

Ancient Reincarnation

1. Introduction

2. How Souls Change Bodies

3. Retributive Karma

Retributive karma means that you will be compensated in your future lives for the good or bad deeds in your present life. You rack up karmic credits by doing good deeds and karmic debts by doing bad deeds. Your karmic credits lead to reward in the next life; you'll be rewarded with pleasure. However, in your next life, your karmic debts will have to be paid off, and they'll be paid off by suffering:

There is something more to be considered than the present. There are the periods of the past and, again, those in the future; and these have everything to do with fixing the value of life. Thus a man, once a ruler, will be made a slave because he abused his power and because the fall is to his future good. Those that have money will be made poor- and to the good poverty is no hindrance. Those that have unjustly killed, are killed in turn, unjustly as regards the murderer but justly as regards the victim, and those that are to suffer are thrown into the path of those that administer the merited treatment. It is not an accident that makes a man a slave; no one is a prisoner by chance; every bodily outrage has its due cause. The man once did what he now suffers. A man that murders his mother will become a woman and be murdered by a son; a man that wrongs a woman will become a woman, to be wronged. Hence arises that awesome word retribution for in very truth this ordinance is a retribution, justice itself and a wonderful wisdom. (*Enneads*, 3.2.13)

Again Plotinus discusses the repayment of karmic debt, and the universal justice that governs all souls as they rise and fall along the Great Chain:

No one can ever escape the suffering entailed by ill deeds done: the divine law is inevitable, carrying bound up, as one with it, the pre-ordained execution of its judgment. The sufferer, all unaware, is swept onward towards his due, hurried always by the restless driving of his errors, until at last wearied out by that against which he struggled, he falls into his fit place and, by self-chosen movement, is brought to the lot he never chose. And the law decrees, also, the intensity and the duration of the suffering while it carries with it, too, the lifting of chastisement and the ability of the soul to rise from those places of pain - all by power of the harmony that maintains the universal plan. (*Enneads*, 4.3.23)

4. Reincarnation into Animal Bodies

Promotion and demotion on the Great Chain.

5. Problems with Retributive Karma

There are many ways to interpret karma. On the *retributive model*, good deeds in one life are rewarded with benefits either in that same life or in subsequent lives; evil deeds done in one life are punished with harms either in that same life or in subsequent lives. It has been argued that any type of retributive karma is deeply immoral (Kaufman, 2005). There are at least four objections to retributive karma.

The first objection is that retributive karma provides no cognitive link between past deeds and future rewards or punishments (Kaufman, 2005: 19-20). Justice requires that people know why they are being punished or rewarded. If people cannot know why they are being punished or rewarded, then they cannot learn the moral laws. This moral understanding requires memory of the past deeds which triggered the punishments or rewards. However, people do not remember their past lives. Hence punishments or rewards cannot serve any disciplinary purposes. Retributive karma does not permit either moral education or moral progress. It cannot motivate people to change their behaviors.

The second objection is that retributive karma preserves evil. The simplest type of retributive karma involves eye-for-eye retribution. Plotinus endorses this type of retributive karma (*Enneads*, 3.2.13, 3.3.4, 3.4.2 4.3.23). Plotinus says that someone who commits murder in this life will be murdered in some next life; somebody who rapes in this life will be raped in the next life. This clearly entails an endless future series of murders and rapes. Eye-for-eye retribution entails that evil is preserved; it rules out any moral progress. Further, this type of retribution does not morally benefit the evil doer in any way. But punishment ought to have some beneficial outcome.

The third objection is that retributive karma blames victims for their misfortunes. If a person is born with a mental or physical defect, then retributive karma entails that they deserved it. Or a person is the victim of a crime because they deserved it. However, it is morally wrong to blame the victim. Worse, an entire racial or ethnic group deserves its brutal treatment (Kaufman, 2005: 21). According to retributive karma, the Native Americans deserved genocide, the Africans deserved to be enslaved in America, and the Jews deserved the Holocaust. However, those peoples did nothing to deserve the evils which befell them. Retributive karma entails morally false and monstrous consequences.

The fourth objection is that retributive karma incorrectly entails that those who cause harm are legitimate agents of justice (Kaufman, 2005: 25). When a person harms their victim, retributive karma entails that the victim deserved the harm. The harm is a just punishment for past misdeeds. Hence the person who causes the harm acts as a legitimate agent of justice. By acting as a legitimate agent of justice, the person who causes the harm is not doing wrong. They are not a criminal and do not in turn deserve any punishment of their own. On the contrary, they are blameless. Or perhaps they even deserve some karmic reward. This seems to entail that there is no evil at all.

These objections all stem from the fact that retributive karma returns good for good and evil for evil. However, this is an immoral principle. Retributive karma cannot be a part of any morally acceptable reincarnation theory. Retributive karma is therefore rejected here. Fortunately, retributive karma is not the only type of karma. Better models of karmic action are available. The morally correct karmic law is based on the Golden Rule. It returns good for good and good for evil. It returns good for evil not by rewarding wickedness, but by punishing the wrongdoer in a way that teaches a moral lesson.

6. Escape from the Cycle of Rebirth