

Why Believe in Rebirth?

Dr. Jeffery D. Long



In a now famous conversation between Carl Sagan and the Dalai Lama, Sagan, a scientist and renowned skeptic, asks, “Your Holiness, what if we were to prove, scientifically, that there is no such thing as reincarnation?” To Sagan’s great astonishment, the Dalai Lama replied without hesitation that if rebirth were to be disproven, then the word would need to be put forth that Buddhists should stop believing in it. The Dalai Lama, however, then stumped Sagan with the question, “How would one disprove reincarnation?”

How, indeed? Belief in reincarnation, or rebirth, like many other spiritual beliefs, would, at least at first glance, appear incapable of falsification—and falsifiability is the criterion by which any claim can be said to be properly scientific. In other words, if one wants to assert a scientific claim, one must be able to answer the question, “What would be needed to disprove this claim?” By what test could one measure the departure of consciousness at the moment of death, and the continuity of the same stream of awareness in another, newly born or conceived individual? More to the point, how could one demonstrate in a conclusive fashion that such a transfer never occurs, or that it is impossible?

Some would argue that its very un-testability is a sufficient basis for rejecting the idea of rebirth: that one cannot measure or analyze a soul or stream of consciousness as it leaves the physical body because there is no such thing as consciousness independent of the life of the brain.



Dazu Wheel of Reincarnation

Dazu Wheel of Reincarnation

This, however, is not a scientific conclusion, but a philosophical assumption. And while it is certainly not an unreasonable assumption to make, it might also be the case that the death of the brain is analogous to the malfunctioning of a television set or radio. The fact that my TV or radio is broken does not mean television and radio stations have ceased to broadcast. What if the brain does not generate consciousness, but rather mediates it to the physical plane of reality to which

science has access—the sensory, material world—from a plane no less real, but not amenable to scientific investigation, at least as science is currently configured? This, of course, is a completely un-falsifiable claim, and many would argue that it is a fanciful one: a product of wishful thinking, rather than of a clear-headed examination of the available evidence. Fair enough. But, as David Ray Griffin argues, it is not only believers in the survival of consciousness beyond death who engage in wishful thinking. “The pervasiveness of wishful thinking becomes all the more evident when we realize that it can be negative as well as positive, as our thoughts about philosophical possibility, and our interpretations of empirical data, are sometimes guided by what we hope *not* to be true.” Hermann von Helmholtz, a nineteenth century scientist, provided an example of such negative wishful thinking when reportedly said of telepathy, “I cannot believe it...[Not] even the evidence of my own senses would lead me to believe in the transmission of thought from one person to another...It is clearly impossible.”

Such stubborn skepticism, an a priori rejection of the possibility of a phenomenon even before either positive or negative evidence is proffered, would seem to be as alien to the spirit of empirical research as a stubborn insistence that the phenomenon is real. It is not that either form of insistence is necessarily wrong; but neither equates to science. Both, rather, are philosophical inclinations, to which one may be drawn for reasons having little or nothing to do with empirical evidence. A peculiarity of the discussion of the survival of consciousness after death is that one such set of assumptions—the negative set—is taken by many to be established science, when the reality is that a variety of possible accounts of reality are logically compatible with our current scientific knowledge.

The pervasive importance of belief in the survival of the conscious entity beyond the death of the body in humanity’s religious and philosophical traditions, including among believers who are also scientists, suggests that this is an idea that one can take seriously without running afoul of our best current science on the mechanics of consciousness: the workings of the brain, which parts of the brain are active when we experience particular mental and emotional states, and so on.

Science, in other words, is compatible with a variety of ontologies: a wide range of views about the ultimate nature of reality, beyond what science itself is able to confirm or to reject. Science tends to be widely associated with a materialist ontology: the view that the world visible to the senses (or their extensions, via instrumentation) is all that exists. It is logically possible, though, to affirm the findings of science while holding a variety of other views about those areas that are not amenable to scientific investigation.

Given the inapplicability of the scientific method to the question of rebirth, belief in this phenomenon typically belongs to the realm of religion and philosophy. It is something that people affirm not due to a rigorous examination of scientifically tested evidence, but because it plays an important role in their worldview or system of values. For many, the idea of rebirth, along with the closely connected concept of karma, a principle of cosmic justice, together provide a psychologically reassuring and logically consistent answer to existential questions like, “What happens to our consciousness after physical death?” and “Why does there seem to be so much undeserved suffering in the world?”

