The orphic origins of belief in reincarnation in ancient Greek philosophy

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Key concepts

Reincarnation; rebirth; soul; Orphic philosophy; Dionysus; Orpheus; the afterlife; apotheosis; life and death; immortality.

ABSTRACT

Reincarnation is a belief which, many would agree, cuts across diverse cultures of the world today. What deserves to be pointed out, though, is that reincarnation, as a philosophical concept, seems to be a human concept – and as such, had been firmly postulated in ancient times as well. This point, without doubt, was true of the ancient Greek culture within which the Orphic mystery religion existed. The Orphic religion developed into a public religion of a sort between the sixth and fifth centuries BC, and spread mainly through the activities of its peregrine priests. Its philosophical ideas, including reincarnation, were expressed in connection with its ascetic doctrines and practices. As a result, the philosophical teachings of the Orphics were largely religious in nature. By virtue of the enormous philosophical orientation of Orphism, therefore, this paper deems it worthwhile to take a closer look at ancient Greek philosophy through the prism of Orphism. The article attempts to examine the concept of reincarnation as understood in ancient Greece, and discusses how well the concept could be traced to the metaphysical teachings of the Orphics. It thus seeks to show that some basic beliefs about life, death, and especially reincarnation held by numerous ancient Greek philosophers, could be said to rest on ideas found in the religious philosophy of the Orphics.

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ORPHISM: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Even though there often is a mention of one idea, belief, practice or another as "Orphic", there is not much evidence to believe that there is a fixed set of any of these that can neatly be tied up and described as Orphic as such. However, as we shall observe in the course of this article, there is reason to hold that the strands of ideas that we are able to associate with the ancient Orphic mystic movement – especially those that relate to reincarnation – also appeared in diverse forms in the philosophical works of later thinkers of ancient Greece.

The word Orphism and its adjectival form Orphic are derived from the word Orpheus. In ancient Greek culture, Orpheus was the name of the mythical god whose poetry and music were believed by his followers to convey the original religio-philosophical doctrines that came to be commonly known as Orphic philosophy. The followers of Orpheus, accordingly, were the Orphics and their belief system was Orphism. It must be added here that Orpheus was also believed to be the chief priest of Dionysus (or Bacchus – to the Romans)[2]. The Orphic secret religion then became known as a Dionysiac cult-society because of the reverence it had for Dionysus. For instance, "part of the Orphic ritual [was] thought to have involved the mimed or actual dismemberment of an individual representing the god Dionysus, who [was] then seen to be reborn."[3]

The resort to myths for philosophical teaching by the Orphics seemingly necessitated the development of manuals by the teacher-priests, for those myths needed to be explained in ways that would reveal their precise and intended import – both religious and philosophical – to all initiates. Consequently, the practice of seeking and teaching initiates with manuals became a significant feature of the Orphic movement right from the sixth century BC when the earliest signs of the movement were noticed (Campos 2010), to the fifth century BC by which time Orphic philosophy had gained substantial visibility and influence in Greece. With their assumption of a mystical way of life, it was expected that many ordinary practices would either be prohibited or attract disapprobation. The Orphics

[2] Dionysus was regarded as the god of wine and fertility. Consequently, Orphic initiates, just like members of the Dionysiac mystic movement (that preceded Orphism), engaged in orgies that were symbols of Dionysus (Joe 2008).

[3] Orphic religion. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/433191/Orphic-religion (Accessed on 29 August, 2012).

even considered it inappropriate, according to some scholars, to eat meat (Lewis 1949: 180-183).

The centrality of the concept of reincarnation to the Orphic movement was shown in different ways. It could, for instance, be seen in the very myth that revealed the uniqueness of Orpheus and Dionysus. Both of them were believed to have separately gone to Hades (the underworld), succeeded in avoiding death and returned to earth. The latter was subsequently reborn as the son of Semele[4]. The place of belief in reincarnation in the Orphic world-view could also be found in the teaching regarding the ultimate purpose of human existence. The purpose, they believed, was for the human soul to be purified. By purification, they meant a situation where the "person" (that is, his or her soul) was devoid of evil and imperfections and lived as a god or among the gods. The Orphics also conceived, most importantly, that the soul could not be purified in a single life-time and, thus, postulated the successive incarnations of the soul for purification. For this to be achieved, however, one could logically assume that they had to believe in the immortality of the soul. Finally, the Orphics held that each soul, after the death of the body, would be in Hades for a period of a thousand years before it was reborn unto the earth (Lewis 1949: 180-183).

