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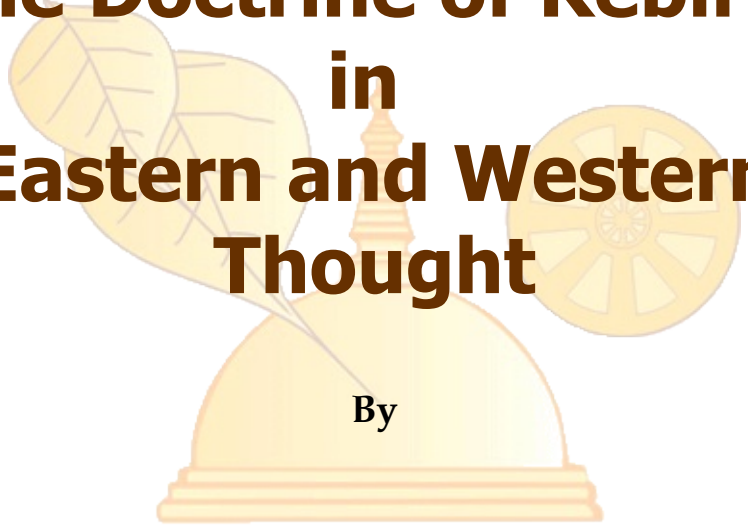

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The Doctrine of Rebirth in Eastern and Western Thought

There is one essential difference between a modern European or American who approaches the study of Buddhism today and a citizen of Ancient India who, amazed and fascinated, listened to the message of final release offered to him in the words of the Buddha. This difference lies in the fact that in the minds of the Buddha's listeners at his time—as in most Orientals even today—there was a deep-rooted intuition of what we call the doctrine of rebirth which formed a solid basis for the acceptance of the new teaching.

The Buddha, in fact, nowhere in his discourses explains this doctrine *in extenso*; we can clearly see from his words that it was quite current among his contemporaries, not exactly as a doctrine, but as a living belief of nearly everybody, except an unimportant number of followers of the sceptical or materialistic schools such as the Charvakas. The

Buddha only formulated more precisely the already known doctrine, rejected its old mythical and ritualistic connotations, and set it upon firm rational and ethical foundations. The doctrine of rebirth in union with the law of cause and effect in the moral sphere received thus a similar validity as, in Western thought today, the so-called laws of nature.

For an average Westerner today, however, the teaching of rebirth is a more or less new doctrine, quite different from the Christian, agnostic or materialistic outlook he is already familiar with. When he now comes to study Buddhism, it is certainly of advantage if he becomes acquainted with this belief in the various forms it has taken outside the sphere of Buddhist thought. He can then perceive more clearly the fundamental change the Buddha introduced into the formulation of the doctrine and the importance of this new formulation.

It is difficult to settle with definiteness the question when and how the idea of rebirth emerged in Indian thought. The first allusions to it are found in the Rig Vedic hymns. The pious Aryan poet believed, according to some of his songs, that as a reward for good deeds he would gain a long, though not eternal, life among the gods. It is not yet clear, however, what his lot would be at the end of this long life among the gods. Later texts often mention that a repeated death

will then follow, and this death is something to be dreaded.

From this notion it was only a small step to the idea of a series of deaths occurring in an endless sequence. Such series seems to be implied in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa (10:4:3:10) where departed fathers are mentioned as falling prey to death again and again. Though a rebirth on earth is not yet explicitly mentioned; this last step is taken in the oldest Upanishads, where a clear formulation of the concept of rebirth can be found several times.

Among the factors which may have contributed to the emergence of the idea of rebirth in Aryan thought, the influence of the original subjugated inhabitants of India has often been mentioned. It must certainly be admitted that in the course of more than a millennium's co-existence, the aborigines must have considerably influenced their conquerors racially and culturally. It is quite possible that, in some form, the idea of rebirth may have been current among them.

