

Does Life Have Meaning?

Destiny and Reincarnation

by

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There comes a point in everyone's life when one asks the question about life's meaning. It may be an individual query or one for mankind as a whole. Often the precipitating factor is some kind of life crisis, a negative experience or an event such as illness, accident, disappointment, or failure. Much depends upon the response to this central question. The negative or positive response comes from deep in our inner nature and our sphere of will. It determines our attitude about life and our trust in life. It can either lame or inspire our will to live.

As a response, a general, resounding yes or no is not sufficient. Rather, individual destinies are so diverse that an individual answer is also required. Further, this question draws others along with it, as we shall see, and is interwoven with them, and, perhaps the meaning we seek does not even exist in a certain form but must be co-created by us through deeper insights into the interconnectedness of life and personal efforts of will?

The uncertainty may nevertheless be valued as positive, as a wake-up call. An animal can not ask questions because it can not objectify its experiences and think about things or itself. The ability to ponder one's self or one's life brings to light something of our real humanity, the possibility of self determination and building of the self.

The answer to our question is readily at hand for those with a purely materialistic view of life. It would be something like this: The individual human life has no meaning. It can not have because meaning would require that we be conscious, intentionally working, planning, and precognitive beings. We, however, know that "God is dead," that is, dreamed up by insecure, superstitious people as the image of perfection in Heaven. In the end we are only members of a higher order of mammals that, like all organisms, is subject to absolute transitoriness. As an organism, we are determined by strict laws of nature, created in the stream of time, and then we disappear again without a trace. The uniqueness of human life is equally dependent upon a thousands of coincidences that are sometimes challenging, sometimes hindering, or even destructive as in the case with accidents or wars.

Hopelessness because of meaninglessness

This world view is one that millions of people in our age of natural science are convinced to be true. It penetrates more or less consciously and negatively into the life of the soul. The feeling of meaninglessness creates insecurity and anxiety and promotes resignation and weakness of will. In challenging life situations courage, trust, and perseverance become paralyzed. Questions arise: In the end everything was for nothing! What is the point? Where did it all get me?

In spite of our high standard of living, in Germany every year around fourteen thousand people commit suicide. How many must it be in the whole of the civilized world? According to statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO), Poland is ranked number one for suicides and Germany is number six. The city of Berlin has the highest suicide rate in the world, this record reached in 1978 because of the suicide rates of children and youth. When one finds out that at least ten times more people are taken to the hospital for failed suicide attempts each year, then one begins to realize the extent of the desperation.

Further, every year over 100 million people become ill with serious depression. This descent into darkness and paralysis of the will, which have developed into one of the worst plagues of civilization, come from a chronic lack of mental strength and passion which give our life meaning. When no meaning is there to light the path, how quickly unhappy circumstances in which suffering, loss, failure, and severe hindrances turn into situations which appear unsolvable. It is the darkness of these situations that so often pushes the depressed person into self-destruction.

No wonder that countless people attempt to deaden their feelings of frustration which have grown out of meaninglessness by any means possible! For that, our civilization offers countless methods, from finding excessive pleasure in base sensuality to the addictive desire for sensation awakened by the mass media and the increase in alcohol and drug consumption of our youth, to name only a few.

Human life can not flourish in an atmosphere of meaninglessness, without substance in which a healthy breathing of the soul is possible. The question about the meaning of life has become now a question of the preservation of the inner existence of humanity. Taking a long range view, progression or regression, cultural flourishing or demise, yes, even humanity's existence or nonexistence, depends upon a positive search for the answer to the question: What is the meaning of life?

Setting goals

In the pre-Christian era the religious content of the myths and cults permeated one's entire life with meaning and purpose. Knowledge today which comes largely from natural science can not accomplish this and often brings about an opposite effect. Natural science, in spite of the abundance of knowledge and technical advancement, can not answer questions about the

essential nature or the *meaning* of existence. But since ideas of natural science are increasingly filling and mastering the consciousness of modern humanity, the knowledge from pre-Christian era and of Christian faith is more and more replaced. The strength of faith present in earlier times is noticeably on the decrease as is indicated clearly by the slogan, "God is dead." So, in our modern times the draining of all meaning is practically preprogrammed and takes stronger hold. In response, the question of meaning steps more prominently into the foreground and is more consciously and clearly formulated. The answer is all the more pressing.

How can the buried, or deeply hidden, meaning of life be newly discovered or recognized in a way that is appropriate for our time? Christian Morgenstern writes:

Whoever does not know the *destination*
Can not find the path
And will wander around the same circle
His entire life;
And comes to the end
Where he started from.
The meaning that was gathered
Is all the more shattered.

The word *destination* can lead us further. Human life and behavior are not determined by species-specific instincts, drives, and desires. Human beings, who have been given reason, can look ahead, out of the given circumstances, make plans, and form thoughts that point into the future. In other words, human beings can develop goal-oriented ideas. This is the case in all walks of life and is often much more of a determining factor in our lives than we are aware. Setting our mind on an idea – depending upon the quality of life – can lay claim to our entire self and be an impulse for our will. It can become a life ideal and largely determine our future life path.

One thinks of the great explorers at the beginning of the modern age: the first time a ship was sailed around the world, the first time someone set foot at the North or South Pole, or climbed the highest mountain. What great efforts these goal-oriented people made with their life's commitments! Life on this Earth is so diverse that the goal-setting possibilities are endless. A young man may see his ideal as starting a family with at least three children, or a father plan to give up the rented apartment as soon as possible to move into his own home. Another may plan to remain unmarried and earn so much money in ten years that he can travel the world and get to know every continent. Others put their energy into being successful in chosen careers. Athletes expend great effort and must set aside many things (alcohol and nicotine, for example) to become world class competitors and perhaps, at some high point in their lives, enjoy the recognition of the whole world.

But can we not all use some kind of high point in small measure, whether it be the fulfillment of a desire, compensation, or some other recognition of

our efforts, in order to go through life with renewed vigor and realization of some degree of life's meaning!

