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Beth Seacord

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JUDAISM, REINCARNATION, AND THEODICY

Tyron Goldschmidt and Beth Seacord

The doctrine of reincarnation is usually associated with Buddhism, Hinduism and other Eastern religions. But it has also been developed in Druzism and Judaism. The doctrine has been used by these traditions to explain the existence of evil within a moral order. Traversing the boundaries between East and West, we explore how Jewish mysticism has employed the doctrine to help answer the problem of evil. We explore the doctrine particularly as we respond to objections against employing it in a theodicy. We show how it supplements traditional punishment, free will and soul-building theodicies, and helps these theodicies avoid various objections.

Why is there a righteous person who has good, and
[another] righteous person who has evil?
This is because the [second] righteous person was
wicked previously, and is now being punished.
Is one then punished for his childhood deeds? Did not
Rabbi Simon say that in the Tribunal on high, no punish-
ment is meted out until one is twenty years or older?
He said: I am not speaking of his present lifetime. I am
speaking about what has already been previously.
— *The Bahir*¹

I. Introduction

According to recent polls, more than a quarter of Americans believe in reincarnation, and the trend is apparently increasing.² In any case, the doctrine has been held by a plurality of humanity, has been put to philosophical uses, and deserves philosophical consideration.

The doctrine of reincarnation was a part of ancient Western religious and philosophical systems, including Pythagoreanism and Neoplatonism. Today it is a significant part of Hinduism and Buddhism, but can also be found in Judaism, Druzism and other religious traditions. In contrast to Eastern traditions in which the doctrine of reincarnation is central, Jewish

¹*The Bahir*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1989), 77–78.

²See William Garrett, *Bad Karma: Thinking Twice About the Social Consequences of Reincarnation Theory* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2005), 1, 15.



theologians have diverged on the topic,³ and do not have it as a central tenet; however, it has become so widespread a view among orthodox Jews that its rejection would be a little heterodox. Indeed, Levi ibn Habib (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries) and Menashe ben Israel (seventeenth century, a teacher of Spinoza) treat it as a dogma established by the majority of religious authorities, despite there being some disagreement:

The belief in reincarnation is a firm belief for our entire congregation, and none are to be found disputing it, except Rabbi Saadia Gaon and [Yedaiah] Bedersi. . . . And thus wrote Rabbi Levi ibn Habib . . . “But there is a much greater portion of the sages of Israel who believe [in it], and they wrote that it is a true belief and one of the fundamental principles of the Torah that solves the problem of a righteous person who suffers. We are obligated to heed the words of these authorities, and have this belief without any doubt or wavering whatsoever.”⁴

The exponents of reincarnation elaborate on the doctrine considerably. But it has received little critical consideration from contemporary Western philosophers. The neglect has three closely related causes: unfamiliarity, obscurity and implausibility. These factors can be impediments to philosophical consideration, but are no excuse. They can even be an impetus: after all, Western philosophers devote considerable attention to views that are *prima facie* as strange.

We explore how embedding reincarnation in a theistic context advances the prospects of an answer to the problem of evil, and helps to answer objections to three well-known theodicies—punishment, free will and soul-building theodicies. Free will theodicies explain (at least some) evils in terms of the conditions necessary for the great good of free will. Soul-building theodicies explain (at least some) evils in terms of the conditions necessary for the great good of personal growth. A third form of theodicy is the punishment theodicy. Although seldom mentioned in philosophical debates, punishment theodicies are otherwise widely held. Punishment theodicies explain (at least some) evils in terms of just punishment for bad deeds.

These theodicies face objections. Each cannot account for hard examples of evil (hence our qualification, “at least some”). However, reincarnation can supplement the theodicies, and when supplemented some of the hardest examples of evil can be explained. As we proceed, we provide further details of the doctrine as it is developed within Judaism, and show how these anticipate objections.

Our treatment of reincarnation and the problem of evil extends conceptualizations of reincarnation and the problem of evil by Western as well as by Eastern philosophers. First, we treat reincarnation within a theistic and Jewish framework, whereas reincarnation is typically associated with

³See Yitzchak Blau, “Body and Soul: Tehiyat ha-Metim and Gilgulim in Medieval and Modern Philosophy,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 10 (2001), 1–19.

⁴Menashe ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayyim* (Amsterdam: Sh. A. Su’ero, 1651), 154b.

Eastern traditions, which are often non-theistic. These traditions explain evil in terms of reincarnation but, when non-theistic, they do not employ reincarnation in answering the problem of evil or providing a theodicy in the strict sense of the terms—as a problem about *God* permitting evil, and as a justification (*dike*) of *God* (*theos*) permitting evil.⁵

Secondly, we draw attention to two categories of evil besides those of moral and natural evils. The problem of evil is as much a problem about the existence of evil as its distribution, and reincarnation typically addresses two problems of unjust distribution: bad things that happen to good subjects, and good things that happen to bad subjects. The first case involves evil in two ways: the bad things that happen, and their happening to good subjects. The second case involves only the problem of an unjust distribution, since bad subjects do not deserve good things. This is an evil not typically addressed by Western philosophers, who focus on bad things that happen to good people.

We address only the use of the doctrine of reincarnation in theodicy and problems arising for the doctrine in this context. There are other problems—metaphysical problems about whether reincarnation is so much as possible and evidential problems about whether it ever actually occurs—that we do not discuss. We do not argue that reincarnation is possible or occurs—and thus that it actually accounts for evil—but only that adherents of the doctrine have additional resources for answering the problem of evil.

II. Reincarnation: The Basics

According to the doctrine of reincarnation, subjects undergo cycles of life and death, living as one form and dying, and then living again as another form any number of times. A subject could thus live as a human, die, be reborn as an insect, die, be reborn again as a human, die, and so on. There is much more to reincarnation in the religious traditions espousing it, from the nature of the subjects to the nature of the cycles, their number and end. This statement conveys the doctrine about as accurately as any concise statement could. Doubtless some exponents of reincarnation would dispute the terminology. Perhaps *subject* has metaphysical connotations they eschew: Buddhism and Hinduism have distinct doctrines about the nature of personal identity, and Jewish mystics identify various aspects of the soul, some of which are reborn in any incarnation and some of which are not.⁶ However, we could interpret the terminology in our statement broadly enough to include most theories of reincarnation. Throughout the essay, we refer to the bare doctrine outlined here as *reincarnation*.

In many Eastern traditions reincarnation is associated with karma, an impersonal law allowing subjects to carry over merits or demerits

⁵Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, "Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman," *Philosophy East and West* 57:4 (2007), 544.

⁶See Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim* (Jerusalem: n.s., 1988), chap. 3; chap 14.

into subsequent lives. In contrast, according to some Eastern as well as Western traditions, a supreme being dispenses merits and demerits; according to Judaism, God supervises rewards and punishment meted out in subsequent lives.

III. The Punishment Theodicy

The punishment theodicy attempts to explain the existence of evil in terms of punishment: since God or the moral order is perfectly just, subjects are punished for wrongs committed in the past. Punishment takes the form of the evil of suffering, and serves various good purposes, including retribution, recompense, incapacitation, deterrence and rehabilitation. According to Jewish tradition, punishments fulfill a number of purposes.

