COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman

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Introduction

The doctrine of karma, as elaborated in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious traditions, offers a powerful explanatory account of the human predicament, and in particular of seemingly undeserved human suffering. Whitley R. P. Kaufman (2005) is right to point out that on some points, such as the suffering of children, the occurrence of natural disasters, and the possibility of universal salvation, the karma theory appears, initially at least, much more satisfactory than the attempts made to solve the perennial problem of evil by writers working within the mainstream theistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (p. 19). Kaufman, we think, is also correct to highlight the lack of critical analysis given by contemporary (analytic or Anglo-American) philosophers of religion to the theory of karma, at least in comparison with the voluminous body of work produced in recent years on the theistic problem of evil (p. 16). Kaufman’s recent article in this journal, therefore, is to be welcomed as a step toward redressing this imbalance in the literature, and in the process helping to remove the Western theistic bias of much contemporary philosophy of religion.

On the other hand, we think that Kaufman has unfortunately done little to further the general understanding of the doctrine of karma and the way in which this doctrine is presented as an answer to the problem of evil. Kaufman offers six objections to the karma theory, stating “Here I will present five distinct objections to the theory of rebirth, all of which raise serious obstacles to the claim that rebirth can provide a convincing solution to the Problem of Evil” (p. 19). We believe not only that all of these objections fail in their stated aim, but that Kaufman’s way of proceeding, his methodology, helps to explain why his criticisms of the karma theory do not succeed. But before considering Kaufman’s six objections in detail, we wish to say something briefly about the preliminary remarks Kaufman makes in the introductory section of his article.

First, a terminological worry. Kaufman states that he will be treating the karma theory as a ‘theodicy’ (pp. 16–17). As traditionally understood, a theodicy aims primarily, in the celebrated words of John Milton, to “justify the ways of God to men” ([1667] 2000, p. 3). That is to say, a theodicy aims to vindicate the justice or goodness of God in the face of the evil found in the world, and this it attempts to do by offering a reasonable explanation as to why God allows evil to abound in his creation. The construction of theodicies has therefore played a pivotal role in theistic
religions, but it clearly has no place within nontheistic religions. That is why Barry Whitney’s comprehensive bibliography on theodicy has so few entries relating to the doctrine of karma (Whitney 1993). Kaufman is not unaware of this problem, but states in response that “it would be a great mistake to insist on an unnecessarily narrow formulation of the problem of evil, in particular one that assumes an ethical monotheist religion” (p. 17). However, this is to confuse the project of offering a theodicy with the much broader project of offering a response to the problem of evil. Although a theodicy can be offered as a solution to the theistic problem of evil, it may be of little or no use in relation to other varieties of the problem of evil. It would be more appropriate, therefore, to speak of karma as an explanatory account of the existence of evil and suffering, rather than as a theodicy or a moral justification for the actions of a benevolent God.4

Second, Kaufman conceives of the doctrine of karma not only as a theodicy, but also as a ‘theory’ in the sense of a fully developed philosophical account of the presence of evil, or, as he puts it, “a complete, systematic theory of the origins and explanation of human suffering” (p. 18). Given such high expectations, it is no wonder that the doctrine of karma is a failure in Kaufman’s eyes. For, to begin with, the theory of karma is not intended as an account of the origins of evil (as is, for example, the Christian doctrine of original sin), since the karma theorist does not allow for any beginning to the cycle of births and rebirths (we will return to this matter below when dealing with the infinite regress problem). More importantly, however, the karma theory is not usually put forward by its proponents as a complete and systematic explanation of human suffering.5 Rather, the karma theorist wishes to reflect our ignorance in the face of the complexity of reality by offering only a sketchy account as to why humans suffer, one that is based on the unargued assumption that the universe is ultimately just. At a number of important points, for example, the account is deliberately left vague or incomplete: few details, in particular, are provided on the inner workings or mechanics of the karmic process, as will be seen below in relation to the memory problem.

Our gravest concern with Kaufman’s introductory comments, however, relates to his methodology. He states that his article “is not an exercise in doctrinal exegesis” (p. 16)—by this apparently meaning that he will not be concerned with how the doctrine, as originally formulated in the relevant scriptural sources, should be interpreted. This, at least, seems to be the import of his later remark that “my focus will be on modern commentators and secondary sources rather than on scriptural origins” (p. 18). This strikes us as a strange way to proceed. If the issue at hand were, say, the adequacy of the Christian doctrine of the Fall as a response to the problem of evil, it would be seriously remiss of one to overlook what the Christian scriptures have to say on this matter and to concentrate exclusively on how the theme of the Fall was developed by later or contemporary theologians. Paying due attention to the scriptural (and historical) origins of religious doctrines is vital if these doctrines are to be understood correctly. Otherwise, we run the risk of setting up ‘straw men’ as targets, and neglecting the rich, complex, and varied tapestries woven by the great religious traditions.
Kaufman, it seems, has succumbed to the tendency, prevalent in much contemporary analytic philosophy of religion (although thankfully beginning to wane), of treating religious beliefs and doctrines in a highly abstract and ahistorical manner. Kaufman writes, for example, that “My method will be to examine a simplified, idealized version of the karma-and-rebirth doctrine, one abstracted as far as possible from particular historical or doctrinal questions” (p. 16). Similarly, he states elsewhere, “I will analyze the doctrine of karma in its rationalized and simplified form; the particular details, or alternative formulations of the doctrine, will not be noted unless they appear relevant to the theodicy question” (p. 18). It is doubtful, however, that the karma theory can be idealized and abstracted in this way without distorting the theory. By not giving sufficient attention to the ways in which the doctrine of karma has been interpreted, developed, and expanded, particularly in the original sources, Kaufman regularly neglects and misunderstands important aspects of the doctrine. Indeed, if we adopt Kaufman’s strategy of considering only a minimalist version of the karma theory—one reduced to the bare claim that “people suffer because of their past deeds in this and previous lives, and likewise enjoy benefits based on past good deeds” (Clooney, quoted by Kaufman, p. 18)—we would be prevented from making use of and appreciating the varied resources available to the karma theorist. As we hope to show in what follows, the more nuanced view of the karma theory that is found in the scriptural texts helps to meet each of the objections raised by Kaufman.

The Memory Problem

Kaufman is concerned with the moral issues raised by the utter lack of any memory traces of previous lives. He claims that “justice demands that one who is being made to suffer for a past crime be made aware of his crime and understand why he is being punished for it” (p. 19). However, the crucial notion of ‘being made aware of one’s crime’ is vague and cannot do the work Kaufman requires of it unless it is precisely defined. On a strong reading, ‘being made aware of one’s crime’ will require quite specific details regarding what happened, when and where it happened, why it was morally wrong, what consequences it had for oneself and others, and so on. But, surely, justice does not demand that a criminal be made aware of their crime in this strong sense. On a weaker interpretation, and in line with what Kaufman states in the quotation above, ‘being made aware of one’s crime’ amounts to arriving at some understanding as to why one is being punished. Although this reading is more in keeping with the demands of justice, such demands are clearly met by the theory of karma since the theory explains present suffering as a necessary consequence of wrongdoing in the past. According to the karma theory, then, the criminal is capable of understanding why they are being punished, even though they may not remember any of the actual details of their past criminal acts.

