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UNDERSTANDING KARMA IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: INSIGHTS FROM MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

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Investigating an ancient doctrine is an inherently complex task, particularly when examining a principle that not only makes its earliest textual appearances in the first millennium BCE but also spans a vast array of cultures around the world. One such doctrine, deeply intertwined with our daily actions, is the Indian principle of karma. Delving into this doctrine is challenging due to its multifaceted nature, encompassing cultural, historical, religious, textual, and philosophical dimensions. This complexity presents several challenges to understanding and accepting the principle of karma. The first type of challenge concerns understanding the doctrine within its textual and historical contexts, such as textual diversity, interpretative variability, and its development over time. The second type of challenge deals with moral issues surrounding the justice of karma, particularly its implications for suffering and destiny. Addressing these challenges is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of karma's role in both historical and contemporary contexts. In this essay, we will consider and respond to some of these challenges, demonstrating how the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of karma remains relevant and meaningful today. First, I will offer an explanation of what I mean by the principle of karma, setting the groundwork for subsequent discussions. Second, I will explore the first type of challenges related to the textual aspects of understanding the doctrine of karma and respond to them. Third, I will discuss the moral challenges related to the justice of karma, particularly how it pertains to suffering and destiny, and provide responses to these challenges. By examining these aspects, this essay aims to offer a nuanced understanding of karma that respects its complexity and acknowledges its relevance in both ancient and modern contexts.

Keywords: Karma; Mahāyāna Buddhism; Moral Fatalism; Generalization; Upaya; Universal Justice

Introduction

Investigating an ancient doctrine is an inherently complex task, particularly when examining a principle that not only makes its earliest textual appearances in the first millennium BCE but also spans a vast array of cultures around the world. One such doctrine, deeply intertwined with our daily actions, is the Indian principle of karma. Many Indian teachings and traditions regard karma as a fundamental moral principle that elucidates the workings of the world. Therefore, it is often referred to by some believers and scholars as "Natural Law" [Burley 2013, *156*]. Despite its foundational role for many around the globe, there are "gaps that are left unexplained" [Ghose 2007, *270*]. Hence, delving into this doctrine is challenging due to its multifaceted nature, encompassing cultural, historical, religious, textual, and philosophical dimensions. This fact presents several challenges to understanding and accepting the principle of karma, leading some thinkers

to reject or overlook this doctrine. These challenges can be categorized into two types. The first type concerns understanding the doctrine within its textual and historical contexts, such as textual diversity, interpretative variability, and its development over time. I will call this type textual and historical challenges. The second type of challenges deals with moral issues surrounding the justice of karma, particularly its implications for suffering and destiny. This category involves complex discussions about free will, predestination, and the moral fairness of suffering as a result of past actions, possibly in previous lives. I will call this type moral challenges. We will see in explaining karma in the first section and responding to the textual and historical challenges in the second section that some of the moral challenges are caused by misreading the principle of karma as a theory of retributive justice, and ignoring the complexity of karma within the traditions that accept it as a fundamental belief.

Scholars of Buddhism have responded to these challenges and objections in three distinct ways: first, some reject it as incompatible with scientific laws; second, others overlook and ignore the doctrine of karma when understanding and studying Indian moral teachings; third, they attempt to naturalize, demythologize, and modernize the understanding of karma to align with a scientific viewpoint, making it relevant in contemporary times. In this essay, we will consider and respond to some of these challenges in three sections. First, I will offer an explanation of what I mean by this principle in this essay. Second, I will explore the first type of challenges related to the textual aspects of understanding the doctrine of karma and respond to some of them. Third, I will discuss the second type of challenges that deal with moral issues surrounding the justice of karma and respond to some of them.

1. **Karma and *Cetanā***

We have mentioned above that delving into the doctrine of karma is challenging due to its multifaceted nature, encompassing cultural, historical, religious, textual, and philosophical dimensions. This complexity necessitates a clear explanation of what we mean by this principle in this essay. Generally, karma is understood as a natural mechanism of moral cause and effect, where actions have consequences based on their merit; good deeds lead to positive outcomes, while bad deeds result in negative ones. This meaning is apparent in the ancient Indian tradition, found already in *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, considered one of the oldest Buddhist scriptures, in which karma is described as follows: “By you... has the seed been sown; Thus you will experience the fruit” [Bodhi 2000, *328*].

This belief is not limited to the Eastern world; some people from the West have also been influenced by such a principle. For example, Aldous Huxley’s engagement with the concept of karma can be traced through several of his works, such as *The Perennial Philosophy* and *Island*. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley discusses the core mystical teachings of various religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, where the concept of karma is a significant theme. He explores how karma underpins these philosophies and aligns with the universal truths found across different spiritual traditions [Huxley 1958]. In his final novel, *Island*, Huxley presents a utopian society where the understanding of karma is integrated into the education system [Huxley 2009]. The inhabitants of the island are taught from a young age to understand the consequences of their actions, which is a direct application of the karmic law of cause and effect.

