

The Truth of 'Karma'

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Karma is a widely used and relevant term in today's world although it is rooted in Hinduism, Buddhist and Jaina traditions that date back to more than 1000 years. In its simplest sense, it can be understood as a theory of "what goes around, comes around"; meaning that individuals have to face consequences, whether good or bad in terms of the actions performed in the recent or remote and unknown past which ultimately will determine the life

we have at present and to a certain extent what we will face in future due to our present actions. Such a concept seems to be very simplistic and attractive to follow, however it is extremely complex. All concepts pertaining to humans have been made and defined by humans and ultimately for humans. The fact that such a concept even exists, means that it has been given due importance and consideration by a mass of people for it to have existed, continued and strengthened over the years.

Biologically we are very much like animals, the actual meaning of human life and its distinction from those of the animals is established on when we focus on aspects like purpose of human life, beliefs, values, dispositions, morals, which act as an intervening variable in the way we respond to the environment. Morality is an important aspect of individual and collective life, a concept that gives cultural definitions of what is "wrong" and "right" for an individual, a society, a kind of judgment on individual's acts that cannot go unnoticed and a mechanism that ensures that these acts receive consequences whether good or bad. Why do we feel bad when we steal money from others? It is only because such an act has been defined as being "immoral". This is probably the reason why the concept of karma was introduced centuries ago, a mechanism introduced to induce responsibility in the individual for his/her own actions and regulate their behavior so as to ensure that each individual has a sphere within which certain acts are "allowed" to be exercised. This was done also through creating a sense of fear of punishment for indulging in acts that go beyond the moral prescription. It is human tendency to avoid any kind negative consequences, which is why when actions that have the probability of yielding negative, harmful consequences are indulged into, they create feelings like fear and anxiety about "what will happen in the future" as a consequence, and guilt about something that cannot be controlled because it is done over in the past.

I believe that the concept of "good" and "evil" also operate through the concept of morality, and form the fundamental basis of the theory of karma. Since only when there is a clear definition of what is good and what is bad, will there be good vs bad acts, and consequently the repercussions of those acts. Also, only when the evil exists can the good exist, because it provides a comparative standard through which we can contrast, understand and classify something as being evil or good, eg- in soap operas, only through the villains are we able to find out who the "hero" actually is.

The aim of this paper is not to get into the technicality of theory of karma and what it propounds, but rather to look into the fact that how such an ancient and archaic concept still holds relevance in an individuals life and to what extent; basically its practicality in real life setting, in today's world, where the concept is used by every household without realizing the meaning of its usage. Thus the concept of karma is very relevant in today's world; where

sanctions on individual's selfish actions need to be imposed through this theory to be able make the individual also see the larger picture, which includes everyone else in the surrounding.

Conception of karma

The term "karma" is a Sanskrit word which literally means "actions", everything that a human does. The term itself doesn't hold a significant meaning, which basically points to the fact that our understanding of what karma actually means and entails comes largely from the theory of karma, which establishes a cause and effect relationship between our actions and their consequences. Although the theory talks about only deeds or actions determining the consequences, some theorists believe that karma also includes the thoughts and words of an individual; holding a person responsible for nothing only what he/she does but also what he/she thinks and speaks. This is because they believe that the content in a person's heart is extremely important and not just what is outwardly expressed. Thus this theory becomes important from the point of view of society because everything that an individual does IS directed at others; this theory actually works in relation to others because individual deeds, words and actions are always directed at or received by others. The concept of good-evil, moral-immoral wouldn't exist if an individual was an isolated entity and didn't have any interaction with the "others" around.

Karma theory not only talks about the present existence but also all the past existences that we have had, and in that sense the deeds committed in the recent past (this lifetime) and the remote past (past existences), all come together to determine our present and future. It makes the past, present and future, then extend on a continuum, where if one wants to understand why our present is shaped in a certain way, we look at our past deeds, and if we want to see how our future will be, we look at what we are doing now, since we have a control over and regulate it accordingly. In this sense this theory makes life very deterministic, and gives explanations for all unknown and unexplainable events in terms of a person's conduct in terms of others by oversimplifying things.

