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WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

"And None of Us Deserving the Cruelty or the Grace"—Buddhism and the Problem of Evil

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The Indian theory of karma is, according to Max Weber, the most perfect solution to the problem of evil.[1] This judgment has cast a long shadow over scholarly discourse in the twentieth century, with partisans lining up on one side or the other on the question of whether karma does or does not solve the problem of evil.[2] Weber's claim was intended, and taken by some who endorsed it, to be true of any theory of karma (e.g., Buddhist, Hindu, Jaina) in spite of substantial differences,[3] in virtue of what they all have in common—namely, the idea that good or ill befalls a person according to the good or evil of their deeds.

One might well wonder, however, whether the Buddhism—or indeed any worldview incorporating karma—has a problem of evil to solve in the first place. In its classic formulation, the problem of evil is pegged to belief in a god of a very specific sort. The *locus classicus* for the problem is Job, who was upright and honored God, and who precisely for that reason was made to suffer the appalling loss of wealth, friends, family, and health. How could a god who is supremely good and just, and who moreover has it in His power to make it otherwise, allow

this to happen? And is it not just Job. The wicked have power, as Psalm 35 observes, and flourish like a green bay tree; the just do not always fare so well. The problem of evil is a problem of proportion and commensurability—not simply that "the world is full of suffering,"[4] but that this suffering is *undeserved*, or wildly out of all proportion with the moral qualities of the sufferer. This is indeed the heart of Ivan Karamazov's famous complaint, and what makes it so compelling.[5] Such conspicuous and grotesque mismatch of moral worth to natural flourishing impugns either God's power or His goodness—or else His very existence.[6] But since Indian Buddhists will quite happily endorse the lattermost option—there simply is no creative, controlling power organizing reality—the flourishing of the wicked and suffering of the virtuous do not so much pose a problem, we might think, as simply describe the nature of things. Such an outlook might have been shared by the archaic Greeks, as that world is evoked by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. There are gods, of course; but none of them has the monopoly on power together with the reliable goodness necessary to make the flourishing of the wicked and the suffering of the virtuous a *problem*.

It may be, however, that the disbeliever cannot be rid of the problem of evil so easily—at least so several in the European tradition have thought, and Weber is evidently one of them.[7] Although formulated most sharply in terms of an all-powerful and benevolent God, the problem of evil, they would insist, challenges all of us. It is, quite simply, intolerable that we should dwell in a condition in which the consequences of our actions are wildly unfitting or disproportionate. If we truly believed there was no fit or proportion between the quality of our actions and the results, we would find ourselves incapable of acting—at least, incapable of prosecuting consistently any project over time,

committing ourselves to principle, and on the whole acting *for reasons*. And any other such so-called action is mere behavior, not action at all.

Thus Plato and Aristotle—neither of whom believed in a creator-god capable of affecting the course of events in daily life—both have the problem of evil. For both, we are to understand our own actions by relation to the larger, rational, and providential order of the universe. But if the universe is well arranged—that is, arranged in such a way that we can make sense of what is good for us and good to do in light of that arrangement—then why do the wicked flourish and the good sometimes suffer miserable fates here and now? Many of Plato's myths look designed to address this human need for moral order and proportion in the world within which our actions take place.[8] Many Chinese philosophers, it has been argued, have the same basic problem, without commitment to the creator-god of the Mediterranean monotheisms.[9]

On this view, only something like the "tragic" worldview of Sophocles may be immune to the classic problem of evil since there is no expectation that the world should be fair—with goods distributed according to moral or ethical merit—in the first place. It is the lamentable but simple fact of the matter that there is no proportion between actions and their consequences. But while insisting there is nothing for it but to accept this hard fate, Sophocles also (and relatedly) observes darkly, "It is best for a man that he should never be born; second-best, having been born, that he should return whence he came—and quickly."[10] While a bit of bracing pessimism may be salutary, many find such acceptance difficult to maintain once outside the amphitheater. To find reason to go on, to act in the world and to value and care, we must be able to hope that a fair and measured arrangement is possible. That such fair arrangement is not evident in our daily

lives *just is* the problem of evil. This is a problem of evil that we all have, regardless of our theistic convictions.

Nevertheless, in what follows I shall argue that the Buddhists, on the whole, did not have the problem of evil and, in particular, they often did not use the doctrine of karma to justify suffering or render it explicable and tolerable to reason. But this is not for reasons of Sophoclean pessimism. Rather a much more salutary lesson is to be drawn regarding the fact of suffering and our aversion to it. While karma is indeed invoked—or deliberately *not* invoked—to address effectively this psychological "problem of suffering," it does so by undermining the core presumption underlying the problem of evil: namely, that suffering is something *deserved*, that such desert could ever function as an adequate explanation, and that this sort of explanation is something we ought to be demanding in the first place.

KARMA AND SUFFERING EVIL IN BUDDHISM

If the doctrine of karma is seen as the perfect solution to the problem of evil, it is because the doctrine just is a commitment to the perfect fit between the moral quality of one's actions and the felt quality of one's subsequent experiences. There are variations across both Buddhist and non-Buddhist doctrines about the exact fit—is it the deed, the consequence, or the intention behind it that matters more in determining the quality of the consequences for the agent? Are the results experienced primarily as external, nonmoral goods and evils, as positive and negative internal states, or perhaps as the accretion of a spiritually inhibiting substance about one's person? Does a commitment to such a doctrine of karma require a commitment

to literal rebirth? But one shared point in all such doctrines of karma is that there is no judge or adjudicator of actions standing serenely above all of the manifold actions and results; no god or gods *implement* karmic results, so there is no agent punishing or rewarding the actions of human beings (or indeed of nonhuman beings).[11] The fit between action and result is perfect because it is simply the natural unfolding of events according to their kind. On the karma principle, no one *blames and punishes* you for stealing a sheep; your sheep-stealing itself gives rise to the suffering that befalls you somewhere down the road.

But this can solve the problem of evil only if *all* the misery that befalls a person can be traced to some previous wicked deed—otherwise there is still unexplained, apparently undeserved suffering, and that is precisely the problem of evil. Yet the Buddhists, at least, do not hold that *all* suffering is to be traced back to a previous misdeed. Take the *Milindapañha* (*Milinda's Questions*), a text from about the first century CE that purports to be a record of a lengthy encounter between the Greek king Menander (Pāli: *Milinda*), who reigned in Bactria (today's Afghanistan) in the second century BCE, and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena (possibly historical, possibly an invention of the text). In it, the king interrogates Nāgasena extensively on points of Buddhist thought, and the monk replies equally extensively, often by offering metaphors or similes that should indicate the correct, usually unanticipated, ways of considering the matter under examination. Often the king offers objections or dilemmas which Nāgasena must resolve or dissolve, as in this passage from *Milindapañha* IV.1.viii.

The Buddha, King Milinda reminds us, is said to have "burnt up all *kamma*."[12] It is constitutive of attaining enlightenment that all previous intentional acts have had their result, and no more such acts have set anything further in motion. This is what it means

for the cycle of *saṃsāra*—the endless fluctuation of good and evil fortune—to have ceased. How is it then, the king asks, that the Buddha nevertheless suffered pain when someone dropped a stone on him, and required medical attention for dysentery? If he suffered injury, pain, or illness, surely this must indicate that there was at that point some previous unexpiated bad action of his own at the root of it. Nāgasena's reply is, perhaps, surprising:

> "Sire," he says, "not all that is experienced is rooted in *kamma*. What is experienced, sire, arises from eight (material) causes by reason of which many beings experience feelings. What are the eight? Some things that are experienced here, sire, arise originating in winds (of the body), [135] arise originating in bile . . . originating in phlegm . . . arise resulting from a union of the humours of the body . . . arise from a change of season . . . arise from the stress of circumstances . . . arise suddenly, some things that are experienced here, sire, arise born of the maturing of *kamma*."

