

KARMA, CAUSALITY AND FREEDOM

Is man bound by his *Karma*? Can he transcend his *Karma Phala*? These are some of the important questions that will be examined in the present paper.

The doctrine of *Karma* is peculiar to Indian tradition. Almost all the systems of Indian philosophy with the exception of the Carvakas accept the doctrine. Even the Buddhist and the Jainas do not lag behind. The doctrine has percolated so much to the grass root that the common man in India is greatly influenced by it. In fact, whenever he faces difficulty in life he reconciles himself with the concrete realities by invoking and resorting to the law of *Karma*. Many sociologists, both Eastern and Western, attribute general sluggishness and the consequent poverty in India to a strong and unshakable belief in the law of *Karma* by its common masses.

The doctrine has been variously formulated. But the most important formulation of it is as follows : (i) Any *Karma* or action that a man performs must give rise to some effect, and (ii) this effect must be enjoyed by the agent; if not in this life then in the lives to come in future. As you sow, so shall you reap; - runs the doctrine in nutshell. Let us examine these one by one.

Thesis (i) *Every action must give rise to effect*: The understanding of this thesis depends upon what exactly we mean by an action. An action is ordinarily distinguished from an event in that the former has an agent, whereas the latter cannot be said to have any agent at all. As for instance, teaching is an act whereas, raining is an event. To teach we need a teacher, whereas, there is no such agent who creates rains. Raining is a physical phenomenon that takes place in nature and can be adequately explained in causal terms without any reference to intention, desire or will. On the other hand, the act of

teaching cannot be explained without reference to intention, will, desire, and such other concepts. Seen in this light, whatever a man does with intention turns out to be an action. But now the question is what about pure mental acts like thinking, feeling and willing? Are they acts at all? Is physical manifestation a necessary ingredient of action? If this is so, then thinking, feeling and willing cannot be treated as acts for the simple reason that there may be cases when one thinks but may not manifest it physically. If intention constitutes the basis of an act, then thinking cannot be excluded from its domain for the simple reason that it (intention) does enter into thinking in a very intimate way. There cannot be thinking which is unintentional. In other words, mental acts which do not manifest physically cannot be excluded from the domain of acts. What distinguishes an act from a non act or event is the conscious decision, choice or intention. An event does not come into existence through conscious decision or choice, whereas an act comes into being only through conscious decision. That is why we hold a person accountable or responsible for his actions for the simple reason that it is he who takes a decision to perform a peculiar action in lieu of another.

But now the question is what is it to take a conscious decision or to perform an action? When an agent chooses one action in lieu of another, he gives reasons. One is said to have taken conscious decision only when one can give reasons why did one choose a particular action. It is said that freedom lies in choosing a particular action. But what does really happen when one chooses? One's desires, convictions, hopes, ambitions and even the world view come into picture. That is to say, in choosing an action, one's desires and convictions, play a very important role and accordingly one weaves out reasons. Reasons for an action are really the external manifestation of one's desires, convictions, hopes, ambitions and even ideologies. As a matter of fact, there is a very close and intimate relationship between one's actions and ideologies and hopes. Actions for which sophisticated reasons are given may be termed as higher-order actions like taking part in revolution, fighting against alien rules, protection of civil liberties and so on. But actions like eating, sleeping, walking and running for which a chain of sophisticated reasons are not usually called for, may be termed as lower-order actions. But at the same time, even in the case of lower-order actions, one may ask, as for example, why does one eat one type of food in lieu of another or

why does one walk in one particular route instead of another? All these show that reasons constitute the basis and the criterion of an action. It is on this basis that we distinguish action from events. It is altogether a separate issue if reasons are also a species of causes. An action is that which a human individual does with a reason. Seen in this light, it can be questioned if other non-human creatures can be said to be performing actions. If reasons constitute the basic ingredient of actions, then animals cannot be said to be performing action at all. To apply reasons means to think of alternative mode of acting. As a matter of fact, animals do not exhibit any sign of performing actions with reasons. Now the question is : how to characterize the so called actions of the animals? In answer, it can be said that they are event-like rather than action like. The weaving of nest by the weaver bird at the approach of rainy season is more of an event than of an action for the simple reason that the male weaver bird starts weaving the nest because of certain hormonal change in its body at a particular period of the year.

