

The Law of Karma: A Meditation

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According to the popular conception of the Eastern “law of karma,” the law states that what we do to others will rebound upon ourselves. We will suffer what we cause others to suffer, benefit in ways we benefit others.

There are two basic problems with this idea. The first is that it simply does not appear to be true. The world as we experience it does not appear to be ordered in this way. Bad things happen to good people; good things happen to bad. In order to maintain belief in this ‘law’ we have to project its operations into an afterlife, since it does not appear to be operative in this life.

But beyond this, it is morally and spiritually problematic. If the only reason we avoid harming others is because we fear that the harm will rebound upon ourselves, then we never escape the sphere of our own self-concern. As Kant might point out, such a conception reduces the moral to the prudential. I treat the other well, not out of sincere concern for the welfare of the other, but only out of concern for how my treatment of the other will ultimately affect me. In this respect, the law of karma seems egoistic in its basic thrust; it reduces moral concern to self-concern.

What I would like to suggest, however, is that the law of karma, literally construed, is but the ‘shadow’ (to use a Platonic figure) of a more profound moral and spiritual law. Let us call this more profound law, ‘the law of agapic love.’ The law of karma may be seen as an attenuated form of this law of love, designed as an ‘upaya’ – an expedient spiritual device – that appeals to egoic self-concern to lift us beyond egoic self-concern.

To make this clear we need to say a bit about ‘the law of agapic love.’ This law states that our ultimate spiritual welfare, and the realization of our spiritual destiny, depends upon our loving others *as* ourselves. But the reason for this is not that our behavior toward others will magically or mechanically rebound upon us (as the law of karma seems to suggest), but because we are metaphysically constituted such that we cannot achieve our own ultimate happiness – beatitude – in isolation from others.

Beatitude entails the awareness that, at the deepest level of our being, we are metaphysically united with those whom, at the egoic level, we take to be ‘other.’ The truly enlightened person recognizes the other as another instance of herself. Such an awareness requires a reconstitution of the ego, a transformation of heart and mind called “metanoia” in Christianity, which is customarily (but somewhat poorly) translated as “repentance.”

The beatified ego no longer sees itself as enclosed within itself, but has come to see itself as but an instance of the universal Self (God) from which *all* egoic selves spring. Its identification with this universal Self is, at the same time, its recognition that others are but other instances of itself – or better, other instances of *the* Self, with which *itself* is spiritually united.

This idea finds expression in the Great Commandment of Christianity, where Jesus declares that the way to “eternal life” is to love God with all one’s heart, mind, and soul and one’s neighbor as oneself. To love God with all one’s heart, mind, and soul is to recognize one’s unity with the universal Self out of which all selves arise. The one who knows this unity spontaneously loves her neighbor as herself, for she recognizes her neighbor as another instance of the universal Self of which she also is an instance, and thereby recognizes that her own self-concern is replicated in every other.

The claim of Christianity – and all the great spiritual traditions – is that such recognition is itself ‘beatitude,’ the spiritual fulfillment of the person. To spiritually *see* the universal Self, and to see all else as arising from it and abiding within it, is the “beatific vision.”

The *failure* to see this leaves one in egoic isolation, which manifests itself in various forms of spiritual malaise: angst, dread, depression, rage, despair. This is the deeper meaning of the law of karma: the more we oppose ourselves to others, the more we enclose ourselves in ourselves, the more we bring upon ourselves spiritual destitution.

Finally, a word might be said about how the law of karma may be viewed as a “shadow” – in the Platonic sense – of the law of love. Plato famously depicts the ordinary human being as like a prisoner in a cave, able to see only shadows of images on the back of the cave wall. The prisoners take these shadows to be reality itself, when actually they are at best faint, distorted, and limited images of the true reality, to be found only outside the cave.

Let us understand Plato’s cave to represent our egoic isolation. The shadows on the cave wall represent the way reality appears to us when viewed from within the framework of this isolation; we see everything merely in terms of how it does or does not meet our egoic self-interest. Only those who make it outside the cave of their egoic isolation are able to see reality as it truly is, that is, as it is from the perspective of what we have called the “universal Self,” and what Plato simply calls “the Good.”

Outside the cave we find the law of love. This law tells us that we are ontologically united with all others at the deepest level of our being. Thus, what happens to them happens to us; *not* because our behavior toward them will rebound upon us in our egoic isolation, but because it is of the very nature of the beatified self to know itself as one with others. The beatified self suffers with others’ suffering and rejoices with others’ joys. This is the nature of beatitude and the meaning of agapic love.

Within the cave of our egoic isolation, where we experience ourselves as cut off from others and often in violent conflict with them over access to social and material goods, this law of love gets expressed, in a shadowy way, as the law of karma. On one level, the law of karma wags a threatening finger at us: What you do to others will rebound upon you. At a more profound level, the law of karma whispers to us: You and the other are ultimately one.

As an “upaya,” we may understand the wagging finger as a device for getting us to attend to the whisper – a whisper whose ultimate aim is to have us begin the work of making our way out of the egoic cave altogether.