The punishment theodicy might be attractive because punishment helps restore moral balance to the world, and a world in moral balance is of greater value than one out of balance. The world seems morally better when people receive what they deserve—when offenders are punished for or made to right the wrongs they commit. Where a wrong is not easily righted, justice might require that the offender give something of equal value in order to restore moral balance. For instance, the murderer cannot easily right his wrong by bringing the victim back to life, so justice might require the life of the murderer in exchange—either in capital punishment, life imprisonment or a life of community service. Punishment theodicies are attractive for tapping into our intuition that a world where malefactors pay for their crimes is of greater value than a world where they go unpunished.

The punishment theodicy does not explain all evil, particularly the original moral evil that deserved the punishment in the first place. But that wickedness could be explained in another way, through a free will theodicy, while other evils, particularly natural evils, could be explained in terms of punishment. The main problem is that punishment theodicy does not appear to be a viable explanation for much evil at all.

Objections to the Punishment Theodicy

The punishment theodicy faces two objections, first, from the proportion of punishment, and second, from its allocation. The first objection is that punishment is often unjust because the suffering inflicted is not proportionate to the wrongs committed; many appear to suffer far more than they deserve. For instance, it is hard to believe that those suffering from famine committed crimes severe enough to warrant such suffering. In addition, in many religious traditions the most righteous people often suffer the most. Job is a paradigmatic example of a righteous person who suffers greatly, but the moral of the story appears to be that Job's suffering is a test and not a punishment for past wrongs (although some commentators do understand his suffering as punishment for wrongs committed in a past

life).⁷ There often seems no real correspondence between a person's suffering and their misdeeds.

The second objection is that the punishment is often unjust because it is not deserved at all; many perfectly innocent beings suffer, including animals and young children, who do not or do not yet have the freedom or moral sophistication required to act wrongly. William Rowe and Bruce Russell present the problem of innocent suffering with particular force. Rowe describes the hypothetical case of a fawn, "Bambi," trapped in a wildfire: "The fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering."⁸ Russell recounts the true case of a 5-year old girl, "Sue," who was "raped, severely beaten over most of her body and strangled to death."⁹ It is incredible that Bambi or Sue could have committed wrongs meriting such horrific suffering. The punishment theodicy appears hopeless in explaining such suffering—indeed, so hopeless as to receive virtually no treatment from contemporary philosophers.

Answers from Reincarnation

Reincarnation provides the resources for answering both objections. The punishment theodicy supplemented with reincarnation contends that at least some suffering is the result of punishment. There is sometimes the appearance of suffering being disproportionate because we consider only wrongs committed during a certain life where the subject may be perfectly innocent. However, subjects had past lives during which they committed wrongs, and thus deserve the punishment received during subsequent lives. Thus we can explain the famous example of apparently gratuitous suffering—Rowe's fawn. The suffering appears gratuitous because we consider only the subject's innocence during its current fawnish life. But the suffering is not gratuitous since it serves as just punishment for wrongs committed during past lives; Bambi might have been the owner of a factory farm in a previous life.

Eastern and Jewish traditions attribute a punitive aspect to reincarnation. Since this is relatively well-known in the case of Eastern traditions, we focus on Jewish tradition. The two most central mystical Jewish texts are the *Bahir* (Book of Illumination) and the *Zohar* (Book of Splendour). Both are traditionally attributed to rabbis of the second century, though most modern scholarship places their authorship in the thirteenth century. They include some of the earliest explicit treatments of reincarnation as punishments. In the relevant passage from the *Bahir* quoted at the beginning of this essay, the rabbis pose a question about the suffering of a

⁷See Moses Nachmanides, *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe Ben Nachman*, ed. Charles B. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963); and Moses Nachmanides, *The Gates of Reward*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1983), 31–46.

⁸William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16:4 (1979), 337.

⁹Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 6:2 (1989), 123.

righteous person, to which the answer is that the person was previously wicked and so deserved to suffer as punishment. The rabbis understand that the person could not be punished for actions committed as a child during his current life, and conclude that he is punished for wickedness committed during a previous life. The *Zohar* similarly considers reincarnation as a punishment; for example:

“And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them” [Exodus 21:2]. The *Targum* translates, “And these are the judgments which you shall arrange before them.” These are the arrangements of reincarnations, the judgements of the souls which are each and all sentenced to receive their punishments.¹⁰

Subsequent medieval, renaissance, and early modern rabbis treat reincarnation as punishment. Thus ben Israel in his book on the soul, *Nishmat Hayyim* (Soul of Life), explains why God creates apparently innocent beings with disabilities, inevitably resulting in suffering, in terms of reincarnation:

We observe that many people are born without limbs, sometimes blind and sometimes lame. . . . [W]e must ask what wrong or what sin did [such] immaculate, clear and pure soul[s] commit? The truth is that they are those whose souls sinned, who were buried, but came [into the world] another time in a reincarnation in order to receive their punishment by having this insipid body.¹¹

The most extensive and detailed Jewish exposition of reincarnation is *Sha'ar HaGilgulim* (The Gate of Reincarnations), a record of the teaching of Isaac Luria (the *Arizal*, sixteenth century) on the subject by his primary disciple, Hayyim Vital. This work treats reincarnation as punishment in various places; for example:

Behold, after a person's death, he is repaid for his sins before he is entered into purgatory, through many kinds of punishment, all termed *reincarnation*. This means that he can be reincarnated as a mineral, vegetable, animal or person. Almost all people have to reincarnate in these ways. The reason being that [a person] is unable to receive his punishment, until he is an embodied soul, at which time he can suffer and feel this pain, and thereby be atoned of his sins. But the extent of his sinning determines the kind of reincarnation he will have, whether it be as a mineral, vegetable or animal, etc.¹²

Jewish mysticism thus allows for subjects to be reincarnated as animate as well as inanimate beings, as humans as well as animals. The kind of being the subject is reincarnated into depends on the kind of wrongs committed. Reincarnation thereby allows for *fitting* kinds of punishments. For example, “someone who speaks slander or such like is reincarnated into a silent stone.”¹³ The Hassidic master Pinchas of Koretz (eighteenth century) would joke that a conceited person who constantly says “I am this, and I

¹⁰*Sefer HaZohar*, ed. Yehuda Ashlag (Jerusalem: n.s., 1974), 543.

¹¹Ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayyim*, 159.

¹²Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, 59.

¹³*Ibid.*, 62.

am that" (Yiddish: *Ich Bin, Ich Bin*) would be reincarnated as a bee (*bin*). That would be a fitting punishment since a bee is the antithesis of conceit, being devoted to and willing to sacrifice its life for the hive.¹⁴ When a human soul is reincarnated as an animal, it suffers in two ways, spiritually and physically. The spiritual suffering results from confinement in an animal body, which does not allow the soul to express its full intellectual and emotional potential. The physical suffering is the pain endured by the animal, as it struggles or is harmed. This explains the suffering of apparently innocent animals as just punishments for wrongs committed in past lives.

