

Karmic Perplexities

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ALL moral and religious teachers find their, greatest perplexities in the anomalies of life and death. Why such things as constantly happen should happen at all, and how the fortuitousness of death is compatible with any system, are dark enigmas to every school but one. The disposition made of them is either a frank avowal that all explanation is hopeless, or a reference to the good pleasure of Almighty God, who has given and will give no reasons, but upon whose wisdom and equity we may rely. Theosophy, however, does propound a rational exposition which fits every case, does disclose a Law so inclusive that nothing is outside its range, so uniform that no exception is possible or conceivable; not dismissing God as a superfluity, but considering that Law as the expression of His will. If moralists and theologians would suspend for an hour their mental habit, and would then fearlessly inquire whether that is not a fuller faith in Deity which regards each event as demonstrating His justice rather than re-opening suspicion of it, they would probably repudiate their old notions as worthless compared with the new, and see in Karma, as we do, a vindication of the purpose underlying life.

But Karma, like other things, has to be studied. Problems cannot be settled by a word, or a phrase, and we no more dispose of difficulties by solemnly saying, "Karma", than the theologians do by solemnly saying "Faith". We need to know what the term means, and what is its function on different levels, and why those levels are not to be confused, and how interpretation may be made judicious instead of rash. In fact, the lines of thought are incomputable, though a few general propositions simplify the whole field. Sometimes these are best arrived at by taking up the puzzling questions, handling them freely, getting at the core of the matter, educing thence a principle or a fact.

One of the very first perplexities every thinker, even the youngest, encounters, is the apparent injustice of what we call "accident". If only the worthless or the bad suffered physical injury, or loss of property or life, [Page 14] all would seem fair. But there is no such rule. The colliding trains hurl into agony the very best of men or the most innocent of children, involving in one common anguish the devout and the reckless, the honest and the fraudulent. The sinking steamer carries to the same death men of opposite characters, making no distinction between worth and worthlessness. The broken bank makes valueless the property of every stockholder, whatever may be his circumstances or merit. Pestilence is indifferent to classes, and, like the rain from heaven, falls alike upon the just and upon the unjust. So, when we hear that desolation has entered where only cheer and happiness would seem appropriate, we have an instinct of protest at the unfitness of the incident, an unformulated suspicion that the government of the world is not what it should be, is heartless, unfair, inaccurate.

This feeling is stronger when the evil has been directly brought to pass by criminal neglect or intention. A careless switchman or a train-wrecker brings mutilation, perhaps death, on innocent travellers, and himself escapes punishment. The bank fails through rascality; the upright stockholders are impoverished,

and the rascally President is enriched. A forger disgraces a family name, and the family sacrifice their property to keep him from the jail where he belongs. A nation decrees an unjust war; the vanquished are covered with blood and debt. Then our sense of right uprises, and we clench our hands at a state of things which makes possible the overthrow of right by wrong.

Perhaps most of all is that feeling keen when harm occurs through the very devotion to duty. A man loses his life in attempting to save the drowning. The physician hurrying to the bedside of the sick falls on the ice and is maimed. A philanthropist incurs disease from the hovels he is unselfishly trying to comfort. Aristides is banished because he is just, and Socrates put to death because he voices truth to the nation. Then we ask ourselves, How is it possible that any real equity presides over mundane affairs, any valid order pervades the mechanism of things? Very likely we feel a half-formed conviction that, if we had been in control, such wrongs would not have been allowed, for our protecting arms would have been around the good and the generous.

This attitude is not unworthy, it is not even irrational, but still it is erroneous. It is not erroneous because it unduly values moral distinctions, or because it over-estimates the claim excellence has upon happiness, but because it does not clearly see the meaning of Karma and discriminate between the planes whereon its various species operate.

