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LOGICAL AND BIBLICAL DEFEATERS OF REINCARNATION AND KARMA

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SYNOPSIS

Hinduism and Buddhism have convinced tens of millions of people over centuries that human beings survive the grave. They neither cease to exist nor await a restitution of their physical bodies once for all at the resurrection of the dead. Rather, our good and bad deeds produce good and bad outcomes (karma) in the next and subsequent lives (reincarnation). Especially in the past hundred years, scores of Westerners (whether Hindu or Buddhist or not) have embraced the doctrines of reincarnation and karma.

I argue that reincarnation and karma, while appealing on the surface, are riddled by deep intellectual flaws. Neither Hinduism nor Buddhism affirms the existence of a personal creator and designer. Therefore, their accounts of karma and reincarnation cannot rely on such concepts. This leaves them bereft of a key conceptual element of their view. Karma is seen as an impersonal law that somehow records good and bad deeds and assigns karmic outcomes from one lifetime to another. Yet the notion of moral evaluation and the assignment of karmic outcomes through reincarnation is rational only if a personal and moral evaluator and agent is the fulcrum of the system. But the very idea of karma is of an impersonal system.

Worse yet, for the systems of karma and reincarnation I discuss here, there is no individual self. Buddhists deny the existence of any self. Nondualists deny the existence of finite selves but affirm the existence of a universal self (Brahman). But in both cases, there is nothing on which karma can work. If there are no selves, then no self can be reincarnated as another self!

The answer to all this is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather than leaving us to atone for our own sins through karma, He offers salvation to us through His matchless achievements. This truth gives us true hope in this life and in the next.

People have always considered what—if anything—lies beyond the grave. Is death the end of existence, an entry into eternity, or an intermission between earthly lives? Some Eastern religions—such as Hinduism and Buddhism—have for centuries taught that the soul reincarnates in many different bodies. A vast segment of humankind, throughout all ages, has believed in reincarnation and karma. These doctrines have given hope for life after death and have caused fear of what that life might be. For those who believe in reincarnation, death is not the end. We are reborn into another life after death. But karma is a hard taskmaster. Karma is not a person but a law of cause and effect with no exceptions. Every human's life circumstances are determined by the moral actions of previous lives. All future lives will be determined by past lives. Absent is the notion of grace.

The philosophies behind these beliefs differ. For Hindus, karma and reincarnation involves a disembodied entity that enters a new body on death. For Buddhists, there is no such entity (or soul) to be reincarnated. In fact, Buddhism speaks of *rebirth* as opposed to *reincarnation*, since there is nothing to be incarnated again. The self is a collection of contingent states that dissolve upon death. There is no soul to animate a new body. Nevertheless, we can test the rationality of these ancient doctrines of karma and reincarnation as one basic claim and note the differences as we progress through the arguments.

THE LURE OF REINCARNATION

About a quarter of Americans now believe in reincarnation and karma, and in 2010, the *New York Times* ran a major story on its appeal.¹ Why are so many people drawn to the doctrine of reincarnation?

First, when we survey the vast number and kinds of injustices in the world that are never brought to justice, we call out for justice nonetheless. What of the young girl tricked into the sex trade by an international slavery association who dies while enslaved? Is that it? Is that the end of the story?

Reincarnation offers hope for many who would otherwise fear their own demise. If we don't "get it right" in this life, we will have another chance the next time around—and the next and the next as well. Some worried souls even consult therapists in the hope of learning the details of their past lives, which, they believe, may help them solve their present problems.

JUDGE AND JURY

Second, reincarnation also claims to insure justice on a cosmic scale. We each get what we deserve in every life. In Eastern religions, reincarnation is connected with the law of karma, which insures that our good and bad deeds produce good and bad results from lifetime to lifetime. The goal is not to come back in a happy life but to attain enlightenment and leave the cycle entirely.

The law of karma is an unbending and impersonal rule of the universe. By “working off” one’s bad karma over many lifetimes, a person finally can attain enlightenment, escape the process of rebirth, and progress to a transcendent state (defined variously by different traditions). But can reincarnation realistically offer hope and a sense of justice to a troubled world? Can it answer the nagging and perennial problems of death and injustice?

The doctrine of karma and reincarnation is a direct challenge to Christian teachings on salvation and the afterlife. God (not karma) is the moral judge of the cosmos, and no human being reincarnates but rather will be part either of the resurrection of the just (saved by grace) or of the unjust (justly condemned by their works). The rest of this article will critique these non-Christian teachings logically and offer a compelling biblical alternative.

Problem 1: The Assessment of Karma²

Both Hinduism and Buddhism deny the existence of an unlimited and personal being who created, designed, and orchestrates the events of the cosmos. Both religions have their gods and goddesses, but none of them are anything like the God of the Bible. Therefore, both religions must account for their distinctive beliefs without the aid of such a being. Put another way, these religions (and all religions) must be able to support their doctrines rationally within the structure of their respective worldviews. Let us see what this means for karma.