At the same time, though, a strong denial of the reality of rebirth is similarly rooted in a set of philosophical principles, and not in the conclusions of science—because, again, this is not a scientific question. Although many will affirm that neuroscience has proven that consciousness is an effect of brain activity, and that there is no such thing as an afterlife in the traditional religious sense, this is not a scientific conclusion, but rather a logical leap from science to metaphysics. The scientific data in this field, while giving us a great deal of useful and important information about the function of the brain, underdetermines the question of the nature and origin of consciousness. The widespread affirmation by a good many neuroscientists, therefore, that neuroscience has proven

the non-existence of a consciousness that survives physical death, is an error that is based on “negative wishful thinking.” Neuroscience has proven no such thing. It has shown that a great deal about the structure of our consciousness at a given moment can be explained by brain activity. But it cannot prove the falsehood of an un-falsifiable claim.

Again, the argument here is not that the reductionist materialism of many neuroscientists is indefensible. But it is rarely ever given a proper philosophical defense. Rather, it is simply assumed. When one takes into account that another possible approach to the nature of consciousness is available from within the realm of science itself—at the cutting edge of physics—such reductionist assumptions appear even less justifiable. Marilynne Robinson puts the matter incisively, “Nothing can account for the reductionist tendencies among neuroscientists except a lack of rigor and consistency, a loyalty to conclusions that are prior to evidence and argument, and an indifference to science as a whole.”



From the pragmatist perspective of the philosopher William James—who, though skeptical of such things, was, unlike Hermann von Helmholtz, at least open to testing paranormal phenomena—the question of rebirth, like the question of the existence of a deity or deities, is in the realm of topics on which no conclusive evidence, positive or negative, can be presented. According to James, one is free to believe in such things or not, depending on how such belief or disbelief fits into the larger worldview through which one finds meaning in life. Those who are inclined to believe in rebirth because it helps them make sense of their life experiences in a profound way are free to do so, and those who are inclined to reject this notion as a superstition are equally free to do so on the basis of its un-testability. Both may claim that their views are consistent with science, which, at least as currently configured, is not in a position either to confirm or to deny conclusively whether rebirth occurs.

The best candidate, it seems, for scientifically testable evidence for rebirth, is in accounts of past life memory, the details of which can, at least in principle, be confirmed or proven false. Few scientists, however, pursue research into this phenomenon because it is viewed—due to the pervasiveness of materialism, as well as Abrahamic religious beliefs, in the scientific community—as well outside the mainstream of acceptable science. As noted by Jonathan Edelman and William Bernet, “One reason that parapsychological studies on reincarnation in particular may often

be considered outside the pale of solid academic research is that reincarnation entails an ontology that deeply contradicts contemporary scientific, philosophical, and Christian theological views of mind consciousness.” There is dogmatism, in other words, in the scientific community just as there is in the realm of religion. So many scientists are already convinced that reincarnation is impossible that it is not viewed as a worthwhile use of time and resources to pursue research suggesting that it might, in fact, occur.

The implications, though, were proof of rebirth to emerge, would be profound indeed. As Edelmann and Bernet point out, “If it were shown that a human mind or consciousness could reincarnate into another body after death, this would have a revolutionary impact on how we understand mind-body relationships, the nature of human memory, and the ontology of consciousness, as would the studies done on near-death experiences. Moreover, reincarnation would rule out reductive materialism, and give some credibility to non-physical views of consciousness in Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.”

The alleged instances of past life memory that have been investigated by the intrepid scientists who have been willing to pursue this line of research fall into two categories: spontaneous and hypnotic.

The phenomenon of apparent past life memories emerging during hypnosis is presented famously in the work of Brian L. Weiss, a Miami-based psychiatrist who documented the memories that emerged in one of his patients after he had placed her under hypnosis in a bestselling book published in 1988 and titled *Many Lives, Many Masters*. Particularly after the publication of this book, “past life regression” became an increasingly popular element in the repertoire of New Age spiritualists.

Interesting though the revelations were that occurred when persons were regressed to past lives through hypnosis—a process that many also found to have therapeutic value—as far as scientific verification of reincarnation went, they proved to be of little value. As a tool of empirical investigation—including investigation of crimes allegedly occurring during the childhood of regressed patients—hypnosis proved to be unreliable. The power of leading questions to generate entirely fanciful visions in the minds of patients make it incapable of withstanding rigorous scrutiny. Even in cases where information given in regression could be independently verified, the possibility could never be entirely discounted that the information in question was already known, at least on an unconscious level, by either the patient or hypnotist.

