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Who gets what? Assessing the reincarnation debate

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Reincarnation is a death-specific and forward-looking philosophico-religious phenomenon that enjoys a cross-cultural appeal. It represents the theory that when the soul separates from the body at death, it informs another body for another round of earthly life. The debate on reincarnation has, so far, revolved around the reality or otherwise of reincarnation and the associated claims. In this article, we undertake a holistic and critical examination and appraisal of the key arguments underlying the reincarnation debate, with emphasis on the nature and structure of reincarnation, as well as the value of reincarnation belief. The aim is to determine who gets what among the contending parties. Although oral interviews were involved in the exercise, textual and doctrinal analysis of extant literatures on reincarnation formed the predominant source of data for the research. Our finding reveals that although the phenomenon of reincarnation is bedeviled by internal contradictions and belief in it hardly justifiable, belief in it has some positive values, including coping and unifying values that could be harnessed for the well-being of people and society. These observed values of reincarnation and the attendant belief in it, the article concludes, do not constitute a conclusive proof of the reality of reincarnation.

Contribution: The contributive value of this paper lies in bringing to the fore the fact that contrary to popular assumption, the notion of belief is in reality, epistemically more powerful than knowledge, at least in the context of religion. Considering that *HTS Theological Studies* focuses on religious issues and that 'belief' and 'knowledge' are religious concepts, we consider this paper to be suitable to its objectives.

Keywords: reincarnation; death-specific belief; after-life; death; transmigration; metempsychosis.

Introduction

Some scholars are of the view that belief in reincarnation is an integral part of people's appreciation of meaning as well as a veritable coping mechanism, given its tendency to strengthen their resolve in the event of loss or bereavement (cf. Benore & Park 2008; Hogan & DeSantis 1996; Pargament 1997; Park & Folkman 1997). The concept of reincarnation is an age-long phenomenon of belief with a cross-cultural appeal. Experience has shown that one major desire of every man is to live forever either by way of unbroken existence in this material world or by way of a continued existence in a metaphysical plane. As a basic tenet forming the foundations of most religions and cultures, it teaches that the soul of humans, and by extension animals and plants, is not only eternal but subject to repeated returns upon death in another form.

The presumed value and merit of reincarnation notwithstanding, some schools of thought either deny its reality or, in the event that its reality is accepted, deny that it has any positive value. Advocates of this position point to the inherent internal contradictions and the consequential effects of admitting the reality of reincarnation to buttress their position. From the religious perspective, and especially the Christian stand point, it is argued that admitting the reality of reincarnation will make no sense of such concepts as 'heaven' and 'hell'. Then from the demographic and economic points of view, reincarnation belief makes the alarm about over-population a false one, given that the idea of over-population is impossible on the framework of reincarnation.

While in this article, we examined the meaning, nature and character of reincarnation, the belief thereof, as well as the associated debates, our findings, among other things, reveal that firstly, the contenders in the reincarnation debate are not in disagreement about the meaning of reincarnation as they are about its reality; secondly, reincarnation is both a death-specific belief and a coping mechanism in the face of death-associated misfortunes; thirdly, reincarnation belief can serve as a useful instrument for group solidarity and fourthly, what passes for many people as reincarnation could be explained biologically in terms of genotypes and phenotypes.

Methodologically, this study combines library research and in-depth interviews with doctrinal analysis.

The rest of the article is divided as follows: In part two, we explore the meaning, nature, forms, character and dimensions of reincarnation. Besides arguing that reincarnation enjoys a cross-cultural belief, we examine the contending arguments underlying the reincarnation debate. Next, we weigh the merits and demerits of the arguments surrounding the phenomenon of reincarnation, using the evaluative method of philosophy, pointing out the various points constituting the key arguments of the contending blocks (Part III). This is immediately followed by Part IV where discussion and assessment of the overall arguments in Part III are carried out. Part V is the conclusion, where the authors sum up the discourse while declaring their position.

