

KARMA, REBIRTH, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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According to the seed that's sown
So is the fruit ye reap therefrom.
Doer of good will gather good,
Doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed, and thou shalt taste
The fruit thereof.

*Samyutta Nikaya*¹

The doctrine of karma and rebirth represents perhaps the most striking difference between Western (Judeo-Christian and Islamic) religious thought and the great Indian religious traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain). To be sure, Western theology also makes use of a retributive explanation of evil in which an individual's suffering is accounted for by his previous wrongdoing. But given the obviously imperfect correlation between sin and suffering in an individual's lifetime, Western religions have resorted to other explanations of suffering (including, notoriously, that of Original Sin). However, Indian thought boldly combines this retributionism with the idea of multiple human incarnations, so that all suffering in this life can be explained by each individual's prior wrongdoing, whether in this or in a prior life, and all wrongdoing in the present life will be punished in either this or a future life. In this way, Indian thought is able to endorse a complete and consistent retributive explanation of evil: all suffering can be explained by the wrongdoing of the sufferer himself. As Ananda Coomaraswamy declares, in answer to the question "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?": "The Indian theory replies without hesitation, *this man*."²

It is frequently claimed that the doctrine of karma and rebirth provides Indian religion with a more emotionally and intellectually satisfying account of evil and suffering than do typical Western solutions to the problem of evil. Thus, for Max Weber, karma

stands out by virtue of its consistency as well as by its extraordinary metaphysical achievement: It unites virtuoso-like self-redemption by man's own effort with universal accessibility of salvation, the strictest rejection of the world with organic social ethics, and contemplation as the paramount path to salvation with an inner-worldly vocational ethic.³

Arthur Herman, in his classic *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, similarly asserts the superiority of karma to all Western theodicies: "Unlike the Western theories, . . . the doctrine of rebirth is capable of meeting the major objections against which those Western attempts all failed" (Herman 1976, p. 287).⁴ Michael Stoeber

also claims that the Indian idea of rebirth is “more plausible” than traditional Christian ideas such as purgatory (Stoeber 1992, p. 167). And the karma doctrine appears to be increasing in popularity in the West as well, perhaps because of these perceived advantages.

However, despite these and similar enthusiastic endorsements, karma as a theodicy has still received comparatively little critical analysis in comparison with the scrutiny to which dominant Western ideas such as Original Sin or free will have been subjected. Paul Edwards contrasts the “devastating critical examination” to which Christian and Jewish tenets have been subjected with the lack of any “similarly detailed critique of reincarnation and the related doctrine of Karma” by Western philosophers (Edwards 1996, p. 7).⁵ A bibliography of theodicy writings between 1960 and 1991 lists over four thousand entries, but only a half dozen or so of these specifically address karma.⁶ In this essay I would like to make a gesture toward filling in this gap. Whereas Edwards’ work concentrates on the metaphysical and scientific critique of Karma, I will limit my discussion to the specific question of whether a karma-and-rebirth theory, even if true, could solve the problem of evil. That is, can it provide a satisfactory explanation of the (apparent) unfairness, injustice, and innocent suffering in the world? I will argue here that the doctrine, in whatever form it is proposed, suffers from serious limitations that render it unlikely to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of evil.

Preliminary Qualifications

Let me state at the outset my limited purposes in this essay. This is not an exercise in doctrinal exegesis or historical comparative anthropology; such issues are not my concern and are outside my competence in any case. Nor do I do intend to enter into the debate about the textual sources of the karmic doctrine (e.g., whether they first appear in the Upanishads, or whether there are precursors in the Brahmanas), or the question of the extent of the influence of the karma doctrine in contemporary Indian thought.⁷ Rather, my method will be to examine a simplified, idealized version of the karma-and-rebirth doctrine, one abstracted as far as possible from particular historical or doctrinal questions.

Such an approach will not be without controversy. Many writers have, in fact, doubted whether karma is meant to function as a theodicy, or indeed whether Indian thought should be taken as recognizing a “problem of evil” in anything like its Western formulation. Wendy O’Flaherty points to the “widespread” belief that Indians do not recognize the problem of evil, or even that “there is no concept of evil at all in India” (O’Flaherty 1980, p. 4). Arthur Herman makes the extraordinary claim that Indian thought is not much interested in the theodicy question precisely because the karma doctrine provides a fully satisfactory explanation of evil:

since the rebirth solution is adequate for solving the theological problem of evil, this undoubtedly explains why the problem was never of much concern to the classical Indian, and why theodicy, as a philosophical way of life, was practically unknown to them. (p. 288)

However, O'Flaherty's *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* amply demonstrates the falsity of the claim that theodicy is solely a Western concern. She shows how Western scholars have "overlooked" the presence of the problem of evil in Indian thought by focusing on systematic philosophy and theology rather than mythology and folk tradition; in fact, "myths of theodicy are perennial in India" (p. 6).

