

Karma

The Unobservable of Existence

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Prelude

Karma is the unknown we appeal to when a problem has not been properly arbitrated. The common refrain “*there will be karma*” expresses the sense of a residual unfairness, of a debt which should have been paid; the sense that the pain others impose on us will be imposed on them and... vice versa. Perforce life itself is unfair if only because we cannot answer the questions that need to be answered. We do not know whether the universe calibrates or arbitrates us. We do not know whether we have a soul. We are bounded by the ignorance of existence; so when we perceive injustice we invoke karma. Karma satisfies our sense of an equilibrium that should be... but may not be.

In an era dominated by rationality, the appeal for karma is only hypothetical and never real. It is an invocation to a simulated unknown. For most, karma is entirely unobservable and entirely uncertain. The maintained hypothesis that underscores karma is that an unfair act establishes a karmic residue which must be purged. Karma is the mechanism which purges the residue; a mechanism for the equilibration of unfairness. While karma has ancient origins, it has entered modern discourse if only to underscore our belief in natural fairness that individuals should do unto others as they expect others to do unto them. Karma is the moral equivalent of Newton’s third law that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. But it is not a law that can be easily tested.

Karma admits various definitions. Bronkhorst (2011)¹ considers a definition with three variations. The first definition notes that in Hinduism and Buddhism karma is tantamount to a force initiated by the deeds and desires of individuals, a force perpetuated in the subsequent cycles of birth and rebirth. The objective of an individual must be to free themselves from this cycle of karmic retribution. A second definition suggests karma is the aggregate of the ethical consequences of individual actions, a form of cosmic balance sheet which must be settled across future lifetimes. In the third definition embedded in Jainism, karma is the mechanism used to purify the soul. Almost certainly, if karma exists, it satisfies all three definitions; for the reaction force which emerges as a consequence of ethical imbalance is designed to purify the soul that creates the imbalance. Karma then entails an imbalance, a reaction to that imbalance, and the subsequent cleansing of the imbalance. In sum, the doer in doing establishes the consequences; they establish their karma. The principle is simple; the unfairness generated returns to the one who generates it.

The purpose of this essay is not to compete with ancient or contemporary conceptions of karma. Rather the purpose is to consider the rationality of karma when rationality logically rejects it. The rational individual who observes the suffering of the innocent and the exoneration of the culpable will reject karma; the unfairness is too ubiquitous. There is too much disequilibrium for us to believe in equilibrium. Yet while the logic of observation suggests karma does not exist, many invoke its hypothetical presence, perhaps in hope rather than in expectation. The problem is a problem of observability. We are limited by the finiteness of our existence which bounds what we can observe. And if karma does exist, it is necessarily unobservable. Karma cannot be tested in an experiment based on observation; it must be conceived and tested in a thought experiment based on what may be possible. This essay proceeds to construct that thought experiment.

¹ Bronkhorst, J. (2011). *Karma*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

Background

I was introduced to existentialism through Dostoyevsky and Kafka, graduated to Camus, Gide, Sartre and Kierkegaard, but always revisit Dostoyevsky and Kafka. I have come to regard existentialism as the projection of the experience of existence onto others and the projection of the experience of others onto me. Through existence and the mediation of others, we converge to who we are, not necessarily who we want to be, but who we are. And karma is relevant to that convergence. In this essay I will correlate my experience with existentialism. I begin with synchronicity as I have found it to be a calibration of karma.

Synchronicity was defined by Jung² to mean the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningful but not causally connected events. Jung regarded synchronicity as a bridge between reality and a collective unconscious. In my essay in 2013³, I gave this example of synchronicity

Example 1

I was in a second hand bookshop in Melbourne on a Wednesday. I was looking at a shelf of old books by Mark Twain. I dislodged a book next to them and it fell off the shelf. I picked it up; it was by the Russian author Ivan Turgenev titled 'On the Eve'. I had been a collector of Turgenev's books for a couple of years after visiting his house at Bougival outside Paris; but I did not have 'On the Eve'. Turgenev is not a well-known author in Australia and, aside from his work 'Fathers and Sons', most of his books are difficult to find. I had no money on me, so I decided the next time I came in to the city I would buy it. On the Friday of that week, I travelled by train to the city with the intention to buy Turgenev's 'On the Eve'. A fellow got on the train two stations after me, sat down next to me, and began reading a book. It was 'On the Eve' by Turgenev.

² Jung, C.G. 1973. Synchronicity. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³ Sawyer, K. (2013) *Synchronicity: The Anonymous Test of Existence*.

This is a standard example of synchronicity. As I wrote in the 2013 essay

“This illustrates synchronicity in its benign form. The observer observes the improbable. Reading Russian literature on Australian trains is rare. Reading Turgenev is rarer and reading On the Eve even rarer. The exactitude of the coincidence made this improbable. The same book, on the day intended for its purchase, made it improbable. At another time the meaning would have been diluted. Synchronicity involves exactitude, exactitude with the power to confront. But it cannot be talked about or written down. Rationality does not permit it.”

