ON REINCARNATION: A REPLY TO HALES

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Some philosophers have argued that Cartesian Mind-Body Dualism is an empirically testable hypothesis because we know just what empirical evidence would suffice at the sensory level to confirm belief in personal reincarnation, properly described in minimalist terms. In short, belief in personal reincarnation implies certain testable predictions and, according to Derek Parfit, A.J.Ayer, and others, if what is predicted thereby were to occur frequently enough, we would have sufficient evidence to warrant belief in reincarnation and hence, by implication, some basic form of Cartesian mind-body substance dualism. While such Cartesian Dualism itself would therefore be an empirical thesis, it's truth would not support, rather than undermine, the core of physicalist theories of mind, at least to the extent that such physicalist theories fail to explain equally plausibly the data in the relevant cases. Of course, Parfit is not alone in arguing that what it would have taken to confirm empirically belief in personal reincarnation just has not occurred; and so, we would not, for all that, be justified in believing the Cartesian story even though that story is indeed an empirically confirmable hypothesis.(Reasons and Persons 227 pb).

Some of us have been suggesting that because belief in reincarnation (and hence in Mind-Body Cartesian dualism) is an empirical question for all the reasons noted by Parfit, Ayer, and others, examination of the strongest reincarnation case studies that have emerged over the past twenty five years is crucial. Do such cases actually show that the predictions implied by belief in reincarnation occur and cannot be equally well explained by appeal to some other hypothesis inconsistent with any form of mind-body dualism? There are literally thousands of documented cases that have in varying degrees satisfied the conditions that Parfit and others have specified as necessary and sufficient

for warranting belief in reincarnation. In short, the claim that some of us have been urging is that the thesis is confirmed by appeal to the data in the strongest cases, that there is no equally plausible explanation of the data in the cases in question, and that if we are right, the mind-body problem has been solved empirically in favor of a basic form of Cartesian substance dualism.

II. Hales's Rejoinder

Steven Hales argues that even if we accept all the reincarnation-type cases discussed in the literature as sound data satisfying Parfit's stated conditions about what would suffice to show that some people do in fact sometimes reincarnate, Parfit and others (including myself) would still be wrong in concluding that belief in reincarnation would have been empirically confirmed thereby. Hales gives two basic reasons and a number of subsidiary reasons for his position.

(a) His first basic reason is that reincarnation, as a proposed explanation of the data in the stronger cases, does not satisfy the standards for a good explanation, whereas explanations offered in the prevalent physicalistic *paradigm* do. In fact, for Hales, appealing to reincarnation would be to offer not even a minimally acceptable, explanation because such an appeal would not explain how or why reincarnation occurs. This is what he means when he says that reincarnation hypothesis does not explain the data and that such data can only be explained within a well-confirmed theory. In natural science, then, good explanations must explain how or why the events allegedly explained occur, and appeal to reincarnation as an hypothesis to explain the facts in the stronger cases would not, for that reason alone, satisfy the requirements of a good scientific explanation. Alternative explanations offered under the dominant physicalistic *paradigm*, however, do not suffer from such a deficiency; and that is why, according to Hales, appeal to the best available scientific theory of mind, namely, anti-Cartesian physicalism, offers the only possible explanation for the cases in the data, even if those sorts of explanations are incomplete in some basic way or fashion. In short, for Hales, under the best of conditions, appealing to reincarnation in order to explain the data in crucial cases explains nothing at all.

