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Retributive karma and the problem of blaming the victim

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Abstract A defining feature of retributive conceptions of karma is their regarding of suffering or misfortune as consequent upon sins committed in previous lives. Some critical non-believers in karma take offence at this view, considering it to involve unjustly blaming the victim. Defenders of the view demur, and argue that a belief in retributive karma in fact provides a motivation for benevolent action. This article elucidates the debate, showing that its depth is such that it is best characterized as a disagreement in form of life (in Wittgenstein's sense) rather than as a disagreement in opinions. Also briefly discussed is an example of a non-retributive form that belief in karma and reincarnation can take.

Keywords Karma · Reincarnation · Blaming the victim · Arvind Sharma · Ludwig Wittgenstein · Hinduism · Buddhism

In the case of some debates over religious and ethical matters, even if an imminent resolution looks unlikely, the possibility of a resolution is at least in view. In other cases, however, the disagreement runs so deep that a resolution is hard to conceive. An instance of these difficult cases is the dispute concerning the ethical propriety of believing in retributive karma. Karma, as many readers will know, is the Sanskrit term for "action," and a belief in retributive karma is the belief that at least some of the hardships, misfortunes or disadvantages that we suffer

are consequences of sinful actions that we ourselves performed at some earlier time, often in a previous life.[1] Sometimes the belief is articulated in bald and provocative terms. "Evil is man-made," writes Christmas Humphreys, "and is of his choosing, and he who suffers suffers from his deliberate use of his own free will. Cripples, dwarfs and those born deaf or blind are the products of their own past actions" (1983, p. 55). Another defender of this belief, Joseph Prabhu, says of our misfortunes that they

> may serve as a reminder of some wrongdoing or weakness that we may well have forgotten, or may have been too insensitive even to recognise. Or, if that is not the case, as for example, in children or infants stricken with illnesses or handicaps, the belief is that this is the consequence of some crime committed in a previous life. (1989, p. 73)

From time to time, the debate erupts into the public sphere and is picked up by the popular media. This occurred in 1999 when the then England football manager Glenn Hoddle allegedly endorsed the view that some people are born with physical or intellectual impairments "for a reason"—the reason being that their "karma is working from another lifetime" (quoted in Dickinson 1999). Calls for Hoddle's resignation rapidly ensued, and he resigned less than a week later (see BBC News 1999d).

Remarks such as those of Humphreys, Prabhu and Hoddle are apt to stir up trouble. Often the reaction is one of hostility and disgust. Commenting on the statement from Humphreys in particular, Paul Edwards characterizes the sentiment expressed in it as "unbearably cruel", and wonders whether "Humphreys really practiced what he preached" (2002, p. 14). From the sort of non-religious, or anti-religious, standpoint

[1] See, for example, McClelland (2010, p. 148) and Krishan (1997, pp. xi, 3–4, 44–46, 70–71, 195–196).

represented by Edwards, the holding of certain people responsible for their own misfortunes, in the way that the doctrine of karma proposes, is seen not merely as mistaken, but as morally reprehensible. The nub of the problem is that, "We do not make the world better but we make it worse by blaming the victims" (Edwards 2002, p. 46).

Often implicit, and sometimes explicit, in criticisms of the belief in karma is the view that western society ought to have outgrown such "medieval" or "pre-modern" ideas. These criticisms tacitly accept a conception of "the West" as having progressed morally, and perhaps religiously, beyond the level of societies where beliefs in karma and reincarnation remain prevalent. The place that these beliefs have in many people's lives—how they are integrated into a broader religious and cultural worldview—tends not to be considered. Meanwhile, those who seek to defend the doctrine of karma often fail to see one of the deepest reasons why it can appear so morally unsettling. They assume that, provided one does not actively strive to worsen the practical situation of disadvantaged people, one does not do them any harm by attributing their situation to deeds done in previous lives. This assumption overlooks the possibility that holding someone responsible for her own misfortune may itself constitute an injury, and hence blankly misses a central point of the contention that blaming the victim makes matters worse.

This article will consider further the sort of disagreement that has just been outlined, exploring its moral, religious and conceptual dimensions. It will highlight the extent to which this disagreement exemplifies the kind of debate whose depth immunizes it against easy resolution. Taking the row surrounding Hoddle's now notorious remarks as a starting point, the discussion will focus on a defence of the belief in retributive karma that has been offered by Arvind Sharma. I shall argue that Sharma's defence overlooks an important matter: by trying to separate the mere regarding of someone as responsible for her own misfortune on the one hand, from behaving unkindly to that person on the other,

Sharma's position fails even to notice that merely regarding someone as responsible for her own misfortune may itself be perceived as an injustice. By discussing and elaborating an analogy that Sharma draws to illustrate the distinction he is making, I aim to bring out significant particularities of the belief in retributive karma, especially its differences from certain kinds of empirically grounded belief. In the light of these differences a firmer grip on the nature and depth of the debate can be achieved. Rather than trying to resolve the debate, my discussion will clarify why its resolution is so difficult. A secondary aim is to indicate the variety of forms that beliefs in karma and reincarnation can take, and to this end a non-retributive construal of rebirth will briefly be considered.