Still, there remains the question of whether it is appropriate to use such doctrines as karma as solutions to the peculiarly Western formulation of the theodicy problem, structured as an inconsistent triad (God is omnipotent, God is good, and yet there is evil in the world). Thus, Charles Keyes points out that many writers have been uneasy with characterizing karma as a theodicy, because this presupposes the idea of a benevolent, omnipotent deity that is "uncharacteristic of South Asian religions" (Keyes 1983, p. 167). However, it would be a great mistake to insist on an unnecessarily narrow formulation of the problem of evil, in particular one that assumes an ethical monotheist religion. In fact, there is no reason to restrict the problem to monotheist religions, or to theist religions, or even to religions at all. As Susan Neiman points out, "nothing is easier than stating the problem of evil in nontheist terms" (Neiman 2002, p. 5); she cites, for example, Hegel's insistence that the real is identical to the rational. The problem of evil in its broadest question simply asks such universal human questions as "Why do the innocent suffer and the wicked flourish?" "Why is not the world better ordered and more just?" "Why is there suffering and death at all in the universe?" One might call this the "existential" problem of evil in contrast to the "theological" problem, and it is one that is shared by all people and all religions. And to this broader existential problem of evil, karma clearly does function as a purported solution. As Keyes explains, karma is a "theory of causation that supplies reasons for human fortune, good or bad, and that can at least in theory provide convincing explanations for human misfortune" (p. 167).

There is yet one further question regarding my approach. Even granting that karma serves as a theodicy of some sort, is it appropriate to treat it as a rigorous and systematic theoretical explanation of all evil in the world? That is, does karma constitute a "theory" in the sense of a fully developed philosophical or theological account of the presence of evil?⁸ Scriptural references to the doctrine are notoriously vague and obscure and require substantial filling in (e.g., the epigraph given above). In part this obscurity is deliberate; the Upanishads in places suggest that the doctrine is deliberately kept secret and esoteric (e.g., Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad 3.2.13). In part this obscurity is due to the gradual evolution of the doctrine from the idea of efficacy of the sacrifice to the idea of efficacy of virtuous action in general, and to the effects extending beyond the lifetime. As Chapple (1986) points out, there is no intrinsic connection between the idea of karmic causation and that of rebirth or reincarnation (except that without the rebirth idea karma would not constitute a plausible theodicy). And the karma doctrine constitutes only one element of a very complex system of Indian thought, so that it is hard to know whether karma ought to be treated as a complete and systematic theodicy on its own. For this reason, Francis Clooney (1989) has attacked the notion of abstracting the theory from its historical, cultural, and doctrinal context (what he calls the culture's "frames of reference").

However, the evidence that the theory can be treated as a self-contained theory on its own terms is precisely that modern defenders have done so. For the idea of karma is brilliant in its simplicity and straightforwardness. As Clooney characterizes it, the basic idea is simply that “people suffer because of their past deeds in this and previous lives, and likewise enjoy benefits based on past good deeds” (p. 530). The attraction of the idea is obvious: each person makes his own fate, and all suffering happens for a reason. There is no arbitrary or meaningless suffering in the world. Moreover, even if one is miserable in this life, one can look forward to happiness in future lives, if one does one’s duty. The tremendous intellectual and emotional power of this theory no doubt accounts for its wide popularity over the ages.

Hence, my project here is to evaluate karma as a complete, systematic theory of the origins and explanation of human suffering. This view of karma is just what has attracted such Western thinkers as Max Weber, who praised the doctrine for its consistency, and Peter Berger, who characterizes the theory as the “most rational” type of theodicy: “every conceivable anomaly is integrated within a thoroughly rational, all-embracing interpretation of the universe” (Berger 1967, p. 65). Arthur Herman singles out for praise the consistency and completeness of the theory (p. 288). Karl Potter is impressed by the “carefully worked-out theory concerning the mechanics of karma and rebirth” (Potter 1980, p. 248). And M. Hiriyanna equally defends karma as a systematic explanation of all events in the world: “the doctrine extends the principles of causation to the sphere of human conduct and teaches that, as every event in the physical world is determined by its antecedents, so everything that happens in the moral realm is preordained” (Hiriyanna 1995, p. 46).⁹

It is this modern development of karma as systematic theodicy (whatever its historical antecedents) that I propose to examine and critique here. As Bruce Reichenbach argues, even if we have no way of knowing what historically was the problem that karma was originally intended to meet, the progressive development of the theory was no doubt motivated by a desire “rationally to account for the diversity of circumstances and situations into which sentient creatures were born, or for the natural events experienced during one’s lifetime which affected one person propitiously and another adversely” (Reichenbach 1990, p. 63, see also p. 13).¹⁰ The attraction of the karma doctrine over time is, as Reichenbach says, “its alleged explanatory power in this regard which has gained for it adherents through the centuries” (ibid.). I propose, then, to examine the doctrine of karma as developed in the modern period into a complete and systematic explanation of human suffering. Hence, my focus will be on modern commentators and secondary sources rather than on scriptural origins, and I will analyze the doctrine of karma in its rationalized and simplified form; the particular details, or alternative formulations of the doctrine, will not be noted unless they appear relevant to the theodicy question.¹¹

I will restrict my analysis in particular to the issue of whether karma provides a morally satisfactory solution to the problem of evil. There are, of course, serious physical and metaphysical issues involved as well in evaluating karma, including the idea that there is a causal mechanism by which deeds in one’s past life affect events in future lives, that the soul (or some entity independent of the physical

body) is the bearer of individual identity, that the soul can inhabit different bodies at different times and does not die with the body's death, that it can act wholly independent of the body, and that it is the bearer of moral responsibility (as well as personal identity) across time. Paul Edwards provides a careful critique of such issues in his *Reincarnation*. The present essay, in contrast, considers karma not as a metaphysics but solely as a theodicy: we will ask simply whether, even on these assumptions, the theory can explain the presence in the world of human suffering and misery. In the end, the purpose of this essay is not to evaluate the relative merits of one religion over another, but rather to explore one of the most intriguing conceptual possibilities in the theodicy debate: whether suffering can be wholly (or even mostly) explained and justified as the result of individual wrongdoing.

