

## Hinduism, Reincarnation, and the Mind-Body Problem

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep177/>

Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Mike Egnor. I have the privilege today to have as my guest my friend, Arjuna Gallagher. Mr. Gallagher is from New Zealand, and he is a Hindu. And he has a YouTube channel called Theology Unleashed, which is a wonderful channel that I listen to a lot and I encourage our listeners to check it out.

Michael Egnor:

He discusses in a very profound way many topics in theology and science and culture, and he's had some great guests. He's had David Bentley Hart, Graham Oppy, Mark Tan, Mark Solms, who's a neuroscientist, Matt Dillahunty, who's an atheist, James Fodor, a philosopher, Steven Barr, who's a Christian philosopher, Aron Ra is an atheist. And I've had the privilege of being on Arjuna's Theology Unleashed YouTube channel as well. It's a great channel.

Michael Egnor:

In addition, Arjuna has done a wonderful documentary entitled The Persecuted Saints You've Never Heard Of. It's an intriguing story about a monastery of Orthodox monks who were persecuted because of a theological position that they took. When I started listening to it, I couldn't stop listening to it. It's a fantastic documentary. Please check it out on Arjuna's channel. Welcome, Arjuna. Thank you for joining us.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah, thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

Michael Egnor:

I don't know a lot about Hinduism, and I would suspect that many of our listeners don't know a lot either. What is Hinduism?

Arjuna Gallagher:

The word Hinduism is often misused as if it describes one religion, but really it's a category of religions. I was recently listening to Dr. Howard Resnick, who was on a Muslim interfaith dialogue podcast. And he explained that comparing Islam to Hinduism, it's a category mistake. The accurate comparison would be the Abrahamic traditions to Hinduism. I was on their podcast a few weeks earlier and they were saying, "Oh, the problem with Hinduism is every village you go to, everyone has a different belief." It's like, well, Hinduism for a lot of people is an ethnicity. They grow up in this culture. There's foods. It includes the ritual aspects of the religion.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But if you actually look inside the traditions of what is taught in these traditions, you have a diverse set of belief systems taught in different traditions, and a lot of them will be very specific about what they believe. I'm a member of a tradition called within the tradition, the Brahma Gaudiya Vaisnava Sampradaya. And that's a chain extending back, at least claimed by the tradition, all the way back to the beginning of the creation of this universe, that's the claim that's made. But we have recent appearances of prophets and incarnations of God all the way back to 500 years ago.

Michael Egnor:

If you were to describe central themes that are held by most, if not all, Hindus, what might they be?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah, so you do get a lot of diversity, but the things that are common are an acceptance of the Vedas as authoritative. The Vedas is the Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharvaveda, and there's also Puranas and Itihasas and so on. And the beliefs would be cyclical time. So all Hindus are going to believe that time didn't have a beginning, it doesn't have an end. There's periodic creation and destruction. Everything's always existed, but sometimes it appears and sometimes it disappears or is destroyed.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Some of them are going to believe that there's an eternal spiritual world, which is never destroyed. It doesn't have a day or a night, so to speak. Although it has no day or night in the sense of destruction or annihilation, I mean. I'm not a super expert scholar on the differences within the various Hindu traditions.

Michael Egnor:

Sure. Okay. Do you believe that God is personal?

Arjuna Gallagher:

This is a big debate, which has gone on within Hindu traditions for thousands and thousands of years, the personalism and impersonalism debate. The followers of Adi Shankaracharya, they take a more impersonal view. And it's very much like Buddhism, whereas the Vaishnavas, they have a very personal view of God. And that's what I'm a follower of.

Michael Egnor:

If God is not personal, I do know that Hinduism generally involves a notion of karma, and a notion of reincarnation, and a notion that people are compensated for their good or bad behavior in future lives. If God isn't personal, how are their lives judged? I mean, how does good and evil come out of an understanding of God as being impersonal?

Arjuna Gallagher:

That's a good question, and that's an argument you could offer against the impersonal views. They have a mechanistic idea that karma is just a material mechanism that goes on all on its own. But of course, there's problems with that, because to execute karma you need to be tuned into incredibly subtle nuances of a person's motivations and intentions. And it's hard to think how something that lack personal features could be that tuned into personal qualities.

Michael Egnor:

Indeed. What does Hare Krishna mean? I hear it a lot.

Arjuna Gallagher:

We're called and we call ourselves Hare Krishnas, because that's part of the mantra we chant, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare." These are names of God. And the idea is that by associating with God's name, we become purified because God is all pure. And when we associate with God, we become pure so we chant these names all the time.

