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Book Review

Mikel Burley, *Rebirth and the Stream of Life: A Philosophical Study of Reincarnation, Karma and Ethics*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. viii + 202, ISBN: 978-1-62892-226-4 (Pbk).

In recent decades, western philosophers of religion have taken an increasing interest in non-Western religions and the ideas found therein. In *Rebirth and the Stream of Life*, Mikel Burley seeks to contribute to the aim of expanding philosophy of religion beyond the three Abrahamic faiths by undertaking a detailed study of the idea of rebirth (and to a lesser extent the doctrine of karma). Burley's aim is not to defend rebirth but to explore the implications of what it means to believe in it, thus making his book a work of philosophical hermeneutics which attempts to analyse and elucidate its subject matter without advocating or rejecting it. In this it succeeds admirably.

The first chapter ("Varieties of rebirth") presents an overview of various rebirth theories and charts their similarities and differences. Burley here provides a useful typology of his own devising. Those rebirth theories which have "soteriological orientations" (p. 18), that is, which conceive life as having a goal or direction, are divided into two main types: cessative, when there is a final spiritual goal such as the release from the cycle of rebirth, and affirmative, when there is incremental spiritual evolution without a definite endpoint. Rebirth theories are also divided into retributive and non-retributive. The retributive theories are typically interwoven with the doctrine of karma, which holds that our good or bad actions will have good or bad consequences for us, which may be felt in this lifetime or a future one. The non-retributive rebirth theories are divided into two kinds: those that envisage "affinitive continuities" between lives, such that one's knowledge and personality traits in this life are carried over to the next incarnation, and those that acknowledge "consanguineous continuities," where one is thought to be reborn within one's own family, immediate or extended (p. 33). By outlining some of the many different ways in which rebirth can and has been understood, the opening chapter succeeds in its aim of showing how problematic it is to suppose that there is a classical or paradigmatic conception of rebirth theory, and accordingly it serves as a useful corrective against simplistic or one-dimensional presumptions about what rebirth beliefs must be like.

In the chapters that follow, Burley seeks to show how theories of rebirth (and the claims bound up with them) might be intelligible in spite of the attempts of some philosophers to categorically rule them out as absurd, usually on the grounds that such theories conflict with certain conceptions of personal identity or memory claims. Burley notes that such philosophers typically make unwarranted presumptions, such as that personal identity claims can be made on the basis of thinly-described thought experiments devised in isolation of specific cultural contexts, and that there is one true conception of "remembering" that is somehow independent of all cultural contexts in which the concept of "remembering" is employed. His view is that once these presumptions are identified and their reasonableness challenged, the objections built thereon seem much less definitive than they otherwise would. Moreover, being aware of certain distinctive forms of rebirth theory, such as the idea of multiple simultaneous rebirth (in which it is possible for a soul to be reborn in two bodies at the same time), and the metaphysics that underpin them, makes it less easy to assume that abstract logical principles such as the transitivity of identity apply in actual cases of belief in rebirth.

This epitomizes Burley's approach throughout the book, to tackle potential misunderstandings of rebirth theory by showing its multifarious forms, the complexity of these forms, and, above all, the importance of locating these forms within the cultural

contexts in which they are found. While these are important points and are often very well made, they do sometimes limit the way Burley engages with his subject matter. In Chapter 6, for example, he considers a series of moral objections levelled against the doctrine of karma, the second of which charges that karma involves a kind of morally offensive victim-blaming. The objection goes like this: to hold that those who experience misfortune have quite literally brought this misfortune upon themselves by some past misdeed(s) is tantamount to blaming the victims for their own ills, which is a morally offensive thing to do. Burley's response is not to tackle the objection *per se*, but to claim that there is a considerable "divergence in perspectives on the world" (p. 146) between a believer in retributive karma and the one who would raise this objection, and that as a result one cannot expect a neat solution acceptable to both parties since "the starting assumptions are too disparate" (p. 148). But treating the objection as irresolvable in this way strikes me as unnecessary given that a little analysis shows the objection to be rather toothless.

To see this, let us consider what, exactly, the objector takes to be morally objectionable about blaming victims for their misfortunes. Unfortunately here Burley is not explicit and leaves it to his reader to fill in the blanks. As far as I can tell, there are three possibilities. First, we might suppose that victim-blaming is morally objectionable because it is thought to entail *a refusal to assist* the victim. But such a refusal does not follow at all: it is perfectly possible to believe that a victim has caused her own misfortune while doing one's utmost to alleviate her suffering (as Burley acknowledges, p. 144). Second, we might suppose that victim-blaming is morally objectionable because it involves *passing judgement* on the victim. But again, it is perfectly possible to believe that a victim has caused her own misfortune without thereby judging her, or condemning her, or morally evaluating her in any way (as Burley notes, p. 142). Third, we might suppose that victim-blaming is morally objectionable simply because it involves *holding the view* that the victim is responsible for her own misfortune. But there is nothing objectionable about holding such a view if it is true; for example, if someone were to fall down a flight of stairs while drunk, there is nothing objectionable in holding the view that the victim brought the misfortune upon herself because clearly she did. The only scenario in which it does seem morally objectionable to hold the view that victims are responsible for their own misfortunes is if this view happens to be false, which would only be the case if the doctrine of karma is false. The upshot is that the objection presupposes the falsity of the very doctrine it is trying to undermine. Consequently, a deeper examination of the objection suggests that it ought to be rejected on the grounds that it begs the question rather than treated as something that is irresolvable due to the differing worldviews held by the objector and the believer in karma.

Despite the occasional missed opportunity like that just outlined, Burley's treatment of the various theories of rebirth is careful, considered, and erudite, and he does a fine job disrupting the unsophisticated notion of rebirth that prevails among western philosophers of religion. This makes his book easy to recommend to philosophers of religion as well as to anthropologists of religion, who will gain much from his comparative accounts of rebirth across a wide variety of cultures, including various African traditions and the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Lloyd Strickland
Manchester Metropolitan University