

Is there such a thing as collective karma?

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by Richard Hayes in the autumn of 2009

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1. The idea of collective karma

In previous lectures I have referred to an interview with Lati Rinpoche in which the topic was karma and rebirth. One of the topics that came up in that interview was the notion of collective karma. That portion of the dialogue went as follows:

Hayes: What is the most frequently encountered question when you are speaking to Western audiences?

Lati Rinpoche: People always want to know why the ways of the world are as they are and who created these things. People want to know why there is so much pain and suffering in the world, and why there are so many thieves and other bad people causing so much suffering for others.

Hayes: That reminds me of a question that was once put to me when I was giving a public lecture about Buddhism. A Jewish person in the audience asked me how the Buddhists would explain why during the Second World War in Europe so many innocent Jewish children, who had never done anything wrong to deserve punishment, were put to death in Nazi concentration camps or were left as homeless orphans. That situation was completely lacking in any justice in that so many of the victims were apparently totally innocent. How would Lati Rinpoche answer that question if it were put to him?

Lati Rinpoche: The proper Buddhist answer to such a question is that the victims were experiencing the consequences of their actions performed in previous lives. The individual victims must have done something very bad in earlier lives that led to their being treated in this way. Also there is such a thing as collective karma.

Hayes: Do you mean that the Jewish people as a whole have a special karma?

Lati Rinpoche: Yes. All groups have karma that is more than just the collection of the karma of the individuals in the group. For example, a group of people may decide collectively to start a war. If they act on that decision, then the group as a whole will experience the hardships of being at war. Karma is the result of making a decision to act in a certain way. Decisions to act may be made by individuals or by groups. If the decision is made by a group, then the whole group will experience the collective consequences of their decision.

Hayes: What can an individual do to change the karma of the group that he or she belongs to?

Lati Rinpoche: You can change all karma through practice. You can persuade the group to adopt pure attitudes and to develop pure practices.¹

According to Wilhelm Halbfass, this notion of collective karma is not part of traditional Indian thought. The origin of the idea seems to be the doctrine of karma as taught by the Theosophical Society, which was founded in 1875. Halbfass also notes that it was the Theosophical Society that introduced the expression “the law of karma.” In traditional Hindu and Buddhist texts, karma is never referred to as a law in any of the several senses of that English word, although it is described in ways that naturally make Western people think of it as being somewhat like other laws of nature, such as the law of gravity or the law of diminishing returns.²

The history of the idea of collective karma is not the topic to be explored in this lecture. Rather, the focus of this lecture is what kind of sense can be made of the idea of collective karma in a traditional Buddhist framework and in a modern Western Buddhist framework.

2. The metaphysics of collective karma

Let us begin by discussing how collective karma might “work” at the level of traditional Buddhist metaphysics. The first problem we encounter is that most Buddhist doctrines of metaphysics do not regard complex objects as having an independent reality. Given that an individual person is regarded as an abstraction and a convenient fiction, a group of people would be even more of an abstraction. It is difficult to imagine what kind of status in traditional Buddhist ontology a race, or an ethnic group, or a nation, or a business corporation such as KLM might have.

A second problem that arises when one looks at this from a traditional Indian Buddhist perspective is that karma, as we saw in earlier lectures, is described as being part of the *saṃskāra-skandha* that accompanies an individual consciousness continuum (*citta-saṃtāna*) which is described as an unbroken chain of causal events wherein each event is both a consequence of previous events and a cause of future events in the mentality of what we would call an individual person. If collective karma or group karma were talked about in similar ways, then there would have to be some sort of collective consciousness and collective *saṃskāra-skandha* that is not merely the sum of the individual continuums of consciousness of the individual members of the group, but rather an independent entity of some sort. And this collective consciousness and collective *saṃskāra-skandha* would have to be, as it were, larger than any individual person but smaller than the totality of all consciousness. It would have to be (if one can speak in such terms at all) the size of, say, the Jewish population or the Dutch population.

To make matters even more complicated, the number of these “group consciousness” entities would be uncountable, since almost all individuals belong to any number of groups. So a given person might be the citizen of a city, and of a county, and a nation, and an ethnic group

1 The full text of the interview is in Richard P. Hayes, *Land of No Buddha: Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist*, (Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications, 1998).

