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Belief in karma: the belief-inducing power of a collection of ideas and practices with a long history

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Statement of the Problem: A popular Western idea of karma is that we always get what we deserve based on our actions and intentions. This study discusses the power and attractiveness of the belief in karma. The major questions to be addressed include: why do so many people seem to believe in karma, and what makes the idea of karma viable?

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: To answer these questions, a philosophical analysis of karma and related concepts, such as rebirth, merit, and the transfer of merit, is necessary. This study provides these analyses, along with a historical survey focusing on classical texts and references.

Findings: The attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The second reason involves the idea of rebirth. The belief in both karma and rebirth can bring consolation with the hope of life hereafter, where one's destiny is determined not by chance, but by the moral quality of one's actions in this or previous lives. The belief in karma also incorporates diverging elements, such as transfer of merit. The practice of transfer of merit serves to improve an individual's moral and religious status through rituals or other suitable means, while the doctrine of karma itself strongly speaks to the strict fulfilment of retributive justice.

Conclusion & Significance: Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, although their mutual compatibility is debatable. Thus, an inconsistent combination of religious ideas can be spiritually and psychologically viable because of persistent human desires and needs, despite, one might say, insufficient epistemic justification (viz. lack of evidence or lack of logical argument).

Biography

Tommi Lehtonen is the director of responsibility and ethics at the University of Vaasa, Finland. he specializes in ethics, social philosophy, and philosophy of science, and has extensive experience in multi- and interdisciplinary research. His expertise areas include the role of attitudes in decision-making and choice behaviour, values and ethics of management, and sustainability in economic, social and cultural contexts. He has published widely in philosophical and social scientific journals. He is currently involved in an international research project on the impact of globalisation on school curricula in India, China, Taiwan, Indonesia and Finland.