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## REINCARNATION AND RELATIVIZED IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

There are five main claims that may be made about life after death:

(a) We are reincarnated in the self-same body we had in life.

(b) We are reincarnated in *another* body. (For my purposes in this paper it is a matter of indifference whether this is thought of as reincarnation in *another* world, or as reincarnation in *this* world: the arguments I shall be examining apply equally to either case. Throughout the paper the term ‘reincarnation’ used without qualification should be taken to mean ‘reincarnation in a different body’.)

(c) We are revived, or continue to live (or to have conscious existence) in a disembodied form.

(d) We are not exactly *reincarnated*, because this life is a kind of dream which we are having, and a future life, whether a bodily life or not, will involve waking up (as it were) from this dream or dream analogue.

(e) There is no life after death.

It is not difficult to find subscribers, present and past, to each view. Picking more or less at random, for (a) we have, for example, St Paul (on some readings, at least), St Thomas, Peter Geach, and a number of other modern writers; for (b) we have Pythagoras, Plato sometimes, John Hick, and apparently a very large number of Eastern thinkers;<sup>2</sup> for (c) we have Plato in another mood (or perhaps Socrates), Descartes, and – at least for the logical possibility – Peter Strawson; for (d) we have, primarily, Kant;<sup>3</sup> while for (e) we have Lucretius, Spinoza, Voltaire, and a wide variety of contemporary thinkers: perhaps most practising philosophers in the western tradition.

Identity requires a continuant, and there are a number of well-known arguments in the literature which show that the incorporeal soul is not acceptable in this role. Thus option (c) above is not a live option. Given that, I shall argue that option (b) is also untenable. Writers who eschew (c), such

<sup>1</sup> I have been helped in writing this paper by discussions with Toomas Karmo, C. B. Daniels, B. Linsky, and in particular with my colleague Ali Kazmi.

<sup>2</sup> I say ‘apparently’, for in his interesting article ‘Rebirth’ (*Religious Studies* xxiii (1987), 41–57) Roy W. Perrett argues persuasively that in Indian religions the type of rebirth that is invoked does not (and could not) involve *personal* identity.

<sup>3</sup> Kant offers this possibility in the first *Critique* (A778 = B806–A780 = B808). He emphasizes that it is *merely* a possibility, one which cannot be *known* to be true: but it seems likely that it represents his *belief* about the matter. (See J. J. MacIntosh, ‘The Impossibility of Kantian Immortality’, *Dialogue*, 1976.)

as Hick, Penelhum, Langtry, and an earlier version of myself, cannot consistently opt for (b), even as a logical possibility. If (c) is untenable, it will follow that (b) is as well.<sup>1</sup> We will thus be left with the orthodoxy of (a), the implausibility of (d),<sup>2</sup> or the truth (as I believe) of (e).

Can we tell a coherent, non-question-begging story in which reincarnation in a different body occurs? At first glance it seems clearly possible. Do a little digging, add some elementary identity theory, and it seems impossible. Dig a little more, relativize identity, and we see that retaining the impossibility seems to require an assumption – that human beings have essential properties – that not all philosophers are prepared to make. Finally, we shall see that this seeming requirement is indeed merely a semblance, and that relativizing identity does not, in fact, save reincarnation as a logical possibility.

### 1. THE (APPARENT) POSSIBILITY OF REINCARNATION

Reincarnation, like disembodied existence or time travel, is one of those things that seem, initially, to be conceptually possible. For surely we can tell a story about someone who has died and, subsequently, been reincarnated. If we cannot, the tabloids at our local supermarket will happily do it for us. Of course, the very word ‘reincarnation’ is etymologically question begging, carrying with it, as it does, its load of dualistic baggage, but I shall assume here that the term can nonetheless be used neutrally.

The story we must tell is simple, though we should be at some pains to follow John Wisdom’s sound advice and tell our story aseptically: it should contain nothing more than is observable, though that, of course, can include all the sincere reports purportedly reincarnated persons make (or, indeed, could make) of their fears, hopes, interests, desires, proclivities, apparent memories, and so on. Thus what is really at issue here is whether there could ever be, for a putative reincarnatee, or for others, evidence that was sufficient to allow us to accept the reincarnation claim. For present purposes I shall borrow a well-known example provided by Bernard Williams.<sup>3</sup> Let us suppose that the human being to whom we pointed when in the past we pointed at Charles awakes one morning and announces, after an initial period of confusion, that he is Guy Fawkes.