Karma as Systematic Theodicy: Five Moral Objections

The advantages of the karma theory are obvious and I will not dwell on them here. It is repeatedly pointed out, for example, that it can explain the suffering of innocent children, or congenital illnesses, with which Western thought has great difficulty. It is further argued that it is a more profoundly just doctrine, in that the fact of multiple existences gives the possibility of multiple possibilities for salvation—indeed, that in the end there can be universal salvation. This is again in contrast to the Western tradition, in which there is only one bite at the apple; those who fail in this life are doomed to eternal perdition. However, the doctrine as a whole is subject to a number of serious objections. Here I will present five distinct objections to the rebirth doctrine, all of which raise serious obstacles to the claim that rebirth can provide a convincing solution to the Problem of Evil. I do not claim this to be an exhaustive list, nor do I claim that everyone will agree with each of them. However, I think that they are serious enough as to require at the very least a fuller and more detailed defense of karma as theodicy than has so far been given.

The Memory Problem

An oft-raised objection to the claim of prior existences is the utter lack of any memory traces of previous lives. Both Paul Edwards and Bruce Reichenbach point out the oddity that all of us have had long, complex past lives, yet none of us have any recollection of them at all. More often, this objection is raised to cast doubt on whether we did in fact have any past lives at all. But my concern here is the *moral* issue raised by this deficiency: justice demands that one who is being made to suffer for a past crime be made aware of his crime and understand why he is being punished for it. Thus, even Christmas Humphreys in his vigorous defense of karma concedes the “injustice of our suffering for the deeds of someone about whom we remember nothing” (Humphreys 1983, p. 84). A conscientious parent explains to his child just why he is being punished; our legal system treats criminal defendants in just the same way. Would not a compassionate deity or a just system make sure the guilty party knows what he has done wrong? It is true that one's belief that all crime is eventually punished might serve a disciplinary function even where one is not aware

just what one is being punished for at the time. However, the fact that the sufferer can never know just what crime he is being punished for at a given time, that the system of meting out punishments is so random and unpredictable, constitutes a violation of a basic principle of justice.

Moreover, the memory problem renders the karmic process essentially useless as a means of moral education. Yet, strikingly, it is regularly claimed by adherents that one of the great virtues of karma and rebirth is precisely that “the doctrine presupposes the possibility of moral growth” and that rewards and punishments “constitute a discipline of natural consequences to educate man morally.”¹² For example, suppose I am diagnosed with cancer: this must be a punishment for something I have done wrong—but I have no idea what I did to deserve this, or whether it occurred yesterday, last week, or infinitely many past lives ago. For that matter, I might be committing a sin right now—only I will not know it is a sin, because the punishment might occur next week, next year, or in the next life.¹³ Radakrishnan suggests that retaining memory could be a hindrance to our moral development, since it would bring in memories of lower existences in the past (see Minor 1986, p. 32). But even if this is occasionally true, it is hardly plausible to say it is better *never* or even rarely to remember past deeds or lives; acknowledging past mistakes is in general an important (even essential) educating force in our lives. Yet none of us does remember such past events, nor is there definitive evidence that anyone has *ever* recalled a past life.¹⁴

The memory problem is particularly serious for the karmic doctrine, since most wrongs will be punished in a later life, and most suffering is the result of wrongdoing in prior existences. (Recall that the theory is forced into this position in order to explain the obvious fact that most misdeeds do *not* get automatically punished in this world, and most suffering is not obviously correlated with wickedness.) How, then, can it be said that the doctrine promotes moral education? It is not an answer to say that our knowledge of moral duties can come from elsewhere, from religious scripture, for example. For the point is that the mechanism of karma itself is poorly designed for the purposes of moral education or progress, given the apparently random and arbitrary pattern of rewards and punishments. If moral education were truly the goal of karma and rebirth, then either punishment would be immediately consequent on sin, or at least one would have some way of knowing what one was being punished (or rewarded) for.

