

Reincarnation for Everyone¹

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Abstract: I argue that rebirth (reincarnation) is metaphysically versatile in the sense that it can be made to work with a variety of popular metaphysical views about the human person. By drawing on the Buddhist appeal to karmic causation in place of a transmigrating soul, I sketch accounts of rebirth, or something close enough to rebirth for us to care about, that are suited to Baker's constitutionalism, Lewis's four-dimensionalism, and Olson's animalism.

1. Introduction

One of the most widespread religious beliefs is the belief that human beings, at some point after their deaths, are reborn into the world to live another life. This phenomenon goes by various names, most prominently "reincarnation" and "rebirth". Though some authors use these terms in slightly different ways, I will use them interchangeably.² What does it mean to be reborn? I won't attempt an analysis, but paradigm cases of rebirth are cases where: a human person dies in the biological sense; subsequently, that same human person lives again in the biological sense; and that person's new biological life begins in the ordinary way, i.e., with embryonic development.

¹ After this paper was accepted for publication, I discovered (or perhaps rediscovered, having forgotten) that "Reincarnation for Everyone" was already the title of a book: see Perkins (2011).

² For discussion, see Burley (2016: 5-8).

The hypothesis that human people undergo rebirth is a bare-bones hypothesis that does not by itself entail (or preclude) many further claims that have often been associated with it, such as: the claim that rebirth is driven by karma; the claim that we can be reborn as non-humans, such as plants, animals, or deities; the claim that there are intermediate states between births; the claim that we can inherit memories, personality traits, and physical features from past lives; and so on. Some of these ideas will make appearances in the discussion to follow, but none of them are entailed by the mere claim that human beings undergo rebirth.

Do human beings undergo rebirth? A stunning array of religious and philosophical traditions around the world claim that we do, including many South Asian religions, certain branches and offshoots of the Abrahamic religions, some ancient Greek traditions, some Native American traditions, some African traditions, and others.³ But rebirth is of interest even apart from specific religious traditions. After all, it is relevant to the perennial human interest in whether we survive our deaths. If rebirth occurs, then we do survive death. If rebirth does not occur, then one potential avenue of survival is closed off. So it seems to me that rebirth is worth taking seriously.

Many arguments have been made both for and against the claim that human beings undergo rebirth. The most widely-known arguments for rebirth draw on parapsychological evidence.⁴ But there are also arguments from innate characteristics,⁵ causal regress arguments,⁶ and others.⁷ There are many arguments against rebirth too.⁸ And there are debates about rebirth theodicies.⁹ So far, I have not seen any argument either for or against rebirth that I find wholly convincing, and I am not about to offer such an argument of my own. But I am going

³ For a more complete list with references, see Burley (2016: 15-16).

⁴ E.g., Stevenson (1974).

⁵ E.g., see *Nyāya Sūtra* 3.1.18-23 and its commentaries, and Vyāsa's commentary on *Yoga Sūtra* 2.9.

⁶ Regress arguments for rebirth are defended by the Indian Buddhist philosopher Śāntarakṣita and his commentator Kamaliśīla in *Tattvasaṅgraha* 22. More recently, these arguments are discussed by Potter (1968), Perrett (1987), and Effingham (2023).

⁷ E.g., McTaggart (1969: ch. 4), Filice (2006), and Huemer (2021).

⁸ E.g., MacIntosh (1989), Flew (1991), and Edwards (1996).

⁹ E.g., Kaufman (2005), Goldschmidt & Seacord (2013), and Gupta & Barua (2022).

to explore an issue that bears on the prospects of rebirth: what would human people have to be like, metaphysically speaking, to be reborn? Many authors seem to take it for granted that rebirth requires the existence of immaterial souls that can transmigrate from one body to another.¹⁰ If this assumption is correct, then rebirth is held hostage to a highly controversial metaphysics of the human person. But it is not correct. Not only can rebirth proceed without transmigrating immaterial souls; it turns out to be surprisingly metaphysically versatile.

In what follows, I argue that plausible accounts of rebirth, or something close enough to rebirth for us to care about, are available for a variety of prominent metaphysical views about the human person. My primary aim in sketching these accounts is to show that rebirth (or something close to it) is metaphysically possible given each of the views of the human person I consider. However, since this conclusion would lose much of its interest if it were obvious that rebirth does not in fact occur, I will also do my best to ensure that the accounts of rebirth I sketch below are consistent with known empirical facts, such as the fact that we (or at least most of us) do not have conscious memories of past lives. But it is not my goal to argue that rebirth actually occurs, or even that it is not unlikely that it occurs.