"A compelling rationale for respect"?

Following Glenn Hoddle's alleged assertion that disabled people are reaping the consequences of karma from a former lifetime, the BBC reported that "Disabled groups have described his remarks as deeply offensive," with Anne Rae, the Chair of the British Council of Disabled People, calling them "an insult to disabled people" (quoted in BBC News 1999b).[2] The Times newspaper quoted a spokeswoman for the Disabled [Football] Supporters' Association demanding Hoddle's resignation and declaring it to be "disgusting for a man in his position to be talking like this" (quoted in Dickinson and Farrell 1999). In his own defence, Hoddle claimed that his remarks had been "misconstrued, misunderstood and misinterpreted", and he emphasized the fact that he has done "a lot of work ... to raise money for disabled charities" (quoted in BBC News 1999a).

While Hoddle's own spiritual beliefs owe more to "New Age" reconstructions of traditional understandings of reincarnation than to the traditional understandings

[2] See also BBC News (1999c).

themselves, it was nevertheless remarkable that many of Hoddle's critics seemed oblivious to the prevalence among certain religious groups, including various Hindu and Buddhist communities, of the kind of view attributed to Hoddle. Responding to such apparent oversights, Arvind Sharma, writing in Hinduism Today, noted that "Glenn Hoddle's comments on karma, reincarnation and disability ... should have attracted little attention. The belief that disability is the result of past life karma is held by Hindus, Buddhists and other religionists" (1999). In Sharma's opinion, "Hinduism offers a very rational explanation for disability and a compelling rationale for respect and proper treatment of the disabled" (1999). He argues that the belief that disability is a result of immoral acts committed in a previous life need not lead to disrespectful treatment of disabled people. This is because the proper question for the Hindu to ask "is not, 'Why him or her?' It is, 'Given the situation, what is my duty?'" (1999).

In order to contextualize Sharma's argument, it is important to see it as responding to commentators such as Anne Rae, whom Sharma quotes as offering the following statement:

> Hoddle's views have angered and frustrated those Disabled People who understand that these medieval beliefs underlie much of the (unspoken) justification for prejudice and discrimination against us. Good life, good reincarnation; bad life, bad reincarnation. Not dissimilar to the view held by some Christians that "the sins of the father are visited upon the children." (Quoted in Sharma 1999)

This characterization of beliefs in karma and reincarnation as "medieval" itself discloses an interesting prejudice concerning the relation between secular western values and those

of cultures wherein such allegedly outdated notions remain pervasive.[3] From this prejudicial standpoint, the belief in karma is consigned to the category of primitive religious dogmas that we should have left behind centuries ago.

Another notable feature of the comment attributed to Rae is its implicit consequentialism. One might have expected a spokesperson for organizations of disabled people to emphasize the intrinsic offensiveness of insinuating a direct connection between a person's physical or intellectual impairment and some undetectable transgression for which the person is assumed to be responsible. The connection between immorality and impairment is one that has a long history among traditions in which the doctrine of karma and reincarnation is prominent. For example, the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* (c. 200 CE), a lawbook of Brahmanical Hinduism, states that

> Some evil men become disfigured because of bad deeds committed in this world, and some because of deeds done in a previous life. ... In this way, as a result of the remnants of their past deeds ... are born individuals despised by good people: the mentally retarded, the mute, the blind, and the deaf, as well as those who are deformed. (Ch. 11, vv. 48–53, trans. Olivelle 2005, p. 217)

And a relatively early Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture presents the Buddha as proclaiming that resisting his teachings or obstructing those who wish to follow them is liable to result in one's being "born again and again, born either blind, dull-witted, dumb, or as an outcaste, always living in misery, always a victim of abuse" (quoted in Willson 1987, p.

[3] Cf. Tom Shakespeare (2007, p. 421): "Society may have progressed beyond pre-modern ideas about disability being punishment for former sins, or karma, but it generally regards disabled people as defined by their deficits ... ."

15).[4] Passages such as these vividly exemplify the kinds of belief to which Rae is opposed, and yet, rather than focusing on the intrinsic offensiveness of such beliefs, Rae seeks to highlight their role in justifying "prejudice and discrimination" against disabled people.