2 Wilhelm Halbfass, “Karma and Rebirth, Indian Conceptions of,” ed. Edward C. Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

(whatever *that* is), and labor union or professional society, and the supporters of a football club, and the Michael Jackson fan club, and each of these groups would presumably have its own collective consciousness, its own *saṃskāra-skandha* and its own particular karma and karmic ripening.

A further complication would be how to connect the individuals to all the groups to which they belong. Lati Rinpoche suggests that each individual's individual karma plays a role in which group she belongs to. So presumably it is the ripening of an individual's karma that leads to being born in, say, a Dutch-speaking Roman Catholic family in Antwerp and therefore an heir not only of her previous individual karma but also of the collective karma of the Belgian nation, the city of Antwerp, the Roman Catholic church and all speakers of the Dutch language. An interesting question to think about is whether a person who voluntarily learns to speak another language thereby participates in the collective karma of the speakers of that language. Do people who speak Dutch fluently with a French accent have a somewhat different collective karma from those who speak Dutch more falteringly or who know only how to read Dutch? Of course, many of these questions of group identity would not be seen as having any karmic consequences whatsoever. Karma enters the story only if a group of people make a collective decision to form a particular policy. Simply being part of the group of people who speak French would not have karmic consequences according to Lati Rinpoche's explanation, while being a voting member of L'Académie française might well have some sort of karmic consequences. When group decisions are decided by a vote, one might well wonder whether the group of those who voted in favor of a policy have the same collective karma as those who voted against it.

Once one begins to think about some of these questions, it is difficult to find a reasonable place to stop asking. The more one asks, the more potentially complex this whole notion of collective karma becomes. To those who like relatively clear, simple and elegant explanations, the very idea of the metaphysics of collective karma and karmic ripening becomes a nightmare. That does not, of course, make the idea false. There is no reason why truth must be simple and more like a pleasant dream than a nightmare. Suffice it to say that those who talk in terms of collective karma owe the rest of us quite a few explanations, especially if they claim that collective karma is more than a fiction that may serve some kind of convenient way of talking about things it is useful to talk about.

3. The epistemology of collective karma

When it comes to discussing the utility of the teaching of karma in general, there is a concern that some people have brought up and that it is not unreasonable to discuss. One way of looking at the doctrine of karma is that it serves as a reminder that conscious actions have consequences and that a responsible moral agent will consider probable or possible consequences before acting. When the Theosophical society talks about karma and rebirth, for example, they talk about life as a learning process through which one learns in each successive life certain lessons that will then become part of the wisdom one takes into a next life. Part of the lesson one might get in one life is experiencing the ripening of karma from a previous life. The problem that arises in connection with that view is that generally speaking

lessons about life are most effective when one can remember both the actions and the consequences of the actions. Given that few people recall the actions of previous lives, few people are in a position to learn the lesson that continued rebirth or reincarnation is supposed to provide.

This problem of the opaqueness of rebirth—the impossibility of recalling the specific actions of a previous life that may be ripening in this life—is a problem only at the individual level. It is much less of a problem at the collective level. There is such a thing as what some people call “institutional memory” and what most people simply call “studying history.” On the other hand, speaking of collective karma does not seem to add any explanatory value to how one learns from the past that is not already available in talking about studying history and seeing what kinds of things seem to happen as a result of certain kinds of decisions. Anyone who can read a history book can “learn the lessons” embedded in the story that book tells. One need not be an American to learn about the consequences of the use of slave labor in the early American economy. Any policy that has been formulated by anyone in the human race can be studied by anyone else in the human race, and its consequences can be “learned” (or, more accurately, speculated about) by anyone. There is no need for anyone to be the member of a group to learn the lessons of that group’s collective decisions.