As the above passage suggests, reincarnation does not replace the traditional Jewish view of purgatory—*Gehinnom*, a spiritual realm of punishment—but supplements it. While there remains a purgatory, certain kinds of sin can most appropriately be punished by reincarnation. The same point is developed by Solomon Alkabetz, another disciple of Luria, into an explanation of the death of infants; thus Alkabetz, as quoted by his contemporary, Isaiah Horowitz (sixteenth–seventeenth centuries):

Some are forced to undergo a second round of life in this world as a punishment for sins committed which cannot be atoned for in the purely spiritual regions. This is the way the King of Kings has arranged it. When one has broken a number of covenants one may have to return to earth for each and every covenant one has broken during a previous life on earth. This is the mystical dimension of infants or small children dying. They obviously did not commit a sin in their most recent incarnation, yet they may have had to experience death a second time to expiate for having broken God's covenant with Israel in a previous incarnation.¹⁵

Thus reincarnation can supplement what is taken to be among the weakest of theodicies, the punishment theodicy, so as to provide explanations of the most problematic kinds of evil, the suffering of animals and children.

Reincarnation would help answer the perennial question: Why do bad things happen to good people? But it also promises to answer a related question: Why do good things happen to bad people? While suffering is explained as retribution for wrongs committed in past lives, the good that befalls the wicked can be explained as reward for the good deeds performed in past lives. Indeed, most printed editions of the *Bahir* begin the passage quoted at the outset of our essay with the question, "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?" This aspect of reincarnation has received less attention from Jewish mystics, though it is put forward by the medieval mystic and biblical commentator Moses ben Nachman (thirteenth century). He presents this as one of two explanations for the prosperity of the wicked:

¹⁴DovBer Pinson, *Reincarnation and Judaism: The Journey of the Soul* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), 93; also see Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, 63.

¹⁵Isaiah Horowitz, *Shney Luchot Habrit*, trans. Elyahu Munk (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2000), 1193.

However, [concerning] this rare problem [of the righteous who suffer] together with the more frequent other problem of seeing an absolute and truly wicked man succeeding in all matters of prosperity, the perplexed person may [expect the righteous man to be ultimately rewarded and can] look forward to troubles which will finally befall the wicked man. Alternatively, he may consider that [the wicked man's] peace is part of the secret mentioned, which is the mystery of the transmigration of souls.¹⁶

Ben Israel is more definitive about the last option:

The wicked prosper and the righteous are struck down and deprived—this is nothing but the subject of reincarnation. . . . A wicked person who has it good is [termed] “a wicked person descendent of a righteous person” in that he was righteous previously [in a past life] and now [in this life] he enjoys the fruit of his labour [in the past life].¹⁷

Reincarnation thus helps account for the distribution of evil as well as good, and has in this respect more explanatory power than do other theodicies, which do not account for the unjust distribution of good.¹⁸ We'll develop the theodicy further as we respond to various objections, especially from Whitely Kaufmann.¹⁹

Objection 1: The Memory Problem

Problems for reincarnation arise from our lack of memories of past lives. For example, there is a metaphysical puzzle of whether a future subject could be the same as a past subject without memories of the past life, a problem depending on psychological criteria of identity across time. This is not our memory problem. Our memory problem is a special problem for the use of reincarnation in a punishment theodicy. The objection is that punishment is not just unless the subjects know what they are being punished for—a moral forcefully impressed by Kafka's *The Trial*.²⁰ But subjects do not remember, and so do not know, any aspect of past lives. Therefore, punishing subjects for wrongs committed in past lives is unjust, and so a

¹⁶Nachmanides, *The Gate of Reward*, 45.

¹⁷Ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayyim*, 159.

¹⁸A reviewer raises the interesting question of whether it would be just for God to reincarnate a good person with the knowledge that the person will subsequently be wicked, especially in light of the rabbis' view that God might cut a person's life short where that person would otherwise become extremely wicked (see b. Sanh. 68b). Even if God doesn't *know* that the person will be wicked, is reincarnation worth the risk? Later we will see that dispositions we develop can carry over from past lives. That might make it unlikely that a good person will become extremely wicked in a subsequent life. Furthermore, God can prevent a good person from becoming extremely wicked in a subsequent life, while granting the opportunity to do other good deeds and even to sin. In some cases a good person might be reincarnated to perform good deeds he didn't have an opportunity to perform previously, and will be prevented from sinning; see Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, 41.

¹⁹See Whitely R. P. Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil,” *Philosophy East and West* 55:1 (2005), 15–32.

²⁰Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

just God or moral order would not punish subjects for wrongs committed in past lives.²¹

Punishing subjects who lack knowledge about the crimes they committed prevents punishment from serving the twin purposes of moral education and rehabilitation. In order for punishment to educate and rehabilitate, the wrongdoer must know what she is being punished for; only then can the punishment show her how serious the wrong is, and inspire her to reform. Since subjects cannot recall crimes committed in past lives, reincarnation cannot serve the purposes of education and rehabilitation.

There are three replies to the memory problem. The first is to deny that just punishment requires subjects to have knowledge of their wrongs. Consider a war criminal who has escaped detection until the end of his life, at which point he has such advanced Alzheimer's disease that not only has he no memory of his crimes but he cannot even be made to understand that he is guilty. Nevertheless, punishing the war criminal is just. While the punishment serves no rehabilitative purpose, it still serves the purposes of recompense and, perhaps, deterrence.²² The memory problem *at best* shows that punishment in reincarnation does not serve rehabilitative purposes, but it overlooks other purposes that render punishment just.

The second reply to the memory problem contends that knowledge of wrongs committed in past lives can be had. Within the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon (the *Vilna Gaon*; eighteenth century) lists two ways subjects can come to understand what wrongs they committed in past lives:

[H]ow does he know what he ruined [by sin] previously [in a past life]? There are two signs for this: first, what [sin] he stumbles in many times during this incarnation . . . ; secondly, what sin his soul desires greatly—since it was habituated [to it] previously [in a past life], and it became his nature. Thus there are some people who desire a certain sin, whereas others desire another sin.²³

By committing a wrong in a past life, the subject becomes more disposed towards that wrong, and that disposition carries over into the subsequent life. Thus subjects can understand what wrong they committed in past

²¹See Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 19–21.

²²In the case of the war criminal, the purpose of deterrence is served since other people know the crimes he committed and are deterred by the punishment from committing the same crimes. In contrast, in the case of reincarnation, others are as ignorant as the subject being punished is of what wrongs he committed in past lives. However, punishment in reincarnation can still serve the purpose of deterrence for those adhering to the doctrine. So long as they understand that some of the suffering they observe is punishment for wrongs committed in a past life, they can understand that wrongs have dire consequences, and be deterred from committing wrongs—even if they do not understand which wrongs the suffering is punishment for.

²³Elijah ben Solomon, *Perush al Yonah* (Vilna: s.n., 1800), 5b.

lives by examining their weaknesses and the wrongs they commit often: these are likely the wrongs they committed in past lives.

