



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Integral Advaitic theodicy of spiritual evolution: *karma*, rebirth, universal salvation, and mystical panentheism

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Abstract

This article outlines and defends an ‘Integral Advaitic’ theodicy that takes its bearings from the thought of three modern Indian mystics: Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo. Their Integral Advaitic theodicy has two key dimensions: a doctrine of spiritual evolution and a panentheistic metaphysics. God has created this world as an arena for our moral and spiritual evolution in which evil and suffering are as necessary as good. The doctrine of spiritual evolution presupposes *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation. The doctrines of *karma* and rebirth shift moral responsibility for evil from God to His creatures by explaining all instances of evil and suffering as the karmic consequence of their own past deeds, either in this life or in a previous life. The doctrine of universal salvation also has important theodical implications: the various finite evils of this life are outweighed by the infinite good of salvation that awaits us all. After outlining this Integral Advaitic theodicy, I address some of the main objections to it and then argue that it has a number of comparative advantages over John Hick’s well-known ‘soul-making’ theodicy.

Keywords: John Hick; *karma*; panentheism; rebirth; soul-making theodicy; Sri Aurobindo; Sri Ramakrishna; Swami Vivekananda; theodicy; universal salvation

Introduction

Until quite recently, most scholars working in the area of theodicy tended to make sweeping claims about ‘Indian’ or ‘Hindu’ theodicy in general, at the heart of which lie the twin doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, according to which one’s suffering in this life is the result of one’s own past misdeeds, either earlier in this life or in a past life. For instance, the famed sociologist Max Weber remarked over a century ago: ‘The most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian teaching of “karma,” the so-called belief in the transmigration of souls’ (Weber (1963), 145). Likewise, the philosopher Arthur Herman (1976, 287) argued that while none of the major Western theodicies succeed, the Indian ‘doctrine of rebirth solves the problem of evil’. By contrast, Whitley Kaufman (2005, 28) claims that ‘the doctrine of karma and rebirth, taken as a systematic rational account of human suffering by which all individual suffering is explained as a result of that individual’s wrongdoing, is unsuccessful as a theodicy’.

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However, in the past few years, scholars of Indian philosophy have begun to show that there are a wide variety of theodicies within Hinduism and that the precise nature, importance, and role of the *karma* doctrine varies considerably from one Hindu theodicy to another.¹ In this article, I will outline and defend a Hindu theodicy of spiritual evolution that takes its bearings from the Integral Advaitic thought of the modern Bengali mystics Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), and Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950).² It should be noted that my aim in this article is not strict textual exegesis, and I do not mean to suggest that the philosophical and theodical views of these three figures are identical. In fact, I have discussed the nuances of their respective theodicies elsewhere (Maharaj (2018), 241–309; Medhananda (2022a); *Idem* (2022c), 259–263). My aim here is to present an Integral Advaitic theodicy grounded in some of the key shared ideas of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo.

The first section outlines the core tenets of this Integral Advaitic theodicy of spiritual evolution. The second section then addresses some of the main objections to the Integral Advaitic theodicy sketched in the previous section. Finally, the third section argues that this Integral Advaitic theodicy has a number of comparative advantages over the Christian philosopher John Hick's well-known 'soul-making' theodicy.

An Integral Advaitic theodicy of spiritual evolution

According to Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo, the sole reality is the Infinite Divine, which is the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) Absolute in one aspect and the personal (*saguṇa*) God with omniattributes in another aspect. The personal God, far from being separate from His creation, *manifests* as this entire universe and all individual souls. I call their panentheistic philosophy 'Integral Advaita', since it upholds an all-encompassing divine oneness. This world-affirming Integral Advaita philosophy contrasts sharply with the eighth-century Śāṅkara's world-denying Advaita philosophy, which holds that the sole reality is the impersonal Brahman and that the personal God, the world, and individual souls exist from the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) standpoint but not from the ultimate (*pāramārthika*) standpoint.³

Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo developed a distinctive theodicy on the basis of this Integral Advaitic metaphysics. Hereafter, I refer to their Integral Advaitic theodicy as 'IAT'. According to IAT, God has created this world as an arena for our moral and spiritual evolution in which evil and suffering are as necessary as good. As Ramakrishna puts it, God permits moral evil in His creation 'in order to create saints' (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 37; Gupta ([1942] 1992), 97). Vivekananda further elaborates his guru Ramakrishna's theodicy of spiritual evolution as follows:

It [this world] is a great gymnasium in which you and I, and millions of souls must come and get exercises, and make ourselves strong and perfect. This is what it is for. Not that God could not make a perfect universe; not that He could not help the misery of the world. (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 4: 207)

Through the experience of both good and evil in ourselves and others, we gradually learn to combat our selfish tendencies and cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that bring us closer to God. Good and saintly people serve as role models who inspire us to emulate them by exercising self-control and engaging in ethical behaviour and spiritual practice. On the other hand, when we engage in unethical behaviour or witness the unethical deeds of others, we come to recognize the negative consequences of evil and feel motivated to try to eliminate our own selfish and unethical tendencies. As Vivekananda notes, the omnipotent God is perfectly capable of creating a world without any suffering and evil.

However, in a world without evil, we would be deprived of invaluable opportunities for moral and spiritual growth.

Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo further elaborate this process of spiritual evolution at the core of IAT by appealing to the doctrines of *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation. According to the law of *karma*, we will eventually experience the consequences of all our thoughts and deeds, whether good or evil, either in this life or in a future life. Our present circumstances – favourable or unfavourable – are the karmic result of what we ourselves did in the past. As Ramakrishna puts it, ‘God has ordained that if one commits sin, one has to reap the fruits of that sin. Won’t you burn your tongue if you chew a chilli?’ (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 36; Gupta ([1942] 1992), 97). Likewise, Vivekananda responds to the problem of evil and suffering by appealing to the law of *karma*:

Then the question comes: If God is the ruler of this universe, why did He create such a wicked universe, why must we suffer so much? ... [I]t is not God’s fault. It is our fault that we suffer. Whatever we sow we reap. He did not do anything to punish us. Man is born poor, or blind, or some other way. What is the reason? He had done something before, he was born that way. The *jīva* [individual soul] has been existing for all time, was never created. It has been doing all sorts of things all the time. Whatever we do reacts upon us. If we do good, we shall have happiness, and if evil, unhappiness. (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 1: 397)

Notice that the law of *karma* goes hand in hand with the doctrine of rebirth: even if we do not reap the karmic consequences of our deeds in this life, we will definitely do so in a subsequent embodiment. Accordingly, Vivekananda claims that a person is born ‘poor’ or ‘blind’ because of something he or she did in a previous life.

The twin doctrines of *karma* and rebirth have two important theodical implications. First, the law of *karma* shifts moral responsibility for evil from God to His creatures: we are responsible for bringing evil into the world through our own evil thoughts and actions. Second, the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth jointly explain, in principle, all instances of evil and suffering in the world. Recent Western philosophers have often emphasized instances of ‘gratuitous’, ‘pointless’, or ‘dysteleological’ suffering – that is, instances of suffering that cannot be explained or justified in terms of any known theodicy, such as the Nazi Holocaust. As Herman (1976, 287–289) points out, however, on the assumption of the Indian theory of *karma*, there is no strictly gratuitous suffering, since all instances of suffering are the karmic consequences of past deeds, either in this life or in a previous life.

It is important to recognize, however, that for Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo, the ultimate purpose of the law of *karma* is not to give us what we deserve but to foster our moral and spiritual growth.⁴ Aurobindo clarifies the educative role of suffering as follows:

And what of suffering and happiness, misfortune and prosperity? These are experiences of the soul in its training, helps, props, means, disciplines, tests, ordeals, – and prosperity often a worse ordeal than suffering. Indeed, adversity, suffering may often be regarded rather as a reward to virtue than as a punishment for sin, since it turns out to be the greatest help and purifier of the soul struggling to unfold itself. (Aurobindo (1997–2006), 13: 267–268)

While our present suffering is no doubt the result of our own past behaviour, the experience of suffering presents us with opportunities to learn from our mistakes and to strive to become better people. To employ Vivekananda’s analogy of the world as a moral

'gymnasium', just as we become physically stronger through resistance training, we become morally and spiritually stronger through various adversities and challenges.

Crucially, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo all uphold the doctrine of universal salvation, the view that each one of us, without exception, will eventually succeed in reaching the goal of our spiritual journey – namely, ultimate salvation. As Ramakrishna puts it, 'All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food' (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 879; Gupta ([1942] 1992), 818). While we will not all attain salvation at the same time, each one of us will definitely attain salvation either in this life or in a future life – represented, in Ramakrishna's analogy, by the noon and evening meal times.⁵ If some people are ultimately deprived of spiritual salvation, then God could still be accused of partiality and cruelty. John Hick ([1966] 2010), 341–342, for instance, argues that the doctrine of eternal punishment for unredeemed souls is fatal to theodicy. On the one hand, God is not perfectly loving if He does not wish to save all His creatures. On the other hand, God is not perfectly omnipotent if He *does* wish to save everyone but is unable to do so. Since the doctrine of eternal punishment implies one of these two premises, it undermines not only theodicy but theism more generally. When combined with the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, the doctrine of universal salvation is essential to IAT: the infinite good of spiritual salvation that awaits *all* of us, either in this life or in a future life, outweighs all the necessarily finite evils of this world.

However, even if we accept the theodical force of the doctrines of *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation, we can still ask: why did God create this world as a moral-spiritual gymnasium in the first place, if He knew that it would entail so much suffering for His creatures? As Vivekananda notes, the omnipotent God *could* have made a 'perfect universe' without any suffering at all (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 4: 207). But if He could have, why didn't He? On one occasion in 1884, a visitor named Hari asked Ramakrishna precisely this question:

- HARI: 'Why is there so much suffering in the world?'
- SRI RAMAKRISHNA: 'This world is the *līlā* [sportive play] of God. It is like a game. In this game there are joy and sorrow, virtue and vice, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil. The game cannot continue if sin and suffering are altogether eliminated from the creation ...'
- HARI: 'But this play of God is our death.'
- MASTER (*smiling*): 'Please tell me who you are. God alone has become all this – *māyā*, *jīvas* [individual souls], the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. 'As the snake I bite, and as the charmer I cure.'... Ignorance, Knowledge, and Integral Knowledge [*ajñāna*, *jñāna*, *vijñāna*]. The *jñānī* [one who has attained Knowledge] sees that God alone exists and is the Doer, that He creates, preserves, and destroys. The *vijñānī* [one who has attained Integral Knowledge] sees that it is God who has become all this.' (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 437; Gupta ([1942] 1992), 436)

