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Reincarnation and the Lack of Imagination in Philosophy

Abstract

It has been observed, by D. Z. Phillips among others, that philosophy suffers from a “lack of imagination”. That is, philosophers often fail to see possibilities of sense in forms of life and discourse due to narrow habits of thinking. This is especially problematic in the philosophy of religion, not least when cross-cultural modes of inquiry are called for. This article examines the problem in relation to the philosophical investigation of reincarnation beliefs in particular. As a remedial strategy, I argue for increased attention both to ethnographic sources and to the articulation of distinctively religious moral visions that reincarnation-talk facilitates.

1. A Deficiency in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Any philosopher who wishes to make pronouncements about whether a particular belief or verbal affirmation makes sense ought first to reflect carefully upon the range of situations in which the belief or words in question might be expressed. In one of the most dogmatic and philosophically dangerous moments in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein declares that, “When a sentence is called senseless, it is not, as it were, its sense that is senseless. Rather, a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation” (PI §500). It is difficult

to know what to make of this remark, largely because it omits to say anything about possible contexts in which the act of calling a sentence senseless might occur. We may wonder whether it matters, for instance, *who* is doing the calling or what her relationship is to the person who spoke the sentence that is being called senseless. Would the people within this situation have to belong to the same culture, the same form of life, in order for the exclusion to be warranted? What if the speaker of the allegedly senseless sentence, or some third party, were to protest that it is *not* senseless?

Philosophers, including those influenced by the work of Wittgenstein, are often rather too hasty to pronounce sentences senseless. Conceptual possibilities get neglected, owing apparently to a constriction of the imagination. D. Z. Phillips was vividly aware of this problem among philosophers of religion in particular. “The main deficiency in contemporary philosophy of religion”, he wrote, “is not lack of analysis, but lack of imagination” (2000: 77). Though not immune from such a lack himself, Phillips was at least alert to its dangers. The same cannot always be said of other philosophers of religion, who are prone to display a tin ear for possibilities of sense, especially with regard to religions or cultures very different from those with which they are most familiar. Since this is a deficiency from which all philosophers and aspiring philosophers are liable to suffer to some extent, it is all the more important that those who profess to be in the business of contemplating “possibilities of human life” should seek to foster a sensitivity to the variety of forms that human life takes.¹ By doing so, we stand a chance of expanding our appreciation of the phenomena under investigation, of what the scope of human life can be, and of thereby locating ourselves within a wider horizon; we may come to recognize something of the precarious contingency of the human possibilities exhibited in our own lives, a

¹ Cf. Phillips (2000: 42), where he speaks of a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy as “one which contemplates possibilities of human life rather than seeks answers” and of “a contemplation of possibilities which leads to an understanding that life can be like that.” In the background of this latter remark is Wittgenstein’s contention that, with regard to many of the things that people do, “We can only *describe* and say, human life is like that” (GB: 3e).

recognition that can in itself be a source both of wonder and of humility.

In this article I shall reflect upon deficiencies of philosophical imagination in relation to conceptions of reincarnation or rebirth. I shall argue, with reference to particular examples, that there has been a tendency among some analytic philosophers to display an obtuseness in response to notions of reincarnation, and that this is indicative of a lack of imagination on their part. For the purpose of overcoming a recalcitrant philosophical tendency to assume that reincarnation beliefs must presuppose a particular metaphysical theory of human beings, I shall encourage attentiveness to ethnographic studies that bring out the ways in which talk of reincarnation manifests in the lives of believers (section 4) and to how such talk can express an outlook on the world that comprises a distinctive moral vision (section 6). Over and above contributing to an increased seriousness of consideration of conceptions of reincarnation in particular, my purpose in discussing these examples is to emphasize the philosophical value of an expanded openness to alternative perspectives on human life more generally.

2. Remembering a Previous Life

My first example is a brief parenthetical remark of Wittgenstein's that occurs in the midst of a passage in which he is considering the intelligibility of doubting whether one is in pain. Were someone to express such a doubt, Wittgenstein suggests, "we would think, perhaps, that he does not know what the English word 'pain' means; and we'd explain it to him" (PI §288). If, however, the person in question were to respond by affirming that he does understand the meaning of the word, but what he is unsure of is whether what he is now feeling is pain, then "we'd merely shake our heads and have to regard his words as a strange reaction which we can't make anything of". Already, I would say, there is a constriction of imagination being displayed in Wittgenstein's remark, for as others before me have pointed out, the term "pain" has a range of uses that far exceeds the narrow conception with which Wittgenstein appears to be operating (see, e.g., Robjant 2012). "Pain" need not refer only to immediate stabbing pain-

sensations, for example, such as the feeling of being pricked with a pin; it can also cover more prolonged and diffuse emotional states; and, what's more, there need be no precise conceptual demarcation to be made between "sensation" and "emotion" in many areas of our discourse (Robjant 2012: 273–280). Once our diet of examples has been enriched, it becomes apparent that there may very well be instances in which someone is unsure whether she is in pain; following a bereavement or the end of a love affair, for example, it might be only by means of sustained self-reflection, perhaps assisted by talking things through with a friend or counsellor, that she comes to recognize the depth of the pain she is in.

