

TRANSMIGRATION IN THE UPANISHADS AND THE GREEK THOUGHT

Transmigration is a belief taken for granted in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It was during the *Upanishadic* period that this belief arose in India. The *Upanishads*, during the formation of which Buddhism and Jainism arose as a reaction to Brahmanic Hinduism, first taught this doctrine.* Among the Greeks, it was Plato who gave a significant role to this theory in his philosophy. His philosophy is close to the *Upanishadic* views in many ways. He wrote his dialogues when the later *Upanishads* were taking shape. This article is an attempt to study the *Upanishadic* and Platonic view of Transmigration. The term 'transmigration' means the passage of the soul from one body to another. Other terms used are 'rebirth', 'reincarnation' and 'metempsychosis'. Reincarnation sometimes is used in a specific sense : the passage of the soul from one body to another in the same species, while transmigration includes other species also.

I

1. Upanishadic View of Transmigration

Transmigration was taught in the *Upanishads* as a secret doctrine like that of Brahman and Ātman. It was a new teaching not known to the Brahmins as testified by *Brhadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads*.¹ The *Upanishadic* sages who were very much interested in the destiny of man and his condition after death formulated many eschatological theories. Though these theories took shape in the context of sacrifices and rituals, they actually seem to have risen from a reaction to the theology and practice of Brahmanic sacrifices and rituals. During the Brahmanic times, the sacrifices became so important that on these the harmony of the cosmos, the well-being of man and the

* Belief in rebirth is found in *Atharyaveda*, 12, 2, 52,
1, *Br. Up.* 6, 2; *Chq. Up.* 5, 3.

power and prosperity of the gods depended. "By means of sacrifice, the gods obtained that supreme authority which now they wield."² It was by sacrifice that man built his heavenly self.³ The Brahmins alone had access to this absolute power because of their knowledge of the sacrifice and the rituals.

The *Aranyaka* theology, which replaced contemplation with the actual performance of the various Vedic sacrifices and rituals, manifests the reaction to the exaltation of Brahmanic power, and the liberation of the human spirit and the emergence of philosophic thought. The perfect observance of the Vedic prescriptions entitled man to earthly prosperity and heavenly enjoyment. The Upanishadic views asserted the radical insufficiency of Brahmanic religion by teaching transmigration (*samsara*), which was the fate of those who practised it.

2. The Path of the Soul after Death

There are different descriptions about the journey of the soul after death.

(a) Knowledge of the path in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* :

Heaven, rain-cloud, earth, man and woman are sacrificial fires. At death man is laid in the funeral fire and the gods offer him in that fire. Man arises from this offering with the colour of light. Those who know this and those who worship with faith (*śraddha*) go to the Brahma-world and they never return to the earth.

Those who know this, and those too who in the forest truly worship (*upāsate*) with faith (*śraddha*), pass into the flame (of the cremation-fire); from the flame, into the day; from the day, into the half month of the waxing moon; from the half month of the waxing moon, into the six months during which the sun moves northward; from these months, into the world of the gods (*deva-loka*); from the world of the gods, into the sun; from the sun, into the lightning-fire. A person (*puruṣa*) consisting of mind (*manas*) goes to those regions of lightning and conducts them to the Brahma-worlds. In those Brahma-worlds they dwell for long extends. Of these there is no return (*Br. Up.* 6, 2, 15).

Those who perform sacrifice and do good *deeds* are born again :

But they who by sacrificial offering, charity, and austerity conquer the worlds, pass into the smoke (of the cremation-fire);

2. *Śathapathabrahmana* (S.B.), 3, 2, 2, 1,

3. *S.B.* 4, 3 4, 1-5,

from the smoke, into the night; from the night, into the half month of the waning moon; from the half month of the waning moon, into the six months during which the sun moves southward; from those months, into the world of the fathers; from the world of the fathers, into the moon. Reaching the moon, they become food. There the gods—as they say to King Soma, “Increase! Decrease!”—even so feed upon them there. When that passes away for them, then they pass forth into this space; from space, into air; from air, into rain; from rain, into the earth. On reaching the earth they become food. Again they are offered in the fire of man. Thence they are born in the fire of woman. Rising up into the world, they cycle round again thus. But those who know not these two ways, become crawling and flying insects and whatever there is here that bites (*Br. Up.* 6, 2, 16).

