

Philosophical views of reincarnation

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of reincarnation through various philosophical lenses, ranging from atheistic materialism to theistic and Jain perspectives. The *Charvaka* school, representing ancient Indian materialism, rejects the existence of the soul, the afterlife, and rebirth, viewing consciousness as a byproduct of physical elements. In contrast, theistic philosophies, both monotheistic and polytheistic, affirm the existence of an eternal soul that undergoes rebirth after death. Jain philosophy presents a detailed framework, emphasising the soul's eternal nature and its entanglement in a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth due to karmic particles. Through the doctrines of *Atmavad* (soul theory) and *Karmavad* (action theory), Jainism explains how karma binds the soul, influencing its journey until liberation (*Moksha*) is attained. This comparative analysis reveals that while views differ on the nature and continuity of the soul, the idea of rebirth remains central to understanding existence and consciousness in most spiritual traditions.

1. Introduction

The current research on reincarnation aims to investigate basic issues about reality, existence, knowledge, reason, awareness, and the nature of space and time. Investigating how knowledge is obtained, what truth is, and how reasoning, argumentation, and inference can support the evaluation of claims and the drawing of reliable conclusions are all goals from an epistemological standpoint.

The idea that after death, the soul or consciousness reincarnates into a different body is known as reincarnation. Many Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, are based on this idea. Reincarnation and moksha, or freedom from the cycle of birth and death, are closely related ideas in Hinduism. In Hinduism, moksha, or freedom from the cycle of birth and death, is intimately related to reincarnation. Rebirth is also taught in Buddhism, although it emphasises karma and spiritual growth rather than the concept of a permanent soul (*atma*). Although Jainism acknowledges the existence of the soul, it emphasises spiritual cleansing and non-violence (*ahimsa*) as ways to break free from the cycle of reincarnation.

The veracity of claims of reincarnation in science is a topic of continuous discussion. Divergent perspectives on the nature of the soul and the circumstances surrounding rebirth can be found in several philosophical and theological traditions. According to reincarnation beliefs, every lifetime has a purpose and imparts moral and spiritual teachings.

Some philosophies completely reject reincarnation, even though it is commonly recognised in many religious traditions. One important example is the ancient Indian materialist philosophy known as the *Charvaka* or *Lokayata* school. *Charvakas* held that consciousness originates in the body and ends with death, rejecting the notions of the soul, karma, and rebirth. They rejected spiritual or metaphysical claims and only recognised direct perception (*pratyaksha*) as a legitimate

source of knowledge. *Charvaka*, an atheistic and rationalist school, stood in stark contrast to the spiritual perspectives of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism by emphasising pragmatic living and the pursuit of material pleasure.

2. An Atheistic School of Philosophy (No Reincarnation): Charvaka

The *Charvaka* or *Lokayata* school represents an atheistic and materialist tradition in ancient Indian philosophy. It firmly rejects the idea of reincarnation and other metaphysical beliefs. Its core principles include:

- **Materialism:** The idea that matter is the basic building block of the universe.
- **Rejection of Supernatural Entities:** Denial of the existence of gods, spirits, or any supernatural beings.
- **Scepticism:** The legitimacy of sacred books and conventional religious knowledge is questioned by Charvaka philosophers.
- **Perception-Based Knowledge:** The only recognised source of knowledge is direct perception, or *pratyakshs*.
- **Rejection of Inference:** Inferences and testimony that provide indirect knowledge are regarded with mistrust.
- **Hedonism:** The idea that the main objectives of life are to pursue pleasure and stay away from misery.
- **Rejection of the Afterlife:** Denial of the soul, rebirth, or any form of spiritual liberation after death.

There is only one life, according to the tenets of atheistic philosophy, especially those of the *Charvaka* school. According to this perspective, materialism - the search for pleasure and the avoidance of suffering is the ultimate goal of existence. *Charvaka* maintains that death signifies the end of consciousness, which is viewed as a result of the material elements (earth, water, fire, and air), as it rejects the idea of an afterlife or reincarnation. Consciousness vanishes after death when these components split apart.

Charvaka does not deny the biological birth of living beings, even while it rejects spiritual rebirth. It recognises that life emerges through natural processes, including material elements, even though it does not support reincarnation.

It's interesting to note that despite the philosophy's assumption of a limited lifespan without reincarnation, the observable world (*samsara*) demonstrates that the cycle of life has persisted throughout time (*anant kaal*) and that the number of living beings is still increasing.

This observation aligns with the law of conservation of matter and energy, suggesting that although individual organisms die, the total quantity of matter, energy, and life in the universe remains constant, merely transforming. Therefore, while *Charvaka* denies reincarnation in the spiritual sense, the ongoing cycle of birth, death, and new biological creation reflects a natural form of continuity. This can be understood as an interchange of *paryaya* (modes or states), where the fundamental substances persist, but their forms change.

The key difference between atheist and theist philosophies is belief in the soul and reincarnation. Theists accept the soul's rebirth after death, while *Charvaka* holds that consciousness is a byproduct of material elements (earth, water, fire, air) and ends at death, excluding any mention of space (*akash*).