In fact, the difficulty is not merely one of moral education. It has been pointed out that the total lack of memory renders the theory more of a *revenge* theory than a retributive one—and hence morally unacceptable.¹⁵ That is, it suggests that justice is satisfied merely because satisfaction has been taken on the perpetrator of the crime, ignoring completely a central moral element of punishment: that the offender where possible be made aware of his crime, that he acknowledge what he has done wrong and repent for it, that he attempt to atone for his crime, and so forth. As such the rebirth theory fails to respect the moral agency of the sinner in that it is apparently indifferent to whether or not he understands that what he has done is wrong. As Reichenbach rightly points out, the lack of memory prevents one from undergoing the

moral process involved in repentance for one's crimes and even attempted rectification for them (p. 95).¹⁶ Further, as Francis Clooney recognizes, the lack of memory of prior lives undermines the pastoral effectiveness of karma as providing comfort to the sufferer: "little comfort is given to the suffering person who is usually thought not to remember anything of the culprit past deeds" (p. 535). A vague assurance that one must have done unremembered terrible deeds in the past is hardly satisfactory.¹⁷

The Proportionality Problem

The rebirth solution to the Problem of Evil purports to explain every ill and benefit of this life by prior good or bad conduct. To be a morally adequate solution it must presuppose as well (although this is rarely stated explicitly) a proportionality principle—that the severity of suffering be appropriately proportioned to the severity of the wrong. But herein lies a problem: given the kinds and degrees of suffering we see in this life, it is hard to see what sort of sins the sufferers could have committed to deserve such horrible punishment. Think of those who slowly starve to death along with their family in a famine; those with severe depression or other mental illness; those who are tortured to death; young children who are rendered crippled for life in a car accident; those who die of incurable brain cancer; those burned to death in a house fire. It is difficult to believe that every bit of this kind of suffering was genuinely earned. One may grant that we as finite humans are not always in a position to judge what is just or unjust from God's perspective; nevertheless, the point of the rebirth theory is precisely to make suffering comprehensible to us as a form of justice. Indeed, belief in karma might make us tend to enact even more brutal and cruel penalties (e.g., torturing to death) if we try to model human justice on this conception of what apparently counts as divine justice.

The evidence from our own practices is that in fact we do not consider such punishments morally justified. For example, capital punishment is considered excessive and inappropriate as punishment even for a crime as serious as rape. Yet according to the karma theory every one of us without exception is condemned to "capital punishment," that is, inevitable physical death, even apart from the various other sufferings we have to endure. An eye-for-an-eye version of the rebirth theory holds that if one is raped in this life it is because one must have been a rapist in a past life, and what could be fairer than that whatever harm one caused to others will be caused to you later? But it is hard to believe that we are all subject to death because we have all been murderers in a past life. Moreover, this answer simply will not work for most diseases (one cannot "cause" another to have Parkinson's or brain cancer). (It also leads to an infinite regress problem, on which see below). It is certainly hard to stomach the notion that the inmates of Auschwitz and Buchenwald did something so evil in the past that they merely got what was coming to them—but the rebirth theory is committed to just this position.¹⁸

Nor does the idea of the "pool of karmic residues" solve this problem: it is equally hard to believe that even an enormous accumulation of past bad acts could justify the horrible suffering of this world, or indeed that fairness would allow all one's lesser wrongs to accumulate and generate a single, horrible punishment rather

than smaller punishments over a longer period. Indeed, it raises the question of fairness of the mechanism: why would some people be punished separately for each individual wrong, while others are punished only all at once and horribly (further undermining the possibility of moral education, one might note)?

The Infinite Regress Problem

In order to explain an individual's circumstances in the present life, karma refers to the events of his prior life. But in order to explain the circumstances of that prior life, we need to invoke the events of his previous life—and so on, *ad infinitum*. The problem is quite general: how did the karmic process begin? What was the first wrong? Who was the original sufferer? This familiar objection points out that rebirth provides no solution at all, but simply pushes the problem back.¹⁹ And the response typically given by defenders of rebirth is quite inadequate: they claim that the process is simply beginningless (*anādi*), that the karmic process extends back infinitely in time.²⁰ But this is no answer at all; indeed, it violates a basic canon of rationality, that the “explanation” not be equally as problematic as the problem being explained.²¹ Thus, explains Wendy O’Flaherty: “Karma ‘solves’ the problem of the origin of evil by saying that there *is* no origin. . . . But this ignores rather than solves the problem” (p. 17).

Roy Perrett has responded to this criticism by arguing that the doctrine of karma satisfactorily explains each individual instance of suffering, and it is unreasonable to demand that it give an “ultimate explanation” of the origin of suffering. After all, he says, “explanation has to come to an end somewhere” (Perrett 1985, p. 7). However, the fallacy in this argument can be illustrated by analogy. Consider the “theory” that the world is supported on the back of an elephant, which in turn rests on the back of a tortoise. Now if this is to be an explanatory account of what supports the world, it only begs the question: what supports the tortoise? A famous (probably apocryphal) exchange between Bertrand Russell and an anonymous woman goes as follows:

WOMAN: The world rests on the back of a giant turtle.

RUSSELL: What does the turtle rest on?

WOMAN: Another turtle.

RUSSELL: What does *it* rest on?

WOMAN: Another turtle.

RUSSELL: What does *it* rest on?

The discussion goes on this way for quite some time, until the woman becomes exasperated and blurts out: “Don’t you see, Professor Russell, it’s turtles *all the way down!*”²² It will hardly do for the woman to claim that, as her solution explains how the world is supported in each individual instance, she need not worry about the infinite regress. This solution is the equivalent of borrowing money in order to pay off a debt: a solution that merely postpones the problem is no solution at all.²³

It is also noteworthy that the denial of a beginning to the process sidesteps the question of divine responsibility for the beginning of evil in the world. If there is a

creator, then why is he not responsible for the misdeeds of his creations? There is no easy answer to this question, but neither can it be avoided altogether. Christianity has long been criticized for its doctrine of the Fall of Man and Original Sin for these same reasons. I do not claim here that the Christian solution succeeds, but only that the Indian solution does not evade these difficulties, either.

