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KARMA AND REBIRTH IN THE STREAM OF THOUGHT AND LIFE

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Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning.

Wittgenstein¹

The belief in karma and rebirth, according to which actions performed in one lifetime bear fruit in a subsequent one, is widespread, some version of it being common among Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, and some other religious traditions. Ethnographic studies sometimes provide examples of how this belief manifests in people's lives. For instance, fieldwork carried out by Richard and Candy Shweder in the eastern Indian town of Bhubaneswar yielded interview footage exhibiting how members of the Hindu community apply the concepts of karma and rebirth in describing their situations. A poignant case is that of an eighty-three-year-old high-caste brahmin woman who, over the preceding five years, had lost her husband, her eyesight, and her eldest daughter. During the interview, she remorsefully characterizes these occurrences as consequences of her own sinfulness:

"I was born a woman. I gave birth to a daughter. My daughter died. My husband died before I did. Suddenly my vision disappeared. Now I am a widow—and blind." She weeps: "I cannot say which sin I have committed in which life, but I am suffering now because I have done something wrong in one of my births. All the sins are gathered near me." (Shweder 1991, p. 159)

Other sources of examples include autobiographies and memoirs. In the memoir of Ani Pachen, a Tibetan warrior-nun who led an insurrection against the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the author recounts how, when being tortured in a Chinese-run prison, she would attribute her suffering to her former misdeeds. In one instance, after recalling how she was brutally lashed with wet bamboo canes, Pachen writes: "My ears were beginning to ring, and my face was burning. My previous karma, I thought. The pain will eliminate my sins" (Pachen 2001, p. 217).

What are non-believers in karma and rebirth to make of this way of conceiving of events, of the idea that one's present circumstances are a result of sinful behavior in a previous life? Many philosophers, including some influenced by the later work of Wittgenstein, would say that there is something confused about a belief in reincarnation or rebirth. It is confused because it requires a dualistic conception of human beings, according to which we comprise two distinct metaphysical components, a body and a mind or soul, with the latter being capable of existing on its own and of

“transmigrating” to a new body when the old one dies. “Since time immemorial,” writes Peter Hacker, “human beings have fantasized about metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls.” Akin to these fantasies, Hacker suggests, are the thought experiments of philosophers who imagine, for example, a “prince awakening ‘in the body’ of a cobbler, having retained all his memories,” or the more fleshed-out but nonetheless fantastical scenarios depicted by fiction writers, envisaging such things as a man waking up to discover that his familiar human body has been replaced by that of a giant beetle. “Amusing or terrifying as these fictions are,” continues Hacker, “it is doubtful whether they make any sense.” Although they may exhibit an enigmatic charm, the mere fact that we can imagine them does not show them to be logically possible (Hacker 2007, p. 301).

But is it right to characterize traditional beliefs in rebirth as fantasies, lumping them in the same category as rudimentarily sketched philosophical thought experiments and more extravagantly imaginative fictional narratives? Other philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein would contend that such derogatory characterizations are premature if one has not yet given careful attention to the culturally informed contexts, the forms of life, within which the beliefs have their place. From this perspective, the philosopher’s task is not to try to convince herself or anyone else of the truth or falsity of the belief in question, but to investigate its sense by examining its “surroundings,” namely the modes of language and activity with which expressions of the belief are implicated.² Such an approach does not preclude the possibility that the belief may, in the end, be deemed obscure or incoherent, but it precludes any such judgment in advance of a conceptual, “grammatical,” investigation.³

My purpose in this essay is to explore how some key concepts from Wittgenstein’s later work can benefit our understanding of beliefs in karma and rebirth. I shall begin by elucidating the crucial theme of “bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, sec. 116), for if the distinction between “metaphysical” and “everyday” is misunderstood, then the task of investigating religious concepts will be torpedoed at the outset. A consideration of how certain Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers have sought to bring the concept of the soul back to its everyday spiritual and ethical use will introduce the Wittgensteinian notion of a “picture” (either visual or verbal) whose meaning requires more than a mere superficial glance to discern. This will open the way to a discussion of attempts to “demythologize” the concepts of karma and rebirth in the study of religions, especially among scholars and indeed practitioners of Buddhism, for these attempts bear a certain resemblance to Wittgensteinian methods. While acknowledging that these “demythologizing” or “psychologizing” interpretations offer inventive reconstructions of the beliefs concerned, I shall argue that they fail to account for a central feature of these beliefs as they are evinced in examples such as those of Ani Pachen and the Hindu widow cited above.

