

THEORIES OF REINCARNATION IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY— ANCIENT PERSPECTIVES*

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Much of the literature on reincarnation published during the past half-century has centered on investigating *cases* of persons, often very young children, who claim to remember a past life. Undoubtedly the interest in case-investigation in this area is due in part to the influence of Dr. Ian Stevenson, whose work on reincarnation has been hailed as pioneering by experts in the field.¹ Over a period of forty years, Stevenson traveled extensively and investigated some 3,000 cases of children around the world claiming to recollect past-life memories.² He wrote prolifically, publishing around 300 papers on 14 books on reincarnation his lifetime.³ Based on his investigations, Stevenson concluded that memories, emotions, and even physical injuries in the form of birthmarks could be transferred from one life to another—specifically, that birthmarks corresponded to a physical wound on the deceased person whose life the child purportedly recalled.⁴ Stevenson also argued that certain abnormalities observed in medicine and psychology—for example, phobias and phobias observed in early infancy—could not be fully explained by genetics or the child’s environment and that the transfer of personality from past lives provided a possible explanation (although Stevenson could not say what type(s) of physical process might be involved for the personality transfer to take place).⁵

Thus the reincarnation research of recent years has been, in a sense, scientific: it has aimed to provide a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon (here, past-life memories) based on observation and the employment of experimental investigative techniques—such as interviewing the subjects of past-life memories and determining whether the details of their memories can be confirmed historically, hypnotic regressions, and demographic studies.⁶ Far less emphasized in the reincarnation literature is the fact that the idea of reincarnation has occupied a unique position among *philosophers*. Many distinguished philosophers in the history of philosophy—indeed, “household names” such as Plato, Hume, and Schopenhauer—have held views on reincarnation. The details of these views often go undiscussed in book-length treatments on reincarnation; the standard treatment is to briefly mention, usually as part of an introductory note, that famous philosophers have held views about reincarnation but without getting into the details.⁷ Surely, and perhaps understandably, some of these philosophical theories may be seen by reincarnation researchers as antiquated (because “unscientific”) and therefore deserving of the standard treatment. However, the details of philosophers’ views on reincarnation are interesting in their own right and may yet prove useful in the search for answers to the enduring human question of whether survival after death is possible.

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¹ For overviews of Stevenson’s life and work, see Shroder 2001 and Tucker 2005. See also the introductory essay in Kelly 2012.

² For some accessible books which summarize some of this research, see Stevenson, 1974, 2000b and 2003.

³ For a full bibliography of Stevenson’s publications, see the Appendix in Kelly 2012.

⁴ See Stevenson 1993 and 1997; cf. also Stevenson 2000b.

⁵ See Stevenson 1977 and 2000a.

⁶ For examples of the hypnotic regression technique, see Bowman 1998 and Wambach 1978. The use of demographics in this connection is also discussed in Wambach 1978. For a thorough but extremely critical discussion of hypnotic regression, see Edwards 1997, pp. 80-98.

⁷ Two examples of this “standard treatment” are the first chapters of Stevenson 1974 and Edwards 1997, respectively, although Edwards is more detailed. Cf. also Ducasse 1961, pp. 207-222, wherein the review of philosophers is earnest but too compressed to explain their views on reincarnation.

This paper aims to provide a modestly detailed introduction to theories of reincarnation held by famous philosophers. This paper will discuss the views of four ancient philosophers in particular: Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, and Plotinus.

1. Preliminaries

Let me begin by outlining a few important preliminary points. First, some terminology. In what follows I shall be using the term “soul” in a somewhat artless way. Let us understand the term “soul” to mean the “essential” part of a human personality that is responsible for animating a body—i.e., making the body move and comport itself in such a way that we say, correctly, that the body is “alive”. I myself take no position on whether the soul is a material or immaterial thing and I will not address myself to that issue. Nor will I take up other related issues—such as whether animals and other living things or objects have “souls” of a different kind than human beings, whether a “soul” is the same thing as a “spirit” or “ghost”, and how it is possible for the “soul” to exist independently of the body. One need not take a general position on such issues to recount historical theories of reincarnation, which is all that I aim to do here; a rough and ready concept of “soul” thus will suffice. (The notion of “soul” I’m working with is probably what many people mean when they use the word “mind” in ordinary discourse. I have elected to use the term “soul” because the idea of reincarnation has in most cases been phrased by philosophers in terms of the word “soul,” which I shall retain in presenting their views.) Using this concept of “soul”, let us define the term “reincarnation” as follows:

Reincarnation is a form of life after bodily death in which the soul becomes incarnate again through reentry in a new human or possibly animal body.⁸

The main thrust of reincarnation is that the individual soul lives in a body on earth not once but several times. C.J. Ducasse notes that this idea been designated by various names in the history of thought: “Metempsychosis, Transmigration, Reincarnation, Rebirth are the most familiar, but Reembodiment, Metensomatosis, and Palingenesis have also been used.”⁹ In what follows I will stick primarily to the term ‘reincarnation’ but I will sometimes use the term ‘metempsychosis’ interchangeably. I will also use the words ‘transmigrate’ and ‘reborn’ to designate the process by which a disincarnate soul enters a new body and becomes incarnate again.

According to Ducasse, the possibility of reincarnation “presents to us the idea of a long succession of lives on earth for the individual, each of them as if it were a day in the school of experience, teaching him new lessons through which he develops the capacities latent in human nature, grows in wisdom, and eventually reaches spiritual maturity.”¹⁰ Such an idea has been widely accepted, albeit in different forms, by many Eastern religions, notably Buddhism and Hinduism. Readers familiar with the Buddhist and Hindu notion of *karma*—i.e., the destiny that the soul generates for itself by its acts, thoughts, attitudes, and aspirations—will immediately identify it with Ducasse’s description.¹¹ Although

⁸ I base this definition of reincarnation on Ducasse 1961, p. 207, though I have substituted ‘reentry’ for his term ‘rebirth’ in order to avoid circularity.

