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Taking reincarnation seriously: Critical discussion of some central ideas from John Hick

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Reincarnation has not been entirely neglected in the philosophy of religion but it has not always been taken seriously or carefully discussed in relation to its role in believers' lives. John Hick is exceptional insofar as he gave sustained attention to the belief, at least as it features in the philosophies of Vedānta and Buddhism. While acknowledging the value of Hick's recognition of the variety of reincarnation beliefs, this paper critically engages with certain aspects of his approach. It argues that Hick's search for a 'criterion' of reincarnation is misguided, and that his distinction between 'factual' and 'mythic' forms of the doctrine is over-simplifying.

Keywords: Reincarnation; John Hick; Rebirth; Buddhism; Hinduism; Vedānta

Western writers have usually not paid sufficiently close attention to eastern thought to do more than reject reincarnation as incompatible with accepted Jewish, Christian or Muslim teaching. However the Hindu and Buddhist conceptions deserve more serious attention.¹

If, as John Hick maintained, 'the philosophy of religion is not properly just the philosophy of the Christian (or Judaeo-Christian) tradition, but in principle of religion throughout history and throughout the world',² then, given the pervasiveness of beliefs in reincarnation in numerous religious traditions, inquiry into these beliefs ought to have a prominent place in the philosophical study of religion. When we look for examples of such inquiry, although we do find a fair number, they tend to be undertaken without much careful consideration of the religious traditions within which beliefs in reincarnation have their primary place. A partial

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¹ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 368.

² Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 12–13.

exception to this tendency is exhibited in the work of Hick himself, most discernibly in his *Death and Eternal Life* but also more fleetingly in other publications.³ While remaining largely disdainful of what he termed ‘popular’ ideas of reincarnation,⁴ Hick had a high regard for the philosophical conceptions of this notion that are formulated in the traditions of Vedānta and Buddhism. Hick not only considered these to be coherent, but also came to believe that something quite like the Buddhist formulation is probably true. In *Death and Eternal Life*, for instance, he declares cautiously that ‘There are forms of reincarnation doctrine which may be broadly true pictures of what actually happens’,⁵ and in later work he insists that ‘there must be a series of further lives’ beyond our present one, and that it is ‘most probably’ not the case that our present life is our first.⁶ This belief in multiple lives was connected with Hick’s soteriology. Roughly speaking, he maintained that everyone is heading for salvation in the end but that it takes numerous lifetimes for most of us to develop the moral and spiritual qualities that make us worthy of heaven.⁷

Clearly, Hick was, among other things, a constructive theologian who devised his own vision of reality and of the purpose of human life. Doctrines of reincarnation constitute one area of traditional religious beliefs upon which he drew in order to construct a systematic worldview that has been a significant stimulus for other theologians and philosophers of religion. While a critical study of Hick’s overall system lies beyond my current purpose, the present paper contributes to an informed assessment of that system by closely examining his treatment of reincarnation. Through critical engagement with Hick’s ideas, this paper also aims to enhance the level of philosophical discussion of reincarnation itself within the philosophy of religion and to scrutinize certain assumptions that are often brought to philosophical inquiries into religious beliefs more generally.

Two features of Hick’s treatment in particular will be discussed. Section I deals with Hick’s search for ‘the criterion or criteria’ for someone now alive being well described as the ‘same person’ as someone now dead,⁸ and explains how Hick arrives at the conclusion that ‘a link of memory is essential’ to doctrines of reincarnation.⁹ Section II explores the distinction

³ See especially: Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, ch. 11; *Death and Eternal Life*, chs 16–19; *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 11–12; *An Interpretation of Religion*, 367–69; *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 194–200; *Between Faith and Doubt*, 152–158.

⁴ See, for example, Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 152–153.

⁵ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 391 (original emphasis).

⁶ Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 151, 157.

⁷ See, for example, *ibid.*, 151

⁸ See Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 305; *Philosophy of Religion*, 133.

⁹ See Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 364.

that Hick makes between, on the one hand, a ‘factual’ conception of reincarnation and, on the other hand, what he variously calls ‘a metaphysical picture without factual content’, ‘a purely metaphysical theory’, or ‘an illuminating myth’.¹⁰ As we shall see, these two features are closely interconnected, as the ‘link of memory’ criterion, which Hick takes to be crucial, is also what on his view distinguishes factual from non-factual conceptions of reincarnation. In the course of my discussion issues will be raised concerning certain assumptions that seem to be operative in Hick’s argument, notably the assumption that a doctrine’s being factual consists in its making an ‘actual or possible experiential difference’ along with certain auxiliary assumptions concerning what counts as making such a difference. These assumptions lead Hick to deny that what he terms ‘mythic’ conceptions of reincarnation ‘could be of any practical interest to anyone’, on the grounds that they lack a belief in the ‘link of memory’ that Hick takes to be so essential. Section III argues that this assertion is unwarranted, firstly because there are ‘mythic’ conceptions of reincarnation that can accommodate a version of the memory link, and secondly because there are reasons to doubt whether any memory link is essential to reincarnation beliefs in the first place.

I. The search for a criterion

The search for ‘the criterion or criteria by which someone living today is said to be the same person as someone who lived [much earlier], of whom he has no knowledge or memory’ is a central preoccupation of Hick’s most sustained discussion of reincarnation.¹¹ Aware that there are people who have claimed to remember former lives, Hick admits that if such claims are genuine, these memories would constitute one criterion of personal identity across lifetimes.¹² He is also aware, though, that the vast majority of people have no recollection whatsoever of former lives, and the issue that concerns him is whether reincarnation could be a universal phenomenon – as it is claimed to be by adherents of religio-philosophical traditions such as Vedānta and Buddhism – rather than something that happens only to a small number of individuals. So it appears that another criterion is required. Bodily continuity is clearly a non-starter, as no one maintains that someone who reincarnates retains the same, materially continuous, body from one life to the next;¹³ so Hick holds that the continuous

¹⁰ Ibid., 327, 356, 327.

¹¹ Ibid., 305.