Another example of a Western thinker whose work is influenced by the principle of karma is Carl Jung [Coward 1983]. Jung’s approach to psychology was significantly shaped by his exploration of Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism. Yet, he remained a Western thinker and did not formally adopt Buddhism or any other Eastern religion as his personal belief system. His work integrates concepts from various religious traditions to deepen the understanding of the unconscious.

The fact that the principle of karma is pervasive across various Indian traditions necessitates a clear explanation of what we mean by this principle in this essay. And since it is both difficult and time-consuming to start from scratch, and space does not permit a comprehensive exploration of each, my focus will be specifically on Mahāyāna Buddhism, and this discussion will build on existing scholarly work. Scholars often identify the workings of karma with one of the key components differentiating the Buddhist notion from its other representations in ancient India, its close association with *cetanā*. *Cetanā* is one of the five omnipresent mental factors accompanying every moment of experience, whether we are engaged in purposeful activities or acting inadvertently. For example, Bronwyn Finnigan, citing the Saṃyutta Nikāya, explains *cetanā* as follows: "It is volition *cetanā*, O monks, that I call Karma; having willed, one acts through body, speech, or mind" [Finnigan 2022, *14*]. Similarly, Lynken Ghose, drawing from several sources including the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Abhidharmakośa*, and *Visuddhimagga*, defines karma as "action" specified by the term *cetanā* [Ghose 2007, *263*]. Ghose further elaborates *cetanā* as "the psychic or mental feeling of being pulled in a particular direction, which underlies any action, be it a mental action, such as a thought, or a physical one, such as speaking or acting" [Ghose 2007, *265*].

Since I have previously mentioned that my focus will be specifically on Mahāyāna Buddhism, I will reference three more passages from two prominent thinkers in this tradition. The first is Vasubandhu's definition in the Examination of the Five Aggregates: "It is a mental action, which impels a *citta* towards good qualities, flaws, and that which is neither" [Anacker 2005, (PSP), *67*]. In chapter four of the Verses on the Treasury of Abhidharma (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*), Vasubandhu discusses how "The variety of the world arises from action. Action is volition *cetanā* and that which is produced through volition *cetanā*. Volition *cetanā* is mental action: it gives rise to two actions, bodily and vocal actions" [Vasubandhu 1989, (AK) IV 1a–d]. Vasubandhu thus describes *cetanā* as a form of karma that shapes our experiences through its directive role.

Moreover, a more accurate reflection of *cetanā's* role is seen in its continuous operation, guiding the mind towards various objects and coordinating other mental processes in relation to these objects, thereby molding our experiences. Asaṅga elaborates on this by defining *cetanā* in the Compendium of Higher Knowledge: "Volition (*cetanā*) is construction by the mind (*cittabhisamskara*), mental activity (*manaskarma*). Its function consists of directing the mind to the domain of favorable (*kusala*), unfavorable (*akusala*), or neutral (*avyakrtd*) activities" [Rahula 2001, (AS), *9*].

Consider the hypothetical case of John, who accidentally causes a fatal accident without any intent or effort. Although *cetanā* directs John's mental actions, it is not focused on the unintended consequences, hence not accumulating mental karma related to the accident. However, if John had the intent to murder someone, it would be necessary to consider whether emotions like anger or jealousy were involved. Since *cetanā* is one of the omnipresent factors that include contact, feelings, ascertainment, and attention, its intricate function underscores its central role in Buddhist ethics, demonstrating how our mental orientation towards the world fundamentally shapes our experiences and actions. Thus, *cetanā* is not just about the movement of the mind but also about how it constructs our reality, coordinating other mental activities to form a cohesive experience that defines our moral landscape.

In this essay, following Buddhist usage, I use karma as a principle of volitional action that directs and influences individual experiences through mental, verbal, and physical activities. It is fundamentally governed by *cetanā*, which is the mental action or intention that propels the mind towards various objects and coordinates other mental processes in relation to these objects, thereby shaping an individual's experience with the world. Karma encapsulates the ethical implications of these actions, determining the quality and nature of one's future experiences based on the moral valence of their current actions.

2. **Textual and Historical challenges**

In this section, I explore the first type of challenges related to the textual aspects of understanding the doctrine of karma. I will focus on these understanding challenges and reserve the historical aspects for another occasion[1]. Given the prevalence of the principle of karma across various Indian traditions, it prompts an important question: How should this principle be interpreted or understood? To grasp this challenge briefly, let us consider the usage of terms such as "reincarnation". There is a common tendency to use the terms "rebirth" and "karma" to describe the return of the same soul in a different body in another lifetime, or to equate "reincarnation" with "karma". Although these usages are not incorrect, they do not apply across all Indian traditions and schools. For instance, while the terms "rebirth" and "reincarnation" describe the return of the same soul in Hinduism, this concept does not apply to Buddhism. Francis Story notes, "Much misunderstanding of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has been caused in the West by the use of the words reincarnation, transmigration, and soul" [Story 1975, *30*]. In Buddhism, the notion of an enduring soul or self is absent because all phenomena are seen as compounded, impermanent, and conditioned. The constituents of an individual are in constant flux. In other words, some objections could be raised to some Indian traditions but not to Buddhism.

