An end have these bodies of an embodied soul that is eternal; it is not born nor dies nor is it that having been it will not be again. It is unborn, ancient, everlasting; it is not slain with the slaying of the body. As a man casts from him his worn-out garments and takes others that are new, so the embodied being casts off its bodies and joins itself to others that are new. Certain is the death of that which is born and certain is the birth of that which dies. 

Gita.¹

There is a birth and growth of the self. According to his actions the embodied being assumes forms successively in many places; many forms gross and subtle he assumes by force of his own qualities of nature. Swetaswatara Upanishad.²

BIRTH is the first spiritual mystery of the physical universe, death is the second which gives its double point of perplexity to the mystery of birth; for life, which would otherwise be a self-evident fact of existence, becomes itself a mystery by virtue of these two which seem to be its beginning and its end and yet in a thousand ways betray themselves as neither of these things, but rather intermediate stages in an occult processus of life. At first sight birth might seem to be a constant outburst of life in a general death, a persistent circumstance in the universal lifelessness of Matter. On a closer examination it begins to be more probable that life is something involved in Matter or even an inherent power of the Energy that creates Matter, but able to appear only when it gets the necessary conditions for the affirmation of its characteristic phenomena and for an appropriate

¹ II. 18, 20, 22, 27. ² V. 11, 12.
The Life Divine

self-organisation. But in the birth of life there is something more that participates in the emergence, — there is an element which is no longer material, a strong upsurging of some flame of soul, a first evident vibration of the spirit.

All the known circumstances and results of birth presuppose an unknown before, and there is a suggestion of universality, a will of persistence of life, an inconclusiveness in death which seem to point to an unknown hereafter. What were we before birth and what are we after death, are the questions, the answer of the one depending upon that of the other, which the intellect of man has put to itself from the beginning without even now resting in any final solution. The intellect indeed can hardly give the final answer: for that must in its very nature lie beyond the data of the physical consciousness and memory, whether of the race or the individual, yet these are the sole data which the intellect is in the habit of consulting with something like confidence. In this poverty of materials and this incertitude it wheels from one hypothesis to another and calls each in turn a conclusion. Moreover, the solution depends upon the nature, source and object of the cosmic movement, and as we determine these, so we shall have to conclude about birth and life and death, the before and the hereafter.

The first question is whether the before and the after are purely physical and vital or in some way, and more predominantly, mental and spiritual. If Matter were the principle of the universe, as the materialist alleges, if the truth of things were to be found in the first formula arrived at by Bhrigu, son of Varuna, when he meditated upon the eternal Brahman, “Matter is the Eternal, for from Matter all beings are born and by Matter all beings exist and to Matter all beings depart and return,” then no farther questioning would be possible. The before of our bodies would be a gathering of their constituents out of various physical elements through the instrumentality of the seed and food and under the influence perhaps of occult but always material energies, and the before of our conscious being a preparation by heredity or by some other physically vital or physically mental operation in universal Matter specialising its action and building
the individual through the bodies of our parents, through seed and gene and chromosome. The after of the body would be a dissolution into the material elements and the after of the conscious being a relapse into Matter with some survival of the effects of its activity in the general mind and life of humanity: this last quite illusory survival would be our only chance of immortality. But since the universality of Matter can no longer be held as giving any sufficient explanation of the existence of Mind, — and indeed Matter itself can no longer be explained by Matter alone, for it does not appear to be self-existent, — we are thrown back from this easy and obvious solution to other hypotheses.

One of these is the old religious myth and dogmatic mystery of a God who creates constantly immortal souls out of his own being or else by his “breath” or life-power entering, it is to be presumed, into material Nature or rather into the bodies he creates in it and vivifying them internally with a spiritual principle. As a mystery of faith this can hold and need not be examined, for the mysteries of faith are intended to be beyond question and scrutiny; but for reason and philosophy it lacks convincingness and does not fit into the known order of things. For it involves two paradoxes which need more justification before they can even be accorded any consideration; first, the hourly creation of beings who have a beginning in time but no end in time, and are, moreover, born by the birth of the body but do not end by the death of the body; secondly, their assumption of a ready-made mass of combined qualities, virtues, vices, capacities, defects, temperamental and other advantages and handicaps, not made by them at all through growth, but made for them by arbitrary fiat, — if not by law of heredity, — yet for which and for the perfect use of which they are held responsible by their Creator.

We may maintain — provisionally, at least, — certain things as legitimate presumptions of the philosophic reason and fairly throw the burden of disproving them on their denier. Among these postulates is the principle that that which has no end must necessarily have had no beginning; all that begins or is created
has an end by cessation of the process that created and maintains it or the dissolution of the materials of which it is compounded or the end of the function for which it came into being. If there is an exception to this law, it must be by a descent of spirit into matter animating matter with divinity or giving matter its own immortality; but the spirit itself which so descends is immortal, not made or created. If the soul was created to animate the body, if it depended on the body for its coming into existence, it can have no reason or basis for existence after the disappearance of the body. It is naturally to be supposed that the breath or power given for the animation of the body would return at its final dissolution to its Maker. If, on the contrary, it still persists as an immortal embodied being, there must be a subtle or psychic body in which it continues, and it is fairly certain that this psychic body and its inhabitant must be pre-existent to the material vehicle: it is irrational to suppose that they were created originally to inhabit that brief and perishable form; an immortal being cannot be the outcome of so ephemeral an incident in creation. If the soul remains but in a disembodied condition, then it can have had no original dependence on a body for its existence; it must have subsisted as an unembodied spirit before birth even as it persists in its disembodied spiritual entity after death.

