

**Ronald Bonan**

## ON METEMPSYCHOSIS

“ὁ θάνατος μῆζεν πρὸς μᾶς”

Epicurus, *Letter to Meneceae*

And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many  
deaths.  
(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven,  
O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and  
promotions...

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 49

The philosopher has always been engrossed with the notion of death. Schopenhauer understood this and elevated the idea to the rank of the Muses:

“Death is the true inspiring genius and the musagete of philosophy. This is why Socrates defined it as θανάτων μελέτη”  
(Plato, *Phaedra*, 81a).

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

## *The Metaphysics of Death*

This notion has been presented to us by turns in its various aspects, at times as a metaphysical concept, at other times as an ethnological or religious reality.

The approach we have chosen here is, in a way, psychological, not that our intention is to develop the classic themes of the divers psychological reactions of man faced with death; rather we propose to elucidate, through the idea of metempsychosis, what may be called a fundamental psychology, this being understood as a domain close to ontology and even more so to cosmology, which is delimited by the different eschatological beliefs elaborated by humanity at grips with the disconcerting reality of death.

But the investigation must be even more delimited, to the degree in which it is not a comparative study of the various eschatological systems that would adopt the thesis of metempsychosis as a fundamental postulate. Mircea Eliade himself was alarmed at such an undertaking because of its amplitude and difficulty. In the main we are inclined to set forth the “commonplaces” of the doctrines of reincarnation so as to try to grasp its principal articulations. Our aim is of an archaeological order (in Michel Foucault’s use of this term, that is, an attempt to state the principles and basic structures of a system of thought, an attempt prompted by the desire to elucidate the reasons for each principle).

We say immediately, at the risk of disappointing some expectations, that it will not be a matter here of refuting or ratifying the data of reincarnation but of understanding them from the point of view of philosophy. This does not exclude that if the occasion arises we would allow ourselves to test the coherence of the doctrine if only with the aim of a better understanding of its details.

A last remark of a methodological order before going on to the essential: we started from the postulate that the concepts of Oriental philosophy reveal their concepts to the Occidental reader with no more reticence than those of traditional Greek philosophy: this may “shock” some, but the presence of reincarnational themes in Occidental thought (in Plato, for example) made the transition easier for us and helped us to overcome the misfortune that we are “non-readers” of Sanskrit.

THE DOCTRINE OF REINCARNATION

First of all: are the terms of “reincarnation” and “metempsychosis” totally synonymous? If the first designates the passage of a soul from one body to another, thus presupposing that the soul is incarnated and is in its natural place, the second designates the movement of migration from one body to another. This is the same as saying that the two ideas are inseparable and perfectly complementary, designating by turns the static, then the dynamic, moment of the same reality.

This static/dynamic complementarity defines a sort of optic paradigm, so that we find the doctrine in question given from the two points of view, which brings up a first difficulty for establishing a synthesis. In fact, the static description is determined as an ethic (since it is a matter of describing the consequences of the incarnation of a soul destined to repeat the operation indefinitely). Inversely, the dynamic description would be eschatological (to the degree that the soul is apprehended in its *extra corpore* cycles).

However, in the dynamic version, as in the static, it is necessary to accept a fundamental postulate that is affirmed as evidence for Hinduism (and Buddhism), a true first principle of metempsychosis:

“Consciousness is an energy distinct from the matter making up the physical body and is superior to it.” (*Revenir*, p. XIV).\*

Since this is a postulate we accept it as such without discussion (reserving the right to contest the evidence for it). At this point, we do not discuss this idea or put it into perspective. We merely maintain that it is indispensable to the idea of metempsychosis, a consubstantial element (in fact, it is redundant to speak of metempsychosis, then of consciousness as a reality distinct from matter). It would be contradictory to accept a discourse on reincarnation without provisionally accepting the dualist principle of the independence of the soul.

