

Research Paper

## A Psychological Framework for Understanding Karma: Internal Mechanisms over External Forces

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of karma has traditionally been understood as a metaphysical law of moral causation within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Previous literature primarily approaches it through theological or philosophical lenses, leaving a gap in understanding its psychological basis. This paper investigates whether karma can be explained as an internal psychological mechanism rather than an external cosmic force. It hypothesizes that karmic experiences are manifestations of unconscious processes that preserve moral equilibrium within the psyche. The study employs a theoretical and integrative design, drawing from psychoanalytic theory, cognitive psychology, and cross-cultural research. Key constructs include Freud's structural model of the psyche, particularly the role of the superego in generating guilt and pride; Nelissen and Zeelenberg's (2009) Dobby effect as evidence of self-punishment behavior; and Jung's theory of synchronicity, interpreted through attribution theory and cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and the just-world hypothesis. The analysis suggests that so-called karmic outcomes emerge from interactions between internalized moral standards and attributional processes. "Bad karma" reflects guilt-driven self-punishment, "good karma" arises from superego reinforcement and heightened self-esteem, and "synchronic attribution" explains coincidental events perceived as morally meaningful. These findings imply that karma functions as a psychological regulator that reconciles moral conflict and sustains belief in a just world. Understanding karma through this lens bridges theology and psychology, enhances culturally sensitive therapeutic practices, and underscores the universality of moral regulation across human experience.

**Keywords:** Karma, Psychoanalytic Framework, Moral Equilibrium, Cognitive, Attributional Processes, Cross-cultural Psychology

The concept of karma has occupied a central place in religious, philosophical, and cultural thought for millennia. Rooted in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, karma is traditionally understood as a cosmic law of moral causation, wherein virtuous deeds are believed to yield rewards and immoral actions to invite punishment. Beyond its theological foundations, karma has endured as a pervasive cultural belief that shapes moral reasoning, personal responsibility, and social conduct across diverse societies. The universality of this belief raises important questions about whether karma functions solely as a metaphysical doctrine or whether it also reflects underlying psychological processes.

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From a psychological standpoint, the belief in karma can be understood as an expression of the human need to preserve moral equilibrium and impose order on lived experience. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's structural model of the psyche, offers a compelling framework for this reinterpretation. The superego, as the internalized moral authority, governs human behavior by rewarding conformity with pride and punishing violations with guilt. In this light, karmic outcomes may be seen not as cosmic decrees but as manifestations of unconscious psychological mechanisms, including guilt, self-punishment, and compensatory attributions. Complementary perspectives such as Jung's theory of synchronicity and cognitive biases like confirmation bias and the just-world hypothesis further illustrate how individuals attribute moral meaning to otherwise coincidental events.

It is important to clarify that this paper does not seek to disprove the existence of God, higher powers, or metaphysical dimensions of karma. Rather, its purpose is to provide a scientific and psychological explanation of how karmic beliefs may operate within the human psyche. By framing karma through this lens, the intention is not to challenge theological ideas but to highlight the psychological mechanisms that may underlie and sustain such beliefs.

This paper therefore bridges philosophical and psychological perspectives on karma by examining how traditional religious doctrines intersect with psychoanalytic and cognitive theories. First, it outlines the cultural and theological foundations of karma in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It then explores relevant psychological theories—Freud's superego, the Dobby effect, and Jungian synchronicity—that illuminate how karmic beliefs may originate in unconscious processes. Finally, it presents a theoretical framework that distinguishes between good karma, bad karma, and synchronic attribution, demonstrating how the ego reconciles moral conflict through karmic interpretation. In doing so, the paper argues that karma, while rooted in ancient theology, can also be fruitfully understood as a psychological mechanism that maintains moral balance and preserves the integrity of the self.

In contemporary society, belief in karma continues to shape individual behavior, social interactions, and cultural narratives across both secular and religious contexts. However, most discussions of karma remain grounded in metaphysical or theological explanations, leaving a gap in psychological understanding. At a time when mental health, moral decision-making, and cross-cultural communication are increasingly emphasized, a psychological framework for karma provides a scientifically grounded means of explaining how individuals internalize and act upon moral principles. By situating karma within internal cognitive and psychoanalytic processes, rather than external forces, this framework not only bridges cultural traditions with modern psychology but also reduces reliance on purely supernatural interpretations. Such a model is especially timely in an era marked by growing interest in the intersection of spirituality and science, offering a way to validate deeply held beliefs while keeping them aligned with empirical psychological principles.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### ***Philosophical and Cultural Perspectives of Karma***

Karma has its roots in ancient Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, where it is understood as a cosmic principle of moral causation. Theologically, it is viewed as an impersonal force that records moral behavior, ensuring that virtuous actions are rewarded and immoral ones are punished (Bronkhorst, 2011).

