Article

Belief in Karma: The Belief-Inducing Power of a Collection of Ideas and Practices with a Long History

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Abstract: This article provides an analysis of the concept of karma and related concepts, such as rebirth, merit, and transfer of merit, along with a historical survey focusing on classical texts. The attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The second reason involves the idea of rebirth. The belief in both karma and rebirth can bring consolation with the hope of life hereafter, where one's destiny is determined not by chance, but by the moral quality of one's actions in this or previous lives. The belief in karma also incorporates diverging elements, such as transfer of merit. The practice of transfer of merit serves to improve an individual's moral and religious status through rituals or other suitable means, while the doctrine of karma itself strongly speaks to the strict fulfilment of retributive justice. Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, although their mutual compatibility is debatable.

Keywords: karma; rebirth; merit; transfer of merit

1. Introduction

A popular Western idea of karma is that we always get what we deserve based on our actions and intentions. This idea implies that the universe is governed by the law of karma, which automatically guarantees a fair and just outcome for all, sooner or later. Furthermore, the popular idea of karma is associated with the belief that people are rewarded or punished by the natural (or societal) consequences of their actions in this life or hereafter. The idea of karma also indicates that what people are facing now and what they will face in the future have been concocted out of the thousands of choices they have made in this life or past lives. These choices have motivated actions that in turn have contributed to who people are today, with all their strengths and weaknesses. Aside from these popular beliefs, it is important to remember where the concept of karma originated. The concept has a long history in Indian-origin religions and currents of thought, which give it a much richer and more complex meaning than the simplified Western concept suggests.

This article discusses the power and attractiveness of the belief in karma, as well as the accumulated effect of deeds in past and present lives. The major questions to be addressed include: why do so many people seem to believe in karma, and what makes the idea of karma viable? To answer these questions, a philosophical analysis of karma and related concepts, such as rebirth, merit, and the transfer of merit, is necessary. This study provides these analyses, along with a historical survey focusing on classical texts and references.

I will defend the view that the rational and psychological attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is *the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts* on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The popular belief in karma underlines this ideal. The second reason refers to the idea of rebirth. The belief in karma and rebirth can *bring us consolation with the hope of life hereafter, where our fate will be determined not by chance*, but by the moral quality of our actions in this or previous lives. Faith in karma and reincarnation can give us solace by promising us another life, one in which our fate will be

determined not by chance, but by the moral quality of our actions, both now and in the past. Furthermore, this study draws attention to inconsistencies and conflicts in Indian philosophy and religion. I suggest that an inconsistent combination of religious beliefs and orientations can still be attractive because of persistent human desires and needs, such as the fulfilment of justice and the improvement of one's moral status.

1.1. An Asymmetry in Karmic Explanations for Life Events

The idea of karma originally comes from the South Asian religions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, but, at least superficially, it is known globally. Although karma is an ancient belief, neither the Vedas nor the Brāhmaṇas contain the belief in karma in a more developed form as found, for example, in the Upaniṣads. Thus, the earliest Vedic tradition provides only a partial basis for the doctrine of karma as we understand it today. Against this background, some scholars hold that it was actually the Jains who introduced the idea of karma (Bronkhorst 2007).

As noted, the idea of karma is present in popular worldviews and Western culture. Many people refer, perhaps with a twinkle in their eye, to karma as an explanation for specific life events, more often for setbacks and failures than for success and achievement. In contrast, others, perhaps more seriously, refer to karma as a justice-serving order of reality that ensures that everyone gets their just deserts, either in this life or hereafter. It is noteworthy that in popular opinion and practice, there is sometimes an asymmetry between karmic explanations of success and setbacks. Both success and setbacks can be considered the fruits of one's actions, i.e., karma. Some people explain setbacks as metaphysical sanctions for bad deeds done in a previous life, while success is explained as a reward for good deeds mainly done in this life. This asymmetry—regarding bad deeds done in a past life versus good deeds done in the present life—is understandable, because an undefined reference to past bad deeds may mitigate one's negative moral status (for example, "the guilty one was my past self, about whom I know next to nothing"), whereas it is often pleasing, if not flattering, to ascribe credit for good deeds to oneself, namely, to one's present self.

Another asymmetry involving the concepts of karma and rebirth is present as well. There are many claimed accounts of people remembering their previous lives, while the basis ("residue") of individual karmic outcomes, rewards, or punishments, is usually not exactly detailed or remembered (Doniger 1980b, p. 372). Thus, in the context of the belief in karma, individual achievements or setbacks in life are not necessarily explained by specific good or bad actions in previous lives. Rather, karma is considered residual, meaning that the moral quality of human deeds is accumulated in personal karmic "accounts" or "bookkeeping", based on which it is not necessarily possible to discover which reward or punishment is due to which deed (or which karmic "bookkeeping entry").