We may flesh out this account of putative reincarnation, by allowing that the person claiming to be Guy Fawkes gives us all the evidence we could hope for (except, of course, for evidence of bodily continuity between himself

<sup>1</sup> This is explicitly recognized by Paul Badham, who argues in *Christian Beliefs About Life After Death* (London, 1976) for the necessary acceptance of dualism by Christians.

<sup>2</sup> In ‘The Impossibility of Kantian Immortality’, *op. cit.*, I have argued that Kant’s version of this story is not only implausible but impossible, but my argument there does not touch the general case. (Indeed, I do not think that there is a sound argument available that defeats the general case.)

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams, ‘Personal Identity and Individuation’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LVII (1956–7), reprinted in *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, 1970.

and Guy Fawkes): unlike Charles he is familiar with early seventeenth-century, but not with late twentieth-century, idioms and vocabulary; he displays knowledge of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century doings, knowledge, perhaps, which we are certain Charles did not have: he tells us things which we cannot find any explanation for a twentieth-century human's knowing: he may tell us, for example, of something buried in a place which has been covered by a building since 1606, and when we vandalize the building in the interests of philosophical truth, we find the items there as specified; and so on.

In short, we assume that whatever *kind* of evidence apart from bodily continuity we deem relevant to establishing identity, Guy Fawkes/Charles, as I shall now call him, produces in ample quantities. We should not, however, pass by this point without noticing what a huge assumption is contained therein. Graham Nerlich has pointed out<sup>1</sup> that similarity may be evidence for either identity or disidentity: which it is a function of the intervening circumstances. If we leave a block of ice in a refrigerator and, next morning, find a qualitatively similar block of ice there, that is (some) evidence for its being the *same* block of ice; if we leave a block of ice in front of a roaring fire and next morning find a qualitatively similar block of ice *there*, that is (some) evidence for its *not* being the same block of ice. But in the putative reincarnation case, it is obvious that, given the asepticity of our enterprise, we not only do not know, we have no idea, whether the intervening conditions are at the refrigerator end of the evidential scale, or at the roaring fire end: so it is by no means clear what *could* count as evidence. It is clear enough, I suppose, what would be *taken* to be evidence: but I agree with Nerlich – there is no reason at all to suppose it *is* evidence.

Assuming this point overcome, we ask, could such a scenario ever be sufficient to allow us (and him) to conclude that this person *was* Guy Fawkes? Well, if it isn't, nothing is, so it's this or nothing. To many people it has seemed sufficient, while to others it has, more plausibly, seemed sufficient with the proviso that there not be more than one such apparent continuant.

And, really, there is nothing more to the argument for the possibility of reincarnation: it involves suggesting that the thing is possible on the face of it – that there could be evidence sufficient to establish identity – and then meeting, or trying to meet, whatever objections may be produced.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graham Nerlich, 'On Evidence for Identity', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, xxxvii (1959).

<sup>2</sup> I here ignore the argument attributed to fish by Rupert Brooke in 'Heaven':

This life cannot be All, they swear,  
For how unpleasant, if it were!

However, an extended version of this argument (which he calls 'the basic religious argument') may be found in John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, Harper & Row (1976), pp. 152ff. In 'The Argument Concerning Immortality' (*Religious Studies*, xxii (1986), 219–33) Roy W. Perrett discusses Hick's version of the argument and concludes, gently but correctly, 'The argument is...uncompelling'.