MEANING OF REINCARNATION

Reincarnation may be defined as the belief in the rebirth of a human being unto the earth. "Reincarnation" is, as such, correctly interchangeable with "rebirth". However, it must be indicated here that what is meant by such "rebirth" is not just the coming into being of a body (which was once possessed by a person). Rather, rebirth is often understood in philosophical terms where the concept of the "soul" is postulated – except in, say, Buddhist rebirth where the existence of the soul is not suggested. The soul which in most cases is believed to be a metaphysical (spiritual) entity is also taken to be the other part of the bodily person. This means that believers of reincarnation, save Buddhists, conceive of a person in dualistic terms – as a body and soul. While the body is perishable, the soul is believed to constitute the stable and immutable part of the human being, and is that which finds itself in

[4] Orpheus went to the Hades in a bid to bring his dead wife back to life. Although he failed in that mission, he is said to have "charmed" Hades with his music to enable him return to earth (Joe 2008).

a new human body whenever there is reincarnation. In this regard, the person whose soul is believed to have reincarnated is literally said to have been reborn.

The origin of *palingenesia* (reincarnation) in ancient Greek philosophy may be traced to the Dionysiac cult-society, which was sometimes described as a "self-contained group, with a common life centered in its daemon" (Cornford 1957). Although the cult-society conceived that the daemon (or soul) "both reside[d] in all its members at once, and also [laid] beyond any one of them," its idea that the common life was divine and immutable was what really led to the doctrine of reincarnation, because the group held that this common life "which [was] perpetually renewed, [was] reborn out of that opposite state, called death…" (Cornford 1957: 161). And when Orphism emerged by the sixth century, it took up this notion of *palenginesia* and moralised it (Cornford 1957: 162). For instance, it taught that one had to perform moral actions to purify one's soul in each incarnation, and that purification was the basis for reincarnation. For this reason and for the linkages established in the previous section between Dionysian beliefs and Orphism, it would be quite appropriate to describe Orphism as a continuation or reinvigoration of the Dionysiac cult.

Plato also appeared to have endorsed the Orphic origins of the doctrine when he discussed it in its pristine sense. He suggested in the *Phaedo* (1977) that his Pythagorean discussants whose teaching on reincarnation will, in the course of this article, be shown to be an offshoot of Orphic metaphysics, also understood the pre- (but close-) Pythagorean characterisation of the doctrine (*Phaedo* 70c). This indeed lends credence to the seemingly Orphic influence on the Pythagoreans, and the Greeks in general (including Plato). Therefore, it could be postulated that, if someone subscribed to the view that ancient Greek philosophy was the foundation of Western civilisation, then, that person would most likely be willing to also accept that reincarnation(as elucidated in the foregoing), in Western thought, had its origin in the religious philosophy of ancient Greece. But, this article is only interested in showing that some basic beliefs regarding life, death and the afterlife expressed by many ancient Greek philosophers bear – to a large extent – the signature of Orphic philosophy.

EVIDENCE OF ORPHIC INFLUENCE ON OTHER ANCIENT GREEK THINKERS

(i) Soul, life, and death

In this section, as in the rest of this article, the views of some ancient Greek philosophers are explained in relation to the teachings of the Orphics. This is not to discount the fact that other individuals like Homer and, perhaps, some religious units might have held a few positions that were consistent with the views here attributed to the Orphics. However, Orphic philosophy elects itself as a reference point for the analyses of the philosophical concepts discussed in this article because of (i) the elaborate or apparent highly developed nature of Orphic doctrines at the time, (ii) the convergence between several aspects of Orphic teaching and the philosophical doctrines of the Greek thinkers whose ideas are discussed in this article, and (iii) the enormous visibility or presence of Orphism in ancient Greece – as a result of which the borrowing of Orphic doctrines were more likely. These reasons also account for the title which this article bears.

