

ESSENTIALIST AND ETHICAL VIEWS OF KARMA IN BUDDHIST METAPHYSICS

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Introduction

Few things have been as contentious in Buddhism as detailing the connection between the doctrine of karma and rebecoming. In fact, this issue was at the centre of the controversies addressed at the 3rd Buddhist Council. While there is no accepted and definitive answer to this question, there are answers to this dilemma found in Early Buddhism that may help to reconcile modern Buddhist interpretations of karma with other philosophical and scientific theories.

I have identified a problem in the Buddhist theory of karma that fails to answer strong critiques of the theory, especially from western critics. This is the conflation of *essentialist* karma and *ethical* karma. This research is intended as a new model of looking at Buddhist karma, by differentiating the metaphysical from the ontological and the essentialist from the ethical conceptions of karma theory.

Methodology

The research methodology is necessarily qualitative. The research begins with heuristic data collection across the range of Buddhist thought in order to subject that data to hermeneutic analysis using scientific and western philosophical methods. Scientific assumptions regarding the nature of mind will be made from the standpoint of biological naturalism, because it is thought to be the theory that accords with the preponderance of evidence in neuroscience and is representative of a larger trend toward materialistic analysis in global society.

This analysis divides Buddhist karma into two categories, essentialist and ethical karma, which can be tested against the assumptions of biological naturalism and western ethical theories. It is hoped that groundwork can be found from which to approach the fixation of belief in karma and that groundwork can be identified in the broader traditions of early Buddhist thought in order to propose an acceptable solution to the doctrinal questions involved.

Results and Discussion

It is important to distinguish karma as a conditioning factor in the process of *paṭiccasamuppāda* from the ethicised karma that underlies Buddhist ethical practice. An essentialist view of karma is of one element in Buddhist ontology, while an ethicised view of karma and its effect on rebecoming is better viewed as an instrumental, and necessarily metaphysical (at least to the non-enlightened) conception of Buddhist morality, rather than as an ontological driver of the process of rebecoming. This repositioning clarifies the essentialist view of karma as a conceptualisation that captures the Buddhist principles of causality to be used as a tool to understand *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

The understanding of *paṭiccasamuppāda* facilitates the understanding of *suññatā* and *majjhimāpaṭipadā* and leads to enlightenment. In establishing the essentialist view of karma as part of a larger understanding of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, one follows Nāgārjuna in refuting the essential nature of all things to come to an understanding of the Buddha's teaching. Even the essentialist view of karma is shown to have no essential nature of its own, but merely a conventional, instrumental truth value (*sammuti saccā*). Many contemporary Buddhist interpretations conflate essentialist karma with the ethical doctrine of karma. Instead, if karma is divided into essentialist and ethical categories, then essentialist karma may be viewed as ontological while an ethicised concept of karma is rightly viewed as an ethical theory derived from the Buddhist worldview.

The relation of ethicised karma to the process of rebecoming differs from the standard model of Theravada Buddhist philosophers who seek to eliminate metaphysical issues through the use of verificationism, following the lead of scholars who were heavily influenced by British logical positivists. However, this model is only tenable via appeal to "extrasensory perception" and the authority of the Buddha and the Arahants. While there may be few, if any, sources of wisdom on par with the Buddha, this argument is not philosophically satisfying because it is an appeal to authority disguised as an appeal to empirical verificationism. While an empiricist methodology is used in this research, it is divorced from the verificationist principle of logical positivism and the ethical aspect of karma theory is accepted as inherently metaphysical.

However, all ethical theory is metaphysical, as is all theory relating to the existence of life after death. This does not mean that these theories have no value. The assumption that they are non-cognitive or meaningless is another legacy of positivism. For example, the differentiated functions of karma as a basis for Buddhist ethics and as a conditioning factor in the process of *paṭiccasamuppāda* are both maintained in pragmatic and neo-pragmatic evaluations without the need for a stretching of the verification principle to “prove” the existence of karma. Instead, ethical karma can be considered instrumentally and judged according to the same standards as other ethical theories; as well as empirically as part of a causal process that may be subjected to future scientific testing. This differentiation between the two types of karma allows analysts to avoid conflating a normative ethical theory with an ontological process.

Conclusion

Many fundamental doctrines of Buddhism (*paṭiccasamuppāda*, *anattā* and *anicca* in particular) accord to with scientific theories, but the theory of karma is partially in accordance with science and partially metaphysical. Having differentiated between essentialist karma and an ethical karma in Buddhist theory, it becomes possible to better support the Buddhist doctrine of karma in the face of predominantly western criticism. Most of these criticisms of the karma are based on the imposition of western metaphysical assumptions, rather than scientific theory, on Buddhist thought to advance an unfounded view of annihilationism that was explicitly condemned by the Buddha. In fact, while the very nature of karma makes it impossible to conclusively “prove” it scientifically, karma and rebecoming are more evidence-based than the theory of annihilationism put forth by believers in eternal oblivion.

Karma remains of fundamental importance to Buddhism in the modern world as an ethical theory rather than as an actual physical or metaphysical “force” bringing moral order to the universe. This reconceptualization of karma theory allows the doctrine to maintain its place within Buddhist philosophical thought in the sphere of ethical theory, while philosophically stronger concepts such as *paṭiccasamuppāda* and *anattā* are better placed than karma to explain Buddhist ontology.

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