

“Reincarnation is a more plausible account of life after death than disembodied existence”. Discuss.

Death is the cessation of life and the failure to survive. Life after death (LAD) is the belief that at least something of person's "ego"/ conscious self survives the physical death of the body. Beliefs in LAD can be divided into 5 broad groups- Reanimation, Otherworldly embodiment, Disembodied existence (DE), reincarnation and mystical union. In this essay I am going to focus on the plausibility of reincarnation and DE, in relation to LAD. Reincarnation is the claim that the soul migrates after death to another body and DE is the view that the soul survives death without either the earthly body or a new body. Reincarnation is presented by Hindus, Buddhists and also by Plato in the Myth of Er. Thinkers which are associated with DE are Plato, Lewis and Price. I disagree with this statement and believe DE is a more plausible account of LAD than reincarnation.

Some people such as Hindus may agree with this statement and state that reincarnation is a more plausible account of LAD than DE. Hindus believe in an indestructible soul, which is incarnated in a series of bodies. The soul also has many layers to it. A memory- bearing layer, which collects memories from the many lives that the soul leads. A conscious layer i.e. the sense of self-being in this particular body, being male or female, being in a certain building at this moment in time etc. This is new to each incarnation and is shed when the soul leaves and gains a new body. For example, John would have access to the new "conscious layer" of his soul; he would think he is a man and would be aware he worked for a car company. However John would not be able to recall being Sarah although her memories would be part of his soul. For Hindus the criteria for preserving personal identity are the memory, personality and beliefs. Hindus also believe birth situation reflects behaviour in previous lives. This is because of karma, which is the doctrine that the sum of a person's voluntary actions in previous states of existence controls his or her fate in future existences. From this method suffering can be explained, so some people may find this view more appealing than views of DE, which cannot explain suffering. So from the views of Hinduism some people may believe reincarnation is a more plausible account of LAD than DE because it explains suffering and also there is psychological continuity of a person.

However, I disagree and do not believe this is more plausible. This is because as we see from Bernard Williams the reliability of memory is questionable. We often forget details and there is also false memory syndrome. Also if we use beliefs and personality as part of preserving personal identity then this is not a more plausible account of LAD than DE because of the variation of beliefs in a lifetime. Also personality is largely affected by circumstance and this is too broad and not unique to a person. For example, if John and Sarah are intelligent, proud, impulsive and they are both strong Christian believers, we can see this is a weak criterion because there might be any number of people that fit this characterisation. Also the similarity between John and Sarah might not be apparent because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. For example, if John was born in India, he might not be a strong Christian so therefore they will not have the same beliefs. Therefore DE is more plausible.

Buddhists do not believe in the existence of an immaterial soul, but they do believe that the sense of self as a radically separate and distinct individual is illusory. Distinguishing between individuals can occur by the uniqueness of a combination of activities, thoughts, likes and relationships. Reincarnation ends when the person achieves the realisation that the individual self is illusory. This is through enlightenment. For Buddhists the criteria for preserving personal identity is memory. So for some people the Buddhist view may influence them to believe reincarnation is a more plausible account of LAD than DE because there is no need for immaterial substances and it avoids the problem of interaction.

However, since Buddhists do not believe in a soul then there does not seem to be any “psychic substance” which could store and transmit this mental “pattern”. Also they appeal to the law of karma, lives are causally connected through karma and those of the same person. But how can a person’s previous life affect this one now if there are no immaterial substances? Also from Plato’s argument for the cycle of opposites we see DE is a more appealing account of LAD because it offers an argument for the soul’s existence. Something is what it is because of its opposite, this is definition by negation. The material body dies, so the soul must be immaterial and eternal. Therefore DE is more conceivable than the Buddhists view of reincarnation as there are no immaterial entities present here.

In my opinion, DE is a more plausible account of LAD than reincarnation. Plato’s argument from Knowledge is an argument for substance dualism, so it can also be applied to DE. We categorize and evaluate objects, we have knowledge of categories. We can’t gain knowledge from the material world because our senses cannot be trusted. Therefore there must be immaterial forms that are the basis for these categories. We access this through our immaterial soul. From this argument we see it is logical to believe in a soul and DE because we exist after death without a body. It is not coherent to believe in reincarnation because after death, when in the world of the forms we do not come back to earth in another body. Plato said, “And those who have purified themselves sufficiently by Philosophy live thereafter altogether without bodies.” So from Plato’s argument we see DE is more probable than reincarnation. This argument is also logical, whereas reincarnation has no valid argument.

Lewis was a Cartesian dualist and believed non-bodily LAD will involve an experience like those we have when dreaming or those of living in a “world of thought”. Lewis’ idea of DE seems more conceivable than the idea of reincarnation because we can imagine existing in a world of thought, but the idea of being incarnated into another body does not seem plausible, in my opinion.

The scientific evidence for an immaterial soul also shows DE is more plausible than reincarnation. From the near death experience of Pam Reynolds we see there is a soul and that DE can occur, whereas for reincarnation we have no proof of its occurrence. In this example, Pam was clinically dead and all brain activity was reduced. She was also under medical supervision. She heard a conversation between the doctors and could give exact details of their conversation “Arteries are too small, move onto left leg”. It seems DE is the only reasonable explanation for this event as she was also wearing earplugs at the time. So therefore as we see from this example, DE is a more conceivable account for LAD than reincarnation because we have evidence that DE can occur. Although some people may say there is evidence of reincarnation, I disagree because naturalistic explanations could be offered for this. For example, the claim of reincarnation may not be genuine or it could be fraud. So

therefore DE is a more plausible account of LAD than reincarnation because we have proof of it occurring and the patient was under medical supervision, so the claim could not be false.

Some people may believe in reincarnation because the idea that a finite number of “souls” have existed for all time might be considered as plausible as the idea that a new soul is created for every physical body and will exist forever. However this is not persuasive for an atheist or even a Christian to prefer the doctrine of reincarnation. DE is a more plausible account of LAD than reincarnation in my opinion because we have scientific evidence for DE in the form of near death experiences, but we have no evidence for reincarnation. Also in my view, there is no argument for reincarnation, unlike for DE where we have Plato’s argument from knowledge and the cycle of opposites. Reincarnation is simply a view of LAD expressed by Hindus and Buddhists. So therefore DE is a more plausible account of LAD than reincarnation.