

THE RIVER of LIFE - ecumenicalism rampant

Mankind's search for transcendent truths has been an inspiring one, at times only for its fervor, but often for the seriousness and purity of its motives. Across history and the planet, countless people have given their lives for a glimpse of the reality that lies beyond our five senses. What has emerged is a remarkable consensus, though not unanimity, on two points:

1. we share the space in which we live with “something” that we do not generally see, and
2. the existence of that “something” has implications for how we ought to behave.

These conclusions have often had a good effect on human behavior. They have been used as the backbone of most moral systems that sought to raise human behavior above the brute. Whether religion has, in net, been a force for good or evil in human history is unclear to me. Whatever good that can be attributed to organized religions, I believe that most of them suffer from three related failings. A truly successful theology must avoid these pitfalls, which have been the source of so much sorrow throughout history.

#1. The whole truth. I believe that many of those who have sought higher truth have succeeded, with a recurring flaw: they have, almost without exception, believed that the sliver of truth they saw constituted the whole truth. I prefer to start with the belief that virtually all religions are, at least in some part, correct and to try to mine the human experience for all its wisdom rather than insisting on wasting major portions of it by succumbing to the difficulty of reconciling vastly different views of reality. Religions encourage adherents to believe that they have seen *the truth* instead of *a truth*. That single failing has been responsible for countless acts of bigotry and persecution. It is much easier to treat other people badly if we can start from the knowledge that these “others” are wrong about the most important truths of all.

#2. Ritual and Myth. The second accusation that I will level against most religions is that they misunderstand the roles of myth and ritual. I can well imagine that there are benefits to recurring, stylized actions and stories. They can provide focus and a sense of communality. A god would want these sorts of focusing, purifying, collectivizing behaviors. But I cannot believe that higher cosmic powers really care much about the precise details of ritual. I refuse to believe that salvation awaits only those who have dressed in a certain way, or chanted in a particular direction. I must believe that deities are more (or perhaps less) selective and discerning than that.

In fact, the importance attached to ritual in most religions deserves to be thought of as a kind of idolatry: the rituals themselves become the objects of worship, obscuring rather than revealing the truth to which they should lead. It has been said that when someone points at the moon, it is important that you look at the moon, not at the finger.

An excruciating example of ritual run amok is the use of the Lord's Prayer. Jesus offered it as a precise antidote to the mindless chanting of prayers with no heed to their content. Christianity's response to Jesus' gift of rhetoric has been to turn it into a mindless chant. He must be disappointed. In the same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions against religious leaders who dress up in fancy costumes and parade their prayers before the public. Has the Pope never read this passage?

Christianity is, I think, no worse than most other religions in mistaking useful activities for salvation-laden duties, and for mistaking the metaphorical truths of myth and revelation for literal descriptions of fact. The god of Christianity has shown himself to be a fine poet, a high-order user of metaphor. If the example of Jesus, a master user of parable, is to be extrapolated, one can assume that god rarely says anything literally.

My personal suggestion for myths would be to attach them to natural cycles. It is certainly not an original suggestion but I would opt for the year's four major holidays to be on the solstices and the equinoxes. Christian mythology is only enhanced by assuming that God is poet enough to convince people that He sent his messenger to the world on the year's shortest day and to have him rise from the dead at the beginning of spring. Certainly rituals anchored to the seasons could, as natural facts, be agreeable to many people as moments worthy of celebration.

#3. Politics. The third historic failing of religion has been its propensity to be co-opted and pressed into the service of political forces. It is striking how many political conflicts have religious overlays that exacerbate, often by disguising, the underlying political and economic motivations. The few who want power can often get it by appealing to the profound emotions that religion evokes in the many.

A THEOLOGY

I will present my personal theology with the understanding that it must be considered metaphor. One of my goals has been to imagine that many of the reports of the religious are true and that my task is to imagine what it is they are seeing. But if there is a universe of the spirit outside of our own, it is unimaginable that I would discern its details. With that caveat, I will proceed to write as if I firmly believe what follows.

The nature of the individual. Each of us is made of, and carried by, a flowing, sentient river of energy that is Life. We are each merely separate parts of the river, walled off from it by a membrane that defines each of us as a separate unit and confers a degree of autonomy, allowing us to wiggle from side to side of our own free will, while being carried by a greater force for a greater purpose. Happiness, I presume, comes from discerning and carrying out Life's purpose.

Birth and death. An individual is born when a part of the River congeals and adheres sufficiently to create a distinct unit, surrounded by a permeable membrane. Throughout the life of the individual there is an exchange of energy across the boundary between the individual and the River. When the wall weakens sufficiently to release the energy back to the River the individual dies. Several possibilities occur here. Let's explore some.

