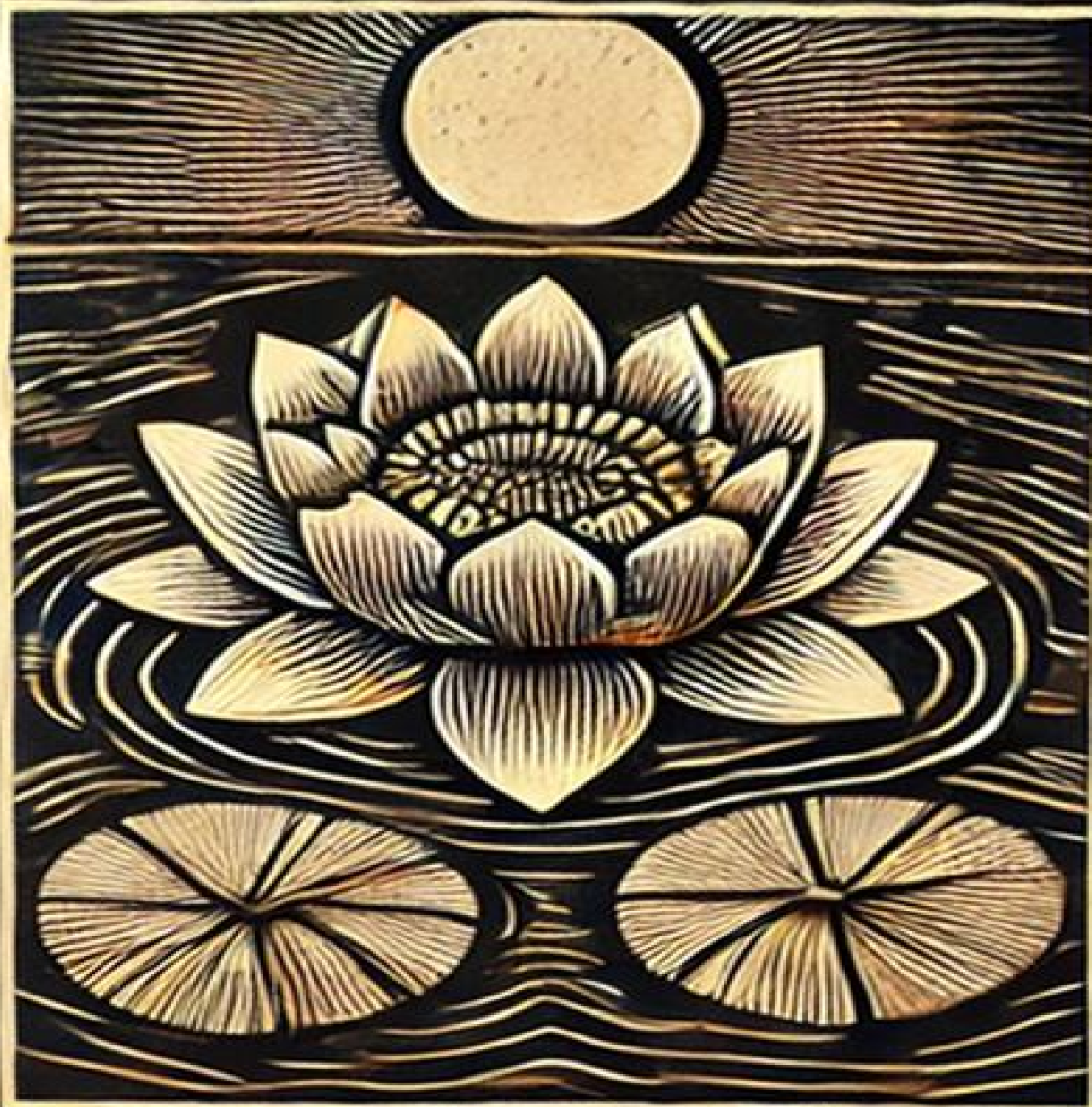
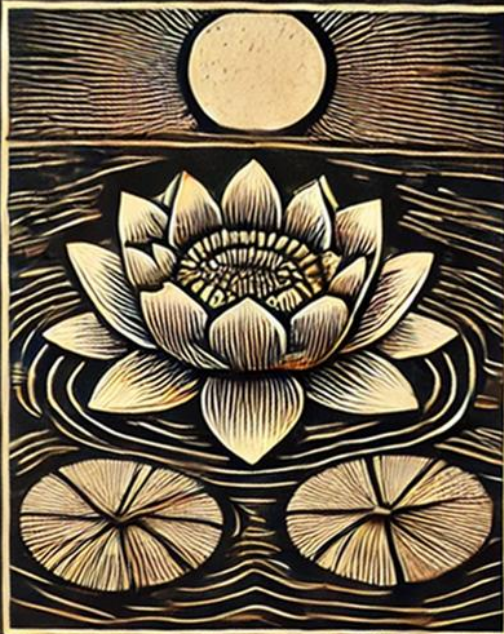


# BUDDHISM



STEVE HAYS

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# Buddhism

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## **Preface**

Although Buddhism holds no attraction for me, it interests me in two respects:

- i)** It's a huge missionary field. So we need to be able to reason with Buddhists on their own grounds.
  
- ii)** Unlike modern atheism, Buddhist philosophy represents the major pre-Christian atheist tradition. In its formative period it never had Christianity as a foil. So it's a "purer", more honest acknowledgement of what life in a godless universe implies than much modern atheism, which is influenced by Christian, making it ostentatiously and inconsistently moralistic. Modern atheism is reacting to Christianity while Buddhism is reacting to the world (a world without Christianity).