That is, while every wicked deed is sure to result eventually in suffering of some kind for the perpetrator, not every episode of suffering can be traced back to some previous ill deed. For any given episode of natural or human-caused suffering, it *may* be that previous actions of the current sufferer caused it—but it may just as easily not be. The Buddha's foot was injured when his jealous cousin, Devadatta, tried to assassinate him by dropping a boulder on him from above, and the injury was painful. But this pain was not the fruition of some previous bad deed of the Buddha's—it is just the sort of thing that happens sometimes, due in this case to Devadatta's jealousy and having nothing in particular to do with the Buddha at all.[13]

The venerable Nāgasena is no radical free-thinker here. The claim he will repeat later in his conversations with the king

(at MP 303) is based on passages in the Pāli canon of the Buddha's discourses, some of the oldest Buddhist material that has come down to us. In the *Sivaka Sutta* (SN 36.21), when asked whether he agrees with the claim that "whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action,"[14] the Buddha offers the same manifold causes that Nāgasena offered the king:

> Some feelings, Sīvaka, arise here originating from bile disorders. . . . Some feelings, Sīvaka, arise here originating from phlegm disorders . . . from wind disorders . . . from an imbalance (of the three) . . . [some are] produced by change of climate . . . by careless behaviour . . . caused by assault . . . [some are] produced as the result of kamma. . . . [This] one can know for oneself, and that is considered to be true in the world.
>
> Now when those ascetics and brahmans hold such a doctrine and view as this, "whatever a person experiences, whether it be pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, all that is caused by what was done in the past," then they overshoot what one knows by oneself and they overshoot what considered to be true in the world. Therefore, I say that this is wrong on the part of these ascetics and brahmins.[15]

Not just illness and injury, but even death can occur adventitiously, due to causes other than previous bad deeds. Although the text is confused about whether premature death that *is* a result of previous bad action should be "untimely," the *Milindapañha* is clear that there is such a thing as untimely death due to an assortment of physical causes, distinguished from previous karma. Nāgasena even quotes a verse of what he presumably took to be the Buddha's words, articulating this position: "From hunger, from thirst, if bitten by a snake, and from poison, by fire, water, a knife it is that one dies untimely. From winds, bile, phlegm, a

union and the seasons, from stress, suddenly . . . it is that one dies untimely."[16]

The *Milindapañha* and the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* are not obscure texts. Given this, it seems odd that several scholars have supposed that—for Buddhists as well as Hindus—the so-called doctrine of karma offers the perfect solution to the problem of evil,[17] with one contemporary scholar citing the "karmic principle of justice" as answering Job's problem in particular.[18] A more recent debate disputes how successful a solution it is, but both sides agree it is supposed to be one.[19]

But on the Buddhist view, karma cannot be an apt place to look for either a formulation of the problem of evil or its solution. For although bad action surely brings misfortune, some misfortune arises without a bad action for its cause; there may well be other causes of suffering—mundane, physical causes, not admitting of any further, meaningful explanation. Who is more "innocent" than the Buddha? And yet he got dysentery. Sometimes "the famished man, not obtaining any food . . . dies untimely even though there is a further (portion) of his lifespan" (MP 302)—not because he starved someone in a previous life, but simply because he could not get food in this one. The Buddhist will not insist, like Job's facile friends, that there must after all have been some vicious deed he committed in the past that is responsible for his current misery. Even supposing "you deserved it" *were* a global answer to the problem of evil, it is not one the Buddhist view of karma is in position to offer.[20]

It is also, I shall try to show, not the sort of answer a Buddhist would be inclined to give, could she be made to feel "the problem" in the first place. There is a structural reason for this, and an ethical one.

The structural reason is that the Buddhists had a rather uneasy relationship with karma from the first. Operating in a milieu in which denying that wicked deeds resulted in misery

for the evildoer was considered a free license to wanton transgression, the Buddha incorporates appeals to karma throughout his teachings. Causing misery brings misery on oneself; causing happiness brings happiness, inexorably. This recourse to the principle of karma persists through the next several centuries of development of Buddhist thought in India; indeed, the denial of karma is often regarded as a wrong view, tantamount to the egregiously wrong view of nihilism.[21] But it does not sit altogether comfortably within a Buddhist framework.

The ethical reason is simply the first noble truth—the ubiquity of suffering—which is simply to be understood (SN 56.11). Understanding that suffering penetrates all of existence undermines the very distinction between "deserved" and "undeserved" suffering, or indeed the notion that suffering is the sort of thing that is *deserved*. If we are concerned *explain* suffering in some way that should trace it back to a fault in someone's actions, then we have failed to adopt the appropriate stance toward the basic fact of suffering, and thus to make the ethical transformation Buddhism advises.

CRACKS IN THE KARMA-RESULT STRUCTURE WITHIN BUDDHISM

The highest Buddhist aim is nirvana—the cessation of suffering. Mahāyāna Buddhism proposes we take the universal cessation of suffering as our aim; but whatever differences this may introduce in other respects, for the purposes of this discussion it amounts to much the same. Nirvana, individual or universal, is a cessation so complete that there is no more desire, action or effect, pleasant or unpleasant. Indeed, this is why King Milinda thought that the Buddha, fully awakened, should suffer no illness or injury.

The suffering characteristic of existence, through all its ups and downs, may be typically traced back to three roots—craving, aversion, and confusion; but confusion about the self is paramount. Cessation is achieved only through realizing the impersonality of our condition: "I do not see any doctrine of self," says the Buddha, "that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it" (MN 22.22).

In particular, every conceivable candidate for the role of "myself" is transient and vulnerable, dependent upon countless factors for its nature, its arising, and its passing away. There is nothing that persists or controls, and thus nothing capable and *worthy* of being a self (MN 22.26)—of being gratified and aggrandized. This is a metaphysical antiholism that resists all teleology: there is nothing with respect to which the parts become meaningful, nothing in virtue of which something can become good.[22] When we have thoroughly understood that we are not persistent entities—enduring agents and subjects of experience—then the craving and clinging that inevitably cause suffering in its various forms will also cease. Without a self to protect and promote, the story goes, much of the motive for unwholesome behavior evaporates. With practice at seeing oneself and others as selfless, one's interest becomes turned toward the badness of suffering itself, with no distinction for whose suffering it is.[23]

Such psychological and practical changes do not happen easily, or instantly upon drawing the conclusion to a valid argument that there is no self. The habits of mind—of thinking and feeling—that we build up around the self are very deep and very persistent. It takes a great deal of patience and mental practice to begin to uproot the nest of emotive energy entangled in the conception of ourselves as independent agent-subjects (or substances), and to replace this with a recognition of the transient

and mutually interdependent and conditioned nature of all things. Many mental and practical exercises, as well as endless similes and stories, are constructed with the aim of enabling us to make this understanding a thoroughgoing perspective shift. The principle of karma, however, seems to directly undermine this effort in two significant ways.