This apparent emphasis on the consequences, or likely consequences, of the beliefs in question allows Sharma to respond in a way that aims to decouple the beliefs from the purported behavioural consequences. He argues not merely that believing someone's disabity to be a result of past sins need not give rise to maltreatment of disabled people, but that, on the contrary, such a belief is liable to encourage positive action towards them. The "compelling rationale for respect and proper treatment of the disabled" to which Sharma refers consists in the idea that, in the light of the doctrine of karma and reincarnation, one can expect any disrespectful or improper treatment of disabled people on one's own part to eventuate in deleterious consequences for oneself in a future life.[5] Indeed, although Sharma does not put the point quite so explicitly himself, he might plausibly be taken to be implying that if one behaves uncharitably in this life, one will be reborn disabled oneself in the next. Sharma writes: "It is not for us to say, 'It is the result of your karma.' It is for us to ask, 'Given his or her condition, what is my duty, my dharma?' Otherwise, if you blame the victim, you will be blamed, rather than helped, when you happen to be the victim" (1999).

The reasoning here is prudential, the underlying assumption being that what motivates the believer in karma to behave well towards disabled or other disadvantaged people is the threat of not being treated well oneself in the future—the threat, that is, of being retributively afflicted, neglected or abused as a consequence of the rebalancing effect of the impersonal karmic law. There is, apparently, no recognition on Sharma's part that there might be

[4] The translation is by Bhikkhu Pāsādika, and the passage is from the *Pravrajyāntarāya Sūtra*, which is quoted both in the *Sūtra Samuccaya* (commonly, though contentiously, attributed to Nāgārjuna, c. 2nd–3rd century CE) and in Śāntideva's *Śikshā Samuccaya* (8th century CE).

[5] Some popular writers, following Edgar Cayce, have designated this the "karmic boomerang effect" or "boomerang karma." See, for example, McClelland (2010, p. 150) and Hardo (2007, p. 249).

anything morally objectionable about blaming the victim per se, regardless of any repercussions that doing so may have for the one who does the blaming; in other words, no recognition that holding the victim responsible for her own misfortune might in itself be a bad thing.

One possible source of the difficulty may be an unduly restricted conception of what "blaming the victim" consists in. As we will see in the next section, Sharma sometimes gives the impression that, if blaming the victim is wrong at all, it is wrong because it involves, firstly, overtly telling the person in question that she is to blame for her predicament, and secondly, refusing to assist that person even if she is in need of help. While these responses to someone's misfortune may indeed be patently harmful, and sources of offence, it would be misleading to suppose them to be the only possible sources. From the perspective of a non-believer in karma, an entirely intelligible reaction to the sort of link between sin and disadvantage that this doctrine makes would be to regard the making of this very link as intrinsically offensive, irrespective of whether the believer verbally asserts the link in the presence of the disadvantaged person or refuses to offer any practical assistance. Admittedly, Rae muddies the waters by implying that it is the capacity of the belief in karma to support prejudice and negative discrimination that is the problem. What I am suggesting is that the problem can be conceived in a different way, as consisting not in the capacity of the belief to support or "underlie" prejudice and harmful behaviour, but in the fact that the belief itself constitutes a harmful prejudice, a prejudice that derogates and insults the disadvantaged person whether or not it is overtly expressed in words or actions. It is this conception of the problem that Sharma's response fails to address, and which Sharma does not recognize as constituting a problem at all.

From the viewpoint of someone who raises the sort of objection I have just outlined, any attempt to defend comments such as those attributed to Hoddle on the grounds that the person

making them has done a considerable amount of charity work in aid of disabled people will appear beside the point. Indeed, even if the person in question has gone beyond mere charity fundraising and has actively campaigned for the sorts of far-reaching socio-political changes that many disability rights activists advocate, this would not diminish the problem.[6] For the problem at issue is not that people such as Hoddle fail to act in ways intended to improve the social and economic status of disabled or other disadvantaged people. The problem is that they hold a belief that involves perceiving such people in a particular way—as being responsible for their own disadvantage.

That Sharma does not see the problem in these terms is brought out by his observation that, when encountering someone who is in need of assistance, a belief in karma "commends warm-hearted concern to minimize the person's problems, even though caused by his or her own actions in the past" (1999). What is overlooked here is that the "even though"-clause is, from the sort of ethical perspective I have been highlighting, radically undermining of any merit that the "warm-hearted concern" may otherwise have possessed. To regard one's action as one of assisting someone even though that person is responsible for her own need of assistance is to place it in a very different light from that of assisting the person simply because she is in need. It is to look at the person in a wholly different way, and hence to stand in a radically different relation to her—a relation that, far from offering "a compelling rationale for respect", could be construed as intrinsically disrespectful.

