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Karma, Morality, and Evil

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Abstract

The doctrine of karma has been praised as a rational and morally edifying explanatory response to the existence of evil and apparent injustice in the world. Critics have attacked it as a morally misguided dogma that distorts one's vision of reality. This essay, after outlining the traditional doctrine, examines three criticisms that have been central to recent debates: firstly, that the doctrine offers no practical guidance; second, that it faces a dilemma between free will and fatalism; and third, that it involves a morally repugnant form of blaming victims for their own misfortunes. Possible responses are considered, the depth of the disagreement is highlighted, and a morally significant difference between alternative ways of articulating the belief in karma is analyzed.

1. Introduction

'*Karma* doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history.' So wrote Max Weber in *The Religion of India*, first published in 1916.[1] Since the law of karma is often assumed to operate independently or at least semi-independently of a supreme deity, some would question the aptness of the term 'theodicy' in this context, opting instead for an alternative such as 'Cosmodicy' (Huxley 1947: 68), 'anthropodicy' (Larson 2003: 254–5) or 'karmadicy' (Herman 1987); but the idea that the doctrine of karma constitutes an impressive response to the existence of evil in the world has been widely endorsed.[2]

Whether this doctrine has been a blessing or a curse to those religions that have adopted it, however, remains a vexed question. Some commentators have lauded it as 'a doctrine of hope' due to the prospect of eventual moral and spiritual perfection that it is deemed to promote (Yamunacharya 1967: 72);[3] others have dubbed it 'a philosophy of despair' due to its purportedly fatalistic implications (Kuppuswamy 1977: 46).[4] Some find it to be morally 'comforting', 'soothing' and 'satisfying' (Wadia 1965) as well as an intellectually satisfactory – 'or rather, the least unsatisfactory' – solution to the problem of evil (Nayak 1993: 146, 182);[5] others condemn it as either 'completely vacuous as a principle of moral guidance' (Edwards 1996: 42) or as the playing of 'a cruel joke on the credulity of the masses' (Kuppuswamy 1977: 47), 'a convenient tool for explaining away the perceived inequality in human society' (Ramendra 2011: 56).

This essay will critically examine some recent debates concerning the morality of belief in karma and in the closely allied notion of rebirth or reincarnation. To make sense of these debates it will first be necessary to offer some remarks on the nature of the karma doctrine itself and its place within South Asian religious traditions (section 2). Then will ensue discussion of three serious charges recently brought against the doctrine: namely, that it is morally vacuous (section 3), that it involves an irresolvable dilemma concerning moral agency (section 4), and that it cruelly blames victims for their own afflictions (section 5). Possible responses will be considered along the way, and (in section 6) attention will be given both to the depth of basic moral disagreement that often divides opponents in debates over karma and to the scope that exists for divergent ways of articulating karma-related beliefs, especially with regard to whether those articulations are self- or other-directed. In conclusion (section 7) I will propose that the doctrine of karma is not well conceived as a theoretical product of inductive (or, as one critic has put it, 'counter-inductive') reasoning; it is better

envisaged, at least for the most part, as a constitutive element in a worldview within which believers seek to make sense of the suffering and contingencies of life.

2. The Doctrine of Karma

Deriving from the verbal root *kṛ* ('to do, make, perform, accomplish ...'), *karma* is the nominative singular form of the Sanskrit noun *karman*.[6] In its widest sense 'it means any act, intentional or unintentional, moral or amoral' (Pandeya 1967: 98); but in the context of what has come to be known as the *doctrine of karma* it denotes a morally evaluable action plus the potential or power of that action to bring about a particular result or consequence, which is liable to come to fruition some time after the commission of the action itself, perhaps in a future life (Krishan 1997: 4). Crucially, the consequences that are most pertinent here are ones that bear upon the experience or well-being of the agent herself. As an early Buddhist scripture puts it: 'By you ... has the seed been sown; Thus you will experience the fruit' (Bodhi 2000: 328).[7]

Scholarly opinion on the origins of the karma doctrine is divided. While it is generally agreed that its earliest formulations occur in some of the oldest Upanishads, there remains considerable dispute both over the antiquity of these texts and over the question whether the doctrine evolved within Vedic Brahmanism itself or, alternatively, was appropriated from cultural groups located towards the eastern region of the Gangetic plain – the region from which Buddhism, Jainism and the now defunct Ājīvikas hailed.[8] Fortunately, for the purposes of this essay it will not be necessary to resolve these complex historical matters.[9]

In Buddhist traditions, *karma* (or its Pāli equivalent, *kamma*) is often explicitly understood to encompass the *intention* behind or *volition* with which the action is performed; hence it has been defined as 'volition and that which is effected by it' (*Abhidharmakośa* 4.1, quoted in Griffiths 1982: 281).[10] Thus the emphasis is placed on its being *voluntary* actions

that generate ‘merit’ or ‘demerit’ for the agent (Arnold 2012: 31), with the perhaps somewhat crude analogy of a ‘bank account of karma’ often being invoked to convey this idea (Schlieter 2013).