¹² For Hick’s discussion of empirical investigations into purported memories of former lives, see *ibid.*, 373–378, and *Between Faith and Doubt*, 153–155.

¹³ It has been claimed that bodily characteristics such as birthmarks and wounds can be “reincarnationally” inherited’ from a previous life (Christie-Murray, *Reincarnation*, 230), but this is not claimed to be because the

factor must be something ‘mental’. He asserts that, in speaking of a person’s being born, living for a certain time, then dying and being born again, ‘we are presupposing the existence of a continuous mental entity which we may call the self or the person.’¹⁴

In the absence of continuity of memory, at least as a universal phenomenon, Hick considers whether the connecting link that he is seeking might consist in ‘the psychological continuity of a pattern of mental dispositions.’¹⁵ In later work, he refers to this as a ‘dispositional (or karmic) structure’ which underlies, and ‘which both affects and is affected by’, ‘the now consciously thinking and acting personality’.¹⁶ What Hick has in mind here are, principally, character traits; he is wondering whether, if someone who is now alive exhibits at least some of the character traits of a person who previously existed, this could be construed as criterial for the later person’s being a reincarnation of the earlier. Hick discounts this proposal, however, on the grounds that it is too permissive to be a viable criterion for two individuals to be counted as the same person. He notes that certain people who are alive at the same time have character traits in common, and to regard simultaneously existing people as numerically identical ‘would be a direct violation of our concept of “same person”’.¹⁷ And even in cases where one of the two individuals with common character traits is no longer alive, there are nevertheless liable to be many other people with those same, or very similar, traits; and hence the plausibility of regarding the two individuals in question as links in a chain of reincarnations is undermined.¹⁸ It is undermined because there is no principled reason for considering them alone to be linked by reincarnation when there are so many other equally viable candidates. Thus it would seem that all three of the criteria of personal identity countenanced by Hick – namely bodily continuity, a link of memory, and continuity of dispositional structure – have been ruled out, and therefore it may appear that belief in reincarnation becomes incoherent or at least lacks credible support.

material constituents of the body remain the same. Hence it would be misleading to speak of bodily continuity even in these cases. For extensive work on the putative links between reincarnation and birthmarks and birth defects, see Stevenson, *Reincarnation and Biology*.

¹⁴ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 304.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 307; *Philosophy of Religion*, 134.

¹⁶ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 11. See also *idem*, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 155–156, and *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 199.

¹⁷ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 304. There are in fact cases of peoples who purportedly believe in ‘multiple simultaneous reincarnation’; see, for example, Mills, “Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit,” 28–29. I briefly discuss such cases in Burley, “Believing in Reincarnation,” 272–277, but shall not be considering them here.

¹⁸ See Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 307–308.

In work subsequent to *Death and Eternal Life*, Hick downplays talk of ‘personal identity’ across different lives, not least because he is aware that this terminology is problematic in the context of Buddhism. Buddhists – or, at any rate, those schools of Buddhism with which Hick has the closest affinity – typically deny the existence of a permanent self, and hence it is unlikely that they would readily accept a description of the relation between two members of a succession of rebirths as one of personal identity.¹⁹ Rather, as Hick acknowledges, they are more likely to speak of an ongoing ‘karmic process’, in which consequences follow actions, some of which consequences will manifest in future lives.²⁰ Intermingled in Buddhism with this notion of a succession of consequences caused or conditioned by prior actions is the notion of what Hick calls ‘an ever-changing series of moments of consciousness.’²¹ As Hick observes, a common view among Buddhists is that ‘the first moment of thought in the new stream of life stands in direct causal sequence to the last moment of thought in the dying person, which thought thus determines the nature of the next birth.’²² ‘Thought’ here can be construed broadly, and need not imply conscious thought – or what contemporary analytic philosophers of mind might call ‘phenomenal consciousness’.²³ Hence, although some Buddhists do speak of the ‘continuation of mind’ or of a ‘stream of consciousness’ persisting across reincarnations,²⁴ the more prevalent view is that, for at least the vast majority of reincarnating individuals, the continuity lies below the level of conscious awareness.

Despite his recognition, and indeed approval, of these points from Buddhism (which amount to the idea that ‘reincarnation’ or ‘rebirth’ can be a coherent concept even if it involves oppugning the claim that, if B is a reincarnation of A, then B must be the same person as A) Hick persisted in talking of the need for something to be passed on from one life to the next. He became especially fond of the analogy of relay runners passing a torch from one person to another: ‘We are like the runners in a relay race: the torch has been handed to

¹⁹ It bears emphasizing, though, that there have been numerous disagreements between competing Buddhist schools on this and related matters. For illuminating discussion, see McDermott, “Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism,” esp. 167–172. For further discussion of Buddhist accounts of personhood, see Collins, *Selfless Persons*.

²⁰ Hick uses the term ‘karmic process’ in, among other places, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 155, and *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 26.

²¹ Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 196.

²² Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 345.

²³ Ned Block devised a distinction between ‘phenomenal consciousness’ and ‘access-consciousness’ in his article “On a Confusion about the Function of Consciousness.” I am doubtful that the distinction is a clear one, but, roughly speaking, to be phenomenally conscious of something is to have immediate perceptual awareness of it, whereas to have access-consciousness of that thing is for knowledge of it to be able to enter into one’s judgements and actions but without one’s necessarily being immediately aware that this is occurring.

²⁴ See, for example, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, interviewed in Bärlocher, *Testimonies of Tibetan Tulkus*, 117.

us and for a short time the whole project depends upon us. Our life thus has urgent meaning.’²⁵ But this image, of course, encourages the thought that there is some ‘thing’ that remains the same from one life to the next, which is the very thought that many Buddhists have deliberately tried to discard. As one western Buddhist writer has put it, part of the problem is the tendency of people in general ‘to think in terms of “things” rather than conditions’:

we think that for rebirth to mean anything, there must be a thing (e.g. a soul) that passes from life to life, but perhaps this static model is inadequate. [...] a relationship can exist between two ‘things’ such that the second arises in dependence upon the first, and yet no ‘thing’ passes between them.²⁶

It is unfortunate that Hick, despite being aware of this point, repeats the relay race analogy so frequently and uncritically.