Religious Forms of Language and “Everyday Use”

Philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein have been reasonably united in maintaining that his later work offers a damning critique of the dualistic picture of human beings

most paradigmatically associated with René Descartes.⁴ They differ considerably, however, in their views of what the implications of this critique are for religious conceptions of the soul. On the one side are those who draw the conclusion that religious talk of the soul as something that can separate from the body is confused and must be abandoned. Hacker, for example, considers “religious doctrine and promises of an afterlife” to be among the pernicious influences that have “exacerbated” confusion over concepts such as those of mind and soul (2007, p. 289). On the other side are those who, while admitting that certain philosophical *misrepresentations* of religious modes of thought and language need to be abandoned, nevertheless maintain that, correctly understood, religious soul-talk is not confused. Philosophers in this latter camp typically strive to recover the ethical and spiritual significance of religious forms of language while avoiding the suggestion that terms such as “soul” refer to a mysterious immaterial substance that somehow causally interacts with the material body.

The contrast between these two ways of inheriting Wittgenstein’s approach and of comprehending its implications for our understanding of religion can be captured in relation to Wittgenstein’s well-known affirmation that “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” ([1953] 2009, sec. 116). For those who take Wittgenstein’s methods to show that religious modes of language are (at least in many instances) confused, the “everyday use” of words does not include their religious uses; the latter are, for the most part, to be categorized with the metaphysical uses. Meanwhile, for those who take Wittgenstein’s methods to facilitate not a rejection but an elucidation of religious uses of language, those religious uses are held to be included within the category of the everyday: everyday uses of language are not all of one type, and among the multiple types is the religious, with its own idiosyncrasies and sub-varieties.

One source of difficulty for deciding which of these two interpretations is most closely aligned with Wittgenstein’s own approach is the fact that “metaphysical” is itself a term with various uses, and hence it may not be obvious what, in Wittgenstein’s remark, is being contrasted with “everyday use.” Terms such as “metaphysics” and “metaphysical” are patently not the exclusive preserve of academic philosophers; they also have a life within other modes of discourse. Scholars and students of literature discuss the “metaphysical poets,” anthropologists and literary critics as well as philosophers speak of “metaphysical world views,” and phrases beginning with “the metaphysics of . . .” crop up in many domains.⁵ Traditionally, among the central objects of metaphysical inquiry in philosophy have been God, the soul, and the freedom of the will;⁶ hence, unsurprisingly, the concepts of theology, religion, and metaphysics have been closely intertwined. Belief in God or the immortality of the soul is commonly characterized as a “metaphysical belief” or a belief in a “metaphysical entity.”⁷ And when the logical positivists devised arguments for the nonsensicality of metaphysical discourse, they typically assumed that religious discourse would be jettisoned too.⁸ So it is hardly surprising that many of those who understand Wittgenstein’s methods to involve a rejection of metaphysics assume them also to involve a rejection of religion, or at least a rejection of much of what religious believers have traditionally had to say.

But when Wittgenstein speaks of “bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” by “metaphysical” he means the particular practice of “try[ing] to grasp the *essence*” of something without pausing to consider whether the terms that apply to that thing are, “in the language in which [they are] at home,” ever used in the way one is assuming ([1953] 2009, sec. 116). In short, to use a word in a metaphysical way—in the sense of “metaphysical” that is most pertinent to Wittgenstein’s purpose—is to use it in a way that detaches it from its practical and linguistic surroundings in the “hurly-burly” of life.⁹ Thus, it does not follow that religious uses are to be lumped in with metaphysical ones (in *this* sense of “metaphysical”), for religious activities and uses of language are *part* of the hurly-burly of life. The crucial methodological point is that if those religious uses of language are to be understood by the philosopher, they must be considered in relation to their specifically religious contexts and not abstracted from those contexts or assumed to be identical to the uses of homonymous or similar terms within non-religious contexts. They must, in other words, be brought back to their everyday *religious* use.

Pictures of the Soul

Attempts to return words such as “soul” and “spirit” from their metaphysical to their everyday religious uses have been made by Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers such as D. Z. Phillips and İlham Dilman.¹⁰ The work of both of these philosophers in this area relies heavily on Wittgenstein’s idea of a “picture.” By this is meant a mode of expression such as a visual image or form of words that does indeed express something, and cannot be replaced or paraphrased without some loss of meaning, and yet is in a certain way figurative: if understood in too crude a manner it could be highly misleading. Thus, Wittgenstein writes:

What do I believe in when I believe that man has a soul? What do I believe in when I believe that this substance contains two carbon rings? In both cases, there is a picture in the foreground, but the sense lies far in the background; that is, the application of the picture is not easy to survey. ([1953] 2009, sec. 422)

Picturing a substance as containing two carbon rings would be misleading if one assumed the “rings” to be just like wedding rings or little hoops; the mistake would be in overlooking the fact that “ring” has a particular use in organic chemistry that is different from its use in other contexts. Similarly, one has to be careful with the idea that people have souls. To assume that this sense of “having” is equivalent to that in which someone *has* (possesses) a material item such as a fountain pen or a bicycle would be misleading, and to assume that the soul is *in* the body in the same sense as a coin is *in* my pocket, or my brain is *in* my skull, is liable to be a distortion of the religious sense of this idea.

“Religion teaches us that the soul can exist when the body has disintegrated,” writes Wittgenstein.

