REINCARNATION REDUX

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Robert Almeder offers a host of arguments in response to "Evidence and the Afterlife". I'll first address three of his smaller objections, and then look at his primary challenge to my views. All three of these initial criticisms were discussed in my original paper but, hydra-like, bear further applications of the sword.

THREE OBJECTIONS

Objection one. I beg the question against reincarnation. Almeder claims that I beg the question against the reincarnationist by declaring that "the reincarnationist hypothesis is disproportionately implausible at the outset, whatever the data, in virtue of the high initial improbability of any theory inconsistent with the physicalist paradigm." I do not insist that any theory inconsistent with materialism has a high initial improbability. Rather, I deny that reincarnationists are offering any theory whatsoever. Reincarnationists bring two things to the table: (a) case studies and (b) the hypothesis that reincarnation is the best explanation of the facts in these studies. My contention is that materialist theories of the mind are well-developed, systematic, and highly justified. They may be wrong, for all that, and I am open to the possibility. But the epistemic warrant of these theories weighs against accepting the reincarnation hypothesis, even when we take the case studies at face value. If I hear intermittent knocking in my car engine that my mechanic has been unable to identify, it would be seriously wrongheaded of me to believe that the knocking must be caused by poltergeists. I ought to take my car around to other mechanics in the belief that the sound is ultimately explanable by automobile science. This does not beg the question against the poltergeist hypothesis; it is simply the most rational thing to do.

Objection two. Theories could never change given what I say. Almeder contends that I am unwilling to allow the evidence for reincarnation to challenge materialist theories of the mind and, that generalized, this would forbid allowing any data to refute any accepted theory. In response, I believe that Almeder has a mistaken conception of the interplay between theory and experiment, and that he grossly oversimplifies the way in which theories are overthrown. Excellent, well-confirmed scientific theories change only when these two conditions are met: there is observational or experimental evidence that is inconsistent with what the theory predicts, and there is a replacement theory that has the virtues of the original and fewer of its vices. This is why I said in my original paper that "perturbations in the precession of the orbit of Mercury were not enough to jettison Newtonian mechanics; it took such data along with the theory of relativity to do so." General relativity didn't win the day just because it could explain Mercury's funky orbit, but because it explained Mercury's orbit and everything else as well or better than Newtonian mechanics. Theories can and do change. The case studies of the reincarnationists just aren't enough to do it on their own.

Objection three. My view is dogmatic anti-Cartesianism. I agree that I am an anti-Cartesian in the sense that I believe mind-body dualism is probably false. This is about as mainstream a view in contemporary philosophy as one is likely to find. Am I dogmatic about it? No. Dualism may be true. We may be Cartesian egos that reincarnate and survive our deaths. Likewise I am not dogmatic about chemotherapy as a treatment for cancer, even though I understand that there is much to be said on its behalf. The point is simply that we shouldn't abandon either chemotherapy or materialism about the mind for the first snakeoil remedy that comes along, no matter how many glowing testimonials the salesman can provide.[1] The case studies of the reincarnationists are no different in kind than these patent medicine attestations. I have explicitly stated the conditions for a justified belief in an afterlife – we need both high quality evidence and a comprehensive theory that explains it. This is far from dogmatism.

THE PRINCIPAL CONTROVERSY

Almeder and I both accept the case studies offered as evidence in favor of reincarnation – he in fact, and I for the sake of argument. The key point of

dispute between us is Almeder's contention that

(A) No explanation of the data in the cases in question is as plausible as the hypothesis of reincarnation.