I begin in §2 by discussing the Buddhist view that rebirth occurs via karmic causation, since the Buddhists have maintained for over two millennia that rebirth does not require a transmigrating immaterial soul. Then I argue in §§3-5 that the Buddhist strategy can be adapted to at least three materialist views that have been prominent in recent work on the metaphysics of the human person: Lynne Baker's constitutionalism (§3), David Lewis's four-dimensionalism (§4), and Eric Olson's animalism (§5). In the case of Baker's view and Lewis's views, I will defend the possibility of rebirth in the strict, metaphysical sense, where the reborn person is numerically identical to the deceased person. In the case of Olson's view, I will defend the possibility of what we might call practical rebirth, corresponding to a practical sense of being the same person. Practical rebirth is not strict rebirth, if strict rebirth requires that the reborn person is numerically identical to the deceased person. But as we will see, practical rebirth is like strict rebirth in all the ways required for it to matter to us practically in the same way that strict rebirth does. The upshot will be that the possibility of rebirth, or at least

¹⁰ E.g., Parfit (1984: 227-228), Cockburn (1991), Edwards (1996: 15) and Hales (2001).

something close enough to it for us to care about, is not highly dependent on the outcomes of ongoing debates about the metaphysics of the human person.¹¹

2. Karmic Causation

From its earliest days, the Buddhist tradition has believed in rebirth without a transmigrating soul.¹² To make sense of this, Abhidharma Buddhism introduced a distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth. This distinction can be - and has been - fleshed out in various ways.¹³ But I prefer to characterize it as follows: ultimately true statements are statements which describe the world as it really is. They refer only to things that really do exist and describe those things only as they really are. Conventionally true statements, on the other hand, are statements which reflect the way we normally think and speak about the world in practice, provided that they could, in principle, be paraphrased as ultimately true statements about the way things really are.¹⁴

According to Abhidharma Buddhism, it is not ultimately true that there are people or other ordinary substances. Instead, there are mereological simples arranged as if they composed such substances. These mereological simples are called *dharmas*, and they are tropes (particular property instances), such as color tropes, shape tropes, texture tropes, and so on. *Dharmas* are short-lived. On some views, they exist for only a single instant, to be replaced at subsequent times by other *dharmas*.

The Abhidharma position on the human person is that, where it is ultimately true that there are *dharmas* arranged person-wise, i.e., *dharmas* arranged as if they composed a human

¹¹ See also Brenner (2024: 174-181).

¹² This section presents the Abhidharma view as I understand it, in light of various sources such as Collins (1982), Siderits (2007, 2014), Carpenter (2014), Harrison (2019: ch. 3), and others. For historical sources treating the Abhidharma account of rebirth, see Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* *Bhāṣya* III and Buddhagosa's *Visuddhimagga* XVII.133-174.

¹³ See, e.g., McDaniel (2019).

¹⁴ On the relevant notion of paraphrase, see van Inwagen (1990: 98-114).

person,¹⁵ it is conventionally true, but not ultimately true, that there is a human person. And where some *dharmas* arranged person-wise at one time are appropriately related to some *dharmas* arranged person-wise at another time, it is conventionally true, but not ultimately true, that there is a human person who persists over time. What exactly is the appropriate relationship that these *dharmas* must stand in? To a first approximation, they must be causally related, the earlier *dharmas* causing the later ones. Spelling out the relationship more precisely is difficult,¹⁶ but it is not necessary to do that here.

The crucial ingredient in the Abhidharma account of rebirth is karma. Whenever there are *dharmas* arranged person-wise, there are among these *dharmas* some karmic dispositions (*saṃskāras*). Karmic dispositions are *dharmas* that have a certain kind of causal influence on which other *dharmas* will occur at subsequent times, and how those *dharmas* will be arranged. The effects that they can have are quite diverse, corresponding to what Buddhists take to be conventional truths about the many ways a person's karma can affect their lives. But for my purposes, the most important way in which karmic dispositions influence subsequent *dharmas* is this. At the point when it is conventionally true to say that a person suffers biological death, karmic dispositions among the *dharmas* arranged dying-person-wise cause *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise to appear elsewhere, in a place we would conventionally say is the interior of a womb. From there, the *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise give rise to *dharmas* arranged fetus-wise, then infant-wise, and so on. On some views, the shift from *dharmas* arranged dying-person-wise to *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise is spatially discontinuous - it is causation across a spatial gap. On other views, the gap is bridged by *dharmas* arranged as if they composed an intermediate-state being.¹⁷ Either way, the upshot is that the *dharmas* arranged dying-person-wise are appropriately causally related to the *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise, so it is conventionally true that a human person is reborn.

