

# Karma and Politics

by Bill Herbst

*This week's commentary is another reprint of an article written and published in 2004 as part of a short-lived monthly astrology column I wrote for a local Minneapolis magazine called The Edge, which was (and still is) a New Age publication about metaphysics, spirituality, and wellness. In the weeks ahead, I may repost one or two more articles from the ten columns I penned for that brief, one-year column.*

*Version 1.2 (posted on 1 August 2023)  
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In American social discourse, the labels "liberal" and "conservative" are tossed about as if we all agreed on their meanings. The general consensus has been that liberals are political Democrats who favor big government, the social welfare state, and regulations over business, while conservatives are political Republicans who favor smaller government, fiscal restraint in social programs, and unfettered free markets.

Beyond academic debates about government and markets, what are the spiritual underpinnings of liberalism and conservatism? What do those in each camp really believe deep down about life for themselves and others on this small and shrinking planet?

## **PERSONAL KARMA**

None of us is actually "born equal." Perhaps in the abstract, but not in fact. Human beings are birthed into lives of vastly different talents, liabilities, and external circumstances. Certain humans are born into great opportunities and conspicuous bounty, while others suffer terrible limits and chilling deprivation. As poet William Blake wrote, "*Some are born to sweet delight. Some are born to endless night.*" Why is this so? What cosmic agency allots these fates?

Karma.

The term "karma" has its etymological origins in Sanskrit as a word meaning "action." In its earliest meanings, karma implied no moral or ethical significance, but that neutrality shifted for the word's later conceptual usage within eastern religions. Technically, karma is defined in Hinduism and Buddhism as "reaction" or "inevitable consequences," specifically, the consequences of one's actions in life, whether those reactions are experienced as positive or negative. In modern "new age" parlance, however, personal karma is seen as the sum total of benefits and liabilities that have accrued and become associated with an

individual soul. As each of us walks the road of our “dharma” — our unique life-path — we encounter the results of our past karma, either as lovely Easter eggs hidden along the way to be discovered with delight, or as land-mines buried in the pavement of our path, waiting silently and with sinister intent to detonate when we step on them.

Most typically, karma is popularly associated with the concept of reincarnation, especially as an explanation for why otherwise seemingly random events happen to some individuals but not to others. In this view, karma is a system of “cosmic justice.” The rationale is that events aren't actually random at all, but are rather the cumulative result of all the actions we chose (or perhaps will choose) over the many lives that comprise our soul's long evolution toward spiritual maturity.

But karma need not be seen through the mythic filters of metaphysical scenarios. Belief in reincarnation or any other brand of afterlife is not required. In a larger sense, karma is simply the spiritual teaching of how life works in determining how life works.

If you're ten years old and come down with leukemia, that's karma. You did nothing to cause the disease, and your suffering it implies no current culpability or present tense wrong-doing. Still, the leukemia is your lot nonetheless and is “deserved,” no matter where it came from. The disease is simply the result you encountered, the hand you were dealt in the card game of life. That last statement may be galling to those who insist that we “choose” our reality, but such a belief is mainly a philosophical hedge against feeling victimized.

Generally speaking, karma implies the tricky paradox that nothing is random. Everything is earned or deserved. Curiously, though, that orientation could just as easily be flipped on its head to accommodate the exact opposite principle, where everything — the entirety of our personal experience — is randomly distributed. We simply get whatever we get. The mere fact of experiencing something makes it ours, whether or not we “earned” it.

That's not how karma is generally used and understood, but it's not really that much of a stretch to flip it over. Karma could become malleable, a catch-all for whatever we define it to mean. The moral/ethical scheme of either full responsibility or no responsibility could work either way for karma. An even fuller paradox is that life puts its stamp on us just as we put our stamp on life. At the heart of the mystery, life embodies both suffering and joy. Everyone gets both, and most spiritual disciplines advise doing the best we can to remain neutral and un hypnotized by either.

If karma can be boiled down to the unique path of a spiritual teaching for any individual, whether random or fated and deserved or not, then what exactly is the extent of our responsibility for other human beings, especially those we don't know?