Schools of classical Indian philosophy have developed more or less sophisticated models of the psychological processes that characterize the relations between karma, rebirth and spiritual fulfilment. For instance, the school of Yoga associated with Patañjali (*c.* third–fourth century CE) speaks of our ordinary actions being rooted in particular forms of ignorance; these actions generate psychological impressions and traces, the accumulation of which determines the type and duration of one’s next life along with the modes of experience one will undergo (Bryant 2009: 198–202). Though different schools have their own nuanced systems of doctrine and practice, Yoga shares with other Brahmanical branches of Indian philosophy, as well as with Buddhism and Jainism, a concern with liberation from *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth). Both Yoga and Buddhism maintain that progress can be made towards this goal in the short to medium term by maximizing virtuous actions and minimizing vicious ones; the longer-term objective, however, is to eradicate the ‘root’ of ignorance and to thereby remove the source of all further action and tainted experience. This requires sustained meditative discipline and the cultivation of non-attachment to worldly phenomena (Bryant 2009: 47–8; Burley 2007: 130–1).[11]

Since rebirth traditions deriving from South Asia hold the fructifying of merit in pleasant and of demerit in unpleasant experience to be an operation built into the very structure of the universe, the phrase *law of karma* has commonly been used to denote it (Lopez 2008: 21–2). Like Kant (1956: 166), a proponent of the karma doctrine would be apt to identify both ‘the starry heavens above’ and ‘the moral law within’ as strictly law-governed. Unlike Kant, however, such a proponent would not be apt to draw a sharp distinction between moral and natural law. Psychology and cosmology tend to blur together in the South Asian rebirth

traditions, with the concept of *dharma* being a capacious principle that encompasses both right action and the orderly functioning of the universe as a whole (Koller 1972).

Although there has historically been a strong conceptual link between karma and rebirth,[12] the two concepts ought not to be conflated, for there exist beyond South Asia numerous forms of belief in rebirth that make no reference to karma.[13] Moreover, it has been observed that among Hindus and Buddhists there is a growing tendency to regard karma as operating within a single lifetime instead of over several lives.[14] Some scholars have characterized this tendency in terms of 'demythologization'; that is, an attempt to make the doctrine more consistent with a modern scientific worldview, according to which the idea of a soul or causally connected 'stream of consciousness' undergoing a succession of lives is, at best, highly suspect and, at worst, incoherent.[15] It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a detailed account of the multiple competing interpretations of karma and rebirth that have been developed both historically and in the contemporary world. However, the fact that there is not just one commonly agreed upon version of the doctrine will become relevant at certain stages of my discussion below, which will focus on some recent controversies over the doctrine's moral implications.

3. Moral Vacuity?

It is often assumed that believing in karma brings with it normative implications for how one ought to act. Some claim that these implications are laudable: the belief gives one a reason to behave virtuously, knowing that immoral behaviour leads to future suffering. Others declare the implications to be baleful: one will have a justification for neglecting the misfortunes of others, presuming them to be the natural consequences of past sins on the sufferer's part. Paul Edwards, however, has argued that the doctrine of karma provides no guidance for action whatsoever: although it does, he maintains, have ramifications for our *attitudes* towards

victims of suffering (ramifications that will be discussed in section 5 below), it is devoid of any practical significance. This is because, given a certain essential feature of belief in karma, it turns out that absolutely anything one does must be presumed to be the 'right thing' to do (Edwards 1996: 42–3).

The essential feature in question is the belief in universal justice – the idea that, notwithstanding any appearances to the contrary, the world is in the final analysis a perfectly just place.[16] If one holds this as a non-negotiable, or categorical, assumption, then it follows, Edwards maintains, that regardless of what eventuates, and hence regardless of whether we assist those who are in need (or whether our efforts to do so are successful), 'the ultimate outcome will be just, in the sense that every human being will be getting exactly – no more and no less – what he deserves' (1996: 43). The problem that this belief generates can be illustrated by an example. We might imagine a soldier on a battlefield – let us call him Arjuna – who is perplexed about whether to take part in the imminent fight between feuding cousins.[17] Should he participate, and thus run the risk of having his kinsmen's blood on his hands, or should he refrain, thereby foregoing his duty as a warrior? If one assumes that universal justice obtains, it hardly seems to matter what he does. If he slaughters his cousins, then it must be the case that they 'deserved' to die. If, on the other hand, he lays down his weapon and is himself slain, then this must be what justice demands. Necessarily, whatever happens, it must be right; and hence, it seems, the decision is arbitrary. Morality is abolished.

