Reincarnation, theodicy and Judaism

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A dialogue in *Philosophy East and West* has focused on the contribution an eastern doctrine of reincarnation can make to the typically western pursuit of constructing theodicies (Kaufman, 2005; 2007; Chadha and Trakakis, 2007; Sharma, 2008). This new article by Tyron Goldschmidt and Beth Seacord in *Faith and Philosophy* is a welcome addition to the topic, differing from previous contributions by bringing a distinctively Jewish perspective to the discussion. In so doing, it not only furthers the debate by making points that could be made by philosophers within any religious tradition or none (which it does with frequent ingenuity); it also brings uniquely Jewish insights to the table. These insights are valuable in themselves, but this approach also has wider methodological significance. First, it enables Goldschmidt and Seacord to avoid treating the doctrine of reincarnation in a way it would never have been intended - as a means to responding to an alien, theistic problem of evil – since the theistic problem of evil is not alien to the Jewish tradition (see concerns expressed by Chadha and Trakakis, 2007, pp. 534 – 535). Second, it does justice to the doctrine as it is believed by the religion’s adherents and conveyed in Scriptures, and so avoids a crude ahistorical or a-contextual account of reincarnation (see Chadha and Trakakis, 2007, p. 535). One of the achievements of the paper is to offer an example of a way in which philosophy of religion can engage with lived religion, as well as focusing on and contributing to a religious tradition other than the Christian faith – still something of a rarity in mainstream analytic philosophy of religion.

Goldschmidt and Seacord outline three theodicies, which, they argue, can be combined together, and joined with the doctrine of reincarnation, in a way that solves many of the traditional problems with theodicies that have been raised in the past. For example, animal suffering is a perennial problem for soul-building theodicy, because it is usually thought that an animal is not the kind of being that develops morally or spiritually, so its suffering cannot be soul-building, and appears to be entirely gratuitous. This, argue Goldschmidt and Seacord, can be answered by an appeal to a punishment theodicy + reincarnation: the animal is suffering because of a sin it committed in a previous life. Alternatively, they point out, we could appeal to a soul-building theodicy + reincarnation: the soul which is currently an animal will have the opportunity to grow morally as a result of its suffering when it gains full understanding at the end of its cycle of lives. This latter solution is also appealed to in relation to a punishment theodicy in which people who cannot remember the sins they committed in their previous lives are currently undergoing punishment for them. According to this argument, they will regain their memories at the end of the cycle of their lives, and so will understand how they have sinned and for what they have been punished.

In making these arguments, Goldschmidt and Seacord go some way towards making a ‘combination theodicy + reincarnation’ explicable, though they nevertheless left me with certain reservations. Waiting until the end of the cycle of lives before soul-building takes place seems, *prima facie,* an uneconomic process for building souls, since the soul in question would continue, in possibly *numerous* future lives, to act without the lessons a soul who could remember (where memory is the issue) or understand (in the case of animals) would learn from its suffering. We might then question the goodness of a God who would allow the gratuitous sin and suffering that would inevitably arise if the soul-building does not take place till the end of the cycle of reincarnations, where this might be avoided through an alternative soul-building process. If we reject a soul-building theodicy in the case of animal suffering because of this concern, we should then also reject the ‘end of the cycle of lives’ hypothesis as a solution to the memory problem in the context of rehabilitative punishment for the same reason. This still leaves us with retributive punishment as a way of explaining animal suffering. But what kind of God would we be left with who would cause the suffering of an animal for purely retributive reasons?

Another reservation with which I am left concerns the question of personal identity over time, where ‘over time’ includes ‘between incarnations’. Goldschmidt and Seacord understandably set this rather large question aside, but at times one feels it as an unhelpfully conspicuous absence. One instance of this is in their treatment of dysteleological evil in the context of soul-building theodicy. Goldschmidt and Seacord suggest that the problem of dysteleological evil might be ameliorated by the idea that we will still have opportunities to grow morally and spiritually in future lives, when we are no longer suffering the effects of the dysteleological evil. This naturally gives rise to questions about whether and how our identity remains the same if these dysteleological experiences are in some sense discounted or nullified. The question of identity is frequently discussed within considerations of reincarnation and karma in eastern philosophical frameworks, but the answer given from a Jewish perspective is likely to be quite different.

A distinction is sometimes drawn between defences (which show that it is logically possible for a good and all-powerful God to allow evil), and theodicies (which aim to provide a plausible explanation for why a good and all-powerful God would, in fact, allow evil). The former are perhaps easier to provide, but, it is sometimes argued, are ultimately less satisfying and religiously helpful. Goldschmidt and Seacord succeed in what I take to be the aim of their paper: to show that if (both retributive and rehabilitative) punishment, free will, and soul-building theodicies are combined, and added to the doctrine of reincarnation, they provide more answers to the perennial problems with theodicies than when these are treated individually and without the doctrine of reincarnation. They also make a valuable contribution to philosophy of religion by drawing on Jewish sources in their consideration of this topic. However, my sense is that a fuller account is needed of the above, and other, outstanding questions in order for this to become a full-blown and potentially persuasive theodicy. The opportunity to discuss this paper and these questions further is therefore greatly welcomed.

Bibliography

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