We all know how every step that brings us closer to a desired goal fills us with satisfaction and awakens and increases our joy in life. Setting a goal makes life seem all at once *meaningful*. In fact, the search for meaning in life is inseparably bound to the discovery of or setting of worthwhile life goals. This activity carries an upright force that pulls one out of resignation and frustration, makes it easier to overcome hindrances, and gives us inner strength.

One can see the opposite happening in the majority of our youth today. Since parents and schools, even the whole of society, often do not show the way to desirable goals that can take hold of one at the deepest inner level and promote enthusiasm, then those dormant healthy forces are often transformed into their opposites. A will that is not put to good use finds expression in destruction. Those with more sensitive natures, simply "flip out" or fall victim to cults or drugs.

Without an ability to remember, to look into the past, our life of soul would fall apart. But just as much we need to look toward shining goals in the future to keep our human souls in balance! Without this meaningful forward outlook one would eventually vegetate within the daily routine or suffocate in resignation.

The questionable validity of setting outer goals

The activity of setting goals to give meaning to our lives is standing on shaky ground. Is it not constantly being tested or defeated by the negative side of life? Perhaps the man who plans to start a family is diagnosed with a grave illness so that all of his plans are for nothing, or maybe he is forced to change careers after he has already had a successful start. The effects of a serious illness can make it impossible for an athlete to have a career in sports. Perhaps unanticipated inflation turns one's savings into practically nothing overnight and the trip around the world is no longer possible. How many plans and goals disappear day in and day out because of loss of employment? The resultant decrease in quality of life, the loss of self esteem, and the threat of unwanted and completely unfulfilled spare time cause people to question the meaning of life. What new meaning can society create or what can be found by the individuals themselves when unemployment continues indefinitely?

There are actually no *outer* goals immune to negative circumstances. The higher the goal and the more intensely the person is committed to its achievement, the deeper the "hole" into which he feels he has fallen. How many disappointments lead in this way everyday to mental breakdowns and often end in suicide because everything has become meaningless!

And how is with people who are born brain damaged or retarded, or the chronically mentally ill who must spend their lives in institutions? Are they not mentally incapable of setting goals or understanding them? Are not their

lives, which are completely dependent upon their fellow human beings, absolutely meaningless from the beginning? During the time of the Third Reich in Germany, the term “valueless life” was coined and the “humane” shortening of those lives was systematically carried out. The questions of euthanasia and “assisted suicide” show that this plaguing term and its consequences have in no way been resolved. Lives are still perceived as incurable and valueless; lives are still ‘humanely’ shortened.

But death, *early* death, is by far the biggest stumbling block to finding meaning. Infant and child death by illness or accident snuffs out the becoming or blooming human life. Thousands of people every year fall victim to natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanoes and floods. It seems especially tragic when people purposely cause the early deaths of their fellow human beings by means of wars, murderous dictatorships and revolutions, or crimes of all sorts. Even if we have found the meaning of life, is it not destroyed again by the gruesome power of early death which can push us into a black hole of unpredictable coincidence and meaninglessness?

We can not save ourselves from this glimpse into the underbelly of life. We are confronted with it daily through the media. These are hard tests that lay in ambush for those making an effort to find meaning in their lives. Obviously we must move to a totally new dimension in order to carry on in a productive manner.

Death as a test of the question of meaning

Every deeply penetrating search for the meaning of life will eventually arrive at the question about the true nature of human beings, where we come from and where we are going. We have already pointed out that a purely materialistic world view sees human beings as only subject to genetic inheritance and environment, as a transient natural creatures whose being is limited to the time span between conception and death. Every life path, then, deadends without goals or meaning. There also remains very little of all of human experience – the acquiring of earth knowledge and the efforts involved in moral striving. Without some idea of an eternal existence, it is not only an early death that extinguishes all meaning but also a completely normal death at an advanced age. With the sheer numbers of people being born all the time, in the end, this or that individual matters as little as this or that ant.

The modern human being sees him/herself standing before the seeming uncrossable chasm between knowledge and faith. Religions of all times, Christianity also, would not make any sense without a belief in a life of the soul after death. But ideas that are oriented to natural science make it increasingly more difficult for modern human beings to believe in this traditional, or even dogmatic, idea of eternal life. The one-sided concept that humans evolved from animals and a naturalistic theory of creation, from the “big bang” theory to molecular biology, make belief difficult. So too does medical evidence of the dependence of our consciousness on nerve and brain physiology because the complicated chemical-physiological and

electrical processes are almost always only referred to in materialistic terms. Add to that what has been previously neglected: explaining the difference between the animal soul and the human soul. This is a central question that, remarkably, theology has not addressed seriously enough. Could not also a dog, whose expressions of passion and dispassion, drives and aggression clearly indicate its soul, also have an immortal soul?

The mystic Angelus Silesius wrote:

Man, become your real self,
Because when the world disappears,
The unreal falls away,
The real self remains.

A fundamental tenet of Anthroposophy is to understand the real self as the 'I' being and to recognize that the spirituality of the world is individualized through the 'I.' In the human soul shines the spirit as the self-conscious 'I' and this soul, as the actual, immortal, divine core, must be fundamentally differentiated from the animal-related soul. Without this differentiation between soul and spirit required by our times and which already took place in ancient Greece in the form of the ideas of psyche and pneuma, every study of man is predestined to failure.

Lasting value as the last goal?

Understandably many people desire to insure themselves against unpredictable life circumstances by hoarding treasures that "moths and rust" can not harm. In consideration of *lasting value* some institutions recommend diamonds or gold bars. Might not such an effort in the realm of transience (in a Goethean sense) be seen as an image of an event in a higher plane? Death is the great equalizer: It disassociates the person not only from his physical shell but also from all earthly valuables, every kind of possession, one's rank and social standing, and one's pride in a nation or race. What is able to withstand its destructive power and is worth taking across the threshold of death? What proves itself to be real when the "unreal," the transitory, falls away, when that which makes us male or female, white, yellow, or black falls away?

It is the growth earned by all earthly learning, effort, and work that our 'I' brings with it into the spiritual world as the fruit of development in our human life. Above all, the gained wisdom, deepening of the feeling nature, ability to be interested, devotion and sympathy, as well as the strengthening of the will into solidity of character, self control, and unselfishness. Herein rest the seeds of new creative abilities.

