

## Rebirth and Soul Evolution

THE IDEAS that men currently form about life and things are for the most part pragmatic constructions. They are forms of a reason which is concerned with giving only such a serviceable account to itself of its surroundings as shall make a sufficient clue to our immediate business of the growth, action, satisfaction of the personality, something feasible, livable, effective for our journeying in Time, something viable in the twofold French sense of the word. Whether it corresponds to or is directly in touch with any real reality of things seems to be very much a matter of accident. It seems to be sufficient if we can persuade our facile and complaisant reason of its truth and find it serviceable and fruitful in consequences for thought, action and life-experience. It is true that there is another unpragmatic reason in us which labours to get rid of this demand of the intellectual and vital personality; it wants to look at the real truth of things without veils and without any object, to mirror the very image of Truth in the still waters of a dispassionate, clear and pure mentality. But the workings of this calmer greater reason are hampered by two tremendous difficulties. First, it seems next to impossible to disengage it entirely from the rest of ourselves, from the normal intellectuality, from the will to believe, from that instinct of the intelligence which helps the survival, by a sort of subtle principle of preference and selection, of the way of thinking that suits our personal bent or the accomplished frame of our nature. And again, what is the Truth that our reason mirrors? It is after all some indirect image of Truth, not her very self and body seen face to face; it is an image moulded from such data, symbol, process of Reality, — if any real Reality there is, — as we can gather from the very limited experience of self and existing things open to human mind. So that unless there be some means by which knowledge can burst through all veils

to the experience of the very Reality itself, or unless there be some universal Logos, divine Mind or Supermind, which knows itself and all things and our consciousness can reflect or get into touch with that, a pursuing insufficiency and uncertainty must always keep its baffling grasp upon even the highest power and largest walk of our reason and beset all the labour of human knowledge.

Nowhere are these disabilities more embarrassing than in those fundamental questions of the nature of the world and of our own existence which yet most passionately interest thinking humanity because this is in the end the thing of utmost importance to us, since everything else, except some rough immediate practicality of the moment, depends on its solution. And even that, until this great question is settled, is only a stumbling forward upon a journey of which we know not the goal or the purpose, the meaning or the necessity. The religions profess to solve these grand problems with an inspired or revealed certainty; but the enormity of their differences shows that in them too there is a selection of ideas, separate aspects of the Truth, — the sceptic would say, shows of imagination and falsehood, — and a construction from a limited spiritual experience. In them too there is an element of chosen and willed believing and some high pragmatic aim and utility, whether that be the soul's escape from the sorrow or unreality of existence or celestial bliss or a religio-ethical sanction and guidance. The philosophical systems are very obviously only feasible selective constructions of great reflective ideas. More often these are possibilities of the reason much rather than assured certainties or, if founded on spiritual experience, they are still selective constructions, a sort of great architectural approach to some gate into unknowable Divine or ineffable Infinite. The modern scientific mind professed to rid us of all mere intellectual constructions and put us face to face with truth and with assured truth only; it claimed the right to rid man of the fantastic encumbrance of religion and the nebulous futilities of metaphysical philosophy. But religion and philosophy have now turned upon science and convicted her, on her own statement of facts, of an equal liability to the two

universal difficulties of human reason. The system of science seems to be itself only another feasible and fruitful construction of the reason giving a serviceable account to itself of the physical world and our relations to it, and it seems to be nothing more. And its knowledge is fatally bound by the limitation of its data and its outlook. Science too creates only a partial image of Truth stamped with a character of much uncertainty and still more clearly imprinted with the perverse hallmark of insufficiency.

We have to recognise that human reason, moving as it does from a starting-point of ignorance and in a great enviroing circle of ignorance, must proceed by hypothesis, assumption and theory subject to verification of some kind convincing to our reason and experience. But there is this difference that the religious mind accepts the theory or assumption, — to which it does not at all give these names, for they are to it things felt, — with faith, with a will of belief, with an emotional certainty, and finds its verification in an increasing spiritual intuition and experience. The philosophic mind accepts it calmly and discerningly for its coherent agreement with the facts and necessities of being; it verifies by a pervading and unfailing harmony with all the demands of reason and intellectualised intuition. But the sceptical mind — not the mind of mere doubt or dogmatic denial which usually arrogates that name, but the open and balanced mind of careful, impartial and reserved inquiry, — gives a certain provisional character to its hypotheses, and it verifies by the justification of whatever order or category of ascertainable facts it takes for its standard of proof and invests with a character of decisive authority or reality. There is room enough for all three methods and there is no reason why our complex modern mind should not proceed simultaneously by all of them at once. For if the sceptical or provisional attitude makes us more ready to modify our image of Truth in the light of new material of thought and knowledge, the religious mind also, provided it keeps a certain firm and profound openness to new spiritual experience, can proceed faster to a larger and larger light, and meanwhile we can walk by it with an assured step and go securely about our principal business of the growth and perfection of our being. The

philosophic mind has the use of giving a needed largeness and openness to our mentality, — if it too does not narrow itself by a closed circle of metaphysical dogma, — and supports besides the harmony of our other action by the orderly assent of the higher reason.