There is additionally the prospect of subjects coming to know the wrongs they committed at a future point. Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb proffers such a proposal in answer to an objection along the lines of the memory problem: “the suffering could be a relevant and useful punishment for the past, because *memory of his past can be restored at a later time*, and at that time he will appreciate the relevance of his suffering to his past misdeeds.”²⁴ The Jewish tradition does not propose an endless cycle of reincarnations. The cycles eventually come to an end, and then the subjects are appraised of their behaviour throughout past lives, and rewarded and punished for whatever deeds could not be dealt with through reincarnation.²⁵

However, there remains the problem of why the subjects are ever kept ignorant of wrongs committed. Gottlieb provides an ingenious answer, illustrated with the example of a pirate who kidnaps children:

It may even be that appropriate punishment requires that [the subject] be ignorant of the reason for his suffering while it is happening. For example, one type of punishment we often employ with children is to make the wrongdoer experience what he has done to others. (“You took his toy; now you lose your toy for today.”) In this way he learns what it feels like. Now imagine a pirate who kidnaps infants and sells them as slaves. Those infants experience pain, terror, deprivation, etc., *never knowing why*. How could the pirate experience that? Only if as an infant in a future life he experiences it! Of course *eventually* full memory will be restored and he will *see* the relevance of the punishment to the crime.²⁶

Sometimes suffering can serve the purpose of moral education only if the subject is ignorant of the wrong the suffering is punishment for, or even of the suffering being punishment at all. For part of the wrong committed when inflicting suffering on others might consist in the apparent pointlessness of the suffering to the victim. The perpetrator can learn how bad that is and why his act is so wrong only by undergoing suffering that is, at least for some time, apparently pointless.

The third reply is to contend that knowledge of wrongs committed in past lives is not necessary for punishment in reincarnation to serve the purposes of moral education and rehabilitation. So long as the punishment is of the right form, it could deepen the subject’s understanding of the kind of wrong he committed in a past life—even if he does not know that he committed that wrong. Thus a subject who neglected to feed the hungry in a previous life could be sensitized to the importance of feeding

²⁴Dovid Gottlieb, *The Informed Soul: Introductory Encounters with Jewish Thought* (New York: Mesora Publications, 1990), 152; italics in original.

²⁵In the case of humanly administered punishments, it generally seems that subjects must understand at the time why they’re being punished in order for punishment to serve rehabilitative purposes. After all, if they don’t understand then, they’re not likely to understand at a later stage. Reincarnation, however, allows for such knowledge.

²⁶Gottlieb, *The Informed Soul*, 152; italics in original.

the hungry by suffering from hunger. The suffering does not even require moral education for rehabilitation; thus in Gottlieb's example, "if our pirate's 'second childhood' involves painful experiences which leave him timid and shy, those experiences are serving the purposes of correcting his former tyrannical character"²⁷—and without the pirate having to acquire a deeper understanding of the badness of being a tyrant. The rehabilitative purpose of punishment is related closely to soul-building, which we pursue further in Section IV.²⁸

Objection 2: The Proportionality Problem

The original problem with the punishment theodicy was that subjects appear to suffer more than they deserve for the wrongs committed in their present lives. Reincarnation was then introduced to explain that this is mere appearance; the punishment is proportionate to wrongs committed in past lives. However, one might object that suffering is disproportionate not only to the wrongs subjects commit during their present lives, but also to wrongs committed during past lives: While people throughout history have behaved badly, it doesn't seem as if they have behaved so badly as to deserve the quantity and quality of suffering there is—all the misery caused by disease, natural disasters and violence. Although some subjects might have committed wrongs diabolical enough in past lives to deserve such misery, there seem to be more individuals that undergo horrors than plausibly deserve it.

We can deepen the problem with the following consideration: it seems as if only persecutors deserve the suffering of persecution; only the Nazi death camp officers could deserve the suffering of the death camps. But the persecuted have always outnumbered the persecutors. Thus the persecuted could not have once been the persecutors, and so persecution cannot be explained in terms of wrongs committed in past lives.

Kaufman frames the proportionality problem as a dilemma: an instance of suffering is the result of either a specific wrong committed in a past life or a "pool of karmic residues,"²⁹ an accumulation of wrongs committed in past lives. For Kaufman, there are two problems with taking the first horn. These arise from principles of proportionality requiring that the punishment fit the crime—an "eye for an eye."³⁰ The first problem is that such principles imply that rape victims must once have been rapists, that "we are all subject to death because we have been murderers in a past life"³¹—

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸A reviewer points out that while suffering hunger might sensitize one to the importance of feeding the hungry, it might instead make one *more* greedy and *more* protective of one's wealth. There's always the risk that challenges might make us worse, rather than better, people. But whether the risk is one worth taking is a general problem for soul-building theodicies, and not a special problem for reincarnation.

²⁹Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 21.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

which is highly implausible. The second problem with the first horn of the dilemma is that such principles cannot account for natural evils that subjects cannot have caused in past lives, such as Parkinson's disease. According to Kaufman, there are also two problems with the second horn. The first problem is that there is more suffering than can be accounted for in terms of punishment—even for “an enormous accumulation”³² of wrongs. The second problem is that a single harsh punishment for an accumulation of wrongs rather than a number of lighter punishments for each wrong would be unfair.

There are various replies to the the proportionality problem. The first is that the first horn of the dilemma relies on too strict a principle of proportionality. A more sensible principle requires only that the punishment fit the crime, not that punishment take the same form as the crime; for example, proportionality can be satisfied by fining a perpetrator of an assault, and does not require assaulting him in the same way. Thus Jewish religious law treats “an eye for an eye” as an idiom for fair compensation, and not literally.³³ Proportionality would not mean that rape and murder victims committed rape and murder in past lives, though they would have committed wrongs as bad as rape and murder; similarly, victims of Parkinson's disease need not have caused the disease in past lives, though they would have committed wrongs as bad as causing Parkinson's would be.

However, Kaufman could respond that the implication that victims of rape or murder are guilty of acts as serious as these is still highly implausible. More significant then is our second reply. The reply is that Kaufman underestimates the extent of the wrongs committed in the past, including past lives. There are powerful arguments for the view that we are much more morally culpable than we take ourselves to be.³⁴ For instance, someone who prefers to watch a child drown in a shallow nearby pond than to get his pants wet is a monster, but if the arguments of Peter Singer and Peter Unger have any force, then we are all very much like that person in allowing the starvation of very many children in Africa instead of donating some—indeed, a large proportion—of our income to them. But subjects in the present are not very much worse than those in the past. Thus if present subjects are extremely morally culpable, then past subjects were too; and, if reincarnation is true, then present subjects were likely extremely morally culpable in past lives.³⁵

³²Ibid.

³³See b. Ketub. 32b; b. B. Qam. 83b.

³⁴See Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:1 (1972), 229–243; Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Anselm also argues that seemingly slight wrongs are really enormously grave; see *Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 281–282. Thanks to Thomas Flint for the Anselm pointer.

³⁵Indeed, as a reviewer points out, if people are more morally culpable than they might seem to be, that mitigates the very first objection raised against punishment theodicy, that the suffering inflicted does not seem proportionate to the wrongs committed.