## **The wheel of life and death**

In Buddhism this is extended to the idea that everything physical or mental is by nature transitory and in a constant state of change. Whatever rises must fall. This state of change must thereby result in decline and decay. In this sense existence is an unending cycle of growth and decay, integration and disintegration.

Along with the frailty and insecurity of life, it is believed that at the center of existence there is a void. This void is the result of the insubstantial nature of life, and the aggregates, although forming a recognizable and perceivable object, do not produce a substance " all of them are insubstantial, a part of the endless movement of life. *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 14 (2004), 141-146.

## Unrequited longing

A sequel to my earlier post:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/05/god-soul-and-meaning-of-life.html>

In this post I comment on some other statements by Thaddeus Metz, *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge 2019):

The stronger version of the argument is not that God and a soul are unintelligible, but that they must be insofar as they are deemed to be necessary for life's meaning (Metz 2013b). The claim is that the logic of supernaturalism as a theory of meaning requires spiritual conditions to be quite different from what exists in the physical world and hence to be beyond what we can conceive. On the one hand, in order for God (or a soul) to be the sole source of meaning, God must be utterly unlike us. The more God were like us, the more reason there would be to think we could obtain meaning from ourselves, absent God. On the other hand, the more God were utterly unlike us and radically other, perhaps for being atemporal or absolutely simple, the less clear it would be whether we could truly understand His nature or how we could obtain meaning by relating to Him.

**i)** That's not self-explanatory. Why must God be utterly unlike us to be the sole source of meaning? That's hardly self-evident. Where's the argument?

**ii)** Conversely, how does it follow that "the more God is like us, the more reason there'd be to think we could obtain

meaning from ourselves, absent God"? What if God is like us in some respects but unlike us in other respects?

**iii)** The idea of timeliness isn't beyond what we can conceive.

It's difficult to evaluate this objection because it needs to be unpacked in much greater detail even to know what the claim amounts to .

The last salient argument against extreme supernaturalism has been the most common one for naturalists to make, and it is less complicated than the other two. It is the contention that meaning, at least in life, intuitively seems possible despite atheism, even when such meaning is construed objectively and not merely subjectively. If we think of the stereotypical lives of Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso, they seem meaningful merely in virtue of the activities they performed, even if we suppose there is no all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful spiritual person who is the ground of the universe and who will grant eternal bliss to our spiritual selves upon the deaths of our bodies (Trisel 2004: 384–5; Wielenberg 2005: 31–7, 49–50, 2016: 31, 33–4; Norman 2006). Supposing for the sake of argument we are currently living in an atheist world, we remain inclined to differentiate between lives devoted to long-distance spitting, creating a big ball of string or living in an experience machine, on the one hand, and those exemplifying morality, enquiry or creativity, on the other. Meaning is absent in the former cases and present in the latter ones, which can constitute ends higher than pleasure that merit pride or admiration upon their realization.

The argument is powerful, having convinced even many religiously inclined theorists of meaning. For example, one has said that it is 'beyond reasonable doubt' that some meaning would be possible even if there were no God and a soul (Quinn 2000: 58), while another remarks that it would be 'incredible' (Audi 2005: 334) to think that no meaning would accrue from beneficent relationships in themselves. A recurrent example is rescuing a young girl from severe injury; surely, that would be a meaningful deed to perform, even if a perfect being does not exist and we will die along with the inevitable demise of our bodies, so the argument goes (Trisel 2004: 384–5; Audi 2005: 341–2).

It's counterintuitive considered in isolation, but in combination with naturalism, his paradigm examples cease to be meaningful. In a godless universe, how you choose to live your life is arbitrary.

This is analogous to eliminative materialism. The position is absurd to the point of self-refutation, but it's driven by a larger commitment to physicalism. The way to dissolve the counterintuitive impression is not to say some ways of living are meaningful even in a godless universe, but to say that since some ways of living are meaningful, we don't live in a godless universe.

'Only a religion with a creator God offers the possibility of compensation for the badness of my wasting my life'

That raises an interesting issue. There are men and women who convert late in life. It's too late for them to make up for the lost years in this life.



A different sort of argument for moderate supernaturalism appeals to a ranking of what human beings characteristically want. By this argument, the moderate supernaturalist will grant that a naturalist sort of meaning could satisfy some of our 'surface desires' (Seachris 2013: 20, n. 47), or at best our mid-level needs, longings and wishes. However, he will maintain that only a supernatural meaning could satisfy 'profound desires anchored in the core of our being' (Seachris 2013: 20, n. 47), 'fundamental human aspirations' (Cottingham 2016b: 136) or 'the voracious human hunger for meaning' (Haught 2013: 176; see also Seachris 2011: 154, 2013: 14; Goetz 2012: 44, 47; Cottingham 2016b: 127).

The problem with this reasoning is that it just does not seem true to say that human beings qua human beings desire a world with a purposive God or a blissful soul. In particular, many in the South and East Asian traditions simply do not hanker for the existence of God or a soul as construed in this Element. Literally billions of adherents to Hinduism and Confucianism, for example, have desires radically different from believers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. If so, then a spiritual realm is not necessary for them to have a greater sort of meaning, by the logic of the present argument. Indeed, if there is in fact no spiritual dimension, and if our desires are malleable, then one would be best off letting go of desires for perfection that cannot be fulfilled (on which see Trisel 2002).

That's very superficial:

**i)** To begin with, most adherents are folk Hindus and folk Buddhists. They don't adhere to the austere outlook of Indian philosophy.