The moment in Wittgenstein's remark to which I want to draw principal attention, however, comes just after the point about shaking our heads and not knowing what to make of our interlocutor's strange behaviour. Wittgenstein then adds in parentheses: "(It would be rather as if we heard someone say seriously, 'I distinctly remember that sometime before I was born I believed ...')". Again one of the startling features of Wittgenstein's remark – especially to readers whose alertness to the importance of context has been heightened precisely by their having internalized a certain Wittgensteinian sensibility – is its presumption that we can say *anything* about how we would react to an utterance independently of any information pertaining to the circumstances in which we are to imagine the utterance being made. When considering how I would react to someone's saying that she distinctly remembers believing something before she was born, my first thought is not "I would not know what to make of such an utterance"; it is something more like "I wonder in what circumstances someone might say such a thing". Furthermore, it strikes me that, philosophically, this is the right thought to have. For to assume that there is only one way in which I would react, and that this reaction applies across all possible contexts, would be immediately to constrain the options; it would be to close off possibilities of sense that may emerge only in specific circumstances. In short, it would show a lack of imagination.

It might in fact make very good sense to speak of remembering something before one's birth in cultures in which a belief in

reincarnation or rebirth is prevalent. Throughout human history and in many regions of the world there have been such cultures, some of which continue to exist today.² Any philosopher who pauses to look and see the abundance of anthropological reports and autobiographical accounts concerning these cultures will soon discover a diverse range of contexts in which it would make sense for someone to say what Wittgenstein suggests “has no place in the language-game” (PI §288). It should go without saying that whether any utterance belongs in a particular language-game will depend on which language-game is being played. It is thus philosophically infelicitous to speak of “*the* language-game,” as though there were only one type of scenario that constitutes a candidate for being the one in which a given form of words might be used. Wittgenstein himself makes the point eloquently in another passage:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? ... There are *countless* kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call “signs”, “words”, “sentences”. And this diversity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (PI §23)

In view of this diversity, there is little point in denying that a given form of words has a place in the language-game unless we have some reasonably clear idea of what language-game is being referred to. While it will, no doubt, be true of some people, in some contexts, that they would not know what to make of someone’s claiming to remember having believed something before she was born, this will not be true of all people in all contexts. As philosophers, if we are not to prematurely foreclose the possibilities of sense that we are able to see in human uses of language and hence in human forms of life, we should nurture an expanded imagination, the type of imaginative capacity that comes through attentiveness to cross-cultural modes of inquiry.

² For discussions of some of the variety of beliefs in reincarnation, see Obeyesekere (2002) and Burley (2016).

3. Unilluminating Thought Experiments

Many philosophers are cautious about discussing concepts that are primarily at home in cultures with which they, the philosophers, are unfamiliar. Such caution seems wise. But its application requires some consistency, lest the appearance be given that the philosopher is simply trying to excuse herself from doing the necessary work of examining concepts in relation to the broader conceptual environments in which they have the sense that they do. In discussions of reincarnation philosophers are often tempted to put this necessary work aside and to opt for concocted thought experiments instead. While in some respects the thought experiments display a degree of imagination on the philosopher's part, they are rarely fleshed out in sufficient detail to bear any comparison to the nuances and complexities of everyday life or even to the situations depicted in works of narrative fiction. The philosophical friends of thought experiments may say that this is precisely their point: the thought experiments isolate the salient particularities from all the messy irrelevancies of life. The risk, however, is that the thought experiments steer our thoughts in unhelpful directions, often leading them into darkened crevices rather than opening up our imaginative powers.

In an essay specifically on reincarnation Peter Geach exemplifies how a philosopher might attempt to avoid straying into unfamiliar conceptual territory by limiting the cultural scope of his inquiry at the outset. Having declared that he will “stick to Western conceptions of mind and body” rather than trying “to discuss any Hindu or Buddhist views”, he then seeks to justify this procedure in the following terms:

This may strike some people as frivolous, in the way that it would be frivolous for somebody writing philosophical theology to discuss the writings of Judge Rutherford rather than of Thomas Aquinas. No doubt Hindu and Buddhist writings about reincarnation are of more inherent interest than *The Search for Bridey Murphy*; but I am wholly incompetent to discuss them; and even if I were myself able to talk about *atman* and *karma*, these are not notions which many of my readers could readily deploy. The vulgarized *Bridey Murphy* notion, on the other hand, is formulated in terms that we all use familiarly, even if

confusedly; and if we discuss this notion, there is less chance of our darkening counsel with words void of understanding. (Geach 1969: 2)

