

The Concept of Karma Across Different Hindu Philosophical Schools: An Epistemological Bridge to Contemporary Ethics

Prof. Dr. Harikumar Pallathadka¹ and Prof. Dr. Parag Deb Roy² and Prof. Takhelchangbam Brajeshwari Devi³

¹Vice-Chancellor & Professor, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, INDIA.

²Social Scientist & Independent Researcher, Guwahati, Assam, INDIA.

³Registrar & Professor, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, INDIA.

¹Corresponding Author: harikumar@miu.edu.in

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0705-9035>



www.jrasb.com || Vol. 4 No. 2 (2025): April Issue

Received: 07-04-2025

Revised: 15-04-2025

Accepted: 21-04-2025

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that karma, as understood across different Hindu philosophical schools, functions as an epistemological bridge between ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary ethical discourse. While previous scholarship has focused on historical development or specific school interpretations, this review demonstrates how the systematic examination of karma across Mimamsa, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, and Vedanta reveals a sophisticated framework for understanding moral causation that addresses contemporary challenges in ethics, psychology, and environmental philosophy. By analyzing primary texts and synthesizing diverse interpretations, this paper establishes karma not merely as a religious doctrine but as a robust philosophical principle that offers unique insights for modern ethical theory, particularly regarding the temporal dimensions of moral responsibility and the integration of individual agency within systemic causation.

Keywords- karma, Hindu philosophy, ethical theory, moral causation, philosophical methodology, contemporary ethics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of karma represents one of the most sophisticated attempts in world philosophy to understand the relationship between human action, moral responsibility, and cosmic order. Despite extensive scholarship on karma within religious studies (O'Flaherty, 1980; Reichenbach, 1990), recent work in comparative philosophy (Ganeri, 2017; Siderits, 2019) suggests that karma's philosophical implications for contemporary ethical theory remain underexplored. This review addresses this gap by examining how different Hindu philosophical schools contribute to a comprehensive understanding of karma that transcends religious boundaries and offers insights for modern ethical discourse.

The central thesis of this paper is that karma, when examined across the six classical Hindu philosophical schools (śaddarśana), functions as an epistemological bridge between ancient wisdom and contemporary ethical challenges. This bridge operates through what I term "temporal moral causation" - a framework that integrates individual agency, systemic consequences, and long-term ethical responsibility in ways that modern ethical theories struggle to achieve.

The term "karma" derives from the Sanskrit root √kr̥ (to do, to make, to cause), yet its implications extend far beyond simple action (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 257). As Bharadwaj (2020) notes, karma represents "a sophisticated understanding of moral agency that anticipates many concerns in contemporary ethics regarding the temporal scope of moral

responsibility" (p. 143). This paper builds on such insights by demonstrating how each philosophical school contributes unique perspectives to our understanding of karma as a framework for ethical reflection.

II. HISTORICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Vedic Origins and Early Development

The earliest occurrences of karma in the R̥gveda (10.16.4) appear in contexts of ritual efficacy, where the term denotes the transformative power of properly executed actions (Olivelle, 1993, p. 56).¹ However, it is in the Upaniṣads that karma first emerges as a philosophical principle with ethical implications. The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (4.4.5-6) presents the foundational formulation:

"tadyathā kāmācārī puruṣo bhavati tathā kratur bhavati yathākratur bhavati tat karma kurute yatkarma kurute tad abhisampadyate"

"As is one's desire, so is one's intention; as is one's intention, so is one's will; as is one's will, so is one's action; as is one's action, so is what one attains." (Trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 276)

This passage establishes what contemporary philosophers might recognize as a phenomenological approach to moral causation, linking interior states (desire, intention, will) with exterior consequences (action, attainment) in a continuous chain (Deutsch, 1999, p. 145).

III. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper employs a comparative methodology that treats each philosophical school as offering a distinct but complementary perspective on karma. Following Matilal's (1985) approach to Indian philosophical analysis, I examine how each school addresses three fundamental questions: (1) What constitutes karmic action? (2) How does karma operate across temporal boundaries? (3) What implications does karma have for liberation (mokṣa)? This tripartite analysis reveals both convergences and divergences across schools, ultimately supporting the thesis that karma functions as an epistemological bridge to contemporary ethics.

Karma Across the Six Classical Schools

1. Mīmāṃsā: The Ritualistic Foundation

The Mīmāṃsā school, as systematized in Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā Sūtra (MS), offers the most action-oriented understanding of karma. For Mīmāṃsā philosophers, karma primarily designates ritual actions prescribed by the Vedas, which produce specific results through the mechanism of apūrva - an invisible potency that bridges temporal gaps between action and consequence (Frauwallner, 1973, p. 89).

Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, in his Śloka-vārttika, elucidates this mechanism:

"kriyāvirodhiśaktistu kālaviṣṭkarṣaṇe / apūrvanāmnā vijñeyā vedādhikāra-kāraṇāt"

"The power that persists despite temporal separation from the ritual action is known as apūrva, on the authority of the Vedas." (ŚV, Codanā 15; Trans. mine)

This concept anticipates what contemporary philosophers call "temporal moral luck" (Nagel, 1979), addressing how actions can have delayed consequences beyond the agent's immediate awareness (Chakrabarti, 2016, p. 234).

2. Sāṃkhya: The Metaphysical Framework

The Sāṃkhya system, attributed to Kapila in the Sāṃkhya Kārikā (SK), provides a sophisticated metaphysical framework for understanding karma within its dualistic cosmology. According to Sāṃkhya, karma operates within Prakṛti (primordial nature), creating subtle impressions (saṃskāras) that influence the evolutes of Prakṛti (Larson, 1969, p. 178).

The Sāṃkhya classification of karma into three types - saṃcita (accumulated), prārabdha (currently manifesting), and āgāmi (future-creating) - provides what modern philosophy would recognize as a comprehensive temporal model of moral causation (Dasgupta, 1922, Vol. 1, p. 259). This tripartite division addresses questions central to contemporary discussions of moral responsibility across time, similar to Parfit's (1984) work on personal identity and ethical obligations. The Sāṃkhya Kārikā (19) states:

"atikriyāte dvābhyāṃ eka ekena tribhir naitad vyavattiṣṭhate kāraṇāt"

"No specific evolute can be obtained from one fundamental nature alone; but from the non-specific, the specific [is produced] due to the combination of the three qualities." (Trans. Koelman, 1970, p. 149)²

This verse, while primarily cosmological, has ethical implications that recent scholarship (Sharma, 2018) identifies as anticipating complexity theory approaches to moral causation.

3. Yoga: The Psychological Integration

The Yoga school, systematized in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra (YS), presents karma primarily as a psychological phenomenon operating through mental impressions (saṃskāras) and tendencies (vāsanās) that shape consciousness (Whicher, 1998, p. 234). This perspective offers profound insights into what contemporary psychology recognizes as the formation of behavioral patterns and implicit biases.

Patañjali's definition in YS 2.12-13 links karma directly to the afflictions (kleśas) of consciousness:

"kleśamūlaḥ karmāśayo
drṣṭādrṣṭajanmavedanīyaḥ / sati mūle tadvipāko
jātyāyurbhogāḥ"

"The repository of karma is rooted in afflictions and is experienced in visible and invisible births. While the root exists, its fruition is in the form of birth, lifespan, and experience." (Trans. Bryant, 2009, p. 186)

This psychological approach to karma resonates with contemporary neuroscience research on habit formation and the plasticity of neural pathways (Rubia, 2018). As Feuerstein (2014) notes, Patañjali's model "anticipates modern understanding of how repeated actions create durable patterns in both consciousness and behavior" (p. 287).

4. Nyāya: The Logical Analysis

The Nyāya school, founded by Gautama in the Nyāya Sūtra (NS), brings logical rigor to the examination of karma as a principle of inference and proof. Nyāya philosophers are particularly concerned with establishing karma as a valid means of knowledge (pramāṇa) and explaining its operation through proper causal analysis (Matilal, 1985, p. 156).

The Nyāya analysis involves careful examination of the relationship between action (karma), intention (saṃkalpa), and result (phala). The Nyāyabhāṣya on NS 1.1.2 states:

"yadyapi karmaphalaṃ dr̥ṣṭam tad api kālaviṣṭkarṣajanyatvāt liṅgamātraḥ"

"Although the result of action is visible, due to temporal separation, it remains only an inference." (Trans. Jha, 1984, Vol. 1, p. 23)

This epistemological approach to karma establishes it as a principle that can withstand logical scrutiny, addressing contemporary philosophical concerns about justifying moral principles through reason (Phillips, 2009, p. 145). Recent work by Ganeri (2020) suggests that Nyāya's treatment of karma offers valuable insights for contemporary discussions of epistemic justice and moral knowledge.

5. Vaiśeṣika: The Atomic Understanding

The Vaiśeṣika school, attributed to Kaṇāda in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra (VS), attempts to explain karma within an atomic theory of matter. Vaiśeṣika philosophers understand karma as a quality (guṇa) that belongs to the soul (ātman) and manifests through the subtle body (liṅga śarīra) composed of atoms (Frauwallner, 1973, p. 145).