**ii)** There's a distinction between natural yearnings and a cultural overlay. Sometimes a cultural overlay will choke natural yearnings. But the overlay doesn't reflect their natural yearnings, if left to their own devices.

**iii)** If you think reality is indifferent or hostile to your yearnings, then you give up hope and settle for something less. You make due. But that doesn't mean you don't long for something better.

## Dialogue with a Buddhist philosopher

How should a Christian apologist argue with a Buddhist philosopher? Folk Buddhists retain many common sense beliefs, so they are easier to witness to, but Buddhist epistemology and metaphysics are quite radical, presenting less traction.

In some cases, an individual can put themselves out of reach of evidence by retreating so far into the maze that they are hopelessly lost (barring divine intervention). So there may not be enough common ground for a Christian apologist to have a constructive dialogue with a Buddhist philosopher.

One issue is how seriously a Buddhist philosopher or Buddhist monk actually takes Buddhist skepticism. In general, their Buddhism is the result of social conditioning. They wouldn't normally adopt such a counterintuitive philosophy. To what extent are they saying this to keep up appearances? Deep down, how many are truly committed to it? Especially if presented with an alternative?

Buddhism is a tragic worldview that reflects radical alienation from the world into which they are thrust. It's an elaborate coping mechanism. It cultivates an attitude of fatalistic resignation to an uncaring reality. And that attitude makes sense given the pre-Christian background.

There are, of course, a variety of Buddhist schools of philosophy. It's not monolithic, although they share a family resemblance.

Buddhism is pre-Christian. Although classical Buddhism is atheistic, the foil is Hindu polytheism and pantheism. It

didn't develop in opposition to Christianity. And while Buddhist philosophers can try to retool traditional arguments to deflect Christianity, that's rather ad hoc. If they were starting from scratch, with Christianity on the table, would Buddhism even have a foothold?

One of the ironies of Buddhist atheism is the mythological deification of Buddha:

The most articulate recent spokesman for this position has been Paul J. Griffiths, e.g., in his **ON BEING**

**BUDDHA: THE CLASSICAL DOCTRINE OF BUDDHAHOOD**

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

There, and in his seminal article, "Buddha and God: A Contrastive Study in Ideas about Maximal Greatness" (Journal of Religion, vol. 69, 1989, pp. 502-529),

Griffiths seems to argue not only that Buddhists *did* adopt an increasingly God-like conception of Buddha, but that they *had* to, since religious theorizing about the ultimate is driven by the need to maximize that which is regarded as highest, truest, or most real.

Without going into the strengths and weaknesses of this provocative idea, I would note that it is eerily reminiscent of the ontological argument for God's existence, but applied to the realm of intellectual

history. Jackson, Roger (1999) "A Theology And

Buddhalogy In Dharmakirtis Pramanavarttika," **FAITH**

**AND PHILOSOPHY: JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN**

**PHILOSOPHERS**: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 2, p499n7.

Here atheism comes full circle to reunite with robust theism. Perhaps the most consistent—albeit extreme—version of Buddhism is Buddhist idealism:

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780198746973.001.0001/oso-9780198746973-chapter-11>

<http://www.sjsu.edu/people/anand.vaidya/courses/comparativephilosophy/s1/The-Problem-of-Other-Minds-in-Buddhist-Epistemology-M.-Inamo.pdf>

However, even a radically antirealist position like Buddhist idealism offers a number of openings for Christian apologetics in terms of certain a priori and/or transcendental arguments, viz.

- Argument from logic
- Argument from design
- Argument from reason
- Argument from numbers
- Argument from simplicity
- Argument from contingency
- Argument from counterfactuals

There's still the challenge of how to bring that down to earth in terms of Christianity's claims about historical redemption, but establishing the necessity of God is a preliminary step.

There's also the question of whether philosophical Buddhism is skeptical to the point of self-refutation, viz. :

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-india/#Ske>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/contradiction/#LNCBudTe>  
t

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mind-indian-buddhism/#6.1>

If so, then it can't provide a standard of comparison to judge Christian theism.

On the one hand, Buddhist philosophy appeals to intellectual pride and autonomy. On the other hand, it represents a despairing and desiccated worldview. Christian apologetics can exploit the emotional fault-lines.

## Carnival mirror

If atheism is true, then there's no guiding, overarching intelligence to coordinate what happens or how we perceive reality. So for all we know, it's like each of us was born in a coma. The world we perceive is a comatose delirium. Indeed, each of us was born into a separate comatose delirium.

Or, to vary the metaphor, it's like each of us was born standing in front of a mirror. All we perceive is the world reflected in the mirror. And for all we know, it's a carnival mirror. Indeed, each of us was born standing in front of a different carnival mirror. And the other people we see, the "us", aren't real people but belong to the "world", the distortions, of the carnival mirror.

Consider the horror of that scenario. Stop and think about that nightmarish scenario. (Indeed, a never-ending nightmare is yet another illustration.) Let the horror of that scenario seize you.

Most atheists (in the West) don't think that way because they operate as if atheism's false and there is a guiding, overarching intelligence to coordinate what happens and how we perceive reality. Buddhism is a prominent exception. Certain strains of Hinduism share the same skepticism because, even though they aren't atheistic, the kind of God they believe in isn't the ultimate reality.

## Escape from time

I think Buddhism makes a certain amount of sense in its original setting. It arose in a pre-Christian culture, so the available options were awful. From a pre-Christian standpoint, life is characterized by irredeemable suffering. For some people, it's suffering from the get-go. Others get off to a better start, but incrementally, sometimes dramatically, and inevitably, lose more and more of what little makes life worthwhile. In Buddhism, time is your enemy, so the only solution is a radical solution: to escape time by ceasing to be.

