

# Karmic Theodicies

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## 1. Introduction

Karmic theodicies are prominent in certain South Asian religious and philosophical traditions.<sup>1</sup> They suggest that at least some evils are permitted by God because they are karmic consequences of past actions. Although some authors speak of karmic theodicies in a broader sense that encompasses both theistic and non-theistic hypotheses, I will limit my attention to the former. Even given this limitation, there is not just one karmic theodicy; there are many. But all of the karmic theodicies that I am aware of can be sorted into two categories<sup>2</sup>: retributive karmic theodicies, which emphasize retribution for morally bad actions, and character-building karmic theodicies, which emphasize moral development. Retributive karmic theodicies have been prominent historically, but more recently, character-building karmic theodicies have become prevalent as well.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See especially *Brahma Sūtra* II.1.32-36 and its commentaries. See also Herman, *The Problem of Evil*.

<sup>2</sup> Distinguished, e.g., by Stoeber, “Personal Identity.”

<sup>3</sup> Recent work on karmic theodicy includes: Gupta & Gallagher, “Reincarnation”; Gupta & Barua, “The Alchemy of Suffering”; Medhananda “An Integral Advaita Theodicy” and “A Great Adventure”; Freschi,

Many objections have been leveled against retributive karmic theodicies, so one might wonder: do character-building karmic theodicies avoid these objections? And if so, do they thereby improve on their retributive counterparts? Stoeber (1990) argues that they do. Moreover, the recent prevalence of character-building in work on karmic theodicy suggests that others may share this view. But in this article, I contend that character-building karmic theodicies do not improve on retributive karmic theodicies, and therefore, if one rejects retributive karmic theodicies on the basis of the formidable challenges they face, then one should reject character-building karmic theodicies as well.

In Section 2 I sketch both retributive and character-building karmic theodicies. Then, over the course of Sections 3-6, I identify what I take to be the four main weaknesses of retributive karmic theodicies, and argue that, for each of these weaknesses, character-building karmic theodicies exhibit a similar weakness. The four weaknesses of retributive karmic theodicies concern these topics: navigating moral constraints on retribution (Section 3); explaining the origin of suffering (Section 4); accounting for the appearance of innocent suffering (Section 5); and avoiding bad behaviors such as victim-blaming (Section 6). One thing I will not do in this article is compare karmic theodicies to non-karmic theodicies. Although a great deal could be

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“The Theory of Karman”; Williams, “Theodicy in a Deterministic Universe”; Gupta, “Re-envisioning a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava ‘Perfect Being Theology’”; Maharaj, *Infinite Paths*, chs. 7-8; Barua, “Verifiability of Reincarnation” and “The Mystery of God; Burley *Rebirth and the Stream of Life*, ch. 6, “Karma, Morality, and Evil”, and “Retributive Karma”; Smythe, “Objections to Karma”; Bilimoria, “Toward an Indian Theodicy” and “Duhkha and Karma”; Goldschmidt & Seacord, “Judaism, Reincarnation, and Theodicy”; Shokhin, “Philosophical Theology”; Sharma, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil”; Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil”; Kaufman, “A Reply to Critics”; Chadha & Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil”; Filice, “The Moral Case for Reincarnation”; Edwards, *Reincarnation*, ch. 2; Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*; Matilal, “Samkara’s Theodicy”; Lorimer “Reincarnation and Theodicy”; Stoeber, “Personal Identity”; Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, ch. 5; Clooney, “Evil, Divine Omnipotence, and Human Freedom”; Perrett, “Karma and the Problem of Suffering”; Sharma, “Theodicy and the Doctrine of Karma”; and Herman, “Indian Theodicy” and *The Problem of Evil*. Cf. Griffiths, “Buddhist Karmic Theory”, Griffiths, “Karma and Personal Identity”; and White, “Buddhist Karmic Theory,” on the Buddhist karmic but non-theistic explanation of suffering.

said about whether karmic theodicies are better or worse than, e.g., free will theodicies, that comparative assessment warrants at least an article of its own, so I set it aside here.

## 1. Two Kinds of Karmic Theodicies

Before I turn to evaluate them, I will take a moment to lay out the basic features of both retributive and character-building karmic theodicies. Retributive karmic theodicies claim that morally bad actions cause deserved retribution to be inflicted on the agents who performed those actions. Karmic retribution can be conceived either as retributive punishment inflicted by God or as a natural consequence of wrongdoing. In the latter case, the law of karma is analogous to a law of nature, and karmic consequences are merely allowed by God.<sup>4</sup> Either way, retributive karmic theodicies claim that karmic retribution often takes the form of suffering, and God is morally justified in permitting that suffering because it is deserved. This theodicy is a plausible interpretation of the traditional Vedānta response to the problem of evil.<sup>5</sup> It also has contemporary defenders and critics.<sup>6</sup>

Retributive karmic theodicies come in many forms, differing over which actions result in karmic retribution; over which forms of retribution result from which sorts of actions; and even over whether there is a one-one correlation between actions and retributive experiences at all.<sup>7</sup> But what will prove most important for my purposes is that they can vary in scope. They might be comprehensive, claiming that every instance of suffering (or nearly every instance of

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of karma as a natural consequence appears in, e.g., Garrett, *Bad Karma*, 38, and Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Herman, “Indian Theodicy” and *The Problem of Evil*, reads Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja’s commentaries on *Brahma Sūtra* II.1.32-36 in this way. But see Freschi, “The Theory of Karman,” who has a different take on Rāmānuja’s theodicy.

