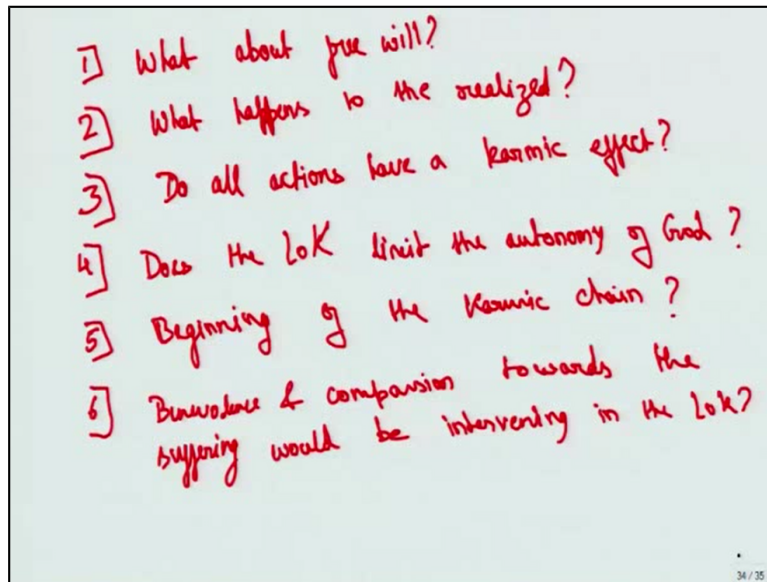


Ethics
Prof. Vineet Sahu
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology-Kanpur

Module No. #01
Lecture No. #23
Theory of Karma Part-2

Now, we continue with our conversation, about the Karmic Theory.

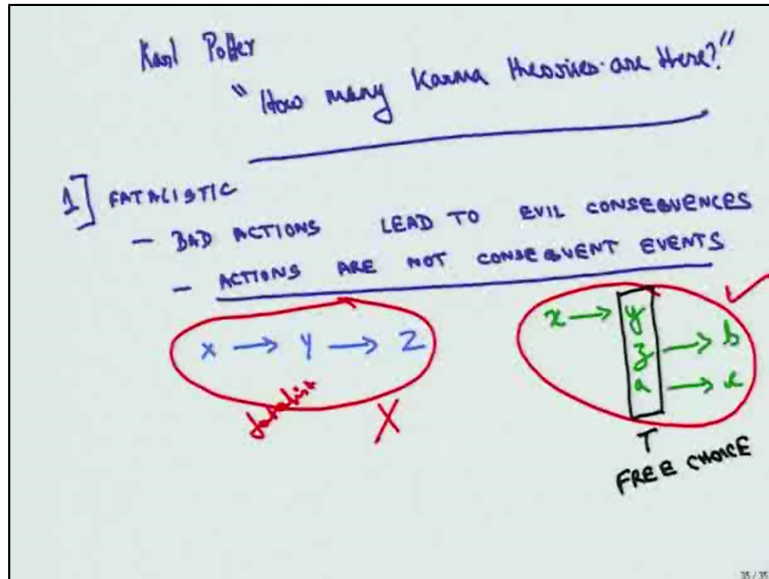
(Refer Slide Time: 00:21)



We would like to talk about, what are the loopholes of the criticisms of Karmic Theory. Now, if you look at the screen, we had talked earlier about, the various questions that comes to the mind, when we talk about, the Karma Theory. It is, what about free will, and what happens to the realised souls.

Does all actions, have a karmic effect. Does the Law of Karma, limit the autonomy of God, beginning of the Karmic Chain? Benevolence and compassion towards the suffering, would be intervening in the Law of Karma. Now, I find a very good exposition of critic, that is faced by the Karma Theory, in Karl Potter's work.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:04)



Karl Potter, was an eminent Indian philosopher. In his article, how many Karma Theories are there? So here, Karl Potter talks about, many of these criticisms that, we covered in the forms of questions. Now, let us first, take a look that whether, Karl Potter points out, these very usual criticisms of the Karmic Theory, and let us explore them in detail. Whether, the Karma Theory promulgates, a kind of Fatalism or not. Well.

Let us take a look at this. Now, if we find that, whatever action we do, brings about its consequences. Then, the consequences are winding. And then, these consequences also are pre-emptors actions, or actions themselves. So, does this get a kind of a Fatalism. The worry, that many people have voiced, is that well, Karmic Theory, commits to a kind of Fatalism. In fact, on a more crucial note.