According to Ramakrishna, God created this world – containing copious amounts of good and evil, virtue and vice – in a spirit of sportive play (*līlā*). This answer, however, does not satisfy Hari, who immediately retorts that a God who revels in the suffering of His creatures seems to be more of a Divine Sadist than a perfect Supreme Being worthy of our worship. At this point, Ramakrishna changes tack by denying the presupposition at the very basis of Hari's objection – namely, that God is different from His suffering creatures. Ramakrishna claims, on the basis of his panentheistic spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, that

God Himself sports in the form of His various creatures, so all the suffering endured by His creatures is actually God's own playfully *self-inflicted* 'suffering'. From the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*, Ramakrishna does not so much solve as *dissolve* the problem of evil: the problem of evil is only a problem for those who mistakenly think that they are different from God.⁶

Ramakrishna's theodical appeal to his own spiritual experience of *vijñāna* raises an important issue. For an explanation of suffering to constitute an adequate response to the problem of suffering, is it sufficient to establish the bare *possibility* that the explanation is true? Or is it necessary to go further and establish the *plausibility* of the explanation? The answer depends on which problem of suffering is under discussion. According to the logical problem of suffering, the existence of suffering is logically incompatible with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God. As Alvin Plantinga (1974, 9–28) has noted, establishing the logical possibility that suffering coexists with God is obviously sufficient to refute this logical problem of suffering. However, the problem of suffering that interests most contemporary philosophers and theologians is not the logical but the evidential problem. According to the evidential problem of suffering, the existence of suffering makes it *implausible* to believe that the theistic God exists. Establishing the logical possibility of the coexistence of God and suffering is clearly not sufficient to refute this evidential problem of suffering. Peter van Inwagen (1996) and Eleonore Stump (2010, 19–20) have plausibly argued that there are two distinct lines of response to the evidential problem of suffering: theodicy and defence. A theodicy aims to establish that a particular explanation of why God permits suffering is *plausible* or *more probable than not*. By contrast, a defence aims to establish the more modest conclusion that a particular explanation of why God permits suffering is true *for all we know*, in the sense that we have no good reason to believe the explanation is *false*. The vast majority of philosophers responding to the evidential problem of suffering have contented themselves with providing a defence rather than a theodicy (van Inwagen (1996); Murray (2009), 353–360; Stump (2010), 19–20).

By contrast, IAT constitutes a full-blown theodicy rather than a mere defence, since it offers positive reasons for believing that the explanation of suffering it provides is *true*. Most fundamentally, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo claimed to have gained direct knowledge of the truth of key elements in their theodicy – particularly the existence of God, the doctrine of rebirth, and panentheism – through their own spiritual experiences. When Vivekananda asked Ramakrishna how he knew that God exists, Ramakrishna replied: 'Because I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense' (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 4: 179). Likewise, Vivekananda observed:

If you have seen a certain country, and a man forces you to say that you have not seen it, still in your heart of hearts you know you have. So, when you see religion and God in a more intense sense than you see this external world, nothing will be able to shake your belief. (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 2: 165)

As for the theodical doctrine of panentheism, Ramakrishna – as I already noted – realized its truth in the spiritual state of *vijñāna*, which revealed to him that 'it is God who has become all this' (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 437; Gupta ([1942] 1992), 436). Likewise, Aurobindo claimed that the final stage of spiritual realization is 'to perceive all things as God' (Aurobindo (1997–2006), 13: 76).

With regard to the doctrine of rebirth, Vivekananda claims that anyone can attain knowledge of their past lives through the practice of special yogic disciplines explained in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*:⁷

[C]onsciousness is only the surface of the mental ocean, and within its depths are stored up all our experiences. Try and struggle, they would come up and you would be conscious even of your past life.

This is direct and demonstrative evidence. Verification is the perfect proof of a theory, and here is the challenge thrown to the world by the Rishis. We have discovered the secret by which the very depths of the ocean of memory can be stirred up – try it and you would get a complete reminiscence of your past life. (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 1: 9)

Of course, spiritual experience can only provide ‘verification’ of theodical truth-claims if spiritual experiences have epistemic value. But why should we believe that spiritual experiences have epistemic value in the first place? Vivekananda answers this question by providing a sophisticated argument for the epistemic value of supersensuous perception, which resonates strongly with contemporary arguments in the philosophy of religion.⁸ Since I have discussed this argument in detail elsewhere (Medhananda (2022c), chs 5–6), I will only summarize it here. The following passage contains Vivekananda’s core argument:

What is the proof of God? Direct perception, *pratyakṣa*. The proof of this wall is that I perceive it. God has been perceived that way by thousands before, and will be perceived by all who want to perceive Him. But this perception is no sense-perception at all; it is supersensuous, superconscious ... (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 1: 415)

We ordinarily take our sensory perceptions to be proof that what we perceive actually exists. As Vivekananda puts it, ‘The proof of this wall is that I perceive it.’ This everyday behaviour is justified, he claims, on the basis of a general epistemic principle, which he formulates as follows: ‘whatever we see and feel, is proof, if there has been nothing to delude the senses’ (*ibid.*, 1: 204). Let us call this the *Principle of Perceptual Proof* (hereafter ‘PP’). Vivekananda also holds that direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) encompasses both sensory perception and supersensuous perception.