## 2. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REINCARNATION

(a) *The Argument from Chimpanzees*

Suppose I offer you the following as a non-altruistic reason for your behaving in a particular way. If you do not, I tell you, then, after your death, God will create a chimpanzee and do unpleasant things to it; however, if you do behave in the requisite way, God will create a chimpanzee and arrange a pleasant life for it. This gives you, assuming a certain amount of gullibility on your part combined with inter-species altruism, a reason, but not a *self-interested* reason, for acting in the required way. Not to labour the point, the reason does not become more interestingly egocentric if I tell you that the chimpanzee will bear your name, or that the created entity won't be a chimpanzee but a human. Finally, adding that the postulated human will resemble you, even if it resembles you as exactly as possible, would still give you no self-interested reason for action. (The qualification is necessary: it cannot resemble you *exactly*, even on the property level. It cannot, for example, have the property you have of being identical with you; where you have memories of your doings, it has apparent memories, and so on. However, it has the same abilities as you, the same interests, the same q-memories, the same personality traits, etc., etc.) Lucretius, here speaking through the pen of Dryden, makes the point nicely:<sup>1</sup>

... tho' our Atoms shou'd revolve by chance,  
 And matter leape into the former dance;  
 Tho' time our Life and motion cou'd restore,  
 And make our Bodies what they were before,  
 What gain to us wou'd all this bustle bring,  
 The new made man wou'd be another thing;  
 When once an interrupting pause is made,  
 That individual Being is decay'd.

Lucretius is making two important related points: the first is that an identity claim is, *inter alia*, a uniqueness claim: the claim that *b* is identical with *a* entails that *only b* (i.e. *only a*) is identical with *a*: that anything identical with *a* is also identical with *b*. But (as Lucretius suggests) for humans we know of no continuant other than the body which can accomplish this. The second point is that qualities which do not specifically pick out individuals, and hence clusters of such qualities, are *not* individuating items. In principle two things may qualitatively resemble one another *exactly* and yet be two, not one. Leibniz saw this clearly, and for this reason based his claim of the actual non-occurrence of such a situation on theological grounds: it was *theologically* not possible, he thought, that the *actual* world be like that, but

<sup>1</sup> John Dryden, 'Translation of the Latter Part of the Third Book of Lucretius: Against the Fear of Death', 19–26 (*The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), Vol. 1, 405). [Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 3.847–51: ... si materiem nostram collegerit aetas/post obitum rursumque redegerit ut sita nunc est/atque iterum nobis fuerint data lumina vitae,/pertineat quicquam tamen ad nos id quoque factum,/interrupta semel cum sit repentia nostri.]

such a situation was possible, and so it was a *contingent* truth that no such indiscernibles existed.<sup>1</sup> Considerations of this sort may lead the attentive to decide that not only identity, but even Parfitian survival, could not survive such a continuity gap.

If God creates two posthumous apparent clones of you, at most one of them can be identical with you, and the need is for a means of discrimination: which one, if either, is *you*? The orthodox answer is that the one with your body is you (or better: the one which is spatio-temporally continuous with you is you); the Cartesian answer is that the one with your immaterial soul is you. Geach is nicely unimpressed with this second answer. He writes:

It is a savage superstition to suppose that a man consists of two pieces, body and soul, which come apart at death; the superstition is not mended but rather aggravated by conceptual confusion, if the soul-piece is supposed to be immaterial. The genius of Plato and Descartes has given this superstition an undeservedly long lease of life; it gained some accidental support from Scriptural language, e.g. about flesh and spirit – accidental, because a Platonic–Cartesian reading of such passages is mistaken, as Scripture scholars now generally agree.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I am concerned with a third answer: that such a posthumous clone *could* be you even though it doesn't have a body continuous with your present body, and neither you nor it have an incorporeal soul that existed in the temporal gap that separates you from it.

Lotze asked:

If the soul in a perfectly dreamless sleep thinks, feels, and wills nothing, *is* the soul then at all, and what is it? How often has the answer been given, that *if* this could ever happen, the soul *would* have no being! Why have we not had the courage to say that, *as often as* this happens, the soul *is* not? ... Why should not its life be a melody with pauses?<sup>3</sup>

Kant<sup>4</sup> and Penelhum<sup>5</sup> have dealt with this issue as far as the soul is concerned, but Lotze's question continues to be asked, if not of souls, then of people. We have already seen one kind of answer to that question. Here is a second, perhaps stronger, answer:

### (b) *The Argument from Modality*

Given only two very simple (necessary) truths about identity, plus elementary first-order modal logic, we can show that reincarnation is impossible. In what follows, I give the various proofs concerning identity claims in terms of

