
UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON REBIRTH AND RESURRECTION

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To ask meaningful questions not only about life after death, but also about life before death.
- To understand appreciate resurrection and reincarnation.
- To encourage the students to develop a personal conviction on life after death.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit focuses on two significant understandings of life after death: rebirth and resurrection.

4.2 ORIGINS ON THE THEORY OF REBIRTH (OR REINCARNATION)

A belief in reincarnation has been shown to be part of the institutionalised eschatology of tribal people in different parts of the world. Even today, traces of such views are found as far apart as among the Igbo tribe of South East Nigeria and the natives of the Trobriand (or Kiwira) Islands, of the coast of New Guinea just off the North-Western tip of Australia. It is certain that rebirth theories flourished among the tribal, non-Brahmanic religious in the Gangetic region of ancient India, in pre-Aryan times. Scholars have observed that the documented evidence of rebirth or – more accurately – karmic eschatology in Vedantic and Buddhist texts in our country reveal not so much the earlier pre-Aryan conceptions but the attempt to accommodate it to the religious convictions of the fair-skinned invaders from the North. Indeed, the Rig-Veda, the oldest of all

ancient Indian texts, makes no mention of reincarnation at all. Rather than lose ourselves in a maze of hypotheses and conjectures, however, we shall begin our study of reincarnation with a glance at the earliest textual evidence: the writings of Plato in the West and the ideas expressed in the later Vedas in the East.

4.3 PLATO ON REINCARNATION

There is a most convenient extract from Plato's *Timaeus* which gives us, in a nutshell, his doctrine on the subject: "The Demiurge created as many souls as there are stars, and then laid down the laws by which their destinies would be governed: At the first birth, the conditions of all souls will be equal so that there will be no disadvantaged among them; entering into Time and distributed throughout the universe, these souls will take on the nature most capable of honouring the gods. However, human nature being dual, superiority must be deemed to reside in the virile [i.e. male] sex. Once souls have been implanted in bodies, and the person's actions have resulted in either losses or gains... he who has lived right will mount towards the particular star assigned to him to dwell there in a condition of happiness that conforms to the state of his soul. However, he who has failed the test will be reborn again, changing his nature for that of a woman. If, in this new nature, the soul does not cease and desist from malice, it will be reincarnated continuously into animal bodies according to the nature of its vice. Through such continued metamorphoses, it will never see the end of the penalties it must suffer. Having made known to souls these dispositions of the laws by which their destinies would be governed definitely not foreknowing the malice to which any of them might become prey – the Demiurge then thrust the created souls into Time, disturbing them throughout the earth and moon." (Plato).

Some Comments on this Text

There are, of course, other texts of Plato, scattered references here and there, but this, in our opinion, is the most concise summary of his views so we shall confine myself to them. We note, just for the record, that Plato – like most of the ancient classical thinkers – thought that the moon (like the other planets) was inhabited, along with the earth. The souls which would "take on the nature most capable of honouring the gods" refer to human nature. In other words, they would animate intelligent human beings who alone would be capable of believing in the gods and raising up altars in their worship. There is a strong dose of male chauvinism evident, here – which is also to be found in Indian conceptions of reincarnation. All humans were supposedly male at the onset. Reincarnation in a woman's body was the result of a *fall*. In Greece, as in India, to be born as a woman is the consequence of a fault committed in a previous existence. A further degeneration would be rebirth as an animal. As Plato puts it in *Phaedo*: "Those for whom gluttony, excess and passion for drink have been regularly indulged without any effort being exerted to master these vices will no doubt see their souls implanted in the bodies of donkeys or similar beasts." The strong apologetic thrust of the theory of rebirth is already in evidence from this text. Over again, Plato is reminding us that humans are not justified in blaming the Deity for their unhappy state. If we find ourselves in a miserable condition, it is because of our conduct in a previous existence.

4.4 INDIAN TEXTS ON REINCARNATION

The three great religions of India – Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – all share a common set of eschatological features. They can be summed up as follows:

- a) A theory of rebirth that postulates a cyclical theory of continuity, so that death is merely a temporary state in a continuing process of births and rebirths.
- b) A theory of *karma* that postulates that one's present existence is determined for the most part by the ethical nature of one's past actions.
- c) A theory of the nature of existence known as *samsara*, which included all living things in the cycle of endless continuity.
- d) A theory of salvation (*nirvana*), the salient characteristic of which is the view that salvation must involve the cessation of rebirth, and must therefore occur outside the whole cycle of continuity or *samsara*.