¹⁵ For a more detailed treatment of this kind of paraphrase, see van Inwagen (1990: 98-114). I use the term "compose" in van Inwagen's sense. To say that the *xs* compose *y* is to say that "the *xs* are all parts of *y* and no two of the *xs* overlap and every part of *y* overlaps at least one of the *xs*" (1990: 29).

¹⁶ See especially Carpenter (2015).

¹⁷ See Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya* III.10-17 for a Buddhist version of this suggestion. When I turn to develop new models of rebirth below, I will suggest other ways to spell it out.

Of course, *dharmas* arranged dying-person-wise will not only cause *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise, but also *dharmas* arranged corpse-wise. So why is it conventionally true that the person is reborn rather than conventionally true that the person becomes a corpse? One way to answer this question is to claim that, in order for it to be conventionally true that an individual persists, there must continue to be *dharmas* arranged living-organism-wise, i.e., arranged as if they composed a living organism. *Dharmas* arranged corpse-wise do not satisfy this condition, whereas *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise often do. So, if it is conventionally true that the human person continues to persist after their biological death, it is because of the *dharmas* arranged embryo-wise, and not the *dharmas* arranged corpse-wise.¹⁸

One might also object that, on the Buddhist view, it is only conventionally true that human people are reborn; it is not ultimately true that people are reborn (for it is not ultimately true that there are people at all). At the level of ultimate truth, rebirth has not been vindicated. This worry is right as far as it goes. Nevertheless, it is true that we are reborn in the same sense as it is true that people exist in the first place (viz., conventionally).¹⁹ That's much more than a typical rebirth skeptic is willing to say. And anyway, I will not rely on Buddhist conventionalism to develop the accounts of rebirth I want to develop. What I need from Buddhism is only the idea of rebirth occurring via karmic causation. I will deploy this idea outside of the Buddhist context by recasting karmic dispositions as properties of persisting substances.²⁰

Going forward, I will make two controversial assumptions about karmic dispositions. First, I will assume that karmic dispositions are metaphysically possible. This assumption is plausible. No doubt karmic dispositions are unusual, but it is not clear to me that the unusual features of karmic dispositions should cast much doubt on their possibility. For one thing, lots of unusual things, including unusual causal powers, are possible. For another thing, I - along with many Buddhists, apparently - find karmic dispositions conceivable, and I side with those

¹⁸ Thanks to a referee for this objection. My response is inspired by the similar move in Zimmerman's (1999) model of resurrection, though I think something like it is implicit in the Buddhist account.

¹⁹ This objection and reply were suggested by (different) referees, and they are very similar to a traditional Buddhist dialectic (Siderits 2007: 65-66; Carpenter 2014: 103).

²⁰ As in, e.g., the Nyāya school of classical Hinduism.

who regard conceivability as defeasible evidence of possibility.²¹ So, in the absence of some better reason to be in doubt about karmic dispositions, I will assume going forward that they are possible.

My second controversial assumption about karmic dispositions is this: if such dispositions are possible, then it is also possible for material objects to possess them. This assumption is plausible too. After all, it is at least conceivable that fundamental particles have, among their more mundane causal powers, dispositions to jointly cause karmic effects under appropriate conditions. Similar ideas have been put to use in the literature on resurrection.²² So I will feel free to suggest that the human person possesses karmic dispositions even on views which conceive of the person as material.

In the remainder of this essay, I will use the Buddhist idea of karmic causation between distinct biological lives to develop three models of rebirth, each suited to a prominent account of the metaphysics of the human person: a constitutional model suited to Baker's constitutionalism; a four-dimensionalist model suited to Lewis's perdurantism; and an animalist model suited to Olson's animalism. I believe that these models could be adapted to many other views of the human person as well. The three views I have chosen are meant to be representative, not exhaustive.

3. Rebirth for Constitutionalists

Constitutionalism is the view that the human person is a material object that is distinct from, but constituted by, a human body. The constitution relation is understood in a variety of ways, but one point on which its proponents agree is that constitutionally related objects are co-located, i.e., located in exactly the same place at exactly the same time. So for the constitutionalist, the human person and the human body are distinct but co-located material objects.

²¹ On the notion of conceivability as evidence of possibility, see, e.g., Yablo (1993).