Most will accept this anecdote occurred, for why would I contrive it? But most will not attach meaning to it. We are addicted to chance; not determinism. In 2013 I wrote that I had experienced approximately forty examples of synchronicity with significant meaning; I have now experienced many more. They appear to be a form of calibration. Like synchronicity, observations of karma cannot be easily told to others; the more that is told the less credible the teller. I have had observations of karma with similar exactitude, but to discuss a specific example connotes more risk than to discuss synchronicity. To speak of the misfortune of others and relate it to their past actions is to play the God we never are. I am too risk averse to speak publicly of the karma of others. I can, however, relate an anecdote against myself.

Example 2

On May 1, 2017 I booked in to stay at the *Hotel de France* in Ferney-Voltaire near Geneva. I was visiting Chateau Voltaire which I had visited some years earlier. On that occasion I had stayed at a hotel on the outskirts of the town. I determined not to make that mistake again. May 1 is May Day, a national holiday in France and the hotel closed at 11am. As I was arriving in the afternoon, the hotel had left instructions for me; a code to enter the hotel and my room key in an envelope inside. When I arrived at 4pm, I noticed Hotel de France was right next to a restaurant called Karma; the signs juxtaposed *Karma* and *Hotel de France*. I entered the hotel with the code. There were three envelopes

with keys, but not one for me. The town was deserted. I returned to the hotel twice, but my envelope was not there. I resolved to go to the town noticeboard to look for another hotel. I had to walk a couple of kilometers and found a hotel. Though I did not realize it at first, it was the hotel I had stayed in years before. That was the start of my problems. At this hotel, the internet wasn't working properly so I couldn't Skype home; when I went to the front office to get some help, the office had closed and when I returned to my room, my key wouldn't work. I eventually had to wake someone up to get a master key. I had little sleep that night. Long story short...*Hotel de France* maintained they had left the key for me and that someone had slept in my room. They wouldn't refund my money until I provided a receipt from the other hotel and until they had determined what happened. They finally determined someone had slept in the room I had been allocated. The person had the room the night before, realized it was May Day and there would be no staff on duty, knew the code, and knew the envelope with room 24 would be there. They had a late night flight out of Geneva and decided to use the room until they left around 9pm. And I was left outside. I eventually got a refund from *Hotel de France*. However, the problems did not end there. As a result of staying at the other hotel, someone got access to the details of my debit card and I got scammed. I had to put a stop on my debit card and finally got a refund on the dubious transaction. The bottom line I suppose is that if you are writing about karma, don't stay at a hotel with the word karma attached.

The premise of this essay is that synchronicity and karma are related. Synchronicity calibrates karma. Karma is unobservable, but synchronicity provides an insight. Synchronicity is an interface to a reference frame where there is greater observability. The problem is that both concepts are so outside our sense of rationality. We are limited by our powers of observation; we can infer but can never fully determine. In the paper *The Search for Significance*⁴ I summarized the problem this way

⁴ Sawyer, K. (2018). *The Search for Significance*

“The problem which underwrites synchronicity is its singularity; it does not admit randomization and, as a consequence, does not admit standard statistical testing. Synchronicity is a singular event; it cannot be sampled from a population, and its attributes cannot be inferred. It has a uniqueness which distinguishes it from other problems in statistical inference. And its exactitude means it cannot be analysed in terms of probability across time. The second problem is observational dependence. A synchronistic occurrence typically happens only once and is observed by only one. Rather than a test of a hypothesis, synchronicity becomes a test of belief. Even with multiple observers, observational dependence is critical.”

The person who observes synchronicity sees it differently from the person who is told about it. There are two reasons. First, at the time the synchronicity is observed the exactitude is often compelling, but its impact cannot be related to others. Secondly, synchronicity involves meaning, but often only for one. Synchronicity is a singular phenomenon where the observer matches the event to previous experiences. The matching defines the meaning. The synchronicity is conditional on the observer; their history and their thoughts. The challenge is to purge the representative bias that results from overweighting the matching.⁵ The observer and the independent person may both accept that the observation has occurred but, due to the conditionality and representative bias, they see it differently. The singularity is pivotal to synchronicity and karma. The table below summarizes.

Table 1
Synchronicity and the Observer

Observer	Independent Person
Observation	Observation
Conditionality	No conditionality
Representative bias	No representative bias
Meaning	Chance

⁵ Kahneman and Tversky (1974)

Synchronicity has been identified in many studies. The project *Understanding Uncertainty* at Cambridge University⁶ contains many examples. In his book *Incredible Coincidence, The Baffling World of Synchronicity*, Alan Vaughan⁷ discusses the case of Allen Falby and Alfred Smith.