What does it all mean? *Exploring the nature, character and dimensions of reincarnation*

Generally, the term reincarnation is understood to mean the possibility of dead human beings returning to the world to begin another cycle of existence. It is a belief that someone who once lived, died and was buried is returning as a newly born baby. In the opinion of Perry (2015), reincarnation is widely conceived as the consciousness of the past self in the present self, that is, the belief that the present self had once existed in an old being that had died but is currently incarnating a new body. A closer look at the notion of reincarnation will reveal that the belief therein is strongly tied to the belief in the reality of the doctrine of karma. To summarily put, karma is the principle that for every human action, there is a reaction (consequence). Expressions like 'what goes around, comes around', 'the sin that men do, lives with or after them', 'whatever a man sows, that he will reap', etc. are ways of expressing the principles of karma.

From a religio-cultural perspective, reincarnation represents a doctrine that seeks to address the problem of post-bodily death existence, physical resemblance, as well as character traits of departed ancestors found in their offspring. Among the Igbo people, the Yoruba people and the Urhobo people of Nigeria, man is seen as a being composed of body/matter and soul/mind/spirit. It is the spirit aspect of man that survives death and which returns, by way of incarnation, for another round of earthly existence. Onwubiko (1991), Onyewuenyi (1996) and Otite (1982) are of the opinion that many names among the Yoruba, Igbo and the Urhobo people of Nigeria such as Babatunde (father returns), Yetunde (mother returns), Babatunji (father wakes once again), Sotunde (the wise man returns), Nnenna ya (mother of her father), Nnanna (father of his father) and other names that refer to any of the dead members of the family or extended family are pointers to the fact that these communities are of the belief that reincarnation is real. The association of names to departed loved ones is what Mbabuike (1996) has in mind when he wrote that 'anthroponyms, personal names, among

the Igbo and other ethnic groups are *identificatory*, *classificatory* and *declaratory*'. In fact, for the Igbos, the concept of *Ịlọ ụwa*, which means a return to the world, says it all about the Igbo's firm belief in the reality of reincarnation. In the words of Onwubiko (1991):

> African Religion is *world Affirming* and does not contain doctrine of eternity and in heaven. There is in them, the concept of *spirit world*. ... Therefore, Africans do not believe that people stay there forever. They must come back to this world to live and die to come again. This is embodied in the belief in reincarnation… Among the Igbo people, it is *ỊLỌ ỤWA*. The belief in *Ọgbanje* is a specific aspect of it. (p. 60)

In further affirmation of the fact that the Igbo people have a firm belief in the reality of reincarnation, Ikenga-Metuh (1999) submits thus:

> Africans look forward to reincarnation as a desirable blessing. Men and women regard marriage and the begetting of children as a sacred duty to their ancestors and to themselves, because not to do so would be to deny the ancestors the opportunity to reincarnate in their children, and deny themselves the chance of reincarnating in their own grandchildren and great grandchildren. (p. 255)

For Onyewuenyi, as for Pythagoras, reincarnation involves a circular movement in which the reincarnating soul is either here or in another sphere of existence, but not in both. Onyewuenyi and Pythagoras, however, differ in one major respect, whereas in the framework of the Pythagorean theory, the reincarnating soul of a deceased person can inform the body of not only humans but also those of animals, trees, plants or insects for another round of earthly existence, that is, whereas 'cross-specie reincarnation'[1] is possible within the framework of Pythagoras' theory, Onyewuenyi's theory gave room for only 'specie-reincarnation'.[2] Onyewuenyi's conception also endorses both Hindu and the Jewish brands of reincarnation. Reincarnation is, for the Hindus, the natural process of birth, death and rebirth. On the basis of Hindu and Jewish theories, upon death of a body, the occupant soul disengages from it and lives a discarnate existence until such a time it assumes a new body. What this view implies is that at any given time, the soul is either incarnate or discarnate, but not both. Seen thus, the Hindu's and the Jewish's views share similarities with that of Onyewuenyi in that they all affirm the logical principle of non-contradiction that holds that a thing cannot both be and not-be at the same time. Given Plato's and Pythagoras' accounts of reincarnation (Plato's notion of reincarnation is contained in his 'Myth of Er'), it follows that human beings possess immortal souls that at birth can transform to form entirely new beings such as cats, dogs, cows or trees, etc. Properly speaking, this conception of reincarnation that is popular in the West is known as metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul.

