

The Law of Karma

Chapter IV from *First Principles of Theosophy* by C. Jinarajadasa

Who toiled a slave may come anew a Prince,
For gentle worthiness and merit won;
Who ruled a King may wander earth in rags
For things done and undone.

— The Light of Asia

Little by little, as man's knowledge grows, the world in which he lives is seen to be a world of law. Each law of nature, as it is discovered, liberates more of our will, however much it may seem at first sight to circumscribe our action; and since actions are but the resultant diagonal of a series of forces of thought and feeling of an inner world, man's supreme need is to understand that inner world of his as one of law and order. The great Law of Karma or Action, which Theosophy expounds, reveals to man something of the inner fabric of his being, and so helps him little by little to be a master of circumstance, and not its slave.

We are already familiar in science with the conception of the whole universe as an expression of energy. The electron is a storehouse of energy; so too, though on a larger scale, is a star. This energy is continually changing, motion transforming itself into light or heat or electricity, and a heavy element into a lighter, and so on from one transformation to another. Man, himself is a storehouse of energy; he takes in energy with his food, and transforms it into the movements of his body. The energy in man, when utilized for a kindly action, is beneficent; and we call such a use "good"; when it is employed to injure another, we term such a use "evil". All the time that man lives, he is a transformer; the universal energy enters into him, to be transformed by him into service or into injury.

The Law of Karma is the statement of cause and effect as man transforms energy. It takes into account not only, as science does, the visible universe and its forces, but also that larger, unseen universe of force which is man's true sphere of activity. Just as, with the flicker of an eyelid, man throws into the universe a force which affects the equilibrium of all other forces in our physical cosmos, so too, with each thought and feeling, he changes the adjustment of himself to the universe, and the adjustment of the universe to himself.

The first principle to grasp, in the attempt to understand Karma, is that we are dealing with force and its effects. This force is of the physical world of movement, or of the astral world of feeling, or of the mental world of thinking. We are using all three types of force, the first with the activities of our physical bodies, the second with the feelings of our astral bodies, and the third with the concrete and abstract thoughts of our mental and causal bodies. To aspire, to dream, to plan, to think, to feel, to act — all this means to set in motion forces or three worlds; and, according to the use made by us of these forces, we *help* or we *hinder*.

Now, all the force which we use, on all the planes, is the energy of the Logos; we are but transformers of that energy. As we so transform and use that energy, it is His Desire that we use it to further His Plan of Evolution. When we help that Plan, our action is "good"; when we hinder it, our action is "evil". And since we use His force all the time, we must, at each moment of time, either help or hinder that Plan.

Since man is not an individual by himself, but is one unit in a Humanity of millions of individuals, each thought or feeling or act of man affects each of his fellow-men, in proportion to the nearness of each to him as the distributor of force. Each such use of force by a man, which helps or hinders the whole, of which he is a part, brings with it a result to him; this result is briefly stated, in terms of his action and its resultant reaction, in Fig. 36.

ACTION AND REACTION				
HIGHER MENTAL	ASPIRATIONS	IDEALS	☆	125
LOWER MENTAL	APPRECIATIONS	INSPIRATIONS	○	25
	CRITICISMS	WORRIES	●	25
ASTRAL	SYMPATHIES	JOYS	△	5
	RESENTMENTS	GRIEFS	▲	5
PHYSICAL	HELPFUL ACTS	COMFORTS	□	1
	HURTFUL ACTS	PAINS	■	1

