

Karma

The meaning of the term *karma* has undergone a curious evolution. The word is Sanskrit and means ‘act’, ‘action’, ‘deed’. The theory or idea which the term was originally used to refer to is that conscious beings – typically humans – determine their own destinies through the quality of their acts: man is master of his fate. In popular use, however, the term has acquired a fatalistic ring, so that if one sighs, ‘It’s my karma,’ the implication is that one is the helpless victim of destiny.

Logically, these two ways of seeing karma are not really far apart, for the theory of karma holds that it operates over long periods, up to many lifetimes. If I look at myself now, I may feel free to choose my actions, my karma, and so influence my future. But when misfortune befalls me for no obvious or immediate reason, I may consider karma retrospectively and decide that the reason for present suffering must lie in a misdeed which I cannot possibly remember because I did it in a former life. (The same goes for good luck as for bad.)

The theory of karma is thus linked to that of rebirth. Writing of Gujarati peasants, David Pocock says that belief in rebirth tends to relate to the past: ‘Some sin in a previous life “explains” why a man is born as an untouchable, or why some woman has had the great misfortune to survive her husband, . . .’¹ He also writes: ‘Rebirth is primarily for other people.’² In this context karma theory functions as what the West calls a theodicy, a theory to explain why there exists what appears *prima facie* to be unjust suffering; the answer is that the suffering

is in fact deserved. In such a context, ‘karma’ is used to mean what from the classical point of view should be called the *result* of karma.

Various forms of the karma theory are found in all the three main religions that began in ancient India: brahminism/Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. All share the assumption that karma is ethically charged – though ethics is not always fully separated from ritual. Thus a karma is (morally) good or bad, and the theory holds that the universe contains a mechanism to ensure that a good deed will bring good results for the doer, a bad deed bad results. If this mechanism is impersonal, as it is in Buddhism and Jainism, it is not strictly appropriate to call these results rewards and punishments, for the results arrive simply through the operation of a causal law comparable to the modern idea of a law of nature.

Early history.

The Sanskrit word *karma* is an action noun derived from the common verb *kr*, “to do, to make”. The stem of the noun is *karman*; *karma* is the nominative. While originally any act could be described as *karma*, in the Vedic texts which were primarily concerned with ritual, the *Brāhmaṇa*-s, the term came to denote ritual action: a *karma* was a rite. Some rites could be performed for evil purposes, as black magic, but the karma *par excellence* was a prescribed rite. Further, the theory was propounded that a person who carried out all prescribed rites could be sure of rebirth in a heaven. The causal mechanism by which this took place was, naturally, anything but obvious. An analogy was drawn with agriculture: a certain kind of seed is sown and after a time a corresponding plant appears and can be harvested. Like a harvest, the result of

karma is always finite. This analogy provides the karma theory with some of its basic vocabulary: the action is a seed (Sanskrit: *bīja*) and its maturation (*vipāka*) is a fruit (*phala*). The process by which this occurred came to be known in brahminical Sanskrit as “the unseen” (*adr̥ṣṭa*).

The theory of karma first occurs in the last part of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, a text better known as the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (7th or 6th century BCE?). The sage Yājñavalkya takes his questioner Ārtabhāga aside to tell him, ‘A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action.’ (3.2.13) Here we cannot tell whether good / bad action (karma) refers to ritual or ethical goodness; it is possible that ‘bad action’ refers to incorrect performance of sacrifice. However, the next time that Yājñavalkya talks of good and bad action, in 4.4.7, it is clear that good action means action done without desire, so that there is at least an ethical dimension, even if the ‘action’ is ritual action.

In the first of these two passages, it is said – by Ārtabhāga, not by Yājñavalkya, though the latter does not dissent – that when a man dies all his constituent parts, including his mind, are distributed through the world: ‘his speech disappears into fire, his breath into the wind, his sight into the sun’ etc. But in the second passage Yājñavalkya says, ‘A man who’s attached goes with his action to that very place to which his mind and character cling. Reaching the end of his action, of whatever he has done in this world – from that world he returns back to this world, back to action.’³ The former passage does not sound like a theory of rebirth, the latter does; in fact it looks like a very simple ethicised theory of rebirth, in which this world is the scene of action and the

other the scene of reaping the results, and when the results have been reaped one repeats the cycle.

The main passage concerning rebirth, however, occurs in the sixth and last book of the *BĀU*, in a passage widely known as ‘the five fire doctrine’ (*pañcāgni-vidyā*). This describes three possible fates at death. Those who offer sacrifices, make donations and perform austerities are said to go on the path of the fathers (*pitṛ-yāna*), and reach their world (*pitṛ-loka*) (evidently a heaven), but then in the end return to this world via the rain and get reborn. Better than these are those who have understood the teachings of the *BĀU* and thus go by the path of the gods, bypassing the world of the fathers, and escape rebirth; worse are those who know neither of the two paths, who become insects and other lowly creatures.