Now do I understand what it teaches?—Of course I understand it—I can imagine various things in connection with it. After all, pictures of these things have even been painted. And why should such a picture be only an imperfect rendering of the idea expressed? Why should it not do the *same* service as the spoken doctrine? And it is the service that counts. ([1953] 2009, pt. 2, iv, sec. 23)

The thought here is that a visual depiction, such as a painting, can express an idea, and may be the best or even the only means of expressing precisely *that* idea, without its being the case that the painting merely represents a scene that “in real life” (as one might say) would be readily available to our senses. Wittgenstein makes roughly the same point in one of his lectures on religious belief (1966, p. 63), in which he remarks of Michelangelo’s painting of the creation of Adam that it may be an excellent depiction of the creation—it may be as good as it gets—and yet there would be no sense in asking whether God or Adam really looked like that (as one might ask of a portrait of one’s great grandmother, for example). And none of this should be assumed to mean that the painting is “*merely* figurative,” as though there were some other kind of painting that would count as a *literal* depiction. One could describe it as figurative, provided this is not taken to imply that the painting does not show what is really meant.¹¹ The same point applies to religious forms of language.

Christian ideas of one’s immortal soul being saved or damned may exemplify the point. Talk of falling “into the hands of God” or, alternatively, “into the pit of hell” presents pictures that may optimally express the ideas concerned. A believer may even say that they are pictures of *what will happen*. Yet it would not follow that they depict “what will happen” in the same sense as, say, a weather forecaster’s diagram does. The *use* of the pictures is different, and the use is the vital thing. The trouble with much of what goes by the name of philosophy of religion, Phillips complains, is that it rarely pays attention to how expressions concerning the soul are used: “We are offered talk of immaterial substances, disembodied spirits, and so on. . . . The resultant analyses are a dislocation of the religious expressions” (Phillips 1995, p. 452).

Dilman seeks to retrieve the ethical and spiritual significance of soul-talk in his interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedo*. He construes Socrates’ talk of “the body as a tomb or a cage of the soul, and of death as its release” as instances of “thinking of the way appetites of the body, lust, gluttony, and the like, impede a different kind of life: spiritual life, a life of aspiration to certain ideals” (Dilman 1992, p. 79). The image that Plato presents of “the soul’s temporal existence as a journey through cycles of reincarnation” is, on Dilman’s reading, “a religious picture . . . [that] represents a way of thinking about life, a way of sizing up our actions within life’s brief span” (p. 6). Phillips is less sympathetic than Dilman to the imagery of reincarnation in the *Phaedo*. “The dialogue is an uneven one,” he opines, “and in many places Plato does speak as though by the soul he referred to a separate and independent element. This is particularly true when Plato speaks of the transmigration of souls” (Phillips 1970, p. 46).

Many interpreters of Plato would draw a distinction between a “literal” reading and a “figurative” or “symbolic” one,¹² and would place Dilman’s firmly in the latter

category. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, there is no difficulty in acknowledging that talk of separating from the body and undergoing successive reincarnations conjures up images with ethical and spiritual resonance; one may also acknowledge that this way of speaking and the images it evokes are, in a certain sense, figurative. Again, however, this would not imply that they are not really what one means (and that what one really means could best be expressed in a non-figurative paraphrase). The difficulty comes when one assumes the literal-figurative distinction to be a distinction between two equally intelligible ways of understanding the picture, the only interpretive question to be resolved being that of which of them was intended by the author (Plato, in this case). For Phillips and Dilman the distinction is not of this kind, for they would concur with Hacker that the purportedly “literal” interpretation is merely a confusion; there is nothing that could really count as *understanding* the picture non-figuratively, because any attempt to render it in other terms crumbles into incoherence. Phillips, as we have seen, is willing to attribute some confusion to Plato’s text itself, whereas Dilman seeks a more thoroughgoing ethico-spiritual reading.

“Demythologizing” Karma and Rebirth

By analogy with Rudolf Bultmann’s approach to biblical hermeneutics, one might describe Dilman’s interpretation of Plato as an instance of “demythologizing.” Bultmann sought an interpretation of the New Testament that stripped away what he saw as extraneous and outdated mythological trappings in order to reveal its central message more clearly, that message being an “existential” one that demands a decision about how to live. For Bultmann, the correct response to the message or “proclamation” (*kerygma*) of the New Testament is “to live an eschatological existence,” in which God’s grace is understood to be operative here and now (Bultmann 1958, pp. 81–82). To respond in this way is to change one’s “attitude to the world” (Bultmann 1957, p. 153).¹³ One could say, invoking a phrase from Dilman that I quoted above, that it is to live “a different kind of life: spiritual life, a life of aspiration to certain ideals.” Just as, on Dilman’s reading of Plato, the idea of reincarnation is a picture that governs the decisions one makes in one’s present life, so on Bultmann’s reading of the New Testament the eschaton is not to be conceived of as chronologically subsequent to this life; rather, “In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it” (Bultmann 1957, p. 155).