1.2. The Common Non-Religious Notion of Merit

As was mentioned, an analysis of the concepts of rebirth and merit is necessary to understand the viability of the belief in karma. Let us start with the concept of rebirth. Although rebirth (S.: *punarjanma*, *punarbhava*) is often associated with the doctrine of karma in the classical Indian literature (Edgerton 1965, p. 30; Herman 1976, pp. 212–13; Halbfass 1991, pp. 291–92), the two ideas are logically distinct from each other. It is conceptually possible that every intentional action has either pleasant or painful consequences for its agent, based on the moral goodness or badness of the action, without the result of a consequent afterlife (Ayrookuzhiel 1983, p. 141; Fuller 1992, p. 246). Also, rebirth is possible without any such system as karma. Thus, karma does not imply rebirth, and rebirth does not imply karma (Sharma 1996, p. 29). However, to answer the question regarding why rebirth is needed, it is common to refer to the idea that rebirth makes it possible for the corrective justice entailed by the doctrine of karma to be fulfilled. In this sense, the notions of merit and demerit play an important motivational and explanatory role. One might say

that the belief in karma, being closely related to the notions of merit and demerit, sucks its power from that role.

To understand this concept, it helps to have a general, non-religious idea of what merit is (Lehtonen 1999, 2000). People often say that someone has merit when they think that that person did something good, and they give them credit for it. Giving someone credit for their deed entails providing a positive sanction, like verbalising gratitude or bestowing a reward. Along with receiving merit for their deeds, one can also be considered meritorious based on their traits, abilities, or capacities, such as their physique, stamina, or intelligence. Competitions involving each of these attributes can result in rewards. The examples here show that, in the right sense of the word, merit is more than just a good deed or quality. It also entails deciding that someone deserves praise or a reward for what they did. Such decisions are based on a social system that employs sanctions to enforce and strengthen order and discipline in society (Feinberg 1970, p. 23). Generally, one can only receive merit for actions that comply with social norms. In a social system, merit is *a deed or quality that is seen as a reason to praise or reward someone*. It is sufficient to point out here that some other terms, such as "credit", "desert," and "qualification", can be used in the same sense as "merit" in suitable contexts.

I have assumed that the concepts of praise and reward are intertwined with the concept of merit. According to conventional secular practises, praise or rewards are given only to those who perform good deeds or display virtue, and neither praise nor rewards can be transferred from one individual to another. Given this, the logic of merit includes the idea that merits are personal, meaning that the appreciation or reward for a deed or quality should only go to the person who did the deed or possesses the quality. The same is true for fault or demerit as a basis for blame or punishment: neither can be transferred, because one is blamed or punished as the person who did the deed or possesses the quality (Westermarck 1939, pp. 117–18). This means that, before receiving a reward or punishment, a person must have merit or demerit. Another premise of a standard system of reward and punishment is that rewards and punishments are proportional to merits and demerits. In addition, the concept of the agent, or the doer of the deed, is central to the distribution of rewards and punishments.

Aside from personality, another important aspect of the logic of merit is that having merit as a result of an action commonly implies intentionality. The assumption of intentionality can be seen, for example, in the fact that intentional actions are generally regarded as more meritorious than good, but unintentionally performed, actions. Unintentional actions can fall into two categories: those committed by accident and those committed knowingly, but unintentionally. One implication of the intentionality presupposition is that individuals, as well as groups or institutions, can be meritorious if they act intentionally. A football team, a construction crew, or an army, for example, can be considered meritorious if they took deliberate action to achieve a goal. However, the merit of a group requires not only intentionality, but also that the group's intention cannot be reduced to that of its individual members.

Let me summarise the key points of the preceding discussion. In secular contexts, appreciation or reward is only given to the person who does something good or has a good quality, and it cannot be given to someone else. Thus, merit logic is based on the idea that merits are personal. In terms of actions, merit implies intentionality: people or groups of people are considered meritorious when they perform intentional actions.

1.3. The Notion of Merit in Indian Religions

I have covered a few typical, non-religious applications of the term merit in the previous section. Based on these considerations, the following preliminary definition of merit is proposed: merit is a deed or quality that is seen as a reason to praise or reward someone. Next, I will examine how Indian religions view the notion of merit, because that notion is a central ingredient in the doctrine of karma and is essential for explaining the viability of that doctrine. I will focus on uses of the term merit in Indian religions that stand

out as unusual or troubling when compared to its use in secular contexts. Such uses may require special treatment or explanation, so as not to destroy the rational justification of the idea of karma.

However, before getting into the details of the idea of merit in Indian religions, it is helpful to take a quick look at the idea of salvation and liberation, especially in Hindu traditions. The ideas of merit and transfer of merits are part of the doctrinal context in which liberation is considered a central objective. According to the traditional Hindu view as described, for example, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, there are three ways (*trimārga*) in which *mokṣa*, or the liberation from the wheel of life and death (*saṃsāra*), is achievable, and negative karmic consequences can be avoided (Hopkins 1971, pp. 91, 93; Crawford 1982, pp. 123–29; Klostermaier 1989, pp. 46, 145–49, 184–85, 210–11; Weightman 1991, pp. 200, 214):

1. By acquiring merits, which is called *karmamārga* (*karmayoga*), or the way of works (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.49–51, Feuerstein 2014, p. 109);
2. By learning that the inner self (*ātman*), that is, the substrate of the individual, is identical with the absolute (*brahman*), which is called *jñānamārga* (*jñānayoga*), or the way of knowledge (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.37, Feuerstein 2014, p. 145);
3. By devotion leading to union with God, which is called *bhaktimārga* (*bhaktiyoga*), or the way of love (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.11, 6.30–31, Feuerstein 2014, pp. 137, 163).