Many would call this view 'fatalism'. But Edwards is willing to concede to the believer in universal justice that it need not be fatalistic (1996: 42–3). By this, Edwards means that universal justice need not preclude human freedom. To return to my example, it could be that Arjuna has a genuine choice, that whether he charges into battle or retreats to the sidelines is, in some meaningful sense, *up to him*.[18] To say that he has no choice in the matter would, on Edwards' view, be fatalistic. But the believer in a supremely just world need not say this;

instead, she can say that, despite its being ultimately up to Arjuna what he does, whichever decision he makes will turn out to be in perfect accordance with justice. Whether there really is room for a conceptual distinction between fatalism and this whatever-happens-is-just view remains contentious, however.[19]

Francis Story offers an instructive real-life example that is germane to the present issue. He cites the case of a doctor who specializes in pulmonary diseases and is also a Buddhist. While acknowledging the carcinogenic effects of smoking, the doctor himself remains 'a fairly heavy cigarette smoker', remarking that even if '[a]ll the physical causes of cancer' are present, cancer will develop only if the individual's karma is 'also a predisposing factor' (Story 2000: 45). Is this a fatalistic attitude? Talk of 'predispositions' and 'physical causes' implies that karma is not perceived as fully determining whether one contracts cancer, and yet the doctor's apparent sanguinity about his own habit implies that he supposes karma to play the *major* role. Even with this latter point in view, however, it does not look as though the doctor's attitude is fatalistic in a strictly deterministic sense of that term, which seems to be the sense that Edwards is privileging when he concedes that belief in karma need not be fatalistic. But the case is complicated, and we should not of course rule out the possibility of some degree of incoherence or self-deception on the doctor's part.

A believer with a more 'totalizing' conception of karma's operations may admit that, were the doctor to contract cancer, it is his heavy smoking that would be the primary causal factor, while adding that it is the doctor's karma that is responsible for his smoking in the first place; that is, were it not for certain bad deeds performed by him in the past (including in previous lives), the doctor would not have suffered the misfortune of taking up the habit. Such a view of karma's role starts to sound far more deterministic, as it may be construed as implying that it is not only the *outcomes* of certain of our decisions that are karmicly determined, but the decisions themselves. Further complications are present in the case of an

activity such as smoking, whose strongly addictive character may preclude its being straightforwardly described as freely chosen on anyone's account.[20] But if we return again to Arjuna on the battlefield, it looks as though the proponent of the totalizing conception is liable to say that his 'decision' whether or not to fight is itself the outcome of past karma – it is just part of an ongoing mechanistic process within which we are all mere instruments rather than free agents.[21]

Despite Edwards' concession to the believer in karma, other commentators have been less willing to distinguish belief in universal justice from fatalism (where 'fatalism' is construed in a strictly deterministic sense). One recent critic of the moral value and coherence of the belief has presented the problem facing the believer in terms of a dilemma, which I shall discuss in the next section.

4. A Karmic Dilemma?

As we have seen, Edwards' complaint about the karma doctrine is that it lacks any capacity for moral guidance: since, on the assumption that the universe is inherently just, any practically achievable outcome would itself be just, what ordinarily appear to us as morally serious decisions are in fact arbitrary. This arbitrariness would be a disastrous result for advocates of karma, who vaunt its morally edifying potential. Further difficulties for the view that karma offers a viable response to the problem of evil have been raised in recent work by Whitley Kaufman (2005, 2007). One of these difficulties takes the form of a dilemma, one horn of which bears a close resemblance to Edwards' charge of moral vacuity.

The dilemma concerns what Kaufman sees as an irresolvable tension between universal justice and free will. If one believes in universal justice, then one believes that everything that happens (or, we might say, everything that happens which has any moral significance) is morally just; in effect, there is no moral evil, because any putative 'victims' of apparently

evil acts must have received only what they deserved. The one who performs the act cannot be blameworthy: she is an instrument of karmic law, like 'the executioner who delivers the lethal injection' (Kaufman 2005: 25) – or, if we take the metaphor of an 'instrument' more strictly, like the syringe through which the lethal injection is administered. And yet the very idea of *desert* presupposes the possibility of free agency. Without it, moral responsibility would be eliminated, and then no one would be deserving of praise or blame: apparently moral judgements would have become vacuous. So belief in universal justice – and hence in the law of karma – seems both to require belief in free moral agency and to obviate it.

One way of responding to a dilemma of the sort just outlined would be to protest that it relies on an artificial philosophical reconstruction of belief in karma as opposed to a faithful account of how the belief manifests in the everyday lives of those who hold it. While it is undoubtedly true that some philosophical defenders of the so-called 'theory' of karma seek to portray it as 'logical' or 'scientific', in contrast with what they see as mere religious dogmas such as the idea of God's providential will,[22] it may well be the case that such would-be apologists are attempting to defend a chimera. And if that is so, then the 'theory' attacked by the philosophical enemies of karma may be a chimera too.

Kaufman openly admits that what he is criticizing is really 'a simplified, idealized version of the karma-and-rebirth doctrine, one abstracted as far as possible from particular historical or doctrinal questions' (2005: 16). He is right to point this out, for if we attend to the lives of believers in karma, we are apt to witness a frequent intermingling of other beliefs: beliefs, for example, concerning the capacity of gods or spirits to intervene on one's behalf if propitiated, to unleash their ire if angered, or to affect the course of one's life by their capricious or mischievous games.[23] We will also discover a multiplicity of forms that the belief in karma itself can take. As one sceptical commentator remarks: 'Whether the celebrated law of Karma ruling the universe is deterministic and causal or probabilistic, essentially retributive or

essentially reformative, basically moral or metaphysical, seems open to serious dispute' (Chari 1967: 128).[24] Some varieties of the belief include, for instance, ideas not only of cross-species rebirth but also of salvation being directly achievable 'by birds, animals, reptiles, insects and even plants' (Meenakshisundaram 1967: 26). Others regard this as an absurdity, and maintain, moreover, that talk of 'an evil-doer [being] reborn as an animal' can mean only 'that there will be a predominant degree of animality in that human form' (Sastri 1967: 118).[25]