As various historians of Oriental thought remind us, this

\* All quotations are translated directly from the French editions which the author cites in his notes and bibliography.

principle is present in Western tradition. It is found in Socrates, Pythagoras and Plato. It is present in Judaism (the Zohar Cabal); in Christianity (Origen); in the Suffi for Islamic thought, then again in the Middle Ages with Giordano Bruno, condemned to death for his reincarnationist doctrines. Closer to us in time, the theme is developed in Goethe, the English poets, in Joyce, Jung and Gauguin. It has traveled through the centuries and is always represented by a philosophical, religious or, indeed, artistic current.

A short analysis would suffice to show the great divergences in the different "schools." It is enough to consider the difference in thought that may predominate between Pythagoras and Goethe, but beneath these irreducible differences it may be possible to find a unity of belief, one that links Empedocles and Schopenhauer.

This unity occurs around a certain number of "dogmas" that make up the body of reincarnationist doctrines. We borrow the formulation of the principles among them from a connoisseur of these doctrines, J. L. Borges. (See his book *Qu'est-ce que le bouddhisme?*)

### *Statement of the Doctrine*

To begin with, a few words on the eschatological context. The belief in the transmigration of the soul implies a cosmology of infinite annihilations and periodical creations. Without going into detail on these changes in ontological status, we point out the absence of the idea of absolute beginning in this metaphysics. We will return to this cyclic view and the logic it implies.

If we now place ourselves at any particular moment of this sequence we can grasp a second important point of reincarnationist doctrines:

"Each reincarnation is the consequence of a former reincarnation." Borges, *op. cit.*)

Here we must mention a difficulty arising from an apparent contradiction between several currents of the same reincarnationist inspiration. In fact, the causality that links two successive

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reincarnations is described in determinist terms on one hand and voluntarist terms on the other. A certain current presents a theory in which the choice of the body of incarnation to come is made automatically and in terms of the quality of the previous life. Thus a debauched existence determines a reincarnation in the body of an animal (the one whose behavior is closest to the excess of which the “former” individual was guilty). Another current affirms that there is a free choice of a body on the part of the soul at the moment of a new incarnation:

“You receive the body of your choice. The soul itself creates its body through personal desires. The external energy of the master only furnishes the material envelope that will allow it to satisfy its desires.” (*Partir*, p. 65).

However, it is possible to reconcile these two theories, if we think that basically it is the desires themselves that are determined and that consequently the soul that chooses freely chooses in terms of a certain nature. But in this case we only refer the difficulty to a greater one, because in these conditions we do not understand how a change in the ontological status would be possible, the soul having a nature identical to itself and thus predestined to the same kind of somatic choice for each reincarnation.

We see even more redoubtable difficulties arise, to the point that the question of knowing if we are right to submit these doctrines to a logical analysis of rationality is sometimes posed with insistence. Do the doctrines of reincarnation lay claim to a rational coherence? Or like the Platonic myth do they tolerate the contradiction proper to “eschatological” licence?

We will examine this question later. For the moment, we will continue to state the fundamental principles. A third essential notion is that of the determinant factor of the change in the somatic envelope, rather than its quality. It is the final thought of the living, the one that death interrupts, that serves as a selective factor:

“All that we have thought during our life, all that we have done, leave impressions on our mind and these impressions influence the last thought we will have when we die. Material nature will then grant the body that the quality of our thoughts has

determined. The body we inhabit today is thus the expression of our consciousness at the moment of our last death.” (*Idem*, p. 13).

What is important to understand is the synoptic and integrative nature of the last thought of the dying person. We know that all those who have escaped death bear witness with regard to the reality of this last synopsis, a veritable speeded-up film of an entire life, a snapshot synthesis of a temporal succession limited by a beginning and an end. This synthesis is like a key that will open one new body but is unable to open others. This is how discrimination operates.

Hindu thought calls this key *karma* (a term that has the Sanskrit suffix *kri*, meaning “to do” or “to create.”) It must be pointed out that the *karma* is a substantive, which allows us to think that it is a matter of an autonomous entity. We find the concept in Sanskrit texts to designate the discriminating element in reincarnation as well as a sort of law of conservation of moral energy. Borges tells us that it is a matter of an ethical interpretation of the law of causality.

This allows us to go on to a fourth principle: “*Karma* acts in an impersonal way.” (Borges, *op. cit.*, p. 57).

