

Karma and Free Will An Elementary Study

by Emily Kislingbury, F.T.S.

Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 5

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

ONE of the benefits accruing from the study of Theosophy should be the power of clearing our thoughts and conceptions on those subjects which are of vital importance to our right-living. The hopeless muddle in which some of us have been landed by conflicting theologies, cosmogonies and philosophic systems make such a clearing most necessary and desirable, and the confusion they have created is the main reason, why many in these days have fallen back on materialism, where the deductions of physical science are refreshingly clear and simple by comparison, and satisfactory to the mind, so far as they go. In dealing with the abstruser side of Theosophy, there is danger of a return to the old state of mystification, and a darkening of knowledge by a multiplicity of words and so-called explanations. Would it not be better to lay firm hold of a few basic laws, and try to see how many things which now seem so complicated may be referred through all their windings to these few mainsprings of action in the Macrocosm, and therefore of reaction or reflection in the Microcosm? We worry our brains and puzzle over things which are perfectly simple, and would be so regarded if the philosophers had not spun out of the haziness of their psycho-materialist conceptions difficulties which would never have presented themselves to those who see by the clearer light of intuition. Then, again, the intolerance and self-assertiveness of these so-called philosophers and the brilliancy of expression with which some of our modern scientists have certainly put forward their own teachings, have so imposed upon a world expectant of new truth, that the voices of the intuitionists have been feeble in comparison and proportionately disregarded.

Now, however, that the turn of the tide has come, we should make the most of our opportunities, and try to make clear statements about our own position. Much has been said, I know, to the effect that Theosophists must not dogmatize, for Theosophy has no creed. But surely that which we all accept as *truth* must constitute our body of doctrine [Page 18] or teaching, and a *dogma* is nothing but a truth clearly laid down and stated, for the guidance of the student and of all who come after. True, we must always bear in mind that such dogma, or definite statement of truth, is capable by its nature, of *indefinite expansion*, but it must have its root unshaken, rivetted in Eternal law.

Even inductive science, having arrived by its own methods at certain generalizations which it calls *laws* of nature, lays these down for general acceptance; such are the laws of gravitation, attraction, cohesion, the correlation of forces, *etc.*. This does not prevent students from verifying each and all of these laws by experiment, and proving the truth of every statement made by the teacher, and even starting new theories in connection with them. And so it should be in Theosophy. The student should accept, at least provisionally, the laws of the science he has come to study; when he has heard the statements of his teachers concerning their own doctrines, he will be in a position to test their truth for himself. Without some such definitions to anchor by and work up to, he will soon be "in endless mazes lost", and will

never arrive at any correct conclusions, nor find the "law within the law".

And no Theosophist desiring to teach others must shrink from the admission that such definite statement, call it doctrine, law, dogma, or what you will, must be taken as a basis of Theosophic study.

Such a law, then, is Karma, and to many amongst us the unveiling of this truth by Theosophy has been the way out of a maze of difficulty, and the deliverance from a burden greater than that borne by Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. But already there is a tendency shown by some to darken this blessed light by sophistry, to blur over those "Eastern windows that look towards the sun", by confusing Karma with fatalism, or by allowing their half-formed convictions to be shaken on account of some of the forms in which its action does not seem clearly traceable. If we could explain it all, we should indeed be as gods, knowing good and evil, and should be fit to pass away altogether from this plane of being.

Of course also we are here confronted with another difficulty — the appeal to authority. "Who are those that say these things are so? and why should I believe them?". Well, we are not going into that question here. Those who have accepted on good grounds, or at least on grounds satisfactory to their own minds, the Eastern teachings, do not require to discuss it, and I am not now engaged in trying to convince those who have not yet done so, to accept that authority. I only want to make a statement of what is meant by Karma, according to the [Page 19] teachings of the *Secret Doctrine*, and to show its various aspects, and then to try and point out how it bears upon that other arch-difficulty and *bête noire* of theologians and philosophers — man's free-will.