It has been proved, in fact, that various forms of the rebirth doctrine as "reincarnation" or "transmigration of souls" were held by almost all ancient peoples of the world, including African Negroes, Polynesians, Indians of all three Americas, etc. But if the Ariyans acquired this notion from the previous inhabitants of

the country, it certainly was readily assimilated in terms of the previous Aryan notions. It then received a new and higher elaboration, especially with respect to ethical formulation.

In the period of the Brāhmaṇa texts the course of cosmic and human events became closely linked with priestly sacrifices and ritualistic practice. The idea of evil consequences of bad deeds, however, was not extinguished entirely, and as soon as the idea of rebirth became explicit in the oldest Upanishads, the concept of moral retribution was linked with it.

Though still coupled with many naive features, these texts present a very high conception of rebirth which is not to be found in other ancient cultures in which primitive notions of transmigration do not imply moral criteria. Rather the fate to which the departed individual is destined is usually determined by his social rank in this life and sometimes by heroism in battles, the most rightly estimated quality of man in those times.

In a few passages of the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad we find allusions to a still higher conception of rebirth, as for example when Yajnavalkya says that the departed person is accompanied by knowledge and deed and by previous experience.

This conception comes very near to that of the

Buddha. It must have prevailed among the educated classes of his time just prior to his renunciation. An average educated Indian of those times evidently believed in the existence of an endless chain of successive lives. Some people tried to influence the quality of their future lives by religious practices such as rituals and sacrifices, hoping thereby to achieve final salvation sometime in the distant future. More refined thinkers, particularly of the higher classes, appear to have believed that moral conduct could improve their lot in future lives. But they did not believe such religious practices led to final freedom, which now seemed to them the only desirable aim. They could no more find satisfaction in the hope of a happy rebirth as a reward for a righteous life, but felt the endless round of rebirths as itself a heavy burden.

Seeking an escape from the repetitive patterns of life and death, eager to find a solution, many earnest thinkers left their homes. One among them was Siddhattha Gotama, the future Buddha. His story is known sufficiently well; so it need not be repeated here. After he gained final knowledge, he also formulated anew the old doctrine of rebirth according to his experience and insight. His formulation appears even in this modem age as rational and logical. Even without previous verification, it can be accepted by educated people today as the only plausible

explanation of the inequality in the fates of men.

The idea of rebirth coming to the modern West from the East, however, is not altogether new to the European mind. European thought has deep roots in ancient Greece and there the doctrine of rebirth was not only known but also endorsed by a number of eminent thinkers. The oldest mention of the idea can be found in Herodotus, who held that it came to Greece from Egypt. The Greeks may have borrowed it from the Egyptians and pretended it was their own theory. However, this doctrine has not yet been proven to have existed in Egypt. Some scientists such as Schroder and Grabe held the opinion that it came to Greece from India. Whether or not this be so, in Greece itself there were quite favourable conditions for the doctrine to evolve without foreign importation. In other parts of ancient Europe, too, the idea of rebirth must have been known. The beliefs of ancient European tribes are not known sufficiently well, but Caesar mentions that in Britain the Druids held the belief in rebirth (*De Bella Galileo*VI, 14).

Earlier than in Greece, this idea can be found among Thracian tribes, particularly the Gaels. Herodotus tells us that they believed their god Zalmoxis lives in a hollow mountain. Departed men come to him, but after three years return to the earth.

In Orphism the doctrine of rebirth is formulated still more clearly. Orphism was a mystery religion which taught that the human soul was of divine origin, but had fallen into sin. As a consequence it was obliged to transmigrate through various forms of life, human and animal. The soul can liberate itself through purification, renunciation and non-killing. At a certain period between two lives on earth, soul was tortured in hell or lived in bliss among the gods, according to its deeds and endeavours during its life on earth. The next life was also influenced thereby. This, we can see, is the highest formulation of this doctrine to be found outside India.