The outlook of Buddhism reflects existential nihilism. Logically speaking, consistent Buddhists ought to be antinatalists. In practice, that's what celibate Buddhist monks are—although I'm sure that behind-the-scenes, many Buddhist monks are sexually active.

In a sense, both Buddhism and Christianity are future-oriented, but they have radically different views of the future. Christianity has a more positive view of the present, but acknowledges that for many people, this life is grim. Even in a fallen world, there are many natural goods, but these aren't evenly distributed.

From a Christian standpoint, time is your friend—at least in reference to the afterlife (assuming you die in the faith). The best is yet to come. In Christianity, you escape suffering, not by oblivion, not by escaping time, but by escaping into a better time. A bit like those time-travel scenarios where the present is hellacious, but with your time-machine you can go backward or forward to a time of your choosing, when things were better (or got better).





## Reflections on reincarnation

**1.** I rarely write about Hinduism and Buddhism because it's fairly specialized. Reincarnation is neglected in Christian apologetics because most Christian apologetics is focussed on challenges to Christianity in the West.

**2.** Before addressing the specifics, I'd like to make a general observation. Not all paranormal claims are mutually consistent. Compare reincarnation with crisis apparitions. There are reports of dead relatives appearing to a loved one to warn them or give them encouragement during a crisis. But if *that's* true, then how can reincarnation be true? According to a standard paradigm, reincarnation involves a memory wipe. When a person is reborn, they forget their past lives. Start all over again.

That rules out crisis apparitions. The dead relative has moved on. Been reincarnated. Started from scratch in a new body, as a baby. Immersed in a new life history.

They don't remember their loved ones from past lives. At this point they are younger than their children. Reincarnation resets the lifecycle. Your late mother can't appear to you as your late mother. She's now a little girl.

Reincarnation and crisis apparitions can both be false, but they can't both be true. And I think there's unambiguous evidence for crisis apparitions, whereas the evidence for reincarnation is ambiguous at best.

**3.** To my knowledge, apologists for reincarnation offer three lines of empirical evidence: *déjà vu*, transgenerational birthmarks, and memories of a past life.

#### 4. Déjà vu

**i)** I think this is the weakest evidence. Not just weak evidence for reincarnation, but weak evidence that it's even paranormal.

In my own life I've had déjà vu experiences. One time, sitting at a fast food joint, years ago, I suddenly had the intensive feeling that I'd done this before. I'm pretty sure that I hadn't done it before in this life. But since the establishment was built in my lifetime, it wasn't even possible for me to have been there in a past life. So whatever the explanation, it can't be reincarnation.

Likewise, I've lived in at least two consecutive locations where I had déjà vu experiences. But both of them were built in my lifetime, so that can't be chalked up to a past life. And even if they hadn't been constructed in my lifetime, what are the odds that in a past life I lived in both places—not to mention both places in succession?

**ii)** Moreover, the sensation I've had is more like a time loop than remembering a past life. It's not the sensation that I was in the same place in a *different* life, but that *this* life is repeating itself.

**iii)** Sometimes our minds play tricks on us. That's my explanation.

But assuming for argument's sake that déjà vu demands a paranormal explanation, telepathy is a simpler explanation. What if one person's memories occasionally leak into another person's mind?

#### 5. Transgenerational birthmarks

**i)** The claim is that babies sometimes reproduce the unique birthmark of a dead person, like an ancestor. In fact, this has become a TV trope:

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ReincarnationIdentifyingTrait>

**ii)** I haven't studied the literature in sufficient depth to know if such a phenomenon actually exists. Of course, the appeal is circular. If some babies reproduce the birthmarks of a dead person, then those aren't unique birthmarks.

**iii)** However, let's stipulate for discussion purposes that the phenomenon exists and demands a paranormal explanation. How would reincarnation be an explanation for replicated birthmarks? On a standard paradigm of reincarnation, the soul (mind, consciousness) transfers from the dead body to a new body. A body-swap scenario. But how would that cause any physical traces?

**iv)** Why would reincarnation duplicate birthmarks rather than duplicating the body? If the body is not a double, why the same birthmarks?

**v)** What reincarnation have to do with heredity? Why would someone be reborn in the body of a lineal descendent? Isn't reincarnation just the idea that the same soul is reembodyed? But that's not a genetic or genealogical relation—as if, to be reincarnated, you must be a reincarnated ancestor. Assuming (ex hypothesi) that reincarnation is true, why can't the soul transfer to a body in a different family tree? To my knowledge, reincarnation is usually treated as independent of lineage.

**vi)** It would be interesting to know if there's a history of witchcraft or necromancy in these families. If a baby has

the birthmarks of a dead ancestor, is that a family curse? Was the baby hexed? Are the dead (damned) casting a malevolent influence on the living?

## 6. Past life memories

**i)** Suppose for argument's sake that reincarnation is true. Suppose someone underwent 100 past lives. In fact, that's a conservative estimate. How would they remember 100 life histories? Wouldn't their recollection be hopelessly scrambled? How would they remember what they did in each life? Who they knew in each life?

Memory has a sense of relative chronology. You remember childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, &c. You remember that some things happened to you before other things.

But if you underwent 100 past lives, how could you possibly keep the timelines straight? Assuming that some people remember events before they were born, that would actually constitute *prima facie* evidence that reincarnation is false, since it's hard to see how you could keep all those life histories separate in your mind.

**ii)** An alternative explanation is that those aren't *your* memories. You're tapping into someone *else's* memories. They are invading your mind. That doesn't require all the machinery of reincarnation, so it's a simpler explanation.

