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## COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

### Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: An Interjection in the Debate between Whitley Kaufman and Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis

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The recent debate in the pages of *Philosophy East and West* has acquired a sharp focus with the following comment by Whitley Kaufman toward the end of his response to Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis:

Let me summarize my main concern about the karma/rebirth system this way. The great attraction of the karma system is its reassurance that we are completely in control of our own fate, that whatever happens to us is a predictable consequence of our own choices. While it means we are prisoners of our past, it also means that the future is entirely within our control. No doubt, this feature of karma is a source of its great appeal. But this promise comes at a great price. It entails that there is no such thing as innocent suffering, that everyone gets just what he deserves. But then there can be no moral obligation to help others in distress, to protect, to rescue, perform acts of charity, or even to feel compassion for a sufferer. Most other theodices begin with the acceptance that there is such a thing as innocent suffering, that as humans we do not have godlike control of our destiny, but are fragile, vulnerable beings, often in need of help from others. The implication is a deep moral obligation to help those in need, to feel compassion and pity for those in pain. In contrast, karma elevates the “blame the victim” idea into a systematic principle. The question at stake is which account is more plausible, the idea that everyone is getting just what he deserves, and so we should not interfere with the cosmic punitive scheme, or the idea that there is genuine, undeserved suffering in the world, and that it is thus our duty to help reduce the misery and pain in the world?<sup>1</sup>

The statement that “karma elevates the ‘blame the victim’ idea to a systematic principle” seems to capture the central logic of the passage and therefore raises the question: does the doctrine of karma and rebirth, as presented within the Indic religious tradition, countenance such a view?

I think one needs to be clear about the issue to begin with, namely whether the doctrine of karma and rebirth can be interpreted callously by those who might wish to do so, or whether it is a callous doctrine, in the sense depicted in the passage, by and of itself. An example might help clarify the point. A patient may have contracted lung cancer as a result of being a chronic smoker. Medical science avers this to be the case. Then does it make medical science a callous science? From the standpoint of medical science it is a question of fact and not value. Chronic smoking causes cancer, so the statement that a patient is now suffering from lung cancer as a result

of being a chronic smoker is a statement of fact, which does not make medical science a callous science. If, however, the doctor were to say to the patient after she has been so diagnosed, “You brought this cancer on yourself by chronic smoking. You are to blame for it. *Therefore I am not going to treat you*”—then the doctor would be exhibiting a callous streak and would have let down his profession. The doctor has converted the fact into a *negative* value by blaming the victim. Normally, however, doctors convert it into a *positive* value—in the sense that while holding the victim responsible for her condition, they do what they can to treat it and are solicitous rather than callous in their approach to the patient.

It is important to bear in mind that the doctrine of karma and rebirth, as understood within the Indic tradition, encompasses both these dimensions of *fact* and *value*.

Just as the doctor accepts the individual responsibility of the smoker as a fact but proceeds to help him in terms of his value system, similarly the doctrine of karma and rebirth accepts the individual responsibility of the sufferer as a fact but promotes the value of helping those who suffer as part and parcel of the value system associated with the doctrine. Altruism apart, this is an implication of the doctrine itself, for, according to the doctrine, others treat us the way we treat them. So if we now do not help someone by using the blame-the-victim argument, then we ourselves in the future will not be helped when we require help because the same blame-the-victim argument will be used against us. Thus, even from a purely precautionary perspective it would be dangerous to invoke such an argument for not helping others. *One need not be an innocent victim to be helped—it is enough for one to be a victim to qualify for help* in terms of the doctrine of karma and rebirth.

The doctrine of karma and rebirth, however, is not limited to prudential ethics. Karma goes hand in hand with *dharma* in Hinduism—or, in other words, “the doctrine of karma and rebirth presupposes the possibility of moral growth.”<sup>2</sup> Hence the repeated references in Hindu texts to people engaged in doing good to others (*Bhagavadgītā* V.25 and so on). Crucial to the doctrine of karma is the understanding of good and bad karma. Discrimination between the two may involve several criteria but one common criterion is encapsulated in a gnomic verse which says: “Sage Vyāsa has said only two things in the eighteen Purāṇas: that helping others is virtue and hurting others is vice.”<sup>3</sup> The *same* doctrine of karma and rebirth, which holds us accountable for what happens to us, also urges us to perform good karma rather than bad karma and unattached karma rather than attached karma. Thus, just as doctors go about treating diseases that the patients have brought upon themselves, those who subscribe to the doctrine of karma and rebirth are also under an ethical obligation “to help reduce the misery and pain in the world.”