The official Greek religion based on the epic poetry of Homer does not teach this doctrine, but it seems to have been quite well known by the people. It also formed a part of the teachings of some philosophers. According to Cicero it was Pherekydus who first taught this doctrine, but the first clear formulation comes from Phythagoras (570–500 B.C.). Phythagoras was a practical philosopher, teaching not only theoretical knowledge, but also a way of life. He took over the whole Orphic doctrine and therefore attached the greatest importance to the right way of living. He founded an Order with a discipline based on renunciation, aimed at gaining liberation from the wheel of lives.

The same doctrine was further taught by Empedocles (ca. 490– 430 B.C.). In early years a politician, he later felt a higher calling in himself and refused even the crown. In his poems we find the following verses:

> "For I have been here now a boy and
> a girl, a bush and a bird and a
> dumb fish in the sea!
> From what honour, from what height
> of bliss have I fallen to go about
> among mortals here on earth!"

His poems are full of compassion for suffering beings. He reprimands the killing of animals for food and sacrifices. During his life as a philosopher he wandered from place to place preaching his doctrine. He was admired and venerated.

Of interest to us also is the poet Pindarus who wrote poems about popular heroes. He held these heroes to be souls of those who had purified themselves in the course of previous lives and were then born on earth for the last time as kings, heroes and sages, no more to return hereafter.

Among philosophers, we find the rebirth doctrine again taught by Plato (ca. 428–347 B.C.), who took it over from the general body of knowledge and

expounded it in the form of myths or parables in his famous philosophical dialogues. Contrary to Empedocles, who claimed to remember his previous lives, Plato admits he has no exact knowledge of the facts but holds the doctrine plausible. Plato's myth on rebirth is as follows:

The soul was cherishing once the state of divine being, but in the course of time became unable to maintain the inner balance of its qualities and due to this lack of mindfulness fell into matter and according to its level took birth in some position among men. After death the soul of a bad man suffers in Tartarus and that of a good man rejoices in a heavenly abode. After a thousand years every soul takes birth on earth again, possibly also in some animals. The soul chooses its own rebirth and during the next life it can acquire merits for better insight and choice when further rebirth is to take place. After ten lives on earth soul becomes purified and regains the state of a divine being, but a new fall is again possible.

Plato's notion of the rebirth doctrine is apparently inferior to that of Empedocles and other former teachers, including the Orphics.

The thought of post-Platonic philosophers took another course, away from belief in rebirth, particularly due to Aristotle. Only in Neoplatonism do

we again find the rebirth doctrine. It was Philo of Alexandria (15–10 B.C.–50 A.D.) who first taught that souls attached to the body and earthly life must again and again take birth on earth until, no longer deceived by this life, they realise that the body is a prison of the soul.

The rebirth doctrine reached its full height again with Plotinus (205–270 A.D.), whose system of philosophy was the last great fruit of the declining spirit of the Attic age. This system holds that souls were once in unity with the universal principle called the "One." As a consequence of some inexplicable course of necessity and, at a time, due to their own fault, the souls fell from their blissful state into empirical, temporal exigency. There they have to transmigrate, according to the strength of their sensual attachments, through successive lives in celestial, human, animal and even vegetable forms. Their fate exactly corresponds to their previous deeds. If they succeed in purifying themselves from sensuality and attachment to matter, they will become re-unified with the One and thus gain liberation.

The doctrine of rebirth was taught by later Neo-Platonists such as Porphyry (ca. 234–330 A.D.) and Iamblichus (died 330). These, however, restricted its validity to the realm of humans.

We have seen that the doctrine of rebirths was embodied in Greek thought during the entire period of its evolution. Its ethical aspect was well elaborated and corresponds to the Indian conception of karma. However, as the doctrine never became widespread and did not prevail, it could not withstand the influence of the new Christian faith and only survived for some time in a few Gnostic communities.