“Falby was an El Paso, Texas, highway patrolman who crashed his motorcycle when pursuing a speeding truck. The crash nearly amputated one of Falby’s legs; an artery was ruptured and he was bleeding to death. Alfred Smith saw the accident; he was not a doctor but could see what had to be done for the dying patrolman. Whipping off his tie, Smith bound Falby’s leg in a crude tourniquet. It worked. Smith saved Falby’s life. Falby was hospitalized for several months and returned to his police job [...]Fast forward to five years later [...] Falby was on highway night patrol when he was called to investigate a bad accident on US 80. A car had smashed into a tree. A man was in a serious condition; an ambulance was on the way. Falby reached the wreck first. He found the injured man unconscious. The man’s right leg was saturated with blood. He had severed a major artery and was bleeding to death. Falby applied a tourniquet above the artery. When the bleeding stopped, he pulled him from the car. That’s when Falby recognized the victim as Alfred Smith who had saved his life five years earlier.”

What this illustrates is the matching of one event to a previous event, a form of equilibration where a good deed is reciprocated five years later. Rationality would suggest this to be chance; but the exactitude is difficult to ignore and it is an exactitude that I too have observed. Does the existence of just one example like the above suggest that synchronicity is more than the calibration of the arbitrary, that synchronicity is a calibration of karma? My observations suggest that to be the case.

As I stated in the *The Search for Significance*, synchronicity appears to be an interface to a reference frame where there is greater observability; where the past, present and future are all observable. Logically why would such an interface exist if it were to only calibrate the meaningless and not the

⁶ <http://cambridgecoincidences.org/>

⁷ Vaughan, A. 1979. *Incredible Coincidence, the Baffling World of Synchronicity*. New York: Lippincott.

meaningful? Synchronicity does not calibrate chance. Synchronicity calibrates events with meaning to the observer, if only to that observer; and at least some of those events will have ethical consequences. Synchronicity is an interface to the equilibration of the ethical consequences of previous actions. Synchronicity is an interface to what we cannot observe; an interface to karma. But most will not agree. We are limited by our powers of observation.

Before considering this further, let me digress to what many regard as the most profound literary work on karma, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The title suggests karma and the book details it. The book is the story of a pre-meditated crime and its consequence. It is an event study of karma where the consequences of a crime are matched to the punishment of the crime. Dostoyevsky uses synchronicity to calibrate both the crime and the punishment. Synchronicity is embedded in *Crime and Punishment*, yet most readers would not have seen. Dostoyevsky would seem to have understood karma better than most. *Crime and Punishment* is a story of karma and synchronicity. It is an existential masterpiece. And it is consistent with the premise of this essay.

Crime and Punishment

The two works that first interested me in existentialism were Kafka's *The Trial* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In *The Trial* Joseph K anticipates punishment for an unknown crime; in *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov anticipates punishment for a known crime. Both are expositions of karma. In a lecture to this society in 2002, I compared the trial of Joseph K to the trial of the whistleblower. When a person blows the whistle, they are judged; not formally but implicitly. They are judged by perpetrators, bystanders and by themselves. Like K, they are put on trial. The final refrain in *The Trial* sums up K's sense of injustice; "*It was as if the shame of it should outlive him.*" It was K's expectation of karma. And it is whistle blowers' expectation of karma; but it is not usually realized. Whistleblowing elevates the expectation of karma because it elevates unfairness.

I will assume most of you have read *Crime and Punishment*. If not read it slowly; for it can never be distilled. If you do have the occasion to study *Crime and Punishment* in detail, I suggest you read David Matual's *In Defense of the Epilogue of Crime and Punishment*; and the works of Robert Louis Jackson especially *Philosophical Pro and Contra in Part One of Crime and Punishment*.⁸In writing this essay, I found it difficult to summarize the plot; it has been summarized so often. Raskolnikov is an impoverished ex-student living near Sennaya Ploshchad in Saint Petersburg. Raskolnikov deals with an old pawn broker; after sixty pages he murders her and her sister. The crime is premeditated; the punishment is not. *Crime and Punishment* is a study in psychopathology; the reader enters the mind of Raskolnikov until he is redeemed. I will explore three related themes; conscience, synchronicity and karma.

What is conscience? For me, it is a form of self-arbitration but I accept that conscience is too intrinsic to be defined; you will have your own definition. Conscience is a moral constraint we impose on the dialectic of our consciousness. Dostoyevsky referenced conscience twenty times in *Crime and Punishment*. In an exchange with his friend Razumihin, Raskolnikov offers this

I don't contend that extraordinary people are always bound to commit breaches of morals, as you call it. In fact, I doubt whether such an argument could be published. I simply hinted that an 'extraordinary' man has the right that is not an official right, but an inner right to decide in his own conscience to overstep certain obstacles, and only in case it is essential for the practical fulfilment of his idea (sometimes, perhaps, of benefit to the whole of humanity).

