Rebirth

THE THEORY of rebirth is almost as ancient as thought itself and its origin is unknown. We may according to our prepossessions accept it as the fruit of ancient psychological experience always renewable and verifiable and therefore true or dismiss it as a philosophical dogma and ingenious speculation; but in either case the doctrine, even as it is in all appearance well-nigh as old as human thought itself, is likely also to endure as long as human beings continue to think.

In former times the doctrine used to pass in Europe under the grotesque name of transmigration which brought with it to the Western mind the humorous image of the soul of Pythagoras migrating, a haphazard bird of passage, from the human form divine into the body of a guinea-pig or an ass. The philosophical appreciation of the theory expressed itself in the admirable but rather unmanageable Greek word, metempsychosis, which means the insouling of a new body by the same psychic individual. The Greek tongue is always happy in its marriage of thought and word and a better expression could not be found; but forced into English speech the word becomes merely long and pedantic without any memory of its subtle Greek sense and has to be abandoned. Reincarnation is the now popular term, but the idea in the word leans to the gross or external view of the fact and begs many questions. I prefer “rebirth”, for it renders the sense of the wide, colourless, but sufficient Sanskrit term, punarjanma, “again-birth”, and commits us to nothing but the fundamental idea which is the essence and life of the doctrine.

Rebirth is for the modern mind no more than a speculation and a theory; it has never been proved by the methods of modern science or to the satisfaction of the new critical mind formed by a scientific culture. Neither has it been disproved; for modern science knows nothing about a before-life or an after-life for
the human soul, knows nothing indeed about a soul at all, nor can know; its province stops with the flesh and brain and nerve, the embryo and its formation and development. Neither has modern criticism any apparatus by which the truth or untruth of rebirth can be established. In fact, modern criticism, with all its pretensions to searching investigation and scrupulous certainty, is no very efficient truth-finder. Outside the sphere of the immediate physical it is almost helpless. It is good at discovering data, but except where the data themselves bear on the surface their own conclusion, it has no means of being rightly sure of the generalisations it announces from them so confidently in one generation and destroys in the next. It has no means of finding out with surety the truth or untruth of a doubtful historical assertion; after a century of dispute it has not even been able to tell us yes or no, whether Jesus Christ ever existed. How then shall it deal with such a matter as this of rebirth which is stuff of psychology and must be settled rather by psychological than physical evidence?

The arguments which are usually put forward by supporters and opponents, are often weak or futile and even at their best insufficient either to prove or to disprove anything in the world. One argument, for instance, often put forward triumphantly in disproof is this that we have no memory of our past lives and therefore there were no past lives! One smiles to see such reasoning seriously used by those who imagine that they are something more than intellectual children. The argument proceeds on psychological grounds and yet it ignores the very nature of our ordinary or physical memory which is all that the normal man can employ. How much do we remember of our actual lives which we are undoubtedly living at the present moment? Our memory is normally good for what is near, becomes vaguer or less comprehensive as its objects recede into the distance, farther off seizes only some salient points and, finally, for the beginning of our lives falls into a mere blankness. Do we remember even the mere fact, the simple state of being an infant on the mother’s breast? and yet that state of infancy was, on any but a Buddhist theory, part of the same life and belonged to the same
individual,—the very one who cannot remember it just as he cannot remember his past lives. Yet we demand that this physical memory, this memory of the brute brain of man which cannot remember our infancy and has lost so much of our later years, shall recall that which was before infancy, before birth, before itself was formed. And if it cannot, we are to cry, “Disproved your reincarnation theory!” The sapient insipiency of our ordinary human reasoning could go no farther than in this sort of ratiocination. Obviously, if our past lives are to be remembered whether as fact and state or in their events and images, it can only be by a psychical memory awaking which will overcome the limits of the physical and resuscitate impressions other than those stamped on the physical being by physical cerebration.

I doubt whether, even if we could have evidence of the physical memory of past lives or of such a psychical awakening, the theory would be considered any better proved than before. We now hear of many such instances confidently alleged though without that apparatus of verified evidence responsibly examined which gives weight to the results of psychical research. The sceptic can always challenge them as mere fiction and imagination unless and until they are placed on a firm basis of evidence. Even if the facts alleged are verified, he has the resource of affirming that they are not really memories but were known to the person alleging them by ordinary physical means or were suggested to him by others and have been converted into reincarnate memory either by conscious deception or by a process of self-deception and self-hallucination. And even supposing the evidence were too strong and unexceptionable to be got rid of by these familiar devices, they might yet not be accepted as proof of rebirth; the mind can discover a hundred theoretical explanations for a single group of facts. Modern speculation and research have brought in this doubt to overhang all psychical theory and generalisation.