One can try to earn karmic merits by, for example, performing sacrifices, offering gifts to Brahmins (*dāna*), and making religious promises (*vrata*) regarding the performance of some task or mission (Klostermaier 1989, pp. 169–72). Penance (*tapas*) or expiation (*prāyaścitta*), usually fasting (*upavāsa*), is often associated with religious promises (Wadley 1983, p. 149). Sometimes, expiation is also called medicine (*bheṣaja*, *cikitsā*), which illustrates its power to decrease the accumulation of bad karma (Tähtinen 1982, p. 34). The intensity of the suffering attached to the penance is believed to affect the time required to diminish demerits. The stronger the intensity of the suffering, the sooner the karmic demerits will diminish. In some ascetic groups, especially in Jainism, torturing the body is believed to hasten the "ripening" of bad karma so that the ascetics can detach themselves from *saṃsāra* and reach liberation sooner than their karma would require in ordinary circumstances (Brockington 1992, pp. 81–82; Bronkhorst 1995, pp. 333–35, 340–41; Oberhammer 1984, pp. 132–33, 149–50). Yoga, pilgrimage, and bathing in the Ganges River are also regarded as means of erasing negative karma. In the *Garuḍapurāṇa* (1.106.19–20), several courses of purification are given by which impurity can be washed away: lapse of time (*kāla*), rites in fire (*agni*), action (*karma*), earth (*mṛd*), wind (*vāyu*), mind (*manas*), knowledge (*jñāna*), penance (*tapas*), repetition of sacred words (*japa*), repentance (*paścāttāpa*), and fasting (*nirāhāra*) (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Part I 1978, p. 322; Tähtinen 1982, p. 35).

Now, let us focus on the notion of merit. To begin, the term merit (S.: *dharma*, *puṇya*) is used in Indian religions in ways that are similar to how it is used in secular contexts. However, it is also used in ways that are not used in secular contexts. People believe that they gain special religious merit when they do things like feed monks, perform a ritual, go on a pilgrimage, build temples, worship gods, study the scriptures, and follow strict rules (Babb 1975, p. 92; Crawford 1982, pp. 128–29). For example, a priest might give a blessing or let a person take part in a religious ceremony as a reward for this kind of behaviour. The reward can also be supernatural, such as assistance from a deity that is anticipated to result in favourable karmic repercussions, such as a successful rebirth, positive harvest, or illness recovery. These examples demonstrate that certain behaviours and, in particular, rewards not found outside of religion are present in religion. Nonetheless, the formal criteria for determining merit in religion and outside of religion are often the same. To be of merit, something must be a good deed or have a good quality according to criteria for what is considered good. Thus, even if the extensions of merit differ, the intention of the term merit is often the same, whether it is used in a religious or secular context.

According to the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara (700–800), people must work for their salvation and cannot transfer their karma to anyone, not even God (Potter 1980, p. 263; Reichenbach 1990, p. 152). This is also what the *Mahābhārata* (XII.279.15, 21) says:

Whatever deed a man does in four ways viz. with eye, with thought, speech or action, he receives (in return) that same kind of action; a man does not enjoy (i.e., experience the results of) the good deed or evil deeds of another; man attains (a result) in consonance with the actions done by himself (quoted from Kane 1977, p. 1595).

Regardless of these views, the concept of merit transfer is prominent in classical Indian literature, particularly in the Purāṇas. The Purāṇas, however, disagree with one another regarding the potential for merit transfer (Doniger 1980a, p. 4; Fuller 1992, p. 246).

In classical Buddhist texts, especially the Hīnayāna/Theravāda tradition, individuals are solely responsible for their merits, and merits cannot be passed on to others. For example, in the *Saṁyattanikāya* (III. 43), the third collection of the *Suttapiṭaka* of the *Tripiṭāya*, the Pali canon of Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes the personal nature of karma and advises each being to achieve his or her own salvation (Woodward 1975, p. 37; McDermott 1980, p. 190). The *Saṁyattanikāya* (I.227) also states that you get what you sow. This means that those who do good receive good, while those who do bad receive bad (Davids 1971, p. 293). According to popular belief, the transfer of merit can be found in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It can be seen, for example, that at the end of every ceremony, an important part of Mahāyāna practice is to bestow the merit that has been attained to benefit other sentient beings (Williams 1996, p. 208). Wolfgang Schumann says that the Mahāyāna teaching of the transfer of merit "breaks the strict causality of the Hīnayānic law of *karman* (P.: *kamma*) according to which everybody wanting better rebirth can reach it solely by his own efforts". However, Schumann adds that the only difference between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna on this point is found in the texts, because the religious practice in South Asia recognises the transfer of merit in Theravāda as well (Schumann 1973, p. 92).

1.4. The Historical and Doctrinal Context of Merit Transfer

In taking the most common examples into account, there are two main reasons why the transfer of merit is done. On the one hand, merit transfer is a way to help someone get healthy and live long, to have a good rebirth, or to help with the afterlife of a deceased loved one. Sometimes, it is said that what is given by the transfer of merit also includes progress toward *nirvāṇa* (Reichenbach 1990, pp. 173–75; Keown 1992, pp. 46, 89–90, 116–18, 121, 124–25; Tillekeratne 1996, p. 121). On the other hand, the transfer of merit is a way to avoid being unhappy in this life or in the next, especially because of bad karma, by making up for or getting rid of one's karmic flaws. In this sense, the transfer of merit is thought to stop bad karma from coming true, or, to use a metaphor, prevents the "ripening of the karmic fruits" (*vipāka-phala*) of bad actions.

