

Article

Seeing in Eternal Return: Hermeneutical Perspectives on Karma and Rebirth

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Abstract: This article is a reflection on a conception of death, that of karma and rebirth, and its value in interpreting one's life. I have thought about this conception in two ways. The first is that I can see the circumstances of my life as the result of causes of which I was the agent, and the second is that I can see my life and the relationships in my life as part of a much larger narrative that began before this life. Through an examination of Vaishnava and Advaita theology, Nyāya philosophy, and some Puranic and Epic texts, I argue for an interpretation of karma and rebirth as a rational system that allows one to see relationships as involving many layers of complexity.

Keywords: rebirth; Rāmānuja; Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava; eschatology; karma; saṃsāra; hermeneutics; Indian philosophy; Uddyotakara (Nyāya); pratyābhijñā; Advaita (Sureśvara)

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains.

Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden*, "Where I lived, and what I lived for"

Fare you well, fare you well I love you more than words can tell

Words by Robert Hunter, music by the Grateful Dead, "Broke-down Palace"

1. Introduction

This article is a reflection on a conception of death, that of karma and rebirth, and its value in interpreting one's life. I have thought about this conception in two ways. The first is that I can see the circumstances of my life as the result of causes of which I was the agent, and the second is that I can see my life and the relationships in my life as part of a much larger narrative that began before this life. My approach here is not argumentative; this article is not an attempt to assert the superiority or validity of one view over another. It is hermeneutical and interpretive; I reflect on what it means to see the events one's life through a many life theistic model. Simply put, what does belief in rebirth matter to *this* life?

The two quotations above are the sorts of ideas about death that were imprinted in my mind in my mid-teens; both express the fleeting nature of life and inspired me to think about what death means for life. In my late-teens and thereafter I began to study and reflect on Indian religious traditions, even performing the ritual, meditative, and ethical practices in my own life. I became especially aware of the "many lives theism" of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition and other related traditions. The "many life theism" of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and other many life scenarios of the Indian traditions offered

alternatives to the more familiar “one life theism”¹ and various forms of “physicalism,”² had access to as a young adult. The term “many life theism,” as I use it here, is the view that there is *karma* (a “law” of action and reaction that governs or controls sentient beings) and *saṃsāra* (repeated birth and death with no beginning, *anādi*, but with an end, called *mokṣa*), all of which is overseen by God. Karma, then, is the determining power in life into which freewill might insert and assert itself in some way, and *saṃsāra* characterizes the soul’s movement in the process of living over the course of unlimited embodied instantiations. While not all Indian religions are theistic, I explore a theistic models of *karma-saṃsāra*, one sustained by God in some manner, and one in which a real or eternal self is the experiencer of the various embodied existences. I make some attempts to distinguish this from single or one life theism (especially as found in the Abrahamic religions) and Buddhism (a *karma-saṃsāra* model with no God and no unchanging or eternal soul, *anātman*), and I acknowledge the more metaphysically reduced model of scientific reductionism (that consciousness is produced from the body and brain, an organism that is the result of a purely material process of evolution).

The introduction of these new ideas from the Indian traditions were a significant hermeneutical break with the conventional ideas with which I had grown up, a break that is significant enough to deserve a focused and critical reflection. This particular article was inspired by the questioning of Professor Francis X. Clooney, SJ, which led to a series of panels at the Dharma Academy of North America and the American Academy of Religion in 2015 and 2016. I have thought about rebirth scenarios Indologically, and philosophically and theologically. For me questions about death immediately led to questions about how I should live knowing that I shall die, about why we find ourselves in existence at all, or the cause of the brute fact of our existence, and why our individual life is the way it is and not some other way. The study of philosophical and theological texts has continued to enrich and refine the ways that I address these issues in my personal quest to make sense of the mystery of being.

2. Seeing One’s Life as the Result of Causes from a Previous Life

The argument of this section is that the theistic *karma-saṃsāra* view can be interpreted as a rational system in the sense that the individual’s will (*kratu*), which I understand as an agent’s (*kartr*) desire (*kāma*) that has become a resolution or a decision to act in a particular way, is the cause of effect’s in an individual’s life. Effects are one’s dispositions (*vāsanās*), socio-economic circumstance (*varṇa*, which we might, interestingly, think about as a form of class or even “caste”), as well as all the personal attributes of the body such as intelligence, physical strength, attractiveness, length of life (which we might think about as phenotype and the underlying genotype). The defining feature of the *karma-saṃsāra* model I wish to highlight here is that the effects are produced by causes (the “will”) and that the cause-effect relationship is pre-determined, universal, and for the most part inviolable. These are the conditions that would make *karma-saṃsāra* “rational.” It may or may not be rational to believe in rebirth,³ but many sought to present a logically coherent picture of why a person has particular circumstances based on cause-effect reasoning. *Karma-saṃsāra*, then, is an explanatory model that

¹ These terms, many life theism and one life theism, are from Filice (2006). While recognizing the diversity of Abrahamic theologies, I would call them “one life theism,” i.e., that the soul is born and dies once, after which an eternal destination is assigned. There is purgatory, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition and to a more limited degree in the Church of England, a temporary place of venial-sin-expiation, espoused by Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent and the Tractarians (Cross and Livingstone 1974, *sv.* purgatory). While not argued here, I think the concept of purgatory is different from the *karma-saṃsāra*-many-life model discussed below because purgatory is a one time event, whereas rebirths are many. There is evidence that Christian authors new of a rebirth systems, probably from Plato, early on, but it was rejected, e.g., in Augustine’s *City of God*, Book X, Chapter 30, *ff.*; he argues against reincarnation and the co-eternality of soul with God. Tertullian also argued against rebirth (Edwards 2001, chp. 14).