In *Rāja-Yoga*, he further develops this argument by defending another epistemic principle: the testimony of an *āpta* – a credible person – about her perception of some entity constitutes ‘proof’ for others that that entity exists (*ibid.*, 1: 205). Let us call this the *Principle of Testimonial Proof* (hereafter ‘TP’). Crucially, he includes credible yogis under the category of an *āpta*. Vivekananda argues that both PP and TP are uncontroversial principles of rationality that are indispensable in everyday life. After all, it is a mark of rational behaviour to take our sense-perceptions as evidence that what we perceive actually exists. For instance, if I am crossing the street and I see a car rushing toward me, it is reasonable for me to believe that there is a car about to hit me and, therefore, to act on this belief by getting out of the way. Likewise, it is equally rational for people to believe the perceptual testimony of others. For instance, if a trustworthy person tells me that it is raining outside, it is reasonable for me to believe that it is raining on the basis of this person’s testimony. According to Vivekananda, if we accept PP and TP, then the ‘words’ of a credible yogi who claims to have perceived a supersensuous reality such as God or an immortal soul constitute ‘proof’ for others that that supersensuous reality exists.

Apart from the argument from spiritual experience, Vivekananda presents a moral argument in support of the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Medhananda, [forthcoming](#)). He argues that the theory of rebirth is the best way to ‘explain this world of inequalities’ (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 4: 269). Assuming the existence of a ‘just and merciful God’, why, for instance,

are some children born into highly favourable circumstances, while other children are 'born to suffer, perhaps all their lives' (*ibid.*)? According to the theory of rebirth, the circumstances in which I find myself are the result of my own thoughts and deeds in previous lives. If we do not accept *karma* and rebirth, it becomes very difficult – if not impossible – to reconcile God's perfect love with the existence of human inequalities.

Addressing objections to the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth

There are, of course, numerous objections to the theodicy sketched in the previous section, many of which target the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. In this section, I will discuss two of the most serious objections to these doctrines. Some philosophers have argued that human population growth is incompatible with rebirth (Edwards (1996), 226–233). If there is a fixed number of human souls and new souls are not created, then it seems impossible to explain how there can be as many souls as there currently are people – roughly 7.9 billion – since there were only about 3 billion people in 1960. We can respond to this objection by noting that most Hindu traditions – including the Integral Advaita tradition discussed in this article – hold that while the number of souls is fixed, souls can inhabit not only human bodies but also other biological organisms including non-human animals, plants, and even bacteria.⁹ Moreover, this earth is only one of many planes of existence (*lokas*) in which souls exist. Aurobindo, for instance, refers to higher 'typal' worlds in which souls reside (Aurobindo (1997–2006), 21–22: 708). From this perspective, it is easy to explain how the number of total souls can remain constant in spite of the fact that the human population here on earth has grown exponentially. The increase in human population can be compensated for by a proportional decrease in the number of souls inhabiting non-human bodies here on earth and/or by a proportional decrease in the number of souls in non-earthly realms of existence. Vivekananda, for instance, reconciles rebirth with human population growth along precisely these lines: 'It is a significant fact that as the human population is increasing, the animal population is decreasing. The animal souls are all becoming men' (*ibid.*, 1: 400).¹⁰

However, Paul Edwards (1996, 229–231) argues that this line of response to the population problem is unsatisfactory, since it is based on 'noxiously *ad hoc*' assumptions. According to Edwards, when the astronomers John Adams and Urbain Leverrier assumed the existence of the planet Neptune in order to account for a discrepancy between the calculated and observed orbits of Uranus, their assumption was certainly *ad hoc* – since it was not based on direct observation – but not noxiously *ad hoc*, for two reasons: 'the theory that it was meant to save was itself powerfully supported by a vast array of observations and, although *ad hoc*, it was independently testable' (*ibid.*, 230). By contrast, Edwards claims that in the case of rebirth, the assumptions of the existence of superterrestrial realms and the possibility that souls inhabit not only human bodies but also non-human animal bodies and other organisms are noxiously *ad hoc*, since (a) there is no good empirical evidence in support of the theory of reincarnation and (b) these assumptions are not 'independently testable' (*ibid.*).

However, if we accept the epistemic value of spiritual experience, Edwards's (b) is disputable. Numerous mystics, as well as many people who claim to have had near-death experiences, report having perceived spiritual beings in higher realms.¹¹ Regarding (a), Edwards was aware of the work of the psychiatrist Ian Stevenson (1966), who documented numerous cases of children who claimed to remember details from their previous life, many of which were subsequently verified.¹² However, Edwards argues that these cases do not constitute convincing evidence for the truth of rebirth. He claims that the belief in reincarnation necessitates belief in a whole host of 'collateral assumptions', which are 'surely fantastic if not indeed pure nonsense', including the assumption that the mind can

exist apart from body, that a person who dies an adult is reborn with the mind of a baby, and so on (Edwards (1996), 255). Therefore, Edwards argues that it is more reasonable to explain Stevenson's cases in a way that avoids the acceptance of rebirth. However, Stevenson himself is quite cautious in drawing conclusions from even his best cases. While Stevenson acknowledges that these cases *may* be explained without assuming the truth of rebirth, he claims that *it would not be unreasonable* for someone to conclude that these cases are best explained by accepting the truth of rebirth, along with all the relevant collateral assumptions, no matter how 'fantastic' they might seem. Hence, it is question-begging for Edwards to dismiss the evidential validity of Stevenson's cases on the basis of the 'fantastic' nature of the collateral assumptions.¹³

Edwards further claims that all of Stevenson's cases 'have big holes' (Edwards (1996), 256). Most seriously, he points to a 'disparity in the number and quality of Eastern and Western cases' (*ibid.*, 268), suggesting that it is hardly a coincidence that most of Stevenson's cases occurred in countries like India and Sri Lanka where belief in reincarnation is widespread. If reincarnation is true, there should be a large number of cases in countries like the United States and Britain where fewer people believe in reincarnation. Edwards also claims that when Stevenson investigated cases in Asia, he relied on translators who were not always 'trustworthy', since they had a prior belief in reincarnation (Stevenson (1996), 262).

