

I first want to thank Dani Rabinowitz for inviting me to participate in this forum, and to thank Tyron Goldschmidt and Beth Seacord for their very interesting and carefully-argued paper. I confess that I have not thought much about reincarnation before, and I certainly did not know that “it has become so widespread a view among orthodox Jews that its rejection would be a little heterodox” (394). My ignorance points to something that, while obvious, should not go unmentioned. Analytic philosophy of religion has historically been not only a very Western discipline, but also a very Christian one. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this state-of-affairs, but it means that philosophers of religion have been cut off from interesting arguments drawn from other religious traditions. As a result, there are challenges to standard arguments, and solutions to perennial problems, that have scarcely been considered.

Goldschmidt and Seacord present reincarnation as just such a solution, and argue that it can help address the question of why a benevolent and almighty God would permit evil. Understandably, they wish to sidestep difficult metaphysical questions about whether reincarnation is even possible, and focus instead on the central question of whether it can contribute to theodicy. They are keen to minimize their argumentative burden in other ways too. On their view, reincarnation supports, but does not replace, more traditional theodicies. They agree that sometimes the innocent suffer and deny that all suffering is a result of punishment for wrongs committed in past lives (405, 411). They also admit that “new souls” can come into being (405). In short, some but not all suffering is to be explained by an appeal to past-life wrongdoing, and some but not all existing subjects have been reincarnated.

Here I should say that there is an argument that I want to make, but that does not seem fair to make. It seems to me that given these concessions, any additional explanatory power gained by appeals to reincarnation cannot outweigh the associated metaphysical and metaethical costs, which seem prohibitively steep. Yet I cannot make that argument without shifting the ground of the debate into territory that Goldschmidt and Seacord have explicitly ruled out.

I sincerely do not wish to criticize Goldschmidt and Seacord because they did not write a different article, or insist that they must start with first principles. On the other hand, I find myself at a bit of a loss. Suppose I grant that in a past life, I could have been a non-human animal, a plant, or even an inanimate object and that my experiences in all these states would still count as mine (398). Suppose, too, that I further grant that past-life “Earthworm Bill” and “Silent Stone Bill” would still count as moral agents in the relevant sense, and would deserve future punishment or reward for their wormy, stony behavior. Having granted that much, I am left with little to argue about. Are there cases in which reincarnation (so-construed) would augment traditional theodicies and help answer the problem of evil? I expect so.

But, despite initial appearances, perhaps they would not actually be the hardest cases. Consider, for example, Bruce Russell’s case of Sue, a 5-year old girl who was “raped, severely beaten over most of her body and strangled to death” (397). If we do not countenance reincarnation, and so deny the concomitant possibility that God might dispense punishment on the basis of past-life wrongdoing, then we have no license whatsoever for thinking that Sue might have deserved this horrible fate. Indeed, the very idea is absurd and repellent. If we do countenance reincarnation, however, then by definition it becomes more probable that Sue’s suffering is deserved. Even

though reincarnation may not *entail* that the best explanation for present suffering is past wrongdoing, it does make that explanation available, and hence more probable.

I would prefer a theodicy that does not make it more probable that some people deserve to be raped, or make it more probable that sometimes God justly uses rape as an instrument of punishment. A theodicy that admits such claims is no theodicy at all. On the other hand, if we do not appeal to past-life wrongdoing to explain Sue's fate, then we are left with a paradigmatic "hard case" that remains unexplained—exactly the sort of case that reincarnation is meant to help solve. Our worry about why God would allow Sue's suffering remains untouched. Reincarnation has not helped at all.

Perhaps we could argue that reincarnation does help: Sue is innocent, and her suffering undeserved, but God will repay her after death with a glorious future life or lives. I worry about the crudely utilitarian calculations implied by this move. In any case, it is similar to the traditional Christian theodicy that balances off earthly suffering by appealing to post-mortem recompense in heaven. We cannot assess which theodicy is better without assessing the underlying metaphysics and metaethics implied by each.

William Wood
Oriel College, Oxford