

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14852.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14852.001.0001)

The Phoenix Complex

A Philosophy of Nature

By: Michael Marder

Citation:

The Phoenix Complex: A Philosophy of Nature

By: Michael Marder

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14852.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262374873

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023



The MIT Press

6 DEATH, REBIRTH, AND BEYOND IN HINDU TRADITIONS

As Laurence Gosserez rightly observes in his study of the phoenix, “It is not always possible to establish with clarity the exact kinship among diverse mythic birds, such as the Greek and Latin phoenix, the Egyptian *bennu*, Chinese *fenghuang*, Persian *simorgh*, the Judaic phoenix [*ḥol*, MM] or the Arabo-Muslim *anqa*.”¹ There are neither definitive lineages nor exact equivalences here, only probable influences and cross-cultural reverberations. The list of names, which Gosserez has hastily compiled, would not, however, be complete without the Indian bird Garuḍa. In the very first book of *The Mahābhārata*, *The Book of the Beginnings*, Garuḍa is said to have been born all by himself, “in all his might without help from his mother,” Vinatā, the daughter of Dakṣa, one of the agents of creation (M 1(5)20.1.1–5).² Like *bennu*, Garuḍa is a sun-bird: “Ablaze like a kindled mass of fire, of most terrifying aspect, the Bird grew instantly to his giant size and took to the sky. Upon seeing him, all the gods took refuge with the bright-shining Bird; and prostrating themselves they spoke to him of the many hues as he sat perched: ‘Fire, deign to grow no more! What that thou do not seek to burn us. For this huge mass of thine creeps fiercely onward!’” (M 1(5)20.1.5–10).

The bird’s connection to the sun and to fire, its self-mediated birth, its instantaneous transformation from a hatchling to a magnificent and unique specimen—all this resonates with the key shared features of various phoenix narratives. Still more impressive is the resonance between the cosmic and historical scale of the Egyptian *bennu* and the Indian Garuḍa, as attested in the hymn of praise that the gods sing to him: “Thou art the Lord, of the aspect

of fire, thou art our ultimate / redemption. . . . Of thy heat that never lackest in fame we hear, / All that is future and all that has befallen. / Superbly thou shinest upon all that moves and stands, / Eclipsing the splendor of the sun. / Thou art the finisher of all that is, the lasting and the brief. . . . / Destroying and ending the revolutions of the Eon” (M 1(5)20.1.10–15).

Not only is Garuḍa a singular witness of the entire history of being (knowing “all that is future and all that has befallen”), as the phoenix will later be for Claudian, but he also marks the end of “the revolutions of the Eon,” in a way similar to how *bennu*’s and phoenix’s life span coincides with the Egyptian Great Year. The radiance emanating from Garuḍa and eclipsing the light of the sun finds its parallel in the ancient Egyptian root *wbn*, from which *bennu* is formed, meaning “to arise brilliantly,” or “to shine.” The arising is replete with phallic connotations too: “Filled with glow, might, and strength,” the bird “rose like the upraised staff of Brahmā” (M 1(5)26.1.1–5). The mission Garuḍa receives from his mother shortly after his birth is to steal soma, the elixir of life, from the gods, which cannot help but be associated in our minds with how Prometheus stole fire from Olympus in Greek mythology. Encountering Viṣṇu after successfully obtaining soma, Garuḍa is granted two boons, one of them being, “May I even without the aid of the elixir never age and never die!” (1(5)29.1.15). From that time on, the bird’s achievement of immortality goes hand in hand with his role as the destroyer and ender of eons.

The imbrication of life and death in the figure of Garuḍa is even more evident in his designation as “cleaver of mountaintops, drier of the water of the rivers, whirler of the worlds, awesome image of death” (M 1(5)26.1.1–5). The bearer of the elixir of life and himself immortal, Garuḍa embodies the wheel of time that rolls toward death and destruction—the “whirling” of worlds, recalling the famous dance of Śiva—which in turn prepares the ground or the stage for world-making. The mythic bird thus embodies the Hindu conception of infinite time: “Unlike the Hebrew and Christian conceptions of creation, the Indian allows for the infinity of time, and regards the universe as one of many that stretch, in cycles of creation and destruction, into the endless past, and that will stretch, in similar cycles, into the endless future.”³

The term “Eastern phoenix” is a misnomer, which is not so innocent, considering that it extends as a model or a prototype the Greek and Latin figuration of the mythical creature to regions outside Europe. But this does not mean that what I have referred to as “the phoenix complex” is not shared by cultures in the East and in the West, still before the emergence of the phoenix properly so called. The reason for affixing a Western name to the complex is that, with all its disastrous consequences, it is most crisply implemented in the West both with regard to the natural world and with respect to the technological concretization of this way of treating nature. The actual capacity to burn the world as a whole, while hoping for its ongoing regeneration from the ashes, was realized with the industrial-scale use of fossil fuels. But the advantage of non-Western traditions, such as those thriving on the Indian subcontinent, is that, in addition to hosting modes of thinking that dovetail with the phoenix complex, or with which the phoenix complex dovetails, they untie the ideational and affective knots that “complexify” it in the first place. What Schelling struggled to express in the conceptual and natural language at his disposal, what he grappled with in terms of incipient and final freedom, can be stated with beautiful economy in the words of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (which is, probably, the most famous portion of *The Mahābhārata*) or of the early *Upaniṣads*, or, again, of certain hymns from *R̥g Veda*—materials, to which we turn next.

*

In the *Bhagavad Gītā* the god Kṛṣṇa endeavors to allay the doubts and concerns of prince Arjuna, who is reluctant to throw his army into battle in the Kurukshetra war. His arguments, though, are not tactical; in his speeches, Kṛṣṇa explains nothing less than the nature of the self, of birth, death, and rebirth, as well as the path to freeing oneself from bondage to the cycle of reincarnations. The infinite time Garuḍa embodies turns out to be that of each creature, whether vegetal or human, animal or divine.

“Truly,” Kṛṣṇa says early on, “there was never a time when I was not, nor you, nor these lords of men; and neither will there be a time when we shall cease to be from this time onward” (BG 2.12).⁴ Nonbeing is illusory, so long as there is a world soul (*ātman*) essentially unsullied by the events of

birth and death, the soul or breath that cannot be harmed or even touched by empirical occurrences. “These bodies inhabited by the eternal [*nityasya*], the indestructible [*anāśino*], the immeasurable [*prameyasya*] soul/breath [*ātman*] are said to come to an end [*antavanta*].”⁵ Yet “he who imagines this (*ātman*) the slayer and he who imagines it the slain, neither of them understands [that] it does not slay, nor is slain” (BG 2.18–19). The phoenix exemplifies the indestructibility of *ātman* traversing the gap of death; the figure of Garuḍa is more precise, in that he reveals the illusory nature of death as such. The infinity of finite creatures is assured not by virtue of producing another finite being in their likeness, but by finding *ātman* within oneself and, through this indestructible breath of life in oneself, identifying with other living beings, in whom the same *ātman* similarly dwells. Hence, Kṛṣṇa appeals to Arjuna: “Know that that by which all this universe is pervaded is indeed indestructible [*avināśī*: also, “not to be lost”]” (BG 2.17).