⁹ Ducasse 1961, p. 207. As an interesting etymological note, the term ‘metempsychosis’ (Greek: μετεμψύχωσις) literally translates to something like ‘soul animating in after’ from the Greek: *meta* (μετά) = ‘after’, ‘successive’, + *empsychoō* (ἐμψύχω) = ‘to animate’, from *en* (εν) = ‘in’, + *psyche* (ψυχή) = ‘soul, spirit’. The idea of course is that the soul is in the body animating it after having been disincarnate.

¹⁰ Ducasse 1961, p. 210.

¹¹ For more on the Buddhist and Hindu notions of karma, see the 2013 background papers by Jason Gray, accessible [here](#) and [here](#).

karma and theories of reincarnation are often found together, it is possible that one could believe in reincarnation without accepting a notion of karma.

The doctrine of reincarnation has existed in innumerable many forms. To name a few: some forms posit that human souls transmigrate between human and animal bodies while others claim that transmigration is possible between human bodies only; some posit that the soul undergoes several cycles of transmigration before perishing while others don't; some have extraordinarily complex accounts of the "interregnum" stage (what the soul undergoes as it is in between bodies) while others don't. No matter how many different forms it has taken or contexts in which it has appeared, the doctrine of reincarnation has had an extraordinary number of adherents throughout its history. To appreciate any account of reincarnation, be it scientific or philosophical or religious, one must know something about why so many people have found the idea of reincarnation attractive in the first place—i.e., what people generally find *valuable* about it. W.R. Alger, a clergyman and nineteenth-century author who published one of the first major histories in English on the idea of life after death, enumerates some value concepts that have attached to the idea of reincarnation. Alger writes:

No other doctrine has exerted so extensive, controlling, and permanent an influence upon mankind as that of metempsychosis,—the notion that when the soul leaves the body, its rank, character, circumstances, and experiences in each successive existence [depends on] its qualities, deeds, and attainments in preceding lives...[T]he theory of the transmigration of souls is marvelously adapted to explain the seeming chaos of moral inequality, injustice, and manifold evil presented in the world of human life...Once admit the theory [of metempsychosis] to be true, and all difficulties in regard to moral justice vanish.¹²

According to Alger, reincarnation may be used to explain moral inequality, injustice, and the existence of human evil in the world. If Alger is correct, then reincarnation is valuable in part because of its potential *explanatory power*—specifically, its power to explain the (apparently) contingent, intractable, and seemingly inexplicable phenomena that disrupt and destroy human life.¹³ While there are surely other items besides the ones Alger lists, let us briefly examine the second and third items on his list and then, by means of examples, see how reincarnation might explain them. I shall not take up "moral inequality" because it is entirely unclear what Alger intended it to mean.

First, consider the existence of human evil. Suppose that an infant child is tortured to death because her parents failed to pay a ransom to her kidnappers by a certain time. Naturally, one might wonder what reasons there are for such an evil to exist in the world; relatedly, those who believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God might wonder how such an evil could exist if God exists. Could reincarnation solve this problem? Some philosophers of religion, Keith Yandell for one, have suggested that the answer is yes. Borrowing Yandell's formulation, a believer in reincarnation plus some notion of karma could accept a principle such as the following:

For any evil E that occurs to a person in lifetime N, E is the just consequence of wrong actions by that person in lifetime N or in lifetimes prior to N.¹⁴

This principle might explain the infant-torture case as follows: the person or soul that was in the infant body had done bad actions in previous embodiments and the evil presented to us is a result of just

¹² Alger 1880, p. 475, 481.

¹³ For more on the *value* of the idea of reincarnation (incl. its explanatory power) but in the specific context of theology, see the first chapter of MacGregor 1978, pp. 1-13.

¹⁴ Yandell 1999, p. 124.

punishment for those bad actions. Whether this is a good or acceptable model of explanation is a separate question which I will not take up here. However, the point is that one might find the idea of reincarnation attractive in that it provides at least a starting point for solving the mystery of why evil exists in the world or how it could exist concurrently with God.

Next, consider Alger's second item—injustice. Alger does not specify what kind of injustice he has in mind, so the term lends itself to broad interpretations. But one plausible reading of injustice in this context might be “the contrary of cosmic justice”. Roughly speaking, cosmic justice is the idea that the universe is in some sense just and that objective facts about what is good and bad depend on a law of cause and effect which operates uniformly in the universe, whereby the degree of what is objectively good or bad is “repaid” to agents in ways favorable or unfavorable commensurate with their motives or actions.¹⁵ As an example of something that might conflict with one's belief in cosmic justice, consider a premature death. Suppose that Abby, a young adult in the prime of her life who is by all accounts a moral person, is tragically killed in a car accident. In their grief Abby's friends and family express the sentiments that she didn't deserve to die so young, that she left the earth too soon, and that she was a good person and it isn't fair—in other words, her premature death is a cosmically unjust thing. Now suppose that ten years later a child located far away from both Abby's hometown and the site of her death recalls having memories of Abby's life and an investigator confirms the details of these memories with Abby's family. If the family is persuaded by the investigator's findings that this child is Abby reincarnated, it could give them solace and the sense of justice they were yearning for: they may think that Abby's soul has returned to earth to finish the life she started and so her death was not actually premature.¹⁶ According to such a belief, reincarnation *explains away* the injustice of a premature death: the universe is just after all and the injustice of Abby's death is apparent because Abby's life was only temporarily interrupted.