The Problem of Explaining Death

If rebirth is to account for all human suffering, it must, of course, explain the paradigmatic case of innocent suffering: death itself. But the problem here is that in the typical rebirth theory death seems not to be presented as punishment for wrong, but rather is *presupposed* as the mechanism by which karma operates. That is, it is through rebirth that one is rewarded or punished for one's past wrongs (by being born in high or low station, healthy or sickly, etc.). But there can be no rebirth unless there is death. So even if one is moving up in the scale of karma to a very high birth for one's great virtue, one must still undergo death. This would appear to undermine the moral justification for (arguably) the greatest of evils, death itself. For in most versions of the theory death is not even taken as something that needs explaining, but is rather assumed as simply the causal process by which karma operates. Indeed, one might well ask why *everyone* is mortal; why are there not at least some who have been virtuous enough to live indefinitely? Did we all commit such terrible wrongs right away that we have always been subject to death? Typically, though, death and rebirth are not themselves morally justified but simply taken as the neutral mechanism of karma (see, e.g., Humphreys, p. 22).

There are several ways one might try to get around this problem. Max Weber suggests that the finiteness of good deeds in our life accounts for the finiteness of our life span.²⁴ But this entails a quite different karmic system, one in which one is punished not for positive misdeeds, but for the lack of infinitely many good deeds. It also seems to suggest that we are morally required to be infinitely good to avoid death—a rather implausible moral demand on us and one that undermines the moral justification of karma to be a fair system of rewards and punishments (one might ask why we are not rewarded with infinitely long life for not committing “infinite evil”). Moreover, there is a troublesome hint of circularity in Weber's solution: it seems odd to say that the finiteness of our life span derives from the finiteness of our goodness; to do infinitely much good one apparently needs an infinitely long life.

Another possible solution is simply to deny that death is indeed an evil, since it is the means by which one reaches greater rewards in life. But this is hardly satisfying, for there is no reason at all that death needs to be the mechanism by which one attains one's rewards: why not simply reward the person with health, wealth, and long life, without having to undergo rebirth in the first place? Karma certainly does not need death and rebirth: as soon as one accumulates sufficient merit, one could be instantly transformed into a higher state of existence. Further, this solution simply resorts to denial of the commonsense fact that death usually involves a terrible and often physically painful disruption of one's existence, including the separation from all one's loved ones and from all that one holds dear.

A different strategy might be to say that the ultimate reward is indeed escape from death, the release from the cycle of *saṃsāra* or rebirth, as many Indians believe. The trouble with this solution is, to put it colloquially, that it throws out the baby with the bathwater. The problem of evil arises not because life itself is an unmitigated evil, but because it contains such a strange mixture of good and evil. Karma implies that all of the good in life—health, wealth, happiness—is due to our good deeds. Why, then, is not perfect goodness rewarded with a perfectly good earthly life (one without death, pain, sickness, poverty, etc.)? If the idea that the ultimate goal is escape from life itself, it simply goes too far.²⁵ The idea of Nirvāṇa in Indian thought is often identified with release from not only the evil in life, but from all aspects of life, the good and the bad.²⁶ But to say that life itself (not just the bad aspects of it) is the problem cannot be a solution to the problem of evil, but rather an admission of failure to solve it. For why is life bad, full of suffering and misery, rather than good? It is also an implausible claim, since experience shows that life can be very good indeed, so why is it not good all the time?

The Free Will Problem

The karma solution is often presented as the ideal solution that respects free moral agency: one determines one's own future by one's present deeds. In fact, as is often pointed out, karma is paradoxically both a fatalist and a freewill theory. For Keyes, karma "manages to affirm and deny human responsibility at the same time" (p. 175); Walli tries to account for this peculiarity by interpreting karma in two stages: in the early stages of existence it is fatalistic, but later it becomes a "moral force" (Walli 1977, p. 328). It is often noted that, despite the promise of control over one's destiny, in practice the doctrine of karma can often result instead in an attitude of fatalistic pessimism in the believer. Thus, Berger argues that by legitimating the conditions of all social classes, karma "constitutes the most thoroughly conservative religious system devised in history" (p. 65).

Karma is also praised as a freewill theory on the grounds that it gives the individual multiple (infinitely many?) chances to reach salvation in future lives. However, it is not clear whether the multiple-life theory in fact constitutes an advantage over Christian doctrine. Since in Christianity the individual has but one life in which to earn salvation, this entails a high degree of moral importance to one's life (especially given that death could come at any time). In contrast, for karma there is no such urgency, for all mistakes and misdeeds can be rectified in the fullness of future lives. The significance of a particular lifetime, let alone a particular action, is radically diminished if the "life of the individual is only an ephemeral link in a causal chain that extends infinitely into both past and future" (Berger, p. 65). Again, this could encourage fatalism, a sense that one's choice here and now does not matter much in the greater scheme of things.