Gnosticism was no unitary movement or teaching. The name applies to a variety of Hellenistic and early Christian doctrines with mystical tendencies, some showing a deep desire to penetrate to the final truth through inner experience. The doctrine of rebirth found in some Gnostic schools may have been taken over from Greek sources, but Jewish influence cannot be excluded.

The best formulation of the doctrine can be found in Basileides (2nd century) of Alexandria. He taught that all suffering is in fact deserved, being the outcome of sins committed either consciously or unknowingly. In the course of rebirth, salvation may be gained through purification and knowledge. The same doctrine was held by Carpocrates who thought it found support even in Jesus Christ's words (Matt. 5, 25–26; Luk 12, 58–59). In the parables of Jesus, Carpocrates maintained the jail stands for the body and the paying of the last farthing for expiation of all wrong doings.

Among Christians, we find the famous Clement of Alexandria (died 216) and his pupil Origen (185–254) whose thoughts were influenced by Gnosticism. According to Origen, souls were created by God and they all will come back to him again. Lower worlds, including hell, are not eternal (as taught by the Church even today) and serve only the purpose of purifying the soul.

Neoplatonic thoughts were awakened within Christianity itself by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita (ca. 500). His description of the soul's final goal—which he, of course, calls God—resembles quite closely the conception of the Buddhist Nirvana. His system tacitly implies rebirth.

As European thought evolved, the idea of rebirth disappeared from the surface, although below the surface it must have been preserved in certain strains of heretical thought. Explicitly, however, we find it as late as the Renaissance in the works of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), a keen philosopher who was burned to death by the Catholic Inquisition for teaching things contrary to official dogma. One of his teachings was a kind of pantheism: the soul (which he calls the "monad") penetrates as the world soul the entire universe, but at the same time is present in every man, animal and even plant, transmigrating

from one being to another.

The repressive atmosphere of ecclesiastical dogmatism, however, prevented European thought from grasping the revolutionary idea of rebirth alluded to in Bruno's philosophy. The dogma of God's creation of the soul and its single existence on earth was so deep-rooted in the minds of even philosophers and scientists (and is so, in fact, up to this day in those who resorted to materialism) that only a genius or open-minded artist like Lessing or Goethe could break through this narrow-mindedness and grasp the universal validity and rationality of the doctrine of rebirth. At the same time that it satisfied such thinkers emotionally, it fulfilled their logical demands and their reasoned reflections concerning themselves and the evolution of mankind. Thus it was the German poets, and later on philosophers as well, who clearly accepted this idea, sometimes with great enthusiasm. This is particularly conspicuous in Lessing's book *The Education of Humankind* (*Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes*, 1780). Goethe confessed several times that he believed in rebirth—in his poems as well as in a letter to Wieland (April 1776), who showed great understanding of it. Friedrich Schiller gave expression to his feeling concerning his previous lives on earth in his poem "The Mystery of the Reminiscence" (*Das Geheimnis der Reminiszenz*),

dedicated to his Laura.

Goethe's brother-in-law, J.G. Schlosser, even started an open literary discussion on this theme with his book on the transmigration of the souls (*Ü*ber die Seelenwanderung, 1781). His opponent J.G. Herder later changed his mind and only rejected the return of the soul to earth, assuming an evolution of it in higher worlds. Less known believers in this doctrine were J.C. Edelmann and P. Hebel.

Then the pure philosophers came on the scene again. In his work *The Critique of Pure Reason*(1788), Kant tries to prove the immortality of the soul. He argues that the soul must gain perfection. As we seldom see this accomplished in this life, it is possible only in the course of an unending process. In his early work *Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*(1755), he formulates a hypothesis on rebirth on other celestial bodies. In his academic lectures he criticized the teaching of the Church concerning the eternal punishments and rewards for temporary deeds on earth.