² Briefly, physicalism is the view that consciousness fully depends on the brain; for discussion and evaluation from a Vaiṣṇava point of view see (Edelmann 2012, pp. 61–92).

³ In addition to Filice (2006), *op. cit.*, who argued for the philosophical consistency of many life over one life theism, the vast body of work by Ian Stevenson (1997) and his students attempts to ground rebirth in scientific terms using the methods of contemporary science. See (Edelmann and Bernet 2007) for discussion and evaluation.

eschews chance as an explanation as to why a being's particular effects are attached to his life and not some other.

Before I examine Sanskrit classical sources, let me begin with two different, but noteworthy, 20th century thinkers who argued that rebirth is a rational model. Bimal Krishna Matilal (1985, pp. 363, 366), a philosopher, wrote in an examination of *karma*: "The present comes out of the past and the shape of the future depends upon what we do in the present [...] The law of *karma* is a principle of moral causation. This principle of moral causation is an extension of the principle of causation in the field of physical or natural science to the field of ethics and moral responsibility." He goes on to say that the *karma* theory, "refuses to admit that the world is arbitrary and that there is anything called chance or caprice." His point is that there is a rational connection between an agent's moral choices in the past and the condition in which he presently lives, and that this form of causal relation is like the physical sciences, i.e., governed by cause-effect laws. Ian Stevenson (1997, p. 5), a parapsychologist, was led to think about this issue as follow:

During the last century medical research has increased our knowledge of some of the proximate physical causes of birth defects . . . But causing them in which persons? Why is one person born with a birth defect when another—his twin brother perhaps—is not?"

He goes on to say that those who hold a conventional medical or scientific view can examine physical causes, but they "cannot—without violating their principles—ask about more ultimate causes, such as why a particular *person*, as opposed to a particular *body*, has a congenital malformation" (ibid., italics in original). Reincarnation tells us why a particular good or bad situation in life belongs to a particular person; it explains not just the cause of the effect, but why an effect is located on a specific agent.

2.1. Karma-Saṃsāra Explains the Circumstances

The early Vedic tradition centralized the human will or intention (*kratu*) as the determinative force and it is from the will, a cause, that effects, the circumstances, are produced. While the Veda Saṃhitās are generally seen to have not said anything about *karma-saṃsāra*, the *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* (10.6.3.1) says:

Let one meditate on the truth that is brahma! Now this person here is indeed made of will. According to his will, when he departs from this world, he becomes of similar will in the next world beyond.⁴

For the *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* it is undoubtedly a sacrificial context in which this will would have been exercised and the results of the exercising of this will would have also been understood in a cosmology defined by the Vedic ritual, but it makes a lot of sense that the will would be seen as so important since the sacrificer, in this context, by choosing to a particular ritual, is shaping his future.

The view that one's will could determine one's future was articulated in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad* (4.4.3, cf. *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* 3.14.1), using much the same terminology as the *Śatapatha*, but in a more general context than ritual. It likens the death experience to reaching out or stepping toward another body (*anyam ākramam ākramya*), just as a caterpillar moves from the tip of one blade of grass to another.⁵

⁴ satyaṃ brahmety upāsīta | atha khalu kratu-mayo 'yaṃ puruṣaḥ sa yāvat kratuḥ asmā lokāt praityevaṃ kratuḥ hāmuṃ lokam pretyābhisambhavati (Kane 1962, p. 1535). Kane clearly based his translation on Eggeling (1897, p. 400), yet the latter translates *kratu* as "understanding, or will, purpose," and he notes a very similar passage as the *Śatapatha's* in the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* (3.14.1), along with Śaṅkara's commentary, which seems to justify this translation. The context for the *Chāndogya* is a discussion on how one should meditate on brahman. Śaṅkara writes: "How should one meditate? One should set to a will. A resolution or will is an intentional cognitive episode that is fixed, like 'it shall be so,' which is unwavering; by this means one should meditate (on brahman)" (Jha 1942, p. 151). katham upāsīta | kratuḥ kurvīta kratuḥ niścayo 'dhyavasāya evam eva nānyathety avicalaḥ pratyayastam kratuḥ kurvītopāsītetyanena vyavahitena sambandhaḥ. Sanskrit text from: http://grettil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/grettil/1_sanskrit/1_veda/4_upa/chupsb_u.htm.

⁵ When introducing the analogy of a craftsman (perhaps a weaver or goldsmith) who creates an artifact out of the old material that is newer and more beautiful (*navataram kalyāṇataram*), the Upaniṣad introduces an implicit progressiveness to the process, but later accounts are not as optimistic (ibid., 4.4.4).