The Theosophical notion of the idea of collective karma does not seem to offer much explanatory value that could not be arrived by other means. What about the Buddhist notion of collective karma? When I discussed that matter with Lati Rinpoche, I found that he had a tendency to keep coming back to the idea that karma is very complex and mysterious and impossible for people to know fully. The following excerpt from the interview, which took place in Toronto, illustrates what I mean:

Lati Rinpoche: Collective karma just applies to group actions and group decisions, such as the decision to go to war. But it should not be understood as applying to individuals. For example it is not the case that a Tibetan in this life was a Tibetan in a previous life or will be a Tibetan in the future. That is not how group karma works at all. The way it works is that if a group of people decide to agree with each other and live together in harmony, then they will experience happiness. But if they decide to be in conflict with each other, then they will experience the hardships of conflict. For example, Toronto is a very beautiful city that has so many wonderful hospitals and beautiful parks and is very peaceful with very little crime. That is because the citizens of Toronto have decided collectively to be civilized people. They have made an effort in that direction. And it is because of what they have done as individuals in their past lives that the individual citizens of Toronto are so fortunate as to be able to live here.

Hayes: I see. So is it possible that the Tibetans made some collective decision to be hostile towards the Chinese and as a consequence of that group decision were overwhelmed? Or is there any way of knowing exactly why a group of people experiences the history that unfolds for them?

Lati Rinpoche: It is not such a simple thing to determine all the factors involved in karma. Karmic roots are beginningless and may ripen at any time.

Hayes: Does that mean that there is no way that an individual or a group can discover what specific actions of the past have made the present turn out as it has? Can we learn something of value from history in order to change the shape of the future?

Lati Rinpoche: We ordinary people cannot understand completely the great complexity of causes and conditions that are behind the consequences we feel in the present time, because they are really infinite. But what I can say is that there are patterns that we can observe.

All things considered, it does not seem as though the Buddhist conception of collective karma is much of an improvement on the Theosophical version that was most probably its source. But while the doctrine may not have a great deal of explanatory value as a philosophical position, it may still have some practical benefits as a convenient fiction. Let us turn now to that question.

4. Practical utility of the notion of collective karma

4.1. Positive uses of the doctrine

There is a tendency, I think, for discussions of morality to be focussed almost entirely on individuals and their rights and responsibilities and obligations. Sometimes it is tempting to use group identity as a way of hiding away from inconvenient truths about an individual's participation in systems that are inherently unjust or destructive. It is useful to have ways of talking about collective actions—the actions of business corporations, of nations, and of such nebulous things as the “consumerist culture”—and of avoiding the temptation to hide behind groups. To speak of group karma may be one way to achieve those goals.

Let us think this through by looking at some examples. Much has been written in recent years about Thomas Jefferson's complex relation with the institution of slavery. On the one hand, he was morally opposed to the very idea of slavery and found it repugnant that one man should be the owner of another. He made it clear that it would have been better had an economy based on slave labor never arisen. On the other hand, Jefferson realized that an economy based on slave labor *had* arisen and that the consequences of abandoning it too quickly would be disastrous at many levels. He worried about how the agricultural economy of the American South and, to no small degree, the industrial economy of the American North would be able to survive in the absence of slave labor. He worried about how slave owners could be compensated for the considerable money they had invested in buying slaves if the slaves were set free. He worried about what would happen to the freed slaves if they suddenly found themselves freed in a society that did not fully welcome them as social equals or as fitting candidates for citizenship. How just would it be to send slaves who had been born in America to Africa, where their ancestors had come from? The men and women born into slavery into America were not Africans and never had been, nor were they Americans, and Jefferson wondered whether they ever would be.

Jefferson's struggle with this issue of the morality of slavery are well documented, because he kept journals and wrote numerous letters. He thought about the question in a great deal of detail and considered a variety of possible ways to eradicate slavery and to return America to a more secure moral footing. The question is: could Jefferson have thought about this issue any more profoundly and arrived at any better solutions if he had had the doctrine of collective karma at his disposal? That is a question to which I have no answer, but I submit it is a question worth asking and thinking about.

In more modern times, the advanced economies of the world no longer rely on slavery, but they do depend on other forms of energy that raise many of the same moral problems. Naomi Klein is a Canadian Journalist who has written about the politics of global warming. In a recent interview with American journalist Amy Goodman, she spoke about a coalition of developing nations led by Bolivia but joined by numerous African countries. She says this about their position:

...essentially what they're saying is that the climate crisis as we know was created in the industrialized world. There is a direct correlation between industrialization (what we call development) and carbon emissions. In fact, 75% of the historical carbon emissions have been produced by only 20% of the world's population. Then we have this cruel geographical irony, which is that the effects of climate change [are] felt overwhelmingly in the developing world, and the parts of the world that are least responsible for creating the crisis. According to the World Bank, 75-80% of the effects of climate change are being felt in the developing world. So, you have this inverse relationship between cause and effect.³

The evidence that Naomi Klein reports is almost diametrically opposed to what one would expect from the doctrine of collective karma. A question worth asking—and again I have no answer—is whether some version of the doctrine of collective karma would be more effective in thinking about the combined actions of groups of people than analyses that make no references to karma and its ripening.

