

Arguments Supporting / Denying the Buddhist Conception of Rebirth Do Not
Necessitate its Truth or Falsehood

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Introduction

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has been subject to major debate among scholars. Succinctly stated, there are two primary classifications of the debate regarding the doctrine of rebirth. The first classification seeks to demonstrate or refute rebirth empirically and the second theoretically. Recent attention has refocused the debate to empirical evidence affirming or denying the doctrine of rebirth. Dissenters of said doctrine have cited population growth as a demonstrative negation of said doctrine. However, such evidence in fact is not demonstrative of the negation of rebirth. Additionally, the theoretical debate underpinning the Empirical Argument, the Continuity of Identity, faces the same challenge. Both theories cannot prove nor disprove the independent existence of rebirth. Rather, because of the existence of four realms unknowable and unverifiable to humans which the doctrine of rebirth incorporates, the most that can be asserted is that the theories either prove the doctrine of rebirth coherent or incoherent.

The two primary articles examined in this paper are by Ian Stevenson and Stephen Harris. Stevenson authored the Empirical Argument which seeks to demonstrate through case-studies that memory recall is evidence of rebirth. Harris addresses the theoretical argument, the Continuity of Identity. Harris argues that memories are not a sufficient way to demonstrate the doctrine of rebirth. Ultimately, I will argue that neither argument proves nor disproves the doctrine of rebirth. Instead, all discussion aims at the coherency of the possibility for the doctrine of rebirth.

Understanding Buddhist Rebirth

To fully understand the concept of Buddhist rebirth, one must first understand karma and The Wheel of Life (Lin and Yen 2015, 2). The central notion of karma is that if an individual

engages in good acts, then they will have a good future life (Lin and Yen 2015, 2). If an individual engages in harmful acts, then said individual will have a negative future life (Lin and Yen 2015,2). At the end of the individual's life, their acts are weighed and thus will be reborn accordingly on the wheel of life (Lin and Yen 2015, 2). While the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to reach nirvana and thereby not be reborn, that is rare. Thus, when reborn, an individual will be reborn in one of the six realms (Teiser 2008, 139). The two realms that we experience first-hand are the human and the animal. In other words, we at best can only quantify the number of humans and animals. The remaining four realms are unquantifiable to us in the human form.

Argument on Continuity of Identity

One theoretical debate regarding the tenant of Buddhism rebirth is the argument of continuity of identity across lives in the case of the bodhisattva (Harris 2018, 386). A bodhisattva is one that vows to remain in the cycle of samara to help others (Harris 2018, 386). However, Buddhism accepts material dissolution and psychological discontinuity (Harris 2018, 386). Thus, the vow undertaken by the bodhisattva is not ascribable to a reborn individual. Those who wish to maintain the view that the bodhisattva can uphold their vow argue that Buddhist can reconstruct the theory of personal identity by changing the factors necessary for continuity (Harris 2018, 386). Another such way for Buddhism to reconcile the continuity of identity and the rejection of anatman is by adopting some form of psychological identity (Harris 2018, 386).

Empirical Argument

One may also demonstrate rebirth through the Empirical Argument. The Empirical Argument states that if one can make valid memory claims about events that occurred before

they were born, and such memories can be established by any normal means then rebirth is true. (Tetley 1990, 200) Therefore, for the argument to succeed one must empirically demonstrate the antecedent true (Tetley 1990, 200). It is cited that this is the most compelling argument for the validity of rebirth (Tetley 1990, 201). Advocates of the doctrine of rebirth would find case-studies demonstrating that individuals have acquired such knowledge (Tetley 1990, 201). However, dissenters lend less credence to the studies whereby individuals claim to have such knowledge due to the lack of verifiability of such cases (Tetley 1990, 220). Once more, there is an impasse as to the whether there is in fact rebirth.

While the first debate attempts to support or disprove the doctrine of rebirth on a theoretical level, the second attempts verifiability on a misguided empirical level. However, I would argue that all attempts will remain inconclusive due to the nature of Buddhism, and more broadly religion. This can be demonstrated through the thought-experiment of population growth. If one limits the wheel of life too two realms, then the task becomes one of a pure empirical nature as Buddhist have made clear that the attainment of nirvana is quite difficult. Thereby leaving an equation of those who practice Buddhism minus those who do not plus a percentage of practicing Buddhists who have or have not attained enlightenment. Then by comparing projections of such formula to population growth empirical evidence would demonstrate if rebirth is reasonably true. But because there are six realms of which only 2 are remotely quantifiable, this is a forsaken task. Additionally, theoretical critiques of the doctrine of rebirth are forlorn because rebirth may be objectively true but not adequately explained by scholars. Therefore, any debate on rebirth is not “provable in principle” but merely whether there is consistency in any given theory.