The clincher for a *karma-samsāra* view is in 4.4.5: “If one acts good (*sādhu*), one becomes good; if one acts negatively (*pāpa*), one becomes negative. One becomes something positive (*puṇya*) by positive action, something bad by bad action.” The Upaniṣad goes on to say that as one desires (*kāma*), one then forms a resolve or will (*kratu*), from which one then acts in particular ways, and that action determines one’s future (Olivelle 1999, pp. 120–24). Śāṅkara notes something very important here, i.e., that “desire is the root or foundation of rebirth” (*kāmo mūlaṃ saṃsārasya*, comments *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 5.4.7, see (Kane 1962, p. 1548)). This model looks to the future, providing a chain-linked explanation—i.e., from desire, to will, to action, and finally, to result—but one only needs to reason back (into an infinite past⁶) to conclude that one’s present situation is the result of the same chain-linked explanation.⁷

The manner in which this will manifests is explained in, for example, the *Mānava-dharma-śāstra* (or *Manu-smṛti*) (12.3)⁸ as well as Vātsyāyana’s commentary (*bhāṣya*) on the *Nyāya-sūtra* (1.1.2–3), both of which say action can be of body, speech, and mind. For Vātsyāyana the *adharmā*, or inappropriate and demerit accruing activity of the body is killing, of the speech is lying, and of the mind is malevolence, whereas the *dharma* of the body is charity, of the speech is truth-telling, and of the mind is compassion. Thus, in each of these three ways the will is expressed and the activities of each would produce good or bad results; there is, then, an attention to ethical considerations if for no other reason to create a better future for one’s self. And yet the Upaniṣads, as well as Yoga and Puranic Hinduism, will come to reject the sufficiency of “good” (i.e., *puṇya*, *dharma*, etc.), as discussed below.

The genius of the Yoga tradition was its ability to locate the individual will in a larger karmic cosmological and psychological context. It attempts to explain our habits and dispositions by *karma-samsāra*. For example, Vācaspatimīśra I (c.mid-9th century) in his *Tattva-vaiśārādī* (a sub-commentary on the *Vyāsa-bhāṣya* attributed to Vyāsa) on *Yoga-sūtra* 1.24 begins by saying that good and bad actions ripens (*vipāka*) into good and bad results, e.g., into the length and quality of one’s life. He goes on to say:

“Pre-dispositions” (*āśaya*) to action refer to those deep impulses (*vāsanā*) that are commensurate with “ripenings” and that reside in the deep recesses of ordinary awareness. For no behavior typical of a young elephant is conducive towards experience suitable to a young elephant so long as that action does not manifest the type of becoming brought about by the experience of a young elephant in a preceding rebirth. Therefore, the unfolding experience of a young elephant is in conformity with the “ripening” from a (previously existing) young elephant (Larson Forthcoming).⁹

I understand Vācaspati as saying that our present is a constructed result of the our past, that our habits of mind and body, which lead to actions, and which are a fundamental part of our becoming in this world, must be seen in the context of a larger narrative, a story about cause and effect, from a previous life, and by extension that this story was also the continuation of a story that preceded it, and so forth back into eternity. Thus, just as the details of the quality of my life are explained in terms

⁶ The *Vedānta-sūtra* (2.1.35 ff.) and the commentaries will say that the process of *karma-samsāra* must have had no beginning to avoid partiality on the part of God.

⁷ Madhva, the Dvaitva theologian, would seem to undermine this rationalistic interpretation in his interpretation of this part of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* in saying that “all beings are always under the direct will of the Lord. The desires of a being have their origin in the desires of Viṣṇu, so the beings act in obedience to the desires of Viṣṇu” (Vasu and Bhattacharya 1916, p. 538). Thus our desires would not be our own, nor, then, our fate. B.N.K. Sharma, however, interprets Madhva as saying here that Viṣṇu “causes Jīvas [souls] to do things according to His will in conformity with their deserts. The Lord being possessed of such a nature, the Jīva does what the Lord implies him to do in keeping with his deserts. Hence they say the Jīva follows the Lords will (*Kāmayamānaḥ*)” (Sharma 1988, p. 160).“

⁸ śubhāsubha-phalaṃ karma mano-vāg-deha-sambhavam | karmajā gatayo nṛṇām uttamādhama-madhyamāḥ || (Mandlik 1886, p. 1478). Karma has a result that is pure or impure; they are created by the body, words, and mind. People proceed to a [position] that is middle, terrible, or great from karma.

⁹ vipākānugunā vāsanās tāś cittabhūmāv āserata ity āśayāḥ | na hi karabhajātinirvartakaṃ karma prāgbhaviyakarabhogabhāvitāṃ bhāvanāṃ na yāvad bhivyanakti tāvat karabhocitāya bhogāya kalpate | tasmād bhavati karabhajātanubhavanā bhāvanā karabhavipākānuguneti | Translation based on Larson, and Sanskrit text from SARIT: <http://sarit.indology.info/exist/apps/sarit-pm/works/>.

of cause-effect, so are the particulars of my impulses, but they are themselves constructed by actions of the past. Does Vācaspatimiśra give one a fuller sense of the “will” (*kratu*) than in the Upanśads, it now being seen as a construction from *karma-saṃsāra*? Should we thus consider our individual will not as an autonomous entity, but as something that is itself a “karmic effect,” a feature of our cognitive and psychological life, just as the body is also a “karmic effect”? These are in some sense classical questions in philosophy about *freewill*.