This principle is a little less implicit than the preceding but is understood in terms of the fact that the ontological status of *karma* is both individual and general; individual because it is the result of an entire life; general because it is the impersonal element in the individual. We “Aristotelians” would say the universal form, which participates in the universal. This fourth principle is of capital importance. Its primary meaning is the inscription in what there is in us of the unalterable, thus the eternal, the givens of my particular life.

“No divinity sits as a judge distributing punishment and reward; each act has in itself the germ of a reward or a punishment that may not be realized immediately but is ineluctable.” (*Idem*).

This permits us to understand the double ontological status of *karma*. As a universal element in us it also represents the absolute moral criterion, immanent and transcendent at the same time. Each of us is thus responsible in a way for the expression he has been able to give to the universal in himself and must account for

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it in the form of an ontological inscription of behavior in the subtle element that is transmitted in reincarnation.

This is the occasion for us to give a corollary for this fourth principle: death represents a forgetfulness of the previous life.

“After death, the entire context of that life founders in oblivion. In this respect, sleep is an experience on a reduced scale.” (*Partir*, p. 65).

We mention this corollary to combat a prejudice that would have the first proof of the truth of reincarnation be that of a certain memory of former lives. We will also return to this subject.

A fifth and final principle completes this statement. It is the properly eschatological description, that of the six conditions that may be experienced by the soul of the man who is rendering up his own:

—the condition of god (attained if during the human incarnation the individual attains *nirvāna*, a sort of quietude, equilibrium in passions and profound reflections in the realizations of the metaphysical cycles);

—the condition of man (the only one to put an end to reincarnation through obtaining *nirvāna*);

—the condition of *asura* (Titan);

—the condition of animal;

—the condition of *preta* (a sort of damned sub-human);

—the condition of infernal being.

Essentially, this is the doctrine. A certain number of consequences come from these primary principles, consequences that we will try to enumerate with the aim of completing the information and of giving ourselves some slight diversion (some of them are paradoxical and amusing).

### *Consequences of the Doctrine of Reincarnation*

First, the serious consequences:

—reincarnation is a doctrine that helps support misfortunes with resignation. To the question, “How did you lose your sight?” the blind Hindu answers, “In a previous life I must have committed some crime.” In other words, there is no suffering and no

happiness that is not deserved;

—the idea of charity becomes a moral vice (ostentation) or an error, since to be unfortunate only expiates sins committed in a previous life, and the attempt to help is to put off the unavoidable payment of this debt. Thus Ghandi condemned the foundation of refuges and hospitals;

—no violent interruption of life can be justified in this view: a slaughtered animal sees his progress checked;

—each “soul” has several chances to elevate itself to *nirvāna*;

—the finality of human existence is to escape a new reincarnation.

Then there are the “less serious” consequences. Consider for example the diminishing of the effect of actions such as suicide or definitive farewell: “Farewells and suicide lose their dignity if they are repeated.” (Borges, *Histoire de l'éternité*, 212).

These consequences are not malevolent inventions but quotations taken from the same book that we have used to illustrate the doctrine itself. For example:

“The glutton who literally crams himself with an impressive quantity of food without discriminating will receive the body of a pig or a goat. This form will allow him to enjoy himself with all sorts of rubbish.” (*Partir*, p. 78).

In the same way, change of sex can be achieved without surgery:

“The man who is too fond of his wife will naturally think of her with his last breath, so that he will be reborn in a woman's body.” (*Ibid.* p. 71).

Or this anecdote that amusingly illustrates the idea that we must not be shocked by the doctrine of reincarnation, since during our life our body is being renewed at every moment and from the cellular point of view, totally, every seven years:

“They say that a Brahman propounded this doctrine to one of Alexander's soldiers. The soldier let him talk, then knocked him down. At the protestations of the Brahman, the soldier, whom he had converted, said, “It is no longer I who struck you, and you are no longer the one who was hit.” (Borges, *Qu'est-ce que le bouddhisme?*).



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But it is easy to draw amusing consequences from metaphysical theories, and if we amused ourselves that way with Heraclitian mobilism or the theories of Zeno, that denied the intelligibility of movement, all Western thought would be turned to ridicule. We would follow in that the example of Diogenes who repudiated by his example.