How often we are shocked or concerned about our own imperfection or the imperfection of others. But, in the final analysis, it is only the expression of the fact that human beings, in spite of being the crown of creation, are still *unfinished* and are called upon to develop toward perfection. The poet

Friedrich Rueckert indicates this with the following poem:

In everyone there lives an image
Of what he should become.
As long as he is not that,
His happiness is not complete.

This divine-spiritual, primal image is the highest goal of humanity. To strive toward that goal and increasingly make it a reality are the actual deeper *meaning* of our lives. Human beings, as carriers of spirit, in contrast to animals, have unlimited capabilities of learning and developing, of evolving. From insight and freedom human beings are able to develop into what is seminally present in them. Creation continues within human beings, albeit with their cooperation as beings capable of self-education.

This is only possible because they have the “divine spark” spoken of by Christian mystics. It is what makes them immortal and calls them, during the course of every human life, to grow into a spiritual flame. The knowledge of the true being and laws of development that are possible today takes the horror out of death and throws a new light on the question of life’s meaning. Without this powerful light we must remain in the darkness of meaninglessness.

The earthly duty of humankind

In setting these higher goals, are the other goals in the foreground devalued as meaning-giving elements or even eliminated? When we further illuminate them we find that that is not at all the case.

Every human activity, especially regular work, requires a certain amount of subject knowledge, attentiveness, overview, carefulness, devotion, efficiency, talent, and responsibility, to name only a few qualities. This applies equally to very demanding work of professionals and artists and to the seemingly simpler tasks such as cleaning, washing, or weeding. No matter the work, our ‘I’ is always challenged in some way. If it does not rise to the challenge, is indifferent, then we have before us an inattentive, lazy, disorderly, or irresponsible person.

In other words, every activity is embedded in the great, lifelong soul-spiritual developmental process of human beings. That is why the achievement of the goal or success is not the only important thing, but the striving itself is equally important. What experiences and learning processes are gone through, what difficulties overcome, what new qualities of soul are developed on the way to the goal? These soul qualities connect, usually unconsciously, with the highest goal and allow the true fruit of life to slowly ripen. In this way also we can see and feel that everyday existence is permeated with the enlivening element that imparts meaning to life. The person who is religiously- and spiritually-oriented can illuminate and enliven all surface goals and thereby gain a higher quality of life.

But how does it look when insurmountable hindrances stand in the way, when illness, accident, or failure makes reaching the goal an impossibility? How often the normal daily routine is interrupted by experiences that are perceived to be painful, disturbing, unjust, or humiliating. And are there not also so-called unlucky people for whom the negative gains the upper hand and threatens to darken the entire life with an overabundance of apathy, worry, and disappointment? Does it not belong to the nature of being human to strive for success, happiness and passion, and to avoid or insure one's self against, whenever possible, all unhappy, painful experiences?

There is only one outlook here that will help and it takes into consideration the higher, spiritual viewpoint. Older, wiser, more experienced people often accept that they would not have wanted to miss the hard, disappointing, painful experiences and times. The depth and maturity of soul gained would surely not have happened in a life that was only happy and carefree.

It is decidedly so that inner development of the individuality is not interrupted by the darker side of life. Quite the opposite is true: Everyone can learn from their mistakes! As a wellspring of order, contemplation, relaxation, and self control, our 'I' in thinking, feeling, and willing is nowhere so challenged as during difficult times. Error and lack of knowledge call on us to make more efforts to gain knowledge. Interaction with other people, which can be difficult, requires from outside enhanced patience, tolerance, and love. Hindrances and blockades, as with all unhappiness in general, require a stronger input and perseverance of the will.

Difficult and unhappy circumstances always signify a special chance for development for the individuality. They challenge the spiritual presence in a way that occurs seldom in other life circumstances. All difficult times can be understood as *tests* that are essential to life. Seen from the perspective of the spiritual world, which is our real home, could it be that joy and sorrow, happiness and pain, and gain and loss are all at the same level in the service of challenging our 'I' being? According to Goethe it is the law of polarity that penetrates all life and makes possible an increase in development including also the more perfect appearance of the human ideal.

In considering divine thought (ideal), which is at the foundation of the creation of human beings, the poet Albert Steffen takes us a step further: "At every moment where, from the 'I' of the person, in the sphere of freedom, love develops, there are all the Heavens joyful to witness a worthy revelation. Man should know this! And all the purely immediate world crises should be viewed with this consciousness, from this aspect of the heart, and be overcome."

It is my hope that this article will stimulate the reader to test the content of truth in these thoughts. Their recognition strengthens our trust in life and God, allows our courage to grow, and steels our will.

Destiny and meaning in light of reincarnation

In thinking over the question about the meaning of life, hopefully everyone will critically look back upon their own lives. Desired and undesired

experiences, encouraging and discouraging encounters and relationships, joyful and burdensome events, successes and failures, all parade before our mind's eye and form themselves into an individual life. The progression of this life leads us to form judgments or to come to some kind of conclusions as a prerequisite for an answer to the question of life's meaning. It is inseparably entwined with that powerful mystery of life, individual human *destiny*.

The mysteriousness of destiny

Every person must form, carry, and live his destiny. One's relationship to it essentially determines one's attitude of soul, trust in life, and self awareness.

It is one of life's experiences that many people stand before their destinies in a state of not understanding. This weighs especially heavily on a person whose life is burdened by suffering, worry, and unhappiness. Anyone who believes he can go against his own destiny, can not say yes to it, is living in a state of dissatisfaction, with himself and the world. This causes a weakening of the will. This attitude is often bound together with jealousy of others who have a happier destiny and, in countless cases, can end in depression or self destruction.

In order to get away from one's self and gain the strength of objectivity in relation to one's own life, it is recommended that one take a look at other people who have had difficult destinies, over which they have triumphed, and try to see things through their eyes.