<sup>1</sup> The argument (which is unsound) for the actual non-identity of indiscernibles (and hence against undifferentiated elementary particles such as Newtonian atoms) is based on the principle of sufficient reason. See, e.g., 'First Truths', 'Discourse on Metaphysics', the fourth letter to Clarke, and 'On Nature Itself, or On the Inherent Force and Actions of Created Things'.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Geach, *God and the Soul*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolph Hermann Lotze, *Metaphysic*, ed. Bernard Bosanquet (book 3 trans. A. C. Bradley), Oxford, 1887, vol. 2, 3.5.307, p. 317. The question has also been addressed by Terence Penelhum in response to an *Analysis* problem set by A. N. Prior: 'Is it possible that one and the same individual object should cease to exist and, later on, start to exist again?', *Analysis* 17.6, (June, 1957), 123–4.

<sup>4</sup> In the Paralogisms.

<sup>5</sup> In *Survival and Disembodied Identity*.

proper names 'a', 'b', and 'c': the extension to the general case is straightforward in each instance. The two truths about identity we require are that identity is reflexive and obeys Leibniz's Law:

Reflex:  $\forall x(x = x)$

LL:  $a = b \rightarrow (A \leftrightarrow B)$ , where  $A$  is a sentence containing predications on  $a$  and  $B$  resembles  $A$ , save that one or more such occurrences of  $a$  are replaced by occurrences of  $b$ .

In view of the confusion concerning identity in the literature about reincarnation it is worth stressing that any relation that was not reflexive or did not obey LL could hardly be considered to be identity. For the modal results we add a rule of necessitation (RN: that if  $\alpha$  is a theorem, so is  $\Box\alpha$ ), and the axioms Df  $\Diamond: \Diamond p \leftrightarrow \sim \Box \sim p$ ,  $T: \Box p \rightarrow p$ , and  $K: \Box(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\Box p \rightarrow \Box q)$ .

Given reflexivity and LL it follows immediately that:

- (a) identity is symmetric:  $\forall x\forall y(x = y \rightarrow y = x)$
- (b) identity is transitive:  $\forall x\forall y\forall z((x = y \ \& \ y = z) \rightarrow x = z)$
- (c) if  $a$  and  $b$  are identical, they are necessarily identical:  
 $a = b \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$

The proofs are straightforward; I give the proof of (c) since it is relevant to what follows:<sup>1</sup>

- (1)  $a = b \rightarrow (\Box(a = a) \leftrightarrow \Box(a = b))$  LL
- (2)  $a = a$  Reflex
- (3)  $\Box(a = a)$  2, RN
- (4)  $a = b \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$  1, 3

Equivalently, if  $a$  and  $b$  are *possibly* non-identical, then they *are* non-identical:

- (5)  $\Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow a \neq b$  4, Transp, Df  $\Diamond$

With this result in mind, consider the following addition to the Guy Fawkes story. If it is possible for the human being we used to call Charles to wake up one morning and begin behaving in all relevant respects Guy Fawkesily (and it is), then, equally, it is possible for the human being we used to call Robert to wake up one morning (the same morning, come to that), and begin behaving the same way. We may suppose moreover – it is, after all, our story – that Guy Fawkes/Charles and Guy Fawkes/Robert are *not* the same person: a whisper in the ear of Guy Fawkes/Charles awakens no complicitous twinkle in the eye of Guy Fawkes/Robert. But then, clearly, we have a problem. For we have no more reason to identify Guy Fawkes/Charles with Guy Fawkes than we have to identify Guy Fawkes/Robert with him. So we must either identify *both* with Guy Fawkes, or neither: but we cannot identify *both*, for identity is both symmetric and transitive. So we cannot identify either Charles or Robert with Guy Fawkes.

<sup>1</sup> Such a proof is not new. See Ruth Barcan, 'The Identity of Individuals in a Strict Functional Calculus of Second Order', *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, XII (1947), 12–15. In fact, the Barcan Marcus proof is both more complicated and less open to Quinean objections. For a recent version, which 'adapts [her proof] almost line for line', and an important discussion of the issues involved see David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, pp. 109–11.