It is thus a central tenet of the theory of karma that all crime is eventually punished. But, in Kaufman’s view, such a tenet is “essentially useless as a means of moral education” (p. 20), and this because the karma theory does not allow for the
recollection of past lives and hence of mistakes made during past lives. He concedes that retaining memories of past misdeeds may sometimes be a hindrance to our moral development, but goes on to add that “it is hardly plausible to say that it is better never or even rarely to remember past deeds or lives; acknowledging past mistakes is in general an important (even essential) educating force in our lives” (p. 20; emphasis in the original).

But Kaufman’s reasoning here is suspect. Acknowledging past mistakes is by no means an essential, or even the most important, educating force in our lives. We do not need to commit crimes before we can learn that murder is wrong or that rape is despicable. As children we are introduced to the morals of our society through stories and fables that reiterate the point that good is rewarded and bad is punished. And as intelligent adults we adapt and revise the ethical values of our culture in the light of a broadly liberal education. Our ethical beliefs are also refined by our knowledge of, and perhaps personal contact with, various historical exemplars of good and evil. Let us not also underestimate the benefits in moral understanding that can be obtained from the close study of ethics, moral philosophy, and allied subjects.

Moreover, remembering precisely one’s past mistakes is not the only way to acknowledge the mistakes one may have made in the past. Such acknowledgment of past failures is clearly possible without remembering where, when, and what one actually did to deserve punishment. Consider, for example, a drunk driver who kills a pedestrian before colliding with a pole. Suppose that the driver falls into a coma as a result of the collision, and after a month regains consciousness but lacks any awareness of the accident or his drunken state, which brought it about. Any reasonable court of law would demand that the offender in this case be made to acknowledge his mistake. The theory of karma, similarly, requires us to acknowledge our past mistakes, but not by remembering in detail what we did wrong in some past time and thence repenting for it.

Kaufman further maintains that the memory problem is particularly serious for the theory of karma given that this theory holds that “most wrongs will be punished in a later life and most suffering is the result of wrongdoing in prior existences” (p. 20). He adds, parenthetically, that karma theorists are forced into this position partly on account of the obvious fact that wrongs do not get punished immediately. But this fact, according to Kaufman, imperils the educational value of the theory of karma:

For the point is that the mechanism of karma itself is poorly designed for the purposes of moral education or progress, given the apparently random and arbitrary pattern of rewards and punishments. If moral education were really the goal of karma and rebirth, then punishment would be immediately consequent on sin, or at least one would have some way of knowing what one was being punished (or rewarded) for. (p. 20)

These remarks, however, reveal a gross misunderstanding of the workings of karma. The law of karma states that there is a necessary connection between any act that has moral value and its result (specifically, the reward or punishment accrued on ac-
count of the action). Thus, the theory postulates karmic residues as an imperceptible link between the act and its consequence. Karmic residues are positive or negative depending on the quality of the act. The fruitions of these residues have joy or extreme anguish as results, in accordance with the quality of their causes. The law of karma does not promise that the punishment or the reward will be yielded instantaneously. Right actions and wrongdoings are rewarded or punished automatically (for the agent will be burdened with imperceptible karmic residues until the circumstances are right for their fruition) although not instantaneously (since there may be a time lag between the performance of an act and the fruition of the karmic residues acquired on account of that act).

The theory of karma says nothing specific about when and in what form the rewards and punishments will be meted out; it only states that an agent is bound to enjoy or suffer the results of their behavior—if not in this life, then at least in some future life. The theory cannot therefore be used to predict the timing and the form of the rewards or punishments, although this in itself is no reason to think that the pattern of rewards and punishments is arbitrary or random. Consider the fact that legal trials today can take many years to deliver a verdict, with few or no people being in a position to predict exactly when the judgment will be delivered or what exact form the punishment (if punishment there be) will take. But once the verdict is made and the ensuing punishments are meted out, we do not judge these punishments to be random or arbitrary simply because they were delayed. The hope that a just punishment will be meted out to the criminal at some future time is sufficient to sustain our faith in the legal system as a means of moral education, and a similar hope motivates the belief that the law of karma can allow for the moral development of the individual. Moral education, then, does not require that any justly deserved punishments be immediately consequent on sin.

Kaufman, however, might object that if punishment does not immediately follow the wrongful act, then if moral education is to be possible, there must at least be some way of knowing what one was being punished for. This again presupposes that moral education can proceed only by means of learning from and acknowledging one’s past wrongdoings. The theory of karma does not offer a way of knowing the precise correlations between particular good or bad acts in the past and the results to be enjoyed or suffered by the agent in the future, but belief in karma entails that these correlations must obtain. However, the theory is intended not only to turn our attention to the necessary correlations between acts and their results, but also to provide us with a deeper understanding of the workings of karma and thus with a manual of sorts for attaining the highest goal of human existence, namely mokṣa or freedom. Before delving into an explanation of karma-yoga (the path of action) in the third chapter of the Bhagavad-Gitā, Lord Krishna announces, “Thus far I have described this knowledge to you through analytical study. Now listen as I explain it in terms of working without fruitive results. . . . When you act in such knowledge you can free yourself from the bondage of works” (2:39).

The recipe sounds simple: “Therefore without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachments
one attains the Supreme (i.e., liberation)” (3:19). Thus, the theory of karma and re-
birth explains that the root cause of human suffering is lust and attachment to the
fruits of one’s actions. As long as these desires and attachments persist in the agent,
the agent cannot progress on the path to liberation. The wrongdoing is therefore not
so much in the particular action performed as in the attachment the agent has in
seeking the fruits of action. The theory thus helps the agent become aware of what,
in broad terms, they have done wrong in the past and what they can do to improve
their future condition. The message, in a nutshell, is: get rid of attachments to the
fruits of actions and you won’t acquire any karmic residues on account of sinful
behavior.

In chapters 3 and 4 of the Bhagavad-Gītā, where details on ‘the path of action’ as
a means to liberation are provided, the theory of karma is put forward as an expla-
nation for human suffering as well as a guide to how we may overcome our suffer-
ings. The doctrine of karma, therefore, presupposes the possibility of moral growth
and details how we may go about achieving it. The explanatory account offered by
karmic theorists may be incomplete in many respects and may fail to motivate every-
one to pursue the path recommended by karma-yoga, but that does not diminish the
theory’s potential to inspire the moral development of individuals.

The Proportionality Problem

Kaufman states that the karma theory can be a morally adequate solution to the
problem of evil only if it presupposes a proportionality principle, namely “that the
severity of suffering be appropriately proportioned to the severity of the wrong”
(p. 21). But this principle, Kaufman adds, is flouted by the theory of karma, for
“given the kinds and degrees of suffering we see in this life, it is hard to see what
sort of sins the sufferers could have committed to deserve such horrible punishment”
(p. 21).