But here, also, we reach a limit. Among other things, we look again at the apparently "valueless life" of retarded, brain-damaged, or mentally disturbed people. These are destinies which from the very beginning are often perceived as absolutely meaningless because they have no control whatsoever over their own lives. Physical limitations and lack of freedom all the way to official declarations of mental incapacity appear to hinder every form of development and self-determination.

The mysteriousness and problematic nature of destiny is made even more so by another fact of life that every observer must find challenging. The varying circumstances from which people begin their lives and also the extraordinarily unequal circumstances are hard to understand. What a strong influence on personal development, career success, and just getting along well in life are such things as inherited talent, a harmonious homelife, the best education, and a healthy social and cultural milieu. And is not a child born in the slums to a mentally disabled mother and an alcoholic father, who must grow up in those attendant circumstances, predestined, so to say, to a life of crime? The readers will certainly know, from personal experience, the many variations between these two extremes of destiny. Their causes remain hidden.

How can we explain such heavy influences on destiny as the fact that we are born male or female, and have a healthy body or a weak body, or even

that we have a genetic defect that we have to deal with our entire lives? (Biology will tell us it has to do with an accidental combination of genes.) What is the reason we are born into a certain race or a certain cultural milieu? Even though joy and suffering, happy and unhappy circumstances, play into every life, still there are countless people who are burdened with a life full of hindrances, unhappiness, and enmity while others seem to have won the lottery of recognition and success.

A purely intellectual understanding of life can only lead to the view that individual destinies are not only unequal but apparently ruled by a massive injustice that manipulates all of human existence on this Earth. How strongly the feeling of having to suffer unjustly or being mistreated can sicken our soul and put us into a state of dissatisfaction or worse. Countless people are subject to this and find themselves on the shadowy side of life.

A view that is only oriented toward life's outer circumstances and denies spiritual connections is only able to see destiny, with all of its unpredictable events, as the sum of accidental coincidences, senseless and almost unbearable. But even for those with religious viewpoints difficulties arise. For instance, the Muslim believes that everything is predestined by Allah. This can create fatalism on the one hand or fanaticism on the other hand. The Christian view of *foreknowledge* of an all-powerful, all-knowing God is evermore dissatisfying to modern humanity because of the unfathomable nature of divine working in our lives which is both personal and yet unknowable. The idea that all unjust suffering and unhappiness will be balanced out in a "better world" in eternity is small comfort.

Insight into individual destinies is so difficult because it requires knowledge of the true essence of human beings, their 'I' as the actual carrier of their destiny. What follows will explore this possibility from an anthroposophical viewpoint.

The idea of reincarnation as an aspect of humanity

No one can claim to have comprehensively contemplated the meaning of life and the mystery of destiny who has not taken the possibility of reincarnation of the human soul into consideration as a possibility. The concept of repeated Earthly lives however does require a spiritual viewpoint regarding the true, essential being of humanity. A basic understanding of the immortality of the soul after death, its post-existence, must begin with the term "preexistence." A supernatural-spiritual, or cosmic world, must be accepted as being just as real as the physical world on Earth.

Reincarnation is an article of faith for millions of people in the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. Actually, this knowledge of reincarnation is an ancient, generally accepted aspect of humanity that is documented from ancient Germany, Greece, and Jewish esoteric traditions. This idea was never completely lost, and many great Christian philosophers in the West were convinced of its truth.

As Eastern wisdom and schooling practices are gaining increasing influence in Western lands, it must be pointed out that the aim is not to

uncritically or dogmatically accept or even propagandize a traditional element. Impossible – because the highest goal of the Buddhist religion is to bring the wheel of rebirth to a standstill as quickly as possible. This kind of escape from the Earth as the “Valley of Wailing and Suffering” is often also combined with the idea of total depersonalization and dissolution into the bliss of Nirvana.

The idea of reincarnation must be given new impetus as a truth in such a way that takes into consideration the human development up to our modern times. This requires that the term ‘I’ is understood as the spiritual core of an eternal individuality. This concept has never existed in the East and, indeed, could not have existed since human development at the time when the Eastern culture arose had not yet reached the proper degree of maturity to understand it. But this ‘I’ concept did exist in ancient Greece, the cradle of Western civilization. Aristotle first spoke of *en-tel-echie*,¹ meaning the eternal spiritual element in human beings which makes them related to the gods.

Another basic requirement is the inclusion of one of the greatest discoveries of Western natural science with which names like Goethe, Darwin, and Haeckel are irrevocably linked: the *development* of all life forms. This thought is also only marginally present in Eastern wisdom. Of course, in the materialistic-thinking in the West there is the danger that this thought will be limited to the mechanics of development in the sense of one-sided fields such as molecular biology and genetic engineering, for example. It is a symptom of our decline that the theory of evolution has taken on only outer, more or less accidental environmental influences (like mutation, selection, fight for existence, and so forth) as factors in development and that spiritual or creative aspects are denied. However, it can be shown that, in the sense of Goethe’s teaching on metamorphosis, the development of every life form is the expression of an encounter between two worlds. As it relates to human beings it means this: The growth of a child must be understood, down to the anatomical transformations and physiological processes, in light of the fact that a soul-spiritual being works its way into the growing organization over a period of about twenty years. In an unconscious way it works on the formation of its own physical covering in order to come completely to itself and to serve the mature, physical body in this world. It is the *embodiment* of a spirit-soul that has “descended” from supernatural worlds.

The Christian religion knows of reincarnation: “And the Word became flesh.” The working, spiritual principal of the Divine Nature is taken seriously in that He becomes human. As long as the concept of incarnation is not reconciled in other related areas of life study such as embryology, biology, anthropology, as well as in medicine and pedagogy, there can be no sustainable, reality-oriented study of man, nor an understanding of reincarnation. One of the main goals of the technically-oriented tenets of Rudolf Steiner’s spiritual science is to make an essential contribution to the task of the future, which is to bring the concept of spirit into organic science and into practical applications.

The concept of rebirth and development of the individuality

In the first part of this essay we described the development of the individuality as one of life's highest meaningful goals. Even if we look away from the many hindrances and disturbances, the question remains: Does one single human lifetime contain enough years to realize the potential dormant in every person and to make use of his/her hidden spiritual resources?