But a deeper problem is whether the doctrine of karma can in fact be squared at all with the existence of free moral agency. The difficulty can be illustrated with the following example. Consider the potential terrorist, who is deciding whether to draw attention to his political cause by detonating a bomb in a civilian area. How are we

to reconcile the automatic functioning of karma with the man's choice? The karma solution must face a dilemma here. There is either of the following possibilities:

(1) Karma functions in a determinate and mechanical fashion. Then, whomever the terrorist kills will not be innocent but deserving of their fate. From the terrorist's perspective, if he is the agent of karma his action is no more blameworthy than that of the executioner who delivers the lethal injection. Indeed, no matter what evils he does in the world, he can always justify them to himself by saying he is merely an agent for karma, carrying out the necessary punishments for these "wicked" people. Alternatively, it may be that his potential victims do not deserve to die this way, in which case the man must be determined not to kill them. In either case, freedom of the will (supposedly a virtue of the karma theory) is absent.

(2) The other possibility might be countenanced as a way to preserve freedom of the will. Perhaps it really is up to the terrorist to choose whether to kill his victims. Indeed, let us say that he has the potential to create genuine evil: to kill innocent, undeserving civilians. But now the problem is that a central, indeed crucial, tenet of the karma theory has been abandoned: that *all suffering* is deserved and is justified by one's prior wrongful acts. For now we have admitted the genuine possibility of gratuitous evil, innocent suffering—just what the theory was designed to deny. One could, of course, suggest that such gratuitous suffering will eventually be fully compensated for in a future life. But this, as Arthur Herman recognizes, would be a theory very different from that of karma. It would be a doctrine that asserts that all suffering will be *compensated* for (eventually) rather than holding that all suffering is *justified* (i.e., by one's misdeeds). Herman rightly rejects this alternative version of the theory as a recompense, not a karma, theory (p. 213).²⁷

This dilemma also undermines the idea of karma as a predictive, causal law (a status often asserted for it). Further, either horn of the dilemma undermines the moral-education function of karma as well (see Herman, p. 215). In (1) one cannot learn because one apparently cannot do wrong. In (2) if one suffers, one can never know if it is because one has done wrong or because of the gratuitous harm caused by the wrongdoing of others. Similarly, if one enjoys success one can never know if it is because of one's merits or because it is payback for the gratuitous evil one suffered earlier.

Reichenbach (p. 94) suggests a way in which some defenders of the doctrine of karma have tried to evade this difficulty and preserve the reality of free will: by asserting that karma explains only evil that is not caused by wrongful human choices (i.e., karma is a theory of "moral evil" rather than of "natural evil"). But this strategy is troublesome. First, there are innumerable cases where the categories of moral-versus-natural evil seem to break down: harm caused or contributed to by human negligence (negligent driving of a car, failing to make buildings earthquake proof); harm that was not directly caused but that was anticipated and could have been prevented (starvation in Africa); harm caused in cases of insanity or diminished mental capacity; harm caused while in a state of intoxication (drunk driving); and so forth. In such cases it is doubtful that we could draw a clear distinction between moral and natural evil, but the strategy fails if one cannot draw such a line. Moreover, the great

comforting and consoling function of the karma doctrine is gone: one cannot be sure whether or not one's suffering is retribution for past wrong, and one cannot even know which of one's sufferings are punishments for one's prior wrongs and which are not. Even more importantly, this strategy represents not so much a solution to the difficulty as a wholehearted concession to the radical limitations of the theory, an admission that enormous amounts of suffering cannot be explained or justified in terms of just punishment for past wrongs. One can no longer be sure whether the circumstances one is born into (e.g., poverty) are the result of one's previous sins or of someone else's wrongdoing. This revised explanation of moral evil presumes that suffering can be random, inexplicable, meaningless, freely chosen without regard to the victim's deserts, while the explanation of natural evil presumes that all suffering is explicable and justified. One might wonder whether the explanations of moral and natural evil are now so much at such cross-purposes that the rebirth theory as a whole loses its coherence.

Thus, the dilemma seems to show that karma is simply not consistent with the genuine possibility of free moral choice. The basic problem here is the deep tension (even incompatibility) between the causal determinism implicit in the karma doctrine and the ideal of free moral responsibility, which makes one fully responsible for one's actions. Most commentators never successfully reconcile the two, if indeed they can be reconciled. An example is Hirianna, who insists that "everything that happens in the moral realm is preordained," but that this is fully consistent with human freedom, by which he means "being determined by oneself" (pp. 46–47 and n. 23). It is not clear how one can escape this contradiction. The more one insists on human freedom, the less are events in the world subject to karmic determination.²⁸

The difficulty is even worse for the interpretation of karma that extends the idea of causal determinism to one's character or disposition in future lives. Thus, someone who does evil will inherit in the next life not only lowly circumstances but also a wicked, malevolent disposition; those who have a good disposition owe it to their good deeds in previous lives. Now even one's character and moral choice are influenced, even determined by, one's past lives; this threatens to do away with free moral choice altogether. And once one has a wicked disposition, it is a puzzle how one can escape spiraling down into further wrongdoing, or at best being permanently stuck at a given moral level, if karma has already determined one's moral character. (The problem is exaggerated even further if one accepts the view that particularly bad people become animals; how could one ever escape one's animal state, since animals do not appear to be capable of moral choice at all?)²⁹

There is in the end a fatalistic dilemma for the theory. Either the karma theory is a complete and closed causal account of evil and suffering or it is not. That is, either the present state of affairs is fully explained causally by reference to prior events (including human actions) or it is not. If it is fully explained, then there can be no progress or indeed no change at all in the world. Past evil will generate present evil, and present evil will in turn cause equivalent future evil. There is no escape from the process. Alternatively, if there is the possibility of change, then karma must no longer be a complete causal account. That is, it fails as a systematic theory

and therefore cannot in fact solve the problem of evil, since there must be evil in the world for which it cannot account.

