

Karma and Reincarnation as Alternatives to the Risk Society

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Abstract

The thesis of the article with the proposed title is that the knowledge and acceptance of the theosophical understanding of karma and reincarnation can be seen as an alternative to the risky reality in which modern human civilization lives. The alternative unfolds in two main directions – an explanation of individual, family, national and general human suffering on the one hand, and on the other hand, the possible result of this knowledge is indicated – an increase in personal and social responsibility towards life in all its manifestations. The proposed thesis is based on a comparison between German sociologist Ulrich Beck's research on risk society and the understanding of reincarnation and karma or the law of cause and effect in the theosophical doctrine of Helena Blavatsky. The thesis is dictated by the close-in-meaning conclusions that Ulrich Beck and Elena Blavatsky make about the fate of humanity, regardless of the different historical eras in which they both live and work.

Keywords: karma, reincarnation, risk society, theosophical doctrine, alternative, Beck, Blavatsky.

1. Introduction

The concepts of “karma” and Rebirth/Reincarnation are fundamental in Hinduism and Buddhism. Western science prefers not to deal with them. Bringing them to the fore in a topic related to the incessant and growing problems of humanity, which, according to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, lives in a society of total risk, can to a certain extent explain the reasons for the risky nature of modern civilization and offer an alternative. The alternative is primarily associated with a change in the way of thinking, in the awareness of unity between all beings on the planet and hence the understanding of one's own existence as an opportunity for moral and spiritual improvement as a part of the whole – in the name of peace, love and mutual assistance between people.

“Karma”, also known as the law of cause and effect, means every action and thought that becomes the cause of the next action and thought – both in a personal aspect and in a wider – familial, ancestral, national, planetary.

“Reincarnation” means the succession of multiple births and physical lives of the immortal human spirit, of the immortal triad according to theosophy – atma, buddhi and manas, or to put it another way – of the higher human essence as a triad of the immortal monad (atma), the Spirit Soul (buddhi) and the Human Soul (manas).

In the article, these concepts are used in sync with the definitions of modern human civilization as a Risk Society and the way in which each person relates and copes with the incessant risks in life – Ulrich Beck calls this coping Reflexive Modernity.

2. Karma in the risk society

The reflexive modernity of the risk society as an individual process reveals how the global risks created by humanity as a whole change the life of the individual. Like the law of cause and effect common to Indian philosophy and to theosophy – karma – risks have an obligatory “future component” of which Beck speaks. That is, the results, the consequences are most often manifested and specified in the future – near or more distant, acquiring the character of absoluteness, of a mandatory result and consequence of previous actions and causes. Air pollution and deforestation is a cause-and-effect action that affects all people on the planet with a change in the Earth’s climate. And everyone suffers from this change. In the terms of theosophy, the karma of the risk situations created is borne by the collective humanity as a community of interconnected and interdependent individuals.

As already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, “cause” and “effect” are among the fundamental concepts in theosophical doctrine and risk society. Risk society is an accelerated illustration of the theosophical law of cause and effect, called the law of karma. If the law of karma says that you will reap what you sow, then Beck speaks of a “boomerang effect” from the risks created, an effect that inevitably reaches every member of society: “Where everything becomes a threat, nothing is dangerous anymore. Where there is no escape, risks may not be thought of. Environmental fatalism about the end of the world swings the pendulum of private and political sentiment in all possible directions (...) Sooner or later the risks also affect those who produce them or profit from them” (Beck, 2013: 57).

In the concepts of “cause” and “effect”, the German sociologist collects and summarizes the essence of the risk society as a unity of universal and individual actions and irresponsibility regarding the creation of a diverse risk reality in modern times. This reality integrates the behavior of the individual and the society in an inseparable connection and wholeness in a process of co-creation – co-creation in the generation of dangers for life on Earth. The community in the creation of risks blurs the responsibilities, as a result of which the risky reality becomes everyday and acquires the contours of “normality” in which all humanity is immersed. The consequences are again for the entire population of the planet, which as a whole suffers from universal irresponsibility and co-creation in the generation of risky situations: “To the highly differentiated division of labor corresponds universal complicity, and to it universal irresponsibility. Each is both cause and effect and in this way is uncaused. Causes disappear imperceptibly in the general flow of a continuous change of actors and conditions, reactions and counter-reactions” (Beck, 2013: 51), notes Beck and summarizes that “a person can do something and continue to do it without being personally responsible for it. Man acts in the conditions of his own absence. He acts physically without acting morally and politically” (Beck, 2013: 51).