When one turns from examination of the data and investigation of the cases to talk of explanation, and hypotheses, one has turned to the familiar philosophical terrain of what justifies beliefs, and what makes a theory rational to adopt. I argued in my original paper that (A) is false, and that the ET hypothesis is as plausible – in fact more plausible – than the hypothesis of reincarnation. Almeder hotly contests this, so let's reexamine the matter. He agrees that the ET hypothesis is empirically testable, falsifiable, and subject to confirming evidence. Almeder writes, "It is easy to imagine what would convince us of the ET hypothesis, but we would certainly need to wait until we could talk with them at length and they could show us exactly how it could be done." This is an astounding claim. Almeder is proposing a *sine qua non* for what would justify acceptance of the ET hypothesis; to wit:

(B) We are epistemically justified in accepting the ET hypothesis only if the aliens show us exactly how mind control works.

What makes this so remarkable is that I insisted on something analogous in my original paper, namely that a necessary condition for justifiably accepting the hypothesis of reincarnation is a theory that embeds the cases. That is, I proposed

(C) We are epistemically justified in accepting the reincarnation hypothesis only if someone shows us exactly how reincarnation works.

Yet Almeder goes to great lengths to eschew this contention, maintaining that "in the reincarnation cases the explanation seeks to establish the fact of reincarnation without explaining how reincarnation works or even why." This is no more than special pleading. Almeder arbitrarily holds the ET hypothesis to a higher standard than reincarnation. In the first place, it seems evident that if we should accept (B), we should accept (C) as well, and in the second place if anything should be held to a higher standard, it should be reincarnation. It is this view which is at odds with our best theories about the mind, and so it is this view which needs the stronger support before commanding our assent.

A related problem is in Almeder's defense of the idea that we may know that a fact is true without knowing why. He claims that in statistical studies of cases of primary schizophrenia, the best available explanation of the data

indicated that a gene or complex of genes was responsible for the disease. The geneticists claimed to know that there was a genetic basis for schizophrenia without knowing what genes were responsible, or how they worked. Similarly, claims Almeder, we may know that reincarnation occurs without knowing why, how, or what is responsible.

The problem is that this example is disanalogous to the case of reincarnation. Here are some important points of contrast. (1) With schizophrenia there is already a highly justified, detailed theory of genetics in place, one that is consistent with other scientific theories. With reincarnation there is no theoretic framework, and no compatibility with a received body of knowledge. (2) The schizophrenia researchers were looking for a way to integrate their data into a pre-existing theory. Reincarnationists are not trying to integrate their findings with any pre-existing theory. (3) The quest to discover the genes responsible for schizophrenia was not based solely the statistical data from the twin studies, but but also on a well-confirmed theory about genetics. The reincarnationists are trying to draw sweeping conclusions from raw data alone. (4) Finally, the schizophrenia researchers were not using their data to try to overthrow any widely accepted theories about the disease. Reincarnationists, on the other hand, appeal to their case studies in order to dethrone a widely accepted theory: materialism about the mind.

Reincarnation, unlike the hypothesis that schizophrenia has a genetic basis, is a *deus ex machina*. If coherence with established scientific theory is not a desideratum, then we might as well, *pace* homeopathy guru Jacques Benveniste, believe that water retains the memory of things once dissolved in it, and that the special knowledge or abilities seen in Almeder's case studies were acquired by drinking from water that once drowned someone with those abilities; hence reincarnation is not the cause at all.[2] I reaffirm my position that in the case of a truly excellent theory, we cannot know that it is wrong without some account of why.

To see how this plays out in a recent scientific example, consider the existence of random events. In 1830 any purported random event would have been written off by scientists as explanable (at least in principle) by deterministic science. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for an event to be random? In 1830 it is unlikely that anyone could have said, since the universal view was that no events were random, and all data to the contrary

was to be considered flawed or ultimately subject to deterministic explanation. This was not rigid dogmatism, it was good science. It was not for another 100 years, with the development of quantum physics, that conditions could be provided for when an event is truly random. The theory was needed first. And it is just such a theory that Almeder and the reincarnationists lack.