While in some ways exhibiting a candid humility, an apology such as this does little to dispel readers' concerns about the author's competence to discuss the matter at hand. Even by the standards of 1969 (the year in which Geach's essay was published), the attitude manifested in these comments comes across as embarrassingly parochial.³

As it happens, Geach in fact devotes little space to the case of Bridey Murphy either, preferring instead to keep the discussion at a more abstract level. This culminates in the sort of science-fiction thought experiment that proliferate in the philosophy of personal identity, with Geach inviting his readers to suppose that he has been kidnapped by a surgeon who is going to dismember his body for experimental purposes; urging Geach not to worry, the surgeon tells him that all his memories, having been extracted from him while unconscious by means of a truth-drug, "will be fed into the previously washed brain of another victim" (Geach 1969: 14).⁴ Reflecting upon this ghoulish vignette, Geach concludes that the transferral of his memories to the brain of the surgeon's other victim would not amount to the continuation of Geach's life: "The provenance of these 'memories' would be so different from the provenance of unquestionably genuine memories that they could not be counted as memories" (ibid.). By analogy, Geach further concludes, the purported memories of anyone claiming to remember a previous life cannot possibly be genuine memories, and hence "the *Bridey Murphy* idea of reincarnation not only is generally held for no good reason, but could barely be supplied with good reason, or even with clear sense" (1969: 16).⁵

³ I am not the first to highlight this parochialism in Geach's essay; see Perrett (1987: 41–42).

⁴ Exactly what sort of process the words "fed into" are supposed to indicate is left unspecified.

⁵ Other philosophers who have asserted the incoherence of having the memories of someone who died before one was born include Bernard Williams (1973, chs 1 and 2). I discuss Williams' argument in Burley (2012a). See also Hacker (2007: 301).

What is doing most of the work in Geach's argument is the assumption that it is the "provenance" of a putative memory that determines whether it is a genuine memory or not. His thought experiment does nothing to *support* this assumption; at most, it merely illustrates the point that, for Geach, someone who claims to remember having done or experienced something when the action or experience in question was in fact done or experienced by a different bodily human being *must* be mistaken or deluded about her own purported memory. It is unclear why a believer in reincarnation should accept this contention, especially if it is out of step with the ordinary use of the concept of memory that obtains in her religious or cultural community.

In Hindu and Buddhist traditions the ability to remember one's previous lives is held, at least in many circumstances, to be a sign of spiritual advancement, and meditative disciplines are taught that have the development of this ability as their aim.⁶ Although differing interpretations of the relevant textual sources exist, on the whole it does not appear that when these traditions speak of remembering or having awareness of one's previous lives, the operative concepts are being used in some specifically technical or figurative sense. Rather, what we see are uses of these concepts that gain their life and sense from the religious and cultural surroundings into which they are integrated; it is amid those surroundings that we see the sense that they have, notwithstanding the suppositions of anyone who, sharing Geach's view of the matter, would deny them any clear sense on the basis of a hurriedly sketched thought experiment.

The case of Bridey Murphy is, as Geach readily admits, far removed from the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism; it was an especially controversial case involving past-life hypnotic regression.⁷ Such cases bring with them their own conceptual complications and difficulties of interpretation. While the context of past-life regression therapy undoubtedly gives rise to language-

⁶ See, e.g., *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 2.39, 3.18 (Bryant 2009: 266, 343); Buddhaghosa (1999, ch. 13, §§13–71). For discussion of the latter, see Collins (2009).

⁷ See Winter (2012: 103–123). For a more polemical treatment, see Edwards (1996: 59–79).

games in which talk of what one did or believed in a former life would have a place, there remains plenty of scope for contestation over whether these language-games are themselves riddled with subterfuge and delusion. A philosophical investigation of these language-games might lead us to concur with Geach's verdict that talk of reincarnation in the context of hypnotic regression does indeed lack a "clear sense." But to suppose this verdict to be inevitable in advance of any such investigation is again to display a lack of philosophical imagination.

4. If a Crocodile Could Talk ...

Philosophers often assume that belief in reincarnation presupposes a dualistic conception of human beings, according to which human beings are composites of two distinct substances, which in René Descartes's well-known terms might be designated "mind" and "body" or *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (Descartes 1644, Part 1, §53). This assumption is sometimes encouraged by reincarnation researchers and their philosophical defenders. When the researcher Ian Stevenson hazards a definition, for example, he says that reincarnation "includes the idea that men consist of physical bodies and minds. At a person's death, his physical body perishes, but his mind may persist and later become associated with another physical body in the process called reincarnation" (1977: 305 fn. 2).⁸ Evidently not wanting to be too prescriptive in his use of vocabulary, Stevenson adds that anyone who finds "the word 'mind' in this definition unclear or otherwise unattractive ... may certainly substitute another word such as 'soul' or 'individuality.'" The assumption that talk of reincarnation characteristically goes along with talk of a mind or soul – or, more typically in Buddhism, a "stream of consciousness" (*viññāṇa-sota*)⁹ – that persists from one bodily life to the next is not in itself misleading. It becomes misleading only when accompanied by the further assumption that, prior to any detailed examination of particular examples, we already

⁸ For attempts to defend some version of metaphysical dualism in the service of Stevenson's project, see Almeder (1997, 2013).