²² See, e.g., Jacobs & O'Connor (2010).

According to Baker's (2001, 2007) influential version of constitutionalism, the human person has a certain psychological property essentially: a first-person perspective. A first-person perspective in Baker's sense involves, not merely first-person thoughts, but attributing those thoughts to oneself. However, it is a particular rather than a universal. Each person has their own first-person perspective. The human body begins to constitute a person when it begins to support the rudimentary first-person perspective of a typical human infant. The body continues to constitute a person as the rudimentary perspective of the infant develops into the robust first-person perspective of a typical human adult. The body ceases to constitute a person only when it irreversibly ceases to support a first-person perspective (2007: 334-339; 2001: ch. 4).²³

Baker also endorses a particular criterion of identity for the human person. A human person who exists at one time is the same person as a human person who exists at another time if and only if the former has numerically the same first-person perspective as the latter (2001: 132; 2007: 345). In virtue of what is a first-person perspective at one time the same first-person perspective as one at another time? Baker's answer is: nothing. The identity of first-person perspectives across time is a primitive, brute fact (2007: 345).

Suppose Baker's constitutionalism is true. Is rebirth possible? Given Baker's view, rebirth would involve a person being constituted by multiple human bodies successively. More specifically, it would involve a human person ceasing to be constituted by one body when that body ceases to support a first-person perspective at death, and then beginning to be constituted by another body when that body begins to support a first-person perspective sometime during its biological development. Given Baker's metaphysics, this occurs if and only if the former first-person perspective is numerically identical to the latter first-person perspective. So the key question is this: is it metaphysically possible for distinct, spatiotemporally and materially discontinuous bodies to successively support numerically identical first-person perspectives? Baker (2005, 2007) herself claims that this is possible in the course of her defense of the

²³ In the latter source, Baker distinguishes between a first-person perspective and a capacity for a first-person perspective, instead of speaking of a rudimentary first-person perspective.

possibility of resurrection. But whereas Baker's account of resurrection relies on divine providence, the model of rebirth I will now sketch appeals instead to karmic causation.

My first-person perspective persists over time. So long as my body remains in good working order, the fact that my body constitutes a person with my first-person perspective at the present time causes my body to constitute a person with my first-person perspective at subsequent times as well. And notice: it does not merely cause my body to constitute a person with *some* first-person perspective or other at subsequent times; it causes my body to constitute a person with *my* first-person perspective in particular. That is why *I* persist from moment to moment, rather than being replaced by a qualitative near-duplicate. Why my first person perspective rather than another? Perhaps because the body is disposed to sustain whichever first-person perspective it already supports (if any). This disposition, together with the fact that my body currently constitutes a person with my first-person perspective, causes my body to continue to constitute a person with my first-person perspective at subsequent times.

Similarly, the constitutionalist can say that, in virtue of karmic dispositions, the fact that my body constitutes a person with my first-person perspective at the last moments of my present biological life causes another body altogether to constitute a person with my first-person perspective at subsequent moments. And not just some first-person perspective or other, but mine in particular. For the karmic dispositions are dispositions to sustain whichever first person-perspective my body supports in its dying moments. And that is my first-person perspective. Since I go where my first-person perspective goes, I will cease to be constituted by my current body and begin to be constituted by another body.²⁴

I will consider a few objections to this view. First, this account of rebirth seems to require a person to jump discontinuously through spacetime from one body to another when rebirth occurs. One might protest that persistence across a spatiotemporal gap is impossible.²⁵ But this objection appears to target Baker's account of personal identity, which features no spatiotemporal continuity requirement (as shown by her account of resurrection), rather than the conditional thesis that, if her view about the human person is correct, then rebirth is metaphysically possible. And even apart from Baker's view, there is enough doubt about

²⁴ For a similar account of resurrection, see Corcoran (2001). Cf. Zimmerman (1999).