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In Hindu philosophy, the destiny of the eternal soul, including the quality of one's rebirth and progress toward liberation, is determined by one's actions in life. The doctrine of karma emphasizes that every action produces consequences, and each cause inevitably leads to its destined effect. (Lakhan, 2008).

In Buddhism, karma is understood as the universal law of cause and effect, where the consequences of an action—whether physical, verbal, or mental—are primarily shaped not by the action itself, but by the intention behind it. Even if an action is not carried out, the mere presence of the intention to act still generates karmic consequences (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

In Jainism, karma is understood as a subtle form of matter that binds to the soul and determines its experiences and destiny. It is classified into eight types, which obscure knowledge, hinder true faith, cause pleasure or pain, cloud faculties, fix lifespan, decide the realm of rebirth, determine social status, and restrict free will. Together, these karmas govern the soul's journey until liberation is achieved (E. Black et al., 1966).

In sum, while Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism each interpret karma through distinct theological and philosophical lenses, they share the common view that actions inevitably shape the course of one's existence. Whether conceived as moral causation, intention-driven consequences, or subtle matter binding the soul, karma functions as a regulating principle that links behavior to destiny and underscores the ethical responsibility of human life.

### ***Psychological Theories Relevant to Karma***

Freud's structural model of the psyche provides a foundational lens for understanding how internalized moral codes, housed in the superego, influence behavior. Freud (2018) described the superego as the part of the psyche that internalizes societal norms and enforces them through guilt and self-reproach. This aligns with the idea that karmic outcomes may stem from unconscious drives to reconcile guilt through compensatory actions.

Nelissen and Zeelenberg's (2009) study on the Dobby effect provides empirical evidence that individuals engage in self-punishment as a response to moral transgressions. Their research demonstrated that after violating moral standards, people are more likely to impose financial penalties on themselves, even when there are no external consequences. This self-punitive behavior serves as an unconscious mechanism to alleviate guilt and restore one's moral self-image. It is thus possible that the Dobby effect extends beyond financial punishment. The Dobby effect suggests that karmic retribution can originate from within, as individuals unconsciously seek to balance their moral transgressions through self-inflicted punishment rather than external forces. This is consistent with Freud's idea of evading and compensating for guilt through self-punishment.

Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity describes meaningful coincidences that lack causal connection but are perceived as deeply significant (Jung, 2013). This concept resonates with karmic beliefs, where unrelated events are interpreted as morally linked. For example, losing money after an unethical action may be seen as "bad karma," even if the events are unrelated. This interpretation stems from cognitive biases, the most prominent being Confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) and the Just-World Fallacy (Lerner, 2013).

Freud's structural model, particularly the role of the superego, offers a compelling psychological explanation for how internalized moral codes influence behavior, often

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manifesting as guilt and self-punishment. The Dobby effect, as demonstrated by Nelissen and Zeelenberg (2009), reinforces the notion that individuals are intrinsically motivated to atone for moral failings, even in the absence of external enforcement. This self-regulatory mechanism blurs the boundary between internal psychological processes and culturally embedded beliefs such as karma. Jung's concept of synchronicity further illustrates how individuals may attribute moral meaning to coincidental events, reinforcing beliefs in karmic justice. Cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and self-serving bias may mediate these perceptions, leading people to interpret unrelated events as morally significant. Together, these perspectives suggest that the belief in karma may, at least in part, be rooted in unconscious psychological mechanisms aimed at maintaining moral equilibrium and self-concept integrity.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### *Attribution and Belief in Karma*

According to the law of karma, virtuous actions are believed to yield rewards, while immoral actions invite punishment. This belief system resonates strongly with the *just world hypothesis* (Lerner, 2013), which posits that individuals are motivated to perceive the world as fair, where people ultimately “get what they deserve.” Once the belief in karma takes hold, individuals tend to reinforce it through attributional processes: positive or negative outcomes are repeatedly explained as karmic consequences, while instances that contradict this worldview are overlooked or dismissed. This selective perception reflects the operation of confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), which sustains and strengthens the belief in karma over time.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the superego plays a central role in this process. The superego embodies the internalized moral standards and ideals acquired during childhood, functioning as the individual's moral conscience (Freud, 2018). It evaluates behavior according to these standards, generating pride when actions conform to moral values and guilt when they do not. Thus, when superego demands are reinforced, individuals interpret the resulting pride, satisfaction, and positive outcomes as manifestations of *good karma*. Conversely, when the superego is violated, the guilt and subsequent misfortunes are often attributed to *bad karma*.

