Karma as Social Theory

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Every religious or spiritual concept is also a social theory, explicitly or implicitly serving as a guide for individuals and communities in the context of certain notions about the nature of the universe, the purpose of life, and criteria for ethical behavior. It is usually not only prescriptive but also explanatory and sometimes even predictive about optimal behavior given certain conditions and assumptions.

Many of the foundations of modern western social and behavioral sciences were, in fact, borrowed from religious traditions of antiquity. Sigmund Freud’s theories of human behavior, for example, are in large part secularized versions of Greek and Roman mythology. Emile Durkheim’s sociology is a synthesis of rabbinic thought and Catholic theology updated and embellished by a French rabbi’s son. Karl Marx’s class analysis and theories of sociohistorical change are in many ways a sophisticated Christian eschatological approach to analysis and the possibility (or perhaps inevitability) of change without the explicit religious assumptions.

The more I have read and thought about the concept of karma, so basic in Asian spiritual thought, the more intrigued I have become with its theoretical insights into the nature of human behavior, human agency (the ability of individuals and social collectivities to bring about change in the world), and the importance of nonviolence in human behavior.

Karma in Asian Thought

The law of karma, or action, is a basic notion of cause and effect: “As we sow, so shall we reap” is the saying one Hindu author uses to explain the law (Jagannaman 1984: 54). The concept, which is quite widespread if not universal in human cultures, has a status in Asian thought as solid as the law of gravity in Western science. For many it is also closely linked to Gandhian theories of nonviolence and ahimsa (non-harmfulness) and is rich with implications for the possibility of nonviolent change from the individual to the macro level.

According to the traditional concept, each individual soul goes through a cycle of rebirths, known as Samsara or the wheel of life, the endless round of deaths and rebirths: when a person dies, the soul leaves its body and transmigrates to another. The nature of the next reincarnation is determined by the person’s karma, that is, the collective consequences of all individual actions. The gods do not punish or reward; negative actions bring their own dire consequences, and positive actions bring their own rewards.

Encounters with the gods, from this perspective, are primarily pedagogical, so that people can learn how to be rewarded, rather than punished, for their actions. You are responsible for all of your actions — touching fire will cause a burn whether knowingly or unknowingly. One’s individual life at any point is the summation of all previous actions so that together we create the kind of social environment in which we live.

In this system one is not to fear or mourn death; it is simply another passage. The soul leaves one body and enters another in the same way that a person changes clothes. The broad cosmology of the Hindu tradition allows the individual to look somewhat philosophically upon the transitory pain of present existence. Even if life seems intolerable, a person can work diligently to do the best with his or her current lot and thereby look forward to a better life in the future.

The karma-samsara concept contains a deterministic element that sometimes convinces people to accept their fate and not try to change their immediate life circumstances, which amount to rewards and punishments for actions in a previous life. Some karma (praradhaka karma), such as family or environment, is generally beyond our control, although we jointly construct even our family and to some extent our environment. The karma-samsara theory is supposed to facilitate the individual’s transcendence of the profane life by endowing it with religious duty. The system leads to remarkable abuse when exploited, however, by providing a powerful rationale for the ruling classes and legitimating a false consciousness among the poor, who are taught that their poverty is punishment for their deeds in a previous lifetime. This is ideal rationale for what sociologists call “blaming the victim” (Ryan 1976; Piven and Cloward 1971).

The idea of karma is not entirely deterministic, however. First, two of the three stages of karma are amenable to

1. I am grateful to Dr. S. Jeyapragasam and Prof. Stephen Philips for their comments and suggestions. Portions of this article will appear in Kurtz (2006).
change. The accumulated karma of all previous births (samskāra karma), and actions in the present life determine a person's future (agami karma). Cultivating new habits and ridding oneself of evil thoughts and desires can alter the impact of the habits of previous lifetimes. Finally, a better life in the future can be constructed through attention to present life duties. Moreover, we have the freedom to choose whether or not to live according to our dharma—that is, the duty appropriate to the state produced by individual karma—just as we can decide to ignore gravity if we are willing to face the consequences. Finally, even though we should not strive to change our own life situation, we should attempt to improve others', an idea promulgated both by Hindu activist Mohandas Gandhi and the current Buddhist leader, the 14th Dalai Lama (in Kurtz 2005).