The standard consolation, that one has is, particularly in the Indian scenario, may be more accurately in the rural agrarian scenario, that well, if I suffer a misfortune, that is the result of my bad karma, earlier. Now, this is what, Karl Potter points out that, this is perhaps, one of the foundational criticisms of Law of Karma, that it brings about Fatalism. That, we see, that well, whenever any misfortune happens, it is understood as a result of bad karma.

Where is the problem? The problem is, that well, we do not need to seek any solution to misfortune. And, misfortune is taken as a given, is taken as a result of the past actions. Now, look

at this, very interesting, if you transpose it to the current Indian scenario. Let us take a look at this. Let us imagine this. Most of the Indian ways of working, are very little heat, regard to the safety criteria.

That is a very empirically verifiable feature. Our motorcyclist, do not use helmets. Our car drivers, do not use seat belts. Our industries, flout safety norms. Our transportation, name the field, healthcare, everything, flout safety norms. Our constructions, our engineering, flout safety norms. Now, many of them could be understood, that well, this is of course economic reasons. But, one lineage, that allows for, or that condescends, this lack of safety awareness, is perhaps reading of the Law of Karma.

Because, it causes a kind of Fatalism. That, where accidents are seen, not as any intentional event. Or, even by the very term accident, we mean something, which was unintentional, or which was unplanned for, or which just occurred. So, giving responsibility is, only in the narrow range of events. So, even calling an accident, the collision, gives a stronger intentional stance to the event, which was say perhaps, an accident between two vehicles.

So, Karma Theory, when it is criticised to be fatalistic, is criticised because, this brings about a reduction in responsibility, of the agents involved. That, if there is an earthquake, well, it was their bad karma, that it happened. And perhaps, the next step is that, we need not explore, why it happened, or how it can be prevented. It brings in a kind of Fatalism, that well, whatever had to happen, has happened, nothing more nothing less.

So, this brings in, a kind of a Fatalism. Now, there are various ways to answer that. Now, if you want to defend the Law of Karma, you would say that well, yes, we do see, in fact, that there are misfortunes that occur, in spite of all the precautions, that we take. Titanic did sink, although it was touted as an unsinkable ship. Space shuttles do fall off. So, in spite of all our caution, there may be something that goes wrong. And, that is linked to the Law of Karma.

So, it is also not preventing us, from finding the cause of these karma, or these misfortunes. Law of Karma, nowhere tells you that, you will not find out the cause of these bad actions, and you

will not take precautions, or you will not take actions, to prevent this from happening before. Notice, what is binding, or what is determined in the Law of Karma, is that a bad action, gets a bad result. As, our former president, late Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan said, that well, the Law of Karma is, conservation in the law of moral universe.

So, in the moral universe, nothing is lost. Every action has a reaction. So, every intentional action, every desireful action, has a result. So, according to Law of Karma, when I am answering the charge of Fatalism, if I have to defend the Law of Karma, or the defenders of the Law of Karma have putted, in spite of your best efforts, there can be events out of your control. That is a result of a bad karma. But, you are constantly creating, new karmic balance.

It is like, you are running a corporation. And, you inherit some bad debts, some bad assets. Now, that is what, you inherit. But, that does not combining to you, that you make bad decisions, thereafter. You can turn around, the path of the corporation, by taking accurate decisions, taking right decisions. Accumulating good karma, accumulating good assets, accumulating revenue, and that is seen as, almost a funny analogy between, a bank account, and the karmic account.

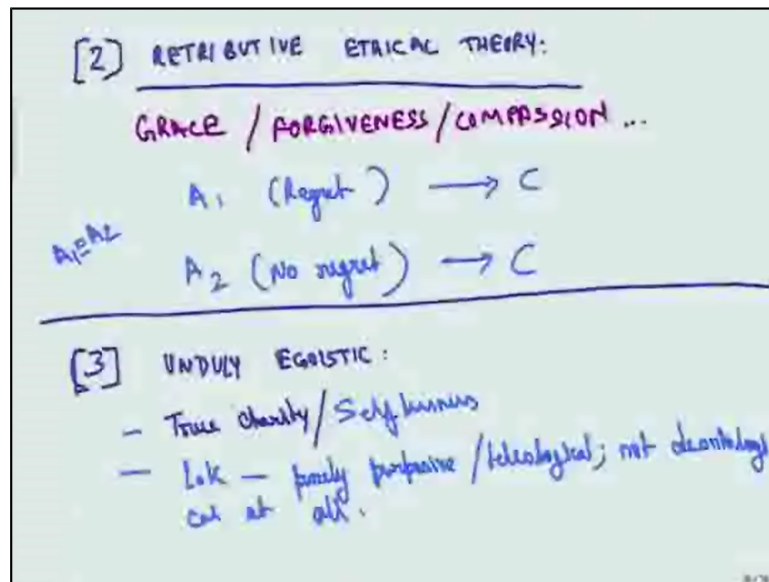
So, you have to face, what you have done. But, that does not bind you that, it continues as a cycle. That, everything you see, where the defect lies. When the charge of Fatalism, is laid upon the Karmic Theory is that, bad actions, lead to bad consequences, or wicked consequences. But, life or actions are not consequences, or consequent events. So, this is where, we deny that well, Law of Karma does not claim Fatalism.