The third reply is that not all suffering is a result of punishment for wrongs committed in past lives; some suffering is to be explained in such terms, while other suffering is to be explained by other theodicies, including free will and soul-building theodicies. This reply is advocated by Arvind Sharma, who points out that not all suffering is explained by Eastern traditions in terms of punishment and reincarnation.³⁶ The Jewish tradition has invoked various answers to the problem of evil besides the punishment theodicy,³⁷ and even identifies at least four righteous individuals, who underwent “death without sin and suffering without iniquity.”³⁸ The third reply concedes that the punishment theodicy, even when supplemented with reincarnation, does not explain all suffering. But this does not mean that it cannot help explain some suffering, including some of the most difficult cases.

As for the second horn of the dilemma, Kaufman merely asserts that there is too much suffering in the past to be accounted for as punishment for an accumulation of wrongs. This might be supported as follows: There has always been terrible suffering. If terrible suffering is to be explained as punishment for an accumulation of wrongs committed in past lives, then terrible suffering in the past is to be explained as punishment for an accumulation of past wrongs. But being so terrible, the suffering in the past must have already sufficiently punished the accumulation of wrongs until then; but then the subsequent suffering cannot be explained as a punishment for the already required accumulation of past wrongs.

However, the previous two replies apply again here: the wrongs committed in past lives are so grievous that their accumulation demands punishment in the form of terrible suffering across various lives. In addition, Kaufman overlooks the possibility that subjects could continue sinning and thereby continue building up future punishments for themselves, even while they are suffering for their past sins. Another explanation for the continued presence of terrible suffering is that the process of reincarnation is effective at purifying souls despite appearances to the contrary: some souls might be purified by terrible suffering, while new souls come into being that will need purification. Finally, as we have already noted, not all suffering is to be explained as punishment.

Objection 3: The Problem of Explaining Death

Kaufman argues that death cannot be explained in terms of the theodicy developed. Death is an unnecessary, gratuitous evil since it serves neither as punishment for wrongs committed in past lives, nor any role in rewards for good deeds:

³⁶See Arvind Sharma, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: An Interjection in the Debate between Whitley Kaufman and Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis,” *Philosophy East and West* 58:4 (2008), 572–575.

³⁷Gottlieb, *The Informed Soul*, 131–145.

³⁸b. Šabb. 55b. *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed, Shabbath*, trans. Harry Freedman and ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1987).

[T]here is no reason at all that death needs to be the mechanism by which one attains one's rewards: why not simply reward the person with health, wealth, and long life, without having to undergo rebirth in the first place? Karma certainly does not need death and rebirth: as soon as one accumulates sufficient merit, one could be instantly transformed into a higher state of existence.³⁹

Kaufman objects that death—let alone, the cycle of deaths involved in reincarnation—cannot be accounted for in terms of punishment or soul-building. This is a serious problem because death is a severe and pervasive evil.

There are two replies to this problem. The first is that death is not gratuitous on the theodicy. Subjects often need to reincarnate in order to receive fitting recompense for their crimes, to have more opportunities, and to develop morally, since such punishment and growth can sometimes come only through experiences of a different kind of life. As we have seen, subjects may even need to be reborn as a different species. But reincarnation cannot be had without death. Thus death is necessary for higher goods.⁴⁰

Secondly, while not denying the evil of death, Jewish views on reincarnation minimize it—as do Jewish views about the afterlife generally, such as the doctrines of an ultimate eternal life in the World to Come—insofar as they deny death's finality. There can even be the opportunity to have the same spouse in a subsequent life. Vital explains that sometimes a subject will be reincarnated without his wife, and sometimes with his wife:

Sometimes he had already married his soul mate, but he sinned in some way, and is required to reincarnate to rectify that . . . but he comes back alone, as [the *Zohar* comments] on the verse, "If he comes by himself" [Exodus 21:3]. But sometimes he has merits, and so even though she is not required to reincarnate, his wife returns and reincarnates with him, which is the mystical meaning [of the rest of the verse], "and his wife will go out with him" [ibid.].⁴¹

Death need neither be a consequence of murder nor as bad as Kaufman believes. Indeed, death is necessary for reincarnation, and reincarnation serves various good purposes, including allowing for a fresh start in a radical way—an opportunity that cannot be had without death, or at least something very much like death. Death involves much that is bad, but nothing that cannot be undone by God, who "will swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25:8), and it might also allow for goods that cannot otherwise be had.

The doctrine of reincarnation can even be used to console the bereaved. For example, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (the *Baal Shem Tov*, eighteenth century) consoled the bereaved parents of a young child by explaining how

³⁹Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 23

⁴⁰See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 228–230, for various good purposes death can serve.

⁴¹Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, 33.

the child's short life served the purpose of soul-building: he had been a righteous convert in a previous life, and needed only a few more years living as a Jew in their loving household to achieve the requisite character.⁴²

Objection 4: The Free Will Problem

Kaufman raises several problems for the punishment theodicy stemming from implications reincarnation has for the existence of libertarian freedom. The major objection is that reincarnation is inconsistent with the view that there is free will. The problem is illustrated via a dilemma about a terrorist detonating a bomb. On the one hand, suppose that

Karma functions in a determinate and mechanical fashion. Then, whom-ever the terrorist kills will not be innocent but deserving of their fate. From the terrorist's perspective, if he is the agent of karma, his action is no more blameworthy than that of the executioner who delivers the lethal injection. Indeed, no matter what evils he does . . . he can always justify them to himself by saying he is merely an agent for karma . . . carrying out the punishments for these "wicked" people.⁴³

On the other hand, suppose that Karma does not function in a fully determined and mechanical fashion, but that the terrorist has free will:

[L]et us say that he has the potential to create genuine evil: to kill innocent, undeserving civilians. But now the problem is that a central, indeed crucial, tenet of the karma theory has been abandoned: that *all suffering* is deserved and justified by one's prior wrong acts. For now we have admitted the genuine possibility of gratuitous evil, innocent suffering—just what the theory was designed to deny.⁴⁴

The problem is that suffering inflicted by other subjects either is the just consequence of past wrongs (including wrongs committed in past lives) or is not. If it is the just consequence of past wrongs, then those inflicting the suffering are never blameworthy, which is absurd. If the suffering is not the just consequence of past wrongs, then the the punishment theodicy, even supplemented with reincarnation, does not explain all suffering. Either way, the theodicy fails.

Chadha and Trakakis reply to Kaufman by denying that, so long as suffering is a just consequence of past wrongs, those inflicting it are blameless. The subject inflicting the suffering is blameworthy if "it is not his role to carry out the punishment."⁴⁵ This is illustrated with an example of a killer who is sentenced to death, but who is then executed by a vigilante prison guard, rather than the designated officials. Similarly, in the case of

⁴²See Yonassan Gershom, *Jewish Tales of Reincarnation* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), 202.

⁴³Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 25.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, "Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman," 547.

the terrorist, "it is not for him to distribute the relevant punishment."⁴⁶ God (or an impersonal moral order) can have a right to punish wrongs when others do not have such a right.