First, to the extent that karma is twinned with a belief in rebirth, it encourages us to trace out distinct individuals and regard each as the same enduring thing over time. This is not the ancient objection that karma (and the rebirth implied in it) is metaphysically incompatible with no-self; for this objection is perfectly resolvable by substituting a continuous succession of momentary entities for endurance of a single thing over time.[24] But even if we formally replace endurance with continuity, the karma principle requires us to individuate these continuities, and attend to their distinctness from one another as well as to their specific internal connectedness. Indeed even without literal rebirth, anything like the principle of karma would seem to require us to strongly differentiate and isolate one particular enduring entity—or determinate chain of continuity—as *the* cause, distinct from everything else. More extremely, if karma is to be a system of reward and punishment, then some individual or another has to be picked out as the *guilty party*—still "the same person" later, in whatever sense necessary to receive their just deserts. The evident incompatibility of this with a metaphysical ethics of no-self was pointed out by a minority Buddhist position (known as *pudgalavāda*), which cited it as a reason for positing "the person" as ultimately existing.[25]

The second tension between karma and the practice of seeing no-self arises when we suppose that karma is taken as an incentive: do good things now to get good things in the future; avoid evil deeds now to prevent evil befalling you in the future.

This simple and prevalent thought is in tension with the Buddhist view that we ought to give up our craving for and attachment to such goods as are ordinarily thought to come from karma. This is not to say, of course, that Buddhists eschew all such appeals in practice, or that such appeals *must* undermine the aims of the no-self claim.[26] But in the ordinary cases of which we might think in the context of solving the problem of evil, if the incentive works, it is because I am not yet seeing things at all correctly; and when I act under such incentives, I reinforce the perspective from which such goods are to be sought and such evils to be avoided.

These tensions have prompted some contemporary Buddhist scholars to recommend naturalizing the principle of karma[27]—not without some basis in the early literature[28]—while others suspect that karma was not in fact part of the *Buddha's* own view at all (again, perhaps not entirely without ground).[29] But references to karma pervade Indian Buddhist thought,[30] and insofar as they do, karma would seem—so far from solving any problem of evil—to undermine the specifically Buddhist solution to the problem of suffering. For according to the Buddhist diagnosis, thinking in terms of self causes suffering and must be eliminated; yet that very same thinking in terms of self is required when conceiving a result as the *result* of some previous action, connected by a distinct and unified causal chain. *Just to the extent* that it explains current suffering by previous bad action, it encourages just that clinging to thinking in terms of self as originator of action and owner of experiences that the Buddhists claim must be dismantled if suffering is to be eliminated. This effect is only exacerbated when karmic consequences are invoked as incentives for good behavior.

This brings us, then, to the ethical incongruity in treating karma as a solution to the problem of evil in Buddhism.

At its core, the proposal mistakenly presumes that the Buddhist acknowledges a problem of evil that *would* be solved, if only those suffering were to blame for their own sorry state. But taking any such (causal) explanation as a *justification*—that is, supposing that there is or ought to be a system of reward and punishment, of blame and guilt, and that this would somehow redeem suffering by giving meaning to it—is wholly antithetical to the Buddhist ethical outlook. To shed light on this, let us consider how karma does (and does not) figure in stories of ordinary life meant to inform ordinary life with the Buddhist perspective.

AND NONE OF US DESERVING THE CRUELTY OR THE GRACE

The sayings of the *Dhammapada* were collected across the subcontinent over several centuries. It has been observed that in many of these verses, there may be nothing particularly *Buddhist* about the moral advice offered. Some have doubted whether all of it was in fact originally Buddhist at all, or whether it was a collection of precepts in common currency, picked up and appropriated by whatever was the dominant religious view of the day. But a text is not just its words; it is also what is done with it. And certainly in what was done with the *Dhammapada*, it is a decidedly Buddhist text.

For instance, in order to illustrate the sage advice given in the verses and make it more alive, stories—sometimes several embedded within each other—were associated with each observation. Quasi-historical, these stories are full of a variety of characters and incidents from everyday life, often featuring monastics, and special guest appearances by the Buddha, who is said to have told the tales originally as part of his teachings.

In fifth-century Sri Lanka, these stories—which had been accumulated and circulating over more than 400 years—were translated into Pāli as the *Dhammapada-aṭṭakathā*, the *Commentary on the Dhammapada*.

We start in the middle of a lengthy and complicated tale illustrating the verse that reads, "Even while a man is gathering flowers and is absorbed in pleasure, death comes and carries him off, even as a mighty flood overwhelms a sleeping village." The fact that so complicated a tale is told to illustrate this verse is indeed very much to the point: in explicating loss, there is no straightforward "evil done then, evil suffered now"; it is always more involved, and more compromising.

Bandhula, a friend of King Pasenadi and commander-in-chief of his army, is a fair and honest judge, which wins him the enmity of powerful men. These men pour poison regarding Bandhula in the king's ear. Believing the slander, the king arranges the treacherous massacre of Bandhula, together with his thirty-two sons. His wife, Mallikā, receives the news while hosting the sangha's daily meal: " 'Your husband's head has been cut off and likewise the heads of your sons.' When she learned the news, she said not a word to anyone, but put the letter in a fold of her dress and ministered to the Congregation of Monks as if nothing had happened."[31] Shortly after, a servant drops a jar of ghee in front of the Elders, but

> the Captain of the Faith [Sariputta] said, "No notice should ever be taken of the breaking of anything that is capable of being broken." Thereupon Mallikā, drawing the letter from the fold of her dress, said, "They have just brought me this letter: 'The head of your husband has been cut off and the heads of your two and thirty sons likewise.' Yet even when I heard this, I took no thought. Much less, therefore, am I likely to take thought of the breaking of a mere jar, Reverend Sir."

Later, she advises her thirty-two widowed daughters-in-law:

> "Your husbands were free from guilt and have merely reaped the fruit of misdeeds in previous states of existence. Grieve not, nor lament. Cherish no resentment against the king." The king's spies listened to her words and went and told the king that they cherished no hatred of him. The king was overcome with emotion, went to Mallikā's residence, asked Mallikā and her daughters-in-law to forgive him, and granted Mallikā a boon. "I accept," said she.

Her request that the widows all be allowed to return to their families is granted.

Notice first the apparently paradoxical nature of Mallikā's consolatory words: "Your husbands were free from guilt and have merely reaped the fruit of misdeeds in previous states of existence."[32] There is a curious fluidity of identity at work here. Their *husbands* are the persons who were born at a particular time and place to Mallikā and Bandhula, were boys and grew into the adult men they married. *These* persons are guilt-free, the crimes for which they were killed were fabricated—and their wives should take some solace in that. These persons are also, however, direct inheritors-by-continuity of previous existences and the deeds that constituted them. Those previous deeds set in motion a chain of causes that would eventually have issued in some such circumstance as the current one. For each wife, the man she married both is and is not the person who committed misdeeds in a previous life.

"Reaping the fruit" is not the language of retribution, nor of desert.[33] It is natural cause and effect that is being appealed to here: the wives are being encouraged to see their innocent husbands' deaths as, in a way, the coming to fruition of the larger, extended and beginningless personal factors that are directly,

though distantly, responsible for the men's births in this life.[34] They are at the same time, then, being explicitly *diverted* from looking at the human agents—the king's men acting under orders, or the slanderers, or the king himself—as the relevant cause of their husbands' deaths. This is not to say that the king did no wrong—and we will come back to this, as the story itself does. But each wife is being advised to attend instead to other causes that belonged properly to her husband in such a way that his untimely death was not to be avoided. She is not advised to *look for* specific causes, or the particular misdeed—it is an important part of the perspective to be adopted that such looking would be futile and relatively uninformative. This "opacity of karma"[35] is integral to the perspective-shift being recommended. Rather than an invitation to determine *the* culprit, it is a gesture toward the infinite embeddedness, dependency, and consequently compromised nature of whatever—and whomever—we take to be a discrete entity.

