

The Coming to Birth of the Spirit

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“You cannot dip your feet twice into the same waters, because fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.”
Heracleitus

The present article embodies a part of the material which I have assembled during recent years toward a critical analysis of the Indian, and incidentally neo-Platonic and other doctrines of “reincarnation,” regeneration, and transmigration, as these terms are defined below. These doctrines, often treated as one, appear to have been more profoundly misunderstood, if that is possible, than any other aspect of Indian metaphysics. These theses that will be proposed are that the Indian doctrines of the palingenesis is correctly expressed by Buddhist statement that in “reincarnation” nothing passes over from one embodiment to another, the continuity being only such as can be seen when one lamp is lighted from another: that the terms employed for “rebirth” (e.g. punar janma punar bhava, punar apâdana (prati januma, nava jamna)) are used in at least three easily distinguishable senses (1) with respect to the transmission of physical and psychic characteristics from father to son, i.e. with respect to palingenesis in a biological sense, defined by Webster as “the reproduction of ancestral characters without change,” (2) with respect to a transition from one to another plane of consciousness effected in one and the same individual and generally one and the same life, viz. that kind of rebirth which is implied in the saying “Except ye be born again” and which the ultimate term is deification, and (3) with respect to the “motion” or peregrination of the Spirit from one body-and-soul to another, which “motion” necessarily takes place whenever one such a compound vehicle dies or another is generated, just as water might be poured out of some vessel into the sea, and dipped out by another, being always “water”, but never, except in so far as the vessel seems to impose a temporary identity and shape on its contents, properly “a water”; and thirdly, that no other doctrines or rebirth are taught in the Upanisads and Bhagavad Gita than are already explicit and implicit in the Rig Veda.

“Spirit” we employ in the present introduction with reference to atman, brahman, mrtysu, purusa, etc., alike, but in the body of the article only as rendering of atman, assuming as usual a derivation from a root an or va meaning the breathe or blow. But because the Spirit is really the whole of Being in all beings, which have no private essence but only a becoming, atman is also used reflexively to mean the man himself as he conceives “himself” (whether as body, or body-and-soul, or body-and-soul-and-spirit, or finally and properly only as Spirit), and in such contexts we render atman by “self”, or sometimes “self, or spirit”. Capitals are employed whenever there seems to be a possibility of confusing the very Man or immanent God with the man “himself”; but it must always be remembered that the distinction of spirit from Spirit and person from Person is “only logical, and not real,” in other words, a distinction without difference (bhedabhea). A sort of image of what may be implied by such a distinction (which is analogous of that the

Persons as envisaged in the Christian Trinity) can be formed if we remember that the Perfected are spoken of as “rays” of the Supernal Sun, which rays are manifestly distinct if considered in their extension, but no less evidently indistinct if considered in their intension, i.e. at their source.

The Upanishads and BG are primarily concerned to bring about in the disciple a transference of self-reference, the feeling that “I am” from oneself to the Spirit within us: and this with the purely practical purpose in view of pointing out a Way (marga, Buddhist magga) that can be followed from darkness to light and from liability to pain and death to a state of deathless and timeless beatitude, attainable even here and now. In the Upanishads and early Buddhism it is clear that what had been an initiatory teaching transmitted in pupillary succession was now being openly published and in some measure adapted to the understanding of “royal” and not merely “sacerdotal” types of mentality, for example in the BG.

On the other hand, it is equally clear that there existed widespread popular misunderstandings, based either on an ignorance of the traditional doctrines or a too literal interpretation of what had been heard of them. The internal evidence of the texts themselves with their questions and answers, definitions and refutations, is amply sufficient to show this. Hence, then, the necessity of those innumerable dialogues in which, alike in the Upanishads, BG and Buddhism, that which in “us” is, and that which is not, the Spirit are sharply distinguished and contrasted; the Spirit being that which “remains over” when all other factors of the composite personality “identity-and-appearance,” or “soul-and-body” have been eliminated. And furthermore, because “That One that breathes yet does not breathe” (RV. X,129.2) is not any what as opposed to any other what, It or He is described simultaneously by means of affirmations and denials, per modum excellentiae et remotiois. The following analysis of the Supreme Identity (tad ekam), restricted to words derived from an, to “breathe” or va, to “blow”, may contribute to a better understanding of the texts:

Despirated Godhead: Avatam, niratma, anatmya, nirvana, Pali nibbana. Only negative definitions are possible.