Of course, there are additional value considerations that a belief in reincarnation bears on. Aside from satisfying our curiosity about what happens after we die, one obvious consideration, implicit in Ducasse's remark above, is that belief in reincarnation can help give our present lives purpose and meaning: what one does in this life matters for the purpose of one's soul eventually developing into its best form or becoming fully “spiritually mature.” Belief in reincarnation can also help in connection with how we relate to others. To use perhaps a fantastic example, if one thinks his neighbor is a bad person, he may react to his neighbor's bad acts with less hostility if he thinks it is possible that his neighbor will be reincarnated as a centipede. And finally, belief in reincarnation may inform one's perception of nature, such that it affects how one views one's relationship to other natural objects, e.g., plants and animals. This last point about reincarnation and nature mattered to the ancients, as we will soon see.

Having defined some important terms and having briefly discussed a few reasons that people have found the idea of reincarnation valuable, I will now discuss the views of reincarnation held by Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, and Plotinus.

2. *Pythagoras*

Pythagoras, one of the most famous ancient Greek philosophers, lived from ca. 570 BCE to ca. 490 BCE. The popular image of Pythagoras is one of an extremely skilled mathematician and scientist, and readers

¹⁵ Here I follow but slightly modify Robert Ellis's definition of “cosmic justice” in Ellis 2001, p. 53.

¹⁶ Indeed, the families involved in the James Leininger reincarnation case, by far the most famous reincarnation case in the West in the past several decades, express a similar sentiment when accepting the proposition that James Leininger is the reincarnation of fighter pilot James Huston, Jr. See Bruce Leininger's remarks at 10:30 of ABC *Primetime's* 2004 segment on James Leininger, accessible [here](#). For more on the Leininger case, see Leininger 2009.

unfamiliar with his philosophy may recognize his name from the Pythagorean Theorem taught in many high-school geometry courses. However, according to Carl Huffman, a leading scholar on Pythagoras, “The early evidence shows...that...Pythagoras was famous in his own day and even 150 years later in the time of Plato and Aristotle...as an expert on the fate of the soul after death, who thought that the soul was immortal and underwent a series of reincarnations.”¹⁷ One unruly difficulty of presenting Pythagoras’s views on reincarnation is the fact that he wrote nothing in his lifetime. Additionally, Pythagoras’s contemporaries did not keep detailed records of his thought. Further complicating matters is the fact that, as Huffman notes, “[by] the first centuries BCE...it became fashionable to present Pythagoras in a largely unhistorical fashion as a semi-divine figure, who originated all that was true in the Greek philosophical tradition...The Pythagorean question, then, is how to get behind this false glorification of Pythagoras in order to determine what the historical Pythagoras thought and did.”¹⁸ Huffman’s suggestion is that one should “rely on the earliest evidence before the distortions of the later tradition arose.”

The earliest and best evidence that Pythagoras believed in reincarnation is a famous fragment (Fragment 7) by Xenophanes, a poet and contemporary of Pythagoras’s. Xenophanes writes:

Once he [Pythagoras] was present when a puppy was being beaten,
they say, and he took pity and spoke this word:
Stop! Do not strike it, for it is the soul of a man who is dear.
I recognized it when I heard it screaming.¹⁹

Assuming that the story is true, Fragment 7 is evidence that Pythagoras believed in a form of reincarnation according to which human souls were reborn in animal bodies after death. Huffman points out that this evidence is confirmed by Dicaearchus, a pupil of Aristotle’s who lived in fourth-century BCE. According to Porphyry, Dicaearchus said that Pythagoras believed “that the soul is immortal and that it transmigrates into animal bodies.”²⁰

What more can be said about Pythagoras’s conception of reincarnation besides this? Unfortunately not much else, for we simply do not have enough good evidence to draw any definitive conclusions of Pythagoras’s view. Some fourth-century BCE authors such as Diogenes Laertius²¹ report that Pythagoras remembered his previous human incarnations but not all accounts agree. Despite these obstacles, one may nevertheless draw some interesting tentative conclusions on the basis of looking at other evidence and interpreting Fragment 7.

One piece of evidence comes from Herodotus and it concerns a possible basis for Pythagoras’s belief that human souls reincarnate as animals.²² In the *Histories* 2.123, Herodotus says that the ancient Egyptians believed in a form of reincarnation according to which the human soul is immortal and, upon bodily death, transmigrates into every sort of animal body and returns to human form after a period of 3,000 years.²³ Herodotus claims that some Greeks believed in this form of reincarnation but it is unclear whether he is referencing Pythagoras in particular. If one could somehow show that Herodotus has Pythagoras in mind, then it might be argued that Pythagoras conceived of reincarnation as Herodotus’s

¹⁷ Huffman 2011.

¹⁸ Huffman 2011.

¹⁹ For the Greek, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, p. 219. In the interest of readability, I have adopted the translation by Osborne 2007, p. 47.

²⁰ See Porphyry 1965, §19.

²¹ See Bk. VIII, Ch. 1 of Diogenes Laertius 1925, p. 4.

²² In this paragraph I follow Huffman 2011, §4.1.

²³ See Herodotus 2003, p. 108. Herodotus’s description of the Egyptians is controversial among ancient historians. For example, Thompson 1996 argues that Herodotus “ascribed to the Egyptians a set of ideas familiar in Greece but radically un-Egyptian” (p. 119, quoting Jasper Griffin).

account of the Egyptians suggests and this explains why he thinks that a puppy could contain a man's soul.

