous life although the brains of the previous persons have long been dead? Or that Stevenson's children, their parents, or some other witnesses and informants are, intentionally or unintentionally, not telling the truth: That they are lying, or that their very fallible memories and powers of observation have led them to make false statements and bogus identifications?" Here Edwards was hammering at a central vulnerability of Stevenson's research: No matter how much evidence suggestive of reincarnation Stevenson accumulates, he cannot begin to say what a soul is, much less show how it might travel from one body to another. On the other hand, in trying to make Stevenson's suppositions seem absurd, even Edwards was admitting that if these cases are not the product of lies, bogus identifications and fallible observations – if somehow they could be demonstrated to be honest and accurate accounts – then they would constitute legitimate evidence for reincarnation, even if we can't explain how reincarnation works."

<sup>3</sup> When the self-preservation instinct is not followed, as in a suicide, there are, of course, situational elements that overwhelm it at the time concerned.

<sup>4</sup> Shroder 1999: E4 has Stevenson saying the following: "Modern psychologists imitated physicists by only being interested in what happened in a lab, not in things like love and death, and parapsychologists imitated psychologists. That is, you have tight control of conditions. But it seems to me that it is far better to be 90 per cent certain of something important than 100 per cent certain of something that is trivial."

<sup>5</sup> (a) Note the guardedly expressed conclusion of Stevenson reported in Shroder 1999: E3: "I think a rational person, if he wants, can believe in reincarnation on the basis of the evidence." The same source quotes on p. E4 the following remark of anthropologist Antonia Mills: "Like Stevenson, I conclude that while none of the cases I studied offer[s] incontrovertible proof of reincarnation or some related paranormal process, they are part of a growing body of cases for which normal explanations do not seem to do justice to the data."

(b) Shroder 1999: E3–E4: "A 1975 article in no less than the *Journal of the American Medical Association* said Stevenson 'had collected cases in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds' besides reincarnation. ... Apart from that early positive review ... , mainstream science had almost completely ignored him."

(c) According to a BBC television programme I saw at Rajkot on 5 January 1993, the other researchers investigating reincarnation seem to be Satwant Pasricha, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-sciences, Bangalore and Erlendour Haroldsson (I could not gather the institutional affiliation of the latter).

<sup>6</sup> The last feature would tie in well with the importance attached to the last moments of life or the 'hour of death' in several religious philosophies; cf. Edgerton 1926.

<sup>7</sup> The 'suggestion' explanation deserves serious consideration because in the documented cases a difference has been noticed that *may* be related to difference of culture. Cf. Shroder 1999: E4: "As a group, the North Americans have fewer specific

memories than the children in places like Lebanon and India. They tend not to talk about place or personal names as much, or at all, making identification of a specific previous personality unlikely. The only American cases Stevenson has found where children have said enough to clearly identify a previous personality and included verifiable statements about their lives are 'same family cases' ..."

\* A list of Stevenson's publications can be obtained from the website <<http://hsc.virginia.edu/personality-studies>>. Below I have included only those of his publications which concentrate on issues concerning the use of the data. The data themselves are collected in volumes with titles such as *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* and *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*. The only volume under the former title was first published in 1966 (New York: American Society for Psychical Research. [Reprint?] 1974. University Press of Virginia. Second edn of the 1974 volume: 1980 by the same publisher. German translation of Heinrich Wendt under the title *Reinkarnation* ... Braunschweig: Aurnum Verlag. 1976). The dates of publication of the volumes carrying the latter title are 1975, 1977, 1980, 1983 (University Press of Virginia).

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