## **KARMA AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHERS**

Conservatives tend to believe that personal karma is sacrosanct. The core belief is that each individual's karma is sacred, whether decreed by God or by the results of one's actions, and NOT therefore to be interfered with by others. If you have "good" karma, then that's your inheritance to be enjoyed fully. Should you have "bad" karma, that's also your spiritual lesson to suffer, and no one should lighten or remove that burden from your shoulders. Personal wealth or personal poverty are both seen as correct lessons.

Liberals tend to embrace a quite different belief, namely, that the earthly playing field should be leveled toward greater equality. Liberals do not trust "cosmic justice," believing instead in the dutiful necessity of human intervention through social legislation aimed at correcting apparent injustice. This is equivalent to the Robin Hood approach, to take from the rich and give to the poor as a way of equalizing society.

Conservatives sometimes accuse liberals of being too soft, while liberals sometimes accuse conservatives of a lack of compassion. Under these accusations lies a common belief — in justice — but justice viewed from a different perspective. Conservatives lean more toward divine or natural justice; liberals lean more toward human social justice.

## **THE LIMITS OF FAMILY**

Does this mean that conservatives are totally committed to non-intervention in other people's karma? No, of course not. If that were true, then conservatives would never share their wealth with anyone. They would hoard however much they have, reserving it all for no one but themselves.

In fact, people — even staunch conservatives — routinely intervene in the karma of others. Liberals and conservatives alike recognize that no man is an island (although some conservatives arrogantly think of themselves as "self-made," and some liberals foolishly dilute personal responsibility to the vanishing point). We all interact and share with others. We all tie our karma to that of others in various ways, both by choice and by necessity. The question is, with whom do we allow this sharing?

The answer is simple. We share generously with and provide copious assistance to anyone we regard as "Us." By contrast, we are neither empathetic nor compassionate and thus downright miserly as hell with all those we regard as "Them."

Conservatives tend to believe that the blood family, either biological or through marriage, is sacred. Those people are "Us." In other words, their belief is that one's karma is linked to blood relations in an order of importance that flows outward from parents, wives, and children, toward lesser relations of aunts, uncles, and cousins. One's blood line and traditional heritage through the nuclear family and its lineage have profound spiritual meaning for conservatives.

Beyond blood, conservatives feel a kinship with those who share cultural and religious similarities. Their friendships matter in terms of karmic linkage, as do their business associations. In other words, conservatives value familiarity and conformity.

Liberals also believe that family is sacred. Unlike conservatives, however, liberals let the ripples of family connection extend toward infinity. All men are seen, at least to some extent, as brothers. All humans are one family in liberal belief. Liberals may share less with those on the outer rungs, but they believe that our karma is no less linked because of distance or lack of familiarity.

At the edges of the bell curve, some extreme conservatives would feed their own families, friends, and beloveds, while letting your family and friends starve without a shred of remorse. Conversely, some extreme liberals could not sleep at night as long as a single human being suffers with hunger or any other deprivation. The gray area here is in how much we take on of other people's karma. Conservatives take on less; liberals take on more. But both conservatives and liberals believe that karma should be shared through family.

### **PROPERTY, OWNERSHIP, WEALTH, AND POVERTY**

For conservatives, ownership is absolute. Private property is sacrosanct. Thus, conservatives believe in capitalism, where ownership of the means of production is primal. For liberals, however, ownership is relative. Liberals believe that some property (or even for some more left-leaning radicals, most property) should be held in commonwealth for all. Thus, liberals lean toward socialism.

A basic conservative tenet is that hard work leads to success and wealth. Conversely, some conservatives hold that the poor must therefore be lazy. Liberals believe that wealth too often comes from personal advantages imbued by the "accident" of birth, so liberals tend to see the poor as disenfranchised.

For conservatives, poverty is a problem of defective character and personal irresponsibility (a visitation of karma with which we should not interfere). For liberals, the same problem is one of lack of opportunity and collective irresponsibility (the shared karma of extended family, in which we must intervene). As a result, conservatives tend to believe that extremes of wealth and poverty are correctly part of the natural order. Liberals tend to believe that extreme wealth and poverty are aberrations to be limited.

*Ask yourself: How do I feel about other people's karma? Is our personal experience random or earned? Is life just or unjust, luck or fate? What do I believe about property, wealth, and poverty? Who comprises my family?*

All this boils down to two fundamental questions: *Who is Us? Who is Them?* Your answers probably reveal much about your politics.