Spirit, God, Sun, “Knower of the Field”, King: atman, Pali atta. In motion, vayu, vata, “Gale of the Spirit”; and prana, “Spiration”, the “Breath of Life” as imparted, not the breath empirically, but the “ghost” that is given up when living creatures die. Being “One and many”, transcendent and immanent, although without any interstice or discontinuity, the Spirit, whether as atman or as prana can be considered in the plural (atmanah, pranah), though only “as if”. Form, as distinguished from substance: Intellect

What-is-not-Spirit; Moon; The Field, World, Lower Earth, the King’s domain: Anatman, Pali anatta. The hylomorphic, physical and psychic, or lower-mental, vehicle of the Spirit, (is) seemingly differentiated by its envelopes. Mortal substance as distinguished from its informing Forms.

These are not “philosophical” categories, but categories of experience from our point of view, sub rationem dicendi sive intelligendi, rather than secundum rem.

We can scarcely argue here in detail what was really meant by the palingenesis, metempsychosis, or metasomatosis of the neo-Platonic tradition. We shall only remark that in such texts as Plotinus Enneads III, 4.2 (Mackenna’s version), where it is said that “Those (i.e. of us) that have maintained the human level are men once more. Those that have lived wholly to sense become animals ...the spirit of the previous life pays the

penalty,” it must be realized that it is a metempsychosis and metasomatosis (an not a transmigration of the real person) that is in question; it is a matter, in other words, of the direct and indirect inheritance of the psycho-physical characteristics of the deceased, which he does not take with him at death and which are not a part of his veritable essence, but only its temporary and most external vehicle. It is only in so far as we mistakenly identify “ourselves” with these accidental garments of the transcendent personality, the mere properties of terrestrial human existence, that it can be said that “we” are reincorporated in men or animals: it is not the ‘spirit’ that pays the penalty, but the animals or sensitive soul with which the disembodied spirit had no further concern. The doctrine merely accounts for the reappearance of psycho-physical characteristics in the mortal sphere of temporal succession. The intention of the teaching is always that a man should have recognized “himself” in the spirit, and not in the sensitive soul, before death, failing which “he” can only be thought of as in a measure “lost”, or at any rate disintegrated. When, on the other hand, it is said that the “Soul” is “self-disturbed” (cf. Atmanam vibhajya, MU VI, 26) and “always the same thing present entire” (ibid., III,4,6) and that this “Soul passes through the entire heavens in forms varying with the variety of place”- the sensitive form, the reasoning form, even the vegetative form" (ibid., III,4,2) it is evident that it is only as it were that there is any question of “several Souls,” and that what is described is not the translation of a private personality from one body to another, but much rather the peregrination of the Spirit (atman) repeatedly described in the Upanisads as omnimodal and omnipresent, and therefore as occupying or rather animating body after body, which bodies or rather bodies and sensitive souls, follows one another in causally determined series.

All this is surely, too, what Eckhart (in whom the Neo-Platonic tradition persists) must mean when he says “Aught is suspended from the divine essence; its progression (i.e. vehicle) is matter, wherein the soul puts on new forms and puts off her old ones ... the one she doffs she dies to, and the one she dons she lives in” (Evans ed. I,379), almost identical with BG II,22 “As a man casting off worn-out garments, taketh other new ones, so the Body-dweller (dehin = sarira atman), casting off worn-out bodies, enters into new ones,” cf. BU IV,4.4 “Just so this Spirit, striking down the body and driving off its nescience, makes for itself some other new and fairer form.”