There are numerous instances in classical Indian literature where merit is said to be transferred. In the Vedas, which were written between 1500 and 800 BCE, the idea of transferring merit was linked to the belief that merit came from performing rituals correctly. The merit gained by performing rituals correctly was thought to be transferred from the gods to the person on whose behalf the sacrifice was made via the priests who performed the ritual (Reichenbach 1990, p. 152). As a result, the person considered to receive the merit for the performance of a sacrifice did not have to be the one who carried out the ritual. In this regard, certain ritual practises altered the notion that one can obtain karmic outcomes only for actions performed by oneself. These rituals included Vedic *yajñas*, which were sacrificial ceremonies carried out by priests for people who had hired them by paying the required fee. The relationship between the one for whom the ceremony was performed and those who performed it was a constant and essential element in various *yajñas* (Krishna 1996, p. 12; Tull 1989, pp. 34–35, 107). According to Daya Krishna (1996, p. 172), *yajña* constitutes the core of the Vedas and the doctrine of karma. However, *yajña* and the doctrine of karma are at odds with one another:

The hard core of the theory of the *yajña* is that one can reap the fruit of somebody else's action, while the hard core of the theory of karma denies the very possibility

of such a situation ever arising in a universe that is essentially moral in nature (Krishna 1996, p. 175).

This kind of ambivalence and inconsistency is relatively common in religions. Different religious traditions include many ingredients that vary in their motivational bases. Here, *yajñas* serve to improve the individual's moral status through ritual actions, while the doctrine of karma strongly speaks to the fulfilment of retributive justice. Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through the transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, despite being potentially conflicting. The transfer of merit is intriguing, because it implies that it can change not only one's fate, but also what one deserves. Therefore, merit transfer could be described as "composite causality", in which influencing one's fate and basis for receiving a reward are inextricably linked.

Several scholars say that the idea of transferring merit can be found in its earliest form in the Brahminic funeral rites called *śrāddha*. In these rites, ritual food was given to the dead to try to keep them from being destroyed in the afterlife or from suffering "repeated death". The descendants also fed the priests who assisted them in performing the *śrāddha*. As a result of this rite, it was thought that some of the descendants' merit, such as the merit for doing the *śrāddha*, went to their dead relatives (Malalasekera 1967, pp. 86–87; Gombrich 1971, pp. 206, 210, 214–15; Knipe 1977, p. 112; Doniger 1980a, pp. 3–4, 10–11, 33–34; Bechert 1992, p. 100). Thus, as is similar to the transfer of merit, the *śrāddha* practise implicitly assumes that one person's actions can influence another's fate in the afterlife.

The lay Buddhist ritual *mataka dānē* was another practise of donating gifts, mostly food, to monks in order to gain merit for one's deceased parents or other relatives (Gombrich 1971, pp. 208–9; Bechert 1992, p. 100). The merit gained by feeding priests or monks was frequently thought to be given to gods in exchange for their protection, such as against sickness, crop failure, or evil spirits (Malalasekera 1967, p. 88; Gombrich 1971, pp. 207, 209–10, 214, 216; Gombrich 1988, p. 126). Later Hinduism's *prasāda* ritual assumes that a gift that has been blessed by a priest is given to a god to show the worshiper's devotion. The gift is then given back to the worshipper with extra merit. It is believed that by adding to a gift in this way, the worshipper will receive the god's favour (Doniger 1980a, p. 12).

A food offering served as the intermediary for the transfer of merit in *śrāddha*, *mataka dānē* and *prasāda*. However, *The Upaskâra of Śankara Misra* to *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* (VI.1.6) says that if the person who does a ritual is evil, the ancestors will not get any good from it:

> When evil Brāhmans, unworthy recipients, are fed at the obsequial rites, no fruit accrues from this to the ancestor; or [. . .] the result of the obsequial rites does not accrue to the ancestors (Gough 1975, p. 179).

Vrata ("will" or "what is willed"), a religious practise in North India, is another kind of ritual that involves the transfer of merit. Instead of giving food, it involves making a promise. A *vrata* binds a person to an act or service in order to make amends for past wrongdoings or to change his or her life path. Making amends is based on the idea that good deeds improve people and enable them to do more good deeds in the future (Vetter 1988, p. 99, n. 21). It is believed that the benefits of keeping one's vow sometimes extend to other people, typically to the vow holder's family, and particularly to their parents or kids (Wadley 1983, pp. 147–49, 158–59). This extended reward is called a transfer of merit in a figurative sense. In a similar way, an extended rewarding also takes place when a hereditary status, such as nobility, is transferred from one generation of a family to another generation of the same family.