Because, it is only saying that well, let me put it in a figurative analogy. Say, if X leads to Y, and Y has to lead to Z. Well, this is the problem, when we see the Law of Karma as fatalistic. Right. But, when we see the Law of Karma, as its advocates would like to have, is that a bad action, leads to a bad consequence. But, what happens here, will have its own consequences.

So, this may have consequences as B, and this may have consequence as C. So, this is what is. According to the Karmic Theory, this is wrong, and this is right. That, it is, in this moment, that we have free choice. And, this free choice determines, the results that we get. Okay. Now, we talk

about the second critic, that has been very often faced by, the Karmic Theory is that, it is a Retributive Ethical Theory.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:19)



Now, what is meant by Retributive Ethical Theory. Now, when we talk about the Law of Karma, and we have had Theories of Punishment. And, one of the Theories of Punishment is that well, if something wrong has been done. To avenge that wrong, one has to do, another similar act. For example, an eye for an eye. Or, a punishment, that causes the same, if not, more harm than, what the action caused. So, this is retribution. In a way, taking revenge.

Now, what is Karmic Theory doing. When it says, that well, it is retributive. Retributive Karmic Theory would mean that, every action is being revenged. Every action has an impersonal principle, taking revenge. So, if I do something good, I get something good. If I do something bad, I get something bad. So, this is a kind of a very retributive theory. That well, what is missing here. Well. What is missing here, as in other religious ethics, we would talk about, is the notion of, what about grace, forgiveness, compassion, etcetera.

Now, the critics of Karma Theory would be saying, that well, this is simply a vindictive theory. That well, here I give you something good, and there you get something good. And, you do something bad, and you get something bad, in return. But, is not this, there is something wrong with it, as an ethical theory that, where is the whole concept of retribution. So, even in the Indian

tradition, this is a problem with Karmic Theory.

Because strongly, Theistic Schools of Vedanta, or other Theistic Schools, have argued for the forgiveness, received from God, or of Daya, of being emulated of your sins. Now, let me put it in a very non-religious way. If I do something wrong, and I genuinely repent it. I wish, I would not have done it. Right. I still face the consequence, that comes from it, if the Law of Karma holds.

On the other hand, say, you have done something equally wicked. And, you have enjoyed it. And, you do not have any regrets, or repentance about it. Where, you also face the consequence of the action. So, putting it simplistically, Action-1, Action-2. Action-1 has regret. Action-2 has no regret. Consequence, continues to be the same, if A-1 is similar to A-2. So, regret is not shown in the equation, that well, that regret does not have any moral value, in the moral calculus.

Feeling of repentance or regret, seems to be irrelevant. Now, that is where, perhaps an ethical theory is not capturing, the whole plethora of human conduct. Now, if you are defender of the Karmic Theory, you would say that well, yes, you are right that well, an action, an evil done, or a good deed done, will get its consequences. Even, if you repent, or do not repent, or if you are proud of it, or you are not proud of it, yes, guilty to that charge.

But, for somebody who repents, definitely their actions would be revised, and better thereof. So, the one, who is a habitual offender, or a repeated offender, is the one, who does not have the regret repentance factor in working. Whereas, the, one who is having regret and repentance, it does not as one could said, become a Vasna, does not become a Sanskar, does not become a quality, or a property, or a tendency. It does not become a tendency of the agent, to repeat these wrongdoings.

But, again look at it, this way. That, the agent, no matter how good he be, or she be, if he or she has committed something right or wrong, is bound to get the reward or punishment for the same. That, there is no way of amelioration. It has to be a zero-sum game. Now, Theistic Schools, in fact will come to a criticism of the Theory of Karma, which has even called Theory of Karma, as impersonal and naturalistic. That is the last point, that we would be tackling.