1. Cross-speciesism denotes the idea that a dead being, in coming back for another round of existence, informs another body or takes a form completely different from the one it had earlier inhabited (cf. Banwari 2015), 'The theory of reincarnation and the journey of the soul: A comparison between ancient Greek and Indian belief'. Available at https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10413/12707.

2. We define 'specie-reincarnation' as reincarnation that takes place within and among a given species or class of being, that is, a scenario whereby a soul exiting the body of a dead human informs another human body and not any other body.

Nkeonye Otakpor (1996) based his notion of reincarnation on what he calls 'the market-place theory'. According to his theory, the world in which we live is like a market-place, wherein human beings are the key players (sellers and buyers). Character is among the prominent wares or goods displayed for sale in this market. Reincarnation, the idea of being born again, is predicated on the quality of a person's character while on earth. As the levels of sales and gains depend largely on the quality and price of the goods plus the attitude/character of the seller to his customers, so also are the chances of staging a come-back (reincarnation) dependent on the quality or strength of a person's character while on earth. Otakpor feels that the Igbo (African)[3] notion of reincarnation is like his doctrine of the 'market place' in every respect except that they are not exactly the same when it comes to the idea of determining when to go to and when to leave the market. Inasmuch as the Igbos people believe that human beings do make return journeys to the world, they are of the conviction that return journeys are not for every soul. There is a condition precedent that, in this case, is the quality of the intending returning soul's character in his or her previous earthly existence. As fantastic as Otakpor's theory appears to be, he is silent on what happens to those souls who lack the basic qualifications for a return ticket.

According to Ezekwugo (1992a:197), reincarnation represents 'a metaphysical circular movement of the soul'. He notes that the principle of reincarnation is based on the assumption that human life has such a short lifespan that is considered insufficient for the soul to gain enough experience as to enable it to qualify for eternal bliss or beatific vision. The foregoing doctrine of reincarnation presented is basically Western in orientation. It has to be pointed out that the Westerners' conception of reincarnation is borne out of their conception of human nature in which man is viewed as a being that is composed of two basic stuffs: mind/soul and matter/body. While the element mind is spiritual and indestructible, that of the body is material and perishable.

Biologically, reincarnation is explained in terms of the expression of dominant genes of the dead in the newborn baby that supersedes the recessive genes. That is to say that from the biological perspective, alleged reincarnates of deceased ancestors are conceived in terms of biological inheritance, that is, persons who have the traits of their deceased parents passed unto them. Through sexual or asexual reproduction, these individuals acquired the genetic information of their parents. Thus, resemblance in colour, shape, attitude and indeed general appearance of certain children with their deceased ancestors is easily explained in genetics through the duo concepts of 'genotype' and 'phenotype'. While genotype refers to the complete set of genes within an organism's genome, phenotype, which happens to be another name for physical trait, is the complete set of observable traits of the structure and behaviour of an organism.

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3.Emphasis is ours.

Reincarnation: For and against

It appears that all the participants in the reincarnation debate are in agreement as to the meaning of reincarnation. What is obvious they disagree about is on the reality or otherwise of reincarnation. In other words, scholars and philosophers engaged in the debate are sharply divided. We now turn our attention to a review of the reasoning and arguments informing the positions of the various contenders in the debate.

Reincarnation is real

Thinkers and scholars who argued in favour of reincarnation include ancient personalities and scholars such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Empedocles, Plotinus and later-day scholars like Stevenson (1974), Currie (1978), Weiss (1988, 2004), Onwubiko (1991), Ezekwugo (1992), Ikenga-Metuh (1999), Clare and Spadaro (2001), Almeder (2001) and Di Muzio (2013), etc. Pythagoras advanced a transmigration version of reincarnation, seeing that in his view, the occupant soul, upon the death of a body, departs and informs another human or animal body for another cycle of existence (cf. Heinrik 2014). Pythagoras' theory of reincarnation underlies the doctrine of vegetarianism that preaches against the consumption of meat. The idea here is that the soul of our dead relation or friend could be the one informing the animal that we intend to kill or slaughter. Pythagoras' affirmation of the reality of reincarnation was such that he believed himself to be a reincarnation of Euphorbus who was killed at Troy.[4] The type of animal ethics that flow from Pythagoras' theory of reincarnation does not have its foundation on the intrinsic value of animals *per se*, but as a result of the belief or assumption that discarnate human souls can and do incarnate animal bodies. Empedocles projected a theory of reincarnation similar to that of Pythagoras. Thus, like Pythagoras, he prohibited man from killing animals. Osborne (2007) quotes him to have observed in his poem, *Purification*, thus:

> Taking up his own dear son, though changed in form, the father, great fool, cuts his throat and offers prayer … And in the same way son taking up father, children their mother, they bereave them of life and feast on their beloved flesh. (p. 47)

Plato's popular 'Myth of Er' encapsulates his theory of reincarnation and the picture of the afterlife as contained in his *The Republic* (1987: pt. II. Bk 10 614-21a-d). For Plato, at all material time, the state of a person's soul is the consequence of his previous life, just as his present state will in turn influence the dimension of life he chooses next, that is, whether as a beast, donkey, kite, bee, ant or human (pt 11. Bk 10 620 a-e). Plotinus, another reincarnation apologist and a neo-Platonist philosopher, also defended the reality of reincarnation. However, his neo-Platonism notwithstanding, he introduced some elements of originality in his reincarnation theory by adding plant bodies to the list of entities human souls could transmigrate into.

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4.This account was offered by Ezekwugo (1992a) in his work. Ezekwugo appears to be emotional in his pro-account of reincarnation.

In a related development, in one of his works on reincarnation, Stevenson (1974) forcefully defended the reality of reincarnation. Following the two cases, he examined concerning children who manifested memories of the past, Stevenson came to the conclusion that reincarnation is real. For Currie (1978), reincarnation is real, just as it is a process that allows the soul to enter and leave the physical body cyclically in order to learn and grow spiritually. Accordingly, death only offers humans the opportunity for renewal, nay, a return home. Currie posited the existence of two worlds – the material and the immaterial worlds. The soul, being the immaterial, the eternal and the indestructible aspect of man, is capable of making to and fro movements between these two worlds for the purposes of enhanced knowledge.

The psychiatrist, Brain, L. Weiss, is also an ardent advocate of reincarnation of the later day class as can be seen in two out of his many works on reincarnation. Like Currie, Weiss affirmed the existence of two worlds. Thus, in Weiss (1988), he theorised that there are two lives and that in between these two lives is a spot inhabited by higher spirits. He reasoned that the possibility of humans coming in contact with these higher spirits makes their terrain a meeting point between science and metaphysics. In *Same Soul, Many Bodies* (2004), he contends that we have more lives to live in the future the way that we have lived in the past. This being the case, what we do in this life will influence our future along the evolutionary path to immortality. Weiss' experience with one of his patients informed his strong affirmation of the reality of reincarnation as well as his submission that humans often reincarnate within the same families and in friends with whom we have created powerful bonds and chosen as learning mates in the course of our different lives (Weiss 1998).

The African philosopher, Charles Ezekwugo, equally conceived reincarnation from the cyclical perspective. In another piece of his works, *Discover Your Star*, Ezekwugo (1992b) betrayed his belief in and affirmation of the reality of reincarnation when he observes that:

> [M]any way-side beggars and human beings who fall victim to vultures, cause dogs to lick their blood, perhaps, had once misused their privileged positions. Instead of giving service to humanity, they deified themselves and lorded it over others in their previous incarnations. (p. 20)

Elizabeth Clare and Patricia Spadaro (2001) are also strong defenders of the reality of reincarnation. The thrust of their argument in their popular work on reincarnation is that we have all been here before. For them, there are karmic connections from past lives that have contributed to the circumstances of our current life. They are of the affirmation that the actions we did in the past (the good and bad ones) have influence on the family in which we are born, on the people to whom we feel attracted, as well as the reason why some people make us cringe.