This misunderstanding and misconception lead to what I call the "generalization problem", where we attempt to classify all aspects and versions of the principle of karma into one notion to simplify its explanation and understanding in our contemporary world. An example of this problematic approach is evident in Whitley R. P. Kaufman's essay, *Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil*[2]. In this essay, Kaufman presents five objections to the principle of karma. However, his objections are based on "a simplified, idealized version of the karma-and-rebirth doctrine, abstracted as far as possible from particular historical or doctrinal questions" [Kaufman 2005, *16*]. To see how this approach is problematic, it is sufficient to briefly review one of Kaufman's objections. In the following lines, I will consider the problem of explaining death. According to Kaufman, for rebirth to account for all human suffering, including the paradigmatic case of innocent suffering (death), it must justify death morally [Kaufman 2005, *23*]. However, in typical rebirth theories, death is not seen as a punishment for wrongdoing but as a necessary mechanism for karma to operate. Rebirth allows for the allocation of karmic rewards or punishments, but this process requires death to occur. Even virtuous individuals who are destined for a high rebirth must undergo death, which seems to undermine the moral justification for death, arguably one of the greatest evils. Death is often assumed as a neutral mechanism rather than something needing explanation or moral justification.

Kaufman's objection implicitly presupposes a more conventional self, one that may align with the concept of a permanent self, in two key aspects. First, by questioning why everyone must die, the objection assumes a continuity of self that might allow for exceptions (e.g., virtuous individuals achieving immortality). This suggests an expectation of a stable identity that could potentially avoid the universal condition of death. Second, the idea that innocent suffering, such as death, needs to be morally justified implies a stable subject who experiences suffering. This perspective aligns with the notion of a permanent self that endures and can be the subject of moral evaluation and karmic retribution over time.

In contrast, the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (no-self) asserts that there is no permanent, unchanging self. Instead, what we consider the self is a collection of constantly changing physical and mental components (the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness). In Buddhism, the continuity of karmic effects is explained through the doctrine of dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*), which posits that all phenomena arise and cease due to interconnected causes and conditions. There is no need for a permanent self for karma to operate; rather, it is the causal process itself that ensures the continuity of karmic results.

While Kaufman's approach saves time and effort and makes the doctrine of karma easier to understand and explain, it risks ignoring some important aspects of this doctrine and imposes ideas that may be essential for some Indian traditions but not for all. Although Kaufman acknowledges that "such an approach will not be without controversy", he continues to raise these objections without specifying the particular notion of karma that belongs to a specific tradition or school [Kaufman 2005, *16*].

Some objections may apply to certain Indian traditions but not to Buddhism; hence, as Adam L. Barborich concludes, "the main cause of these misunderstandings regarding particularly Buddhist conceptions of karma is a tendency toward the conflation of multiple karmic functions into one essentialist, overarching and unwieldy karmic theory" [Barborich 2018, *13*]. Therefore, a preliminary step in investigating the principle of karma should be to specify a particular school or tradition and explain the doctrine of "karma" in accordance with this tradition[3]. Hence, I will avoid extreme generalization in this essay. Failing to do so risks imposing and generalizing ideas that are inaccurate and not applicable to all Indian traditions and schools. Consequently, in this essay, I will focus on one Indian tradition – Mahāyāna Buddhism. Moreover, concentrating on a single school and tradition streamlines the research process, saving both time and effort, particularly when navigating the complexities of a vast tradition.

Another challenge is raised to the traditional understanding of the doctrine of karma in our contemporary age. Many thinkers describe karma as a "medieval or pre-modern" idea, characterizing it as a primitive religious dogma that should have been abandoned centuries ago [Burley 2013, *2*]. For instance, Peter Hacker suggests that "human beings have fantasized about metempsychosis" – the belief in the transmigration of the soul to a new body – dismissing these beliefs as "fantasies" [Hacker 2007, *301*]. To understand how the traditional concept of karma may be problematic in the 21st century, we will consider a passage from Śāntideva's *Training Anthology* (*Sikshā-Samuccaya*) and the Buddhist Six Realms.

In the Training Anthology, Śāntideva presents karma as a type of "poetic justice" in depicting a hellish punishment meted out for the sin of lying [Goodman 2017, *134*]:

> Yama's men seize him, and forcing open his mouth, pull out his tongue. By the power of karma, as the result of that lie, his tongue becomes five hundred leagues long. As soon as it comes out, Yama's men force the tongue down onto the ground of blazing iron. A thousand ploughs appear, made of blazing iron. Mighty oxen propel them onto his tongue. Rivers of oozing pus and blood, full of worms, flow out [Śāntideva 2016, (ŚS), *72*].