But we said above that we are not interested in refutation, especially if the theses in question are not presented in a demonstrative way, which is almost always the case as far as the doctrines of reincarnation are concerned, as pointed out by the historians:

“In India, faith in transmigration is so profound that no one has attempted to prove it, contrary to what happens with Christians, where there are abundant proofs of the existence of God.” (Borges, p. 58).

The same, farther on:

“The Hindus have not tried to demonstrate this doctrine; for them it is an obvious axiom.” (Borges, p. 51).

Like all doctrines that imply faith, recourse to proof is out of place and doomed to failure. All the more so because what we are concerned with here and now has within it, according to its adepts, a part of inner and experienced evidence.

But where faith is not as widespread as it is in India, reincarnationists have tried to win conviction and to that end have presented arguments that deserve a close examination, because they are extremely revelatory with respect to the doctrine itself.

### *The Arguments in Favor of Reincarnation*

It should be noted that some books of a proselytizing nature go so far as to speak in terms of the “science of reincarnation.” We do not want to get involved in polemics, but such expressions are veritable provocations for the Western philosopher. Here are some “proofs” of the validity of this science.

—Onirical phenomena such as the reveries of an awakened

consciousness are manifestations of our ancestral past in us;  
—regressions under hypnosis are signs of reincarnation;  
—the synopsis at the moment of death is also a sign;  
—extra-corporal experiences (the vision of one's own body during coma).

This first series usually serves to arouse interest. A second series of arguments serves to persuade, indeed, to convince:  
—the argument of *déjà-vu* (the sensation of recognizing situations, places or persons that we know we have never perceived);  
—the argument of inner certainty (the feeling of eternity doubled by that of a presence in oneself of another).

This argumentation, this recourse to proof, has three fundamental propositions:

- a) when the consciousness relaxes, the memory of former lives is awakened;
- b) at times without relaxation consciousness has access to this memory;
- c) in some, naturally or through spiritual exercises, consciousness of the reality of reincarnation appears as a proof, that is, a correlative of the awakened consciousness.

As promised, we are not going to launch ourselves into refutation, but we would like to. As you may perhaps sense, it would be a useless endeavor for the simple fact that some arguments carry that subjective element that is beyond the true and the false: faith.

### *Discussion of the Arguments*

Some of these yield easily to rational analysis. The first series, for example, has a feeble resistance to the argumentation of a psychological order. It would be relatively simple to show that the manifestations of the unconscious during a lessening in control and relaxation of repression occasion phenomena that are perfectly analogous to those invoked as experimental proofs. It would be especially interesting to point out that after analytical treatment the content of these unconscious or semiconscious manifestations vary to such a degree that it would lead to the belief that we have in some way changed our past!

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The analysis of the second and third propositions is much more interesting. The phenomenon of *déjà-vu* has long intrigued specialists (psychologists and philosophers). Far from being considered a chimera, it attracts the attention of those who aim at exploring all the enigmatic manifestations of psychism. Sigmund Freud tried to give an explanation by means of the theses of psychoanalysis:

“I believe we are mistaken when we qualify as illusion the sensation of *déjà-vu* and *déjà-éprouvé*. Actually, in these cases it is a matter of something that has been experienced, but this something cannot be the object of a conscious memory, because the individual had never been conscious of it. In short, the sensation of *déjà-vu* corresponds to the memory of an unconscious dream.” (Freud, *Psychopathologie de la vie quotidienne*, p. 283).

What seems interesting to us in this explanation is the fact that Freud takes into account that the psychological experience is that of the individual without being that of the person. As for *karma*, there exists a principle in us that is both individual and universal. However, this explanation dispenses with the hypothesis of reincarnation. This argumentation is not a refutation in that we have only changed the hypothesis. This is no doubt what troubled Lacan, who wanted to replace the Freudian hypothesis of an unconsciousness with a veritable reality, possessing the same mysterious characteristic of being at the same time individual and universal. It is a question of language. Thus the explanation of the phenomenon of immediate recognition becomes the following:

“The sentiment of *déjà-vu* has caused so many problems for the psychologists that we could designate it as homonym. It is the symbolic key that releases the spring. *Déjà-vu* occurs when a situation is experienced with a full symbolic signification that reproduces a homologous symbolic situation, already experienced but forgotten, one that is revived without the subject’s understanding the particulars. This is what gives the subject the impression that he has already seen the context, the tableau, of the present moment.” (J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire III. Les psychoses*, p. 127).