The theme of “demythologization” has become pervasive in recent and contemporary interpretations of the doctrine of karma and rebirth in Buddhist and to a slightly lesser extent in Hindu traditions. Although such interpretations are rarely executed with explicit reference to Wittgenstein, a distinction comparable to that which Wittgenstein makes between the “picture in the foreground” (or “surface grammar”) and “the sense [that] lies far in the background” (or “depth grammar”) is frequently present.¹⁴ Offering a comprehensive survey of these demythologizing approaches exceeds the scope of this essay, but a selection of illustrative examples will be discussed.

A common, although not universal, feature of demythologized construals of karma and rebirth is the search for an essential doctrine that logically and historically precedes later embellishments or “accretions,” the “accretions” being seen as having been added by successive generations of redactors and commentators.¹⁵ Writing around 1940, J. G. Jennings interprets “the original core” of the Buddha’s teaching to be a “doctrine of pure altruism or non-egoism, which has since been overlaid very naturally by one making a stronger appeal, namely the wonderful Indian dogma of personal salvation through long purgation by transmigration in successive lives” (1947, p. xxii).¹⁶ Noting that early Buddhist scriptures reject the idea of a stable “soul” or “self” (*attā*), Jennings argues that this rejection is incompatible with a doctrine that regards the actions of a given individual in one life as having repercussions for that same individual in a future lifetime. Thus, rather than being understood as the rebirth of an individual self or person, the concept of rebirth should be understood as applying to the recurrence of our selfish *desires*, which tend to repeat themselves unless we control and diminish them through the assiduous cultivation of selfless altruism.¹⁷ According to this interpretation, our actions do have consequences beyond our present lives, but these consequences are “collective not individual” (p. xxv). By the notion of “collective karma,” Jennings seems to mean simply that our actions impinge upon others, and upon the world as a whole, in ways that are liable to outlast the present finite existence that each of us is undergoing. It is thus not one-self who will suffer or enjoy the fruits of one’s actions subsequent to death, but those “in endless succeeding generations” (p. xxxvii).

More recently, Stephen Batchelor has echoed this thought:

Regardless of what we believe, our actions will reverberate beyond our deaths. Irrespective of our personal survival, the legacy of our thoughts, words, and deeds will continue through the impressions we leave behind in the lives of those we have influenced or touched in any way. (Batchelor 1998, p. 38)

Demythologizing approaches such as this are evident not merely among Western interpreters of Buddhist and Hindu traditions, but within certain strands of those traditions themselves. The twentieth-century Thai monk-philosopher, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, is an example of a highly educated practitioner whose reinterpretation of his own Theravāda tradition involves “the systematic reduction of metaphysical aspects of Buddhist teaching, such as notions of rebirth in heaven or hell, to psychological conditions” (Jackson 2003, p. 33). Central to Buddhādāsa’s hermeneutical approach is a distinction between two levels of meaning, designated “everyday language” (*phasa khon*) and “Dhamma language” (*phasa tham*), respectively.¹⁸ For Buddhādāsa, the task of interpreting ancient Buddhist scripture could be described as bringing words back from their metaphysical use and ascribing to them not their “everyday” sense in non-Buddhist contexts but their specific significance in the Buddhist teachings (*dhamma* in Pāli, *dharma* in Sanskrit). Thus, it is what Buddhādāsa is calling the “everyday language” that exhibits the foreground picture or surface grammar, in Wittgenstein’s sense, with “Dhamma language” designating the depth grammar or background meaning.

“In everyday language,” writes Buddhadāsa, “the word ‘birth’ refers to the physical entrance into the world from the mother’s womb” (1971, p. 67). “In Dhamma language,” meanwhile, “the word refers to the birth of the idea of ‘I’ and ‘me’ any-time it arises in the mind” (p. 68). What Buddhadāsa means by “the idea of ‘I’ and ‘me’” is “a mental event arising out of ignorance, craving, and clinging” (Buddhadāsa n.d., p. 1). And what *this* denotes is an instance of self-serving desire or “self-centredness” (n.d., p. 17). Thus, although expressed in somewhat different terms, the contention here is close to what we saw in Jennings’ interpretation: “rebirth” designates the recurrence of selfish cravings or desires. The soteriological goal of Buddhism thus becomes the eradication of selfish motivations for action alongside the heightening of one’s “awareness” of whatever one is doing.¹⁹