Mallikā herself, notice, does not need such consolation, nor such diversion. She immediately sees that a mortal has died—something breakable has broken. One is reminded here of Cicero's story of Anaxagoras's reaction to news of his son's death: "I knew all along that I had begotten a mortal."[36] This does not mean that Mallikā does not feel her husband's absence, or feel sorrow at the loss of her sons. But she immediately accepts that what is a standing possibility for every human being has happened now, in this way, for her husband and sons, and she does not indulge in excessive grief. What has come together comes apart, and she was under no illusion that she or they or anyone had ultimate control over this.

Giving her daughters-in-law vague appeals to karma approximates this perspective. It makes available to them her alternative way of relating to their husbands' deaths, and thus prepares

the way for the next and perhaps most important part of her advice: rejecting the expected, "normal" reaction of indignation against the king who ordered the massacre. "Cherish no resentment against the king." This rejection of resentment, which opens up space for a different kind of response to the situation, is absolutely central to Buddhist morality—for hatred, anger and resentment are particularly virulent forms of aversion, one of the three fundamental roots of suffering.[37]

The opening of the *Dhammapada* offers opportunity for multiple elaborations on this theme of appropriate reactions to violence:

> "He abused me, he struck me, he defeated me, he robbed me;"
> If any cherish this thought, their hatred never ceases. ||3||
> "He abused me, he struck me, he defeated me, he robbed me;"
> If any cherish not this thought, their hatred ceases. ||4||
> For not by hatred are hatreds ever quenched here in this world.
> By love rather are they quenched. This is an eternal law. ||5||

The story illustrating the last verse is particularly colorful.[38] A wife who was barren encourages her husband to take a second wife; but she is immediately jealous when the younger wife conceives a child. She secretly gives the second wife an abortifacient, and she does the same again the next time the young wife conceives. Wising up, the second wife does not announce her third pregnancy. But when she is too far along to hide it, the jealous first wife eventually finds a way to slip poison into the pregnant woman's food. The second wife dies in childbirth along with the child, earnestly wishing, "When I have passed out of this existence may I be reborn as an ogress able to devour *your* children" [48]. She is reborn as a cat, while the husband beats and abandons the first wife, who soon dies of her injuries.

Notice there is no mention anywhere of anyone having deserved any of what befell them in virtue of their behavior in this, or any previous life. An everyday moral sensibility might suppose that being beaten and cast out is simply what the murderous first wife deserves. The text does not present it this way; instead this eventuality is simply what, perhaps predictably, this man did when he found out his wife had killed his other wife and their unborn child. The first wife's unhappy death is *not* the moral of the story.

The first wife is reborn as a hen, whose chicks are three times devoured by the cat before she is similarly devoured, earnestly wishing that in the next life she may do the same to the cat. The pair are then reborn as a leopardess and a deer, with the same predictable pattern, and the same dying wish. In each rebirth, the women get what they wished for—not what they "deserved." Finally, the leopardess is reborn as "a young woman of station," the deer as an ogress. After having her first two children eaten by the ogress, the young woman runs with the third to the monastery where the Buddha is teaching, the ogress close behind.

The young wife lays her boy at the feet of the Buddha, saying "I give you this child; spare the life of my son." The Buddha has the ogress, held at the gate, summoned within, and before them both says, in effect, "*Why are you doing this?*" and quotes what we have as verse 5 of the *Dhammapada*. The ogress gets the point. In the longer thirteenth-century Sinhala vernacular version, the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, the Buddha has to say a bit more to get her there: "As spit, snot, and so on, are washed off with clean water . . . so hatred that burns on the fuel of justifications must be drenched with the water of compassion, not fed with the firewood of reasons and causes . . . Good, founded on compassion, destroys malice and puts out the fire of enmity."[39]

The Buddha tells the young mother to let the ogress hold the child. Entrusted with the child, the ogress caresses him, and gives him back. Then she cries because, she says, now that she is no longer eating human flesh, she will starve.[40] So the Buddha tells the mother to invite the ogress into her home and feed her with the best rice-porridge.

The story goes on.[41] But this is enough to see that it is not karma that fuels the misadventures, but rather hatred, anger, and resentment. There is no suggestion that the barren wife of the first incarnation has behaved anything but appallingly; yet she is not considered to have "got what she deserved," either in being beaten to death, or when reborn as a hen in the house of a chick-devouring cat. The husband's domestic misfortune is not credited to some foul deed in this or some previous life. Nor is the misfortune of the fruitful wife attributed to any previous misconduct of her own.[42] At the end of the tale, the ogress is to be allowed to hold the child not because she has *earned* it, or because her eating the first two infants is inconsequential, but because this is the only way out of the ongoing cycle of suffering caused by the perfectly "well-grounded," "justified" mutual resentment these two women have cultivated toward each other. The new mother has to be willing not to consider questions of guilt and desert, but instead look to the hunger of the ogress and invite her into her home to assuage that hunger. This is the only real prophylactic against more baby-devouring.

The Buddha is not acting in this story as a *judge* (perhaps it is interesting to contrast in this respect the tale of wise king Solomon searching for the best and fairest way to decide the competing claims of two women over an infant child). There is no apportioning of blame when the rivals come to the temple, no weighing of conduct in the balances. Obviously, if indignation is ever righteous, then the new mother has every justification for

her resentment toward the ogress. What more reason could one possibly need? Likewise, the doe has every reasonable ground to be angry with the leopardess; the hen is entitled to her fury with the cat; and the young woman, brought into the household by the first, barren wife only to have her children killed in the womb, has ample ground for complaint. The Buddha does not inquire into any of this, nor give either party the opportunity to recite all the good reasons she has for calling the other to the punishment she so richly deserves.[43] This indeed is the crux of the whole story.[44]

In the tale of the murder of Bandhula along with his thirty-two sons, Mallikā—the widow and bereaved mother—sees the pointlessness of anger, and more importantly, sees how important it is so to see things. From the first intimation of her loss, she does not frame things—for herself, or for her daughters-in-law—in such a way that anger would reasonably and naturally arise. Instead she frames things in a way that the reasonable and authentic response is, "This violence stops here." And so it does. The power of her thus taking responsibility for nonproliferation so moves the king that he asks her forgiveness, and returns her gesture by allowing her to name what she wants from him.

In the tale, Mallikā's response is directly contrasted with its opposite. The now remorseful king goes to visit the Buddha, entrusting the symbols of royal power to the care of Kāyāyana, a nephew of the murdered man, who has been given his uncle's post. This nephew, however, thinks of the king as "the man who treacherously murdered my upright uncle and blameless cousins," and accordingly wants to punish him. Kārāyaṇa makes off with the royal symbols of power, and gives them to Prince Viḍūḍabha, who claims the throne. Upon discovering the usurpation, the king, remorseful but still unwilling to give up power, rushes headlong back to the city, where he promptly dies of exhaustion, alone, outside the city gates.