In a letter in 1871 (Jackson (1981, p.194)), Dostoyevsky expressed similar sentiments. "*I am a man and nothing human is alien to me. Man on the surface of the earth does not have the right to turn away and ignore what is taking place on earth.*" Dostoyevsky inserted his humanism into *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov's test of his conscience was a test of his humanism. The conscience of Raskolnikov is

⁸ Matual, D. (1992). "In Defense of the Epilogue of Crime and Punishment" *Studies in the Novel*.
Jackson, R. (1981). *The Art of Dostoevsky*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

central to *Crime and Punishment*. When Raskolnikov introspects, it is a dialogue with his conscience. His conscience morphs into the investigation by Porphyry Petrovich. Raskolnikov and Porphyry become a double; the investigator becomes the conscience of Raskolnikov. Porphyry does what Raskolnikov's conscience cannot do. Porphyry arrests the suffering. He arrests Raskolnikov.

In his 1945 lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre wrote

“Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life.”

We converge to our fate through our actions. Raskolnikov converged to his fate but, as Matual notes in his 1992 essay, the convergence was marked by coincidence and happenstance; by synchronicity. We do not know whether Dostoyevsky observed synchronicity in his own life. However we do know he invoked synchronicity at critical points in *Crime and Punishment*. In *The Boundaries of Genre*, Gary Saul Morson suggests Dostoyevsky identified a theory of synchronicity well before Jung, a theory that there may be a connection between simultaneous events with no causal basis.⁹ Morson (1981, p.191) notes that Dostoyevsky called it synchronism rather than synchronicity, but the principle is the same; the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningful but not causally connected events. Dostoyevsky inserted synchronicity into the life of Raskolnikov. Perhaps it was the experience of Dostoyevsky; we will never know. There are two important synchronicities in *Crime and Punishment*, the first when Raskolnikov conceives the murder of the pawnbroker, the second as he is about to be arrested by Porphyry. At the time the murder of the pawnbroker is conceived, Raskolnikov overhears a conversation conceiving the murder. It was as if his mind had been read by others. The discussion of the synchronicity begins on p.51 of *Crime and Punishment*

⁹ Morson, G. (1981). *The Boundaries of Genre*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

“Almost beside him at the next table there was sitting a student, whom he did not know and had never seen, and with him a young officer. They had played a game of billiards and began drinking tea. All at once he heard the student mention to the officer the pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna and give him her address. This of itself seemed strange to Raskolnikov; he had just come from her and here at once he heard her name. Of course it was a chance, but he could not shake off a very extraordinary impression, and here someone seemed to be speaking expressly for him; the student began telling his friend various details about Alyona Ivanovna.”

And the discussion of the synchronicity ends on p.54 with this summary

“Raskolnikov was violently agitated. Of course, it was all ordinary youthful talk and thought, such as he had often heard before in different forms and on different themes. But why had he happened to hear such a discussion and such ideas at the very moment when his own brain was just conceiving ... the very same ideas? And why, just at the moment when he had brought away the embryo of his idea from the old woman had he dropped at once upon a conversation about her? This coincidence always seemed strange to him. This trivial talk in a tavern had an immense influence on him in his later action; as though there had really been in it something preordained, some guiding hint.....”

Those who have experienced multiple synchronicities know the synchronicity experienced by Raskolnikov is not as preposterous as it seems. The exactitude of timing; the matching of the real and the unconscious; and the sequence of events suggest a determinism that cannot be tested, yet not ignored. Dostoyevsky used synchronicity to both anticipate the crime and anticipate the arrest. Synchronicity was pivotal in *Crime and Punishment* just as synchronicity is pivotal to karma.

Crime and Punishment is principally about karma, about the consequences of an action. Raskolnikov expects punishment even before he commits the murder; and the punishment begins immediately after the crime. The punishment is his internal torment rather than an external sanction; his fear and

loathing, his dilution of consciousness, his indifference to others, his inner catastrophe. Even before his arrest, Raskolnikov summarizes the karma enveloping him

“But how did I murder her? Is that how men do murders? Do men go to commit a murder as I went then? I will tell you some day how I went! Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her! I crushed myself once for all, forever...But it was the devil that killed that old woman, not I. Enough, enough, Sonia. ‘Let me be!’ he cried in a sudden spasm of agony, ‘let me be!’”

He should have said *Let it be*, for *Let it be* was what was needed. *Let it be* is often used to allow what needs to be equilibrated to be equilibrated. *Let it be* is the signature of karma. For Raskolnikov, there was an eventual equilibrium. In the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov rises almost Lazarus-like; his punishment completed and his purpose fulfilled. It represents the moral regeneration of Raskolnikov. Matual (1992) argues the epilogue to be consistent with the rest of the story; but other Dostoyevsky scholars disagree. Many regard it as an unnecessary add-on. The epilogue is the karma prescribed by Dostoyevsky, but not necessarily the karma others would prescribe. Karma is too heterogeneous for everyone to agree. Karma is too diffuse to be observed by everyone in the same way. It is the problem of observability.