The result of universal irresponsibility, Ulrich Beck points out with concrete dimensions: “In the water supply, all social classes draw water from the same tap; and on the other hand, at the sight of the bare forests in the ‘rural idylls’ far from the industrial centers, it finally becomes clear that all class-specific boundaries fall away before the content of poisons in the air we all breathe. Under these circumstances, the only really effective remedy that can protect us is not to eat, not to drink, or not to breathe” (Beck, 2013: 56). With its irresponsible actions, humanity as a community creates an absurd environment for its existence, affirms the German sociologist. In the last quarter of the 20th century, Beck makes a prediction that came true in the first decades of the 21st century: “Regardless of all the cosmetic fixes, the risks would actually increase, and with them the global threat to all. Thus, would arise a society in which the explosive

force of risk spoils and poisons the pleasure of everyone who profits from the risks” (Beck, 2013: 86).

3. E. P. Blavatsky about karma

From the point of view of theosophy, the conclusions of the German scientist so far advanced are a concrete illustration and proof of the law of cause and effect known as karma. According to the understanding of karma, the individual, the family, the nation, humanity create the causes that produce the effects. This is how the question of the origin of suffering in the life of the individual and in society is answered. Theosophy, like Indian philosophy, holds that however powerful and motivated the questions about suffering may be, such as “Why does this evil happen to me,” “What did I do to deserve it,” or “Where did I go wrong,” the explanation is one: The cause of suffering is created by man himself. Thus, the meaning of the proverb “No evil comes alone” becomes clear. It has causes, and consequences and is often accompanied by a combination of difficult situations. Blavatsky notes in this connection: “It is not the “Rector” or “Maharajah” who punishes or rewards, with or without “God’s” permission or order, but man himself – his deeds or Karma, attracting individually and collectively (as in the case of whole nations sometimes), every kind of evil and calamity. We produce causes, and these awaken the corresponding powers in the sidereal world; which powers are magnetically and irresistibly attracted to – and react upon – those who produced these causes; whether such persons are practically the evil-doers, or simply Thinkers who brood mischief” (Blavatsky, 2005, I-180).

From the quotation, it is clear that theosophy adheres to the understanding characteristic of Indian thought that not only actions but also thoughts produce an effect, i.e., one’s thoughts are also subject to the law of karma. “Our philosophy has as strict a doctrine of punishments as the most severe Calvinists, but much more philosophical and agreeable to absolute justice. No deed, not even a wrong thought, can go unpunished; the thought is punished even more severely than the action because the thought is potentially more dangerous than the actions” (Blavatskyia, 94), asserts: “And I tell you that everyone, whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Bible, 1991: 1199).

Helena Blavatsky admits that she cannot name the reason for the existence of the law of karma. At the same time, she repeatedly emphasized the meaning and significance of this law: “No definition or limitation could describe that which is impersonal, appearing not as a being but as a universal working law. If you ask me about his reasons, I have to answer you: “I don’t know”. But if you ask me to define its results and tell you what they are according to our beliefs, I can say that the experience of thousands of centuries shows that it is absolute and faultless justice, infallibility and reason. In its results, Karma is that which corrects human injustice and all the defects of nature, a law of retribution that rewards and punishes equally impartially. Karma “does not care about ranks and titles” and cannot be appeased or repelled by prayer. This notion is common to Hindus and Buddhists who believe in Karma” (Blavatskyia, 131-132).

Blavatsky also emphasizes that karma affects not only the individual but also the family, the community, the nation and even the planet. This dependence stems from the Theosophical understanding that all human beings are manifestations of the One Absolute Reality and as such are interconnected and interdependent. “Among theosophists, it is held to be an axiom that the interdependence of Mankind is the cause of what is called Distributive Karma, and it is this Law which offers the solution of the great question of collective suffering and relief from it” (Blavatskyia, 135). Blavatsky relates what was said to an extremely strict moral position arising from the unity and connectedness of humanity: “No man can rise above his own weaknesses without raising the whole of which he is a constituent part. In reality, there is no such thing as “Separateness” (Blavatskyia, 135). From here, it can also be concluded that the good and moral

actions, thoughts and behavior of an individual influence and affect society, no matter how invisible this may seem. The same should apply to immoral behavior.