A difference between Jennings and Buddhadāsa is that, while Buddhadāsa relies heavily on the distinction between an “everyday” or exoteric level of meaning and a “Dhammic” or esoteric level, Jennings denies the need for such a distinction and proposes that the Buddha himself denied it as well. To support this view, Jennings points to a passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* wherein the Buddha, who is approaching death, declares to his disciple Ānanda that he has “set forth the Dhamma without making any distinction of esoteric and exoteric doctrine; there is nothing . . . with regard to the teachings that the [Buddha] holds to the last with the closed fist of a teacher who keeps some things back.”²⁰ For Jennings, the ethical sense of the Buddha’s teachings does not in fact lie behind a foregrounded pictorial form of words; in order to see it one simply has to pay attention to those passages in the Buddhist scriptures that emphasize the absence of a permanent self and to disregard those that show signs of a “Hinduizing” influence (Jennings 1947, pp. lviii–lxxiii). As an exegetical strategy, however, this is circular: certain passages are disregarded on the grounds that they are “accretions” exhibiting inconsistencies with the “original core” of the Buddha’s teaching; but this “original core” can be identified only insofar as it is what remains when the accretions are expunged. This is why some critics of Jennings’ thesis have complained that he offers no real “justification for excising passages that refer to transmigration and regarding them as later accretions to the doctrine” (Burrow 1949, p. 201).

Buddhadāsa’s distinction between two levels of meaning is defended by Roderick Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox, who argue for the existence of an “esoteric transmission” of Buddhist teachings stretching back to the Buddha himself and typically articulated through a “twilight language” (*saṃdhyābhāṣā*), “a purposely created mode of communication having a concealed meaning” (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986, pp. 10, 12). Central to the case that Bucknell and Stuart-Fox present is the claim that canonical accounts of three forms of knowledge, which the Buddha is purported to have attained on the night of his spiritual awakening, can best be interpreted as descriptions of meditative practices. Canonical accounts of the first form of knowledge describe the Buddha’s recollection of thousands upon thousands of his “previous lives”; in each case, the Buddha recalls such details as what his name was, which family and social class he belonged to, what experiences he underwent, and how the lifetime ended.²¹ Accounts of the second form of knowledge describe the

Buddha's "godlike vision" that affords him knowledge of how the fortunes of beings are related to their previous actions: those who "behaved badly in body, badly in speech, badly in thought" were, "[a]t the breaking up of the body after death . . . born in hell"; those who "behaved well," meanwhile, "were born in a happy heaven world."²² The third form of knowledge is described as "the knowledge of the destruction of the taints"; that is, the knowledge of how one's mind becomes tainted with selfish desires, ignorance, and so forth, and of how to free it from those taints.²³

On the face of it, the first two forms of knowledge attained by the Buddha appear to conflict with the sort of psychological account of "rebirth" propounded by Buddhādāsa and Jennings. If it were merely the recurrence of self-serving desires and attitudes that were denoted by "rebirth," then what sense would there be in the Buddha's identifying distinct names and biographical information pertaining to each of his former lives? Jennings omits the passages in question from his selection of excerpts from the Pāli Canon;²⁴ Bucknell and Stuart-Fox, on the other hand, reinterpret them in psychological terms. "The death of a being," they write, "is the ceasing of [an] image" (1986, p. 88), where "image" is understood "to denote not only visual images but also their counterparts in the other modalities . . . includ[ing] mental verbalizing" (p. 159); "rebirth . . . is the arising of the next image; and the *karma* which determines that birth is the previous emotional involvement which determines the course of the linking process" (p. 88). In the light of this analysis, the Buddha's recollection of his previous lives is construed as a "retracing" of the sequence of images or thoughts further and further back into his early life—but not *beyond* his biological lifespan—and his perception of the karmic relations between previous actions and current circumstances is construed as his insight into the emotionally influenced process of one image or thought giving rise to the next, and so on.²⁵ The destruction of the taints is, first, the destruction of the taint of failing to observe the images and the connections between them, and, second, the cessation of "emotional involvement in sense objects and images" (1986, p. 89).

Unlike Jennings, both Buddhādāsa and Bucknell and Stuart-Fox are careful not to claim that a psychologized conception of rebirth is the only one that could have been intended by the Buddha. Buddhādāsa allows that rebirth after death occurs, but considers the question of what form that rebirth will take to be a "trivial" one, given that as long as "the 'I' and the 'mine'" continue to arise, any future life will be pervaded by suffering. The essential task is to eliminate that self-serving impulse (Buddhādāsa n.d., pp. 18–19). Bucknell and Stuart-Fox, meanwhile, distinguish between "physical" (or "macrocosmic") and "mental" (or "microcosmic") phenomena, and propose that many terms central to Buddhist thought have a "double reference." *Samāsāra*, for instance, refers to *both* an ongoing series of ("physical") lifetimes, each being connected by relations of karmic consequence, *and* "the stream of thought" that is patterned by relations of "emotional involvement" (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986, pp. 93–94).

One way of reading the latter suggestion would be as a claim that the words attributed to the Buddha are systematically ambiguous between the two levels of meaning. Although this is a rather difficult idea to make sense of, it conforms fairly

closely to proposals made by other interpreters.²⁶ What Bucknell and Stuart-Fox write, however, is that “It is likely . . . that [the Buddha] and his immediate followers actually perceived these correspondences as identities. For them the flow of thought probably did not merely correspond to *saṃsāra*, but actually *was saṃsāra*” (1986, p. 93). This speculation is interesting, and may be implying that the concept of *saṃsāra* in early Buddhism is one that cannot be characterized other than by invoking aspects both of the concept of thought and of the concept of life; but the speculation is not sufficiently elaborated to indicate exactly what the authors had in mind. In the end, the emphasis of Bucknell and Stuart-Fox’s work is not so much on recovering the *original* meaning of the teachings, but on “translat[ing]” those teachings into an idiom that will “be genuinely intelligible and useful for modern humankind”; what they take to be most appropriate for this purpose is “predominantly the idiom of psychology” (1989, p. 196).