Other evidence is weak but possibly suggestive of Pythagoras's view. For example, even if one does not find Herodotus helpful, one might still recognize that Herodotus's account of the Egyptians raises an important question about Pythagoras: Did Pythagoras think that human souls undergo multiple reincarnations, and if so, how long does the cycle last? We cannot know for sure. Huffman mentions a remark from Ion of Chios, another fifth-century BCE poet and dramatist, which says "although dead he has a pleasant life for his soul, if Pythagoras is truly wise, who knew and learned wisdom beyond all men."²⁴ Although Ion says nothing of multiple reincarnations, his remark could be interpreted as suggesting that, if the soul undergoes a cycle of multiple reincarnations, its experience in between bodies is pleasant on Pythagoras's view. Given the lack of available evidence, however, this interpretation seems at best speculative.

Huffman has elsewhere argued that Pythagoras regarded the soul as immortal and that Pythagoras likely used the Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή, pron. *psūkhē*) for soul instead of *nous* (νοῦς, pron. *noos* = 'intellect') or *daimon* (δαίμων, pron. *daimōn* = 'spirit').²⁵ Huffman says that ψυχή refers not to a comprehensive soul but to a single psychic faculty in which the emotions are located and that Pythagoras's contemporaries believed that animals and humans shared ψυχή. If Huffman's argument is correct, it avails an interpretation of Pythagoras on which he thinks that the whole human soul with all its psychic faculties does not reincarnate in animals but only that aspect called ψυχή. Fragment 7 suggests that personal identity is preserved through incarnations for Pythagoras, for he recognizes something distinctive about the man he holds dear in the puppy's scream. A person's identity could thus be preserved in a person's ψυχή, the idea being that a person's character is constituted (at least in considerable part) by their emotions.

Finally, it is worth noting that Pythagoras's remark about reincarnation in Fragment 7 may have implications for the moral status of animals. As Catherine Osborne puts it, "The doctrine of reincarnation, on [Pythagoras's] view, entails avoiding cruelty to animals, or at least cruelty to those animals who are one's own friends in disguise."²⁶ The concern to avoid cruelty seems unobjectionable. For in Fragment 7 Pythagoras (a) felt pity, (b) said that the puppy is the soul of a man he holds dear, and (c) said he recognized the man's voice when he heard the puppy screaming. But to explain how these things make it *morally* wrong to treat animals cruelly on Pythagoras's view one would have to reconstruct the story of Fragment 7, along with providing a story of how one translates certain Greek words, such that it demonstrates how Pythagoras could be committed to the idea that animals themselves have an elevated moral status. On Osborne's own reconstruction of Fragment 7, Pythagoras is asking us to *invite* animals into the same moral sphere as humans and to judge our response according to whether the individual soul (contained in the animal) is hostile or friendly.²⁷ Unlike Huffman, Osborne appears to think that the whole human soul transmigrates on Pythagoras's view.

3. *Empedocles*

Empedocles lived in Sicily some eighty years after Pythagoras (ca. 495-435 BCE). He was a poet, philosopher, physician, scientist, and an active politician in his native city of Acragas. He was also a vegetarian.²⁸ In philosophy, Empedocles is perhaps best known for his theory of physics, which is based

²⁴ Huffman 2011, §4.1.

²⁵ See Huffman 2009. The rest of this paragraph summarizes the main claims of Huffman 2009.

²⁶ Osborne 2007, p. 47.

²⁷ For the full reconstruction, see Osborne 2007, pp. 46-50.

²⁸ These facts about Empedocles are taken from Parry 2012.

on his claim that everything in nature is composed of four material elements—fire, air, water, and earth—and that these elements are moved by two opposing, equally balanced, cosmic forces called Love and Strife. In his poem *On Nature*, Empedocles uses this physics to reject Parmenides’s claim that there is no change. For Empedocles, change can be accounted for in terms of the elements and the cosmic forces interacting: “Everything else comes to be and passes away because each is composed of elements that successively combine because each is composed of elements that successively combine to form them and separate at their destruction” (from Fr. 17).²⁹ Love is responsible for combining the elements while Strife is responsible for separating them.

Empedocles, like Pythagoras, appears to have accepted some form of the doctrine of reincarnation, although the details of his account are not clear. In his other main poem *Purifications*, Empedocles writes at Fragment 137:

Taking up his own dear son, though changed in form,
the father, great fool, cuts his throat and offers a prayer...
And in the same way son taking up father, children their mother,
they bereave them of life and feast on their beloved flesh.³⁰ (Fr. 137, lines 1-2, 5-6)

In this passage Empedocles is talking about animal sacrifice. For Empedocles, the problem with animal sacrifice appears to be not that it is cruel but that one fails to recognize that an animal is a loved one in disguise.³¹ It is unclear from the context exactly why Empedocles is referring to family members in the passage instead of, say, friends or acquaintances, but one may plausibly interpret 137 to say at least this: Though you might not think so, animal sacrifice involves the killing of creatures that have a human soul.

So Empedocles at least appears to believe that human souls are reborn in animal bodies after death. Unfortunately not much else can be said about Empedocles theory of reincarnation; we just do not have the evidence. Diogenes suggests that Empedocles believed that human souls are reincarnated in plant bodies as well,³² but whether this is true is controversial.

One may infer that Empedocles’s commitment to vegetarianism is justified by his belief in reincarnation. For it would seem that, for Empedocles, killing and eating animals is a form of cannibalism because human souls are reincarnated as all sorts of living creatures (animals); therefore, one should abstain from eating meat. Some commentators have taken very seriously Empedocles’s references to family members in Fragment 137. For instance, Osborne sees Empedocles’s views on animal sacrifice and meat-eating as being strongly motivated by a fear of offense against one’s *kin*. Indeed, on Osborne’s view, what Empedocles finds particularly abhorrent is not that you are murdering and eating just any human being but that you may be murdering and eating, say, your own dead mother.³³

4. Plato

In Plato we get an ancient thinker who believes that the soul is immortal and appears to believe that human souls transmigrate in both human and animal bodies. Moreover, both karmic notions and the value concept of becoming “spiritually mature” (see §1 above) appear to be important for Plato’s theory of reincarnation. Plato’s teachings on the immortality of the soul are sprinkled throughout his corpus.