Recently, however, the psychiatrist Jim Tucker (2005, 2013), building on Stevenson's pioneering work, has amassed an impressive collection of American cases of children claiming to have past life memories. While Tucker acknowledges that the evidential value of these cases varies widely, in the strongest cases, the child in question mentioned specific details about his or her past life which were later verified by others and which the child could not have learned by any normal means. For instance, an American child called James Leininger, at age two, had repeated nightmares of a plane crashing, shouting 'Airplane crash on fire!', and told his parents that he was a Second World War fighter pilot whose name was 'James' and whose plane was shot down by the Japanese, that his aircraft carrier was called *Natoma*, and that he had a friend named Jack Larsen. His father Bruce later verified all of these claims, finding that they corresponded to James Huston, a fighter pilot killed in the Battle of Iwo Jima during the Second World War, whose plane took off from an aircraft carrier called the USS *Natoma Bay*. His father also verified that Jack Larsen was another pilot based on USS *Natoma Bay* (Tucker, 2016). Tucker concludes, on the basis of the available evidence, that the 'most obvious' explanation of the facts is that James Leininger is the reincarnation of the World War II fighter pilot James Huston (*ibid.*, 206).

The philosopher Derek Parfit, in his classic book *Reasons and Persons* (1984), rejected the doctrine of reincarnation but gave an example of the kind of empirical evidence – which, at the time, he believed did not exist – that *would* make plausible the belief in reincarnation:

There might, for example, have been evidence supporting the belief in reincarnation. One such piece of evidence might be this. A Japanese woman might claim to remember living a life as a Celtic hunter and warrior in the Bronze Age. On the basis of her apparent memories she might make many predictions which could be checked by archaeologists. Thus she might claim to remember having a bronze bracelet, shaped like two fighting dragons. And she might claim that she remembers burying this bracelet beside some particular megalith, just before the battle in which she was killed. Archaeologists might now find just such a bracelet buried in this spot, and their instruments might show that the earth had not here been disturbed for at least 2,000 years. This Japanese woman might make many other such predictions, all of which are verified. (Parfit (1984), 202)

Arguably, some very recent cases of alleged rebirth investigated by Tucker – such as that of James Leininger – do meet, or come very close to meeting, these stringent standards for credible evidence of reincarnation set by Parfit. In fact, on the basis of such empirical evidence, Robert Almeder (1992, 81) has argued that the belief in rebirth is now ‘as empirically well established as the belief in the past existence of dinosaurs’, which is based on the evidence of fossils. In light of this considerable empirical evidence for rebirth and the abundant testimony of mystics and people reporting NDEs, I think, contrary to Edwards, that it is not noxiously *ad hoc* for believers in rebirth to account for human population growth by claiming that souls can inhabit non-human animal bodies and reside in superterrestrial realms.

Critics like Edwards (1996, 233) make another very intuitive argument against rebirth.¹⁴ If we have lived before, we should have at least some memories of one or more of our past lives. However, since we do *not* remember anything from our past lives, the doctrine of rebirth must be false. I think there are four plausible lines of response to this objection. First, memory is not a reliable indicator of personal continuity, since we typically have no memories of the first six months after our birth (Ducasse (1951), 492; Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 2: 218). Edwards responds to this rebuttal by arguing that even if we have no memories from the first six months after our birth, we are the same person as we were then because we have ‘the same body’ (Edwards (1996), 235). By contrast, rebirth, by definition, means that we inhabited a *different* body in a previous life, so the absence of any memories from our previous life constitutes evidence that rebirth is false.

However, Edwards’s claim that bodily continuity is sufficient to secure personal identity even in the absence of memory amounts to nothing more than a dogmatic assertion. In fact, there is a vast philosophical literature on the question of personal identity, and the ‘bodily criterion’ view advocated by Edwards – the view that personal identity is secured by bodily identity – is a highly controversial minority position in contemporary metaphysics (Olson, 2019). Edwards provides no arguments in favour of the bodily criterion of personal identity. Moreover, philosophers such as Peter Unger (2000) have argued that the bodily criterion is implausible in light of the ‘brain transplant’ thought-experiment. If person X’s brain is transplanted into another human body, then our intuition is that X remains the same person even though X’s brain is now in a different body. This intuition suggests that the bodily criterion is false. Partly as a result of such thought-experiments, the majority of contemporary philosophers advocate some form of the ‘psychological continuity’ theory of personal identity, which is compatible with the possibility of rebirth (Olson, 2019).