⁹ See, e.g., Kalupahana (1987: 24 *et passim*).

know very well what this talk means. It is this further assumption that is linked with a constriction of the imagination and which is prone to lead the philosopher astray.

Owing to the popular association between reincarnation and substance dualism, philosophers who wish to emphasize what they perceive as the absurdity of a dualistic theory of human beings occasionally adduce images resemblant of reincarnation, implying that such images constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of the dualistic theory. D. Z. Phillips exemplifies this approach in a critical discussion of the idea, commonly attributed to Descartes, that personal identity resides exclusively in some immaterial mind or “consciousness,” which is ontologically independent of, and yet somehow comes into temporary contact with, the organic material body. “If my essence were something called consciousness,” Phillips writes,

it should be possible to imagine it occupying an entirely different body, say, that of a crocodile. The crocodile, to convince the sceptics might say, ‘I am D. Z. Phillips.’ What more could they want – a direct communication from consciousness? But we could make nothing of this eerie phenomenon, not even if the crocodile added, ‘I’ve just finished a book on the problem of evil.’ This is not because the consciousness of the crocodile is out of reach, but because the crocodile does not participate in the form of life in which the words would have purchase. The crocodile is not saying anything. The crocodile cannot be D. Z. Phillips because the latter has a biography ... that it would make no sense to attribute to a crocodile. And that is what I do have – a biography, not a consciousness. (2004: 155)

Since Phillips wants only to attack what he sees as philosophical confusions and not to be seen as mocking earnestly held religious beliefs, he appends to this passage a note in which he acknowledges the existence of “religions in which notions of reincarnation involve assertions about previous or future lives of human beings as animals.” Phillips is “not denying such beliefs”, he says, for he does not take those beliefs to be reliant on the confused ideas that are the target of his criticisms (ibid.: 163 n. 10).

As we can see, the argumentative approach that Phillips deploys in his crocodile example takes the following form. It begins with the conditional premise that *if* it were the case that a person’s

essence consisted in “something called consciousness,” then imagining that consciousness occupying a different body, such as that of a crocodile, would be possible. We are then asked to imagine certain things that might, initially, be assumed to count as a specific person’s consciousness occupying the body of a crocodile, only to be urged to deny that anything we have imagined really fits the description. Implicitly, we are invited to agree that, since a person’s consciousness cannot be imagined to occupy an entirely different body, such as a crocodile’s (or: since nothing could possibly count as really imagining such a thing), it cannot be the case that a person’s essence consists in consciousness.

A danger with this style of argument is that it relies upon one’s readers being willing to go only so far down a particular line of imagining as is required for them to recognize that some crucial concepts that they might have supposed to be doing work in the imagined scenario have in fact been taken “on holiday” (to invoke an apt phrase from PI §38). In this particular case, it relies on one’s readers seeing that the concepts of *saying something* and of *having a biography* do not apply to crocodiles, and that it makes no sense to suppose that “something called consciousness” would be sufficient to constitute a person. The danger arises if one’s readers, being too shrewd even to contemplate trying to apply the concepts in the inapposite ways enjoined by the imagined scenario, begin to think more carefully about how those concepts *could* be applied. Even given Phillips’ caveat that he is not criticizing religious beliefs in reincarnation, some readers might be aware that religious believers do sometimes speak of consciousness being transferred from one body to another (see, e.g., Olson 2005, ch. 13; Zivkovic 2014: 74). Some believers also speak in terms of the consciousness that someone “has created” in one life “carry[ing] him on to the next type of body”, which might be the body of a human being or of an animal or of a demigod (etc.), depending on the sorts of qualities upon which one’s consciousness has been “fixed” (Prabhupāda 1975: 231). Since the dividing line is neither sharp nor stable between religious forms of language on the one hand and the metaphysical discourse of philosophers on the other, readers who can find sense in religious notions of consciousness being

reincarnated in a new body may be reluctant to follow Phillips in assuming that we must end up with incoherent imaginings when we contemplate the possibility of a continuity of biography between a human being and a crocodile.

If the cartoonish image that Phillips offers us is not to be conflated with religious ideas of people being reborn as animals, then how are we to discern a relevant difference? Phillips admits in the note to which I have referred that he “cannot pursue these issues further here” (2004: 163 n. 10). But he did not have an opportunity to pursue them elsewhere either, and so we are left only with the caricature and not with the religious notions that should be differentiated from it. If we want to deepen our understanding of those religious notions we shall have to do the imaginative work ourselves.