More recently, Almeder is one scholar that has vigorously canvassed support for the acceptance of the phenomenon of reincarnation as real. For him, reincarnation is as real as anything we can think of. In response to the critics of Cartesian dualism who dub reincarnation an 'off-shoot of Cartesian immaterialism that lacks empirical validation', Almeder (2001:358) posits that 'reincarnation is an empirical thesis which, if confirmed in terms of what it predicts, merely shows that that form of empiricism which denies Cartesian Dualism is unacceptable'. He goes further to observe that 'there is nothing inconsistent with being an empiricist and believing in Cartesian immaterial substances' (2001:358). In response to Hales' (2001a, 2001b) call for the rejection of reincarnation hypothesis on the grounds that it claims reincarnation is true without knowing why, how or the causal factor, Almeder (2001) argues that:

> [W]e can certainly justifiably assert the existence of a certain entity or process as an explanation for a body of data without having to say how or why the entities appealed to in the explanation work as they do in causing the data explained by appeal to them. (p. 349)

In his 2013 article on reincarnation, Di Muzio offers a philosophico-religious defense of reincarnation. Di Muzio sees reincarnation as a corrective mechanism, arguing that by means of reincarnation, human beings are provided with the opportunities to live many lives that in turn offer them ample windows for repentance and moral growth. Moreover, he opines that the theory of reincarnation makes the Christian idea of divine justice consistent with the inequalities that depend on idiosyncratic human impressions. Di Muzio predicates his position on the assumption within the Christian circle that baptism is essential for salvation. Given this observation, he contends that 'reincarnation evens the playing field and extends an equal opportunity for salvation to all human beings' (2013:171). In his reaction to the call by some people for the outright rejection of the theory of reincarnation because it is laden with the problematic issue of personal identity vis-à-vis punishment on the last day, Di Muzio agrees that both memory and character are fundamental to identity but notes that character weighs more in establishing identity than memory by way of remembrance. Critics of reincarnation had argued that when a given person has been allowed to live many different lives, it becomes difficult to determine the appropriate person to be punished given the fact that the last person in the series of many different lives may not even have an iota of memory concerning his or her past lives.

The rationale behind Di Muzio's endorsement of the theory of reincarnation is that for him, the twin doctrines of 'divine justice' and 'divine punishment' would only make sense if individual human beings are given opportunity for many different lives that can pave way for repentance, change of attitude and indeed moral improvement rather than God imposing 'an everlasting punishment upon sinners who offended him only for a human lifetime' (p. 168).

Reincarnation is not real

Scholars on the other side of the debate are those who are opposed to the claims affirming the reality of reincarnation.

Among those that deny the reality of reincarnation are the likes of Ayer (1956), Flew (1976), Parfit (1984) and Hales (2001a, 2001b). As time goes on, even Christians themselves began to consider the notion of reincarnation as both unreal and contradictory to the Christian faith. Their argument is that it is appointed unto man to die once and thereafter comes judgement. It is further argued that after judgement the soul found to have sinned would be put to death, whereas the innocent ones (pure souls) would be made to continue their spiritual existence but not to come back to earth for another cycle of existence. This strand or brand of belief seems to foreclose the idea of reincarnation in the classical sense.

Although the main-line scholars who denied the reality of reincarnation have their individual reasons for doing so, the unifying factor in their objection is the contradictory and non-verifiable nature of the claims associated with reincarnation. Thus, for Flew (1976), evidence adduced for reincarnation is a non-repeatable counter instance that is not amenable to scientifically controlled conditions. As claims of reincarnation cannot be validated via a laboratory experiment, the best we could do is to jettison reincarnation as untenable. For Ayer (1956), the chief criteria for accepting an alleged reincarnation of someone else as true is the possession by the allegedly reincarnated person, of the verified memories we would expect of the already dead person that appealed to facts that were not items of public knowledge.

In a similar vein, Parfit (1984) is of the position that we should dismiss the idea of reincarnation for the reason that we have no evidence of the sort required to justify our belief in reincarnation. He bases his position on the grounds of the inability of reincarnation hypothesis to offer a plausible account of the mind.[5]

Onyewuenyi developed a 'vital force' theory of reincarnation that he used to demonstrate that Africans do not believe in reincarnation, even though they think they do so, and that the term 'reincarnation' is first and foremost a language of accommodation imposed on Africans by the Western scholars and anthropologists. According to the 'vital force theory', beings are essentially forces. A being is made up of visible and invisible aspects. It is the invisible aspect of a being that makes that being what it is. Onyewuenyi calls the invisible aspect of a being 'the inner nature' or 'force of the being'. The visible and the invisible aspects of man do not imply any dichotomy between a man's body and soul as is obtainable in the Western ontology. The implication here is that when a man dies, 'his bodily energy goes (vanishes) but his vital force persists and waxes stronger and stronger ontologically' (1996:38).[6]

