

# *Heredity and Reincarnation*

In the “Encyclopaedia Britannica” entry for “Heredity” we read the following:

“**Heredity**, the sum of all biological processes by which particular characteristics are transmitted from parents to their offspring. The concept of heredity encompasses two seemingly paradoxical observations about organisms: the constancy of a species from generation to generation and the variation among individuals within a species. Constancy and variation are actually two sides of the same coin, as becomes clear in the study of genetics. Both aspects of heredity can be explained by genes, the functional units of heritable material that are found within all living cells. Every member of a species has a set of genes specific to that species. It is this set of genes that provides the constancy of the species. Among individuals within a species, however, variations can occur in the form each gene takes, providing the genetic basis for the fact that no two individuals (except identical twins) have exactly the same traits.

“The set of genes that an offspring inherits from both parents, a combination of the genetic material of each, is called the organism’s genotype. The genotype is contrasted to the phenotype, which is the organism’s outward appearance and the developmental outcome of its genes. The phenotype includes an organism’s bodily structures, physiological processes, and behaviours. Although the genotype determines the broad limits of the features an organism can develop, the features that actually develop, i.e., the phenotype, depend on complex interactions between genes and their environment. The genotype remains constant throughout an organism’s lifetime; however, because the organism’s internal and external environments change continuously, so does its phenotype. In conducting genetic studies, it is crucial to discover the degree to which the observable trait is attributable to the pattern of genes in the cells and to what extent it arises from environmental influence. . . .

“Because genes are integral to the explanation of hereditary observations, genetics also can be defined as the study of genes. Discoveries into the nature of genes have shown that genes are important determinants of all aspects of an organism’s makeup. For this reason, most areas of biological research now have a genetic component, and the study of genetics has a position of central importance in biology.”

It's a proven, obvious, and undeniable fact that so much about the nature of our physical body, our personal traits and characteristics, our propensity for certain types of illness and health conditions, etc. are all due to our heredity. In other words, they have been transmitted to us and become part of us through the genealogical line of the family into which we have been born.

Some people say that since this is so, it would be foolish and "obviously mistaken" to attribute those various things to Karma. "It's in your genes, it's your heredity!" insist the disbelievers in Karmic Law. "Of course it's got nothing to do with this so-called Law of Karma you keep talking about. How can it?"

It has everything to do with the Law of Karma, which is perfectly just, impersonal, unerring, immutable, and ever active. Our heredity is itself the effect and result of our own Karma, i.e. the self-created destiny of our soul, which is our true inner individuality, that part of us which is successively reborn in different bodies and personalities on this Earth.

In one sense, heredity is a **cause** but in a much larger sense it is merely an **effect**.

Let's see what William Q. Judge, one of the founders of the Theosophical Movement, has to say about it in his article "Is Heredity a Puzzle?":

"The whole difficulty arises from the *inherited transmitted* habit in the Western mind of looking at effects and mistaking them for causes, and of considering the instruments or means, through and by means of which laws of nature work, as causes. Heredity has been looked at, or is beginning to be, as the cause of crime and of virtue. It is not a cause, but only the means or instrument for the production of the effect, the cause being hidden deeper. It seems just as erroneous to call heredity a cause of either good or bad acts as it is to call the merely mortal brain or body the cause of mind or soul. ...

"Karma and Reincarnation include the premise that *the man* is a spiritual entity who is using the body for some purpose.

"From remote times the sages state that he (this spiritual being) is using the body which he has acquired by Karma. Hence the responsibility cannot be placed upon the body, nor primarily upon those who brought forth the body, but upon the *man himself*."

In his book "The Ocean of Theosophy," p. 72-73, he explains further:

"Some urge that Heredity invalidates Reincarnation. We urge it as proof. Heredity in giving us a body in any family provides the appropriate environment for the Ego. The Ego goes only into the family which either completely answers to its whole nature, or which gives an opportunity for the working out of its

evolution, and which is also connected with it by reason of past incarnations or causes mutually set up. ...

“Heredity provides the tenement and also imposes those limitations of capacity of brain or body which are often a punishment and sometimes a help, but it does not affect the real Ego. ... The limitations imposed on the Ego by any family heredity are exact consequences of that Ego’s prior lives. The fact that such physical traits and mental peculiarities are transmitted does not confute reincarnation, since we know that the guiding mind and real character of each are not the result of a body and brain but are peculiar to the Ego in its essential life. Transmission of trait and tendency by means of parent and body is exactly the mode selected by nature for providing the incarnating Ego with the proper tenement in which to carry on its work. Another mode would be impossible and subversive of order.”

For sake of clarity, it may be useful to be aware that the term “Ego” is not a negative word in Theosophy. In much of today’s popular spirituality it is something bad but they are usually referring to what Theosophy calls the “*personal ego*” or the self-consciousness of the personality. The term “Ego” by itself – whether with a capital or lower case “e” – invariably means in Theosophical teachings the Higher Ego, the Reincarnating Ego, our Higher Manas principle, the permanent individuality (“ego” literally means “I”) which endures from one embodiment to another.

