The Significance of Rebirth

THE ONE question which through all its complexities is the sum of philosophy and to which all human enquiry comes round in the end, is the problem of ourselves,—why we are here and what we are, and what is behind and before and around us, and what we are to do with ourselves, our inner significances and our outer environment. In the idea of evolutionary rebirth, if we can once find it to be a truth and recognise its antecedents and consequences, we have a very sufficient clue for an answer to all these connected sides of the one perpetual question. A spiritual evolution of which our universe is the scene and earth its ground and stage, though its plan is still kept back above from our yet limited knowledge,—this way of seeing existence is a luminous key which we can fit into many doors of obscurity. But we have to look at it in the right focus, to get its true proportions and, especially, to see it in its spiritual significance more than in its mechanical process. The failure to do that rightly will involve us in much philosophical finessing, drive on this side or the other to exaggerated negations and leave our statement of it, however perfect may be its logic, yet unsatisfying and unconvincing to the total intelligence and the complex soul of humanity.

The bare idea of repeated births as the process of our soul existence does not carry us much farther than the simple material reality of this single life in the body, that first fact of our conscious sensation and memory which is the occasion of all our speculations. Behind our present starting-point and preceding this one lappet of our race in the fields of being rebirth reminds us indeed of a past, of pregnant anterior courses, a soul-existence in many previous bodies which have immediately created what we now are. But to what use or advantage if there is no progressive significance in our pre-existence and our persevering continuity?
In front of us it rolls far back from our vision the obstruction of the near blank wall of death; our journeying upon earth becomes less of a long or brief unretraceable road ending abruptly and perplexingly in a cul-de-sac; our physical dissolution is robbed of the cruellest poison of its sting. For the burden of death to man the thinking, willing, feeling creature is not the loss of this poor case or chariot of body, but it is the blind psychical finality death suggests, the stupid material end of our will and thought and aspiration and endeavour, the brute breaking off of the heart’s kind and sweet relations and affections, the futile convicting discontinuity of that marvellous and all-supporting soul-sense which gives us our radiant glimpses of the glory and delight of existence,—that is the discord and harsh inconsequence against which the thinking living creature revolts as incredible and inadmissible. The fiery straining to immortality of our life, mind, psyche, which can assent to cessation only by turning in enmity upon their own flame of nature, and the denial of it which the dull acquiescence of a body consenting inertly to death as to life brings in on us, is the whole painful irreconcilable contradiction of our double nature. Rebirth takes the difficulty and solves it in the sense of a soul continuity with a beat of physical repetition. Like other non-materialistic solutions it gives the right to the soul’s suggestion as against the body’s and sanctions the demand for survival, but unlike some others it justifies the bodily life by its utility to the soul’s continued self-experience; our too swift act in the body ceases to be an isolated accident or an abrupt interlude, it gets the justification of a fulfilling future as well as a creating past for its otherwise haphazard actions and relations. But simple persistence, mechanical continuity is not enough; that is not all our psychical being signifies, not the whole luminous meaning of survival and continuity; without ascension, without expansion, without some growing up straight into light in the strength of our spirit our higher members toil here uncompleted, our birth in matter is not justified by any adequate meaning. We are very little better off than if death remained our ending; for our life in the end becomes then an indefinitely continued and renewed and temporarily consequent
in place of an inconsequent, abruptly ended and soon convicted futility.

By rebirth, too, this world around us, our environment, its suggestions, its opportunities are no longer left as the field of an ephemeral physical flowering or as a Life which cares very little for and means very little to the individual, though it may offer much perhaps during its uncertain longer time to the species. The world grows to us a field of soul-experience, a system of soul-recurrences, a means of self-effectuation, perhaps a crystallising of the conscious being's effective self-reflections. But to what end if our recurrence is only a repetition or a hesitating fluctuation within a few set types with a very limited, always uncompleted circle of accomplishment? For that is what it comes to, if there is no upward outlet, no infinite progression or no escape or enlarging into the soul's infinities. Rebirth tells us that what we are is a soul performing constantly the miracle of self-embodiment; but why this embodiment, what this soul has to do here with itself and what use it is to make of this world which is given to it for its grandiose scene, its difficult, plastic material and its besieging battery of multiform stimulus and suggestions, is hardly at all clearer than before. But the perception of rebirth as an occasion and means for a spiritual evolution fills in every hiatus. It makes life a significant ascension and not a mechanical recurrence; it opens to us the divine vistas of a growing soul; it makes the worlds a nexus of spiritual self-expansion; it sets us seeking, and with a sure promise to all of a great finding now or hereafter, for the self-knowledge of our spirit and the self-fulfilment of a wise and divine intention in our existence.