²⁹ Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, pp. 289-90.

³⁰ Translation adopted from Osborne 2007, pp. 49-50.

³¹ Here I follow Osborne 2007, p. 50.

³² See Bk. VIII, Ch. 2 of Diogenes Laertius 1925, p. 77, where Diogenes relates Empedocles’s own account that he was once “a boy and a maid, a bush and a bird, and a dumb fish leaping out of the sea.”

³³ See Osborne 2007, p. 51ff.

Although reincarnation appears in the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* dialogues, it is most prominent in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* (Book X).³⁴ For this reason, I will discuss only the *Phaedo* and *Republic* in this section.

The *Phaedo* is noteworthy because it is perhaps the only dialogue where Plato gives a discernable *argument* for reincarnation.³⁵ Before exploring Plato's argument for reincarnation, let me make a few general remarks about the *Phaedo* to provide some context.

One difficulty of interpreting Plato's dialogues concerns the role of the character Socrates—specifically, whether Socrates represents Plato's own views or whether Plato is presenting views held by the actual man Socrates. For simplicity, I shall assume that the Socrates of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* represents Plato's own views.³⁶ The main subject of the *Phaedo* is the immortality of the soul. The setting is a prison on the last day of Socrates's life, before he is to be executed for the offense of corrupting the youth. The dialogue is told from the perspective of Phaedo (hence the dialogue's name) of Elis, one of Socrates's students who, according to the dialogue, had been present at Socrates's deathbed. In the *Phaedo* Socrates spends his final hours engaging in dialectic with Phaedo and two other friends, Simmias and Cebes, examining various arguments for the immortality of the soul. Socrates examines at least three distinct arguments that the soul is immortal, and of these the famous "argument from recollection" is crucial to understanding Plato's position on reincarnation.³⁷

The argument from recollection is an argument for a thesis about knowledge. Put epigrammatically, the thesis is that "learning is no other than recollection."³⁸ In the *Meno* Plato argues for this thesis by having Socrates, by means of questioning, induce a slave-boy to prove the Pythagorean Theorem not having learned it through teaching. In the *Phaedo*, Plato argues by tying recollection to his Theory of Forms. Roughly speaking, Forms are objective, ideal *standards* or *concepts*: they are universal, abstract objects that give concrete objects in the world the reality that they have. To illustrate, consider Socrates's own example from the *Phaedo*—the notion of equality. Imagine two objects of the same length. Because they are of the same length, we say that these two objects are equal to each other. Now by virtue of what are they both equal? According to Socrates, it is their standing *in relation to* the Form, the standard, of the Equal itself. The two objects cannot themselves be the concept of Equal because there are many other objects that are equal. The same reasoning applies for other properties, such as 'good' and 'beautiful'. Standing in relation to the Good itself or the Beautiful itself is what makes objects good or beautiful on Plato's view. Additionally, the Forms do not exist in objects in the world but in a pure, incorruptible realm of their own. Thus, if there is knowledge of Forms it must, according to Plato, be gained in a way other than sensory experience. One knows that two objects are of equal length only through knowledge of the Equal itself; repeated sensory experiences of equal things is never sufficient to give us knowledge of the Equal itself. Consequently, knowledge of the Forms is not acquired during our lifetime. Rather, it is "written on our souls." This does not mean that we are born with knowledge of the Forms or acquire it upon being born. On the contrary, Plato rejects these ideas. Plato points out that if people were born with knowledge of the Forms then people would have knowledge of the Forms all the time. But clearly this is not the case. Therefore, the only possibility remaining is recollection—that is, we had knowledge of the Forms, lost it at birth, and then recollected it. Plato proposes that we can recollect our knowledge of the Forms *with the appropriate training* during our

³⁴ For an ambitious discussion of reincarnation in the *Timaeus*, see Osborne 2007, pp. 54-57.

³⁵ I owe this point to Jozef Müller. Plato's argument for reincarnation is at 80e-84c of the *Phaedo*.

³⁶ This assumption is uncontroversial since both the *Phaedo* and *Republic* are generally taken to be dialogues from Plato's "middle period", which scholars distinguish from other periods in part by Plato using the character Socrates to represent his own views.

³⁷ The argument from recollection may be found at 72e-77b. The next paragraph summarizes 72e-77b.

³⁸ From 72e-73.

mortal lives. Training is thus a kind of aid to memory: it causes us to remember what we have forgotten. More specifically, doing philosophy is the best kind of training for recollecting our knowledge of the Forms. For Plato, the philosophers—the lovers of learning and wisdom—will have more perfect knowledge of the Forms than, say, the lovers of bodily pleasures like food and sex, because to love learning is to love ideas and truth whereas to love bodily pleasures is not to love these things.³⁹

Having argued for the recollection thesis, Socrates proceeds to give an argument for the soul's being immortal. The argument is basically this: in order to recollect the knowledge of the forms, the soul must have existed before birth. Combining this argument for the soul's being immortal with an earlier argument in the *Phaedo* concerning the nature of opposites,⁴⁰ Socrates infers that if the soul existed before birth then the soul exists after death. But we have already seen by way of the recollection thesis that the soul existed before birth. Therefore, the soul exists after death.⁴¹

After giving this argument, Socrates revisits an earlier theme of the *Phaedo*: the idea that doing philosophy is “training for death.” It is at this point in the *Phaedo* that karmic notions and “spiritual maturity” begin to come into play. Socrates reminds us that the world of the Forms is pure and without corruption. So, if one wishes to enter the world of the Forms, one's soul must also be in a pure and uncorrupted state. According to Socrates's exchange with Cebes at 81e-82b, the state of one's soul is the result of the life one has led, and this in turn will influence which life we next choose:

S: [Inferior men of previous bad upbringing] wander [in the underworld] until their longing for that which accompanies them, the physical, again imprisons them in a body, and they are then, as is likely, bound to such characters as they have practiced in their life.