The proportionality problem, however, is not as intuitively compelling as Kauf-
man seems to think. The level of difficulty in believing that the terrible evils men-
tioned by Kaufman (including such things as death by starvation or torture, mental
illness, or becoming crippled as a result of a car accident) are simply punishments
for past misdeeds is proportional to the level of difficulty in comprehending the bru-
tality and ruthlessness of much human behavior that we see in this world—acts of
genocide such as the Holocaust and totalitarian regimes like those of Hitler, Stalin,
and Pol Pot quickly come to mind.

Kaufman also claims that the seeming lack of proportionality in the karma theory
may have disastrous practical consequences, since “belief in karma might make us
tend to enact even more brutal and cruel penalties (e.g., torturing to death) if we try
to model human justice on this conception of what apparently counts as divine jus-
tice” (p. 21). As indicated earlier, however, God is not an essential part of the karmic
cycle, and therefore it is wrong to conceive of the karmic model of justice in terms of
divine justice. It is more accurate to think of the karma theory as providing a model
of impersonal or cosmic justice. The Buddhist and Hindu scriptures often use agri-
cultural analogies to explain the workings of karma, thus suggesting that karma is to be understood as a purely natural process.7

Kaufman’s main objection takes the form of a dilemma for the karma theorist: either an ‘eye-for-an-eye’ version of the karma theory is adopted, so that if (for example) one is raped in this life it is solely because one was a rapist in a previous life; or else an appeal is made to the ‘pool of karmic residues,’ so that one’s horrible suffering is explained in terms of the accumulation of an enormous number of past bad acts. The former option, according to Kaufman, is plainly unjust, for it amounts to the view that we are all condemned to ‘capital punishment’—that is to say, physical death—because we have all been murderers in a past life. But the analogy between death and capital punishment seems out of place. More will be said on this subject when we turn to Kaufman’s comments on the problem of explaining death, although it may suffice to mention here that death need not be viewed—and is certainly not viewed within the religious traditions that spawned the theory of karma—as something that is intrinsically evil. Therefore, to treat death as analogous to capital punishment is only to misrepresent the nature and status of death in the theory of karma and in the Indian context more widely.8

Kaufman rejects the second horn of the dilemma above by emphasizing the issue of the fairness of the mechanism responsible for meting out the punishments. The Scriptures relating to the doctrine of karma do not enter into any details on the workings of karma, thus inviting the possibility of competing views as to how exactly the law of karma operates. One possible view, explored by Kaufman, is that the pool of karmic residues has a cumulative effect, with all of one’s lesser wrongs accumulating to generate a single, horrible punishment. But, as Kaufman suggests, such a method of administering punishment conflicts with our sense of fairness, and it therefore sits uncomfortably with a basic tenet of the karma theory, namely that the universe is fundamentally just. Furthermore, this purported explanation of human suffering assumes that the only way to get rid of debts incurred on account of past bad acts is to suffer a single, horrible punishment at some point in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Such an assumption, however, is alien to traditional forms of the karma theory, as will be made clear by considering the role that the pool of residues has usually played in the theory.

Kaufman, we concede, is correct in insisting that the idea of karmic residues is of no help to the proportionality problem. But this is only to be expected, since the pool of residues is invoked in order to ground the notion of free will, which forms a crucial part of the theory of karma. It may be helpful at this point to elucidate briefly the three basic kinds of karmic residue: Sancita, which denotes all the accumulated karma of the past; Prarabdha, which refers to the karmic residues that shape the physical, social, and spiritual condition of each person; and Agami, or the residues that will be acquired on account of one’s future actions. As T.M.P. Mahadevan explains:

An apt analogy is often usually given to bring home to our minds the element of freedom that karma involves. Imagine a bowman with a quiver of arrows, taking an aim at a target. He has already sent a shaft; and another arrow he is about to shoot. The bundle of arrows
in the quiver on his back is the Sancita; the arrow he has shot is Prarabdha; and the one he is about to send forth from his bow is Agami. Of these, he has perfect control over Sancita and Agami; it is only the Prarabdha that cannot but take effect. Man has the freedom to reform his character and alter his ways, only the past which has begun to take effect he has to suffer. (Mahadevan 1971, pp. 60–61)

The suggestion that we have a significant degree of control over Sancita and Agami draws attention to a theme we have already touched upon, namely the possibility of moral progress in a karmic world, as well as indicating how Kaufman’s dilemma regarding proportionality goes astray. This dilemma assumes that the only way to get rid of negative karmic residues or debts acquired on account of past bad acts is to suffer some form of punishment. What this ignores, however, is the way in which the karma theory has been developed to provide its devotees with a method for alleviating and preventing suffering. The Bhagavad-Gītā, for example, lists different paths (yogas) or inner disciplines that are said to lead to the moral advancement of the individual and ultimately to mokṣa. These ‘paths’ include karma-yoga (the path of action), dhyāna-yoga (the path of meditation), bhakti-yoga (the path of theistic devotion), and jñāna-yoga (the path of knowledge). The various paths, however, are merely a means to the same end, as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an eminent interpreter and translator of the Bhagavad-Gītā, explains: “we may climb the mountain from different paths, but the view from the summit is the same” (1949, p. 102). In a similar vein, the Yogasūtras of Patañjali (see sūtras 11 and 12) recommend meditation or contemplation as a means of burning the seeds or karmic residues so as to render them incapable of bearing fruit or producing suffering and bondage. As this indicates, there are a number of ways in which one’s karmic residues can be rendered incapable of bearing fruit or producing pain and suffering. The availability of these various routes, therefore, shows that Kaufman’s dilemma is misconceived insofar as it assumes that the only way to get rid of negative karmic residues accumulated on account of past wrongdoings is to undergo some punishment.

The Infinite Regress Problem

Kaufman introduces the infinite regress problem in the following terms:

In order to explain an individual’s circumstances in the present life, karma refers to the events of his prior life. But in order to explain the circumstances of that prior life, we need to invoke the events of his previous life—and so on, ad infinitum. The problem is quite general: how did the karmic process begin? What was the first wrong? Who was the original sufferer? This familiar objection points out that rebirth provides no solution at all, but simply pushes the problem back. (p. 22)

The typical response given by karma theorists, notes Kaufman, is to say that the rebirth process is beginningless, extending back infinitely in time. According to Kaufman, however, “this is no answer at all; indeed, it violates a basic canon of rationality, that the ‘explanation’ not be equally as problematic as the problem being explained” (p. 22).
Kaufman’s point seems to be that to explain a particular instance of evil, E1, by stating that E1 was brought about by some prior event, E2, and then to explain E2 by stating that it was brought about by some event further in the past, E3, and so on ad infinitum for every other event, is to leave E1 dangling as a brute fact, and so this does not qualify as a genuine explanation of E1 at all. In other words, an explanatory regress that is infinitely long will forever defer the sought-after explanation, just as (to borrow Kaufman’s own analogy) to borrow money in order to pay off a debt is simply to defer the payment of the debt rather than to remove it. Any genuine explanatory account of evil must therefore avoid such a vicious regress.