Nevertheless, Kaufman justifies his simplifying approach by pointing to the fact that, since the nineteenth century, efforts have been made to develop the karma doctrine into 'a complete, systematic theory of the origins and explanation of human suffering' (2005: 18). It is those attempts at what we might call *systematic karmology* that constitute the immediate object of Kaufman's attack, irrespective of the more ragged assortment of karma-related convictions that manifest in the lives of ordinary believers. Given Kaufman's explicit admission that he is abstracting away from 'historical or doctrinal questions', it is surprising to find, in a response to his initial essay, the charge that his critique's 'underlying weakness ... consists in a lack of proper attention to the original sources and to the historical and doctrinal background in which the theory of karma is set' (Chadha and Trakakis 2007: 550–1). Had he insinuated that he was dealing with conceptions of karma in all their historical and doctrinal complexity, this charge would have been fair; but in the light of Kaufman's unequivocal demarcation of his target, it seems somewhat misplaced.

Whatever we think about the critical reach of Kaufman's claim that a systematized version of karma faces a crippling dilemma, there is another, even more emphatically moral, objection to karma that surely does find purchase against the doctrine in some of its everyday as well as its more systematized forms. The objection is that the belief in karma, at least in its

retributive varieties, involves an odious mode of 'blaming the victim', and it is to this objection that I shall now turn.

5. Blaming Victims?

From time to time believers in karma come out with statements that strike those who do not share their belief (and perhaps some who *do* share it, or something like it, as well) as morally outrageous. Examples are not hard to find, and the sheer apparent heartlessness of such statements has undoubtedly done much to damage the moral standing of the doctrine in the eyes of many. It is not only in ancient spiritual or legal texts that, for example, people afflicted by oppression and poverty or who have physical or intellectual impairments are declared to be suffering the consequences of their own former sins;[26] such declarations are also heard in the contemporary world, often to the exasperation and dismay of campaigners against social discrimination who perceive them as throwbacks to a 'pre-modern' or 'medieval' era.[27]

In some instances, it seems almost as though the believer in karma has, under sceptical questioning, been pushed into a corner; she supposes that her belief system must have the resources to account for all apparent injustices and instances of pain and misery, and this supposition prompts her to make speculative assertions that more careful moral reflection might have guarded against. An instance of this sort occurs in an interview with a Tibetan Buddhist *tulku* named Lati Rimpoche (a 'tulku' being a high spiritual preceptor who has been recognized as the reincarnation of a previous master).[28] During the conversation, the interviewer, Richard Hayes, puts to Lati Rimpoche the awkward question of how he would account for the trauma undergone by countless Jewish children under Nazi persecution in the 1930s and '40s. Confronted with a question of this kind, we might expect, or perhaps hope, that the only honest answer would be that there is simply no way of accounting for such

horrors: as the Buddha himself is alleged to have said, the precise working out of the results of karma is among the 'inconceivable matters', conjecturing about which 'would reap either madness or frustration' (Bodhi 2012: 463).

Lati Rimpoche, however, does not forego conjecturing. Speaking via an interpreter, he replies:

> The proper Buddhist answer to such a question is that the victims were experiencing the consequences of their actions performed in previous lives. The individual victims must have done something very bad in earlier lives that led to their being treated in this way. Also there is such a thing as collective karma. (Quoted in Hayes 1998: 76)[29]

Hayes, pressing him on this reference to 'collective karma', asks what 'an individual [can] do to change the karma of the group that he or she belongs to'. 'You can change all karma through practice', answers the Rimpoche. 'You can persuade the group to adopt pure attitudes and to develop pure practices.' Again Hayes pursues the point, asking whether the suggestion being made is 'that the Jews may have suffered the humiliations of the holocaust because they did not live up to Jewish standards of purity, or rather because they did not live up to Buddhist standards ...'. The Rimpoche replies that '[t]here are attitudes that all peoples regard as pure', such as '[b]eing kind to other people', but adds that he does not 'know specifically about the history of the Jews' (77).

Some would say that, whether one knows about the history of a group of people or not, speculating that they, either individually or collectively, 'must have done something very bad' to deserve becoming victims of a genocidal regime hardly exemplifies kindness. Indeed, some would say that it 'is nothing but adding insult to injury' (Kuppuswamy 1977: 44), the raising of 'the "blame the victim" idea into a systematic principle' (Kaufman 2007: 559).

Paul Edwards, despite maintaining, as we have seen, that the doctrine of karma 'provides no guidance on how to act', remarks that it nevertheless has noxious implications for how we should look upon others. So 'horrifying' are some of these implications, Edwards observes, that 'believers in Karma, especially those in the West, are careful not to spell them out, if they are aware of them' (1996: 43). In the case of Lati Rimpoche, it seems, we have a believer, speaking to a western audience, who is not afraid to spell out the implications that Edwards and others find so appalling.