C: What kind of characters do you say these are, Socrates?

S: Those, for example, who have carelessly practiced gluttony, violence, and drunkenness are likely to join a company of donkeys or similar animals. Do you not think so?

C: Very likely.

S: Those who have esteemed injustice highly, and tyranny and plunder, will join the tribes of wolves and hawks and kites, or where else shall we say that they go?

C: Certainly to those.

S: And clearly, the destination of others will conform to the way in which they have behaved?

C: Clearly.

S: The happiest of these, who will also have the best destination, are those who practiced popular and social virtue, which they call moderation and justice and which was developed by habit and practice, without philosophy or understanding?

C: How are they the happiest?

³⁹ Cf. 81b and 83a-83e.

⁴⁰ See 70c-72e.

⁴¹ Socrates buttresses this argument by giving an additional argument about the soul being a “simple substance” at 77b-80c, which I do not discuss here.

S: Because it is likely that they will again join a social and gentle group, either of bees or wasps or ants, and then again the same kind of human group, and so be moderate men.

C: That is likely.

S: No one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs from life, no one but the lover of learning...

This exchange clearly shows that Plato accepts a notion of reincarnation in which human souls transmigrate in animal bodies. Elsewhere in the *Phaedo* it appears that Plato believes that souls first enter the underworld—the Greek idea of the afterlife—before reentering an animal body.⁴² Plato does not say anything in the *Phaedo* about special conditions for a soul’s reentry—e.g., whether a soul must remain in the underworld for a certain period of time before reentering, and so forth. What does seem clear is that, for Plato, the soul’s destiny is a product of the choices one makes during one’s mortal life. Our choices shape our characters and our characters will determine the next life we choose. Unlike the lover of the body, whose soul is impure, the philosopher can avoid an animal life by having a pure soul. One’s soul becomes pure by doing philosophy in the right way—living virtuously and avoiding material things, keeping away from bodily passions, and gaining true knowledge of the Forms. Philosophy as “training for death”, then, is a kind of purification of the soul. Plato suggests that the pure soul is the best, most mature state of the soul and that one will not choose to return to a body once one is in a pure state.

In the *Phaedo* Plato does not speak of disincarnate souls being reborn in human bodies. However, it does seem clear from both the *Phaedrus*⁴³ and the *Republic* that he accepts the idea that human souls can be reborn in human form. In the *Republic*, Plato discusses reincarnation in Book X (at 614a-621d) when Socrates relates the famous Myth of Er. The Myth of Er repeats some of the same themes as in the *Phaedo*. However, unlike the *Phaedo*, one cannot take the Myth of Er to be an *argument* for reincarnation, for it is only a myth. Yet Catalin Partenie, in an excellent article, has suggested that for Plato one function of myths is as a means of persuasion: “Myth represents a sort of back-up: if one fails to be persuaded by arguments to change one’s life, one may still be persuaded by a good myth.”⁴⁴ It is extremely unlikely that Plato would use a myth that contains philosophical ideas contrary to his own to persuade one to change one’s life in a certain way, so I shall treat the Myth of Er as being in line with Plato’s own views. Er’s tale contains a great deal of imagery but its three core ideas are clear: an account of the astral plane (which I do not discuss), an account of reincarnation, and finally the idea that good people are rewarded after death while bad people are punished.

The story begins with a warrior named Er who dies in battle. His body is collected from the field of battle ten days after his death. On the twelfth day, when he had already been laid on the funeral pyre, Er revives and tells others of his journey in the afterlife.⁴⁵ Er said that he and some other departed souls who traveled with him came upon a spectacular place with four openings, two of which went into and out of below the earth, while the other two went into and out of the heavens. Between the openings sat judges

⁴² See 81d-81e; cf. also 83e.

⁴³ See *Phaedrus* 248c-249b. In this passage Plato writes that the human soul, according to the degree of truth to which it has attained, is reborn in a correspondingly suitable body. There are nine tiers of human bodies in which the human soul can be reborn.

⁴⁴ Partenie 2011, §3. Cf. also Socrates’s closing remark at 621b: “And so, Glaucon, [Er’s] story wasn’t lost but preserved, and *it would save us, if we were persuaded by it...*” (Emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Nowadays such a phenomenon would be termed a “near-death experience” (NDE). And indeed, some writers appeal to the Myth of Er to lend support to the case for NDEs. See, e.g., the closing chapter of Moody 1975.