In this matter of the soul and rebirth the initial hypothesis now lies quite open to us; the barrier has fallen. For if there is one thing now certain it is that physical science may give clues of process, but cannot lay hold on the reality of things. That means that the physical is not the whole secret of world and existence, and that in ourselves too the body is not the whole of our being. It is then through something supraphysical in Nature and ourselves which we may call the soul, whatever the exact substance of soul may be, that we are likely to get that greater truth and subtler experience which will enlarge the narrow rigid circle traced by physical science and bring us nearer to the Reality. There is nothing now to bar the most rational mind, — for true rationalism, real free thought need no longer be identified, as it was for some time too hastily and intolerantly, with a denial of the soul and a scouting of the truths of spiritual philosophy and religion, — there is nothing to prevent us from proceeding firmly upon whatever certitudes of spiritual experience have become to us the soil of our inner growth or the pillars on our road to self-knowledge. These are soul realities. But the exact frame we shall give to that knowledge, will best be built by farther spiritual experience aided by new enlarged intuitions, confirmed in the suggestions of a wide philosophic reason and fruitfully using whatever helpful facts we may get from the physical and the psychic sciences. These are truths of soul process; their full light must come by experimental knowledge and observation of the world without us and the world within.

The admission of the soul's existence does not of itself lead, by its own necessity, by any indispensable next step, to the acceptance of rebirth. It will only bring in this indispensable consequence if there is such a thing as a soul evolution which enforces itself always and is a constant part of the order of existence and the law of the time process. Moreover some kind

of admission of an individual soul is a first condition of the truth of rebirth. For there is a plausible theory of existence which admits an All-Soul, a universal being and becoming of which the material world is some sensible result, but does not admit any at all abiding truth of our spiritual individuality. The All-Soul may continually develop, may slowly yet urgently evolve its becoming; but each individual man or apparent individual being is to this way of thinking only a moment of the All-Soul and its evolution; out of that it rises by the formation which we call birth and it sinks back into it by the dissolution which we call death. But this limiting idea can only stand if we credit a creative biological evolution and its instrument of physical heredity with the whole causation of all our mental and spiritual being; but in that case we have no real soul or spirit, our soul personality or spiritual becoming is a fruit of our life and body. Now the question of rebirth turns almost entirely upon the one fundamental question of the past of the individual being and its future. If the creation of the whole nature is to be credited to the physical birth, then the body, life and soul of the individual are only a continuation of the body, life and soul of his ancestry, and there is no room anywhere for soul rebirth. The individual man has no past being independent of them and can have no independent future; he can prolong himself in his progeny, — the child may be his second or continued self, as the Upanishad puts it, — but there is no other rebirth for him. No continued stream of individuality presided over by any mental or spiritual person victoriously survives the dissolution of the body. On the other hand, if there is any element in us, still more the most important of all, which cannot be so accounted for, but presupposes a past or admits a future evolution other than that of the race mind and the physical ancestry, then some kind of soul birth becomes a logical necessity.

Now it is just here that the claims of physical and vital evolution and heredity seem to fail, — as a cause of our whole mental and spiritual being. Certainly it has been shown that our body and the most physical part of our life action are very largely the results of heredity, but not in such a way as to exclude an

assisting and perhaps really predominant psychical cause other than the ancestral contribution. It has been shown if you will that our conscious vitality and those parts of mind which depend upon it, something of temperament, something of character, certain impulses and predispositions, are to a great extent shaped — or is it only influenced? — by evolutionary heredity; but not that they are entirely due to this force, not that there is no soul, no spiritual entity which accepts and makes use of this instrumentation, but is not its created result or helplessly subject to it in its becoming. Still more are the higher parts of our mind marked with a certain stamp of spiritual independence. They are not altogether helpless formations of evolutionary heredity. But still all these things are evidently very much under the influence of environment and its pressures and opportunities. And we may draw from that, if we choose, a limiting conclusion; we may say that they are a phase of the universal soul, a part of the process of its evolution by selection; the race, not the individual, is the continuous factor and all our individual effort and acquisition, only in appearance, not really independent, ceases with death, except so much of our gain as is chosen to be carried on in the race by some secret will or conscious necessity in the universal being or the persistent becoming.

But when we come to our highest spiritual elements, we find that here we do arrive at a very clear and sovereign independence. We can carry on far beyond any determination by environment or the pressure of the race-soul our own soul evolution by the governing force of our spiritual nature. Quite apart from any evidence of an after-life on other planes or any memory of past births, this is sufficient warrant for a refusal to accept as sufficient any theory of the ephemeral being of the individual and the sole truth of the evolutionary Universal. Certainly, the individual being is not thereby shown to be independent of the All-Soul; it may be nothing but a form of it in time. But it is sufficient for our purpose that it is a persistent soul form, not determined by the life of the body and ceasing with its dissolution, but persisting independently beyond. For if it is thus independent of the physical race continuity in the future, if

it thus shows itself capable of determining its own future soul evolution in time, it must have had secretly such an independent existence all through and it must have been determining in reality, though no doubt by some other and indirect insistence, its past soul evolution too in time. Possibly it may exist in the All-Soul only during the universal continuity, may have arisen from it in that, may pass into it eventually. Or on the contrary it may exist in it prior to, or it is better to say, independent of the universal continuity, and there may be some kind of eternal individual. But it is sufficient for the theory of rebirth that a secret soul continuity of the individual does exist and not alone a brute succession of bodies informed by the All-Soul with a quite ephemeral illusion of mental or spiritual individuality.