The people of Lati Rimpoche's own country, Tibet, have of course suffered grievously since the Chinese invasion of 1950. Hayes proceeds to inquire whether he believes these circumstances to be 'the consequence of impurity of practice within Tibetan culture as a whole'. Once again the response given by Lati Rimpoche, who successfully escaped from his occupied homeland in 1964, is stark:

> I'm sure that those Tibetans who were left behind to suffer great hardships under the Chinese Communists must have done something very bad in previous lives to deserve such consequences. It could be that in former lives they tortured other people or were responsible for injustice. As a result they must now live under an unjust system. (Quoted in Hayes 1998: 77)

In contrast to the Rimpoche's conviction that proportionality obtains between the amount and intensity of suffering in the world on the one hand and the seriousness of the transgressions committed by those who endure it on the other, Kaufman expresses incredulity – with which many will sympathize – that the severest of torments could be even remotely proportionate to any transgressions, even if the cumulative aggregation of sins over myriad lifetimes is taken into account (2005: 21–2). In response, Chadha and Trakakis have proposed

that such incredulity is apt to dissolve when one contemplates 'the brutality and ruthlessness' of which human beings are capable (2007: 538). Their point could be elaborated by noting that anthropogenic atrocities such as the Nazi holocaust and the Chinese abuses in Tibet themselves epitomize the depths of evil to which humans can sink, thereby supplying examples of precisely the sorts of behaviour for which horrendous suffering would constitute just retribution. For those willing to venture down this track of reasoning, there cease to be any forms of suffering so severe that they could not, in principle, be 'explained' by reference to the sufferers' past-life sins.[30]

In reply, perhaps surprisingly, Kaufman turns the problem into one of numbers: 'it is simply implausible that so many people could have been so evil' (2007: 557). By putting it in these terms, Kaufman implies that a world containing fewer instances of suffering than ours would be one in which it were easier to accept that, even in its most extreme forms, suffering is invariably deserved. An alternative response, and one that is already suggested in Kaufman's initial essay, would be to question how certain modes of suffering could figure in *any* system of justice, whether human, divine or cosmic.[31] A response of this latter kind would be indicative of a deep moral disagreement between the participants in the dispute. The capacity to see the condition of someone who has been crushed by intolerable afflictions as just retribution for something she 'must' have done in a previous life is a mode of perception that others will not share. It involves seeing the person in a different light from that in which she would be seen by someone who never associates suffering with natural or divine retribution in this way.

Invoking the notion of the law of karma as merely an aspect of the natural cosmic order, the believer in karma may deny that her own perception of the situation entails any moral disapproval or blame. From this perspective, declaring that victims of persecution must have acted badly in previous lives is simply a matter of stating the facts. Furthermore, she might

add, perceiving people in this way need have no direct bearing on how one *behaves* towards them: benevolent action may be the appropriate response, regardless of the aetiology of their condition. Those who do not accept the belief, meanwhile, might struggle to see how perceiving someone as responsible for her own misfortune could fail to be, in itself, a form of moral evaluation. Indeed, they might say, the very assumption that designating someone as deserving of her mistreatment could constitute a non-evaluative description displays a kind of moral obtuseness – an ignorance of the extent to which such descriptions are imbued with evaluative connotations. From this point of view, even if the believer in karma actively strives to alleviate the victim's suffering, the moral character of the act will not be separable from the mode of perception. It will, in other words, remain an act of assisting someone who is assumed to have brought the trouble on herself, as opposed to an act of assisting an innocent (though that difference need not, in itself, entail one or the other act's being construed as straightforwardly 'better' or 'worse').[32]

6. Oneself and Others

Apologists for an emphatically retributive conception of karma are often willing to 'bite the bullet' with respect to the charge that it involves blaming victims for the misfortunes they experience; the doctrine *does* blame the victims, they admit, but not unfairly so, for the 'victims' are themselves the guilty ones: 'Our misery and happiness are in exact proportion to our wickedness and virtue' (Nayak 1993: 59). The doctrine is saved from fatalism and cruelty, it will be added, due to its vehement rejection of passivity in the face of affliction. As one prominent western defender of Buddhism has put it, 'even if all deserve their suffering, in that they have caused it, there is no excuse for callous indifference to their suffering by those more "fortunate"' (Humphreys 1983: 38–9). While critics may see the callousness in

the very willingness to regard the suffering as deserved, defenders seek to shift the focus of discussion towards the doctrine's implications for remedial action.

