

Reincarnation: A Critical Examination
by Paul Edwards
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Reviewed by Peg Tittle

This is a great book.

First, as an examination of reincarnation (and Karma), it is exactly what the jacket claims: comprehensive and systematic. Edwards carefully examines the standard arguments in favour of reincarnation: child prodigies, déjà vu, memories of earlier lives, telephone calls from the dead, and birthmarks. He also debunks 'Bridey Murphy', Robert A. Munroe, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, and a few others.

He then presents five arguments against reincarnation: (1) Tertullian's objection (people die at different ages--why do we all come back as infants?); (2) the argument from Darwinian evolution (how can there be an infinite series of past incarnations in human bodies if we descended from nonhuman species?); (3) the recency of life argument (an infinite regress of lives contradicts what we know about the billions of years following the Big Bang--there was no life); (4) the population argument (if every birth is a rebirth, how can our population be increasing?); (5) the absence of memories argument (if reincarnation were a fact, we should be able to remember our past lives, but we don't).

Second, the book is a model in the application of clear and critical thinking. Edwards is relentlessly rational as he examines both the evidence and the arguments. Mostly, he uses a sort of reductio ad absurdum approach, which is summarized late in the book (255):

A believer in reincarnation is committed to a host of collateral assumptions the most important of which I will now enumerate. When a human being dies he continues to exist

not on the earth but in a region we know not where as a 'pure' disembodied mind or else as an astral or some other kind of non-physical' body; although deprived of his brain he retains memories of life on earth as well as some of his characteristic skills and traits; after a period varying from a few months to hundreds of years, this pure mind or nonphysical body, which lacks not only a brain but also any physical sense-organs, picks out a suitable woman on earth as its mother in the next incarnation, invades this woman's womb at the moment of conception of a new embryo, and unites with it to form a full-fledged human being; although the person who died may have been an adult and indeed quite old, when he is reborn he begins a new life with the intellectual and emotional attitudes of a baby; finally, many of the people born in this way did not previously live on the earth, but (depending on which version of reincarnation one subscribes to) in other planes or on other planets from which they migrate (invisibly of course), most of them preferring to enter the wombs of mothers in poor and over-populated countries where their lives are likely to be wretched."

Often his criticism is delightfully concise: "If she had [suffered brain-death], she would not have been able to talk intelligently to Kubler-Ross after her resuscitation" (145); "It is scarcely credible that not a single one of all these [1400, astral] travellers had the good sense to have himself photographed" (170); and speaking of deathbed visions, he says "No Hindu is on record as having met either the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ" (160).

One weakness, for me, is Edwards' attraction to ad hominem arguments. In one case, he unfortunately, and unnecessarily, goes too far: he introduces the case of Sai Baba "[to show] Stevenson's excessive readiness to accept paranormal claims and his questionable judgment" (271).

And though Edwards dissociates his examination of reincarnation from the Judaeo-Christian belief systems, I think many of his arguments can be applied with good result to belief in a heaven

and a hell, the immortality of the soul, and 'original sin'--and I wish he would've discussed this a little (he mentions resurrection in passing early in the book, but that's about it).

Also, in his discussion of Karmic 'law', he describes well that "far from providing moral guidance, the doctrine of Karma is bound to lead to perplexity" (42): if all suffering is just desert for previous transgression, it would be not only pointless but wrong to help the suffering. However, he fails to take the next step of showing how this makes a mockery of the whole system, anchored as it is on the eventual progression through better and better lives to Nirvana: how can one lead a 'better' life if good works are essentially impossible? (Even adding pleasure/goodness, as opposed to alleviating pain/badness, is wrong, because whoever is involved is already getting as much pleasure/goodness as they deserve).

However, by far the best part of the book is the refreshing tone: Edwards has no problem ridiculing the ridiculous. At one point, he says "I personally cannot see how Principia Mathematica could ever have been completed if Russell and Whitehead had not started on it long before they were born" (50); later, speaking of celebrities and their earlier lives, Edwards says "Stallone thinks he may have been a monkey in Guatemala, something I find entirely credible..." (86).

To conclude, I highly recommend this book: it has the rigour of an academic text, with the clarity and accessibility of a good magazine article, plus the fun of a stand-up comedy act.