4. About alternatives

If we look at the risky society from the standpoint of the theosophical understanding of personal and social suffering, the conclusion is forced that the problems of modern times are the result of the individual and collective actions of mankind throughout the known history of civilization. From the position of the scientist, Beck himself points out this dependence and consequences, making historical reminiscences that lead him to use metaphysical concepts such as “predestination” and “fate”. This is evident from the following quote: “Unlike fortunes, which attract but can also repel, in relation to which a choice, a decision is always possible and necessary, risks and damages creep in everywhere hidden and unhindered in relation to any free (!) decision. In this sense, they lead to the appearance of previously unknown predetermination, to a kind of “civilizational destiny of risks”. In some respects, it recalls the fate of the classes in the Middle Ages. Now in an advanced civilization, there is a kind of endangered fate that man is born with and cannot avoid as a result of any achievement – with this “small difference” (but of great importance) that we all face with her. Therefore, in the advanced civilization that comes to remove all predestination, to open opportunities for people to make their own decisions, to free them from the compulsions of nature, there arises a hitherto unknown, global, worldwide destiny of threats, in respect of which no there are almost no individual possibilities for decision-making – already only because harmful and poisonous substances are firmly connected with the natural base, with the elementary life processes in the industrial world” (Beck, 2013: 63-64).

5. On the meaning of the term “reincarnation”

The knowledge of reincarnation as an element of the general knowledge of the theosophical alternatives of the risk society refers to the repeated passage of the septenary man through the phases of life and death. From the second chapter of the present study, it is clear that according to “The Secret Doctrine” planetary, cosmic and universal development is subordinated to the incessant alternation between birth and death. This matter has the character of law in theosophy, like some Eastern schools, and is directly related to the law of karma. The four noble truths taught by Gautama Buddha are aimed at overcoming samsara – the thirst for existence and the wheel of endless births and deaths that it creates for man, obtaining enlightenment and merging with nirvana (Benares Sermon, 1995). In the three volumes of “The Secret Doctrine” Helena Blavatsky refers to it as an a priori law. This is mainly manifested in the exposition of the general processes of cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis. In “The Secret Doctrine” Blavatsky emphasizes the evidence of reincarnation in ancient mythologies, as well as the connection between reincarnation and karma. In the much more practically oriented “The Key to Theosophy”, more extensive explanations of the nature of reincarnation and karma are given.

In “The Key to Theosophy” reincarnation is defined as a succession of births, thanks to which “the eternal development of countless millions of Egos towards perfection and well-deserved rest takes place” (Blavatskyia, 132). Reincarnation enables the Ego (manas) which attaches itself to the impersonal monad (atma-buddhi) to perfect itself with each birth and gradually acquire the spiritual and material perfection necessary for merging with the Absolute of theosophy or the nirvana of Eastern wisdom.

The question of reincarnation, as Blavatsky used the term in her English text of “The Secret Doctrine”, is related to the seven-fold division of man. As shown in the chapter “Philosophical Aspects of “The Secret Doctrine” in study “Theosophical alternatives to the risk society” (Kaltseva, 2023), the theosophical division of man is as follows: The densest, the physical

body, is called the sthula sharira; Less dense, but invisible to the human eye, is the astral body or linga sharira; The vital principle or prana, the etheric body, is the third human principle, considered from below – from the physical body upwards; The fourth principle – kama rupa is our animal soul, the receptacle of passions and desires, the lower manas or lower reason of man; The fifth principle, the higher manas, is the human soul, our Ego, which, together with the next two principles, is the immortal part of the personality. The sixth principle is buddhi or the spiritual soul, which, together with the seventh principle – atma, constitutes the impersonal monad, which emerged from the Absolute at the beginning of the manvantara, the period of wakefulness and action of the universe. This division results in the division of human bodies into four lower bodies – physical, astral, ethereal and mental or sthula sharira, linga sharira, prana and kama rupa. And on three higher ones – manas, buddhi and atma. The four lower bodies are the temporary mortal part which, according to theosophy, ceases to exist at the physical death of the personality. The best achieved as moral and spiritual qualities from the lower and higher manas, after physical death, merges with the atma-buddhi and forms the immortal part of the personality. It is this immortal part which reincarnates, i.e., receives a new body, brain, and memory after a certain period of rest, called by the theosophists Devachan. It corresponds to the Christian paradise or the Buddhist nirvana.