Keeping this view of action in mind let us examine the relationship between *Karma* and *Karma phala* or action and its results or consequences. What does it exactly mean to say that every action must have some effect? The physical theory of Newton tells us that every action has opposite and equal reaction. This principle may be applicable to physical or natural events which can be measured and presented in mathematical terms. The entire Newtonian mechanics is based upon certain basic principles of rest, motion, action and reaction and they form a system. Does this principle apply to actions performed by human beings? It is true that certain actions like playing, teaching, running and walking, have a physical base in that one cannot play, teach, run and walk without making use of some limbs or organs of the body. Teaching cannot be done without speaking and consequently making use of the mouth. Opening the mouth and then to speak is a physical act. As for example, opening the mouth involves the expansion of the muscles in the mouth. Similarly, speaking involves production of vocal sounds. Which one is to be treated as the effect of teaching that the agent or the teacher shall reap? It is true that by teaching one seeks to transmit knowledge and this transmission is impossible without opening the mouth and speaking. Teaching or transmission of knowledge has impact on others. That is to say, it is likely to produce some effect on others. Any action that one performs is likely

to produce some effect in the neighbourhood or on others. But this is not what the *Karma* theorists mean by *Karma Phala*. *Karma Phala* is not that type of effect which is produced on others, but the one which is meant to be reaped and enjoyed by the doer or the agent. How to specify this effect? Let us name the effect of the action which is produced on others as E and the one which is meant to be reaped and enjoyed by the agent or the doer as E_1 . The relationship between an action and E is causal, whereas the relationship between an action and E_1 is not causal. The effect E_1 which has to be reaped and enjoyed by the agent is the corresponding moral desert of the action concerned. Any action that an individual performs, besides having a concrete and empirical effect, has a moral desert attached to it. It is this moral desert that the agent or the doer has to reap and enjoy. But difficulties arise in specifying the moral effects of actions. How to specify the moral effect, say for instance, of teaching? What one is likely to get if one teaches well? One answer may be that one gets appreciation from students and other colleagues. But it may not happen like that. One may teach well yet may not be appreciated. Suppose someone murders somebody. What is the moral effect of this act which is to be reaped by the murderer? The instant response may be that the murderer will be murdered by somebody. If the principle of retribution is accepted, then it can be said that one who teaches well will also be taught well either in this life or in lives to come. Again, take for instance, what is the moral desert of self-sacrifice? In the Buddhist *Jātaka* stories, the past lives of the Buddha have been portrayed wherein it has been shown that he (the Buddha) sacrificed his life for other creatures and this ultimately helped him coming up in the ladder of *Nirvāṇa*. But this does not show that if you sacrifice for others, they will also sacrifice for you in turn. Rather, it means that good actions bring good results and bad actions bad ones. Seen in this light, the *Karma* theorist seems to be laying down a very general principle that good actions breed good results and bad actions bad ones. In this sense only mental acts like thinking, feeling and willing can be said to have good or bad effect. The *Karma* theorists generalize this principle to such an extent that for them a moral consequence either good or bad is attached to every piece of action. Further, for them, actions are either good or bad and the agent or the doer has to reap these consequences. The relationship between the agent, action and its moral consequences is necessary. That is to say, moral consequence is built into the very

fabric of every action and the agent simply cannot escape them. But at the same time, transcendence of agency and action has also been visualized in the Indian tradition and it will be discussed later on in the subsequent sections.

Is the moral consequence of an action like any other natural consequence? Can it be measured? Can it be concretized in mathematical terms? The answer to these questions can be given only in negative terms. The moral consequence ought to follow from the actions performed by men. But a man during his life-time performs innumerable types of actions, good and bad as the case may be. How to individuate the moral consequences of different actions? We simply know good actions produce good results but unless the so-called 'good consequence' is specified we cannot know which good action produced which good result. The doctrine of *Karma* in this sense, appears to be saying something which is casually operative but, as a matter of fact, it invokes a moral principle and seeks to generalize it so much that it brings the agent, action and its moral consequence to one inseparable nexus.