²⁵ Vasubandhu raises a version of this objection in *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya* III.10-11.

spatiotemporal continuity requirements on personal identity for many philosophers to have entertained metaphysical speculations about time travel and teleportation.²⁶ Moreover, even if there is a spatiotemporal continuity requirement on personal identity, the constitutionalist could say that the first-person perspective travels from one body to another via a hyperspatial dimension, constituted by an intermediate-state body in the meantime.²⁷

Second, it might be objected that the origin of a human person has a known biological explanation which leaves no room for a karmic-causal explanation.²⁸ After all, a human person develops from a fetus, which develops from an embryo, which is a product of fertilization. What space is there for karma? The constitutionalist can reply that karma's role is to ensure that, when I die, a developing human body begins to support my first-person perspective in particular as opposed to any other. There are two ways the story might go. First, it might be that each developing human body is disposed to begin supporting a certain particular first-person perspective. The mere fact that these bodies all have ordinary biological causes does nothing to ensure that any of them will be disposed to begin sustaining my first-person perspective rather than, e.g., producing a new first-person-perspective. But karma can do that job. We may suppose that my karma can override the disposition of some developing body to produce a new first-person perspective and cause it to begin supporting mine instead. Alternatively, perhaps developing human bodies are only disposed to begin supporting some first-person perspective or other, and apart from interference by some force outside of ordinary biological causes, it would be a causally brute fact which particular first-person perspective any given body did in fact begin to support. In that case, we may suppose that karma causes a developing body to begin supporting my first-person perspective as opposed to any other.

However we tell the story, one might wonder what it is about the karmic dispositions of the dying body that enables them to determine which particular first-person perspective the

²⁶ Thanks to Lindsey Schwartz for (a version of) this point. See also Merricks (2001, 2009) on the view that survival does not require spatiotemporal continuity.

²⁷ Precedent for appealing to hyperspace to make sense of religious doctrines is found in Hudson (2005: chs. 7-8), and Chhabra & Das (2020).

²⁸ The apparent tension between biology and karma is discussed by McTaggart (1969: ch. 4), Hick (1976: 381-388), Reichenbach (1990: ch. 4), and Story (2010 [1975]). Cf. Edwards (1996: 245-248).

new body supports without affecting that body or the person it begins to constitute in any other way.²⁹ The answer lies in the fact that the karmic disposition in question is a disposition to preserve whichever first-person perspective is already supported by the body in which it resides. So given that my body supports my first-person perspective, if the karmic disposition is one of the causes of the fact that the new body begins to support some first-person perspective, then it will inevitably be my first-person perspective.

4. Rebirth for Four-Dimensionalists

David Lewis (1976) defends a four-dimensionalist - and more specifically a perdurantist - view of the human person. Perdurantism claims that the human person is composed of person-stages, i.e., person-like entities that exist only for a short time - on some views, only at a single instant of time. Because the human person is composed of stages existing at different times, it is extended along the temporal dimension in much the same way it is extended along spatial dimensions.

Which person-stages are stages of the same person? Lewis opts for the view that person stages compose a person only if the stages are psychologically similar in the right ways. Each stage must be very psychologically similar to the immediately preceding stages, and it must not differ too much from any of the other stages. Further, the psychology of each stage must be caused by the psychology of the immediately preceding stages in the ordinary way that such causation occurs. And finally, the stages must be maximal in the sense that the thing they compose is not a proper temporal part of any other thing composed of stages meeting these conditions (ibid: 17-18, 20-24).

Suppose Lewis's view of the human person is correct. Then my rebirth requires that the person stages of mine which exist at the last times of one biological life are related to person stages which exist early in a later biological life in the causal and psychological ways just described. Is this possible? Take the psychological requirement first. Lewis explicitly leaves the details of the required degree and kind of psychological similarity open. So one very simple way

²⁹ A reviewer raised this objection.

to satisfy the psychological similarity requirements is to adopt a view such as Unger's (1990), where the required psychological similarity is minimal and accommodates major discontinuities in respect of specific beliefs, desires, intentions, memories, and so forth. But I think it is possible to satisfy more demanding versions of the psychological similarity requirement as well.

I will assume that if a person retains a large store of memories from one life to the next, then they will satisfy demanding versions of the psychological similarity constraints. This is especially plausible given that anyone who has memories of a previous life is also likely to have other mental states, such as beliefs and desires, that have carried over from that past life. For example, a person who remembers a loved one from a past life may also retain a desire to be with that loved one.³⁰ So one way to secure the required psychological similarity is to propose that children retain memories of past lives in a way that would not be manifest in ordinary life. A number of authors suggest that children are normally born with memories of past lives, but those memories are buried in the subconscious. They only rise to consciousness under special conditions, such as adequate spiritual development.³¹

There is another option as well. Even if there are no children born on Earth with memories of past lives, conscious or subconscious, we might very well live in a vast and diverse multiverse - perhaps even one in which, for every intrinsic, qualitative profile a universe can have, there is a universe of that sort somewhere in the multiverse.³² Then it may be that, after I die, a child will appear in some universe with mental states intrinsically just like memories of the life I am now living.³³ (Of course, mere similarity is not enough for personal identity. The similarity must be appropriately caused as well. But at the moment I am only discussing the psychological similarity requirements that Lewis places on personal identity. I will turn to the causal requirements shortly.) However, Lewis's (1986) modal multiverse will not do the trick if

³⁰ Stevenson (1974: 17) reports that children who seem to remember past lives sometimes also wish to return to (what they take to be) their former families.