Numerous facts gained through research on evolution elucidate this question. The phylogenetic development of the five-toed, short-legged ancestral horse up to the perfection of the highly specialized Arabian stallion has required thousands of years. Just as much time has lapsed in regard to what we know today as the African elephant. The early small-headed creature with just the beginning of a trunk is hardly recognizable as the beautiful and powerful animal it has become. Likewise there is such genetic development underlying the human physical organization, subject to the laws of species and form. But whoever contemplates the essence of the individuality, as the carrier of the 'I' and the essence of biography, will realize that, as it relates to spirit, every person is a species unto himself. As opposed to the animal kingdom, here it comes down to the *development* of every *single* individual and also to the short measure of time allotted to a *single lifetime*.

In past millennia individuals were much more strongly connected in the lives of their family, kinfolk, and race. They were predetermined by blood ties. Personality, responsibility for one's self, and consciousness of freedom were only rudimentary. The primitive state of development that can still be found today in some tribes would not support the self-aware, self-determining promoters of individual rights that make up the majority of people in modern times. Throughout history we find very different developmental conditions that individual souls could not change.

Johann Georg Schlosser, a friend in his youth of Goethe and later Goethe's brother-in-law, said: Reincarnation "explains a thousand mysteries." (1781) Indeed, there is hardly a human problem that, when viewed with a sense of the concept of reincarnation, does not take on a new kind of fruitful illumination. True, it is not only animal species that have many thousands of years to develop, but also the human individuality. From the time that the human physical organization matured out of its animal-like previous developmental stages to the point where it could take in the 'I' spark, the rhythmically integrated chain of recurring lives on Earth pulls itself through creation as a totality on a higher order. Jean Paul said: "Let a soul return as often as it will. The Earth is rich enough to give them new talents, with new centuries, and new pasts and with new futures." Since human beings grow beyond nature as the only beings given an intellect, they require this very special adaptation of the law of development. All the efforts and experiences of *one* life subject to the temporary nature of physical existence must be processed into the yield of destiny during the spiritual life between death and rebirth. Afterward, the soul that is reborn into a new physical body finds itself in new conditions, in a new age, and a different culture, all appropriate for its advanced possibilities for development.

Every person is inseparably bound to the greater developmental path of humanity as a whole and may see himself as a member of the process. In spite of all the hindrances, coincidences, accidents, and evil attacks, we can not fall out of the divine plan of development for humanity. This is a certainty that releases a calming and satisfying feeling.

There is an old saying: “No master just falls from Heaven,” even though we come down from a higher world. In the same way, no person can come into the world as a “blank slate”! With our talents and inclinations, our weaknesses and difficulties, we bring the good, the immature, or even sometimes the bitter fruit of our previous lives with us.

The ultimate reason for recurring lives on Earth is for the higher development of the individuality. Reincarnation provides us with the necessary periods of time. This higher level of meaning combines seamlessly with the concepts developed in the first section of this essay, of gaining meaning through goal setting. Thusly, the concept of reincarnation is also related to the laws of development of modern biology, which cover all of evolution in the kingdom of nature. Rudolf Steiner published much material and gave many lectures on the subject of reincarnation *for our times*, particularly the publication *Reincarnation and Karma*. In the study of biology one learns that every higher-level organization has gone through many previous stages that were more primitive. This also applies to levels of achievement in the soul-spiritual area. Individual talents and abilities do simply happen, unearned, a gift from above. Also, in the opposite case, they are not unjustly hampered. Such an understanding of the issue is appropriate for the self-consciousness of Western people who agree that individual striving and effort are their duty on Earth. “What you have inherited from your fathers, earn it, so that you may own it!”

Higher levels of organic development are captured through heredity and may not be lost. Spiritual science can reveal how similar laws are also active on a spiritual level. If a species can be understood in the physical sense when one grasps the conditional aspect of heredity, then also the spiritual being can be understood in connection with a similar spiritual heredity. I have my physical form because I am descended from human ancestors. From where do I have that which comes to expression in my biography? As a physical being, I repeat the form of my ancestors. What do I repeat as a spiritual being? ² Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, said: “What for some appears to be a special gift or talent, is, in my opinion, the fruit of long experience gained over many lifetimes. To that I must add that I believe we are reborn on this Earth. You and me [sic], we all are reborn many times, live many lives, and store up our rich experience. Talent that is apparently intuitive is, in reality, hard-gained experience.”

Completely independent of the influence of Eastern elements, in eighteenth century central Europe, G.E. Lessing published his spiritual testament *The Education of the Human Race*. Written in his last year of his life, this short publication views the concept of reincarnation in a more modern sense:

Perhaps all of the witnesses to past cultures such as monuments, works of art, writings, cults, and so forth, will senselessly disappear. But what people have striven for, suffered, and learned by the creation of these things, they will take with them into future lives as higher abilities.

These abilities benefit not only single individuals, but also all of mankind. Humanity educates itself! Humanity as a whole actively takes part in its own development and is in no way merely the result of a higher creative power as in the other three kingdoms of nature.

In 1851 Gustav Widemann, a homeopathic doctor, won an essay contest sponsored by textile manufacturer Maximilian Drossbach (1810 – 1884) concerning the question of reincarnation: “But it is not only the interest of the returning individual force that can be thought of as a reason for reincarnation. It is also the interest of other people. There is no other force that can be of such good service to the whole of humanity as recurring lives on Earth.”

With Lessing and Widemann one can hear the new breath of life infused into Western thinking, evolved from an earlier Christian way of thinking. The perfection of human beings over a long path of recurring lives does not have to do with self-perfection or salvation of self in an egotistical sense. Selfless service to others, mutual helpfulness – love thy neighbor as thyself – are incorporated into the concept of reincarnation and development. The “fight for existence” that is present in humanity is caused by the greedy, lower nature of mankind. This nature can be raised and transformed in and by every person. The positive effects of such individual development benefit others in the long run.