Karma and the Verifiability Problem

There is one final matter that I think has significant moral relevance in this debate: the charge that the rebirth (or preexistence) doctrine is objectionable because it is *unverifiable* (or unfalsifiable).³⁰ Whatever happens is consistent with the theory; no fact could apparently falsify it. Whatever the terrorist does is (as Humphreys insists) simply the determination of karma. Further, one has no capacity effectively to predict the future by this theory. Even if one has done wrong (assuming that there are precise guidelines for what counts as wrongdoing, a difficult assumption in a world of moral dilemmas), one has no way of knowing just what the punishment will be, or when it will occur, in this life or the next. A remarkable example of the willing endorsement of the advantages of unfalsifiability is made by Arthur Herman in defending karma:

Thus no matter how terrible and awe-inspiring the suffering may be, the rebirth theorist can simply attribute the suffering to previous misdeeds done in previous lives, and the puzzle is over. Extraordinary evil is solved with no harm done to the majesty and holiness of deity.³¹

Another defender of karma and transmigration also unwittingly demonstrates the problem with such theories. He claims that the evidence for transmigration is provided by the law of karma itself (i.e., the law of moral cause and effect), since without the transmigration of souls, karma would be an inadequate solution to the Problem of Evil.³² Such a justification is transparently circular: it presupposes that the karma solution is true in order to defend it.

Now, one might fairly doubt whether, in general, religious claims can meaningfully be held to the same standards of empirical verification as scientific claims. Nonetheless, the virtue of testability and falsifiability is that it provides a check against all of the familiar human biases: dogmatism, ethnocentrism, and so on. This is a particular problem for the karma theory, since the very unfalsifiability of the doctrine can be used to rationalize the status quo or justify oppression or unfairness on the grounds that their suffering is punishment for their prior wrongs (for they would simply have to pay their debt later). It is widely acknowledged that the repressive caste system in India lasted so long in large part because the doctrine of karma encouraged Indians to accept social oppression as the mechanical workings of karma. Hiriyanna remarkably presents it as an *advantage* of the karma theory that in India sufferers cannot blame God or their neighbors for their troubles, but only themselves (even if their neighbors are indeed unjustly oppressing them).³³ Human fallibility being what it is, the idea that all suffering is due to a previous wrongful action provides a great temptation to rationalize the status quo with reference to unverifiable claims about one's past wrongs. This is surely too great a price to pay for whatever pastoral comfort such fatalistic reassurance provides.

Conclusion

I conclude that the doctrine of karma and rebirth, taken as a systematic rational account of human suffering by which all individual suffering is explained as a result of that individual's wrongdoing, is unsuccessful as a theodicy. Even if this conclusion is correct, however, it does not follow that the doctrine must be wholly discarded for purposes of theodicy. As I mentioned earlier, it is far from clear whether karma should be interpreted in the rationalistic manner of Max Weber and Peter Berger. Francis Clooney argues that the Vedānta rejects rationalism and "believes that reason working alone is eventually confronted with insoluble problems" (p. 545). Perhaps the doctrine of karma should not be taken in a literalistic sense as a system of "moral accounting," but rather be understood figuratively, as pointing to the higher mysteries of Indian religion such as the ultimate unity of *ātman* (the individual self) and *brahman* (the ground of being). In rejecting the rationalist account of karma as a theodicy, I leave it as an open and important question whether a mystical interpretation of the doctrine might be a better way to approach the profound mystery of human suffering.

Notes

- 1 – Cited in Keyes, p. 262.
- 2 – Coomaraswamy 1964, p. 108. The reference, of course, is to John 9:2, in which Jesus rejects the retributive explanation of a man's blindness.
- 3 – Weber 1947, p. 359.
- 4 – In the second edition, Herman backs off this claim, and says that he now thinks that the traditional problem of evil is "insolvable" (p. viii).
- 5 – I do not, however, necessarily mean to endorse his claim that the critique of Christian and Jewish thought has been "devastating."
- 6 – Whitney 1998.
- 7 – On which there is enormous disagreement. See, for example, Creed 1986, p. 10 (karma is "not central to the modern Hindu philosophical curriculum"), and Walli 1977, p. 277 (the "entire structure of Indian culture" is "dominated" by the idea of karma).
- 8 – See Karl Potter's defense of treating karma as a "theory" (pp. 243 ff.).
- 9 – Even Wendy O'Flaherty says she has "come to have more respect for the internal consistency and usefulness of the karma theory as a theodicy" (1976, Preface to the paperback edition).
- 10 – Not all modern defenders of karma would accept this version of the doctrine. Robert Minor (1986) describes how the modern Indian philosophers Sri Auro-

bindo and Radakrishnan develop alternative interpretations, both rejecting the idea of karma as a juridical and hedonistic concept, that is, as dispensing sorrow and suffering as punishment for wrongdoing.

