

## Reincarnation and Karma

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“So can you tell me where you will go when you leave this world?”

(*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, 4.2.1)

Belief in reincarnation is historically and culturally widespread. Belief in karma also surfaces in a wide range of times and places. While karma and reincarnation are often automatically associated with each other, belief in reincarnation is not always accompanied by belief in karma, and they are separable conceptually. Reincarnation belief appears to be broader in scope than belief in karma, with various versions of it appearing in ancient civilizations in India, Africa, Greece, and the Americas (see Obeyesekere 2002). Gananath Obeyesekere speaks of the “ethicization” of reincarnation as a condition for the development of a doctrine of karma in his anthropological thought experiment in *Imagining Karma*. Specifically, ethicization refers to “the processes whereby a morally right or wrong action becomes a religiously right or wrong action that in turn affects a person’s destiny after death” (p. 75). While notions of reincarnation and karma are present in various times and places, this discussion will focus on the religious and philosophical positions usually associated with Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist perspectives (see Chapter 1, Hinduism; and Chapter 2, Buddhism).

To limit the scope to Indian thought and its offshoots does not mean that one consistent theory of reincarnation and/or karma can be articulated, even within a single religious/philosophical tradition. If standard religious texts, both long-standing and contemporary religious practices, and philosophical writings on reincarnation and karma are all considered, understanding of a complete and consistent system seems continually out of reach. Just when the shape of the web of reincarnation and karma seems to be coming into focus (when considering one tradition), another text or lived practice is remembered and the shape shifts again. In fact, in an article with the same title, Karl Potter (2001) asks the question “How many karma theories are there?” He goes on to suggest that given the formal permutations possible from the various factors that constitute karma theories, an almost infinite number of theories of karma are conceivable. Similarly, in the case of reincarnation, to offer three sample variables, theories might differ due to (1) the length of time between death and subsequent reincarnation, (2) the nature of the entity that is purported to be reincarnated (e.g., an indivisible soul of a recently deceased person [often limited to direct relatives], a life

force, or, as in the case of Buddhism, the denial of an entity which is reincarnated and yet the assertion of rebirth), and (3) the range of forms of reincarnations (e.g., human only, or humans and other sentient species, including gods, or all living things whether sentient or not).

Therefore, rather than attempting to articulate a consistent account of reincarnation (and rebirth) and karma, this chapter will sketch aspects of several accounts to give some sense of the philosophical issues involved.

## Reincarnation/Rebirth

Reincarnation asserts that human persons after death (the end of one embodiment or incarnation) are then embodied or re-incarnated in another body. This way of putting the matter implies that there is some entity that is re-incarnated, something that carries over from life to life (whether or not that something is identified as the same person). While this chapter draws primarily from Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist accounts, in its most basic form (simply emphasizing re-embodiment), reincarnation is compatible with Christianity. Indeed, core Christian doctrines emphasize the resurrection of the body or the receiving of a heavenly body (see Chapter 74, Resurrection, Heaven, and Hell; and Chapter 65, Theism and the Scientific Understanding of the Mind). However, in a form not affirmed by Christians (Origen being a notable exception), reincarnation most often includes the notion that this cycle of birth and death both has gone on for a long time in the past and will go on for a long time in the future (even if it includes some additional notion that it might be most preferable to completely escape this cycle).

The Buddhist position on reincarnation rejects an enduring entity that reincarnates, an idea that would be contradictory to the Buddha's teaching of *anatman* or no-self. No entity or stand-alone soul is embodied in successive lifetimes. This is still a variant of other reincarnation theories in the sense that successive lives of a person are joined together in an unbroken string, but it is also a radical variant since a permanent entity that crosses from one life to the next is denied. Rather, the person is accounted for entirely by reference to the five aggregates (*skandhas*): "material body, feelings, perception, predispositions, and consciousness" (McDermott, in O'Flaherty 1980, p. 165). In Buddhism it is the causal flow that continues on, with mental and karmic elements moving from one set of associated physical elements at the end of one life to a new set of physical elements to start the next lifetime. Hence, the preferred term in Buddhism is *rebirth* to avoid the implication of a continuing essence in reincarnation (see McDermott, "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism," in O'Flaherty 1980, for a standard account of a person and rebirth in early Buddhism).

What does a reincarnation/rebirth theory explain? Reincarnation is used to account for striking similarities between a deceased person and a living person. Reincarnation is also used as an explanation for a remarkable skill or unusual knowledge or peculiar interest shown by a living, often young, person; this person is taken to be a reincarnation of some previously living person who possessed that skill, knowledge, or interest. In addition, what appear to be striking coincidences (e.g., birthmarks on newborns which are positioned exactly where mortal wounds were inflicted on a person) are also explained by reincarnation. Reincarnation theory accommodates the intuition that

there is more to a person than just the physical body and that persons are too valuable to be annihilated at death – reincarnation asserts that some core of the person continues on. When karma is linked to reincarnation/rebirth, an explanation of certain events in life is possible while still holding to some objective sense of justice.