The oppressing sense of a circle of mechanical recurrence and the passionate seeking for an outlet of absolute escape haunted the earlier statements of the truth of rebirth and have left upon them in spite of the depths they fathomed a certain stamp of unsatisfactory inadequacy, — not illogical, for they are logical enough, once their premisses are admitted, but unsatisfying, because they do not justify to us our being. For, missing the divine utility of the cosmic workings, they fail to explain to us with a sufficiently large, patient, steadfast wholeness God
and ourselves and existence, negate too much, miss the positive sense of our strain and leave sounding an immense note of spiritual futility and cosmic discord. No statement of the sense of our being or our non-being has laid a more insistent stress on rebirth than did the Buddhistic; but it affirms strongly only the more strongly to negate. It views the recurrence of birth as a prolonged mechanical chain; it sees, with a sense of suffering and distaste, the eternal revolving of an immense cosmic wheel of energy with no divine sense in its revolutions, its beginning an affirmation of ignorant desire, its end a nullifying bliss of escape. The wheel turns uselessly for ever disturbing the peace of Non-being and creating souls whose one difficult chance and whole ideal business is to cease. That conception of being is only an extension from our first matter-governed sense of the universe, of our creation in it and of our decisive cessation. It takes up at every point our first obvious view of the bodily life and restates all its circumstances in the terms of a more psychical and spiritual idea of our existence.

What we see in the material universe is a stupendous system of mechanical recurrences. A huge mechanical recurrence rules that which is long-enduring and vast; a similar but frailer mechanical recurrence sways all that is ephemeral and small. The suns leap up into being, flame wheeling in space, squander force by motion and fade and are extinct, again perhaps to blaze into being and repeat their course, or else other suns take their place and fulfil their round. The seasons of Time repeat their unending and unchanging cycle. Always the tree of life puts forth its various flowers and sheds them and breaks into the same flowers in their recurring season. The body of man is born and grows and decays and perishes, but it gives birth to other bodies which maintain the one same futile cycle. What baffles the intelligence in all this intent and persistent process is that it seems to have in it no soul of meaning, no significance except the simple fact of causeless and purposeless existence dogged or relieved by the annulling or the compensating fact of individual cessation. And this is because we perceive the mechanism, but do not see the Power that uses the mechanism and the intention
in its use. But the moment we know that there is a conscious Spirit self-wise and infinite brooding upon the universe and a secret slowly self-finding soul in things, we get to the necessity of an idea in its consciousness, a thing conceived, willed, set in motion and securely to be done, progressively to be fulfilled by these great deliberate workings.

But the Buddhistic statement admits no self, spirit or eternal Being in its rigorously mechanical economy of existence. It takes only the phenomenon of a constant becoming and elevates that from the physical to the psychical level. As there is evident to our physical mind an Energy, action, motion, capable of creating by its material forces the forms and powers of the material universe, so there is for the Buddhistic vision of things an Energy, action, Karma, creating by its psychic powers of idea and association this embodied soul life with its continuity of recurrences. As the body is a dissoluble construction, a composite and combination, so the soul too is a dissoluble construction and combination; the soul life like the physical life sustains itself by a continuous flux and repetition of the same workings and movements. As this constant hereditary succession of lives is a prolongation of the one universal principle of life by a continued creation of similar bodies, a mechanical recurrence, so the system of soul rebirth too is a constant prolongation of the principle of the soul life by a continued creation through Karma of similar embodied associations and experiences, a mechanical recurrence. As the cause of all this physical birth and long hereditary continuation is an obscure will to life in Matter, so the cause of continued soul birth is an ignorant desire or will to be in the universal energy of Karma. As the constant wheelings of the universe and the motions of its forces generate individual existences who escape from or end in being by an individual dissolution, so there is this constant wheel of becoming and motion of Karma which forms into individualised soul-lives that must escape from their continuity by a dissolving cessation. An extinction of the embodied consciousness is our apparent material end; for soul too the end is extinction, the blank satisfaction of Nothingness or some ineffable bliss of a superconscient Non-Being. The affirmation of
the mechanical occurrence or recurrence of birth is the essence of this view; but while the bodily life suffers an enforced end and dissolution, the soul life ceases by a willed self-extinction.