The Orphic conception of the soul and, thus, of the constitution of the human being could be deduced from the myths which Orphism espoused. In its mythology, humans fell because of a primal sin but could rise again through purifications and, thus, rebirths (Burnet 1950: 31). The sin came about because Titan killed and ate his child. Empedocles, nonetheless, attributed the fall not only to bloodshed – that is, animal sacrifice (DK, Fragment 128-139)[5] – but also to meat-eating of any kind (Fragment 115). Consequently, in an attempt to lead good moral lives, the Orphics "suppressed the Titanic and cherished the Dionysiac" in them. They engaged in orgies and other acts which, in the thinking of Heraclitus, could only be described as "shameful" (Fragment 15). While this comment alone, without a deep look at Orphic doctrines, might mislead one into thinking that the Orphics' main concern was *this* life, an interrogation of why they sought to live good moral lives would prove otherwise. Such interrogation would also bring to the fore their position on the nature and existence of the soul. For, they thought of a world next to this which was of

[5] DK suggests that the fragment that follows it is taken from the compilation made by Diels (1951). This compilation is the standard work for the citation of original material among researchers on ancient Greek philosophy. All fragments are taken from this source unless otherwise stated.

great value, and in which the soul of a person could live after death. This suggested that they had a dualistic conception of a person and the world. Life in the "real" sense was that lived by the soul in the yonder world. As a result of this belief, the Orphic aspired to (qualify his or her soul for) that life. Indeed, what most people regarded as life was death to the Orphic, as he or she also conceived of earthly life to entail an entrapment of the soul, even if temporarily.

The Orphic attitude to life, death and the afterlife subsequently found some echo in the views of later Greek philosophers on eschatology. One example was Homer's suggestion that the soul (or what he called "the breath-soul") did survive death in Hades (Kirk & Raven 1957: 9). The most prominent beneficiaries of Orphic beliefs, however, appeared to be Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato. As this article seeks to expatiate on this point, it is done so in agreement with John Burnet who also suspects that Pythagoras (c582 –c500 BC) was directly influenced by his contemporary Orphics to come up with some of the views which he expressed on the afterlife (Burnet 1950: 43). Orphic dualism was also seen in such works of Plato as the *Apology, Gorgias, Phaedrus, Meno and Phaedo* where Plato also laid emphasis on the soul, and gave preference to the next world. When he was confronted with death, Plato did not only point out the futility of causing death to his body, but he also excited himself with prospect of life in the next world where his soul would meet with those of the righteous who, to his mind, lived in the spiritual, blissful, next world (Plato 1975: *Apology* 41a). It is worthy of note, however, that the Pythagorean influence mentioned in the preceding sentence could only be secondary because – as already hinted at and shown later – they (the Pythagoreans) borrowed this and many ideas from the Orphics.

Like the Orphic teaching which accentuated the inherent importance of the soul, some Greek philosophers identified life with the soul. Such soul-theorists, at least, saw the soul as the bearer of life (or as a life-giving principle). Some even went further to make taboos of foods which they considered to have some affinity with human life. The taboos, in any case, could, according to Guthrie, also be seen in some Orphic writings (Guthrie 1965: 250). While Anaxagoras (500 BC – 428 BC) belonged to the former group (Fragment 4), Empedocles (c490 – c430 BC) could be identified with the latter. Empedocles advised against the consumption of certain foods – especially beans – because of the affinity which those foods were believed to have with life (Fragment 140). This apparently was to show the sanctity of human life and the need not to violate it. Again, because human life was

conceived to extend beyond this world or existence, it became a sort of tautology to think of life in terms of existence, and a contradiction to see death as a sort of non-existence. This was because life or the bearer of life, to the Orphic, always *existed.* It was, for instance, believed that the purified soul of an Orphic devotee was immutable, just as Orpheus himself who, Plato confirmed, was believed to have survived death (Plato 1975: *Apology* 41a). The tautology would have arisen because by saying that, that which lived existed, one would have implied that, that which existed (life, or the soul) existed; while by regarding death as nonexistence, one would have virtually classified life (or soul) which always existed, as capable of not existing – at least, at the period of bodily death. Empedocles probably saw through this when he remarked that it was impossible for something to come into being (or, for there to be birth, life) in the strict sense – since that which *was* could not come from that which *was not.* And, that there could not as well be death since the destruction of that which truly had life was also impossible (Fragment 12, 13). Life (or specifically, human life), to him, was a period in which "things" joined together to form a human being, and death was merely a dissolution of this compound, since nothing which *was* could be annihilated. The same line of thought could be found in Democritus (c460 – c359 BC) who understood life and death, growth and decay, and indeed, all change in terms of the movement of atoms in space (Fragment 37, 57-58). The coming together of atoms, he argued, led to the formation of things, while their separation disintegrated things. Plato also conceived of death as just a separation of the soul from the body in the *Phaedo* (Plato 1975).

