

Freewill and Karma

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[Page 12] Make pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, the same to thee, and then prepare for battle, for thus and thus alone shalt thou in action be free from sin.

Those who have spiritual discrimination call him wise whose undertakings are all free from desire, for his actions are consumed in the fire of knowledge.

Even if thou wert the greatest of all sinners, thou shalt be able to cross over all sins in the bark of spiritual knowledge.

— Bhagavad Gîtâ.

THE problem of free will, that is to say, the question as to how far that choice which we appear to exercise in our conduct and actions, is actually a free choice or only a necessity, bound and conditioned by causes which lie beyond our reach on this plane of consciousness, is one which we cannot hope to solve, simply because we cannot get at the plane of causes, because the plane on which we live is almost wholly a plane of effects, and we are not therefore in possession of the necessary factors which should go to make the equation.

But though we cannot determine specifically, in reference to any of our actions, to what extent we are bound or free, there are some considerations which we cannot neglect, entering into the question of that free choice which we are conscious of exercising, and which we do exercise, however much our philosophy may prompt us to fatalistic conclusions. For the veriest fatalist does act as if he had free choice in some matters; we have to admit the apparent freedom, and act as if it were a real freedom, however much we may postulate a deeper necessity as the real determining power.

I would make two divisions of the subject, (a) the actual problem as to how far, if at all, we are free to act in one direction or another; (b) what should be our mental and philosophical attitude towards life itself, in view of the limitations imposed upon us by necessity.

(a) I use the term necessity as synonymous with Karma in a restricted sense. Karma is the law of action. All effects are the results of previous action, and the law which counterbalances the cause and the effect, the law which makes action and reaction equal and opposite, is the law of Karma. This Law teaches us that our present life is determined and conditioned on every hand by necessity; that certain forces are operating in the moulding of our life and destiny, because these forces were [Page 13] set in motion by us in previous incarnations. I am speaking now, of course, of our individual life, in so far as it differs in its circumstances from the individual lives of our fellow-men; for there is also the deeper necessity of our human nature as such, by which we have to share in the Karma of the whole race.

The following quotation from *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 639, sets this forth very clearly:

Those who believe in *Karma* have to believe in *destiny*, which from birth to death every man is weaving thread by thread around himself, as a spider does his web. . . . When the last strand is woven, and man is seemingly enwrapped in a net-work of his own doing, then he finds himself completely under the empire of this *self-made* destiny. It then either fixes him like the inert shell against the immovable rock, or carries him away like a feather in a whirlwind raised by his own actions.

It should be observed that this implies choice as well as necessity; but when the choice has been made, when the die has been cast, there is no longer any room for free will in that particular direction. It may seem to some, however, that this will land us in the deepest depths of fatalism, that it will involve us ultimately in a chain of cause and effect from which there is no hope of escape, that it will finally leave no room whatever for any freedom of choice. There is much to be said for the extreme necessitarian view of the matter, for that philosophy, if such it can be called, which regards choice as a mere matter of habit, or of likes and dislikes engendered by heredity and environment, over which we have no control. I hope to be able to show, however, that this view of the matter may be quite consistent and accurate, even when pushed to its extreme limit, and yet it is in harmony with the deeper teachings of Theosophy, which undoubtedly does leave room for the exercise of free will within the limitations of Karma; but which further shows the way of escape, "even if thou wert the greatest of all sinners".

The question is really one as to the action of Karma, as to how far the Karmic effect of an action may reach. Now Karma is cause and effect, but the effect may be either proximate or deferred. The action of Karma, therefore, is intimately associated with the transfer of energy to a higher plane, where it may remain latent for a long period of time, but will ultimately become the determining power in a new series of actions on the plane of effects. We shall see therefore, that the Karmic effect of any action, in so far as it becomes a determining power in our future lives, must be exactly in proportion to the transfer of energy to a higher plane which is associated with that act. Neglecting for the time being the higher spiritual planes of Atma-Buddhi, and dealing [Page 14] only with the mental plane, we may say therefore that the Karmic effect of any action is just in proportion to the extent to which we can bring our mental powers to bear upon that act; because by exercising the mind in the act, we produce on the mental plane a corresponding dynamic effect. Now this is practically saying that the more we are conscious of freedom of choice, and the more we exercise our mental powers of discrimination in reference to any particular action, the greater and more far-reaching will be the Karmic effects. We all admit that an irresponsible action does not merit the same reward or punishment as one done with deliberate intention. Further we make allowances for the state of society and environment. The act of killing and eating an enemy cannot be regarded in the same light when it is performed by a savage, as it would be if done by a member of a

civilized community. Now, we are bound to associate with the law of Karma the idea of absolute justice. Where there is no choice there is no responsibility, and where there is no responsibility there can be no Karmic penalty.