What we learn from the karma in *Crime and Punishment* is what I have learnt. Karma tends to be calibrated; a calibration unobservable to most and renounced by even more. Karma is necessarily unobservable; we see extracts, snippets of equilibration but never the full picture. Karma tends to be overlapping rather than in one direction; there is too much disequilibrium for the consequences of previous actions to be equilibrated all at once. And karma is not usually realized in this life; we try to proxy it through our legal system but we never can. We always must hope for an epilogue of regeneration.

The Law of Karma

Let me turn to the metaphysical presuppositions that have given rise to what Reichenbach¹⁰ in 1990 defined as *The Law of Karma*. Reichenbach discusses the various possibilities as to the origin of the concept in Indian culture and concludes

“Whatever the specific origins of the doctrine, it is clear that the original concept of karma as action was later applied specifically to the moral sphere of human action and conjoined with the doctrines of transmigration and reincarnation of the soul. From the very character of the law, we might speculate that the reason for its development had to do with a very pressing problem. The problem which confronted the Indian was how rationally to account for the diversity of circumstances and situations into which sentient creatures were born, or for the natural events experienced during one’s lifetime which affected one person propitiously and another adversely. There appeared to be no obvious, prima-facie connection between the good fortune of one individual and his personal worth, or between the ill fortune of another and her worth. Accordingly, it was postulated that there is a law which governs the kind of birth, qualities of character and temperament, and subsequent circumstances that a person experiences. Thus, it was in the context of attempting to resolve a problem which was both theoretical and existential that the doctrine of karma had its inception. And indeed, beyond all else, it is its alleged explanatory power in this regard which has gained for it adherents through the centuries.”

This statement reflects what I have reflected on. The unfairness we observe is against our sense of natural fairness, against our sense of equilibrium. In his autobiography¹¹, Charles Darwin reflects on the dilemma of weighing up the ubiquitousness of suffering against the wonders of the universe. Why is a design that renders the universe so remarkable not evident in the arbitration of fairness. It

¹⁰ Reichenbach, B. (1990). *The Law of Karma*. London: Macmillan.

¹¹ Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley Autobiographies, edited with an introduction by Gavin de Beer. London: Oxford University Press.

is a dilemma we must all reconcile. Only two explanations are possible; there is no arbitration or there is an arbitration we cannot see.

In motivating karma, Reichenbach references Buddha's account of Moggallana's death. In Pali tradition, in a previous life the parents of Moggallana were trying to force him to marry a wife he did not want; Moggallana kills his blind parents while imitating the sound of bandits. In a subsequent life Moggallana is killed by bandits. This is a simple exposition of karma; that the misdeeds of one life are priced in a subsequent life. There is one-to-oneness in the Buddha's account that I have not observed; but the principle is clear. Reichenbach summarizes the proposition thus

There is a correlation between the quality of previous acts (good or bad) and the types of resulting experiences, the quantity of evil done and the amount of pain experienced, the kind of karmic action done and the kind of experience one has as a result."

By this account karma is precisely measured. In literature, there are many variations of the redemptive theme of self-imposed karma. In the legend of *Robert the Devil*, the basis of the opera *Robert le Diable*, Robert is born as a result of his mother's contract with the devil. Robert redeems himself in the same life by reversing his wrongs. The prescription for redemption is simple enough¹²

"Robert goes to Rome, casts himself at the feet of the pope, makes confession to a holy hermit, submits himself to the harshest penance, and swears that henceforth he will taste no food that he has not first wrested from the jaws of a dog. On two separate occasions, when Rome was besieged by the Saracens, he fights incognito for the Emperor and gains the victory for the Christians. Recognized at last, he refuses all rewards and honors, the imperial crown, even the monarch's own daughter, goes away to dwell with his hermit in the wilderness, and dies a saint, blessed by both God and men."

It is one recipe for redemption; but one that most would not embrace.

¹² Attributable to the 19th century Italian writer Arturo Graf

Reichenbach asserts that the law of karma has five components

1. All actions for which we can be held morally accountable and which are done out of desire for their fruits have consequences.
2. Moral actions have consequences according to the character of the actions performed. Right actions have good consequences, wrong actions bad consequences.
3. Some consequences are manifested in this life, some in the next life, and some remotely.
4. The effects of karmic actions can be accumulated.
5. Human persons are reborn into this world.

It's an old fashioned view of the world that assumes morality is measurable, infinitely divisible and transferable across lives. But why would a rational person subscribe to such a view? There is no good reason to so subscribe if one believes the world is the finite world we observe, not the infinite world we do not. Our bounded existence compels us to seek arbitration in this life, not a future life. We seek justice against those who have wronged us. But rarely do we seek redemption for **our own** transgressions, apart from the nominal sorrys that punctuate our lives.