3. A Theistic Philosophy and Reincarnation

Theistic philosophy explores the nature of God or gods and their relationship to the universe and the existence of living beings. Theism includes **monotheism** (belief in one God, as in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), **polytheism** (belief in multiple gods, as in Hinduism and ancient Greek mythology), and **pantheism** (belief that God is identical with the universe). Debates on God's attributes—omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence—are ongoing.

According to theistic traditions that acknowledge reincarnation, the soul or consciousness exists on its own and transitions into a new body following the death of the previous one. This procedure confirms that the soul lives on after physical death. However, as stressed in Eastern philosophies, there is little to no in-depth discussion of *karmic* particles or the moral ramifications of past lives being carried into the present in many theistic systems. Instead of using *karma* as a binding force, the emphasis is still on the soul's journey, which is directed by divine will.

4. Jain Philosophy on Reincarnation

The two main tenets of Jain philosophy are ***Karmavada*** (the theory of karma and its effects) and ***Atmavada*** (the existence of the soul).

In Jainism, the soul is a unique, everlasting being that exists independently of the body. The soul has taken prior lives and will continue to have new births in the ***lokakash*** (universe) until it attains liberation because of its eternal nature (past, present, and future). Until the soul loses all karmic material and achieves moksha, or the pure condition of ***Siddha Shila***, it continues its path via recurrent cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

The *Karmavada* system explains the method by which *karma* connects the soul to the cycle of reincarnation. Every conscious or unconscious action draws karmic particles, which cling to the soul. The soul is weighed down by these karmas and is unable to ascend towards *moksha*. These layers of *karma* cover and distort the soul.

There are **eight types of karmas** in Jainism, among which **four are destructive (ghati karmas)** that directly obscure the soul's purity:

1. **Gyanavarniya Karma** – Obscures knowledge
2. **Darsnavarniya Karma** – Obscures perception
3. **Mohaniya Karma** – Causes delusion and attachment
4. **Antaraya Karma** – Creates obstacles to right effort

These karmas must be destroyed or shed through right conduct, knowledge, and penance for the soul to attain liberation.

The second set of karmas, known as **Aghatiya (non-destructive) karmas**, affect the soul's circumstances and physical body but do not obscure its inherent qualities. These are:

1. **Vedaniya Karma** – Produces feelings of pleasure or pain
2. **Nama Karma** – Determines the physical body
3. **Ayusya Karma** – Determines lifespan
4. **Gotra Karma** – Determines social status or birth environment

Ghatiya karmas obscure the soul's limitless knowledge and perception, whereas **Mohaniya karmas** (delusion) and **Antaray karmas** (obstruction) are the main causes of bondage. *Antaray* impairs the soul's innate vigour and willpower, while *Mohaniya* causes attachment and false beliefs.

The *Aghatiya* karmas, on the other hand, are the result of *Ghatiya* karmas from previous lives and influence the soul in the present life. They take effect at birth. They emerge anew based on past karmic interactions rather than being carried into subsequent births.

Enlightened humans can predict their future rebirth and comprehend the **gati** (past) and **agati** (future) of their soul's karmic journey through spiritual insight and advanced purification.

5. Conclusion

In summary, atheistic ideologies such as *Charvaka*, which reject reincarnation and see the mind as a creation of material factors, were the starting point of our study. The existence of the soul and its journey beyond death were then acknowledged as we progressed through theistic viewpoints. Lastly, the eternal soul's cycle of birth, death, and rebirth guided by *karmic* connections is explained in detail by Jain philosophy through *Atmavada* and *Karmavada*.

Knowing the destructive and non-destructive character of *karmas* helps us to comprehend how the soul changes over the course of a lifetime with the ultimate goal of shedding all karmic layers and achieving *moksha*, or freedom from the cycle of rebirth.

References

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A decorated and retired Director General from Military Engineering Services, Mr. Pavan Kumar Jain is also a fellow and arbitrator of 'The Institution of Engineers (IEI), India', 'Indian Building Congress (IBC)' and 'Indian Road Congress (IRC)'. He graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Roorkee with a Bachelor's in Civil Engineering (B.E) and Master's in Structural

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His technical prowess has also transpired in the international scientific community with the help of a research paper he co-authored. It was published in the International Journal, "British Hydromechanics Association (BHRA)" in 1985. Another research paper authored by him was published in the journal "Indian Military Engineers (IME)" in 2000. Subsequently, he undertook a research study in 'Safety Culture in Construction Industries'. As a stalwart supporter of the 'Jain Philosophy', he attended an online course named "Scientific Exploration of Jain Philosophy" which was conducted under the aegis of Florida International University (FIU), Miami, USA. The course explored Jainism as an extension in the Technical realm. During the course, Mr. Pavan Kumar Jain authored and presented a concept paper titled "Structure of Jain Cosmology" and "Scientific analysis of Jain philosophy", which garnered him academic appreciation from the course professors. He firmly believes that the gaps in the comprehension of Jain Philosophy can be filled with the help of effective seasoning of simple language into a democratic and expressive discourse with the effectuation of scientific principles. If you wish to connect with him or want to reach out to him for any queries, feel free to drop a message at: mespkj@gmail.com.