To assist someone even though she is responsible for her own need of assistance is, incontrovertibly, to give assistance. But it is, at the same time, to maintain that there are grounds for not giving assistance. That's what is widely regarded as so offensive, for example, about the view that certain victims of sexual assault were "asking for it" because they went out late at night wearing skimpy clothing. To refrain from assisting such a victim

[6] For discussion of disability rights issues, see, for example, Barnes (1994) and Shakespeare (2006).

to bring her assailant to justice on the grounds that the victim was not respectably dressed at the time of the attack, or had been working as a prostitute, or has a reputation for being flirtatious, etc., would be to blame her very explicitly for the crime that has been committed against her. But even if one were to assist the victim, doing so with the thought that one is helping her even though, or despite the fact that, she is at least partially responsible for inviting the assault would have a very different moral character from simply recognizing that the woman needs assistance and that her mode of attire, occupation as a sex worker, past sexual history, etc., constitute no grounds whatsoever for mitigation on the assailant's part.[7]

Facts and values

From a perspective such as Sharma's, these points may be deemed to give insufficient weight to the distinction that Sharma is making between what, for a believer in karma, is the fact that someone is responsible for her own situation on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the evaluative decision concerning how we ought to treat that person here and now. It might be said that the case of someone who is sexually assaulted, and who happens to have been wearing revealing clothing at the time, is quite different; it is different because wearing revealing clothing does not make one responsible for being assaulted, whereas according to the doctrine of karma, committing a sin in one life does make the perpetrator responsible for certain hardships suffered in a subsequent life. I would concede that the cases diverge in various respects, and would reiterate that the sexual assault example was adduced primarily to illustrate the specific point that assisting someone even though one considers her to have brought on the trouble herself has a very different moral character from assisting her merely because she is in need.

[7] For a far more sophisticated discussion of these themes than I can provide here, see Nussbaum (1999, pp. 136–46). For relevant recent campaigning literature, see the materials produced by SlutWalk Toronto (2012) and "Slut Means Speak Up!" (2011).

In a more recent article of Sharma's than the one I have so far been discussing, he articulates his position with reference to an analogy of his own—an analogy with the medical scientific view that many cases of lung cancer are, in large part, caused by chronic smoking. "From the standpoint of medical science", he writes,

> it is a question of fact and not value. Chronic smoking causes cancer, so the statement that a patient is now suffering from lung cancer as a result of being a chronic smoker is a statement of fact, which does not make medical science a callous science. If, however, the doctor were to say to the patient after she has been diagnosed, "You brought this cancer on yourself by chronic smoking. You are to blame for it. Therefore I am not going to treat you"—then the doctor would be exhibiting a callous streak and would have let down his profession. The doctor has converted the fact into a negative value by blaming the victim. Normally, however, doctors convert it into a positive value—in the sense that while holding the victim responsible for her condition, they do what they can to treat it and are solicitous rather than callous in their approach to the patient. (2008, pp. 572–573)

One interesting feature of this analogy is the statement that Sharma attributes to the imagined doctor who would thereby "be exhibiting a callous streak". From the way in which Sharma presents it, it isn't clear exactly what the callousness consists in. Undoubtedly, refusing to give medical treatment to the patient would be callous. But what if the part of the statement that Sharma places in italics were omitted, leaving only the assertion that the patient is to blame for her own illness: would that, on its own, display callousness? Perhaps it depends on how the doctor goes about expressing this to the patient. There are, we may presume, ways of tactfully conveying the information to the patient that her smoking has contributed to her life-threatening condition without doing so in a bluntly accusatory manner. To say to the woman

that she is to blame for her illness would carry a moralising tone that is inappropriate in most clinical contexts, but to refrain from explaining the most likely causes of her illness would, equally, be neglectful of the sort of responsibility that the doctor has to his patient. So the doctor's duty could be described as being to explain, as best he can, the facts of the matter without thereby passing any moral judgement upon the patient. In the light of the facts, the patient may react by blaming herself for her illness, but this will not be as a result of her having been blamed in terms of moral disapproval by the doctor.

On this reading of Sharma's illustrative analogy, it is the whole of the statement attributed to the doctor that is inappropriate, and not just the final, italicized, portion. And what makes it especially inappropriate is the nature of the relation in which the doctor stands to the patient. It is not the doctor's place to morally criticize his patients within the clinical setting even if, in the privacy of his own thoughts, he may feel that the patient has behaved irresponsibly. There are, no doubt, many interesting issues that cases of this sort raise. The central one for our current purposes, however, is how, or whether, any illuminating comparison can be made with the belief in karma.

As with most analogies, there are both important similarities and important differences that need to be taken into account. The most salient difference is that, while the belief that chronic smoking significantly raises one's chances of developing lung cancer is based on a substantial body of empirical evidence, the belief in retributive karma is not based on empirical evidence at all. Although there are some researchers who do not rule out the possibility of finding empirical evidence to support it,[8] it remains the case that the belief in retributive karma does not owe its existence to any such evidence; it has arisen, and persisted,

[8] See, for example, Stevenson (1977, p. 323), where Stevenson tantalizingly notes that "There is ... almost no evidence ... that offers any empirical basis for the concept of retributive karma" (my emphasis). Stevenson elsewhere remarks that he has studied four cases "in which a birth defect has been said to derive from some wrongdoing on the part of the previous personality [i.e., the alleged previous incarnation of the person with the defect]" (Stevenson 1997, p. 1372). In general, however, the sorts of cases investigated by Stevenson and his colleagues tend to be inconsistent with what traditional beliefs in retributive karma would lead one to expect; see, for example, Tucker (2009, pp. 73–74).

in human communities independently of anything that would be recognized as data comparable to that which supports the connection between smoking and lung cancer. Some critics of the belief in karma would infer from this that it is irrational to hold the belief and that would-be believers have an epistemic obligation to seek out reliable evidence before the belief can be considered rational. This, however, would be to make the mistake of treating the belief as falling within the same logical category as beliefs that are founded on empirical evidence. The point about beliefs in reincarnation and retributive karma is not that there is little empirical support for them, but rather that they are not well characterized as empirical beliefs in the first place.