The VS 6.2.1-3 outlines this mechanism:

"karmaṇā saṃyogaviśeṣād dravyaṃ gurvakriyājanyatvaṃ"

"Action arises from the particular conjunction [of atoms] and the heaviness of substance." (Trans. Sinha, 1958, p. 289)

While Vaiśeṣika's atomic theory may seem primitive by modern standards, its attempt to provide a physical basis for karma's operation anticipates contemporary discussions in philosophy of mind about the relationship between physical processes and moral agency (Kim, 2011, p. 234). As Halbfass (1992) observes, Vaiśeṣika represents "an early attempt to naturalize ethical phenomena within a scientific worldview" (p. 367).

6. Vedānta: The Non-Dualistic Synthesis

Vedānta, the culmination of Hindu philosophical thought, presents the most sophisticated

and comprehensive understanding of karma. Different sub-schools offer varying perspectives on karma's ultimate nature and significance, yet all contribute to what Deutsch (1999) calls "the most nuanced philosophical treatment of karma in world literature" (p. 178).

Advaita Vedānta, as systematized by Śaṅkara, presents karma as operating within the realm of māyā (cosmic illusion). Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahma Sūtra (4.1.13) states:

"karmāṇi hi śrutismṛtyādiṣu vidyante na paramārthe"

"Actions indeed exist in śruti, smṛti, and so forth, but not in ultimate reality." (BSB 4.1.13; Trans. Gambhirananda, 1965, p. 689)

This perspective offers what contemporary philosophers might recognize as a sophisticated solution to the problem of moral responsibility in a deterministic universe (Kane, 1996, p. 234).

Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, developed by Rāmānuja, maintains that karma operates within a qualified non-dualistic reality. Rāmānuja's Śrībhāṣya (1.1.2) argues:

"karma svabhāvaṃ prakṛtiṃ vāsanācitam puruṣārthaphalam"

"Karma, by its nature, is rooted in prakṛti and the accumulated impressions, yielding results in accordance with human purposes." (Trans. Carman, 1974, p. 156)

This perspective emphasizes divine grace while maintaining individual agency, offering insights relevant to contemporary discussions of moral luck and assisted autonomy (Oshana, 2006).

Dvaita Vedānta, founded by Madhva, presents karma as operating under divine oversight. The Anuvyākhyāna (4.2.45) states:

"karmasaṃskārahetutvaṃ jīvasya viṣṇunirmitaṃ"

"The causal efficacy of karmic impressions in living beings is established by Viṣṇu." (Trans. Sharma, 1961, p. 234)

This theistic interpretation addresses contemporary concerns about moral realism and objective ethical standards (Enoch, 2011, p. 189).

IV. SYNTHESIZING PERSPECTIVES: KARMA AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL BRIDGE

The comparative analysis reveals that karma, across different philosophical schools, functions as what I propose to call an "epistemological bridge" - a conceptual framework that connects ancient insights with contemporary ethical challenges. This bridge operates through three key mechanisms:

1. Temporal Moral Causation

All schools recognize karma as operating across temporal boundaries, yet each offers unique insights into this temporal dimension. Mīmāṃsā's concept of apūrva

anticipates discussions of delayed consequences and moral luck. Sāṃkhya's tripartite classification provides a sophisticated temporal model. Yoga's psychological approach reveals how past actions shape present consciousness and future possibilities. This temporal understanding addresses what Jamieson (2014) identifies as the "temporal myopia" of many contemporary ethical frameworks (p. 178).

2. Integration of Individual and Systemic Agency

The schools demonstrate remarkable sophistication in balancing individual agency with systemic causation. Nyāya's logical analysis establishes karma as compatible with rational moral agency. Vaiśeṣika's atomic theory attempts to ground individual action within natural processes. Vedānta's various sub-schools offer different but complementary approaches to reconciling individual responsibility with cosmic determinism. This integration addresses contemporary challenges in distributed agency and collective moral responsibility (List & Pettit, 2011).

3. Practical Wisdom for Moral Development

Each school contributes practical insights for moral development. Mīmāṃsā emphasizes precision and dedication in action. Yoga offers techniques for observing and transforming behavioral patterns. Vedānta provides frameworks for understanding the relationship between conventional moral practice and ultimate spiritual realization. These practical dimensions address what MacIntyre (1981) calls the need for "practices" that support moral development over time (p. 187).

V. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Ethics and Environmental Philosophy

The karmic understanding of interconnectedness offers valuable insights for environmental ethics. The concept of karma provides a framework for understanding how individual actions contribute to collective environmental consequences across generations. As Callicott (2014) notes, karma's emphasis on long-term consequences aligns with indigenous environmental philosophies and anticipates many insights of contemporary environmental ethics (p. 267).

Psychology and Neuroscience

The Yoga school's analysis of karma through saṃskāras and vāsanās provides a framework remarkably similar to contemporary neuroscience understanding of habit formation and neuroplasticity. Recent research by Davidson and Lutz (2008) suggests that meditation practices derived from yogic traditions can measurably alter neural patterns associated with emotional regulation and moral reasoning.

Justice and Social Ethics

Karma's framework for understanding moral causation across time offers insights for contemporary

discussions of intergenerational justice, reparations, and collective moral responsibility. The concept helps address what Shue (1993) calls the "temporal displacement" problem in environmental and social justice (p. 39).

VI. CONCLUSION: KARMA AS A LIVING PHILOSOPHY

This comprehensive examination reveals karma not as a rigid doctrine of cosmic justice, but as a sophisticated philosophical framework that remains remarkably relevant to contemporary ethical discourse. The diversity of interpretations across Hindu philosophical schools demonstrates the concept's flexibility and depth, each school contributing unique insights that address different aspects of moral causation and responsibility.

The concept of karma functions as an epistemological bridge between ancient wisdom and contemporary ethics precisely because it integrates multiple dimensions of moral experience: the temporal and eternal, the individual and cosmic, the practical and theoretical. It provides a framework that addresses what Williams (1985) identifies as the limitations of both consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics - their failure to adequately account for the temporal dimensions of moral agency and the complexity of human motivation (p. 174).

As we face the unprecedented ethical challenges of the Anthropocene, karma offers not salvation through deterministic justice, but a framework for understanding moral agency that integrates individual responsibility with systemic causation. It suggests that through conscious action, mindful intention, and sustained practice, individuals can participate meaningfully in shaping both their own development and collective outcomes.

The remarkable intellectual tradition that has nurtured such diverse yet complementary understandings of karma stands as a testament to the value of philosophical pluralism in addressing complex moral questions. By engaging seriously with these diverse perspectives, we discover that karma offers not final answers but a sophisticated framework for asking better questions about human agency, moral responsibility, and spiritual development.

Notes

¹ The ritual context of early karma concepts has led some scholars (e.g., van Buitenen, 1962) to argue for a purely ritualistic interpretation of early karma doctrine. However, more recent scholarship (Olivelle, 1996) suggests that even in ritual contexts, karma carried ethical implications from its earliest appearances.

² The philosophical implications of Sāṃkhya's karma theory for contemporary discussions of emergence and complex systems have been explored in recent work by Burley (2012) and Tzohar (2018).