The “typical text” that we would cite to exemplify this (no doubt, we can supplement this with other extracts from our study of Indian Philosophy) is from the *Chandogya Upanishad*: “Those who in the village reverence a belief in sacrifice, merit and almsgiving – they pass into the smoke (of the funeral pyre); from smoke, into the night; from the night, into the latter half of the month: from the latter half of the month, into the six months during which the sun moves southward, into the world of the fathers; from the world of the fathers, into space; from space, into the moon. That is King *Soma*. That is the food of the gods. The gods eat that. After having remained in it as long as there is a residue (of their good works), then by that course by which they came they return again, just as they came, into space, from space into wind. After having become wind, one becomes smoke. After having become smoke, he becomes mist. After having become mist, he becomes cloud. After having become cloud, he rains down. They are born here as rice and barley, as herbs and trees, as sesame plants and beans. Thence, verily, indeed, it is difficult to emerge, for only if someone or other eats him as food and emits him as semen, does he develop further. Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here – the prospect is indeed that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the womb of a Kshatria, or the womb of a Vaisya. But those who are of stinking conduct here – the prospect is, indeed that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine or the womb of an outcast (*candala*)” (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 5.10.3-7).

Some Comments on this Text

As with the Platonic *Timaeus* text, we hasten to add that we have chosen this as a typical or representative text out of several possibilities. One can cite many references to reincarnation in the various Upanishads, from the *Gita* and from other Indian religions. But this is a fairly detailed presentation and so should suffice for our purpose. What strikes one, first of all, is the incorporation of the system of caste into the whole theory with the result that a divine sanction is given to a vested-interest interpretation of a social structure which implies being wedded to a very oppressive status quo. Reincarnation in various sub-human forms is upheld clearly over here.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) How diverse is the belief in rebirth?

2) What are the common eschatological features of Indian religions?

4.5 IMPLICATIONS OF REINCARNATION THEORY

Reincarnation, like all views upholding the afterlife is not a scientific truth that can be proved. Neither can it be disproved, in my opinion. However, before we enter into this aspect of the question, it would be good to ask ourselves what are the various philosophical implications of the theory of reincarnation – first, in general, and then with which special reference to the philosophy of the human person. Positively, it seems to me that reincarnation upholds a certain holistic vision of things. It recognises that there is a certain basic inter-connectedness between humans and all of reality. It is significant that karma and reincarnation is held to be pervasive even in an atheistic world-view. Karma, in such cases, is seen as a kind of cosmic law that binds all of reality together. “As you sow, so shall you reap”: this is guaranteed, not by the intervention of some divinity who restores order, but the very structures of the cosmos. However, it certainly involves a dichotomised conception of the human person. The real self is not at all embodied: it is something deeper than that, something that can cast off the bodily element and assume a totally different body without any difficulty. Our particular embodiedness is something really alien to us. It’s like putting on or taking off a shirt or a dress which is not part of me at all.

I am not saying that an integrated understanding of the human person is rationally provable while a dichotomised one is not. It is true that we experience a tremendous psyche-somatic union in the human person but it is possible, while not denying this phenomenon, to interpret it – as Plato and reincarnationists do – as not necessarily obliging us to uphold such an integration. What I’m saying is that it doesn’t seem to me that reincarnation is compatible with a philosophy of human person that implies an integrated understanding of the human person. This, of course, is in no way a “refutation” of reincarnation.

4.6 CRITICAL RESPONSE ON REBIRTH

Reincarnation theory is basically an attempt to respond to the scandal of suffering in this world. Particularly it seems to offer some kind of explanation as to why some children are born mentally retarded or blind or in some way deformed: it's all a punishment for fault in previous existence. And so too when the poor get poorer and the rich get richer or when those who live decent lives are trampled underfoot while the rascals prosper. The former are expiating crimes of a previous life. The latter are being rewarded for the good they did in their earlier birth. And if they are now abusing their power, well, they'll pay for it in the next round.