Reincarnation. Reincarnation occurs if one membrane, as it falls away at death, is replaced sufficiently quickly with another membrane so that most of the material remains intact. The new individual thus consists of primarily the same "stuff" as did the deceased. Note that reincarnation -- the erection of a new wall about a piece of the moving river -- would be more likely if the deceased possessed a good deal of cohesiveness: "integrity" seems the perfect word to describe what would be required for one to survive the leap from one skin to the next. A poorly defined personality would be likely to dissipate when exposed to the rush of the River.

This suggests a sequence of objectives across different lives. The first objective would be to construct a sturdy wall -- to create a sense of "self" strong enough to survive the leap of death. The River would want us to do that. Given that the River has its purposes for each of its parts, being able to use the same material across several lifetimes would be useful. But here's the rub: strengthening the wall has the effect of impeding the exchange of energy between the individual and the River -- this is detrimental to both of them. The individual is less controllable for the overarching purpose of the River, and the individual is denied access to the energy of the River.

So the second objective of the individual is to dissolve the wall to permit a two-way energy flow while maintaining structural integrity. An example of this can be seen in each individual. It is a major task of a child to create a strong sense of self; strong enough that the adult is able to open up to others without fear of losing identity. While the "building" phase of a personality would be marked by concern about one's self, and by preoccupation with establishing and defending one's identity, the second phase would be marked by openness and lack of ego. People in the first, less mature, stage are likely to be pushy and egocentric. Unpleasant as it may be, it is a necessary stage of development. The ultimate description of the other extreme is Nirvana, a state described as an absence of ego, of oneness with a life force. This would occur when the individual's structural integrity was so profound that the wall could be completely removed and the individual would remain coherent and intact while being swept by and totally in touch with, indeed a part of, the River of Life.

The nature of god(s). A god is nothing more than a larger-than-usual pool of energy, which can be created by directed, concentrated human energy. If enough humans believe that anything is a god, they will direct enough of their own energy to a single place to create an impressively large pool of energy, contained within a wall that does not easily deteriorate. But even though gods differ from humans only by degree -- we are all made of the same stuff -- the existence of these pools does have interesting implications.

The monotheistic religions. The individual, by being an adherent of a particular monotheistic faith establishes a link to an impressive energy pool that allows the faithful access to energy, as repeatedly described by religious people who credit their faith with giving them the strength to weather hard times. The reciprocal bargain is that the energy of the faithful is added to the pool at the death of the individual, allowing the pool to grow: spirit is the food of the gods. The lukewarm adherent is obviously an annoyance to a god: this type of person may well demand and receive from the pool more energy than his poorly developed soul will replenish at death. The theistic pools are apparently oriented toward growth: toward the acquisition of the energy of their believers. (Actually I assume that, on the death of Christian, the energy is divided among several pools -- Jesus', Jehovah's and perhaps some to Mary's -- according to formulas of considerable complexity. Similar considerations would govern Moslems. Truly eclectic faiths such as B'hai no doubt pose formidable accounting challenges.) The less theistic "religions" -- Buddhism, Taoism, animism, atheism operate differently.

The Buddha pool. The Buddha pool is not directed toward growth; it is merely a recycling center, repackaging material and sending it back. Keeping none for itself beyond a subsistence quotient the Buddha pool would not grow over time. One might see in these different types of god-pools as mirroring the differing degrees of expansionism and acquisitiveness manifest in the various religions and in the behaviors of their adherents.

Ancestor worship. The "religions" that stress "praying" for/to the departed are merely directing energy to the deceased in order to preserve their structural integrity over time. Religious devotion feeds a god so mere remembrance of a deceased parent directs energy and preserves the unity of a drifting soul -- drifting precisely because a "religion" lacking a strong monotheistic center will have no designated repository for souls. They merely float down the River till they dissipate. But an infusion of energy by way of devotional observances will contribute to the structural coherence and longevity of the soul.

Atheism: To be an atheist is to promise your soul to no one. At death, with no one to claim it, the soul drifts off down the River to dissolve. The choice of being theist or atheist may then boil down to which fate one finds more savory: to be one more drop added to the pool that is God, or to drift off into nothingness.