<sup>6</sup> Defenses include: Herman, “Indian Theodicy” and *The Problem of Evil*; Perrett, “Karma and the Problem of Suffering”; Filice, “The Moral Case for Reincarnation”; Chadha & Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil”; and others. Critiques include: Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, ch. 16; Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil”, Kaufman, “A Reply to Critics”; and others.

<sup>7</sup> On this point, see Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, 18-22.

suffering) is an instance of karmic retribution. Or they might be more selective, claiming that, while some instances of suffering are cases of karmic retribution, some are not. The latter idea is present in early Buddhist texts,<sup>8</sup> and more relevantly for my purposes, it has also been suggested by some theists.<sup>9</sup>

Retributive karmic theodicies have certain virtues. The main advantage of the comprehensive ones is their impressive explanatory scope. They offer to explain every kind of suffering, including: both moral evil and natural evil; both adult suffering and infant suffering; both human suffering and nonhuman animal suffering; both horrors and lesser evils; and so on.<sup>10</sup> For each of these kinds of suffering, the claim is that the suffering in question is deserved retribution for morally bad actions. If the victim has not performed any such actions in this life, they may have done so in a previous life. For example, in the case of nonhuman animals, a typical South Asian view is that a person can be reborn as an animal as a retributive consequence for wrong actions they committed while they were a human being.<sup>11</sup>

Theodicies which are much more selective in their use of karmic retribution to explain suffering sacrifice some of the explanatory scope of their more comprehensive cousins. But a selective theodicy which has no restrictions on the kind of suffering that it might explain retains a certain versatility: it can, in principle, be applied to any instance of suffering whatsoever, regardless of kind. That makes it a useful supplement to other theodicies, because it can be used to fill in their explanatory gaps.<sup>12</sup>

So much for retributive karmic theodicies. Turn now to character-building karmic theodicies, which claim that at least some morally significant actions karmically cause experiences that promote character-building. For example, if Devadatta is affluent but stingy about giving to charity, this might karmically cause him to be reborn into circumstances of

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<sup>8</sup> Including *The Questions of King Milinda* IV.1.62-66. See Rhys Davids, *Questions*, 190-195.

<sup>9</sup> See Filice, "The Moral Case," and Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 405, 411-412.

<sup>10</sup> A point maintained by, e.g., Herman, *The Problem of Evil*, Part III.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion, see Smythe, "Objections to Karma," 483-484, and Gupta & Barua, "The Alchemy of Suffering."

<sup>12</sup> See Filice, "The Moral Case," and Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 412-417.

poverty in which he gains a greater appreciation for the needs of those who are not affluent.<sup>13</sup> It might be that Devadatta's actions directly cause karmic consequences, or it might be that his actions contribute to the overall state of his moral character, and the overall state of his moral character in turn causes karmic consequences. Either way, the idea is that actions which are morally bad or at least morally suberogatory cause relevant character-building experiences, i.e., experiences which improve the character of the agent who performed them in a way that makes the agent less likely to perform similar actions in the future. Character-building karmic theodicies entail that at least some instances of suffering are karmically caused character-building experiences, and God permits those instances of suffering because of their character-building value. These experiences enable agents to grow from moral and spiritual immaturity to moral and spiritual maturity over the course of many lifetimes.

Several prominent Hindu thinkers have defended character-building karmic theodicies, including Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo.<sup>14</sup> The view has more recent defenders as well.<sup>15</sup> In some cases it is hard to tell whether proponents of karmic character-building theodicies wish to deny that karmic consequences are retributive or merely assign their retributive function a secondary status. I will keep both options in mind in what follows. Note also that character-building theodicies can be punitive without being retributive. One need only adopt a consequentialist theory of punishment on which punishments are justified by their tendency to reform wrongdoers. Then one can say that karmic character-building experiences are non-retributive punishments aimed at reform.

Like their retributive counterparts, character-building karmic theodicies may be either comprehensive or selective. If they are comprehensive, they have wide explanatory scope, for they claim that every instance of suffering (or nearly every instance of suffering) is a karmic consequence that will ultimately contribute to character-building. Any instance of suffering which does not contribute to character-building in this life may do so in a future life.

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<sup>13</sup> A similar example appears in Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 401-403.

<sup>14</sup> According to Medhananda, "An Integral Advaitic Theodicy." See also Maharaj, *Infinite Paths*, chs. 7-8, and Medhananda, "A Great Adventure."

<sup>15</sup> Including: Stoeber, "Personal Identity"; Gupta & Barua, "The Alchemy of Suffering"; Medhananda, "Advaitic Theodicy"; and Gupta & Gallagher, "Reincarnation".

Admittedly, it is not immediately obvious how the suffering of infants and nonhuman animals could be character-building experiences for their victims, but a number of philosophers have suggested ways that this might work. For example, Gupta & Barua (2022: 89-90) propose that animal suffering leaves traces in the animal's psychology that persist through the process of rebirth until the individual is reborn as a human being. At that point, their impact on the individual's psychology is manifested.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, proponents of character-building theodicies could opt for a selective theodicy where some instances of suffering are karmically caused character-building experiences, and others have a different explanation.<sup>17</sup> For example, they might say that God maintains a karmic system in which, although not all instances of karmic suffering lead to character-building, enough of them do to justify maintaining the system.<sup>18</sup> Or they might use the karmic character-building theodicy to fill in the gaps of another theodicy that covers a lot of ground on its own. But the karmic character-building theodicy is probably only versatile enough for this job if it can be successfully applied to any kind of suffering, including infant and animal suffering.

So those are retributive and character-building karmic theodicies in outline. Over the next four sections, I will discuss what I take to be the four biggest weaknesses of retributive karmic theodicies and argue that character-building karmic theodicies suffer from similar weaknesses.