We know for instance that in the phenomena, say, of automatic writing or of communication from the dead, it is disputed whether the phenomena proceed from outside, from disembodied minds, or from within, from the subliminal consciousness,
or whether the communication is actual and immediate from the
released personality or is the uprising to the surface of a tele-
pathic impression which came from the mind of the then living
man but has remained submerged in our subliminal mentality.
The same kind of doubts might be opposed to the evidences
of reincarnate memory. It might be maintained that they prove
the power of a certain mysterious faculty in us, a consciousness
that can have some inexplicable knowledge of past events, but
that these events may belong to other personalities than ours
and that our attribution of them to our own personality in past
lives is an imagination, a hallucination, or else an instance of
that self-appropriation of things and experiences perceived but
not our own which is one out of the undoubted phenomena
of mental error. Much would be proved by an accumulation of
such evidences but not, to the sceptic at least, rebirth. Certainly,
if they were sufficiently ample, exact, profuse, intimate, they
would create an atmosphere which would lead in the end to a
general acceptance of the theory by the human race as a moral
certitude. But proof is a different matter.

After all, most of the things that we accept as truths are re-
ally no more than moral certitudes. We have all the profoundest
unshakable faith that the earth revolves on its own axis, but as
has been pointed out by a great French mathematician, the fact
has never been proved; it is only a theory which accounts well
for certain observable facts, no more. Who knows whether it
may not be replaced in this or another century by a better—or
a worse? All observed astronomical phenomena were admirably
accounted for by theories of spheres and I know not what else,
before Galileo came in with his “And yet it moves,” disturbing
the infallibility of Popes and Bibles and the science and logic of
the learned. One feels certain that admirable theories could be
invented to account for the facts of gravitation if our intellects
were not prejudiced and prepossessed by the anterior demon-
strations of Newton.¹ This is the ever-perplexing and inherent
plague of our reason; for it starts by knowing nothing and has

¹ This was written in pre-Einsteinian days.
to deal with infinite possibilities, and the possible explanations of any given set of facts, until we actually know what is behind them, are endless. In the end, we really know only what we observe and even that subject to a haunting question, for instance, that green is green and white is white, although it appears that colour is not colour but something else that creates the appearance of colour. Beyond observable fact we must be content with reasonable logical satisfaction, dominating probability and moral certitude, — at least until we have the sense to observe that there are faculties in us higher than the sense-dependent reason and awaiting development by which we can arrive at greater certainties.

We cannot really assert as against the sceptic any such dominant probability or any such certitude on behalf of the theory of rebirth. The external evidence yet available is in the last degree rudimentary. Pythagoras was one of the greatest of sages, but his assertion that he fought at Troy under the name of the Antenorid and was slain by the younger son of Atreus is an assertion only and his identification of the Trojan shield will convince no one who is not already convinced; the modern evidence is not as yet any more convincing than the proof of Pythagoras. In absence of external proof which to our matter-governed sensational intellects is alone conclusive, we have the argument of the reincarnationists that their theory accounts for all the facts better than any other yet advanced. The claim is just, but it does not create any kind of certitude. The theory of rebirth coupled with that of Karma gives us a simple, symmetrical, beautiful explanation of things; but so too the theory of the spheres gave us once a simple, symmetrical, beautiful explanation of the heavenly movements. Yet we have now got quite another explanation, much more complex, much more Gothic and shaky in its symmetry, an inexplicable order evolved out of chaotic infinities, which we accept² as the truth of the

² Or used to accept, but now it is suggested that this order is only a schema created by our own mind or determined by the constitution of our brain, a syntax and logic of word and thought which we impose on a world that in fact does not or may not contain any such thing.
The Problem of Rebirth

matter. And yet, if we will only think, we shall perhaps see that even this is not the whole truth; there is much more behind we have not yet discovered. Therefore the simplicity, symmetry, beauty, satisfactoriness of the reincarnation theory is no warrant of its certitude.