Already the discovery of *ātman* within oneself helps one cut the ties to individual identity that overlays this shared stratum of existence. It, therefore, represents a vector of liberation: while the phoenix complex is invested in the resurrection of the same embodied being, or of another who is simultaneously the same and not the same as the original, the insight into *ātman* renders the unique material, genetic, or psychic identity of the I secondary. “Neither is this (*ātman*) born nor does it die at any time, nor, having been, will it again come not to be. Birthless [*ajo*], eternal [*nityah*], perpetual [*śāśvato*]” (BG 2.20). Births, deaths, and rebirths occur at an epiphenomenal level, which does not affect *ātman*; hence the prohibition of mourning directed toward those who are wise enough to realize this epiphenomenality—“the wise [*paṇḍitāḥ*] do not mourn for the dead or for the living” (BG 2.11)—which will become apparent in a different epoch and cultural context in the thought of Baruch Spinoza.⁶

Should we, then, not mourn species loss and the passing of human or nonhuman beings who are particularly dear to us? By cutting our attachments to life and to lives, our own and that of others, can we silently authorize environmental devastation in the name of the “birthless” and undying *ātman*, which remains unperturbed by empirical events in the world? Is the having-been of everything and everyone who has ever existed sufficient

enough to ensure their (our) coming-to-be-again when the fragile conditions required for life are under threat?

According to Amerindian philosophies and some Christian doctrines (such as those of St. Hildegard of Bingen, whose works were discussed in chapter 5), an individual soul dons the body as a garment, which it takes off at death—the garment hiding, as well as expressing, the one who wears it. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *ātman* is the wearer of bodies as diverse as a blade of grass, a fly, an elephant, a palm tree, a human, a lotus flower: “As, after casting away worn out garments [*vāsāmsi jirṇāni*], a man later takes new ones, so, after casting away worn out bodies, *ātman* encounters other, new ones” (BG 2.22). A single world soul wears different bodies, which can be discarded, abandoned, or cast away (*vihāya*), as they age. The garment factory of material existence is not infinitely stocked, however, and its equipment as well as logistics have gone haywire. What if some or even most of these bodies-clothes are no longer available? Moreover, the garments may be manufactured as already worn out from the moment of their first fabrication, abandoned ab initio, defined by this abandon or by abandonability. Reincarnation is the donning of a new body or a piece of clothing by *ātman* (indeed, of a multitude of bodies/clothes that happen to be alive at a given time), but the novelty and renewability of the supply are far from guaranteed. The glitch of groundless hope that is operative in the phoenix complex is in equal measure present in the vision of the world concretized in *The Mahābhārata*.

The deaths and rebirths of different living bodies that *ātman* acquires find their parallel in the stages of life, undergone by the same organism: “Just as in the body childhood, adulthood, and old age happen to an embodied being, so also he (the embodied being) acquires another body [*dehāntara-prāptir*” (BG 2.13). The cycle of reincarnations is due to the appropriation (*prāptis*) of bodies by the one who inhabits them, the embodied self. My body as a child, as an adult, and an old man is, in fact, three distinct bodies appropriated by *me*. I am reincarnated in myself as an adult, after the child that I was is no longer, and as an elderly person, after the adult, too, passes away. My adulthood is the child of my childhood; my elderly body is the offspring of me as adult, the same and other from its predecessor. I die in myself and I am reborn from myself, coming close to the figure of the phoenix or

Garuḍa, as much as to the nature of Kṛṣṇa himself as revealed to Arjuna: “I am the father of the universe, the mother, the establisher, the grandfather” (BG 9.17); “I am . . . the origin, the dissolution and the foundation [*prabhavaḥ pralayaḥ sthāanam*]” (BG 9.18); “I am both immortality and death, being and nonbeing [*amṛtam cāiva mṛtyuśca, sad asac cāham*]” (BG 9.19). Millennia later, the American poet Walt Whitman will convey something of this idea in his “Song of Myself,” included in *Leaves of Grass*.

In the microcosm of my existence, the macrocosm of *ātman* makes itself known: within the span of that which I call my life, I am perpetually reborn and I constantly die. The moment of my death, conventionally considered, is yet another link in the endless chain of such events. That is why, once again, mourning is out of place: “And moreover even if you think this, to be eternally born [*nityajātam*] or eternally dead [*nityam . . . mṛtam*], even then you should not mourn for this, Arjuna” (BG 2.26). The overall orientation of the phoenix complex prohibits mourning: it is absurd to mourn a life that will remake itself, or one that, “eternally born” (of itself), stretches in an infinite chain of self-renewal, beginning ever afresh. The “eternally dead” is also unmournable, since it has never been alive, and so has never slipped out of life and, having never been, will not ever be. Death is vanquished by its negation in immortality as much as by its confinement in eternity.

*

When we turn to the hymns compiled in *The Ṛg Veda*, the goddess Uṣas (Dawn) personifies the idea of perpetual rebirth and of the ever-young beauty. While she is one of the few feminine deities in the hymns, “cognate with the Greek goddess Eos and the Latin goddess Aurora” (and, through Aurora, with the Virgin Mary, as presented by St. Hildegard of Bingen),⁷ Uṣas belongs, together with the phoenix, in Gilbert Durand’s category of the “spectacular symbols” of the diurnal order (Durand observes that *divinity* as such is diurnal, celestial, and spectacular—“in Sanskrit the root *div*, which means ‘to shine’ and ‘day’, gives *Dyaus*, *dios* and *deivos*, or the Latin *divus*.” And he adds that “the *Upaniṣads* . . . are full of luminous symbols: God is called the ‘Shining One,’ [while] ‘Brilliance and Light of all lights and what is shining is merely a shadow of its brilliance.’”⁸) Entwined with the dark of

night, the time of dawn is a transitional, limitrophe figure between death, on the one hand, and the new life and light of day, on the other.⁹ Thus, in a hymn dedicated to Indra, it is sung that “from of old [*sanāt*], the two young girls of distinct forms, ever regenerating, go around heaven and earth along their own courses—Night with her black, Dawn with her gleaming white shapes, progress one after the other” (RV 1.62.8).¹⁰ Remarkably, not only life regenerates each time but also death resurfaces and regenerates, circling heaven and earth along its course. Or, perhaps, it is the twin movement of renewed life and death that is subject to regeneration, while keeping the “distinct forms” of the two sisters who participate in this movement.