## **2. First Weakness: Constraints on Retribution**

The first major weakness of retributive karmic theodicies concerns navigating plausible constraints on just retribution. A few standard objections to retributive karmic theodicies allege that they violate such constraints. Some objectors say that personal identity is not retained through the process of rebirth, and therefore retributive theodicies violate the

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<sup>16</sup> On animal character-building, see also Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw*, ch. 4; Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 416; Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain*; and Medhananda, "Advaitic Theodicy," 78-79.

<sup>17</sup> Gupta, "The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*," hints at such a theodicy.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to a referee for this point.

plausible constraint that a person should not be held responsible for the actions of another person.<sup>19</sup> Some say that, because we do not remember our past lives, retributive theodicies violate the plausible constraint that a person should not be held responsible for an action without being told why.<sup>20</sup> And some say that, given the severity of the world's suffering, retributive theodicies violate the plausible constraint that retribution should not be disproportionately harsh.<sup>21</sup>

These worries apply more or less equally to comprehensive and selective retributive theodicies. At best, selective theodicies might have a bit more wiggle room. For example, a selective theodicy could circumvent the worry about disproportionately harsh retribution by denying that the most severe instances of suffering are karmic consequences. But this maneuver comes at a high price, since it leaves some of the worst instances of suffering to be explained in another way. The worst instances of suffering are also usually among the toughest cases for other theodicies to handle, so this response may be at odds with the strategy of using the selective theodicy as a strategic supplement to other theodicies.

Still, these are not knock-down objections. In my estimation, discussion of these objections in the literature up to this point has shown that they can be successfully rebutted by

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<sup>19</sup> Worries about maintaining personal identity through rebirth appear in: Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 107-111; Stoeber, "Personal Identity," 495; Dhavamony, "Christianity and Reincarnation," 162; Edwards, *Reincarnation*, 233-237; Griffiths, "Buddhist Karmic Theodicy" and "Karma and Personal Identity"; and Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, ch. 8. For replies, see: Ducasse, "Life After Death", 149-150; Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 308, 354, 364-365; McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion*, 128-129; White, "Buddhist Karmic Theory"; Perrett, "Rebirth," 52-55; Filice, "The Moral Case," 55-56), and Medhananda, "Advaita Theodicy." Cf. Laine, "Persons, Plants, and Insects."

<sup>20</sup> Versions of this objection are leveled by: Stoeber, "Personal Identity", 496; Dhavamony, "Christianity and Reincarnation," 160-161; Smythe, "Objections to Karma," 481-482; Kaufman, "Karma," 19-21, and "A Reply to Critics", 556-557; and Freschi, "Theory of Karman," 3; and resisted by Perrett, "Rebirth", 56; Filice, "The Moral Case," 56-58; Chadha & Trakakis, "Karma and the Problem of Evil", 535-538, and Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 400-403.

<sup>21</sup> This objection is pressed by Kaufman, "Karma," 21-22, and Kaufman, "A Reply to Critics," 557, and it is echoed by Bilimoria, "Toward an Indian Theodicy," 287-288. For replies, see: Chadha & Trakakis, "Karma," 538-540; and Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 403-405.

supplementing retributive karmic theodicies with suitable auxiliary hypotheses. For example, the objection about personal identity can be rebutted by adopting the view that we have immaterial souls and we go wherever our souls go, regardless of disruptions in psychological, biological, or bodily continuity.<sup>22</sup> The objection about suffering retribution without knowing why can be rebutted by speculating that God has a good reason to wait and reveal this information later.<sup>23</sup> And the objection about disproportionately harsh retribution can be rebutted by suggesting that morality is more demanding than we normally take it to be, and so the typical human being is morally worse than we normally take them to be.<sup>24</sup>

However, adding auxiliary hypotheses like these to the karmic theodicy is costly. Each such hypothesis makes the theodicy more controversial and more complex, and in doing so, it reduces the probability that the theodicy is true. So two things seem clear even from this birds-eye view of the debate about whether retributive karmic theodicies violate constraints on retribution: on the one hand, the objections are not decisive, and on the other hand, retributive karmic theodicies do not emerge totally unscathed.

Can character-building karmic theodicies do better? As long as they deny that karmic consequences are retributive, character-building theodicies are immune to objections concerning plausible constraints on just retribution. It doesn't matter whether personal identity is retained through rebirth, so long as the reborn individual inherits the moral character of the deceased individual. It doesn't matter whether anyone remembers or knows of their past lives, since character dispositions can be retained even after one has forgotten the experiences through which one acquired them, just as one retains knowledge of how to ride a bike even after one has forgotten the experience of learning to ride a bike.<sup>25</sup> And it doesn't matter whether the suffering one experiences is out of proportion to any wrong actions which

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<sup>22</sup> This is arguably the traditional Hindu view. See, e.g., Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, ch. 7 on the Hindu view of the self.

<sup>23</sup> According to Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 402, Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb suggests that God temporarily keeps us in the dark because it will be instructive for us to learn what it is like to suffer for unknown reasons.

<sup>24</sup> Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 404.

<sup>25</sup> These points, including the bike analogy, are from Stoeber, "Personal Identity," 498 (cf. 495).

one has performed, since the point of the suffering is to promote character-building, not to exact retribution for past wrongs.