Further sections will expand on the ego's reliance on karmic attribution as a means of reconciling the opposing demands of the id and superego.

#### *Bad Karma*

The guilt arising from a violation of the superego stems from the fundamental conflict between the id's instinctual drives and the superego's moral demands. Responsibility for resolving this tension falls to the ego, which, operating according to the reality principle (Freud, 2018), seeks adaptive means of restoring equilibrium. Such resolutions often take the form of compensatory actions—ranging from simple apologies in the case of minor transgressions to more elaborate forms of self-punishment, as illustrated in the work of Nelissen and Zeelenberg (2009). Importantly, this self-punishment can occur either at the conscious or unconscious level.

#### **1. Conscious Self-Punishment**

Conscious self-punishment refers to the intentional act of placing oneself in discomfort or suffering as a means of atonement or as a self-imposed consequence for perceived wrongdoing.

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For example, a student who cheats on an exam may later experience intense guilt and, in response, deliberately deprive himself of pleasure—such as avoiding friends or refraining from a favorite activity. Through this self-denial, he engages in conscious self-punishment, attempting to resolve the inner conflict between the id's impulses and the superego's moral demands that gave rise to his guilt. Even if the student had confessed the misconduct to his teacher, the resulting disciplinary actions would similarly function as sources of discomfort. In such cases, the compensatory behaviors are seldom interpreted as manifestations of karma; rather, they are understood as self-regulatory mechanisms whose “reward” lies in the relief from guilt.

### **2. Unconscious Self-Punishment**

Unconscious self-punishment occurs when an individual, without conscious awareness, places themselves in a state of discomfort or suffering. This mechanism is typically observed when direct self-punishment by the ego is psychologically intolerable for the individual.

For instance, consider an individual who, due to financial hardship, shoplifts items from a grocery store. Later that same day, he loses his wallet while commuting. Although such events might be interpreted as the workings of karma, they are more plausibly understood as manifestations of unconscious self-punishment orchestrated by the ego. The process remains unconscious precisely because acknowledging the self-inflicted nature of the punishment would be intolerable for the individual—after all, having resorted to theft out of necessity, he could not consciously accept further financial loss.

In such cases, attributing these compensatory experiences to external or supernatural forces like karma serves as a psychological defense, allowing the individual to evade personal responsibility and thereby avoid the additional distress that conscious recognition would entail.

### **3. Synchronic Attribution**

Synchronic attribution is derived from Jung's concept of synchronicity, in which two unrelated events are perceived as meaningfully connected. This mechanism often serves as the ego's first recourse when the superego is violated, as it provides a convenient resolution to internal conflict without resorting to self-punishment—a process that would conflict with the id's pleasure principle. When an external event occurs that can symbolically function as a compensatory act, the ego appropriates it to restore balance, and the individual consciously attributes the experience to karma.

For example, a man who speaks rudely to his friends later stubs his toe while walking down the street. Although the injury is purely coincidental, he interprets it as *bad karma*—a meaningful punishment for his behavior. In reality, this is not a causal relationship but an instance of synchronic attribution, where coincidental misfortune is endowed with moral significance.

### ***Good Karma***

Good karma may be conceptualized as the psychological outcome of reinforcing the superego's moral standards and values. Actions are deemed “good” when they align with the internalized ideals of the superego, and such actions are rewarded internally with heightened satisfaction, pride, and self-esteem (Freud, 2018). Empirical findings support this mechanism: Hansford and Hattie's (1982) meta-analysis of 128 studies involving over 200,000 participants demonstrated a consistent positive relationship between self-esteem and

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academic achievement, with self-esteem accounting for approximately 4–7% of the variance in performance (Baumeister et al., 2003). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this suggests that reinforcement of the superego—through experiences of pride and confidence—enhances an individual’s ability to perform effectively while reducing errors.