The *complexio oppositorum* (the conjunction of opposites in the matrix of the phoenix complex) is glaring in the Vedic construction of the time that has run out and the time that is dispensed, graciously, after the end; of black and white; of darkness and the new light. In fact, the unity of opposites is pronounced both between Dawn and Night and within Dawn herself. So, in the hymn dedicated to Uṣas, we read: “Having a gleaming calf, herself gleaming white, she has come here. The black one has left behind her seats for her. Having the same kin-bonds, immortal, following one upon the other, the two, Day and Night, keep exchanging their color. The road is the same for the two sisters—unending. They proceed on it, one after the other, commanded by the gods. They do not oppose each other, nor do they stand still, though well grounded—Night and Dawn, of like mind but different form” (RV 1.113.2–3). Death and rebirth, corresponding to Night and Dawn, belong to an immortality that is not stagnant, that is marked by a constant rotation or exchange of places and colors, that travels along the same unending road. The two sisters’ difference in form echoes the same idea from the other hymn I have cited, but, given the dynamism of the exchanges, of positional changes (one follows the other, and then the first follows the second), and nonoppositional arrangement, this difference and each of these forms, too, are in motion. Even the twin of Night is not constant: at times, she is Day; at other times, she is Dawn, in the same way that the other of death is sometimes life and sometimes (re)birth.

The activity proper to Uṣas is “dawning forth” and “awakening” all creatures to life, the activity, through which she “hold[s] sway over every earthly

good” (RV 1.113.7). These awakenings are singularly adjusted for a plethora of creatures called forth into life (“Living beings are not alike in what they have in view. Dawn has awakened all creatures” [RV 1.113.6]); whereas dawning forth is everywhere the same, the dawn is different for each. A bridge between finite lives, this activity is, itself, infinite: “Over and over in the past the goddess Dawn dawned forth. And today she has dawned forth here, the bounteous one. And she will dawn forth through later days. Unaging, immortal, she proceeds according to her own customs” (RV 1.113.13). Viewed from the vantage point of such repetitions, Uṣas traces continuous lines along a discontinuous path, punctuated by the night. She is the forerunner of the fire (“you have caused fire to be kindled” [RV 1.113.9]), to which the aging phoenix entrusts himself, in order to rejuvenate from the ashes in the dominant versions of the myth. But, in line with the alternating sequences of the following and the preceding, she, who awakens all creatures to being, is also convoked into being by fire: “the hoarse-voiced singer [=Agni, the god of fire], himself being praised, arouses the radiant dawns” (RV 1.113.17).

When, in a hymn addressed to all the gods, it is sung, “Might this earth [*kṣāḥ*] here be like (the place) of the dawns” (RV 10.31.5), the hope is that the earth would be ever fresh and ever refreshed, recovering its youth every day, at daybreak, like the dawn. Of course, we are dealing with the conjunction of opposites in this verse, which wishes for the chthonic domain (the Greek word for earth as *chthōn*, or the underworld, derives from the same Proto-Indo-European root as *kṣāḥ*) to be or to become akin to the place of dawn, of the birth and rebirth of light in its incomplete separation from darkness. Diurnal and nocturnal orders intermix.¹¹ But the renewal of the earth, in all its impenetrable obscurity as *kṣāḥ*, will have come to pass not so much by the brilliance of light shed upon it in the dawning of the place that it is; this renewal depends on the other dimension of fire, which is life-giving heat, stimulating a more complete awakening than light alone. Isn’t Jesus’s exclamation in Luke 12:49 reminiscent of this Vedic verse, even if it sounds more abrupt than this ancient text: “I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were kindled already!”¹²

The gifts of Dawn are those of rebirth, of the extension of life across and despite its discontinuities or intermittencies. As in the phoenix complex, the apotheoses of her gifts are the offspring who outlive their parents, in whom or through whom parents outlive themselves: “Today, then, o bounteous one, dawn for the one who sings; for us shine down a lifetime full of offspring” (RV 1.113.17). Thanks to the intimate connection between Uṣas and Agni, who in *The Mahābhārata* treats Garuḍa as his equal, her gifts are sacrificial. That is why she is “the beacon of sacrifice” (RV 1.113.19), opening through her own retreat the path for the rising sun: “She has left a path for the sun to drive on. We have come to where they lengthen lifetime” (RV 1.113.16). Why have to “come to where they lengthen lifetime” at this exact point, at which Uṣas is no longer (at least for now) and at which the sun can take over, traveling along the itinerary pre-delineated by her? Because the retreat in question is not a mere absence but a giving withdrawal that, in the measure that the retreating one disappears, charts a possible path for those who will come afterwards—the offspring, above all.

In this spirit, the Vedic tradition ascribes a protective capacity to sacrifice and to its main deity, Agni, who preserves, rather than destroys, whatever is burned. The phoenix presents us with an afterglow of this ancient sacrificial logic. In effect, Agni imparts something of his own immortality to the offerings he receives: in a hymn dedicated to him, he is revered as “immortal Agni [*agnir amṛtān*] among mortals” (RV 7.4.4). Imploring cremation fire to be just right, perfectly adjusted for receiving the dead, another hymn sings: “Don’t burn him through, Agni; don’t scorch him; don’t singe his skin, nor his body. When you make him cooked to readiness, Jātavedas, then impel him forth to the forefathers” (RV 10.16.1).

Besides preserving, fire spans the worlds of mortals and immortals, the present and the past, the offspring and the ancestral realm. Its minute adjustments are the expressions of elemental justice, dispensing parts of the body, the senses, and breath itself back to their proper elements: “Let your eye go to the sun, your life-breath to the wind. Go to heaven and to earth as is fitting. Or go to the waters, if it has been fixed for you there. Take your stand in the plants with your limbs” (RV 10.16.3). The luminosity of vision returns to

the sun; the airiness of breath floats back to the wind. The body is distributed among various elements (through the element of fire), reuniting with the immensity of life; its parts are not claimed by one domain alone but are allocated to the realms above and below, “to heaven and to earth as is fitting.” It doesn’t take long for a quiet vegetal resurrection to be announced, either. The motif that begins with “take your stand in the plants with your limbs” returns at the end of the hymn: “The one whom you have entirely burnt, Agni, that one extinguish in turn. Let the *kiyāmbu* plant grow here and the *pākadurvā* and the *vyalkaśā*” (RV 10.16.13). Plant growth is the cooling down of fire and, at the same time, the continuation of fire in what no longer shares its hot and fiery nature, the extinguishing that promises a new life.

(I must add, parenthetically and in a rather telegraphic style, that the cosmic justice of fire is predicated on its wisdom, which lends to Agni the epithet Jātavedas, or having understanding and insight (*veda*) of all existence (*jāta*). Fire has its own material discernment, singularly fitting each thing it burns or melts at various speeds, analyzing it to its basic components. The just dispensation of each part to its proper element depends on fire’s wise approach to and embrace of the body it burns—or cooks. The hymnic imploration of funereal fire, “Don’t burn him through, Agni,” is meant only to remind Jātavedas of his own discernments, to call fire back to its just and wise self.)