Psychologization and the Loss of Significance

It is no accident that the attempts to “demythologize” or “psychologize” the concepts of karma and rebirth that have been outlined in the preceding section are all concerned primarily with Buddhist rather than Hindu traditions. This is because, although efforts have been made by some Hindus to reconceptualize their traditional teachings in the mold of what are perceived to be more “rational” and “scientific” modes of thought,²⁷ these efforts have tended not to go as far as those by interpreters and followers of Buddhism. Several Hindu intellectuals, seeking to align the doctrine of reincarnation with a Darwinian theory of evolution, have downplayed the possibility of “retrogressive reincarnation”; that is, rebirth of a human in animal form.²⁸ This has sometimes gone hand-in-hand with the introduction of psychological reinterpretations of traditional references to human-to-animal rebirth, construing talk of “rebirth in animal form” to be “a figure of speech for rebirth with animal qualities” (Radhakrishnan 1937, p. 232).²⁹ But these reinterpretations have generally accepted that the doctrine does involve a belief in a succession of lifetimes that, although physically discrete, are nevertheless spiritually and ethically interwoven.

Among my purposes in this essay has been that of indicating the range of conceptual possibilities available to interpreters of karma and rebirth and of showing how the reinterpretive projects of certain scholars of Buddhism in particular implicitly echo themes prevalent in Wittgenstein-influenced philosophy. As we have seen, in some instances the purported motivation behind the reinterpretation is to recover the “original” or “essential” meaning of the doctrine. Jennings is a poignant exemplar of this approach, and Dilman’s reading of the *Phaedo* also presents itself as an exposition of what the text really means rather than merely as one among a number of possible readings. Meanwhile, there are other instances in which the motivation is to bring the doctrine up to date, to make it intelligible to a modern audience. We have seen signs of this motivation in the work of Bucknell and Stuart-Fox, even though they are not always explicit on this point. In any event, regardless of the particular motivations in play, it is important to notice what is gained but also what is lost in any

reinterpretation. One way of doing this is to reflect upon the reinterpretive strategies in the light of the examples with which I began this essay.

In the cases of both the Hindu widow and Ani Pachen, an obvious feature is the way in which these women perceive their present suffering as a consequence of their own misdeeds performed in a previous life. From the religio-cultural perspective that each of them inhabits, it makes sense to think of one's suffering in this way, to see it as a kind of punishment that will have a spiritually purifying effect in the longer term: "The pain will eliminate my sins," as Pachen puts it. Seeing the pain in this way, as deserved, brings with it a deep acceptance and a way of articulating that acceptance. Evident in Pachen's response in particular is a willingness to forbear the suffering and a hopefulness that there are better times ahead. As another Tibetan woman who was dreadfully abused by Chinese officials recalls, a Buddhist lama would try to reassure her by saying "Whatever we are passing through . . . is a result of our karma, so we must bear it gracefully with faith that truth is its own witness."³⁰ The pain is something that must be endured if the better times are to be reached. Thus, when Pachen has been tortured so badly that she finds herself longing for death, she pulls herself out of that despair with the thought that, were she to die, she "would be reborn with the same sins in front of [her]." It is better, she adds, "to suffer and hope for a higher rebirth" (2001, p. 219).

Those who do not believe in karma and rebirth will not be able to share these thoughts. Wittgenstein, in one of his lectures on religious belief, considers the case of someone who, being ill, regards it as a punishment. While admitting that he has no such thoughts of punishment in relation to illness, Wittgenstein does not think of himself as contradicting the person who does have these thoughts. Rather, the difference goes deeper: it consists in thinking in a different way, saying different things to oneself, "hav[ing] different pictures" (Wittgenstein 1966, p. 55).³¹ Dilman, in his reading of the *Phaedo*, acknowledges the powerful effect that the idea, the picture, of rebirth can have in someone's life; and by continuing to refer to it as a specifically *religious* picture, Dilman avoids reducing it to something less conceptually rich and nuanced than it is. What we see in the various readings of Buddhist conceptions of karma and rebirth that we have looked at, however, is the deployment of interpretive strategies that erase or obfuscate the dimension of individual responsibility for one's circumstances, thereby shifting the interpretation in a direction that cannot make sense of the examples we are considering.