What we instead observe is logical refutation of karma. In 1976 I travelled to India. I alighted from a bus at Mahabalipuram to see the Hindu temples. There was a child begging who had essentially no limbs; his head nearly half his body; his body only two feet long; his eyes the eyes of immeasurable suffering. I visited the temples and met the bus a kilometer away. And he was there again. He had rolled his way to a new location. Schopenhauer identified suffering as the unfulfillment of wants; Buddhism references it as dukkha. We have wants; therefore we suffer; the antidote is detachment. But while we may detach from our wants, how can we detach from the immeasurable suffering of others? If their suffering is karma, it is too much for most of us; our empathy cannot allow it.

If you ever visit Saint Petersburg, I suggest you visit the apartment of Sergey Kirov. It is as he left it on the morning of Saturday December 1, 1934 to go to the Smolny Institute. On every wall is a photo of Stalin. Kirov was assassinated that afternoon, almost certainly at the orders of Stalin. Kirov was a rival in Stalin's mind. Kirov was a humanist relative to Stalin. At the 17th congress of the Communist Party in February 1934, Kirov received only three negative votes; Stalin 267 from 1300 delegates. A group of more than 100 veteran party members wanted to replace Stalin with Kirov; Kirov declined the offer and reported it to Stalin. Kirov was too pure for his own good. As Trotsky surmised¹³, Kirov had become too popular. Kirov's assassination led to Stalin's *Great Purge* and established Stalin for who he was. Visiting the apartment of Kirov it is hard not to reject the law of karma. Where was the trial of Joseph Stalin? Where was his karma?

In aggregate, there seems to be disproportionate unfairness. Most would reject the hypothesis of a divine hand, or at least most would suggest a divinity considerably less omniscient, omnipotent and compassionate than what is required. In my paper *The Independent Regulator* I reflected on an article by Roderick Firth¹⁴ published in 1952, *Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer*. As I noted there

“Firth introduces us to the ideal observer, the observer who most would like to be their observer and their judge. The ideal observer is an absolute to which benchmarks are benchmarked; a proxy for God perhaps, but most certainly an ethical absolute in a world of relativism. Firth characterizes the ideal observer as one who is both omniscient and omnipercipient, cognizant of all facts and all the consequences of every action. The ideal observer is disinterested; they exhibit the impartiality of Bentham that every man should count for one and none for more than one. And the ideal observer is also dispassionate, without emotion of any form directed for or against a given individual. The ideal observer is then the detached one who observes and judges with full information, with transparency and with a consistency befitting of their omniscience. They are the ideal observer.”

¹³ Trotsky, L. (1934). “On the Kirov Assassination”, New York: Pioneer Publishers.

¹⁴ Firth, R. (1952). Ethical absolutism and the ideal observer, “Philosophy Phenomenological Research, 12, 317-345.

The ideal observer is consistent with my observations of synchronicity. An ideal observer, omniscient and omnipercipient, seemingly disinterested and dispassionate, observes and calibrates. The ideal observer is not necessarily an entity, more likely a process; a process of equilibration. An appeal to the unknown is an appeal to reveal, not arbitrate. Through repeated observations of synchronicity, I have concluded that there is calibration. The calibration appears to be related to an equilibration process too convoluted for us to understand, or at least for me to understand. We can infer, but never resolve. Synchronicity and karma appear to be related. Most will not agree.

This is the preface for my rationale for the existence of karma. It is the rationale for the thought experiment foreshadowed at the beginning of this essay. I have observed many examples of karma, not quite the one-to-one in Buddha's account of Moggallana, but with a similar exactitude calibrated by synchronicity. There is a sense of the determinism exhibited in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Trial*, that we converge to a script and the convergence is calibrated. That has been my experience¹⁵ and I cannot conceive the universe to be so selective. Indeed history is replete with evidence of karma, not enough for most, but certainly enough to make us hypothesise. Everyone knows the story of Oscar Wilde, but most don't know the story of Lord Alfred Douglas; at least not the complete story. There is a symmetry suggesting karma. Douglas provoked Wilde to sue his father the Marquess of Queensberry for libel after Queensberry left a card inscribed with "for Oscar Wilde -- posing as a sodomite." Wilde's lawsuit backfired; Wilde was imprisoned; and it destroyed him although it left us

¹⁵ In 1974, I scrutineered for John Dawkins when he was first elected to Federal Parliament. After the election he wrote to me advising that "If I can do anything at all for you, please let me know." In 1987 Dawkins became the Federal Education Minister and introduced the unified national system of higher education. As a result RMIT became a university. In 1991, I was appointed the first Professor of RMIT. In 1992 I blew the whistle. My employment at RMIT was terminated in 1994 and I successfully contested a Supreme Court case for breach of contract. Further a 1995 Senate Committee recommended an independent inquiry relating to the matters I had raised. It never happened. I have appeared before four parliamentary inquiries related to whistleblowing and have advocated for whistleblowing for twenty-five years. Whistleblowing was when I first started to experience synchronicity and a sense of karma. Critical points in the whistleblowing were calibrated by synchronicity. Whistleblowing represents an extreme test of the parry and thrust of fairness and unfairness. It is a greater test than many understand.

with the legacy of *De Profundis*. What is less well known is that Douglas was also imprisoned nearly thirty years later and...imprisoned for libel. Prison seemed to mollify Douglas. There he wrote seventeen sonnets known as *In Excelsis*. In the end Douglas reconciled with Wilde, if only vicariously in a biography extolling Wilde's genius and expressing sympathy for homosexuals. It was a renunciation of Queensberry. Perhaps it was karma; we will never know. We can only conjecture.