Kaufman responds in turn by denying that wrongs arise merely from a misappropriation of roles. Otherwise

what was wrong about the 9/11 attack—or any crime—was not that innocent people were killed (everyone who died . . . deserved, according to karma, exactly what they got) but that the wrong people did the dirty work. . . . But what exactly does this mean? That the destruction of the planes and the buildings on 9/11 was supposed to have been accomplished by a lightning strike or some other natural force?⁴⁷

There are then two problems with Chadha and Trakakis's reply. The first is that it does not account for the grievousness of wrongs; the evil of the terrorism of 9/11 cannot be reduced to a misappropriation of roles. The second is that the reply apparently has the consequence that the victims would have suffered similarly even were the wrong not committed, which is implausible; there would have been no victims of 9/11 had the terrorists cancelled their plans. Kaufman further criticizes the reply as "an oddly constricted view of free will" since we would be "prevented from ever harming innocent people and yet not prevented from inappropriately providing justified punishment to guilty people."⁴⁸ The view of free will that emerges would place arbitrary limits on our abilities, so that we could perform some kinds of wrong but not others.

There are two replies to the free will problem. The first supplements Chadha and Trakakis's reply. They locate the blame of the perpetrator of a wrong in a misappropriation of a role. We add another source of blame: the intention of the perpetrator. Those who inflict suffering on others do not typically do so in an attempt to deliver justice. The example of the prison guard is not representative so long as he is trying to take justice into his own hands, as opposed to shooting the prisoner for fun. The perpetrators of terrorism are not attempting to deliver justice; even when they pretend to be responding to injustices committed against them, they are not trying to deliver justice upon their victims—who are targeted precisely because they are innocent. There are at least two necessary conditions for just punishment: first, one must fill the proper role and have the authority to punish, and secondly, one must have the correct intentions.

The other problems raised by Kaufman could be dealt with independently. We could answer the second problem by replying that the victims would have suffered similarly were the wrongs against them not committed. While the victims would not have suffered by the same means and at the same time they did, they would have suffered in a relevantly

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Whitley R. P. Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics," *Philosophy East and West* 57:4 (2007), 558.

⁴⁸Ibid., 558–559.

similar way at a later time in this or another life. We could answer the final problem by replying that our ability to harm others is limited, but not arbitrarily: we are prevented from harming the innocent for a reason—because this would run contrary to the moral order.

Kaufman might deny that this accounts fully for the gravity of the wrongs. The common view is that the gravity of wrongs often results not only from the bad intentions of the perpetrator but also from the bad consequences for the victims, especially in undeserved suffering. This is implied by Kaufman's characterization of "genuine evil" as "harm[ing] the innocent, producing undeserved suffering."⁴⁹ The second reply grants that there is "genuine evil" in this sense. We prefer this reply, and have already pursued it above: not all suffering is punishment; some suffering can only be explained via other theodicies. Kaufman characterizes such a reply as a "wholehearted concession to the radical limitation of the theory, an admission that enormous amounts of suffering cannot be explained or justified in terms of punishment for past wrongs."⁵⁰ However, how problematic a concession it is depends in part on how much suffering cannot be accounted for as punishment, and on how much of this can be accounted for in another way, by another theodicy. Conversely, how limited the theodicy developed is depends in part on how much suffering it can account for, and we contend that it can explain some of the most difficult cases of suffering.

Objection 5: The Moral Consequences Problem

Some might argue that if people actually believe that punishment and reward are meted out in subsequent lives, then this will have morally objectionable consequences. The belief might make us less willing to help those in need; believers in reincarnation might view suffering as deserved, and may not be motivated to help others (or themselves). Like a prisoner who is serving out a deserved and justly administered sentence, we might feel little sympathy for the afflicted and downtrodden and believe that we should not interfere with the justice delivered by God (or karmic forces).

Additionally, adherents might believe that, by helping those in need, we are depriving them of the opportunity for moral education and rehabilitation. Still worse, by helping others, we might actually be keeping them from completing their punishment, being atoned, and meriting the World to Come (or nirvana). Two problems for reincarnation can be distilled here, one for the adherent and another for those who suffer: first, the doctrine fosters a callous character in its adherents; secondly, it prevents the alleviation of suffering. Thus, reincarnation not only fails to solve the problem of evil, but deepens the problem by bringing about more evil.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid., 558.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹See Garrett, *Bad Karma*.

Carlo Filice responds to the objection by contending that “if we had the absolute power to remove these evil circumstances at once,” then by removing all the suffering we might indeed be interfering with the subject’s enlightenment. But since we don’t actually have such power, we cannot interfere with enlightenment in this way:

[T]he world may work in such a way that our attempts at immediate eradication of the evil conditions would find resistance—perhaps just enough resistance to produce improvements in the lot of the “victims” while not removing the needed difficulties these must face so as to learn tough lessons.⁵²

Therefore, we need not worry that our alleviating suffering will foil the subject’s chances of enlightenment, since however much suffering we alleviate, there will always remain enough for the purposes of enlightenment.

While Filice is right that we cannot remove all suffering, there remains the problem of whether we should remove all pain and suffering from the world *if we could*. If we could alleviate all suffering caused by natural disasters, then we should; at the very least, that wouldn’t be wrong. Any theory implying otherwise faces a strong *prima facie* objection. But the doctrine of reincarnation apparently implies that alleviating all suffering would be wrong because it would deprive us of the opportunity of enlightenment.

Fortunately, the doctrine does not imply that we should not try to eliminate suffering. According to the Jewish tradition, moral progress is not accomplished by punishment for sins alone, but also through good deeds—including acts of kindness and alleviating the suffering of others. For just one example—and returning to the question of our moral responsibility towards the starving—Jewish religious law demands donating at least ten percent of one’s income to charity. So by alleviating the suffering of others, we need not be robbing them of their only opportunity for progress toward enlightenment.

What of the thought that good deeds, such as kindness and charity, would not be possible without any suffering in the world? That would indeed make it wrong to eliminate absolutely all suffering—at least until there’s been enough opportunity to perform good deeds. The Jewish view is that there is first a period of moral challenges and opportunities, and then a period when the challenges are removed and evil is eliminated.⁵³ Theists more generally take God as having some overriding reasons for not eliminating all or any evil so long as he doesn’t. So perhaps the question of whether one should remove all evil from the world *if one were in such a God-like position* is not so straightforward. However, the question faces theodicies more generally, and is not a special problem for reincarnation.

There remains the problem that viewing the suffering of others as just punishment reduces our compassion for them, making it less likely that

⁵²Carlo Filice, “The Moral Case for Reincarnation,” *Religious Studies* 42:1 (2006), 54.

⁵³See Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Da’ath Tevunoth*, trans. Shraga Silverstein (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1982), 47–57.

we will help them, however much other religious teachings demand that we do. There are two possible responses to this problem. The first—and a point we have repeated—is that reincarnation does not entail that all suffering is punishment for wrongs committed in past lives; while some suffering is to be explained in this way, not all suffering is. We are not entitled to view all suffering as punishment for wrongs committed in past lives, and can retain presumptions of innocence about others, and “judge everyone favourably.”⁵⁴ The second is that we can foster compassion by recognising that we are all engaged in cycles of rebirth; if we are not the victims of poverty and disease today, we might have been in previous lives and still may be in the future. Indeed, virtually everyone must reincarnate, including the righteous, who might have to suffer for a wrong committed in an otherwise exemplary past life.⁵⁵ The Hassidic master Aharon Roth points out how the view, deepened by the doctrine of reincarnation, that there is so much more to others than meets the eye should induce greater reverence for them, for “even a simple person can have a soul rooted in a very lofty place.”⁵⁶ The doctrine of reincarnation can thus improve the way we view and treat others.