Far more promising is the phenomenon of spontaneous past life memory, especially in children. An impressively large number of cases of this kind—cases numbering in the hundreds—was compiled by University of Virginia professor of psychiatry, Ian Stevenson.

The phenomenon of very young children, between the ages of three and six, claiming to remember details of their past lives is not unheard of in India. A skeptic, however, might claim that such alleged memories, particularly occurring in a culture where reincarnation is a widely accepted belief, are simply a reflection of this prevailing belief. Such stories certainly do not meet the rigorous standards of rational inquiry that would be needed for them to be accepted as scientific proof of rebirth. Children are highly impressionable. A story that might simply begin in the imaginative mind of a child could sound to an adult who believes in reincarnation like an event from the life of a person they know who has died. Leading questions and prompting might lead the child, who wants to please adults, to craft a story that fits the details for which the adult is looking, and so thus reaffirms the adult’s belief in rebirth. This is not science, but wish fulfillment.

Stevenson’s work was plagued by problems of this kind, given that a large number of his cases were drawn from regions such as India and Southeast Asia, where belief in rebirth is woven into

the cultural fabric. It was also argued that Stevenson's methodology failed to include cases that were not supportive of his theories—falsifiability, again, being a key component of scientific investigation. Stevenson's findings were nevertheless extremely interesting, including numerous cases in which birth defects could be traced to events that allegedly happened in previous lives—such as large moles in places where candidates said that they had been shot or stabbed in a past incarnation.

It is much more difficult, though, to discount this phenomenon when it occurs in a culture in which belief in reincarnation is widely rejected, such as that of the United States. Take the case of Ryan, a boy from Oklahoma. Ryan's parents are conservative evangelical Christians. Belief in reincarnation is strongly rejected in this religious tradition as a false doctrine, and the broader American culture in which the family lives is strongly skeptical of the concept (though not all Americans reject the idea of reincarnation, with roughly twenty percent of the population accepting this idea, according to most opinion polls).



Ryan and Matry Martyn

Around the age of four, “Ryan began talking about going home to Hollywood. He would cry and plead for Cyndi [his mother] to take him home so he could see his other family.” This account is given in *Return to Life*, a book by Jim Tucker, the child psychiatrist at the University of Virginia to whom Ryan's parents took him for help. Tucker, building on the work and sharpening the methodology of his mentor, Stevenson, has continued to compile cases of apparent past life memory. Collecting Ryan's detailed accounts of his past life, and correlating them with carefully researched information, Ryan's parents and Tucker concluded that the life Ryan was describing was that of Marty Martyn, an agent from the golden age of Hollywood, but not a person of any particular fame, and with no connection to Ryan or his family. The details Ryan articulated were not readily available, such as on the internet, and no one in Ryan's family, nor Tucker, had any knowledge of Martyn prior to engaging in this research. In the most striking portion of the entire story, Ryan at one point said, with some frustration, that he did not understand why God would allow someone to live for sixty-one years and then make them come back as a baby. All of Ryan's information about Martyn's life at this point had proven accurate, but on this one point of fact, he was at odds with Martyn's official death certificate, which stated that Martyn had died at the age of

fifty-nine. Further research, however, proved that Martyn had in fact died at the age of sixty-one, and that the birth certificate was incorrect. Ryan therefore not only had detailed information about the life of a man no one in his family had ever met and about whom they had no prior knowledge, but his information actually led to a correction of the public record of the death of that same man.

Is Ryan's story scientific proof of rebirth? Not necessarily. The phenomenon described here is susceptible to a variety of interpretations, including a form of telepathic contact between the deceased Marty Martyn and the living Ryan. It does, however, raise serious questions about the standard materialist paradigm that is used to explain phenomena such as consciousness.