Looking back to the early teachings of Buddhism, Bhikkhu Bodhi reports that, without claiming belief in karma and rebirth to be the foundation of ethics, the Buddha had emphasized its role as 'a strong inducement to moral behavior' (2005: 3). Spelling out what he means, Bodhi observes that recognizing the potential of 'our good and bad actions' to 'rebound upon ourselves, determining our future lives and bringing us happiness or suffering,' affords 'us a decisive reason to avoid unwholesome conduct and to diligently pursue the good' (ibid.).[33] Again, from an alternative moral perspective, one may feel perturbed that this purportedly 'decisive reason', far from encouraging moral behaviour, is itself decidedly unwholesome – replacing, as it does, genuinely moral motivation with unalloyed self-interest. That the desire to receive reward and escape punishment in the afterlife might have a corrupting rather than edifying effect has long been a complaint made against certain eschatologies. Why, it has been asked, should we not regard virtuous behaviour as *intrinsically* good, irrespective of its potential to bring happiness (Jantzen 1984: 37)? '[S]hould we do the right because it is right,' asks Bruce Reichenbach, 'or should we do it because it is in our best interests and to our benefit?' Opting for the latter, he submits, would 'falsify the character of morality' (1990: 137–8).[34]

It is not my purpose to try to resolve this clash between opposing conceptions of virtuous action. Rather, my point is to signal how deep the disagreement goes. So deep is it that proponents of the belief in karma, at least in its retributive form, frequently fail to comprehend how anyone could find objectionable their apparently instrumental understanding of morality. Those who are repelled by what they see as the emotional cruelty of blaming the victim, meanwhile, cannot countenance how one could adhere to a metaphysical doctrine with such unpalatable moral implications; they tend, therefore, to

regard 'an *a priori* conviction that karma is true' as having deluded believers into 'a distorted conception of reality' (Kaufman 2007: 557). Another of my tasks in this penultimate section, however, is to highlight a difference between applying the retributive conception of karma to others and applying it to oneself. As the case of Lati Rimpoche's remarks (cited in section 5 above) illustrates, expressions of what the believer conceives as natural implications of the karma doctrine can often sound, as Edwards' puts it, 'unbearably cruel', even lacking in due humility (1996: 14, 46). Yet the sentiment can resonate differently when voiced with regard to one's own situation.

Poignant examples can be found in the memoir of Ani Pachen, a Buddhist warrior-nun who was imprisoned by the Chinese regime for her part in the Tibetan uprising of the 1950s.[35] Among the many instances of torture she describes is one in which, under interrogation, Pachen was subjected to a merciless whipping with wet willow sticks by prison guards. 'Before they reached me I felt the drops of water flicking off the sticks', she writes.

> Then they were on me. They lashed my face, my hands, my back, my feet, my head. *Om Mani Peme Hum*, I whispered under my breath. *Guru Rinpoche*. ... My ears were beginning to ring, and my face was burning. My previous karma, I thought. The pain will eliminate my sins. (Pachen and Donnelley 2001: 217)

This harrowing passage exemplifies the profound insight that we gain from Pachen's memoir into the religious sensibility that informs her perspective on life and the world. Under conditions of intense physical and psychological abuse, the thoughts that come to her mind are not coloured by hatred or resentment. Initially she recites a mantra, venerating the 'jewel-lotus' (*maṇi-padme*), traditionally associated with Avalokiteśvara, the 'Bodhisattva of compassion' (Lopez 1988: 7; 1998: ch. 4). She also invokes Guru Rinpoche ('Precious

Master'), the common Tibetan name for Padmasambhava, who is popularly revered for having converted Tibet 'into a realm of Dharma' (Lin 2003: 150).[36] But there is no sign of self-pity in Pachen's account; while taking responsibility for her situation by referring to her past karma, she views the trauma that she is undergoing as a kind of purification.[37]

Elsewhere, Pachen prays that her own tribulations may relieve those of others (2001: 243). Praying also that the sins of her persecutors, including Chairman Mao himself, may be 'cleared', she attributes their egregious behaviour to their own former karma (256).[38] The relationship is complex between these different strands of belief – the belief, for example, that both the suffering of the persecuted and the brutality of the persecutor can somehow be consequences of the respective individuals' past-life actions. When abstracted from the life in which they are expressed, these strands may appear incongruous; yet when seen in the context of the life as a whole, they coherently mesh together – it is in the life that we see their intelligibility.

The respective passages from Lati Rimpoche and Ani Pachen exemplify two ways of inheriting and articulating the doctrine of karma as it obtains within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. There is, on the face of it, no contradiction between them: holding one's own suffering to be a result of one's past actions is not merely consistent with holding the sufferings of others to be results of *their* past actions, but is internally related to it – another aspect of the same belief. However, the infusion of Pachen's words with self-effacing good-will towards her fellow sufferers, combined with her acknowledgements that committing evil is itself a kind of misfortune (the most serious misfortune of all), strikes a moral tone that is not evident in Lati Rimpoche's confident assertions concerning the victims of Nazi tyranny and the 'Tibetans who were left behind'. One way of capturing the difference would be to say that, while the mode of expression exemplified in the passages from Lati Rimpoche exhibits a

cold detachment in the face of others' suffering, that exemplified by Pachen wears compassion on its face.

7. Conclusions

The suggestions I have made in the preceding section concerning different forms – or at least different emphases – that the doctrine of karma can take are really only a beginning. A fuller treatment of these issues would have to pay attention also to the many ways in which the doctrine has been amended and re-envisioned during recent times, incorporating themes and tropes from evolutionary biology for example.[39] I hope, however, enough has been said to indicate that the moral implications of the karma doctrine are not a simple matter and that the question whether, as Weber maintained, 'it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history' is not one that can be answered with a straightforward affirmation or denial.