1.5. The Development of Karma from a Ritual Concept to a Moral Doctrine

As has been explained, one fairly widespread theory holds that Vedic rituals provided some ingredients for, but not a full version of, the doctrine of karma. Good (*puṇya*) and bad (*pāpa*) referred to the value of an action (*karma*) based on how well it was done in the ritual, with good being the right way to do the rite and bad being the wrong way to do it (Tull

1989, p. 2). However, karma did not just remain as a ritual idea. Over time, it took on moral meanings, especially in the Upaniṣadic tradition (Collins 1982, pp. 55–58; Tull 1989, p. 41; Obeyesekere 2002, p. 4). According to the famous passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (III.2.13), "one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action" (Radhakrishnan 1990, p. 217). It is believed that this verse, which dates from between 600 and 500 BC, marked the beginning of karma as a doctrine with moral qualifications. However, the verse (III.2.13) is part of a conversation between two pandits, Yājñavalkya and Jāratkārava Ārtabhāga, which makes it seem like karma was a doctrine to be kept secret and not revealed to just anyone (Potter 1980, p. 266; Basham 1989, pp. 43–44). Insofar as karma is considered a moral doctrine, viewing it as a secret contradicts the idea that moral views should be widely accepted. According to the prevailing view, Siddhártha Gautama Buddha (ca. 563–ca. 483 BCE) was the first to completely make the concept of karma ethical (Gombrich 1988, p. 46). In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (III.415), the fourth collection of the *Suttapiṭaka* of the *Tripiṭaka*, the Buddha connects karma to intention or will (*cetenā*):

> I say, monks, that *cetanā* is *kamma*; having intended (*cetayitvā*), one does a deed by body, word, or thought (quoted from McDermott 1980, p. 181).

This particular statement does not say anything about how the actions in one's life affect the quality of another life. However, the Buddhist doctrine of karma is based on the idea that every intentional action has good or bad effects on the person who did it, depending on how morally good or bad the action was (Gombrich 1971, pp. 203–4).

The evolution of Indian philosophy toward a moral conception of karma is also reflected in attitudes toward the transferability of merit. The emergence of specific sociological and socio-psychological factors in Indian culture was linked to the development of a moral notion of karma. One of those factors needs to be highlighted in particular. Brahmanism (800 BCE–400 CE), the forerunner of classical Hinduism (400–1800), became a tolerant and adaptable religion in which the belief in the authority of Vedic literature was virtually the only doctrinal demand connecting different sects. However, between 700 and 300 BCE, there were religious reform movements in India that were not in line with this demand. Jainism and Buddhism were the most influential of these sects, and along with them, Indian thought became increasingly individualistic. Individualism made it harder to believe that merit could be moved from one person to another (Reichenbach 1990, p. 152). However, the denial of merit transfer was never supported by the majority of Buddhists. According to Heinz Bechert, the Buddhist doctrine of the transfer of merit (*pattānumodanā*) was fully formed between the 5th and 7th centuries CE (Bechert 1992, pp. 99–100). The transfer of merit continues to be a prominent religious practise in Mahāyāna Buddhism and in Hīnayāna lay Buddhism.

With regard to this discussion, Karl Potter has proposed that there are two major action orientations in Indian philosophy and religion. The "transactional" orientation presupposes a positive approach to action (*pravṛtti*), including the transfer of merit, whereas the "philosophical" (or "non-transactional") orientation presupposes a negative approach of withdrawal from action (*nivṛtti*) (Potter 1980, pp. 265–67). These two orientations have coexisted for thousands of years without weakening the strength or allure of the other, even though their compatibility is debatable.

So far, the provided examples of merit transfer have been related to various rituals. They all hold the same belief that merit is passed between living family members or between deceased relatives and their descendants. Merit transfer can also happen between a student and his teacher or between people and their ruler. The concept of group karma is frequently associated with the second type of merit transfer, or that which occurs between people and their ruler.

While ritual practises are often cited as the original setting for the transfer of merit, this is not the case for all of the classical examples of merit transfer. In India, it is widely held that good or bad karma can be passed from one person to another through social interactions, such as sharing a meal. Some Tamils, for example, believe that accepting cooked food from someone else, particularly a Brahmin or holy man, can result in good

karma. People also believe that eating food from thieves or prostitutes gives you bad karma (Daniel 1983, p. 29). Food is the most common medium of merit transfer in general (Doniger 1980a, pp. 12, 29). Additionally, among Buddhists, the most common form of merit is providing food for monks (Collins 1982, pp. 219–21; Gombrich 1988, p. 126).

The Mahāyāna belief in bodhisattvas ("a being aspiring to enlightenment") is linked to a certain type of merit transfer. Bodhisattvas are believed to do good things, not only for their own spiritual growth, but also to help other people who are suffering. It is thought that the transfer of merit is based on the bodhisattvas' promise to be reborn as many times as needed to reach full Buddhahood, not just for themselves, but for the benefit of all sentient beings (Suzuki 1990, p. 61; Dutt 1978, pp. 103–5; Williams 1996, pp. 49–54). The *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajrcchedikā*) (3) includes the following bodhisattva vow:

> As many beings as there are in the universe of beings, [. . .] all these I must lead to Nirvana, into that Realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind (Conze 1958, p. 25).

The bodhisattva's way of life is characterised by the compassionate development of six perfections (*pāramitā*): generosity (*dāna*), virtue (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), vigour (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) (Harvey 1994, pp. 34–35; Williams 1996, pp. 204–14). It is thought that the bodhisattvas' efforts to reach these perfections help other people reach their own liberation. The bodhisattvas' vow says that they can never say no to helping other people (Gombrich 1971, p. 204; Schumann 1973, pp. 127, 130, 174). Nevertheless, fulfilling this obligation is not just a matter of being obedient. It is believed that bodhisattvas are full of compassion (*mettā*) and capable of erasing the negative karma of those in need (Harvey 1994, p. 13). According to Chapter 4 in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (108c-d),

> the Bodhisattva: this great-souled one, who yet possesses the most sublime perfections, acts through pure compassion; he acts without egoism, like a dog, in the presence of all creatures; he bears, on the part of all creatures, outrages and bad treatment; he assumes all fatiguing and painful tasks (Vasubandhu 1988, p. 691).