In the light of the apparent failure to find something that can both plausibly be held to be passed on from one life to the next and usefully serve to distinguish a relation of reincarnation from one of mere similarity of character traits, Hick raises the question whether the doctrine of reincarnation is appositely thought of as ‘a factual assertion’ at all.²⁷ I shall come to his considerations on that matter in section II below. Here, however, it is important to register Hick’s conviction that at least some versions of the doctrine do make ‘sufficient connection with actual or possible human experience’ for the doctrine ‘to constitute [...] a factual claim.’²⁸ The connection with experience that Hick envisages is the link of memory. For although he had earlier admitted that relatively few, if any, individuals exhibit credible recollections of previous lives, there exists nevertheless, within both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the hope of a liberatory state of spiritual awakening, a state termed *moksha* or *nirvāna*, in which, or shortly prior to which, one may attain lucid past-life recall – ‘a total retrospective awareness’²⁹ – which offers effective confirmation of reincarnation. As a classic

²⁵ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 226. See also his *The Fifth Dimension*, 248; *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 200; and *Between Faith and Doubt*, 158.

²⁶ Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, 87–88. Occasionally, Buddhists do use phrases that suggest a soul being released from one body and entering another (see, for example, Tsering Wangyal’s article “The Reincarnation of Kathleen Frei,” quoted in Bärlocher, *Testimonies of Tibetan Tulkus*, 755), but such phraseology is relatively rare among Buddhists.

²⁷ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 327.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

instance of such retrospective awareness, Hick cites the experience attributed to Gautama the Buddha, who is held within Buddhist traditions to have recalled details of countless of his own former lives as well as achieving insight into the multiple lives of others.³⁰

With this hoped-for remembrance of the chain of karmically connected lives in sight, Hick declares ‘a memory link’ to be ‘essential to any theory which identifies individuals as being reincarnations of specific members of an earlier generation and which thus speaks of a particular series as the successive lives of one and the same soul.’³¹ ‘[O]ne and the same soul’ is probably not a phrase that Hick would have used in his later writings, due to his more consistent mindfulness of the denial of a permanent soul in many forms of Buddhism. He did, however, continue to insist that ‘there must be an underlying thread of memory, which may possibly sometimes emerge in consciousness’,³² and which will be ‘actualised at the end of a long journey through many lives’;³³ it is that thread which ‘constitutes the connection of this particular series of mortal lives.’³⁴ Provided this memory link – at least in potentiality – is admitted, Hick finds the reincarnation doctrine to be coherently conceived as more than a mere ‘metaphysical theory’; ‘metaphysical’ being used here ‘in the pejorative sense’ of a theory whose ‘truth or falsity makes no actual or possible experiential difference.’³⁵ The theory does make an experiential difference, Hick maintains, because even if one does not currently recall any previous lives, one can legitimately expect to recall them eventually.

It is worth noting that Hick’s search for a criterion of one individual’s being the reincarnation of another – even if the idea that the two individuals are the ‘same person’ is set aside – itself relies on a metaphysical picture, the picture of there being some connecting link which constitutes the logical foundation for the reincarnation doctrine itself. Largely overlooked in this search for a criterion is any close analysis of the place that believing in reincarnation has in believers’ lives, and how in particular it connects with certain ethical attitudes and modes of evaluation and action. It is noticeable that Hick disparages ‘the popular picture of reincarnation’,³⁶ which includes the ‘idea of being born again as a lower

³⁰ Hick (ibid., 379) quotes a discourse attributed to the Buddha from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, 2.213–214, and also mentions a passage from the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (Hick, ibid., 396, n. 34). See also Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 11, and *Between Faith and Doubt*, 156. For more recent translations of the primary material, see Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 673–674, and Gethin, *Sayings of the Buddha*, 33.

³¹ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 364.

³² Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 157.

³³ Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 196.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 356.

³⁶ Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 152.

form of animal’ – an idea which, according to Hick, ‘has very little serious support’³⁷ – and instead prefers to focus on more technical formulations of the doctrine in the philosophical literature of Vedānta and, especially, relatively early Buddhism. There is, of course, nothing wrong with being selective in the sources that one discusses: it is impossible to discuss everything. And it is understandable that a philosopher such as Hick should be attracted to recognizably philosophical elaborations of the reincarnation doctrine. The notions of ‘criteria’ and ‘support’ that pervade Hick’s treatment of the topic remain puzzling, however. Why, for example, should he say that the idea of being reborn as an animal ‘has very little support’? What kind of support should we be looking for? There are, after all, numerous stories in Buddhist and Hindu literature of people being reborn as animals. Indeed, a whole genre developed in early Buddhism of stories that purport to be of previous lives recalled by the Buddha himself, many of which were lives of animals or other non-human beings.³⁸ Since these are mostly kinds of morality tale, which draw upon Indian folk traditions, they are probably part of what Hick meant by ‘the popular picture of reincarnation’. But, given that they are part of the rich and colourful mix of factors that contribute to the variegated doctrine of reincarnation, it is unclear why they should be considered unworthy of serious attention.

What Hick seems to be assuming is that there is an essential core of the doctrine, residing beneath extraneous accretions such as folktales and everyday modes of discourse. On this assumption, if we can hone down the doctrine to its core (which task consists in largely excluding from one’s analysis the particular contexts within which expressions of belief in reincarnation have their natural place, and instead striving to discover the ‘criterion or criteria’ which ‘support’ that belief) then the ‘truth-value’ of the doctrine can be determined. The assumption is natural enough, and is one that recurs in other areas of the philosophy of religion.³⁹ It is, in large part, this assumption that generates in Hick’s account a broad-brushed distinction between a ‘factual’ and a ‘purely metaphysical’ way of understanding the doctrine of reincarnation,⁴⁰ a distinction that risks glossing over fine nuances within and between particular versions of this doctrine. It is to a critical examination of that distinction that I now turn.

³⁷ Ibid., 153.