However, this doesn't mean that character-building karmic theodicies are better off than retributive ones, for they have their own constraints to navigate: moral constraints on bringing about good consequences by means of suffering.<sup>26</sup> For example, just as it is plausible that one should not be held responsible for the actions of another, some philosophers contend that God would not permit suffering for the sake of good consequences unless those good consequences accrue to the same person who experienced the suffering. If so, then it is still important that personal identity is retained through rebirth. And just as it is plausible that, normally, a person should not be subjected to retribution without being told why, it's also plausible that, normally, a person should not be permitted to suffer for the sake of good consequences without being informed why. So while the retributive theodicy needs a story about why God remains silent about what we are being held responsible for, the character-building theodicy needs a story about why God remains silent about the good consequences of our suffering, some of which might lie in our future lives. Finally, just as retribution should not be disproportionately harsh, suffering should not be permitted for the sake of a consequence that is not good enough to outweigh it. So while the defender of the retributive theodicy has to worry about whether our suffering is too severe to be just, the defender of the character-building theodicy has to worry about whether our suffering is too severe to be outweighed.

So, for each of the constraints on retribution that I discussed above, there is an analogous constraint on permitting suffering for the sake of good consequences. And there are other such constraints besides. Some philosophers contend that one ought not to permit horrendous suffering for the sake of a good consequence if that good can be attained effectively enough without suffering, or with less suffering. And it is certainly not outrageous to wonder whether

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<sup>26</sup> Most of the following constraints are discussed by Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief*, 233-238. Some are more controversial than others. Trakakis does not discuss the constraint about God informing us why we are suffering, but constraints along these lines have been discussed. See Oliveira, "Sceptical Theism," 330-331, and the sources he cites.

hardship which falls short of horrendous suffering, or which involves much less horrendous suffering than what actually occurs, would effectively promote character-building. There might be more stringent constraints on permitting suffering for the sake of good consequences as well. For example, I have an intuition that one should not torture a child, even if (for some reason) there is no better way to promote character-building in that child. I also have an intuition that one should not even *allow* a child to be tortured under these conditions.<sup>27</sup>

One might be able to get around some constraints on permitting suffering for the sake of good consequences by opting for a selective karmic theodicy on which only less-than-horrendous evils are karmic character-building experiences. But as before, this move comes at the price of leaving the hardest and most significant work of theodicy undone.

Another way around at least some of these constraints is to suppose that karmic consequences are retributive in addition to being character-building experiences. Even if it is normally wrong to subject someone to suffering for the sake of a certain greater good, it may not be wrong to do so in a situation where the suffering in question is deserved.<sup>28</sup> But to make this move is to trade constraints on greater goods back for constraints on retribution. We again have to face worries about whether personal identity is retained through rebirth, whether it matters that we can't remember our past lives, and so on. Once these constraints become relevant again, the character-building theodicy faces exactly the same challenges as the retributive theodicy. We have made no progress.

Aurobindo may have a better way around constraints on permitting suffering for the sake of greater goods. He suggests that, prior to beginning the character-building process, each individual consented to undergoing it.<sup>29</sup> If a doctor were to perform a surgery on a patient who

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<sup>27</sup> Gupta & Barua, "The Alchemy of Suffering," 92, consider a version of this objection that is focused only on doing evil. When they go on to discuss allowing evil, they no longer seem to be considering side constraints.

<sup>28</sup> I owe this point to Akshay Gupta.

<sup>29</sup> Medhananda, "A Great Adventure," 247-248. See also Spiegel, "The Premortalist Free Will Defense" and Hronich, "Premortalism and the Problem of Involuntary Suffering."

had refused treatment, the doctor would be doing something wrong. But as long as the patient consents, the doctor is in the clear. Similarly, perhaps God would be doing something wrong by permitting certain horrendous evils, but if we consent to the suffering, God is in the clear.

Aurobindo's consent hypothesis is not without drawbacks. For one thing, we will soon see that it exacerbates other problems for character-building theodicies. And for another thing, it is an auxiliary hypothesis that makes the theodicy considerably less simple. The hypothesis requires: that we once existed in a suffering-free condition (perhaps a discarnate condition); that we were able, in that condition, to make an informed decision about undergoing the character-building process; and that each of us in fact chose to undergo it. Moreover, it strikes me as unlikely that a morally immature individual would choose to endure multiple lifetimes of suffering for the sake of virtue, for they will not value virtue very highly. So perhaps the best version of the theodicy adds that only a small portion of all created agents chose to undergo the character-building process, while many other created agents are lurking somewhere out of suffering's reach (again, perhaps a discarnate condition).<sup>30</sup>

Alternatively, one could say that God knew, via middle knowledge, which individuals would opt for character-building and which would not, and created only the former. Either way, one can see that the controversial commitments of Aurobindo's consent hypothesis multiply quickly. So the character-building theodicy does not come out ahead by exchanging worries about constraints on retribution for worries about constraints on promoting greater goods.

### **3. Second Weakness: The Origin of Suffering**

The second weakness of retributive theodicies concerns the origin of suffering. A number of critics contend that the retributive karmic explanation of suffering merely pushes the

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<sup>30</sup> Medhananda, "A Great Adventure," 247-248, argues that something like this was, in fact, Aurobindo's view.

explanatory problem back a step, and in fact leads to an infinite regress.<sup>31</sup> The thought is that, if each life's suffering is explained at least partly by actions performed in previous lives, then each life is preceded by an earlier life, and so there is an infinite regress of lives. Traditionally, South Asian proponents of the comprehensive retributive theodicy embrace this regress. Doing so is costly insofar as the possibility of causal regresses is hotly contested. But some philosophers think another problem remains even if the regress is deemed metaphysically possible. If God has sufficient control over human actions (as some theories of divine providence entail), then maybe God could have ensured that there was no regress of evil and suffering by creating a world with an infinite regress of only good actions and good consequences. Alternatively, God could have created a world containing no agents at all. And although these value-judgments can be hard to make, one might think that worlds like these would be better than worlds with an infinite regress of suffering, and therefore worlds which God would choose to make instead of ours.<sup>32</sup>