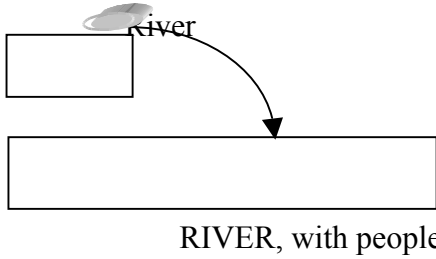
Conclusions

1. You can deal with whichever "other" you please, or none at all. Each choice has its attendant benefits and pitfalls.
2. Just because it works for you, doesn't mean it necessarily works for anyone else -- and it certainly will not work for *everyone* else.
3. Build your wall, then tear it down.
4. The odds of salvation do not depend on the kind of hat you wear.
5. Avoid doing to others what you wish they would not do to you.
6. No agent of higher morality would ask you to harm another person for its sake. Any god that needs that much help is not worth giving your energy to.
7. Even cosmic reality is too fractal to permit gross simplification. Do the best you can with the piece of truth you see.
8. Yes, an elephant *can* be like a wall, *and* a rope, *and* a smooth, tapered cylinder, *and* piece of rough paper, *and* a tree trunk, *and*...
9. Try to figure out what the River wants you to do, understanding that the answer may be, "Whatever you want to do."
10. The greatest evils in the world have been the result of individuals' beliefs in their own rightness.

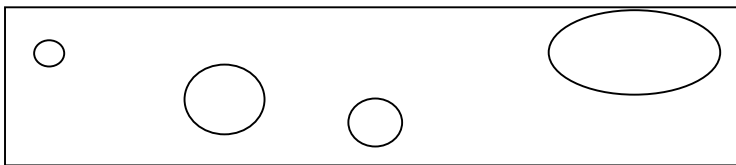
Reincarnation – and more – explained

Before your birth you are handed a book and required to choose the family into which you will be born

You begin your life as a Ring, jumping (or being pushed) off the edge of a ledge and falling, flailing into the River of Life. (This is after having selected your family out of a photo album, during the song *Mother Pickin'*)

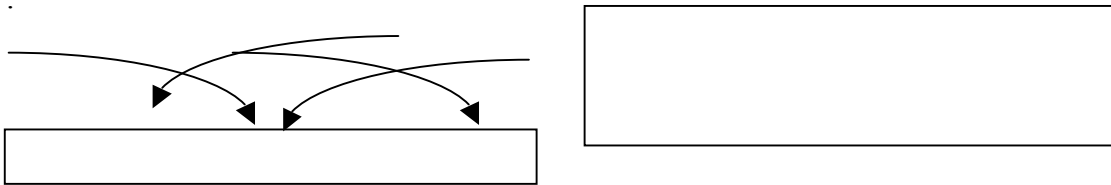


Seen from above, a person is a Ring surrounding a piece of the River

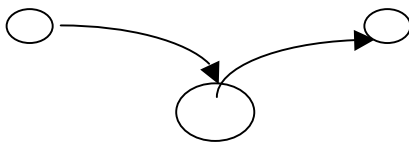


The view is as seen from someone in the River, looking down the length of the River

All along the course of the River, Rings are falling from the sky as people are born



In this light rain of Rings, sometimes one incoming Ring lands on another already in the water. (Deep theological question: How dense is the River with people? That determines probability of repeat hits.)



Usually it doesn't matter much. The falling ring bounces off the floating ring, and aside from a little ringing in the ears, everything is fine. The exception occurs when this happens at the death of the floating ring. An individual dies when the wall/boundary/ring falls away/dissolves.

In that case the descending new Ring manages, to one extent or another, to enclose the same piece of river, by replacing the old ring just as it slips away.

If the match is "close" across lives we can well think of the soul as having been reincarnated. So saying someone is reincarnated is to say that much of this water enclosed by the present person has been used before

Possibilities:

1. Most souls are reincarnated -- the River is dense with people and most water gets reused a lot.
2. Few souls are reincarnated -- the River has low population density.

3. I am (largely) Tiberius reincarnated. He has had no other reincarnations since he died. But he had enough structural coherence to keep his piece of the River hanging together after death long enough for my entering Ring to (coincidentally?) encompass a lot of the same part of the River as did Tiberius.
4. There are two very different kinds of reincarnation. One involves a Ring being used multiple times, the other involves a piece of the River being used multiple times. It's not clear which attributes of a person would be carried by each kind of reincarnation.
4. Galileo to Newton we know. Just as Galileo dies Newton's Ring falls that almost completely replicates his. This gives a particularly good piece of the River a new dose of Air. (OK, I forgot about Air. The entering Ring/Soul/Person acquires Air during the jump into the River. It is Air that makes a person float in the River. It indicates something like "Soul") One imagines that the Isaac Newton Ring -- in addition to the bit of River -- also has a great history.
5. Maxwell to Einstein. Here's the "proof of my theory" or at least an application that solves a problem I raised. We found that Einstein was born five months *after* JC Maxwell died. I remained convinced that nevertheless Einstein was Maxwell reincarnated. Violet allowed that reincarnation before death is a possibility. Here is how I now see it: Einstein's entering Ring lands on top of the weakly encompassed space that is Maxwell (who dies, at a young age, five months later). One might argue that Einstein's Ring, a thing of some considerable heft, killed Maxwell and took over that part of the River. But this essentially qualifies as reincarnation: it is essentially the same water being used across lifetimes. This is an unusual birth to Einstein, which accounts for his slowness in early childhood development -- he did not talk until he was about three years old.