It is believed that bodhisattvas can cancel out bad karma because they are perfect and have a lot of merit from doing good things over an uncountable number of lives.

Listening to a bodhisattva's teaching is widely held to be one of the most effective ways to clear away negative karma. It is assumed that some of the karmic outcomes of a bodhisattva's good deeds are passed on to his audience through his teaching. People believe that the good karma of the bodhisattva will cancel out the bad karma of those who listen to him and help them reach *nirvāṇa* faster. This idea has been put in a figurative way by saying that the bodhisattva's longer path to *nirvāṇa* makes the path of those who hear him shorter (Bechert 1973, pp. 15–16; Bechert 1992, pp. 98–99; Williams 1996, p. 208).

When someone receives a gift from a bodhisattva, they have a moral obligation to become a bodhisattva themselves and help other beings who are suffering. This is an important part of the bodhisattva belief. (Schumann 1973, p. 178; Bechert 1973, p. 18.) Another important part of the bodhisattva belief is that a bodhisattva does not risk losing his status as a bodhisattva by giving (*pariṇāmanā*) his karmic merit to other people. Because he gives karmic merits to those in need without expecting anything in return, he receives good karma even though he is not aiming for it. In this way, the bodhisattva can never run out of the good karma he has earned (Schumann 1973, p. 111).

Ascetics in the *pāśupata* school of Hinduism act in the opposite way of bodhisattvas. The *pāśupata* ascetics try to make up for their faults by humiliating themselves in front of their audiences. They do this by imitating snoring, making erotic gestures, and acting crazy (Oberhammer 1984, pp. 178–81, 186–87). The ascetics are thought to have been cleansed of their demerits and to have gained merits as a result of being so publicly humiliated. In turn, those who witness an ascetic's humiliation are thought to gain demerits. As a result, the *pāśupata* ascetics are thought to gain merit by provoking people to do wrong. Another Hindu belief is that devotion to God (*Īśvara*, "Lord"), the author of the law of

karma, cancels the devotee's accumulation of bad karma and prevents negative karmic consequences from manifesting. For example, the *Bhagavadgītā* (9.30–32, 12.6–7) says that if even a very bad person devotes himself to Kṛṣṇa, his pious intention (*bhakti* or loving devotion) will be counted as virtue. His soul will be purified, and he will achieve complete liberation (Feuerstein 2014, pp. 199, 247, 249; Doniger 1980a, p. 28; Basham 1989, p. 92).

Classical Hindu scriptures are also more cautious about whether bad karma can be erased in ways other than by receiving the bad karma's consequences. For instance, the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* maintains that one must experience all of the positive and negative karmic effects. For until and unless they are enjoyed, karmic repercussions persist, even after a hundred million aeons. In a similar way, the *Gautamadharmasūtra* (14.5) states that "because the deed does not perish whatever human action it may be, whether good or evil, it cannot be got rid of except by enjoying its consequences; know from me that a man gets rid of good and evil deeds by enjoying (their consequences)" (Kane 1973, p. 39).

I have considered some classical examples of merit transfer, in which the belief is motivated by humans' needs to improve their moral and spiritual status and prospects for the afterlife. In light of classical examples, there are primarily two different categories of merit transfer. First, the transfer of merit is associated with rituals in which an offspring's merit is believed to be transferred to their deceased ancestors for support in the afterlife. Another major type of merit transfer is associated with the Mahāyāna belief in the bodhisattvas' compassion for other beings. Bodhisattvas show compassion through their teachings and other good deeds, which are believed to cancel out the bad karma of the people they meet. I have also paid attention to how attitudes towards the transferability of merit changed as Indian philosophy evolved towards a moral understanding of karma. The transfer of merit has been rejected by some philosophical schools due to the doctrine of karma, which states that people can only acquire karmic outcomes for actions they have performed themselves. As has been stated, even if different religious ideas vary and seem to draw from different directions, that has not prevented conflicting ideas and doctrines from maintaining viability. Thus, a religious outlook on life does not need to be maximally consistent, and complex traditions with internal tensions can still be psychologically attractive and convincing.

1.6. Beliefs in the Effects and Non-Effects of Karma

One view commonly that is associated with the moral notion of karma is that a person's accumulation of karmic merits and demerits has an effect on the physical and socioeconomic circumstances under which he or she will be reborn. In particular, karmic accumulation is believed to affect whether a person will be reborn as a human or as an animal, whether he will be healthy or disabled, and whether he might be reborn in heaven or hell (Chakrabarti and Lehtonen 2020, p. 32). In Hinduism, *dharma* is a concept that helps explain karmic accumulation and effects. *Dharma* ("what holds together") is the basis of a cosmic moral order (*ṛta*) that determines the duties of each caste (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.31, 18.46; Feuerstein 2014, pp. 103, 313; Crawford 1982, p. 60; Keyes and Valentine 1983, p. 20; Fuller 1992, p. 245). Karmic accumulation is believed to determine the social rank into which a person will be reborn if they are reborn as a human being. According to the *Manusmṛti* (8.386), there would be no thief, no adulterer, no defamer and no aggressor if the basis of all order (*dharma*) is followed (Olivelle 2009, p. 151; Tähtinen 1982, p. 10). This indicates that following the social and moral order or breaking it is the ultimate cause of pleasure or pain, respectively. Thus, no one meets with success or hardship by accident; pleasant experiences will come of merit, and painful experiences will come of demerit, according to the law of karma. In this way, karma functions as an explanation of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This makes the belief in karma psychologically motivating, as well as possibly also comforting.