One could rightly object that the subject has experienced this

situation in a former life, a hypothesis that is not excluded by this explanation. Except that if it were the case, we would no longer understand the recourse to the symbolic dimension (which would thus become absolutely useless). Lacan's explanation is that between the unconscious "impersonal" subject and the conscious one there is a simple homonymy. Language establishes the link between the two and does so in an objective-subjective way. Once more the hypothesis of reincarnation appears as more onerous.

In our opinion, more "materialistic" explanations suffice to account for the phenomenon, and without desiring to compare ourselves to Lacan or Freud, we will suggest a hypothesis that seems the most simple to us. We imagine that it is a matter of a curious behavior of our memory. It is as though some perception first occurs but on the threshold of a perfect consciousness. An instant later the sensorial excitations occur, and this time we receive them in a clear and distinct consciousness. Our memory is activated and offers us the feeling of *déjà-vu*. But it localizes this reminder poorly. To justify its weakness and confusion we suppose a considerable distance in time, consigning the experience to a remote former life. In actuality, it is only a matter of an immediate past, and the gulf that separates us from it is that of our distraction.

This hypothesis seems tempting to us because of its extreme economy of intellectual notions and procedures. It merely describes the mechanism of an illusion. But the principle of economy is a Western principle (Leibniz uses it frequently). It is foreign to the logic of reincarnationist doctrines that employ excessive means. Some examples to illustrate this inflation of concepts and in some respects very Oriental excess: Plato describes the cycle of souls in the *Republic* as a period of a thousand years. The *kalpa* (Hindu reincarnationist cycle) is evaluated at twelve million years. Marvelous analogies are used to give us some idea of this:

"Let us imagine a stone mountain 18,000 meters high. Every hundred years a very fine Benares silk is passed over it. When this delicate skimming operation has caused the disappearance of the mountain not one *kalpa* will have passed." (Borges, *Qu'est-ce que le bouddhisme?*, p. 53).

Borges continues, "The Hindu mentality delights in imagining vast

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periods of time that are completely foreign to Western practice.” (*Ibid.* p. 53) We cannot resist describing the way Hindu doctrines succeed in giving us an idea of the rarity of the incarnation of the soul in a human body, a fantastic example of the ignorance of the principle of economy:

“A parable tells us of a turtle who lives at the bottom of the sea and whose head emerges every hundred years. A ring floats on the surface of the water. The chances that the turtle will put his head through the ring are as slight as for a being after its death to be incarnated in a human body.” (Borges, *Ibid.*, p. 62).

Infinites unroll between the two passages of a soul into a human body: in spite of the frightening durations the argument of memory and *déjà-vu* continues to play a role, while simple logic tells us its unreality (the man of today would have to remember the world that existed several million years ago!) This tells us the slight hold that the reincarnationist argument offers to logic and the inappropriateness of the expression, “science of reincarnation.”

This is why the third proposition is undoubtedly the most worthy of attention, the one that shows a psychological certitude, an inner sentiment.

Faced with this kind of argument the supporters of rationalism could do nothing but furnish a dialectic argumentation (in the Kantian sense). A marvelous conversion of preoccupation must be mentioned here. In that monument of rationalist philosophy, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we find two famous pages that provide the conceptual tools for thinking about the appeal to the inner certitude of the durability of the soul. We allude to the celebrated “paralogism of the personality” that Kant invokes to illustrate the defect that drives man to affirm the “numerical identity” of himself as evidence of the order of inner certitude.

It is the same problematic, because what the philosopher of the *Critique* has in view is the idea of the durability of a unique substance, equal to itself throughout time (that of one life and probably that of several). The paralogism is stated thus:

“Whoever is conscious of the numerical identity of himself in different times is therefore a person.