The Buddhistic theory adds nothing to the first obvious significance of life except an indefinite prolongation by rebirth which is a burden, not a gain, and the spiritual greatness of the discipline of self-extinction,—the latter, no doubt, a thing of great value. The illusionist solution adds something, but does not differ very greatly in its motive from the Buddhistic. It sets against the futile cosmic repetition an eternity of our own absolute being; from the ignorance which creates the illusory mechanism of a recurrence of rebirth, it escapes into the self-knowledge of our ineffable existence. That seems to bring in a positive strain and to give to our being an initial, a supporting and an eventual reality. But the hiatus here is the absence of all true and valid relation between this real being of ours and all our birth and becoming. The last event and end of our births is not represented as any absolute fulfilment of what we are,—that would be a great, fruitful and magnificently positive philosophy, nor as the final affirmation of a progressive self-finding,—that too would give a noble meaning to our existence; it is a turning away from the demand of the universal Spirit, a refusal of all these cosmic ideas, imaginations, aspirations, action and effectuation. The way to find our being given us is an absolute denial of all our becoming. We rise to self by a liberating negation of ourselves, and in the result the Idea in the universe pursues its monstrous and aimless road, but the individual ceases and is blest in the cessation. The motive of this way of thought is the same oppressive sense of an ignorant mechanical cosmic recurrence as in the Buddhistic and the same high impatient passion of escape. There is recognition of a divine source of life, but a non-recognition of any divine meaning in life. And as for rebirth it is reduced in its significance to a constant mechanism of self-deception, and the will not to live is shown us as the last acquisition, the highest good and the one desirable result of living. The satisfaction which Illusionism gives,—for it does give a certain high austere kind of satisfaction to the intellect
and to one turn of spiritual tendency,—is the pressing to a last point of the obvious antinomy between this great burdensome and tyrannous mechanism, the universe, and the spirit which feels itself of another and a diviner nature, the great relief to a soul passioning for freedom, but compelled to labour on as a spring of the dull machine, of being able to cast away the cosmic burden, and finally the free and bare absoluteness of this spiritual conclusion. But it gives no real, because no fruitful answer to the problem of God and man and the significance of life; it only gets away from them by a skilful evasion and takes away from them all significance, so that any question of the sense and will in all this tremendous labour and throb and seeking loses meaning. But the challenge of God’s universe to the knowledge and strength of the human spirit cannot in the end be met by man with a refusal or solved by an evasion, even though an individual soul may take refuge from the demand, as a man may from the burden of action and pain in unconsciousness, in spiritual trance or sleep or escape through its blank doors into the Absolute. Something the Spirit of the universe means by our labour in existence, some sense it has in these grandiose rhythms, and it has not undertaken them in an eternally enduring error or made them in a jest.\footnote{The magnificent and pregnant phrase of the Koran, “Thinkest thou that I have made the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in a jest?”} To know that and possess it, to find and fulfil consciously the universal being’s hidden significances is the task given to the human spirit.