It is not clear, however, why the karma theorist must resort to an infinite regress in explaining the occurrence of evil. When one suffers some particular evil, the karma theorist would explain this as punishment for some past misdeed, but the past misdeed itself need not be explained as the inevitable outcome of some event further in the past of one’s life. Indeed, it seems that only if the karma theory were interpreted in a hard deterministic fashion would such an explanatory regress result. But hard determinism, the view that there is no free will of the sort required for moral responsibility, clearly has no place in any philosophical system that subscribes to the doctrine of karma. We have already seen how the idea of the pool of karmic residues is introduced to show that the theory of karma does not preclude free will. A karma theorist will therefore be either a libertarian or a compatibilist. If the former option is adopted, then any explanation as to why an agent freely chose a morally wrong course of action will necessarily be incomplete. For in the libertarian view, the free choices of an agent may be influenced by the agent’s internal state of mind and their external environment, but these do not determine the choices the agent freely makes. Therefore, no matter how many antecedent causal conditions one isolates, these will not suffice to explain why the agent chose to go one way rather than another way. Explanations of free action in terms of sufficient causal conditions are simply unavailable according to the libertarian perspective.

The compatibilist, by contrast, may avail herself of such explanations, for she can fully account for the agent’s decision to perform a course of action by appealing to, say, the agent’s desires and values. What is important to note for our purposes, however, is that regardless of whether the karma theorist adopts a libertarian or a compatibilist position, her ‘theodicy’—that is, her attempt to explain why people suffer harm—will be the same, for ultimately it will be grounded in the notion of human free will. More precisely, the karma theorist would say that people suffer harm as punishment for their past misuse of their free will, in which case each person bears full moral responsibility for their own suffering. The karma theorist, in short, need not launch into an infinite explanatory regress in order to determine where ultimate moral responsibility for each person’s suffering lies.

The Problem of Explaining Death

In Kaufman’s view, if the theory of karma is to account for all human suffering, it must account for “the paradigmatic case of innocent suffering: death itself” (p. 23).
The typical rebirth theory, Kaufman notes, does not regard death as a punishment for some past wrong, but rather views death as the mechanism by which karma operates. This, however, appears to create problems for the karma theory:

[I]t is through rebirth that one is rewarded or punished for one's past wrongs (by being born in high or low station, healthy or sickly, etc.). But there can be no rebirth unless there is death. So even if one is moving up in the scale of karma to a very high birth for one's great virtue, one must still undergo death. This would appear to undermine the moral justification for (arguably) the greatest of evils, death itself. (p. 23)

But why does Kaufman characterize death as a momentous evil? It seems that what leads him to this view is what he calls “the commonsense fact that death usually involves a terrible and physically painful disruption of one’s existence, including the separation from all one’s loved ones and from all that one holds dear” (p. 23). But one can accept this fact without endorsing Kaufman’s view of death as the greatest evil. To see this, consider the belief, shared by many religious traditions in both East and West, that death involves a temporary separation of conscious being from physical or embodied existence. In the Hindu tradition, for example, it is usually thought that consciousness departs the body at death, remaining in a free and pure state before settling into another body. Somewhat similarly, the traditional Christian view holds that, in the interval between death and the Last Judgment, people lie in a sleep-like state or a kind of limbo between heaven and hell. According to these religious traditions, one’s postmortem state is temporarily characterized by a lack of embodiment, and this in turn is thought to render one immune to the possibility of experiencing pain. But if death can provide some relief from pain, it is far from clear why death should be thought of as the greatest of all evils. Indeed, Buddhists and Hindus tend to regard death as a morally insignificant break in the lifetime of an individual.

Kaufman does raise the possibility of denying that death is an evil as a proposed solution to the problem of explaining death. But this, he thinks, “is hardly satisfying, for there is no reason at all that death needs to be the mechanism by which one attains one’s rewards: why not simply reward the person with health, wealth, and long life, without having to undergo rebirth in the first place?” (p. 23). Karma, to be sure, does not necessarily require death. It is possible, for instance, for one to achieve liberation within a single lifetime, and so death and rebirth cannot be essential to the functioning of karma. As Austin Creel puts it, “One point on which there seems to be wide agreement is that karma is basic whereas rebirth is derivative” (Creel 1986, p. 2).

But then, as Kaufman asks, why not simply reward the person or transform them to a higher plane of existence, without having them undergo rebirth? The problem here, however, is that if—as Kaufman has just granted for the purposes of argument—death is not something evil, but is rather morally neutral or even good, then the question ‘Why do people die?’ is not relevant. For the phenomenon we are trying to explain is the existence of evil, and if death is not an evil we do not need to account for it.

To appreciate the role death plays in the theory of karma, we cannot overlook, as Kaufman does, the important metaphysical theses regarding the nature of persons
that form the background to the theory of karma and rebirth. Both Hindus and Buddhists agree that death is a rather insignificant event in the karmic life of an individual. In the Hindu tradition, the person is identified with the soul, while the body, senses, and mind are taken to be mere auxiliaries. Following this line of thought, the person or soul is unaffected by the phenomenon of death, and the soul simply sheds one set of auxiliaries and replaces them with another at rebirth. The Bhagavad-Gīṭā illustrates this view well:

As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes to another body at death. A person with poise is not bewildered by such a change. . . . For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He [the soul] has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain. . . . As a person puts on new garments giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones. (1 : 13, 20, 22)

Buddhists, by contrast, do not postulate a soul as the substantial being that transmigrates from one life to another carrying the karmic residues. In their view, rather, “consciousness continues to exist by virtue of karma, otherwise called the predispositions.” Like the Hindus, however, Buddhists do not consider death to be a significant event in the karmic life cycle. For according to the Buddhist view, death does not mark a momentous break in the succession of elements that explains the apparent continuity of persons within a lifetime. The following quote from the Milindapaṇīha, consisting of a dialogue between King Milinda and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena, can be used to illustrate this point:

“Bhante Nāgasena,” said the king, “Is a person when just born that person himself or is he someone else?”
“He is neither that person” said the elder, “nor is he someone else.”
“Give an illustration…”
Said the elder, “It was I, your majesty, who was a young, tender, weakly infant lying on its back, and it is I who am now grown up. It is through their connection with the embryonic body that all these different periods are unified.”
“Give an illustration…”
“It is as if, your majesty, new milk were to change in the process of time into sour cream, and from sour cream into fresh butter, and from fresh butter into clarified butter. And if anyone, your majesty, were to say that the sour cream, the fresh butter and the clarified butter, were each of them the very milk itself—now would he say very well were he to say so?”
“Nay verily, bhante. They came into being through connection with that milk.”
“In exactly the same way, your majesty, do the elements of being join one another in serial succession: one element perishes, another arises, succeeding each other as it were instantaneously. Therefore neither as a same person nor as a different person do you arrive at your latest aggregation of consciousness.”

The sage here introduces the doctrine of momentariness and dependent origination in order to explain that a person is neither the same nor different over any given
period of time. At each moment the elements of being perish, causing others to arise (or, more precisely, to be reborn). Death therefore consists of the dissolution of the elements of being, and rebirth is only the appearance of new elements caused by the disappearance of the old. This process operates at every moment in the life of an individual, but we fail to notice it since it occurs instantaneously.