There are theories of existence which accept the individual soul, but not soul evolution. There is, for instance, that singular dogma of a soul without a past but with a future, created by the birth of the body but indestructible by the death of the body. But this is a violent and irrational assumption, an imagination unverified and without verisimilitude. It involves the difficulty of a creature beginning in time but enduring through all eternity, an immortal being dependent for its existence on an act of physical generation, yet itself always and entirely unphysical and independent of the body which results from the generation. These are objections insuperable to the reason. But there is too the difficulty that this soul inherits a past for which it is in no way responsible, or is burdened with mastering propensities imposed on it not by its own act, and is yet responsible for its future which is treated as if it were in no way determined by that often deplorable inheritance, *damnosa hereditas*, or that unfair creation, and were entirely of its own making. We are made helplessly what we are and are yet responsible for what we are, — or at least for what we shall be hereafter, which is inevitably determined to a large extent by what we are originally. And we have only this one chance. Plato and the Hottentot, the fortunate child of saints or Rishis and the born and trained criminal plunged from beginning to end in the lowest fetid corruption of a great modern city have equally to create by the action or belief

of this one unequal life all their eternal future. This is a paradox which offends both the soul and the reason, the ethical sense and the spiritual intuition.

There is too the kindred idea, behind which a truth obscurely glimmers, that the soul of man is something high, pure and great which has fallen into the material existence and by its use of its nature and its acts in the body must redeem itself, must return to its own celestial nature. But it is evident that this one earthly life is not sufficient for all to effect that difficult return, but rather most may and do miss it entirely; and we have then either to suppose that an immortal soul can perish or be doomed to eternal perdition or else that it has more existences than this poor precarious one apparently given to it, lives or states of being which intervene between its fall and the final working out of a sure redemption. But the first supposition is subject to all the difficulties of that other paradox. Apart from the problem of the reason of the descent, it is difficult to see how straight from celestial being these different souls should have lapsed immediately to such immense differences of gradation in their fall and in such a way that each is responsible for the otherwise cruel and unequal conditions under which he has to determine so summarily his eternal future. Each must surely have had a past which made him responsible for his present conditions, if he is to be held thus strictly to account for all their results and the use he makes of his often too scanty, grudging and sometimes quite hopeless opportunity. The very nature of our humanity supposes a varying constituent past for the soul as well as a resultant future.

More reasonable therefore is a recent theory which suggests that a spirit or mental being has descended from another and greater plane and taken up the material existence when the physical and the animal evolution had proceeded far enough for a human embodiment upon earth to be possible. He looks back to a long series of human lives, beginning from that point, which has brought each of us to his present condition, and forward to a still continuing series which will carry all by their own degrees and in their own time to whatever completion, transfiguration,

return awaits the self-embodying human soul and is the crown of its long endeavour. But here again, what is it that brings about this connection of a spiritual being and higher mental nature and a physical being and lower animal nature? what necessitates this taking up of the lower life by the spirit which here becomes man? It would seem surely that there must have been some previous connection; the possessing mental or spiritual being must all the time have been preparing this lower life it thus occupies for a human manifestation. The whole evolution would then be an ordered continuity from the beginning and the intervention of mind and spirit would be no sudden inexplicable miracle, but a coming forward of that which was always there behind, an open taking up of the manifested life by a power which was always secretly presiding over the life evolution.

What this theory of rebirth supposes is an evolution of being in the material world from matter to embodied mind and a universal spirit which ensouls this evolution, while our individual spirits exist in the universal and follow their upward course to whatever purposed consummation or liberation or both may beckon to us at its end. Much more than this it may mean, but this at least; a soul evolution the real fact, an assumption of higher and higher forms the first appearance. We might indeed allow a past and future for the human soul, but place them below and above this terrestrial plane and admit only one casual or purposeful existence upon earth. But this would mean two orders of progressive existence unconnected and yet meeting for a brief moment. There would be an errant individual human soul intervening in the ordered terrestrial evolution and almost immediately passing out without any connecting cause or necessity. But especially it leaves insufficiently explained the phenomenon of the largely terrestrial animal being and nature of this spiritual and supra-terrestrial entity, this soul, its struggle for liberation, and the infinitely varying degrees in which in different bodies it has succeeded in dominating the lower nature. A past terrestrial soul evolution sufficiently accounting for these variations and degrees of our mixed being and a future soul evolution that helps us progressively to liberate the godhead of the spirit, seem

the only just and reasonable explanation of this labour of a matter-shackled soul which has attained a variable degree of humanity in the midst of a general progressive appearance of the life, mind and spirit in a material universe. Rebirth is the only possible machinery for such a soul evolution.