Vital forces are ontologically graded such that the vital force of the dead occupies a higher ontological hierarchy than that of the living. Owing to their acquisition of an enhanced vital force and superiority of intelligence over the living coupled

with the ontological relationship existing between them and the living members of their family, the dead ancestors are able to replicate or perpetuate themselves in the living members of their family. For Onyewuenyi, it is this act of the ancestors perpetuating themselves by way of reproduction that has been mistakenly and regrettably called reincarnation. He likened this idea of 'the ancestors' vital force' and 'their perpetuation through reproduction' to the paradox of 'the sun' and 'the sun rays'. In the sun and the sun rays paradox, the sun is seen as an entity that has rays that extend to all corners of the earth. The sun heats and brightens through its rays, yet its rays singly or collectively are not the sun in the same way that:

> [T]he vital force which is the being of the ancestor can be present in one or several of the living members of his clan through…his vital influence without its being diminished or truncated (p. 40)

Thus, 'just as the sun is the causal agent of heat, so also is an ancestor a causal agent of his descendants who are below him in the ontological hierarchy' (1996:38).

Hales (2001a, 2001b) is another staunch critic of reincarnation. Hales rejection of the theory of reincarnation is based on his conviction that an experiment should not be accepted unless it is confirmed by a theory. He argues that the basic problem associated with reincarnation as a theory of mind is not that it lacks evidence in support of its claims, but that even in the face of its claims, it runs short of a well-developed and systematic theory. The implication of this deficiency, he says, is that the epistemic warrant of materialist theories of the mind weighs against accepting the reincarnation theory (2001b:359–367). What Hales seems to imply here is that our theory about any phenomenon should be able to predict the data by which the theory is confirmed. Reincarnation theory fails to do this because it claims that reincarnation is true without knowing why, how or the causal factor. In other words, for Hales, there would have been no much difficulty in accepting reincarnation hypothesis if it is empirically testable, falsifiable and subject to confirming evidence (cf. 2001a).[7] In order to provide support for his position, Hales invokes the ET hypothesis. The ET hypothesis is about the 'intelligent, technologically advanced extraterrestrials who regard humans with great amusement, and secretly monitor and occasionally interfere with our lives' (2001a:342). The ET hypothesis would have been confirmed, if the aliens were to land and reveal themselves and their techniques. Similarly, the ET hypothesis would have been falsified, if we were to completely survey the universe and find no such aliens. Such are the conditions that Hales would want the reincarnation hypothesis to satisfy, but which regrettably it does not.

Assessing the arguments

Belief in reincarnation portends a lot of far-reaching implications for man and society. The cardinal idea underpinning reincarnation belief is that a dead person is

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5. For more details on Parfit's criteria for the acceptance of reincarnation hypothesis, see *Reasons and Persons* (1984).

6. Emphasis is ours.

7. Hales insinuates this while comparing the ET hypothesis with Almeder's reincarnation hypothesis. For more on this, see Hales (2001a:335–346). Hales and Almeder had some scholarly exchanges on the vexed issue of reincarnation. Cf. Almeder (2001:347–358).

brought back to life. This being the case, the expectation is that the person that is brought back to life should bear both inward and outward resemblance with the deceased person whom he or she has reincarnated. However, as Preuss (1989) rightly observes, in most cases, the reincarnate and the reincarnated are not the same in terms of abilities, emotions, intelligence, socio-economic status, talents, characters, dispositions, orientation, ideologies and spirituality. The appearance of birthmarks on the body of the newly born, and in most cases, at the exact spot where the particular ancestor bore it, is about the strongest argument adduced in favour of reincarnation, but it does not seem to us that the similarity of birthmarks argument is a good defense, given the confirmations coming from the sphere of genetics as it concerns social theory of resemblance among relations.