One place to look for a fuller account of beliefs in reincarnation, including beliefs that humans can become animals and vice versa, is the ethnographic research of anthropologists. In contrast with Phillips’ talking crocodile we might consider a poignant anecdote from the fieldwork diary of anthropologist Sandra Evers. In June 1992, while carrying out research among the Betsileo people of Madagascar, Evers was washing her clothes in a river along with local women. On the opposite bank were a couple of boys, sons of a man named Rafidy Andriana. Suddenly the boys began repeatedly shouting “*Renibe!*” and the women quickly ran out of the water. Evers instinctively followed them, though she was puzzled as to why the boys had shouted “*renibe*,” a word which she knew meant “grandmother.” Then Evers saw that the women were pointing towards a crocodile swimming in the river. Later, Evers learned that “The boys and women had recognised the crocodile as the reincarnation of the mother of Rafidy Andriana, since it supposedly moved just like she did” (Evers 2002: 44). This visit from his mother was welcomed by Rafidy and his family, as it was believed to confirm their right to reclaim their “noble” (*andriana*) status. It is said by the community within which Evers was staying that the death of someone belonging to a formerly noble family would, on occasion, be followed by the emergence of a small worm from the dead person’s back. This was understood to indicate the

ancestors' "speaking" and giving their approval to the reclamation of the family name. The worm would then be taken to the river by the eldest member of the family, in the belief that it would there grow into a crocodile which would be a reincarnation of the deceased person (44–45).

Referring to the latter ideas as constituting a "myth," Evers says of the crocodile that it "represented the reincarnation" of an ancestor; she says of the worm that it "symbolized the ancestors' decision that the family could reclaim its *andriana* status" (1999: 259 fn. 1). To describe the belief of these people as mythic or symbolic is not, however, to downplay the palpable ways in which it bears upon their lives, nor is it to deny that there is a sense in which they really believe it. Although the women in the river would have run away from the crocodile regardless of the terms by which it was referred to, we see their belief in reincarnation exhibited in the language that they use. They see the grandmother's movements in the movements of the crocodile and they hear the ancestors' decision in the emergence of a worm. Notwithstanding Phillips' insistence that a human being "has a biography that it would make no sense to attribute to a crocodile," the Betsileo people show us how it is possible to see the lives of worms, crocodiles and human beings as intimately blended in a single narrative.

Whether Phillips would have considered this way of seeing things to rely on confusions of the sort that he discusses in relation to Cartesian dualism is difficult to say. But Evers' vivid account of her experiences among the Betsileo may prompt us to think more imaginatively about what it can mean for an ancestor to communicate in or through a reincarnate animal form. It should also remind us, as philosophers of religion, to be wary of offering shallow reconstructions of reincarnation beliefs by means of crudely sketched thought experiments, from which conclusions are then drawn about the intelligibility or unintelligibility of the beliefs in question. The rich conceptual life of the Betsileo people stands worlds apart from Geach's mad surgeon, for example. Nor should we suppose that understanding the Betsileo belief in reincarnation consists in identifying an underlying theory to which they purportedly subscribe; it consists in learning about and getting a

feel for the forms of life that give sense to their language-games. Even for the anthropologist who has immersed herself in the culture for months or years, there may be aspects that remain, as Wittgenstein puts it, “a complete enigma” (PPF §325). But this should, if anything, make us more rather than less cautious about declaring the people’s words and beliefs to be senseless. The most that can be said is that there are certain things about them that *we* do not understand. And that may be due to a lack of imagination on our part.

5. Residual Worries about Dualism

Tough-minded philosophers might be inclined to think that this talk about getting a feel for forms of life and seeing the sense in particular language-games is all well and good but that it does little, if anything, to help us with the important task of establishing whether the language-games in question do or do not presuppose some metaphysically dualist conception of human beings. What we need to know, the tough-minded philosopher might say, is whether, when we hear (for example) that the Betsileo believe there to be a continuity of life between a deceased ancestor, a worm that allegedly emerged from her corpse, and a crocodile that came swimming down the river, we are to take this to mean that they believe that a single soul was transferred from the woman to the worm and then to the crocodile. For, it might be added, if they do not believe this – or something very much like it – then they do not “really” believe that the crocodile was a reincarnation of the woman at all; they merely talk *as though* this were the case, perhaps because doing so adds some colour and poetry to their lives that would otherwise be missing.

The assumption behind the line of thinking that I have just attributed to “tough-minded philosophers” is commonly rehearsed in debates concerning “realism” and “non-realism” in the philosophy of religion.¹⁰ The assumption is that a binary choice exists with regard to how forms of language pertaining to religious

¹⁰ I should mention that I have borrowed the term “tough-minded philosopher” from Winch (1965–1966: 56–57; reprinted in Winch 1972: 193–209, at 194–195).