Recently it has been common for defenders of karmic theodicies to explain the origin of suffering by appealing to a primordial fall theodicy, where human beings initiated the chain of karmic causation through their own free choices.<sup>33</sup> For example, Gupta (2024) suggests two ways to avoid an infinite regress of karmic causation: one involves each soul suffering a primordial fall from a pre-embodied state; the other involves uncaused free actions that disrupt

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<sup>31</sup> Versions of this objection are urged by: Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 116, and *Death and Eternal Life*, 308-309; O'Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth*, 17; Dhavamony, "Christianity and Reincarnation," 161; and Kaufman, "Karma," 22-23, and Kaufman, "A Reply to Critics," 557-558. For replies, see: Perrett, "Karma and the Problem of Suffering"; Sharma, "Karma and Reincarnation," 231; Matilal, "Samkara's Theodicy," 371; Filice, "The Moral Case," 51-53; Chadha & Trakakis, "Karma," 540-541; Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 411-412; and Gupta & Barua, "The Alchemy of Suffering," 91-92. Cf. Gupta, "Beginningless *Karman*." A version of this objection is also the subject of *Brahma Sūtra* II.1.32-36.

<sup>32</sup> O'Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth*, 14, seems to endorse an objection of this sort. See, e.g., Perrett, "Karma and the Problem of Suffering" for a reply.

<sup>33</sup> Versions of this view appear in, e.g.: Matilal, "Samkara's Theodicy," 371; Filice, "The Moral Case," 52; Chadha & Trakakis, "Karma," 540-541; Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 411-412; Gupta & Gallagher, "Reincarnation," and Gupta, "Beginningless *Karman*." For a detailed treatment of the notion of a primordial fall in Hindu mythology, see O'Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth*, ch. 2.

causal chains of events that might otherwise be infinite. I will focus on the former hypothesis. Not only do primordial fall hypotheses cut off the regress of karmic causation; they afford an explanation of why God would create a world that contains suffering rather than one that does not. The thought is that God values free will enough to create free agents even though this freedom entails the risk of a fall.

However, primordial fall theodicies have their share of drawbacks. In addition to adding another contentious auxiliary hypothesis to the karmic theodicy, positing a primordial fall makes the theodicy vulnerable to the array of objections that have been leveled against primordial fall theodicies, such as: the worry that the freedom to fall is not valuable enough to justify God's permitting the fall to occur; the worry that such freedom may be compatible with God's determining that no fall occurs; and so on.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, by introducing a primordial fall to the picture, the karma theorist seems to have solved one problem at the cost of introducing several more. Granted, there is a lot to say about objections to primordial fall theodicies, and I do not wish to make any claims here about whether they are successful. But once again, the main point I want to make is clear enough from a bird's-eye view of the matter: dealing with the origin of suffering requires commitment to one or more controversial auxiliary hypotheses in addition to those we have already encountered, and so it further reduces the probability that any retributive karmic theodicy is true.

Can character-building karmic theodicies do better? They can cut off infinite causal regresses without appealing to a primordial fall theodicy by suggesting that we originally came into existence in a state of moral immaturity, and that state, or actions downstream of it, karmically caused our first experiences of suffering. However, there remains the deeper problem about why God would create a world that contains suffering rather than one which does not. In this context, the problem takes the form of a familiar objection to character-building theodicies in general, namely, that God could have easily created a world of individuals who are morally mature from the start instead of a world where individuals must endure a character-building process powered by suffering in order to reach moral maturity.

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<sup>34</sup> As noted by Kaufman, "A Reply to Critics," 557-558.

Some proponents of karmic character-building theodicies reply to this sort of objection by appealing to pantheism: we are not ultimately different from God, so God is not inflicting the suffering of the character-building process on others, but rather on Godself.<sup>35</sup> This reply is inadequate, at least for versions of pantheism where the intimate relationship between God and creatures is something less than numerical identity. For example, if we are (proper) parts of God, if we are attributes, modes, or states of God, or if we are in any way asymmetrically dependent on God, then we are numerically distinct from God. And if we are numerically distinct from God, then God is inflicting suffering on (numerically distinct) others. Even if God shares in that suffering in an intimate way, that doesn't justify inflicting it on others. I can't go around torturing other people as long as I also torture myself!

A better response to this objection is that God values free will, and so God has granted us the ability to develop our moral characters via our own free choices, rather than making that choice for us by creating us morally mature from the beginning.<sup>36</sup> But although this response is better, it is very similar to the retributive theodist's appeal to a primordial fall, which is, after all, a kind of free will theodicy. In addition to complicating the character-building theodicy with an auxiliary hypothesis about free will, it renders the character-building theodicy vulnerable to many of the same objections that the primordial fall theodicy faces. So this response isn't likely to leave character-building theodicies with any significant advantage over retributive theodicies.

Maybe the best response to the objection about why God didn't create us morally mature is that there is value in the character-building process itself, not merely in its result. Suppose brain surgeons develop an operation which makes a person always disposed to perform the most virtuous action in any situation. Given the opportunity to undergo this operation, thereby bypassing the ordinary process of moral development, would you accept? I wouldn't. There is something valuable about the human process of real-life character development that is just too precious to circumvent. Skipping it seems somehow like cheating. So perhaps God makes a karmic character-building world because of the value of the character-building

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<sup>35</sup> See Medhananda, "Advaitic Theodicy", 570-571, who attributes the reply to Ramakrishna.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to Akshay Gupta for this suggestion.

process.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps. But like the appeal to free will, this strategy is vulnerable to various *prima facie* worries. For example, one might wonder whether the value of the process is great enough to justify horrendous evil, given that the alternative of creating naturally virtuous people is also very good. And one might wonder whether God could accelerate the process so that it didn't take many lifetimes. For example, if compatibilism is true, then perhaps God could arrange for us to make virtuous choices more often, thereby developing virtuous character more quickly. So again, it is not clear that character-building theodicies are better off than their retributive counterparts.