(b) Hales' second major objection is that, independently of what we just noted, we should not reject the anti-Cartesian physicalistic *paradigm* to explain

the problematic data because there are equally plausible, or even more plausible, explanations of the data available that are consistent with the dominant physicalistic theory of mind; and they too are empirically testable. Here he offers the ET hypothesis as a more plausible alternative explanation of the data and, in the offing, argues that the reincarnation explanation of the data is more like the "dark suckers" theory of light bulb illumination than it is like the "light emission" explanation of the facts. Since we have no good reason to reject our best physicalistic theory of mind unless we have stronger, or more persuasive, explanations of the data, we have no justification for countenancing the reincarnationist's so-called explanation of the crucial data, especially when it does not allow for an understanding of the why or how of reincarnation. The appeal to reincarnation, then, makes no sense from the viewpoint of an adequate theory of mind, and the requirements of a scientific explanation of the data that would fall therein. Because these two reasons seem to be the most dominant reasons Hales offers against the reincarnation hypothesis, we may focus on them before going on to other difficulties he raises.

III. Reincarnation as an Explanation of the Data

In response to Hales' first objection, it seems fair to say that we can certainly justifiably assert the existence of a certain entity or process as an explanation for a body of data without having to say how or why the entities appealed to in the explanation work as they do in causing the data explained by appeal to them. As noted elsewhere, in the history of science we often get solid evidence for a fact, but do not know why the fact occurs or even how it occurs; and in the reincarnation cases the explanation seeks to establish the fact of reincarnation without explaining how reincarnation occurs or even why. It is fair to say, for example, that long before we could identify either the gene causing the disease, or the mechanism by which the gene produced the disease, we knew that a certain percentage of the cases of primary schizophrenia were purely genetic or metabolic. That conclusion was simply the best available statistical explanation of the data in studies of identical twins, raised in different environments, but born of parents both of which had been diagnosed before parenting as primary schizophrenics. In those days, it was not uncommon to hear geneticists say "We do not know what gene or complex of genes causes it, how such genes work, or why such genes are there at all, but we do know

that this is sometimes a purely genetic disease because there is no other equally plausible way to explain the results of the identical twin studies". As it happens, for the above reasons, we knew long before the discovery of the gene causing primary schizophrenia, and long before we knew how the gene works in causing the disease, that a certain percentage of the cases of primary schizophrenia were in fact of a purely genetic origin. Failure to know why or how the disease occurred was by no means evidence for either an unconscionable haziness or the illegitimacy of the explanatory belief that primary schizophrenia is often, or even most often, a purely genetic disease. And the claim itself was not, for that reason, vague, controversial, obscure or confused. One can argue for much the same reasons that we know that some persons have reincarnated.

If all this is so, if, that is, one can know that X is the cause of Y without knowing how or why X acts causally, then Hales' first basic objection to the appeal to reincarnation as an explanation of the data in the richer cases flounders on the supposition that all explanations in science are adequate only if causal in nature. While it is certainly the goal of mature science to explain causally why the facts are as they are, it is first and foremost the goal of science to determine what the facts are to be explained causally, and determining what the facts are is often a simple matter of what is the best available explanation of the data we have for determining what the causes of certain phenomena may be even though we do not know why those causes are there, or even how they work as causes. So the explanation of the data in the better reincarnation cases need not, in order to be an acceptable (rather than ideal)explanation of the phenomena in question, show how reincarnation causes the data or even why it does. All that is required is that the hypothesis that fits the data be not arbitrary, that it have independent test implications at the sensory level, that the data in the case studies in question be precisely what we would expect if the explanatory hypothesis were correct, that the hypothesis be empirically and explicitly falsifiable, and that there be no equally plausible and non-arbitrary alternative hypothesis that explains the data equally well. Let us turn to Hales' second major objection, namely, that the ET hypothesis is an equally plausible hypothesis for the data in the stronger cases.