To begin with a negative — Karma is not Fate and it is not Predestination; neither is it Nemesis (alone) nor is it Providence, though all these may be looked upon as aspects of Karma. Unfortunately we have no word in the English language that can embrace all the fulness of its meaning, for the simple reason that the conception does not exist in our philosophy, nor in any school of thought that has taken root on English soil. In a foot-note to the *Secret Doctrine* (ii. 305), and much of its most precious teachings is contained in foot-notes and in very small print, but let no student pass them over on that account) there is what seems to me the most complete and satisfactory definition of Karma, so far as it can be compressed into a few sentences.

I give here its substance, and alter the wording only as much as is necessary to connect it with the context. "Karma is an absolute and eternal law in the world of manifestation" the concatenation of cause and effect, and as regards its operation in human lives, it is the practical illustration of the saying "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap". It is Nemesis, Adrasteia and Themis in one. As Themis, it is universal Order and Harmony, and by its action keeps man within the limits of nature and righteousness; it is therefore also Nemesis, or the law of Retribution, since it exacts the penalty for every infraction of the law of order; thus also it is Adrasteia or the Inevitable, since every action has its reaction, and is bound within the chain of cause and effect. Each action committed by man is the effect of some cause previously set in motion by himself, and becomes in its turn the cause of never-ending consequences.

Karmic influence extends not only throughout the life of a man's present personality, but reaches far back to the dawn of his self-consciousness in previous incarnations, and will accompany his individuality to the

end of the Manvantara; it will follow him for weal or for woe in the new personality he puts on at each re-birth; he cannot escape from it, for it is indeed the "besetting God" spoken of by the Psalmist. And it is because this haunting quality of Karma is more felt by us when it concerns our evil deeds than when it rewards us, so to speak, for our good ones, that the Greeks personified it as Nemesis, the Avenger, and as the Erinnyes or Furies, pursuing the evil-doer by land and sea until he had worked out his allotted punishment.

Some have objected that this is not borne out by the facts of life, for we often see the "wicked flourishing as a green bay-tree", and the [Page 20] poor and deserving suffering endless trials and misery, from no apparent fault of their own, and often without sympathy or alleviation from their more fortunate brethren. Yes; but we must remember that we see only the course of one short life, and often not the whole, indeed at best only the outside of that, and it is just here that the teachings of Theosophy come in to solve the problem of the inequality and the seeming injustice of men's lots. Some French writer has said that if there were no other life, man would have to invent one in order to adjust the balance of injustice in this; hence also the popularity of the belief in a rewarding heaven and a punishing hell. For this belief has an eternal truth at the back of it. That truth is the continuation of life through a series of incarnations on earth or some other planet, our condition being each time determined by Karma, that is to say by that which is the consequence of our former lives. We have what we deserve in the long run. Man does not start in each life with a *tabula rasa*, at least after his seventh year, a clean sheet on which he can write, or as some parents and educators have imagined *they* can write, what each one pleases. He brings with him the record of his past deeds, good and bad, the certificate, as it were, of character from his last place of service. This character will colour all his acts in each re-birth, until, following in the track of evolution, he reaches finally the nirvanic condition, when his will or his state of consciousness becomes one with the divine.

This doctrine of Karma does not exclude transmission of characteristic traits by heredity; but these will on examination be found to belong to the physical order, or to lie on the borderland between this and the mental plane, which Theosophy calls "Kama-manasic". In our study of the seven principles in man, we have seen how these principles or planes of being overlap one another, the Astral or psychic being but the shadow of the physical, and yet having a certain independent existence, as it is known to survive the physical body often for a considerable period. The Manas, or spiritual-mental principle, sending down as it were a ray into the lower quaternary, that ray is immersed in the matter of that quaternary, and takes on a certain outward colour or character resembling those among whom it dwells. Should it be overborne, either by such outward circumstances, or by hereditary tendencies inherent in the physical or passional nature, the outcome cannot fail to be disastrous. It is not uncommon, however, to see children who at an early age showed a striking likeness to either parent, by degrees outgrowing that tendency and developing, as we say, a character of their own, the very physical features becoming changed as the inner nature asserts itself. [Page 21]

Now some will ask, where then is man's free-will, if he is thus bound by the chain of cause and effect? This celebrated problem has exercised the minds of thinkers not only in the West but in those parts of the East where, I suppose, the esoteric teachings were not understood; but is it really as difficult as it is made to appear? and will not the *Secret Doctrine* in this, as in other respects, become the Karma of the philosophers, by revealing to babes the mysteries that the most learned have hitherto been unable to fathom?