Arjuna Gallagher:

The names are quite unique because they're in vocative and Sanskrit you have more grammar, it's more flexible. So the vocative is how you call out directly to someone. Other mantras are more offering respects from a distance, but this is a direct call to the divine.

Michael Egnor:

The sense that I have of Hinduism, and I think that are a lot of listeners will have as well, is that there certainly is a pantheon of gods. There's, there's a lot of different god., generally speaking, or even in the view of Hinduism that you ascribe to, what role do those God's play? Is it really pantheistic or is there one overall God, and these other deities are beneath that God?

Arjuna Gallagher:

There's many Hindus who will believe in something that's rather pantheistic, or something that all these different demigods are equal and you can worship any one of them and get the same result. And the result is that it's just something that you can temporarily fix your mind on until you're advanced enough to fix your mind on that personal absolute, which is beyond all these forms. This is not the Hare Krishna view or any ... No Vaishnava subscribe to that view. The Vaishnava view is that God's a person and his name, form, pastimes, are all fully divined. When we meditate on those things, we're advanced.

Arjuna Gallagher:

As for the demigods on the Vaishnava of a view, they are something like arch angels perhaps, or I'm not super expert on the Christian theology on that aspect. But they're like engineers, which oversee the functions of the material universe. So there's even a demigod controlling the weather. Everything in the material universe is conducted by a person. They're powerful personalities and they're jiva souls, which means they're just like you or me. And we could become a demigod and a future birth.

Michael Egnor:

Okay. Are they worthy of worship in the Hindu faith?

Arjuna Gallagher:

In the Hindu faith, the Vaishnava traditions at least, yeah, no, in Hinduism more broadly the word puja is used. And the word puja will be used for saying something like you should honor your mother and father. There's not this hard distinction of ... I mean, it's more a philosophical understanding. So offering respect you can do to anyone, but it's the philosophical view with which you do that with, which is stressed.

Arjuna Gallagher:

If I worship my guru thinking he's God, that's wrong. But if I worship my guru, understanding he's a servant of God and he's helping me come closer to God, then that's fine. And then we also worship God. But yeah, it's not this hard distinction of a kind of honor you give to one or the other. It's more about the philosophical understanding that's stressed.

Michael Egnor:

I see. Yeah, in the Christian viewer, or at least from the Thomistic view, which I think is pretty mainstream, angels are separated intelligences. They're souls without bodies. And obviously there can be good angels and bad angels, demons. Are any of the members of the pantheon in the Hindu faith demonic, as opposed to angelic?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah, there are demons and they're always fighting with the demigods and there's a tag war back and forth. And you could ask a problem of evil question about that, and the one answer that's given is that the purpose is for the demigods, they can forget about God, but when there's trouble, then they're reminded and they go take shelter at God so that the demons serve that purpose.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. I'm sure you've heard of the Euthyphro dilemma that was posed by Plato. It's a dilemma that is something good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good.

Michael Egnor:

How does Hinduism look at the origin of good and evil? Is the origin of good and evil something that just exists independently of God, for those Hindus who believe in a personal God? Or is good and evil a command of God?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. We don't have the same dichotomy of good and evil that you find in Christianity. What is discussed in the tradition is people becoming conditioned by the modes of material and nature covered by the modes of material nature, and good qualities overcoming bad, bad qualities overcoming the heart. And then with the idea of karma, you don't get an idea of evil so much, because everything that happens serves a higher purpose.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Its analogy that's given is to the jail system. So sure, it's not good that there's a jail with prisoners in it. But the fact is that prisoners exist, is that criminals exist. And because criminals exist, it's a good thing that the jail system exists because it ... Let's hypothetically say the jail system's actually doing a good job at keeping criminals off the streets and reforming them. That's a great thing. So everything in the material world serves the purpose of elevating conditioned souls from their conditioned state, giving them a chance to try to express their selfish desires, become frustrated, and ultimately turn back to God.

Michael Egnor:

The issue of reincarnation often comes up in discussions of Hinduism. What are your beliefs on reincarnation, and what do you understand to be the general belief of most Hindus?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. Reincarnation would be another one that almost all Hindus, if not all of them, would ascribe to. You'll get differences, of course, with the impersonalists, who think that we don't have separate souls. That they'll think maybe something's going from lifetime to lifetime, but eventually an illusion will be dispelled and you'll realize that you're one with everything and you don't have a separate identity.