When do we know that it is our past life karma that is actually causing an event to occur and not any other rational reason? The theory provides answer to this by stating that when events that have no meaning or relevance in our lives, have no logical reasoning and occur repeatedly, we should know that it is time for retribution of past karma. For example- when one repeatedly loses jobs despite immense individual efforts and for reasons that seem illogical, and this also happens to creep into the next generation, then the person can call it "job karma". However we don't know which deed in the past led to the creation of this karma.

Karma theory also then makes life and death a continuous process, freedom from karma cannot occur through death since it will be carried on to the next life in another form or body or carried on to the successive generations. Then the whole purpose of life can be understood in terms of battling it out with ones karma and regulating ones present karma in the hope to find a better life in the uncertain future. Thus an individual is always "tested" for ones deeds, if the test is passed, there is hope of shaping a better future, and if not then there will be anxiety regarding it. As far as the past is concerned, it seems that the individual is "condemned" to a life in the present, but has no control over it since it is determined by the past. Thus with the past there is

guilt and no hope, and with the future there is a little hope and possibility of improving one's conditions but only through regulation of one's actions in the present.

Bruce R. Reichenbach, in his paper- "law of karma and principle of causation"- 1988 talks about the difference between law of karma and law of universal causation. The law of universal causation is concerned with cause and effect of deeds irrespective of whom it affects and regardless of the intentions of the agents. It is also irrespective of moral judgments and is based on two events that are temporally conjoined with one another. However the law of karma is completely the opposite of above mentioned. It is best understood as an application of the law of universal causation to moral causation, with the only difference existing in terms of distinction between "phalas"- immediate and visible effects that agents bring about, which is true of law of causation; and "samskaras"- invisible, dispositions, and tendencies to act, think or experience in a way conducive to one's own happiness or unhappiness, which is true of law of karma. The distinction accounts for the specificity of the law of karma, the fact that karmic effects depends only on the intention, the fact that samskaras are not actualized till the appropriate environment is provided, seeds lie dormant till appropriate conditions are provided. For example- contraction of malaria is dependent on the susceptibility to the disease, which is created by some action of the past remained dormant until we encounter malaria carrying mosquitoes in our environment. He basically tries to suggest that karma is a special application of the universal causation; has some special modifications of the agent- dispositions and tendencies which have an important connection with moral actions.

Problems with the karma theory

Whitley R.P. Kaufman- "Karma, rebirth and the problem of evil", addresses the Indian thought about karma which combines retributionism and multiple incarnations so that suffering can be explained as an individual's wrongdoing in the past for which he/she will be punished in present or future. "All suffering can be explained in terms of the sufferer himself". There are certain general questions addressed by people like- why do the innocent suffer and wicked flourish, why is the world not ordered and just if law of karma is operating, does karma constitute a "theory" in the sense of a fully developed philosophical or theological account of the presence of evil? The purpose of his research was to debate whether suffering can be wholly explained and justified as the result of individual wrongdoing or not? Certain problems have been addressed:

- **Memory problem:** Paul Edwards and Bruce Reichenbach suggest that there is no recollection of past lives which further leads us to question whether we even had past lives or not. It raises certain moral issues because, justice demands that one who is punished should suffer for a past crime be made aware of his/her crime and understand why they are being punished for it. The karma theory then becomes random and unpredictable. Radhakrishnan suggests that we hardly ever remember past events nor is there any evidence that anyone has ever recalled a past life. Also, the mechanism is poorly designed for the purpose of moral education or progress given the apparently random and arbitrary patterns of reward and punishment. It also seems like it is a revenge theory than a retribution theory because satisfaction has been taken on the perpetrator of the crime ignoring completely a central moral element of punishment, that the offender be made aware of his crime and repent for it and attempt to atone for it. Reichenbach "lack of

memory prevents one from undergoing the moral process involved in repentance for one's crimes and even attempted rectification for them."