IV. The ET Hypothesis as an Explanation

Imagine, for the sake of discussion, Hale's ET hypothesis. This is the hypothesis

that there is a group of extra-terrestrials considerably more intelligent and technologically advanced than homo sapiens and who, purely for entertainment, manage to provide selected humans with special memories and cognitive skills that they would have had if they had lived earlier as people who had those memories and skills. In short, they recreate, for example, Napoleon's memory, sense of humor, and cognitive skills (including his ability to speak Napoleonic French) and implant them into young Anne Davis who, is suddenly becoming aware of these memories, then for obvious reasons mistakenly believes that she was in a past life none other than Napoleon himself. After all, in her mind, and in the mind of others also, she has all the memories we would expect Napoleon to have, and she has the memories that only Napoleon could have. She remembers having lived as Napoleon and describes, for example, the details of the battle of Waterloo in the way that only Napoleon's military mind could describe it. Besides that, she can now speak in proper dialect Napoleonic French, which she demonstrably did not learn to speak in her lifetime as Anne Davis, and she typically says such things as "I was Napoleon in my last life" or "I remember living as Napoleon in my past life". When questioned, she asserts (to the sheer delight of our alien manipulators) that there could be no better explanation for her having all these verified memories than that she is indeed the reincarnation of Napoleon. In short, we can easily imagine a hypothesis in which all the evidence that counts, or would count, for justifiably believing in reincarnation equally counts for this ET hypothesis. In fact, under the ET hypothesis, the evidence that we would count as evidence for reincarnation (assuming that the criterion for personal identity involves having certain unique and *systemically* connected memories) is more fundamentally empirical evidence that supports the ET hypothesis. Under the ET hypothesis, all the evidence that counts for reincarnation counts more properly for the ET hypothesis. Is there anything wrong with the ET hypothesis as an alternative explanation for the reincarnation data?

To begin with, if we assume, (as we should) that empirical testability is a necessary condition for any hypothesis that seeks to explain human behavior, we will not succeed if we criticize the ET hypothesis by claiming that the hypothesis is not empirically testable. It certainly seems testable in principle. As we have just described the ET hypothesis, all the empirical evidence that supports the reincarnation hypothesis will count equally for the ET hypothesis.

The only difference by way of testability is that confirming the ET hypothesis requires testing the claim that the cause of all the evidence supporting the belief in reincarnation roots in the activities of the extra-terrestrials. It is easy enough to imagine what would convince us of the ET hypothesis; but we would certainly need to wait until we could talk with them at length and until they could show us exactly how it could be done. For obvious reasons, the ET hypothesis may not be actually currently testable, but it is certainly testable in principle. As it presently stands, however, any explanation of the reincarnation data in terms of the activities of extra-terrestrials would need to assume the existence of extra-terrestrials who are the causal agents producing the data that would otherwise support belief in reincarnation.

Will we be tempted to respond that the ET hypothesis is arbitrary, or *ad hoc*, because belief in extra-terrestrials is willful belief in what is merely logically possible, and there is no good independent evidence for there being such creatures anyway? If so, we can expect Hales and the advocates of the ET hypothesis to respond that, apart from the fact that the reincarnation hypothesis fits the data in the richer cases, which the ET hypothesis also does, there is no independent empirical evidence for belief in minds or souls that could reincarnate.

Advocates of the ET hypothesis might, of course, argue even more strongly that there is in fact good empirical evidence that there are extra-terrestrials; and there is certainly a compelling argument that the probability is quite high that there must be extra-terrestrials, even if nobody has yet publicly confirmed their existence in any clear way. Hales asserts as much in a footnote. But, they will add, there is no such independent evidence favoring belief in Cartesian minds that could reincarnate. So, from an empirical view, belief in aliens manipulating people's minds to produce data confirming the false belief in reincarnation, is actually a much stronger empirical hypothesis than belief in reincarnation, even though it need only be as plausible in order to undermine belief in reincarnation.