This point seems to be often and thoroughly missed. H. D. Lewis, for example, thinks that it is open to us to say that one of them is genuinely Guy Fawkes (and is having real Guy Fawkes memories), while the other is not Guy Fawkes, and has come to possess these ‘pseudo-memories...in some preter-natural way’.<sup>1</sup> But this, as Chesterton has one of his characters remark in a discussion about identity, is a difference without a difference. To insist, when there is no conceivable further evidence that could affect the case, and when both supply the evidence which is supposedly sufficient to establish identity, that one of them might *really* be Guy Fawkes, while the other one *really* is not, is to let the word ‘really’ lose its grip on reality.

Many writers on this topic have accepted this, but have still felt that all was not lost in the reincarnation case. For suppose, it might be said,<sup>2</sup> that Robert *doesn't* start behaving in this strange way. Granted that *if* Robert began behaving Guy Fawkesily it would be a case of everyone or no one, and hence no one, but suppose he doesn't: in such a case there would be no reason *not* to make the identification Charles = Guy Fawkes.

Here is John Hick on the matter:<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of several Hicks, H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub>, he<sup>4</sup> says, ‘It is not even necessary to suppose that God has *actually* created H<sub>3</sub>, for the mere *possibility* of his doing so is as much a threat to H<sub>2</sub>'s identity as is H<sub>3</sub>'s actual existence. If the actual *existence* of H<sub>3</sub> alongside H<sub>2</sub> obliges us to refrain from identifying H<sub>2</sub> as Hick [i.e. H<sub>1</sub>], then the mere *possibility* of H<sub>3</sub> ought similarly to restrain us from conferring identity....’

Hick goes on:

The question, then, is whether we can properly move from the premiss that there cannot be two beings in the world to come each of whom is the same person as Mr X in this world, to the conclusion that there cannot be *one* being in the world to come who is the same person as Mr X in this world. And it seems clear to me that we cannot validly reach any such conclusion... I deny that the unrealized logical possibility of there being two resurrection ‘Mr X's’ makes it logically impossible for there to be one.

Hick agrees, in short, that *if* Guy Fawkes/Robert surfaced, Guy Fawkes/Charles could not be identified with Guy Fawkes, but believes that the identification would be unproblematic if a competitor for the identity title did not appear.

There are two different responses to this. One comes from David Wiggins, who points out that this would commit us, implausibly, to the view that an

<sup>1</sup> H. D. Lewis, *The Self and Immortality* (Macmillan, 1973), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, has been said, e.g., by Penelhum, MacIntosh, Hick and Langtry. See T. M. Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*; J. J. MacIntosh, ‘Memory and Personal Identity’, in S. Coval and J. J. MacIntosh, eds., *The Business of Reason*; John Hick, ‘Theology and Verification’, in *Theology Today*, xvii (1960), as well as chapter 15 of *Death and Eternal Life*, Harper & Row (1976); and Bruce Langtry, ‘In Defence of a Resurrection Doctrine’, *Sophia*, 21.2 (1982).

<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 290–2. As I have indicated, Hick is by no means alone in this view. I single him out simply as a recent, and clear, example.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to J. J. Clarke, ‘John Hick's Resurrection’, *Sophia*, 10.3 (1971), 18–22.

identity claim was a claim of ‘unlimited generality about the whole universe, viz. that there was no competitor *anywhere* to be found, nor presumably *at any time* any competitor which could not be fitted into the history of *a* without breach of transitivity. I do not believe,’ he continues, ‘that “ $a = a$ ” has such a close resemblance to a general proposition.’<sup>1</sup>

The other, modal, response points out that the problem is much more extreme for, as we have seen, identity is a relation which, if it holds, holds necessarily:

$$a = b \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$$

i.e.  $\Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow a \neq b$

So, *contra* Hick, the very *possibility* of an alternate contender showing up is sufficient to defeat the identity claim. Here, as elsewhere, there is no such thing as contingent identity: and the claim that we are all right as long as Robert doesn’t *actually* show up amounts to a claim that there is, or could be, contingent identity. But the argument shows that reincarnation is impossible, and no one, including God, any other putative reincarnator, and the supposedly reincarnated person, could ever have good reason to believe that such a thing had occurred.