Let us return to Almeder's defense of (A). The claim in (B) is not the only argument Almeder has against the ET hypothesis, so let us look at what seems to be his central argument in defense of (A). Almeder writes, "in the end... the problem with the ET hypothesis is that it is simply not as plausible as the reincarnation hypothesis." In other words, reincarnation has a higher prior probability than mind-controlling ETs. Why does it have a higher prior probability? Almeder says variously that "we know what we would take" as necessary and sufficient conditions for reincarnation to occur, and that reincarnation is "the hypothesis we would offer initially to explain the data". I agree that reincarnation may be the first explanation we would offer. I disagree with the implied premise that

(D)If X is the first explanation for data Y that comes to mind, then X is the most plausible explanation of Y.

The history of human inquiry swarms with counterexamples to (D). In *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas offers the Teleological Argument as the fifth way to demonstrate God's existence. Aquinas argues that all natural bodies seem to act for an end; natural objects seem orderly, lawful, precise in operation, and remarkably functional. What would explain this data, data which is publicly available to all? Surely we all know what we would take as compelling, if not downright conclusive, evidence for the hypothesis that the universe and everything in it is the result of design, viz. what we see around us – functionality, usefulness, order, lawful behavior. If there is design, then logic demands a designer. And what hypothesis would come first to everyone's mind? Aquinas is not bashful: "some being exists by whom all natural beings are directed to their end; and this being we call God."

Of course none of this follows. The fact that Aquinas is all too ready to jump to the conclusion that design is the only viable hypothesis for order, and even more hastily leap to the conclusion that the only available universe-designer must be the Christian God, does not justify these as the most plausible explanations. One might argue that in the 13th century design was the only

hypothesis anyone could think of, and so achieved plausibility through the dearth of competitors. Thus if design is the only game in town, it will have a higher prior probability than anything else.

I do not deny that this is so. It is when we have a naturalistic theory that (1) is congruent with our other best theories about the physical world and (2) explains order without design, that we stand ready to reject the design hypothesis as a mere stab in the dark. These days there are a host of such theories, including the familiar evolution through natural selection and the recent theory of self-organizing complex systems.[3] There is no scientific theory behind the design hypothesis, and without one it is epistemically irresponsible to cling to design in the face of these other naturalistic explanations. Design may be the first explanation we offer, and we may think we know what would confirm it, but these days the design story is not the most plausible story available. Indeed it would be remiss to think even that organization and lawfulness serve to confirm the design hypothesis in any meaningful way. So it is with reincarnation. Like the design hypothesis, in the 13th century reincarnation may have had a high prior probability as an explanation of the types of cases discussed by Almeder and others. This is no longer the case. There are naturalistic explanations – one is the ET hypothesis – congruent with our best available theories about the physical world. These are the explanations to which we should turn.

This doesn't stop everyone, though. These days the banner of design is carried by creation "scientists". They begin by arguing that there are physical phenomena that mainstream science cannot adequately explain. For example, the rate of production of helium from the earth's crust and mantle exceeds by a factor of 2 to 5 the Jeans rate of thermal escape from the upper atmosphere. This so-called "helium problem" remains under active investigation by earth scientists. Creationists take the helium problem to demonstrate that the earth has a young atmosphere, contradicting (and hence invalidating) radiometric dating. In turn this underwrites their belief that the universe is only 6000 years old. Note that both the creationists and the reincarnationists use the same argumentative strategy: normal science fails to explain phenomenon X. Our approach can explain X. Thus normal science is wrong.

Geoscientist Donald U. Wise has recently argued that scientists have erred in trying to rebut creationists item-by-item.[4] Instead scientists should force

creationists to defend their total picture of science. It is when we see "creation science" as a whole that its absurdity becomes manifest. I am insisting on the same thing from Almeder and the reincarnationists – an accounting of their total scientific model. Unfortunately they have none to offer, just a repeated appeal to their anomalous evidence and its strength. If this approach won't persuade us in the case of creationism where at least some (albeit cartoonish) vision of science is presented, it should convince us even less with reincarnation.