who ordered the souls which openings to go into. The judges directed the just and good souls to go upward to the heavens while the bad and unjust were directed to go below. When Er himself came forward the judges ordered him to remain, telling him that he was to be a messenger to human beings about the things that were in the afterlife. The judges instructed Er to listen and look at everything in the place. From one of the openings in the sky Er saw pure souls float down who recounted wonderful experiences. But souls returning from below looked haggard and miserable, and they cried as they related their suffering and all the awful things they'd seen below. Er learned that those returning from below the earth had been required to stay there for a thousand years and pay a tenfold penalty for each wicked deed they did during their mortal lives. But certain souls, such as those of murderers and tyrants, were doomed to remain underground and unable to escape. After seven days in the meadow, Er and the souls returning from the underground and the heavens were ordered to go on a journey. On the fourth day of their travels, they came to a magnificent new place where many goddesses, including Lady Necessity, were present. There all the souls were organized into rows and they drew lots to choose their next life, except for Er who was not allowed to choose. It is at this point in Er's story that reincarnation into human bodies appears to be possible on Plato's theory. Er recalled that the first soul to come forward was that of a man who had returned from the heavens, having spent his mortal life living virtuously through habit and not through the pursuit of philosophy. Without adequately examining his choice, the man hastily chose the life of a tyrant. Afterwards, the man realized that it was a bad choice; had he examined that life carefully, the man would have seen that he was fated to do many evil things, eating his own children among them. Er observed that many souls returning from the heavens chose in this way—simply and unreflectively preferring a different life from the one they'd had before. The souls returning from underground, however, having been trained in suffering, were careful to choose better lives. Moreover, Er reports seeing animal souls choose human lives and many human souls choosing easier, animal lives. In a memorable anecdote, Er reports having seen the soul of Orpheus choose the life of a swan, of Ajax the life of a lion, of Agamemnon the life of an eagle, and so on.

As with the *Phaedo*, one of the morals of the Myth of Er seems to be that the character of our soul determines the next life we choose. Consequently, it is important how we train our souls during our mortal lives. In addition, the idea of philosophy as purification and “training for death” is interspersed in the Myth of Er. For, as Socrates remarks at 619d-e, one who knows and appreciates the intrinsic worth of virtues like justice, courage, and moderation is in the best position to choose his next life wisely:

...if someone pursues philosophy in a sound manner when he comes to live here on earth and if the lottery doesn't make him one of the last to choose, then, given what Er has reported about the next world, it looks as though not only will he be happy here [on earth], but his journey from here to there and back again won't be along the rough underground path but the smooth heavenly one.

But unlike the man from the heavens who chose the life of the tyrant, the philosopher's soul will have been trained to adequately examine the lives available to him. The upshot is that knowledge of the virtues will always work to one's advantage.

5. *Plotinus*

Plotinus, who is generally regarded as the founder of “Neoplatonic” philosophy, lived from ca. 205 CE to 270 CE. He was educated in Alexandria by Ammonius Saccas and taught at Rome from 245 CE until the end of his life. Despite these facts—that he is not Greek and his life and teachings occur long after the periods during which Plato and Aristotle lived and wrote—scholars typically include Plotinus as part of the ancient philosophical tradition. For he is one of the most important thinkers in antiquity after Plato

and Aristotle, his philosophical ideas influencing many of the early shapers of Christian theology.⁴⁶ But the main reason for including Plotinus is that he initiated a new, original phase in the development of Plato's ideas. Though as Lloyd Gerson has argued, it may not have been Plotinus's intention to be new and original.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the result of Plotinus's interpretation of Plato was a unique set of views that are clearly distinguishable from Plato's. Hence why scholars began labeling Plotinus's views as "Neoplatonic."

Naturally our interest here is how Plotinus develops Plato's theory of reincarnation. Several passages in *The Enneads*, Plotinus's master work, make plain that he believes in a form of reincarnation which retains several core features of Plato's theory. For example, in *Enneads* III.4.2, Plotinus describes the various possible modes in which the soul can be reincarnated, among which animal bodies are included.⁴⁸ There are also several passages in *Enneads* III and IV which discuss the idea that the disembodied soul has a choice of lives and periodically descends to earth to assume a different body.⁴⁹

But perhaps the most interesting *development* of Plato's theory issues from *Enneads* I.1.12.⁵⁰ In this difficult passage, Plotinus aims to explain away the prima facie incompatibility of reincarnation with one of the fundamental principles of his philosophical system: namely, that the soul considered in itself—i.e., essentially—is incapable of behaving sinfully. For Plotinus, the soul exists in different forms or phases. In its simple form, the soul is divorced from the body; in relation to the material world, the soul is embodied and includes all the bodily passions and states. When the soul is embodied, its true nature becomes obscured by the impurities of the material world, and it is then that the soul is said to be capable of behaving sinfully and liable to punishment. However, that which sins and suffers is really only the incarnate image (Greek: εἰδῶλον = 'apparition', 'phantom') of the soul, and only behaves sinfully because of its connection with the body. The Essential Soul, which is remote from the body and matter, cannot be convicted of sinful behavior. Plotinus is primarily concerned with the Essential Soul, the pure soul as part of the intelligible order of things. However, this does not mean that Plotinus is altogether unconcerned with the incarnate image of the soul. On the contrary, even though the soul's "true awakening"⁵¹ is from the body and not with the body, Plotinus says that before it can be awakened the soul must pass from one body to another until it has completely purified itself. The soul can go to its "own" place after death.⁵² But if it is excessively attached to the body, then it must be drawn back to assume bodily form once more, instead of departing with the pure souls to the realm of disembodied existence. As Rich puts it,

⁴⁶ MacGregor 1978, p. 6.

⁴⁷ From Gerson 2013: "Plotinus (like all his successors) regarded himself simply... as an expositor and defender of the philosophical position whose greatest exponent was Plato himself. Originality was thus not held as a premium by Plotinus. Nevertheless, Plotinus realized that Plato needed to be interpreted... Consequently, there were at least two avenues for originality open to Plotinus... The first was in trying to say what Plato meant on the basis of what he wrote or said or what others reported him to have said... The second was in defending Plato against those who, Plotinus thought, had misunderstood him and therefore unfairly criticized him."