From this point on, all karma doctrines are indissolubly linked to a theory of rebirth, which takes the form that whether one’s actions in life conform to the requirements of the particular ideology or not determines whether after death one is reborn higher or lower in the scale of being. The scale of being goes down from gods, who live in heavens, to demons and suffering souls, who live in hells at the bottom; humans and then animals are about half way down.⁴ Those who accept these doctrines all hold that the cycle of rebirth, known as *saṃsāra*, involves far more pain than pleasure, so that salvation lies in escape (*mokṣa*).

Jainism.

Probably the oldest elaborated theory of karma which we know of –

and which indeed still survives – is that of Jainism. It accepts these main tenets but in other ways is quite unlike the brahminical theory. Jains believe that all matter contains sentient life in a form which adapts itself to the size and shape of whatever body it inhabits, and yet is defined as immaterial. It is called a *jīva*, which literally just means ‘life’. The Jain conception of karma likewise runs counter to most ideas of materiality, for it defines karma as matter. A *jīva* is naturally pure and buoyant, and if left inviolate will float to the top of the universe, where it can remain in eternal bliss. But every act (karma) attracts something analogous to dust which clings to the *jīva* and weighs it down. So to gain release one has to scrub off all the old dust and not let any new dust gather. Karma comes in six different colours: the purest is white and the worst black. But ultimately even white karma is a bad thing, for it keeps the *jīva* in *saṃsāra*. Indeed, ‘the earliest detectable Jaina doctrine of karma leaves no room at all for the idea of meritorious action.’⁵ A further unique feature of the Jain doctrine of karma is its extreme elaboration in terms of possible karmic effects; these include not only effects on one’s future thought and behaviour but also the precise kind of being one will be reborn as, one’s future longevity and environment.

In early Jainism, karma was strictly a matter of overt action: intention was irrelevant. By the time of Umāsvāti⁶ (c.400 CE?), this had changed, probably under the influence of Buddhism, which had taken a diametrically opposite position.

While the Jain theory of how karma operates is completely different from the brahminical theory, both evidently draw on a social background of

agriculture. While the brahmin vocabulary likens actions to crops, the Jain emphasis seems to be on the sweat and dirt of agricultural labour.

Buddhism.

We know from the earliest Buddhist texts⁷ that theories of karma were much debated in the Buddha's environment, especially among religious leaders who, like the Buddha, did not accept the Vedic teachings of the brahmins; and that some teachers denied rebirth while others denied that one's actions could affect the process. For the Buddha, to deny the theory of karma was the most basic of all 'wrong views'; correspondingly, his own teaching was based on karma. The first step on his 'noble eightfold path' is 'right view', and that is explained as acceptance of the karma theory.

At the same time, curiously enough, the Buddha's own theory of karma is more closely linked to the Upanishadic one than to that of the anti-Vedic Jains. He did not regard karma as material or, indeed, attempt to explain how it worked.

He saw the possible ethical range of karma as symmetrical, good or bad. However, he took a step no less radical than defining action as a form of matter: he explicitly defined karma as intention (*cetanā*). For the Buddha, all that counts happens in the mind; so the moral quality of an act depends solely on the intention behind it.

This was an astonishingly bold move. In opposition to brahminism, it deprived ritual activity of any intrinsic value. In opposition to Jainism, it located ethics in the mind, not in externals. The implications are enormous. If karma is located in the mind, all sentient beings are ethically on the same footing. In

particular, the caste-bound ethics of brahminism is denied, since intention is the same whether it is intended by male or female, young or old, brahmin or outcaste. Along the same lines, the Buddha used the brahminical words for ‘pure’ and ‘purifying’, terms appropriate to correct ritual action and status, and used them to mean ‘virtuous’ or ‘meritorious’; it is ‘purifying acts’ (*punya karma*) which bring Buddhists good results in this and future lives. In fact, the metaphor of purifying the mind is constantly used to express progress towards the final goal, nirvana.

If ethical value lies in intention, the individual has the kind of autonomy which in the West we associate with Protestantism: the final arbiter is one’s conscience. Accordingly, the general principle was that the Buddhist monk or nun could not be disciplined for an offence which they did not acknowledge. In the same spirit, the moral rules laid down for the laity are formulated as personal undertakings: the Buddhist layman declares, ‘I undertake to abstain from taking life,’ and so forth, articulating personal commitment.