Rather than aiming to preserve the unique material form of a finite being, as in the Greek and Latin phoenix narratives, Vedic Hinduism, at least in some of its strands, focuses on the return of the body to the elements and on the continuation of life in other, unrecognizable configurations. Aside from identity, the vectors of this continuation are scrambled and temporal sequences are, consequently, disrupted. With the inversion of the relative positions of following and preceding, the very sense of resurrection or reincarnation swings toward indeterminacy, the future melting into the past. We have witnessed Agni’s and Uṣas’s intricate dance of precession and succession; now it turns out that Agni is “the son born before his two parents [the kindling sticks]” (RV 10.31.10). The kindling sticks are none other than heaven and earth, which earlier in the same hymn, were to meet, to touch, intermingle, and receive one another with the mediation of dawn.¹³ To rebirth

after death, we are obliged to add that one is born before one is born and that one dies after one has died. Thus, in a hymn to Yama, the god of the underworld and of death, the last line reads, “The base was stretched out in front and the ‘coming forth’ [*nirayaṇam*: ‘afterbirth’] was made behind” (RV 10.135.6).

*

Other Vedic hymns throw into relief a transcultural dimension of the phoenix complex, according to which the power of death is eroded by one’s afterlife in one’s progeny. In a direct conjuring (away) of death, a hymn begins with the line: “Depart, Death, along the further path, which is your own, different from the one leading to the gods. To you who possess eyes and who listen, to you I speak: do not harm [*mā . . . ririṣaḥ*] our offspring nor our heroes” (RV 10.18.1). The idiosyncratic path of death is the farthest when it does not lead to another life (say, of dwelling with the gods) but culminates in death. Such a path is also its own destination, which is why it is so long as to be virtually infinite. Personified, though, death itself is alive with its sense organs and their corresponding activities: it possesses eyes and listens. And the harm it is urged not to inflict has to do with the possibilities of biological and cultural survival, affecting primarily the offspring and the heroes—survival as the rebirth of the individual and the collective in the progeny and in mythic archetypes.

The second line of the same hymn spells out the meaning of “effacing the footprint of death,” which is the aim of the entire phoenix complex. “Effacing the footprint of death when you have gone, establishing for yourselves a longer, more extended lifetime, swelling up with offspring and wealth, become cleansed and purified, o you who are worthy of the sacrifice” (RV 10.18.2). This effacement is not a total negation of death; it happens “when you have gone,” having been claimed by death for itself. How is this possible? The extension of a lifetime, mentioned in this verse, refers, once again, to biological and cultural legacies—to survival in one’s offspring and wealth, which has now supplanted the heroes. It entails a discontinuous continuation of life after death, which effaces, precisely, the trace of death felt in oblivion and nonexistence. When in another Vedic hymn, singers beseech

Mitra and Varuṇa (called Rudras with reference to Rudra the “healer but also a terrifying archer”¹⁴) to protect them, they ask to be safeguarded from the effects of death that pivot on its trace as the erasure of all traces. What they fear the most is that “we in our own persons not endure (becoming) the specter of a nobody, either in our remains or in our lineage” (RV 5.70.4).

The sober recognition that is everywhere present in *The R̥g Veda* is that death itself is ineffaceable, that, according to a line from the hymn to the god Ādityas, “We are men, whose kinsman is death” (RV 8.18.22). Rather than an external menace, death is a close relative of mortals, so much so that there are no bonds of kinship without it. But, despite the undeniable and proximate reality of death, this and numerous other hymns make a bid for a continuation of life, for survival after death: “For even though we are men, whose kinsman is death, o Ādityas, extend our lifetime for us to live” (RV 8.18.22). The simultaneous acknowledgment and repudiation of death, concentrated in the words “even though,” is the crux of the phoenix complex. In the hymn to Ādityas, this conjunction is possible due to the rebirth of the supplicants in their “progeny and posterity”—“For the sake of progeny and posterity, make for us a longer lifetime to live, o very great Ādityas” (RV 8.18.18). “A longer lifetime to live” would then be made *for us*, but it will not be lived *by us*, within the limits of our fragile bodies.

In a text traditionally interpreted as priest Bṛhaduktha’s funeral hymn sung on the occasion of his son Vājin’s death, the logic of finite existence trouncing its own finitude is reduced to its bare bones. “All living beings,” sings Bṛhaduktha, “are held down within their bodies, but they have extended themselves by multiplying through their offspring” (RV 10.56.5). The act of generating offspring challenges the spatial and temporal limits of the body, which, without this creative overflow that is also manifest in the senses and in how they reach out to the world, would have been a prison (we are “held down within” our bodies, the Vedic text says). The following verse elaborates on the extension beyond oneself, which goes two ways: from posterity to the ancestors and from the ancestors to posterity. “Sons set up their lord [father] as a finder of the sun. . . . And their forefathers have established their own offspring as their paternal power, as their ‘stretched thread’ among the later generations” (RV 10.56.5). The patriarchal overtones are glaring here, from

the father–sons relation to the solar fetish associated with paternal power. Nevertheless, the stretching on of a thread of life is illustrated with the backward-looking cult of the ancestors and the forward-looking ordering of the descendants. A phoenix-like rebirth is conditional on both twines of the “stretched thread.”

The idea of birth from death, which animates the phoenix complex, is also anticipated in Vedic Hinduism. In a hymnic reflection on cosmogony, it is sung that “in the first generation of gods, what exists [*sát*] was born from what does not exist [*ásat*]” (RV 10.72.3) And just as at the origin of the world existence is generated *ex nihilo* from nonexistence, so the birth of mortals is from a “dead egg.” The goddess Aditi becomes the mother of immortals and of mortals, her eight sons. “With seven she went forth to the gods. She cast away the one stemming from a dead egg” (RV 10.72.8), and that one was the first mortal being.¹⁵ Born *from* death, the mortal son of Aditi is also born *for* death, as well as for procreation that delays the finality of this fate and that allows this tragic (miscarried?) act of generation to be repeated time and again: “With seven sons Aditi went forth to the ancient generation. For procreation but also for death, she brought here again the one stemming from a dead egg” (RV 10.72.9).

The god of the underworld, Yama, renders the notion of being born from death literal. Although he is born immortal,¹⁶ Yama freely elected death over immortality in order to honor the rest of the gods with his sacrifice: “For the sake of the gods, he chose death and for the sake of offspring he did not choose immortality. . . . Yama left behind his own dear body (as offspring)” (RV 10.13.4). Whereas choosing death and not choosing immortality are formally identical, subjectively there is a tremendous difference between the two expressions. For the sake of the gods, the choice of death is intelligible entirely within a sacrificial frame of reference. For the sake of offspring, not choosing immortality is a double negative that opens the time and the space for a punctuated, rugged continuation of life despite death. Astoundingly, reborn from the threshold of death, Yama is his own progenitor and his own offspring: he “left behind his own dear body (as offspring).” This theme, too, will recur in those phoenix narratives, where the rejuvenated bird is born from the dead body of its predecessor.