Again, we can assume that where we see in Time a certain stage of development, there must have been a past to that development. Therefore, if the soul enters this life with a certain development of personality, it must have prepared it in other precedent lives here or elsewhere. Or, if it only takes up a ready-made life and personality not prepared by it, prepared perhaps by a physical, vital and mental heredity, it must itself be something quite independent of that life and personality, something which is only fortuitously connected with the mind and body and cannot therefore be really affected by what is done or developed in this mental and bodily living. If the soul is real and immortal, not a constructed being or figure of being, it must also be eternal, beginningless in the past even as endless in the future; but, if eternal, it must be either a changeless self
unaffected by life and its terms or a timeless Purusha, an eternal and spiritual Person manifesting or causing in time a stream of changing personality. If it is such a Person, it can only manifest this stream of personality in a world of birth and death by the assumption of successive bodies, — in a word, by constant or by repeated rebirth into the forms of Nature.

But the immortality or eternity of the soul does not at once impose itself, even if we reject the explanation of all things by eternal Matter. For we have also the hypothesis of the creation of a temporary or apparent soul by some power of the original Unity from which all things began, by which they live and into which they cease. On one side, we can erect upon the foundation of certain modern ideas or discoveries the theory of a cosmic Inconscient creating a temporary soul, a consciousness which after a brief play is extinguished and goes back into the Inconscient. Or there may be an eternal Becoming, which manifests itself in a cosmic Life-force with the appearance of Matter as one objective end of its operations and the appearance of Mind as the other subjective end, the interaction of these two phenomena of Life-force creating our human existence. On the other side, we have the old theory of a sole-existing Superconscient, an eternal unmodifiable Being which admits or creates by Maya an illusion of individual soul-life in this world of phenomenal Mind and Matter, both of them ultimately unreal, — even if they have or assume a temporary and phenomenal reality, — since one unmodifiable and eternal Self or Spirit is the only entity. Or we have the Buddhist theory of a Nihil or Nirvana and, somehow imposed upon that, an eternal action or energy of successive becoming, Karma, which creates the illusion of a persistent self or soul by a constant continuity of associations, ideas, memories, sensations, images. In their effect upon the life problem all these three explanations are practically one; for even the Superconscient is for the purposes of the universal action an equivalent of the Inconscient; it can be aware only of its own unmodifiable self-existence: the creation of a world of individual beings by Maya is an imposition on this self-existence; it takes place, perhaps, in a sort of self-absorbed sleep of consciousness,
out of which yet all active consciousness and modification of phenomenal becoming emerge, just as in the modern theory our consciousness is an impermanent development out of the Inconscient. In all three theories the apparent soul or spiritual individuality of the creature is not immortal in the sense of eternity, but has a beginning and an end in Time, is a creation by Maya or by Nature-Force or cosmic Action out of the Inconscient or Superconscient, and is therefore impermanent in its existence. In all three rebirth is either unnecessary or else illusory; it is either the prolongation by repetition of an illusion, or it is an additional revolving wheel among the many wheels of the complex machinery of the Becoming, or it is excluded since a single birth is all that can be asked for by a conscious being fortuitously engendered as part of an inconscient creation.

In these views, whether we suppose the one Eternal Existence to be a vital Becoming or an immutable and unmodifiable spiritual Being or a nameless and formless Non-being, that which we call the soul can be only a changing mass or stream of phenomena of consciousness which has come into existence in the sea of real or illusory becoming and will cease to exist there, — or, it may be, it is a temporary spiritual substratum, a conscious reflection of the Superconscient Eternal which by its presence supports the mass of phenomena. It is not eternal, and its only immortality is a greater or less continuity in the Becoming. It is not a real and always existent Person who maintains and experiences the stream or mass of phenomena. That which supports them, that which really and always exists, is either the one eternal Becoming or the one eternal and impersonal Being or the continual stream of Energy in its workings. For a theory of this kind it is not indispensable that a psychic entity always the same should persist and assume body after body, form after form, until it is dissolved at last by some process annulling altogether the original impetus which created this cycle. It is quite possible that as each form is developed, a consciousness

3 Prajna of the Mandukya Upanishad, the Self situated in deep sleep, is the lord and creator of things.
develops corresponding to the form, and as the form dissolves, the corresponding consciousness dissolves with it; the One which forms all, alone endures for ever. Or, as the body is gathered out of the general elements of Matter and begins its life with birth and ends with death, so the consciousness may be developed out of the general elements of mind and equally begin with birth and end with death. Here too, the One who supplies by Maya or otherwise the force which creates the elements, is the sole reality that endures. In none of these theories of existence is rebirth an absolute necessity or an inevitable result of the theory.4