³⁸ See Shaw, *The Jātakas*. For further discussion, see Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*.

³⁹ I am thinking here of, for example, the way in which many philosophers of religion try to determine the truth-value of a belief in God (or the proposition that God exists), or of a belief in eternal life, while dealing only with very thinly described conceptions of how these beliefs feature in believers’ lives.

⁴⁰ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 327, 356.

II. 'Factual' and 'purely metaphysical' conceptions of reincarnation

The task of understanding the 'factual'–'purely metaphysical' distinction that Hick draws is complicated by the way in which he sketches the two sides of the alleged dichotomy. Having initially characterized 'a factual assertion' as one 'which either corresponds or fails to correspond with reality,' Hick fairly rapidly shifts the emphasis from correspondence with reality to connecting with human experience by suggesting that something's constituting 'a factual claim' consists in its making 'sufficient connection with actual or possible human experience'.⁴¹ From what Hick goes on to say, it is clear that the sort of connection with human experience that he regards as being especially pertinent to the question of whether the doctrine of reincarnation makes a factual assertion is that which I noted in section I, namely the connection of memory – this being the connection that obtains between a person at a given time and that same person at an earlier time by virtue of the person at the later time being able to remember being the person at the earlier time. As Hick sees it, even if the person at the earlier time died before the person at the later time was born, we nevertheless have something (a memory of the past) that corresponds with past reality – provided it is a reasonably accurate memory – and also connects with human experience. (Although Hick is not as explicit as he might have been, we may assume his point to be that there is a connection with human experience in the sense that the later person undergoes the experience of remembering a previous life.)

Hick contrasts this 'factual' construal of the doctrine with one in which the doctrine is 'the painting of a metaphysical picture without factual content, such that its truth or falsity makes no difference to the course of actual or possible human experience'.⁴² He then further describes this latter interpretive possibility as one according to which the doctrine is taken to be 'an illuminating myth – comparable for example with the [C]hristian myth of the fall of man from a state of original perfection'.⁴³ Among the various points that could be made in relation to these brief characterizations are the following three.

Firstly, since Hick does not regard metaphysical pictures as being invariably or necessarily devoid of factual content, we must assume that he is here singling out a specific kind of metaphysical picture. In a subsequent remark, which I quoted earlier, he indicates that he considers the term 'metaphysical' to have (at least) two senses; for, having used the phrase 'purely metaphysical theory', he then adds that he is, in this instance, using 'metaphysical'

⁴¹ Ibid., 327.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

‘in the pejorative sense that its truth or falsity makes no actual or possible experiential difference.’⁴⁴ This implies that there is, for Hick, also a non-pejorative sense of ‘metaphysical’, which would denote a theory whose truth or falsity would make an actual or possible experiential difference. In the absence of a variety of examples, it is not obvious what we should understand making (or not making) an experiential difference to amount to. But, as noted above, Hick does give, as one example of something that constitutes an experiential difference, the link of memory. Therefore we can take it that, on Hick’s view, a theory (or doctrine or conception) of reincarnation is factual if it includes the claim that remembering previous lives is at least possible; and such a theory (or doctrine or conception) is non-factual – i.e., empty of factual content – if it does not include that claim, and includes no other claim concerning actual or possible changes to experience. The vagueness of this notion of making an experiential difference remains a problem for the distinction that Hick wants to make, and I shall return to this problem in due course.

Secondly, given that it is a doctrine without factual content that he is contrasting with the factual construal of the doctrine, we might find it surprising that Hick refers to ‘its truth or falsity’. In other words, we might wonder how, by Hick’s own lights, a doctrine without factual content could have any truth-value at all. As we shall see, however, Hick does allow for different kinds of truth; for example, a doctrine could embody a moral truth or a mythological truth, or perhaps a spiritual truth, without its thereby embodying a factual truth. Hence, it seems that Hick is operating with a restricted sense of ‘factual’, according to which a claim or assertion is ‘factual’ if, and only if, it is in principle verifiable by some sort of ‘experiential’ means; and he is operating with a restricted sense of ‘experiential’, according to which remembering something (or possibly remembering it!) counts as a mode of experiential verification but many other things that do in fact involve a change in one’s experience would not count. (Instances of these ‘many other things’ will become apparent in my discussion of the following point.)

Thirdly, when Hick writes of ‘an illuminating myth’, citing the illustrative example of the myth of the Fall, we may reasonably understand him to mean that what is, or could be, illuminated by the doctrine of reincarnation is, primarily, something about our ethical lives. In other words, the doctrine expresses something important about the human condition and the right way to live – indeed, we might even say that it expresses something true about these things – without our needing to describe it as true in a factual sense. This interpretation of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 356.

Hick's notion of an illuminating myth is supported by certain things that he says towards the end of his chapter on Buddhist conceptions of rebirth in *Death and Eternal Life*, and by briefer passages in some of his later works. In one later work, for example, he makes the following observation:

The doctrine of reincarnation is seen by some as a mythological way of making vivid the moral truth that our actions have inevitable future consequences for good and ill, this being brought home to the imagination by the thought that the agent will personally reap those consequences in a future earthly life.⁴⁵

The suggestion here is that one way of understanding the doctrine of reincarnation is as an injunction to see our relationships with others, including those that we shall never meet because they will live after we have died, in such a way that the consequences of our actions for those others are treated as no less important than the consequences of our actions for ourselves. An exemplar of something approximating this interpretation is J. G. Jennings, who is one among a small cluster of interpreters cited by Hick in this connection.⁴⁶ Jennings writes of the Buddha that, although he inherited the doctrine of karma from the Brahmanical cultural milieu in which he lived, he transformed it from a doctrine of individual compensation and retribution into one of responsibility for the well-being of humanity and of the world taken as a collective whole. With the Buddhist denial of permanent individual souls, Jennings argues, comes the view that the consequences of our actions are experienced not by ourselves in future lives, but by the whole world community over time, and yet the discourse of future lives is retained as a narrative vehicle for that essentially ethical message.⁴⁷

Among more recent advocates of the sort of ethical interpretation of karma and rebirth that Jennings outlines is Nagapriya, the British-born Buddhist whom I quoted earlier in connection with the problem of thinking of rebirth 'in terms of "things" rather than conditions.' Nagapriya wavers a little between, on the one hand, denying that believing in rebirth is necessary at all – or, at any rate, denying that it is 'necessary in order to practise

⁴⁵ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 349. Cf. *ibid.*, 363: 'There are some Hindus and Buddhists who regard the idea of rebirth as an illuminating myth'.