A hymn dedicated to an unnamed god known only as “who” (*ká*), expresses the entanglement of mortality and immortality in a more laconic mode yet. “*Who* is the giver of breath, the giver of strength” and one “whose shadow is immortality, whose shadow is death [*yasya chāyā amṛtam yasya mṛtyubḥ*]” (RV 10.121.2). If divinity is brilliance, diurnal and spectacular, then its shadow is much more than a mere privation of this defining feature in nocturnal darkness; the shadow is also an effect of divine bright glow, the shadow *of* brilliance as brilliance, that makes this glow what it is. It is in this sense that Chāyā, or Shadow, is a goddess, who is the consort of the sun god, Sūrya.¹⁷ In her shape, representative of other chthonic gods, the divine resides in the shadows and as the shadows too. Furthermore, the unnamed god is the giver of breath and a giver of death, where the sense of the two gifts is far from certain (nor is it certain that these gifts are two, and not one). To give breath, to bring mortal beings to life, is already to deliver them over to a death to come. To give death is not to bring to a determinate end a body that, in any event, does not rest within its limits and that extends itself into the other or others through its fecundity. The same goes for rebirth: its concept is incomplete without the idea of redeath (*punar mṛtyu*), initially formulated in the Vedic *Brāhmaṇas* and in the *Upaniṣads*.¹⁸

The brilliance of light—in line with the brightness of the funeral fire and the flames, in which the phoenix is rejuvenated—provides guidance to those who are dead and are soon to be reborn. Let us go back to Bṛhaduktha’s hymn to register the mechanisms, the mechanics and machinations, that direct textual spotlights onto these lights. “Here is one (light) of yours, and far away is another one. Merge with the third light. At the merging of your body, be one cherished and dear to the gods at this highest means of begetting” (RV 10.56.1). Presumably, the Vedic verse under our consideration spells out the meaning of a much more cryptic exhortation to the dead in an earlier funeral hymn, “Unite with your body in your full luster” (RV 10.14.8). Merging, uniting your light and other lights with the third is rejoining the shine of divinity through “the highest means of begetting.” In the process, the body is not absent, as it also merges together with divine light, is born into the light. “In your full luster” likely refers to the karmic balance of actions performed in the past life and determining the brightness

of your shining, even though this sense of “karma” does not get consolidated until the composition of the *Upaniṣads*. Still, the question remains: how does the merging of lights happen?

The answer is indicated in the second verse of the same hymn: “Unswerving, in order to uphold the great gods, you should exchange your own light as if for the light in heaven” (RV 10.56.2). These are the mechanics and machinations of life’s reproducibility in the Vedas: whereas in the ancient Greek world an aging finite being replaces itself with another who is younger and formed in its image, in *The R̥g Veda* an afterlife ideally involves an exchange of the personal for the universal, of your own light for the light in heaven. The actual impossibility of such an exchange does not escape the author of Vedic verse. The operation is to be carried out with the awareness of its nature as a transcendental illusion, signaled by the words “as if.” Your own light and the light in heaven are incommensurable and, therefore, cannot be exchanged one for the other. But you are to act as if this were possible, regardless. In the later developments of Hindu traditions, notably of yogic practices and the notion of *ātman*, with which these practices strive to reconnect, the exchange will be effectuated already in this life. Schematically, we might say that what the discipline of yoga teaches is how to dim down the glare of your own light so as to let the other light shine through, including from within you.

*

As for the doctrine of reincarnation, of rebirth that is in equal measure a redeath, its formulations, like the sense of karmic action tied to the balance of good and bad deeds, first appear in the *Upaniṣads*. Take, for instance, Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad, which states: “When people depart from this world, it is to the moon that they all go. . . . Now the moon is the door to the heavenly world. It allows those who answer its question to pass. As to those who do not answer its question, after they have become rain, it rains them down here on earth, where they are born again in these various conditions—as a worm, an insect, a fish, a bird, a lion, a boar, a rhinoceros, a tiger, a man, or some other creature—each in accordance with his actions and his knowledge” (1.2).¹⁹ The moon’s “simple” question is *Who are you?* pertaining to the realm of self-knowledge, as opposed to other kinds of knowledge. The answer that serves

as a pass is *I am you*. Once this answer is given, “he gets on the path leading to the gods and reaches first the world of fire, then the world of wind, then the world of Varuṇa, then the world of Indra, then the world of Prajāpati, and finally the world of *brahman*” (1.3).

There are, then, two general paths that may be followed after death: the path of reincarnation down on earth and the path “leading to the gods” that rehashes the Vedic merging of lights. The moon functions as a hinge, turned both upward and downward, raining those to be reborn on earth and sending those on the way to *brahman* to the world of fire. It is, in the first instance, an elemental hinge separating water from fire, even though, according to one version of Agni’s genealogy, he is “the child of waters [*apām napāt*]” (RV 3.1). Passage through fire is a step on the second, divine path, which is also reserved, in keeping with this logic, for the phoenix in versions of the myth that emphasize her fiery rebirth. But the region of (cosmic) fire in the *Upaniṣads* is more complex: “A fire—that’s what the region up there is. . . . Its firewood is the sun; its smoke is the sunbeams; its flame is the day; its embers are the moon; and its sparks are the constellations” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 5.4.1). While fire down below reflects cosmic fire, the moon (that together with the funeral pyre serves as a gateway for the deceased) is an ember within the elemental paradigm of the cosmic blaze. Both paths, therefore, begin from the end, with the rests of firewood and fire itself dying out.

The delivery of a dead body to fire repeats the instance of fiery birth, dispensing the deceased to his “native” element. “When he has departed, when he has reached his appointed time—they take him to the very fire from which he came, from which he sprang. Now, the people who know this, and the people here in the wilderness who venerate this: ‘Austerity is faith’—they pass into the flame, from the flame into the day. . . . This is the path leading to the gods” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 5.9–10). A birth, death, and rebirth in fire is the lot of those “who know this” and who favor a life of austerity in the wilderness. A certain merging with outside nature, as opposed to life in the village described in the next verse (5.10.3), is the prerequisite for passing through the flame and embarking on another path to an afterlife that eschews reincarnation here below. We are, most likely, privy to an attempt to reconcile in the same text two clashing traditions: on the one hand, an

older idea regarding the fate of those who are born out of fire to return to the same element at the time of their death, and, on the other, freshly paid attention to the (karmic) balance of actions in this life, the place where life is spent, and the way of worshipping appropriate to this life.