As a matter of fact, however, we find a great difference; for the old theories affirm, the modern denies rebirth as a part of the universal process. Modern thought starts from the physical body as the basis of our existence and recognises the reality of no other world except this material universe. What it sees here is a mental consciousness associated with the life of the body, giving in its birth no sign of previous individual existence and leaving in its end no sign of subsequent individual existence. What was before birth is the material energy with its seed of life, or at best an energy of life-force, which persists in the seed transmitted by the parents and gives, by its mysterious infusion of past developments into that trifling vehicle, a particular mental and physical stamp to the new individual mind and body thus strangely created. What remains after death is the same material energy or life-force persisting in the seed transmitted to the children and active for the farther development of the mental and physical life carried with it. Nothing is left of us except what we so transmit to others or what the Energy which shaped the individual by its pre-existent and its surrounding action, by birth and by environment, may take as the result of his life and works into its subsequent action; whatever may help by chance or by physical law to build the mental and vital constituents

4 In the Buddhist theory rebirth is imperative because Karma compels it; not a soul, but Karma is the link of an apparently continuing consciousness,—for the consciousness changes from moment to moment: there is this apparent continuity of consciousness, but there is no real immortal soul taking birth and passing through the death of the body to be reborn in another body.
and environment of other individuals, that alone can have any survival. Behind both the mental and the physical phenomena there is perhaps a universal Life of which we are individualised, evolutionary and phenomenal becomings. This universal Life creates a real world and real beings, but the conscious personality in these beings is not, or at least it need not be, the sign or the shape of consciousness of an eternal nor even of a persistent soul or supraphysical Person: there is nothing in this formula of existence compelling us to believe in a psychic entity that outlasts the death of the body. There is here no reason and little room for the admission of rebirth as a part of the scheme of things.

But what if it were found with the increase of our knowledge, as certain researches and discoveries seem to presage, that the dependence of the mental being or the psychic entity in us on the body is not so complete as we at first naturally conclude it to be from the study of the data of physical existence and the physical universe alone? What if it were found that the human personality survives the death of the body and moves between other planes and this material universe? The prevalent modern idea of a temporary conscious existence would then have to broaden itself and admit a Life that has a wider range than the physical universe and admit too a personal individuality not dependent on the material body. It might have practically to readopt the ancient idea of a subtle form or body inhabited by a psychic entity. A psychic or soul entity, carrying with it the mental consciousness, or, if there be no such original soul, then the evolved and persistent mental individual would continue after death in this subtle persistent form, which must have been either created for it before this birth or by the birth itself or during the life. For either a psychic entity pre-exists in other worlds in a subtle form and comes from there with it to its brief earthly sojourn, or the soul develops here in the material world itself, and with it a psychic body is developed in the course of Nature and persists after death in other worlds or by reincarnation here. These would be the two possible alternatives.

An evolving universal Life may have developed on earth the growing personality that has now become ourselves, before it
entered a human body at all; the soul in us may have evolved in lower life-shapes before man was created. In that case, our personality has previously inhabited animal forms, and the subtle body would be a plastic formation carried from birth to birth but adapting itself to whatever physical shape the soul inhabits. Or the evolving Life may be able to build a personality capable of survival, but only in the human form when that is created. This would happen by the force of a sudden growth of mental consciousness, and at the same time a sheath of subtle mind-substance might develop and help to individualise this mental consciousness and would then function as an inner body, just as the gross physical form by its organisation at once individualises and houses the animal mind and life. On the former supposition, we must admit that the animal too survives the dissolution of the physical body and has some kind of soul formation which after death occupies other animal forms on earth and finally a human body. For there is little likelihood that the animal soul passes beyond earth and enters other planes of life than the physical and constantly returns here until it is ready for the human incarnation; the animal’s conscious individualisation does not seem sufficient to bear such a transfer or to adapt itself to an other-worldly existence. On the second supposition, the power thus to survive the death of the physical body in other states of existence would only arrive with the human stage of the evolution. If, indeed, the soul is not such a constructed personality evolved by Life, but a persistent unevolving reality with a terrestrial life and body as its necessary field, the theory of rebirth in the sense of Pythagorean transmigration would have to be admitted. But if it is a persistent evolving entity capable of passing beyond the terrestrial stage, then the Indian idea of a passage to other worlds and a return to terrestrial birth would become possible and highly probable. But it would not be inevitable; for it might be supposed that the human personality, once capable of attaining to other planes, need not return from them: it would naturally, in the absence of some greater compelling reason, pursue its existence upon the higher plane to which it had arisen; it would have finished with the
terrestrial life-evolution. Only if faced with actual evidence of a return to earth, would a larger supposition be compulsory and the admission of a repeated rebirth in human forms become inevitable.