Many believers in the law of karma claim to find it consoling. They regard it as contributing to a conception of a 'law-abiding' universe, 'so constructed as to sustain moral values and uphold them' (Rao 1967: 139). Critics have accused the makers of such claims of proceeding by means of counter-inductive reasoning – of inferring from the fact that the universe has been patently inequitable in the past that it will or must be supremely just in the long run. Such reasoning, Edwards complains, is 'utterly perverse' (1996: 33). What may be perverse, however, is the assumption that belief in karma has anything to do with inductive reasoning. The conviction that the universe is ultimately just is based neither on inductive nor on counter-inductive reasoning; rather, it is better characterized as a metaphysical-cum-ethical vision, constitutive of a worldview within which the believer struggles to make sense of the phenomena of good and evil, joy and suffering, that she encounters from day to day.

Edwards is perhaps right to point out that the doctrine of karma, in itself, provides no practical moral guidance. It would, for example, be impossible to predict how someone will respond – or even how she would think she ought to respond – in a given morally pressing situation merely on the basis of knowing that she believes in karma; the possibilities are legion, and multiple other factors are liable to come into play. But this is, in large part, because the doctrine is not a normative ethical theory; it is one of a variety of cultural and religious elements that together provide believers with a rich conceptual palette by means of which to articulate their responses to a radically unpredictable and often apparently hostile world. It has, as Kaufman points out, been treated by many recent exponents as an explanatory theory; but even then, it is rarely presumed to offer precise moral guidance independently of culturally imbibed conceptions of duty.[40]

Those who have no place in their lives for the belief in karma may wonder how anyone, faced with personal tragedy, could find it the least bit comforting to suppose the pain one is undergoing to be a result of things done in a previous life; they may, moreover, be appalled by the implications of this belief when applied to the tragedies of others. If such a belief is 'rational', one might suppose, then the form of rationality it embodies is one devoid of due empathetic concern. Nevertheless, the hope that virtue must in the end be aligned with happiness is one that has reverberated throughout human history, stimulating the reflections of many great philosophers.[41] If, under analysis, that hope appears forlorn or even morally corrupting, its persistence remains, at least, understandable.

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Notes

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[1] Weber (1958: 121). See also Weber (1963: 145) and Berger (1967: 65–7).

[2] See, e.g., Wadia (1965: 146); Tripathi (1967: 91–2); Nayak (1993).

[3] 'Reincarnation is the message of the Gospel of Hope, of the certainty of ultimate success' (Besant 1910: 46). 'Rebirth gives ground for hope and scope for development. ... That is the gospel of rebirth' (Rao 1967: 141).

[4] See also Keith (1925: 596); Kane (1977: 1566); Bhattacharji (1982). Weber himself, keenly aware of the doctrine's close association with the Indian caste system, observed: 'The devout Hindu was accursed to remain in a structure which made sense only in this intellectual context; its consequences burdened his conduct' (1958: 121). For a contrary view, see Sastri (1961).

[5] See, more recently, Filice's verdict that belief in reincarnation 'is likely to have the best chance of dealing with the persistent problem of evil' (2006: 59).

[6] Monier-Williams (1899: 258, 300–1); Chapple (1986: 2).

[7] See also Keyes (1983: 262–3); Schlieter (2013: 464); Carter and Palihawadana (1987: 13, 89–94).

[8] For the view that the karma doctrine originated within Vedic thought, see Tull (1989). For the opposing view, see Bronkhorst (2007: esp. Part 2).

[9] For fuller historical exposition, see O'Flaherty (1980), McDermott (1984), Krishan (1997), Bronkhorst (2011). For a more speculative historical reconstruction, see Obeyesekere (2002).

[10] Vasubandhu, the author of the *Abhidharmakośa* (4th or 5th century CE), is here following *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.415 (Bodhi 2012: 963). See also McDermott (1980: 182).

[11] For comparison between Yoga and Buddhism, see Tandon (1995), Yamashita (1994), Sarbacker (2005: ch. 4).

[12] It is, for instance, commonly asserted that the combined 'theory' of karma and rebirth 'is fundamental to all the systems of Indian philosophical thought' (with the exception of the so-called 'materialist' Cārvāka school) (Ramakrishnan 1967: 93; see also Tripathi 1967: 87 and several other essays in the same volume).

[13] For accounts of rebirth beliefs among diverse cultural groups, see e.g. Parrinder (1956–57); Werblowsky (1987); Stevenson (2001: 29–40); Obeyesekere (2002). For Native American and Inuit traditions in particular, see Mills and Slobodin (1994).

[14] Sharma (1996: 34); Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1983); Nagapriya (2004: 97–100).

[15] For discussion of 'demythologizing' in relation to Buddhism in particular, see McMahan (2008: 45–52) and Burley (forthcoming).

[16] 'Karma ... represents the idea of universal justice; the belief that in the end, good will be rewarded and wrong-doing punished' (Larson 2010). See also Rao (1967: 139–40).

[17] The example is mine, not Edwards'. Readers familiar with the *Bhagavadgītā* will recognize its derivation.