#### **4. Third Weakness: Innocent Suffering**

The third weakness of retributive karmic theodicies concerns their implications for apparently innocent suffering. Consider first retributive karmic theodicies that are comprehensive. These theodicies have the radical consequence that there is no innocent suffering—that every case (or nearly every case) of apparently innocent suffering is instead a case of deserved suffering. Some philosophers contend that this consequence threatens our morally significant freedom, since it entails that no one has the freedom to cause unjust as opposed to deserved suffering.<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, some say that it makes wrongdoers into agents of justice, since any suffering that an agent inflicts on a victim is deserved.<sup>39</sup> Others say that it clashes with the commonsense belief that it is morally important to alleviate suffering, since it is not morally important to prevent just retribution.<sup>40</sup> And finally, some say it clashes with commonsense beliefs about which moral attitudes are apt, since it suggests that the apt

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<sup>37</sup> According to Medhananda, "A Great Adventure," 248, Aurobindo endorsed a version of this response. See also Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy", 271.

<sup>38</sup> Versions of this objection appear in, e.g., Dhavamony, "Christianity and Reincarnation," 163-4, and Kaufman, "Karma," 24-27, and Kaufman, "A Reply to Critics", 559. See also the replies by Chadha & Trakakis, "Karma," 545-548, and Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 407-409.

<sup>39</sup> This is one aspect of Kaufman's free will problem. For relevant references, see the preceding note.

<sup>40</sup> This worry is mentioned by Herman, *The Problem of Evil*, 284, defended by Kaufman, "Karma," 559, and rebutted by Filice, "The Moral Case," 54-55, and Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 409-411.

response to (say) natural disasters with enormous death tolls is not horror but rather a satisfied sense of justice served.<sup>41</sup>

Again, these are not knock-down objections. One way to rebut some of them is to say that the karmic theodicy is speculative, so we ought to err on the side of caution in case apparently innocent suffering really is innocent suffering after all.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, other things being equal, it is morally important not to inflict suffering on others, to prevent suffering if it can be prevented, and perhaps also to cultivate attitudes such as moral horror and empathy. But this rebuttal only goes so far. For example, while it might work to justify cultivating attitudes like moral horror, it does not entail that those attitudes are *apt*, as they seem to be. Indeed, I think that this whole dialectic is mostly only engaging with the symptoms of a more fundamental issue. The bottom line is that the world overwhelmingly seems to be a realm of innocent suffering. We are horrified by natural disasters with large death tolls because they seem horrifying; we empathize with the victims because they seem innocent; we rush to help them because it seems that doing so would alleviate innocent suffering; and so on.

In my view, these intuitions are themselves strong evidence that the world contains innocent suffering. But even those who don't take intuitions very seriously still have to contend with explanatory questions about why we have them. Consider a case of suffering that seems innocent, such as a child at play falling and scraping her knee. What is the best explanation of the fact that this suffering seems innocent? *Prima facie*, the best explanation is that it seems innocent because it is innocent. It would be a much worse explanation to suggest that the child had recently done something very wrong and her parents had somehow orchestrated her fall as a punishment. Similarly, it would be a much worse explanation to suggest that it is karmic retribution for wrongdoing in a past life. The latter requires positing rebirth and karma. Other things being equal, it is much simpler to take the appearances at face value rather than positing unseen mechanisms and events to account for it. So, other things being equal, the hypothesis that this case of suffering is gratuitous is much simpler than the karmic hypothesis that it is deserved. (But of course, this is only a defeasible reason to prefer the gratuitous evil hypothesis

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<sup>41</sup> See especially Edwards, *Reincarnation*, 43-44.

<sup>42</sup> A somewhat similar reply is offered by Filice, "The Moral Case", 54, and echoed by Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 410.

over the karmic hypothesis. A sufficiently strong case for the reality of karma and rebirth could overcome this consideration.)

What I have said so far pertains to retributive karmic theodicies that are comprehensive. Those that are more selective take some of the bite out of this objection, at least if karmic retribution is fairly sparse. While it strikes me as enormously implausible on the face of it to say that no suffering is innocent, it is not nearly so implausible to say that the occasional case of apparently innocent suffering is not what it seems to be. Moreover, on a very selective theodicy, our range of morally significant freedom is much wider (as it seems to be), inflicting suffering on others is normally unjust (as it seems to be), preventing suffering is normally morally important (as it seems to be), and attitudes of horror and so forth directed at suffering are normally apt (as they seem to be). But there is an unfortunate tradeoff here, because the less apparently innocent suffering the theodicy casts as karmic retribution, the less apparently innocent suffering it accounts for without punting to another theodicy. And if another theodicy is introduced, then the overall picture becomes very complex, featuring karma, reincarnation, and whatever commitments the other theodicy brings with it. Again, this seems much more extravagant than simply admitting that much of the world's suffering is gratuitous.