But even then the developing vitalistic theory need not spiritualise itself, need not admit the real existence of a soul or its immortality or eternity. It might regard the personality still as a phenomenal creation of the universal Life by the interaction of life consciousness and physical form and force, but with a wider, more variable and subtler action of both upon each other and another history than it had at first seen to be possible. It might even arrive at a sort of vitalistic Buddhism, admitting Karma, but admitting it only as the action of a universal Life-force; it would admit as one of its results the continuity of the stream of personality in rebirth by mental association, but might deny any real self for the individual or any eternal being other than this ever-active vital Becoming. On the other hand, it might, obeying a turn of thought which is now beginning to gain a little in strength, admit a universal Self or cosmic Spirit as the primal reality and Life as its power or agent and so arrive at a form of spiritualised vital Monism. In this theory too a law of rebirth would be possible but not inevitable; it might be a phenomenal fact, an actual law of life, but it would not be a logical result of the theory of being and its inevitable consequence.

Adwaita of the Mayavada, like Buddhism, started with the already accepted belief — part of the received stock of an antique knowledge — of supraphysical planes and worlds and a commerce between them and ours which determined a passage from earth and, though this seems to have been a less primitive discovery, a return to earth of the human personality. At any rate their thought had behind it an ancient perception and even experience, or at least an age-long tradition, of a before and after for the personality which was not confined to the experience of the physical universe; for they based themselves on a view of self and world which already regarded a supraphysical consciousness as the primary phenomenon and physical being as only a secondary and dependent phenomenon. It was around these data
that they had to determine the nature of the eternal Reality and the origin of the phenomenal becoming. Therefore they admitted the passage of the personality from this to other worlds and its return into form of life upon earth; but the rebirth thus admitted was not in the Buddhistic view a real rebirth of a real spiritual Person into the forms of material existence. In the later Adwaita view the spiritual reality was there, but its apparent individuality and therefore its birth and rebirth were part of a cosmic illusion, a deceptive but effective construction of universal Maya.

In Buddhistic thought the existence of the Self was denied, and rebirth could only mean a continuity of the ideas, sensations and actions which constituted a fictitious individual moving between different worlds,—let us say, between differently organised planes of idea and sensation; for, in fact, it is only the conscious continuity of the flux that creates a phenomenon of self and a phenomenon of personality. In the Adwaitic Mayavada there was the admission of a Jivatman, an individual self, and even of a real self of the individual;5 but this concession to our normal language and ideas ends by being only apparent. For it turns out that there is no real and eternal individual, no “I” or “you”, and therefore there can be no real self of the individual, even no true universal self, but only a Self apart from the universe, ever unborn, ever unmodified, ever unaffected by the mutations of phenomena. Birth, life, death, the whole mass of individual and cosmic experience, become in the last resort no more than an illusion or a temporary phenomenon; even bondage and release can be only such an illusion, a part of temporal phenomena: they amount only to the conscious continuity of the illusory experiences of the ego, itself a creation of the great Illusion, and the cessation of the continuity and the consciousness into the superconsciousness of That which alone was, is and ever will be, or rather which has nothing to do with Time, is for ever unborn, timeless and ineffable.

5 The Self in this view is one, it cannot be many or multiply itself; there cannot therefore be any true individual, only at most a one Self omnipresent and animating each mind and body with the idea of an “I”.
Thus while in the vitalistic view of things there is a real universe and a real though brief temporary becoming of individual life which, even though there is no ever-enduring Purusha, yet gives a considerable importance to our individual experience and actions, — for these are truly effective in a real becoming, — in the Mayavada theory these things have no real importance or true effect, but only something like a dream-consequence. For even release takes place only in the cosmic dream or hallucination by the recognition of the illusion and the cessation of the individualised mind and body; in reality, there is no one bound and no one released, for the sole-existent Self is untouched by these illusions of the ego. To escape from the all-destroying sterility which would be the logical result, we have to lend a practical reality, however false it may be eventually, to this dream-consequence and an immense importance to our bondage and individual release, even though the life of the individual is phenomenal only and to the one real Self both the bondage and the release are and cannot but be non-existent. In this compulsory concession to the tyrannous falsehood of Maya the sole true importance of life and experience must lie in the measure in which they prepare for the negation of life, for the self-elimination of the individual, for the end of the cosmic illusion.