The imagery here is stark and serves as a moral lesson on the severe consequences of negative karma, specifically the act of lying. In this scene, the sinner is punished in the afterlife by Yama, the lord of death, in a manner that directly relates to his misdeed. The exaggerated and grotesque punishment of having his tongue stretched and plowed is a symbolic representation of the pain and suffering that lies can inflict upon others. The mention of "five hundred leagues long" exaggerates the scale to emphasize the magnitude of the wrongdoing and its repercussions. The detailed description of the punishment is meant to instill fear but also to teach adherents about the importance of truthfulness and the dangers of deceit. Hence, Śāntideva uses this dramatic narrative to reinforce the teaching on karma and ethical behavior, urging readers to consider the profound consequences of their actions.

Let us turn to the Buddhist belief in the Six Realms. The Buddhist Six Realms form a core component of Buddhist cosmology and are integral to the teachings about samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). Beings are reborn into these realms based on their karma, and each realm represents different conditions of existence and is associated with particular afflictions and forms of suffering. These realms are the god realm (*deva*), the demi-god realm (*asura*), the human realm (*manushya*), the animal realm (*tiryagyoni*), the

ghost realm (*preta*), and the hell realm (*naraka*). Accordingly, our karma determines in which realm we will be reborn. However, Śāntideva's passage and the Buddhist Six Realms raise the questions: How can we persuade someone who is not a Buddhist of such a doctrine? How can we believe in our modern world that a sentient being will be reborn in one of the Buddhist Six Realms? Should we understand it literally or metaphorically? These questions encapsulate a significant challenge in reconciling traditional Buddhist teachings with contemporary worldviews, especially those influenced by scientific understanding.

Scholars respond to the problem of the traditional understanding of karma by attempting to naturalize, demythologize, and modernize it to align with a scientific viewpoint, making it relevant in contemporary times. For instance, Mikel Burley suggests a way to "demythologize" and "psychologize" the understanding and reading of the principle of karma, making it compatible with our contemporary scientific worldview. He does this by using Wittgenstein's approach of "bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" [Wittgenstein 2009, *sec. 116*][4]. When Wittgenstein uses the term "metaphysical use", he refers to the attempt to "grasp the essence of something" outside of its actual and real-life context, and in our case, beyond its religious context [Wittgenstein 2009, *sec. 116*]. In other words, we need to distinguish between two uses of language: the metaphysical and the everyday usage. When philosophers investigate and explore such religious principles, they should not treat them as abstracted from their usage context.

Another challenge that arises from what I have mentioned above is the verifiability problem. This problem refers to the difficulty in empirically proving or falsifying the concept of karma due to several aspects. The first aspect is its metaphysical nature, which operates in a realm that transcends physical observation and empirical measurement. Karma is concerned with moral actions and their consequences, which are often believed to manifest in future lives. This metaphysical aspect makes it challenging to study karma using scientific methods that rely on observation, experimentation, and falsification. Another aspect is the subjectivity of experience, where these experiences are often interpreted through a spiritual or religious lens, which varies significantly from one individual to another, making objective assessment difficult. Additionally, the causality and time frame of karma are often thought to transpire over long periods, sometimes stretching over multiple lifetimes according to the doctrines of reincarnation and samsara. This non-immediate causality poses a problem for verification, as the cause (an action in a past life) and its effect (a consequence in the current or future life) cannot be simultaneously observed or experimentally linked. Because of these aspects of karma, Kaufman concludes that "the rebirth doctrine is objectionable because it is unverifiable" [Kaufman 2005, *27*]. The verifiability problem complicates the empirical study of karma, revealing the limitations of applying scientific methods to metaphysical and subjective beliefs. As karma remains pivotal in many Eastern philosophies, understanding it outside these traditions may necessitate a nuanced approach that blends faith with interpretive flexibility.

Scholars have responded to the critique that the doctrine of karma is not based on empirical evidence and therefore cannot be falsified or verified by arguing that it does not belong to the category of empirical beliefs in the first place. For instance, Mikel Burley argues that even if karma is not an empirical belief, this does not mean that it does not play "an explanatory role in many people's lives" [Burley 2013, *155*]. Burley further cites Martin Willson's illustration that sometimes even science cannot explain certain phenomena and uses the term "coincidence" as an explanation [Burley 2013, *156*]. Scientists do not reject such explanations. Therefore, if they accept "coincidence" without requiring empirical verification or falsification, why do Western thinkers argue that the doctrine of karma is objectionable because it cannot be scientifically verified or falsified? In other words, the question should not be how we can verify or falsify such a doctrine, but why

such a religious doctrine needs to be empirically verified. Does a doctrine need to be empirically verified or falsified to be a good method for moral development?