In a way, the king does in fact die as a result of his unjust killing of Bandhula. But there are no non-natural agents or impersonal natural forces at work. His crime set in motion both his remorse, and so his journey to the Buddha, *and* the nephew's desire for retribution. He contributes, moreover, a desire to hold onto the kingdom that leads him to take the exhausting journey that kills him. The nephew, having acted out his revenge, creates the circumstances for the new king, Viḍūḍabha, to recall his own thirst for retribution against slights the neighboring Sākiyas showed him years ago. The very next line is: "When Viḍūḍabha became king, he remembered his grudge."

But before seeing where this leads, we should not leave the old king without noting how nothing is said about his sorry fate being due to his crime, nor about what became of him postmortem on account of it. "Retribution" is something carried out by human beings suffering under a confusion that presents such action as the right, even the necessary, thing to do—much for the worse for all concerned. Mallikā's way is the only way to whatever happiness is yet to be won for us.

The new king's old grudge leads him to slaughter his kinsmen, the Sākiyas, while they—out of honor—do not fight but put up only a show of doing so. On the way back from their bloody victory, the king and his men bed down for the night in and around a riverbed. There is a flash flood, and half the men, including the king, are washed away.[45]

The local Buddhist monks speculate about this before the Buddha. "The slaying of the Sākiyas was unjust," they say (*Dhp-A* 360). "It was not right to say, 'The Sākiyas must be killed,' and to smite them and kill them." The Buddha replies with a clairvoyance about previous misdeeds not ordinarily available: "Monks, if you regard only this present existence, it was indeed unfitting [*ayutta*] that the Sākiyas should die in such wise.

What they received, however, was entirely fitting, considering the bad deed [*pāpakamma*] they committed in a previous state of existence . . . [when] they conspired together and threw poison into the river."[46]

Finally, we have just the sort of invocation of karma that people expect: it's okay that someone suffered, because it is actually punishment for an earlier crime. But that is not quite what the Buddha says. He says that the Sākiyas' being killed was *indeed* unjust (or more precisely, "unfitting"); but it was *also* fitting and only to be expected that they would suffer unjust death because they had set in motion the conditions for such a result some time ago. This also means that those who killed the Sākiyas *acted unjustly*—they are not the instrument of natural justice. Their intention was bad, and it will set in motion that sort of effect for themselves in the future.

Once again, we are diverted from casting the situation simply in terms of just deserts. There is this life, in which they were unjustly killed; and there is the endless succession of lives (an unwhole totality), with reference to which they justly died; but no preference is given for the long view over the short—the endless, nonteleological succession of lives is no proper whole with claim to be the "real truth of the matter." If, then, we are not to think, "They deserved it. He had it coming to him," how *are* we to think of it? This is modeled for us by the monks, who turn immediately from wondering about the justice of the slaying to sympathy for the perpetrators washed away in the flood after their victory. "Viḍūḍabha slew all those Sākiyas," they say (*Dhp-A* 361) "and then, before the desire of his own heart had been fulfilled, he and his numerous company were swept out to sea and became food for fishes and tortoises." To which the Buddha replies, "Monks, or ever the desire of these living beings be fulfilled, even as a mighty flood overwhelms a sleeping village, so

the Prince of Death cuts short their lives and plunges them into the four oceans of suffering."

Here would be an excellent opportunity to say that Viḍūḍabha is being punished for his injustice against the Sākiyas. But that is exactly what the Buddha does *not* say. Instead he encourages the opposite outlook: rather than consoling the monks that, after all, Viḍūḍabha only got what he deserved, he points out that Viḍūḍabha got what all of us get, at some (least expected) point. The Buddha encourages us to reflect: We are all in his position.[47] We set our hearts on something, order—and disorder—our priorities and perspective for the sake of it; we do (and fail to do) any number of things in pursuit of this end to which we have become so attached. And then—something intervenes; a flood comes and washes the whole business away. This is a condition we all share, each day of our lives.

IS THERE A PROBLEM OF EVIL TO SOLVE?

What is Job's complaint? It is not that there is suffering, or even that there is innocent suffering. When he, upright as he is, loses his children and all his property, he "fell down upon the ground, and worshipped; And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job I.20–21). It is only when he himself is struck with a repulsive and debilitating disease—when, as we later hear, his condition has become one in which he is cast out from any possibility of human relations—that he curses not God, as predicted, but the day he was born.

What does it *mean* to "curse the day that you were born"? There is not much within the biblical text from which to build

an interpretation. But it seems at least that "it was a black day that saw me born" must mean something like "there is no conceivable good to anyone, or to the universe, that I was born."

But the Buddhist is likely to be perplexed at this point. Whatever put it into your head that there was supposed to be any good to anyone—yourself or others or the order of reality as a whole—in your being born? Where did this expectation come from that one's having been born ought to have some modicum of good in it, or reason? That there must be some purpose served, or else it was an especially *black* day? We are all conceived and born in the usual way, due to familiar causes—there is desire, there is physiology and biology and physics. All these factors are entangled in suffering, in psychological suffering, in the metaphysical suffering of vulnerability and dependence.[48] Where does this expectation come from that there is some amount or kind of suffering that is *too much*, or the *wrong kind*? Suffering is just the nature of reality—this is the first of the four Noble Truths.[49] Indeed, our inability to accept this—our insistence that there must be some more permanent reality to hold onto—is just what leads to greater suffering. If there is a *problem* of suffering (rather than a problem of evil), it is in our resistance to this fundamental truth, and Buddhist teaching, theoretical and practical, devotes considerable resources and ingenuity to addressing this. One may think here of the much-recounted tale of the woman who had lost a child, and was utterly bereft.[50] The Buddha advises her to bring him a mustard seed from a house that has known no loss. When she has suffered terrible loss, the woman is not offered karma as consolation—she is encouraged to look beyond her own immediate loss, or to see it in the context of the human condition, and the community of fellow sufferers.

To feel pained at the ultimate meaninglessness of one's life, at the futility and lack of overarching justificatory narrative, is to be

caught up in a false metaphysical view—one that supposes *real* reality is one of well-formed wholes, a fitting and valuable order to things, and that our experience is therefore to be evaluated according to how it measures up to this standard. It supposes that there is some end whose goodness—rightness, appropriateness—would or could make sense of the series of changes, give them meaning and purpose. But if there are no wholes, no greater order, no promise of unity and meaning—if the whole of reality is just "from this, that arises; from that, this arises"—the question "Why was I ever born?" just cannot arise in the same way.[51] When Job asks, "Why?" he is looking for the final cause, not the efficient or material cause. And on the Buddhist view, there simply are none of those to be found in the order of reality. Final causes are introduced only in the intentional thought and actions of living beings, and they go out of existence with them. It is in fact our attachment to these final causes—"my life will be meaningless unless . . ."— that is, on the Buddhists' diagnosis, responsible for unnecessary suffering that we generate independently of other causes. This is not Sophoclean pessimism, because there is no cause for dismay at the lack of meaning in suffering—it is the thought that suffering *could* be redeemed or redemptive, but is not, that does the damage.

WHY IS LIFE SO HARD?

