

CHAPTER 32

THE DOCTRINE OF KAMMA AND REBIRTH IN THE WEST

The doctrine of kamma and rebirth is the keystone of the philosophy of Plato. Beings are for ever travelling through “a cycle of necessity”; the evil they do in one semicircle of their pilgrimage is expiated in the other. In *The Republic*, we find kamma personified as “Lachesis, the daughter of necessity,” at whose hands disembodied beings choose their incarnations. Orpheus chooses the body of a swan, Thersites that of an ape, Agamemmon that of an eagle. “In like manner, some of the animals passed into men, and into one another, the unjust passing into the wild, and the just into the tame.”

In the period preceding the Persian Wars, the contact of the West with the East caused a revolt against the simple eschatology of Homer, and the search began for a deeper explanation of life. This quest, it is interesting to note, was begun by the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor, who were influenced by India.

Pythagoras,³⁸⁵ who was born about 580 BCE on the island of Samos, travelled widely and, according to his biographer, studied the teaching of the Indians. It was he who taught the West the doctrine of kamma and rebirth.

“It is not too much,” says Garbe in his *Greek Thinkers*,³⁸⁶ “to assume that the curious Greek, who was a contemporary of the Buddha, would have acquired a more or less exact knowledge of the East, in that age of intellectual fermentation, through the medium of Persia.”

Rebirth As Viewed By Others

Bhagavad Gītā

“As a man, casting off worn-out garments, taketh the new ones, so the dweller in the body, casting off worn-out bodies, entereth into others that are new.”

“For certain is death for the born, and certain is birth for the dead.”

385. Pythagoras remembered having fought as Euphorbus in the Trojan War. Empedocles had been in past births a boy, a girl, a bird, and a scaly fish in the ocean. (Frag. 117, Diels.)

386. i. 127

Herodotus

"The Egyptians propounded the theory that the human soul is imperishable, and that where the body of anyone dies it enters into some other creature that may be ready to receive it."

Pythagoras

"All have souls, all is soul, wandering in the organic world and obeying eternal will or law."

Plato

"Soul is older than body. Souls are continually born over again into this life."

Ovid on Pythagoras

"Death so called, is but old matter dressed
In some new form: and in varied vest
From tenement to tenement though tossed,
The soul is still the same, the figure only lost.
And as the softened wax new seals receives,
This face assumes, and that impression leaves,
Now called by one, now by another name,
The form is only changed, the wax is still the same,
Then, to be born is to begin to be
Some other thing we were not formerly.
That forms are changed I grant;
That nothing can continue in the figure it began."

—translated by Dryden

Schopenhauer

"We find the doctrine of metempsychosis, springing from the earliest and noblest ages of the human race, always spread abroad in the earth as the belief of the great majority of mankind, nay really as the teaching of all religions, with the exception of the Jews and the two which have proceeded from it in the most subtle form however, and coming nearest to the truth as has already been mentioned in Buddhism. Accordingly while Christians console themselves with the thought of meeting in another world in which one regains one's complete personality and knows oneself at once, in these other religions the meeting again is already going on only incognito. In the succession of births those who now stand in close connection or contact with us will also be born along with us at our next birth, and will have the same or analogous relations and sentiments towards us as now, whether these are of a friendly or hostile description."

"Taught already in the Vedas, as in all sacred books of India, metempsychosis is well known to be the kernel of Brahmanism and Buddhism. It accordingly prevails at the present day in the whole of the non-Mohammedan Asia, thus among more than half of the whole human race, as the firmest conviction and with an incredibly strong practical influence. It was also the belief of the Egyptians from whom it was received with enthusiasm by Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato: the Pythagoreans, however, specially retain it. That it was also taught in the mysteries of the Greeks undeniably follows the ninth book of Plato's Laws."

"The Edda also especially in the 'Volusna' teaches metempsychosis; not less was it the foundation of the Druids."

"According to all this, the belief in metempsychosis presents itself as the natural conviction of man, whenever he reflects at all in an unprejudiced manner..." *The World As Will And Idea.*

Hume

"Metempsychosis is the only system of immortality that philosophy can hearken to."

Disraeli

"There is no system so simple, and so little repugnant to our understanding as that of metempsychosis. The pains and pleasures of this life are by this system considered as the recompense or the punishment of our actions in another state."

Dante

"And then son, who through your mortal weight shall again return below."

Emerson

"We must infer our destiny from the preparation we are driven by instinct to have innumerable experiences which are of no visible value, and which we may receive through many lives before we shall assimilate or exhaust them."