When we go into details, the uncertainty increases. Rebirth accounts, for example, for the phenomenon of genius, inborn faculty and so many other psychological mysteries. But then Science comes in with its all-sufficient explanation by heredity, — though, like that of rebirth, all-sufficient only to those who already believe in it. Without doubt, the claims of heredity have been absurdly exaggerated. It has succeeded in accounting for much, not all, in our physical make-up, our temperament, our vital peculiarities. Its attempt to account for genius, inborn faculty and other psychological phenomena of a higher kind is a pretentious failure. But this may be because Science knows nothing at all that is fundamental about our psychology, — no more than primitive astronomers knew of the constitution and law of the stars whose movements they yet observed with a sufficient accuracy. I do not think that even when Science knows more and better, it will be able to explain these things by heredity; but the scientist may well argue that he is only at the beginning of his researches, that the generalisation which has explained so much may well explain all, and that at any rate his hypothesis has had a better start in its equipment of provable facts than the theory of reincarnation.

Nevertheless, the argument of the reincarnationist is so far a good argument and respect-worthy, though not conclusive. But there is another more clamorously advanced which seems to me to be on a par with the hostile reasoning from absence of memory, at least in the form in which it is usually advanced to attract unripe minds. This is the ethical argument by which it is sought to justify God’s ways with the world or the world’s ways with itself. There must, it is thought, be a moral governance for the world; or at least some sanction of reward in the cosmos for virtue, some sanction of punishment for sin. But upon our perplexed and chaotic earth no such sanction appears. We see the
good man thrust down into the press of miseries and the wicked flourishing like a green bay-tree and not cut down miserably in his end. Now this is intolerable. It is a cruel anomaly, it is a reflection on God's wisdom and justice, almost a proof that God is not; we must remedy that. Or if God is not, we must have some other sanction for righteousness.

How comforting it would be if we could tell a good man and even the amount of his goodness, — for should not the Supreme be a strict and honourable accountant? — by the amount of ghee that he is allowed to put into his stomach and the number of rupees he can jingle into his bank and the various kinds of good luck that accrue to him. Yes, and how comforting too if we could point our finger at the wicked stripped of all concealment and cry at him, “O thou wicked one! for if thou wert not evil, wouldst thou in a world governed by God or at least by good, be thus ragged, hungry, unfortunate, pursued by griefs, void of honour among men? Yes, thou art proved wicked, because thou art ragged. God's justice is established.” The Supreme Intelligence being fortunately wiser and nobler than man's childishness, this is impossible. But let us take comfort! It appears that if the good man has not enough good luck and ghee and rupees, it is because he is really a scoundrel suffering for his crimes, — but a scoundrel in his past life who has suddenly turned a new leaf in his mother's womb; and if yonder wicked man flourishes and tramples gloriously on the world, it is because of his goodness — in a past life, the saint that was then having since been converted — was it by his experience of the temporal vanity of virtue? — to the cult of sin. All is explained, all is justified. We suffer for our sins in another body; we shall be rewarded in another body for our virtues in this; and so it will go on ad infinitum. No wonder, the philosophers found this a bad business and proposed as a remedy to get rid of both sin and virtue and even as our highest good to scramble anyhow out of a world so amazingly governed.

Obviously, this scheme of things is only a variation of the old spiritual-material bribe and menace, the bribe of a Heaven of fat joys for the good and the threat of a hell of eternal fire or bestial tortures for the wicked. The idea of the Law of the
world as primarily a dispenser of rewards and punishments is
cognate to the idea of the Supreme Being as a judge, “father” and
school-master who is continually rewarding with lollipops his
good boys and continually caning his naughty urchins. It is cog-
nate also to the barbarous and unthinking system of sometimes
savage and always degrading punishment for social offences
on which human society, unable still to find out or organise a
more satisfactory way, is still founded. Man insists continually
on making God in his own image instead of seeking to make
himself more and more in the image of God, and all these ideas
are the reflection of the child and the savage and the animal in us
which we have still failed to transform or outgrow. We should
be inclined to wonder how these fancies of children found their
way into such profound philosophical religions as Buddhism
and Hinduism, if it were not so patent that men will not deny
themselves the luxury of tacking on the rubbish from their past
to the deeper thoughts of their sages.