When Hick says ‘I deny that the unrealized logical possibility of there being two resurrection “Mr X’s” makes it logically impossible for there to be one’ he is in fact denying that  $a = b \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$  or, equivalently, is denying that  $\Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow a \neq b$ , but, as we have seen, the argument to this is simple and straightforward, and more than a mere denial is required to defeat it: Hick owes us an account of why he finds the argument invalid or otherwise unsound. ‘...it seems clear to me’, he says, ‘that we cannot validly reach any such conclusion’, but if this is his view then he really should tell us which of the steps in the argument he rejects, and why he does so.

In defence of Hick’s lacuna it should be said that in the literature the argument against his position has not been spelled out in detail by his opponents, though it can certainly be found in other contexts. Clarke, for example, simply asserts the (correct) conclusion, that possible disidentity is as disabling to Hick’s position as actual disidentity, Lipner<sup>2</sup> offers an *ad hominem* which works against Hick’s position as stated, but not against every such position, as Langtry<sup>3</sup> has recently pointed out.

Nonetheless the point is clear: anyone who agrees with Hick in rejecting

<sup>1</sup> David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1967), p. 73. Wiggins makes the same point in *Sameness and Substance* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980), p. 208, points out further that ‘if the stipulation theorists had their way, then it would have to make sense to say to the Guy Fawkes claimant: “If it hadn’t been for that other fellow, who appears to be just as good as you are at reminiscing about attempts to blow up the Palace of Westminster, you would have been Guy Fawkes.” Even those who doubt that if one is Guy Fawkes, one is necessarily Guy Fawkes must find this idea hard to take seriously.’

<sup>2</sup> J. J. Lipner, ‘Hick’s Resurrection’, *Sophia* 18.3 (1979), 22–34.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Langtry, *op. cit.*

the argument must reject one of the following: propositional logic, elementary modal logic, the reflexivity of identity, Leibniz's Law, or modal substitution in Leibniz's Law. If it is 'clear' that the argument is invalid, then it must be 'clear' that one or more of these is at fault, and the reader is entitled to be told which.

Once we have seen that if identity *could* fail then it *does* fail, there is a more general move available for all such reincarnation cases: in every such case it is, *ex hypothesi*, possible that the *original* entity continued and is still in existence at the relevant later time: but then *no* amount of evidence (of whatever kind) would be sufficient to establish the identity of the *rival* claimant with the original. But if it is not enough in this possible case, it is not enough in the actual case, either. This importantly differentiates case (b), *different* body reincarnation, from case (a), *same* body reincarnation. Against (a) this move is not possible.

Incidentally, if we allow some fairly plausible assumptions about accessibility (so that, e.g., we allow the Brouwer axiom B:  $p \rightarrow \Box \Diamond p$ , i.e., if something is the case then it must possibly be the case) it is easy to show that modal operators are irrelevant to both identity and disidentity, that possible, actual, and necessary identity all come to the same thing, as do possible, actual, and necessary disidentity.<sup>1</sup> We have already seen that if *a* and *b* are identical they are necessarily identical. The rest follows straightforwardly:

- (1)  $a = b \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$  taut
- (2)  $\Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow a \neq b$  1, Transp, Df  $\Diamond$
- (3)  $\Box(\Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow a \neq b)$  2, RN
- (4)  $\Box \Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow \Box(a \neq b)$  3, K
- (5)  $a \neq b \rightarrow \Box \Diamond(a \neq b)$  B
- (6)  $a \neq b \rightarrow \Box(a \neq b)$  4, 5, Syll
- (7)  $\Diamond(a = b) \rightarrow a = b$  6, Transp, Df  $\Diamond$
- (8)  $\Diamond(a = b) \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$  1, 7, Syll
- (9)  $\Diamond(a \neq b) \rightarrow \Box(a \neq b)$  8, Transp, Df  $\Diamond$

I.e., modalities do not significantly affect either identity or disidentity sentences, for we have

$$\Diamond(a = b) \leftrightarrow (a = b) \leftrightarrow \Box(a = b)$$

and  $\Diamond(a \neq b) \leftrightarrow (a \neq b) \leftrightarrow \Box(a \neq b)$

This is all of interest in itself but, as already mentioned, to refute the reincarnation claim all that is needed is  $a = b \rightarrow \Box(a = b)$ , which follows directly from Leibniz's Law and reflexivity.