The point is reiterated in the *Visuddhimagga*:

Strictly speaking, the duration of the life of a living being is exceedingly brief, lasting only while a thought lasts. . . . As soon as that thought has ceased the being is said to have ceased.15

It is only elements of being possessing a dependence that arrive at a new existence: none transmigrated from the last existence, nor are they in the new existence without causes contained in the old.16

But Kaufman not only misunderstands the nature and role of death in the Indian religious traditions; he also misconstrues the nature and value of this-worldly existence, as it is understood by proponents of the theory of karma. This is evident from his discussion of the view that the ultimate reward is escape from death or release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This view, according to Kaufman, “simply goes too far,” for, as he explains:

The problem of evil arises not because life itself is an unmitigated evil, but because it contains such a strange mixture of good and evil. . . . But to say that life itself (not just the bad aspects of it) is the problem cannot be a solution to the problem of evil, but rather an admission of the failure to solve it. For why is life bad, full of suffering and misery, rather than good? It is also an implausible claim, since experience shows that life can be very good indeed, so why is it not good all the time? (p. 24)

That the only genuine problem of evil relates to the challenge of explaining why the world contains “such a strange mixture of good and evil” may be correct from a Judeo-Christian perspective, but it utterly fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the Hindu and Buddhist view of the human predicament, according to which life itself is nothing more than suffering and misery. If this bleak view of our predicament is accepted, the problem of evil does not disappear, but takes on an ever-greater significance.

Kaufman thus overlooks the karma theorist’s estimate of the worth of life or this-worldly existence. Proponents of the karma theory, it should be added, do not usually regard ordinary experiences as the benchmark for judging the worth or value of life. For as pointed out by Patan̄jali, author of the *Yogasūtras*, ordinary pleasurable experiences are not what they appear to be:

Those [karmic residues] with merit as cause have pleasure as result; those with demerit as cause have pain as result. And just as the nature of this pain is counteractive, so for the yogin, even at the moment of pleasure in an object, there is nothing but counteractive pain. (Sūtra 14)

[T]o the discriminating all is nothing but pain. . . . Thus it has been said, “Undifferentiated-consciousness (avidya) is pleasure in an object of sense.” That which is the sub-
sidence of the organs because of their satiation with enjoyments is pleasure; after there has been a craving, the failure to subside is pain. And by the application of the organs to enjoyments one cannot make one’s self free from thirst [for enjoyment]. Why is this? Since passions increase because of (anu) application to enjoyments, and the skill of the organs also increases. Therefore application to the enjoyment of pleasure is not a way of approach [to freedom from thirst for objects]. Surely one aiming at pleasure and permeated by objects is sunk in the deep bog of pain, like the man who, while in fear of the scorpion’s poison is bitten by the poisonous snake. . . . (Sūtra 15)\(^{17}\)

The pursuit of pleasure and happiness, therefore, will inevitably lead one into deeper trouble, since all life is suffering. The ignorant indulge and suffer, whereas those with knowledge seek to escape this cycle of worldly existence by attaining nirvāṇa or liberation. This is a view also shared by Buddhists, for whom the belief that ‘all existence is suffering (dukkha)’ is considered to be the first Noble Truth.\(^{18}\) Kaufman, then, does not pay sufficient attention to the theoretical background of the theory of karma and rebirth, and as a result fails to appreciate the way in which life and death are evaluated by the karma theorist.

*The Free Will Problem*

Kaufman also objects to the theory of karma on the grounds that the theory does not sit comfortably with the notion of free moral agency. His critique here divides into three separate objections, each of which will be outlined and assessed.

*Kaufman’s First Objection*

Kaufman states that in the Christian scheme of things one’s present existence has great moral importance, since how one leads one’s life will determine whether one achieves (or is granted) salvation. By contrast, on the multiple-life karmic theory, “there is no such urgency, for all mistakes and misdeeds can be rectified in the fullness of future lives,” thus encouraging a sense of fatalism, “a sense that one’s choice here and now does not matter much in the greater scheme of things” (p. 24).

The first point to note, in reply, is that Christian eschatology is not as uniform as Kaufman presents it. Although many Christian thinkers adhere to the traditional picture of the afterlife as including both a heaven and a hell, an increasing number of Christians find the idea of hell (construed as the everlasting punishment of unrepentant sinners) morally repugnant and thus resort to alternative views on the afterlife. The most favored alternative is ‘universalism,’ according to which all people are in the end saved by God and enjoy eternal communion with him. Origen infamously upheld this view through his doctrine of the *apocatastasis* (the restoration of all souls, even those of sinners, to their original condition), and in this he was followed by Gregory of Nyssa. In more recent times, a number of Christian philosophers and theologians have endorsed universalism, including John Hick (1976, chap. 13), Thomas Talbott (1990a, 1990b), Marilyn Adams (1993), and Jürgen Moltmann (1996, pp. 235–255).\(^{19}\) But if, as these universalists suppose, we can rest assured
that everyone will be saved, then the urgency of ‘getting it right the first time so as to avoid damnation’ obviously disappears.

Furthermore, there is no reason to think that the multiple-life theory removes one’s sense of urgency, for one would presumably want to attain the goal underlying the entire karmic process—namely liberation, or release from samsāra, the cycle of birth and rebirth—as quickly as possible. This sense of urgency is further reinforced by the idea, found in various Hindu and Buddhist religious texts, that one must not take one’s incarnation as a human being for granted. For incarnations of this sort are thought to be rare and precocious, as they are reached only after a lengthy and laborious spell in the subhuman realm and can just as quickly be followed by further spells in such a realm. As the Hindu scriptural commentator Louis Renou points out, a jīva (life force) is said to be granted a human life only after going through 8,400,000 previous incarnations of lower forms of life—2,000,000 as a plant, 900,000 as an aquatic animal, 100,000 as an insect, 100,000 as a bird, 300,000 as a cow, and 400,000 as a monkey (Renou 1962, p. 65). This, combined with the Hindu belief that liberation or mokṣa is possible only through the human body, makes the urgency of seeking liberation in this lifetime all the more pressing.

Kaufman’s Second Objection
Kaufman further states that the karma theory faces a debilitating dilemma in relation to the existence of free moral agency. Suppose that a terrorist is planning to detonate a bomb in a civilian area. Two possibilities then present themselves:

Either (1) “Karma functions in a determinate and mechanical fashion,” in which case the terrorist is determined to act the way he does. But then the terrorist is not acting freely, but is merely ‘the agent of karma,’ and “whomever he kills will not be innocent but deserving of their fate.”

Or else, (2) “Perhaps it really is up to the terrorist to choose whether to kill his victims. Indeed, let us say that he has the potential to create genuine evil: to kill innocent, undeserving civilians. But now the problem is that a central, indeed crucial, tenet of the karma theory has been abandoned: that all suffering is deserved and is justified by one’s prior wrongful acts” (p. 25, emphasis in original).