Karma is the law of cause and effect, not merely in morals, but in physics, in mind, in soul, in every field wherein action is possible. We are prone to think of it as confined to ethics, and doubtless that is the region [Page 15] most important for motive, but it really is an omnipresent law, pervading the universe seen and unseen. Nothing is beyond its scope, for whenever and wherever occurs an act, then and there must occur the consequences of the act, and those consequences are Karmic. If we hurl a stick into the air, the effect on one muscular system, the upward sweep of the missile, its action on the atmosphere, its descent and its impact on the ground — all are determined by Karma. If we read an essay at an Aryan meeting, the vibrations started by the voice, the trains of thought excited by the propositions, the emotions of assent or dissent aroused in the hearers — all are Karmic. If we are addicted to day-dreaming, Karma shapes the visions coming from the habit Karma had established, and Karma sees to it that we are weakened or strengthened according to the quality of that habit. If we provide for the animal nature mainly, for the intellectual, or the spiritual, the resultant type is as Karmically ordered as is the crop in autumn from the farmer's sowing of the spring. So necessary, so close, so connected, so inevitable is all effect from cause, that we may even, from this point of view, consider it as mechanical, the differentiation being into the fields of the phenomena, not in the character of the Law.

It is only through the invariability of the law of causation that any human knowledge becomes possible. If there was ever a single case where action could begin and end in itself, there might be another, or any number; if there was one where the effect had no relation to the cause, there might be others; if either class had presence in a world of life, uncertainty would pervade that world from end to end. Not a sunrise or a crop or an investment or a plan or an engagement could be assured; history would be worthless, for it would teach nothing, and prediction would be impossible, for there would be no basis for its erection. Science and mechanics and commerce and art would vanish from the earth, since they all presuppose a uniformity of natural law. Once interrupt the continuity of the causal connection, and you dislocate the whole structure of things to its remotest end.

Then there is another fact. Forces belonging to one plane must not be expected to produce the results of forces belonging to another plane. This is not saying that forces on one may not give rise — by induction, so to speak — to forces on another, but that each force has its natural and legitimate effects, not interchangeable with the effects of a different force. The most concentrated attention of the most powerful mind will not educe a crop of wheat from a field wherein no wheat has been sown; and the balmiest spring and the sunniest summer will not confer learning on the idle mind which hates to read or think. Spirituality, however lofty, saves no man from loss who has put his money in a foolish enterprise; and destruction from a cyclone is not averted by the sweetest disposition that [Page 16] ever graced a Western prairie. There has to be congruity between the means and the end, relation between cause and effect, homogeneity between act and result.

Braced with these simple considerations, we can the better meet the perplexing problems arising in life. A labourer falls from a platform, and we think it hard that an orphaned family is plunged into beggary. And yet, the slip occurring, the fatal fall must also occur, unless either the law of gravitation is suspended or a human frame made insusceptible to injury. Is this conceivable? A useful man, serving the community and a radiating centre of beneficence, is paralyzed from malarial poison, and we protest against our loss. Have we any right to exact that the fever-germ shall not flourish in the body adapted to it, or, on the other hand, that the force of moral character shall be an antidote to physical disease? A man is killed by an explosion when rescuing others from a fire, and we resent his death as an injustice to human sympathy. Yet can we justly demand that explosives shall lose their nature when they will work harm, or, as an alternative, that a noble motive shall be a safeguard from bodily danger? Ignorance — what frightful, irremediable evils it begets! How many thousands suffer life-long penalty for an early act from which due instruction would have saved! The young girl, inexperienced, untaught, takes a step which never can be retraced, and the whole course of an incarnation is diverted into dreary fields. The young man, unknowing, unprepared, is made a victim by shrewder minds, and commits a folly or a wrong which stains his name for ever. How unfair it all seems; how disproportioned the punishment to the fault! That a small mistake, the result of ignorance, should draw after it consequences so huge and so enduring offends our sense of right and the fitness of things. And yet how could it be otherwise? To break at any point the links in the long chain, each link the effect of its predecessor and the cause of its successor, and thus arrest the continuance of action, one of two things is necessary: either the break must be arbitrary, and then you have that violation of law which would be a fatal precedent in a universe of law; or the break must be by new forces, natural and working naturally. But these cannot be forces from the mental, psychical, or spiritual plane — repentance, suffering, better knowledge, and the like; they must be forces, however induced, which act on the same plane as is the chain. Ignorance of climatic and local conditions in a strange land brings about a sun-stroke or a fever: regret and pain through years will not heal the consequent weakness; only medical aid will do that, though it may be prompted by the regret and pain. So ignorance in other fields produces through a solecism or an error no little public odium: bitter penitence does not cancel that, though it may arouse a strength of character and a forceful life which will overcome and end the evil. [Page 17]