- 11 – For example, a rebirth theory that does not allow for rebirth in animals may be unable to account for animal suffering, and hence may perhaps be objectionable on the grounds that it cannot explain all suffering. See, for example, the Chandogya Upanishad (rebirth in a dog's or pig's womb) and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (rebirth as an insect). See also Minor, p. 34 (for Radakrishnan, Vedic claims about human rebirth as animals or plants should be taken only metaphorically).
- 12 – Hirianna, p. 49; see also Stoeber, p. 178. John Hick has pointed to a related problem: if karma is an effective system of moral education, then why do we not see steady moral progress through the ages? (Hick 1976, p. 320). Herman, too, acknowledges that payback cannot be deferred, lest it undermine the possibility of learning (p. 215).
- 13 – Even worse for the theory of karma is the idea that a punishment might be due to a "pool" of accumulated karma from the past (see Reichenbach, p. 78), making it even more difficult to know whether I am being punished for a specific sin or a collection of many sins.
- 14 – Various defenses are given for the apparent lack of memory. Yogis are said to remember past lives, but it is hard to verify such a claim, and in any case the problem is that *everyone* ought to remember. Sometimes it is said that in the time between lives we will recall all our past sins, but again this is hard to verify and doesn't answer the problem of why karma does not allow us to remember them here and now. For a discussion of some of these problems, see Edwards, pp. 233 ff., and Herman, pp. 255 ff. See also Reichenbach, p. 160, and Humphreys' cryptic solution (the brain forgets, but the "inner mind" remembers [p. 56]). John Hick lists some literature of purported recollections of past lives (1990, p. 132). Edwards critiques such claims (chap. 7).
- 15 – See, for example, Nayak, quoted in Stoeber, p. 178.
- 16 – It might also be noted that for theories of personal identity that make persistence of memory essential to personal identity, the lack of memory would indicate that the person being punished is not the same person who committed the wrong.
- 17 – A closely related further problem is, of course, that karma violates the legal principle "nulla poena sine lege": no penalty (punishment) without a law clearly identifying in advance that the conduct is wrong, and just what the penalty is for violating it.
- 18 – Remarkably, just such a claim was recently made by an ultra-orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem, who declared that the victims of the Nazi Holocaust were killed because they were reincarnations of sinners and had to atone for their sins.

- 19 – See, for example, Watts 1964, p. 38; Hick 1976, pp. 309, 314; Hick 1990, p. 139; and O’Flaherty 1976, p. 17.
- 20 – See Herman, p. 263, and Hirianna, pp. 47, 198. The latter’s “solution” is even worse: he denies that it would even be possible to solve this problem, since we cannot conceive of a first action before one’s character is formed. But instead of recognizing that this undermines the karma solution, he inexplicably thinks that the impossibility of solving the regress problem is a defense of karma. See also Herman, p. 285 (the Vedas do indicate an ultimate beginning).
- 21 – Indeed, according to this infinite-regress explanation, every wrong is *preceded* as well as followed by suffering, so it is not clear on what basis one can say which is cause and which is effect.
- 22 – John Locke cynically relates a similar story in an attack on the philosophical notion of ‘substance’, which he thought had no explanatory value. He mentions the “Indian philosopher” who, in trying to explain what supports the world, had he “but thought of this word *Substance*, he needed not to have been at the trouble to find an Elephant to support it, and a Tortoise to support his Elephant: The word Substance would have done it effectually” (John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. 2, chap. 13, par. 19).
- 23 – Roy Perrett argues that the objection is based on an “over-stringent conception of explanation” (p. 9), and that, while “individual instances of suffering are explicable by reference to karma, the fact that suffering exists in our world at all . . . is just a brute fact” (p. 7). And this, Perrett suggests, is “perfectly reasonable,” since all explanations have to come to an end somewhere. However, it is surely implausible to construct a theodicy that answers the question “why is there suffering” by saying: “it is just a brute fact.”
- 24 – Weber 1964, p. 145.
- 25 – See Hick 1976, pp. 321, 437.
- 26 – Hirianna, p. 69.
- 27 – See also Reichenbach, p. 17.
- 28 – Humphreys’ analysis of an analogous dilemma, whether to aid a sufferer, is not particularly helpful: “the help or withholding of it is just as much his karma as his present sufferings”: “one can’t interfere with karma” (pp. 65–66).
- 29 – Augustine raises a further objection, pointing to a man who is mentally retarded (a “moron”) but is of high moral character: “How will they be able to attribute to him a previous life of so disgraceful a character that he deserved to be born an idiot, and at the same time of so highly meritorious character as to entitle him to a preference in the award of the grace of Christ over many men of the acutest intellect?” (“On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins,” chap. 32, in Augustine 1984).

- 30 – A problem raised both by Paul Edwards (1996) and Bruce Reichenbach (1990).
- 31 – Herman, p. 287.
- 32 – Hirianna, p. 47.
- 33 – *Ibid.*, p. 48 (although he does not specifically mention caste). See Humphreys, p. 55 (the condition of cripples and dwarfs can be justified by their sins).

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