Where do the Rings come from?

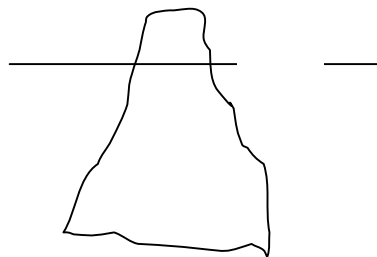
Rings are recycled. It was a Ring doing mother-picking. Some part of each person is embodied in the Ring. It would constitute a different kind of reincarnation -- the reuse of the Ring rather than the water.

Death happens because the air acquired in the fall into the River has all leaked out. At this point the Ring is heavier than water and sinks. And as the Ring falls and burrows into the mud, it suddenly opens onto a ledge. And there is edge to that ledge and a book of family photos on a table.

Unrelated to reincarnation --

Cross section

You are an iceberg



Icebergs Explained

In the popular philosophy literature, and in much everyday discourse, much is made of the distinction between thoughts and feelings. I have always had a difficulty in drawing the distinction between the two ideas. The dictionary definitions of the two ideas do not draw any compelling distinction. If I am cut off by a thoughtless driver in traffic, is the anger a thought or a feeling? Both thoughts and feelings seem to exist as mental entities. Let me offer a metaphor that, to me, clarifies this relationship and offers a useful approach to other topics of cognition. I don't pretend that this is all that original,¹ only that the metaphor has not been pursued as vigorously as would be useful.

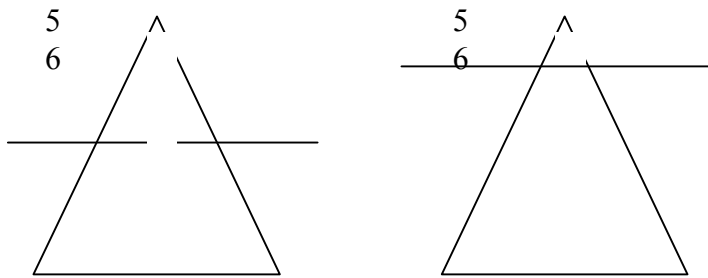
¹ I would cite Dennett, Calvin, Montague, Stanovich as influential to my conception, without suggesting that any of them would agree with it.

The metaphor is of cognition as an iceberg. The waterline divides cognition into what I would roughly call the conscious -- the portion above the water -- and the subconscious -- the larger, submerged portion of the iceberg.²

Here's how I imagine the contraption behaves. Suppose some stimulus arrives from the environment -- the water in which the berg floats -- and strikes the iceberg, calling from sort of response from the organism. Possible responses are generated subconsciously (below the surface) and start to bubble up toward the consciousness. As ideas bubble up they are vetted, compared to past experience and some are rejected. When possible responses are just below the surface, we know them as "feelings." When they break the surface we have "had an idea" and we label them "thoughts." That is, a thought and a feeling are the same "thing" at different stages of "development;" at different distances from the water-line of consciousness.

Introspection is sometimes the process of trying to "get in touch with feelings." The image here is of trying of see a bit beneath the surface. If one can do this then feelings become thoughts -- i.e. what was beneath the waterline of the subconscious is now available for conscious examination.

How high do you float? I suppose that different people would be pictured as having different proportions of their being above the waterline. Those people would be intellectual and thought-driven. Those who float lower would be more emotion driven. Here's the implication: if one floats high, then the vetting process of possible responses will be less thorough: more ideas will break the surface simultaneously. The numbers shown on the iceberg represent the number of alternatives under consideration. The high-floating intellectual (left) is



presented with three alternatives possibilities responses for conscious consideration. S/he then proceeds to intellectually decide on the best choice. The low-floater (right) only perceives one possible course of action. The response is "obvious" --no need to anguish. This is not to say that floating high is better than floating low. Let me sketch four possible types of people to illustrate high- and low-

floating when each type works well and badly.

	Floats high	Floats low
Works well	Thoughtful, giving consideration to all sides of a question	Intuitive, quickly able to see (to "feel") a good course of action.
Works badly	Paralyzed, unable to choose among available alternatives	Narrow-minded, inflexibly unable to consider viewpoints other than the "obvious."

The reader might ask whether this characterization of different types of people rings true.

I have been asked whether or not I actually *believe* all this. I like to think of it as Schrodinger's belief: true and not true. But all myths should be that way -- true and not true.

² I suspect that "conscious" and "subconscious" are rather archaic, largely discredited terms. For the moment I use them to say roughly what I mean. I could try the vocabulary of dual processes instead.