NOW the soul has a consciousness of the numerical identity of

itself in different times:

THUS it is a person.” (Kant, *Critique de la raison pure*, p. 293).

Kant puts the accent on the notion of person, but it may be also on the unity of this.

However, let us remember that this is false reasoning, a paralogism. And we may consider, without forcing things, that the reasons that drive man to commit this fault in logic are those that motivate him with the inner sentiment of the durability of the soul and the anteriority of life. Man is led to this kind of reasoning by the fact that to affirm the numerical identity of something he is spontaneously led to consider whatever there is of permanent in that something. Now, when the thing whose identity he is considering is the subject himself, the one who is posing the question, a sort of logical short-circuit is produced. To consider oneself as the object of knowledge brings with it the difficulty of grasping oneself in time and space as is done with any object of knowledge. Now, the time in which I consider any object is within me as a form of sensitivity:

“I thus associate each of my successive determinations and all together to the numerically identical self, in all time that is, in the form of an interior intuition of myself.” (*Ibid*).

This means that each time I test a determination that I assume to be mine, I make it mine by an involuntary movement that simply means I bring it to my consciousness. Or that each time I try to test a temporal continuity between one determination and another, in virtue of a continuous thread manifesting my numeric identity, I find it impossible for me to know if I impose this continuity or if I verify it because time is the form that makes this verification possible in virtue of the dimension of all apperception.

“Thus one must never hold as conclusive the personality of the soul but consider it as a proposition perfectly identical to the consciousness of self.” (*Ibid*).

The interiority of time means that all the time I am conscious of myself I am conscious of this time as belonging to the unity of myself. The identity of my person is thus infallibly found in my own consciousness. This is due to the fact that I consider myself from

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my own point of view. On the other hand, if I consider myself from another's point of view (as the object of my exterior intuition) I do so in a time that is exterior to my consciousness, which gives me access to the possible discontinuity of my identity. However, this point of view is abstract and insignificant with regard to the feeling I have of my numeric identity.

We thus cannot conclude the objective permanence of self in spite of the feeling we have of it:

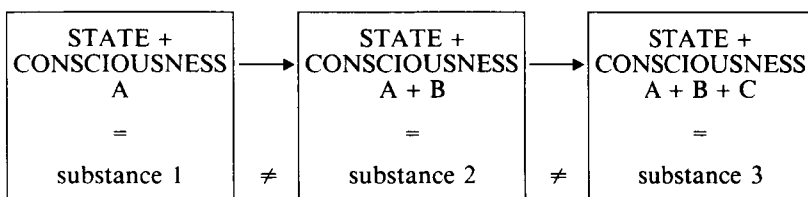
“The identity of the consciousness of self in different times is thus only a formal condition of one's thoughts and their connection but does not at all prove the numeric identity of my subject, where it may produce a change such that it would not allow maintaining the identity while permitting to always continue giving the homonymous title of self, thus meaning that which in any other state, even the complete change of the subject, could still conserve the thought of the preceding subject and in this way transmit it to the following.” (*Ibid.* p. 294).

An astonishing text by Kant in which the hypothesis of the transmigration of the soul is made possible but at the same time unintelligible (not astonishing if we consider the status of the noumenon in criticism). The sentiment of a numeric identity would be the same, even though we changed bodies once a day, but this transformation, to the degree in which it does not affect the formal conditions of the awareness of self, leaves the self in relative indifference. We have seen that this self can thus only claim the status of homonymic unity (which reminds us of the Lacanian explanation of *déjà-vu*).

Obviously, the consequences we assume from this reasoning astounded Kant himself, who, a rare thing for him, wanted to illustrate his text with an example:

“An elastic ball that hits another in a straight line communicates all its movement, consequently its state, if we consider only positions in space. Now, by analogy with these bodies, admit substances of which one would transmit representations to the other with the consciousness that accompanies them. We could thus conceive an entire series of substances in which the first would communicate its state with the consciousness it has of it to a second, this one its own, with that of the preceding substance to

a third, and that one in its turn the states of all the preceding with its own state and consciousness of that state. The last substance would thus have consciousness of all the previous ones, as though they were its own, since these states would have entered into it with the consciousness that accompanies them, and yet it would not have been the same entity in all those states.” (*Ibid*).