What is the problem of Free-will and Necessity? Popularly stated it is this: Man, being the creature of circumstances over which he has no control, having come into this world by no wish of his own, and being conditioned and limited on all sides by the necessities of his nature and of his surroundings, can only act within those limits and conditions; thus, though he may appear to act freely, such freedom is an illusion, perceived only by the philosophic few. Man being therefore obliged to act in a certain manner under certain conditions, was said by Calvin and his followers to be predestined to salvation or perdition, and thus grew up a set of teachings which have tinged a particular section of the Christian Church with gloom, narrowness, and uncharity. Surely the ancient Greeks did not teach this when they pictured Hercules at the parting of the ways, making his choice between earthliness and heavenly virtue? What is the meaning of the *Two Paths* in Theosophy, the broad and the narrow ways of the Gospels, between which man is to choose, if he has no freedom of will, no power of choice between good and evil? He would be a mere senseless machine, the work of an equally senseless Creator. True, man cannot act altogether contrary to his nature, he is bound within certain limits and conditions; but he can rise above the lower part of his nature by continually choosing the good and refusing the evil, by self-restraint and self-sacrifice. And by setting his will always in the direction of good, by making for righteousness in thought as well as deed, he will, in spite of many failures, gradually rise in the scale of consciousness, until his will becomes more and more purified, and is finally united with the Eternal Will of the Universe. Thus what was once his nature, *i.e.*, to please the flesh, is so no longer, and he has outstepped the limits and conditions by which he was formerly bound. He is free, by uniting his will with the Divine Will. He has put off the old man, and has put on the new man, being "renewed in the spirit of his mind".

But among the limitations to be overcome or patiently suffered, as the case may be, are those which we have woven around our own feet [Page 22] by our former actions, and which Theosophy calls "Karmic results". But we must never take these as predestining us to a certain end. They are a debt which we have to pay to the uttermost farthing, and in paying it cheerfully, honestly, and to the best of our ability, we shall be making good Karma either for this life, if it be long enough, or if not for some *future* existence, and we shall be freeing our footsteps from that tangle that we have ourselves woven around them, and be clearing the onward path for the free exercise of our will, or rather the Divine Will within us, in the future. Thus the right understanding of Karma, or even a firm hold on the doctrine as the expression of a righteous law, should tend to make men happier, more contented, more patient and persevering in overcoming difficulties, stronger both to bear and to forbear, to will, to dare and to do.

Most certainly its inculcation in youth would act as a strong deterrent from evil courses, but unfortunately, as an eminent novelist of our own day has said: "What father now teaches his children that a human act, once set in motion, flows on for ever to the great account?" The world wants the doctrine of Karma, and we cannot doubt that it will, when once generally accepted, become to the weak a saviour and to the perplexed a solvent of many difficulties. We are told by statisticians, and the frequent accounts published in the newspapers make it patent to all, that suicide is frightfully on the increase; theosophically, I believe there is nothing that entails more terrible Karmic results. Is not this one of the crimes, the decrease of which would naturally follow on a wider acceptance of this doctrine of Karma, showing that for all the evil and the curse of life here, there is not only a cause but a remedy; and that remedy is for each one to try and become master of his fate instead of letting his fate master him. By teaching the law of Karma we can show that no effort on the right path will go unrewarded, and that every step on the upward climb raises others as well as ourselves; by inspiring hope in those who believe that all is lost, by helping those to live who have thought that life was no longer possible, by showing those among our sisters who feel their shame and degradation that it is still possible for them to begin life afresh, and that though they must suffer for the faults they have committed, this need not deter them from making every effort to

regain the character they have lost. And this is a work that many of us may engage in quietly, for who of us, alas! has not come across some case of the kind I am now thinking of; it is not possible for all to work on a large scale, but every one of us can help his neighbour, and it will be *our* Karma if we pass by on the other side, or if, worse still, we drive one back by our indifference [Page 23] or uncharitableness on the life she would gladly leave if she knew how to get on to the better path.