If care is not taken, one might suppose wrongly that the afore-mentioned Orphic belief in the immortality of the soul would be denied by Heraclitus (c540 – c470 BC) – although he, in reality, assumed it. First, when Heraclitus criticised Dionysus (and by extension, his followers) for encouraging indulgence and singing "shameful" (unholy) songs during Dionysiac festivals (Fragment 15), his reason, in the words of Freeman, was that: "indulgence [was] death to the soul" (Freeman 1949: 121). Now, it is tempting to take his statement as pointing to the mortality of the soul. He did not imply that. Given his idea that the soul naturally drifted up toward the substrate "Fire" – which he associated life with – as contrasted with moist which drew humans down to itself through indulgence or the bodily (Fragment 50, 57, 67), he could be understood as asserting that indulgence was death because it was a drawback, a hampering of the soul's movement toward life (Fire), a denial of some life and, by implication, a way of bringing some death to the soul. Indulgence did not bring absolute death to the soul as such.

Secondly, the Orphic notion of the immortality of the soul was extended or transformed by Heraclitus into a transcendental concept of existence within which all opposites (in terms of experiences and entities) dissolved. That, since everything moved constantly between Fire and moist or life and death, humans acquired and dropped simultaneously some amount of both opposites in every action they took. In this regard, life and death appeared to be the same since they were different parts of the same reality (Fragment 127). And that, through the cycle of reincarnation, birth and death constantly succeeded each other in the life of a soul. But the soul, Heraclitus observed, would always drift toward Fire (life). This, in my view, underscored the Orphic nature of the Heraclitic soul; for, the ultimate immortality of the soul – and for that matter, the permanent association of life with the soul – was the only reason why it (the soul) drifted constantly toward Fire.

Nonetheless, there were some logical problems with aspects of the philosophy of Heraclitus. For instance, he condemned earlier religious teachers (the mystics) in Greece for pretending to possess knowledge about the afterlife, and threatened them with Hell fire (Freeman 14). In itself, that was not necessarily wrong. The problem with him, however, had to do with a claim he subsequently made in Fragment 102. That claim, which has been well interpreted by Freeman, was that: "To the Godhead, everything [was] fair, good and just; it [was] only human beings who found some things wrong, others right. Beauty, pleasure, virtue, everything seen through moral eyes, had this relativity" (Freeman 1949: 124). This view seems to be an extension of his idea that on the basis of the inherent rationale of things (*logos*) "… all things [were] one" (Fragment 50). But, if everything was indeed good, and every action subject to moral description was, in essence, good in the sight of the Godhead, we have to wonder how the same being would logically be interested in casting the earlier religious teachers – whom for their lack of real knowledge he (Heraclitus) described as foolish and harmful – into Hell. Heraclitus would have been right only if there was no difference between Heaven and Hell, or if those who did what was "good" were eligible to dwell in Hell too.

(ii) Reincarnation

With such a broader view of life and the world in general, and with the emphasis laid on the soul, came the need for the Greek philosophers to explore how the immortal soul actually carried on with its independent life. If, as already discussed, the soul existed in the afterlife

then questions about the nature of its functions and experiences, about how these two connected to the soul's past or reconnected the soul to earthly life, and whether an afterlife existent should have anything at all to do with any future life on earth, could not have escaped the attention of the soul-theorist philosophers of Greece.

A return of the soul to this world was therefore postulated by many ancient soul-theorists, just as we noticed of the Orphics above. Although the belief in rebirth was shared among such soul-theorists as Empedocles and Plato, the time given for a soul to be reborn or complete its cycle of births was not unanimous. Empedocles did suggest that a soul would not be born again after "thrice ten thousand seasons" (Fragment 115), a period which modern scholars such as Guthrie (1965: 252) has compared with the ten thousand years mentioned by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (248e) (Plato 1868). Quite related to this was the view held by the later Pythagoreans and which also became part of the teachings of the Stoics that reincarnation of the soul took place in as short a period as every two hundred and sixteen years (Fragment 14, 8; Kirk & Raven 1957: 224), while for Plato it was a thousand years between any two births. Plato's position, though, was remarkably Orphic.