Objection 6: The Infinite Regress Problem

The Infinite Regress Problem is the theodicy’s failure to explain the origin of suffering. The objection is that the punishment theodicy supplemented with reincarnation explains events in a current life in terms of events in a prior life, and then explains events in that life in turn in terms of a yet prior life, and so on forever into the past. Because there is no terminus of explanation, the theodicy lacks explanatory power.⁵⁷

However, we deny that the punishment theodicy, even supplemented with reincarnation, explains all evil; the theodicy does not explain the wrongs that subsequent suffering is a punishment for. However, these wrongs—moral evils—can be explained in another way, via the free will theodicy. According to Jewish tradition, the original sin committed by Adam and Eve was not the result of punishment for a previous wrong; the sin was the *first* wrong ever committed. According to Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (eighteenth century), the only kind of evil present before the sin was man’s evil inclination, which was necessary for the great good of free will: “Thus man was created with a good inclination and an evil inclination, and he has the free will to direct himself towards whichever side he wants.”⁵⁸ He chose badly with disastrous consequences:

⁵⁴Avot 1:6.

⁵⁵See Vital, *Sha’ar HaGilgulim*, 58–59.

⁵⁶Aharon Roth, *Shomer Emunim* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Toldot Aharon, 1988), 141b.

⁵⁷Also see John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 308–309.

⁵⁸Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1997), 44.

When Adam sinned things changed drastically. . . . For originally whatever deficiency there was in nature . . . was necessary for Adam to be in the state of balance [so as to have free will]. . . . But by his sin he caused perfection to be concealed more than it was and deficiency to be increased, and he brought evil upon himself.⁵⁹

There is also no threat of an infinite regress because the past is not infinite. The very first verse of the Hebrew Bible is about God's creating everything else, and that is traditionally taken to include time itself.⁶⁰ To be sure, there are hints about events prior to the creation; for example, Rabbi Abahu (third–fourth centuries) taught that until creating our world God “created worlds and destroyed them.”⁶¹ However, these imply nothing about an infinite regress of explanations of evil.

Kaufman responds “that belief in radical free will would manage to avoid a regress in explaining the origin of evil,” albeit to no avail since such an explanation “is no better an explanation of evil than that of Christianity and the doctrine of the fall.”⁶² However, the view that there is free will is far more plausible than the doctrine of the fall, not least because the former is included in the latter. In any case, the view that there is free will is very plausible; while it comes with some philosophical costs, so does the alternative.⁶³ The view is held by at least a plurality of philosophers, and is not the kind of consequence typically taken to count strongly against a theory; for example, critics typically do not think it a refutation of the free-will theodicy to point out that it entails that there is free will.

IV. Combining Theodicies

The Free Will Theodicy

The free will theodicy accounts for evil as the unfortunate result of wrongs committed by free subjects. Those who endorse the theodicy contend that morally significant freedom requires a choice between good and evil, and that it is better for beings to freely choose good than to be forced to choose good by an overwhelming propensity for good or by a limited range of merely good options. According to Luzzatto, our moral freedom is such a great good as to be the very reason for the creation:

God is the very essence of good. But it is the nature of good to bestow good, and this is what He willed, to create beings in order to bestow good upon them—for without a receiver of the good, there is no bestowal of good. But in order for this bestowal to be perfect, He knew in his Sublime wisdom, that

⁵⁹Ibid., 50.

⁶⁰See Obadiah Sforno, *Biur al HaTorah* (Venice: Zuan Grippo, 1567), 4.

⁶¹*Midrash Rabbah HaMevoar: Sefer Bereishit*, ed. Avraham Shteinberger (Jerusalem: Machon HaMedrash HaMevoar, 1982), 9:2; see Hasdai Crescas, *Or HaShem*, ed. Shlomo Fischer (Jerusalem: n.s., 1990), 216; Levi Gersonides, *The Book of The Wars of the Lord* (Vol. 3), trans. Seymour Feldman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 17.

⁶²Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics,” 557.

⁶³See Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

it is fitting for those who receive it to receive it as the fruit of their labor. For then they will be the masters of this good and would not be shamefaced in receiving it, as one who receives charity from another. About this [the sages] said: "One who does not eat of his own is ashamed to look at his benefactor" [y.Or 1:3].⁶⁴

Indeed, being "the master of this goodness . . . and not given it by chance" is to be "partially reminiscent, as far as it is possible, of the perfection of God. For God is perfect by Himself and not as a matter of chance."⁶⁵ But, unlike God, man's free will comes with the potential to do wrong, though the great good of free will is worth the risk; as Swinburne explains, "it is good that the free choices of humans should involve genuine responsibility for other humans, and that involves the opportunity to benefit or harm them."⁶⁶ As it turns out, humans have not always chosen well, and some of the evil there is has resulted from this.

Objections

The most salient objection to the free will theodicy is from evils not resulting from free will—natural evils. However, the free will theodicy can be extended to explain natural evils. Swinburne and van Inwagen have proposed that significant free will might require our ability to predict the effects of our choices; the subject has a choice about whether he will harm someone only if he knows which actions would in fact result in harm—for example, that punching another will produce pain rather than pleasure. But unless there were regular natural laws, he could not predict the effect of his punch. But if subjects live in a system with regular laws, the inevitable consequence might be evils, such as earthquakes and diseases. However, one might wonder why these natural laws need hold in regions (and times) distant from any morally free subject. Why should non-human animals suffer from a system devised for the good of *human* moral decision-making? After all, an all-good God will care for all creatures, not just humans.

Answers from Reincarnation

The punishment theodicy, especially when supplemented with reincarnation, can help explain natural evils not accounted for by the simple free will theodicy. We might combine theodicies to explain suffering that animals endure in the wild. As we saw above, the fawn burned in the forest fire might be the reincarnation of an evil individual who needs punishment for past crimes.

Reincarnation helps solve another problem, one involving subjects deprived of free will. This often results from the bad choices of others; some subjects exercise their free will so as to deprive others of free will. For

⁶⁴Luzzatto, *Da'ath Tevunoth*, 17–19.

⁶⁵Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem*, 38.

⁶⁶Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 99.

example, bad parents can so damage their child's moral understanding and capacity that he will have significantly reduced moral freedom; thus the tragic phenomenon of the abused so often becoming an abuser. There is something paradoxical in invoking the great good of the parent's free will to explain why God permits them to harm the child when that harm consists in their depriving the child of free will. To be sure, with great freedom comes great responsibility, and there is no greater responsibility than responsibility over the freedom of others. Having the free will to affect the free will of others renders us very significant. But some might think this significance too great, the risks too severe. Furthermore, there is injustice in some subjects being deprived of free will while others are not.

Reincarnation helps explain why God would allow some subjects the free will to deprive others of free will. Reincarnation extends the opportunities for free will, providing subjects deprived of free will in one life a future life in which they are not deprived of free will. The damage done by abusive parents need not be permanent; God can wipe the slate of the soul clean, and provide the child with good parents in a subsequent life. Thus the injustice of the previous incarnation would be compensated for. Far from restricting free will, reincarnation *extends* free will. The doctrine can thereby supplement another theodicy besides the punishment theodicy—the free will theodicy.