Empirical Argument Analysis

The empirical argument can be expressed as follows:

If (i) subject *S* makes veridical memory claims about events which took place before s/he was born, and (ii) it can be established that *S* could not have acquired this historical information by any normal means, then the doctrine of rebirth is true. Case-studies of such memory claims have been made which satisfy condition (i). Therefore, the doctrine of rebirth is true. (Tetley 1990, 200)

As Tetley aptly notes, the Empirical Argument is “powerful” because of its “trans-historical” and “trans-cultural appeal” (Tetley 1990, 200). In other words, case-studies are universally recognized as demonstrative evidence regarding a specific subject matter. Therefore, dissenters must resort to critiquing the truth or falsity of the data. However, this is a difficult task. Dissenters can only refute the second premise, essentially arguing the case-studies do not prove rebirth (Tetley 1990, 219). One argument by Paul Griffith states “there are a number of other hypotheses . . . which can be used to explain the cases” of memory recall (Tetley 1990, 221). Here, Tetley again aptly notes this argument does not disprove rebirth (Tetley 1990, 222). Rather, it seeks to disprove that the case-studies conducted were either not adequate and or that memory recall is not dispositive of rebirth. Another such example is John Hick’s argument that the studies were done “several years after each case first became known” and had been conducted through a “local interpreter” (Tetley 1990, 222). Additionally, Hicks states, “this is not to exclude the possibility that stronger cases may be forthcoming” (Tetley 1990, 222). Here, as noted prior, Hick’s retort does not disprove the doctrine of rebirth. His critique allows the possibility that rebirth can be demonstrated through more thorough case-studies. However, empirical evidence will always be subject to criticism unless the theoretical possibility of rebirth is addressed prior to empirical evidence. Therefore, as will be discussed in the next section, the

Empirical Argument amounts to merely a demonstration that rebirth cannot be proved nor refuted.

Understanding the futile results of the Empirical Argument, critics have now cited the global population growth as negating the doctrine of rebirth (Halliwell 2011). However, citing population growth has even more challenges. Only two of the realms that compose the samsara are in theory quantifiable, the manusa (“human”) and tiryak (“animal”) (Lin and Yen 2015, 2). The remaining four realms are unquantifiable. This presents a problem for dissenters citing population growth as negating rebirth. Although the human realm may be expanding this does not necessarily negate the doctrine of rebirth. The human realm can expand while the other realms are minimized. Because there is no empirical measurement or data concerning the other realms, one cannot adequately draw such a conclusion.

Moreover, including the animal realm into the calculation of the human realm does not necessarily negate rebirth. The existence of other unquantifiable realms always leaves the possibility that there could be an influx or outflux at any period in time. To empirically demonstrate rebirth, one has two options. The first option is to quantify the unquantifiable (i.e. the other four realms). The second option is to accurately quantify the human and animal realms and either approximate the other four realms or to wholly disregard them. As the first option is not tenable because it is a contradiction, one is only left with option two. However, to quantify both the animal realm and human realm is practically impossible. The animal realm includes not only animals but insects as well. Thus, one would have to account for every animal and insect on the planet. Furthermore, option two completely disregards the other four realms. This utter disregard would therefore yield inaccurate results thereby not adequately utilizing empirical data to support or refute rebirth.

Continuity of Identity Analysis

The continuity of identity argument is the theoretical argument underlying the Empirical Argument. Buddhist metaphysics hold that: (1) persons adhere to a path across lives; (2) persons conventionally persist through time; and (3) persons karma aggregate and determine their status in future lives. However, Buddhists must reconcile these traits while rejecting the conception of atman (Harris 2018, 388). As Buddhists assert that “all memories, conscious intentions, [and] beliefs” are lost upon death how is one to recall memories as argued by the misguided Empirical Argument (Harris 2018, 389)?

Ultimately, memories are not dispositive of determining the truth or falsity of rebirth. As Harris states, “I do not think these recollections [memories] play a serious role in determining the intelligibility of ascribing identity across lives” (Harris 2018, 398). This is because Buddhist texts akin memory recall of past lives alongside abilities to teleport, fly, and mind reading (Harris 2018, 398). This implicitly suggests that the ability to practice memory recall is a wholly independent ability distinct from “ordinary meaning” (Harris 2018, 398). In other words, it may provide that individual with a “magical glimpse” into a life “discontinuous from the present one” (Harris 2018, 399). If this was the underlying theory adopted by the Empirical Argument, the arguments would be self-defeating. While Stevenson argues that the case-studies are demonstrative regarding the doctrine of rebirth, Harris is arguing that little emphasis should be placed on them. Therefore, other arguments would need to be made when concerning the continuation of identity in support of both the doctrine of rebirth and the importance of memories.

Now one must reconcile the continuity of personal identity as applied to samsara and its realms. Harris notes that “in Jataka stories . . . the Buddha is portrayed in a variety of animal forms” but still is described as “developing one or more of the virtues of Buddhahood” (Harris 2018, 399). However, as Harris concedes, this is a “tenuous link in continuity of identity” (Harris 2018, 399). One would retort that what distinguishes human from animal is human’s ability to reflect on choices and desires as current science and philosophy understand it. Thus, the advocate would either have to demonstrate that the good karma being acquired while in a lower form does not need to be reflect on but merely done or that animals in fact have the ability to reflect on choices and desires. The prior could be conceded as there are levels of karma that one can acquire. Therefore, performing the action such labeled as a good karmic act is all those lower forms of the wheel can perform. This salvages the Buddhist conception of rebirth, but it does not validate the truth or falsity of rebirth. It merely salvages the theory as to make it non-contradictory with the remaining tenants.

Conclusion

While the Empirical Argument and the Continuity of Identity Argument are valiant efforts, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth will remain subject to debate so long as it incorporates “unknowable” realms. One cannot prove that rebirth is true through the arguments explored but can only compose theories which withstand scrutiny. The only way to truly establish the truth or falsity of rebirth is to know the unknowable.

References

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