³¹ See Ducasse (1961: 149-150), Hick (1976: 308-309, 354, 364-365), Perrett (1987: 54), and Filice (2006: 56).

³² Cf. the traditional South Asian cosmology of many inhabited worlds (Prebish and Keown 2006: 11).

³³ Cf. Huemer (2001).

rebirth requires being born more than once in the actual world, and not merely being born in more than one possible world. In that case, what is needed is the sort of multiverse that would amount to just one Lewisian world.³⁴ One that would do the trick is Hudson's (2005: ch. 1) hyperspatial multiverse. Hudson argues that our universe may be one member of a multiverse of diverse 3-space universes existing together in a single four-dimensional hyperspace. In this multiverse, all of the universes are actual, even given Lewis's metaphysics.

One might worry that the first person stages of a typical human are too psychologically undeveloped to include a large store of memories of past lives. Perhaps the first person stages in a human begin to occur before the brain develops to the point where it houses such memories. But even if this is true, the four-dimensionalist can say that rebirth occurs later than the first person stages of a life. We can make sense of this by drawing on Lewis's own account of fission (1976). For Lewis, fission is partial overlap of stages: two people initially share the same person stages and then, at the point of fission, they each begin to have their own person stages. Likewise, fusion would involve two people whose earliest stages are distinct and whose later stages are shared. We could say that the recently deceased person and a developing infant fuse in this way when the infant develops sufficient psychological complexity.

Turn now to the causal requirement: the psychology of the final person stages of my present life must cause the psychology of the person stages in my next life, and it must do so in the ordinary way that psychologies are casually maintained. More specifically, Lewis requires that the psychology of later stages directly causally depends on the psychology of earlier stages, where this causal dependence is lawful, mostly exemplifying the patterns of psychological change we see in ordinary life (1976: 17). The four-dimensionalist proponent of rebirth can appeal to karma to satisfy these constraints. If the final stages of a person's biological life have appropriate karmic dispositions, then we may imagine that the fact that those stages have certain mental states directly causes the first stages of a subsequent biological life to have qualitatively similar mental states, largely according to the very same regularities as are exhibited in ordinary persistence.³⁵ We may suppose the fact that the final stages of the earlier life have a certain memory causes the first stages of the next life to have that same memory; the fact that

³⁴ Thanks to Lindsey Schwartz for prompting me to clarify this.

³⁵ Cf. Hudson's (2001: ch. 7) account of resurrection.

the final stages of the earlier life have a certain experience causes the first stages of the next life to have a memory of that experience; and so on. Of course, there are inevitably some ways in which the karmic causation I am describing differs from ordinary psychological causation. But Lewis seems open to some deviations. For example, in his work on time travel, he seems to be open to spatiotemporal gaps.³⁶

Moreover, setting Lewis aside for the moment, it is worth noting that the karmic causation I have described resembles ordinary psychological causation more closely than cases of teletransportation do, where the relevant similarities are due to causation mediated by a teletransporter, rather than direct causation between person stages. That should be enough to make it plausible (even if still controversial) that the karmic story has what it takes for survival. So at the very least, rebirth is possible given perdurantism and a plausible psychological criterion, whether Lewis's or another.

Once again, one might worry about the possibility of causation across a spatiotemporal gap. And if the four-dimensionalist opts for the multiverse hypothesis I floated above, then they will need something even more radical: karmic causation between distinct universes in a multiverse. But once one allows for karmic causation to operate across a spatiotemporal gap, it seems plausible to me that it might even operate between distinct universes that are spatiotemporally related, such as those in Hudson's hyperspatial multiverse. And for those who are more queasy than I am about these radical kinds of causation, I suggest an intermediate state consisting of a series of person stages that runs through hyperspace. The idea here is that the final stages of my current biological life karmically cause the hyperspatial stages of a hyperspatial series to have similar mental states, and likewise, the final hyperspatial stages of this hyperspatial series in turn karmically cause the early stages of a biological life in another universe to have similar mental states.