To deny that beliefs in retributive karma are empirical beliefs is not to deny that they play an explanatory role in many people's lives. It is to deny that karmic explanations are typically treated by those who deploy them as being empirically demonstrable or falsifiable – or, at any rate, as being empirically demonstrable or falsifiable in anything remotely like the way in which a medical scientific hypothesis (such as "chronic smoking substantially increases one's chances of developing lung cancer") is treated.

The role that beliefs in karma do play in many people's lives is well brought out in certain ethnographic studies, where we see that, while believers are far from ignorant about processes of natural causation, they tend to invoke karmic explanations in response to questions that are not addressable in terms associated with natural causation. Thus, for example, in a study of Burmese forms of Buddhism, Melford Spiro notes that, notwithstanding their knowledge that "crop failures ... are caused by drought, heat, and other natural causes", Burmese people frequently have further questions to ask, questions such as:

> ... why did the rains fail this year [in particular]? And why in the north, and not in the south? Or why did the oxen destroy U Youn's seedbeds but not U Htein's? Or why did

> the fire burn U Pain's crop but not U Kyi's? Why else, if not for differences in karma? (1982, p. 136)

To illustrate roughly the same point, Martin Willson (1987, p. 54) notes that, were someone to be killed by a falling branch while walking through the forest, a scientific explanation for the occurrence would leave us with no account, other than "coincidence," of why this particular person happened to be walking beneath that particular branch at precisely the time when it fell. In some cultures, an explanation in terms of sorcery might be looked for, whereas from a Buddhist perspective, an explanation would refer to the person's karma.[9]

Conceiving of the distinction that is being made here by speaking of, on the one hand, scientific explanations or explanations that appeal to natural causes, and on the other hand, explanations that appeal to karma, may be slightly misleading. It may be misleading because those who deploy explanations that appeal to karma often have an expanded conception of "natural causation" or "natural law," which encompasses both what Spiro has in mind when he refers to "natural causes" and what he has in mind when he refers to explanations in terms of "differences in karma." Since the nineteenth century it has been a common practice among expositors of South Asian religious thought to utilize the vocabulary of "natural law" when giving an account of the doctrine of karma, and this practice was enthusiastically taken up by Indian authors writing in European languages.[10] The practice has been especially prevalent in

[9] The similarities between the sorts of questions that are responded to in terms of sorcery or witchcraft on the one hand, and karma on the other, are striking in many respects. Note, for example, La Fontaine's remark that "witchcraft explains why misfortune happened to a particular person at a particular point in time, not how it happened" (2009, p. 125), and also the account of witchcraft beliefs among the Azande in Evans-Pritchard (1937, esp. p. 69). This, however, is not the place to pursue these similarities further.

[10] Cf. Obeyesekere (2002, p. 131): "... even though nineteenth-century scientific philosophy is outdated, Buddhist intellectuals, who rarely have moved out of that century, even nowadays refer to karma as a 'natural law' in order to designate its determinate and impersonal quality."

publications issued by or influenced by the Theosophical Society, and has become pervasive in popular expositions of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs.[11]

Although we should be wary of assuming that these popularized formulations are fully representative of Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of karma, whether traditional or contemporary, there is little doubt that the running together of what, in western academic parlance, might be termed the "natural" and the "normative" (or "ethical") aspects of human life is fairly common among believers in karma. One manifestation of the absence of a clear distinction of this kind is the fact that, in cultures wherein belief in karma is prevalent, it is common for illnesses and impairments to be conceived of as consequences of karma.[12] The empirical explanation of how the disease, injury or congenital abnormality occurred is placed within a broader karmic account of why this individual, and not someone else, was affected by this particular condition. Thus, in the case of smoking and lung cancer, while it is likely to be accepted that chronic smoking dramatically increases one's chances of developing the disease, it is also likely to be maintained that why only some and not all heavy smokers develop it, and why many but not all instances of it prove fatal, is a matter of karma.