Homonymic identity

This Kantian analogy seems to aim expressly at the application of his theory of paralogsms to the problematic of reincarnation and to furnish an answer conforming to the criticism that satisfies the psychologist, the critic and the reincarnationist at the same time.

In the main, the argument comes back to the suspension of judgment dear to Stoics but goes beyond it, because it shows the definitive (constitutive) powerlessness of the human spirit to express itself on the reality of things, especially when this permits the knowledge of the anteriority of the spirit to itself outside the usual conditions for knowledge. For example, it is impossible to speak of the objective nature of time. We know that the thesis of reincarnation affirms the existence of cycles. Philosophy (at least critical philosophy) leaves such questions undetermined. This also means that neither does it show its impossibility. The example of the succession of substances would be perfectly compatible with a circular concept of time.

But what makes sense to us is the profound reason of such a resignation of logic: we know the official, epistemological reason, that which is in the main the strength of criticism. There is no knowledge except through the senses or by construction in intuition. However, the “archaeological” reason, the one that stigmatizes rationalism as a form of knowledge, is the desire to disengage a relatively indeterminate domain, logically speaking, so as to insert the truths of faith and to make room for ethics.



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In other words, if logic does not solve the question of the profound identity of the spirit, that of the reality of its numeric identity (and indirectly that of the continuing existence of the soul after death) it is because it finds an interest in this lack of determination.

It is thus that we would like to take up the last part of this investigation by asking the following question: Given the arbitrary nature of the affirmation of metempsychosis and correlatively that of the cyclic nature of time, what practical interest does such a thesis serve?

### THE DOCTRINE OF CYCLES

The link between the theory of metempsychosis and that of cycles is obvious, even though several variants of the nature, duration and internal logic of the cycle of the soul confront each other within reincarnationism itself.

What attracts our attention is the truly ethical import of this eschatological theory. For it to have one, the individual must feel concerned with the destiny of his soul, and the immensity of the periods that separate two incarnations could weaken this moral dimension. However, we must not forget that the cycle allows the passage of the soul through properly extra-terrestrial space in rapport with its "quality," and that, conforming to the Kantian conception, from the point of view of the living, millions of years of "subjective unconsciousness" are as nothing. A page from the diary of Nietzsche illustrates this astonishing idea:

"If you think you have the right to a long period of peace before being reborn, I swear you are mistaken. Between the last moment of consciousness and the first glimmer of a new life there is no 'lapse of time'. This delay lasts as a flash, while billions of years could not measure it. When a 'self' defaults an infinite amount of time it is no different from an immediate succession." (Nietzsche, quoted by Borges in *Histoire de l'éternité*, p. 215).

The practical extent of the necessary illusion for numeric identity appears here in all its clarity: what I do in this life has immediate consequence in my later life even if it takes place in an infinitely

long time, this being nothing for me. We begin to see the sufficient reason for the nature, impersonal and individual, of *karma*. Impersonal, it neutralizes the infinite that separates me from my next life; individual, it establishes the continuity in the succession of cycles.

So that there is a broad analogy of function between the theory of cycles and that of the eternal return in Nietzsche, even though in other cases we must keep from making too close a comparison: both come from an ethical intention, both are systems that grasp the action by giving it such breadth that man must reflect twice before undertaking it. Another text by Nietzsche presents things from this point of view and shows the eternal return as a selective machine according to the expression of Gilles Deleuze:

“If in everything you do you begin by asking yourself, is it certain that I want to do it an infinite number of times? This will be the most solid center of gravity for you. My doctrine teaches, live in such a way that you want to relive, this is your duty because you will live again in any case! The one whose effort is supreme joy, let him strive! The one who loves rest above all, let him rest! The one who loves above all to obey and follow, let him obey! But he must realize what his preference is and not back away from it by any means! It is a question of eternity. This doctrine is kindly toward those who have no faith in it. It has neither hell nor threats. He who does not have faith in it will only feel that his life is futile.” (Nietzsche, *La Volonté de puissance*, IV, pp. 242-244).