But is the victim always to be blamed? Could not our hypothetical smoker, suffering from lung cancer, end up that way not because she smoked herself but because she worked in an environment filled with smoke produced by others, although she herself did not smoke?

A passage in a famous Buddhist text, a text that has already figured in this

debate, suggests that the Indic religious tradition was not unaware of the possibility. The following citation from the *Milindapañha*, which consists of the dialogue between King Milinda and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena, makes this amply clear:

That illness of dysentery, sire, that arose in the Lord was not an illness that arose because of anything (he had) done earlier; it arose simply in connection with the union of the humours of the body. None of the bodily illnesses that arose in the Lord, sire, was produced by kamma but from one or other of these (remaining) six origins.

“This too, sire, was said by the Lord, the deva above devas, in an explanation to Moliyasīvaka in the splendid exposition, the *Samyuttanikāya*: ‘Some things that are experienced here, Sīvaka, arise originating in bile; and this is to be understood for oneself, Sīvaka, that some things that are experienced here arise originating in bile. And this too, Sīvaka, is agreed upon by the world as the truth, that some things that are experienced here arise originating in bile. As to this, Sīvaka, those recluses and brahmans who speak thus and are of these views: ‘Whatever this person experiences, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, all that is due to what was done earlier,’ go beyond their personal knowledge and they go beyond what is agreed on by the world as the truth. Therefore I say it is wrong in these recluses and brahmans. And, Sīvaka, some things that are experienced here arise originating in phlegm ... in the winds (of the body) ... born of a change of season ... born of the stress of circumstances, suddenly ... and some things that are experienced here, Sīvaka, arise born of the maturing of kamma; and this is to be understood for oneself, Sīvaka, that some things that are experienced here arise born of the maturing of kamma. And this is also agreed upon by the world as the truth, Sīvaka, that some things that are experienced here arise born of the maturing of kamma. As to this, Sīvaka, those recluses and brahmans who speak thus and are of these views: ‘Whatever this person experiences, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, all that is due to what was done earlier,’ go beyond their personal knowledge and they go beyond what is agreed upon by the world as the truth. Therefore I say it is wrong in these recluses and brahmans. So, sire, not all feelings are born of the maturing of kamma. ...<sup>4</sup>

The point at issue is this: if the Buddha died after suffering from dysentery, then could it not be claimed that the Buddha had not been free from all taint as is claimed and that this attack was brought on by his bad karma? The passage emphasizes that what happens to one could have *natural* causes. Not everything that one suffers is always to be attributed to *moral* (i.e., karmic) causes. This does raise the sticky question of how one might distinguish between the operation of the two causes, but what is important for the issue at hand is the clear recognition here that not *everything* that happens to one may be traced to karma and rebirth in accordance with the view presented here in a Buddhist text. In other words, the victim may not always be blameworthy.

To conclude: Whitley Kaufman draws attention to a possible distortion to which the doctrine of karma and rebirth is liable. But within the matrix of the Indic religious tradition, within which it was developed, it is typically not understood in this way. The victim is not to be blamed but to be helped, nor is the victim always to be blamed.

## Notes

- 1 – Whitley Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics,” *Philosophy East and West* 57 (4) (October 2007): 559–560.
- 2 – M. Hiriyanna, *Popular Essays in Indian Philosophy*, new ed. (Mysore: Kavyalaya, 1999), p. 32. See *Bhagavadgītā* VI.33–47.
- 3 – *aṣṭādaśapurāṇeṣu vyāsasya vacanaṃ dvayaṃ paropakāraḥ puṇyāya pāpāya par-apīḍanam*.
- 4 – I. B. Horner, trans., *Milinda’s Questions* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 191–192.