It is not as if the Buddhists are tongue-tied in the face of this question, or that they refuse to acknowledge it. In this, I think they were less pessimistic than the Greeks.[52] But they do not confuse the fact of suffering with any supposed problem of evil. The idea that evil is a special *problem* comes from the expectation that the distribution of pleasures and pains *ought* to be just, but is not; and

it comes, especially in its secular version, from the related idea that we could not make sense of having projects at all if we thought that the distribution of positive and negative results was only arbitrarily connected to the virtuous effort we bring to life and our conduct through it. But such expectations are, on the Buddhist view, symptoms of precisely the sort of confusion they take to be at the root of suffering. The only "problem of suffering" is quite simply that there is suffering and we do not like it. But that we do not like it is not something in need of an explanation; and how it in fact arises is something amenable to perfectly ordinary sorts of explanation. There are traceable, discernable causes of suffering, and it is in fact this which holds out hope for its amelioration.

Ultimately, suffering comes from our ignorance or confusion, and from the confused and misguided feelings and desires and aversions that therefore arise. Generally, where there is suffering, there is some confusion, some craving and attachment somewhere, as part of its conditions; and conversely, the need and inflexibility that come from confused ways of grasping our condition result inevitably in suffering. There is tremendous benefit in understanding this, and in tracing out the particular paths through which our insistence on the specialness and priority of ourselves leads to suffering for ourselves and others.

But if suffering comes down to our ignorance, does this mean that we are *to blame* for our suffering? That we are only "getting what we *deserve*"?

On the contrary. On this point, Ivan Karamazov is exactly right: "there is suffering and none are guilty". As the Buddhist view is not particularly concerned with *innocence* as opposed to guilt, we might say that the question of blame and desert is simply taken off the table.[53] The categories of guilt and blame, justice and desert are the wrong ones to bring to the situation at hand.[54] *Saṃsāra*, with its endless ups and downs, is not the sort

of thing anyone *deserves*. And no one is *to blame* for the human condition—for the fact of ignorance, or the fact that ignorance causes confusion, craving, grasping, clinging; for the fact that grasping at what is fleeting is therefore a futile, Sisyphusian enterprise that sets people against each other and makes them callous or incognizant of the suffering their actions cause. It is a desperate, pitiable condition. The more we recognize it, the more heartbreaking it is to see, the more urgently we seek to interrupt this self-perpetuating process, to eliminate suffering by eliminating the causes of suffering.

NOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

Dp-A	*Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, see Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*
JS	*Jaina Sūtra*, see Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras*
MN	*Majjima Nikāya*, see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*
MP	*Milindapañha*, see Horner, *Milinda's Questions*
SN	*Samyutta Nikāya*, see Bodhi, *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*
AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, see Nyanaponika and Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*, see Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*

My thanks are due to the Einstein Forum, at whose invitation I first prepared an earlier version of these thoughts for their multidisciplinary conference on the figure of Job, and to the audience and other speakers for their insightful discussion.

1. Indeed, "the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history." Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1958), 121.
2. See, among more recent iterations of this debate, John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983, chap. 10), as taken up by Roy Perrett in "Karma and the Problem of Suffering," *Sophia* 24, no. 1 (1985): 4–10; and Whitley Kaufman ("Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 1 [2005]: 15–32) on the one hand, and Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis ("Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman." *Philosophy East & West* 57, no. 4 (2007): 533–56), on the other.
3. Thus Weber calls the Brahamanical "combination of caste legitimacy with the *karma* doctrine, thus with the specific Brahmanical theodicy . . . a stroke of genius" (*Religion of India*, 131), while Buddhists challenged the legitimacy of caste; but the figuring of the karma doctrine as the perfect solution to the problem of evil remains (*Religion of India*, 206–7).
4. As G. Schlesinger has it in his proposed dissolution of the problem of evil ("The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Suffering," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 3 [1964]: 244–47). Perrett offers an astute examination of whether there can be said to be a problem of *suffering* at all—though he adds only parenthetically that the suffering under consideration is "apparently unmerited" ("Karma and the Problem of Suffering," 9). As he observes, our *dislike* of suffering, and our wish to escape it, constitute a separate problem, and one addressed in the Hindu tradition by "a plethora of diverse answers . . . presupposing and yet transcending the logically satisfactory answered by the doctrine of karma" (where "logically" means "causally explanatory," "Karma and the Problem of Suffering," 9). See also in this context Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), the first chapter of which gives an excellent introduction to and orientation in the problem of evil as it relates to Hindu thought in particular.
5. Dostoyevsky has Ivan Karamazov saying,

> If [children] suffer, they must suffer for another's sins; but that reasoning I don't understand. The innocent must not suffer for another's sins! . . . Why should [man] know evil when it costs so

> much? The whole of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'! I say nothing of the suffering of grown-up people! But these little ones! . . . I understand nothing . . . I don't want to understand. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything, I shall be false to the fact . . . I took children only to make my case clearer. I cannot understand why the world is arranged as it is. With my pitiful understanding, all I know is that there is suffering and none are guilty . . . and I can't consent to live by it. I must have justice"; and then, "While there is still time, I want to renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of one tortured child! It's not worth it because those tears must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? . . . By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them, . . . since the children have already been tortured?
>
> (FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY, *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*, TR. CONSTANCE GARNETT, 215–21. DOVER THRIFT EDITIONS, DOVER PUBLICATIONS 2005).

6. This anxiety already finds terse articulation in Thomas Aquinas's thirteenth-century *Summa Theologica*, Question 2, Article 3: "It seems that there is no God. For if, of two mutually exclusive things, one were to exist without limit, the other would cease to exist. But by the word 'God' is implied some limitless good. If God then existed, nobody would ever encounter evil. But evil is encountered in this world. God therefore does not exist." *Summa Theologiae*, tr. Timothy McDermott, OP (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).
7. "The resultant problem of theodicy," Weber writes in *Sociology of Religion* (trans. Ephraim Fischoff, with introduction by Talcott Parsons [Boston: Beacon Press, 1963], 139), "is found in ancient Egyptian literature as well as in Job and in Aeschylus . . . All Hindu religion was influenced by it . . . ; even a meaningful world order that is impersonal and supertheistic must face the problem of the world's imperfections." In his introduction, Parsons highlights the source of the problem of

evil for Weber in the "discrepancies between expectation systems which are institutionalized in normative orders and the actual experiences people undergo," since "*regardless of the particular content of the normative order*, a major element of discrepancy is inevitable"; people's experiences are, consequently,

> frustrating in the very specific sense, not merely that things happen and contravene their "interests," but that things happen which are "meaningless" in the sense that they *ought* not to happen. Here above all lie the problems of suffering and of evil, not merely the existence of phenomena defined in these terms, but also the prevalence of the suffering of those who do not morally deserve to suffer, the prevalence of the exposure to evil of the morally just, who thus are punished rather than rewarded for their pains.

(WEBER, *SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION*, XLVII, EMPHASIS IN ORIGINAL)

For a more contemporary articulation of this line of thought, see Susan Neiman, *evil in modern thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), and Charles Taylor's *sources of the self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), which insists that life be rationally organized around some ultimate good in order for it, and the actions comprising a life, to be meaningful.

8. See, for instance, myths at the end of the *Phaedo*, of the *Gorgias*, and in Book X of the *Republic*.
9. Franklin Perkins, *Heaven and Earth Are Not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
10. *Oedipus at Colonnus* 1225–27; according to Herodotus (8.138), Sophocles is here sharing a bit of common wisdom that was given to King Midas by a silenus.
11. Amber D. Carpenter, "Illuminating Community: How to Learn from India's Lack of a Category for Non-Human Animals," in *Oxford Philosophical Concepts: Animals*, ed. P. Adamson and F. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 63–85), has discussion and further

references regarding the actions of animals and their liability to attract results according to their quality.