Let us suppose, for instance, that some act in one incarnation, say the act of wilful murder, has thrown a man back by its Karmic effect, into an environment of cruelty and violence. Let us suppose that it has thrown him back into a savage community, where it is the right thing to kill and eat your neighbour. In due time, perhaps, the man himself is killed and eaten by a stronger neighbour. But there the Karmic effect ends. Like produces like: the man by the murderous thought which he cherished in the previous incarnation has been attracted in the next to a corresponding environment. For remember that it was not the *act* of murder that produced the Karmic effect, but the *thought* of murder which the man cherished, which produced the dynamic effect on the higher plane, and was therefore carried forward to another incarnation. But in this new incarnation the act of killing is not associated with a dynamic mental effect, with a choice between right and wrong. It is the law of the community to kill, the savage knows no better, unless you succeed in awakening within him the dormant moral faculty; therefore the same act in this incarnation, the act of killing, does not carry forward a Karmic effect. Or take as another illustration the case of the hereditary criminal, the man born with the "criminal brain". It may be impossible for us to determine in any particular case to what extent, if at all, the man is responsible for his criminal acts; but we cannot postulate the same Karmic effects from any particular criminal act of such a man, as we should for one who had a normal brain, and whose associations were not criminal. The criminal himself is the Karmic effect of some previous act on the part of the Ego. The Ego is punished by being forced into an environment of criminal heredity for one or more incarnations: but in so far as it has now only a criminal brain to [Page 15] work through on this plane, it is to that extent irresponsible on the higher plane for the criminal acts, though it may suffer on the lower plane during a long series of Karmic effect.

It is impossible for us to apportion the Karmic merit or demerit which may attach to the acts of any individual, or even to our own acts. It may be that in many cases, even where there appears to be a deliberate choice, there is in reality a deeper necessity governing that action. But we can at least postulate that the retributive action of Karma will only extend to that circle, however limited it may be, where there is really freedom of action. Nor will it avail us to excuse our actions on the plea of necessity. We may deceive ourselves, but we cannot deceive the immutable LAW.

Now it is quite conceivable that although every action can be traced back, in the ever-widening circle of infinity, to some ultimate necessity — the whole manifested universe being itself the "son of necessity" — yet within certain limits, within the limits that condition any particular plane, there may be perfect freedom of action. Moreover it would appear, from the considerations of the action of Karma just deduced, that freedom of action is obtained just in proportion as the higher principles are able to act on the lower; or in other words, just in proportion as action on the lower plane is governed by interaction with a higher plane. Man is higher than the animals, he has so much more freedom to work with and through physical laws, just in proportion as he brings to bear upon these laws the rational thinking principle, Manas. And above Manas is Atma-Buddhi; but these principles being as yet only latent in us, we are not responsible above a certain plane.

It is conceivable, therefore, that though an act must produce a specific effect in a smaller or wider circle, and though we may postulate an ultimate or deeper necessity governing all action, yet within certain limits there may be freedom on all planes of action; there may be necessity in the mass, so to speak, but

freedom in the individual units of the mass. Thus, individually, we are powerless to resist the great stream of evolution which is gradually moulding humanity into something ever higher and higher in the scale of consciousness; yet we may have power to turn back against that stream, and by so doing generate a Karma which, for a certain number of incarnations, will produce results which we will call evil. The evil, however, is only relative to the small circle in which we are free to exercise a choice; it stands as good to the larger circle where necessity operates, because it is the corrective which, sooner or later, brings us back into line; which, indeed, prevents us from escaping altogether from the great cycle of necessity of our humanity as a whole.

And just as we may thus conceive of the working of both free will and necessity in our individual lives, so we must also conceive the operation of [Page 16] the same principles in those higher intelligences which operate on the more universal planes of consciousness, those hierarchies whose conscious intelligence gives rise to the manifested universe in all its aspects. The universe is the "son of necessity", because it is the Karmic result of the *action* of these intelligences, of whom man is part, and of whose essence he partakes in his various principles. The conscious choice at some particular period, by such intelligences, will be fraught with Karmic effects on humanity which will last for millenniums untold. The *Secret Doctrine* gives us the record of such Karmic effects.

Thus good and evil, free will and necessity, are intimately related. Everywhere throughout the universe we can trace the operation of these ; and the one law that binds and harmonizes them is, KARMA.

(b) The second division of our subject takes us at once to a higher region. We leave behind us the question as to how far we are in our individual action conditioned and limited by Karma; nay, we are even able by that deep spiritual insight which Theosophy gives us, to rise above the action of Karma itself. "*Even if thou wert the greatest of all sinners, thou shalt be able to cross over all sins in the bark of spiritual knowledge*".