This doctrine, so rigid, so inflexible, so unaffected by the tenderest, the very finest, sentiments of humanity, seems very hard and cold. But is it not true? As matter of fact, do not the affairs of life move precisely as I have depicted them? Where, indeed, would be the perplexity if they moved as we should wish? Being as they are, facts, certain, incontrovertible, demonstrable facts, it is obviously the act of wisdom to admit them. Repugnance will not alter, nor revolt annul them. But we may take two further steps. In all frankness, can we conceive of a world in which they should be otherwise? Can we, flushed with the warmest of sympathy and the best of motive, yet picture to ourselves a terrestrial organism in

which physical law was continually at the mercy of moral purpose, where fire and famine and disease and accident hurt only the unworthy, where inner character was exactly portrayed in outer condition, where all forces but the beneficent were arrested at their very start, where no incongruities or anomalies ever entered, where the sun shone only on the good and drought visited only the bad? Follow out all the consequences of such a scheme of things, and you will see not only that intellectual growth and moral discipline would be impossible, but that the very simplest of plans would be unformable. Vital powers would die out in confusion and paralysis.

But if the law is as it is, and if no other system is thinkable, there must be good reasons for the existing. Limitless wisdom and limitless power being at the source of the universe, it is fair to suppose that the constitution of things was adopted as being the best. As we probe more deeply into it, the vindication of its excellence becomes ever more patent. We do not need to rely only on faith; demonstration is continually multiplying. Take this very case of Karma, considered as an ethical law. What peace and security it has brought to many of us who were unsatisfied with or shocked at the teachings of conventional religion! How it has cleared away difficulties and doubts and forebodings and anxieties, furnishing solid ground for all purpose and endeavour, giving unclouded skies and transparent atmosphere to the searching eye of thought! What cheer it has brought us, the cheer consequent upon the certainty, the changelessness, the reliability of the great Law, conformity whereto makes us safe! But if that Law is so perfect on its ethical side, if every new exploration of it adds to our delight in its richness and stability, if it vindicates its justice and confirms its excellence at every turn, how natural that the same facts should exist on its physical side. There are no more anomalies therein to us now than there formerly were in its ethical department. As better knowledge has dissipated these, so it will those. Even at this date proof is increasing, that Karma is as truly beneficent in physics as in morals. We understand it better, more of its bearings are being disclosed, suspicion is [Page 18] changing into confidence. As we become better Theosophists, more instructed, less hampered by vestiges of an erroneous past, fuller visions will open, richer fields expand before the sight. Perplexities will dissolve. The start, the grieved surprise: with which we see some apparent contradiction will gradually grow rarer as perception of the real economy merges into content with it; we shall not confuse planes of action or demand an impossible world; but, broadening and clarifying with fuller light, our view shall stretch over the vast area and through the enigmas it includes, sensing its harmony and order and wise uniformity. Karma never fails. Human plans may break and wither, human prescience lamentably err; the mind may stumble and the reason quiver: but the great Law which is our security goes on serenely to its end, every new manifestation of its accuracy being a call to a new reliance, an enlarged trust. In due time the last lingering doubt shall dissolve and vanish, and then we shall know even as also we are known.