In Greek eschatology the soul was not believed to inhabit only human bodies. There was, therefore, belief in the transmigration of souls. In Orphic religion, for instance, the soul was believed to inhabit "successively animal and vegetable bodies" (Burnet 1950: 31). Pythagoras seemed to have adopted this philosophy in addition to the very Orphic idea of the immortality of the human soul. For instance, Porphyrius reports Pythagoras as also believing that the soul could change into other nonhuman forms (Fragment 14, 8a). This was in spite of his (Pythagoras') claims about his past lives in a human form. Diogenes Laertius mentioned that Pythagoras actually suggested that he remembered four of his past lives (Fragment 14, 8). In agreement with this observation seemed to be Pythagoras' claim, according to Heracleides Ponticus, that he (or rather, his soul) had previously existed in the bodies of Aethalides the son of Hermes, Euphorbus the Trojan, Hermotimus the prophet of Clazomenae, and Pyrrhos a Delian fisherman (Freeman 1949: 78). Empedocles asserted of Pythagoras that he could vividly remember things that occurred 10 or 20 generations earlier (Burnet 1950: 43). Guthrie made this point in another way, that Pythagoras "saw easily every single thing that [was], in ten, yea and twenty lives" when he slipped deep into his mind (Guthrie 1965: 251). This seemed to be the process through which he (Pythagoras) came to conclude that he was the son of Hermes. Hermes – who was also identified as the Egyptian Thot – was incidentally associated with the discovery of number and writing. And,

when Empedocles described him as adept in a wide variety of things and exceptionally knowledgeable, he might have also had in mind Pythagoras' claim (Diogenes Laertius 8, 36) to have recognised the voice of his departed friend in the howls of a dog that was being beaten. His claim to know his friend even in the body of a dog was, however, mocked and described as extravagant by Xenophanes (Diogenes Laertius 9, 18). A more perfect example was Empedocles who did not just express his belief in transmigration (Fragment 115), but actually revealed his numerous incarnations as once a boy, then a girl, a bush, a bird and a fish (Fragment 117).

An interesting argument, which was not necessarily Orphic, was nonetheless used by Plato in the *Phaedo* in support of reincarnation (Plato 1977). Just as Empedocles believed that "nothing [could] come from nothing" (Fragment 12), Plato considered impossible the creation of anything, including human souls, *ex nihilo.* As a result, there was the need for souls to reincarnate, otherwise as humans continued to be born into this world, there would come a time when there was going to be no souls left to inhabit new bodies. The cycle of rebirth, it thus seemed, offered a rational explanation for the perpetuation of human life on earth. In the *Republic*, Plato added that the souls that were or ought to be reincarnated had to be fixed in number, and that since each soul was immortal the population of souls could not decrease, neither could it increase (Bk. x, 609-10). For there to be an increment, he argued, one of two impossible situations had to obtain: (i) that souls could be created *ex nihilo*, or (ii) that "nonsoul" entities could be turned into souls, so that all things would eventually become souls. To avoid these, therefore, reincarnation had to be true.

In addition to the foregoing, there were other arguments advanced by the non-Orphic Greek philosophers (especially, regarding the destiny of the soul, upon the death of a human being) which were not entirely Orphic. I will cite aspects of the question of purification (or salvation). It was a feature of ancient Greek mythology to have souls judged after death, with the promise of possible salvation for the soul from the wheels of rebirth. The Orphics held the belief that souls could achieve this and eternally live with the gods through purifications. But, unlike some later Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus and Plato, who thought of two contrasting afterlife abodes akin to the Christian conceptions of heaven and hell, the Orphics believed that "the incurable souls were condemned to lie in the Slough" and nothing more (Burnet 1950: 31). This was a significant difference, nonetheless, between both Heraclitus and Plato and the Orphics, even though all three of

them shared the belief in some form of judgement after death and the possibility of salvation for the soul.

However, this postulation of salvation gave rise to the question of what salvation itself entailed. When the Orphics argued that salvation would be achieved after repeated rebirths, they indeed associated salvation with a life with the gods or as a god. And, this position seemed to have later made possible some interesting postulations in ancient Greece. For instance, it appeared normal for people who were believed to be in the final laps of their incarnations (those who had reached apotheosis) to be referred to as gods. Empedocles saw himself as one. Accordingly, he addressed himself to his people as someone going among them "as an immortal God" and no more subject to death (Fragment 82-112). It is not clear, though, whether Empedocles thought that his lifestyle or social status at that time was because he had reached the final stage of his incarnations, or rather it was because of the so-called final incarnation stage he had reached that was why he occupied certain important positions in society. For instance, being himself a minstrel, prophet, and a physician, he was known to have remarked that those in the threshold of apotheosis were elevated individuals, pure and quite free from human afflictions; and such persons, interestingly, were prophets, minstrels, physicians and princes (Fragment 128, 146, 147). Until the soul was redeemed from the cycle of rebirth, Empedocles believed that the soul had to be successively embodied to pay for its sins. What he shared with the Orphics was that he also had no concept of hell. Rather, he postulated worldly sufferings of various kinds (Fragment 118-121) and also believed that not all humans could reincarnate (Fragment 115). Given the influence of Orphic mysticism on Greek religious philosophy and, from the above, the similarities beginning to emerge between Empedocles' ideas and Orphic teachings, I would not rule out a possible influence on Empedocles by Orphic thought for the views just attributed to him. This point, in fact, is strengthened by Guthrie's observation regarding the intellectual environment at the time of Empedocles, that "there existed a systematic body of religious doctrine, commonly and with good reason known as Orphic, which was current especially in Western Greece, and by individual writers of genius could be modified to suit their own purposes" (Guthrie 1965: 253).