In the Asian religions, then, suffering is seen as integral to the very fabric of existence, as we experience it. It enters into human consciousness when people develop desires for worldly or material objects and become excessively attached. The solution to the problem of suffering is Moksha (liberation) in Hinduism, or the attainment of Enlightenment or Nirvana (that is, supreme bliss) in Buddhism, which allows one to escape the “wheel of karma-samsara.” In Hinduism, the paths of yoga cultivate detachment of the self from dependence on this world, allowing one to escape it. Similarly, in Buddhism, following the Eightfold Path prescribed by the Buddha allows us to reach Enlightenment, or Nirvana.

**Karma Theory and Parallels in Western Social Science**

Theories of karma in the ancient Asian religions have a number of parallels in the modern Western social sciences, which would be worth exploring in some detail, but which I will only mention here. The earliest is reference group theory, first developed by Herbert Hyman (1968) and widely used in small group research. It is based on the idea that individuals have sets of significant others on whom they rely for self-appraisals, comparisons, and internalized interests and norms. As Dawson and Chatman (2001) note,

The theory is often used to describe two major types of relationships between individuals and groups. These two major dimensions are known as “normative” reference group behaviour and “comparative” reference group behaviour. Because some reference groups teach individuals how they should behave, “normative” reference group theory is sometimes referred to as a guide for individuals' behaviour. Additionally, some social groups, or “comparative” reference groups, give individuals a basis for comparing themselves or their group to other individuals or groups. Comparative reference groups also influence individuals' feelings and behaviour.

A later development that has become popular in part because of its adaptability to the mapping of social relations is social network theory, first developed by Barnes (1954; cf. 1972). By looking at citations, one can see influences of various scholarly networks on the development of ideas and research, and by asking people questions about whom they interact with and how frequently, we can begin to map out a social world. One of the interesting applications of the idea is Stanley Milgram's (1967) idea of a “small world”, and that information could be passed through a small chain of individuals from one person to another. The idea sparked the imagination of many people but resulted in few successful studies (Kleinfield 2002).

Most theories of karma suggest that it is somehow exchanged when people interact with one another. One's initial reference group is the family, of course, which is why that group of people has such a profound impact on one's character and life trajectories. As the individual matures and moves outside the home for additional reference groups and social networks, the karma of others becomes influential in shaping one's own sense of self, and internalized norms and values.

One of the ancient debates in karma theory is what contemporary social scientists often call the issue of "agency." That is, to what extent are our choices pre-determined, and how much impact might individuals and groups have on the world and our fate? Although the idea of karma can lead to fatalism, it can also inspire people to responsible action, especially since bad karma may be modified or neutralized by good karma.

A number of implications for individual action and social policy follow from the traditional and social scientific theories related to karma, beginning with a profound theory of agency. One's actions initiate what Robert Thurman (2005) calls “infinite consequentiality;” this process of cause and effect is set in motion with every action as we co-create the universe over time.

The consequences of every thought, word, and deed, moreover, grow exponentially. As Lama Sopa, a Tibetan authority, explains, when one sows seeds, a tree grows which in
turn bears fruit with new seeds that become new trees. The impact of karmic action thus has a ripple effect, or is exponential in its consequences. All elements of the cosmos are interdependent, constituting a self-contained cosmos of ethical retribution, which does not require the intervention of gods to punish or reward. Agency lies with the individuals and collectivities who act within the constraints and boundaries provided by the nature of reality itself.