One might also ask how the psychology of the first person stages in a human being's life can be the result of karma if it is the product of ordinary human development. I reply that some of the psychological states of the first person stages in a new human life are caused by karma alone, and that apart from karma the person would not have been born with memories

³⁶ See Lewis (1976b).

of a previous life or other notable psychological similarities to that previous life. If karma qualifies as a non-physical causal force, then this hypothesis requires that some physical events have non-physical causes.³⁷ This would be a problem for my argument if such causation is either metaphysically impossible or ruled out by known empirical facts. I am skeptical on both counts. Concerning metaphysical possibility, causation of the physical by the non-physical is conceivable, and I have never seen an argument against its possibility that I take to be successful. Concerning the empirical worry, even if it could be shown empirically that there is no karmic interference in psychological development,³⁸ this would not rule out such interference occurring in other universes of a vast multiverse. And as long as enough mental states are caused in this way, both the psychological similarity requirements and the causal requirement will be satisfied. So it seems to me that there is a plausible account of rebirth in a perdurantist context.

5. Rebirth for Animalists

Animalism is the view that the human person is numerically identical to the human animal or organism. Eric Olson is one of animalism's leading proponents. Like most animalists, Olson maintains that the human animal is a wholly material object, and that the criterion of identity for the human animal is biological continuity. If this view of the human person is correct, is rebirth possible? Olson (1997: 71-72) claims that it is not, because death disrupts biological continuity.

The animalist might suggest that the human organism has karmic causal powers that are triggered at the point of biological death to generate an embryo in the womb of another human animal. Since death is a biological discontinuity, the animal does not go the way of its dying body. So if the animal survives, it does so as the karmically produced embryo.³⁹ But does it survive? The sudden shift from mature (albeit dying) human animal to human embryo requires an abrupt loss of all of the mature animal's organs and an abrupt termination of all

³⁷ Here I borrow some phrasing suggested by a referee.

³⁸ Cf. Edwards (1996: 245-248).

³⁹ This suggestion is indebted to Zimmerman (1999).

their operations. There is plenty of room for doubt here about whether biological continuity is maintained. So I am not going to argue that, given Olson's animalism, rebirth in the strict, metaphysical sense is possible. Instead, I will argue that Olson's view has the resources to vindicate rebirth in a certain practical sense, corresponding to his practical sense of "being the same person."⁴⁰

Consider Olson's approach to brain transplant cases. The typical animalist position is that, when a cerebrum is transplanted from one body to another, it is thereby transferred from one human animal to another. But since a human animal's psychology is rooted primarily in its cerebrum, donor and recipient are very psychologically similar. Many of us have the intuition that the donor and the recipient are the same person, contrary to the animalist view.⁴¹

Olson accounts for this intuition using an idea from Parfit (1971, 1984) and others: there are at least some "relations of practical concern"⁴² which people are often thought to bear only to themselves, but which can nevertheless relate numerically distinct people who are appropriately psychologically related. Olson proposes that there is a "'practical sense' of being the same person"⁴³ which is defined in terms of such relations, and which comes apart from numerical identity when these relations do. He offers this idealized version of the view, featuring three relations of practical concern:

x is at time t the same person as y is at a later time t* if and only if x ought to be prudentially concerned, at t, for y's well-being at t*; and y is responsible, at t*, for what x does at t; and it is natural and right at t* to treat y as if she were x.⁴⁴

So if two distinct people manage to stand in the relations of practical concern to the right of this biconditional, then they qualify as the same person in this practical sense. But when are people related in this way? The closest Olson is willing to come to answering this question is to

⁴⁰ Olson (1997: 71-72) and (2022: 400-403) briefly critiques survival hypotheses like this.

⁴¹ Olson (1997: 42-46).

⁴² This is Olson's (1997: 68) term.

⁴³ Olson (1997: 68).

⁴⁴ Olson (1997: 66). Cf. Parfit's (1971: 18-25) past and future selves.

say that: “Presumably the answer will have something to do with psychological continuity: roughly speaking, x is now the same person as y is later on just in case y is then psychologically continuous with x as she is now” (ibid 69). In the absence of a more precise alternative, I will work with this rough version of the view and therefore treat psychological continuity as necessary and sufficient for being the same person in the practical sense.