This, however, is an extreme view and consequence of the monistic thesis, and the older Adwaita Vedantism starting from the Upanishads does not go so far. It admits an actual and temporal becoming of the Eternal and therefore a real universe; the individual too assumes a sufficient reality, for each individual is in himself the Eternal who has assumed name and form and supports through him the experiences of life turning on an ever-circling wheel of birth in the manifestation. The wheel is kept in motion by the desire of the individual, which becomes the effective cause of rebirth and by the mind's turning away from the knowledge of the eternal self to the preoccupations of the temporal becoming. With the cessation of this desire and of this ignorance, the Eternal in the individual draws away from the mutations of individual personality and experience into his timeless, impersonal and immutable being.
But this reality of the individual is quite temporal; it has no enduring foundation, not even a perpetual recurrence in Time. Rebirth, though a very important actuality in this account of the universe, is not an inevitable consequence of the relation between individuality and the purpose of the manifestation. For the manifestation seems to have no purpose except the will of the Eternal towards world-creation and it can end only by that will’s withdrawal: this cosmic will could work itself out without any machinery of rebirth and the individual’s desire maintaining it; for his desire can be only a spring of the machinery, it could not be the cause or the necessary condition of cosmic existence, since he is himself in this view a result of the creation and not in existence prior to the Becoming. The will to creation could then accomplish itself through a temporary assumption of individuality in each name and form, a single life of many impermanent individuals. There would be a self-shaping of the one consciousness in correspondence with the type of each created being, but it could very well begin in each individual body with the appearance of the physical form and end with its cessation. Individual would follow individual as wave follows wave, the sea remaining always the same; each formation of conscious being would surge up from the universal, roll for its allotted time and then sink back into the Silence. The necessity for this purpose of an individualised consciousness persistently continuous, assuming name after name and form after form and moving between different planes backward and forward, is not apparent and, even as a possibility, does not strongly impose itself; still less is there any room for an evolutionary progress inevitably.

6 Dr. Schweitzer in his book on Indian thought asserts that this was the real sense of the Upanishadic teachings and rebirth was a later invention. But there are numerous important passages in almost all the Upanishads positively affirming rebirth and, in any case, the Upanishads admit the survival of the personality after death and its passage into other worlds which is incompatible with this interpretation. If there is survival in other worlds and also a final destiny of liberation into the Brahman for souls embodied here, rebirth imposes itself, and there is no reason to suppose that it was a later theory. The writer has evidently been moved by the associations of Western philosophy to read a merely pantheistic sense into the more subtle and complex thought of the ancient Vedanta.
pursued from form to higher form such as must be supposed by a theory of rebirth that affirms the involution and evolution of the Spirit in Matter as the significant formula of our terrestrial existence.

It is conceivable that so the Eternal may have actually chosen to manifest or rather to conceal himself in the body; he may have willed to become or to appear as an individual passing from birth to death and from death to new life in a cycle of persistent and recurrent human and animal existence. The One Being personalised would pass through various forms of becoming at fancy or according to some law of the consequences of action, till the close came by an enlightenment, a return to Oneness, a withdrawal of the Sole and Identical from that particular individualisation. But such a cycle would have no original or final determining Truth which would give it any significance. There is nothing for which it would be necessary; it would be purely a play, a Lila. But if it is once admitted that the Spirit has involved itself in the Inconscience and is manifesting itself in the individual being by an evolutionary gradation, then the whole process assumes meaning and consistence; the progressive ascent of the individual becomes a key-note of this cosmic significance, and the rebirth of the soul in the body becomes a natural and unavoidable consequence of the truth of the Becoming and its inherent law. Rebirth is an indispensable machinery for the working out of a spiritual evolution; it is the only possible effective condition, the obvious dynamic process of such a manifestation in the material universe.

Our explanation of the evolution in Matter is that the universe is a self-creative process of a supreme Reality whose presence makes spirit the substance of things,—all things are there as the spirit’s powers and means and forms of manifestation. An infinite existence, an infinite consciousness, an infinite force and will, an infinite delight of being is the Reality secret behind the appearances of the universe; its divine Supermind or Gnosis has arranged the cosmic order, but arranged it indirectly through the three subordinate and limiting terms of which we are conscious here, Mind, Life and Matter. The material universe is
the lowest stage of a downward plunge of the manifestation, an
involution of the manifested being of this triune Reality into an
apparent nescience of itself, that which we now call the Incon-
scient; but out of this nescience the evolution of that manifested
being into a recovered self-awareness was from the very first
inevitable. It was inevitable because that which is involved, must
evolve; for it is not only there as an existence, a force hidden in
its apparent opposite, and every such force must in its inmost
nature be moved to find itself, to realise itself, to release itself
into play, but it is the reality of that which conceals it, it is the
self which the Nescience has lost and which therefore it must
be the whole secret meaning, the constant drift of its action to
seek for and recover. It is through the conscious individual being
that this recovery is possible; it is in him that the evolving con-
sciousness becomes organised and capable of awaking to its own
Reality. The immense importance of the individual being, which
increases as he rises in the scale, is the most remarkable and
significant fact of a universe which started without consciousness
and without individuality in an undifferentiated Nescience. This
importance can only be justified if the Self as individual is no less
real than the Self as cosmic Being or Spirit and both are powers
of the Eternal. It is only so that can be explained the necessity
for the growth of the individual and his discovery of himself as a
condition for the discovery of the cosmic Self and Consciousness
and of the supreme Reality. If we adopt this solution, this is the
first result, the reality of the persistent individual; but from that
first consequence the other result follows, that rebirth of some
kind is no longer a possible machinery which may or may not
be accepted, it becomes a necessity, an inevitable outcome of the
root nature of our existence.