Some post-Kantian philosophers were more open. F.N.J. Schelling in his *Philosophy and Religion*(1804) shows an inclination to a conception similar to that of Plotinus: the souls, having departed before "the beginning of time" from the "eternal One," must now

pass through a course of rebirth in order to become purified from their "selfhood" (*selbstheit*) and come back to their home.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was the one philosopher who was influenced directly by the Upanishads and Buddhism. The basic principle of his philosophy is the conception of the will to live. Where the will to live exists, there is, of necessity, life which exists only in its presence. The eternal presence of the will to live cannot be lost and so the will to live manifests itself successively in new forms.

Despite these cases of wider insights, modern European thought, on the whole, remained bound to the presuppositions of natural science. Its sphere of examination was very narrow, lying within the five senses. Contemporary philosophy has accepted this as its starting point, but is unable to go beyond it. The philosopher today does not possess the experience of extrasensory perception, so he takes refuge in abstract or metaphysical speculations without any intuition.

Thus philosophy has withdrawn into isolation, losing contact with the ways of thinking and living of most people. It has become academic. It does not, consequently, satisfy the spiritual needs of people. Meanwhile the old religions have lost their influence and significance. The gap thus arisen has brought

forth several new movements trying to fill it. They overcame new scientific conceptions, but were themselves inspired chiefly by old religions, particularly the Oriental ones.

The most important of these movements has been Theosophy, as represented by the Theosophical Society founded in 1875. Its teaching is syncretic, being based on Hinduistic ideas and penetrated by the spirit of some Mahayana doctrines. The influence of Christianity can be traced too, particularly in the ideas of the Anthroposophic Society, which arose in Germany and broke away from Theosophy in 1913.

The doctrine of rebirth became merged in Theosophical theory with the modern idea of evolution. The picture of individuals, evolving towards perfection in an ever-ascending line, proved to be very attractive; but it abolishes, in fact, the notion of the round of rebirths, the ever-revolving wheel of life which is so essential to the Buddhist teaching of rebirth. According to the Theosophical theory, evolution is God's plan and man cannot but follow it. The place on the scale of evolution once acquired cannot be lost again. In consequence, some European Buddhists influenced by Theosophy also assume that it is impossible to fall back to lower forms of life, such as the animal state.

In the light of the Buddha's exposition of the doctrine, however, this seems to be a very dangerous mistake which may undermine the feeling of an urgent need to strive for the goal. According to the Buddha's description there is no invariable evolution in a continuously upward direction. In the beginningless and endless *saṃsāra*, except for those who enter the definite path to deliverance, there are only ever repeated ups and downs. An unenlightened being who reaches even the highest celestial sphere cannot maintain it. After exhausting his store of accumulated merits, he falls back to this world of uncertainty, and again finds himself at a crossroads. If such a being, who for long periods enjoyed heavenly bliss, cannot maintain mindfulness, he must sooner or later fall as a result of wrong-doings performed in pursuit of pleasures. The pains of lower states of life may bring better insights so that he gradually rises to higher states again. Thus the story goes on, endlessly.

According to the Buddha, only the high degree of mindfulness which comes from the practice of his teaching can bring man to certainty, to the assurance of reaching the goal. This assurance comes when the first stage of sanctity, "stream-entry," (*sotāpatti*) has been reached. This is so according to the Theravada tradition, but other schools have their own, slightly different, stages of assurance.

Most people in the West, upon first hearing about the doctrine of rebirth, experience a kind of agreeable satisfaction. Previously they had feared death as final extinction or as eternal damnation except perhaps the few who dare to feel assured they will gain eternal salvation in heaven. Now they perceive a new hope for further lives on this earth, which they love. Unlike truth-seekers in the Buddha's time, they do not dread the "miseries of *saṃsāra*," but feel relief and joy.

I think we need not despise this attitude. If the majority of people truly believed in rebirth in this way, and lived so as to secure a happy rebirth, the sad picture of the present world torn by hatred and selfish recklessness would change considerably. The Buddha, too, taught the way to a happy rebirth to those who were not yet prepared to accept the more profound doctrine. This should, perhaps, be borne in mind by Buddhists. For sometimes, in their haste to explain to fresh inquirers the fundamental truths of suffering etc., they do not allow them time to cherish the new outlook for the future. In the Orient, too, this prospect of joy in repeated lives is quite common, the idea of gaining liberation being very often postponed to an indefinite future.