Especially in Theravāda Buddhism, the view is found that it is also possible to experience pain that is not caused by karma, but by mere external causes (Halbfass 1991, p. 320). According to *Milindapañha* (134–135; 4.1.63):

> It is not all suffering that has its root in Karma. There are eight causes by which sufferings arise, by which many beings suffer pain. And what are the eight? Superabundance of wind, and of bile, and of phlegm, the union of these humours, variations in temperature, the avoiding of dissimilarities, external agency, and Karma. From each of these there are some sufferings that arise, and these are the eight causes by which many beings suffer pain. And therein whosoever maintains that it is Karma that injures beings, and besides it there is no other reason for pain, his proposition is false (Davids 1965, pp. 191–92).

This view is historically related to the discussion of whether the Buddha's suffering resulted from his bad karma (Walters 1990, pp. 81–82).

1.7. Karma as a Theodicy

The consideration that the concept of karma can offer a moral explanation for every experience has made several authors regard it as an apt theodicy. For example, Max Weber claimed that the doctrine of karma is the most consistent theodicy:

> Karma doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history (Weber 1958, p. 121).

In a similar way, Mircea Eliade stated,

> in the light of the law of karma, sufferings not only find a meaning but also acquire a positive value. [. . .] Karma ensures that everything happening in the world takes place in conformity with the immutable law of cause and effect. [. . .] the archaic world nowhere presents us with a formula as explicit as that of karma to explain the normality of suffering (Eliade 1971, pp. 98, 100).

Several contemporary writers have also paid attention to karma as a moral explanation for pain and pleasure. According to Wendy Doniger,

> [. . .] one must not underestimate the value of karma (and fate) as a plot device, karma ex machina explains what cannot otherwise be justified. Thus inconsistencies in character, such as an inappropriately virtuous demon, or in experience, such as the sufferings of a good man, are explained by reference to karma accumulated in unknowable previous lives (Doniger 1980a, p. 28).

Crawford (1982, pp. 145–46) also states, "By linking the present with the past, the law of *karman* attempts to explicate the mysteries behind individual inequalities, and the problem of suffering". In a similar vein, Gombrich (1988, p. 47) says, "Karman thus offers an explanation for the problem of suffering. It is probably its apparent explanatory power which has made the theory so widely accepted". For his part, Reichenbach (1990, p. 29) conveys that "It is precisely the strength of the doctrine of karma that it links the pain and pleasure that we experience with cosmic or environmental conditions, and these conditions in turn with the moral quality of actions performed". Thus, the attractiveness of the doctrine of karma can be said to be based on its ability to frame people's life experiences with the fulfilment of retributive justice. This may sound like an experiential, if not evidential, basis for the belief in karma. However, I think that the doctrine of karma should be described as a desire-based framing, rather than as an epistemic explanation for the problem of suffering. Thus, as far as I can see, the belief in karma reflects the desire for justice and the desire to improve (and approve) oneself and to understand one's life.

Even if Weber praised the doctrine of karma as "the most consistent theodicy ever produced", theodicy is not the most suitable term for the view of suffering associated with karma. This is because that doctrine does not include the idea of the justice of God (θεός + δίκη) (Lehtonen 1999, p. 88; Chakrabarti and Lehtonen 2020, p. 28). This is not merely an etymological remark; the main difference between the classical theodicies and the karmic view of suffering is their different relations to theistic beliefs. A theodicy attempts to answer the questions that arise when the problem of evil is associated with the theistic beliefs regarding the goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience of God. A karmic answer to the

problem of suffering does not need to treat the problems associated with theistic beliefs (Harvey 1994, p. 30; Herman 1976, pp. 143–291) unless God is regarded as the author of the law of karma, as some Hindus believe. The idea of "God behind karma" is discussed by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), the second president of India, as follows:

> If the law of karma is independent of God, then God's absoluteness is compromised. The critic who declares that we cannot save the independence of God without sacrificing the doctrine of karma has not the right conception of the Hindu idea of God. The law of karma expresses the will of God. The order of karma is set up by God, who is the ruler of karma (*karmādhyākṣaḥ*). Since the law is dependent on God's nature, God himself may be regarded as rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. To show that the law of karma is not independent of God, it is sometimes said that, though God can suspend the law of karma, still he does not will do so. Pledged to execute the moral law which is the eternal expression of his righteous will, he permits evil which he might otherwise arrest. The inner ruler has regard in all cases to the volitional effort which prompt a man's action. He does not care to upset his own laws and interfere with the world-scheme. God, though immanent in the world, does not wish to be intrusive (Radhakrishnan 1997, pp. 694–95).