[18] Speaking of genuine choices or free decisions as involving something's being 'up to him' (or 'up to her', 'up to us', etc.) is typical in the literature surrounding free will and moral responsibility. See, e.g., Frankfurt (1969: 836); Kane (1996: esp. ch. 3); Lehrer (2004); Nelkin (2004: esp. 114).

[19] It also remains a fraught question whether the *Bhagavadgītā* itself allows for any free choice on Arjuna's part; see, e.g., Sharma (1979), Johnson (1997). But my point in borrowing the example of Arjuna's predicament is not to engage in exegesis of the original source.

[20] For discussion of the interrelations between free action, moral responsibility and addiction or compulsion, see Frankfurt (1971) and Audi (1974).

[21] Some interpreters would argue that the prevailing dogma of the *Bhagavadgītā* does indeed preclude free will, though not strictly because of the operations of karma; rather, the text presents the 'Lord' as the unmoving point abiding in 'the heart of all beings', who causes them to revolve as though 'fixed in a machine' (Johnson 1994: 80; Edgerton 1944: 175); Arjuna must 'simply be the instrument' (Johnson 1994: 51). Other interpreters demur, maintaining that free will is consistent with both karma and the controlling power of the Lord. See, again, Sharma (1979) and also Radhakrishnan (1911: 467): '[T]he cautious reader of the Bhagavadgita will find that the real meaning of karma does not exclude free will.'

[22] See, e.g., Deshikananda (1940: 356); Abhedananda (1957: esp. 77–83). For relevant critical discussion, see Lopez (2012: esp. ch. 3).

[23] See, e.g., Daniel (1983: 51–3); Hiebert (1983: 120); Goldman (1985: 420).

[24] Distinctions have also been made between retributive karma on the one hand, and, e.g., 'rehabilitative' (Miles 2002: 67) or 'evolutionary' (Minor 1986) conceptions of karma on the other.

[25] See also Roos (1967) and Story's reply (reprinted in Story 2000: ch. 9).

[26] See, e.g., *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7 (Olivelle 1998: 237); *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 11.48–53 (Olivelle 2005: 217); *Pravrajyāntarāya Sūtra* (quoted in Śāntideva 1922: 73–4; Willson 1987: 15).

[27] For a critical reaction of this kind, see Anne Rae (quoted in Sharma 1999). See also Shakespeare (2007: 421). For discussion, see Burley (2013).

[28] The interview took place in Toronto in 1986, when Lati Rimpoche was in his mid-60s. He died in 2010.

[29] Lati Rimpoche is not alone in having made this claim about Jewish victims of the holocaust. Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding (later Baron Dowding) purportedly declared, in a speech to the Theosophical Society in London in November 1945, that the victims of Nazi concentration camps such as Belsen and Buchenwald were reincarnations of those who had themselves been persecutors of heretics during the Inquisition (Fisher 2001:

283). See also the politically incendiary remarks of the ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Ovadia Yosef reported by Katzenell (2000).

[30] One might be tempted to say, as Wittgenstein did in an entirely different context, 'Our disease is one of wanting to explain' (Wittgenstein 1978: Part VI, §31).

[31] See, e.g., Kaufman's remark that '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' (2005: 21). I take it that the difficulty of stomaching such an idea is not due entirely to the *numbers* of inmates involved.

[32] I explore the issue of moral perception a little further in Burley (2013).

[33] See also Chakravarthi (1967: 62): 'Belief in this doctrine is sure to serve as a perpetual incentive to right conduct.'

[34] The ethic of virtue for virtue's sake receives its classical articulation in Stoic philosophy. See, e.g., Seneca's *De Beneficiis* 4.1.3: '"And what shall I gain," you ask, "if I do this bravely, if I do it gladly?" Only the gain of having done it .... The reward of virtuous acts lies in the acts themselves.'

[35] The memoir was written in English with the assistance of a translator, Adelaide Donnelley. Pachen died in 2002, just two years after the memoir's first publication.

[36] Padmasambhava is estimated to have lived in the eighth century CE (Gyatso 1996: 150; Powers 2008: 111). For more about his legend, see Dalton (2004).

[37] See also Pachen and Donnelley (2001: 219): 'I thought of the terrible karma I must have had in a previous life to be beaten like that, and prayed that the pain I was feeling would eliminate all sins that had been built up.'

[38] See also Martin (2002), reporting excerpts from statements by Pachen: '"I felt terrible for those who imprisoned me," she said, and also expressed sorrow for the captors who tortured her, saying she held the Buddhist belief that their cruelties resulted from their past lives.'

[39] Among the first to pick up this evolutionary motif was Rhys Davids (1881: 94). Huxley also draws attention to it (1947 [1893]), and it has since been developed by sundry Hindu, Buddhist, Theosophical and other thinkers. For discussion, see e.g. Minor (1986); Neufeldt (1986: esp. 240); Lopez (2008: 146–52).

[40] See, e.g., Sharma's emphasis on the question of duty or *dharma* (Sharma 1999).

[41] Kant being the obvious example. See esp. Kant (1956: Part 1, book 2). See also Deussen's claim that Kant's argument for the moral necessity of postulating immortality 'tells not for immortality in the usual sense, but for transmigration' (1906: 315).