

THE THEORY OF KARMA AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF ADVAITA

Philosophy is an attempt to discover a unified theory governing all phenomena in the Universe. Man's first attempt in philosophy was the proposition of the existence of God. He proposed that God is all-powerful and all-knowing and thought that, this concept solves the problem of discovering a unified theory. Then he realised that the concept of God is not the be all and end all of philosophy; the problem of evil remained to be solved.

The creation of God created more problems than it sought to solve. The question was raised : If God exists why is there evil in the world ? For, an omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely compassionate God is incompatible with the existence of evil in the world.

In the meanwhile the creation of God resulted in the creation of religions; and religions interfered with philosophical thinking. Religious ideas can be in a way described as declaration of war of the weak on the strong. The weak took the idea of God to tell the strong that they will be punished by unseen power if they try to suppress the weak. They demanded belief in God and threatened people of drastic consequence if they don't believe in their God. Thus religions have wielded amazing constraints on philosophical thinking. And the problem of evil was never satisfactorily answered either by Philosophers or the leaders of religion. The *Karma* theory of Hinduism contains perhaps a somewhat satisfying answer. Let us examine this in detail.

According to the *Karma* theory, every living organism is endowed with a *Jeevātmā* or soul. The *Jeevātmās* in men have free-will. Men are free to choose actions but have to reap the fruits of their choice. If a man performs good actions or *Punyas*, he will enjoy the fruits of them. If he chooses to do bad deeds or *Pāpas* he will suffer for the same. Of course it is a fact of observation that a man doesn't reap the proper fruits of his actions within his life span. This is explained off, in the following way : The *Jeevātmā* of a man does not die with the corporal death.

It goes and occupies another living organism as its birth and in that body reaps the fruits of its past actions. This explains the problem of evil in perhaps the most justifiable way : *Jeevātmās* themselves are responsible for evil in the world. Thus transmigration of souls seems to be the best explanation and justification for evil in the world.

But a careful examination will show a small but serious snag in the above theory. First of all we have no evidence, or proof for the existence of an immortal transmigrating soul in man. Also free-will in man can be reasonably disputed. Anyway, let us assume that a soul exists and it is capable of free-will. But it is a matter of fact that the soul forgets its previous births and the actions it has committed in it. The soul's identity is effectively lost in transmigration. Actually the soul is ignorant of what for, it suffers. It is as though a man is punished without making him realize, what for he is punished. It is clearly unjustifiable that the soul is made to forget its previous births and its deeds, and then it is punished for its bad deeds. Nor will it deter the soul from committing more crime. In so far as it has forgotten its previous identity the soul can as well think that it suffers for, perhaps, none of *its own* errors.

Even if we accept the truth of the theory of Karma implicitly, and tolerate its snag regarding the oblivion of the soul of its previous births, another indignant question remains to be answered :

God, who has installed this system of souls and Law of *Karma*, should have known that a soul with a free-will is likely to err and hence suffer. If God is both omnipotent and benevolent, he could have avoided the whole drama of the present universe and might not have created the Universe at all. There is a somewhat satisfying answer to this riddle in the *Advaita* philosophy. To put it in a nutshell, it is said, *Jeevātmās* are nothing but the *Paramātmā* or God Himself. By a veil of ignorance called *Māyā*, *Jeevātmās* are oblivious of this fact. Hence the sufferings are just self-inflicted injuries, which cannot be questioned. This concept seeks to answer the problem of evil in an elusive way. One may again come out with the following argument :

The *Jeevātmā* experiences unbearable sufferings and they are

real to it, as far as the veil of *Māyā* is spread over it. Though *Jeevātma* may realize that it is untouched by sufferings when it learns to lift the veil, the suffering is real when the veil is on; and in so far as it does not realize its identity, the problem of evil exists and *Paramātma* need not have created such a situation at all ! Anyway, why should *paramātma* take to such a course of action, when it lacks nothing and needs nothing ?

Thus one doesn't get a satisfying answer to the problem of evil, in the presence of an omnipotent, omniscient and compassionate God, even if we take it for granted that immortal transmigrating souls exist and the Philosophy of Advaita is ' true '.

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