What is this spiritual knowledge ? It is the realization of our own divine nature, of our oneness with the SUPREME, of the SELF within us ; and the working out of our life, the constant reference of all our thoughts and actions to this HIGHER SELF. It is what is called in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* "Devotion to the Supreme Spirit", or more simply "Devotion".

The *Bhagavad Gîtâ* is divided into chapters, each of which gives a phase or aspect of this Devotion. The book itself is the book of the "Science of the Supreme Spirit", or the "Book of Devotion". An understanding of its teachings, and a realization of its principles, brings about true liberation; for only when all our actions are consumed in the fire of the selfless SELF, shall we "in action still be free from sin". But we must note what is the nature of this freedom to which we are to attain; and if we collate the various passages in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* bearing upon this, we soon find that it differs most essentially from the popular notion of freedom. It is not freedom to choose between our likes and dislikes. It is not freedom to turn this way or that at our own pleasure, to choose between the pleasurable sin or the painful duty. It is not freedom from conditions nor freedom from action; but it is freedom from *attachment* to these.

Make pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, the same to thee, and then prepare for battle, for thus and thus alone shalt thou in action still be free from sin.

Be free from the "pairs of opposites" and constant in the quality of Sattva, free from worldly anxiety and the desire to preserve present possessions, self-centred and uncontrolled by objects of mind or sense.

Let then the motive for action be in the action itself, and not in the event. Laying aside all desire for any benefit to thyself from action, make the event equal to thee, whether it be success or failure. A man enjoyeth not freedom from action from the non-commencement of that which he hath to do; nor doth he obtain happiness from the total abandonment of action.

Therefore perform thou that which thou hast to do, at all times unmindful of the event; for the man who doeth that which he hath to do, without attachment to the event, obtaineth the supreme.

We have seen that by reason of our own individual Karma, and also by reason of those deeper Karmic effects which lie utterly beyond our reach, and of which the manifested universe is the expression, we are bound and conditioned on every side, and forced into actions which it is conceivable we might repudiate if we had absolute free will in the matter. Now it has been commonly supposed that since Karma results from action, if we could be actionless we should also be Karma-less. This idea gave rise to the Yoga or contemplative school of philosophy, where it is endeavoured to free the individual from rebirth, and obtain union with the Supreme through inaction and constant meditation. Krishna admonishes Arjuna, however, that liberation cannot be obtained by this means. The true method is right performance of action without attachment to the result; for by this means the Ego is liberated from the illusion of self in connection with any particular chain of cause and effect, and no further room is left for the Karmic action which gives rise to that illusion of personality which constitutes our series of incarnations.

Krishna, speaking as the supreme Spirit, says of himself:

"There is nothing in the three regions of the universe which it is necessary for me to perform, nor anything possible to obtain which I have not obtained; and yet I am constantly in action. . . . All actions are effected by the qualities of nature. The man deluded by ignorance thinks, 'I am the actor!' But he who is acquainted with the nature of the two distinctions of cause and effect, knowing that the qualities act only in the qualities, and that the Self is distinct from them, is not attached in action".

Inaction defeats its own ends, because although we are for the moment to choose between action and inaction, yet there is a deeper necessity, a deeper law which impels all things, even the supreme Spirit to action. Inaction, then, in so far as that inaction is a non-performance of that which it is the law of our nature to perform, becomes a "sin".

The term "sin" must not be confounded here with the Christian theological sense of the word. It means simply the transgression of the natural law of our being, using the term natural in its fullest and widest [Page 18] sense, to include the whole of our being, and not making any artificial distinction between "natural" and "spiritual". It is the province of artificial systems of theology and ritual to make artificial sins.

All religious devotees, of whatever creed, have some special rules of conduct which it is a "sin" to transgress. When we have reached that larger knowledge, however, which liberates us from all artificial systems, the only law which we recognize is a *natural* one, operating on all the planes of our being, and producing physical, mental, moral, and spiritual conditions, to which we must conform if we would be free from "sin".

There is a further idea, however, attached to the term "sin", as used in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*. The deepest law of our being is our real and essential oneness with the Supreme Being. All that serves to dissociate our consciousness from that oneness, all that produces in us the sense of separateness, is therefore evil; it is "sin". Religion (*re-ligo*) is that which binds us back to our real Being, that which dispels the illusion of separateness and personality. Religion, therefore, must be a natural process, in the fullest sense of the term. Now that which separates us from the universal, that which gives rise within us to the idea of the particular, to the idea of time, space, personality, and all other finite concepts, is our attachment to and identification of ourselves with a certain sequence of cause and effect. At the present stage of our evolution we have the consciousness of a personal "I", which is individuated and distinct from other "I's." That Sense of "I" is associated with a certain sequence of cause and effect on the physical plane, that sequence being the aggregate of innumerable lesser units of consciousness, constituting the various organs and cells of our physical body. We do not identify our sense of individuality with every particular cell or molecule of our body. Those cells or molecules live out their own independent lives, their own sequence of birth, activity, and death, and it is the aggregate and sequence of them which go to make up that larger unit of consciousness, which for the time being we call "I".