Reincarnation/rebirth theories raise questions in at least three areas: the conditions for personal identity, the role of memory across reincarnations/rebirths, and the possibility of empirical evidence for reincarnations/rebirths. In passing, it should be noted that many of the issues in establishing criteria (physical, psychological, memory) for personal identity in reincarnation/rebirth scenarios are also present in philosophical arguments about personal identity within a single life (see Parfit 1984 for some of these arguments).

One puzzle about reincarnation theory is how to identify the entity that reincarnates. What counts in favor of one account over another? And what are the identity conditions for the reincarnation sequence? Is memory the appropriate condition for personal identity? Should something weaker than memory proper (e.g., latent memories) be enough for an identity claim? Some aspects of these identity puzzles are captured in a well-known Buddhist exchange on the question of identity relations between person A and subsequent person B (in the same causal continuum):

The King said: “He who is born, Nagasena, does he remain the same or become another?”  
 “Neither the same nor another.” (*The Questions of King Milinda*, part 1 [II.2.1], p. 63)

Memory (internal corroboration) or some empirical connection between lifetimes (external corroboration) is often cited in support of identifying one life as a reincarnation of another.

Since no observations can be made of the actual entity as it moves from death to reincarnation, the claim is that observables make plausible that which is unobservable. Hence, in terms of assessment, the empirical evidence needs to be consistent with and explained by the offered reincarnation or rebirth theory, but it will not prove that alternative theories are mistaken.

Techniques to enhance retrocognition are found in a variety of traditions which affirm reincarnation (the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali offer one set of such techniques). What exactly can memory show? While memories of past lives would seem to count in favor of the view that one had indeed lived those past lives, purported memories even within this life are not infallible. Under what conditions, if any, should memories be taken as a form of internal confirmation for some state of affairs? Memory retrieval techniques that are intended to span across previous lives are also supposed to have some additional benefit – insight into the human condition, avoidance of mistakes made in previous lives, and even the acquisition of knowledge which will be helpful when one again enters the liminal state between death and birth.

## Karma

Karma (Sanskrit, *kamma* [Pali]) means “action,” and in its earliest usage refers specifically to the actions of one who makes a sacrifice with the hope of gaining something

from the gods. This developed over time to refer to actions in the wider ethical realm and the effects of those actions. In response to a question about what happens after death, the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* gives us one of the early statements about karma:

“What then happens to that person?” Yajnavalkya replied: “My friend, we cannot talk about this in public. Take my hand, Artabhaga; let’s go and discuss this in private.” So they left and talked about it. And what did they talk about?—they talked about nothing but action [karma]. And what did they praise?—they praised nothing but action. Yajnavalkya told him: “A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action.” Thereupon, Jaratkarava Artabhaga fell silent. (3.2.13, in *Upanisads*, p. 38)

A simple definition of karma might be that it is “a theory of rebirth based on the moral quality of previous lives” (O’Flaherty 1980, p. xi). Karma is often described as a causal, even inexorable law such that ethically significant actions (good or evil) have corresponding results (for good or evil) in this life or in a future life. Potter has characterized the common core of karma, the “classical karma theory of India” (CKTI), as follows:

[C]ertain fundamental features of one’s present life—vis., the genus, species, and class into which one has been born, the length of life one is (likely) to live, and the type of affective experiences one is having—are conditioned by one’s actions in a previous existence. (“Critical Response,” in Neufeldt 1986, p. 109)

Karma is used to explain cases where injustice in this life is visible – a good action results in a bad event and vice versa. It also explains injustice in this life in more fundamental ways, for example, the unfairness of the kind of life some are born into compared to others (e.g., the unfairness of being born with disease or diminished mental or physical capacities, or conversely, with unusually high intelligence or blazing beauty). Accompanying the initial kernel of ethically charged action and corresponding result are (1) the belief that a human person in some sense is re-embodied after death so that a human life is a series of births, deaths, and rebirths; (2) an ethically significant action in this life can somehow generate a causal chain which can reach fruition in an event one or more lifetimes away from the current life; (3) these resultant events are in the right proportions to the significance (value, potency) of the original action; (4) the causal connection and its proportionality are a given in the nature of the world, a natural (ethical) causal law, and are not subject to the workings of a particular deity who passes judgment. Karma appeals to the deeply human intuitions that somehow injustice must be righted, or that blame needs to be applied, or both.