When the Hindu widow speaks of her sins being "gathered near [her]," or Ani Pachen speaks of her sins being eliminated by pain, a connection is being made between sin, suffering, and spiritual purification that is absent from the demythologized readings. While it is clearly true that, as Jennings and Batchelor observe, our actions (or at least some of them) will have implications that outlast our present lives, this thought can hardly account for the feeling of being responsible for the suffering that one is now undergoing. Neither can this feeling be accounted for by the idea, derived from Buddhādāsa and embellished by Bucknell and Stuart-Fox, that one's current thoughts and mental images are part of an ongoing series of such thoughts and images that are linked together through modes of emotional attachment. No matter

how far back in their present lives the Hindu widow and Ani Pachen “retrace” the path of their respective thoughts and images, they will not come to a point where they discover the cause of their current suffering. Buddhādāsa would be liable to say that it is the identification of themselves with an “I” or “me” who suffers that is at the root of their experience of suffering, and he would be right to note that Buddhism has a long tradition of advocating release from suffering through relinquishing various forms of attachment. But such practices of non-attachment do not themselves explain the situation in which someone finds herself—the situation of losing one’s husband and then one’s eyesight and one’s daughter, or of being tortured in prison.

Of course, non-believers in karma and rebirth may say that these things can be perfectly well explained in ways that do not require their being accorded the sort of moral and spiritual significance that we see the Hindu widow and Ani Pachen attributing to them. But that is not the point: if we are to comprehend the meaning of the belief in these people’s lives, we have to recognize that they *do* attribute moral and spiritual significance to what others might be inclined to call mere misfortunes. The Hindu widow and Ani Pachen find that significance attributable, given the religious perspective from which they view the world, and such significance cannot be accounted for in terms of the demythologized or psychologized interpretations that we have examined.

Conclusion

Dilman is surely right when he describes talk of reincarnation as expressing “a religious picture” that “represents a way of thinking about life, a way of sizing up our actions within life’s brief span.” This applies to such talk as it occurs not only in Plato’s *Phaedo* but also in the lives of many Hindu and Buddhist believers in karma and rebirth. The difficulty is to say something more specific than this, for the idea of a “picture” is apt to strike many as vague and evasive, and as failing to address the central question of whether the picture is to be taken literally (“metaphysically”) or merely figuratively. This kind of response, however, falls into a trap that Wittgenstein was trying to save us—or himself—from when he introduced the idea of a picture in the first place. To say that the picture is in the foreground and the sense is in the background is not to imply that the best way of understanding the picture is to remove it in order to expose a kind of blueprint or prototype embodying the raw, unadulterated “literal” meaning, of which the picture was merely an extravagant adornment. Rather, it is to say that one cannot expect to understand the meaning by looking merely at the surface, and neither will one penetrate through to some hidden meaning by staring at the picture on its own. Instead, one has to inquire into the place that it has in the lives of those who use it.

While this essay hardly provides a thorough investigation into the lives of believers in karma and rebirth, it does indicate some ways in which such an investigation might begin; that is, by observing how the language associated with the belief informs the believers’ responses to certain circumstances, especially circumstances of suffering or abuse. Many non-believers will find those responses unpalatable; in

particular, they may see as morally repulsive the idea of holding oneself responsible for the abuse that one receives from someone else. But one does not have to regard the belief as attractive in order to come to a richer understanding of it; it is by seeing the role of the belief in the hurly-burly of life, which comes through especially vividly in sources such as Ani Pachen's memoir, that one's understanding is enriched.

Much of this essay has been concerned with outlining the range of ways in which other interpreters have sought to return the language of karma and rebirth from a crude metaphysical to a more nuanced sense that is attentive to certain ethical ideals and forms of meditative practice. Following some currently common usage, I have referred to these as "demythologizing" or "psychologizing" approaches. Without denying that there may be forms of belief in karma and rebirth, either traditional or modern, in relation to which these interpretations have stronger purchase, I have indicated some of their peculiarities and noted where they do not apply to the two main examples I have considered—examples that are representative of widely held modes of belief.³² It does not follow from this that examples could not be found elsewhere to which the interpretations apply more closely; nor does it follow that the interpretations are illegitimate when construed as proposals for how karma and rebirth should best be reconceptualized for effective use in the modern world. What follows is that there would be a distortion involved in assuming that the interpretations concerned can be generalized to cover all, or indeed most, forms of belief in karma and rebirth; for, in the case of a significant number of believers, these interpretations do not capture the ways in which the language of karma and rebirth operates in the stream of thought and life.

Notes

Some of the ideas in this article were tested out in a paper that I presented at a workshop on cross-cultural philosophy at Durham University, July 11, 2013. I am grateful to participants in that workshop for helpful discussion. Also valuable were comments on an earlier draft from two referees for this journal.

1 – Wittgenstein 1967, sec. 173; cf. Wittgenstein 1982, sec. 913.

2 – For the idea that the meaning of an utterance is dependent on its "surroundings," see, for example, Wittgenstein 1966, p. 59; 1980a, sec. 129; [1953] 2009, secs. 412, 540. See also Phillips 1993, p. 72.