We may quote these words of H. P. Blavatsky from p. 564 and 568 of “The Secret Doctrine Dialogues” which sum the whole thing up:

“Heredity is a Karmic effect. ... Heredity is governed by Karma, in short.”

However, unless we have some understanding and perception of how this thing called Karma operates, this explanation might not seem satisfactory. So we find HPB elsewhere saying this:

“KARMA, TANHA and SKANDHAS, are the almighty trinity in one, and the cause of our re-births. The illustration of painting our own present likeness at death, and that likeness becoming the future personality is very poetical and graphic, but we claim it as an occult teaching. At the solemn moment of death no man can fail to see himself under his true colours, and no self-deception is of any use to him any longer. Thence the following thing happens. As at the instant of drowning man sees marshalled past his mind’s eye the whole of his life, with all its events, effects and causes, to the minutest details, so at the moment of death, he sees himself in all his moral nakedness, unadorned by either human flattery or self-adulation, and, as he is; hence, *as he* or rather, as his astral double combined

with his *Kama* principle – *shall be*. For the vices, defects and especially the passions of the preceding life become, through certain laws of affinity and transference, the germs of the future potentialities in the *animal* soul (*Kama rupa*), hence of its dependent, the astral double (*linga sharira*) – at a subsequent birth. It is the *personality* alone which changes; the real reincarnating principle, the EGO, remains always the same; and it is its KARMA that guides the idiosyncracies and prominent moral traits of the *old* “personality” that was (and that the EGO knew not how to control), to re-appear in the *new* man that will be. These traits and passions pursue and fasten on the yet plastic third and fourth principles of the child, and – unless the EGO struggles and conquers – they will develop with tenfold intensity and lead the adult man to his destruction. For it is they who are the tools and weapons of the Karmic LAW OF RETRIBUTION. . . . the *new* man is invariably the son and progeny of the old man that was.” (“Theosophical Articles and Notes” p. 201-202)

In “The Key to Theosophy” (p. 111, 141-142) these arguments are presented:

“If we have to believe in a divine principle at all, it must be in one which is as absolute harmony, logic, and justice, as it is absolute love, wisdom, and impartiality; and a God who would *create* every soul for the space of *one brief span of life*, regardless of the fact whether it has to animate the body of a wealthy, happy man, or that of a poor suffering wretch . . . would be rather a senseless *fiend* than a God. Why, even the Jewish philosophers, believers in the Mosaic Bible (esoterically, of course), have never entertained such an idea; and, moreover, they believed in re-incarnation, as we do. . . .

“The new “personality” is no better than a fresh suit of clothes with its specific characteristics, colour, form and qualities; but the *real* man who wears it is the same culprit as of old. It is the *individuality* who suffers through his “personality.” And it is this, and this alone, that can account for the terrible, still only *apparent*, injustice in the distribution of lots in life to man. When your modern philosophers will have succeeded in showing to us a good reason, why so many apparently innocent and good men are born only to suffer during a whole life-time; why so many are born poor unto starvation in the slums of great cities, abandoned by fate and men; why, while these are born in the gutter, others open their eyes to light in palaces; while a noble birth and fortune seem often given to the worst of men and only rarely to the worthy; while there are beggars whose *inner* selves are peers to the highest and noblest of men; when this, and much more, is satisfactorily explained by either your philosophers or theologians, then only, but not till then, you will have the right to reject the theory of reincarnation.”

# The Atma Upanishad

This is the teaching of sage Angiras:

Purusha manifests itself three ways:

As outer, inner, and the supreme Self.

Skin, flesh, vertebral column, hair, fingers, toes, nails, ankles, stomach, navel, hips, thighs, cheeks, eyebrows, forehead, head, eyes, ears, arms, sides, blood vessels, nerves: these make up the outer self, the body, subject to birth and death.

The inner self perceives the outside world, made up of earth, water, fire, air, and space.

It is the victim of likes and dislikes, pleasure and pain, and delusion and doubt. It knows all the subtleties of language, enjoys dance, music, and all the fine arts; delights in the senses, recalls the past, reads the scriptures, and is able to act.

This is the mind, the inner person.

The supreme Self, adored in the scriptures, can be realised through the path of yoga.

Subtler than the banyan seed, subtler than the tiniest grain, even subtler than the hundred-thousandth part of a hair, this Self cannot be grasped, cannot be seen.

The supreme Self is neither born nor dies. It cannot be burned, moved, pierced, cut, nor dried.

Beyond all attributes, the supreme Self is the eternal witness, ever pure, indivisible, and uncompounded, far beyond the senses and the personal self.

In it, conflicts and expectations cease. It is omnipresent, beyond all thought, without action in the external world, without action in the internal world.

Detached from the outer and the inner, this supreme Self purifies the impure.