In either scenario, says Kaufman, the karma theory is not consistent with the possibility of free moral choice, by which he must mean libertarian free moral choice (otherwise option 1 would not rule out free will). Options 1 and 2, however, are not the only alternatives open to the karma theorist. In particular, the karma theorist may hold that the terrorist in Kaufman’s example acts freely without thereby producing undeserved suffering. Kaufman, however, objects to the idea that the actions of a wrongdoer always produce deserved suffering, for he thinks that this licenses the view that “no matter what evils he [the terrorist] does in the world, he can always justify them to himself by saying he is merely an agent for karma, carrying out the necessary punishments for these ‘wicked’ people” (p. 25). But this is a strange view of both karma and morality. As mentioned earlier in relation to the proportionality problem, karma is considered to be an impersonal process, inherent in the universe, by which rewards and punishments are distributed; the impersonal nature of the pro-
cess means that there is no agent or divinity responsible for meting out the relevant rewards and punishments.21

Further, the terrorist cannot excuse his behavior by arguing that he is merely punishing the ‘wicked.’ For even if what he does results in the just punishment of wrongdoers, it is not his role to carry out the punishment. Consider a parallel case involving capital punishment. A serial killer, let us suppose, is about to be executed on account of his crimes, and the execution will be carried out by government officials. In such cases, it is standard thinking that not just anyone would be (morally or legally) permitted to carry out the execution. For example, the prison guard who leads the convicted killer from his prison cell to the execution chamber would have no (moral or legal) right to take the law into his own hands and shoot the criminal himself. It is not the guard’s role or duty to mete out the punishment. Similarly with Kaufman’s terrorist: it is not for him to distribute the relevant punishments or rewards.22

A similar paradox is sometimes raised in the context of the theistic problem of evil: if every instance of suffering is permitted by God for the sake of some greater good, then it seems that when we come across, say, the brutalization of a child, we should sit idly by and allow it to take its course, for otherwise we might be obstructing the actualization of some greater good. The mistake here, as in Kaufman’s account, is that the moral importance of occupying the right kind of role is overlooked. God, by virtue of his role as our creator and benefactor, may have rights over us that we do not have over each other—for example, God may have the right to permit us to endure abuse and murder for the sake of some higher end (e.g., moral and spiritual growth), whereas we have no such rights in relation to our fellow human beings.23

Kaufman makes a further (and indeed inexcusable) blunder when he turns to a suggestion made by Bruce Reichenbach in connection with the dilemma above regarding free will. Reichenbach, notes Kaufman, suggests that “karma explains only evil that is not caused by wrongful human choices (i.e., karma is a theory of ‘moral evil’ rather than of ‘natural evil’)” (p. 25). Kaufman’s parenthetical gloss obviously presents the two categories of evil the wrong way around. More importantly, Kaufman contends that in many cases “it is doubtful that we could draw a clear distinction between moral and natural evil” (p. 25). There is, to be sure, some truth to this, for in some circumstances it is not clear whether a particular evil is the result of culpable wrongdoing or negligence on the part of some human being and hence a moral evil. But this is not to say that the distinction between moral evil and natural evil cannot in such cases be drawn; it is only to say that the distinction cannot in such cases be drawn by us. Also, the cases that Kaufman illustrates to make his point only serve to undermine it:

... harm caused or contributed to by human negligence (negligent driving of a car, failing to make buildings earthquake proof); harm that was not directly caused but that was anticipated and could have been prevented (starvation in Africa); harm caused in cases of insanity or diminished mental capacity; harm caused while in a state of intoxication (drunk driving); and so forth. (p. 25)
Here, as elsewhere, the test for whether we have a case of moral evil or a case of natural evil before us is quite straightforward: if a moral agent (other than God) can reasonably be held morally blameworthy for the occurrence of the harm, then the evil in question is a moral evil; otherwise, it is a natural evil. Using this criterion, the penultimate case identified by Kaufman would, in most scenarios, count as a clear instance of natural evil, while the last case he mentions would normally pass as a moral evil.

**Kaufman’s Third Objection**

Kaufman, finally, notes that, according to the karma theory, the character and dispositions one has in this life are determined by one’s deeds in one’s previous lives. But this, Kaufman states, seems to threaten free moral choice or at least the possibility of moral development, for

once one has a wicked disposition, it is a puzzle how one can escape spiraling down into further wrongdoing, or at best being permanently stuck at a given moral level, if karma has already determined one’s moral character. (The problem is exaggerated even further if one accepts the view that particularly bad people become animals; how could one ever escape one’s animal state, since animals do not appear to be capable of moral choice at all?) (p. 26)

But as indicated by the theory of karmic residues (discussed earlier in our response to the proportionality problem), it is open to the karma theorist to reply that, even if one’s character and dispositions at any given time \( t \) are determined by one’s behavior prior to \( t \), this need not undermine one’s free will. For if one were faced at \( t \) with a choice between two or more alternative courses of action, one’s choice need not be determined (or at least not determined by anything other than one’s self), but may be an entirely free choice. And it is such exercises of free will during the course of one’s life that provide one with the opportunity to (freely) mold one’s character and dispositions (up to a certain point, of course), and thus to progress morally. 24 As Austin Creel puts it:

> The basic question that is posed is whether the doctrine of karma admits freedom: if we are the sum of our yesterdays, how can we affect our tomorrows? Hindu thinkers generally reply that our karma places us where we are but does not determine how we shall react to, or act in, the situations in which we find ourselves.25 (Creel 1986, p. 3)

Also, Kaufman’s parenthetical remark in the earlier quotation is misleading. For according to those karma theorists who believe that it is possible to be reborn as an animal, if one were reincarnated as an animal one need not remain forever in this state, but may eventually be given another opportunity to develop morally by being incarnated as a human. 26

**Karma and the Verifiability Problem**

According to Kaufman, “the rebirth (or preexistence) doctrine is objectionable because it is unverifiable (or unfalsifiable). Whatever happens is consistent with the
theory; no fact could apparently falsify it” (p. 27; emphasis in the original). As is well known, the specter of the verifiability of religious claims was raised in the twentieth century by A. J. Ayer and the logical positivists. Although it is widely conceded nowadays that they failed in their attempt to rule out religious language as unverifiable and hence (cognitively) meaningless, it is also often thought that there remains a place for verifiability, or at least falsifiability, as a virtue that theories of an empirical or a posteriori nature should aspire to possess.

It is important, however, to distinguish different varieties of verifiability. There is, first of all, strong and weak verification. For a statement $S$ to be strongly verified is for there to be some observation statement $O$ that confirms $S$ to such a degree as to raise the probability value of $S$ to 1 or to some value closely approaching 1. By contrast, a statement $S$ is weakly verified when some observation statement $O$ confirms $S$ to such a degree as to raise the probability value of $S$ somewhat (say, from 0.4 to 0.6), but not to 1 or to some value closely approaching 1.

Second, there is in principle and in practice verification. A statement $S$ is verifiable in principle when there is at least one logically (or metaphysically) possible way of verifying the truth of $S$. On the other hand, $S$ is verifiable in practice when we, in our present circumstances, have at our disposal some means of verifying the truth of $S$. For example, the statement ‘There is water on the surface of the planet Mars’ is verifiable in practice, as we now have the technological capability to detect the presence of water on the surface of nearby planets. By contrast, we presently have no way of confirming some such statement as ‘On the morning of April 15, ten thousand years ago, in the locality known today as Melbourne, Australia, there was a heavy downpour of rain.’ There is, nevertheless, some logically possible way of confirming this statement: for example, tomorrow we might be visited by a group of aliens whose ancestors witnessed and recorded the event in question.