The positive outcomes of such improved performance are often attributed to *good karma*. Beyond cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and the just-world hypothesis, this attribution is shaped by the superego’s moral imperative. For theistically oriented individuals, claiming full credit for success may conflict with deeply ingrained moral standards. To avoid this inner conflict, the ego resolves the tension by attributing success to karmic reward, thereby preserving harmony with the superego.

For example, consider an individual who assists a homeless person by offering financial aid. This altruistic act strengthens his sense of pride and self-esteem. Later, at work, he performs successfully, secures several deals, and earns a promotion. Instead of attributing his success to his own competence and effort, he interprets it as *good karma* resulting from his earlier generosity. In this instance, the ego’s attribution, consistent with the superego’s moral demands, reflects the prohibition against “stealing credit” from the divine, thereby reinforcing the perception of a morally ordered world.

### ***Implications***

The framework proposed in this paper carries several important implications across psychological, cultural, and practical domains. Clinically, reframing karma as an internal psychological process rather than an external supernatural law has the potential to improve therapeutic practice. Many clients, particularly in cultures where belief in karma is widespread, interpret their suffering or success through karmic lenses. By grounding these interpretations in psychoanalytic mechanisms such as guilt, pride, and attributional bias, therapists can validate clients’ worldviews while simultaneously offering scientifically informed tools for understanding and managing their experiences. This integration may reduce feelings of helplessness associated with externalized karmic explanations and encourage healthier coping strategies.

Culturally, this framework demonstrates how deeply embedded spiritual concepts can be reconciled with psychoanalytic theory, creating an avenue for dialogue between Western psychological science and Eastern traditions. By situating karma within mechanisms recognizable across cultures—such as the operations of the superego and ego—this theory highlights the universality of moral psychology while respecting culturally specific forms of expression. This may also contribute to cross-cultural psychology’s goal of decolonizing knowledge, showing that indigenous or spiritual concepts are not opposed to science but can instead enrich psychological theory.

On the level of personal growth, the framework emphasizes the individual’s agency in shaping outcomes. Understanding karma as an internal psychological process highlights how aligning one’s behavior with internalized moral standards can enhance self-esteem, pride, and overall performance, while violations may create guilt and self-punishment. This perspective can foster resilience by encouraging individuals to recognize that positive change stems not from external fate but from their own internal regulation and attributions. Such insight empowers individuals to adopt greater responsibility for their actions, improving self-efficacy and reducing reliance on fatalistic explanations.

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Finally, the framework carries implications for future research. By linking psychoanalytic constructs with attribution theory and cognitive biases, this paper lays the foundation for empirical investigations into how people interpret their experiences through the language of karma. Cross-disciplinary studies combining psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and cultural studies may further illuminate how spiritual concepts interact with unconscious processes. This can deepen our understanding of moral cognition, cultural belief systems, and the interplay between unconscious drives and conscious interpretation.

### CONCLUSION

Karma, traditionally conceived as a cosmic principle of moral causation, can also be understood as a deeply embedded psychological mechanism that regulates human conduct and preserves moral order. By examining the interplay between philosophical doctrines and psychoanalytic theory, this paper has demonstrated how karmic beliefs may be grounded not only in theology but also in the structure of the psyche. The superego, as Freud described, enforces internalized moral standards by rewarding virtuous behavior with pride and punishing transgressions with guilt. These dynamics give rise to compensatory behaviors, conscious or unconscious self-punishment, and the attribution of outcomes to external moral forces such as karma. Jung's concept of synchronicity and cognitive biases, including confirmation bias and the just-world hypothesis, further reveal how individuals assign moral significance to coincidental events, reinforcing the perception of karmic justice.

This reinterpretation of karma does not seek to undermine or disprove theological understandings of divinity, higher powers, or metaphysical law. Instead, it offers a scientific perspective that complements existing beliefs by highlighting the unconscious psychological processes that sustain them. In doing so, it becomes possible to view karma as both a spiritual doctrine and a psychological reality: a dual system that regulates behavior by embedding morality in both the external order of the universe and the internal order of the mind.

Ultimately, understanding karma through the lens of psychology underscores the universality of the human drive for moral equilibrium. Whether attributed to divine justice or to unconscious psychic mechanisms, the law of karma reflects the enduring human need to believe that actions carry consequences and that the world is ordered in a way that is fair and meaningful. By bridging cultural, theological, and psychological perspectives, this paper has shown that karma remains not only a central tenet of ancient philosophy but also a vital construct for understanding how individuals navigate morality, responsibility, and the search for justice in everyday life.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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