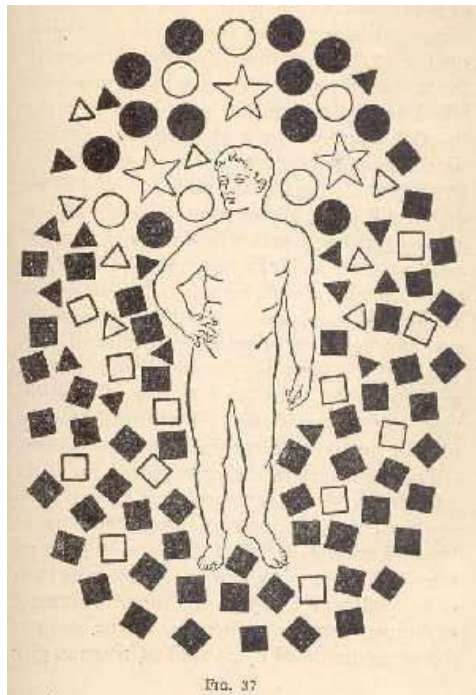
FIG. 36

Each hurtful act is so much force (represented in the diagram by a black square) thrown out into the universe, which works itself out in the injury inflicted on another; but the equilibrium of the universe to that other has then been disturbed by the injurer, and that equilibrium must be restored at the expense of the wrong-doer. His "karma" for the injury is a "pain"; the force which produces that pain discharges itself through the injured as the fulcrum, and thus restores the original equilibrium. Similarly is it with a kind act; its karma or reaction is a force which adjusts circumstances so as to produce a "comfort".

Furthermore, in this universe of law, each type of force works on its own plane. One man may give alms to a beggar with pity and sympathy, but another merely to get rid of him as a nuisance; both perform a kind act, and to both the karma of the act on the physical plane is a "comfort"; but there is to the former an additional karma on the astral plane for his pity and sympathy, and it returns to him as a happy emotion, while to the latter there is no karma of this kind. Similarly, I may have nothing but pity to give to a sufferer; I reap thereby an emotional "happiness", but I do not reap a physical "comfort" as well.

For the purpose of the exposition of this difficult subject, a symbol has been taken for each type of force which makes karma (see last column in diagram); these signs-squares, triangles, circles and the star — are merely symbols, and nothing more. On the higher mental plane, where the soul of man resides in his causal body, evil "is null, is naught, is silence implying sound"; there, no evil counterpart exists to the soul's aspiration. There is therefore nothing which can be symbolized by a black star. The wicked man is not a wicked *soul*; he is but the representative in an earthly body of an undeveloped soul, whose energies are too feeble as yet to control his emotional and physical agents.

Each one of us, as he enters this life, comes from a long past of many lives; as we take up our task once more on earth, we bring with us our karma of good and evil. Now this karma, as already explained, consists of forces; and Fig. 37 is an attempt to suggest to our imagination this fact of the individual as a fulcrum for the discharge of the good and evil forces of his own creation.¹



¹ In the diagram, the black signs represent pains, griefs and worries respectively, and the white symbolize ideals, inspirations, joys and comforts. See Fig. 36.

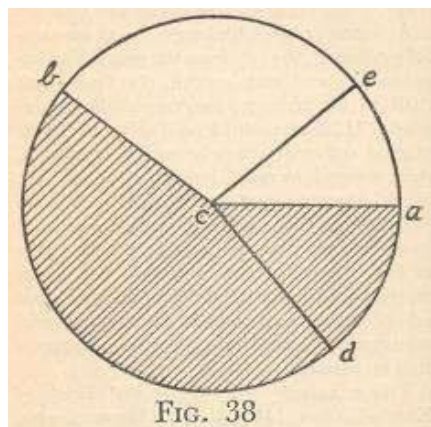
Perhaps, as we look at the diagram, our eye is first impressed by the large number of "pains", "griefs" and "worries" which are the man's due; and we count only three "ideals". But we must not forget that the forces of all the planes are not of equal value in the production of changes in a man's destiny; a unit of physical force, producing a "comfort", may be only a hundredth fraction as powerful as a unit of mental force which makes an "ideal". If we give 1 as the "work" equivalent for a physical unit of force, we shall not be exaggerating if we put 5 for an astral unit, 25 for a lower mental, and 125 for an "ideal" of the higher mental world. While a man may have many "pains" and "griefs" and "worries" as his karma, yet if he but have a few "ideals" as well, he will make a success of his life and not a failure; on the other hand, a man may get as his karmic due wealth and position, giving him many "comforts" and "happiness", and yet, if he has not brought from his past any "inspirations" for his mind, his life may be merely one largely of agreeable futility.