Now just as each individual man is thus the macrocosm to his own world of microcosms, so the Supreme Spirit is the macrocosm, the one unit of consciousness, to which our individual Egos stand in the relation of microcosmic units. We shall be able to see now why non-attachment to the fruit of action brings about our final salvation, by enabling us to attain to the Supreme. Attachment to the fruit of action generates the Karma which identifies us with a certain sequence of cause and effect, giving rise to the idea, "I am the doer", "I am the actor", "This is mine", etc. It gives rise to the "illusive appearance of the marshalling of events and actions on this earth". But when we have recognised the identity of our own soul with the "over-soul"; when we have recognized [Page 19] the oneness of our real spiritual nature, which is not born and does not die, with the Supreme Spirit which IS throughout Eternity, then the illusions of sense life fall away from us, it is no longer "I" who am born and die, who suffer pleasure and pain, who am "bound upon this wheel of change". And yet it is I. It is the larger I which is the HIGHER SELF.

Foregoing self, the Universe grows "I":
If any teach NIRVANA is to cease,
Say unto such they lie.

It is "I", burst from the prison bonds of sense. In that prison I moved from life to death, and death to life, chained to my former actions.

But now,
Thou Builder of this Tabernacle —Thou !
I know thee ! Never shalt thou build again
These walls of pain,
Nor raise the roof-tree of deceits, nor lay

Fresh rafters on the clay.

We find a reflection of "this same exhaustless secret, eternal doctrine", in the Christian scriptures also. Strip away the personal element which makes Jesus of Nazareth the Logos, and the theological dogmas of original sin and vicarious atonement, which make our damnation an arbitrary punishment, and our salvation an equally arbitrary reward, instead of a natural process, and the doctrine is identical. For it is neither Jesus of Nazareth nor Krishna, as *personalities*, who are the Saviours of the world. But Christ (not Jesus), Krishna, and the Logos, are one and the same. They are but different names for "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world". And that light, however dimmed by our sense life on the physical plane, and by error and perversion of priestcraft on the intellectual plane, is still the light of the Supreme Spirit burning in the inner sanctuary of our own immortal nature. It cannot shine upon us from outside; we need no salvation at the hands of a personal creator.

Within yourselves deliverance must be sought;
Each man his prison makes.

But when we have apprehended this indwelling Christ, Krishna, Logos, Supreme Spirit, call it what you will, we turn from the illusions of sense life, and place our feet on that PATH which leads us back "*from the other shore*".

But the journey is still before us; we have to cross over all that load of accumulated Karma which we have been gathering to ourselves in our wanderings from incarnation to incarnation in the illusive fields of Mâyâ. And this we do by the power of this same indwelling spirit. This we do [Page 20] "in the bark of spiritual knowledge", such as all great teachers have revealed, such as constitutes the *Esoteric Doctrine*. For though we must work out our past Karma to the last vibration, we now patiently endure that which happens to us of good or ill. No longer attached to the fruit of our actions, we do not carry forward the account to a new incarnation.

"Those whose souls are in the Spirit, whose asylum is in it, who are intent on it and purified by knowledge from all sins, go to that place from which there is no return".

What is this freedom, then, which we shall finally attain ? It is the freedom of our whole nature, the freedom of the whole universe. All things are lawful to us then, though all things may not now be expedient, as St. Paul puts it. All things are lawful, because we ourselves have become the LAW; because being united with the Supreme Spirit, and knowing it as our own SELF, we shall say with Krishna:

"There is nothing in the three regions of the universe which it is necessary for me to perform, nor anything possible to obtain which I have not obtained ; and yet I am constantly in action".

The Jews tried to kill Jesus because he made himself equal with God. But this is the *Esoteric Doctrine*, whether taught by Jesus or by Buddha; and the exoteric, religion of forms will always seek to kill the esoteric religion of spiritual freedom.

But like St. Paul we have still to say: "Not that I have already attained, or am already made perfect". It is

not a question as to what we are now, but as to what we shall be, when through the power of that Supreme Spirit which dwells in all, and which draws all things back to itself in the great day "BE WITH us", we have risen triumphant at our final initiation.

Such is our high doctrine, such is the power through which, even now, we are "more than conquerors".