Karma, the law of destiny

The physical world is controlled by unchangeable natural laws. They determine the order of things and how they work together. They are understood as the basic law of cause and effect. Precise knowledge of this law makes possible practical interaction with natural forces and has, as a result, dramatically changed the face of the Earth.

Human destiny and individual soul development, which is closely intertwined with the supernatural worlds, are subject to certain laws. They come from a higher, moral-spiritual sphere to penetrate human earthly existence. They can be examined by those who have the ability to gain knowledge of higher worlds. Modern spiritual knowledge can also give certainty about the reality of reincarnation and raise its deep-reaching truth out of the realm of speculation, faith, or theory. The teachings of reincarnation and karma, as the laws of destiny have been called in the East for thousands of years, form the heart blood of modern spiritual science.

Human destiny, which from the outside appears to be a collection of coincidences or the impenetrable fate brought about by a higher power, is a woven fabric whose origin is to be found in the last life or perhaps even further back. It is influenced in the supernatural world through spiritual-

divine processing of all earthly efforts and striving of the soul during thinking, feeling, and willing.

Every real striving for truth, every experience, that deepens us in the sense of devotion, interest in the world, warmth of heart, all industrious, unselfish, or creative work, and all moral efforts, allow the spiritual core of our being to be illuminated and to grow. Such experience and activity connects the soul, even after death, more strongly to the divine-spiritual world. This allows for the acceptance of that which we bring with us in this way and quasi turn over. It can be transformed into a positive seed for the next life. As opposed to this, error and lies, lack of interest and hate, egoistic, inconsiderate, or even criminal behavior, not only darkens our “I,” but also alienates us from our spiritual world origin. The necessary correction and working through of such spirit-denying behavior leads to imbalance in our entire constitution and to disharmony in our being; that is, to weaknesses, predisposition to illnesses, and hindrances in our future destiny on Earth. They are rocks in the road that people have put in their own paths in order to awaken by clearing them away, being more able to find oneself, and to newly strengthen the moral will. But also the events that seem to happen accidentally from the outer environment and are perceived as good or bad are subject to the law of karma. The behaviors and activities in a previous life, whether they are beneficial or harmful to the world, are written into our destiny.

So-called “love at first sight” is, in reality, carried over from a positive encounter between two people in a previous life. In this way many very old relationships can be continued or find fulfillment. The soul ties created through friendship or love, or even discord and hate, are unbreakable. People who are separated through misfortune or some apparently unsolvable dilemma will be brought together again. Every neglectful or atrocious act that debits our “life account” requires a balance in the next life. This is a basic principle of karma: a higher unerring form of *justice*. On the other hand, the mercy of a divine world in its wisdom, has made it possible to learn from one’s mistakes in a new life and to free one’s self from self-alienating and burdensome guilt in order to further develop in a meaningful way.

Why can we not remember our previous lives? I will talk about *one* of the reasons here. Everyone knows that abilities come about through laborious, tireless, and attentive study and practice. Countless tries in the study of writing, or practice on a musical instrument are eventually transformed into full-blown ability. That conscious, mindful labor gradually penetrates to the unconscious and to the physical body, and later, when one writes or plays the music, almost all of the steps to learning are forgotten. At that point, if they popped into the consciousness it would only be a disturbance. A similar situation exists with the higher ordered metamorphosis of one life into the next. The previous life does not live in our conscious mind, but it is all the more present in our predispositions, tendencies, and in our whole physical-mental constitution.

Do not get the idea that a Greek temple builder would necessarily become a better architect in his next life. His technical and artistic efforts to gain the

right mass and proportions and pleasingly formed outer structure are all internalized during the time between death and rebirth. The apparently “forgotten” work reappears as inner feeling creative ability for harmony and composition: Perhaps humanity will be enriched by a genius musician who creates timeless masterpieces. If one has this in mind while contemplating the last, broken pillar of some temple ruins, then one begins to understand what Lessing meant in his work *The Education of the Human Race*.

Another reason that the cloak of forgetfulness covers our previous lives comes from the fact that most people today could make little good use of the unannounced appearance of ancient experiences. Everyone knows how hard it is to objectively view one’s own mistakes and weaknesses or to objectively look at situations involving disagreements with others. The way it is, a person can be blissfully unaware about possible devastating traits carried over from the past and thus get a fresh start in a new life and all the interactions it entails.

To research one’s own karma using methods of spiritual science requires the highest degree of maturity in spiritual schooling. For this reason we stringently warn against using hypnosis or some other quick method, which unjustifiably penetrates the structure of the personality, trying to force a look into previous lives, even though this is possible to a certain degree. Such attempts are usually uncontrollable and therefore all too easily mixed or diluted with error and illusion.

It is a karmic law that, in the next life, experiences and activities that have played out more in the mental-spiritual arena will go a level deeper into the biological-physical aspect. Human relationships, which Goethe named “relationships of choice,” will be transformed in the next life into blood relationships. Good or bad life habits, virtues and sins of a previous life and impossible to change at that time, we find again in the next life in the form of a better or worse physical constitution, or in a particular condition of temperament.

Each person is embedded in certain outer and inner life conditions which can be perceived as related to destiny, can also limit our freedom, and whose root cause is to be found in a previous life. We ourselves were and, for the most part, still are the blacksmith of our own destiny! And, before every person the future lies as a space of freedom that makes it possible to form a new destiny, filled with ‘I’ force and reasonable actions based upon ideals. Here belongs *how* we deal with the preconditions and immutable circumstances such as illness, for example.

Everyone can learn to more deeply understand his or her destiny, accept it, and create it oneself. This is extremely significant for self confidence and willingness to live. Looking toward the next life on Earth works to counter a mood of resignation, to make every effort seem meaningful, and to give hope for the balancing out of any injustices suffered. We learn to diffuse feelings of antipathy, hate, and personal vengeance because our “enemy” is also woven in with us, according to the law of karma. Many evildoers may

avoid the long arm of the law on this Earth, but that is not possible with divine justice. With this in mind, whoever is able to lovingly and truly forgive his or her neighbor is able to unpack a lot of burdensome karma.

In the following paragraphs are a few short points about the laws of karma. The reader is encouraged to investigate the numerous other spiritual-scientific publications on this subject.