⁴⁶ In an endnote in *An Interpretation of Religion* (376, n. 9) the following sources are cited: Buddhādāsa, *Toward the Truth*; Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 173; Jennings, *The Vedāntic Buddhism of the Buddha*, xxiv–xxv; Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta*, ch. 5.

⁴⁷ See Jennings' "General Introduction" in his *The Vedāntic Buddhism of the Buddha*, esp. xxiv–xxv, a passage from which is quoted in Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 358. See also Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 140–141.

Buddhism effectively⁴⁸ – and, on the other hand, claiming that ‘the traditional Buddhist doctrines of Karma and rebirth’, despite presenting ‘themselves in a somewhat archaic, even naive, guise’, ‘nevertheless communicate timeless truths about what it means to be a human.’⁴⁹ The apparent wavering can be accounted for, however, if we note that Nagapriya’s view is that the ‘somewhat archaic’ form in which the ‘timeless truths’ are conveyed is to be understood metaphorically rather than literally.⁵⁰ Thus we can read him as saying that although it is unnecessary for Buddhists to believe in rebirth in a ‘literal’ sense, the metaphor of rebirth nevertheless carries an important ethical message that stands at the very centre of Buddhist teachings. The central truth, as Nagapriya puts it in the closing paragraph of his book, is that

We bear responsibility to our future self [within our present life] and to other human beings through what we do. We have the power to transform the world for good or ill. It is through the compassionate exercise of this power that we fulfil our responsibility to life and transcend the confines of our ordinary mind. We place a feather on the scales of life that tips them towards goodness.⁵¹

Although, when expounded in these terms, the ethical message in question sounds rather insipid, this in itself might tell us something about the use of the vocabulary of karma and rebirth within Buddhist traditions. What it tells us is that, even if we concur with Nagapriya that talk of karma and rebirth is to be understood metaphorically, it may nevertheless remain the case that these forms of language are indispensable and cannot simply be replaced by a ‘literal’ paraphrase without considerable loss of ethical force.⁵² What Max Black has said concerning attempts to paraphrase metaphors more generally is certainly applicable here, namely that ‘the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit (or deficient in qualities of style); it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did.’⁵³

⁴⁸ Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, 132.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² It might also suggest that ‘literal’ versus ‘metaphorical’ is not quite the right way of characterizing the important differences in this area. But I shall not elaborate that thought here.

⁵³ Black, *Models and Metaphors*, 46.

A further instance of how the doctrine of rebirth might be read as an illuminating myth is a conception attributed by Hick to Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, a twentieth-century Buddhist monk-philosopher who, according to one commentator, is ‘widely acclaimed in Thailand as that country’s most provocative intellectual in the Buddhist Sangha.’⁵⁴ Distinguishing between everyday uses of language and uses specific to the language of the Buddhist teachings (dhamma), Buddhādāsa interprets ‘birth’ within the latter context to denote the arising of the sense of ‘I’ or ‘me’ – i.e., the sense of being a distinct individual – rather than ‘physical birth from the mother’s womb.’⁵⁵ Among the implications of this view is that notions of rebirth as something other than a human being are given a psychological emphasis: ‘As soon as anyone thinks like an animal, he is born as an animal [...]. To think like a celestial being is to be born a celestial being.’⁵⁶ This feature of the view is comparable to certain interpretations of reincarnation among recent Vedāntic philosophers, who, while demurring from Buddhādāsa on the figurative significance of ‘rebirth’ in other respects, would nevertheless concur that talk of rebirth in animal form is best viewed as ‘a figure of speech for rebirth with animal qualities.’⁵⁷

While it seems clear, then, that Hick has made a convincing case for there being a range of ways in which talk of reincarnation can be understood, there remains an important question over whether his binary distinction between ‘factual’ and ‘purely metaphysical’ (or ‘mythological’) modes of understanding is a helpful means of representing that range. Here I need to return to the problematic way in which Hick deploys the notion of ‘experiential difference’ in setting out his distinction. As mentioned above, he characterizes ‘a metaphysical picture without factual content’ as one whose ‘truth or falsity makes no difference to the course of actual or possible human experience’, and contrasts this with ‘a factual claim’, which does indeed make a difference to (or a ‘sufficient connection with’) ‘actual or possible human experience’.⁵⁸ Given the vagueness of these phrases, however, we might wonder why the sorts of interpretations of reincarnation put forward by Jennings, Nagapriya and Buddhādāsa could not legitimately be described as factual; for they do, surely, present ways of understanding reincarnation that connect with, and make a difference to, actual or possible experience. In the case of the interpretations put forward by Jennings and

⁵⁴ Swearer, “Introduction: Buddhādāsa – ‘Servant of the Buddha’,” 10.

⁵⁵ Buddhādāsa, *Toward the Truth*, 68, quoted in Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 360.

⁵⁶ Buddhādāsa, *ibid.*, quoted in Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 359–360.

⁵⁷ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, 300. See also Prajñānanda, “Preface,” 9, and Minor, “In Defense of Karma and Rebirth,” 34.

⁵⁸ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 327; cf. 356.

Nagapriya, they make such a difference by highlighting our moral interconnectedness and responsibility for future generations, thereby contributing to an overall orientation of the Buddhist practitioner's values away from self-centredness and towards universal compassion. The sort of interpretation advanced by Buddhadhāsa, meanwhile, has the potential to change one's experience by emphasizing the opportunity that every moment presents for relinquishing attachment to a fixed conception of self-identity and instead giving full acknowledgement to the impermanence of all things, including oneself, that is so strongly advocated throughout Buddhist traditions.

