

The answer was yes. Using the computer analogy of the functionalist, we can explain such continuity in terms of programming. If it is possible to “program” another brain to have the same

psychology as the brain I now have, then it is possible for me to change bodies. And if it is possible for me to change bodies, then it is also possible for me to survive the death of my body.

### Suggestions For Further Reading

*The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*, edited by Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett (New York: Basic Books, 1981), provides a collection of stimulating articles probing the puzzles of personhood. A volume edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), will prove challenging as it takes you deeper into the mystery of personal identity. Also see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), for a revisionist view of the nature of persons and much more. John Hick, in his *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), develops the replica theory in his presentation of what he takes to be a plausible philosophical account of the Christian idea of the resurrection.

## 11.8 What About Reincarnation?

Belief in reincarnation is widespread in India and many Asian countries, and it is becoming increasingly popular in the West, especially among those influenced by New Age thought. There are a lot of popular books and some scholarly ones published on the topic each year. Reports abound in the media of people who claim to recall past lives. Many have tried hypnotic regression in the hopes of remembering a previous life.

If there is such a thing as reincarnation, what reincarnates? Popular belief would answer that the soul does and would equate the soul with the person. However, as Olen suggests in the last reading, if personal identity is constituted by our memory and if we cannot remember our previous lives, then in what meaningful sense can we claim that we are reincarnated? Of course, some people claim to have memories of previous lives. If they do, this would constitute good grounds (at least according to Olen) to suppose that they (their person) has survived. But most of us don't. What is to be said of those who don't remember?

Among some Indian philosophers it is thought the *jiva* (ego, individual self, individual soul) reincarnates. But what is this *jiva*? If it is an immaterial stuff that has no memories of previous experiences, in what sense can it be the same person? However, according to other Indian philosophers, you are not really identical with your *jiva*. The *jiva* is not the true Self, the Atman is, and the Atman does not reincarnate. In fact, it is by coming to the realization of our true Self that we escape the cycle of reincarnation.

Buddhism accepts the idea of rebirth but rejects transmigration—the notion that a soul substance migrates from this life to the next life. The five aggregates (form, sensation, thought, dispositions, and consciousness) separate at death. My next life is the effect of actions performed in this life and previous lives. Personal identity

through time does not consist of a soul substance but of a continuity of karma. And, as in Hinduism, the goal of life is to find release from karma and the cycle of rebirth.

Many Buddhist and Hindu philosophers would find the desire for some sort of personal immortality, even in the form of reincarnation, to be quite selfish and wrongheaded. Real salvation does not lie in endless personal existence but in escape from the illusion of the ego.

Ghose Arabinda (1872–1950) was born in India and educated in England. At King's College, Cambridge, he was an outstanding student in Greek and Latin. He was imprisoned in 1908 for participating in an Indian nationalist movement and while in prison had a powerful religious experience. Upon his release, he settled in Pondicherry, India, and began an ashram (religious community).

Sri Aurobindo, as he is usually called, rejected the world-negating aspects of ancient Indian philosophy. He also introduced the idea of evolution and argued that Brahman, the source of all existence, first involutes (turns in upon itself), next becomes manifest as matter, and then progressively develops toward consciousness through the process of evolution. Human consciousness and personhood is the highest stage of evolution that Brahman has so far reached. But there is a higher stage to come, which he calls the “life divine.” That stage of “Godhood” will radically transform social, cultural, and individual life.

In the next selection, Sri Aurobindo seeks to clear up some common misconceptions about reincarnation. He uses the term **Purusha**, or Person, instead of Atman (true Self), contrasting it with **prakriti**, or the totality of nature that is not Purusha.

### *Reading Questions*

1. Do you agree with Aurobindo that what is attractive about the “cruder” notion of reincarnation is the idea that our personality passes from one body to another? Why, or why not?
2. Do you agree that the loss of memory is a major objection to this theory of personal reincarnation? Why, or why not?
3. How does Aurobindo characterize the Buddhist view of reincarnation?
4. Why does “metempsychosis” better characterize the Vedantist view?
5. If your personality and memories do not reincarnate, in what sense can we say that you reincarnate?
6. Do you believe in reincarnation? Why, or why not?

## The Reincarnating Soul

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### SRI AUROBINDO

HUMAN THOUGHT IN the generality of men is no more than a rough and crude acceptance of unexamined ideas; it is a sleepy sentry and

allows anything to pass the gates which seems to it decently garbed or wears a plausible appearance or can mumble anything that resembles

some familiar password. Especially is this so in subtle matters, those remote from the concrete facts of our physical life and environment. Even men who will reason carefully and acutely in ordinary matters and there consider vigilance against error an intellectual or a practical duty, are yet content with the most careless stumbling when they get upon higher and more difficult ground. Where precision and subtle thinking are most needed, there they are most impatient of it and averse to the labour demanded of them. Men can manage fine thought about palpable things, but to think subtly about the subtle is too great a strain on the grossness of our intellects; so we are content with making a dab at the truth, like the painter who threw his brush at his picture when he could not get the effect that he desired. We mistake the smudge that results for the perfect form of a verity.