Still on identity, assuming physical traits is a factor for personal identification, is it an ancestor's physical traits as a child, a young boy, a youth, an adult or an old man that the alleged reincarnation of the ancestor would reincarnate with? This question becomes necessary because as dynamic entities, human beings are subject to both bodily and attitudinal changes at various stages of their existence. The fact that the ancestor said to originally possess the birthmarks is nowhere to be seen for verification further weakens the birthmarks theory. We are of the affirmation that the advocates of reincarnation theory are yet to resolve the personal identity problem. In a related development, the mind-body problem is another issue posing a challenge for the reincarnation theory. That man is an entity composed of dual components – body and mind, is a principle taken for granted by the advocates of reincarnation. If man is made up of body and mind, how do these two substances relate? And are they really different entities? Different theories exist regarding the nature and status of mind. Thus, for the materialist, as reality is made up of matter, what we call mind is reducible to matter. For the epiphenomenalists, the mind is a distinct, but not an independent by-product of matter. It follows from this that whereas epiphenomenalism provides a ground for the possibility of reincarnation, the acceptance of materialism is a rejection of the reincarnation theory (cf. Goswami 2001; Umezuruike 2017).

If reincarnation is to be understood to mean 'rebirth' or the birth of a soul in a new body along an identical line of beings, it means that life itself is cyclical, that is, endlessly moving in cycles with nothing new coming into existence. What this means is that the world population might have decreased, but not increased, since the time of creation. On this understanding, the alarm by economists and some pro-nature environmentalists that the world as it is today is overpopulated is a false one. If dead human souls reincarnate, is it a must that the reincarnation takes place within the soul's former geographical place of origin or race? Or, do reincarnating souls have the leverage or latitude to take on a new body from any geographical location of their choice? In other words, must all reincarnating Igbo, Yoruba, Chinese or American souls reincarnate to their respective regions, states or countries of origin? If the answer is yes, it means that

nothing new has taken place or will ever take place. If the answer is no, it follows that most Americans you see today were once Africans and vice versa.

In a related development, if we understand reincarnation in the sense of metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul, then we are faced with the unpalatable idea that most human beings that we see today might have existed previously as goats, elephants, lions, *iroko* trees, mango trees, rats or even insects. Consequent upon this line of thought, it may not be out of place to say that the current president of your country or our country used to be a dog or an elephant in his previous existence. Nor will it make any difference if somebody tells you that he is convinced that you were the *iroko* tree in his community during his past existence, or that he recognises you to be the stubborn dog he owned in his previous incarnation. These observations may sound funny and unbelievable to many, but they are some of the obvious implications of the metempsychosis variant of reincarnation. As Ezekwugo (1992a, 1992b) rightly observed, it is more reasonable and logical to agree that beings of the same species get refined within its class. One of the foremost problems posed by reincarnation is that of the problem of memory. If reincarnation is real as many would want us to believe, it means that a person who has reincarnated should be able to remember the events and experiences of his former life or past existence. That is to say that there should be a continuity of experiences, desires and the likes. But it does not seem to us that those who claim to have reincarnated remember anything about their past existence. For instance, those we have been opportune to interview were not able to remember which primary or secondary schools, or even the university they attended; they could not also remember the names of their wives, children, parents or communities as the case may be.[8]

In a related development, if part of the major reasons for reincarnation is to complete unfinished work, it becomes difficult to reconcile this idea with the fact that a person who has reincarnated has to start existence all over again. That is to say, such a person has to be born afresh as a child, attend nursery, primary and secondary schools again, or even the university as the case may be. If, for instance, the person was a graduate and a head of a state in his past existence, why should he start all over again now that he has come back instead of continuing from where he stopped? Assuming that a certain man's previous existence terminated at a point where he had finished his secondary school, commonsense dictates that having reincarnated, he has to continue from where he stopped by seeking for admission to a higher institution rather than starting all over again from primary

8. At this point, we wish to state that the information we sourced from some people, we interviewed on the basis of their being pointed out to us by either their parents or some other persons as reincarnates of certain departed ancestors helped a lot in forming our opinion and assessment of the phenomenon of reincarnation. In deference to their request, we are unable to mention their names here. However, with regard to the general ideas concerning the Igbo (Africa) conception of reincarnation, we are greatly indebted to Chief Ezema Nnamdi, the *Ochendo 1* of Amaozara village, Ihe/Owere, Nsukka. Chief Nnamdi himself told us that his parents did inform him that his name, 'Nnamdi' is for the reason that he is a reincarnate of his late grandfather. He was, however, quick to tell us that he knows nothing about having existed before, much less being his late 'grandfather-come-back'.

school. This, you will agree with us, requires that the man in question has to be born as a full blown person who would be prepared to sit for a qualifying examination to a higher institution, if he so wishes.