Even if we think of 'making an experiential difference' – as Hick seems to do – as being equivalent to lending itself to possible experiential verification, it is unclear why this condition could not be fulfilled by the sorts of interpretations just outlined. Hick focuses his attention on the possibility of remembering one's previous lives – of enjoying a 'total retrospective awareness' akin to one of the stages in the Buddha's purported enlightenment experience – and maintains that it is this hoped-for possibility that makes all the difference between a conception of reincarnation that someone could have good reason to adopt, and conceptions that could be of no 'practical interest to anyone.'⁵⁹ Furthermore, writes Hick, 'It is only when we add memory – even if this should only become conscious at the end of the series of lives – that we have either the [B]uddhist, the [H]indu, or the popular conception of reincarnation or rebirth.'⁶⁰

There are two main problems with this emphasis on the importance of memory. Firstly, by utilizing an overly constrained notion of what remembering one's previous lives consists in, Hick overlooks the possibility that 'mythic' conceptions of reincarnation may be able to accommodate the idea of such a remembrance; indeed, they may do so in ways that bring out ethical and spiritual significances to which Hick's discussion pays little attention. Secondly, by stressing that it is only when the prospect of remembering one's previous lives is present that a conception of reincarnation could have any practical interest, Hick prematurely forecloses religious possibilities; that is, he forecloses the possibility of forms of reincarnation belief that have a coherent place in people's lives without requiring any expectation of past-life recall. In this instance, too, Hick underplays the ways in which reincarnation beliefs are typically woven into a broader network of values and practices with strong ethical meaning. These two concerns will be elaborated in the next section.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 356.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

III. Reincarnation and the ‘link of memory’

When Hick asserts that ‘a link of memory’ is essential for any doctrine of reincarnation to be of practical interest to anyone, he echoes a common thought, versions of which have been voiced by Leibniz and Locke, among others. Locke, whom Hick quotes at some length, considers a case in which someone maintains that he has in him ‘the same Soul, that was in Nestor or Thersites, at the Siege of Troy,’ and yet has no conscious recollection of having performed the actions of either of them. In the absence of such memories, Locke maintains, the possession of the same soul ‘would no more make him the same Person with Nestor, than if some of the Particles of Matter, that were once a part of Nestor, were now a part of this Man’.⁶¹ Leibniz, putting the emphasis more squarely on what one would have reason to desire, offers the following invitation:

Suppose that some person all of a sudden becomes the king of China, but only on the condition that he forgets what he has been, as if he were born anew; practically, or as far as the effects could be perceived, wouldn’t that be the same as if he were annihilated and a king of China created at the same instant in his place? That is something this individual would have no reason to desire.⁶²

Hick maintains, as we have seen, that the sorts of problems raised by Locke and Leibniz can be overcome by incorporating into the doctrine of reincarnation the notion of latent memories of previous lives – memories which, if not actualized before, may eventually be actualized as one approaches a state of spiritual enlightenment. However, given that Hick allows at least the coherence of what he calls ‘mythic’ conceptions of reincarnation, and provides an apparently sympathetic exposition of such conceptions as those offered by J. G. Jennings and Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, it is far from clear why he precludes the possibility that conceptions of these kinds could have space for talk of recalling previous lives.

If we think, for example, of the sort of ethical emphasis given to the doctrine of reincarnation in the interpretations of Jennings and Nagapriya, we could imagine the prospect of ‘remembering one’s previous lives’ as involving the thought of its becoming possible to remember all the deeds, words, and intentions in one’s life which have had positive or negative consequences either for oneself or for others, and of gaining insight into the further

⁶¹ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk 2, ch. 27, §14; quoted in Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 305–306.

⁶² Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics,” §34.

repercussions that they may have for others in the future. Just as, on Jennings' interpretation in particular, it is 'desire [...] that is [...] said to tend to re-exist or be again',⁶³ so, in the revelation of one's previous 'lives', it could be the succession of desires, perhaps both in oneself and in others, that are brought to full awareness.

Furthermore, the idea of being reborn into different 'realms' of existence, which is prevalent both within Buddhist and within Hindu traditions, could be accommodated by invoking the sort of 'psychological reading' of the various realms that Nagapriya outlines.⁶⁴ This amounts to an elaboration of the mode of interpretation that we saw exemplified in Buddhādāsa's construal of animal rebirth as consisting in thinking like an animal ('simply act[ing] out our biological and instinctive urges', as Nagapriya puts it⁶⁵) and of celestial rebirth as consisting in thinking like a celestial being. On Nagapriya's account, talk of rebirth into the preta realm (the realm of ghosts or shades) alludes to states of 'extreme neurotic desire'; the 'realm of the angry gods is one of extreme jealousy, competitiveness, anger, and frustration'; and the various hell worlds are states of debilitating suffering, pain, isolation, and mental illness.⁶⁶ Remembering these 'rebirths' would involve recollecting the various psychological states that one has undergone over the course of one's life and again seeing the connections between these, the conditions that gave rise to them and the consequences that ensued. None of this seems to constitute an especially far-fetched or overly reductive interpretation of the traditional Buddhist doctrines, and in view of what Hick says about the idea of animal rebirth having 'very little serious support',⁶⁷ I take it that, at least in this instance, he would prefer a 'psychological' reading over any other.

We can see, then, that even if, like Hick, one considers the possibility of recalling previous lives to be essential to the doctrine of reincarnation, there is good reason to hold that what Hick terms 'mythic' interpretations of the doctrine are fully capable of accommodating talk of past-life memories, provided one is willing to allow logical space for multiple understandings of what it means to remember previous lives. And, let us recall, there is nothing in Hick's argument that obviates such an allowance; he seems merely to assume a restrictive notion of remembering previous lives rather than arguing for it. There remains a question, however, about why we should regard an actual or possible memory link as being essential in the first place. The remainder of this section will examine a few illustrative

⁶³ Jennings, *The Vedāntic Buddhism of the Buddha*, xxiv.