A Thought Experiment

In discussion of karma with a colleague, he suggested I build a model of karma. Rationality requires models; we are wedded to models as we are wedded to chance. Our thinking is linear and finite; but karma is nonlinear and infinite. Karma is unboundedly uncertain; like an enigma machine reprogrammed with every thought and every action. Even a mind comparable to Alan Turing could never match it. I decided to construct a thought experiment as to the possibilities from the karma I have observed. The experiment consists of a set of hypothetical principles. There are three principles; the principle of natural fairness; the principle of calibration; and the principle of unobservability. These underscore karma in my thought experiment. Rationalists will surely disagree.

***Principle I* Natural Fairness**

When I first considered natural fairness, I was surprised how little had been written on it; and when I consulted the main references there was no reference to karma. Perhaps we are too western for our own good. The main references consulted were John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and Ken Binmore's *Natural Justice*.¹⁶ Neither answers the central question. Why should we be fair? What's in it for us?

Binmore devotes an entire chapter to what he terms the golden rule "*Do as you would be done by*" which has been variously restated over the ages. Jesus stated it in the affirmative "*Do to others whatever*

¹⁶ Rawls, J. (1971). *Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
Binmore, K. (2005). *Natural Justice*. Oxford University Press.

you would have them do to you.” and Confucius in the negative “*Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you.*” Binmore gives an abridged list of those who have endorsed the golden rule. King Alfred, Aristotle, Buddha, Darwin, Epictetus, Hillel, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, Spinoza, Zoroaster; a who’s who of history. It appears to be written into our DNA, as it was written in to the DNA of ancient civilisations. But why? There is no good reason to be fair except.....our **self-interest**.

We bond with others through association, collaboration, friendship, partnership, marriage; but we will always be singular. We exist as a singularity, not as a plurality. We can never be the other person. Why then should we do unto them as we would have them do unto us? Why should individual A do unto individual B as they would want B to do unto them; when A is not B and never will be? Raskolnikov gave us the answer

Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her!

Raskolnikov had become the old woman. He killed her, therefore he killed himself. To be unfair to others is to be unfair to yourself. You kick an own goal. **It is the principle of natural fairness.**

Most do not see it this way. Most see natural fairness as a theoretical and not practical imperative. These are the reasons why. We exploit advantage to survive; and the advantage may be unfair but it satisfies our selfish gene. Secondly we do not think fairness is calibrated; if we are unfair to others perhaps only they will see; we tend to forgive ourselves more easily than we forgive others. Thirdly, others may not be fair to us so why should be fair to them? We cannot be fair to everyone; we have to ration fairness. We are after all human. For most, natural fairness is an ideal and not a reality.

The principle of natural fairness suggests fairness to be a force. While we accept the existence of other forces like electromagnetism which we do not fully observe, we cannot accept fairness to be a force because it is unobservable; and no experiment will render it observable. We cannot accept that

fairness has the intrinsic properties of a force; we cannot accept that unfairness will be offset by an opposing force. Instead we construct a justice system to calibrate unfairness, to oppose unfairness, and to define penalties and compensation. We try to short circuit the karmic force in the universe. However, karma is too written to be short circuited.

The principle of natural fairness explains empathy. We empathise with those who are like us; to be unfair to them would be unfair to us. We empathise with those who randomly suffer because we too could randomly suffer; to be unfair to them would be unfair to us. But we do not empathise with those who do not empathise with us; we perceive that to be unfair to us. We project empathy onto others because it is a projection onto ourselves. It is in our self-interest. It is our version of natural fairness, but not necessarily the right one; for we are limited by who we are.

The principle of natural fairness is the law of karma. We always project onto ourselves. We project onto others; therefore we project onto us. Mathematically it can be described this way. For two individuals A and B, the projection of A onto B is written $A \rightarrow B$. The law of karma is given by

$$A \rightarrow B \qquad (1a) \qquad \textit{then}$$

$$A \rightarrow \qquad (1b) \qquad \textit{then}$$

$$A \leftarrow \qquad (1c)$$

Karma begins with a projection onto others (1a). However, the others become irrelevant to the projection (1b). And the projection returns to us (1c). It is the law of the universe, the law of karma.