Karma is both moral and impersonal in its nature. It is moral because karma evaluates the actions of all humans (and living things) morally and determines what kind of life each being merits after his or her death. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, karma is accrued in previous lifetimes and only applies to one lifetime at a time. Thus, one cannot build up good karma in this life and have it apply to this life, American popular religion to the contrary.

But karma does not include a moral being who evaluates the morality of actions through judgments. There is no judge and, strictly speaking, no judgments. Karma is an automatic and impersonal law. It is something like a moral law of gravity. Since Hinduism and Buddhism lack belief in a creator and designer who runs the universe, they cannot appeal to such a being to know and evaluate morality and assess the proper

rewards and punishments for the next life. How then could karma make such determinations?

Our experience of moral judgments—right or wrong—always involve persons making judgments of value pertaining to people and states of affairs. There needs to be an evaluation and thus an evaluator.³ If a judge and jury pronounce a murder defendant “guilty as charged,” this is no automatic, amoral, or impersonal arrangement. It is, rather, the considered opinion of beings with consciousness, moral knowledge, and the ability to assess facts.

The doctrine of karma, however, excludes consciousness, moral knowledge, or the ability to assess moral states. This is precisely because karma is not a personal and moral knower and evaluator. Some Americans, with their hodgepodge spirituality, claim that God is in charge of karma. But this idea is found in no world religion or established philosophy. Karma is an impersonal replacement for a personal God. We can state the argument formally.

1. Karma is taken to be the moral engine of reincarnation. It is a law that records and assesses moral actions with respect to results in future lives.
2. However, karma requires moral knowledge and moral evaluation in order to ensure that an entity is placed properly in its next life.
3. But karma excludes moral knowledge and moral evaluation, given that it is impersonal.
4. Therefore, (a) the doctrine of karma is false.
5. Therefore, (b) since reincarnation depends on the doctrine of karma for its moral coherence, reincarnation is false.

This is a deductive argument; that is, if the premises are true, the conclusions must be true. But it seems that the premises are unassailable. If so, from this argument alone, reincarnation and karma are refuted. But we are only part way down the logical road.

Problem 2: The Administration of Karma

The second problem for karma is much like the first. An impersonal law of karma is not only incapable of *evaluating* moral deeds but also *administering* karma. The karmic system requires that rewards and punishments be doled out at all times for all people. (Other living things are included in karmic outcomes, but we will leave that aside for now.) Karma must somehow ensure that each person is receiving his (or her) due rewards or punishments by being born in a certain place at a certain time and that he will experience only what fits his karma. This is true for the entire human race. Common sense tells us that such a global karmic ensemble needs a global, karmic administrator. Trying to organize a seminary course is hard enough for one

absentminded philosopher (me). But at least I have a mind capable of evaluating the students' efforts and a will to assign grades according to objective standards. But karma, absent of any mind and any will at any time, is worse than the worst eccentric professor. Put in argument form:

1. Karma is taken to administer moral results for all persons from lifetime to lifetime.
2. However, such administration requires a vastly powerful agent to bring about these moral results.
3. Karma is not an agent who administers rewards and punishments, but an automatic and impersonal system.
4. Therefore (a), the doctrine of karma is false.
5. Therefore (b), since reincarnation depends on the doctrine of karma for its moral coherence, reincarnation is false.

Problem 3: No One Is There To Be Reincarnated

We must hold a worldview, religious or secular, accountable for the logic of its own beliefs and how they fit together. I just argued that the logic of karma provides no moral basis for reincarnation. Now we will see that the very idea of reincarnation—either with or without karma—is illogical for both Hinduism and Buddhism.

Hinduism came long before the Buddha began teaching the dharma (or message). Although Hinduism is varied in its teaching and is not traceable to one founder, a key idea in the nondualistic school of Hinduism is that of Brahman, or a universal self. This view has become familiar to us in America through popularizers such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (the founder of Transcendental Meditation) and Deepak Chopra. For nondualism, there are no individual selves or distinct centers of consciousness. To consider oneself as distinct from another self or from Brahman is to be deceived, to be bewitched by maya (or illusion). The only reality is Brahman, which has no qualities at all. To say that Brahman is this or that is to misunderstand Brahman. This claim raises more than a few philosophical objections (such as how anything can exist with no qualities), but our concern is the relation of nondualism to reincarnation.

If all is one and if duality is an illusion, then there are no particular entities and, thus, no individual selves that are different from other selves or from Brahman. If so, then there is no material available to be reincarnated. If you have but one player, you cannot have a team or compete against a team. If all is one, without a second, then reincarnation cannot even get started. For Hinduism, the goal is to get free from the wheel of rebirth and to attain enlightenment (or moksha). Yet if all is one, if there is no dualism, then there is no wheel of rebirth from which to be freed. Everyone is already one with the One; therefore, reincarnation is neither necessary nor even possible. These are no small problems for nondualism's account of karma and reincarnation.

1. Nondualistic Hinduism denies the existence of finite, individual selves, since all is one.
2. Reincarnation and karma require the existence of finite, individual selves for their operation.
3. Therefore, given the worldview of nondualism, reincarnation and karma are false.