Let us now examine the second thesis that the effect of the action must be enjoyed by the agent if not in this life, then in lives to come. This doctrine is based upon the presupposition that even after the action has been performed its effect, if not enjoyed by its agent, continues to be there. Now the question is how and where the effect is stored to be enjoyed by its doer in subsequent of time? If the effect is natural and empirical it may continue for sometime after the event has taken place. As for example, when we kick a ball its effects, i. e. rolling continues for sometime. By effect, the natural consequence E is meant here but not the moral consequence E₁. It is impossible to find out a locus where the so-called moral consequences of an action can be said to reside. There are three possibilities : (i) Either the consequences reside in the agent, (ii) or they reside in another object outside the agent, or (iii) an invisible and almighty person like God possesses these consequences for future disbursement. The first alternative is not acceptable for the simple reason that if the consequences are not enjoyed by the doer during his life, after his death the consequences also will be destroyed. If it is insisted that the consequences cannot be destroyed unless they are enjoyed by the agent, then the consequences are being treated imperishable and

indestructible by definition. In another sense, the impact of the actions may have an impact on the mind and personality of the agent. A murderer, for example, may suffer in the manner of Macbeth. But the hardened criminal may not suffer any type of mental agony at all. Further, the mental agony of a murderer is the psychological consequences and not the moral ones of the act of murder. Let us examine the second alternative that the consequences are preserved in another person or object and in due course of time are transferred to its agent. This position also is not acceptable for the simple reason that it treats moral consequences as if they are a kind of things which are preserved for the time being in order to be given away at proper time. The so-called moral consequences involve moral judgements or adjudication. To maintain that moral consequences can be preserved in another person apart from the doer or the agent is to presuppose that the preserver is a superior moral agent or else how can he give reward or punishment to its doer? This position is also not acceptable for the simple reason that after the death of the preserver the moral consequences also disappear. Let us now examine the third alternative, i.e., the moral consequences are preserved in the invisible and almighty God who dispenses these to its doer in due course of time. Even if we provisionally accept this position yet it cannot satisfactorily explain the disbursement of consequences in future life of the agent or the doer. Suppose, a particular person performs a particular action in his present life and somehow he does not reap or enjoy its consequences and dies. What will happen to the moral consequences of his actions? As per the tradition, the consequences will be preserved in a powerful being to be given to its doer. This doctrine takes for granted that life does not come to an end with death. Something that counts as the human person survives the bodily death. Now, let us examine this point. The key to the knotty problem rests on what do we mean by a human person? A human person who performs acts is a psychophysical complex. In short, it is the human person in the form of psychophysical complex who performs actions of different types. Death brings an end at this psychophysical complex. It is argued that the soul is immaterial and it survives all types of bodily destruction. This account of soul is incompatible with the concept of enjoyment of consequences for the simple reason that it is not touched by any activity of the body. Let us imagine for the moment that there is life after death. That is to say, the same soul is reborn but with a different psychophysical complex. The previous body, say B, of the soul did

something and the present body say B_1 has to reap the consequences. If these consequences are not exhausted then B_2 and B_3 and etc., may reap the consequences or will be rewarded or punished for actions which they have not performed at all on any point of time. If this happens, then it is highly immoral. Somebody does something; he does not get either reward or punishment on this count. Rather one who has not performed a particular action gets reward or punishment, whatever the case may be, on this count. The *Karma* theorist would escape this paradoxical position by positing a subtle body (*Suksma Sarira*). A human person consists of three ingredients viz., the immaterial soul, a gross body and a subtle body. Death brings end to the gross body but the subtle body which is also material in nature does not die with the so-called death of the person. The Buddhists term this as *Samskaras* and the *Vedanta* and the allied systems of thought characterize it as the *Jivatman*. As a conceptual device it plays its limited role as the repository of moral consequences of various actions performed by the agent or the doer. But the subtle body also comes to an end. Otherwise, the cycle of *Karma* will not come to an end. The Buddhists also believe in the twelve-linked cycle of birth and death. This is otherwise known as the *Jaramarana cakra*. These are the escape routes provided by the Indian thinkers to get rid of the cycle of *Karma* and rebirth.

In one of its extreme formulations, the *Karma* doctrine tells us that whatever a person has including his body and mind is determined by his *Karma*. Not only that an individual performs *Karma* in the present life but he has *Karmas* to his credit from his past lives. Therefore, the never ending cycle of *karma* comes to no end. In this context, certain concepts such as *Karma*, rebirth and past life stand in need of explication. If birth is determined by *Karma* then it must be accepted that a particular individual before birth had performed some *Karma* which is absurd. Further, if the individual's first birth was not determined by his *Karmas*, the *Karma* doctrine is not ubiquitous. This means at least there are certain cases where the doctrine of *Karma* does not operate at all. How to get rid of this circle? Whether *Karma* determines a particular birth or an unconditioned birth afterwards gives rise to *Karmas*? If *Karma* and birth are treated on the cause effect model, the question of first cause may be raised. In a causal series, it is not possible to specify which one is the cause without being the effect of any other preceding cause. In fact, cause and effect are relative to one another. That which is a