There are other statements or colourings of the idea of rebirth which admit a more positive sense for existence and nourish a robuster confidence in the power and delight of being which are its secret fountains; but they all stumble in the end over the limitations of humanity and an inability to see any outlet from their bondage in the order of the universe, because they suppose this to be a thing fixed from of years sempiternal—śaśvatībhyaḥ sambhāhyah, not an eternally developing and creative, but an immutable cycle. The Vaishnava idea of the play of God, striking as it does into the secret of the hidden delight
at the core of things, is a luminous ray shot into the very heart of the mystery; but isolated it cannot solve all its enigma. There is more here in the world than a play of secret delight; there is knowledge, there is power, there is a will and a mighty labour. Rebirth so looked at becomes too much of a divine caprice with no object but its playing, and ours is too great and strenuous a world to be so accounted for. Such chequered delight as is given to our becoming, is a game of disguises and seekings with no promise here of any divine completeness; its circles seem in the end not worth following out and the soul turns gladly to its release from the game’s unsatisfying mazes. The Tantric solution shows us a supreme superconscient Energy which casts itself out here into teeming worlds and multitudinous beings and in its order the soul rises from birth to birth and follows its million forms, till in a last human series it opens to the consciousness and powers of its own divinity and returns through them by a rapid illumination to the eternal superconscience. We find at last the commencement of a satisfying synthesis, some justification of existence, a meaningful consequence in rebirth, a use and a sufficient though only temporary significance for the great motion of the cosmos. On lines very like these the modern mind, when it is disposed to accept rebirth, is inclined to view it. But there is a too minor stress on the soul’s divine potentialities, a haste of insistence on the escape into superconscience; the supreme Energy constructs too long and stupendous a preparation for so brief and so insufficient a flowering. There is a lacuna here, some secret is still missing.

There are certain limitations of our own thought over which all these solutions stumble, and the chief of these obstacles are our sense of the mechanical nature of the universe and our inability to see forward to a greater than our present type of humanity. We see the superconscient Spirit in its effulgence and freedom and we see the universe in its inconscient bondage to the cycle of its mechanical recurrences, or we see existence as an abstract entity and Nature as a mechanical force; the conscient soul stands between as a link between these opposites, but it is itself so incomplete that we cannot find in this link
the secret or make of it a strong master of reconciliation. Then we pronounce birth to be an error of the soul and see our one chance of liberation in a shaking off of these natal shackles and a violent reversion to supracosmic consciousness or the freedom of abstract being. But what if rebirth were in truth no long dragging chain, but rather at first a ladder of the soul’s ascension and at last a succession of mighty spiritual opportunities? It will be so if the infinite existence is not what it seems to the logical intellect, an abstract entity, but what it is to intuition and in deeper soul experience, a conscious spiritual Reality, and that Reality as real here as in any far off absolute Superconscience. For then universal Nature would be no longer a mechanism with no secret but its own inconscient mechanics and no intention but the mere recurrent working; it would be the conscient energy of the universal Spirit hidden in the greatness of its processes, mahimānam asya. And the soul ascending from the sleep of matter through plant and animal life to the human degree of the power of life and there battling with ignorance and limit to take possession of its royal and infinite kingdom would be the mediator appointed to unfold in Nature the spirit who is hidden in her subtleties and her vastnesses. That is the significance of life and the world which the idea of evolutionary rebirth opens to us; life becomes at once a progressive ascending series for the unfolding of the Spirit. It acquires a supreme significance: the way of the Spirit in its power is justified, no longer a foolish and empty dream, an eternal delirium, great mechanical toil or termless futility, but the sum of works of a large spiritual Will and Wisdom: the human soul and the cosmic spirit look into each other’s eyes with a noble and divine meaning.

