

Men Karmic Agents

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We hear at times in Theosophical discussions the question whether we have or have not any part in the execution of Karma, and from some comes the reply that Karma is a force that looks after itself and that can be interfered with by no one, while by others it is asserted that we are all, in measure, the conscious or unconscious executors of Karmic Law, that we cannot escape this any more than other participation in the workings of a system wherein we are involved, and that, as we have to participate, we had better participate judiciously and wisely so as to bring about the healthiest results. These are very certainly contradictory opinions, and of course either has to maintain itself not by force of assertion but by force of argument. [Page 24]

My own conviction is that we are all of us agents in the carrying out of Karmic purposes, and that, as an intelligent agency is always more efficient than one which is machine-like or blunderous, we shall be better servants of Karma, and so better servants of humanity, if we understand something of our duties and dangers and limitations.

Now it must be unquestionably true that a great universal law of Nature, a law pervading the whole universe and regulating alike the planet and the atom, cannot be thwarted by any man or any combination of men. A human being is as powerless to arrest Karma as to arrest the stars in their orbits or the transmission of light through space. In some way and at some time the Karmic purpose will be fulfilled, no matter who objects or opposes. But it does not follow that Karma, in bringing about its ends, dispenses with the use of human instruments, or that those instruments, if imperfect or fitful or fragile, may not hinder or divert for a time the ultimate result. A force working upon and among a dense aggregation of atoms in an exceedingly complicated social system can hardly avoid working *through* them; and if each of them is imperfect, the outcome cannot be as immediately good as if each was without a flaw. But this is precisely what was claimed.

Look at it more in detail. In all cases where men are congregated into communities, some organization must ensue. There must be regulations, however made, and there must be offices to enforce them, however constituted. As civilization advances, government, like other factors in social life, becomes more complex, and varieties and grades of officials are evolved as arise the functions which make them necessary. Thus in a nation like our own there are many kinds of public agents, each given authority for certain purposes in the preservation of order, the protection of individual rights, the maintenance of the general security. When anyone of these is violated, it becomes the duty of the appropriate agent to seize, restrain, punish the violator. Only so can the welfare of all, which is superior to the selfish pleasure of one, be conserved. Hence an offence draws after it the consequence of an offence, in other words, Karma; and he who inflicts that consequence is an executor of Karma. The whole social organism rests upon Karma as its base, and provides that Karmic effects shall be adjusted, administered, effectuated

through a distinct machine.

But it operates also in another manner. In free and constitutional governments the theory, whatever the practise, is that the power of legislation and administration shall be committed by popular choice to those who have previously demonstrated their fitness to use it, and officials are elected in order that they may wisely formulate the general will and impartially carry it into effect. Here are two propositions welded together [Page 25] 1st, that a diffused power shall be concentrated in a few that it may be efficient; 2nd , that the purpose shall be the maintenance of Justice. Each of these is a Karmic proposition, and the spectacle of a nation or a municipality taking certain of its members and elevating them to official heights because they properly belong there is an exhibition of the two-fold principle that reward is the Karmic consequence of merit and that they can best administer Karma who best understand and exemplify it.

Government, then, is organized Karma in civil affairs., organized for the avowed purpose that they who have good Karma shall enjoy it and that they who have bad Karma shall undergo it, and organized with officials whose express duty it is to carry out the Karmic scheme.

But, it may be said, no one doubts that public officers are Karmic agents, and that, when they act aright, they are in the line of duty and are officially vindicating Law. What is denied is that private individuals have any share in such a work, or are empowered to use functions which have never been committed to them. There is an easy answer to this.

It is quite true that private individuals are not the executants of public Karma, but this nobody claims. You and I have not the prerogative of passing statutes or of imprisoning those who transgress them. But it by no means follows that because not public officers and therefore without public functions, we have no private functions as private citizens. In fact we have a good many, some of them very obvious. If an intruder forces his way into our home, we are not bound to await the arrival of a policeman, but may eject him at once. If we detect a thief carrying off our goods, we do not need to follow him till a station is in sight, but may promptly seize both him and them. If a ruffian attacks a passer by, it is commendable rather than faulty if we come to the rescue, although not commissioned patrolmen. Karma — the embodiment of justice — does not accept the services only of those who have helmets on their heads and shields on their coats.