As if that were not enough, moreover, advocates of the ET hypothesis may well urge that the ET hypothesis is equally empirically falsifiable: whatever evidence falsifies belief in reincarnation will, by implication, obviously falsify the ET hypothesis, by simple modus tollens. If the ET hypothesis is true, then it implies whatever evidence we would accept as necessary and sufficient for

belief in reincarnation. Or so it may be said. In the end, however, the problem with the ET hypothesis is basically that it is simply not as plausible as the reincarnation hypothesis. After all, we know what we would take as conditions both necessary and sufficient for somebody being the reincarnation of Julius Caesar. Such a person would need to not only claim to remember having lived as Julius Caesar, but also that person would need to have many of the memories we would expect of Julius Caesar, some confirmed memories that only Caesar could have had, and a limited number of other mental states or dispositions having to do with one's sense of humor, temperament, or non-verbal unlearned skills possessed by the previous personality. At least that is Derek Parfit's telling insight. Parfit claims that this is what it would have taken to prove the existence of Cartesian mental substance, distinct from material substance, as we know it, and that could survive biological death. But, as we saw above, Parfit hastens to add that there is no such empirical evidence; and that is why Parfit believes that, in fact, reincarnation is false along with the hypothesis that there is some basic aspect of human personality that survives bodily corruption. In short, what makes the reincarnation hypothesis so plausible is that the data in the richer cases is precisely what we would have antecedently accepted and predicted as sufficient evidence for reincarnation. It fits neatly our basic and intuitive sense of what constitutes personal identity over time, assuming, for many good reasons, that personal identity cannot be simply a matter of bodily continuity over time. So, there is a *prima facie* plausibility to the reincarnation hypothesis as an explanation of the data in the richer cases because the content of the richer cases is precisely what we would expect or predict if we thought there was any evidence at all that would confirm the hypothesis of reincarnation.

The ET hypothesis, however, is relevantly different in that it is by no means the hypothesis we would offer initially to explain the data in the richer reincarnation cases. In these cases the data fits immediately our highly intuitive notion of what we should expect to find if indeed people ever were to reincarnate.

Of course, if one's preferred criterion for personal identity is hard-wired in terms of bodily continuity of some sort (for the reason that one just knows that there could not be Cartesian immaterial substances), then, of course, there is nothing one would accept as empirical evidence for belief in reincarnation or

any other form of personal post mortem survival. And if one has good reasons for adopting some criterion of personal identity in terms of bodily continuity of some sort, she cannot accept any evidence for post mortem personal survival.

But, interestingly enough, it is just these richer reincarnation cases that challenge or test that anti-Cartesian intuition because one has to offer alternative explanations in terms of highly speculative potential causes for the data, such as extra- terrestrials, whose existence we cannot now confirm in any public way. And even if we did confirm the existence of such extra terrestrials, the hypothesis that they are responsible for the data in the richer reincarnation cases would need to be confirmed as a plausible explanation to fund a purely physicalist criterion for personal identity. If one is not dogmatic about one's anti- Cartesianism, the data in the richer reincarnation cases overwhelmingly suggests as the first plausible hypothesis that the subjects in these cases are indeed reincarnated persons, simply because they have confirmed memories of events that could be known only by the former person in question. Given that our criterion for personal identity includes having certain verifiable memories that only the subject could have, such data is just what we would expect if some minimalist form of reincarnation were true. If one is dogmatic about one's anti-Cartesianism, there is no good explanation of the data, except to say we have no good explanation for this data and will need to wait until it can be explained, presumably in terms of causal mechanisms and processes more amenable to the intuitions of strict physicalist models in natural science, as we now know it. Of course, that is not to explain the data; rather it is a refusal to do so because one just knows that anti-Cartesian physicalistic theories of mind must be true, and that personal identity cannot be a matter that commits us to some form of Cartesian dualism.

If asked, moreover, what empirical evidence we should accept for the claim that ETs are manipulating people into thinking they are reincarnated persons, we would doubtless come up with a suitable response. But claiming that such evidence in fact obtains would appeal to the existence of entities and processes that we cannot now plausibly claim exist. In this sense the ET hypothesis is, in the end, an *ad hoc* explanation because it assumes what is quite questionable for a number of reasons. But if asked what empirical evidence we would accept for the claim that people sometimes reincarnate, we would specify antecedently evidence of the sort that we actually find in the reincarnation cases and which

is not manufactured for the purpose of proving reincarnation; and that is not to appeal at all, by way of an explanation, to entities whose existence we cannot now establish. That is ultimately why the reincarnation hypothesis is the more plausible explanation fitting these cases. It only assumes that personal identity cannot be solely and simply a matter of bodily continuity over time.