<sup>1</sup> Since S<sub>5</sub>, characterized by the axiom  $\Diamond p \rightarrow \Box \Diamond p$ , contains B, it will also yield these results.

3. RELATIVE IDENTITY AND THE REVIVED POSSIBILITY OF REINCARNATION

Perhaps all is not lost, for it has seemed reasonable to some philosophers that identity should be relativized.

Some<sup>1</sup> indeed have suggested that it is not only reasonable but necessary to do so: that that *is* our concept, and that ‘absolute’ identity is a philosophers’ abstraction; others<sup>2</sup> have suggested that whether or not there is, independently, something correctly thought of as absolute identity, nonetheless, since it always makes sense to ask ‘same what?’ in response to any identity claim, it is, at least, always *in order* to relativize identity.

Thus, instead of saying merely, ‘*a* is identical with *b*’, we would say (for some particular *F*) ‘*a* is the same *F* as *b*’.

We write  $a =_F b$ , and note that  $a =_F b \rightarrow (Fa \ \& \ Fb)$ , subject to the usual leniencies concerning tense: ‘The Duke of Wellington *was* the schoolboy Arthur Wellesley’, ‘Arthur Wellesley *became* the Duke of Wellington’, etc. (Geach has pointed out that although ‘*F*’ occurs in two sorts of construction, ‘ $a =_F b$ ’ and ‘*Fa*’, the second can be reduced to the first definitionally:

$$Fa =_{\text{df}} \exists x (x =_F a).$$

Strictly, the relative identity thesis (R) is that for a given *a, b*, it is possible that *a* and *b* are identical under one description, but not identical under another:  $\diamond \exists \phi \exists \psi (a =_{\phi} b \ \& \ a \neq_{\psi} b)$ . I am not invoking this principle (hence I speak of relativized, rather than relative, identity): it is not necessary for present purposes to make such a strong claim. Rather, it is the very notion of relativizing identity that seems to give rise to a problem for anti-reincarnationists. For if we insist on writing our identity sentences in a relativized form, we will have to relativize reflexivity:

$$\forall x \forall \phi (\phi x \rightarrow x =_{\phi} x)$$

and Leibniz’s Law:

$$a =_F b \rightarrow (A \leftrightarrow B)$$

where *A* and *B* are specified as before. (I shall continue to refer to these as Reflex and LL since no ambiguity will result.)

Since these two principles together entail the falsity of R this version of Leibniz’s Law must be rejected or restricted by someone who cleaves to

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Peter Geach, ‘Identity’, *Review of Metaphysics*, xxi (1967–8); and ‘Ontological Relativity and Relative Identity’, in M. K. Munitz, ed., *Logic and Ontology* (New York, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford, 1967), and *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, 1980). For a more lengthy discussion of the points involved see Nicholas Griffin, *Relative Identity* (Oxford, 1975).

relative identity. For present purposes, however, such restriction is unnecessary, since it is not the relative identity thesis **R** that causes the problem with the anti-reincarnation argument, but the bare possibility of relativizing identity.

With relativized reflexivity and relativized LL, symmetry and transitivity still follow immediately:

- (1)  $a =_F b \rightarrow (a =_F a \leftrightarrow b =_F a)$  LL
- (2)  $a =_F b \rightarrow Fa$  taut
- (3)  $Fa \rightarrow a =_F a$  Reflex
- (4)  $a =_F b \rightarrow b =_F a$  1, 2, 3
- (5)  $a =_F b \rightarrow (a =_F c \leftrightarrow b =_F c)$  LL
- (6)  $a =_F b \rightarrow (b =_F c \rightarrow a =_F c)$  5