Moreover, as Eric Olson (2006, 244) has noted, ‘the bodily criterion will tell us nothing about our identity through time unless we have at least some idea of what it takes for a person’s body to persist; yet no one has ever produced a serious account of the identity conditions of human bodies’. According to Edwards, even though we have no memories of the first six months of our life, we are the same person as we were then because we had the same body then. But our three-month old body was, in fact, radically different from our present-day body in innumerable respects, including its size, shape, hair, and musculature. Even at the cellular level, many, if not most, of the cells in our three-month-old body are not the same as the cells in our present body. Edwards (1996, 235) claims that having the ‘same body’ is sufficient to secure personal identity in the absence of memory, yet he fails to provide any account of what it takes for a person’s body to be the ‘same’ one across time.

Second, numerous proponents of rebirth have argued that God has wisely withheld from most of us conscious memory of our previous lives, since having such memories would have added to our psychological and emotional baggage, making it more difficult – if not impossible – to focus on the challenges and opportunities of this life (Barua (2017), 3).¹⁵

In response, Kaufman (2005, 20) argues that ‘it is hardly plausible to say it is better *never* or even rarely to remember past deeds or lives’, since ‘acknowledging past mistakes is in general an important (even essential) educating force in our lives’. However, while acknowledging – and trying to learn from – our past mistakes in *this* life is no doubt an ‘educating force’, the question at issue is whether having knowledge of all our past mistakes in our *previous* lives would be beneficial for us. Arguably, having such knowledge could be psychologically overwhelming for us and could pose a major hindrance in our efforts to improve ourselves and live our present life as best we can.

Third, as Roy Perrett (1987, 54) and Carlo Filice (2006, 56) have noted, even if most of us do not have *conscious* memories of our past lives, the presence of *latent* memories of our past lives is arguably sufficient to secure personal identity. As I already noted in the previous section, Vivekananda and other proponents of rebirth have claimed that memories of past lives are latent in each of us in the form of *saṃskāras* (‘latent impressions’), and it is possible to gain knowledge of these past-life *saṃskāras* – thereby bringing conscious memories of our past lives to consciousness – through certain meditative practices. Edwards fails to consider this possibility that latent memories of past lives are sufficient for personal identity.

Fourth, as I already noted earlier in this section, even if most people do not have any memories of their previous lives, there is now abundant evidence that numerous people across the world – including ordinary people as well as mystics – claim to have memories of one or more of their past lives, and in certain cases, these memories have been verified. While Edwards (1996) found ‘big holes’ in the cases documented by Ian Stevenson, many more recent cases have been carefully documented by Jim Tucker, which deserve serious consideration.

Soul-making theodicy beyond John Hick

Michael Tooley devotes a lengthy section of his entry on ‘The Problem of Evil’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015) to what he considers the ‘most important’ theodicies. It is symptomatic of the pervasive Eurocentric bias in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion that he considers only *Christian* theodicies and does not even acknowledge the existence of Hindu or Islamic theodicies. In the subsection on ‘Soul-Making Theodicy’, Tooley summarizes, and critically examines, the Christian philosopher John Hick’s well-known soul-making theodicy in his book *Evil and the God of Love*. According to Hick, God created us as spiritually immature creatures who will gradually develop into spiritually perfect children of God. Hence, God created this world not as a hedonistic paradise but as a soul-making environment ‘whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realizing of the most valuable potentialities of human personality’ (Hick ([1966] 2010), 258). Central to Hick’s theodicy is his thesis that evil is inevitable in such a soul-making environment, since spiritually immature creatures who do not feel the overwhelming presence of God tend to lead self-centred lives and try to maximize their own happiness at the expense of that of others (*ibid.*, 353, 237). Hick is also quick to point out that for the vast majority of people, the soul-making process is rarely brought to fruition in this life. Hence, Hick argues that eschatology is needed to ‘complete’ his soul-making theodicy: the process of soul-making begun in this life will continue in a purgatorial state in the afterlife until each of us evolves into a perfect child of God who is fit to dwell with God in Heaven (*ibid.*, 351). Moreover, Hick rejects the traditional Christian doctrine of Hell – which he believes is fatal to theodicy – in favour of an eschatology of universal salvation (*ibid.*, 341).

Tooley (2015, sec. 7.1) raises three serious objections to Hick’s soul-making theodicy.¹⁶ While I believe these objections *do* significantly undermine Hick’s theodicy, I will argue

that IAT, the distinctively Hindu soul-making theodicy sketched in the first section of this article, offers unique conceptual resources for responding to all three of these objections. Tooley argues that Hick's theodicy fails to explain why this world contains 'horrendous suffering' – such as the suffering endured by the victims of the Holocaust – since a world without any horrendous suffering could serve as an equally 'good environment for the development of character' (*ibid.*).¹⁷ Indeed, Hick himself concedes that it is a 'mystery' (Hick [1966] (2010), 334) why suffering 'often falls upon men in amounts exceeding anything that could be rationally intended' (*ibid.*, 333).