The questions which surround our existence elucidate themselves at once with a certain satisfactory fullness. What we are is a soul of the transcendent Spirit and Self unfolding itself in the cosmos in a constant evolutionary embodiment of which the physical side is only a pedestal of form corresponding in its evolution to the ascending degrees of the spirit, but the spiritual growth is the real sense and motive. What is behind us is the past terms of the spiritual evolution, the upward gradations of
the spirit already climbed, by which through constant rebirth we have developed what we are, and are still developing this present and middle human term of the ascension. What is around us is the constant process of the unfolding in its universal aspect: the past terms are there contained in it, fulfilled, overpassed by us, but in general and various type still repeated as a support and background; the present terms are there not as an unprofitable recurrence, but in active pregnant gestation of all that is yet to be unfolded by the spirit, no irrational decimal recurrence helplessly repeating for ever its figures, but an expanding series of powers of the Infinite. What is in front of us is the greater potentialities, the steps yet unclimbed, the intended mightier manifestations. Why we are here is to be this means of the spirit’s upward self-unfolding. What we have to do with ourselves and our significances is to grow and open them to greater significances of divine being, divine consciousness, divine power, divine delight and multiplied unity, and what we have to do with our environment is to use it consciously for increasing spiritual purposes and make it more and more a mould for the ideal unfolding of the perfect nature and self-conception of the Divine in the cosmos. This is surely the Will in things which moves, great and deliberate, unhasting, unresting, through whatever cycles, towards a greater and greater informing of its own finite figures with its own infinite Reality.

All this is to the mind that lives in the figures of the present, as it must be to the careful sceptical mind of positive inquiry, no more than a hypothesis; for if evolution is an acknowledged idea, rebirth itself is only a supposition. Take it so, but still it is a better hypothesis than the naive and childlike religious solutions which make the world an arbitrary caprice and man the breathing clay puppet of an almighty human-minded Creator, and at least as good a hypothesis as the idea of a material inconscient Force somehow stumbling into a precarious, ephemeral, yet always continued phenomenon of consciousness, or a creative Life labouring in the Bergsonian formula oppressed but constant in the midst of a universal death, as good too as the idea of a mechanical working of Prakriti, Maya, Shakti into which or in
which a real or unreal individual stumbles and wanders, *dandramāṇo andhena niyāmāno yathāndhah,*\(^2\) until he can get out of it by a spiritual liberation. To a large philosophical questioning it will not seem in disagreement with the known lines of existence or out of tune with the facts and necessities of being or the demands of reason and intuition, even though it admits a yet unrealised factor, things yet to be; for that is implied in the very idea of evolution. It may modify, but does not radically contradict any religious experience or aspiration, — for it is not inconsistent either with a union with Superconscience or bliss in heavens beyond or any personal or impersonal relation with the Divine, since these may well be heights of the spiritual unfolding. Its truth will depend on spiritual experience and effectuation; but chiefly on this momentous issue, whether there is anything in the soul-powers of man which promises a greater term of being than his present mentality and whether that greater term can be made effective for his embodied existence. That is the question which remains over to be tested by psychological inquiry and the problem to be resolved in the course of the spiritual evolution of man.

There are transcendental questions of the metaphysical necessity, possibility, final reality of an evolutionary manifestation of this kind, but they do not need to be brought in now and here; for the time we are concerned only with its reality to experience and with the processional significance of rebirth, with the patent fact that we are a part of some kind of manifestation and move forward in the press of some kind of evolution. We see a Power at work and seek whether in that power there is a conscious Will, an ordered development and have first to discover whether it is the blind result of an organised Chance or inconscient self-compelled Law or the plan of a universal Intelligence or Wisdom. Once we find that there is a conscious Spirit of which this movement is one expression, or even admit that as our working hypothesis, we are bound to go on and ask whether this developing order ceases with what man now is or is laden

\(^2\) “Beating about like the blind led by the blind.”
with something more towards which it and he have to grow, an unfinished expression, a greater unfound term, and in that case it is evidently towards that greater thing that man must be growing; to prepare it and to realise it must be the stage beyond in his destiny. Towards that new step in the evolution his history as a race must be subconsciently tending and the powers of the highest individuals half consciently striving to be delivered of this greater birth; and since the ascending order of rebirth follows always the degrees of the evolution, that too cannot be meant to stop short or shoot off abruptly into the superconscient without any regard to the intended step. The relation of our birth to life on other levels of consciousness and to whatever transcendent Superconscience there may be, are important problems, but their solution must be something in harmony with the intention of the Spirit in the universe; all must be part of a unity, and not an imbroglio of spiritual incoherences and contradictions. Our first bridge from the known to the unknown on this line of thought must be to discover how far the yet unfinished ladder of evolution can mount in the earth series. The whole processional significance of rebirth may be wrapped up in that one yet unattempted discovery.