12. MP 134, Division IV (Dilemmas) I.viii. Quotes from the *Milindapañha* follow the translation of I. B. Horner (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1963) unless noted otherwise.
13. J. P. McDermott points out that this particular bit of the Buddha's post-enlightenment suffering, unlike the dysentery, is ascribed by Nāgasena to chance elsewhere in the *Milindapañha* (*Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma* [New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984], 116).
14. Translations from the Pāli canon are those published by Wisdom Publications as the *Discourses of the Buddha*, unless otherwise noted.
15. Cf. also SN 36.21; AN ii.87–88; AN iii.131. The *Vibhaṇga* (367) also speaks out against considering all prosperity and adversity . . . to be the result of deeds done in past lives (McDermott, *Development*, 92); and the old view is retained in the current Theravāda (Ledi Sadaw, "Some Points of Buddhist Doctrine," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 7 1913–1914, 119).
16. MP VIII.6. Max Müller, in his *Sacred Texts of the East* translation, notes that this verse has not been traced in the *piṭakas*; and I. B. Horner makes no note of a possible source at all. Since many texts of diverse canons have been lost, it is not unlikely that Nāgasena here quotes from what was taken at the time to be the Buddha's words. Where I have put ellipses, Müller has nothing, but Horner has "and from *kamma*." Horner's version is strange because the text has just said that of these, only that which is due to *kamma* is "in due season"—although Horner's translation of this preceding passage is very complicated, evidently making distinctions so as to reconcile it with what is said in the verse. Is muddle here perhaps to do with the fact that the untimely death of an *arhat* was disputed among Buddhists themselves? (McDermott cites *Kathāvatthu* XVII.2 in *Development*, 100.)
17. O'Flaherty observes, "It has been argued that 'the most complete formal solution to the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of *karma*, the so-called belief in the transmigration of souls.' This doctrine, simply stated, 'solves' the problem by blaming evil on itself: one's present experience is the direct result of the action (karma), good and bad, accumulated in past lives and affixed to the

transmigrating soul" (*Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 14). The quote is from Weber (*Sociology of Religion*, chap. 9), who goes on to note that "guilt and merit within this world are unfailingly compensated by fate in the successive lives of the soul . . . What may appear from the viewpoint of a theory of compensation as unjust suffering in the terrestrial life of a person should be regarded as atonement for sin in a previous existence" (*Sociology of Religion*, 145). In his clear and careful study of karma in early Buddhist thought, McDermott observes that multiple causes, and in particular chance—which seems to be the explanation of the splinter of rock hitting the Buddha's toe (MP 181)—"undermines any sense of universal justice as being operative through the principle of kamma" (*Development*, 116). But old habits die hard—see notes 18 and 19.

18. "In the schema of time-space structured existence embodied in sentient existence," writes Winston King, "at all levels and in all forms (human, sub-human, super-human) the *karmic principle of justice* rules without exception or hindrance. There is no such thing as unexplained, causeless suffering, Job to the contrary" (Winston King, "Judeo-Christian and Buddhist Concepts of Justice," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2 [1995]: 67–82; emphasis added).
19. Kaufman ("Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil") treats karma—in Buddhism and Hinduism indifferently—as *supposed to be* a "solution" to the problem of evil, by positing perfect justice in punishments and rewards, but finds it wanting in this respect. Chadha and Trakakis respond to the objections, but without noting that—for the Buddhist at least—karma could not possibly play this role since there is suffering that is not caused by previous actions. In fact, they say that "it is more accurate to conceive of the karma theory as providing a model of impersonal or cosmic justice" ("Karma and the Problem of Evil," 538).
20. This does not mean that *no* current evils were ascribed to bad karma, of course. In MN 135, differences in fortune that one is born into are ascribed to previous deeds having their effects. One is inclined, as in other cases in the Buddha's discourses, to search for contextual clues for why *this particular answer* is given to *this particular questioner*.
21. Cf. *Ratnāvalī* I.9, 43.
22. I explore this understanding of the no-self claim in more detail in *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, chap. 1; and consider the ethical implications of

the rejection of teleology in "Metaphysical Suffering, Metaphysics as Therapy." In *On Suffering: An Inter-Disciplinary Dialogue on Narrative and the Meaning of Suffering*, ed. N. Hinerman and M. Sutton (Oxford: ID Press, 2012), 3–10.

23. This is especially evident in the Mahāyāna (Madhyamaka) tradition, particularly in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.
24. Vasubandhu, *AKBh*. IX
25. See J. P. McDermott, *Development of the Early Buddhist Concept of Karma/Kamma*, 84–86; and for a more detailed discussion of the possible philosophical motivations of the *pudgalavāda*, see my "Persons Keeping Their *Karma* Together," in *The Moon Points Back: Analytic Philosophy and Asian Thought*, ed. Koji Tanaka, Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L. Garfield, and Graham Priest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–44.
26. Here is an attempt to incorporate an interest in action and its fruits within the project of aiming at an enlightenment which recognizes no distinct agents or subjects, and sees the vanity of the sorts of goods and evils to be won by wholesome and unwholesome acts: "(someone) doing demerit is remorseful and says, 'An evil deed was done by me'—therefore evil does not increase. But (someone), sire, doing merit, is not remorseful. Rapture is born of the absence of remorse, joy is born of rapture, the body of one who is joyful is impassible, when the body is impassible, he experiences happiness, the mind of one who is happy is concentrated, and he who is concentrated comprehends as it really is—in this way merit increases" (MP 84, Division II.6.vii). There are a few other such attempts in the oldest forms of Buddhism. J. P. McDermott cites two in his "*Nibbāna* as a Reward for *kamma*" (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, no. 3 [1973]: 344–47): the first is also in the *Milindapañha*, in a colorful description of 'the Buddha's bazaar' (MP 341); the other is the *Nidhikaṇḍasutta* of the *Khuddakapāṭha*, which describes nirvana as something gained by merit accumulated by wholesome actions. One finds a similar incorporation of good action and result within the path to enlightenment in Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī* (treated in detail in my "Aiming at Happiness, Aiming at Ultimate Truth—in Practice," in *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*, ed. The Cowherds [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016]), 21–42.
27. That is, turning it entirely into a claim about the intrinsic effect on the *psyche* of certain sorts of intentional states—see especially Dale

Wright's "Critical Questions towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, On-line Conference on "Revisioning Karma," vol. 11, 2005, http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/2010/04/27/conference-revisioning-karma; but also Damien Keown's "Karma, Character, and Consequentialism" and Christian Coseru's "Karma, Rebirth and Mental Causation", in the same volume.