Some Hindu traditions restrict agency to a conventional (*vyāvahārika*) level of reality, one that needs transcendence, and which is ultimately not real. Sthaneshwar Timalisina (2014, p. 207) has argued that Śaṅkara negotiated between the Advaita theologies of earlier figures like Gauḍapādā (c.600 AD) and Bhartṛprapañca (c.550 AD) by saying that freewill and agency operate, in a mediated fashion, within the convention reality (*vyāvahārika*), but not within the unconditioned level of being that is the unqualified brahman. In Advaita theologies there is not only rejection of agency at the ultimate ontology, but even in a poetic and symbolic sense. For example, in his *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* (1.41–44) Sureśvara (c.740 AD) of the early Advaita tradition presents a particularly dramatic critique of agency. The person whose mind is covered by ignorance (*avidyā*) is bitten (*daṣṭa*) by the teeth of scriptural injunctions to perform action in the Veda, thinking them the causes of his qualification to be the agent of such action. As such he goes up to the level of a god (*deva*) or down to a lower region (*nāraka*) by following or not following the rules, or he becomes a human by mixing good and bad, but in all cases he is *avaśa*, “not free.” One is pushed around, “like an empty gourd is violently knocked around with fierce and chaotic fury when in the midst of the ocean.”¹⁰

Sureśvara presents a startling and unsettling *existential* rejection of agency. The embodied self (*jīva*) is helplessly subjected to unwanted pain due to the overwhelming forces of nature, an experience everyone can identify with, even if one does not accept the larger *karma-saṃsāra* model or nondualistic theology. Sureśvara does problematize a rationalistic interpretation of *karma-saṃsāra* since the gourd, even if it could desire, is hardly the cause of action, and we can sympathize with a feeling that we are not always in control of our lives; even our desires might seem well beyond our control at times.

Vaiṣṇavas do accept agency as an inherent feature of the self,¹¹ even if that agency is a complex and multifaceted concept, one that is often constrained or limited by the material circumstances in which the self is placed, and even if they might agree with the troubled existential picture painted by Sureśvara, and. Nevertheless, much work is still needed to think about how freewill would or could be exercised on the *karma-saṃsāra* model.

2.2. Explaining Experience

The *karma-saṃsāra* model also attempts to explain in rational terms why a person experiences the world the way he does. To use a term from Western philosophy, for Nyāya experience is “theory-laden,” but the theory that lades or filters the raw sense data fed into the senses must be constructed in a previous life. The *Nyāya-sūtra* (3.1.18) argues for the existence of rebirth to justify the eternity of the soul by an examination of experience:

There is the appropriate experience of joy, fear, and sorrow in a new-born because of a connection with memory [produced from] repeated experience in a previous [life].¹²

The commentary (*vārttika*) of Uddyotakara (c.mid-6th century) is particularly helpful in this regard:

When a child is first born, the senses, (on their own), are unable to comprehend (*adhigama*) sense objects, [and yet] it is seen that a new born child experiences joy, fear, and sorrow,

¹⁰ caṇḍotpañjalaka-śvasana-vegābhīhatāmbhodhi-madhyavarti-śuśkālabuvat (Balasubramanian 2016, p. 107).

¹¹ For Vaiṣṇava theological concepts of freewill, agency, and self, see the chapters on Rāmānuja, Madhva and Jīva by Martin Ganeri, David Buchta, and Satyanarayana Dasa and Jonathan Edelmann, respectively, in Dasti and Bryant (2014).

¹² pūrvābhyasta-smṛty-anubandhāj jātasya harṣa-bhaya-śoka-sampratipattam.

which is inferable from smiling, trembling, and crying. These arise from an uninterrupted connection with memory, and there is no uninterrupted memory without a previous body. Birth is a connection with feeling, intellect, senses, and body, which is formed as a whole. Joy is the experience of happiness or pleasure upon obtaining what one had hoped for as the intended object. Fear is the experience of the inability to avoid that which one hopes to avoid as it is about to occur. Lamentation or sorrow is when one is separated from a desired object, and one hopes, but is unable, to obtain it. The word *sampratipattiḥ* refers to the proper experience of them [joy, etc.]. Repetition is the occurrence of many direct experiential episodes of an object.¹³

The word “comprehend” (*adhigama*) seems to be key in Uddyotakara’s argument, for if infants do not comprehend objects, that is, if they were passive screens, or “*tabula rasas*,” again a term in Western philosophy, upon which stimuli were projected, then they would not have the correct responses to stimuli, or perhaps none at all. Since, for an infant, there is no previous experience to build on, for Nyāya we need to posit a previous birth to make sense of their proper responses to stimuli, e.g., the prick of a needle or the taste of the mother’s milk. Let me first say a bit more about what comprehension might mean before exploring why past life experience is needed for an infant. The *Nyāya-kośa* (Jhalakīkar 1928, *qv.* *adhigama*) provides these definitions of comprehend (*adhigamaḥ*) (translations my own):

1. *jñāna* or cognition,
2. *prāpti* or apprehension,
3. *svīkāraḥ* (*vāca-*) or words that have been understood.

Comprehension is thus a cognitive state, one in which there is a particular type of apprehension, and one with a linguistic component. The Nyāya school holds that intentional action—laughing because of joy, crying because of pain, etc.—requires some sort theoretical construct about what is desirable and undesirable. Yet this construct, which results in the experience of joy, etc. is inferable from laughing, etc., and it requires knowledge derived from past experiences, about which one has formed opinions, and that since an infant has joy, etc., the construct must have been created in a previous life. Thus, for Nyāya, previous lives are also necessary for us to make sense of our *present life*. Rebirth rationalizes not only the circumstances of my life, but the reasons why I *interpret* my life as I do. While not discussed here, one could extend the Nyāya model to suggest that the way I interpret my experiences today is also the result of repeated interactions with particular objects.