**iii)** To my knowledge, Hinduism has a dualist anthropology while Buddhism has a physicalist anthropology. In Buddhism, humans have no perduring soul. So how is reincarnation even possible? Who's the you that's reincarnated? Weren't you extinguished at the moment of

death? A new brain and body won't be you, but a blank slate.

## The view from the prison cell

Clearly in a sense Buddhism is atheistic. There is no creator God who set everything in motion, and there is no providential God who hovers over his creation and who is prepared to intervene when things go drastically wrong. For the Buddhist, there is no ultimate meaning to life in this sort of way. Life just is, always has been, always will be. That is the nature of things...Buddhism is certainly not unique in basically accepting the universe as it is and going from there. M. Ruse, **ATHEISM: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW** (Oxford 2015), 182,184.

To my knowledge, that's an accurate summary of the Buddhist outlook. Since, according to Buddhism, reality is grim and you can't change reality, the best thing you can do is to change your attitude towards reality. Come to terms with grim reality. Lower your expectations. Learn to cope with despair. Make a mental adjustment to your hopeless situation, like a life sentence to life. Have a potted plant on the barred window sill of your prison cell. Logically, when exposed to the Gospel, Buddhists should jump at the chance to exit their prison cell.

## The logistics of reincarnation

Recently I was considering some additional, internal problems with reincarnation:

**i)** If accounting for how some people allegedly remember past lives is a problem, then there's the opposite problem of accounting for why most folks have no recollection of former lives. That vastly outnumbers the people who say they remember a past life. So that poses a dilemma for the reincarnational explanation.

**ii)** Reincarnation poses daunting logistical problems. Consider the timing. On the one hand, new bodies only become available for souls to reincarnate at the moment of conception. Conversely, souls only become available when the host dies.

Since the timing of when people die and when people are conceived is random, how is it possible to coordinate the transfer of preexisting souls to new bodies? If reincarnation is true, wouldn't there be shortages in either direction? Bodiless souls and soulless bodies? Souls waiting for a body to become available and bodies waiting for a soul to become available?

What's the mechanism that synchronizes death and conception so that a soul is freed up at the moment of death at the same time a couple in some part of the world succeeds in fertilizing an ovum?

In theory, reincarnation could happen between conception and birth. But there's still going to be a logjam or bottleneck since there's no correspondence between when someone happens to die and when a baby happens to be



conceived. Those are causally and chronologically independent events.

And what about preemies? Moreover, we keep pushing back viability. So the window for souls to reincarnate a new body is narrowing.

## Does every religion have its own Superman?

**Argument from Superman:** Every religion has its own Superman argument. Moroni, Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, Buddha, even Lao Tzu, are all claimed to have proved their religious teachings supernaturally true by miraculous demonstrations of their power. "Our Superman exists; therefore our God exists."

<http://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/11868#superman>

This is Richard Carrier's attempt to "destroy" an argument for God. But so many things go awry in his comparison:

**i)** In the same post, he accuses Christians of cherry-picking the evidence, yet he himself is cherry-picking the evidence. There are founders of notable cults or religious movements who aren't claimed to have proven their teachings supernaturally true by miraculous demonstrations, viz. Anthroposophy, Aum Shinrikyo, British Israelism, Chabad, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies, Nation of Islam, Raëlism, Scientology.

**ii)** Carrier seems to be listing founders of religious movements. If that's his intention, then it's unclear why he includes Moroni on the list. Obviously, that's an allusion to Mormonism. However, the founder of Mormonism is Joseph Smith, or perhaps more accurately, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were the cofounders of Mormonism. As for reputed miracles, it would be necessary to sift the documentary evidence. Keep in mind that Smith was a classic conman. His reputation precedes him. You must also consider whether his cronies had a financial stake in vouching for him.

Maroni is reputedly the angel who appeared to Joseph Smith. But if, by Carrier's logic, that makes Moroni the founder of Mormonism, does that make the Angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses (Exod 3) the founder of Judaism? It's hard to see that Carrier is using a consistent principle when he includes Moroni on his list. Perhaps Carrier is simply confused. Maybe he meant to say Joseph Smith, but because he associates Moroni with Mormonism, he confounded Smith with Moroni.

**iii)** If his intention is to list founders of religious movements, it's questionable to classify Moses as the founder of Judaism. Assuming Judaism has a founder, Abraham is as much a founder of Judaism as Moses. Perhaps we might classify Abraham and Moses as cofounders of Judaism. But Abraham didn't perform miracles. David is another central figure in Judaism, but David didn't perform miracles. It would really be more accurate to say Yahweh was the founder of Judaism.

**iv)** There are no miracles attributed to Muhammed in the Koran. It's only in later Muslim tradition that Muhammad undergoes legendary embellishment as a miracle worker.

**v)** "Superman" suggests an agent with innate superhuman abilities. By contrast, Moses is empowered to perform miracles. Moses is not a "Superman" in his own right. He's just an ordinary human being.

**vi)** By contrast, Jesus does haven't innate superhuman abilities. That's because Jesus is God Incarnate. But that makes Jesus unique compared to the other founders on the list. So that example is disanalogous rather than analogous.

**vii)** Moreover, Jesus performed many public miracles. There were multiple witnesses. Furthermore, Jesus was a 1C figure, for which we have multiple 1C sources. Carrier needs to show comparable evidence in the case of Buddha and Lao Tzu.