- Proportionality problem: Given the kinds and degrees of suffering we see in this life, it is hard to see what sort of sins the sufferers would have committed to deserve horrible punishment. The severity of the punishment is not proportionate to severity of the wrongdoings; there is a question on the fairness of the mechanism.
- Infinite regress problem: We cant answer questions like- how did the karmic process begin? What was the first wrong and who was the original sufferer? There is no solution given for this because of the infinite existence of the past. Wendy O' Flaherty- "Karma solves the problem of the origin of evil by saying that there is no origin... but this ignores rather than solves the problem."
- Problem of explaining death: The question-"why are there not some people who are virtuous enough to live indefinitely?" is raised here. It is through rebirth that we are rewarded or punished but there can be no rebirth unless there is death, so even if one is moving up in the scale of karma to a very high birth for one's great virtue, one must still face death, which further undermines the moral justification for greatest of evils- death itself.
- Free will problem: Keyes has suggested that the karma theory "manages to affirm and deny human responsibility at the same time". Despite the promise of control over one's destiny, in practice the doctrine of karma can often result instead in an attitude of fatalistic pessimism in the believer. The basic problem is that there is a deep tension between causal determinism and the ideal of free moral responsibility. Either the theory is a complete and closed account of evil and suffering or it is not. If it is then there can be no progress or change, if there is then karma theory is not completely causal in nature.
- Problem of falsification: The theory cannot be falsified or verified against all human biases.

Francis Clooney (1989) suggested that karma is brilliant in its simplicity and straightforwardness, "people suffer because of their past deeds in this and previous lives and likewise enjoy benefits based on past good deeds." The main attraction of the theory for people is that it suggests that each person makes his/her own fate, all suffering happens for a reason; even if there is misery one can look forward to happiness in future lives, if one does his/her own duty. M. Hiriyama equally defends karma as a systematic explanation of all events in the world-"as every event in the physical world is determined by its antecedents, everything that happens in the moral realm is preordained".

"Expiation" of karma

Our lives as humans is actually all about life and death which also includes suffering and illness. However we often don't quite understand what life and death actually mean; in reality there cannot be a definition of life and death because these are subjective and also culturally loaded terms. We can only understand them through analogies, and in that sense which analogy we adopt becomes the most important concept for an individual because it governs ones life and how we live it. A philosopher has said that an *awareness* of our own death and mortality is what separates us from the animals. The analogy that I would like to use to understand life and death which forms the basis of understanding of the karma theory is that of waves. If the universe can be considered as a vast ocean, then an individual is like a wave in it; when the wave rises from the ocean's surface, that is life; when it merges back into the ocean, it is death. Thus life and

death are continuous, which is what makes life eternal. When we refer to life, we not only talk about the physical functioning of an individual in terms of the "life force" left in the person; it also pertains to the spiritual or psychological functioning of an individual, for example- a person who has given up on life is alive but spiritually and psychologically dead. We often refer to death as the end of human life in terms of perishing of the human "body", but then where do all the deeds, the beliefs, the dispositions of an individual that we talked about earlier go? This is what the karma theory postulates, that just because we ignore our past deeds and try to forget them, doesn't mean that those deeds didn't occur, the dispositions and beliefs didn't get established and weren't used at other people. And thus a person will always be haunted by one's deeds of the past through guilt, a mechanism that will ultimately move the person to reduce guilt by working in the present because that is the only time we have in hand. This is where karma connects each life of an individual.