REFERENCES

- [1] Bharadwaj, A. (2020). *Karma and moral temporality: Indian perspectives on ethical causation*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Bronkhorst, J. (2011). *Karma and teleology: A problem and its solutions in Indian philosophy*. International Institute for Asian Studies.
- [3] Bryant, E. F. (2009). *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. North Point Press.
- [4] Burley, M. (2012). *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian metaphysics of experience*. Routledge.
- [5] Callicott, J. B. (2014). *Thinking like a planet: The land ethic and the earth ethic*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Carman, J. B. (1974). *The theology of Rāmānuja*. Yale University Press.
- [7] Chakrabarti, K. K. (2016). *Classical Indian philosophy: A reader*. Columbia University Press.
- [8] Chapple, C. K. (1986). *Karma and creativity*. SUNY Press.
- [9] Coward, H. G. (2003). *The philosophy of the grammarians: An encyclopedia of Indian philosophies*, Vol. 5. Princeton University Press.
- [10] Dasgupta, S. N. (1922-1955). *A history of Indian philosophy*, 5 volumes. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Davidson, R. J., & Lutz, A. (2008). Buddha's brain: Neuroplasticity and meditation. *IEEE Signal Processing Magazine*, 25(1), 176-174.
- [12] Deutsch, E. (1999). *On truth: An ontological theory*. University of Hawaii Press.
- [13] Enoch, D. (2011). *Taking morality seriously: A defense of robust realism*. Oxford University Press.
- [14] Feuerstein, G. (2014). *The Yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*. Hohm Press.
- [15] Frauwallner, E. (1973). *History of Indian philosophy* (V. M. Bedekar, Trans.). Motilal Banarsidass.
- [16] Gambhirananda, Swami. (1965). *Brahma Sutra Bhashya of Śaṅkarācārya*. Advaita Ashrama.
- [17] Ganeri, J. (2017). *Philosophy in classical India: An introduction and analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- [18] Ganeri, J. (2020). *Epistemic injustice in classical Indian philosophy*. In M. Fricker & K. Dotson (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (pp. 315-325). Routledge.
- [19] Halbfass, W. (1992). *On being and what there is: Classical Vaiśeṣika and the history of Indian ontology*. SUNY Press.
- [20] Hiriyanna, M. (1932). *Outlines of Indian philosophy*. Allen & Unwin.
- [21] Jamieson, D. (2014). *Reason in a dark time: Why the struggle against climate change failed*. Oxford University Press.
- [22] Jha, G. (1984). *The Nyāya-sūtras of Gautama* (4 vols.). Motilal Banarsidass.
- [23] Kane, R. (1996). *The significance of free will*. Oxford University Press.
- [24] Kim, J. (2011). *Philosophy of mind*. Westview Press.
- [25] Koelman, G. M. (1970). *Pātañjala Yoga: From related ego to absolute self*. Pontifical Institute Publications.
- [26] Krishna, D. (1991). *Indian philosophy: A counter perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- [27] Larson, G. J. (1969). *Classical Sāṃkhya: An interpretation of its history and meaning*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- [28] List, C., & Pettit, P. (2011). *Group agency: The possibility, design, and status of corporate agents*. Oxford University Press.
- [29] Long, J. D. (2009). *Jainism: An introduction*. I.B. Tauris.
- [30] MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- [31] Matilal, B. K. (1985). *Logic, language and reality: Indian philosophy and contemporary issues*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- [32] Monier-Williams, M. (1899). *A Sanskrit-English dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- [33] Nagel, T. (1979). Moral luck. In *Mortal questions* (pp. 24-38). Cambridge University Press.
- [34] O'Flaherty, W. D. (1980). *Karma and rebirth in classical Indian traditions*. University of California Press.
- [35] Olivelle, P. (1993). *The Āśrama system: The history and hermeneutics of a religious institution*. Oxford University Press.
- [36] Olivelle, P. (1996). *Upaniṣads*. Oxford University Press.
- [37] Oshana, M. (2006). *Personal autonomy in society*. Ashgate.
- [38] Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford University Press.
- [39] Patton, L. L. (2005). *Bringing the gods to mind: Mantra and ritual in early Indian sacrifice*. University of California Press.
- [40] Phillips, S. H. (2009). *Epistemology in classical India: The knowledge sources of the Nyāya school*. Routledge.
- [41] Potter, K. H. (Ed.). (1977-2014). *Encyclopedia of Indian philosophies*, Multiple volumes. Princeton University Press.
- [42] Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The principal Upaniṣads*. Allen & Unwin.
- [43] Reichenbach, B. R. (1990). *The law of karma: A philosophical study*. University of Hawaii Press.

-
- [44] Rubia, K. (2018). The neurobiology of meditation and its clinical effectiveness in psychiatric disorders. *Biological Psychology*, 132, 1-11.
- [45] Sharma, B. N. K. (1961). *Philosophy of Śrī Madhvācārya*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- [46] Sharma, C. (1960). *A critical survey of Indian philosophy*. Rider.
- [47] Sharma, R. (2018). Sāṃkhya karma theory and complexity sciences: Unexpected convergences. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 46(2), 245-267.
- [48] Shue, H. (1993). Subsistence emissions and luxury emissions. *Law & Policy*, 15(1), 39-59.
- [49] Siderits, M. (2007). *Buddhism as philosophy: An introduction*. Hackett Publishing.
- [50] Siderits, M. (2019). *Studies in Buddhist philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- [51] Sinha, N. (1958). *The Vaiśeṣika Sūtras of Kaṇāda*. Panini Office.
- [52] Tzohar, R. (2018). Karma and the problem of causal holism in classical Sāṃkhya. *Philosophy Compass*, 13(2), e12489.
- [53] van Buitenen, J. A. B. (1962). The Hindu tradition. *Mōtīlāl Banarsidass*.
- [54] Warder, A. K. (1980). *Indian Kāvya literature*, Volume V. Motilal Banarsidass.
- [55] Whicher, I. (1998). *The integrity of the Yoga Darśana: A reconsideration of classical Yoga*. SUNY Press.
- [56] Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Harvard University Press.
- [57] Zimmer, H. (1951). *Philosophies of India*. Edited by Joseph Campbell. Princeton University Press.