It is not surprising then that men should be content to think crudely about such a matter as rebirth. Those who accept it, take it usually ready-made, either as a cut and dried theory or a crude dogma. The soul is reborn in a new body—that vague and almost meaningless assertion is for them sufficient. But what is the soul and what can possibly be meant by the rebirth of a soul? Well, it means reincarnation; the soul, whatever that may be, had got out of one case of flesh and is now getting into another case of flesh. It sounds simple—let us say, like the Djinn of the Arabian tale expanding out of and again compressing himself into his bottle or perhaps as a pillow is lugged out of one pillow-case and thrust into another. Or the soul fashions itself a body in the mother's womb and then occupies it, or else, let us say, puts off one robe of flesh and then puts on another. But what is it that thus "leaves" one body and "enters" into another? Is it another, a psychic body and subtle form, that enters into the gross corporeal form—the Purusha perhaps of the ancient image, no bigger than a man's thumb, or is it something in itself formless and impalpable that incarnates in the sense of becoming or assuming to the senses a palpable shape of bone and flesh?

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. Achilles, let us say, is reborn as Alexander, the son of Philip, a Macedonian, conqueror not of Hector but of Darius, with a wider scope, with larger destinies; but it is still Achilles, it is the same personality that is reborn, only the bodily circumstances are different. It is this survival of the identical personality that attracts the European mind today in the theory of reincarnation. For it is the extinction or dissolution of the personality, of this mental, nervous and physical composite which I call myself that is hard to bear for the man enamoured of life, and it is the promise of its survival and physical reappearance that is the great lure. 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? Where 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—the old Buddhistic 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 the 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, quite apposite to the subject we have in hand. 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 others "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 that 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, of which Yama affirms that even the gods debated this of old and it is not easy to know, for subtle is the law of it; 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 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 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 everywhere—in all bodies, we say, but really it is not confined and parcelled 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 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? What is it whose issuing out gives this wrench, this swift struggle and pain of parting, creates this sense of violent divorce? 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 have 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 analysis of the successive couches of the earth is a simple matter compared with the analysis of this wonderful creation we call the personality. 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 this is all 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 bed-rock 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 commerce with our surroundings. That commerce adds to our gain, modifies the foundation for a 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. As behind the physical universe there are worlds of which ours is only a last result, so also within us there are worlds of our self-existence which throw out this external form of our being. The subconscious, the superconscious are oceans from which and to which this river flows. Therefore to speak of ourselves as a soul reincarnating is to give altogether too simple an appearance to the miracle of our existence; it puts into too ready and too gross a formula the magic of the supreme Magician. There is not a definite psychic entity getting into a new case of flesh; there is a metempsychosis, a reinsouling, a rebirth of a new psychic personality as well as a birth of a new body. And behind is the Person, the unchanging entity, the

Master who manipulates this complex material, the Artificer of this wondrous artifice.

This is the starting-point from which we have to proceed in considering the problem of rebirth. To view ourselves as such and such a personality getting into a new case of flesh is to stumble about in the ignorance, to confirm the error of the material mind and the senses. 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.

### *Suggestions for Further Reading*

See the article on Aurobindo in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for more background information on his life and views. His major work, entitled *The Life Divine*, is available in many different editions. For a scientific study of reincarnation, see Ian Stevenson's *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2d ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974). Also see *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), for a collection of studies that reveals the complexity of the issues. See Michael A. Slote, "Existentialism and the Fear of Dying," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (January 1975): 17–28, for an approach to the issue that does not focus on afterlife theories but on the very real knowledge we each have of our own deaths and the effect that has on how we live now. *Death and Immortality in the Religions of the World*, edited by Paul Badham and Linda Badham (New York: Paragon House, 1987), contains an informative set of essays including several dealing with reincarnation. Frank J. Tipler in *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) argues that one view of immortality (resurrection) is fully compatible with modern physics.

### *Videos*

*In Search of Life After Death* (24 minutes, 1976) investigates "near-death experiences" and assesses what evidence they might constitute for survival of death. *Life After Death* (32 minutes, 1970) explores ideas about survival and the reasons people have for supposing the belief is true. Roger Woolger in *Other Lives, Other Selves* (47 minutes) deals with past-life regression. All of the above are available from The Hartley Film Foundation, 59 Cat Rock Road, Cos Cob, CT 06807.

*Reincarnation: The Untrue Fact* (39 minutes; produced by the Theosophical Society of America, 1990; distributed by Wishingwell) looks at evidence suggestive of reincarnation.