⁴⁸ Rich 1957 (p. 232) points out that III.4.2 even uses Greek vocabulary similar to Plato in the *Phaedo* 80e-84c.

⁴⁹ See in particular *Enneads* III.4.5, IV.3.8, and IV.8.1 (hereafter *En.* in footnotes).

⁵⁰ Here I follow Rich 1957, p. 233ff.

⁵¹ *En.* III.6.6

⁵² *En.* IV.3.24. Cf. also *En.* IV.7.8: "The same soul passes from one living creature to another. How, then, can the soul of the former become the soul of the next if it is the entelechy (Aristotelian term: roughly, the real, full, actual existence of a thing) of a single body? This objection clearly results from the changing of living things into other living things. The soul's essence does not then consist in being the form of something, but it is a substance deriving its existence not from the fact that it is lodged in the body, but from the fact that it existed prior to becoming the soul of such and such a body..."

[For Plotinus], some souls only take a temporary bow from the stage of life. Soon they are back again in a different role and in different costume. Others, however, leave the scene never to reappear. For them death is a complete laying aside of the body...Or again, to change the metaphor, death, according to Plotinus, may be either a final awakening from a sleep that will never recur, or simply a temporary awakening which is but a prelude to falling asleep again in a different bed.⁵³

But how is this all supposed to work? That is to ask, what determines whether the fate of one's soul is to be a "final awakening" or a "temporary awakening"? The short answer: a retributive notion of "cosmic justice", roughly speaking. For Plotinus, although the pure soul is incapable of behaving sinfully and not liable to punishment, the experience of human life informs us that the person in whom the εἶδωλον of the pure soul is lodged is capable of wicked deeds. Sometimes those wicked deeds go unatoned for. Since retribution, then, is not always repaid for wicked deeds in this world, Plotinus argued that there must be other lives in which the soul could pay the penalty for its crimes.⁵⁴ To use Plotinus's own examples, the cruel master must be reborn as a slave; the murderer must himself be put to death; wealthy people who have been profligate must experience poverty, and so on, until justice has come full circle. Plotinus also says that troubles befalling good people are to be regarded as penalty for former sin.⁵⁵

So far I have focused on Plotinus's story with regard to human souls transmigrating in human bodies. With regard to animal bodies, the best evidence comes from *Enneads* III.4.2:

Those that have maintained the human level are men once more. Those that have lived wholly to sense become animals, corresponding in species to the particular temper of the life, ferocious animals where the sensuality has been accompanied by a certain measure of spirit, gluttonous and lascivious animals where all has been appetite and satiation of appetite. Those who in their pleasures have not even lived by sensation, but have gone their way in a torpid grossness become mere growing things, for this lethargy is the entire act of the vegetative, and such men have been busy be-treering themselves. Those, we read, that, otherwise untainted, have loved song become vocal animals; kings ruling unreasonably but with no other vice are eagles; futile and flighty visionaries ever soaring skyward, become highflying birds; observance of civic and secular virtue makes man again, or where the merit is less marked, one of the animals of communal tendency, a bee or the like.

According to the scheme set forward in this passage, reincarnation proceeds along a descending scale. People who live on the level of sensation alone do not live specifically human lives and so they go into animal bodies; people who live stupid, unreflective lives are content to "vegetate" and so they are reincarnated as plants. On the other hand, both virtuous people and "bad" people like the murderer and the slave master have specifically human lives by Plotinus's lights, for their lives are defined by actions which are *morally* good or bad. Plotinus seems to be suggesting that the faculty most fully developed during the soul's previous existence will determine the type of body that it will assume hereafter.⁵⁶ Like Plato, Plotinus thinks that developing the *intellect* is the chief means of purifying one's soul, though the details of Plotinus's position are actually quite complicated.⁵⁷

⁵³ Rich 1957, p. 234, relying on *En.* III.2.15 and III.6.6.

⁵⁴ Cf. *En.* III.2.13.

⁵⁵ *En.* IV.3.16.

⁵⁶ There are some difficulties for this interpretation, however. See Rich 1957, p. 236f.

⁵⁷ See *En.* V.3.14 and V.5.10.

6. Conclusion

This paper has sketched the theories of reincarnation held by four major ancient philosophers: Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, and Plotinus. On the evidence presented here, we first saw that both Pythagoras and Empedocles believed in a form of reincarnation according to which human souls were reborn in animal bodies after death; beyond this, the details of their views are not known. Then, based on parts of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* dialogues, we saw that Plato believes in a form of reincarnation according to which human souls transmigrate in both human and animal bodies. On Plato's view, the type of life that one next chooses—human or animal—depends on the condition of one's soul after death. The condition of one's soul is determined by the choices that one makes during one's mortal life, for these choices lead to actions which ultimately shape our characters and our characters will determine the life we next choose. Finally, we saw that Plotinus believes in a form of reincarnation according to which human souls transmigrate in human, plant, and animal bodies. For Plotinus, one's character along with a notion of cosmic justice will determine one's next life.

For a long period of time after Plotinus—indeed, many, many centuries—the number of adherents of the doctrine of reincarnation declined significantly in the West. The sharp decline was due to major historical and religious events such as, for example, the establishment of Christianity in Europe and the Inquisition. During the Middle Ages several movements supporting belief in reincarnation were persecuted as heresies. New European interest in reincarnation was not fostered until the Renaissance, as Renaissance scholars brought new translations of Plato and other major Greek cultural works back into Western Europe for the first time since late antiquity. By the middle of the 17th-century, the Greek works were available in North Europe and were being discussed by major philosophical groups such as the Cambridge Platonists. By the 18th-, 19th-, and early 20th-centuries, European philosophers were taking philosophical questions about immortality and reincarnation more seriously and were developing views very different than those of the ancients.

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