Looking round us at the lives which men and women live, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that, in most lives today, there is more "bad" karma than "good", that is, there is on the whole more of tedious toil and sorrow than of happy labor and joy. At the present stage of human evolution, there is, in the store of forces accumulated by each of us, more to give us pain than pleasure. Our evil account is larger than our good, because in our past lives we have not desired to be guided by wisdom, but preferred instead to live selfish lives, caring little whom we hurt by our selfishness. But each karmic force must discharge its energy, for "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap".

As a man "reaps", his karmic forces are carefully adjusted, so that, from the interaction between his good and his evil, the final result shall be an addition, however slight, to his good. If, as we enter life, all our karmic forces of good and evil were to be set into operation, then, seeing how much larger a stock we have of evil than of good, our lives would be so weighted with pain and sadness that we should have little spirit to struggle through the battle of life. In order, however, that we should struggle and succeed, and increase the good side of our account and not the bad, a careful adjustment is made for each soul as he enters into incarnation.

This adjustment is made by the "Lords of Karma", those beneficent Intelligences who, in the Plan of the Logos, act as the arbiters of Karma. They neither reward nor punish; they only adjust the operation of a man's own forces, so that his karma shall help him one step forward in evolution. We can study a typical method of adjustment from the diagrams which now follow.

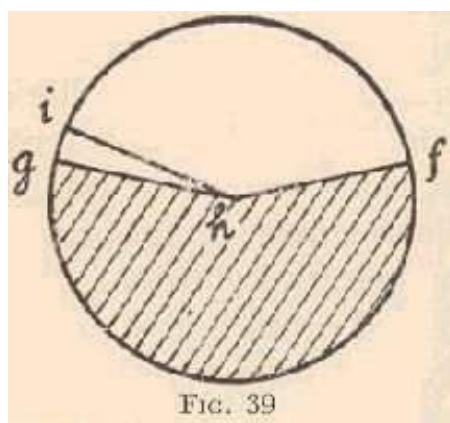
In Fig. 38 we have a circle which represents the totality of a man's karma, or the accumulated force of all his past lives; the circle has two segments, the white and the dark. The white segment represents the quantity of good karma, and the dark that of the evil karma.



We will presume that the individual's total karma comes to one hundred units, and that the relation between his good and his evil is in the ratio depicted in the diagram, which is as 2 to 3. The segment *a e b c a*, then, represents the good karma of 40 units, while the segment *a d b c a* represents the bad karma of 60 units. This total of accumulated past karma is known in Indian philosophy as Sanchita or "accumulated" karma.

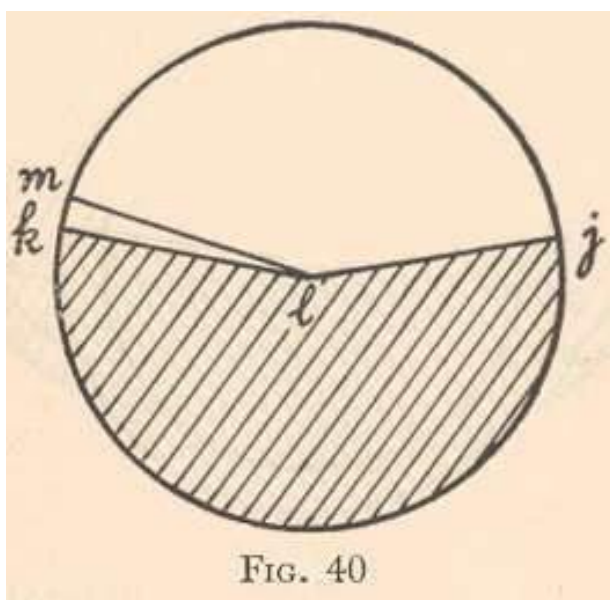
Out of this total, the Lords of Karma select a certain quantity for the new life of the soul; we will imagine that they take for the work of the new life one-fourth of the total. This one-fourth is represented in the diagram by the segment *e c d a e*; and of this *e c a* represents the good, with 10.7 units, and *a c d* the bad, with 14.3 units. The ratio between this good and bad is not as 2 to 3, which is that of the total; it is as 3 to 4, thus giving the individual more out of his good account than is properly speaking his share. This stock of karma, with which the soul starts his incarnation, is called in Sanskrit Prārabdha or "starting" karma; it is that "fate" which the Muslim believes God ties round the neck of each soul at his birth.