None of this negates my contention that there is an important difference between the medical scientific belief that smoking increases one's chances of developing lung cancer and the karmic belief that suffering in this life results from sins performed in previous ones. It merely prompts us to be cautious in how we characterize that difference. Rather than saying that, in the former case, the belief concerns natural causation whereas in the latter it concerns karmic causation, we need to recognize that many believers in karma may be operating with a more expansive conception of the natural, according to which karmic causation is itself a form of natural causation, governed by "natural law." What the difference consists in is, as I

[11] A classic Theosophical account is Besant (1917, esp. p. 11). See also Pavri and Jinarajadasa (1927, p. 108). An example of a popular exposition of Hinduism is What Is Hinduism? Modern Adventures into a Profound Global Faith (2007; see esp. p. 124).
[12] See, for example, Dalal and Pande (1988) and Rukwong et al. (2007).

noted earlier, that the form of natural causation that constitutes the link between smoking and cancer is open to empirical confirmation or falsification, whereas the form that constitutes the link between one's current existential predicament and past-life behaviour is not.

With these points in mind, we might embellish Sharma's analogy by considering a case in which the doctor is a believer in retributive karma. If the patient and doctor both inhabit a culture where the doctrine of karma and reincarnation is generally accepted, they may simply take it for granted that, although the patient's long-term smoking habit has contributed to her developing lung cancer, the underlying reason why she has developed the disease (when not everyone who smokes develops it) is that she engaged in immoral behaviour in one or more previous lives. In this situation, the issue of whether karma has played a role may not arise. It is conceivable, however, that such a situation could provide an occasion for the belief in karma to be questioned. The patient may declare that the suffering she is now enduring is so extreme that she cannot imagine its being the consequence of any past action, however egregious. (This kind of response may be more easily conceivable in a case where someone's child has been diagnosed with a terminal illness: "How could anything warrant the painful death of someone so young!", the parents may exclaim.) Alternatively, the patient may accept the suffering stoically, acknowledging that, through enduring the torments of this life, she must surely be destined to enjoy a more favourable rebirth.

But now suppose that the patient is not a believer in karma. She asks her doctor why she in particular has developed the disease when so many others have smoked no less heavily than she has. "Well," replies the doctor, "there may be various other lifestyle and genetic factors involved, but ultimately it is your karma—you must have done something bad in a previous life." Here we have a scenario quite unlike that in which the patient has been told that it is her smoking that is responsible for causing the illness. Now she is confronted with a belief that is not based on empirical evidence, but is partially constitutive of a worldview with

which she may feel little or no affinity. Moreover, it is a belief that involves holding her morally responsible for her own affliction. No longer is her crime merely that of neglecting her own health; the suggestion is now being made that she did something—something hidden beyond the reach of empirical discovery—that was so morally reprehensible as to warrant the suffering she is undergoing. In these circumstances, I want to suggest, one would be failing to appreciate the gravity of the charge that has been made against the patient if one were to assume that the doctor's karmic diagnosis of her condition is merely a case of his offering "a statement of fact, which does not make [the doctrine of retributive karma] a callous [doctrine]." From the patient's point of view, that doctrine may appear very callous indeed, regardless of whether the doctor verbally confronts her with it or refuses to give her the treatment she requires. Of course, these latter actions may compound the offence that is caused; but my point has been to bring out the intelligibility of someone's regarding the belief itself as offensive—as a source of moral perturbation.

Thinking in a different way

One of the things that I have been trying to expose in the above discussion is the depth of the disagreement between someone who believes that disadvantaged people are karmically responsible for their own misfortunes and someone who finds this belief morally offensive. Sharma implies that what is at issue is a factual matter: the believer in retributive karma holds it to be a fact that, for example, disabled people acted immorally in previous lives, whereas disbelievers deny that this is the case. On this view, the disbelievers have no reason to take offence, since the factual belief does not preclude benevolent modes of action towards disadvantaged people; it merely precludes their being regarded as innocent. But this way of seeing it risks underplaying the conceptual gap—the gap of understanding—that separates the two parties. A more appropriate way of characterizing the disagreement may be to adduce a

distinction that Wittgenstein makes in the Philosophical Investigations between agreement in opinions and agreement in form of life: "What is true or false is what human beings say", he writes; "and it is in their language that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life" (2009, §241). What I have been arguing is that, in the dispute over retributive karma, we encounter a disagreement not in opinions but in form of life: a disagreement that cannot be resolved by rational deliberation—or, at any rate, cannot be resolved by rational deliberation alone—but only by one or other party in the debate undergoing a change of perspective so transformative that it would amount to a change in form of life. This should, perhaps, not surprise us, for the doctrine of karma and reincarnation is part of a religious worldview; to come to believe in it, or to lose that belief, is a matter of conversion, not a matter of seeing the soundness of an argument or the implications of a new piece of evidence.

But since "form of life" is not a technical term for Wittgenstein, and has no strict definition,[13] we might wonder whether anything has really been illuminated by invoking it. What may help is an example which, to my mind, illustrates the kind of thing that Wittgenstein is thinking of when he speaks of agreement, or disagreement, in form of life as opposed to agreement, or disagreement, in opinions. In one of his "Lectures on Religious Belief," Wittgenstein is reported to have said the following:

> Suppose someone is ill and he says: "This is a punishment," and I say: "If I'm ill, I don't think of punishment at all." If you say: "Do you believe the opposite?"—you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite.