**viii)** It's true that miracles are attributed to Buddha. Buddha undergoes legendary embellishment. That's true in part because the sources for the historical Buddha are so far removed from his own time. They aren't reliably connected to the historical Buddha. As such, they can take on a life of their own.

In addition, Buddhism is mainly a religion of ideas rather than events, in contrast to the Judeo-Christian faith, which is primarily a religion of events rather than ideas. Buddhism was never essentially rooted in a historical figure. In principle, Buddhism could still exist even if Buddha never existed, for Buddhism is based on Buddha's "insight" regarding the problem of suffering. He's the founder of that religious movement because he's the first person to have that particular take on the problem of suffering (the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path). But, in principle, anyone could independently hit upon that idea. By contrast, Christianity is subject to historical controls.

**ix)** I don't rule out the possibility that some Buddhist or Taoist adepts might exhibit paranormal phenomena. The occult is a potential source of paranormal phenomena. That wouldn't disprove Christianity, for Christianity makes allowance for supernatural agents other than God, including evil spirits.

## Birthmarks and reincarnation

One primary putative evidence for reincarnation is the recurrence of birthmarks that correspond to the decedent. For instance, Ian Stevenson, a leading apologist for reincarnation, stresses that line of evidence. With that in mind, here's an interesting story:

Meet baby MilliAnna, the fourth generation of women in her family to be born with a wild streak of white hair.

The 18-month-old, from Ridgeland, South Carolina, was born with a unique birthmark that leaves a patch of her dark hair bleached white — just like the previous three generations of women that came before her.

The trait was passed down from her great-grandmother Jaonne, 59, to her grandmother Jennifer, 41, to her mother Brianna, 23. Now, MilliAnna is the latest to be born with the extraordinary hair.

<http://www.insideedition.com/headlines/19740-baby-takes-after-3-generations-of-women-to-be-born-with-streak-of-white-hair>

By reincarnationist logic, this means the same decedent *simultaneously* transmigrated in four *living* individuals! How one person can be reincarnated as four coexistent people poses quite a metaphysical conundrum for personal identity. Put another way, this goes to show that sharing a distinctive birthmark is unreliable evidence for metempsychosis.

Indeed, I daresay it's statistically inevitable that in a world with billions of humans, some unrelated people will share

common birthmarks. That's a natural, predictable coincidence.

## A flickering firefly in the night

We are utterly irrelevant in the vastness of the cosmos, its evolution, and eventual annihilation...It isn't that you exist and this "you" is irrelevant. It's that there is no "you" there in the first place to be either relevant or irrelevant. Phenomena we call thoughts, feelings, and sensations – Yes. But at the heart of these experiences there is no "you" to be found. An apparent you – Yes. There is only emptiness that manifests now and then as the person you take yourself to be.

<http://michaelsudduth.com/dancing-lovers/>

From what else I've read on the subject, I'd say that's a basically accurate summary of the Buddhist position. Buddhism has a fundamentally tragic outlook on life. Buddhism is an exercise in despair management. How to make the best of the losing hand we've been dealt.

As an atheistic philosophy, Buddhism is somewhat insightful on the costly nature of atheism. In addition, Buddhism reflects the hopelessness of a pre-Christian philosophy.

Of course, popularizers like Sudduth try to pretty it up and make it sound better than it really is. It's hard to live with unremitting despair. So they dole out nuggets of chocolate-coated nihilism. The yummy rhetoric masking the toxic core.

Buddhism is about learning to let go, before you have to let go, because Buddhism is a philosophy of flux. Nothing lasts. Sooner or later, you lose everything. So you might as well make the mental adjustment in advance to brace yourself for the inevitable.

There's an element of truth to this. Ecclesiastes makes a similar point. But Buddhism is a half truth. A half truth is more persuasive than a pure lie.

In Buddhism, both good and bad are equally ephemeral. In Christianity, by contrast, good is eternal. Preexistent and everlasting. Nothing ultimately good is ever truly lost.

We might compare and contrast Buddhism with Hinduism:

After my father's death, I went to India and went through rituals that you in the West would find strange. I bathed and anointed my father's body, then carried it on my shoulder, stoked the cremation fires, and watched his body burn. I took his remains to the mouth of the Ganges and watched them float away to return to the dust to where he came from.

I am questioning the whole idea that there is such a thing as a person. A few hours after cremation the person has totally disappeared. You collect the bones; they're like little pieces of ivory. You wash them in the Ganges, and then the person merges back into the energy and intelligence of the universe from where he came...For a few years, which is nothing—like the flicker of a firefly in the middle of the night—we are individuals.

[http://www.postbulletin.com/rel-impermanence-of-life-is-latest-chopra-exploration/article\\_5da6eb71-17c4-523f-9c8a-2f53ede38afc.html?mode=jqm](http://www.postbulletin.com/rel-impermanence-of-life-is-latest-chopra-exploration/article_5da6eb71-17c4-523f-9c8a-2f53ede38afc.html?mode=jqm)

Not surprisingly, this has affinities with Buddhism. The same reductionistic outlook. The insignificance of the individual. Eulogizing his brother at the graveside, Ingersoll said:



Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive in vain to look beyond the heights. We cry aloud, and the only answer is the echo of our wailing cry. From the voiceless lips of the unreplying dead there comes no word.

That's atheism. That's Buddhism.

From Hinduism, Buddhism inherited reincarnation. Buddha was a reformer, but not a radical. Buddhism would be more consistent if it shed reincarnation. That illustrates the power of tradition. Dogma.

Mind you, reincarnation is just as bad, in a different way. Every time you die, you wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. Everything slips through your fingers.

Compare that to Christianity, where the best of the past comes back around in the new Eden, the new Jerusalem. Better than ever.