In Fig. 39 we have this Prārabdha karma; and its good is the white segment *f i g h f* and its evil is the dark segment *f h g f*. It was mentioned that more of good karma was selected for the life than was the ratio in the total karma of all past lives. This is shown in the diagram, where the segment *f i h f* represents the proportion of good according to the total of karma, and the larger segment *f i g h f* represents the proportion of good actually selected for the new life.



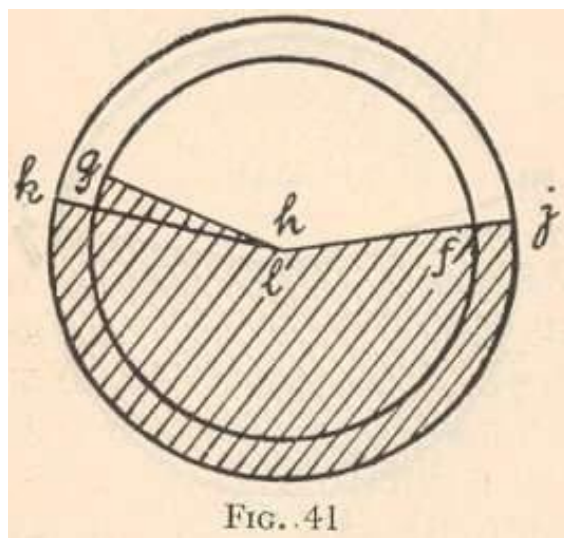
Karma is force; as force spends itself, it does "work", This "work" brings about in a man's life those reactions which are described in Fig.36. As a man's life is lived, the Karma represented by our Fig. 39 exhausts itself. But the "work" it does has, however, the result of making him create new karma by its reaction; according to the man's wisdom will be this new karma which is thus produced. If his "pains" teach him resignation and sympathy, if his "grief" and "worries" spur him to effort to right the wrongs which he has done, if he "pays his karmic debts" with understanding, then the new karma which he generates is good and not evil. But if he is resentful of the debts which he is called upon to pay, if his nature hardens, and as a result he causes misery to others, the new karma which he makes is evil. As a matter of fact, most of us, as we pay our karmic debts, make our new karma mixed, as of old, of both good and evil; only, there will be, in the wiser of us, a larger proportion of good than evil.

This *new* karma created, called in Sanskrit Agami or Kriyamana, or "future" Karma, is shown in Fig. 40.

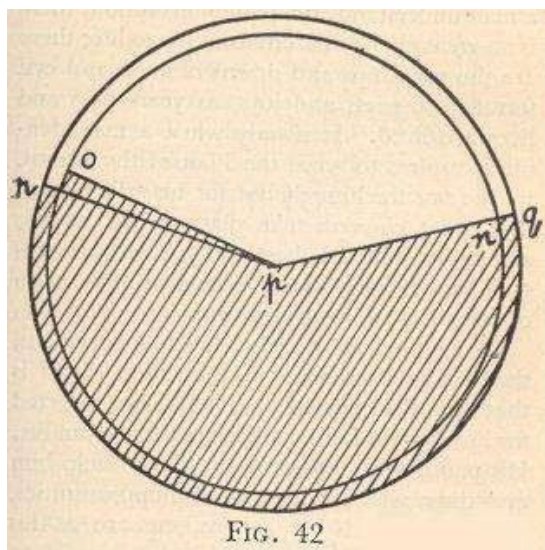


It is a larger circle than that of Fig. 39. While 25 units of karma were spent, good and bad, we shall presume that 36 new units of both have been created; whereas the proportion of good and evil with which the life was started was as 3 to 4, the proportion, as the life closes, of the new karma created — of good 16 and of bad 20 — is as 4 to 5. In Fig.40 the radii *m l* and *k l* mark respectively the sizes of the segments of the old exhausted good karma and the new generated.

