

Replies to Comments

Tyron Goldschmidt and Beth Seacord

We thank Tasia Scrutton and Bill Wood for their insightful criticisms of our essay. Scrutton levels three objections and Wood levels two, which we will consider in order.

The first of Scrutton's objections is that reincarnations in which subjects do not understand which past wrongs they are now suffering for would not be as good as reincarnations in which subjects do understand this—because then they'd more quickly and easily learn from the suffering. So a perfectly good God would bring about reincarnations in which subjects do understand which past wrongs they are now suffering for, at least insofar as he'd bring about reincarnation at all. But subjects typically do not understand this; we proposed that they might only come to this understanding at the end of the cycle of reincarnations. That tells against God's perfect goodness.

There are three replies of varying strengths. First, we described some ways subjects can understand which past wrongs they committed in past lives (p. 7; page numbers refer to the online version). However, this reply only minimizes the problem; it does not eliminate it. For there are still easier ways subjects could come to this understanding—such as by simply remembering the wrongs.

Second, we described reasons for subjects not to understand the past wrongs: for example, as the best way for subjects to learn a lesson in some cases (pp. 7-8) and to provide subjects a clean slate (pp. 16-18). This reply again only minimizes the problem. For there will presumably remain cases where understanding the past wrongs would be the best way to learn the lesson and where no clean slate would be needed. Still, subjects might benefit most as a general rule from being reincarnated with a clean slate, even though there would be cases where no clean slate is needed. And if God must choose some policy or other in imposing natural regularities, this could be the best policy.

Thirdly, a kind of reincarnation where subjects understand which past wrongs they are suffering for would be worse in other ways. It would drastically change the way we live, and in some bad ways. For example, if this understanding were to come easy enough—e.g. by simply remembering—that would undermine the role of parents and peers in our moral education, and would deprive them of a very good responsibility. And just think of all the mischief that could be caused by subjects fraudulently claiming to be certain past subjects!

The second objection is that subjects cannot reincarnate without suffering the effects of dysteological evils from past lives, since these effects become a part of their identity. We can only have the same subject across lives in case the dysteological evil has left some of its effect. But our proposal is that reincarnation allows subjects not to suffer the effects of dysteological evils from past lives.

In reply, we deny that the effects of dysteological evils become a part of the subjects' identities. Dysteological evils change subjects so significantly that we may want to describe the change in such terms, but that is not the literal truth. The effects of dysteological evil do not affect the subjects' essential

properties but their accidental properties; in reincarnation, the accidents are wiped away but leaving the subject's essence. Jews, Hindu, Buddhists and others might have more or less different views about personal identity, but any plausible view must allow for the removal of the effects without ending the subjects. We can easily imagine more radical cases of amnesia that do not destroy the subjects.

Of course, reincarnation usually involves a much more radical removal of psychological as well as bodily effects from past lives—whether we think that is possible might depend on just how much psychological and bodily change our favorite theory of personal identity allows. But, as Scrutton notes, such questions do not especially draw from the problem of evil, and so are not the focus of our project.

The third objection is that we do not provide a theodicy strictly speaking. A theodicy is supposed to be a plausible explanation of why God actually allows evil. Scrutton grants that while we have shown that the doctrine of reincarnation can help traditional theodicies, we have not shown that it is a part of an explanation of why God actually allows evil. The case for a theodicy is incomplete.

We grant the point. We never intended to show that reincarnation is a part of a plausible explanation of why God actually allows evil. That would require showing that reincarnation is plausible—easy enough with an audience of relevant religious believers, but not so easy for others. So, while some religious believers may conclude that the doctrine of reincarnation makes for a plausible explanation of why God actually allows evil in this life—and may even conclude so in light of our paper—others cannot.

Nevertheless, the essay might begin to show that religious believers generally should think something like reincarnation not so improbable—besides for helping understand why God allows evil, it might be the only way to provide opportunities that a perfectly good God has reason to provide.

Wood levels two objections. The first is that the explanatory benefits of the doctrine of reincarnation are outweighed by the metaphysical costs. That objection gets us into debates about the possibility and probability of reincarnation that are beyond the modest scope of our essay—as Wood recognizes.

We don't want to get entangled in such debates in reply. But we note that, even though some won't accept the theodicy because they don't accept the metaphysics behind it, others will—Jews, Druze, Hindus and others. There is value in seeing how millions or even billions of people make sense of things—again as Wood recognizes. And for a neutral agnostic the metaphysics behind reincarnation might not be less credible than the metaphysics behind theodicies particular to rival traditions. (We note that the theodicy does not propose that subjects are punished for wrongs committed while they were animals or inanimate objects, but rather that subjects might be punished in such forms for wrongs committed in human lives, when they had moral agency.)

The second objection is that the theodicy increases the probability that some of the most difficult cases of suffering are deserved. That is a morally problematic—and religiously problematic too, since a good God would never use the most difficult kinds of suffering as punishment. Against the original moral

objection (pp. 13-14), we replied that the theodicy does not entail that any particular case of evil is deserved; Wood contends that it still increases the probability.

We can reply in three ways of varying strength. First, God might have reason for allowing the most difficult kinds of suffering as punishment in some cases. Perhaps it would sometimes be the only fitting punishment for subjects who inflicted such suffering on others; perhaps it would be the only way that the subjects could come to understand the gravity of their wrongs.

Secondly, while the theodicy *might* increase the probability that the cases of suffering are deserved, it need not be increased to anything significant. There might be other theodicies available. Even if the prior probability that some of the worse cases of suffering are deserved goes up significantly with the doctrine of reincarnation—the probability goes from a zero to a non-zero value—the posterior probability that the suffering is deserved should still remain low. So we are not justified in believing that the subjects are being punished for wrongs committed in a past life.

Wood objects that if reincarnation does not apply to these cases, then some of the most difficult cases remain unanswered by the theodicy developed. However, even if the theodicy is not applied to such cases, it might still help in other ways. After all, *no* single theodicy we know of applies to all evil. But that does not mean that the theodicies can't help make sense of some evil. Similarly, for the theodicy we develop.

The third reply is that the increase of probability need not have the morally problematic effects. For one thing, we cannot typically identify which instances of suffering are deserved. For another, we are obligated to alleviate suffering in any case. To be sure, the increase of probability might increase the probability of morally problematic effects, but it need not increase it by very much. (The Jewish tradition typically forbids informing someone that their suffering is for wrongs committed (Bab. Mez. 58b), and even while we are to try see our own suffering as the result of wrongs (Ber. 5a), not all suffering is such a result (Shabb. 55b; Jer. Shabb. 14: 3).)

Finally, the criticism to some extent generalizes against punishment theodicies. A great deal of suffering has been explained in the Jewish tradition as somehow connected to punishment—including suffering that contemporary moral sensibilities would not be inclined to interpret in this way. Insofar as Christian tradition overlap with Jewish tradition here—e.g. the prophets' interpretation of so much suffering as punishment for sin—the problem faces both.