cause in one context, may be an effect in another context and so on. Therefore, to treat something as absolute cause or absolute effect is to violate the rules of conceptual operation. Concepts operate being related to one another. Cause and effect are such concepts. The same thing may be a cause in one context but effect in another context. The seemingly paradoxical situation that arises in the context of birth and *Karma* is the result of the attempt to absolutize cause and effect. It is as follows: If *Karma* is the cause of birth, then it cannot be treated as an effect at all. Similarly, if birth is the result or effect of *Karma*, it cannot be the cause of *Karma* at all.

Sometimes it is argued that the doctrine of *Karma* demolishes the freedom of man for the simple reason that whatever a man does is determined by his *Karmas*. Even the present *Karma* of the individual is determined by his past *Karmas*. Therefore, there is no scope for free choice and free action. Further, the pool of past actions causally determines the present ones and the present ones determine the future ones and so on. So, it has been argued that *Karma* and Causality are incompatible with freedom. In short, the doctrine of *Karma* is a causal doctrine and causality cannot go with freedom.

Let us now examine this thesis. Is *Karma* a causal concept? Can we say that the actions that we perform can be treated as effects of previous actions and causes of future ones? Take for instance, the act of teaching or playing football. What could conceivably be treated as the cause of teaching? One might say that in order to teach a subject one must have studied the subject in question quite for some years. Further, he must have learnt the elementary art of teaching. But these are not causes of teaching but conditions of teaching. Similarly, playing football depends upon certain conditions such as knowledge of the trick of how to kick the ball and run swiftly and so on. One might know all the tricks and yet may not play football at all. Similarly, one may know mathematics or philosophy very well and yet may not teach the subject at all. In this sense, one action cannot be treated as the cause of another action. Causality does not operate among actions. But at the same time, one can discern a kind of homogeneity among the actions of a particular person. If a person is methodical, his methodical nature is likely to be exhibited in different types of functions that he performs. But sometimes we also discover a strange man. As for instance, a person may be very

methodical, organized and meticulous in study and research and very unorganized and unmethodical in household affairs.

In the *Bhagvad Gita* (II.63) arguments have been advanced to the effect that there is a causal chain among different mental dispositions. It runs as follows: Anger leads to infatuation, infatuation leads to failure of memory, failure of memory leads to extirpation of intellect and this ultimately leads to death and destruction of man. In nutshell, anger in man leads to his destruction. Destruction is the consequence that man reaps out of his anger. Even if we take for granted that there is a causal chain among various psychological states, yet it does not prove the general thesis that the present actions of a man are caused by his past actions. In short, it cannot be proved that causality operates among actions.

It is argued by the *Karma* theorist that every action gives rise to its effect and the doer or the agent cannot escape but enjoy it. Let us provisionally accept the thesis that every action produces certain result. But what does it mean to say that the doer "enjoys" the fruit of his action? What does this enjoyment consist in? One of the core meanings of "enjoy" is to consume. The agent, in this sense, has to consume the fruit of his actions. Even if this thesis is accepted, it does not mean that all the actions of the agent, nay, even his whole personality is determined by his past actions. From the fact that the agent enjoys the fruit of his actions, it does not follow that all his actions, including his personality, are determined by his past actions. The supposed causal connection between an action, its consequences and its enjoyability by the agent cannot be extended to the agent including his present and future action. In other words, it is one thing to accept the thesis that there is a causal connection between an action, its consequences and enjoyability and another thing to say that a person is what he is because of his past *Karmas*. The second thesis does not follow from the first one. This shows that the *Karma* doctrine is not as ubiquitous as it is supposed to be. The doctrine does not say that a man's existence is determined by his past *Karmas*; it simply says that a man must enjoy the fruit of his actions. In other words, the doctrine makes room for the freedom of the individual.