Moreover, this latter assumption is less an instance of begging the question against materialism and positions hostile to reincarnation than it is a simple matter of displaying our deepest intuitions about personal identity. And if there is nothing one would take as evidence that somebody is the reincarnation of Caesar, then it is hard to see how one can avoid dogmatic anti-Cartesianism, which is maximally counter-intuitive when we examine closely the implications in terms of an adequate criterion for personal identity over time.

V. Other Objections

In addition to the above two objections, Hales asserts that any presumptively adequate explanation of the data in the stronger reincarnation cases will need to be consistent with the best currently available theory for explaining human behavior, and that the best currently available theory on that score is generally acknowledged to be Physicalism. Since the reincarnation hypothesis is inconsistent with the best currently available theory explaining human behavior, it will be unacceptable in any case. In short, according to Hales, the reincarnation hypothesis is disproportionately implausible at the outset, whatever the data, in virtue of the high initial improbability of any theory inconsistent with the physicalist *paradigm*.

In response, however, this requirement itself represents a question-begging move against the reincarnation hypothesis precisely because the hypothesis is rejected at the outset for the alleged reason that it could not be true if the *paradigm* is true. But this objection is hardly coercive because the evidence offered for reincarnation is in fact evidence that challenges the adequacy of the *paradigm* for explaining crucial bits of human behavior. In other words, the reincarnation hypothesis presents evidence which if true shows that the *paradigm* is false, and if the *paradigm* is not allowed to be challenged by evidence for what is inconsistent with the *paradigm*, then no theory would ever change and anomalies would never be explained because of it. In short, this objection is a question- begging move against the reincarnation hypothesis,

because it regards any evidence against the *paradigm* as fundamentally unacceptable. Although we generally tend in natural science to credit any given explanation with a higher degree of credibility than any other that is inconsistent with the existing *paradigm*, we must allow evidence to challenge the *paradigm*, otherwise the *paradigm* becomes *a priori* true. In the case at hand, we cannot reject the reincarnation hypothesis simply because it is inconsistent with the existing *paradigm*. We must allow it to function as evidence against the *paradigm* simply because there is no plausible alternative explanation of the data available in the current *paradigm* and because there is independent evidence in its favor and nothing falsifying it by way of a plausible alternative explanation of the data.

Hales offers another objection to the effect that even if the conditions Parfit specifies as necessary and sufficient for belief in reincarnation were satisfied, that would provide no reason at all to believe that reincarnation occurs. In fact, however, it is Parfit's view that if such conditions were to be satisfied it would follow logically that reincarnation is true, and that is more than saying that that would provide some evidence for believing that reincarnation is true; it is rather saying that, given certain provisos, one would be epistemically irresponsible not to accept belief in reincarnation if the conditions specified were in fact satisfied in the stronger cases.

Hales also refers approvingly to Antony Flew's objection that the evidence for reincarnation is not repeatable under scientifically controlled conditions. Admittedly, one cannot produce the strong reincarnation case studies at will; but then again we never did produce at will the fossilized remains that confirm belief in the past existence of dinosaurs. Yet few people would for that reason regard our belief in the past existence of dinosaurs as based upon evidence that is merely anecdotal and incapable of aspiring to the level of scientifically acceptable data. In fact, given Parfit's statement of conditions necessary and sufficient for compelling belief in reincarnation, we know exactly what would confirm belief in reincarnation, even if we are not able to produce the confirming data at will. The thesis is anything but based upon anecdotal evidence, because the predictions implied by the hypothesis are clearly publicly observable. For example, if and when somebody makes many detailed and confirmed memory claims about events not previously known to have occurred, and could be known only by the person specified in the past life as the one

now reincarnated, we would have sufficient confirmation of the hypothesis. In short, much of what is confirmed in science derives from experiments that are not laboratory experiments but are experiments none the less. We also know what it would take to falsify the reincarnation hypothesis, even though we cannot produce the data at will. If, for example, all the stronger case studies were demonstrably fraudulent or the product of sloppy methodology, and if no non-fraudulent cases ever occurred again, we would be justified in rejecting the reincarnation thesis as an empirical thesis. Doubtless, other logically possible alternative explanations would be equally falsifying, if they came to be empirically confirmed and repeatable.