Arjuna Gallagher:

The Vaishnava view, which Hare Krishna is one form of Vaishnavism, is very much personal. That the soul has always existed, will always exist, and can transmigrate among any number of forms. And this human form of life is a special opportunity to turn back to God.

Michael Egnor:

One of the criticisms of reincarnation is that it tends to, or it seems that it might encourage a sort of callousness. A sort of sense if a person is in the particular life he's in and he's in a bad state, he's had a lot of problems, he's suffering, that it's because of what he's done in prior lives and he kind of deserves it. Is that an accurate way of looking at reincarnation and at ethics and Hinduism?>

Arjuna Gallagher:

That's a common objection Christians will give to using reincarnation to solve the problem of evil. The trouble with it is it's a misunderstanding of a few things. One is this idea of personal responsibility that the idea of karma and reincarnation brings, is supposed to be personal responsibility, not blaming other people. What I mean by that is there's a difference of how we view ourselves in light of particular philosophical points, and how we view other people in light of philosophical points.

Arjuna Gallagher:

A common example for that is how the guru sees himself is very different from how the disciple sees himself. If the guru sees himself the way the disciple does, then he is not a qualified guru. The guru is supposed to be humble. Similarly, with this karma thing, the common argument will be given that ... It actually has happened, I believe, that a Hindu has seen a starving child and thought, "This child is starving because it's their karma. If I feed them, then I'll be depriving of their karma so I better not feed them. They have this karma, it's there to teach them certain lessons and I better not get involved."

Arjuna Gallagher:

What this misunderstands is that how I view what happens to me is karma, so I see things that what happens in my life is meant to teach me lessons. And you're probably well aware that in psychology, this attitude makes people incredibly resilient and improves the quality of their lives immensely when they take personal responsibility, rather than victimizing themselves and blaming others and externalizing all their problems.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But then how I should view other people is based on Dharma. And so Dharma, one way we can translate the word is duty. Another way we can translate the word is religious principles. There's certain principles

or duties that govern the way I act in the world. I have children, so I have a duty to look after the children. And everyone has a duty when they see a starving child to feed the child. There's certain duties that are based on my position in society, and there's certain duties that are universal. A police officer has a different duty with regard to a criminal than a doctor. A doctor's supposed to treat everybody, regardless of their criminal status. Whereas a police officer is supposed to discriminate.

Michael Egnor:

And we spoke about this a little bit earlier, but I certainly, in the variance of Hinduism that don't believe in a personal God, it's awfully hard to see where duties could come from.

Michael Egnor:

It certainly is evident where you could get a duty if the creator is personal, because that would be the creator's will that you do that. But if there is no will and no person at the core of existence, then how could one properly be said to have a duty, rather than just a desire? Where could duties come from without a personal God?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah, that's an interesting question. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of Hindus which have got into the realm of philosophy of religion. It would be interesting to see how they would answer that. They might want to say they just exist necessarily, we say God is a necessary being. They might want to say these duties are necessary.

Michael Egnor:

I know some of your YouTube videos have dealt with some of the testimony that people have given, that where they can recall prior lives. How does that work and how credible do you believe that is?

Arjuna Gallagher:

With the evidence for reincarnation, in any particular case you could doubt it. I mean, the skepticism can go too far where it's like, "This person is giving evidence for something that I don't think could be true," because of whatever prior assumptions about worldview. And if you just ignore all the pieces of evidence that are given, which contradict your worldview, then your worldview is not responsive to evidence, but rather it's something you use to filter the evidence in order to make sure your worldview's never contradicted.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But where the real credibility comes in this evidence is when you pile a lot of it together and you start to see patterns. If the cause of the evidence of that comes in the form of children who spontaneously report memories of past lives, if it's not caused by them remembering past lives, then we wouldn't expect the data to follow certain patterns, which would be predicted by past life remembrances being the cause.

Michael Egnor:

Sure. And in some ways I see a bit of an analogy to near-death experiences, that you can write off quite a few of them, perhaps as the effects of medications or of delusion or of deception or something of that sort. But there may be a core of them that seem to be veridical, that you have to give some credence to.

Michael Egnor:

A question would arise is how does one know if knowledge of prior lives is genuine, as opposed to, for example, demonic? If there are evil intelligences out there. Because that's been raised with near-death experiences, even the ones that seem real, how do we know where they came from?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah, I've debated this before. And one Christian was giving the argument that the memories were planted by a demon. But in philosophy, there's this problem called Last Thursdayism, which is we can't prove that all of my memories of everything prior to last Thursday are actually real. So the argument is called Last Thursdayism for obvious reasons.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But if you want to say these children's memories of existing in a previous birth were planted by a demon, then you're opening yourself up to the problem of Last Thursdayism. You kind of need to give some amount of credence to memories in order to have a coherent worldview, which includes last year existing.