The doctrine of Karma is never to be applied to others with the same rigour that we must use in interpreting the mystery of our own lives. What do we know of their past trials, their present deserts, their temptations, their difficulties, or of their striving against evil and the force of circumstances? Besides which, there is another side of Karma I have not yet touched upon, that is, its generic or national character. The *Secret Doctrine* tells us (i. 635) that the very earliest impulses of cosmic energy are guided in the right direction by Karma, and that even the illusive appearance of the marshalling of events and actions on this earth follow the "cycles of spiritual evolution."

As there are racial, national and individual cycles, so there is racial and national as well as individual Karma. And some of those very social conditions which have been brought about by the sins of a whole people may be the result of causes in which we ourselves have taken part, and therefore it rests with us to better the conditions of those who are now the victims perhaps of our misdoing in the past. So that wherever our eyes are opened to behold the misery of others, a double responsibility is ours — that which results from the universal brotherhood we all as Theosophists acknowledge, and that to which as agents of Karma we are inexorably bound by obligations entailed upon us by former causes engendered by ourselves; and once we see this, the removal of the consequences becomes for us a sacred duty. We may forsake our duty, and in so doing evince a childish preference for what we may term our own wills; but then ere long Karma the Beneficent will return with redoubled force as Nemesis the Avenger, and there will be no escape from her lash, just as if one should turn his back unheeding on the first warning of smoke and flame in a corner of his house, and going his way should afterwards return to find it a blackened mass of ruins. Within such limits as these the will of man must indeed be brought into harmony with universal and cyclic law, if he wishes to escape destruction; and it is only by living in conformity with the Will of God, as religion phrases it and has always taught, that man becomes really free. And though for each man there is a compelling destiny which, once being set in a certain direction, works inevitably towards its goal, yet that direction *has been chosen by the man himself*, and whether at the end he finds himself fixed in an eternal calm, or carried away by the whirlwind, either destination is the result of his own actions — is KARMA.

So that the summing up of the whole matter appears to me to be — [Page 24] that man has free-will, is free to choose, continually; but his choice in the present will, by Karmic law, be determined by his choice in the past, and equally that of the future by his choice in the present. And as the momentum of Karma, so to speak, gathers as it goes, and increases with the distance, the force to be resisted becomes greater as time goes on, instead of less. Woe then be to him who tampers with his choice or dreams for a moment that he may be exempt from consequences, or free to return on the path that he once freely chose. I do not say that a man may not repent of his error, but the forces which draw him onward maybe too strong for him, and unless he sets his will betimes firmly to readjust the perturbation he has caused in the world of harmony, his efforts to right himself will not prevail.

"Nor", says the *Secret Doctrine*, "would the ways of Karma be inscrutable were men to work in union and harmony, instead of disunion and strife. For our ignorance of these ways — which one portion of mankind

calls the ways of Providence, dark and intricate, while another sees in them the action of blind fatalism, and a third, simple chance, with neither god nor devil to guide them — would surely disappear, if we would but attribute all these to their correct cause. Were no man to hurt his brother, Karma-Nemesis would have neither cause to work for, nor weapons to act through" Nor would he have need to "accuse Heaven and the gods, Fate and Providence, of the apparent injustice that reigns in the midst of humanity". Let him rather "by unity in thought and action, and philosophical research into the mysteries of being", learn how to suppress some bad effects and cease to create others in a world already so full of woe and evil.

The will of man, united with the Will of God, its true source, can do all things; it can create as it can destroy, and the whole Universe is hung upon its hinges. What a destiny lies then before the coming race, and before ourselves as its precursors and inaugurators. But only so long as we *will* to choose the higher life — in the words of Milton:

Freely we serve
Because we freely love, as in our will
To love or not; in this we stand or fall.

Paradise Lost, Book V.

And having so lived, we shall be free to make the greatest choice of all — Nirvana, or the Great Renunciation.