KAMMA AND MORAL CAUSATION:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BUDDHIST AND WESTERN THOUGHT

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of kamma (karma) as a theory of moral causation in Buddhist philosophy and compares it with major Western approaches to moral causality. In Buddhist thought, kamma functions as an impersonal moral law linking intention, action, and consequence within a process-oriented and non-substantialist ontology. By contrast, Western philosophy has often grounded moral causation in metaphysical notions such as divine command, natural law, free will, or agent-centered responsibility. This study argues that the Buddhist conception of kamma offers a distinctive model of moral causation that avoids both determinism and moral relativism while integrating ethical agency with psychological transformation. Through comparative analysis, the article highlights convergences and divergences between Buddhist and Western perspectives and suggests that kamma provides valuable insights for contemporary debates on moral responsibility, agency, and ethical motivation.

Keywords: Buddhist ethics, Kamma, Moral causation, Responsibility, Western moral philosophy

Introduction

The problem of moral causation— how actions lead to morally significant consequences— has been a persistent concern in both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. In Western moral philosophy, debates over moral responsibility have typically centered on issues of free will, intention, and accountability. Classical theories grounded moral causation in virtue and character formation, while medieval and early modern traditions often linked moral consequences to divine command or natural law. In contemporary philosophy, discussions of agency and moral psychology continue to grapple with tensions between determinism and moral responsibility, particularly in light of scientific explanations of human behavior (Kane, 2002; Strawson, 2008). Despite these extensive debates, the question of how moral actions generate ethically meaningful outcomes remains philosophically unsettled.

In Buddhist philosophy, the doctrine of kamma provides a comprehensive and distinctive account of moral causation that links intentional action (cetanā), ethical quality, and experiential consequence. Canonical Buddhist sources emphasize that it is intention rather than mere physical action that constitutes kamma, thereby situating moral evaluation primarily within the domain of mental states and volitional processes (Gethin, 1998). Unlike many Western theories, kamma does not presuppose a divine judge or a metaphysical substance such as an enduring soul. Instead, it operates as an impersonal causal principle embedded within the conditioned structure of reality, explaining moral continuity through causal processes rather than through retributive judgment or metaphysical identity (Harvey, 2013).

This article undertakes a comparative study of kamma and major Western theories of moral causation with the aim of clarifying their underlying assumptions and philosophical implications. By examining kamma alongside Western accounts of agency, responsibility, and moral consequence, the study seeks to highlight both convergences— such as the shared emphasis on intention— and fundamental divergences concerning selfhood and moral ontology. In doing so, it argues that the Buddhist conception of moral causation offers a coherent alternative framework that integrates ethical responsibility with psychological transformation. Such a comparative perspective not only enriches cross-cultural philosophical dialogue but also contributes to contemporary ethical theory by challenging prevailing assumptions about agency, responsibility, and the foundations of moral evaluation (Keown, 2005).

Kamma as Moral Causation in Buddhist Philosophy

In Buddhist thought, *kamma* refers fundamentally to intentional action rather than to fate or deterministic causality. Canonical sources consistently emphasize that it is intention (*cetanā*) that constitutes *kamma*, making ethical evaluation inseparable from the quality of mental states underlying action. Actions motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion are regarded as unwholesome, while those rooted in generosity, compassion, and wisdom are considered wholesome. Moral causation, therefore, operates primarily at the level of volition and consciousness rather than external behavior alone, distinguishing the Buddhist account from moral theories that focus exclusively on observable conduct or consequences (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013).

Kamma functions as an impersonal moral law rather than as a system of reward and punishment administered by a transcendent authority. Moral consequences arise through causal continuity within the psychophysical process, linking intention, action, and experiential result. These consequences may manifest immediately as psychological states— such as peace or agitation— or later as life circumstances and rebirth. Importantly, the Buddhist conception of *kamma* does not entail strict determinism. While past actions condition present experience, they do not rigidly determine it; present intentions can transform, mitigate, or override previous conditions, preserving the possibility of moral agency and ethical development (Keown, 2005).

This account of moral causation is embedded within a non-substantialist ontology grounded in the doctrines of impermanence and non-self (*anattā*). Since Buddhism denies the existence of a permanent self that owns actions or receives their results, moral continuity is explained through causal processes rather than personal identity. Responsibility is not attributed to an enduring subject but to a continuum of conditioned mental and physical events. This process-oriented model avoids the metaphysical difficulties associated with positing a substantial moral agent while still maintaining ethical accountability through causal coherence (Collins, 1998).

Furthermore, the Buddhist understanding of *kamma* integrates moral causation with soteriological aims. Ethical action is not valued merely for social order or external conformity but as a necessary condition for liberation from suffering. Moral causation thus has a pedagogical function: it illustrates how unwholesome intentions perpetuate suffering and how ethical cultivation leads toward freedom. By framing morality within a causal and transformative process, Buddhist philosophy reconceptualizes moral responsibility as an opportunity for ethical growth rather than as a basis for retributive judgment. This distinctive approach offers a philosophically coherent and ethically rich model of moral causation that

contrasts sharply with many agent-centered theories in Western moral philosophy (Harvey, 2013; Keown, 2005).