Buddhism suffers a similar problem, although its worldview differs from nondualism. For Buddhism, the self, considered as a unified substance existing over time, is a fiction. We are, rather, a collection of changing parts without a continuing essence. We are like a chariot, which is nothing but a contingent collection of parts. No part of the chariot is its essence and the parts need no essence to make up a chariot.⁴ Suffering is caused by trying to satisfy a self that does not exist. We must free ourselves from all desire by following the way of the Buddha and eventually leave the wheel of reincarnation.

However, there are no spokes on the wheel of reincarnation. Buddhism speaks of “rebirth” as opposed to “reincarnation,” since there is no incarnation to begin with. Traces of an individual’s karma come together into a new individual who receives his karmic reward. But since there is no substantial person, there is no one there to be reincarnated. If you are a contingent configuration of changing parts without a unifying whole, you are neither a self in this life or the next. Buddhists do not believe that there is a soul that takes on a new body from life to life. There is no soul anywhere to be found. Here is the argument.

1. Buddhism teaches that humans are aggregations of changing parts and, thus, have no enduring soul.
2. Buddhism affirms karma and rebirth.
3. An enduring self is necessary to establish continuity between one lifetime and another one so that karma has something on which to attach.
4. Therefore (a), Buddhism has no basis to affirm karma and rebirth.
5. Therefore (b), one of Buddhism’s defining doctrines is false.⁵

WHERE MERCY IS FOUND: KARMA VS. FORGIVENESS

The law of karma is unmerciful. It cannot ensure justice because, as I have argued, the system itself cannot work, given its assumptions. Reincarnation is a sad wheel of birth, death, and rebirth that one should escape through enlightenment. The message of Jesus Christ is quite different. He taught that no one can keep the moral law that is written on the heart (see Rom. 2:14–15). By nature, we know the basics of morality, as C. S. Lewis argued and illustrated so powerfully in *The Abolition of Man*. Yet our response to what we know is something else again. The human heart (the core of the person) is impure because of wrong attitudes and actions. Thus it is no surprise that human beings have

struggled with guilt through all time and in every place. Jesus saw to the heart of the matter. “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come — sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person” (Mark 7:21–23 NIV).

Paul, the apostle of Jesus, agrees on what’s wrong with the human race by arranging several texts from the Old Testament.

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

there is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away,

they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,

not even one.”

“Their throats are open graves;

their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood;

ruin and misery mark their ways,

and the way of peace they do not know.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Rom. 3:9–18; all Scripture citations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted)

This inner and outer wrongdoing is an offense against a loving and absolutely good and holy God (see Isa. 6:1–8), and no kind of meditation will undo its effects. Jesus warned, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34 NLT). He informed the most devoted religious leaders of His day that “not one of you keeps the [moral] law” (John 7:19). Yet Jesus never spoke of reincarnation as a way out of this prison. Rather, Jesus affirmed that people would receive either eternal reward or eternal punishment according to how they responded to Him during their one lifetime on Earth (Matt. 25:31–46; cf. Heb. 9:27). Reincarnation is not an option. But Jesus has offered Himself as the way of escape. There will be a resurrection of the just and the unjust (Dan. 12:2).

Jesus proclaimed that He came into the world to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10). Through His ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, and casting out

demons, He demonstrated a sinless and perfect life, as well as the power over death itself by raising the dead (see John 11). He said that He “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The apostle John declares that, in Jesus Christ, God Himself entered space-time history. He did not leave us to determine our own fate.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–5, 14)

DEFEATING DEATH, NOT REPEATING LIFE

Jesus offered eternal life to all who would accept Him on His terms. As John goes on to say, “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12–13).

Jesus manifested forgiving love even on His own bloodstained cross. A thief on the cross next to Jesus confessed his sin and asked Jesus to remember him. Jesus responded, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Only a contrite faith in Jesus was required for paradise, not lifetime after lifetime of working off bad karma and building up good karma so that one could be released from this “wheel of suffering.”

Jesus defeated sin and death through His death on the cross and His miraculous and historical resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:1–4). Nothing less could secure our deliverance from the graveyard of our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). Hebrews gives us more good news for those stalked by death and fear. “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb. 2:14–15).

God’s plan for rescuing erring mortals has nothing to do with their own efforts—in this life or from lifetime to lifetime. On the contrary, Jesus affirmed, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). That, indeed, is good news—for this life and for eternity.

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NOTES

- 1 Lisa Miller, "Remembrances of Past Lives," *New York Times*, August 27, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/fashion/29PastLives.html?_r=0.
- 2 Both this and the next section were informed by "The Doctrine of Karma," Paul Edwards, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press, 1996).
- 3 See Douglas Groothuis, "The Moral Argument for God," *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
- 4 This analogy itself fails because the idea of a chariot is a substance with properties, but I will not pursue that in this article. Inorganic entities may have substances as well as organic entities.
- 5 For this argument in more scholarly detail, see Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).