For it is no longer sufficient to suppose an illusory or
temporary individual, created in each form by the play of
consciousness; individuality can no longer be conceived as an
accompaniment of play of consciousness in figure of body
which may or may not survive the form, may or may not
prolong its false continuity of self from form to form, from
life to life, but which certainly need not do it. In this world
what we seem at first to see is individual replacing individual without any continuity, the form dissolving, the false or transient individuality dissolving with it, while the universal Energy or some universal Being alone remains for ever; that might very well be the whole principle of cosmic manifestation. But if the individual is a persistent reality, an eternal portion or power of the Eternal, if his growth of consciousness is the means by which the Spirit in things discloses its being, the cosmos reveals itself as a conditioned manifestation of the play of the eternal One in the being of Sachchidananda with the eternal Many. Then, secure behind all the changings of our personality, upholding the stream of its mutations, there must be a true Person, a real spiritual Individual, a true Purusha. The One extended in universality exists in each being and affirms himself in this individuality of himself. In the individual he discloses his total existence by oneness with all in the universality. In the individual he discloses too his transcendence as the Eternal in whom all the universal unity is founded. This trinity of self-manifestation, this prodigious Lila of the manifold Identity, this magic of Maya or protean miracle of the conscious truth of being of the Infinite, is the luminous revelation which emerges by a slow evolution from the original Inconscience.

If there were no need of self-finding but only an eternal enjoyment of this play of the being of Sachchidananda,— and such an eternal enjoyment is the nature of certain supreme states of conscious existence,— then evolution and rebirth need not have come into operation. But there has been an involution of this unity into the dividing Mind, a plunge into self-oblivion by which the ever-present sense of the complete oneness is lost, and the play of separative difference — phenomenal, because the real unity in difference remains unabridged behind, — comes into the forefront as a dominant reality. This play of difference has found its utmost term of the sense of division by the precipitation of the dividing Mind into a form of body in which it becomes conscious of itself as a separate ego. A dense and solid basis has been laid for this play of division in a world of separative forms of Matter by an involution of the active self-conscience of Sachchidananda.
into a phenomenal Nescience. It is this foundation in Nescience that makes the division secure because it imperatively opposes a return to the consciousness of unity; but still, though effectively obstructive, it is phenomenal and terminable because within it, above it, supporting it is the all-conscient Spirit and the apparent Nescience turns out to be only a concentration, an exclusive action of consciousness tranced into self-forgetfulness by an abysmal plunge into the absorption of the formative and creative material process. In a phenomenal universe so created, the separative form becomes the foundation and the starting-point of all its life action; therefore the individual Purusha in working out its cosmic relations with the One has in this physical world to base himself upon the form, to assume a body; it is the body that he must make his own foundation and the starting-point for his development of the life and mind and spirit in the physical existence. That assumption of body we call birth, and in it only can take place here the development of self and the play of relations between the individual and the universal and all other individuals; in it only can there be the growth by a progressive development of our conscious being towards a supreme recovery of unity with God and with all in God; all the sum of what we call Life in the physical world is a progress of the soul and proceeds by birth into the body and has that for its fulcrum, its condition of action and its condition of evolutionary persistence.

Birth then is a necessity of the manifestation of the Purusha on the physical plane; but his birth, whether the human or any other, cannot be in this world-order an isolated accident or a sudden excursion of a soul into physicality without any preparing past to it or any fulfilling hereafter. In a world of involution and evolution, not of physical form only, but of conscious being through life and mind to spirit, such an isolated assumption of life in the human body could not be the rule of the individual soul’s existence; it would be a quite meaningless and inconsequential arrangement, a freak for which the nature and system of things here have no place, a contrary violence which would break the rhythm of the Spirit’s self-manifestation. The intrusion
of such a rule of individual soul-life into an evolutionary spiritual progression would make it an effect without cause and a cause without effect; it would be a fragmentary present without a past or a future. The life of the individual must have the same rhythm of significance, the same law of progression as the cosmic life; its place in that rhythm cannot be a stray purposeless intervention, it must be an abiding instrumentation of the cosmic purpose. Neither in such an order can we explain an isolated advent, a one birth of the soul in the human body which would be its first and last experience of the kind, by a previous existence in other worlds with a future before it in yet other fields of experience. For here life upon earth, life in the physical universe is not and cannot be a casual perch for the wanderings of the soul from world to world; it is a great and slow development needing, as we now know, incalculable spaces of Time for its evolution. Human life is itself only a term in a graded series, through which the secret Spirit in the universe develops gradually his purpose and works it out finally through the enlarging and ascending individual soul-consciousness in the body. This ascent can only take place by rebirth within the ascending order; an individual visit coming across it and progressing on some other line elsewhere could not fit into the system of this evolutionary existence.

Nor is the human soul, the human individual, a free wanderer capriciously or lightly hastening from field to field according to its unfettered choice or according to its free and spontaneously variable action and result of action. That is a radiant thought of pure spiritual liberty which may have its truth in planes beyond or in an eventual release, but is not true at first of the earth-life, of life in the physical universe. The human birth in this world is on its spiritual side a complex of two elements, a spiritual Person and a soul of personality; the former is man’s eternal being, the latter is his cosmic and mutable being. As the spiritual impersonal person he is one in his nature and being with the freedom of Sachchidananda who has here consented to or willed his involution in the Nescience for a certain round of soul-experience, impossible otherwise, and presides secretly over its evolution. As the soul of personality he
is himself part of that long development of the soul-experience in the forms of Nature; his own evolution must follow the laws and the lines of the universal evolution. As a spirit he is one with the Transcendence which is immanent in the world and comprehensive of it; as a soul he is at once one with and part of the universality of Sachchidananda self-expressed in the world: his self-expression must go through the stages of the cosmic expression, his soul-experience follow the revolutions of the wheel of Brahman in the universe.