According to me, there is a meaning to everything that happens while we are alive, even birth and death have a meaning, the spheres that cant be explained fully are also "given" a meaning by human beings because of their tendency to not have any kind discomfort of not knowing things. Thus, in relation to this, each human life has a purpose, there is a meaning in why we are only born as someone with a particular name and identity, into a particular family, environment, with certain genetic traits and also certain baggage of problems and sufferings. The purpose of life is to keep on finding out meaning and keep questioning ourselves as to why we were born in the first place. As long as we have the meaning we can withstand any suffering, but without meaning, we can have everything we want and still be completely empty. The concept of karma gives this meaning to our lives by constantly providing us with a battle ground where we have to face the expected consequences of actions that we know we indulged in and also the unexpected consequences produced by past life karma. While it is comforting to blame our current suffering like an unexpected, illogical illness to our past life karma that we have no control over, it is equally scary and discomforting to know that we do have to take responsibility for actions committed which we have no memory of; and largely all humans are afraid of such a responsibility because of which they look for agents outside themselves to blame it on.

This is where I introduce the concept of "expiation of karma". I believe that since beliefs and values are what makes an individual different, we deliberately choose to shape our own lives and the consequences in order to demonstrate the power of our beliefs. Expiation of karma, brings a little more determinism in our lives by not only "holding" an individual responsible for one's own actions but also giving a chance to the individuals to redeem themselves, to face retribution in a lesser degree and to build a better, hopeful and a sure future for themselves. To expiate means to pay the penalty for an action, however in this context it largely refers to process of lessening the degree of our karmic retribution through altruistic actions towards others. Since we create bad karma through deeds, words and thoughts directed at others, in only makes sense to also to create good karma by engaging in actions towards others benefit, since we receive benefit through the same; the same principle of "what goes around, comes around" operating here. In such a scenario, the effects of the karma of the past will be faced in a lesser degree than what was actually going to occur. It helps us view karma, not in terms of a determinism from which there is no escape further leading to pessimism, rather an opportunity or a challenge that was unexpected; but since it has arrived and one has mental preparedness towards, to face it head on and "expiate" its negative effects. The purpose of life, thus is not dealing with, ignoring or

forgetting karma but rather expiating it moment by moment, also to be able to value what has been received in the process of expiation, more, because of the struggle and sufferings in achieving it. When do we know we have expiated karma? Does it mean that the event will never occur again? No, it doesn't mean that, it simply means that even when the event occurs, the way we approach and tackle the situation has changed; for example- an unexpected bout of tuberculosis repetitively occurring in the family is a sign of health karma of the family, facing this challenge will help in expiating the karma, so that next time such a situation occurs, our level of preparedness towards it has become better.

Life and death signify a period, a time period that has been given to us to do all that we can to redeem ourselves and become better humans. The time stipulation is important is because it prevents us from becoming lax, keeping ourselves abreast from moment to moment. Thus expiation of karma becomes another activity that will again never let anyone rest, provided one *wants to do* something about their karma which also depends on their understanding of it. We may sometimes wonder why people who are currently indulging in “wrong” actions are the ones enjoying the best lifestyles and benefit; it largely means that these people are en-cashing on benefits received through good karma in the past; however what we don't realize is that they are also “en-cashing without depositing”, which means that this reserve is not going to last forever. Since the concept of karma involves humans beings and their beliefs their society and culture, it can be understood by a discipline like psychology.

However if we for once stop to obsess over establishing the discipline as a science, we might be able understand and debate about these concepts more freely because not everything can be so easily falsified and objectified. The fact that people do experience guilt and anxiety about their past and future respectively, feel responsible for their actions and shape their lives accordingly means that a concept of karma IS indeed operationalising their lives to a certain extent whether they believe in it or not. However criticisms are always present for every theory, because if not scientifically falsified, these arguments in the form of criticisms do help in falsification of the theories, nonetheless it does not stop the individuals from “making” this theory operate for themselves. The purpose or mission of life is to find meaning in life, by understanding the nature of our own karma, using it effectively to shape lives accordingly and making it better everyday; which for obvious reasons cannot be achieved selfishly and definitely in the presence of others in the environment. Thus to conclude, if karma makes our lives deterministic, it also gives us the opportunity to break this determinism created by the past provided we *choose* to do it.