Now, Kaufman’s criticism of the karma theory on the grounds of unverifiability will have no bite unless Kaufman is suggesting that the theory is unverifiable in the weak sense and in principle. For it is no blemish on an empirical theory that it cannot be strongly or decisively verified, since few, if any, theories of this sort can be decisively verified. Also, whether a theory is verifiable in practice will vary from one time to another, and so this sort of unverifiability does not necessarily speak against the credentials of the theory. Kaufman, therefore, must be presuming that the theory of karma is unverifiable both in the weak sense and in principle. But is it? Clearly, it is not. To see this, consider the following logically possible scenario:

In the midst of meditation, your mind is all of a sudden miraculously transported to a higher level of consciousness where you witness many of your previous lives. As you see these previous lives unfolding before you, it becomes evident to you that how you behave in one life determines the circumstances and character you find yourself with in the next life.

Although this may be nothing more than a fanciful story, it indicates how the karma doctrine is susceptible to verification in at least the weak and in-principle senses.
(Consider, in contrast, the statement ‘Everything multiplied in size overnight.’ This statement is not verifiable even in the weak and in-principle senses, and for this reason such statements have often been dismissed as being devoid of factual content.)

Alternatively, we can propose various ways in which the karma doctrine can be falsified. Suppose, for example, that after having physically died you were to find yourself in what Christians call ‘the kingdom of heaven,’ that is to say, a state of being in which you consciously and joyfully experience the presence and love of God. Suppose further that while you are enjoying this beatific vision, God makes it clear to you that there is no such thing as multiple rebirths, that people live on earth only once, and after having died some people proceed to heaven while others are sent to hell. Again, such a scenario may be highly improbable, but it at least seems to be a coherent story, one that we can make sense of (at least, this is a presumption we are entitled to until we are given reason to think otherwise). And if we did undergo experiences of the sort described in this story, we would have compelling evidence in support of the falsity of the karma theory.

Kaufman, however, might object that the theory of karma, although open to verification and falsification, is not a genuinely empirical theory as it has no predictive power. As he puts it, “one has no capacity effectively to predict the future by this theory [i.e., the theory of karma]. Even if one has done wrong ... one has no way of knowing just what the punishment will be, or when it will occur, in this life or the next” (p. 27). But even if it is conceded that very particular or fine-grained predictions about the future cannot be made on the basis of the karma theory, this need not rule out the theory as unempirical. For even well-established scientific theories rarely enable us to make precise predictions. Take, for instance, the theory that smoking causes lung cancer, a theory strongly supported by medical evidence (the claims of the tobacco industry notwithstanding). Even a theory such as this will not enable us to predict when, or even if, a particular smoker will contract lung cancer, how severe the cancer will be, exactly how many cigarettes must be smoked before the onset of cancer, and so on. There are too many unknown variables at play for us to be able to make such precise predictions. Nevertheless, a general, law-like statement of the form ‘Heavy smoking tends to cause lung cancer’ remains indisputable. Similarly, the doctrine of karma provides one with the knowledge that the universe is ultimately just, that no good deed goes unrewarded and no bad deed goes unpunished. Although the doctrine does not enable us to make very specific predictions (given that the mechanics of karma are largely beyond our ken), we can still make some general predictions, such as ‘The more good I do now the better my future will be.’

Conclusion

We therefore conclude that there is good reason to reject each of the six objections Kaufman brings against the theory of karma as a solution to the (nontheistic version of the) problem of evil. The underlying weakness in Kaufman’s critique consists in a lack of proper attention to the original sources and to the historical and doctrinal
background in which the theory of karma is set. The problem of explaining death, for example, will arise only if one overlooks the various metaphysical theses about the nature of persons and this-worldly existence that form part of the background assumptions to the theory of karma. But once these background assumptions are taken into account, it becomes clear why death, far from constituting a problem, is a relatively insignificant event in the karmic cycle of an individual. Similarly, the dilemma Kaufman presents in the context of the proportionality problem ignores the diverse suggestions offered by the scriptural sources as to how sins can be expunged. Further, a proper understanding of the mechanics of the karma process and of the way in which moral responsibility is imputed to individuals by the karma theorist should be sufficient to meet the objections Kaufman raises on the basis of free will and an alleged infinite regress. And, finally, both the memory problem and the verifiability problem are motivated in part by an unreasonable demand for precise correlations between bad acts in the past and consequent sufferings in the future. Kaufman’s comments on the memory problem, in particular, fail to appreciate fully the strong practical dimension of the theory of karma, a theory that is essentially geared toward providing us with directions for progressing morally and for alleviating or preventing suffering. But the theory also has an unmistakable theoretical dimension, one that attempts to provide an explanatory account for the overwhelming amount of suffering we observe in the world. As an explanatory account or ‘theodicy’ of this sort, the theory of karma remains, in our view at least, undiminished by the objections put forward by Kaufman.

Notes

1 – Unless otherwise indicated, all in-text page references refer to Kaufman 2005.

2 – Kaufman, however, goes on to present six distinct objections. Perhaps he thinks that one of these objections is redundant, although he does not say anything explicitly to that effect.

3 – Kaufman states, in reference to Whitney’s work, that “a bibliography of theodicy writings between 1960 and 1991 lists over four thousand entries, but only a half dozen or so of these specifically address karma” (p. 16).

4 – Buddhists and Jains, it may be noted, endorse a theory of karma that is different from that of the Hindus and that unequivocally dispenses with the need for a supreme being or God. Some schools in the Hindu tradition also deny that God has a role to play in the karmic cycle. The ancient Indian philosophers were the first to conceive of God as an abstract principle of reality, that is, Brahman, in the Upanishads. In the view of some scholars, the Indians could entertain such a conception of divinity precisely because they had a theory of karma that does away with the need for a personal God.

5 – Somewhat similarly, it is generally thought that theodicies, as responses to the theistic problem of evil, need not be complete explanations of human suffering—see, for example, Rowe 1988, p. 131.
6 – In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Lord Krishna uses this very strategy to persuade Arjuna to fight. He presents the example of King Janaka, who attained liberation solely by the performance of prescribed duties. Krishna says, “Therefore, just for the sake of educating people in general, you should do your work. Whatever action a great man performs, common men follow. And whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues” (3:20–21). Translations from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* herein are based on Prabhupāda 1989. We have either adopted the renderings unaltered or have adapted and rephrased the relevant passages on the basis of a comparison between the English and Sanskrit versions.

7 – This point is reiterated by several influential scholars, including Potter (1980), who notes that the Yoga account offers “a rather carefully worked-out theory concerning the mechanics of karma and rebirth, which is made available to the non-philosopher through appeal to the model of rice-farming” (p. 248).