IAT, by contrast, offers a three-pronged response to Tooley's objection from horrendous suffering. First, if we follow Hick in defining horrendous suffering as suffering in an amount which exceeds 'anything that could be rationally intended', then we can appeal to sceptical theism. As I have discussed elsewhere, both Ramakrishna and Aurobindo explicitly endorsed a sceptical theist response to the problem of evil as a key element in their broader theodicies (Maharaj (2018), 249–255; Medhananda (2022a), 10–13). For instance, when someone asked what morally justifying reason God might have had for permitting Genghis Khan's brutal slaughter of a hundred thousand people, Ramakrishna responded as follows: 'Is it possible to understand God's actions and Her motives for acting? She creates, She preserves, and She destroys. Can we ever understand why She destroys?' (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 127; Gupta ([1942] 1992), 160–161). On another occasion when the problem of suffering was raised, Ramakrishna similarly appealed to sceptical theism: 'How can we understand the ways of God through our small intellects?' (Gupta ([1902–1932] 2010), 105; Gupta ([1942] (1992), 153). In light of the vast cognitive gulf between our finite intellects and the omniscient mind of God, we are never justified in inferring that God could not have 'rationally intended' the terrible suffering we see in the world from the fact that we cannot think of any morally justifying reasons God might have for permitting this suffering. William Alston (1996, 317) tries to capture the intuitive plausibility of sceptical theism by appealing to a chess analogy: 'Having only the sketchiest grasp of chess, I fail to see any reason for Karpov [a chess master] to have made the move he did at a certain point in a game. Does that entitle me to conclude that he had no good reason for making that move?'¹⁸ As Alston points out, the cognitive gulf between an omniscient God and His creatures is incalculably greater than the cognitive gulf between Karpov and a neophyte in chess.

Second, as Herman (1976) has argued, the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth jointly account for all the suffering in the world, extreme or otherwise. A creature's extreme suffering is just as much the result of that creature's own past misdeeds – either earlier in life or in a past life – as milder forms of suffering are. If Tooley were to ask what the Nazi Holocaust victims did in their past lives to deserve their suffering, a proponent of the *karma*/rebirth doctrine might agree with the Buddha that speculating about the precise karmic causes of a person's suffering can only lead to 'madness or frustration', since the result of *karma* (Pāli: *kamma*) is an 'inconceivable matter' (*acinteyyāni*) (Bodhi (2012), 463). In other words, the *karma* doctrine holds that all of one's suffering, without exception, is the result of one's past actions – either in this life or in a previous life – but it does not provide any kind of calculus or algorithm for determining what precise kinds of actions result in what kinds of karmic fruits.

Third, IAT holds that suffering should not be understood primarily as retribution or punishment for one's past misdeeds so much as an opportunity for spiritual growth. From this perspective, the Holocaust victims will be reborn again in better circumstances and eventually attain the limitless fulfilment of salvation, which will outweigh all the terrible – but necessarily finite – suffering they underwent in the course of their many embodiments, including as victims of the Holocaust. Hence, IAT would hold that the suffering of Holocaust victims was, indeed, the result of their own past actions in a previous

life, but the *purpose* of their suffering was not punishment but spiritual evolution culminating eventually in their salvation. Indeed, the Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1992, 75) described in harrowing detail his efforts to find moral and spiritual meaning even in the most terrible circumstances, noting that some prisoners in the concentration camps gave up their own lives to help their fellow prisoners:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way ... Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp.

One might object that Frankl was able to find meaning in his experiences in the concentration camp and grow spiritually because he was one of the fortunate few to have survived. But this is precisely why the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth are so important: those martyrs who sacrificed their own lives in the concentration camps to help others will reap the fruits of their good deeds in a subsequent life and continue to make progress on their spiritual journey towards the ultimate goal of salvation that awaits us all. IAT, then, accounts for even the most terrible sufferings by combining the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth with that of universal salvation. Since Hick’s soul-making theodicy upholds universal salvation while *rejecting* the doctrines of *karma* or rebirth, it cannot provide a plausible explanation of how the terrible suffering endured by Holocaust victims served the soul-making process.

Tooley’s second objection is that Hick’s soul-making theodicy fails to provide a plausible explanation of non-human animal suffering (Tooley (2015), sec. 7.1). While Hick explicitly acknowledges the problem of non-human animal suffering, Tooley is correct in noting that Hick’s response is hardly satisfactory. From Hick’s Christian perspective, non-human animals are ‘lower’ creatures that lack rational-moral souls and, hence, are excluded from the soul-making process. Nonetheless, Hick suggests that animal suffering is justified to the extent that the existence of animals helps further the soul-making process of human beings – the ‘apex’ of the animal kingdom – by strengthening the ‘epistemic distance’ between humans and God (Hick ([1966] 2010), 309–317). Hick’s explanation of non-human animal suffering is problematic, both because it anthropologically privileges human animals over non-human animals and because it instrumentalizes animal suffering as an indirect means to the end of human soul-making.

IAT offers an arguably much more plausible explanation of non-human animal suffering. According to IAT, non-human animals have souls just as human beings do, and non-human animals do, therefore, participate in the soul-making process. Even though non-human animals are generally not capable of moral development, the souls inhabiting these non-human animal bodies nonetheless make progress in exhausting their past *karma* simply by dint of inhabiting a sub-optimal animal body and undergoing the various kinds of suffering to which non-human animals are subject. Hence, the theological doctrines of *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation apply just as much to non-human animals as to human beings: certain souls, as a result of their own *karma* from previous lives, currently inhabit the bodies of non-human animals and suffer accordingly, but these souls will eventually go on to inhabit human bodies and attain salvation through a gradual soul-making process. According to Herman (1976: 288), a major advantage of Indian theodicies based on *karma* and rebirth is that they explain non-human animal suffering in a far more satisfactory manner than any Western theodicy, including Hick’s.