One way to respond to this challenge is to argue that we are discussing a religious doctrine, not a scientific one. Since we are in the realm of religion, there is no need to demand that karma be scientifically verified. As Burley states, the issue with beliefs in karma is not that they lack empirical support, but rather that they are "not well characterized as empirical" [Burley 2013, *7*]. However, even if it is true that the belief in karma cannot be strictly characterized as empirical, for the sake of the challenge, I will attempt to respond from a philosophical perspective rather than a strictly religious one.

In the following lines, I will follow Burley and Willson's view that a doctrine does not require scientific verifiability for moral development and sometimes scientists use methods that cannot be empirically verified in their theories. One of these methods is Ockham's Razor. It states that among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected. In other words, the simplest explanation, one that requires the least speculation, is usually the best.

In science, Ockham's Razor is used to develop and evaluate theories by favoring simpler models over more complex ones, particularly when it is not possible to verify or falsify every step involved. Scientists apply this principle to avoid unnecessary complexity and to ensure that theories remain as straightforward as possible while still explaining the observed phenomena. For instance, in constructing scientific theories, not every step can always be empirically verified due to limitations in technology, knowledge, or practical constraints. Ockham's Razor allows scientists to proceed with the simplest viable hypothesis that fits the data, making the theory more manageable and testable in the long run.

For example, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection offered a simpler explanation for the diversity of life by proposing that species evolve through gradual changes driven by environmental pressures and genetic variation[5]. While Darwin observed variation in traits, the underlying genetic mechanisms were not understood at his time and were later confirmed with the discovery of genetics.

By applying Ockham's Razor, scientists can navigate the complexity of theoretical development, ensuring that theories remain parsimonious and grounded in observable phenomena. This approach not only simplifies the scientific process but also helps maintain a balance between explanatory power and empirical testability. Therefore, just as scientists use Ockham's Razor to handle unverifiable steps in scientific theories, similar principles could be considered when evaluating non-empirical doctrines like karma, focusing on their explanatory role and practical implications rather than strict empirical verification.

Moreover, continuing the argument that empirical verifiability is not necessary for a belief to be morally significant, I will demonstrate that Mahāyāna Buddhism does not prioritize a scientific worldview over practical and moral goals. Instead, it emphasizes the opposite. This can be shown by examining one of Buddhism's moral techniques that prioritize moral goals over a scientific and empirical worldview: *Upaya*.

Upaya, often translated as "skillful means" or "expedient means", refers to the ability of enlightened beings, especially Bodhisattvas, to adapt their teachings and methods to suit the moral needs and capacities of different individuals. *Upaya* is closely linked to two other key virtues in Buddhism: *prajñā* (wisdom) and *karuna* (compassion). Skillful means guided by wisdom and motivated by compassion embody the ideal way to interact with others within the Mahāyāna tradition. This interplay reflects the Bodhisattva's path, which emphasizes reaching enlightenment not just for oneself but for the sake of all sentient beings.

The concept of *Upaya* is illustrated in many Mahāyāna sutras, notably the Lotus Sutra, which contains several parables demonstrating how the Buddha uses different methods to teach the Dharma based on the audience's capacity to understand. One of the most famous examples is the Parable of the Burning House.

The Parable of the Burning House from the Lotus Sutra is a key scripture in Mahāyāna Buddhism used to illustrate the concept of *Upaya* [Watson 1993, *56–61*]. The parable describes a scenario where a large and wealthy man's house suddenly catches fire. The house is old and falling apart, making it particularly susceptible to disaster. Inside the house, the man's many children are playing, oblivious to the danger that the fire presents. Despite the urgency, when the father tells his children to leave the burning house, they do not understand or ignore him, being too absorbed in their games. Realizing that straightforward persuasion is failing and desperate to save his children, the father devises a skillful method to get their attention and motivate them to come out.

He promises the children that there are three types of carts waiting outside – deer carts, goat carts, and ox carts – each more marvelous than the last. Excited by the prospect of these attractive toys, the children rush out of the house to safety. Once they are outside and safe from the fire, the father reveals that he has instead a single type of cart for them all, which is even greater than those promised – a large, white ox cart beautifully adorned and capable of carrying them wherever they wish to go. The father's use of a skillful lie represents the Buddha's use of Upaya to guide beings to enlightenment. Like the father, the Buddha presents different teachings tailored to the capacities and inclinations of his followers, all with the aim of leading them to enlightenment[6].

Hence, the goal of using metaphorical language or "medieval or pre-modern" doctrines is not to prove a scientific worldview compatible with the modern world. Buddhist teachings highlight a pragmatic and empathetic approach to moral teaching, demonstrating that the ultimate goal is not to adhere rigidly to doctrine but to alleviate suffering and guide beings to enlightenment in the most effective way possible.