beliefs are conceptualized: *either* an affirmation of belief entails that one holds that the object of one's belief "really exists" *or* one does not really have the belief at all; if one does not have the belief, then it remains possible to continue to speak as though one had it, but only in the sense that one's ostensible belief-talk expresses some "non-cognitive" attitude, such as a desire or a wish or an emotion.¹¹ Philosophers who style themselves as "theological realists", for instance, do so because, on their analysis, the essential element in a belief in God is the belief that God "really exists"; while acknowledging that other attitudes (such as love of God, gratitude to God, and so forth) are appropriately adopted by *religious* believers in God, the realist maintains that the essential component – the belief that "God exists" or that "it is true that God exists" – is logically prior to, and isolable from, those specifically religious attitudes or "commitments".¹²

Philosophers of religion who have been influenced by Wittgenstein tend to get lumped together with "non-realists" by the tough-minded "realists" because the Wittgensteinians refuse to attribute a logical priority to a belief that the object of one's belief "really exists"; instead, they look to the ways in which a belief manifests in believers' lives and practices (in, precisely, the attitudes and commitments that believers typically exhibit) in order to see what it means to "really" hold the belief.¹³ For this reason, from the Wittgensteinian perspective there need not be only one thing that believing something to be true consists in, for believing something to be true (or believing something to "really exist") can manifest in numerous ways. Given the recognition of this plurality, it does not automatically follow that what it means to hold a religious or a moral belief to be true *must* be regarded as different from what it

¹¹ The theory that *all* affirmations (or putative affirmations) of religious belief are of this "non-cognitive" kind has been termed, in several instances, "expressivism" and in a few instances "emotivism." For recent critical discussion, see Scott (2013, chs 5 and 6).

¹² A paradigmatic articulation of this "realist" view is given in Trigg (1973: 40–41). It is criticized, along with similar "realist" views, in Phillips (1993a; reprinted in Phillips 1993b: 33–55).

¹³ An early Wittgensteinian critic of the realist emphasis on the belief that "God exists" was Norman Malcolm (1964). The casual labelling of Wittgensteinians as "non-realists" is ubiquitous in the literature; recent examples include Taliaferro (2003: 458) and Wolterstorff (2009: 313–314).

means to hold, say, a scientific theory to be true. However, the perspective does require that the philosopher refrain from assuming that what holding these various beliefs to be true consists in must be the same in all cases; it requires that the “craving for generality” be relinquished in favour of closer attention to particular cases (cf. Wittgenstein, BBB: 17–18).

Thus, from a Wittgensteinian point of view, when the tough-minded philosopher demands to know whether the Betsileo belief that a person can be reincarnated as a crocodile presupposes a metaphysical dualism between material bodies and an immaterial soul, there need be no compulsion for us to assume that either the answer must be “yes” or we must admit that the belief is merely expressive of some “non-cognitive” attitude. This compulsion need not obtain because, firstly, it could be the case that the Betsileo do really believe that a person can be reincarnated as a crocodile without this having the theoretical implications that the tough-minded philosopher suspects, and secondly, even if it is admitted that the Betsileo have a belief in metaphysical dualism, this admission on its own tells us next to nothing about the nature of the belief; we would still have to look to the lives of the believers in order to see what believing in “metaphysical dualism” amounts to in this particular case.

Wittgensteinians such as Phillips would propose that what is required for the nature of the Betsileo belief to become clear is a “grammatical” investigation, one that seeks to show the interconnections between the various things that they say and do (see, e.g., Phillips 1988: 230; 1995: 138; cf. Wittgenstein, PI §90). I would add, however, that, owing to the demands of cross-cultural understanding, such an investigation would have to take the form of an anthropological inquiry, an extension of the sort of inquiry carried out by Evers, which brings out the distinctiveness of the attitudes and commitments that are articulated through the Betsileo’s talk of reincarnated ancestors. Calling for an approach of this kind, with its attentiveness to the lives of believers, is not in itself to deny that the belief in reincarnation can be described as metaphysical; but it is to register how little clarificatory work is done by this description on its own.

6. Distinctive Moral Visions

The amount that has been written about the Betsileo belief in reincarnation, whether by Evers or by anyone else, remains fairly limited in scope and is sometimes inconsistent.¹⁴ I shall therefore turn to a quite different version of belief in reincarnation for the purpose of illustrating the approach of looking to the life and practice of believers to see what holding the belief to be true, or what believing that reincarnation is “real”, consists in. The version of the belief to which I shall turn is one that is prominent in Mahāyāna Buddhism, including the Vajrayāna tradition that predominates in Tibet.¹⁵ We see it in the practice of benevolence towards both humans and animals, which is central to the Bodhisattva path. This path, which many scholars consider to be one of Mahāyāna Buddhism’s defining characteristics, involves a commitment to cultivate virtuous perfections in oneself, including the perfection of compassion for all sentient beings, and to do so over an “incalculable” number of lifetimes (Harvey 2013: 108, 155; Buswell and Lopez 2014: 134, s.v. “bodhisattva”).¹⁶

The compassionate impulse at the heart of this commitment manifests both in meditation practices and in ethical attitudes and conduct. One of the principal means of engendering it is by meditating on the idea that, since all beings have undergone every possible form of life innumerable times before, all of them will have been one’s mother in innumerable previous lives. “Contemplating this, the meditator comes to look upon the frustrations and pain of samsaric beings [i.e., beings immersed in the ongoing flow of life, death and rebirth] as if he were looking

¹⁴ Evers notes, for example, that there are inconsistencies between her own research findings and those of David Graeber. See Evers (1999: 259 fn. 1), and compare Graeber (1999: 337). For a useful, though again somewhat limited, summary of early anthropological research on reincarnation beliefs in Madagascar, see Besterman (1930: 43–47).

