

# TOPICS IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

## Karma, Dharma & Moksa

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### 1 Introduction

*Karma* is an elusive concept in Indian philosophy. In the *Yogasutras* and in the *Bhagavad Gita* the word *karma* is used in many different ways. Krishna admits to Arjuna that *karma* is hard to understand and that ‘even the intelligent are bewildered’ in determining what *karma* is.<sup>1</sup>

Besides these complexities, there is a central notion of *karma* which is almost identical across the different schools of Indian philosophy. In this first section the central notion of *karma* will be explained by exploring its relation to the notions of *dharma* and *moksa*.

Monima Chadha gives five meanings for *karma*. *Karma* is firstly understood as any act, being physical, mental, intentional, unintentional, moral or amoral etc. *Karma* can further be understood in a more restricted sense as any form of mental activity in any state of consciousness, this is not the action itself, but the intention of the action. The pivotal notion of the five meanings given by Chadha, is *karma* as all acts that have moral value. In the fourth sense, *karma* is understood as an imperceptible force or law shaping the destiny of all living beings. Lastly *karma* is the accumulated result (residue) of all acts during one’s life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Juan Mascaró, *The Bhagavad Gita* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>Monima Chadha, *Topics in Indian philosophy* (Churchill: Monash Philosophy, 1998).

The central premise of the law of *karma* is that the universe is essentially morally just and that good actions are rewarded and bad actions are punished. Good actions are those which are performed in accordance with *dharma*.

According to Creel there is no precise western equivalent by which to translate *dharma*. He describes *dharma* as the pattern of ethical regulation and the justification of that pattern. *Dharma* refers to what one should do and why one should do so.<sup>3</sup> In the Hindu tradition, duties are defined by one's caste and stage of life as delineated in the scriptures such as *The Laws of Manu*. *Dharma* can not be determined by examining beings and ascertaining what is the law.

*Karma* and *dharma* can give an explanation for the social system and one's place in that system. *Dharma* refers to where one is in life at a particular moment and the duties that belong to that position. *Karma* refers to the journey of the self through time and gives the individual a sense of place.<sup>4</sup>

The notions of *dharma* has naturalistic and a normative aspects. The normative aspect of *dharma* is the religious and moral law as described above. The naturalistic aspect of *dharma* is *dharma* as an attitude, a disposition.<sup>5</sup> Potter describes *dharma* as 'The attitude of concern towards others as a fundamental extension of the self'. It is this attitude that is instrumental to attain *moksa*.<sup>6</sup>

*Karma* is the cause of *rebirth* and *moksa* is the liberation from the eternal wheel of rebirth. Potter defines *moksa* as freedom from restrictions initiated by the not self.<sup>7</sup>

*Dharma* and *moksa* presuppose each other and are related in a temporal succession. Through renunciation of the fruits of one's actions, a man or woman of *dharma* can perfect themselves and remove the sources of all frustrations to achieve *moksa*.

The Indian concepts of *karma*, *dharma* and *moksa* are thus closely related and dependent on each other. *Karma* can be considered as the stepping stone for *moksa*, with *dharma* as the connecting moral principle. An understanding of *karma* and its relation to rebirth reveals how one can attain *moksa*.

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<sup>3</sup>Austin B Creel, 'Dharma as an ethical category to freedom and responsibility', *Philosophy East and West* 22 (1972).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Potter, *Presuppositions of India's philosophies* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

## 2 Rebirth, Transmigration and Reincarnation

The law of *karma* is closely related to the doctrines of rebirth, transmigration and reincarnation. Hirianna argues that transmigration is a necessary corollary to the doctrine of *karma* because not all the causes of one's actions can be found within the narrow limits of a single life.<sup>8</sup> The theory of *karma* has often been questioned because the doctrines of rebirth, transmigration and reincarnation sound implausible. The objection is that there can not be an individual soul that persists over many lives and many kinds of body without continuity of body and memory.

The question that will be dealt with in this last section is whether we can disassociate the Hindu system of *karma* from its commitment to the doctrines of *karma*, transmigration and rebirth without serious loss in its appeal as a moral ideal.

The theory of *karma* is a fully deterministic and mechanical moral law which does not require any interference of a god. The law of *karma* can explain inequalities observed among creatures and gives an explanation of the human condition. Karl Potter classifies *karma* and rebirth as a theory in that they are 'a set of connected hypothesis, involving the postulation of unobservable or un-commonsensical items, that purports or predict, postdict, or otherwise explain processes in the world'.<sup>9</sup> The law of *karma* can however not be classified as a scientific theory in the Western sense of the word. The transcendental character of transmigration and rebirth make it impossible to provide any proof within the epistemological boundaries of Western science.

A weak point in the theory of *karma* is that any act that can not be explained by physical or other direct causes can be explained away by *karma*. From this point of view the theory of *karma* becomes implausible if rebirth remains unproven.<sup>10</sup>

The *Yogasutras* offer an argument for rebirth in that the will to live exists in every creature and the disposition to the fear of death persist by its very nature because it exists in the form of subliminal impressions of previous lives. This argument is however a logic fallacy because there are other plausible causes thinkable which can explain the instinctive fear of death.

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<sup>8</sup>M. Hirianna, *The essentials of Indian philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000).

<sup>9</sup>Karl Potter, 'The karma theory and its interpretation in some Indian philosophies', in: Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, editor, *Karma and rebirth* (University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup>Chadha (1998).

Several scholars have offered arguments for the separation of the doctrines of rebirth, transmigration and reincarnation from the law of *karma*.

Potter is of the opinion that the acceptance the theory of *karma* is not dependent upon the prior acceptance of the transmigration of the soul because once one has accepted the ultimate value and possibility of attaining freedom, then the conclusions drawn in the *Bhagavad Gita* follow whether transmigration is brought in or not.<sup>11</sup>

The approach taken by Potter limits the philosophy of *karma* to a mere moral theory. Because of this, the theory loses its capacity to provide an explanation for the human condition which is an important aspect of its moral appeal.

According the Chadha, the theory of *karma* alone can not support the theory of rebirth unless the notion of *karma* is reinterpreted in a restricted sense. She states that rebirth as a spiritual phenomenon, as suggested by Brahminical schools, is implausible because it can not be proven. Rebirth must according to her be seen as a metaphorical model supporting the theory of *karma*.<sup>12</sup>

In the approach taken by Monima Chadha to the disassociation of *karma* from rebirth, the theory of *karma* holds its capacity to explain the human condition thereby keeping its appeal as a moral ideal.

## References

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<sup>11</sup>Potter (1991).

<sup>12</sup>Chadha (1998).