No doubt, since these ideas were so prominent, they must
have had their use in training humanity. Perhaps even it is true
that the Supreme deals with the child soul according to its child-
lishness and allows it to continue its sensational imaginations of
heaven and hell for a time beyond the death of the physical body.
Perhaps both these ideas of after-life and of rebirth as fields of
punishment and reward were needed because suited to our half-
mentalised animality. But after a certain stage the system ceases
to be really effective. Men believe in Heaven and Hell but go on
sinning merrily, quit at last by a Papal indulgence or the final
priestly absolution or a death-bed repentance or a bath in the
Ganges or a sanctified death at Benares,—such are the childish
devices by which we escape from our childishness! And in the
end the mind grows adult and puts the whole nursery nonsense
away with contempt. The reward and punishment theory of
rebirth, if a little more elevated or at least less crudely sensa-
tional, comes to be as ineffective. And it is good that it should
be so. For it is intolerable that man with his divine capacity
should continue to be virtuous for a reward and shun sin out
of terror. Better a strong sinner than a selfish virtuous coward
or a petty hucksterer with God; there is more divinity in him, more capacity of elevation. Truly the Gita has said well, krpanāḥ phalabetavah. And it is inconceivable that the system of this vast and majestic world should have been founded on these petty and paltry motives. There is reason in these theories? then reason of the nursery, puerile. Ethics? then ethics of the mud, muddy.

The true foundation of the theory of rebirth is the evolution of the soul, or rather its efflorescence out of the veil of Matter and its gradual self-finding. Buddhism contained this truth involved in its theory of Karma and emergence out of Karma but failed to bring it to light; Hinduism knew it of old, but afterwards missed the right balance of its expression. Now we are again able to restate the ancient truth in a new language and this is already being done by certain schools of thought, though still the old incrustations tend to tack themselves on to the deeper wisdom. And if this gradual efflorescence be true, then the theory of rebirth is an intellectual necessity, a logically unavoidable corollary. But what is the aim of that evolution? Not conventional or interested virtue and the faultless counting out of the small coin of good in the hope of an apportioned material reward, but the continual growth towards a divine knowledge, strength, love and purity. These things alone are real virtue and this virtue is its own reward. The one true reward of the works of love is to grow ever in capacity and delight of love up to the ecstasy of the spirit’s all-seizing embrace and universal passion; the one reward of the works of right Knowledge is to grow perpetually into the infinite Light; the one reward of the works of right Power is to harbour more and more of the Force Divine, and of the works of purity to be freed more and more from egoism into that immaculate wideness where all things are transformed and reconciled into the divine equality. To seek other reward is to bind oneself to a foolishness and a childish ignorance; and to regard even these things as a reward is an unripeness and an imperfection.

And what of suffering and happiness, misfortune and prosperity? These are experiences of the soul in its training, helps, props, means, disciplines, tests, ordeals, — and prosperity often
a worse ordeal than suffering. Indeed, adversity, suffering may often be regarded rather as a reward to virtue than as a punishment for sin, since it turns out to be the greatest help and purifier of the soul struggling to unfold itself. To regard it merely as the stern award of a Judge, the anger of an irritated Ruler or even the mechanical recoil of result of evil upon cause of evil is to take the most superficial view possible of God’s dealings with the soul and the law of the world’s evolution. And what of worldly prosperity, wealth, progeny, the outward enjoyment of art, beauty, power? Good, if they be achieved without loss to the soul and enjoyed only as the outflowing of the divine Joy and Grace upon our material existence. But let us seek them first for others or rather for all, and for ourselves only as a part of the universal condition or as one means of bringing perfection nearer.

The soul needs no proof of its rebirth any more than it needs proof of its immortality. For there comes a time when it is consciously immortal, aware of itself in its eternal and immutable essence. Once that realisation is accomplished, all intellectual questionings for and against the immortality of the soul fall away like a vain clamour of ignorance around the self-evident and ever-present truth. Tato na vicikitsate. That is the true dynamic belief in immortality when it becomes to us not an intellectual dogma but a fact as evident as the physical fact of our breathing and as little in need of proof or argument. So also there comes a time when the soul becomes aware of itself in its eternal and mutable movement; it is then aware of the ages behind that constituted the present organisation of the movement, sees how this was prepared in an uninterrupted past, remembers something of the bygone soul-states, environments, particular forms of activity which built up its present constituents and knows to what it is moving by development in an uninterrupted future. This is the true dynamic belief in rebirth, and there too the play of the questioning intellect ceases; the soul’s vision and the soul’s memory are all. Certainly, there remains the question of the mechanism of the development and of the laws of rebirth where the intellect and its inquiries and
generalisations can still have some play. And here the more one thinks and experiences, the more the ordinary, simple, cut-and-dried account of reincarnation seems to be of doubtful validity. There is surely here a greater complexity, a law evolved with a more difficult movement and a more intricate harmony out of the possibilities of the Infinite. But this is a question which demands long and ample consideration; for subtle is the law of it. अंतर ह्येषा धर्माः.