Here we notice that the actual performance of Vedic rituals and the observance of Vedic prescriptions is substituted by knowledge of the right path of the soul. Man should know that his life itself is a sacrifice and this life which is the product of the sacrifice of heaven, rain, earth, man and woman, is again offered by the gods at his death. And man rises again from this sacrifice in brilliant form. The knowledge of this sacrifice leads man to the world of Brahma to be eternally there. The whole cosmic process whose climax is reached in human life is contemplated as a sacrifice and this knowledge wins lasting life for man. Those who lack this superior knowledge and put their trust in Vedic sacrifices and good works attain the world of the moon where they enjoy the fruits of their good works until they are exhausted only to return to this earth to be born again as human beings. There are still others who neither possess the superior knowledge nor carry out the Vedic prescriptions and who lead a wicked life. They do not have any reward in the other world, but become insects troubling others.

(b) *Chandogya Upanishad on the nature of rebirth*: The same teaching is found in *Ch. Up.* 5, 4–10, which throws some more light on the nature of rebirth in the following passage:

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 Kshatriya, 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*) (*Ch. Up.* 5, 10, 7).

Those who are reborn, will be born as a Brahmin, or a Kshatriya or Vaisya according to the degree of goodness they have acquired; the

bad will be born as a dog or a swine or an outcast according to the pegree of their wickedness.

(c) *The Journey of the soul in Kaushitaki and Prasna Upanishads :*

In *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, it is the knowledge of Brahman that saves the soul from rebirth. After death everybody goes to the moon where their esoteric knowledge will be tested. If they know that the waning moon is the cause of rebirth and the door of heaven, they will be allowed to go forward; otherwise they will return to the earth to be born again as a worm or insect or fish or animal or as a human being, according to their deeds and knowledge. The man, who passes in the test, proceeds through the various heavenly worlds, one superior to the other and, finally, reaches the world of Brahma. Then he advances to the throne of Brahman and is liable to fall at any time on encountering the many obstacles. As he proceeds conquering the obstacles, he leaves behind him his good and bad deeds. In the end he ascends the throne of Brahma and will have to undergo the last test, a test concerning his identity. If he knows that he is the same as Brahman, he will inherit the Brahma-world.⁴

For *Prasna Upanishad*, it is the knowledge of *Ātman* that wins the Brahma-world. Those who seek *Ātman* with faith and austerity reach the sun through the northern course and will not be born again.⁵

3. The Reasons for Transmigration

Due to ignorance people think that this world is everything and there is no other world; and because of this they are born again and again.⁶ The soul of man is like a rider in a chariot. The soul travels towards its⁷ destiny in the chariot of the body with the intellect as driver and the senses as horses. The man who has no understanding and who is not pure will not reach the goal—the absolute *Ātman*. Yogic discipline (controlling the senses, mind and thoughts), instruction and faith are needed to know *Ātman*. Those who do not proceed on the way towards *Ātman* are bound to be born again.⁸ Those who put their trust in sacrifices and rituals are born again when their merits

4. *Kau. Up.* 1.

5. *Prasn Up.* 1, 9-10; see *Cha. Up.* 4, 15.

6. *Katha, Up.* 2, 6.

7. The pronoun 'it' is used when soul stands for the *Ātman*.

8. *Katha. Up.* 3, 5.

are exhausted in the other world.⁹ The fundamental reason for rebirth is the desire (*kama*) in man.¹⁰ Here the desire means the desire for things other than *Ātman* or Brahman.

4. One's Actions Determine the Rebirth

When a man (one who is faithful to the Vedic prescriptions) dies, the departing soul makes for itself a new form—either that of a father, a *gandharva* or a god or some other being according to the nature of his actions. The reason for this transformation is the relation between man and his actions :

According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.

But people say : “ A person is made (not of acts, but) of desires only.” (In reply to this I say:) As is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs; what action (*Karma*) he performs, that he procures for himself (*Br. Up.* 4, 4, 5).