Finally, unlike the Orphics and Empedocles, Heraclitus as mentioned previously conceived of a hell. The conception of a heaven and hell or abodes of bliss and misery for souls was, to a large extent, also envisaged by thinkers who saw the serving of justice in the afterlife as the natural consequence for certain kinds of world. One such world was this

earthly world in which righteous persons who (by the principle of like to like) did not deserve to suffer or be harmed, actually suffered or got harmed; while vicious persons rather appeared to be comfortable and happy. With their postulation of the two afterlife dwelling places, these thinkers also appeared to suggest that some justice would finally be done if the righteous were made to dwell in eternal bliss while the vicious were consigned to the place of pain and misery. Traces of the notion of different fates for different persons (or, specifically, souls) could be found in Plato's *Gorgias* (253e) (Plato 1979) where a myth portraying the scene of judgement in the Meadows made some souls to go to Tartarus and others to the island of the Blest. [Meadows was the place in the underworld where souls "encamped like pilgrims at a festival" (*The Republic* Bk. x, 614)]. In the *Republic* (Plato 1945) another indication of belief in the two afterlife abodes was given in the myth concerning Er. Er was a man who lost his life in a battle. After placing him on the funeral pyre, he resurrected and narrated his experiences in the "land of the dead" (*Republic* (Plato 1945)). He declared of the judgement scene that "the unjust were commanded to take the downward road to the left" where they could dwell in misery for a thousand years while the just lived in a joyous heaven.

CONCLUSION

The concept of reincarnation was without doubt of significant philosophical concern to ancient Greek thinkers. Also, the relative elaborate nature of the Orphic belief system and the influence it had on other ancient Greek philosophers were remarkable. The Orphic belief in the psycho-somatic nature of the human being, the existence and immortality of the soul, post-humous judgement, reincarnation and salvation could be said to have driven the thoughts of the ancient philosophers discussed in this article. These beliefs, together with the concepts of joyful and damnable afterlife abodes expressed by Heraclitus and Plato, appeared to have later influenced many aspects of Christianity – the dominant religious tradition in the modern West. Belief in such concepts as the soul, heaven and hell, post-mortem judgement as found in today's Christianity, are examples. The Greek belief in the afterlife, therefore, could be described as one of the most influential beliefs to have emanated from the ancient world. It could be maintained, also, that it would be unfair on every count to disregard or downplay the Orphic influence on Greek philosophy – and this point is in essence what this article has attempted to stress.

From the foregoing, it could be argued that the doctrine of reincarnation as held in Greek philosophy was not a phenomenon that was really distinct from what pertained in other ancient cultures of the world, and so was the general nature of Greek eschatology. The belief, for instance, in the duality of persons (that is, in body and soul), and in the immortality of the soul were held in Hindu (Prabhupāda 1979: 76) and Inca (Cobo 1990 :19) philosophies too. Another significant feature which Greek reincarnation shared with others was the belief in the moral basis for the return of persons, for, this belief was found in the cultures of the Hindus (Prabhupāda 1979: 76) and Aztecs (Vento 1995: 11). Indeed, just as the Orphics, Pythagoras and Empedocles postulated, bad actions were, for many cultures, expected to bind the human soul to the wheel of rebirth. And that, salvation of the soul – usually earned through good works – involved some union with the gods in the next life. Even though Buddhists, unlike Hindus, taught the doctrine of reincarnation, it is quite important to point out that by their doctrine of *an-atman* (not-self) the soul was regarded as non-existent. Belief in reincarnation could thus be said to be a feature of diverse ancient cultures, although it was not, strictly speaking, the same for all cultures or their traditions.

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