Thus a sense of order is maintained and the feeling of outrage which was aroused at the plight of the apparent innocent is somewhat mollified. They are not so "innocent" after all. And if they humbly submit to their lot, their situation will improve in their next birth. However, this view, as we have seen, stifles quite effectively any social concern or consciousness: it does seem inadvisable to go to the aid of such people, much less encourage them to revolt against the injustices they are undergoing. If they rebel against their punishment or if we seek to mitigate their lot, this will not help them in the long run. For they will have to pay the penalty still, carrying it over to their next life, together with the further fault of rebelling against *dharma*, the cosmic order. Of course, we are not unaware of heroic social reformers and deeply committed persons like Baba Amte and, of course, Gandhiji. But it is a fact that for quite some time, the popular understanding of rebirth in India has dampened many a flame of social concern. Finally, I do feel still a sense of outrage that one be suffering pain and punishment for crimes that he or she can no longer remember – for at least the vast majority has no recollections of former life. This fact alone offsets whatever "mollification" the theory might have set in, as referred to at the beginning of this paragraph.

But some do remember, we are told. And from time to time we read in the popular press – sometimes even in serious journals, very cautious of all sensationalism – startling accounts of people who recall a previous life or seem to recognise a place they've never visited before. Many of us have, at some time or the other, the uncanny feeling that "this place seems vaguely familiar" or this entire event is coming across to me as a repeat performance. True, many "recollection" stories fall apart under close study and can be shown up for the frauds that they are. But there still remains the baffling residue, not to mention the personal experiences referred to above. What shall we make of these? Perhaps the case of Bridey Murphy is the most famous "reincarnation" story on record. But there are many others, some even more impressive and well-documented, which are not so well known. Some of these can be found by consulting a most interesting study by a doctor, Ian Stevenson, MD, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1974).

In the first place, let us emphasize that there is no metaphysical impossibility about reincarnation – provided one accepts a more or less dichotomised understanding of the human person. It is a bit difficult to explain how a human soul (at least, in the traditional Christian conception) could be animating a sub-human reality. It is easier to accept subsequent human incarnations. But this would involve a lot of things to be ironed out concerning what constitutes identity and the self, leaving aside the usual complications that result from the Platonic or Cartesian splitting up the human person into some kind of a "ghost in a machine", as Koestler wryly dubs it.

Then how do we explain the admittedly minimal but genuine-seeming “recollections”? Here, we have to begin with an admission of colossal ignorance. There is extremely little that we know of our real psychic powers and para-psychology is still in its infancy. Who knows, there may be simpler explanations than reincarnation to account for all these weird experiences and, it seems to me, more reasonable to rule out all possibility of such, before we accept the reincarnation hypothesis with all its comparatively more far-fetched presuppositions and implications. It has been suggested that our (“astral”?) bodies emit radiation or “waves” and that many of these remain “in vibration” long after we are dead – in the case of certain magnetic or powerful personalities, for ever. May be there are such “waves” that can be picked up with the right instrument, more or less along the same lines as our radio or television aerial. And perhaps some of them have been picked up somehow or other by sensitive people who lived many years – even centuries? – after the stored in their subconscious.

Of course this “explanation” is studded and shot through with all manner of “may-bes”, “perhaps”, “somehows” and so on. But then the reincarnation explanation is equally a hypothesis and all “scientific” attempts to account for it fall back on an equal number of wild guesses, suppositions and ventures into the dark.

4.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON REINCARNATION

Reincarnation theory – originally perhaps no more than an offshoot of early attempt to grapple with the issue of mortality – immortality – was given a particularly ethical twist in India by the addition of the doctrine of *karma*. In India we have seen that it is quite compatible with an atheistic viewpoint. It does not necessarily imply belief in a presiding deity of reward and punishment. Whatever, we can hardly speak of reincarnation as a single monolithic view and there are even variations within the Indian theme. It is also a rather cosmopolitan notion, as we have seen. Julius Caesar, in his Gallic Wars, reports (rightly or wrongly) that such a view was taught by the old Druids. We also know that the view was also held by the pre-Socratics, the Pythagoreans to be precise.

Many people have claimed that they find in reincarnation an intellectually satisfying answer to the baffling question of evil. In fact it creates more difficulties than it solves. In the last analysis, however, my rejection of this doctrine is based on the fact that it doesn’t “click with” me and my values – in fact, it positively jars with them. That I cannot rationally refute the view does not result in any loss of sleep, for me. After all, it cannot be rationally proved either. And since when have rational proofs or refutations been the basis of our deepest convictions, anyway?