Lessing

"Why should I not come back as often as I am capable of acquiring fresh knowledge, fresh experience? Do I bring away so much from one that there is nothing to repay the trouble of coming back?"

Huxley

"Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of transmigration has its roots in the realm of reality.

"Everyday experience familiarises us with the facts which are grouped under the name of heredity. Everyone of us bears upon him obvious marks of his parentage perhaps of remoter relationships. More particularly the sum of tendencies to act in a certain way, which we call character, is often to be traced through a long series of progenitors and collaterals. So we may justly say that this character, this moral and intellectual essence of a man does veritably pass over from one fleshly tabernacle to another, and does really transmigrate from generation to generation. In the new-born infant the character of the stock lies latent, and the ego is little more than a bundle of potentialities, but, very early these become actualities: from childhood to age they manifest themselves in dullness or brightness, weakness or strength, viciousness or uprightness; and with each feature modified by confluence with another character, if by nothing else, the character passes on to its incarnation in new bodies.

"The Indian philosophers called character, as thus defined, 'Karma.' "It is this karma which passed from life to life and linked them in the chain of transmigrations; and they held that it is modified in each life, not merely by confluence of parentage but by its own acts."

Tennyson

Or if through lower lives I came
Tho' all experience past became,
Consolidate in mind and frame.
I might forget my weaker lot;
For is not our first year forgot
The haunts of memory echo not.

Wordsworth

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The soul that rises with us, our life's star
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from after:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness.

Shelley

"If there be no reasons to suppose that we have existed before that period at which existence apparently commences, then there are no

grounds for supposing that we shall continue to exist after our existence has apparently ceased."

Bowen

Professor Francis Bowen of Harvard University, in urging Christians to accept rebirth, writes:

Our life on earth is rightly held to be a discipline and a preparation for a higher and eternal life hereafter, but if limited to the duration of a single mortal body, it is so brief as to seem hardly sufficient for so grand a purpose. Three score years and ten must surely be an inadequate preparation for eternity. But what assurance have we that the probation of the soul is confined within such narrow limits? Why may it not be continued or repeated through a long series of successive generations, the same personality animating one after another an indefinite number of tenements of flesh and carrying forward into each the training it has received, the character it has formed, the temper and dispositions it has indulged, in the steps of existence immediately preceding. It need not remember its past history even whilst bearing the fruits and the consequence of that history deeply ingrained into its present nature. How many long passages of any one life are now completely lost to memory, though they may have contributed largely to build up the heart and the intellect which distinguish one man from another? Our responsibility surely is not lessened by such forgetfulness. We still seem accountable for the misuse of time, though we have forgotten how or on what we have wasted it. We are even now reaping the bitter fruits, through enfeebled health and vitiated desires and capacities, of many forgotten acts of self-indulgence, wilfulness and sin—forgotten just because they were so numerous.

If every birth were an act of absolute creation, the introduction to life of an entirely new creature, we might reasonably ask why different souls are so variously constituted at the outset? If metempsychosis is included in the scheme of the divine government of the world, this difficulty disappears altogether. Considered from this point of view, every one is born into the state which he had fairly earned by his own previous history. The doctrine of inherited sin and its consequence is a hard lesson to be learned. But no one can complain of the dispositions and endowments which he has inherited so to speak from himself, that is from his former self in a previous state of existence. What we call death is only the introduction of another life on earth, and if this be not a higher and better life than the one just ended, it is our own fault.

Pre-Existence

I laid me down upon the shore
And dreamed a little space;
I heard the great waves break and roar;
The sun was on my face.

My idle hands and fingers brown
Played with the pebbles grey;
The waves came up, the waves went down;
Most thundering and gay.

The pebbles they were smooth and round
And warm upon my hands;
Like little people I had found
Sitting among the sands.

The grains of sand so shining small.
So through my fingers ran;
The sun shown down upon it all.
And so my dream began;

How all of this had been before,
How ages far away.
I lay on some forgotten shore
As here I lie today.

The waves came up shinning up the sands,
As here today they shine;
And in my pre-Pelasgian hands
The sand was warm and fine.

I have forgotten whence I came
Or what my home might be,
Or by what strange and savage name
I called that thundering sea.

I only know the sun shone down
As still it shines today.
And in my fingers long and brown
The little pebbles lay.³⁸⁷



387. Barry Cornwall, *An Anthology of Modern Verse*, chosen by A. Methuen, London, 1921.