The path, passing through fire and leading to the gods, is further outlined in Kaṭha Upaniṣad. To be sure, this path does not end with the gods; it winds on beyond the brightest of light (and beyond its opposition to or pairing with shadows and darkness) to nothing (3.11). Although it commences with the element of fire, in which the phoenix—in its iconic renditions—is reborn, the higher path does not arrive, in a circular manner, at yet another rebirth: “When a man lacks understanding, is unmindful and always impure; he does not reach that final step, but gets on the round of rebirth. But when a man has understanding, is mindful and always pure; he does reach that final step, from which he is not reborn again” (3.7–8). As the question posed by the moon demonstrates, the supreme understanding is a self-understanding that ultimately liberates one from the cycles of *saṃsāra*—rebirth, as much as redeath. Such liberation is the essence of *mokṣa*, cognate with the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*, which, in Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, bristles with the promise of “freedom from all fetters” (6.13). (Earlier, in the same Upaniṣad, an appeal is made to “the one God who covers himself with things issuing from the primal source, from his own inherent nature, as a spider, with threads,” the appeal that plainly says, “may he procure us dissolution in *brahman*” [6.10]).

The phoenix complex trembles with the introduction of the other path, also prominent in Jainism, that does not crave rebirth, the extension of finite existence past its due date, preferably in an identical form. Its mechanisms—its mechanics and machinations—are incapable of processing a disruption of this magnitude. Already the doctrine of reincarnation withdraws the guarantees that rebirth would take place in the same kind of existence as that of the deceased. Only the exceptional cases of karmic stagnation (neither its increase nor decrease) account for the replication of being in its former kind: a horse in a horse, a fig tree in a fig tree, a human in a human. The phoenix’s unchanging shape after its rebirth means that its actions throughout the long stretch of its life do not matter, the form of its existence indifferent to its content. The phoenix is what it is only genetically, by virtue of its birth, which

is always and necessarily a birth from death. This is what Graeco-Roman nature is as *phusis* and especially as *natura*, shaped from the beginning to the end by birth. Conversely, in the world of the Upaniṣads, the natural order, with its tides of rebirth and singular retreats from the cycle of reincarnation, is contingent on moral uprightness. *Dharma* belongs together with *karma*: what or who one is depends on how one acts, that is, on how one acted in one's past life. The acceptance of ethics as first philosophy in Plato's *epekeina tes ousias*, or the idea of the good beyond being, in certain mystical traditions (such as the medieval book of *Zohar* in kabbalistic Judaism), and in Levinas's thought are the closest Western approximations to this paradigm.

In order to process the disruptive influence of *mokṣa*, the phoenix complex mobilizes the discourse of nihilism, accusing Hindu traditions of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Or, as Wendy Doniger has put it, of "throwing away not merely the present life but all those potential future lives as well, committing a kind of multiple proleptic suicide, a preventative euthanasia."²⁰ Nevertheless, the moment of liberation from the cycles of rebirth and redeath is not an embrace of nothingness (the *nihil* of nihilism) in a negation of being. The dialectic of being and nothing is wholly included in the dynamics of reincarnation as the two interlocking circles, the two rings—rebirth, redeath—show, unless they are one and the same ring examined from different sides. "Higher than the immense self [*mahān ātmā*]" and "higher than the unmanifest [*avyakta*]" (Kāṭha Upaniṣad 3.11) is not the absence of being; it is *Puruṣa* (spirit), in which the nothing is (nondialectically) cut from the same cloth as everything, its pale afterglow still detectable in Schelling's infinite that exists before, within, and after the world.²¹ In the formula of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is the amalgam of "the existent, the non-existent, and that which is beyond both [*tatparam yat*]" (11.37).

What is more, an anonymous god—perhaps, the very same as the unnamed god of *The Ṛg Veda*—watches over both paths that await finite beings after their death. If the moon is the border crossing point for the deceased, regardless of their destination, then this god is their common point of departure, the cause of the desire to persevere in existence (clinging to it and to its interruptions, awash in suffering, by old age and death) and of the pacification of this desire. This mysterious god is "the architect

of time; the one without qualities; the one with all knowledge; the lord of both the primal source and of individual souls; the ruler over the qualities; and the cause of liberation from, remaining within, and bondage to the rebirth cycle” (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.16). In a recap of divine brilliance and darkness that *shadow* one another, the god without qualities orchestrates the operations of the phoenix complex and its disassembly. These lines from Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad give us yet another clue, corroborating the intuition that the way out of the complex ought to be sought within it.

*

The name of Brahmā, the creator god in Indian cosmogonies, is “thought to derive from the root *br̥h* which means ‘grow’ or ‘evolve.’”²² Its semantic purview by and large overlaps with that of the Greek verb *phuein* (to grow, to appear), which, as I have already remarked, is formative of the nouns *phusis* (nature as the ensemble of everything that grows and appears in the light) and *phuton* (plant, comprehended as a growing being). What grows out of Brahmā’s creative act is the world as an *āsvattha* tree (modeled on a sacred fig or a banyan; it was under this tree that Prince Gautama attained enlightenment and became the Buddha) that is, simultaneously, a tree of life and of knowledge. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes *āsvattha* as “having its roots above and branches below, whose leaves are the (Vedic) hymns” (BG 15.1). Immediately, though, this hierarchical arrangement is put into question: “Below and above [*adhaścordhvaṁ*] its branches spread, nourished by the qualities, with objects of the senses as sprouts; and below its roots stretch forth, engendering action in the world of men” (BG 15.2). The realms above and below merge into a single domain above-below (*adhaścordhvaṁ*), just as living and knowing, sensing-thinking, and acting are different parts of the same vegetal being.

The practices of liberation from the cycles of redeath and rebirth, however, must sweep aside the leaves, branches, and roots of the cosmic tree. The tree itself is left unharmed; one only distances oneself from it. That is why, although “its form is not perceptible here in the world, nor its end, nor its beginning, nor its existence,” the one on the path of liberation must “cut this *āsvattha*, with its well grown root, by the strong axe of non-attachment

[*asaṅga*]” (BG 15.3). The process leading to *mokṣa* requires one to cut oneself loose from the tree of nature with its sense objects and objects of knowing, desires and bonds tethering one to one’s own existence (what Spinoza will much later call *conatus essendi*), as well as actions aiming at final outcomes. Particularly with respect to the latter, the *Bhagavad Gītā* continues to deploy a vegetal analogy, which is worth exploring in greater depth.

The core idea behind the practices of nonattachment is not, as it may first seem, that of absolute renunciation, the strictest asceticism, self-denial, and abstention from action. (In the development of Buddhism, the path of absolute renunciation is, likewise, renounced as a dead-end street, a deviation from the road to the enlightenment, which is “the Middle Way.”) Rather, in the yoga of action (*karmayoga*), one engages in deeds without attachment, “unattached [*asaktāb*]” either to their outcomes or to the judgments thereof as good or bad, successful or failing (BG 3.7). If the outcome of an action is its coming to fruition, then active nonattachment consists in cutting off the fruit, while persevering in a practice without end in sight, reveling in lush greenness. It means being and acting in the middle.