8 – It is also worth saying something about Kaufman’s claim that the karma theory “will not work for most diseases (one cannot ‘cause’ another to have Parkinson’s or brain cancer)” (p. 21). This is a peculiar oversight, however, since karma is traditionally thought of as embodying a special form of causation in the world. As a causal principle, karma is thought to influence both the mental and the physical realms during the cycle of rebirths. Yogasutras 12–14 describe this process succinctly: “The latent-deposit of karma has its root in the hindrances and may be felt in a birth seen or unseen. These [fruitions, e.g., birth (caste), length-of-life and kind-of-experience] have joy or extreme anguish as results in accordance with the quality of their causes whether merit or demerit” (cited in Woods 1972, p. 121). The point is elaborated further by Creel:

The law or idea of karman, or the understanding of action, comes to have the connotation of moral retribution. . . . The results of previous action are crystallised in the locations of souls in their rebirths; karman determines one’s present status and duties in society, that is, one’s dhāma. Thus karman holds together social status, individual nature or ability, spiritual status, and appropriate behavior. . . . Moreover, the idea of people deserving their social and spiritual status is not susceptible to question as long as it is accepted that people also have the temperament or character or abilities appropriate to their social role. (Creel 1972, p. 162)

Thus, contra Kaufman, karma can cause someone to contract an illness or disease—indeed, karma is thought to shape the physical, social, and spiritual destiny of every human being.

9 – See Reichenbach 1990, chap. 4, where it is argued that the doctrine of karma is usually couched in either a libertarian or a compatibilist framework.

10 – Perhaps what has misled Kaufman is the notion of ‘explanation,’ as such a notion can easily distort the nature and aims of the project of theodicy. The theodist attempts to offer not so much an explanation for the existence of evil, but a moral justification for the existence of evil. Put differently, the aim of the
theodicist is not to determine where ultimate *causal* responsibility for some given evil event lies, but to determine where ultimate *moral* responsibility lies—and in this latter case, the free-will theodicist will say that the ‘buck stops’ with some moral agent’s exercise of free will, thus obviating any need for embarking upon an infinite regress.

11 – See, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:20, 51, and 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

12 – Perhaps death could be described as a great evil if it was thought to result in the permanent cessation of existence. Interestingly, the materialists in the Indian tradition, the Carvakas, did conceive of death in this way, but even they did not think of death as intrinsically bad or painful, but rather equated death with liberation, the highest end of life:

There is no world other than this; there is no heaven and no hell. . . . The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food, keeping [the] company of young women, using fine clothes. . . . The pain of hell lies in troubles that arise from enemies, weapons, diseases; while liberation (*moksa*) is death, the cessation of life-breath. (*Sarvasiddhanasamgraha*, cited in Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, pp. 227–235.)

13 – *Visuddhimagga*, chap. 17, § 47. All citations from the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Milindapañha* are taken from Warren’s translations of the original Pāli texts, in Warren 1986.


15 – *Visuddhimagga*, chap. 8, § 17b.

16 – Ibid., § 47c.

17 – Cited in Woods 1972, p. 122. Although Woods has uniformly translated ‘avidya’ as ‘undifferentiated-consciousness,’ it is more appropriate, at least in this instance, to translate it as ‘ignorance’ (*vidya* literally means ‘knowledge,’ while ‘a’ is the negative prefix in Sanskrit). Woods is thinking of undifferentiated consciousness as something that is attributed to a subject who, being ignorant about the nature of the Self, wrongly assumes that the Self is essentially embodied and hence tied up with the senses and the mind. According to the Yoga, however, the Self is pure consciousness. The body, senses, and the mind are only inessential adjuncts. This ignorance of the true nature of the Self is the cause of all attachments to the objects of sense, and thus results in the suffering of pain.

18 – The Four Noble truths are spelled out in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, 56:11. This citation of the *Samyutta Nikāya* is also from Warren’s translations of the original Pāli texts, in Warren 1986.

19 – An excellent account of the increasing popularity of universalism within Christian thought is provided by Bauckham 1979.

20 – Swami Vishnu Tirtha (1962, pp. 22–25), for example, writes:
Individualized souls transmigrate from one body to another after death in their passage of evolution from vegetative kingdom to animal kingdom and finally to the human plane, human kind being the perfect body. Vegetable, animal and human bodies serve the souls as vehicles in their upward journey. The total number of different kinds of carriages is supposed to be 84 lacs [1 lac = 100,000 lives]. But, human being the highest evolved form, is the best instrument for God realization. . . . It is claimed that through human body only, moksha or emancipation from the wheels of Maya is possible, and not through the bodies of even gods residing in higher spheres. They too have to come down and take up the bodies of men, which only hold key to the door of evolution to God realization.

21 – But see Humphreys (1983, pp. 31–32), who accepts the notion of karmic agents. See also Hick (1976, pp. 319–320), who points out that, according to some Hindu conceptions of rebirth, the mechanism of reincarnation is presided over by God or Ishvara.

22 – One might wonder, however, that if the terrorist does not mete out the requisite punishments, then who will? The obvious answer is that the system of karma itself, operating as inexorably as the laws of nature, will see to it that no wrongdoing goes unpunished.

23 – A position of this sort is defended by Swinburne (1998, p. 224).

24 – This kind of response is available only to the libertarian, although a compatibilist also has a reply at hand: one’s character is determined, but not determined in such a way as to eliminate one’s free will.

25 – See also the interesting quotes from Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in Creel 1986, pp. 3–4, and Minor 1986, p. 35.

26 – Swami Sivananda (1985, p. 195), a contemporary Indian scholar and practitioner of Yoga, writes:

   The law of Karma and justice, if it is true at all, shows unmistakably that there is no real foundation for the notion that there is evolution going on below the stage of man. Every brute, every little insect and every one of the plants and trees, all were, and are going to be again, human beings themselves. They are only temporarily suspended from the class of humanity for some offenses.

   Not all karma theorists, however, accept the possibility of reincarnation as an animal—see, for example, Humphreys 1983, p. 82, and Minor 1986, p. 34.

27 – Indeed, even some specific predictions might be possible. For example, in the Buddhist text Milindapañha, it is suggested that one can predict—on the basis of one’s degree of attachment to the objects of this world—whether one will be reborn into another existence (chap. 41, § 46).

References


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My goal in “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil” was to stimulate discussion about karma and rebirth as a solution to the problem of innocent suffering in the world. As such, I welcome the chance to hear from critics such as Chadha and Trakakis and am happy to attempt a response.¹ In their critique, they attempt to portray me as ignorant of the many precise subtleties and refinements of the karmic philosophy, and thus incapable of judging it. However, as I stated in my original article, my purpose is not to present a historically based synthesis of the karma-rebirth doctrine, but rather to attempt, using the most charitable interpretation possible and not being rigidly bound to doctrinal traditions or texts, an active reconstruction of the best case for a systematic theodicy based on karma, in order to see whether it can successfully explain the origin of evil. But I would also suggest that there is often a certain advantage in having a detached perspective on a subject, since one who is too closely involved in the subject matter may fail to attain objectivity about it, and be prone to dogmatic acceptance of doctrines even when they defy common sense. But let the reader decide: I will briefly present my reactions to their criticism of my six principal objections to karma and rebirth.

The Memory Problem

It is, I argued, a basic principle of justice that one should in general be apprised of what one is being punished for and why; indeed, this knowledge would seem essen-