I conclude this analysis of *karma* in saying that no school of Hindu thought of which I am aware affirms the reality the *person* as a physical and mental being. For Nyāya the “I” that is the person who is joyful is merely an abstract and subtle locus of being. The “I” is not the person that is carried over into the next life, but it is a subject that provides the conditions for the person. Describing the Nyāya thinker Udayana (c.10th century), Chakravathi Ram-Prasad (2011, p. 325) writes, “The Nyāya *ātman* [self] provides no personal identity but provides the condition through which a formal consciousness unifies the psychophysical complex that makes the person.” It must be different than the body and mind because it persists through their changes. This leads into important questions about what exactly is the “I” that would reincarnate, but I shall reflect on that below.

¹³ jātaḥ khalv-ayaṃ kumsārako viṣayādhigamāsamartheṣu indriyeṣu harṣa-bhaya-śokān pratipadyamāno dṛṣṭaḥ smīta-kampa-ruditānumeyān te ca smṛty-anubandhād utpadyante | smṛty-anubandhaś ca nāntareṇa pūrva-śarīram iti | tatra janma nikāya-viśiṣṭābhīḥ śarīrendraya-buddhi-vedanābhīḥ sambandhaḥ | abhipreta-viṣaya-prārthanā-prātau sukhānubabho harṣaḥ | aniṣṭa-viṣaya-sādhanopanipāte taj-jihāsorhānāśakyatā bhayam | iṣṭa-viṣaya-viyoge sati tat-prāpty-aśakya-prārthanā śokaḥ | tad-anubhavaḥ sampratipattiḥ | eka-viṣayāneka-vijñānotpādo ’bhyāsaḥ (Nyaya-Tarkatirtha and Takatirtha 2003, p. 741). For translation and discussion see Dasti and Phillips (2017).

2.3. Rationality and Theism

One might object that many life theism cannot be rational as I have defined it above since theism suggests that God is in control of one's life and thus the effects that one experiences. This would negate self-responsibility and negate the efficacy of the will that would create good or bad karma. There may be theistic models in which this is true—I had alluded to this in Madhva's commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 5.4.7—but here I examine the theism of Rāmānuja (early 12th century), especially his commentary on *Vedānta-sūtra* 2.1.34. Therein he argues God is merely the arbiter, or the distributor of a soul's own karmic deserts.

The *Vedānta-sūtra* characterize God's manner of creating the world as one of distributing the karma of the souls in the world:

There is no partiality or cruelty (in *brahman*) because he is dependent (on karma when making the world), as seen [in the *śruti*].¹⁴

There seems to be an allusion to what we might call the problem of evil in Western philosophies; there is an attempt here to show why God is not malicious despite being all-powerful and despite the world being a mixture of pain and pleasure. Rebirth is needed for Rāmānuja to maintain that God is all-powerful and all good. Rāmānuja writes in his *Śrī-bhāṣya* commentary:

If the manifestation of the world—a diverse mixture of conscious and unconscious things—did belong to the supreme being [Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva, etc.], who is different from objects in this world that are conscious or unconscious, and all else because of being connected to a paradoxical (*acintya*) power, who existed before the manifest world, who is one and also impartite, [if all that is true] then one would be led to the unwanted conclusion of a created world made of superior, mediocre, and inferior things, consisting in plants, men, animals and gods; [in such a case] since [Viṣṇu] would be the cause of extremely fearful suffering, there would be the unavoidable conclusion of [Viṣṇu] being cruel.¹⁵

Here Rāmānuja wants to emphasize the impartite nature of Viṣṇu as opposed to the hierarchical and partite nature of the world. How to account for this difference? And given the hierarchical nature of the world, if Viṣṇu were responsible for it, he would be cruel. To avoid this conclusion, Rāmānuja replies,

The creation or manifestation of this unequal world is dependent upon the *karma* of the living beings (*kṣetra-jña*), i.e., the gods, humans, etc., who are being created.¹⁶

For Rāmānuja God is the creator, but he makes the world according to the karma of the living beings in the world. From this one can conclude that since *I* performed actions in the past of which *I* am now experiencing, *I* alone am accountable for my present situation and *I* alone am responsible for my future. Thus, there can be the sort of rational cause-effect relation on the *karma-saṃsāra* model, even in a theistic context.

2.4. Hermeneutical Reflection

When thinking about the rationality of *karma*, one of the first questions I would have is *how exacting is karma?* If I get punched in the face by a stranger on the street, is it because I punched a stranger on the street in a past life, or are there just risks and rewards associated with the *karma*

¹⁴ vaiṣāmya-nairghṛṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathā hi darśayati || (*Vedānta-sūtra* 2.1.34).

¹⁵ yadyapi parama-puruṣasya sakaletara-cid-acid-vastu-vilakṣaṇasya acintya-śakti-yogāt prāk-sṛṣṭer ekasya niravayasyāpi vicitra-cid-acin-miśra-jagat-sṛṣṭiḥ saṃbhāvyet tathāpi deva-tiryaṅ-manuṣya-sthāvarātmanā utkrṣṭa-madhyamāpakṛṣṭa-sṛṣṭyā pakṣa-pātaḥ prasajyeta | atighora-duḥkha-yoga-karaṇāt **nairghṛṇyaṃ** cāvarjanīyam iti | (*Karmarkar* 1962, pp. 640–41, para. 292).