Moreover, if reincarnation in the form of metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul is real, it means that Africans do not really believe in reincarnation considering their belief in ancestorship. Moreover, the doctrine of metempsychosis makes the idea of ancestorship both a nullity and a contradiction in terms. Africans behave in ways suggesting that their departed loved ones with qualifications for ancestorship are back and very much with them in this physical world. Their (that is, Africans) attitude also suggests that these so-called departed relatives are there in the ancestral world from where they receive sacrifices in the form of food and libation that their living ones offer them. We agree with Onyewuenyi (1996) that 'reincarnation' in the Western (classical) sense is not the correct word to depict Africans impression that their departed ones can and indeed do come back for another round of earthly existence, given the fact that they (Africans) still give the impression that these departed loved ones at the same time enjoy permanent residency in the ancestral world.

We are of the opinion that Africans' position could have been properly termed reincarnation if it has stopped at the level of holding that the souls of Africans, upon death, inform new bodies for another round of earthly existence. But the idea that as many as up to 100 individuals of a given linage could be *Nnannas* (fathers of their fathers) and linked to only one departed loved one, the belief that this same person is permanently resident in the ancestral world goes beyond the meaning of the very word 'reincarnation'. At present, we can neither say that Africans believe in reincarnation in the form of the souls of dead beings of identical species informing new bodies within the same class, nor that they believe in the metempsychosis form of reincarnation, given that what they believe in goes beyond our popular understanding of the two variants of reincarnation. Theirs may well be another form of reincarnation different from the two noted above, but then they (Africans) have to find a suitable name that is expressive of this very idea of the dead being singly resident in the ancestral home and yet manifesting as the same person in many people of his former place of earthly existence.

Onyewuenyi had made efforts to deny that Africans believe in reincarnation in the classical sense of the word; he even went ahead to give a clear picture and in-depth analysis of how what Africans believe in could be possible using the notion of sun rays. The fact, however, remains that as far as our personal interviews and interactions with ordinary Africans can reveal, Onyewuenyi's beautiful and in-depth analysis runs contrary to what the ordinary Africans in the street have in mind. From our personal interactions with a good number of Africans (both the educated and the non-educated) on this matter, we realised that contrary to Onyewuenyi's claims, Africans believe overwhelmingly in reincarnation in the form similar in every respect to the

classical notion of reincarnation. What Africans needed to be told is that their notion/concept of ancestorship contradicts their belief in the reality of reincarnation, at least in its classical sense. Therefore, Onyewuenyi's notion of reincarnation as a 'language of accommodation or imposition' on Africans is not entirely correct in our estimation.

Conclusion

In concluding this article, it is our submission that the notion of reincarnation is, following from the foregoing observations, a highly contradictory and controversial philosophico-religious cum cultural concept whose reality or otherwise has continued to defy any conclusive assertion or finality of assertion. The present treatise, therefore, is by no means conclusive. Notwithstanding the observation made about reincarnation to the effect that it is both a contradictory and controversial concept, we have nevertheless shown that belief in it has a lot of consequential positive values. Not minding the force or passion with which the defenders of the reality of reincarnation argue their case, we have no doubt in our mind that the concept of reincarnation is, for now, no more than an article of belief/faith and should be seen as such. Nevertheless, belief in reincarnation has some epistemological implications. Firstly, it shows that contrary to the popular assumption, belief is, in some context, stronger than knowledge. That, for us, is the most interesting thing about the whole lot of controversies surrounding the phenomenon of reincarnation and the attendant belief, even in the absence of valid empirical data. Secondly, forceful arguments and advocacy for it by its subscribers are a confirmation of the fact that knowledge could be acquired from sources other than the senses. The lesson to be learnt from these observations is that as humans and scholars, we should strive to maintain an open mind.

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Authors' contributions

N.U.A. contributed jointly with M.E.O. in both conceptualising and writing the article. Moreover, N.U.A. helped in gathering ideas through oral interviews. M.E.O., in addition to jointly conceptualising and writing the article with the first author, also contributed to editing and analysis of the article.

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