For all its advantages, a karmic answer (if it can be considered an answer at all—perhaps rather an expressive reaction) to the problem of suffering is not perhaps fully satisfactory for the reason that one does not usually know or remember what good or bad one has done in his or her previous lives (a fact I referred to at the beginning of this study when pointing out asymmetries with the concepts of karma and rebirth). This lack of awareness of one's past can have a negative effect on whether a person can regard his or her sufferings as justified, and, obviously, it is difficult to feel guilty for something about which one knows nothing. In relation to this, Wendy Doniger points out that the doctrine of rebirth in a way neutralizes or impersonalises karmic demerits:

> The myths of karma do blame man for evil, but they neutralize any implication of personal, individual guilt by shifting the blame to a previous existence, of which one cannot be conscious (and for which one cannot truly experience guilt), though one can still make personal efforts to dispel that evil in the future (Doniger 1980b, p. 372).

What the doctrine of karma does not tell either is why there is wrongdoing and suffering at all. Furthermore, if humans are accountable for their destinies, as the doctrine of karma asserts, then they must have some control over them. Nevertheless, human beings cannot control suffering associated with the misfortunes and accidents they meet (Babb 1983, p. 175; Fuller 1992, p. 249). Thus, an individual is responsible for his experience of bad karma, which he is unable to control, just as a lawbreaker has himself to blame for his being punished, although he can avoid or mitigate his punishment in no way.

Thus, a widely held belief is that the doctrine of karma serves as an explanation for the suffering and injustice brought about by prior deeds. However, some empirical studies suggest that people who know the idea of karma and believe in karma may attribute their failures and misfortunes to factors other than karma. Lawrence Babb notes that, although the doctrine of karma appears to be nearly omnipresent in Hindu culture, its role in popular religion remains unclear. Babb bases his view on fieldwork observations from the Chhattisgarh region of Central India:

> The idea that the things that happen to an individual are the "fruits" (*phal*) of past actions was obviously familiar to my informants, but they seemed to regard this a more of somewhat remote and theoretical possibility than as a convincing or satisfying way of explaining misfortune in any concrete instance (Babb 1983, p. 168).

According to Babb (p. 168), "the doctrine of karma explains misfortune with something approaching logical perfection. But this does not seem to commend it to villagers, who

under most circumstances apparently prefer other modes of explanation". These other modes of explanation are, for instance, fate, the anger of unpropitiated deities, and the evil deeds of ghosts. Babb (1983, p. 168) says that "although in the popular traditions of India, karma is indeed one way to explain human fortunes, it is by no means the usual way, or even a very important way, at least as far as certain everyday misfortunes are concerned" (regarding karma as an explanation of suffering in popular Hinduism, see also Ayrookuzhiel 1983, pp. 125, 131–32; Fuller 1992, pp. 248–50). Explaining why the doctrine of karma, even if well-known and widely believed, is not always or necessarily used as an explanation of one's failures and misfortunes may be due to the fact that other explanations (like one's childhood experiences and traumas, or the activity of ghosts and spirits) may avoid the necessity of consenting to the view that one's moral and spiritual status is somehow weak and inadequate because of one's actions.

Even some classical texts imply that karma is not an unfailing guarantee of justice. For example, in the famous *Mahābhārata* (I.63.91–96) story, the sage Māṇḍavya chastises the god Dharma for harshly and unjustly punishing him for torturing a fly as a child (Williams 2003, p. 56). The story appears to call karmic justice into question, and implies that the dispenser of justice must use discretion on a case-by-case basis. The *Mahābhārata* story is also intriguing because it recognises the special status of those who are underage and emphasises that even the dispenser of justice is not above the law.

One could suggest that the transfer of merit is a means by which an individual can strengthen his control over his destiny. However, not even the possibility of the transfer of merit can change the fact that an individual is unable to fully control her destiny in terms of karma, because the karmic order "implicates the entire world-career of the self in its present experiences, and in so doing leaves obscure the question of how an individual might specifically respond to a particular problem" (Babb 1983, p. 178). Thus, it is unknown in a single case which merits are sufficient or which actions are necessary so that karmic misfortunes can be avoided or mitigated. Babb (1983, p. 174) states that, because the other reasons for everyday misfortunes are therapeutic as well as explanatory, they are more usual in popular Hinduism than karma. These other reasons include witches and malevolent spirits against whom specific measures can be taken, as well as annoyed deities, who can be appeased by doing certain things.

1.8. Reasons for Ambivalence in the Belief in Karma

In this study, I have defended the view that the rational and psychological attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The belief in karma underlines this ideal. The second reason involves the idea of rebirth. The belief in karma and rebirth together can provide comfort with the hope of an afterlife in which one's fate is not arbitrary, but rather justly and strictly based on the moral quality of one's deeds in this or previous lives. Although there are many stories of a remembered past life, their justificatory role in the belief in rebirth is not necessarily decisive; the hope for an afterlife may play a more important role. Be that as it may, the belief in karma also incorporates diverging elements, such as the transfer of merit, which confirms that, in Indian traditions, there are two main ways to consider actions. The transactional orientation assumes the positive approach of action, whereas the non-transactional orientation assumes the negative approach of withdrawal from action. The transfer of merit follows the transactional orientation and presupposes karma as the accumulation of merits and demerits. The practice of the transfer of merit serves to improve an individual's moral and religious status through rituals or other suitable means, while the doctrine of karma itself strongly speaks for a strict and non-manipulatable fulfilment of retributive justice. Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through the transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, although their mutual compatibility is debatable. Thus, an inconsistent combination of religious ideas can be spiritually and

psychologically viable because of persistent human desires and needs, despite, one might say, insufficient epistemic justification (viz. lack of evidence or lack of logical argument).

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