Once concede the fact that private individuals can act in the vindication of justice, and you vacate the doctrine that only public officials have that right. The field is then open, and all that remains is to determine to what extent, and how, and in what circumstances a Karmic function attaches to each of us, We can best reach the general principle if we look into the necessary constitution of society.

The root idea of the social organism is that each man shall have all possible liberty consistent with the equal liberty of the rest. Their liberty is a restriction upon his own, inasmuch as it prevents him from doing much which he might do if alone, though he is similarly protected from invasion by his fellows. There is a restraint upon his freedom, compensated for by a protection of what is left, and both the restraint and the protection are maintained through the organism of which he is a part. But this is really [Page 26] an organism, not an aggregation of disconnected particles, a mere heap of sand or pile of sticks, but a body politic, a living, acting, functioning entity, composed of distinct atoms, each alive, and the whole with a

corporate vitality and movement. Hence there are two activities, the one of the organism as such, the other of its integral units; and hence, also, there are two duties towards the root-idea, the one organic, the other individual. For the large, general purpose, the body corporate makes appropriate provision, supplying safeguards for the whole as a whole, and for all those relations of the integers to each other where the power of the whole is needed. Thus society equips a military force for its protection against corporate assault, and courts and policemen for the securing of safety among citizens.

But there is evidently a very large class of cases, too trivial or too intricate for public treatment, which must necessarily be left between man and man, and as to which the duty towards the root-idea must be performed individually. Such are beyond the range of magistrates or roundsmen, yet they have all the importance which arises from life in close contact and from the need to make that life as helpful and as happy as can be. In that minor sphere, that restricted area of social, not public, function, each man is of necessity a judge and an executioner, hearing, trying, determining causes, giving and executing sentence continually. He *must* be so; the act is forced upon him because of his membership in society; he exercises it unconsciously in every opinion uttered, every deed performed; from infancy to death he is incessantly giving verdicts on character, acts, tendencies. No possible mental twists can extricate him from a position inevitable from his circumstances; he may argue, protest, disclaim, he may repudiate the function in the name of philosophy, religion, Theosophy, charity, or what you please, but it can never be shaken off or escaped so long as another human being is within his sight or ken. He may silence his tongue, but his thoughts work on; he may try to paralyze them, but he can only succeed through imbecility which is mental death. Whenever another's acts come before him he forms an opinion as to their merit; whenever he meets a stranger, he takes some impression; whenever he is invited to act he must act or abstain according to conviction; whenever moral questions are grave he must take a position.

This may seem like an abstraction. But look at it in its concrete forms. A poor person solicits you for help: you give or refuse as you think him worthy or the reverse. You are passing a moral judgment on a fellow-being. Certain stories are told you of an acquaintance: you believe or reject them according to their probability. You have tried and determined a cause. A person known to you commits a gross wrong: you decline further association with one whose presence is polluting. You have pronounced [Page 27] and are executing a social sentence. Cases like these are continually occurring, and they must ever occur simply because you are members of society, in perpetual contact with other members, subjected to all the conditions and incidents of social life. And each one is a case of executed Karma, not merely in the bald sense of effect from cause, but in the sense of action morally determined with a view to justice.

