



THIRD EDITION

PHILOSOPHY
of RELIGION

SELECTED READINGS

MICHAEL PETERSON · WILLIAM HASKER
BRUCE REICHENBACH · DAVID BASINGER

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 variable and therefore true, or dismiss it as a philosophical dogma and ingenious speculation; but in either case the doctrine . . . 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. . . . 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," . . . which 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. . . .

The arguments, which are usually put forward by supporters and opponents, are often sufficiently futile and at their best certainly insufficient either to prove or to disprove anything. 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. . . . 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 life. Yet we demand that this physical memory, this memory of the brute brains of man which cannot remember our infancy and has lost so much of our later years, shall yet recall that which was before infancy, before birth, before itself was formed. And if it cannot, we are to cry, "disproved your reincarnation theory!" . . . 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 awakening 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

SRI AUROBINDO Rebirth

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) contends that traditional objections to the theory of rebirth, such as the absence of memories of past lives, the suggestion that paranormal phenomena have other explanations, and that science can explain heredity, do not disprove the theory of rebirth, for science really has nothing to say to the question of the nonphysical soul. At the same time, he rejects the common notion that we are an unchanging, persistent soul or personality that simply undergoes a series of reincarnations. Rather, he distinguishes between the empirical self or personality, an aspect of Nature (Prakriti) that reincarnates, going from death to death, and the true Self (Purusha) that is the force or reality behind the empirical self. The empirical self, usually unconsciously, draws on the experiences gained through numberless rebirths. But the real Self is unchanging and imperishable. Hence, it neither is born nor dies, but is one with reality, watching and enjoying the cycle of rebirths but not itself participating in them.



Reprinted with the kind permission of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust.

always challenge them as mere fiction and imagination unless and until they are placed on firm basis of evidence. . . . 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 generalization.

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 telepathic 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 belong to other personalities than ours and that our attribution of them to our personality in past lives is an imagination, a hallucination. . . . Much would be proved by an accumulation of such evidences but not, to the sceptic at least, rebirth. . . .

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] 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. . . .

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. . . . 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 of a divine knowledge, strength, love and purity. These things alone are real virtue and this virtue is its own reward. . . .

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-evidence and ever-present truth. . . . There comes a time when the soul becomes aware of itself in its eternal and mutable moment; 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 the bygone soul-states, environments, particular forms of activity which built up its present constituents, and knows to what it is moving by developments 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 possibility of the Infinite. . . .

In the ordinary, the vulgar conception there is no birth of a soul at all, but only the birth of a new body into the world occupied by an old personality unchanged from that which once left some now-discarded physical frame. It is John Robinson who has gone out of the form of flesh he once occupied; it is John Robinson who tomorrow or some centuries hence will reincarnate in another form of flesh and resume the course of his terrestrial experiences with another name and in another environment. . . . The one objection that really stands in the way of its acceptance is the obvious non-survival of memory. Memory is the man, says the modern psychologist, and what is the use of the survival of my personality, if I do not remember my past, if I am not aware of being the same person still and always? What is the utility? What is the enjoyment?

The old Indian thinkers—I am not speaking of the popular belief which was crude enough and thought not at all about the matter—[and] the old Buddhist and Vedantist thinkers surveyed the whole field from a very different standpoint. They were not attached to the survival of the personality; they did not give to that survival the high name of immortality; they saw that personality being what it is, a constantly changing composite, the survival of an identical personality was a non-sense, a contradiction in terms. They perceived indeed that there is a continuity, and they sought to discover what determines this continuity and whether the sense of identity which enters into it is an illusion or the representation of a fact, of a real truth, and, if the latter, then what that truth may be. The Buddhist denied any real identity. There is, he said, no self, no person; there is simply a continuous stream of energy in action like the continuous flowing of a river or the continuous burning of a flame. It is this continuity which creates in the mind the false sense of identity. I am not now the same person that I was a year ago, not even the same person that I was a moment ago, any more than the water flowing past yonder ghaut is the same water that flowed past it a few seconds ago; it is the persistence of the flow in the same channel that preserves the false appearance of identity. Obviously, then, there is no soul that reincarnates, but only Karma that persists in flowing continuously down the same apparently uninterrupted channel. It is Karma that incarnates; Karma creates the form of a constantly changing mentality and physical bodies that are, we may presume, the result of that changing composite of ideas and sensations which I call myself. The identical "I" is not, never was, never will be. Practically, so long as error of personality persists, this does not make much difference, and I can say in the language of ignorance that I am reborn in a new body; practically, I have to proceed on the basis of that error.