⁶⁴ See Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, 97–100.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

⁶⁷ Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt*, 153.

examples of how reincarnation beliefs manifest in believers' lives, and will consider whether, or how, the prospect of remembering one's own previous lives plays any significant role in these cases.

My first example is from the autobiography of George Harrison (the popular musician and 'ex-Beatle'). In an introductory passage, written by Derek Taylor, Harrison is quoted as saying the following about friendship:

Friends are all souls that we've known in other lives. We're drawn to each other. That's how I feel about friends. Even if I have only known them for a day, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to wait till I have known them two years, because anyway we must have met somewhere before, you know.⁶⁸

Although Taylor tells us nothing about the circumstances in which this was said, the sentiment that Harrison here conveys is of a piece with what we know of his strong affinity with certain Hindu forms of religiosity, especially those propounded by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Self-Realization Fellowship.⁶⁹ Similar sentiments, with regard to both friendship and romantic love, have been expressed by many others. Michelangelo, for instance, declared to Vittoria Colonna that he saw in her eyes the paradise where he loved her before,⁷⁰ and Goethe wrote to Charlotte von Stein: 'Oh tell me, what does Fate hold in store for us? tell me, how did it fashion between us so pure and strict a bond? Oh, in far bygone times you were my sister or my wife'.⁷¹ From a perspective more closely aligned with Hindu thought, Swami Abhedananda remarks (in a book based on lectures first delivered towards the end of the nineteenth century) that 'Vedanta does not say that the death of the body will end the attraction or the attachment of two souls; but as the souls are immortal so their relation will continue forever.'⁷²

Of course, all these statements could be read 'figuratively', and there may in each case be questions to ask about the depth of belief in reincarnation that it embodies. For our present purposes, however, the important thing is that we see in these statements possible ways in

⁶⁸ Harrison, *I, Me, Mine*, 18. This statement is also quoted in Mahārāja, *Coming Back*, 11–12.

⁶⁹ For details of Harrison's spiritual associations, see Tillery, *Working Class Mystic*.

⁷⁰ See "Rime di Michel Angelo Buonarroti," VI, in Duppa, *The Life and Literary Works of Michel Angelo Buonarroti*, 231.

⁷¹ Goethe, *Selected Verse*, 71. I was prompted to look up Goethe's poem, and the one by Michelangelo, by some comments in Cioffi, *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*, 85.

⁷² Abhedananda, *Reincarnation*, 28.

which a belief in reincarnation can be exhibited in a believer's life – ways that affect the believer's perception of and relationships with friends, lovers and close family members. To tell a friend that you must have known one another in a previous life is one way of articulating the strength of friendship that you feel for him or her; it is not equivalent to saying simply 'I'm very fond of you', and (to quote Wittgenstein from a slightly different context) 'it may not be the same as saying anything else.'⁷³ It may, therefore, not be paraphrasable in terms that omit any allusion to reincarnation. But do we see in these statements any necessity for belief in the prospect of actually or possibly remembering one's previous lives? We might say that the sorts of feelings alluded to by Harrison and others are themselves being conceptualized as vague impressions of memory revived by the presence of the friend or lover. But the question to be asked here is whether there need be any hope of these vague impressions ripening into full-blown vivid memories – a 'total retrospective awareness' – in order for statements of the sort just considered to count as genuine expressions of a belief in reincarnation.

It is, at least, not obvious why there need be any expectation, or even any thought of the possibility, of some future confirmation of the claim that one has known one's friends (or lover or family members) in previous lives – a confirmation secured by remembering the lives concerned – in order for statements to the effect that one must have known them in previous lives to be both intelligible and of spiritual and ethical poignancy. Of course, such statements cannot simply float free of all other ethico-religious commitments in the speaker's life and still retain their sense, but, given a reasonably stable set of reincarnation-related beliefs on the speaker's part, there is no reason to suppose that a latent or occurrent memory link must be present in order for the reincarnation belief to make a profound 'connection with actual or possible human experience'.

A further kind of example of how believers in reincarnation exhibit that belief is those which involve reactions to suffering and misfortune. One source of examples of this sort is ethnographic research such as that carried out by Ursula Sharma among a Hindu community in northern India. On one occasion, Sharma reports, 'When a boat crowded with pilgrims bound for the shrine of a local saint sank in a lake [...] and all the passengers were drowned, one informant remarked that there must have been some very sinful person aboard for such a terrible disaster to have occurred.'⁷⁴ Although explicit reference to reincarnation is not made here, from what Sharma tells us about the surrounding beliefs of the community it is fair to

⁷³ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 71.

⁷⁴ Sharma, "Theodicy and the Doctrine of Karma," 351.

read it as suggesting that the sins in question, if not performed in the present life, must have been carried over from a former one. It implies that there must be a reason why the boat sank, over and above the quite mundane facts that the boat was probably overcrowded and in poor condition, even though the speaker of the remark may be in no position to fathom the details. Also implicit is an acknowledgement of the radical vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life that is so much part of the human condition. For even if there was one person on the boat who, in some sense, ‘deserved’ to be drowned, there is no suggestion that this punishment was deserved by all. In view of the fact that the passengers were making a pilgrimage to a holy site – this being a paradigmatically auspicious form of activity – a thought in the mind of Sharma’s informant may be that the sins committed by the person who is karmically responsible for the disaster must surely have been horrendous, otherwise they could not have so evidently outweighed the meritoriousness of participating in a pilgrimage. Other believers in karma and reincarnation might have responded differently, declaring perhaps that everyone who drowned must have deserved their fate, since the law of karma is never capricious, or that, in this particular case, a malevolent demon must have contravened the natural karmic process and brought about the deaths of innocent people.⁷⁵