3. **Moral Challenges**

In this section, I discuss the second type of challenges that deal with moral issues surrounding the justice of karma, particularly its implications for suffering and destiny. We will see that some of the moral challenges arise from misreading the principle of karma as a theory of retributive justice and ignoring the complexity of karma within the traditions that accept it as a fundamental belief. Some scholars and thinkers find the doctrine of karma to be an appealing framework for understanding suffering, offering an alternative to the traditional theodicies found in Abrahamic religions. For instance, Max Weber says: "Karma doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history" [Weber 1958, *121*]. Others describe it as "a doctrine of hope" [Yamunacharya 1967, *72*] because it is morally comforting, satisfying, and soothing [Wadia 1965]. These statements suggest that for some, the karmic explanation provides a coherent and ethically grounded approach to understanding human suffering and destiny.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the doctrine of karma is immoral and intrinsically disrespectful [Burley 2013, *155*]. For instance, Kaufman suggests that karma is "more of a revenge theory" [Kaufman 2005, *20*]. Therefore, several moral objections and challenges are raised against the doctrine of karma, such as moral fatalism, blaming the victim, and moral nihilism. In the following lines, I will respond to and focus on one of these challenges, since there is insufficient space to cover all of them, and also because other scholars have responded to the other challenges and objections[7].

Let us begin with the challenge of moral fatalism. Some scholars who support the doctrine of karma claim that this doctrine leads to "universal justice", where the universe inherently upholds a fair and just order in which moral actions lead to corresponding consequences in the future [Edwards 1996, *43*]. However, Kaufman argues that the poetic notion of universal justice through the doctrine of karma can often result "in an attitude of fatalistic pessimism in the believer" [Kaufman 2005, *24*].

To explain Kaufman's objection to universal justice, consider the following example. A doctor working in a developing country encounters a young child suffering from a severe but curable illness. The child's family is extremely poor and cannot afford the treatment. The doctor faces two choices: first, the doctor could follow the hospital policy and refuse to treat the child, which would result in the child's condition worsening. Second, the doctor could treat the child, risking losing his job since providing free treatment is against hospital policy, and this decision would impact the treatment of other patients due to the hospital's limited resources.

According to the doctrine of karma, the doctor might refuse to treat the child, believing that the child's suffering is a result of his karma from past lives, implying that the child deserves what is happening. Alternatively, the doctor might treat the child, risking the treatment of other patients, believing that the other patients' suffering is also a result of their karma from past lives.

However, regardless of the scenario's outcome, it could lead to moral fatalism, where the believers might feel that their actions do not ultimately matter because the doctrine of karma ensures that everyone gets what they deserve. This fatalistic attitude undermines the motivation to engage in compassionate and proactive moral actions, as the believer might see suffering and injustice as predetermined and unchangeable, governed by the "universal justice" of karma.

The scenario above entails the view that karma is the sole cause of an individual's condition. If karma is viewed as the sole determinant of an individual's circumstances, it implies a deterministic framework where all current and future events are the inevitable outcomes of past actions. While this idea may have positive outcomes by emphasizing individual responsibility for past actions, it can also have negative outcomes by placing undue blame on individuals for things beyond their control. This perspective can lead to the belief that individuals have no power to influence their destiny.

Believing that karma is the only cause of one's condition can lead to a resignation to fate. Individuals may feel powerless to change their situation, thinking that their current suffering or fortune is a deserved outcome of past deeds, leading to passivity and inaction. This view neglects other significant factors that contribute to an individual's condition, such as personal choices in the present life, environmental conditions, and social influences. By ignoring these factors, it simplifies the complexity of human experiences and reduces the motivation to take proactive steps to improve one's life[8].

In order to respond to the objection that karma leads to moral fatalism, I will show that karma is not the sole cause of an individual's condition on a textual basis, and that the doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) supports the view that karma is not the sole cause of one's condition[9]. In fact, Ghose notes that despite the various scholarly works on Buddhist ethics, this issue is "not widely discussed" [Ghose 2007, *279*].

The first passage is Nichiren's passage in the Nirvana Sutra, where he mentions six reasons for illness: "(1) disharmony of the four elements; (2) improper eating and drinking; (3) inappropriate practice of seated meditation; (4) attack of demons; (5) the work of devils; (6) the effects of karma" [Nichiren 1999, *631*]. This passage illustrates a holistic understanding of causality, recognizing that illness can result from a variety of sources, including physical imbalances, lifestyle choices, improper spiritual practices, supernatural influences, and karma. This multifaceted approach underscores that karma is just one of many factors influencing an individual's condition. By acknowledging multiple causes, Nichiren's view provides a more comprehensive understanding of illness and counters the notion that karma alone determines one's health and circumstances, thus addressing the challenge of moral fatalism.

Moreover, the seventeenth Karmapa Traleq Kyabgon quotes the following passage from the *Samyutta Nikaya* to emphasize that karma is not the sole cause of one's condition:

> Certain experiences, Sivaka, arise here originating from bile, ... from phlegm, ... from wind, ... resulting from the humors of the body, ... born of the changes of the seasons, ... of being attacked by adversities, ... of spasmodic attacks, ... of the effect of karma. Now, Sivaka, those recluses and Brahmans who speak thus, who hold this view: "Whatever a human being experiences, whether pleasure, or pain, or neither pleasure nor pain – All this is by reason of what was done in the past", they go beyond what is personally known, and what is considered as truth in the world. Therefore, I say of these recluses and Brahmans that they are wrong [Kyabgon 2015, *49*][10].