The doctrine of rebirth, as we have seen, is not unfamiliar to the European mind. If it were really grasped and incorporated in life, it would form an

excellent basis for a conscious unfolding of moral qualities in the individual's self-education, qualities which today are so often neglected. Thus it could help heighten the general level of morality.

The doctrine is also perfectly logical. If thought over, it could satisfy in its rationality every scientific-minded person. In contrast the conceptions of human destiny after death taught by Christianity, as well as by modern "scientific" materialism, are quite irrational, or even anti-rational and arbitrary. The doctrine of rebirth, however, besides being rational and logical, can also give the believer a great amount of emotional satisfaction. Moreover, it is testified to by the words of the Buddha, a man second to none in human history.

The doctrine of rebirth should, therefore, be widely propagated wherever possible. We can only look with hope and encouragement at the efforts of the few psychologists and other modern scientists who are trying to find a method of verifying this theory. Again, we can only look with great pity at the sad fact that an increasing number of Orientals are taking over fallacious and inferior materialistic views from the West.

Appendix: Eminent Western Thinkers on Rebirth

Note: All selections are from *Reincarnation, an East-West Anthology*, compiled and edited by Joseph Head and S.I. Cranston (New York: The Julian Press, 1961). It should be emphasized that the passages cited here have been included solely because they illustrate or affirm a belief in rebirth. Inclusion does not imply that they agree with Buddhism in their understanding of rebirth. One significant respect in which the Buddhist conception of rebirth differs from that of speculative thought in the West is its denial of transmigrating self or soul. According to Buddhism, rebirth occurs through the continuation of the mental process in causal sequence from life to life, not through a reincarnating soul. For a fuller account, see Wheel No. 9: Nyanatiloka, ***Karma and Rebirth***, and Wheel No. 167/ 169: V. P. Gunaratna, ***Rebirth Explained***.

—Editor

Pythagoras (582–507 B.C.), Greek

philosopher

[Pythagoras] was accustomed to speak of himself in this manner: that he had formerly been Aethalides … At a subsequent period, he was reborn as Euphorbus, and was wounded by Menelaus at the siege of Troy, and so died. In that life he used to say that he had formerly been Aethalides; and that he had received as a gift from Mercury (god of wisdom) the memory of his soul's transmigrations … also the gift of recollecting what his own soul and the souls of others had experienced between death and rebirth.

Life of Pythagoras, Diogenes Laertius

What Pythagoras wished to indicate by all these particulars was that he knew the former lives he had lived, which enabled him to begin providential attention to others and remind them of their former existences.

Life of Pythagoras, Iamblichus

Plato (427–347 B.C.), Greek philosopher

The soul of the true philosopher … abstains as much as possible from pleasures and desires, griefs and fears … because each pleasure and pain, having a nail, as it were, nails the soul to the body, and fastens it to it, and causes it to become corporeal, deeming those things to be true whatever the body asserts to be so.

For, in consequence of its forming the same opinions with the body, and delighting in the same things … it can never pass into Hades in a pure state, but must ever depart polluted by the body, and so quickly falls into another body … and consequently is deprived of all association with that which is divine, and pure, and uniform.

Phaedo

Virgil (70–19 B.C.), Roman poet

All these souls, after they have passed away a thousand years, are summoned by the divine ones in great array, to the Lethean river … In this way they become forgetful of their former earth life, and revisit the vaulted realms of the world, willing to return again into living bodies.