¹⁵ For discussion of the relation between Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, see, e.g., Williams, Tribe and Wynne (2012: 166–167); Powers (2007: 774–775).

¹⁶ See also Tenzin Gyatso the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (2006: ix): “The principal focus of Mahāyāna teachings is on cultivating a mind wishing to benefit other sentient beings.”

upon the suffering of his own mother, and a great compassion arises within him” (Cooper and James 2005: 61).¹⁷

In his account of living in Tibet during the 1940s, Heinrich Harrer offers a poignant illustration of how the attitude of universal compassion is embodied in everyday activities. “After a short time in the country”, he writes,

it was no longer possible for one thoughtlessly to kill a fly, and I have never in the presence of a Tibetan squashed an insect which bothered me. The attitude of the people in these matters is really touching. If at a picnic an ant crawls up one’s clothes, it is gently picked up and set down. It is a catastrophe when a fly falls into a cup of tea. It must at all costs be saved from drowning as it may be the reincarnation of one’s dead grandmother. (1954: 191)¹⁸

While some readers of this passage might wish to say that the Tibetans were motivated to act benevolently towards their fellow creatures *because* they believed in reincarnation, thereby implying that the belief in reincarnation logically precedes and provides the rationale for the moral action, there is no necessity to read it in this way. We could just as well suppose that it is the moral vision that has logical priority and which gave rise to the reincarnation belief.¹⁹ Alternatively, we could relinquish the assumption that there must be any relation of logical priority here at all, and come to see the Tibetan belief in reincarnation and the moral attitude of compassion that accompanies it as integral dimensions of a single

¹⁷ The locus classicus for an articulation of this practice is *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* by Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419). See the English translation in Tsong-kha-pa (2004: 38–41). Cf. Tsem Tulku Rinpoche (2007: 108): “Therefore, in Mahayana Buddhism, we say ‘all mother sentient beings’ or ‘all mothers’. ... It means that at one time or another, every single sentient being has been your mother and has treated you in such a way, and don’t you think you should repay that kindness?”

¹⁸ The 1997 film, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, that was based on Harrer’s memoir includes a scene in which Tibetans are shown rescuing earthworms from the soil where trenches are being dug for the foundations of a building. “But you see,” says the young Dalai Lama to an incredulous Harrer, “Tibetans believe all living creatures were their mothers in a past life, so we must show them respect and repay their kindness.”

¹⁹ Catherine Osborne (2007, ch. 3) makes a suggestion of this kind in relation to the conceptions of transmigration advocated by the ancient Greek philosophers Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato.

outlook on the world.²⁰ In other words, it need not be that the moral attitude is based on the reincarnation belief, nor that the reincarnation belief was generated by the moral attitude; rather, the moral attitude is articulated through the vocabulary of reincarnation, and hence we see what it means to hold this particular conception of reincarnation *in* the forms of moral activity in which the Tibetan people engage.²¹

By saying this, have we then committed ourselves to a “non-realist” account of the reincarnation belief, an account in which the belief is “reduced” to a moral conviction and in which its “metaphysical” aspects have been eliminated? To characterize the account as reductive would be highly questionable, for it is not proposing that the operative moral attitude is one that could in principle be affirmed independently of the reincarnation belief; that is, it does not suggest that the latter belief serves a merely auxiliary role, perhaps furnishing the moral attitude with mythological or symbolic support. An account of that sort would resemble the well-known reductive analysis of Christian religious beliefs offered by Richard Braithwaite (1971), who maintains that, though religious propositions are sometimes held to be true by “unsophisticated” believers, more sophisticated people assert the propositions merely as imaginative aids to the fulfilment of certain moral convictions, these convictions being in themselves independent of any distinctively religious vocabulary. To share Braithwaite’s view of the matter would be to lack the imagination to see that there can be such things as distinctively religious moral visions, which gain the sense that they have only through the religious forms of language and imagery that are used to express them. As Phillips puts it, “This language is not contingently related to the believer’s conduct as a psychological aid to it. On the contrary, it is internally related to it in that it is in terms of this language that the believer’s conduct is to be understood” (1976: 144; see also *idem* 2000: 72).

²⁰ For further thoughts along these lines, though not specifically in relation to Tibetan Buddhism, see Burley (2013).