In a contrast between “the ignorant ones” and “the wise ones,” the *Bhagavad Gītā* sharpens the sense of positively fruitless action with an eye to the problematic of rebirth. The ignorant ones are “full of desires, intent on heaven” and “they offer rebirth as the fruit of action [*janmakarmaphal-apradām*]” (BG 2.43). Rebirth is the fruit of fruit, the horizon, unsurpassable from the standpoint of sheer ignorance, for all activity in this life. It is, moreover, a fruit that does not signify completion and accomplishment, since it is exclusively focused on the re-initiation of existence after its end. This quality of fruit—its fruitness, as it were—is consistent with the unbridled desirous nature of the ignorant, for whom nothing is ever enough. The wise, for their part, “who have abandoned fruit [*phalam tyaktvā*] born of action, are freed from the bondage of rebirth [*janmabandhavinirmiktāb*], [and] go to the place that is free from pain” (BG 2.51). Indifferent to success or failure, unmoved by desire, having cast aside the fruit, they are similarly aloof to the seed of new life it contains. Paradoxically, perseverance in the middle of an action without any regard to its outcome is more relevant to finality than fretting about end results that invite renewed actions, existences, or births.

The phoenix complex is inconceivable without an obsession with fruit. Not only because *phoenix* may be a designation of a bird and of a tree (namely, date palm), but also because the rejuvenation of finite existence it promises is conditional on fruition—of a new life from death, of oneself from oneself as the same and other to oneself. The uniqueness and independence of the phoenix are the products of its self-generation, mediated by fire or by spontaneous arising from decay. Kṛṣṇa is ambiguous on this point. He affirms, “Although I am birthless [*ajo*] and my nature is imperishable [*avyayātmā*], although I am the lord of all beings, yet, by controlling my own material nature, I come into being [*saṁbhavāmi*] by my own power” (BG 4.6). Birthless, the god subtracts himself from the order of nature, and the designation “imperishable” is a logical complement of this subtraction. Coming into being by means other than birth, he practices an essentially supernatural mode of appearance made possible by his “own power.” His unborn appearance is, nevertheless, a periodic (perhaps rhythmic) reappearance: “For the sake of establishing righteousness, I come into being from age to age [*saṁbhavāmi yuge yuge*]” (BG 4.8). And in the next verse, this mode of appearance is denominated “divine birth”: “He who knows in truth my divine birth and action [*janma karma ca me divyam*], having left his body, he is not reborn; he comes to me, Arjuna” (BG 4.9). What is going on here?

Divine birth is a birth without birth, without the fruit or coming to fruition, and in this sense, resembling the nature without nature of the Plotinian One. Kṛṣṇa groups it with divine action, which is similarly an action without action and without fruit (“Although I am the creator, know me to be the eternal non-doer [*viddhyakartām avyayam*]” [BG 4.13]). A phoenix is reborn from an external medium (fire or the ashes, a fertilized nest, etc.) or from its own (or its predecessor’s) dead body. Born purely of himself, Kṛṣṇa is born without being born, his origin self-grounded and, therefore, ungrounded and abyssal, like that of nature itself. Indeed, he declares, “This, my highest nature, is the origin (or the womb) of all creatures [*etadyonini bhūtāni sarvaṅṅity*]” (BG 7.6). He is the unrooted root of existence and of liberation from the bonds of existence. Freedom from rebirth is granted upon the revelation and the “knowledge in truth” of divine birth, to the extent that the knower gets in touch with this abyssal ground. Can we not—already

or still—accept such birth without birth and, more broadly, nature without nature, having rid ourselves of the fear to fall into naive naturalism or conventional (that is to say, *not* natural) nature/culture oppositions?

When it comes to nature, the *Bhagavad Gītā* gives its readers an insight into the concept, interpreted in an admittedly narrow sense, as the inherent being or essence of things, their being- or becoming-their-own: *svabhāvas*. Nature unfolds in “(1) the means of action; (2) the actions of people; and (3) the union of action with its fruit [*karmaphalasarīyogamī*]” (5.14). The disciplined rejection of fruit has in its crosshairs the third element of nature, undoing “the union of action with its fruit.” What remains and what is cultivated on the path of liberation from the cycle of redeath and rebirth are the actions themselves and the means of action, pure means without ends.

Yogic discipline acts against another *yoga* (the Sanskrit word meaning *union* or *yoke*) tying together the means and the ends, which, never final, coil into the means for further ends. Cutting off the fruit that will become a placeholder for any sort of attachment, including the attachment to and love of one’s life, the path of liberation (also from the phoenix complex) calls for an intervention into the order of nature, denaturing it. Seen from another angle, though, nature is inherently denatured. It is in the very nature of nature to be denatured, insofar as the union of action with its fruit, of the doing and that for the sake of which something is done, is not straightforward. Such a union presupposes, first, a meshwork of hermeneutical and semiotic (above all, biosemiotic) tools forged out of intentions, reasons, motivations, desires, calculations that stitch together the deed, the means of doing it, and the accomplishment held in view in the doing. Second, it is thought that the self is the doer of actions, while the doing lies exclusively on the side of material existence: “All actions are performed exclusively by material existence [*prakṛtyāiva*], and thus the self is not the doer” (BG 13.29).²³ Third, the accomplishment is chronically unaccomplished, as the presumed end twists into a new means. This meshwork, this illusion of agency, and this unending end smuggle into things what is not their own, what is not proper to them, counteracting the movement of *svabhāvas*.

The self-denaturing of nature that results from the operations of *karmaphalasarīyogamī* (or the union of action with its fruit) is the target of yogic

discipline, which, “having abandoned the fruit of action [*karmaphalasamī*], attains steady peace [*śāntimāpnoti*]” (BG 5.12). Strange as it may seem, a “steady peace” is to be experienced in the world of pure means, of means without ends. It emanates from the transformation of insatiable desire (the desire symbolized by the flame: “The form of desire . . . is insatiable fire [*duṣpūrenānalena*]” [BG 3.39]) into the desireless, the quenching of the fire without falling into the stupor of inactivity.

*

In the verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the logistics of reincarnation also appear in a new light. According to Kṛṣṇa, “Action is known as the creative power (of the individual, which causes him to be reborn in this or that condition of being) [*visargaḥ karmasamjñitaḥ*]” (BG 8.3). The performative character of action is astoundingly far-reaching: through it, we create and re-create ourselves in this life, which has repercussions for the next, molding the form of existence to be assumed in reincarnation. *Visargas* (the creative power of action) is projected well beyond the immediate results—the fruit, or the accomplishments—from which it is to be detached on a path of liberation. Through objective accomplishments, one accomplishes *oneself*, the material form one would assume in future existence. Not by chance, *visargas* means “sending forth” or “discharging”; the creative power of action propels one on a trajectory of rebirth that is consistent with the specific contents of that action. But *karma* can also refer to the procreative act, as Rāmājuna explains: “*Karman* (action) is the procreative act connected with a woman which causes a human being, etc., to originate.”²⁴ The discharge of *visargas* has a different semantic tinge here, imbuing the *procreative* act with creative power and inserting the text into the scheme of biological reproduction.