It might be argued that whatever a man does, thinks, feels,

or wills, is causally linked. There is a kind of causal necessity between actions. Therefore, man cannot be said to be performing free action any time at all. The causal chain is interminable. So, an individual can never come out of the causal nexus. This question can be answered in two ways: (i) By giving an analysis of casuality relating to actions, (ii) and referring to the tradition. Let us present the second point first. The *Karma* theorist claims that it is possible to transcend the *Karma* nexus. That is to say, by performing good *Karmas*, the evil influence of the past *Karmas* can be nullified. One can always improve upon one's past *Karmas*. This shows that there is scope of performing good *Karmas* which are not conditioned by the past ones. Let us now present an analysis of casuality relating to actions. Those who argue that all actions are causally linked, must admit that there are no singular and independent actions. Further, one cannot perform any action outside the causal nexus. The following questions can be raised in this connection. Is the initial action responsible for all the subsequent actions or the successive actions in their turn give rise to further actions? If the first alternative is accepted then man cannot perform any fresh action for the simple reason that to perform any action one must have committed another action prior to it and so on *ad infinitum*. If the second alternative is accepted, then the successive actions either will be redundant or will have the independent power to cause fresh actions. That is to say, if the initial action has the potency to give rise to successive actions, then these actions turn out to be mere modifications of the action in question. Therefore, in a sense, it can be said that there is only one action, i.e., the initial action. If the successive actions are said to have independent power to cause fresh actions, then causality cannot be said to be operating in the sphere of actions at all. This shows that at least there are some actions which can be termed as free in nature.

It is sometimes argued that freedom is incompatible with the law of *Karma*. That is to say, if we accept the inexorability of the law of *Karma*, then we cannot accept the thesis that there is possibility of free actions. Those who claim that the doctrine of *Karma* is incompatible with freedom, treat the former as a causal doctrine and further maintain that causality is incompatible with freedom. Let us now examine the contention. What does it mean to say that two things are causally connected? Is causal relation a necessary relation at all? When we say that two things

are causally connected we do not mean that they are necessarily related. But at the same time, there is a kind of necessity relating to cause and effect on which the entire scientific knowledge is built. There is a difference between causal necessity and logical necessity. But causal necessity cannot be said to have a kind of force or compulsiveness with it. When we say that man is free to perform any action it does not mean that causality does not operate in the case of man. Rather, it will be extremely difficult to imagine a world without causality. If it is being argued that to have freedom means to have a world where causality does not operate at all, an impossible thing is being invoked. The idea of an uncaused event is impossible. In this sense, freedom and causality are not incompatible. Rather, the sphere of operation of the concepts of cause and freedom is the same world of events and actions. To say that somebody is free, is to say that he does not succumb to pressure or does not act out of compulsion. In this sense, freedom is opposed to compulsion. To be free means not to act under any kind of compulsion. When many alternatives are left before an agent but he chooses one in lieu of another, he is said to be free. In fact, he is said to be doing something without any compulsion. In short, to accept one out of many alternatives is to act freely. To act freely means to act with reasons and choice. But Davidson points out that reasons are also a kind of causes. As such, they (causes) necessitate action. He says:

Central to the relation between a reason and an action what it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason. Of course, we can include this idea too in justification; but then the notion of justification becomes as dark as the notion of reason until we can account for the force of that *because*.¹

By treating reasons as causes, Davidson is inclined to accept the thesis that actions cannot be free from the grip of causal necessity. For him, every reason is a kind of cause for the simple reason that it originates from the agent and as such must have intimate connection with his emotions, sentiments and ideology. This argument of Davidson's is defective. It rules out the possibility of transcending one's sentiments and emotions. The main thrust of his argument is this: Any action that a man does is bound to be coloured by his inclinations and sentiments. If this argument is accepted, then only agentless actions

can be treated as non-causal. But to ask for this type of actions is to ask for actions which are not performed by any agent at all.

To the extent an individual exercises his choice in performing an action, to that extent he can be said to be free. In this sense, freedom is not incompatible with causality. To conclude, it can be said that the doctrine of *Karma* is not a causal doctrine. In short, it is an ethical doctrine relating to reward and punishment. The doctrine may be formulated as follows: One ought to get the reward or punishment as the case may be, for one's own actions. But the doctrine has been generalized so as to include not only the present but past and future life. Reward and punishment will be unintelligible without reference to freedom. So, action, freedom, responsibility, reward and punishment go together. It is one thing to say that any action that we perform causally determines our subsequent actions and thereby our entire being and personality and another thing to say that we ought to get reward or punishment for our actions. The first one is a causal doctrine and I have argued that the doctrine of *Karma* cannot be regarded as a causal one. But it can very well be interpreted as an ethical one.

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