²¹ Thoughts comparable to this are expressed in one of Wittgenstein’s manuscript entries from 1945 (BEE, MS 116: 283): “But why should we not say: these customs and laws are not *based* on that belief, but they show *to what extent*, in what sense, such a belief exists” (my trans.). For some of the surrounding text, see Rhees (1997: 87–88).

My point here is not to argue that, by giving attention to the distinctively religious moral vision which talk of reincarnation enables, we thereby absolve the religious worldview in question of responsibility for making metaphysical pronouncements that we might otherwise find suspect. To put it in those terms would indicate our being captivated by a picture according to which the “metaphysical” aspects of the worldview are conceptually detachable from the moral vision. Rather, what I am proposing is that by virtue of the internality of the relation between the moral vision and the “metaphysical” talk (i.e., the talk of every sentient being’s having been one’s mother, or grandmother, in innumerable former lives, etc.), we see the meaning of the belief in reincarnation in the religious and moral lives of those who hold the belief; or, at any rate, we see there the meaning of one of the forms that believing in reincarnation takes.

It might be supposed that this way of understanding the relation between morality and metaphysics in the context of religious outlooks stands in an antagonistic relation to the impressive corpora of systematic theorizing that we find in traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism itself.²² This might be supposed on the grounds that much of that systematic theorizing seems intended to supply justificatory arguments for the doctrines, including the moral doctrines, that constitute the religious outlook. There need be no antagonism, however, unless one assumes that the justificatory arguments somehow preceded the doctrines, or that the doctrines were mere rootless babble until the “justifications” came along. But there is no more reason to think that this is the case than there is to suppose that, within the Christian tradition, the sorts of natural theological arguments for the existence of God encapsulated in Aquinas’s “Five Ways” must be chronologically or logically prior to belief in the Christian God. It seems far more plausible to presume that the belief came first and the arguments afterwards, the arguments being instances of what Anselm of Canterbury had earlier described as “faith seeking understanding” (see Migliore 2004, esp. 2–7), not theoretical foundations for a faith that would

²² For an overview of Tibetan Buddhist philosophical movements, see Duckworth (2013).

crumble without them. Similarly, when Buddhist or Hindu philosophers, or philosophers of other traditions, argue for the coherence and truth of some conception of human beings – perhaps a conception that involves distinguishing sharply between bodily and mental elements – they can be read as providing theoretical elaborations of beliefs that do not derive from the theories but are, rather, held fast by a web of conceptual connections within the forms of life that are their natural homes.

7. Conclusion: Enlivening the Philosophical Imagination

I have been arguing against certain prejudices in philosophy, prejudices that frequently stifle the appreciation of diverse perspectives on the world. D. Z. Phillips has identified a central deficiency in philosophy of religion as a “lack of imagination.” He also highlights the “conceptual impoverishment” that occurs when notions of truth and reality are reduced in ways that assume the only choice available is one between the “literal” and the “idiomatic or metaphorical” (2000: 75). What is lost sight of when the conceptual options undergo such a reduction is the possibility of conceptualizations of reality that are well described neither as literal nor as idiomatic or metaphorical – conceptualizations, for instance, whose moral and religious character does not lend itself to being squeezed into one or other of those binary categories.

Taking seriously a belief such as belief in reincarnation is not the same as endorsing or arguing for the truth of the belief, but it does require a willingness to entertain the possibility of believing it. For someone from whom the belief and the form of life in which it is at home are very distant, entertaining this possibility is itself an act of imaginative empathy; it involves a capacity that tends to be better developed among anthropologists than among philosophers, including philosophers of religion. Indeed, as I have intimated in section 4 above, there are moments in Phillips’ own work when a stronger application of imaginative empathy might have facilitated

a more nuanced appreciation of religious possibilities.²³ Methods of enlivening this capacity are legion, though so are the potential obstacles. In this article I have suggested that among the procedures to be avoided are, firstly, dogmatically declaring the senselessness of decontextualized sentences and, secondly, relying on thinly described thought experiments in order to resolve these questions of sense. What is needed instead is a more thorough engagement with ethnographic literature and the devoting of closer attention to the significance of beliefs in the lives, especially the moral lives, of those who hold them. Though I have been limited in the number of examples that I could discuss in a single article, other directions in which to look would include narrative literature, both scriptural and fictional, and biographies and autobiographies that exemplify how religious beliefs inform and sustain distinctive worldviews. These directions have not, of course, been entirely ignored by philosophers of religion; good work has been done and continues to be done, occasionally.²⁴ Nevertheless, more effort is needed if the imaginative deficit is to be rectified.²⁵

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²³ For further critical comments to this effect, see Burley (2012a; 2012b: 112–115, 151–156). I hope, however, it will be recognized that my overall estimation of Phillips’ philosophical acuity is highly favourable.

²⁴ Noteworthy instances include the use of Dostoevsky’s literary work in Sutherland (1977) and the use of biblical narratives in Stump (2010).

²⁵ I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for this journal for helpful comments that enabled me to improve the final draft.

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