The three sections of Upanishads translated below begin with the question, “What is most the Spirit”? That is to say, “What is this “Self” that is not “myself”? What is this “Spirit” in “me”, that is not “my” spirit”? It is the distinction that Philo is making in *Quaestiones ... ad Genesis II,59* and *De Cherubim*, 113ff. (as cited by Goodenough, *By Light, Light*, 1941, pp.374-375) when he distinguishes “us” from that in us which existed before “our” birth and will still exist when “we, who in our junction with our bodies, are mixtures (sunkritoi) and have qualities, shall not exist, but shall be brought into the rebirth, by which, becoming joined to immaterial things, we shall become unmixed (asunkritoi) and without qualities.” The “rebirth” (palingenesia) is here certainly not an “aggregation” or palingenesis in the biological sense, but a “regeneration” (palingenesis as a being born again of and as the Spirit of Light), cf. Goodenough, p.376, note 35.

“What is most the Self,” or “most the Spirit”? As the late C. E. Rolt has said in another context (*Dionysius the Aeropagite on the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, 1920, p.35), “Pascal has a clear-cut answer” “Il n’y a que l’Etre Universel qui soit tel ... le Bien Universel est en nous, est nous-même et ce n’est pas nous.” This is exactly the Dionysian

doctrine. Each must enter into himself and so find Something that is the true Self and yet is not his particular self ... Something other than his individuality which (other) is within his soul and yet outside of him.”

“If any man come to me ... and hate not his own soul (heautou psuchen, Vulgate animam suam) he cannot be my disciple” (Luke, 14:26). The English versions shrink from such a rendering, and have “hate not his own life.” It is evidently, however, not merely “life” that is meant, since those who are at the same time required to “hate” their own relatives, if, on the contrary, they love them, may be willing to sacrifice even life for their sake: what is evidently meant is the lower soul, as regularly distinguished in the neo-Platonic tradition from the higher power of the soul which is that of the Spirit and not really a property of the soul but its royal guest. It is again then, precisely from this point of view that St. Paul says with a voice of thunder, “For the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even the dividing asunder of soul and spirit” (Heb. 4:12), and consistently with this that “Whoever is joined unto the Lord is One Spirit” (I Cor.6:17, cf. 12:4-13).

With this may be compared, on the one hand, BG VI,6 “The Sprit is verily the foeman of and at war with what-is-not-the-Spirit” (anatmanas tu satrutve vartetamaiva satrutvat), where anatman = Buddhist anatta, all that, body-and-soul, of which one says na me so atta, “This is not my spirit,” and on the other, with Eckhart’s “Yet the soul must relinquish her existence” (Evans ed., I,274), and in the anonymous Cloud of Unknowing, Chap. XLIV, “All men have matter of sorrow: but most specially he feeleth sorrow, that feeleth and wotteth that is, “ and with Blake’s ”I will go down unto Annihilation and Eternal Death, lest the Last Judgment come and find me unannihilate, and I be seiz’d and giv’ en into the hands of my own Selfhood.” All the scripture, and even all wisdom, truly, “cries aloud for freedom for self.”

But if “he feeleth sorrow that feeleth and wotteth that he is, “ he who is not longer anyone, and sees, not himself, but as our texts express it, only the Spirit, one and the same in immanence and transcendence, being what he sees, geworden was er ist, he feels no sorrow, he is beatified, - “One ruler, inward Spirit of all beings, who maketh manifold a single form! Men contemplative, seeing Him whose station is within you, and seeing with Him, -eternal happiness is theirs, not others” (KU V,12).

An “actual experience of Unknowing and of the Negative Path that leads to it” (Rolt, *ibid.*) is not easy to be had, unless for those who are perfectly mature, and like ripe fruits, about to fall from their branch. There are men still “living,” at least in India, for whom the funeral rites have been performed, as if to seal them “dead and buried in the Godhead.” “It is hard for us to forsake the familiar things around, and turn back to the old home whence we came” (Hermes, Lib. IV,9). But it can be said, even of those who are still self-conscious, and cannot bear the strongest meat, that he specially, if not yet most specially, “feeleth joy,” whose will has already fully consented to, though it may not yet have realized, an annihilation of the whole idea of any private property in being, and has thus, so to speak, foreseen and foretasted an ultimate renunciation of all his great possessions, whether physical or psychic. Mors januva vatae.