With the necessity of identity, however, we are now in a more difficult situation. For in the proof of necessity we made use of the fact that  $\Box(a = a)$ , based on the theorem  $\forall x(x = x)$ . But we can hardly claim it as a theorem that  $\forall x\forall\phi(x =_\phi x)$ , since this will be false for many substitution instances of  $x$  and  $\phi$ , and only contingently true for many others. So we need, as already noted:

$$\forall x\forall\phi(\phi x \rightarrow x =_\phi x)$$

But then a crucial step in our proof seems to vanish. For we now no longer have an analogue of  $\Box(a = a)$ . In the relativized case, instead of  $\Box(a =_F a)$ , we have only  $\Box(Fa \rightarrow a =_F a)$ , and hence  $\Box Fa \rightarrow \Box(a =_F a)$ . And in order to detach  $\Box(a =_F a)$  from this we would need  $\Box Fa$ . For someone who holds that humans *do* have essential properties (or at least some property  $F$  such that  $\Box Fa$ , for  $a$ ) this may not pose a problem, but there is no need for a Friend of Reincarnation to be also a Friend of Aristotelian (or Cartesian, or Kripkean) Essentialism. So, albeit at the expense of dropping essential properties, reincarnation seems to be back in business.

## 4. THE ULTIMATE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REINCARNATION

There are two ways to avoid the problem posed by relativizing identity. One is to point out that there are plenty of unproblematic properties such that we all have them, and indeed have them necessarily: the property of being  $F$  or not- $F$ , for example, or the property of being the same  $F$  as oneself, for some  $F$ . It is unproblematically true of  $a$  that  $\Box(Fa \vee \sim Fa)$ , and that  $\Box\exists\phi(a = \overset{\phi}{a})$ . More simply, writing  $Ga$  for  $(Fa \vee \sim Fa)$ , and  $Ha$  for  $\exists\phi(a = \overset{\phi}{a})$ , it is (classically) true of  $a$  that  $\Box Ga$ , and  $\Box Ha$ . Needless to say, there are infinitely many such properties.

It must, however, be admitted that these are rather abstract properties, and it might be felt that if we allow these to count in our relative identity arguments, we haven't left absolute identity behind, after all. We could, of course, argue that there simply *are* interesting properties that we have necessarily: origin, or species membership, or what have you. I think that writers such as Kripke,<sup>1</sup> or Prior,<sup>2</sup> or Bogen,<sup>3</sup> for example, who have argued for the necessity of a thing's having just the origin it does are correct in their conclusion, but this is not the place to follow up that line of argument. Notice, though, that for those who do accept such a conclusion, relative identity offers no road back to reincarnation.

However, it is possible to show that reincarnation is impossible, even given relativized identity, without invoking necessary properties, and without invoking what might be thought of as vacuous properties. Consider what is essentially a three place relation,  $R_F$ , defined as follows:<sup>4</sup>

$$R_F(a, b) =_{df} (Fa \rightarrow a = b)$$

This relation is reflexive, non-symmetric, and transitive. Reflexivity follows from the definition. To show non-symmetry we note that we have, vacuously,  $R_F(a, b)$  whenever  $\sim Fa$ . In such cases, we would have  $R_F(b, a)$  if but only if  $\sim Fb$ . Equally clearly, whenever we have  $Fa$ , we have  $R_F(a, b) \rightarrow R_F(b, a)$ . Here is a proof of transitivity:

$$\begin{array}{lll} (1) & R_F(a, b) \quad \& \quad R_F(b, c) & A \\ (2) & (Fa \rightarrow a = b) \quad \& \quad (Fb \rightarrow b = c) & I, Df R_F \\ & \quad \quad \quad \underset{F}{\phantom{F}} & \quad \quad \quad \underset{F}{\phantom{F}} & \\ (3) & a = b \rightarrow Fb & \text{taut} & \\ & \quad \quad \quad \underset{F}{\phantom{F}} & & \end{array}$$

<sup>1</sup> In *Naming and Necessity*.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Prior, 'Identifiable Individuals', *Review of Metaphysics*, xiii (1960).

<sup>3</sup> James Bogen, 'Identity and Origin', *Analysis*, xxvi (1966).

<sup>4</sup> With thanks to Ali Kazmi, who pointed out to me the possibility of circumventing the problem in this way.