¹⁶ srjyamāna-devādi-kṣetra-jña-karma-sāpekṣatvāt viśama-sṛṣṭeḥ | (*ibid.*).

of walking on streets, and the details—getting punched or bumping into an old friend—are left to chance? If I decide to move to a particular place, am I then subject to the general conditions—e.g., storms, violence from other human beings or wildlife, etc.—independent of my personal *karma*, or was it my personal karma that impelled me (through my *vāsanās* and other residues from past lives) that compelled me to move to a particular place? Likewise, is the *karma* of being a human being with a particular race, gender, etc. subject to karmic deserts that are generally related to that race, etc.? In other words, does being a white man have its own karmic deserts that are not *specifically* created by the soul that inhabits the body?

These questions, which I have not found clear answers to in Sanskrit literature, get to the core of what “rationality” might mean in this context, that is, whether the connection between cause and effect is specific or general. To frame the question in the familiar “seed” analogy: do specific karmic seeds, or causes, produce specific fruits or effects, or should we think about karmic seeds, causes, as group-able into general categories that produce effects that are also group-able into general categories? Perhaps one type of seed produces one type of effect, but within each type there is a lot of variation. I do not know of specific answers to these general questions. Perhaps they are best answered through stories.

Having said that, when I have used the ideas above to make sense of my life the result is a radical sense of self-responsibility (e.g., “I did this to myself”) and self-empowerment (e.g., “I can remake myself as I like”), coming with this the sense that I do in fact deserve the good and the bad that happens to me and I can in fact change my future irrespective of the particular material circumstances in which I find myself. There is a type of radical libertarianism associated with *karma* theory to think about it in the landscape of American politics, but one with a greatly expanded notion of self since it says that I made my life as it is, even the events that occurred before I had agency (e.g., as an infant) and I can remake my life as I want it; even God is not directly and immediately involved in this, but God acts the distributor of karmic results and the sustainer of existence in which karma operates.

Moral choices can reduce, then, to questions about what kind of being I want to be within the karmic world, and the abandonment of all *karma*, for example by seeking liberation or devotion (*bhakti*), as the case may be, are about not wanting to be anything that the world of *karma* has to offer. But sticking to a discussion about how to understand *karma* within the world (and even if you seek liberation or devotion you still have to decide what kind of being you want to be who seeks those ends while you are in the world of karma), it opens up a lot of questions as to how particular events—e.g., loss of a loved one, an illness, the attainment of a fortune, etc.—were caused by events in the past, events that I, under normal states of mind, have no awareness of. If I am in a painful accident, I do not *know* that this was caused by some choice I made in the past. Therefore, there is something very theoretical in the form of explanation it provides. The notion of self-responsibility is therefore the result of a cosmological theory, not something I derive from my direct and immediate experience, but as an explanation it does explain “scientifically” (i.e., cause-effect reasoning) my phenomenological experience.

Taking for granted that I would not do something that would cause me pain, or I would only do something that would cause me pain if I thought it was worth the bad effect (e.g., I know eating sugary cakes is bad for my health, but sometimes it is worth it), thinking about karma is something of a negotiation with myself about what I’m willing to suffer in order to enjoy. Maybe killing the spiders in my bathroom is worth a little bad karma so I can enjoy an spider-free shower? This itself gets into questions about what really is good and bad karma, or how much something will cost, so to speak. The Sanskrit literature on this subject is vast, but is all of it to be taken seriously? And if not, then how does one decide what is good and bad? One is immediately thrust into the ethical and meta-ethical theory, and there is a sense in which solipsistic questions about what I want to construct out of karma are deeply dissatisfying, whereas moral questions about how to benefit others through action are more satisfying.

One of my first professors of philosophy, Peter Angeles, argued that there is a cold rationality to the *karma-saṃsāra* theory because if I deserve my circumstances in life, so do others, even the poor, sick, oppressed, etc. Rationality can replace compassion. Matilal (1985, p. 368) notes, “But it is highly interesting to see that the law of karma which was originally formulated to oppose fatalism and encourage free will became later on a plea for fatalism.” And fatalism, he notes, can underpin a rigid social structure like that of the “caste system.” Does believing that a baby born with a terrible disease because of past actions mean I feel less compassion for it? Possibly, but there are other ways to interpret it too, but this might go beyond my scope here. But it also means that karma theory is *not* moral theory, but an *explanatory* and *interpretive* model, and that we need to still consider how to prevent suffering in the world in spite of the rationality of karma.

3. Complex View of One’s Self and Others

In this section I argue that *karma-saṃsāra* opens a complexity in how one can think about one’s self and others. There is a temporal nature to this complexity. I can see my *present* and of others as multilayered, and the *future* of myself and others are unexpected. One of the things that gives life terror and bliss is the unexpectedness of the future, but karma adds another layer to that unexpectedness, and it adds a way of interpreting it as the rational outcome of the past and present.