But Hales asserts confidently that the evidence for reincarnation is crucially disanalogous to the evidence for the past existence of dinosaurs. For Hales, the past existence of dinosaurs is consistent with our best empirical theories, whereas reincarnation is not consistent with either our best empirical theories, or with our best philosophical theories, about the mind. He adds that most contemporary philosophers regard the best theory of mind to be some form of materialism, presumably some form of anti-Cartesian materialism. In responding, as I have, that this way of establishing the desired disanalogy simply begs the question in favor of anti-Cartesianism by not allowing the data for reincarnation to challenge the *paradigm* of anti-Cartesianism, Hales believes that that response blindly "venerates data over theory". However, Hales' response here seems confusing. The data in the reincarnation cases is explained by the theory, if you will, of reincarnation which predicts, in turn, the data confirming the theory. It is difficult to see how this is a matter of blindly venerating data over theory. As theories go, however, belief in reincarnation is nothing more than the attempt to explain the data in the strong cases without, to be sure, explaining how or why the cause in question works the way it does.

Finally, Hales asserts, by way of a *reductio* of the reincarnation thesis, that if we were to accept belief in reincarnation, then it would lead, by simple modus tollens, to an extreme skepticism because it implies that we are not justified in accepting any empirical theory about the world. Given this objection, if, for any reason, we accepted some basic form of Cartesian mind-body dualism, then all scientific explanations will fail because the whole of science is committed to materialism and a world of physical objects purely material

and governed by the laws of physics. Hales then goes on to note, in conjunction with this *reductio*, that rejecting the prevailing theory simply because there is some evidence against it is to endorse altogether too strong a requirement for accepting a theory because there is always some evidence against a prevailing theory. So, even if we did accept the data as supportive of reincarnation, that would not be sufficient to override the physicalist *paradigm*.

On the contrary, science is committed to whatever objects whose existence we can establish by standard methods of testing and confirmation.....even if by those methods we discover an object whose causal activities may remain largely inscrutable to us. Reincarnation, for all the reasons noted above, is an empirical thesis which, if confirmed in terms of what it predicts, merely shows that that form of empiricism which denies Cartesian Dualism is unacceptable, or that anti-Cartesianism (as it is usually understood) is not a defensible empirical view about the nature of the mind. On the face of it, there is nothing inconsistent with being an empiricist and believing in Cartesian immaterial substances. In fact, that's the moral of the Parfit story as soon as we see that reincarnation, minimally construed, is an empirically testable hypothesis. On this construal, we could certainly be justified in accepting any empirical theory about the nature of minds and the world, as long as it did not imply the falsity of an appropriately defined Cartesian mind-body dualism. The only items about which one would end up being skeptical are claims to the effect that belief in any form of Cartesian mind-body dualism is inconsistent with having a proper scientific world-view. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of having some evidence against an anti-Cartesian theory otherwise highly warranted; it's a matter rather of having much evidence necessary and sufficient for the truth of Cartesian Dualism which, if it is true, refutes any theory of mind committed essentially to explaining all human behavior on the assumption that Cartesian Dualism must be false. In other words, if one accepts the data in the reincarnation cases as satisfying something very much like Parfit's necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of Cartesian immaterial substances then the implications are indeed revolutionary, and that physicalistic (anti-Cartesian) theories of mind are indeed mistaken in crucial ways even if in some ways they may not be. That's the simple logic of it all.

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