The other engine of reincarnation is memory: “Whatever state of being he remembers [*smaran bhāvaṁ*] when he gives up the body at the end, he goes respectively to that state of being, Arjuna, transformed into that state of being” (BG 8.6). The future of incarnation depends on the past, be it past actions or a memory that conjures up a certain state of being in the final moments of one’s present existence. What is sent forth into the future, projected or discharged, is the past: the cumulative effects of *karma* or a

momentary mental flashback to the being of a worm, a tree, an insect, a tiger, and any other living beings. To train the mind in focusing on that which these states of being express, a lifetime of practice is necessary, the practice, in which action is decoupled from its fruit. And that which they express is fundamentally the same: “The wise see the same [*samadarsīnah*] in a brahman endowed with wisdom and cultivation, in a cow, in an elephant, and even in a dog or an outcaste” (BG 5.18). Biological and social hierarchies collapse when, seeing *through* different states of being, the wise see being itself: they see with impartiality (*sama*), with the same regard, the shared existence of all. As the next verse concludes, “Even here on earth, rebirth is conquered by those whose mind is established in impartiality [*sāmye*: in equality, sameness, equitability, disinterestedness]” (BG 5.19). The chain of reincarnations stops. Instead of remembering this or that particular state of being, one remembers being itself, which is what one becomes, merging with it as with the “third light” in *The R̥g Veda*.

Seeing the same where difference seems to prevail is a signature gesture of metaphysics, whether in its Western or its Eastern installments. The sameness of the phoenix reborn, comprehending all of nature by means a powerful synecdoche or by blurring classificatory distinctions among types of beings, is a case in point of metaphysical homogenization. Nevertheless, in the phoenix complex, the same is reactivated, or re-instantiated, across immense time spans, such as the Great Year, or the Sothic period. Although Garuḍa similarly marks the end of “the revolutions of the Eon” (possibly alluding to the day of Brahma²⁵), the effect of spotting metaphysical sameness in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the exact opposite: there is no more rebirth, as time stops for the one who merges with being itself. Beyond the discharges, transfers, and deliveries from one state of being to another, release into being is release as such: “The sage, whose highest course is release [*mokṣaparāyanah*]; whose senses, mind and intellect are controlled; from whom desire, fear and anger have departed, is forever liberated [*sadā mukta*]” (BG 5.28).

Mukti is the consequence of *mokṣa*: release into being entails liberation from reincarnation in beings. Whereas Western philosophy continually suppresses and incompletely eliminates differences in the self-reproduction of the same, Hindu traditions let difference be and teach how to disengage from

it. Free of desire, fear, and anger, the one on a path that ends in *mukti* lets difference stay ahead of, or for, others as *their* ultimate reality. What is totally dense and opaque for them—the destination of their gaze—is a transparent medium to see through, fixing one’s gaze on that which is typically obscured by difference. The opaque becomes transparent for the practitioner skilled in fruitless practice: nothing befalls difference other than that. But there is no incarnation or reincarnation in the transparent, in the medium. Liberation from the cycle of redeaths and rebirths ensues.

Book 9 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* highlights the primacy of death (or redeath) over birth in the cycle of reincarnations: “Men who have no faith in this law [*dharmasyāsyā*], Arjuna, not attaining to me, are born again in the path of death and transmigration [*mṛtyusaṁsāravartmani*]” (9.3). Rebirth is a birth for renewed death as a result of turning one’s back on the cosmic law and order of sameness underlying all difference, the *dharma* (meaning not only *law* but also *rectitude* and *uprightness*) that holds up those who uphold it and rescues one from the circle of *saṁsāra*. Without seeing through difference, one drowns in “the ocean of death and transmigration [*mṛtyusaṁsārasāgarāt*]” (BG 12.7); what initially presented itself as a trodden path turns out to be as overwhelming as an ocean, where one is adrift. The true way—indeed, the only way—is a path of no return, a one-way ticket for a journey, where there is “no turning back [*na nivartanti*: also ‘no returning’]” (BG 8.21; 15.4).

Not to detract from the aforementioned observations, the logistics or the mechanics of reincarnation and transmigration are at their clearest in the final Book 18 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. There, Kṛṣṇa unveils before Arjuna a *machina mundi* (a world machine), to resort to an expression used by Lucretius and, later on, by Pico della Mirandola, Nicholas of Cusas, Robert Grosseteste, Copernicus, and others.²⁶ In contrast to organic figures and images prevalent in the rest of the text, this verse really speaks of a machine or a mechanism, *yantra*, which is both our innermost part and a universally prevalent phenomenon.²⁷ The mechanism makes the world go round, or, more exactly, it makes worlds go round, rotating in cycles of redeath and rebirth: “The lord abides in the hearts of all beings, Arjuna,” says Kṛṣṇa, “causing all beings to revolve, by the power of illusion, as if fixed on a machine [*yantrārūḍhāni*]” (BG 18.61).

The power of illusion—also known as “divine . . . illusion [*dāivī . . . māyā*]” (BG 7.14)—beguiles with the finality of difference (including the difference that you are), its nontransparency that hides from view the underlying sameness. This illusion is nature itself, appearing in a multiplicity of living and inorganic forms. Like the shadows irradiating from divine brilliance, the illusory ultimacy of difference emanates from a higher truth. By clinging to one’s own difference, or to the illusion pertaining to it, one keeps coming back to it, desperately endeavoring to propel this idiosyncratic difference into the future. The divine machine, thus, consists of two main parts: a bobbin and a spindle, weaving the illusion and causing the worlds to go round under its spell. The mechanism prompts whomever it processes to desire survival across the gap of dead time, to yearn (consciously or unconsciously) for the preservation of something of oneself in the period following one’s immediate biological existence, to crave another life—and, with it, another birth and another death.

The world machine from the *Bhagavad Gītā* finds an uncanny double in the mechanism (*mechane*) by means of which the finite becomes infinite in Plato’s *Symposium*. Except that the ancient Indian text is acutely aware of the illusory nature of this becoming, while Socrates and other participants in the ancient Greek dialogue are convinced that the mechanism actually allows mortals to partake of immortality. (Since Diotima’s position is summarized by Socrates in her absence, we cannot know with any degree of certainty if her teaching was ironic and if she, herself, was skeptical about the contraption she pinpointed.) Needless to say, the crux of the mechanism, its innermost nucleus or core, is the phoenix complex. The Hindu text laments the replaceability of lives, of existents and modes of existence, while also taking responsibility for this state of affairs instilled in the form of a desire in the very “heart” (*hṛddeśe*) of being. However deeply ingrained in all that lives, the phoenix complex is not our absolute destiny. The world machine we (together with mosquitoes and rose bushes, bacteria and lions, cod and seaweeds) construct with the materials it supplies can be made to malfunction from within, culminating in *mokṣa* and *mukti*, release and liberation.

© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Adobe Garamond Pro by New Best-set Typesetters Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-0-262-54570-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1