In Fig. 41 we have the two Figs. 39 and 40 superimposed one over the other; we see at once that here both a larger quantity of force is generated, and a larger proportion of good to evil.



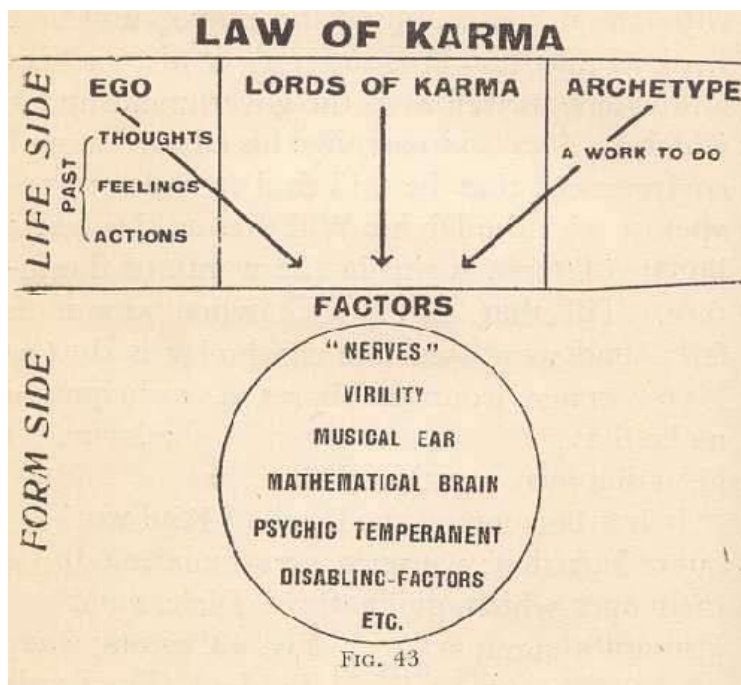
Referring once more to Fig. 38, we now find that the segment *a e c d a* has been exhausted; we must put in its place the new karma represented by Fig. 40. This is done in the new Fig. 42.



The outer circle represents the new total of 111 units, while the inner circle represents the old total of 100; the radii *p r*, *p o* show us how there is for the future a larger proportion of good to evil, the proportion being now practically as 41 to 59. Since the proportion of the old total was 40 to 60, the change is not great; there is only one more unit of the good, and one less of the bad, as the result or one incarnation. But as a matter of fact, till a man understands the plan of evolution, there is no great change in him from life to life; there are the usual ups and downs of good and evil fortune, of griefs and joys, as years pass and lives are lived. It is only when a man definitely aspires to serve the Plan of the Logos, to live not for himself but for his fellow-men, that great changes take place in his karma, and his evolution is hastened. Then his progress is swift from life to life, even as in the ratio of geometrical progression.

We can understand now, how to some extent, there is for each man a "fate", for "fate" is that quantity of good and evil karma selected for him by the Lords of Karma for a given life. His parents, his heredity, those who help him and those who hinder him, his opportunities, his obligations, his death — these are as his "fate"; but while these forces spend themselves, they do not impose upon him the manner in which he shall *react* to them. Small though his will is, as yet, that will is still free; he can react to his old karma and produce good rather than bad new karma. It is true that he is greatly handicapped, both by his past tendencies and by the pressure of his environment; yet the Divine Spirit lives within him, and, if he will but rouse himself, he may cooperate with the Divine Will in evolution, and not work against it. It is the duty of his teachers and elders, as well as of the government under which he lives, so to arrange his education and environment that he will find it easier to cooperate with the Divine Will than to thwart it; but this Utopia is still in the womb of the future. Till that day comes, when any man fails — and much of his failure now is due to his environment — each of us who has helped to make that environment shares in the karma of his failure.

It has been mentioned that, in the working out of karmic forces, the Lords of Karma direct their operation; we must now understand the principles which guide these Directors; they are briefly summarized in Fig. 43.