In Buddhism, the concept of intention or volition (*cetana*) is a necessary component of actions that have karmic significance; since not all actions are volitional, not all actions have karmic effects. On the other hand, in Jainism, intention or volition is not a necessary component of karma, and therefore even actions that lack intentionality will yield karmic effects. Intentionality is not the only issue which produces opposing views within karma theories. Is karma strictly individual or does parental karma affect offspring? Are karmic results inexorable in reaching fruition, or can repentance mitigate or expiate those results? (See O’Flaherty 1980, p. xix, for a sample list of opposing themes within karma theories).

## Causality

Karmic causation can be considered one aspect of a universal law of causation (Reichenbach 1990, p. 2). As such, karma theory has metaphysical implications. Various accounts are given as to the nature of elements and the way in which they carry karmic effects forward (e.g., momentary physical bits [*dharmas*] in early Buddhism), the relationship of karmic effects to that which is the person (e.g., infinitesimal physical bits adhering to the soul [*jiva*] in Jainism), and the working out of how karmic effects can be carried along across reincarnations/rebirths and how they reach fruition at the appropriate time (e.g., Vasubandhu's account of seeds and store-consciousness in *Karmasiddhiprakarana*).

Reincarnation/rebirth theories differ as to the amount of time that exists between the death of one life and the beginning of the next life. If karmically charged causal elements can be thought of as connected to a particular physical entity, what happens when that physical entity dies? Do the karmic elements stay attached to an enduring self or soul? Is a special subtle (invisible) body responsible for transporting that which is karmically significant to the next reincarnation or rebirth? Or, if there is only a karmic/consciousness causal chain that floats free at death from the aspects of physical causation with which it was associated, how does that karmic/consciousness flow hold together, and how does it get reattached to a new physical entity (even if that entity is only considered to be a flow of momentary physical elements)? Does the disembodied consciousness have the possibility of choice in this state between death and birth? The various traditions offer widely divergent responses.

One further causal puzzle is that the requisite causal chains of all persons must somehow be in harmony; otherwise not everyone's karma could come to fruition. As Terence Penelhum notes, karma is more than an affirmation of some general sense of universal causation; the karmic view of causality includes the idea that the universal causal flow promotes justice for everyone (Penelhum, "Critical Response," in Neufeldt 1986, p. 340). It is not surprising that at times theistic oversight is included in some karmic theories.

## Problem of Evil

Karma has often been described as a retributive theory of justice which is complete. That is, karma is a way to account even for suffering and evil that is apparently undeserved; it is deserved because of one's action in a previous life or lives. Given the assumption that apparently undeserved suffering needs an explanation, this view of karma asserts that no philosophical problem of evil needs to be resolved since all evil is the fruition of previous actions and balance or justice is preserved (see Chapter 58, The Logical Problem of Evil; and Chapter 59, The Evidential Problem of Evil).

What of natural or gratuitous evils? If one dies in a volcanic eruption, what exactly does that have to do with some action taken a number of lifetimes ago? Is it plausible that a causal chain exists from the bad action in a previous lifetime to this particular volcanic eruption? Is it possible that not all suffering is linked to personal karmic effects?

If suffering is necessarily linked to one's own past karma, then some difficulties arise even in the case of the historical Buddha, since he is described as experiencing suffering (see Walters 1990 for a discussion of these cases). To be a Buddha (an enlightened one) is to have exhausted all karmic outflows. But if the Buddha suffered, was it due to some karmic effect reaching fruition from a past life? The response to this question in *The Questions of King Milinda* broadens the range of causes for suffering beyond individual karma:

“No, O king. It is not all suffering that has its root in Karma. There are eight causes by which sufferings arise, by which many beings suffer pain. And what are the eight? Superabundance of wind, and of bile, and of phlegm, the union of these humours, variations in temperature, the avoiding of dissimilarities, external agency, and Karma. From each of these there are some sufferings that arise, and these are the eight causes by which many beings suffer pain. And therein whosoever maintains that it is Karma that injures beings, and besides it there is no other reason for pain, his proposition is false.” (*The Questions of King Milinda*, part 1 [IV.1.63], pp. 191–2)

Here personal karma is listed as only one among many possible causes of suffering. External factors could certainly include actions by other persons or natural elements.

### Determinism, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility

Even on the minimalist account given by Potter of the “classical karma theory of India” (CKTI), much is determined by karma. Most views of karma have stronger notions of the extent of karmic determination than this. As an explanatory factor, karma accounts for at least some particular events in one's life as it unfolds. Even on the CKTI, dispositions to act and think in certain ways are part of the effects of karma. Actions that are determined by those dispositions would then seem to also be determined by karma. What then of freedom and moral responsibility? Does acceptance of karma imply fatalism?

The response is to claim that one was responsible for the previous actions that bore karmic fruit in this life. Karma accounts typically assert that the individual has moral responsibility and a concomitant sense of personal freedom necessary for moral responsibility. Each person must play out the karmic effects that have to be received in that life, but each person is also responsible for moral choices made in this present life. In a forward-looking manner, then, there are frequent injunctions in the various traditions to live a moral life as the first stage in one's journey toward final release.