But if the eternal return cannot be a moral theory in the sense that it would introduce a conception of good and evil, it is otherwise for the theory of cycles. It introduces responsibility into human life and moralizes it. First of all, to ignore it is to spoil the almost unique chance to achieve *nirvāna*, but worse, it is to risk hell, a hell all the more terrible because it brings in their turn cycles that are more than equal to the Dantesque visions:

“The bronze hell has four corners and four gates. It is immense and filled with fire. At the end of many centuries one of the gates opens: the sinner succeeds in leaving and penetrates the hell of Dung. At the end of many centuries he can escape and then pass into the hell of Dogs. Several more centuries later, he enters the

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hell of Thorns and returns to the hell of Bronze.” (Borges, *Qu'est-ce que le bouddhisme?* pp. 63-64).

The theory of cycles has infernos and threats (we remember the monstrous conditions lying in wait for the soul after reincarnation). In this regard, the cyclic theory is an anti-Epicurianism. In Epicurianism death is a dissolution that no longer concerns the individual (a thought that should dispel all fear):

“Death is nothing for us, because what is dissolved is deprived of feeling, and what is deprived of feeling is nothing for us.” (Epicurus, *Lettre à Ménécée*).

There is a very instructive diametrical opposition between Epicurus and reincarnationism. First, Epicurus affirms the uniqueness of life:

“We are born once, and we must not expect to be reborn. Thus it follows that eternal duration does not exist in any way.” (Epicurus, *ibid.*).

This negation is followed by an appeal to moderation, which would seem to make the two philosophies similar, but the stoical indifference of the Epicurean sage is not *nirvāna*. In fact, the first concept is perfectly immanent, the second totally transcendent. The Epicurean sage enjoys the moment, because he is conscious of his absolute originality, since he will not return. The Indian sage labors now for an eternity to come and in terms of a past eternity.

We see in this diametrical opposition the ethical importance of reincarnationist cosmology. It remains to interpret the axioms of this doctrine in accordance with this axis in order to understand its “archaeological” economy. The dualist axiom thus sheds a new light to the degree in which monism has never allowed man to be responsible. If conscience is ontologically distinct from matter it may be considered as the cause of its actions, thus liable to answer for them. Reincarnationalist fatalism is in no way determinism. Thus reincarnationalist causality that makes each reincarnation the consequence of the preceding is truly a moral causality (this is why the theme of free choice of a body coexists with a certain automatism).

The responsibility that is incumbent on man in each life is thus

that of all his actions (this finds a strange echo in the Sartrean theories of liberty). This is why all actions are inscribed in destiny and are accumulated at its end: there can be no question of a final repentance. What is done is done. Therefore, before doing it we must carefully reflect, all the more because judgment will be without appeal, emanating from an impersonal principle from which we consequently cannot expect mercy.

Such is the archaeology of the reincarnationist system. It is an ethic of integral responsibility.

We wanted to speak of death, and here it is that the analysis of reincarnationist doctrines has led us to moral considerations. This must not astonish us too much. We only know one face of death, the one that is turned to the side of life. We can only say of the other face what Wittgenstein calls non-sense. However, our entire purpose would be an illustration of the fact that the rapport man has with this unknown is a fundamentally ethical one.

At the end of this analysis it remains only for us to grasp its limits. They are those defined by a choice more or less based on a line of research. Several are possible, particularly the one that runs parallel to the one we have followed: the ontological. The other natural "branch" of what we have called fundamental psychology is the one that is concerned with determining the basic ontological options. The thesis of repetition (reincarnation and cycles) is certainly one of them, as M. Eliade points out:

"In the details of his conscious behavior, primitive archaic man knows no action that has not been presented and experienced previously by another. What he does has already been done. His life is the uninterrupted repetition of actions first performed by others. This conscious repetition of determined paradigmatic actions shows an original ontology." (M. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, p. 15).

In our opinion, such an analysis implies the one we have conducted, which justifies its importance.

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