If man's mind is set on some good he will become that good; if it is set on bad he will become bad.¹¹ According to the degree of goodness or wickedness he has acquired by his deeds at the time of his departure, he will become a new being ascending the scale of goodness or descending the scale of wickedness.¹² Therefore, man is responsible for his future life. He determines the nature of his next life by the actions he performs.

5. The End of Transmigration

Transmigration is terminated by true knowledge. This knowledge will differ according to the different seers of the *Upanishads*. For some, man should know the right path of the soul to the Brahma-world, but for most of them it is the knowledge of the absolute reality called, sometimes *Ātman*, and sometimes *Brahman* or *Purusha*.

9. *Br. Up.* 6, 2. *Cha. Up.* 5, 10, *Prasna Up.* 1, 9, *Mund. Up.* 1, 2.

10. *Mundaka Up.* 3, 2. *Br. Up.* 4, 4. *Prasna Up.* 3, 3.

11. *Ch. Up.* 5, 10.

12. *Ch. Up.* 5, 10; *Kau. Up.* 1, 2; *Katha. Up.* 3, 7; 5, 7. *Mund. Up.* 1, 9 & 10; *Sve. Up.* 5, 7; *Maitri. Up.* 3, 2,

The man whose desire is *Ātman* goes to *Brahman* on his departure from this world.¹³ When a man beholds *Ātman* he is freed from sorrow and liberated from birth.¹⁴ The great sorrow of man is the endless chain of successive lives to which he is condemned. Those who know *Ātman* become passionless, perfect, and are liberated from death.¹⁵ Again, the seekers of the soul reach the sun after death and never return from there.¹⁶ The *Brahma*-knowers, become merged in *Brahman* and are liberated from rebirth.¹⁷ For *Śvetasvatara Upanishad*, the liberating knowledge is the knowledge of the personal god who is the supreme Lord.

Over both the perishable and the soul the One God (*deva*) rules. By meditation upon Him, by union with Him, and by entering into His being, more and more, there is finally cessation from every illusion (*maha-nivṛtti*). By knowing God (*deva*) there is a falling off of all fetters; with distress destroyed, there is cessation of birth and death (*Śvetha. Up.* 1, 10 and 11).

II

DOCTRINE OF TRANSMIGRATION IN GREEK THOUGHT

6. Plato on Transmigration

The doctrine of transmigration in Greek thought is based on the philosophy of Plato. The changing visible world is intelligible because of the subsistent and eternal ideas in imitation of which it is formed. The human soul lies between the ideas and the changing universe. It is the intelligent principle behind every change. Man, who is animated by the soul, has two parts : the soul, the immortal and eternal part, formed by the creator; and the mortal part, the body, produced by the younger gods.¹⁸ The soul, which partakes of the nature of the ideas, is the true being and this attachment to this body is a degradation of the soul and a hindrance to her goal, which is the contemplation of the ideas in the spiritual world. The soul has two basic tendencies: the first towards the good, the noble; and the second towards the bad.

13. *Br. Up.* 4, 4, 6.

14. *Katha. Up.* 2, 10 & 38.

15. *Mund. Up.* 3, 2.

16. *Prasna. Up.* 1, 10.

17. *Śve. Up.* 2, 7.

18. *Timaeus*, 426.

Plato is not quite sure about the reason for her attachment to the body. Sometimes he sees it as a result of sin and sometimes as something natural. Plato did not formulate a systematic theory about the destiny of the soul after death but touched upon it in his dialogues whenever the occasion demanded it.

(a) *Account of soul's destiny in Phaedrus* : Plato's treatment of the soul in *Phaedrus* gives us his principal lines of thought regarding the soul and her migration. Every soul is entrusted with the case of the inanimate. The soul, in her perfect form, flies throughout the universe controlling it; but when her wings are lost, she falls down and clings to something solid and ends up in taking to herself an earthly body, which moves itself because of the soul. This fall is due to the inability of the soul to control its powers. The soul can be likened to a winged traveller through the universe drawn by two horses, one fair and good and the other ugly and evil. During the revolutions through the heavens, the souls cannot keep their looks fixed on the beautiful realities (ideas) because of the evil horse which struggles to have mastery over the good horse and, consequently, many souls loose their wings or have them damaged. If a soul manages to follow in the track of the gods and have the vision of truth, then she is kept from misfortune. But when she fails to do so, loosing her wings, she falls down to the earth.