[13] Cf. Ross (2009, p. 20): "... 'form of life' should not be seen as a theoretical or technical term but should be looked at as simply descriptive of the way language operates: it is interwoven with our lives."

> I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures.
>
> It is this way: if someone said: "Wittgenstein, you don't take illness as punishment, so what do you believe?"—I'd say: "I don't have any thoughts of punishment." (1966, p. 55)[14]

In a case such as this it is entirely possible to imagine the two individuals concerned getting along fairly well together. The one who thinks of his illness as a punishment might even be a patient who is being treated by the other, who is his doctor. The fact that the patient thinks as he does need not interfere with the doctor's ability to treat him, but it does mean that, at a certain level, they do not understand one another. It is not just that they conceive of illness differently: it is that their different ways of conceiving of illness are liable to be ramifications of their conceptions of life more broadly. The patient sees the experiences of his life as having a dimension of significance that is absent from the doctor's conception of life. The patient sees moral and spiritual meaning in occurrences that the doctor sees in purely non-moral and non-spiritual terms.[15] This is why the difference between them runs too deep to be well described as a difference of opinion.

The doctor and one of her colleagues might have a difference of opinion with respect to how the patient's illness should best be treated; they may disagree over the correct diagnosis of the illness (is it glandular fever or merely a severe case of flu?) or about the most effective medication to prescribe (should it be steroids or antivirals?). Disagreements of these kinds occur within a view of the situation that is, for the most part, shared: within a shared form of

[14] I am not the first to have noticed the relevance of this passage to considerations of karma and reincarnation. See Purton (1992).

[15] As a shorthand for "non-moral and non-spiritual" we might be tempted to use the term "naturalistic." But this would run up against the problem that I discussed earlier, which is that believers in karma may be operating with an expanded conception of the natural, according to which morality and spirituality are themselves dimensions of nature.

life. But the difference between one who thinks of illness as a punishment and one who has no such thoughts is of a different order. The disagreement over diagnosis and medication could, at least in principle, be resolved by carrying out further tests on the patient and by appealing to past experience of which treatments have been most effective.[16] But how could a disagreement over whether illness is a punishment be resolved? How this question is to be answered would depend on many details about the particular case, but, as a general point, it is far from clear how it could be resolved by appealing to evidence that both parties already agree to constitute evidence of a relevant type. The kind of disagreement at issue is—or is at least something like—a difference of moral and religious outlook. None of this entails that a disagreement in form of life, or the particular type of such a disagreement to which I have just been referring, is necessarily irresolvable. But it should make us wary of presuming that it can be resolved without a significant change in worldview on the part of at least one of the parties in the dispute.

One implication of these considerations is that we shouldn't expect the debate over whether a belief in retributive karma constitutes a morally unacceptable form of blaming the victim to be resolvable by appeal to commonly agreed criteria of evidence or argument. There will not be any knock-down argument to persuade one side that the other is right, for the starting assumptions are too disparate. For one party, it just is the case that suffering, misfortune, and various types of disadvantage are consequences of sins committed in previous lives. This belief is not based on evidence: it is a basic assumption in the light of which suffering, misfortune, and disadvantage are understood. For the other party, suffering,

[16] The phrase "at least in principle" is important here, and may be even more pertinent to other disagreements in opinions. For example, two art critics may hold contradictory opinions on the artistic value of a given work, and may in practice never reach agreement; but there is no reason why, in principle, they could not. For the disagreement occurs within a cultural context, a form of life, in which there is agreement that there are such things as works of art which have artistic value, and so on. The situation would be very different if someone from a culture which has no concept of art were to try to join the conversation. The disagreement over the artistic merit of a particular work could not even get off the ground. (We need not assume here that the distinction between disagreement in opinions and disagreement in form of life is always sharp, but there is, nonetheless, a significant distinction to be made.)

misfortune, and disadvantage are simply not understood in the same way: different things are thought and said, different pictures are applied.

An alternative conception of rebirth

A risk associated with my discussion up to this point is that the dichotomy between those who believe in karma and reincarnation and those who don't will appear very stark, with little room for compromise between them. In this final section, however, I want briefly to register the complexity of the conceptual possibilities by acknowledging a form of belief in reincarnation that involves perceiving apparent disadvantage in a way different from that which has been considered thus far—a way that departs significantly from the perspective that has been accused of blaming the victim. My purpose is not to advocate any particular form of reincarnation belief, but merely to hint at the variety of forms that such beliefs can take.