Still it may be urged that such cases, however unavoidable, are incidental, not voluntary, and that it is the spontaneous and intentional assumption of Karmic function which is beyond the right of private citizens. But even this cannot be maintained. There are many occasions in social life when direct, immediate, deliberate action to that end is not only proper but demanded. One is *the protection of other people*. An upright person is about to enter into business engagements with a man positively known to you to be dishonest: you are as much bound to put him on his guard as you would be if you saw him travelling on an insecure road. You have found a tradesman careless, slow, tricky, unscrupulous: you do a service to society by making the matter known. Through experience you have learned a hotel, a steamer, a boarding house to be ill-kept: you would warn other travellers, as preceding ones should have warned you. Thus it is that suffering and loss are saved, and that rapacity and unfairness is circumvented. A second case is *the abatement of evil*. A man is rough in manners, insolent in his bearing, ready to impose upon and annoy his neighbours. You have a positive duty to rebuke him if the occasion calls for it, and, if

he does not reform, to refuse him recognition. Men have a right to genial treatment, and to the full enjoyment of social courtesy only as they practise it themselves, and boorishness in private life is restrained and cured only as boors are made to see that it will not be tolerated. It is in this way that the civilities of life are kept up and the aggressiveness of the ill-behaved kept down, and he does a service to good manners, and even to good morals who thus helps to maintain a high standard by Karmic discipline to such as would overthrow it. A third case is *direct punishment for wrong*. Your *employee* cheats a customer: you are quite right to discharge him forthwith. You find a tradesman falsifying as to his wares: it is well to tell him so and to transfer your purchases to another. An acquaintance is shown guilty of malicious mischief-making: justice sustains you in refusing to have further relations with him. There are many cases where action is demanded on all three grounds — the protection of others, the abatement of evil, the direct punishment for wrong. A clerk in a public office is impertinent: complaint to his superior is called for. A car conductor is thieving or brutal: let him be reported. A drunkard has brought himself to distress after warnings: it is well to refuse assistance till the habit is repudiated. These and a thousand other possible illustrations show how punitive action in private [Page 28] life is necessitated by the social condition, that it is salutary in all its bearings, that it is in the direct fulfilment of one part of personal duty, and that Karma *does* at times call upon us to exhibit and vindicate her, though we are not State officials or with any other function than that of honest, intelligent, high-minded civilians.

But, it may still be urged, in undertaking any administration of Karma one is virtually claiming to be administering pure justice, and therefore to infallibly know its exact measure in any case — a thing impossible to mortals. Not at all. If an attempt to administer justice implied exhaustive knowledge of conditions, it would imply Omniscience and therefore Godhood, and, as no one possesses that, the consequence would follow that no attempt could ever be made, whether by civil tribunals, by State officers, or by private citizens. The doctrine proves too much. All that can be exacted on any occasion, corporate or individual, is that every *practicable* element should be observed. As judges strive to ascertain every fact, and to impartially give each its weight, so should we in those minor judicial functions forced upon us by our social relations. We are to be dispassionate, candid, eager to see all sides, free from prejudice or partiality, earnest only that Truth shall be exemplified and upheld. We cannot be infallible since we are not omniscient, but we recede from error as we vacate the regions which produce it.

And so, I hold, we are all of us Karmic agents; often unconsciously, mechanically; often deliberately, voluntarily, necessarily. The mechanism of a human society must largely be worked by human will, and no one can escape the mechanism while remaining in the society. The choice is not between executing Karma and not executing it; it is between executing it with intelligence and good effect, and executing it with blunders and injury. Whether the function be from obvious authority, as with parents, teachers, and employers, or from obligation to the general and individual welfare, as in the relation of equals in age or station, the same rule holds — that this duty, as all other duties, shall be discerned with clearness and performed with skill. As the requisites to just action are increasingly filled, so will multiply the beneficence of its effect; and as true men deal out justice in all their ways, so will the reign of justice extend over human hearts and human homes. Every social evil will shrink and every social good expand. Reform will come as each atom is a reformer. As the one great Life disperses itself through the myriad little lives it vivifies, so the one great Law will manifest itself in the myriad beings moulded by it and effectuating it. We shall not be limp and shapeless products of a Karmic force no one can avert or change, but glad servants of that which courses through our systems and sways our habit and nerves our movement. Thus we shall be amended, society regenerated, and humanity saved.