The irrelevance of others is critical to the law of karma. The law relates to A; not to B. Indeed it can be asserted that the law as written is unnecessarily anthropocentric. B really represents the set of all that is not A including animals and plants; more generally the universe. Essentially the projection

becomes a projection onto all that is not A, written $\sim A$, so that (1b) is then

$$A \rightarrow \sim A \quad (1b)$$

Karma results from the projection onto all that is not us; but karma is the projection back onto us. We project onto a mirror; and the mirror projects back. Karma is our reflection.

We do not see karma because we do not see our own reflection. We do not see the consequences of our actions from the perspective of others. We are too self-interested to see our own self-interest. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde was a good representation of the mirror of karma. When Dorian Gray finally stabs his horribly disfigured picture, he stabs the mirror of his karma; and he stabs himself. The picture had calibrated his karma. So how is our karma calibrated?

***Principle II* Calibration**

Raskolnikov answered this question better than anyone.

Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her!

Unfairness is calibrated as a form of moral equivalence. Unfairness is measured by the suffering imposed on others. If you ignore someone and impose suffering on them, you can expect equivalent suffering to be imposed on you. If you malign someone and impose suffering on them, you can expect equivalent suffering. If you betray someone and impose suffering on them, you can expect equivalent suffering; as Jesus and Judas showed. Unfairness is calibrated by the suffering imposed on others; and is commensurate with the suffering imposed on you. Your suffering is not necessarily realized immediately, nor will it be seen as one-to-one; but it will be realized. This is the principle of calibration. The calibration is necessary for karma. But what is also necessary is for karma to be unobservable; otherwise we could not be who we are.

Principle III Unobservability

Imagine a world where we know that every thought and every action is observed, and that every time we are unfair it is calibrated and projected back onto us. Such a world would be more than Orwellian. With CCTV cameras having such omniscience and omniperception, we could never exercise free will. We would never get off the couch.

Our penchant for CCTV cameras, regulation and political correctness is a proxy for this Orwellian world; a very unsatisfactory proxy. We have tried to prescribe what is fair and what is unfair; and to prescribe penalties for unfairness. But we over-prescribe some forms of unfairness, and under-prescribe others. Over-prescription strangles our freedom to be who we are; under-prescription shifts the incentives to be unfair. We no longer physically abuse; instead we mentally abuse without penalty and without redress.¹⁷ We avoid regulations that need to be avoided.

In order to regulate ourselves we have to return to the golden rule *“Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.”* Most of us can’t do that. Most have a problem with self-regulation. Most don’t see what needs to be seen. Karma is necessarily unobservable to allow us to reveal who we are. Karma is necessarily unobservable to allow us to converge to the essence of our being. Karma is necessarily unobservable so we can be free to choose. This is the principle of unobservability.

Concomitant observations of synchronicity and karma have underscored this thought experiment. And if it applies to one person it must apply to all; for as Einstein noted *“God (or the equivalent) does not play dice with the universe.”* Perhaps Stalin did not truncate his karma; only defer it. Rationality suggests we should maximize our self-interest, but perhaps we are too bounded by our rationality. Perhaps we should indeed do to others whatever you would have them do to you. Perhaps it is in our self-interest to do so. That is what karma suggests we should do.

¹⁷ It is the slow drip that whistleblowers experience.

Reflection

Let me reflect. We do not know what we would like to know. We do not know whether the universe calibrates us. We do not know whether we have a soul. We are bounded by our ignorance and limited by our powers of observation. We do not know whether there is karma. We can infer but we will never know; but the wise will hedge their risks.

Buddhism suggests a path that purges defilements, detaches from attachments, and breaks the karmic cycle of birth and rebirth. However, it is unlikely we will ever attain nirvana; perhaps we are not meant to. Nirvana is a form of nothingness of perfect harmony, and we will never be in harmony. Rather existence is defined by disharmony, by the attachments and defilements which mediate us. While it may be easy to detach from others and others may make it easy to detach from them, it is harder to detach from the principles that define us. We are too attached to our existence.

Let us consider a more feasible path which I call bounded Buddhism.¹⁸ Bounded Buddhism recognizes us for who we are; that we will never attain Nirvana. Bounded Buddhism recognizes our imperfections; that we have a pecking order of compassion and dispassion. Karma suggests that we should always rebalance; limit attachments; engage in random acts of kindness; judge others as we would like to be judged; and *do to others whatever you would have them do to you*; not just for an hour on a Sunday or 10 days in a temple, or three hours at a philosophy class; but on a continuing basis. It is the principle of natural fairness; the law of karma. It is in our interest to do so.

Self-interest defines who we are. We need to understand that our self-interest determines our karma. But we also need to understand that our karma determines our self-interest. However, most do not see it. Perhaps one day they may.

¹⁸ This term is used as an analogy to bounded rationality attributable to Simon, Herbert (1957). "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice", in *Models of Man, Social and Rational: Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior* in a Social Setting. New York: Wiley.