The universal Spirit in things involved in the Nescience of the physical universe evolves its nature self in a succession of physical forms up the graded series of Matter, Life, Mind and Spirit. It emerges first as a secret soul in material forms quite subject on the surface to the nescience; it develops as a soul still secret but about to emerge in vital forms that stand on the borders between nescience and the partial light of consciousness which is our ignorance; it develops still farther as the initially conscient soul in the animal mind and, finally, as the more outwardly conscious, but not yet fully conscient soul in man: the consciousness is there throughout in our occult parts of being, the development is in the manifesting Nature. This evolutionary development has a universal as well as an individual aspect: the Universal develops the grades of its being and the ordered variation of the universality of itself in the series of its evolved forms of being; the individual soul follows the line of this cosmic series and manifests what is prepared in the universality of the Spirit. The universal Man, the cosmic Purusha in humanity, is developing in the human race the power that has grown into humanity from below it and shall yet grow to supermind and spirit and become the Godhead in man who is aware of his true and integral self and the divine universality of his nature. The individual must have followed this line of development; he must have presided over a soul-experience in the lower forms of life before he took up the human evolution: as the One was capable of assuming in its universality these lower forms of the plant and animal, so must the individual, now human, have been capable of assuming them in his previous stages of existence. He
now appears as a human soul, the Spirit accepting the inner and outer form of humanity, but he is not limited by this form any more than he was limited by the plant or animal forms previously assumed by him; he can pass on from it to a greater self-expression in a higher scale of Nature.

To suppose otherwise would be to suppose that the spirit which now presides over the human soul-experience was originally formed by a human mentality and the human body, exists by that and cannot exist apart from it, cannot ever go below or above it. In fact, it would then be reasonable to suppose that it is not immortal but has come into existence by the appearance of the human mind and body in the evolution and would disappear by their disappearance. But body and mind are not the creators of the spirit, the spirit is the creator of the mind and body; it develops these principles out of its being, it is not developed into being out of them, it is not a compound of their elements or a resultant of their meeting. If it appears to evolve out of mind and body, that is because it gradually manifests itself in them and not because it is created by them or exists by them; as it manifests, they are revealed as subordinate terms of its being and are to be finally taken up out of their present imperfection and transformed into visible forms and instruments of the spirit. Our conception of the spirit is of something which is not constituted by name and form, but assumes various forms of body and mind according to the various manifestations of its soul-being. This it does here by a successive evolution; it evolves successive forms and successive strata of consciousness: for it is not bound always to assume one form and no other or to possess one kind of mentality which is its sole possible subjective manifestation. The soul is not bound by the formula of mental humanity: it did not begin with that and will not end with it; it had a prehuman past, it has a superhuman future.

What we see of Nature and of human nature justifies this view of a birth of the individual soul from form to form until it reaches the human level of manifested consciousness which is its instrument for rising to yet higher levels. We see that Nature develops from stage to stage and in each stage takes up its past
and transforms it into stuff of its new development. We see too that human nature is of the same make; all the earth-past is there in it. It has an element of matter taken up by life, an element of life taken up by mind, an element of mind which is being taken up by spirit: the animal is still present in its humanity; the very nature of the human being presupposes a material and a vital stage which prepared his emergence into mind and an animal past which moulded a first element of his complex humanity. And let us not say that this is because material Nature developed by evolution his life and his body and his animal mind, and only afterwards did a soul descend into the form so created: there is a certain truth behind this idea, but not the truth which that formula would suggest. For that supposes a gulf between soul and body, between soul and life, between soul and mind, which does not exist; there is no body without soul, no body that is not itself a form of soul: Matter itself is substance and power of spirit and could not exist if it were anything else, for nothing can exist which is not substance and power of Brahman; and if Matter, then still more clearly and certainly Life and Mind must be that and ensouled by the presence of the Spirit. If Matter and Life had not already been ensouled, man could not have appeared or only as an intervention or an accident, not as a part of the evolutionary order.