## Christ & Buddha

Unlike Christ, our sources for Buddha are centuries after the fact. As a result, there's a wide, unbridgeable gap between the historical Buddha and the literary Buddha. We don't know what he really said and did. All we have are legendary or fictional traditions.

Also, because humans have an innate need to believe in something greater and better than themselves, Buddhists have essentially deified Buddha. He becomes a larger-than-life figure. A surrogate God.

However, lack of solid historical information about Buddha is inessential to Buddhism. Christianity is inseparable from the person and work of Christ. Even if Christ taught nothing distinctive, his uniquely redemptive death and unique person (as the Incarnate Son) make the medium inseparable from the message. Christ isn't just a roadmap, but the destination.

By contrast, what's significant about Buddhism is a set of ideas. It doesn't matter who said it. With Buddha, unlike Christ, you can detach the message from the messenger.

According to tradition, Buddha had a certain insight into the problem of evil, based on two related ideas. Life is fleeting. Everything changes. Nothing lasts.

Hence, if you become emotionally invested in something transitory, you leave yourself open to grief when it passes out of your life.

So the way to spare yourself that kind of suffering is to practice detachment. If you don't care about having it, you

don't care about losing it.

Thus, Buddha offers both a simple diagnosis and simple solution to the problem.

There's an undeniable truth to his analysis, as far as it goes. It's a truism that the more you love something, you more you stand to lose if you lose it. And it's also true that given the evanescent nature of so much human experience, we are quite vulnerable to this type of suffering.

There are, however, some fundamental problems with his insight:

**i)** It's one-sided. Although impermanence can be a source of suffering, a static existence would be interminable. Humans need variety as well as continuity to be happy.

**ii)** Notice that on this view, the problem of evil is essentially metaphysical rather than moral. It's grounded in the impermanence of a timebound existence. An amoral analysis of the problem of evil.

As a result, a Samurai warrior can be pious Buddhist. Butcher innocent men, women, and children on the orders of the Shogun.

Although there's such a thing as Buddhist ethics, that's arbitrary. For the problem of evil isn't moral evil, but impermanence. And since humans are temporary organisms, why treat them with any particular deference?

**iii)** It's a this-worldly solution to a this-worldly problem. Because Buddha isn't God, he can't change the situation. He has to take the situation as a given. The best he can do is

to propose a palliative. Given the situation, here's a bromide to make it feel a bit better.

The Buddhist worldview is essentially pessimistic and fatalistic. Defeatist. There's nothing you can do about your condition. That's beyond your control. At most, you can adjust your attitude. Come to terms with the situation. Make the best of a bad deal.

Given its bleak outlook on life, there's an ineluctable undertone of sadness to Buddhism. Our condition is unutterably hopeless. The best we can do is to numb the pain.

Buddha was just a man. A creature. A mortal. A passenger in the same sinking ship. He is impotent to change the condition that gives rise to suffering in the first place. If all is flux, then even if gods are powerless to change the fabric of reality.

This is completely unlike Christianity, where the ultimate source of suffering is due to sin rather than nature. And where the Savior has the divine power to change the situation.

**iv)** At best, Buddhism avoids one type of sadness by exchanging that for another type of sadness. There's a kind of sadness that comes from losing the good you had. But there's another kind of sadness that comes from missing the good you never had.

Both are deprivations. In Buddhism, you deny yourself a good to avoid grief when you lose it. But you still lose out in a different way. That good is still absent from your life. A felt absence.

What's worse: the absence of what you never had, or the absence of what you used to have? You can miss what you never had as acutely as what you lost.

**v)** The solution is unrealistic. Suppressing our emotional needs doesn't make them go away. Indeed, suppression tends to intensify the yearning.

And even if you could successfully suppress your innate emotional needs, that would be inhuman. That would make you less virtuous. Almost sociopathic.

Buddhism tries to skirt a knife-edge between happiness and unhappiness. But, again, that's unrealistic.

## Possession & reincarnation

In **DEATH & PERSONAL SURVIVAL** (Littlefield Adams 1992), Robert Almeder has written what may well be the most thorough and sophisticated defense of reincarnation that's currently available.

In several respects, this is a major issue:

- i)** Between Hinduism and Buddhism, reincarnation is widely believed.
- ii)** Reincarnation entails a radically different worldview than Christian eschatology.
- iii)** There's not a lot of good apologetic literature on this subject.

From a Christian standpoint, the obvious alternative explanation for alleged cases of reincarnation is possession. And, indeed, Almeder also regards possession as the best alternative explanation. He then deploys several arguments against that explanation, *ibid.* 53-55, 155-58.

I've isolated three basic arguments:

- 1.** He accentuates the fact (if it is a fact) that cases of reincarnation involve personal continuity whereas cases possession involve personal discontinuity.

In cases of possession, the personality of the subject undergoes displacement ("total personality replacement"). In cases of reincarnation, by contrast, the subject testifies to his identity over time, from his former existence to his

current existence. He's simultaneously aware of his past life and his present life. His personality is not submerged.

I have several problems with this argument:

**i)** Assuming, for the sake of argument, that it really is a case of possession (pace Almeder), I don't know why Almeder thinks the incubus would be a reliable witness. The incubus might lie about its "past life." From a Christian standpoint, the incubus would be an evil spirit of some sort—whether a demonic spirit or wandering spirit (of the damned). Not exactly a trustworthy source of information.

**ii)** Moreover, Almeder seems to treat possession as one-off phenomenon. But from what I've read, possession ranges along a continuum. There are degrees of possession. Degrees of influence or control. The "total personality displacement" model represents a limiting case of possession—but by no means the only type.