Most Buddhist rituals involve efforts to obtain merit of some sort, either for oneself or for someone else, thereby transcending one’s current state through the performance of the ritual, but ideally one does not do the ritual because of its outcome. The foundation of Buddhist ritual consists of dana (giving), sila (precepts), and kamma (karma). Keeping the precepts includes conscious acts of service to others and paying respect to them. All of these ritual acts are rooted in the concept of karma, which is conceived in much the same way as it is in Hinduism: because every act has a consequence, if one engages in meditations, chanting, and service, and keeps the precepts, merit will accrue to oneself and to others.

The notion of karma has developed over the centuries with many different aspects in various traditions. Vedanta and Yoga traditions identify three types of karma: that experienced during the present lifetime, the store of karma which has not yet reached fruition, and the karma sown in the present life that will be reaped in a future one (“Karma” 2000).

**Karma and Nonviolence**

Indo-Tibetan scholar Robert Thurman (2005; cf. Thurman 1995) observes that the idea of karma has important consequences for action, particularly when something makes one angry. “When I’m particularly mad at George Bush and company for warmongering, I remember that in another lifetime he was my mother, and that even the most evil people were at some point my errant siblings. That immediately takes a certain edge off the anger.” The problem with anger is that it clouds the mind and makes it difficult to develop positive lines of action that work toward a remedy of the problem. Instead, Thurman advises, one should take three steps: “finding one’s relation to all beings, acknowledging the evil potential in oneself, feeling sympathy for the evil person.”

In its religious contexts — Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism — as well as in Gandhi, the idea of karma is often linked with the notion of ahimsa, or nonharmfulness, as acts of harm toward other beings set in motion chains of causation that ultimately result in harming oneself. As Joan Bondurant (1965: 24) notes, however, Gandhi insists that ahimsa is not merely the negative state of harmlessness, but also a “positive state of love, even doing good to the wrong-doer.” This orientation toward ahimsa has multiple dimensions: it is a spiritual duty and a strategy for effective relationships with others. Gandhi’s belief in karma was no doubt a major component of what he called his “experiments in truth.”

**Gandhi’s Experiments with Truth: Sat-yagraha and Gandhian Ashrams**

Of particular relevance is his decision to found and live in a series of ashrams, spiritual communities that brought together people to live across the social divides of their time. They were modelled after the ancient Hindu concept of the ashram for people to escape the world of material life and engage in spiritual pursuits. Gandhi’s ashram was not an escapist institution for individual spiritual growth, however; it was an instrument for both personal and social transformation.

The ashrams brought together people of different castes, races, religious communities, and genders, living in community together for the first time, and, from the point of view of karmic theory, not only modelling, but actually founding a multicultural world. It was not easy for the participants, who had been taught that to interact with, be touched by, and eat with people across the divides (caste, religion, etc.) was polluting. What was usually forbidden became obligatory in this new community that was Gandhi’s vision of a new world in which such divisions would not exist. The thoughts, words, and deeds of the ashram participants set up series of causal chains that helped to transform the world over the coming decades.

In the 1930s, for example, American Dave Dellinger founded the Harlem Commune, which he moved to Newark, New Jersey in 1939 (Dellinger 1975; Tracy 1996). Dellinger’s ashram was deliberately modelled after Gandhi’s ashram and the community soon began addressing the major issues of their own context, such as racism and war.

Dr. S. Jeyapragasam pointed this (and other important aspects of karma) out to me in a personal communication December 2005.
promoting interracial community and collaboration at a time when it was even illegal in Virginia (just outside the nation's capital) for blacks and whites to marry each other. George Hauser, a student at Union Theological Seminary, was one of the residents of the ashram. As a profound adherent to nonviolence, Hauser refused to participate in the draft and fight in the war, so he was sentenced to serve time in Danbury Federal Penitentiary. When he was about to be released, he was informed that he was welcomed to return to the seminary, but that his political activities had to be cleared by the seminary.