But, look at it, this way. Now, that the very fact, that it makes the moral calculus so perfect, that left hand side and the right-hand side, are to be balanced. That, it does not matter, whether one has a sense of repentance or regret. In fact, there is no intervention possible. That, no matter, how much of a forgiveness I seek, even from divinity, it does not work. We will talk about this, in the next point coming about.

So, when we talk about Retributive Ethical Theory, we see that well, Law of Karma tends to be a Retributive Theory. It is taking revenge. But, the advocates of Karma Theory would say, that well, it is not taking revenge. It is just giving you the, fruit of your actions. But, it is nowhere influencing you, to repeat certain, these kinds of actions, or it is not discounting, the sense of regret. That is, setting about, another chain of events.

Secondly, human predicament is always, a battle between good and bad, a battle between desire and duty. And, this is what characterises human predicament. The Law of Karma is being cooled, to this human predicament. It is seeing, once it is not valuing the temptation, the urge, the desires, that a human being goes through. And, sometimes succumbs to it, sometimes overpass it. So, it expects perhaps, as the critics would say, too much out of human beings. It makes it a cool calculative principle.

Now, coming to the third, criticism that has been laid, against the Law of Karma, as put out by Karl Potter is that, it is unduly Egoistic. Well. What do you mean by unduly Egoistic? And, I quote Karl Potter, “it is said to be unduly egoistic, because it gives too much responsibility to people, to force men to turn inwards, and predicate their lives on a selfish, desire for their own improvement, and eventual release with no attention to their fellow man, true charity, real love for others, becoming irrelevant”. Okay.

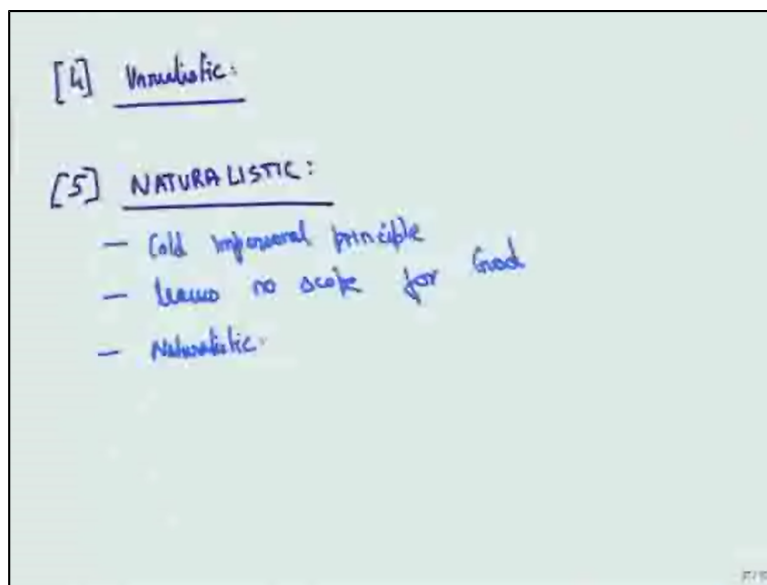
What is meant by this? Well. When I say that, the Law of Karma is unduly Egoistic, is that well, look at it this way. Why does one do a good action. Or, why does one perform, a morally qualified action good or bad, or a morally qualifiable action. Well. According to the Law of Karma, it could be because, you expect something out of it. That well, you do good, you

accumulate credit. Again, going back to the bank analogy. That well, you are doing good for no reason, other than for accumulating it for yourself.

So, this is kind of making it, shrewd coming, and exceedingly selfish. Now, when the agent performs an action, with the anticipation, that this action will give him or her, will accumulate more dessert for him or her, entail him or her for liberation, or self-improvement, or better advantages, in this or coming life. Well. Something in the moral equation or calculus is missing. And, that is missing, is the sense of true charity, or selflessness.

That well, where are actions, that do not have selfless intent. That well, initial part of the moral domain, or the value domain has been, that well, good has been done, for its own sake, not for something else. In this case, it is purely Teleological, it is not Deontological at all. It is Teleological, because it gets you advantages, later. So therefore, it is your own advantages. So, the Law of Karma can be seen as, purely purposive, or Teleological, not Deontological at all.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:11)



Now, the fourth issue, that is characterised by, in the article of Karl Potter, is that the Law of Karma, is said to be unrealistic. Well. Why it is said to be unrealistic. Again, I quote from Karl Potter. It says, “Living aside, the point that it is unverifiable. The theory can only hope to explain events, by invoking God or fate. Since a simple connecting of actions with results, cannot possibly succeed, given the complexity of nature, especially human nature”.