**iii)** Furthermore, he also cites the example of a subject who says, "I was a woman, but now I'm a man."

But this raises serious questions of personal identity. Can you have a man in a woman's body, or a woman in a man's body? Does he think a human personality is essentially androgynous? It seems to me that even a Cartesian dualist has to grant the profound influence of gender on personality.

**iv)** In addition, the degree of displacement is not that cut-and-dried. As one writer observes, "We noted in the last chapter that subjects in reincarnation cases tend to identify thoroughly with the past personality, whereas in most possession cases the previous personality seems more parasitic and apparently displaces the normal personality."

And that distinction may, indeed, be one fair, if rough way to distinguish most reincarnation from possession cases. But transplant cases don't fit neatly in either category. In some of those cases, the original personality of the recipient isn't displaced; instead, it's modified in ways characteristic of the donor. And in others (sometimes in the same cases), the recipient does identify strongly with the donor, and we see the kind of personality blending characteristic of reincarnation cases. Yet in others (and again, sometimes in the same cases), the recipient (a child in these instances), apparently interacts, seemingly mediumistically, with the donor...my recommendation is that we interpret transplant cases as supplementing evidence for possession," S. Braude, **IMMORTAL REMAINS** (Rowman & Littlefield 2003), 243-44.

v) Finally, Almeder's case for reincarnation suffers from a deep methodological fallacy. He begins by distinguishing paradigm-cases of (alleged) possession from paradigm-cases of (alleged) reincarnation. He then draws the conclusion that the evidence for reincarnation is not reducible to possession since paradigm-cases of possession lack some of the typical features of paradigm-cases for reincarnation, and vice versa.

But isn't the specter of vicious circularity hovering in the background? Isn't the correct classification of these phenomena a necessary preliminary step in this whole debate? As such, doesn't his classification scheme take that preliminary step for granted? Almeder is beginning his discussion one step later than he ought to. By what criteria do we identify which features are distinctive to possession and which features are distinctive to reincarnation? Almeda is tacitly assuming what he needs to prove at the very



outset of the discussion. So he needs to go back a step and justify his classification scheme.

Perhaps he'd counter that this objection is reversible. If we can't say whether or not reincarnation is reducible to possession, then we can't say whether or not possession is reducible to reincarnation.

But even if that were then, what then?

**a)** At most, we'd be left with an epistemic stalemate. He'd still have no distinctive evidence for reincarnation.

**b)** Moreover, even if the bare phenomenology of the case-histories underdetermines the correct interpretation, a Christian might well have resources beyond the raw data to exclude one interpretation in favor of another.

For example, if, on the one hand, possession is clearly attested in Scripture while, on the other hand, Scripture disallows reincarnation, then we'll opt for possession as the best explanation.

**2.** Picking up on Stevenson, Almeda also says that, in the case of reincarnation, amnesia sets in after the age of 8. In the case of possession, by contrast, there is no automatic termination. Moreover, where possession ceases, there's a restoration of the underlying personality.

Several problems:

**i)** This line of "evidence" suffers from the general ambiguities I mentioned under (1).

**ii)** Moreover, it's a truism of developmental psychology that children pass through different stages of cognitive

development during their formative years. So we'd expect some important discontinuities. As the risk of stating the obvious, younger kids are quite imaginative and impressionable.

**iii)** Furthermore, appeal to "amnesia" is a face-saving maneuver to explain away the embarrassing fact (embarrassing for the reincarnationist) that most folks don't remember their former lives. The obvious reason is because there's nothing to remember. No past life to recollect.

It's no coincidence that most of the "evidence" for reincarnation comes from highly suggestive technique of hypnosis, during which the patient is asked a number of leading questions (often by a reincarnationist).

**iv)** Finally, amnesia isn't distinctive to alleged cases of reincarnation. It can also be found in cases of possession (or obsession). As one writer notes, "The obvious question would then arise, what sort of relationship might be supposed to exist between the obsessing entity (the deceased Gifford), and his willing victim, Thompson? Thompson's mental state while under the Gifford influence varied from dreaminess and mild dissociation (to which he was in any case liable) to a fairly complete automatism with (probably) a good deal of amnesia, not however quite amounting to a trance," A. Gauld, **MEDIUMSHIP AND SURVIVAL** (Paladin 1983), 156.

**3.** Also borrowing a page from Stevenson, he notes that, by definition, birthmarks and birth defects are congenital. And he treats prenatal possession as synonymous with reincarnation.

It seems to me that this suffers argument from several key equivocations:

**i)** Prenatal possession is not the same thing as preexistence (in a former life).

**ii)** Ex hypothesi, reincarnation involves a single-personality to multiple-body correspondence, whereas possession involves a multiple-personality to single-body correspondence. So they're opposite phenomena, rather than parallel phenomena.

**iii)** Suppose possession is sometimes congenital? After all, some writers think that psi is a hereditary form of mediumistic magic. If we treat that as a working hypothesis, then not only could these symptoms present at an early age, but if the subject is, in some measure, under the influence of an ancestor, then the memory of the subject might well tap into the memory of the ancestor. He would share the memories of an ancestor, not because he is the reincarnation of the ancestor, but because the ancestor has taken possession of his mind, to one degree or another.

And that would include acquired skills, since these are also a function of memory. At the same time, Braude denies any hard evidence for the transmission of acquired skills. Cf. **IMMORTAL REMAINS**, 179. If so, then that's one less evidence for reincarnation—which could, in any event, be as easily explained by recourse to possession.