We suggested at the outset of this article that in popular imagination the emphasis is laid on the latter end of the karmic process: events are interpreted as the results of past deeds, themselves forgotten. The Jains’ minute elaboration of types of karmic result suggest a similar emphasis. Early Buddhism – let us say, the Buddha’s teaching – was just the opposite. Karma is all-important, but by this is meant what you, the agent, decide to do. Here the karma doctrine is an assertion of free will. Admittedly, our decisions how to behave accumulate to create character, which means tendencies: it is harder for a tiger not to kill than it is for a monk. But that is because one has been born as a tiger because of a propensity to murder, a propensity which is one’s own responsibility.

That such a radical doctrine of free will could be widely accepted suggests that the first generations of Buddhists must have lived in unusually fortunate circumstances, a society in which people were less at the mercy of despots and other thugs than has been the case for most of human history. What we know of northern India in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE makes this plausible.

This benign state of affairs did not last, and nor did the original spirit of the Buddha's version of karma. Post-canonical Buddhist literature, like that of Hinduism and (above all) Jainism, is permeated with the basic ideology of karma, but it is mainly viewed retrospectively, as setting strict limits on the ability to control one's life.

Transfer of merit.

The first major shift in Buddhist karma doctrine seems to have occurred shortly after the Buddha's lifetime. This is the distinctive Buddhist doctrine of transfer of merit, a doctrine and practice which have accompanied Buddhism wherever it has spread in Asia. Originally the practice had two rather precise forms. Firstly, at funerary rituals the bereaved family fed monks and with their (ritual) help transferred the merit of this act to the deceased. Secondly, the Buddha was supposed to have advised that after any act of piety, typically feeding monks, one transfer the merit to the local gods. To explain how one could 'transfer merit', exegetes had recourse to the basic doctrine of intention: If one witnessed, say, an act of generosity, and got oneself into the same generous frame of mind as the donor, one had achieved the same mental purification and acquired the same merit. Of course, nothing was really

transferred: that was just a vulgar way of looking at it. The proper analogy was with lighting one lamp from the flame of another.

For all the ingenuity of this explanation, it is clear that in the popular imagination merit is treated like cash, which one can spend to help either oneself or others. It is unlikely to be an accident that this doctrine arose at the same time as northern India was developing a monetary economy.

In the Theravadin view of merit transfer, the recipient has to play an active mental role. You cannot transfer merit to someone who is unaware of it. This restriction was abandoned by the Mahayana. Any act of piety in Mahayana Buddhism is supposed to end with a wish that the merit be transferred to all sentient beings. Moreover, in devotional forms of the Mahayana, the great Bodhisattvas (and even Buddhas) are believed constantly to transfer merit to the rest of the world. This is incompatible with earlier doctrine; in Christian terms, a doctrine of works has been subverted by a doctrine of grace.

Similar developments, probably beginning shortly before the Christian era but spreading and developing over several centuries, took place in Hinduism. The doctrine of karma was called into question, or supplemented, from two directions. The Buddha had firmly defined karma as one's own responsibility, and other traditions had to respond to that; but in theistic Hinduism there was always a problem about who was the true agent, oneself or God. A famous verse found in some versions of the *Mahābhārata* runs: 'I know what is right and don't do it, I know what is wrong and don't stop it. You, Kṛṣṇa, stay in my heart, And I do what you move me to do.' The other problem was whether God was himself bound by karma, in the sense that he could not but punish the wicked and reward the good. The theory that he could not

interfere with the system of retribution was that he ‘has regard for karma’ (*karma-sāpekṣa*). The more monotheistic a religious tradition was, the more it tended to view God as a completely free agent who need have no regard for karma (*karma-nirapekṣa*) and could thus have mercy on the sinner. The only logically satisfactory resolution of this pair of dilemmas is to ascribe all true agency to God; this extreme solution is found, for example, in the Tengalai school of mediaeval Vaiṣṇavism. At this point karma has come as far as can be from its early Buddhist form, and is eclipsed in importance by devotion and subservience to the will of God.

Richard Gombrich

¹ David Pocock, *Mind, Body and Wealth*, Oxford, 1973, p.39.

² *Ibid.*, p.38.

³ Translations by Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*, New York and Oxford, 1998.

⁴ For a convenient summary, see my ‘Ancient Indian cosmology’ in C. Blacker and M. Loewe, eds, *Ancient Cosmologies*, London, 1975, pp. 110-42.

⁵ W.J. Johnson, *Harmless Souls*, Delhi, 1995, p.28.

⁶ Also known as Umāsvāmi.

⁷ Their contents must in part go back to the Buddha’s lifetime, the 5th century BCE, even though they were only written down much later.