From this passage, it is clear that the Buddhist perspective, as articulated in the Samyutta Nikaya, is that karma is just one of several factors influencing a person's experiences and conditions. The passage emphasizes a more nuanced understanding of causality, acknowledging physical, environmental, external, and random factors in addition to karma. This multifaceted view counters the simplistic and deterministic interpretation that karma is the sole cause of all experiences, thereby addressing the problem of moral fatalism and underscoring the complexity of human life and suffering.

After showing that these passages illustrate that karma is not the sole cause of one's condition, it is time to demonstrate how the doctrine of "dependent origination" or "independent arising" supports this conclusion. First, we need a brief introduction to how Buddhism understands the individual. In Buddhism, the individual is a composite of various physical and mental elements, creating a psychophysical complex in a state of constant interaction and influence. Additionally, individuals continuously interact with others, indicating that we do not have a single, core essence but exist in a state of continuous change.

Within this framework, karma operates as a network of interconnected processes involving many individuals. Understanding the complexity of these interactions is crucial for gaining true knowledge, while oversimplifying them leads to ignorance. The Buddha's teachings, or Dharma, illuminate the nature of phenomena (dharmas), which include the elements that make up existence. These teachings stress that actions (karma) and individuals are interdependent. The Buddha challenged the conventional notion of an unchanging, separate self and argued that our actions shape who we become. This interdependence underscores the significance of karma, not only in a moral sense but as a fundamental aspect of existence.

Engaging with the complexity of our experiences leads to personal transformation, the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path. This journey often begins with recognizing internal conflicts and imbalances, reflecting the many facets of our personality. Intensive meditation may not necessarily lead to a definitive understanding of the self. Instead, the Buddha suggested focusing on observable realities and interactions.

This interconnectedness is known as "interdependent arising" in Buddhism. It reveals that we are complex individuals involved in numerous roles and interactions within a multifaceted world. This complexity justifies the practice of mindfulness and awareness, as it helps us understand the intricate nature of existence. Unlike the search for a simple, ultimate truth, the Buddha taught that understanding karma and ourselves involves observing how things interrelate. This approach dispels ignorance and leads to genuine insight. Additionally, the Buddha emphasized that all phenomena are impermanent and lack inherent substance. This perspective, rather than being negative, encourages a deeper examination of reality. Recognizing the impermanence and nonsubstantiality of things is crucial for true transformation and understanding in the Buddhist path.

The doctrine of dependent origination teaches that all phenomena arise due to a web of interdependent causes and conditions. This means that an individual's current condition results from numerous interconnected factors, not just their past karma. This perspective acknowledges that while karma is significant, it interacts with other causes and conditions to shape one's experiences. It emphasizes the importance of present actions and choices. While past karma affects the present, individuals have the power to create

new karma through their current actions, which can influence their future conditions. This interconnected perspective provides a more balanced understanding of karma, counters the notion of moral fatalism, and emphasizes the potential for personal growth and ethical conduct to shape one's future.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have addressed the textual and moral challenges of understanding the doctrine of karma. The principle of karma, prevalent across various Indian traditions, often leads to oversimplifications and misunderstandings, particularly in Western contexts. This generalization problem misrepresents the diverse interpretations across traditions. To avoid such generalizations, I have focused on Mahāyāna Buddhism. Moreover, we have seen that the traditional understanding of karma may conflict with contemporary scientific views, prompting scholars to suggest demythologizing and contextualizing karma to align with modern perspectives. In response to this challenge, I have argued that as scientists use Ockham's Razor to handle unverifiable steps in scientific theories, similar principles could be considered when evaluating non-empirical doctrines like karma, focusing on their explanatory role and practical implications rather than strict empirical verification. And the Buddhist teaching of *Upaya* emphasizes pragmatic and compassionate teaching methods over rigid adherence to doctrine, focusing on alleviating suffering and guiding beings toward enlightenment.

Additionally, while the doctrine of karma is seen by some as a morally comforting alternative to theodicies in Abrahamic religions, it faces criticism for potentially fostering moral fatalism and passivity. Critics argue that viewing karma as the sole determinant of an individual's condition can lead to victim-blaming and a fatalistic attitude that undermines compassionate actions. However, I have argued that the Buddhist doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) counters this by emphasizing that an individual's experiences arise from a complex web of interdependent causes and conditions, not just past karma. This perspective highlights the importance of present actions and choices, promoting a more nuanced and proactive approach to ethical conduct and personal growth.

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[1] For further information on the historical investigation of karma, refer to: [McDermott 1980; Krishan 1997; O'Flaherty 1980; Bronkhorst 2011].