There are not lacking even people who find “proof texts” for reincarnation in the Bible. The most commonly cited one is from the New Testament (John 9:2). Of the old born blind, Jesus’ disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this human being or his parents that he was born blind?” This is often cited as biblical evidence in favour of reincarnation. After all, if the disciples could think that the human being was possibly born blind because of his sins, when else could the poor fellow have sinned but in some former life, some previous incarnation? However, this type of argument betrays a bit of ignorance about Jewish culture. Many Jews

believed in prenatal sin, that is, they held that it was possible for a person to sin while s/he was yet in her/his mother’s womb. St. Augustine , in his *Confessions* also seems to favour this view. However shocking – perhaps even amusing. – such a view may be to us, we should try to understand what motivated such a theory. It was a clumsy attempt to explain precisely how babies could be born blind or crippled or lame. Since many Jews upheld the view that all suffering is punishment for sin, the idea of someone being able to sin right “from the formation of the embryo” was a consistent enough explanation.

Summing up, we cannot deny that the doctrine of reincarnation, however uncertain may be the place and the “how” of its development played an important part in the evolution of human thought concerning the afterlife. As Edmund Robillard says in his popular booklet *Reincarnation: Illusion or Reality?* (1982): “In the domain of religion, it is possible to say about the doctrine of reincarnation what we might say about the Ptolemaic theory in the domain of astronomy: both are admirable syntheses containing many of the observations and discoveries of man down the ages. Without Ptolemy, in fact, Copernicus would never have been possible. Without the doctrine of reincarnation, Mann points touching upon the survival of man after death might have remained in the dark, and consequently even the doctrine of the resurrection might have found acceptance more difficult.”

I would not go so far as to imply that reincarnation theory is a kind of *praeparatio evangelica* for the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection which, I think is what Robillard is doing. But it has certainly helped to keep some kind of conviction in the after-life in the forefront of human longings. In my opinion, however, it is the more rationally demonstrable notion of the immortality of the soul that has played for the Resurrection the role that Robillard had assigned to Reincarnation.

The phenomenon of dreams and of imagination, wherein our minds (souls?) seem to be able to emerge from our bodies and wander elsewhere, even taking some weird form, is for Robillard, the common human experience that suggested reincarnation theory to the ancestors of many nations. We may think there is an even more common and scientific basis for the doctrine. This is the phenomenon of the seasons and of day and night. The seasons, as well as day and night, follow each other in a regular cycle of birth and death. Seasonal deaths and rebirths are more strikingly evident in cold climates, where after the barrenness of winter, nature comes to life again in spring. But the same thing happens even in our country with the cycle of sowing, reaping and harvesting. Day dies in the face of night but come to birth again. What could be more natural than to imagine (especially if one subscribes to a holistic vision of things) that, as it is for nature, so it is for the human person: there is a chain of birth, death and rebirth? That is why so many ancient people had a cyclic, rather than a linear understanding of time.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Name one positive implication of the theory of rebirth.

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2) What are some scientific bases for rebirth?

4.8 ESTIMATE ON CONCEPT OF RESURRECTION

Resurrection of the body is the Christian belief. This little phrase can now be understood in all its implications, after the study on Aquinas’ view of the afterlife. As regards the afterlife, there is no need to profess belief in the immortality of the soul. That is something natural to the soul and can be proved rationally, according to the traditionalistic scholastic approach. But the destiny of the body after death is a different matter. At death, the body corrupts while the soul lives on. A special divine intervention is required, whereby it is resurrected – not merely resuscitated (the distinction will become clearer in the next section). That this will come to pass is an article of faith, based on Christian Scripture, which may be interpreted in the traditional sense (Desbruslais 1977).

Until the body is raised, of course, the souls of those who have died will be deprived of their necessary counterpart. The Christian doctrine of the Assumption of Mary is to be understood precisely in this context. It has been defined that God has made an exception in Mary’s case. All other human beings must wait for the Last Day when their souls will receive a “glorified” body, but until then each individual person is, in a very real sense, incomplete. By a special divine intervention in Mary’s case, her body was saved from corruption and was taken up (Latin, *assumptio*) into heaven already *before* the Last Day – an anticipatory grace. Of course, when one upholds a more holistic vision of the human person, all these dogmas need to be rethought so that their personal relevance and meaningfulness can be established. Such details, interesting and important though they may be, are beyond the scope of this treatise, here.