Tooley's third objection is that Hick's soul-making theodicy 'provides no account of the suffering that young, innocent children endure, either because of terrible diseases, or at the hands of adults', since 'there is no soul-making purpose that is served' (Tooley (2021), sec. 7.1). Let us take Hick's own example of a baby who dies of cerebral meningitis. Hick admits that in such a case 'we can see no gain to the soul' (Hick ([1966] 2010), 330). Here again, IAT, in contrast to Hick's theodicy, holds that the suffering of this poor baby does serve a soul-making purpose. The baby suffered and ultimately died from cerebral meningitis as a result of its own past *karma*, but the baby's soul will go on to inhabit new human bodies in circumstances conducive to its moral and spiritual growth until it eventually attains the final goal of eternal salvation.

I hope I have begun to make the case that the Integral Advaitic theodicy of the Hindu mystics Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo offers a distinctive soul-making framework not vulnerable to many of the standard objections levelled against Hick's theodicy. Moreover, IAT arguably has three major philosophical advantages over the majority of Western 'soul-making' theodicies more generally. First, since IAT presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, it is in a better position than most Western 'soul-making' theories to explain how the soul evolves and grows here on earth in the course of many embodiments until attaining the final goal of salvation. Second, if we grant some epistemic value to mystical experience, then IAT, other things being equal, has greater evidential support than theodicies not grounded in mystical experience, since many of the key planks of IAT – including the existence of God, the doctrine of rebirth, and the truth of pantheism – have been experientially verified by mystics like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo.

Third, the pantheistic dimension of IAT provides an arguably 'deeper' response to the problem of suffering than any theodicy that presupposes a fundamental ontological difference between God and His suffering creatures. Even if suffering is necessary in a world meant for our ethical and spiritual development, why did God choose to create the world as a soul-making arena in the first place? The best response Hick can give is that only such a soul-making environment would allow God's creatures to come to Him freely (Hick ([1966] 2010), 238). But is human freedom a sufficiently valuable intrinsic good to justify all the evil and suffering that it entails? And even if freedom is a sufficiently valuable intrinsic good, couldn't God have created us as free creatures whose naturally good propensities nonetheless outweighed our evil propensities, so that we would have been far less inclined to commit evil deeds, if at all? Hick, as far as I can tell, fails to provide convincing answers to such questions. By contrast, IAT adopts an entirely different approach to the question of why God created this world as a soul-making arena in the first place: since God Himself has become everything and everyone in the universe, the underlying presupposition of the problem of suffering – namely, that there is a difference between God and His suffering creatures – turns out to be false. Accordingly, the soul-making theodicy of IAT is completed by, and finds its ultimate justification in, a mystically grounded pantheistic metaphysics, which *dissolves* the problem of suffering by denying the very presupposition at its basis.

For all these reasons, Tooley and other philosophers of religion would do well to expand their theodical horizons beyond the confines of Abrahamic religions.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Shokhin (2010), Bilimoria (2013), Freschi (2021), Maharaj (2018: 241–309), Medhananda (2022a), and Medhananda (2022b).

2. Vivekananda was the chief monastic disciple of Ramakrishna, and Aurobindo was strongly influenced by both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, as I have discussed in Medhananda (2022a) and Maharaj (2018, 119–124).
3. I provide detailed exegetical justification of the claims in this paragraph regarding Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo in Maharaj (2018, chs 1 and 2), Medhananda (2022c, ch. 2), and Medhananda (2022a) respectively.
4. On this point, see Stoeber (1992, 172–189) and Maharaj (2018, 260–261).
5. Likewise, Vivekananda states that ‘every soul must eventually come to salvation’ (Vivekananda ([1957–1997] 2006–2007), 2: 242). Aurobindo also affirms universal salvation in *The Life Divine*, where he claims that the ‘individual must wake’ into ‘the delight of the eternal superconscient self-possession ... and there become one with the indivisible Sachchidananda’ (Aurobindo (1997–2006), 21–22: 119).
6. As I have discussed elsewhere, both Vivekananda (Medhananda (2022c), 260–261) and Aurobindo (Medhananda, 2022a) followed Ramakrishna in their theological appeal to panentheism.
7. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Medhananda (forthcoming).
8. See, for instance, Wainwright (1981), Alston (1994), Gellman (1997), and Swinburne (2004), 293–327.
9. Precisely which entities have souls is a matter of dispute within Hindu traditions, though all traditions accept that non-human animals and plants have souls.
10. Incidentally, the fact of human population growth also suggests that souls are making moral and spiritual progress, since a human birth is more valuable from a soul-making standpoint than a non-human birth.
11. Ramakrishna, for instance, claimed to have perceived Vivekananda in the *saptarṣiloka* (Realm of Seven Sages) prior to Vivekananda’s birth on earth (Anonymous (1989), 1: 61). For reports of people who claim to have encountered spiritual beings in higher realms during a near-death experience, see Moody (1975) and Alexander (2012).
12. Stevenson (1997, 2003) also documented many more cases in books published after the appearance of Edwards’s book.
13. Almeder (1992, 34–35) makes this point persuasively in his response to Edwards’s objections to rebirth.
14. See also Kaufman (2005), 19.
15. Interestingly, while Edwards acknowledges this line of response, he makes no attempt to refute it (Edwards (1996), 235).
16. In fact, Tooley raises four objections, but I will focus on his first three, due to limitations of space.
17. Tooley (2015) does not provide a clear definition of ‘horrendous’ suffering, so his first objection to Hick’s theodicy lacks precision. Tooley also fails to provide a clear definition of horrendous evil in his co-authored book *Knowledge of God* (Plantinga and Tooley, 2008).
18. For recent work on sceptical theism, see Dougherty and McBrayer (2014).

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