Olson suggests that the donor and the recipient in a brain transplant case are the same person in the practical sense (ibid 69). But it is important to understand that Olson is not claiming any one person is both the donor and the recipient of the transplanted brain. Rather, the donor and recipient are numerically distinct, and the practical sense in which they are the same person is like the sense in which successive, distinct presidents of the United States are the same elected official (ibid 66). However, if Olson is right, then the donor and recipient are related in a way that suffices for such things as rational prudential concern and moral responsibility. So, unlike two successive presidents, the donor ought to look forward to the good things in the recipient’s future in exactly the same way they would look forward to good things in their own future, and they ought to dread the misfortunes in the recipient’s future in exactly the same way they would dread their own future misfortunes.⁴⁵ Therefore, although an account of rebirth spelled out in terms of “being the same person” in the practical sense would not be an account of strict rebirth - at least not if strict rebirth requires numerical identity between the deceased and the reborn - it would be just like strict rebirth for practical purposes.

Olson’s hypothesis about what it is to be the same person in a practical sense can be used to sketch an animalist model of rebirth according to which distinct human animals living successive biological lives are the same person (in the practical sense) because they are psychologically continuous. The most obvious way to develop this suggestion is along the lines of the perdurantist account of rebirth from §4. Suppose an animal, A1, dies at a time, t1. Because of karmic dispositions which A1 possesses, and which are triggered at A1’s death, the fact that A1 has a certain psychology causes a distinct animal, A2, to have a similar psychology at a later time, t2. Hence, in the practical sense of personal identity, the very same human person who lived A1’s life is now reborn to live A2’s life.

⁴⁵ Thanks to a referee for suggesting this way of elaborating the view.

Depending on the degree and kind of psychological continuity required for being the same person in the practical sense, we may imagine that the psychology which is karmically produced in A2 includes anything from merely a generic personality type to memories of A1's life. To square the hypothesis of memories of past lives with their apparent absence in most young human beings, we may again suppose either that they are subconscious or that there is a vast, variegated multiverse in which animals with those apparent memories occur somewhere. And although the karmic causation I am suggesting here is unusual compared to the causal processes that maintain a person's psychology within a single biological lifetime, it is at least as much like these processes as the causation involved in cases of teletransportation.⁴⁶

Many of the same objections that I considered in connection with the previous accounts of rebirth can be raised here. Objection: what if causation across a spatiotemporal gap is impossible? Answer: I doubt it is, but if necessary I can always fill the gap with an intermediate-state organism in hyperspace. This organism would be distinct from, and yet in a practical sense the same person as, both A1 and A2. We can make this work by supposing that the dying organism karmically causes the hyperspatial organism to have similar mental states, and likewise, the hyperspatial organism in turn karmically causes a distinct embryo or infant to have similar mental states.

Objection: what room is there for karma if A2's psychology is the product of ordinary biological development? Answer: karma causes many of A2's relevant psychological states, such as memories of past lives, whereas ordinary biological development does not.

Objection: what if the earliest stages at which A2 is a person are not psychologically sophisticated enough to, e.g., have memories of A1's life? Answer: then we may suppose that A1's psychology causally influences A2's psychology at a later point in A2's psychological development. In that case, A2 is not initially the same person, in the practical sense, as A1, but once A2 reaches the appropriate level of psychological development and receives, via karmic causation, mental states similar to those of A1, such as memories of A1's life, A2 begins to be the same person as A1 in the practical sense. Beginning to be the same person as A1 in the practical sense after not having previously been the same person as A1 in the practical sense

⁴⁶ See also Parfit (1984: §96).

would not be possible if personal identity in the practical sense entailed being numerically identical. But as we have seen, it does not.⁴⁷

On the whole, it seems to me that this account of animalist rebirth is in good shape.

6. Conclusion

According to many religious and philosophical traditions, human people undergo rebirth. The prospects for this doctrine hinge in part on how metaphysically versatile it is. I have argued that rebirth, or something close enough to rebirth for us to care about, is possible given Baker's constitutionalism, Lewis's four-dimensionalism, and Olson's animalism. Although I do not think these are the only views that can accommodate rebirth (or something close to it), the fact that they can do so suggests that rebirth is surprisingly metaphysically versatile, and that the disjunction of rebirth and practical rebirth is even more metaphysically versatile.⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ Here I follow Olson's (1997: 68-69) discussion of fusion.

⁴⁸ Research for this paper was conducted while I was a Killam Memorial Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Alberta. I am grateful to the Killam Trusts for funding my work (award number: RES 0064986). Thanks also to Neil Dalal, Akshay Gupta, Dan Dake, Sarah Mooney, audiences at Denison University and the University of Alberta, and two anonymous referees for helpful feedback. Due to space and readability constraints, I have marked some, but not all, of the specific places where I am indebted to their suggestions.

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