All along we have opted for a more holistic vision of the human person, one that sees her/him as one integral reality. We have praised the Thomistic understanding which, thanks to the notion of the extrinsic dependence, was able to rescue the Aristotelian conception of human being, a far more balanced and unified grasp of the human reality than Plato’s. But we have felt constrained to point out that there is still a dichotomised element that persists in the viewpoint of the Aquinas. And there is also the assumption that matter and spirit are, fundamentally, poles apart: between them there is an unbridgeable abyss (Desbruslais 1977).But, what if we hold a more dynamic vision of reality? What if we were to agree with Teilhard and others of his like that matter is “solidified spirit”, that when matter has attained a sufficient level of complexity, it is able to transcend and consciousness emerges. Is there no way at all to maintain life after death when we hold such a unified conception of the human person? (Pandikattu 2011).

Resurrection and Resuscitation

This is one of the preliminary clarifications we must go into in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. Though some people might use the two words, resurrection and resuscitation, interchangeably as if they were straight synonyms, it is good to be precise in distinguishing them. The word “resuscitation” is currently used in medical circles to refer to the revival of a patient who had previously been pronounced clinically dead. Many modern hospitals have more or less sophisticated equipment to assist the more traditional “resuscitation techniques” such as artificial respiration, mouth-to-mouth breathing and the like. A person who has been “resuscitated” is one who has been, as it were, returned to this level of ordinary human existence where one is still subject to pain, discomfort, disease ... and finally death. In this sense, as in the Christian understanding, it would be more accurate to speak of Jesus having “resuscitated” (not resurrected, as is commonly said) Jairus’ daughter (Matthew 9: 18-26; Luke 8: 40-46) and Lazarus (John 11). Resuscitations were not unknown in the Old Testament. The prophet Elisha resuscitated the son of the Shunamite woman (II Kings 4: 32-26).

The “new life” of Jesus at the Resurrection is considered to be something unique in Christian belief. A very bold and quite different claim is made about his return from death. It is a far nobler and higher level of life that he assumes now, something that has little (nothing?) in common with our life here and now and gives us a hint as to what kind of life awaits our “glorified selves” beyond the grace. He is able to appear and disappear, pass through closed doors and so on. Yet, somehow, he is no mere ghost: it is not merely Jesus’ “immortal soul” that the Apostles’ encounter. For he eats with them, he is not merely seen and heard by them: they can touch and handle him. This is the account given in the Gospels written about Jesus’ life. These facts that the gospel writers are saying about the resurrected Jesus is totally different from the activities of the resuscitated people given in the same scripture.

The notion of resurrection is acceptable, as a belief, only to one who accepts the biblical revelation. For one who doesn’t, these claims would make no sense. Yet, could it be a mere matter of blind faith is the question to be raised. Any faith should have a critical and reasonable basis. Faith cannot be justified on grounds of pure reason alone. However, ‘fideism’ (i.e. the assertion that faith is “blind” and must be swallowed without questioning) is unacceptable. Rationalistic attitude and reasonable basis (not an absolute proof) to faith are called for. In Christian history itself we find St. Paul as much as the early Christians, experienced a tremendous resistance to belief in the resurrection of Jesus from would-be converts. They made ‘resurrection’ the cornerstone and central dogma of their Christian faith and life, emphasising something objective about it. They did not have anything in their culture or the cultures known to them to provide the raw material for their belief in it. It could hardly have been “invented” by them, even if they’d wanted to, for they lacked the background cultural ingredients out of which to fabricate it. So Christian understanding of it is claimed to be a fact.

4.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have dealt philosophically with the twin theories of rebirth and resurrection..

Check Your Progress IV

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is ‘resuscitation’?

2) Give two reasons to indicate that resurrection might have really taken place?

4.10 KEY WORDS

- Resuscitation

: Unlike resurrection, resuscitation refers to the revival of a patient who had previously been pronounced clinically dead.
- Ghost in a machine

: it is the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s derogatory description of René Descartes’ mind-body dualism. Arthur Koestler has written a book by the same title in 1967.

4.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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