The alternative perspective that I want to highlight is illustrated by a follower of Risshō Kōsei Kai, a contemporary Japanese Buddhist movement.[17] In an interview with anthropologist Robert Kisala, this informant reflects in the following terms upon the question why his daughter was born with an intellectual impairment:

> They say that it is because of karma from previous existences, but there is someone involved in care for the mentally handicapped who wrote a book, and he says that it is precisely mentally handicapped children who represent what is best in the human race. Not to gloss over all the problems they face, but it is the mentally handicapped who are really gentle, genuine, and innocent. As other children grow older they gain in wisdom and knowledge, but they also become capable of doing wrong. When I

[17] For general information on this movement, see Clarke (1999, pp. 211–218).

> realized this for the first time, rather than thinking about the cause of her handicap, I thought that instead I have much to learn from her genuineness and purity. (Quoted in Kisala 1994, p. 88)

Here we see articulated a way of regarding intellectual impairment as a kind of blessing rather than a curse: as a condition that is not—or is not straightforwardly or exclusively—detrimental to the life of the person with the impairment or to the lives of those who care for her. It is clear from other things that this man says to Kisala that he still believes in reincarnation,[18] yet his turning away from the question of what caused his daughter's impairment differs from the way in which Arvind Sharma recommends that Hindus should turn away from this question. For Sharma, the question is not to be asked because the more pressing question is, "Given the situation, what is my duty?" This shift to considerations of duty leaves untouched the perception of the person with whom one is faced as a wrongdoer who must have done something to deserve her current predicament. What the alternative viewpoint voiced by Kisala's informant facilitates is a transfigured perception of the person herself: perceiving her not as a pitiable wretch towards whom it is one's duty to display "warm-hearted concern to minimize the person's problems" (Sharma 1999), but as someone with whom one can have a deeply fulfilling relationship, and from whom there is much to be learnt, morally and spiritually.

Of course, this direction of thinking harbours dangers of over-sentimentalization—of failing to see the disabled person as a whole and complex human being due to a veil of innocence and purity that one has cast over her. At the same time, however, the chance is afforded of relating to the person as a source of joy and inspiration, whose characteristics are not viewed as punishments designed to close down certain possibilities of living in

[18] For instance, he refers approvingly to the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, according to which "you choose the place where you are to be born, ... where you might best be able to fulfil your own role" (quoted in Kisala 1994, p. 88).

order to burn off the demerit incurred by former sins; rather, they are viewed as positive qualities that open up opportunities of loving relationship within a community of mutual concern. Kisala's informant is struggling towards a relinquishment of the thought that he is caring for his daughter "even though" she is responsible for her own condition, and the adoption of a transformed perception of the condition itself; he responds to her as the person she is, and not as someone who could have been something more, something less "defective," if only she had not been so sinful in a previous life. The association of bodily or mental impairment with retributive desert is being broken, and the wondrous mystery of his daughter's condition relieved of the taint of shame and guilt.

Conclusion

Sometimes, when viewpoints come into conflict with one another, what is at issue is a disagreement in opinions: basic presuppositions are shared, and what needs to be resolved is the right interpretation of certain facts or the right inferences to be drawn on the basis of those facts. In other instances, however, what is at issue is something deeper, which can be characterized as a disagreement in forms of life: basic presuppositions are not shared, the very framework of one person's thinking is out of joint with that of someone else. What I have argued in this paper is that the dispute between those who perceive the doctrine of karma as involving a morally abhorrent form of blaming the victim, and those who reject this charge, is best understood as a disagreement in forms of life. While the defenders of the doctrine think of illness, disability and other types of disadvantage in terms of retribution, critics of the doctrine don't think of retribution at all. They "think differently, in a different way."

Recognizing its depth does not make the dispute easier to resolve, but it affords us a fuller appreciation of why it continues to be so intractable. Resolution, I have proposed,

would take a form more like religious conversion than like the acceptance of the conclusion of an argument as true or of a fresh piece of evidence as clinching. This is not to say that participation in argument and the accumulation of evidence cannot play their part in precipitating such a conversion, but it is to suggest that such factors are unlikely to be decisive independently of more general shifts in an individual's worldview, which shifts are apt to be tied to broader cultural changes. The growing prestige of naturalistic and scientific ways of thinking within a culture, for example, typifies the factors that tend to militate against continued belief in retributive karma.[19]

Finally, in order to avoid giving the impression that perspectives on karma and reincarnation are reducible to a polar opposition between those who accept the doctrine in its retributive mode and those who reject it altogether, some reflections have been offered on what strikes me as a highly nuanced conception of reincarnation—one which brings out the positive potential of a person's characteristics that might, in another light, be viewed as deficiencies. Such a transfigured perception of the reincarnated person radically subverts many traditional construals of the link between disadvantage and past-life immorality in ways that have hardly begun to be touched on in this article. It goes without saying, therefore, that there remains much scope for further philosophical exploration of these and other complex implications of the variety of beliefs in karma and reincarnation.[20]

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[19] See, for example, Gosling (1974) and (1977).

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