Can character-building theodicies do better? At first, it might seem that they can. As long as they do not claim that character-building experiences are also karmic retribution, they do not have problems about innocent suffering. Suffering which produces character-building might very well be innocent, since one doesn't have to deserve to suffer in order to grow as a result of suffering. However, comprehensive character-building theodicies entail something that is *prima facie* just as incredible as the claim that no suffering is innocent: they entail that no suffering is gratuitous in the sense of being all-things-considered harmful. After all, every instance of suffering eventually produces character-building that is valuable enough, *ex hypothesi*, to outweigh the suffering in question. So there is no instance of suffering one can point to and say truly that the victim would have been better off without it. And in that case, all of the efforts that human beings have put into preventing and alleviating suffering over the centuries—medical research, charitable giving, social justice campaigns, and so on—have at

most been the source of benefits to sufferers, but they have done nothing to make anyone better off overall than they would have otherwise been. I find this very difficult to believe.<sup>43</sup>

The picture of suffering painted by the character-building theodicy is even more incredible if the character-building theorist avails themselves of Aurobindo's hypothesis that we have all consented to undergoing the character-building process. For in that case, not only is our suffering overall good for us; we have also agreed to undergo it. It is no more tragic or horrifying than a patient who undergoes a painful but life-improving surgery to which they have consented.

Once again, I think our intuitions about apparently gratuitous suffering are all by themselves strong evidence that there is gratuitous suffering, but even those who are suspicious of these intuitions have to grapple with explanatory questions about why we have them. Other things being equal, the best explanation of why so many instances of suffering seem gratuitous is that they are gratuitous. Alternative theistic stories about hidden justifications for those evils, such as character-building experiences in future lives, are bound to be more complex.<sup>44</sup>

What happens if we shift to selective character-building theodicies? One kind of selective character-building theodicy claims that, although all (or nearly all) instances of suffering are karmic consequences, they only result in character-building if the victim responds to the suffering in the right way. When the victim does not respond in the right way, the suffering

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<sup>43</sup> A referee suggests that this is not so incredible if molinism is true, because then God can be expected to orchestrate events in precisely this way. But my own incredulity has nothing to do with how likely God would be to orchestrate events in this way, or whether God has the resources to do so. It is entirely rooted in intuitions about moral and prudential considerations of the sort discussed in Crummett, "Sufferer-Centered Requirements."

<sup>44</sup> A referee notes that, according to Hinduism, we are ignorant of reality's true nature and need Scriptural revelation to correct our ignorance, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that our intuitions about evil are misleading and have to be corrected by revelation about karma. Fair enough. But as I see it, this only makes the Hindu view even less plausible, because it entails that the clash between Hinduism and our commonsense picture of the world (which I take very seriously) runs deeper than matters of gratuitous evil. But this raises issues beyond the scope of this paper.

ends up being gratuitous.<sup>45</sup> I think that this suggestion is only marginally better than the hypothesis that no suffering is gratuitous. Speaking for myself, it still seems pretty revisionary and counterintuitive to suppose that the *only* gratuitous suffering that exists is gratuitous because we didn't make the best of it. Moreover, it is still much simpler to suppose that some suffering has no character-building potential than to posit karma and rebirth in order to ensure that every instance of suffering has at least the potential to produce outweighing character-building.

Other selective character-building theodicies concede that many instances of suffering are not karmic consequences at all. However, the farther a theodicy retreats in that direction, the less work it does. And it will probably have to retreat a long way. If it is counterintuitive to say that all suffering is good for its victims, it is not much better to say that most suffering is good for its victims. To make real headway against this objection, the theodicy would have to be very selective, claiming that instances of suffering which are character-building experiences are relatively sparse. So overall, the implications of character-building theodicies concerning gratuitous suffering seem no less troubling than those of retributive theodicies concerning innocent suffering.<sup>46</sup>

## 5. Fourth Weakness: Victim-Blaming

Finally, the fourth weakness of retributive karmic theodicies is practical, as opposed to theoretical, in nature: it concerns whether positive attitudes toward retributive theodicies are

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<sup>45</sup> Thanks to a referee for this suggestion.

<sup>46</sup> A referee suggests that theists in general will have intuitions that some evil is gratuitous, and that these intuitions may change when one accepts a theodicy (whether karmic or otherwise). However, the literature on the commonsense problem of evil suggests that some gratuitous evil intuitions are quite firm. (For example, see Gellman, "A New Look.") I know that mine are, and I prefer responses to the problem of evil that accommodate rather than eliminate gratuitous evil. However, I admit that not everyone will share my intuitions, and so not everyone will see this issue the same way that I do.

morally objectionable, and not necessarily whether those theodicies are true.<sup>47</sup> To illustrate: above we encountered the theoretical concern that, if the comprehensive retributive theodicy is true, then it is not morally important to prevent suffering. But this worry is often paired with (and sometimes conflated with) the practical concern that believing the theodicy would undermine our motivation to prevent suffering.<sup>48</sup> The former concern is that the theodicy entails something implausible; the latter is that believing the theodicy causes one to do something immoral. There are other practical worries too, such as the worry that believing the karmic theodicy will promote social injustices like oppression of certain classes or castes<sup>49</sup> and discrimination against people with disabilities.<sup>50</sup> These worries have a certain degree of plausibility, but not much more can be said about them from the philosopher's armchair. In the end, they are speculative empirical claims and therefore they call for empirical rather than philosophical assessment.