Instead of returning to Union, Hauser went to the University of Chicago Divinity School where he formed a Gandhi study group that began experimenting with desegregation of public facilities. In 1956, when the Montgomery Bus Boycott emerged, the Quaker American Friends Service Committee send Hauser to Montgomery, Alabama, where he and Bayard Rustin trained the organizers in Gandhian methods of direct action, including the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who was just beginning to find his way into the leadership of the new American civil rights movement.

The seeds planted by Gandhi in his ashrams gave fruit not only to Dellinger's ashram and the first experiments in Gandhian nonviolence in the United States, but eventually helped to create the civil rights movement in the US. That struggle, in turn, inspired people around the world in various human rights and pro-democracy groups from South Africa and Chile to the Philippines and China. When I was in the Soviet Union in the winter of 1988, in both Dushanbe and Kiev, people asked me to join with them in singing “We Shall Overcome,” the anthem of the US civil rights movement, which they had adopted for their own struggles against injustices.

Although it is possible that it would have happened in another way, and there were other influences and factors at work, we can see a direct link from Gandhi’s karmic experiments to the explosion of nonviolent movements in the latter half of the twentieth century.

**Karma and Praxis**

Because of the syncretic and flexible nature of Hinduism, a number of paths to Enlightenment are possible, all leading to the same summit. All of them involve disciplined self-transcendence to overcome excessive attachments to this world. Hinduism identifies three main paths, with a different yogic discipline to facilitate progress along each route:

1. The Path of Wisdom or Knowledge, jñana yoga (for reflective persons)
2. The Path of Action, karma yoga (for active persons)
3. The Path of Devotion, bhakti yoga (the most popular path)

Karma yoga focuses on selfless acts or service, so that action—even in one’s work—becomes a form of worshipping God. The key to liberation through karma yoga is doing a task for its own sake rather than for any reward. Consequently, the process contains a paradoxical element: if practiced only for one’s own liberation, it will not work because it will not be selfless action at all. It is this type of yoga that Gandhi felt most appropriate for our time. As Her shock et al. (2003:307ff.) observe, “The elements of the impressive repertoire of Gandhi’s politics - including Satya-graha, or soul force, or nonviolence, nonpossession, and trusteeship — are all different articulations of his understanding of karma yoga.”

Of particular importance is his emphasis on “nonattached action,” the lesson that Krishna gives to Arjuna in the famous Hindu devotional scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. This is the paradox of karma theory - it is a theory of causation, but in the end the point is to do the right thing because it is, not because it will bring a reward or the avoidance of punishment.

According to the Tibetan Buddhist leader Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama ; see Kurtz 2005), people are, contrary to popular belief, naturally more nonviolent than violent; they are naturally filled with compassion, seek affection, and recoil from violence. The universe itself is naturally inclined toward nonviolence; consequently, the Eightfold path that guides the Buddhist’s life contains a set of Five Precepts, the first of which is not to kill (see Ferguson 1977:43). The outcome of taking life is to have an inferior incarnation. Second, even if one does use violence to solve a problem, it is not going to be a successful resolution in the long run. The Dalai Lama (in Kurtz 2005) claims: “Even if you achieve something through force, physical force ... very often it creates a situation [in which...] the other party ... [is] not happy... Therefore, as soon as another opportunity happens, then they'll take retaliation.” According to the Taoist principle of wu-wei, violence simply begets violence: “The use of force usually brings requital. Wherever armies are stationed, briars and moms grow. Great wars are always followed by famines.” (Lao Tzu 1972: 30; Ferguson 1977:65).

The theory of karma may not have the same precision of empirical verifiability as reference group theory, nor
the quantifiability of social network theory, but it is a rich "sensitizing concept" (see Bhimer 1954) of chains of causation over time and space that we might not otherwise see, such as Gandhi's ashram experiments. It might even help us become less violent.

References


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