Arjuna Gallagher:

And as far as veridical aspects, there are ... Many of the cases there's no veridical aspect. There's one researcher, her last name's Bowman. Her work has been on healing these children. She'll do psychology techniques where she'll tell the parents to talk as if this is real. "You were run over by a bus, that was a different life, that was a different body. Now you're in this life and that's not happening now." And by talking to the children in this way, by explaining that their memories are real but they're not there anymore, now they're here, they were able to release this trauma and stop having a phobia of buses in this example.

Arjuna Gallagher:

So there's an immense benefit in treating it as if it's real, but also the veridical aspect comes in many of the ... Yeah, what I was saying is many of the cases, there's no veridical aspect. You can't go and see if there was a child described that was run over by a bus that perfectly matches the same thing, because they just don't give enough information for a match to be identified. But in many cases, a match is identified and it's often found that these children knew information that wasn't on the internet, that only this person knew or only intimate family members knew.

Arjuna Gallagher:

For instance, there was one case where the child located a buried ... I think buried treasure. One child located a gold coin, one child located in a drain on the property that nobody had noticed before, the previous personality had carved a name. And they'll also carry over birth marks, which match scars or wounds on the body of the deceased individual. And they'll carry over personality traits. So you're getting three different aspects of things which are carrying over, along with memories, which should prove to be accurate for the life of a previous personality. So there's a configuration of evidence.

Michael Egnor:

Yes, it's absolutely fascinating. It's kind of interesting that in Thomistic philosophy there's been the observation, as you pointed out, with the Last Thursdayism problem. That is that how can you prove that there was even a last Thursday?

Michael Egnor:

And the reality is I think, if you drill down on it, you're quite right, you actually can't prove the validity of any of your perceptions or any of your concepts. Because in order to demonstrate the validity of perceptions or concepts you have to depend on perceptions and concepts. So fundamentally this kind of radical skepticism is kind of unavoidable, but then again, nobody can live that way. That is, that we all believe that last Thursday happened and that our perceptions and concepts have some basis in reality.

Michael Egnor:

And what that gets down to is that everybody needs to have faith of some sort. You have to believe in something that you can't prove. And I've found this, I think, to be a very powerful argument against atheism, is that if you believe in theism, and particularly if you believe in a God who is rational and who is reliable, then your faith is grounded. Your faith makes sense. That I believe last Thursday happened because God wouldn't let me be deceived like that.

Michael Egnor:

Whereas if you're an atheist, you have no one to appeal to. Then you just have this radical faith that last Thursday happened and you can't prove it. In that sense, faith is the ground for reason, faith in God is the ground for reason, if you don't believe in a rational a God, then you have no reason to believe that you actually know anything.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. That's the argument from reason. I quite like the way C.S. Lewis put it. I can't remember the exact wording, but it was something like thinking that chemicals smashing together in your brain could produce accurate knowledge. As thinking you could disturb the contents of a glass of milk and get it to splatter on a page and produce an accurate map of the world. I think I butchered the quote, but you get the idea.

Michael Egnor:

Oh yeah, no, no. And that's exactly right. Everybody lives completely on faith. There is no certainty of anything. I actually believe it's no certainty that we even exist. And that may sound crazy, but Decartes said, "Cogito, ergo sum." I think, therefore I am.

Michael Egnor:

The problem with that perspective is that that depends on the therefore, that is, it depends on logic. It depends on the logical notion that something can't be true and false at the same time. And we don't have any independent reason to think that logic is true. That is that it may very well be that thinking doesn't mean that you exist if logic doesn't work. So you're still left with this radical skepticism. We all have faith, there's nothing we can be sure of. But a faith in God is at least a rational faith. So it brings up an interesting topic.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah, that's kind of the argument from reason. I want to distance myself from presuppositionalism. But I think the argument from reason is interesting, to this idea that God gave us our rational faculties.

Arjuna Gallagher:

But the counterargument would be that evolution produced our rational faculties. And I guess perhaps that could be debated, but I don't think it evolution can explain the existence of all of our rational faculties and our perceptions.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah, I would totally agree. Well, thank you so much, Arjuna. And we will return shortly. And this has been a fascinating discussion, so thank you. And to our listeners, please join us shortly for our next session. Thank you.

Announcer:

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