Let's set aside empirical issues. I am more worried that endorsing a retributive theodicy is itself immoral, because it amounts to inappropriate victim-blaming. One who believes this theodicy is thereby committed to the position that victims are blameworthy for their own suffering.<sup>51</sup> It is important to distinguish different versions of the victim-blaming charge, as they are sometimes conflated. Some of them are theoretical, such as the complaint that, if victims are blameworthy for their suffering, then this entails (implausibly) that it is not morally important to help them. Others are practical, but parasitic on the empirical worries of the previous paragraph, such as the worry that belief in karmic blame will lead to behaviors like neglect, oppression, or discrimination. But the version of the objection which worries me the

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<sup>47</sup> The discussion that follows is partly indebted to Crummett's parallel discussion of practical objections to sufferer-centered theodicies. See Crummett, "Sufferer-Centered Requirements," 86-90.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, "Critical Questions," sees this as the primary Western objection to karma. For further discussion, see: Sharma, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil"; Goldschmidt & Seacord, "Judaism," 409-411; Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, 108-111; and Lin & Yen, "On the Naturalization of Karma."

<sup>49</sup> Garrett, *Bad Karma*, and Smythe, "Objections to Karma," 484-488 defend this objection.

<sup>50</sup> Burley, "Retributive Karma," has a nice discussion of this issue.

<sup>51</sup> See especially Burley's detailed discussion of this objection in "Retributive Karma."

most is the one discussed by Burley (2013): believing that victims are blameworthy on the basis of a karmic theodicy may be intrinsically wrong (or intrinsically *pro tanto* wrong). To borrow Burley's main example, the belief that people born with disabilities were born that way because of their bad karma seems morally criticizable regardless of its behavioral consequences, as it is an inherently prejudiced way of perceiving the world.

Sharma (2008) replies to victim-blaming worries in part with the example of a doctor who treats a patient's cancer even though the cancer is due to chronic smoking. Though Sharma's attention is primarily on victim-blaming behaviors rather than beliefs, this example shows that not all beliefs that a victim is blameworthy are wrong, since it is not wrong for the doctor to believe that the patient's smoking caused their condition. Even so, I do not think this case rebuts the doxastic victim-blaming objection. Rather, I think there is a morally relevant difference between cases like this one and believing that people born with disabilities were born that way because of their karma. Burley (2013: 156-159) suggests that it matters whether the accusation laid at the victim's feet is based on empirical evidence, as the doctor's belief is and the theodacist's belief is not. Perhaps Burley is right. But I don't need an account of why the cases are morally different in order to see, intuitively, that they are. It's a bit like seeing, intuitively, that one may turn a runaway trolley so that it will kill one person instead of five, but one may not push one person in front of a trolley to save five others. I can see that this is true (or at least have reason to believe it is true) even without a theory which explains *why* it is true.

One might think that proponents of selective, rather than comprehensive, retributive theodicies can avoid blaming victims by claiming that we do not know which specific instances of suffering are karmic consequences.<sup>52</sup> All we can say (and all we need to say) is that any particular instance of suffering might, for all anyone knows, be karmic retribution, and therefore we can't infer that God has no good reason to permit it. The accusation against the victim is thereby softened to a bit of speculation. But it seems to me that it is still inappropriate to believe that, e.g., people born with disabilities *might* deserve their suffering. So the problem remains.

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<sup>52</sup> Sharma, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil", and Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, 109-110, make this point.

Can character-building theodicies do better? No.<sup>53</sup> After all, they entail that one's suffering is something one has brought upon oneself by living a less than saintly life prior to one's current life. Granted, a less than saintly life might still be a quite good life, but it strikes me as inappropriate to claim that people who are born with disabilities are born with them because, e.g., in a past life they didn't give more money to organizations that fight ableism. And Aurobindo's hypothesis that we all consented to the character-building process only increases the extent to which the victims are said to bring their suffering upon themselves. It feels gross to say of an abused child that, at some point prior to their present life, they may have consented to the abuse they are now suffering.

One who prefers a selective character-building theodicy could say that we do not know which specific instances of suffering are karmically caused character-building experiences. All we can say (and all we need to say) is that particular instances of suffering might, for all anyone knows, be karmically caused character-building experiences, and therefore we can't infer that God has no good reason to permit them. My response to this objection is the same as before. Even if it isn't technically victim-blaming, it still seems inappropriate to suggest that people born with disabilities *might* have been born that way because of actions they performed (or omitted to perform) in a past life.

Moreover, character-building theodicies may be guilty of a further faux pas - one which has been discussed in connection with certain non-karmic theodicies.<sup>54</sup> Other things being equal, it is at best morally questionable to claim that someone who has suffered horrendously and takes their suffering to be gratuitous is in fact better off because of their suffering, in virtue of some divinely-ordained good that it promotes. Like karmic victim-blaming, this strikes me as intrinsically wrong (or at least intrinsically *pro tanto* wrong). So on the whole, it is very doubtful that character-building theodicies have any advantage over retributive theodicies in respect of practical objections concerning victim-blaming and the like.

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<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to the students I taught at Mount Holyoke College in Spring 2022 for the more general point that character-building theodicies (karmic or otherwise) have a victim-blaming element.

<sup>54</sup> See Crummett, "Sufferer-Centered Requirements," 87-90, who attributes the point to Hasker, "Suffering, Soul-making, and Salvation," 11.

## 6. Conclusion

I have considered the two main kinds of karmic theodicy: retributive and character-building. I distilled what I take to be the main weaknesses of retributive karmic theodicies from the existing literature on this topic, and asked whether character-building karmic theodicies improve on them in this respect. My conclusion is that, on the whole, character-building theodicies do not appear to be any better off than their retributive counterparts. For each of the major weaknesses that can be found in retributive theodicies, a similar weakness can be found in character-building theodicies. And since these weaknesses seem to me quite troubling, especially in the aggregate, I also conclude that all karmic theodicies face significant challenges.<sup>55</sup>

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