In fact, Almeder's argumentive strategy is no different than that of a patient who, having made an unexpected recovery from a terrible illness, attributes his health to God's healing hand. It is easy to imagine this hospital-room conversation.

"You can't explain how I got better," the patient tells his physician, "but everyone would agree that spontaneous recoveries like mine are best explained by the efficacy of prayer to a benevolent God."

The doctor shakes her head. "No," she says, "just because I can't explain right now how you got better does mean that there is no physical explanation. Medicine of the future will be able tell you all about your recovery. It is natural, not supernatural."

The patient smiles knowingly. "Come on, doctor. If we asked people what empirical evidence they would accept for the claim that there is a loving God who heals the sick, they would specify antecedently evidence of the sort that we actually find in my case, evidence which is not manufactured for the purpose of proving God's existence."

"People take all kinds of evidence for all kinds of things," she replies. "This does not make their inferences justified. An antecedent willingness to see a religious aspect in your recovery does not make it a good scientific hypothesis. As far as science is concerned, The Hand of God is no better than The Fickle Finger of Fate."

"You won't accept anything as evidence against your dogmatic atheism," retorts the patient. "If my miraculous recovery won't count for you, then nothing will."

"I'm open-minded on the issue of God. But this doesn't mean that I'll grab at any old reason offered to believe in him. You think God cured you. Yet I notice that you came to me first."

"God helps those who help themselves."

"Let's avoid bumper-sticker philosophy. You looked to medical science for treatment because we are the ones with the proven track record, we are the ones with the most detailed, investigated, and experimentally confirmed biological theory. Just because medicine cannot at this moment explain every biological event only shows the limits of what we do know, not the limits of what natural science can know. This is what matters."

Why do we leap at the hypothesis of reincarnation when confronted with the case studies? Not because of the evidence fit – the ET hypothesis has that – but because of historical and cultural reasons. I suspect our religious heritage, and our non-scientific propensity to believe in an afterlife, to be at the root. Yet society is changing. In the Middle Ages people believed in possession by demons, and had visions of fire, torment, and Hell. Nowadays they report having been abducted by aliens and subjected to medical experimentation. What people find to be the most intuitively plausible explanation of their experiences is strongly correlated with the concerns of their society. Without Catholicism, how many miracle tortillas that resemble the Virgin Mary, instead of amusing tortillas that look like Aunt Mary, would there be?[5] The lesson to be drawn is that we should rest little weight on what has initial intuitive appeal.

CONCLUSION

Almeder views reincarnationism as "revolutionary," and indeed it is. But the revolution is underequipped and outgunned. Or, to choose a less military metaphor, reincarnationism is not yet ready for prime time. The evidence of the case studies, even when stipulated to be as excellent as claimed by its proponents, is not "necessary and sufficient for the truth of Cartesian Dualism" as Almeder claims. Anomalous data are no maore than dismissable outliers until a theory is developed that not only predicts the new data but retrodicts the old. If we reject otherwise fine theories because there are some things they can't yet explain, we will be left with precious little of science. Modern medicine may not be able to explain the placebo effect, even though all agree that sometimes patients get better when given sugar pills. Yet we don't renounce medical science. It would be just as irresponsible for us to forsake materialism about the mind because of the strange cases of the reincarnationists. When we have an total reincarnationist theory of mentality and personal identity, then

we can take it seriously as a competitor to materialism. Not before. That's the simple logic of it all.

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NOTES

1. An excellent discussion of persuasion through testimonials can be found in (Young 1992).
2. Thanks to Tim Johnson for this example.
3. See (Kauffman 1995).
4. (Wise 1998). My understanding of the helium problem is also based on this fine article.
5. According to *The New York Times Magazine*, April 12, 1998, p. 15, "Reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary have increased from a low of 17 sightings in the 18th century to more than 400 so far in the 20th – most of them since the 1960's. In the past year alone, the faithful have seen Mary on a California tree trunk and in a water stain in a Mexico City subway station."

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