3.1. Unforeseeable-Ness

The *karma-saṃsāra* model says there is an infinitely long story that explains how I got here today, and that many of the details of that story—for example the choices I made, the experiences I had, the feelings I felt—are just starting to show their effects, that some will show their effects later in this life, and others in a future life. It is as if I completely forgot that I bought a lottery ticket last week and I’m about to get the positive results, or that I forgot that I took a drug which is beginning to change my mind and body, or that I forgot I had planted a fruit tree long ago and it is about to bear a fruit I can enjoy. There is, then, a multilayered-ness to my material being. To develop this point, I will introduce some familiar terms from the *Vedānta-sūtra* (e.g., 4.1.13–15):

Karmic residues are of three kinds. (1) There are those residues that were determined at birth to work themselves out during the present life (the one just ending)—these residues are called *prārābdhakarman*. (2) There are those residues that were produced by acts performed either in this life or in a previous one, but which remain latent during this present life—called *sañcītakarman*. (3) Then there are the results of acts performed during this very lifetime, which will mature in some subsequent lifetime in the normal course of events. This kind of karma is called *sañcīyamāna* or *āgamin karman* (Potter 1981, p. 23; cf. Rambachan 2006, p. 106; Buchta 2016, p. 34).

Much of the discussion in the *Vedānta-sūtra* and the commentaries thereon is about how to get free from all forms of karma, what the causes of that freedom are, and what occurs after freedom, but the more interesting phenomenological and hermeneutical question is what does this view of karma say to my present condition, especially (2), the latent karma I have yet to experience?

The complexity I wish to highlight here is that one’s *prārābdha-karma*, one’s presently experienced *karma*, may place one in either a very good situation (wealth, social prestige, beauty, intelligence, fame, power, etc.) or very bad situation (the opposite), and yet one’s *sañcīta-karma*, “latent karma,” does *not* necessarily demand one’s future will be the same as one’s present, for the present *karma* and the latent karma might be very different. Because one has un-manifest *karma*, like a seed un-sprouted, there is an unexpectedness to one’s life: one simply does not know what kinds of seeds one planted in the past that are yet to grow.

There is a sense, then, that this solves the problem of “why good things happen to bad people,” even if that solution is coldly rational. I say this because one could be experiencing the results good karma now, but bad karma, that is latent, suddenly develops an unexpected

way. Bruce Reichenbach (1990, p. 24) notes, “Both sides [theistic and non-theistic Hindus] want to understand why it is that a person experiences pain and pleasure, fortune and misfortune in ways that seem unconnected with the moral quality of their present actions[.]” Good people can also be bad people, and bad people can be good; the ugly can be beautiful, and the beautiful, ugly—all this because there is a deep history to us. We might be good now, but experience the ripening of karmic results that are bad.

3.2. Morality as beyond Good and Evil

The complexity of the *karma-saṃsāra* model is that it also requires going beyond good and bad moral behavior. Hindu theologians mainly focus on entirety of the *karma-samsāra* system, that is, the ignorance that underlies the production of karma, arguing that even good karma is bad, and that good and bad must be gone beyond. For example, when discussing fire sacrifices, the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* (5.24.3) argues, *sarve pāpmānaḥ pradūyante*, that knowledge of *brahman* removes all bad actions (*pāpa*). The Śrīvaiṣṇava theologian Vedānta Deśika, an inheritor of Rāmānuja’s theology, discussed this passage. While talking about the contemplation (*upāsana*) of *brahman*, Vedānta Deśika says in his *Tattova-muktā-kalāpa* (2.55) that the plural of “bad actions” (*pāpmānaḥ*) in the *Chāndogya* indicates that even good action (*puṇya*) must be removed.

S. M. Srinivasa Chari (Srinivasa 2004, p. 303), a scholar of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology, summarizes Vedānta Deśika’s view: “Since even *puṇya* [or a “good act”] is an obstacle for *mokṣa* [or liberation from *saṃsāra*], it has also to be got rid of [. . .] Even *dharma* [right action] becomes *adharmā* [wrong action] from the standpoint of an aspirant for *mokṣa* [liberation].” This is not to say that good and bad have no meaning or that they are the same, but that good karma is an effect, one that the self would then be required to experience, and because one is required to experience it, one is bound by it. Imagine, if you will, that one plants a mango tree, a fruit that is delicious or good, but the condition is that one must also eat all the fruits it produces until it dies. This would be binding. Many life theism opens spaces for thinking about the good “beyond good and bad,” even if it is not clear what that might be (the obvious reference to Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) is itself beyond the scope of this article). Part of the difficulty, then, involves knowing what actions, if any, are beyond the good and evil of karma—this seems to be a central issue in all of the native Indian religions.

3.3. Extended Picture of Relationships and Recognition (*Pratyābhijñā*)

Just as many life theism invites me to see myself in a larger narrative, it invites me to see relationships that define my life in larger narrative too. When my children were born, for example, there was this forceful thought as I gazed upon their faces for the first time: *had I known this soul before? If so, what was the nature of that relationship?* There are many friends and family relationships that seem so deep I wonder if they too had a beginning before my present life. On a *karma-saṃsāra* model it would not only be possible, but even likely, that many of the people in my life—parents and extended family, friends, teachers, co-workers, etc.—would be people with whom I had interacted in the past.