The Aeneid

Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.), Roman poet

Then death, so call'd, is but old matter dress'd
In some new figure, and a varied vest.
Thus all things are but alter'd, nothing dies
And here and there the unbodied spirit flies …
From tenement to tenement though toss'd,
The soul is still the same, the figure only lost
And, as the soften'd wax new seals receives.
This face assumes, and that impression leaves;

New call'd by yore, now by another name.
The form is only changed, the wax is still the same.
So death, so call'd, can but the form deface;
The immortal soul flies out in empty space
To seek her fortune in some other place.

Metamorphoses

Origen (185–254 A.D.), early Church father

Is it not more in conformity with reason that every soul for certain mysterious reasons (I speak now according to the opinion of Pythagoras and Plato and Erapedocles, whom Celsus frequently names) is introduced into a body, and introduced according to its deserts and former actions? …

Is it not rational that souls should be introduced into bodies in accordance with their merits and previous deeds, and that those who have used their bodies in doing the utmost possible good should have a right to bodies endowed with qualities superior to the bodies of others? …

The soul, which is immaterial and invisible in its nature, exists in no material place without having a body suited to the nature of that place. Accordingly, it at one time puts off one body, which was necessary before, but which is no longer adequate in its changed

state, and it exchanges it for a second.

Contra Celsum

The soul has neither beginning nor end … Every soul … comes into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defeats of its previous life. Its place in this world as a vessel appointed to honour or dishonour is determined by its previous merits or demerits. Its work in this world determines its place in the world which is to follow this …

De Principiis

David Hume (1711–1776), British philosopher

Reasoning from the common course of nature, and without supposing any new interposition of the supreme cause, which ought always to be excluded from philosophy, what is incorruptible must also be ungenerable. The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth, and if the former existence in no ways concerns us, neither will the latter … The metempsychosis is, therefore, the only system of this kind that philosophy can hearken to.

The Immortality of the Soul

J.G. von Herder (1744–1803), German thinker

Have you never had remembrances of a former state, which you could find no place for in this life? … Have you not seen persons, been in places, of which you were ready to swear that you had seen those persons, or had been in those places before? … And such are we, who, from a hundred causes, have sunk so deep and are so wedded to matter, that but few reminiscences of so pure character remain to us. The noble class of men who, separated from wine and meat, lived in perfect simplicity according to the order of nature, carried it further, no doubt, than others, as we learn from the example of Pythagoras, Iarchas, Apollonius and others, who remembered distinctly what and how many times they had been in the world before.

If we are blind, or can see but two steps beyond our noses, ought we therefore to deny that others may see a hundred or a thousand degrees farther, even to the bottom of time, into the deep, cool well of the foreworld, and there discern everything, plain and bright and clear?

Dialogues on Metempsychosis

J. W. von Goethe (1749–1832), German poet

I am certain that I have been here as I am now a thousand times before, and I hope to return a

thousand times.

Letter to I. Folk

Arthur Schopenhauer (1783–1860), German philosopher

Were an Asiatic to ask me for a definition of Europe, I should be forced to answer him: it is that part of the world which is haunted by the incredible delusion that man was created out of nothing, and that his present birth is his first entrance into life.

Parerga and Paralipomena

What sleep is for the individual, death is for the will … It would not endure to continue the same actions and sufferings throughout an eternity without true gain, if memory and individuality remained to it. It flings them off, and this is Lethe; and through the sleep of death, it reappears refreshed and fitted out with another intellect, as a new being—"a day tempts to new shores."

These constant new births, then, constitute the succession of the life-dreams of a will which in itself is indestructible … Every new-born being comes fresh and blithe into the new existence, and enjoys it as a free gift; but there can be nothing freely given. Its fresh existence is paid for by the old age and death of a worn-out existence which has perished, but which

contained the indestructible seed out of which this new existence has arisen: they are one being. To show the bridge between the two would certainly be the solution of a great riddle.