But there is this important point gained that it is all an error and an error which can cease; the composite can be broken up for good without any fresh formation, the flame can be extinguished, the channel which called itself a river destroyed. And then there is non-being, there is cessation, there is the release of the error from itself.

The Vedantist comes to a different conclusion; he admits an identical, a self, a persistent immutable reality—but other than my personality, other than this composite which I call myself. In the Katha Upanishad the question is raised in a very instructive fashion. Nachiketas, sent by his father to the world of Death, thus questions Yama, the lord of that world: Of the man who has gone forward, who has passed away from us, some say that he is and other "this he is not"; which then is right? What is the truth of the great passage? Such is the form of the question and at first sight it seems simply to raise the problem of immortality in the European sense of the word, the survival of the identical personality. But this is not what Nachiketas asks. He has already taken as the second of three boons offered to him by Yama the knowledge of the sacred Flame by which man crosses over hunger and thirst, leaves sorrow and fear far behind him, and dwells in heaven securely rejoicing. Immortality in that sense he takes for granted as, already standing in that farther world, he must surely do. The knowledge he asks for involves the deeper, finer problem. . . . Something survives that appears to be the same person, that descends into hell, that ascends into heaven, that returns upon the earth with a new body, but is it really the same person that thus survives? Can we really say of the man "He still is," or must we not rather say "This he no longer is"? Yama too in his answer speaks not at all of the survival of death, and he only gives a verse or two to a bare description of that constant rebirth which all serious thinkers admitted as a universally acknowledged truth. What he speaks of is the Self, the real Man, the Lord of all these changing appearances; without the knowledge of that Self the survival of the personality is not immortal life but a constant passing from death to death; he only who goes beyond personality to the real Person [who] becomes the Immortal. Till then a man seems indeed to be born again and again by the force of his knowledge and works, name succeeds to name, form gives place to form, but there is no immortality.

Such then is the real question put and answered so divergently by the Buddhist and the Vedantin. There is a constant re-forming of personality in new bodies, but this personality is a mutable creation of force at its work streaming forward in Time and never for a moment the same, and the ego-sense that makes us cling to the life of the body and believe readily that it is the same idea and form, that it is John Robinson who is reborn as Sidi Hossain, is a creation of the mentality. Achilles was not reborn as Alexander, but the stream of force in its works which created the momentarily changing mind and body of Achilles [that] flowed on and created the momentarily changing mind and body of Alexander. Still, said the Ancient Vedanta, there is yet something beyond this force in action, Master of it, one who makes it create for him new names and forms, and that is the Self, the Purusha, the Man, the Real Person. The ego-sense is only its distorted image reflected in the flowing stream of embodied mentality.

Is it then the Self that incarnates and reincarnates? But the Self is imperishable, immutable, unborn, undying. The Self is not born and does not exist in

the body; rather, the body is born and exists in the Self. For the Self is one every where,—in all bodies, we say, but really it is not confined and parceled out in different bodies except as the all-constituting ether seems to be formed into different objects and is in a sense in them. Rather all these bodies are in the Self; but that also is a figment of space-conception, and rather than these bodies are only symbols and figures of itself created by it in its own consciousness. Even what we call the individual soul is greater than its body and not less, more subtle than it, and therefore not confined by its grossness. At death it does not leave its form, but casts it off, so that a great departing soul can say of this death in vigorous phrase, "I have spat out the body."