Again, neuroscience tells us a great deal about the mechanics of consciousness: how the interactions of chemicals in various parts of the brain correlate with specific experiences. One may certainly assume a materialist ontology and take an account of brain activity to be a comprehensive account of consciousness. But one may also accept the conclusions of neuroscience on the mechanics of consciousness without buying into a materialist view of its ultimate nature. The fact that my sensory perceptions correlate with activity in part of my brain, and that this activity can be witnessed and measured scientifically, does not mean that my perceptions are not real: that there is not actually a world I am perceiving. And the fact that my consciousness, to all appearances, is dependent upon my brain does not mean that my brain might not simply be a tool or vehicle for something beyond itself that is not reducible to it. As mentioned above, the fact that my television or radio stops working does not mean the television station or radio station has ceased broadcasting. The science, again, underdetermines the philosophical question of the ultimate nature of things. One who is wedded to a materialist ontology might be inclined simply to reject the results of Tucker's research. But this would not be a scientific attitude.



In taking the implications of his research seriously, Tucker has raised the question, “What scientific model of reality might explain phenomena of this kind better than materialism is able to do?” In response to this question, Tucker, in the final two chapters of *Return to Life*, explores some of the implications of recent physics, particularly quantum theory. In these chapters, Tucker makes a number of significant points, including the fact that there are interpretations of quantum theory according to which consciousness is not merely a by-product or epiphenomenon of material processes, but that it is foundational to being itself, that our experience of the material world has the character of a collective dream, and, of course, that consciousness can survive the death of the physical body to be reborn in another form.

In Tucker’s work, importantly, he does not display an extensive or in-depth knowledge of Indian philosophical traditions such as Vedanta, Jainism, or Buddhism. This is important because he cannot be accused of having a communal axe to grind in advancing his theory, one implication of which is that these traditions have been right about many things in the basic account of reality that they give. Like Vedanta and Buddhism, Tucker’s theory puts forth the idea that consciousness is fundamental to the nature of being. Certain aspects of quantum theory also fit well with Jain

philosophy. The fact that the same entity can be validly described as both a wave and a particle, for example, is consistent with the Jain teaching of *anekantavada*, the multi-faceted nature of reality, *nayavada*, the teaching that reality can be viewed from many perspectives, and *syadvada*, the teaching that truth can be expressed in a variety of seemingly contradictory ways. And like all three traditions, of course, it affirms the phenomenon of rebirth itself—including rebirth across species. Interestingly, Tucker's cases even include one in which a child seems to remember a past life as a snake. This affirms not only the view of these traditions of consciousness as distinct from the physical body, but also their view that consciousness is not limited to human beings.



What should one make of such developments? Tucker's

work is of course exciting news to those of us who are drawn to ideas of this kind, and who practice one (or more) of the traditions in question. At the same time, the very fact that one would like very much to believe in rebirth is reason for caution. Just as a materialist errs in simply dismissing the evidence Tucker presents because it does not fit the materialist's preferred, preconceived metaphysical paradigm, an adherent of rebirth, and of an idealist metaphysical account of consciousness, would err in exaggerating the scientific conclusiveness of the information that Tucker has collected—information that is not derived from a repeatable methodology, and which, again, is susceptible to a variety of possible interpretations. And to the extent that rebirth plays a role in a religious or dharmic worldview, one should be wary about placing too much reliance on the latest science (which is subject to eventual change given further experimentation and speculation) in cultivating one's worldview and way of life. Science cannot be simply set aside, given its explanatory power. But it has proper limits. Ethical and metaphysical reflection must certainly be informed by science. They cannot, however, be dictated by it. Science is important for playing the role of falsification, for ruling out what cannot be the case. But there are other foundations for knowledge, other *pramāṇas*, as well. For those of us who adhere to a Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain worldview, our belief in rebirth is founded on the yogic perceptions of our ancient seers, as well as, in some cases, our own *sādhana*, or spiritual practice. Such practices can provide a self-certifying experiential foundation for a worldview that includes rebirth, and it arguably forms a sufficient basis for an individual person to hold this belief. It is not, however, the same as science, which involves publicly available, testable, and repeatable knowledge. In other words, I am certainly justified in believing in rebirth if I am able to remember my own past lives through yogic practice (particularly if the knowledge I receive thereby is verifiable through other sources, and is consistent with other established knowledge). But this is not a sufficient basis for another person to hold the same belief, if that person has not had the same experience. This is a subtle, but important difference between

the experiential and empirical approaches to knowledge, the former being the province of spiritual inquiry, the latter of science. These two need not be incompatible. In fact, they must ultimately be in harmony. But they are not identical.

Because of its many profound implications for spirituality and our understanding of who we are, research of the kind pursued by Jim Tucker clearly deserves greater attention than it has heretofore received. That is this essay's plea.