The karma of gender

The concept of reincarnation throws a decisively new light upon the differences between the two sexes. A deeper look into the spirit-soul present in each gender will, on the one hand, encourages equality of men and women appropriate for our times. But on the other hand, this view must also take into consideration what happens from the perspective of karma: Generally, a male incarnation will be followed by a female one and vice versa, although this is not a hard and fast rule. For example, if someone dies young because of chronic illness or some other circumstance of fate causing him to be unable to fully experience the different conditions of his sex, the person may be reborn with the same gender as the previous life.

There lives, more or less unconsciously, in every person the desire for completion and wholeness, reflected in the vague feeling that being bound to one sex makes one only “half a person.” In our times, without being conscious of the core of our humanity and its laws of development, this desire threatens to mislead many into a tendency for women to exhibit their masculinity and men exhibit their femininity. This appears symptomatically in such actions as young men wearing braids and earrings or women striving to hide their feminine characteristics behind a facade of masculinity, down to their clothing and haircuts.

What is wrong with taking full advantage of the opportunity for a male incarnation to be schooled and strengthened by the special sensitivity, carefulness, or even motherliness that are predominantly female characteristics? In another incarnation more masculine abilities and virtues could be explored. A man who must perhaps work especially with the intellect, whose career requires that he be oriented strongly to the outside environment, can be thankful for the possibility of experiencing an inner life of soul as a woman in his next life. All qualities gained in such swings of the pendulum remain intact and will bear fruit in subsequent incarnations.

From this viewpoint the differences between the sexes can be fully accepted. There is no need for false “equality,” although equal rights are an absolute necessity. Perhaps here the idea of reincarnation can actually create some sense of peace.

A healthy balance in this alternating play of polarities can only be achieved when the development of the ‘I’ being is considered as the highest directional goal. There will be plenty of opportunities for this during the course of life with all its myriad circumstances. Wherever the spiritual core of the individuality feels that its ability to judge, its sense of responsibility and

morality are being addressed, then the shared characteristics that go beyond specific gender will shine forth.

The results of early death

One could think that an early death would destroy the opportunity of development that life presents or, at least, prematurely interrupt it. No matter the circumstances, death is all the more tragic and difficult the earlier it appears. The idea of reincarnation shines a clarifying light on this mystery of life. The karmic result is, in most cases, a quick rebirth, in the same century if possible and under similar cultural and other conditions. This equalizing comes about because life that was taken away, often through no fault of one's own, has had little experience to be worked through in the spiritual world.

The mystery of death, however, is deeper than that. In the spiritual world not only does the time of death play a significant role but also the kind of death and the way we die, in other words, the quality of death. For the soul of an old man over eighty years old, who lays aside his body like well-worn clothing, entering the threshold of the spiritual world is a gentle, expected event. It is a completely different story when a young, healthy and vital body is suddenly destroyed and the soul is torn away through no fault of its own. Senseless, shocking, and terrible as this destruction must seem from an outside view, the victim's soul experiences something significantly positive during the process of working through experiences after death. Young people still largely identify with their physical bodies. The immediate contrast between the transitory nature of the physical body and the eternal nature of the 'I' being leads to a more intense awakening experience than that for a person who is old when he dies. Young people awaken to their own core of being and to the essence of spirit that is in the world. The fruit of an early death brings to the reborn person's deep unconscious hidden knowledge and a feeling for what is essential. Just as someone can be immunized against a disease, so is the person who was killed at an early age immune to any materialistic darkening of the spirit. He will instead instinctively direct his steps in life to a spiritual understanding of the world.

Rudolf Steiner said this in regard to the tragedy of the fallen during the First World War: It is the spiritual world that transforms the "senseless passion" of a war into the meaningful, individual fruit of inner spiritual knowledge, by way of sacrificing the proffered life to a higher necessity. In this way humanity, in light of the tens of thousands of such sacrifices, will be given the power of spirituality." Similarly, every early death, according to the circumstances, leads to enhancement of certain tendencies and abilities.

These results, however, do not apply to death by suicide. This forced separation leads to a very tortuous state of soul and feelings of guilt during the experience of life after death. A person, as spirit, can not escape coming to terms with the big "disappointment." He has set himself at odds with the God-given possibility for development, and all the problems that caused the

suicide remain unsolved and must be worked through following the laws of karma.

Now back to the problem of the seemingly “valueless life” of a mentally retarded individual. Even such a life as that, in which many things are experienced, will be processed, although the ‘I’ is mostly or completely non-functional. The next life in a healthy body includes an enhanced and deep feeling for life and a stronger impulse to new activity on the Earth. The many acts of an educational or caretaker nature received by the individual in the earlier life call forth the desire for a balancing return of activities in the social environment. The karmic teaching from such a handicap is never abstract. It becomes deep-reaching, thoroughly lived experience and forms the starting point for new capacities and enhanced self realization.

The population explosion – a contradiction?

In almost every discussion of the concept of reincarnation the justified question is raised: does not the increase in world population in the last few centuries contradict the idea of reincarnation since only a limited number of souls can be taken on board, so to speak.

The Christian understanding, which can not be taken for granted, that every soul since time immemorial is newly created and planted within the developing body either at conception or shortly after, leads to an incomprehensible number of spirits who have crossed over into eternity. Billions and billions of human lives have already been and will be. An individual soul would seem to disappear in the mass of souls from the past and the future, remain unknown and unrelated. One could speak of a population explosion in Eternity or of an inflation of spirits.

The reincarnation concept postulates there is a certain number of ‘I’ endowed beings, even though that number is unknown, that were created eons ago in a great, divine act of creation. Novalis said: “Whoever does not reach completion here, does perhaps over there; or must begin a repeated earthly course. Should there not also be over there a death whose result would be an earthly birth? In that case, the human race would be smaller; smaller in number than we thought.”

If life between death and rebirth was, on average, as long as a life on Earth then only a doubling of the population would be possible. After that the number of souls waiting to incarnate would be quickly depleted. Through spiritual scientific research it has been determined that at present the timespan a soul spends as a being in the Spheres is something like eight hundred to one thousand years! At any given time there is always a much larger number of disembodied souls than souls that are incarnated. An increase in the population on Earth only leads to an accordant lessening of the souls in the Spheres.