Now, what is meant by unrealistic. Well. The Law of Karma says that well, when we have an action, we have a result. Simple as that. What is unrealistic about this is that, in this entire domain, gamut of human actions, which is so complicated, having such a simple action to action connect, is first unverifiable. And second, it will have to sneak in through the back door, an assumption of a God, or a higher agency, to perhaps connect these actions.

Now, let us look at it, this way. In fact, interesting tributaries, or interesting lines of thinking, that how this, Law of Karma as a theory has influenced, the Indian or the civilisations, wherever it is widely believed in. Well. When every action has to have its own results, it rules away selfless actions. It rules away selfless actions, for actions done without any benefit, action done for its own self.

So, every event, or every action, has to be incentivised. Now, that is one reading, that one can make out of the Law of Karma. It is unrealistic in a sense, that well, it could be Marxist Sociological reading of the Law of Karma could be that, it is to implant a fear of desserts, to prevent evil actions, and to reward good actions. And therefore, to make society, more stable. Because, in principle, it is unverifiable.

So, even when we see that, in this life, people are doing good and suffering, and doing evil and prospering. It is rationalised that, in some other life, they have done something, to deserve this. And, their actions in the current life, will entail better actions in future. So, apart from the fact, it is unverifiable, it could be a very scheming, sociological, religious, psychological phenomena, or a construct, to preserve social order. It is unrealistic, in the sense that, how do we connect, and how actions are to be?

How intentions, actually transport them? How is the Law of Karma? Or, what is the means of execution? How is our intention factored, into this equation? And then, let us come to the final view, or final line of criticism, that is faced by the Law of Karma is that, it is naturalistic. Because, considering yes now, as when we talked about in the fourth point, that unrealistic, that we need to assume, a God or an entity to connect. Well. Law of Karma, does not make any such

assumptions.

It is supposed to be, a cold impersonal principle. It leaves, no scope for God, or any higher agencies. It is naturalistic. So, it follows, almost a naturalistic order. Now, what is it, that we are meaning, when recall something naturalistic. When we call something naturalistic, we mean that well, it exists in the state of nature. And, nature follows laws. And therefore, just as there are natural laws, that law such as gravitation, so there are laws such as karma. So that, it is almost making it a fact of human existence, perhaps naturally perceivable fact of human existence.

Now, when we talk about, it has a cold impersonal principle, we are saying that well, there is no role, that God, or the notion of God, place in this Law of Karma. So, when we talk about the Theists, when we seek grace, when we seek forgiveness, when we seek that well, amelioration, when we seek blessings, to cancel out our evil, cancel out our wicket deeds, is this blank to that. Well. That is simply not possible. It is something like a loan, that has been taken, and it has to be paid.

To a defender of the Law of Karma, would say that well, yes, by doing more actions, you can perhaps neutralise it, unless until it is becomes Prarabdha Karma. Now, there is a long sequence of events, which we have already talked about, and maybe, focus a little bit in the coming time, is that, how actually an event becomes, a karmic event. That, what becomes a Prarabdha action. What become an action, that yields a result, necessarily.

So, considering that, well, according to the Law of Karma, well, it is an impersonal cold naturalistic principle. There is no forgiveness. There is no negotiation. In fact, if I may provide a rather funny analogy is that, when you deal with a government department, or the judiciary, you expected to go by the rules. And, you go by the rules. And, if you are having a punishment. And say, if there is a sufficiently corrupt judiciary. And, you are part of the accused, or you are on the team of the accused.

You would like to step outside, and say, well, my dear judge, I offer you something, and please lessen my sentence, or let me off. And, you try to negotiate. We try to negotiate, every time in

life. We see that well, we deserve this, according to the rules. And, we do not deserve this, according to rules. And, the rule enforcer, ought to do this. But, in that equation, we step beside that, and do a little bit of negotiation. That well, we require this, let us get this.

Now, to the defender of the Law of Karma, if there is a god's ability to forgive evil acts, it is this kind of a negotiation. It is unfair. That, a deed is left unrewarded or unpunished. That, the deed does not yield its results. How is this. Is not this unfair. So, to the defender of the Karmic Theory, it is very fair, that the karmic principle is cold and impersonal. And, to the critic of the Karmic Theory, it is making the ethical domain completely naturalistic, and taking away the power of discretion, or the power of forgiveness, of any religious entity, so claimed.