Again, for our present purposes, the important question is whether the reactions outlined above necessarily entail a belief in a forthcoming remembrance, or possible remembrance, of previous lives. It does not appear that they do. The reactions are indicative of how beliefs in reincarnation are integrated into people’s lives in such a way that, when misfortune strikes – whether it be directly in one’s own life or in the lives of others – the believer will be inclined to understand that misfortune under the aspect of karma and reincarnation, and hence to see in the misfortune a retributive element that is liable either to be completely absent from how a non-believer would perceive the events in question or to take a very different form. As with the examples of believing that one has known a friend or lover in a previous life, the seeing of someone’s death by drowning as a consequence of something terrible done by him or her (or by someone else on board the same boat) is liable to be part of a broader framework of interconnected beliefs, values and practices; and that framework might include the expectation of actual or possible recollection of previous lives. But there is no reason why it must. Reactions to misfortune of the sort that have just been considered are intelligible without such an expectation on the part of the believer. Though they require a belief that

⁷⁵ For indications of how the belief in karma is sometimes intermingled with belief in supernatural beings who intervene in human affairs, see Daniel, “The Tool Box Approach of the Tamil to the Issues of Moral Responsibility and Human Destiny,” and Goldman, “Karma, Guilt, and Buried Memories,” esp. 419–420.

there is a connection between the misfortune and some action in a previous life (if not in the present one), they do not require the belief that we shall, or may, someday come to learn precisely which action is, or which actions are, responsible.

A supporter of Hick's proposal that, in the absence of a link of memory, 'we have nothing left which there could be any reason to assert or which could be of any practical interest to anyone'⁷⁶ might contend that without at least a potential memory link it makes no sense to regard someone as responsible for what happens to them as a result of actions performed in a previous life, since there would be no coherent sense in which it would be them who performed those actions. We should be cautious, however, about assuming that a doctrine of reincarnation must postulate some connecting factor in addition to the connection that is held to obtain between actions and their consequences. To believe that one's current experiences are, in part, conditioned by actions performed in a previous life is, of course, to propose that there is a link between that previous life and that which one is now living; but why should the link be anything other than the conditioning relation between actions and their consequences itself? As many believers in reincarnation see it, 'The nature of each individual is moulded by the experiences of the past',⁷⁷ including past actions, irrespective of whether there is or will be any remembrance of those experiences and actions.

IV. Conclusions

The principal conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that doctrines of reincarnation are not well thought of as empirical theories or hypotheses which require the possibility of confirmation by means of memory in order to have a meaningful role in people's lives. They are, for the most part, constitutive elements within frameworks of thought, evaluation and action. We could call these frameworks 'metaphysical', in the sense that they are not grounded on empirical data. But they are certainly not metaphysical in Hick's 'pejorative sense', where their truth or falsity would make 'no actual or possible experiential difference.' For one could say that the truth or falsity of reincarnation makes all the difference to the life of someone who believes in it; the belief provides the context within which one's relationships with others and one's judgements about how to act are formed. But, in at least the majority of cases, the regarding of one's belief in reincarnation as true is not rightly described as regarding it as well established on the basis of experience, for the belief

⁷⁶ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 356.

⁷⁷ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, 307.

is itself something that shapes one's encounters in the world, and which contributes towards the formation of particular modes of lived experience.

For reasons of the sort just outlined, I find Hick's search for 'the criterion or criteria' of reincarnation to be misguided; it assumes that there needs to be some particular criterion, and that the criterion in question has to consist in some kind of verificatory experience. These assumptions obscure from Hick's view the meaningful role that beliefs in reincarnation can have in people's lives irrespective of any expectation of coming eventually to remember the succession of lives that one has undergone. The great value of Hick's treatment of the doctrine of reincarnation resides in the recognition that he gives to the variety of forms that this doctrine can take. As Hick acknowledges, 'the notion of rebirth [or reincarnation] is a family of concepts',⁷⁸ and among that family of concepts there are many important distinctions to be made concerning their various connections with such things as notions of personhood and of religious and ethical responsibility. As I have sought to show, however, the investigation of this variety of connections is not well served by attempting to impose a sharp dichotomy between 'factual' and 'purely metaphysical' (or 'mythic') conceptions of reincarnation.

There are lessons here for inquiries in the philosophy of religion more generally. Although there has not been space to explore the connections thoroughly here, there are certain similarities between the 'factual'–'mythic' opposition that Hick sets up in his discussion of reincarnation, and the opposition that is often presumed to obtain between 'realist' and 'non-realist' conceptions of religious beliefs and language. Certain of the things that Hick says about 'factual' conceptions of reincarnation resemble, for example, what he says elsewhere about 'naive realist' conceptions of other religious doctrines, especially with regard to the idea of taking certain religious stories or doctrines 'literally'.⁷⁹ Similarly, some of what he says about treating reincarnation as 'an illuminating myth' resonates with what he has said about understanding the Christian notion of Jesus as God incarnate in metaphorical or mythic terms.⁸⁰ A key difference, though, is that while Hick affirms a metaphorical construal of the Incarnation as the only way of making religious sense of this Christian

⁷⁸ Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 388.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Hick's characterization of 'a naive Christian realist' understanding of chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis in Hick, "Religious Realism and Non-Realism," 6.

⁸⁰ See Hick, "Preface," "Jesus and the World Religions," and *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, esp. ch. 10.

doctrine,⁸¹ he seems to write off so-called ‘mythic’ conceptions of reincarnation as lacking ‘any practical interest’.⁸²

These apparent tensions in Hick’s treatment of beliefs in reincarnation are indicative of the problems that are prone to arise when it is assumed that complex and nuanced religious and ethical features of people’s lives can be placed into highly generalized categories such as ‘factual’, ‘mythic’, ‘literal’, ‘metaphorical’, ‘realist’, ‘non-realist’ and so on. While these categories may offer useful starting points in certain instances, they are unlikely to take us very far. What is required in philosophy of religion, as elsewhere in philosophy, is careful attention to particular cases and a suitable degree of wariness about over-simplifying binary categorization.⁸³

Note on the contributor

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⁸¹ ‘[T]he idea of divine incarnation [...] has never been given a satisfactory literal sense; but [...] it makes excellent metaphorical sense’ (Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 12).

⁸² Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 356.

⁸³ This paper is respectfully dedicated to John Hick, who died in February 2012. Despite its critical orientation, I hope that Hick would have appreciated this continued and extended attention to reincarnation.

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