An objection arises from the Vilna Gaon's account of how subjects can know which wrongs they committed in past lives by examining their current dispositions: by committing a wrong in a past life, the subject becomes more disposed towards that wrong, and that disposition carries over into the subsequent life. This implies that past dispositions are retained, that damage done to a soul in a previous life carries over into a subsequent life. However, on this account the dispositions carried over into the subsequent life are those resulting from wrongs committed by the subject—not dispositions resulting from wrongs committed by *others*. Thus the account does not imply that bad dispositions in a subject caused by other subjects, such as the damage caused by abusive parents, carry over into a subsequent life.

The Soul-Building Theodicy

What emerges from our treatment of punishment theodicy is that punishment need not be entirely retributive. According to Jewish tradition, punishment serves educational and rehabilitative purposes; as for reincarnation, subjects suffer from wrongs committed in past lives not only for retribution but also for moral development or soul-building. Thus there is the tale of a miser who is made a pauper in a subsequent life in order to understand the value of charity.⁶⁷ The *Bahir* quoted at the outset of this essay continues immediately to portray reincarnation as the replanting of souls until they realize their potential:

⁶⁷See Gershon, *Jewish Tales of Reincarnation*, 168–173.

His colleagues said to him: How long will you conceal your words?

He replies: Go out and see. What is this like? A person planted a vineyard and hoped to grow grapes, but instead, sour grapes grew. He saw that his planting and harvest were not successful so he tore it out. He cleaned out the sour grape vines and planted again. When he saw that his planting was not successful, he tore it up and planted again.

How many times?

He said to them: For a thousand generations: It is thus written (Psalms 105:8), "The word that He commanded for a thousand generations."⁶⁸

The reincarnation theodicy thus fits nicely alongside the soul-building theodicy. The soul-building theodicy explains suffering as necessary for the great good of character development. Suffering is necessary for us to develop the virtues of courage and patience in the face of trials and tribulations, and to develop compassion, empathy and kindness towards the suffering of others; God allows us to suffer in order to display these virtues. Indeed, if the only purpose of punishment is rehabilitation, then the punishment theodicy is a species of soul-building theodicy.

Objections

There are two main problems for the soul-building theodicy. First, some experience suffering that is so horrendous as to be soul-destroying—suffering that can't or doesn't lead to any soul-building. Adams criticizes the soul-building theodicy on the grounds that "horrendous evil is dysteleological to those who participate in it."⁶⁹ Further, it seems as if a good God would not "permit some to participate in horrors in order that others might profit from a better soul-making environment."⁷⁰ It seems then that some suffering—suffering that does not lead to character development—cannot be explained by the soul-building theodicy. The second problem for the soul-building theodicy involves animal suffering: what can animals learn from suffering? The best evidence suggests that animals do not have the intellectual sophistication to evaluate and develop their own characters. There is, then, no explanation for animal suffering on the soul-building theodicy; Hick contends that "we can glimpse only that aspect of God's purpose for His world that directly concerns ourselves" whereas animal suffering is a mystery.⁷¹

Answers from Reincarnation

According to Jewish tradition, reincarnation serves the purpose of soul-building—not only through suffering, but by allowing for opportunities for good deeds that were not available in past lives. These deeds include following the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) of the Torah, each of which

⁶⁸*The Bahir*, 78.

⁶⁹Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 52.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 317.

involves many specific rules. Some subjects fail to follow commandments because of wickedness or negligence; others simply never have the opportunity.⁷² Reincarnation provides opportunities for character development and fulfilling commandments not available in past lives. According to Luzzatto, reincarnation allows for God to maximize our chances for becoming virtuous:

The highest wisdom arranged, in order to further increase [our prospects of] success . . . , that one soul would enter this world at different times in different bodies, and in this way, would be able to rectify at one time that which it ruined [by sinning] at another time, or perfect that which it did not perfect. Then at the end of all the incarnations, when [the soul] appears before the final judgment, the verdict on it will accord with everything that occurred to it throughout its reincarnations and the circumstances it faced in them.⁷³

Reincarnation provides resources to answer the problems for soul-building outlined above. First, it is possible that some will suffer so greatly that they will make no progress toward virtue. But this life need not be the last and only chance to make progress. Reincarnation allows subjects to live multiple lives, affording further chances to become virtuous. One might wonder why such soul-crushing suffering is permitted in the first place. If the purpose of suffering is to provide challenges that will help us to become better people, why does dysteleological evil exist? In order to answer this question we can combine theodicies. We also have recourse to the punishment and free-will theodicies: any instance of terrible suffering could be punishment for sins committed in past lives.

The second problem for the soul-building theodicy can also be answered by supplementing the soul-building theodicy with reincarnation. As we have seen, if animals are reincarnated people, then their experience of suffering can be punishment for past wrongs. Furthermore, animal suffering would serve soul-building purposes if, at the end of a cycle of lives, the subject could look back on his life as an animal and learn lessons of compassion and humility.

A final objection against reincarnation—especially as it is framed in Eastern traditions as a potentially indefinite process—is that if we have indefinite opportunities to change the kind of people we are, then no decision we make about our characters now, however good or bad, need really matter. For we could, and likely would, take on another direction at some future time.⁷⁴ However, according to Jewish tradition there is a limit to the number of times subjects can be reincarnated, which depends on the kind of wrongs they have committed and the progress they are making; some may only reincarnate three times whereas others, as suggested by the passage quoted above, may reincarnate a thousand times.⁷⁵ Reincarna-

⁷²See Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, 47–48.

⁷³Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem*, 124–126.

⁷⁴Compare Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 229.

⁷⁵See Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, 21; ben Israel, *Nefesh Hayyim*, 161b–162b.

tion thus provides a way for us to maximise our potential, without losing the meaning of what we do here and now.⁷⁶

V. Conclusion

Eastern religions endorse the doctrine of reincarnation, and employ it to explain the existence of evil within a moral order. While it provides resources for a theodicy, the doctrine is largely ignored by Western philosophers. However, reincarnation is not inextricably linked to non-theistic doctrines, and employing it within a theistic framework does not wrench it out of context, since it has already been used within Jewish and Druze frameworks for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, because reincarnation is foreign to contemporary Western philosophy, and Western-style monotheism is foreign to Eastern philosophy, our treatment requires the overcoming of conceptualizations (and prejudices) from both sides. Judaism and Druzism can traverse the boundaries between West and East here. We have focused on the way Judaism employs the doctrine as a part of an explanation of evil, how the doctrine supplements traditional theodicies, and how it avoids various objections. Our treatment is only a beginning, and there remains much more to address, but, for our part, that will have to wait for another life.⁷⁷

*Institute for Advanced Study, Shalem College,
and Grand Valley State University*

⁷⁶The objection might resurface if we adopt universalism, the claim that in the end everyone will be perfected. Judaism does not endorse universalism: souls will acquire different levels, and some will even be annihilated; b. Roš Haš. 17a; see Luzzatto, *Derech HaShem*, 99, 103–105.

⁷⁷Thanks to the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame for hosting us while we wrote this essay.