[2] Another example of adopting a generalizing approach is found in Burley's essay "Retributive Karma and The Problem of Blaming the Victim". Although Burley does not object to the doctrine of karma, and he attempts to offer an alternative way of understanding the disagreements surrounding it, his approach still generalizes, potentially encountering the same problems previously mentioned [Burley 2013].

[3] Sometimes, even within the same tradition or school, there are differences in views and interpretation regarding certain doctrines and subjects.

[4] For more examples of naturalizing, demythologizing and modernizing the concept of karma in the Western world, see: [Ghose 2007; Batchelor 1998]. This approach is just followed by Western thinkers, but also by some Buddhist monks. For instance, Bhikkhu Buddhasasa the twentieth-century Thai monk also followed this approach in *Toward the Truth.* For more information see: [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu 1971, chap. 3; 1974].

[5] Other examples of scientific theories that have employed Ockham's Razor include the Higgs Mechanism, Quantum Field Theory, and the discovery of DNA, among others.

[6] While it is true that *Upaya* is a useful means to reduce suffering and to reach enlightenment, it faces several challenges; one major concern is that it may involve deceiving or withholding complete truths, which could lead to misuse under the guise of "skillful means". For further information about the ethical implications of *Upaya*, see: [Schroeder 2011].

[7] For further responses to the blaming the victim challenge, see: [Burley 2013; 2014]. And for further responses to the moral nihilism challenge, see: [Finnigan 2022].

[8] His objection often results from an oversimplified and generalized view of karma, as we have shown above. For instance, Kuppuswamy calls the doctrine of karma "a philosophy of despair" because it presupposes a form of moral fatalism [Kuppuswamy 1977, *46*]. However, this is a misreading of karma, as it presupposes one interpretation of this doctrine while neglecting the different schools and traditions within the Indian tradition. For example, in Hinduism, the belief in the Indian caste system divides people into hierarchical groups based on their birth, work, and relationships. This belief can lead to fatalism and resignation among the lower castes, reducing their motivation to seek social and economic improvement. On the other hand, Buddhism rejects the Indian caste system and the notion that people cannot change their social group. Buddhism emphasizes the potential for personal transformation and the importance of ethical conduct and mental cultivation in overcoming one's circumstances.

[9] It is important to recognize that the view that karma is the sole cause of an individual's condition may apply to some of Indian schools and traditions, but not all. In other words, we need to approach karma from a pluralistic perspective. Scholars view Buddhism through various lenses, including hard determinism, neo-compatibilism, paleo-compatibilism, semi-compatibilism, and forms of libertarianism, illusionism, and anachronism [Finnigan 2022, *8*]. The fact that Buddhist moral teachings can be interpreted in different ways concerning free will and determinism suggests that there is sufficient room to argue that karma does not necessarily lead to moral fatalism.

[10] For another passage from Theravada Buddhism that illustrates karma is not a sole cause for one's condition, see: [Mendis et al. 1993, *82*].

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А. Шараф

Розуміння карми в сучасному світі: погляд буддизму магаяни

Дослідження давнього вчення є складним завданням узагалі, а особливо тоді, коли досліджується принцип, що не просто залишив свої найдавніші текстові вияви в першому тисячолітті до нашої ери, а й охоплює широкий спектр культур у всьому світі. Однією з таких доктрин, глибоко переплетених із нашого повсякденною діяльністю, є індійський принцип карми. Заглиблення в цю доктрину є складним через її багатогранність, що охоплює культурний, історичний, релігійний, текстовий і філософський виміри. Така заплутаність щодо принципу карми породжує кілька проблем у його розумінні та прийнятті. Перша проблема стосується розуміння вчення в його текстовому та історичному контекстах. Наприклад, доводиться мати справу з різноманітністю текстів, мінливістю інтерпретацій та їхнім розвитком із плином часу. Друге ускладнення пов'язане з моральними проблемами, що випливають з ідеї справедливості карми та, зокрема, таких її наслідків, як страждання і фатум.

Розв’язання цих завдань має вирішальне значення для повного розуміння ролі карми як в історичному, так і в сучасному контекстах.

У цьому есеї ми розглянемо деякі з цих проблем і відповімо на них демонстрацією того, як буддійське розуміння карми в магаяні залишається актуальним і значущим сьогодні. По-перше, поясненням того, як тут тлумачиться принцип карми, закладається основа для подальшого обговорення. По-друге, досліджується перший тип проблем, пов’язаних із текстовими аспектами розуміння вчення про карму, і пропонується відповідь на них. По-третє, описано моральні проблеми, пов’язані з ідеєю справедливості карми, зокрема з тим, як вона узгоджується зі стражданнями й фатумом, і даються відповіді на порушені запитання. Досліджуючи ці аспекти, есей має на меті запропонувати такі нюанси розуміння карми, у яких відбиті повага до складності цього поняття і визнання його актуальності як у стародавньому, так і в сучасному контекстах.

Ключові слова: буддизм магаяни; вища справедливість; карма; моральний фаталізм; узагальнення; упая (upāya)

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