Western Approaches to Moral Causation

Western philosophy has offered diverse accounts of moral causation, often grounded in metaphysical assumptions about the self, agency, and rationality. In classical Greek philosophy, moral causation was closely tied to virtue and character formation. Aristotle, for example, understood ethical action as the expression of cultivated dispositions (*hexeis*) shaped through habituation and rational deliberation, thereby linking moral outcomes to stable character traits rather than isolated acts (Aristotle, trans. 2009). In this framework, moral causation operates through the formation of virtues that reliably produce right action, situating responsibility within the rational structure of the moral agent.

Later theological traditions in Western thought reframed moral causation within a cosmological and theological order. Medieval Christian philosophy, drawing on thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, emphasized divine command and natural law as the ultimate sources of moral normativity. Moral actions were understood to have consequences not only in social life but also in relation to divine justice and salvation. Moral causation, in this context, was embedded in a teleological universe governed by God, where human agency operated within the bounds of divine providence (Aquinas, trans. 1988). This model reinforced a strong conception of moral accountability tied to obedience, sin, and punishment.

In modern philosophy, debates on moral causation have increasingly centered on the problem of free will and determinism. Enlightenment thinkers sought to reconcile moral responsibility with emerging scientific accounts of causal necessity. Compatibilist theories argue that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism, provided that actions flow from the agent's internal states such as desires and intentions (Hume, 2007). Libertarian approaches, by contrast, posit a form of indeterministic freedom at the core of moral agency, insisting that genuine responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise (Kane, 2002). Kantian ethics represents a distinct approach, grounding moral causation in rational autonomy and treating moral law as self-legislated by rational agents rather than imposed by external authority (Kant, 1997).

Despite their theoretical differences, many Western approaches share a common assumption of a stable moral subject who initiates actions and bears responsibility for their outcomes. Moral causation is frequently conceptualized in legalistic or retributive terms, focusing on blame, praise, punishment, and justification. Contemporary moral philosophy and legal theory continue to reflect this orientation, emphasizing accountability and desert as central ethical categories (Strawson, 2008). This contrasts sharply with the Buddhist emphasis

on psychological conditioning and ethical transformation, where moral causation functions less as a basis for retribution and more as a framework for understanding how mental states generate suffering or liberation. The comparison highlights a fundamental divergence between agent-centered and process-oriented models of moral causation.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

A significant point of convergence between Buddhist and Western moral thought lies in the centrality of intention to moral evaluation. Both traditions recognize that ethical judgment cannot be reduced to external outcomes alone but must account for the agent's mental orientation and volitional states. In Western philosophy, this emphasis is evident in Aristotelian virtue ethics, which links moral responsibility to character and rational deliberation, as well as in Kantian ethics, which grounds moral worth in the good will rather than consequences (Aristotle, trans. 2009; Kant, 1997). Similarly, Buddhist philosophy identifies intention (*cetanā*) as the defining feature of *kamma*, thereby locating moral causation primarily within the domain of consciousness and motivation (Gethin, 1998).

Despite this convergence, the two traditions diverge sharply in their underlying metaphysical assumptions about moral agency. Western moral theories typically presuppose a substantial or rational self that persists through time and serves as the bearer of moral responsibility. Whether conceived as a rational substance, a psychological subject, or a narrative identity, the self functions as the locus of moral accountability. By contrast, Buddhism explicitly denies any enduring self (*anattā*) underlying moral action. Moral continuity is explained not through personal identity but through causal processes linking intentions and consequences across time (Harvey, 2013). This divergence has profound implications for how responsibility is understood, shifting the focus from ownership of actions to the transformation of causal patterns of behavior.

A further divergence concerns the function and purpose of moral causation itself. In much of Western thought, moral causation serves primarily juridical or normative functions, such as assigning blame or praise, justifying punishment, or upholding moral norms within social institutions. By contrast, *kamma* functions chiefly as an explanatory and pedagogical principle within a soteriological framework. It illustrates how unwholesome mental patterns perpetuate suffering and how ethical cultivation leads toward liberation. This integration of ethics and soteriology allows Buddhist moral theory to avoid both moral absolutism and relativism, grounding ethical norms in experiential consequences rather than external authority or arbitrary convention (Keown, 2005). As a result, Buddhist moral causation emphasizes ethical transformation over retributive judgment, offering a fundamentally different orientation toward moral responsibility.

Contemporary Relevance of Kamma as Moral Causation

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Conclusion

This comparative study has demonstrated that *kamma* constitutes a distinctive and philosophically robust theory of moral causation within Buddhist thought. Unlike many Western models that rely on divine command, metaphysical substances, or a reified moral subject, the Buddhist conception of *kamma* explains moral continuity through impersonal causal processes grounded in intention and mental conditioning. Moral agency, in this framework, is inseparable from psychological transformation and ethical cultivation, rather than from juridical accountability or metaphysical ownership of action. While Western moral philosophy has developed sophisticated analyses of responsibility, autonomy, and freedom, the Buddhist account of *kamma* offers complementary insights by reconceptualizing moral responsibility as a dynamic process of causal formation and ethical refinement.

By placing Buddhist and Western perspectives in sustained dialogue, this article has highlighted the value of cross-cultural philosophy for addressing enduring ethical questions concerning agency, responsibility, and moral motivation. Understanding *kamma* as moral causation broadens the conceptual landscape of moral theory, showing that ethical responsibility need not depend on a permanent self or external authority but can be grounded in experiential consequences and intentional cultivation. In both traditional and contemporary contexts, this perspective provides a nuanced and practical framework for ethical growth—one that emphasizes transformation over retribution and insight over moral absolutism—thereby contributing meaningfully to ongoing debates in moral philosophy and comparative ethics.

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