If she has seen most of the reality upon becoming man, she will grow into a seeker of wisdom and beauty. Others, according to the knowledge of reality, will be born as a king, a soldier, a trader, a prophet a priest, a sophist, a tyrant and so on. This will be the first incarnation of the soul. If the soul leads a righteous life she will have a better lot in the next life and if unrighteous a worse lot. Anyway the soul will not regain her former life before ten thousand years unless she seeks wisdom consistently. If she has chosen a philosophical life in three successive revolutions of a thousand years, regaining her wings, she flies to her destination. The remaining ones after their first life, are taken to the place of punishment or are born again according to their merits. They are born again and then the soul of a man may enter into a beast and the soul in a beast goes back to a man. The soul of a philosopher alone can recover her wings. It is necessary to turn to the spiritual realities making use of the memories of the vision of the forms which the soul once enjoyed. But only a few can remember much when they discern the likeness of spiritual realities in the things of the visible world.¹⁹

19. *Phaedrus*, 246-50.

(b) *Phaedo on the souls of the dead* : In the early dialogue *Phaedo*, it is stated in the form a legend that the souls of the dead exist in another world and they return here.²⁰ From this book we get some more information about transmigration. If at the time of the release the soul is pure and has not been contaminated by the body since it has never willingly associated with it and has pursued philosophy actually practising it, she will go to the divine world where she will enjoy bliss. But if she is tainted and impure at the time of release because she has willingly associated with the body, immersed in passions and pleasures not mindful of the invisible and intelligible realities, she will be weighed down and dragged back into the world where she will wander through the grave-yards and will be finally imprisoned again in a body. Such men will become animals according to the character they have acquired. Gluttonous and selfish men assume the life of a donkey or some other animal like it. The irresponsible and the violent become wolves or hawks or some other animal similar to these. Ordinary good people, however, become some disciplined creatures like bees and ants or even decent citizens. But nobody can attain the divine nature without pursuing philosophy. Until one consistently seeks wisdom he will pass from one body to another according to the nature of his desires. Philosophy persuades the imprisoned soul to refrain from using the senses, to recollect, to turn her gaze inward and contemplate the invisible divine realities. This philosophical life frees the soul from desires and helps to lead her to the divine world.²¹

7. Transmigration in Other Books of Plato

Meno, which is an early book, without going into details or giving the reasons says that the soul is born again and again.²² *Republic* states the idea that the souls are given certain freedom to choose their lives and if one consistently loved wisdom he will finally become happy.²³

According to *Timaeus*, the first incarnation is not due to the sin but is just natural. The creator of the universe, after shaping the gods, made the souls and fixed each one to a star. He had fashioned the immortal parts (souls) of all living beings and wanted the gods to make the mortal parts. All the souls would be born as men with the

20. *Phaedo*, 70 d.

21. *Phaedo*, 81 b-84 c.

22. *Meno*, 81 b.

23. *Republic*, 617-21.

power of sensation and love, with pleasure and pain and other feelings attached to them. If they conquered these they would live righteously, otherwise unrighteously. The righteous man, in his appointed time, would return to his native star. If he did not, he would become a woman in the next life and if he persisted in evil, he would continuously be born into some brute form according to the evil nature he has acquired, until reason dominates the animal parts. When the creator had ordained this law, he sent some souls to the earth and some to the moon and then he asked the younger gods to make the mortal parts of the souls. The gods made the living beings as the creator had commanded.

The sensations disturbed the course of the souls. Because of the degeneration of men, who were overcome by the attractions of the senses, the different animals came into existence and the human souls were imprisoned in them according to their wickedness.²⁴

Laws further explain the relation between the actions and migration. "And seeing that a soul, in its successive conjunctions first with one body and then with another runs the whole gamut of change through its own action or that of some other soul."²⁵ "For as a man's desires tend and as is the soul that conceives them, so and such as a general rule, does every one of us come to be."²⁶ If the changes in character are unimportant the souls will move on earth in their migration but if the actions are very wicked they will fall into the underworld.²⁷

8. Conclusion

The accounts of transmigration in the *Upanishads* show man's solidarity with the universe. With his material part he is united with the whole universe. At the same time they point to the transcendence of man because of the *Atman* who is completely different from the material world and finite things. Transmigration takes place because of the desire of man for finite happiness and finite things, whether it be human or divine. In effect, the fate of those who are religious according to the Vedic prescriptions does not differ much from the wicked, both are condemned to endless transmigration. For the sage the blissful life of ten thousand years or more in heaven is

24. *Timaues*, 41 b-44 b.