The World as Will and Idea

Victor Hugo (1802–1885), French writer

For half a century I have been writing my thoughts in prose and in verse. History, philosophy, drama, romance, tradition, satire, ode and song, I have tried all. But I feel I have not said a thousandth part of what is in me. When I go to the grave I can say like many others, "I have finished my day's work," but I cannot say, "I have finished my life." My day's work will begin again the next morning. The tomb is not a blind alley; it is a thoroughfare. It closes on the twilight. It opens on the dawn.

From *The Philosophy of Life,*by A.M. Baten

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911), German composer

We all return; it is this certainty that gives meaning to life and it does not make the slightest difference whether or not in a later incarnation we remember the former life. What counts is not the individual and his comfort, but the great aspiration to the perfect and the pure which goes on in each incarnation.

From his biography by R. Specht

G. Lowes Dickinson (1862–1932), British philosopher

The whole series of (man's) actions and feelings in one life are determined by those of a previous, and determine those of a subsequent, life … It is, I think, a really consoling idea that our present capacities are determined by our previous actions, and that our present actions again will determine our future character. It seems to liberate us from the bonds of an external fate and make us the captains of our own destinies. If we have formed here a beautiful relation, it will not perish at death, but be perpetuated, albeit unconsciously, in some future life. If we have developed a faculty here it will not be destroyed, but will be the starting-point of later developments.

"Is Immortality Desirable?" Ingersoll Lecture,
Harvard University, 1909

John M. Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925), British philosopher

Even the best men are not, when they die, in such a state of intellectual and moral perfection as would fit them to enter heaven immediately … This is generally recognised, and one of two alternatives is commonly adopted to meet it. The first is that some tremendous

improvement—an improvement out of all proportion to any which can ever be observed in life—takes place at the moment of death … The other and more probable alternative is that the process of gradual improvement can go on in each of us after the death of our present bodies …

Would it not be worth much to be able to hope that what we missed in one life might come to us in another? And would it not be worth much to be able to hope that we might have a chance to succeed hereafter in the tasks which we failed in here?

Some Dogmas of Religion

C. D. Bread (1887–1977), British philosopher

We shall behave all the better if we act on the assumption that we may survive; that actions which tend to strengthen and enrich our characters in this life will probably have a favourable influence on the dispositions with which we begin our next lives; and that actions which tend to disintegrate our characters in this life will probably cause us to enter on our next life "halt and maimed." If we suppose that our future lives will be of the same general nature as our present lives, this postulate, which is in itself intelligible and not unreasonable, gains enormously in concreteness and therefore in practical effect on our conduct.

Henry Ford (1863–1947), American industrialist

I adopted the theory of reincarnation when I was twenty-six … Religion offered nothing to the point … Even work could not give me complete satisfaction. Work is futile if we cannot utilize the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan. I realized that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock …

The discovery of reincarnation put my mind at ease … If you preserve a record of this conversation, write it so that it puts men's minds at ease. I would like to communicate to others the calmness that the long view of life gives to us.

Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or ta-lent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more.

San Francisco Examiner

C. J. Ducasse (1881–1969), philosopher

Whether or not survival as plurality of lives on earth is a fact, it is at least coherently thinkable and not

incompatible with any facts known to us today. Of all the conceptions of significance of human life on earth the reincarnation hypothesis, which regards each life of a person as being like a day in school, is the only one that makes any sense.

How come one person is born a genius and another a boob; one is born beautiful and another ugly; one is born healthy and another crippled? The concept of rebirth on earth, perhaps after an interval occupied by the individual in distilling out of memories of a life just ended such wisdom as his reflective powers enabled him to extract, would enable us to believe there is justice in the universe.

Providence Evening Bulletin

The relation between the man who sows in one life and man who reaps in a later one is essentially the same kind as that between the child and the adult. The two are the "same" person not in the sense that any item, physical or mental, in the infant's makeup has persisted unchanged and is identically present in the mature man, but only in the sense that the former has changed into the latter by a gradual transformation from hour to hour, day to day, year to year. The sameness of the two is thus in the sense only of continuousness of becoming.

A Philosophical Scrutiny of Religion

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