28. McDermott recalls Aung and Rhys Davids' comment that "result of actions was . . . conceived of as *feeling* experienced by the agent," and adds "it is thus only subjective experience resulting from kamma which is properly termed '*vipaka*' [fruit]" (*Development*, 87) And conversely, "a man's character, as a whole, is a most significant element in determining how the effects of any given act will be experienced" (*Development*, 20).
29. See Stephen Batchelor, *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).
30. See Naomi Appleton, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) for details on the treatment of karma in Buddhist and Jaina narrative literature. The *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* II.6 of the *Jaina Sūtras* (trans. by Herman Jacobi. *Sacred Books of the East* 45, [Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass 1964 (orig. Clarendon 1895)], 414–15) captures the disputes between them over karma in its farcically grotesque caricature of the Buddhist view. The *Milindapañha* captures conflicting views at MP 84 and MP 159 regarding whether witting or unwitting wrong attracts the worse karma—which is surprising since the *Anguttara Nikāya* iii.415 declares that "intention (volition) is *kamma*." McDermott calls it "generally accepted that an emphasis on the role of cetanā in the action of kamma was the Buddha's contribution to the concept of kamma," (*Development*, 28). Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002) and, in a different way, Jonathan Gold, *Paving the Great Way* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) both take karma to be central to Buddhist philosophical and soteriological thought.
31. Translations of *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* are taken from Eugene Watson Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, *Translated from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary* (Harvard Oriental Series, vols 28–30, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), with occasional minor revisions.
32. My attention was originally called to this tale by the excellent discussion by Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics,

and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravāda Buddhism" (*Journal of Religious Ethics*, 24, no. 2 [1996]: 305–27), who make much of this striking line.

33. Contrary to how Chadha and Trakakis speak of it, even as they too note its naturalistic connotations.
34. The way narratives work to place our actions in a much broader temporal perspective is illuminatingly discussed in chapter 4 of Maria Heim's *Forerunner of All Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
35. Hallisey and Hansen use this phrase with marvelous sensitivity in "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life," 319. "The opacity of karma displayed in the narrative," they write, "profoundly configures moral life by undermining any confidence we might have in our ability to identify the karmic results of any particular action that we plan to do. In other words, the story seems to preclude an attempt to describe an ethical intention as good by recourse to the perceived results that it will have for oneself."
36. *Tusculan Disputations* 3. 30).
37. Candrakīrti famously says "all anger felt towards a *bodhisattva* destroys within an instant merits that arise through discipline and giving of a hundred *kalpas*; there is no other evil similar to wrath" (*Madhyamakāvatāra* III.6); and Śāntideva comments at length on the evils of all forms of hatred and anger in the sixth chapter of his *Bodhicārāvatāra*. See also Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* IX.14–39.
38. See *Dhammapada-aṭṭakathā* I.5. This tale is also discussed by Ranjini and Gananath Obeyesekere, in "The Tale of the Demoness Kali: A Discourse on Evil," *History of Religions* 29 (1990): 318–34.
39. Quoted by Obeyesekere and Obeyesekere, "The Tale of the Demoness Kali," 325–26.
40. Obeyesekere and Obeyesekere speculate that "the child in her arms releases her own frustrated maternal love and (*we* might add though no peasant listener would) her guilt" ("The Tale of the Demoness Kali," 328); but the substantial difference between my reading and theirs is that I think "we" would be quite wrong to supplement with what "no peasant listener would"—the language of guilt and its associates is not the language and the categories of the story (at least not of the Pāli). The Buddha is not fishing for expressions of guilt; becoming "established in

the fruit of conversion," as the ogress does, is all the "act of contrition" that is required.

41. A simplified variant of the tale is recounted at *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* xxi.2, without the barren background, with reference to *Dhammapada* 291: "Whoever by causing suffering to others seeks to win happiness for himself, becomes entangled in the bonds of hate; such a man is never freed from hatred."
42. Her sufferings are "*not* configured karmically as the consequence of some previous misfortune on her part," as Heim illuminatingly says of Uppalavaṇṇā, whose story is found in the *Dhammapada* commentary, *Buddhist Legends*, Story V.10 (*Forerunner of All Things*, 197n24).
43. "By the time we reach the middle of the story," write Oberyesekere and Obeyesekere, "we have lost track of who is good, who bad, who originally guilty, and who the wronged one. The text deliberately blurs the distinctions. The question then is, how to stop the spiral of hate unleashed by vengeance?" ("The Tale of the Demoness Kali," 333). Apparently, this eschewing of righteous indignation persists in at least some Buddhist cultures. Pen Khek Chear writes, "The practices of restorative *and* retributive justice, in a Western context, accept the expression of anger by victims . . . Theravada Buddhism acknowledges that people will feel angry, however, people are discouraged from harboring anger and expressing it . . . The Buddhist ideal suggests that the betterment of oneself and others can be achieved without expression or thought of anger"; this should in part explain why "the Cambodian community, on the other hand, has not responded with the same fervor for justice and the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge" as nongovernmental organizations, and the international community generally ("Restorative Justice in the Cambodian Community: Challenges and Possibilities in Practice," Khmer Institute, Articles, 2011, http://www.khmerinstitute.com/articles/art14restorative.html; accessed January 18, 2021).
44. "Punishment is in itself regarded as an evil institution (grouped with theft and lying)," writes O'Flaherty, "rather than a satisfactory answer to the problem of the evil nature of man which results from various wicked dispositions from former births" (*Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 34).
45. *At Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* 360, there is a lot of bother about who is lying down where: those who had committed a misdeed in a previous

existence lie in the way of the flood; those who did not lie upground. So this looks like a standard invocation of karma to explain away the apparent arbitrariness of natural evil (which afflicts the righteous along with the wicked).

46. Dhp-A 360, modifying the translation of Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, Part 2 (Harvard Oriental Series vol. 29), 45.
47. As Pen Khek Chear writes, "where no beings are exempt from *kamma*, there is no victim or offender. The victim does not suffer any more than the offender" ("Restorative Justice").
48. "That the only genuine problem of evil relates to the challenge of explaining why the world contains 'such a strange mixture of good and evil'," write Chadha and Trakakis, "may be correct from a Judeo-Christian perspective, but it utterly fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the Hindu and Buddhist view of the human predicament, according to which life itself is nothing more than suffering and misery." I disagree, however, when they go on to say further that "if this bleak view of our predicament is accepted, the problem of evil does not disappear, but takes on an ever-greater significance" ("Karma and the Problem of Evil," 544), for on the Buddhist view, I think, the problem becomes an entirely *practical* one of how suffering is best eliminated, and is no longer a *philosophical* problem at all. Chadha and Trakakis, who advise us to "appreciate fully the strong practical dimension of the theory of karma" (551), may not disagree.
49. Roy Perrett writes, "Now the Indian answer to this will be that, while individual instances of suffering are explicable by reference to karma, the fact that suffering exists in our world at all (given there are possible worlds in which it does not) is just a brute fact about our world. And this reply seems perfectly reasonable" ("Karma and the Problem of Suffering," 7). While mistaken that the Buddhist explains all suffering by reference to karma instead of other incidental causes, Perrett is essentially right about the profound difference regarding what as seen as *needing* explanation, and what explains.
50. Kisā Gotamī's story is told in *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* viii.13 (Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends, Part 2*, Harvard Oriental Series vol. 29, pp. 257–260).
51. In "Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism," in *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, ed. Edmund R. Leach (Cambridge Papers in

Social Anthropology, no. 5, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968]), Gananath Obeyesekere writes, "In a culture which possesses a theory of suffering like that of *karma* the problem of explaining unjust suffering simply cannot arise" (11).

52. Though for fun, compare Sophocles's "best is never to have been born, second-best to die soon" with *Dhammapada* 113: "Though one should live one hundred years and never see the rise and set of beings, yet it were better far to live out but a single day and see the rise and set of beings."
53. For more detailed discussion of the eschewal of blame and its significance in Buddhist ethics, see Amber D. Carpenter, "Ethics without Justice," in *A Mirror Is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Jake H. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 315–335.
54. And not seeing *this* is the source of Karamazov's own suffering; for all that he insists on not hiding from the facts, he still needs there to be some *justice* in the suffering, or some reasonable payoff.

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