25. *Laws*, 903 d.

26. *Ibid.*, 904 e.

27. *Ibid.*, 904 d.

nothing, not to speak of earthly joys and prosperity gained through the Vedic religion. These things are finite and there will be an end to them. And again man will always be trying to get something of the same nature. The great intuition behind this theory is that man can never realize himself if he aims at something finite. Only the absolute can liberate man from the finite. Until the light of the absolute destroys his ignorance he will be subject to the delusion of the finite. Of course this idea was not clear in the early theories of transmigration which substituted knowledge for sacrifice and good works and, therefore, might appear to be an attempt to break through the institutionalism and formalism of the degenerating Vedic religion. Another intuition is that good actions have good effects and the bad have bad effects and these will cling to man and will shape his present and future lives. The good which man enjoys or the evil he suffers should be attributed to his actions. The transmigration theory in the *Upanishads* does not offer adequate explanation about the first birth of the soul. It is the result of the speculation about the present situation of man and the direction human life would take in the next life. Then this theory is applied to the past life of the soul. Though it is not based on solid metaphysical grounds, it however, bears testimony to the belief in the immortality of the soul and that man is responsible for his future life and that good actions will have rewards and bad actions will have punishment. It is an attempt to explain the inequality among men, and the mystery of evil and suffering in the world.

What we have said about the *Upanishads* could also be said about the Platonic theory. The soul has solidarity with the universe because she is the moving principle behind all material things, she is the source of every activity in the universe, though Plato views this as an obstacle to the true goal of the soul. Just as in the *Upanishads*, man can never be fully satisfied with material realities, he cannot attain his destiny with passing realities. Those who seek apparent realities of the world, though they lead a good life, will not attain the unchanging life in the divine world but be entitled to a good life in this world either as a noble animal or as man. But if a human life is wicked, he will be punished for it by a degrading life as a base brute or as a low class man. Therefore those who seek finite and apparent good will always be tied to the realm of the apparent world. It is through the knowledge of the unchanging eternal ideas which one gets by a philosophical life that the soul can acquire its pristine pure state. So both for Plato and the *Upanishads* the cause of transmigration is the lack of true knowledge of reality and the desire for ephemeral things. For both, the nature of successive births is determined by the actions of man. Therefore, man is responsible for his future life. Plato

clearly asserts the pre-existence of the soul. As in the *Upanishads*, the union with the body is unnatural and the true state of the soul is to be without the body. Plato is not quite sure about the cause of this union: it may be due to sin or it may be natural development. Any way the cause of transmigration is ignorance for Plato as well as for the *Upanishads*. In both, the emphasis of the theory is on the liberation of man rather than on explaining the present predicament of man.

Did the *Upanishads* influence the theory of Plato? Some say he was influenced. He was acquainted with Egyptian and Pythagorean ideas. Transmigration theory is ascribed to Pythagoras, who got it from Egypt which had been under Persian influence around the 6th century B.C.²⁸ This is refuted by others. In the ancient period, it was found among the Celts and the Egyptians besides the Greeks and the Indians. The belief exists among the primitive tribes in W. Africa, S. Africa, Central Australia and sporadically among the Indians of North and South America.²⁹ Therefore, the *Upanishadic* and Platonic theory of transmigration could be a philosophic development of a primitive belief of transmigration. The resemblance of children to their parents, the dream experiences of man, reflection on the activities of the soul, the problem of evil and suffering in the world might have contributed to the formulation of this theory in ancient India and ancient Greece. Whatever be the reasons for this theory, it reveals the basic intuition that the soul is immortal and spiritual and it can realise itself fully and forever by attaining the unlimited, and if the soul fails to attain its goal, it has only itself to blame for its failure.

28. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 12, p. 431.

29. *Ibid.*, Vol. 12, pp. 426-30.