Blavatsky realized that issues like karma and reincarnation were hard to fathom and even harder to believe in her times, which she defined as an age of extreme materialism. The founder of the Theosophical society admits that the evidence for processes and laws, as she calls karma and reincarnation, can only be circumstantial, but this does not invalidate the theosophical proposition that these laws are immutable. As she repeatedly points out in “The Secret Doctrine” and “The Key to Theosophy” for unbelievers and extreme materialists the doctrine she presents can only remain “a working hypothesis”: “If men, even the most educated, believe in Gravity, the Ether, The Force and such non-Science abstractions and “working hypotheses” that they have never seen, touched, smelled, heard, tried – why can’t other people, on the same principle, to believe in their immortal Ego, a “working hypothesis” far more logical and important than any other” (Blavatskyia, 86-87). This quote is Blavatsky’s ironic rebuttal to her contemporary critics, and it is not the only reaction. Blavatsky repeatedly in *The Secret Doctrine* ironizes the approach of her contemporary scientists, who adjust the facts to their hypotheses and deny everything that does not fit into these hypotheses.

6. About alternatives again

From the perspective of possible alternatives to the risk society, the knowledge of reincarnation is related to the questions of suffering and karma. As the Buddha taught, and as Helena Blavatsky confirms in the quote above, it is only through pain and suffering that one learns love, charity and compassion – a fundamental aspiration of theosophists in fulfillment of the first goal of the Theosophical society – Universal Brotherhood. The concrete dimensions of these difficult lessons are manifested in overcoming the incessant desires for possessions – of objects, titles, people, and seeing life only as a series of personal pleasures. Every reincarnation is a kind of risk for the person, and this risk is related to the choices that the person makes during his life. Choosing to live according to the rules of high morality, striving for mutual help, charity, compassion and self-sacrifice brings the Ego closer to the One Reality, to the Absolute. A selfish, immoral and spiritless life guarantees the Ego a long series of rebirths because of attachment to base passions, feelings and desires. What has been said is nothing new both for the centuries-old human knowledge, ethics, aesthetics and philosophy and for the purposes of the religions of the world.

In the discourse of the world risk society, the thesis is that the more people live according to the rules of high morality and brotherhood, the faster the society in its world unity

and connectedness moves in the direction of liberation from the various types of risks and integration based on theosophical and eternal human principles that Theosophy also shares – love, charity, compassion. Related to what one must do in order to ascend with each new birth on Earth to absolute perfection is the question of Theosophical duty to society, which is dealt with in chapter under the heading “Alternatives, Politics and Duty” (Kaltseva, 2023).

If the theory of reincarnation is true, the question remains – “Why do people not remember their previous incarnations.” Blavatsky’s answer is again related to the septenary essence of man – to the multiple births and deaths of the four lower bodies that change in each life and to the immortal higher triad of atma, buddhi and manas. Here’s how Helena Blavatsky answers the question “Why don’t we remember” in “The Key to Theosophy”: “Very simply. For those principles which we call physical, none of which science denies, though it calls them by other names, are destroyed after the death of constituent elements. This also happens with memory along with its brain. And this vanished memory cannot remember nor fix anything in the next incarnation of the Ego. Reincarnation means that the Ego is given a new body, a new brain, and a new memory. So it is absurd to expect that this memory will contain what it never sealed” (Blavatskyia, 86). That is, the physical brain and its memory are part of the lower manas, of the animal soul of man, of kama rupa. As pointed out above, only the noblest experience gained from the lower manas is attached to the higher manas, the immortal part. Hence Blavatsky’s appeal: “To be convinced of the fact of reincarnation and past lives, one must come into contact with one’s real immortal Ego, not with the disappearing memory“ (Blavatskyia, 86).

7. Conclusion

It is a matter of choice whether Karma and Reincarnation as theosophical alternatives to risk society will be accepted, rejected, or whether there will be only partial agreement on some of the propositions in “The Secret Doctrine” and “Key to Theosophy”. The practical nature and focus of the knowledge presented by Blavatsky shapes its deep meaning for the individual and society. Theosophical views, which are also principles in Eastern philosophy, of karma and reincarnation, are easy to dismiss before they are studied. But when one penetrates into their infinite expanse of knowledge, nobility and humanity, it is possible to approve them, to accept them and through them to begin a change – initially personal, individual, which begins to influence and affect the surrounding world. Thus, this world with all its risky situations and challenges may begin to change. The hypothetical nature of this assumption is evolutionary, not revolutionary, in terms of consciousness, action, and behavior in life. In its essence, theosophy is an evolutionary theory, that bets on the gradual, but certain and categorical change – individual and social, in an upward direction by perfecting the unity of spirit and matter.

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