Buddhism has an additional matter to resolve in this context. Can the doctrines of karma, moral responsibility, and no-self all be held consistently? Typical criticisms of Buddhism in this regard ask who it is that is exercising the freedom requisite for moral responsibility. Responses usually emphasize a complete description of all that makes up a person based only on the five *skandhas* without resorting to any enduring self. If a willing person can be so described, then the notion of freedom requisite for moral responsibility is held to be present.

## Karma and Release

If the preservation of justice is an important feature of karma doctrine, perhaps the lesson of karma is simply to perform good actions and avoid bad actions, since one will never escape the effects of bad actions. If karma even under the minimalist CKTI account stipulates that karma dictates the status of rebirths, another lesson of karma doctrine enjoins good actions so that one would have an advantageous reincarnation/rebirth. These are certainly part of the teachings of karma thought and they serve as guides to action. If left here, however, a significant feature of karma teaching is ignored. An ultimate goal in traditions with karma is release from the cycle of reincarnations or deaths and births. The additional claim is that it is karma (whether good or bad) which necessitates rebirths. Melford Spiro has suggested that there are two soteriological goals in traditions with karma: “nibbanic” (from *nibbana*, Pali for *nirvana*) and “kammatic” (from *kamma*, Pali for *karma*) (see Egge 2002, ch. 1, for an extended discussion). The nibbanic goal is release from the world of reincarnations/rebirths and focuses on detachment from the fruits or results of any action (see the Bhagavad-Gita for more on this teaching). The kammatic goal is for a good next reincarnation or rebirth.

Are these divergent goals compatible? Is there one ethic here or are these examples of competing ethical systems? There is much to be discussed on this matter, but one initial approach is to treat the kammatic as a useful means (*upaya*) for laypersons who are unable to aim directly for ultimate release. Aiming at a better rebirth might be a preliminary goal that would put them in a position later to aim at the nibbanic goal.

This distinction is useful to illustrate that Buddhist teaching is often offered on several levels: a mundane level of discourse (and truth), and a supramundane level of discourse (and truth).

## Transfer of Merit

Karmic effects may weigh down an individual such that even a good next rebirth seems difficult. Alternative paths can be loosely grouped under the idea of “transfer of merit.” While transfer of merit or mitigation of individual karmic outcomes are at times spoken of as later Mahayana developments in the case of Buddhism, transfer of merit is present in early Buddhism and is also present in Hinduism. It is only Jainism that diverges sharply on this matter, denying that anyone else can do something effective about one’s own karma. Different traditions offer different aspects of transfer of merit or mitigation of karmic outcomes.

Transfer of merit in some of its earliest forms (e.g., in Hindu ritual and sacrifice) is done for the benefit of suffering ghosts or ancestors. It includes both aspects of ritual action and intentionality (an intention that the benefits of this deed should go to X). Devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity is also another way in which karmic effects can be mitigated through the activity of the deity. Individually, negative karmic outflows can be reduced by repentance or other good actions. Some diseases are even held to be signs of mitigated karmic effects, where those karmic effects would have been much worse

without repentance or some other efficacious religious activity, and where the disease is seen as a chance for further spiritual growth (see Nichiren 1992, "Curing Karmic Disease," pp. 213–21).

The creation of Pure Lands and great storehouses of merit by bodhisattvas as part of the bodhisattva ideal is another way in which karmic effects are said to be mitigated or overcome outright. The Pure Land of Amida Buddha, for example, is where one can go after death if one has called on Amida's name for assistance. As such, it is a circumvention of a rebirth conditioned by karma.

The bodhisattva ideal raises some questions. On the one hand, there is a sense in which the law of karma is not broken since there is a transfer of merit to wipe out the karmic effects that one has accrued (that is, if one adopts something like a ledger metaphor for karma). On the other hand, the necessary linkage of karmic outflows to the individual seems to be broken. Further questions might have to do with the causal chains themselves which make up individuals. How exactly are the latent karmic effects expunged from one's causal flow?

## Recent Developments

One recent development is an emphasis on group karma by thinkers such as Vivekananda and Gandhi (see Creel, "Contemporary Philosophical Treatments of Karma and Rebirth," in Neufeldt 1986). Aside from issues of compatibility with traditional texts and practices, the concept of group karma generates certain questions. Can we be responsible for what someone else did (someone who is not in my reincarnated/reborn line of previous lives)? Ideas of group karma take different forms, but they do create tension with at least one traditional impetus for the concept of karma, namely to differentiate between individuals. Perhaps the differentiation of groups can be considered to be similar but at the level of aggregates.

Other areas of contemporary interest explore possible linkages between karma theory and contemporary science in fields such as psychology and evolutionary theory.

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