Many Indian epic (e.g., *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇas*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Jātaka*, etc.), as well as parapsychological studies of reincarnation by Ian Stevenson, etc., depict a world in which the circle of relationships in a person’s life are filled with people from a past life. One of the more gory stories is in the *Mahābhārata* (3.127). King Somaka had one hundred wives, but bore only one son. After an incident with an insect bite, Somaka realize that the boy could die at any time, leaving him sonless. His family priest describes a ritual that generate one hundred sons:

The family priest said: King Somaka, you should sacrifice [the body] of your son Jantu by the extension of my will (*kratu*), and thereafter you will quickly gain one hundred glorious sons.¹⁷

The sacrificed is described as involving the offering of bodily membranes, like skin and fat (*vapā*) into the fire, and that the wives should smell the smoke of it, which would thus produce the sons, one of which will be Jantu reborn. The women protest, but the sacrifice happens nevertheless, and Jantu is reborn in the same family. When the priest and king die they go to hell, a temporary place of suffering for this gory sacrifice, which was based on their (*kratu*) one might add, yet the king offers to share the priest's demerit, and they are both quickly released from hell. The story is outrageous, but it shows an entanglement of over lifetimes.¹⁸

Even the relationships between the God Kṛṣṇa and his earthly parents is the result of a set of interwoven past lives. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* says Devakī and Vasudeva, who were Prṣni and Sutapā (10.3.34 ff.) in previous lives, had performed yogic austerities for many lives before becoming the "parents" of Kṛṣṇa. This, however, can be contrasted with the Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus. In Luke, we are told where Mary and Joseph are from, that Mary is a virgin to be married to Joseph, presumably that they are Jewish, and that Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel because she was "favored by God," but, at least from Luke (1:26 ff.), and my research here is limited, we do not know why it was Mary and Joseph *in particular* were the "parents" of the God Jesus; their relationship with Christ began in their lifetime, whereas Kṛṣṇa's relationship with his parents extended far into the distant past.

In returning to the moment when a parent looks upon a child for the first time, or likewise when two people who later become friends or lovers first meet, in a *karma-saṃsāra* model we might look at these interactions as recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) rather than a first introduction. "Recognition" is a technical term in Nyāya and Kashmir Śaivism, developed, for example, by the Śaiva theology Utpaladeva (c.925–975 AD); it involves an experience of an object (*anubhava*) when there is a memory of that object (*smṛti*), or the remembrance of one's self as Śiva. In Nyāya, for example Annambhaṭṭa's *Tarka-saṃgraha*, it has a more general sense of a perception of an object when one has a memory of that same object and then one recognizes the object as the same from one's memory, e.g., this is that person (Sastri 1951, p. 110). A fight with a parent, co-worker or friend might just be a dual that has played out before, and love at first sight might just be an old flame re-stoked, bringing with it the passions of the past. Seeing one's child at birth or the "first" pr meeting of a "new" friend, or "new" lover could very well be a "recognition" (*pratyabhijñā*) of a pre-existing relationship that was dormant. There is a lot of unexpectedness, then, when meeting new people on a *karma-saṃsāra* model.

3.4. Hermeneutical Reflection

One of the great enigmas of human history that has always fascinated me is that great men and women often have great flaws, and infamous men and women often have great qualities. On a karma theory, one can look at a person's present life, and one's own, in a much wider time slice, one that allows one to see good, bad, and mixed reactions all present in different phases of maturation in a single individual. It provides a theoretical model for understanding, whether correctly or not, why saints are sometimes sinners, and sinners sometimes saints. It also addresses the important question as why bad things happen to good people, and why good things happen to bad people. On the karma theory, we are witnessing the maturation of different causes, some of which have matured fully and some of which are just starting to present themselves.

¹⁷ yajasva jantunā rājams tvaṃ mayā vitate kratau | tataḥ putra-śataṃ śrīmad bhaviṣyaty acireṇa te || (Mahābhārata 3.127.19). Based on Kisari Mohan Ganguli's edition, not the critical edition: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m03/m03128.htm>, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/mbs/mbs03127.htm>.

¹⁸ The relationship between Bhīṣma and Śikhaṇḍin in the *Mahābhārata* also has a multilife entanglement. The demonic brothers Hiranyakṣa and Hiranyakaśipu in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* are reborn three times together, having been kicked out of heaven.

4. Conclusions

I have emphasized the rationality and the eternal narrative of rebirth, and I have tried to express how these interpretations are rooted in classical Hindu texts, philosophies and theologies. Aside from providing a rational explanation and a multilayered perspective on human life, when I sat down to write this article I had found that there were many other ways that *karma-samsāra* might shape one's interpretation of this life. I have tried to develop just two, but there are more. From a physicalist point of view the fact that the death of this body means the death of my personhood, my memories, and my awareness is either very comforting since life is seen as suffering, or terrifying since life is seen as good. In a rebirth narrative there is no such relief as in physicalism, but most Indian traditions see *mokṣa*, liberation, as a type of ending of the narrative aspect of one's life, a destruction of the person but not the self. In the case of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, there is the destruction of the human person, but there is also the development of a new person, with a narrative and personality that exists in eternal relation Kṛṣṇa. Thus in response to the question "what does belief in rebirth matter to *this* life?," in addition to what was said above, it will always be a challenge that *karma-samsāra* as it is construed in Hindu theologies makes little or no space for the eternality of my personhood as it is constructed by the processes of *karma-samsāra*, even if it does provide a rational way for interpreting life's events.

Much of what we do is to try to find meaning value and purpose in the space between birth and death and it is perhaps here that thinking of one's life as a rational development of one's own actions is most relevant. It provides a real sense of autonomy and self-responsibility; it orders an otherwise caprice and chaotic universe, wherein one seems to be tossed around like a gourd on the ocean, to borrow from Sureśvara, by saying that my life is in fact the result of my choices, even if they are choices I have no memory of making.

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