We arrive then necessarily at this conclusion that human birth is a term at which the soul must arrive in a long succession of rebirths and that it has had for its previous and preparatory terms in the succession the lower forms of life upon earth; it has passed through the whole chain that life has strung in the physical universe on the basis of the body, the physical principle. Then the farther question arises whether, humanity once attained, this succession of rebirths still continues and, if so, how, by what series or by what alternations. And, first, we have to ask whether the soul, having once arrived at humanity, can go back to the animal life and body, a retrogression which the old popular theories of transmigration have supposed to be an ordinary movement. It seems impossible that it should so go back with any entirety, and for this reason that the transit from animal to
human life means a decisive conversion of consciousness, quite as decisive as the conversion of the vital consciousness of the plant into the mental consciousness of the animal. It is surely impossible that a conversion so decisive made by Nature should be reversed by the soul and the decision of the spirit within her come, as it were, to naught. It could only be possible for human souls, supposing such to exist, in whom the conversion was not decisive, souls that had developed far enough to make, occupy or assume a human body, but not enough to ensure the safety of this assumption, not enough to remain secure in its achievement and faithful to the human type of consciousness. Or at most there might be, supposing certain animal propensities to be vehement enough to demand a separate satisfaction quite of their own kind, a sort of partial rebirth, a loose holding of an animal form by a human soul, with an immediate subsequent reversion to its normal progression. The movement of Nature is always sufficiently complex for us not to deny dogmatically such a possibility, and, if it be a fact, then there may exist this modicum of truth behind the exaggerated popular belief which assumes an animal rebirth of the soul once lodged in man to be quite as normal and possible as a human reincarnation. But whether the animal reversion is possible or not, the normal law must be the recurrence of birth in new human forms for a soul that has once become capable of humanity.

But why a succession of human births and not one alone? For the same reason that has made the human birth itself a culminating point of the past succession, the previous upward series,—it must be so by the very necessity of the spiritual evolution. For the soul has not finished what it has to do by merely developing into humanity; it has still to develop that humanity into its higher possibilities. Obviously, the soul that lodges in a Caribbee or an untaught primitive or an Apache of Paris or an American gangster, has not yet exhausted the necessity of human birth, has not developed all its possibilities or the whole meaning of humanity, has not worked out all the sense of Sachchidananda in the universal Man; neither has the soul lodged in a vitalistic European occupied with dynamic production and vital pleasure
or in an Asiatic peasant engrossed in the ignorant round of the domestic and economic life. We may reasonably doubt whether even a Plato or a Shankara marks the crown and therefore the end of the outflowering of the spirit in man. We are apt to suppose that these may be the limit, because these and others like them seem to us the highest point which the mind and soul of man can reach, but that may be the illusion of our present possibility. There may be a higher or at least a larger possibility which the Divine intends yet to realise in man, and, if so, it is the steps built by these highest souls which were needed to compose the way up to it and to open the gates. At any rate this present highest point at least must be reached before we can write finis on the recurrence of the human birth for the individual. Man is there to move from the ignorance and from the little life which he is in his mind and body to the knowledge and the large divine life which he can compass by the unfolding of the spirit. At least the opening out of the spirit in him, the knowledge of his real self and the leading of the spiritual life must be attained before he can go definitively and for ever otherwhere. There may too be beyond this initial culmination a greater flowering of the spirit in the human life of which we have as yet only the first intimations; the imperfection of Man is not the last word of Nature, but his perfection too is not the last peak of the Spirit.

This possibility becomes a certitude if the present leading principle of the mind as man has developed it, the intellect, is not its highest principle. If mind itself has other powers as yet only imperfectly possessed by the highest types of the human individual, then a prolongation of the line of evolution and consequently of the ascending line of rebirth to embody them is inevitable. If supermind also is a power of consciousness concealed here in the evolution, the line of rebirth cannot stop even there; it cannot cease in its ascent before the mental has been replaced by the supramental nature and an embodied supramental being becomes the leader of terrestrial existence.

This then is the rational and philosophical foundation for a belief in rebirth; it is an inevitable logical conclusion if there exists at the same time an evolutionary principle in the Earth-
Nature and a reality of the individual soul born into evolutionary Nature. If there is no soul, then there can be a mechanical evolution without necessity or significance and birth is only part of this curious but senseless machinery. If the individual is only a temporary formation beginning and ending with the body, then evolution can be a play of the All-Soul or Cosmic Existence mounting through a progression of higher and higher species towards its own utmost possibility in this Becoming or to its highest conscious principle; rebirth does not exist and is not needed as a mechanism of that evolution. Or, if the All-Existence expresses itself in a persistent but illusory individuality, rebirth becomes a possibility or an illusory fact, but it has no evolutionary necessity and is not a spiritual necessity; it is only a means of accentuating and prolonging the illusion up to its utmost time-limit. If there is an individual soul or Purusha not dependent on the body but inhabiting and using it for its purpose, then rebirth begins to be possible, but it is not a necessity if there is no evolution of the soul in Nature: the presence of the individual soul in an individual body may be a passing phenomenon, a single experience without a past here or a future; its past and its future may be elsewhere. But if there is an evolution of consciousness in an evolutionary body and a soul inhabiting the body, a real and conscious individual, then it is evident that it is the progressive experience of that soul in Nature which takes the form of this evolution of consciousness: rebirth is self-evidently a necessary part, the sole possible machinery of such an evolution. It is as necessary as birth itself; for without it birth would be an initial step without a sequel, the starting of a journey without its farther steps and arrival. It is rebirth that gives to the birth of an incomplete being in a body its promise of completeness and its spiritual significance.