4.2. Negative uses of the doctrine

While questions arise about positive uses of the doctrine of collective karma, it seems fairly clear that a notion of collective karma could have some unquestionably negative effects. I believe that one reason why many Western people feel uneasy talking about events in karmic terms is that discussion of karma can easily sound like what some people call “blaming the victim.” It was, for example, frequently the strategy of lawyers defending men accused of rape to question the character of the woman who was the victim of rape by suggesting that somehow her behavior provoked or invited the assault to which she was subjected. Recall that Lati Rinpoche said that the Jews who died in the holocaust must have done something very terrible in a previous life to be born as Jews during the time of National Socialism in Germany. He also suggested that the treatment of the Jewish population as a whole must have come about because of collective Jewish karma. He also said that this collective karma, like all karma could be modified through practice. From that point the interview continued as follows:

Hayes: Is what constitutes purity of practice and purity of attitude the same for every group? Let's return to the example of the Jews. According to Jewish belief there are certain practices that the Jewish people should perform in order to remain pure. Other groups do not have to follow these same laws of purity. Is your suggestion that the Jews may have suffered the humiliations of the holocaust because they failed to live up to Jewish standards of purity, or rather because they did not live up to Buddhist standards of purity?

Lati Rinpoche: There are attitudes that all peoples regard as pure. Being kind to other people, for example. I don't know specifically about the history of the Jews.

³ http://www.democracynow.org/2009/11/23/naomi_klein_on_climate_debt_why

The example of purity of behavior that Lati Rinpoche gave was kindness. Normally one thinks of kindness as an individual virtue, but it is not at all difficult to imagine that a group could make a decision to be kind. A nation might, for example, provide aid to another nation that has undergone a severe crisis. Or a collection of industrialized nations might work together to curb their greenhouse-gas emissions. The disturbing implications of the Lati Rinpoche's statement is that somehow or another, the Jewish people of Europe had collectively made a conscious decision to act in some way that everyone would agree was impure, such as deciding not to be kind. By this logic, we would have to suggest that the people of Africa had collectively made a decision to act in some impure way so that being enslaved was a natural karmic consequence of that decision.

Something else one can observe in Lati Rinpoche's answer is that it bears a close resemblance to the kind of thinking one finds in the pronouncements of the Hebrew prophets. Throughout the pronouncements of Jeremiah we encounter references to how God had freed the Hebrews from their captivity and led them to a land of milk and honey, and how the ungrateful Hebrews had then worshiped false gods and one things that are impure in the eyes of God, and God says to these people through the prophet Jeremiah "Therefore I will yet contend with you, and I will contend with your children's children." (Jeremiah 2.9) The notion that the descendants of sinners shall pay the wages of sin is well documented in Hebrew prophetic literature. The captivity of Jews by the Babylonians was already blamed on the sinful ways of those who had been their ancestors of those who were captured. To anyone who finds that kind of discourse of questionable value, the doctrine of collective karma is not an attractive alternative. Indeed, message is very much the same: there is nothing unjust in some people suffering because of the bad actions of others.

5. Conclusions

Any doctrine has value if it has explanatory value or if it can be used to provide a fruitful and productive way of investigating the truth of a situation. A doctrine has explanatory value if it provides explanations that alternative cannot explain, or cannot explain as well. A doctrine is fruitful and productive if it gets people out of certain ruts, or deeply entrenched patterns of thinking that stand in the way of seeing issues clearly. The question with which we started was "Is there such a thing as collective karma?" The question with we can end is: "Does the doctrine of collective karma have explanatory value? Does it help to get out of ruts of thinking that incline people to act unskillfully and harmfully or carelessly or negligently toward others?" I leave the answering of such questions in the hands of people more capable than I.

Works cited

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