Certainly, the increase in world population has many earthly and cosmic reasons which are probably not penetrable at this time. Besides the

improvements in hygienic conditions there is one other reason that can be named: Materialistically inclined people, who do not have the depth brought by a spiritual way of life, are without genuine artistic experience, or the impulse generated by religious contemplation. In their poverty of soul they take less spiritual material to be worked through into their life between death and rebirth. They have connected themselves too strongly with the Earth and therefore require a quicker re-embodiment.

Reincarnation and Christianity

Reincarnation is not an official teaching of Christianity. The Church Father Origenes spoke of preexistence, but in the sixth century Pope Vigilius declared in an edict that the concept of preexistence was an error and should be treated as heresy, and the door to the idea of reincarnation was closed for the confessionally-bound Christian. However, in the Gospels themselves this truth blazes through in certain places. All the ancient Jews knew about the prophecy which said that before the coming of the Messiah the prophet Elijah would reappear. That is why the disciples questioned the Lord about it. He “answered and spoke: Elijah shall come before and bring everything to rights. But I tell you, Elijah is come already and you did not know him, but have done with him what you will. In the same way will the Son of Man have to suffer. Then the disciples understood that He was talking about John the Baptist.” (Matthew 17:11-13).

This would have been the perfect opportunity in the life of Jesus Christ to declare the tradition handed down for generations about recurring lives to be false once and for all. But the opposite is what happened. In this single instance Christ confirmed reincarnation. He spoke on the same subject (Matthew 11:14), saying something that is unique in the entire New Testament: “That you would accept it.” The implication is that the recognition of the concept of reincarnation should not happen on the authority of the Master, but rather returned to the sphere of the freedom and insight of the disciples themselves.

As to development to ‘I’ consciousness and freedom, humanity must be cut off in their consciousness from the supernatural worlds and increasingly made to rely upon themselves within the earthly plan. Within this framework the knowledge about the alternating rhythm of recurring lives had also to retreat for the most part. The feeling that one must make do with a single life on Earth has contributed strongly to the Earth-oriented consciousness of personality. In the meantime however the consciousness and ‘I’ development of humanity is so far progressed that the truth of reincarnation can now be newly presented and understood in a way that is appropriate for our times.

Actually the concept of reincarnation is fundamentally of a deeply Christian character. Like Christianity, it draws our attention to the spiritual core of each person regardless of their outer covering.

But what happens to the souls who lived before Christ? And what about the millions who still today can not come to the deep truths of true

Christianity? Naturally, every person who takes his or her particular religion seriously will find many positive opportunities for development that are not open to an atheist. But as far as salvation is concerned, does it really matter whether one is a Mohammedan, Buddhist, or Christian? Reincarnation leads souls through many lives in many different cultures and races, thereby making it possible for every soul to encounter Christianity.

This great rhythm of life also means that we can and ought to let go of the problems associated with nationalism and racism. One of the worst evils is a person's complete identification with his own particular blood and race, a tenet that is absolutely inappropriate for our times. It muddies the spiritual consciousness and makes one subject to blood-bound instincts and drives. The inhumanity of the spiritually darkened representative of the Third Reich should be a convincing enough lesson! Changes in one's physical aspect in each incarnation causes the forces of love bound up with the blood ties to be changed into more spiritual and unselfish love, the essence of Christianity.

The oft-expressed opinion that reincarnation is identical to self-salvation could only come about through a misunderstanding of the thoughts on development represented here. The salvation of humanity depends upon the realization of the original ideal of humanity. This occurred physically for the first time with Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became man. In the future the earthly destiny of every person will depend upon the relationship he can find to Resurrected One. Through His sacrifice, He became the Spirit of Humanity. He is the lifeblood of the becoming human organism to which He irrevocably aligned Himself.

As we have seen, the concept of reincarnation allows for a genuine understanding of humanity as a whole. It is only in modern times that a world-spanning human consciousness has been formed. Human intelligence and technology have opened up the possibility of having global connections and exchanges. At the same time, the worldwide threat of destruction has been cast as a shadow by technology and human egoism. The global character of the concept of reincarnation contributes important moral forces that could awaken humanity to a re-thinking of our predicament. The recognition of reincarnation and the law of karma could become a healing balm for humanity and the Earth and support a major turnaround on a moral level.

Spiritual rebirth

The search for meaning in human lives is illustrated in the Gospels during a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21): "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he will not see the Kingdom of Heaven." At first, Nicodemus does not understand Jesus' words and thinks He is talking about physical birth. Whereby Jesus explains: "Truly, truly, I tell you, unless you are born from water and spirit you can not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. What is born of flesh, is flesh, and what is born of spirit, is spirit. Do not be amazed that I have told you: You must be born again."

It is this path of imbuing humanity with spirit that has been traversed through all the ages in all religions. In this age of scientific materialism this

knowledge has been extremely darkened. This lofty goal can be achieved only through many lifetimes and in harmony with the development of humanity as a whole. The deed of Christ reveals this highest goal: The spiritual birth of a higher being. Since one short life is not enough to achieve this goal, we must and are privileged, wisely and justly led by the law of karma, to go through many physical births on this Earth. In spite of being bound to “the flesh,” the divine-spiritual world will be opened to us in full consciousness.

This poem by Christian Morgenstern sums up the search for the way:

Overcome! Every hour,
That you victoriously overcome,
Be comforted, that you will
Abundantly find your new life.

Every insult, every shame,
Every suffering, every pain,
Will, with right understanding,
Decide your ascent all the more.

Without original sin you will sparkle,
Lively again before your grandchildren.
Countless people in the dark
Are shown the way to the Sun,
By a victorious one.

Endnotes:

- 1 A principal that carries its goal within itself, or whose goal is self-determined; from the Greek: *en* = inner; *telos* = goal, meaning, purpose; *echein* = to have.
- 2 In *Theosophy* by Rudolf Steiner.