3 – One place where Wittgenstein introduces the idea of a "grammatical" investigation is his [1953] 2009, sec. 90. For discussion, see Canfield 1981, esp. pp. 207–211.

4 – See, for example, Hacker 1999, p. 4; Meredith Williams 1999, p. 1; Kenny 1968, p. 78.

5 – To cite just two of many possible examples: a DVD documentary by Mark Applebaum titled *The Metaphysics of Notation* was released by Innova Records in

2010, and from August to November 2010 the author of a video gaming blog called *Falling Awkwardly* posted a series of four critical discussions of the game *The Elder Scrolls* under the title “The Metaphysics of Morowind.”

- 6 – See, for example, “Metaphysics,” in Caygill 1995, p. 291.
- 7 – See, for example, Chignell and Dole 2005, where they celebrate “a return to traditional discussion of the *entities* referred to by [religious] language,” with God being “conceived as a genuine metaphysical entity” (p. 11; original emphasis).
- 8 – See, for example, Ayer [1936] 2001, esp. chap. 1. For concise discussion, see Martin 1990, pp. 41–43.
- 9 – For the term *Gewimmel*, translated as “hurly-burly,” see Wittgenstein 1967, sec. 567, and 1980b, sec. 629.
- 10 – For critical discussion, see McGhee 1996.
- 11 – Cf. Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, pt. 2, iv, sec. 26: “It is not a picture that we choose, not a simile, yet it is a graphic expression.”
- 12 – See, for example, Archer-Hind 1894, p. xxxi: “The *onus probandi*, I take it, lies with those who do not interpret literally.”
- 13 – For discussion, see Shields 2008, pp. 31–32.
- 14 – For the “surface grammar”–“depth grammar” distinction, see Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, sec. 664.
- 15 – A useful analysis of this style of interpretation in relation to Buddhism is offered by McMahan 2004 and 2008, esp. pp. 45–59.
- 16 – Jennings died in 1941, but his book went unpublished until 1947. His interpretation is partially prefigured by earlier authors; see, for example, Kern 1898, esp. pp. 49–50. T. W. Rhys Davids has also been cited as a forerunner (see Burrow 1949, p. 201). Jennings’ interpretation was brought to the attention of philosophers of religion largely by John Hick’s interest in it; see Hick 1973, chap. 8; 1990, chap. 11; 1976, pp. 358–359. Hick may have been the first to apply the term “demythologize” to accounts of karma and rebirth.
- 17 – “The two bases of the Dhamma are . . . selflessness and helpfulness. The whole elaborate metaphysical superstructure, built up later upon this, fades away” (Jennings 1947, p. xlii).
- 18 – See, for example, Buddhadāsa 1971, chap. 3, and 1974.
- 19 – Buddhadāsa n.d., p. 28: “The Buddha’s goal was a life of awareness. . . .” See also Swearer’s description of modernizing conceptions of Buddhist teachings, which “[demythologize] the tradition in the service of ethical and psychological values. *Nibbāna*, for example, tends to be interpreted primarily as a non-attached way of being in the world. . . .” (Swearer 1995, p. 157).

- 20 – *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* 2012, pt. 2, sec. 32; cf. Jennings 1947, p. xxxviii.
- 21 – See *Sāmaññaphala Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 1.81)*, in Gethin 2008, p. 33.
- 22 – *Sāmaññaphala Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 1.82)*, in Gethin 2008, p. 34.
- 23 – *Sāmaññaphala Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 1.84)*, in Gethin 2008, p. 35.
- 24 – See Jennings 1947, p. 27 n. 14.
- 25 – For their exposition of “retracing,” see Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986, pp. 51–60. See also Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1983.
- 26 – See, for example, the section headed “Cosmology and psychology: macrocosm and microcosm” in Gethin 1998, pp. 119–126, and also Williams, Tribe, and Wynne 2012, p. 57.
- 27 – One early example was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894); see Chatterjee 1993, chap. 3.
- 28 – See, for example, Abhedananda 1957. Publications of the Theosophical Society were significant in promoting the idea of a parallel between the doctrine of reincarnation and biological evolution; see, for example, Walker 1923, pp. 13–14.
- 29 – See also Nayak 1993, p. 76, and Minor 1986.
- 30 – Chompel Gyamtso Rinpoche, quoted in Tapontsang 1997, p. 107.
- 31 – For further discussion of this passage in relation to conceptions of karma and rebirth, see Burley 2013.
- 32 – Although each of the examples upon which I have focused illustrates a specifically self-directed attitude of responsibility for one’s own suffering, this attitude is continuous with the more general conception of the doctrine of karma as involving retributive explanations of why ill fortune befalls certain individuals and not others. This general conception is evident in numerous sources, including: Krishan 1997, pp. xi, 3–4, 44–46, 70–71, 195–196; Sharma 1973; and Spiro 1982, esp. p. 136. It is also central to discussions of whether the doctrine of karma can contribute toward a response to the “problem of evil” (see, e.g., Kaufman 2005).

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