What then is it that we feel to inhabit the physical frame? What is it that the Soul draws out from the body when it casts off this partial physical robe which enveloped not it, but part of its members? . . . The answer does not help us much. It is the subtle or psychical frame which is tied to the physical by the heart-strings, by the cords of life-force, of nervous energy which has been woven into every physical fibre. This the Lord of the body draws out and the violent snapping or the rapid or tardy loosening of the life-cords, the exit of the connecting force constitutes the pain of death and its difficulty.

Let us then change the form of the question and ask rather what it is that reflects and accepts the mutable personality, since the Self is immutable? We have, in fact, an immutable Self, a Real Person, Lord of this ever-changing personality which, again, assumes ever-changing bodies, but the real Self knows itself always as above the mutation, watches and enjoys it, but is not involved in it. Through what does it enjoy the changes and feel them to be its own, even while knowing itself to be unaffected by them? The mind and ego-sense are only inferior instruments; there must be some more essential form of itself which the Real Man puts forth, puts in front of itself, as it were, and at the back of the changings to support and mirror them without being actually changed by them. This more essential form is the mental being or mental person which the Upanishads speak of as the mental leader of the life and body. It is that which maintains the ego-sense as a function in the mind and enables us to have the firm conception of continuous identity in Time as opposed to the timeless identity of the Self.

The changing personality is not this mental person; it is a composite of various stuff of Nature, a formation of Prakriti and is not at all the Purusha. And it is a very complex composite with many layers; there is a layer of physical, a layer of nervous, a layer of mental, even final stratum of supramental personality; and within these layers themselves there are strata within each stratum. . . . The mental being in resuming bodily life forms a new personality for its new terrestrial existence; it takes material from the common matter-stuff, life-stuff, mind-stuff of the physical world, and during earthly life it is constantly absorbing fresh material, throwing out what is used up, changing its bodily, nervous, and mental tissues. But all this is surface work; behind is the foundation of past experience held back from the physical memory so that the superficial consciousness may not be troubled or interfered with by the conscious burden of the past, but may concentrate on the work immediately in hand. Still that foundation of past experience is the bedrock of personality; and it is more than that. It is our real fund on which we can always draw even apart from our present superficial com-

merce with our surroundings. That commence adds to our gain, modifies the foundation for subsequent existence.

Moreover, all this is, again, on the surface. It is only a small part of ourselves which lives and acts in the energies of our earthly existence. . . . Behind is the Person, the unchanging entity, the Matter who manipulates this complex material, the Artificer of this wondrous artifice. . . . The body is a convenience, the personality is a constant formation for whose development action and experience are the instruments; but the Self by whose will and for whose delight all this is, is other than the body, other than the action and experience, other than the personality which they develop. To ignore it is to ignore the whole secret of our being.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why does Aurobindo believe that the appeal to memory neither establishes nor refutes life after death?
2. Why does Aurobindo conclude that the psychological person or personality does not experience immortal life but only the passing from death to death?
3. What is the Self? How does the Self relate to the individual personality and to the question of immortality.

SUGGESTED READING

- Badham, Paul. *Christian Beliefs About Immortality*. London: Macmillan, 1976.
- Badham, Paul, and Badham, Linda. *Immortality or Extinction?* London: Macmillan, 1982.
- Baker, Lynne Rudder. *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Blackmore, Susan. *Dying to Live: Near-death Experiences*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1993.
- Cooper, John. *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1989.
- Corcoran, Kevin. *Soul, Body and Survival*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Davis, Stephen T., ed. *Death and Afterlife*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- Edwards, Paul, ed. *Immortality*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.
- . *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996.
- Hasker, William. *The Emergent Self*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Hick, John. *Death and Eternal Life*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- Lewis, H.D. *Persons and Life After Death*. London: Macmillan, 1978.
- . *The Self and Immortality*. New York: Seabury, 1973.
- Mittal, Kewal, ed. *Perspectives on Karma and Rebirth*. Delhi: Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi University, 1990.
- Moody, Raymond A., Jr. *The Light Beyond*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
- Paterson, R.W. K. *Philosophy and the Belief in Life after Death*. London: Macmillan, 1995.
- Penelhum, Terence. *Survival and Disembodied Existence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.