The Lords of Karma must use the individual's own stock of force; they cannot add to it nor diminish it. He comes out of a past, with karmic bonds to individuals, to a community, to a people; he must be sent to be born where he can "work out" his karma with respect to these. But also, his life is only one of a series of lives, and at the end of them, he is to become a Master of the Wisdom, a Perfect Man, in the image of an Archetype which the Logos has created for him. The Lords of Karma, then, must adjust the individual's karma so that he grows steadily towards his Archetype.

Now, much of a man's activities will depend upon the kind of physical body which he has; and since this is provided by a father and a mother, the heredity from the parents is an important matter. In these days we think of heredity in terms of Mendelian "genes" -- those units of physical attributes which are in the germ-cells of the parents; the Lords of Karma have therefore to select such "genes" as will be useful for the type of body which the karma requires. I quote here what I have written previously on the subject in *Theosophy and Modern Thought*, whence, too, is taken this Fig. 43.

Once more the problem resolves itself into happenings in two worlds, the seen and the unseen. On the seen, the form side, we have man as a body, and that body has been fashioned by factors.² But these factors are helpful to some and are handicaps to others; one man is born with a splendid physique, while another has night-blindness or hemophilia as his share; one may be musical, and another deaf and dumb. In a family with the factor for color-blindness, we have one son normal, but three are affected; why are three handicapped thus, but not the fourth?

We must turn to the life side to understand the riddle of man's destiny. Three elements there come into play. Of these the first is that the man is an Ego, an imperishable circle in the sphere of Divinity; "long, long ago, indeed, he had his birth, he verily is now within the germ". He has lived on earth in many a past life, and there thought and felt and acted both good and evil; he has set in motion forces that help or hinder both himself and others. He is bound and not free. But he lives on from age to age to achieve an ideal, which is his Archetype. Just as for plant and animal life there are archetypes of the forms, so are there archetypes for the souls of men. One shall be a great saint of compassion, another a teacher of truth, a third a ruler of men; artist and scientist, doer and dreamer, each has set before him his Archetype, that Thought of God Himself of what each man shall be in the perfection of his God-given temperament. And each ego achieves his Archetype by finding his work. For this it is that we, as egos, come into incarnation — to discover our work and to release the hidden powers within us by battling with circumstances as we achieve that work.

But to do our work we must have a body of flesh; and the help or, the handicap the body is to our work depends on the factors of which it is made. Here once more there is no fortuitous concourse of factors; Deva Builders come to help man with his destiny. These are the Lords of Karma, those invisible Intelligences who administer the great Law of Righteousness which establishes that as a man soweth so shall he reap; they select from the factors provided by the parents those that are most serviceable to the ego for the lesson he has to learn and for the work he has to do, in that particular body which Karma allots to him.

² In 1914, when I wrote, the word "gene" had not been invented as a substitute for Bateson's "factors" what are now termed "genes".

The Lords of Karma neither punish nor reward; they only adjust the forces of a man's past, so that those forces in their new grouping shall help the man one step nearer his Archetype. Whatever the Lords give to a man, joy or sorrow, opportunity or disaster, they keep one thing in mind, that man's purpose in life at his present stage is neither to be happy nor miserable, but to achieve his Archetype. There is, later on, untold bliss for him in action, when he is the Archetype in realization; but till that day, it is their duty to press him on from one experience to another.

After the zygote³ is made, the Lords of Karma select the factors, since as yet the ego cannot do so himself; if the next stage in evolution for him is by developing some particular gift — as, for instance, that of music — then they select for him the appropriate factors; the musician will need an abnormally sensitive nervous system and a special development of the cells of the ear, and the Lords will pick out these factors as the embryo is fashioned. If at the same time the man's inner strength is to be roused by a handicap, or his nature to be purified by suffering, then an appropriate factor will also appear, some factor perhaps like that which brings about a lack of virility or of resistance to disease. If on the other hand the ego, already a mathematician, is in this life to be a mathematical genius, then those factors in the zygote that build the mathematical brain will be brought out as the zygote grows to be the embryo.

Whatever is the work for the ego, appropriate factors are selected for; it by the Lords; virility for the pioneer in new lands, the psychic temperament for those who can help by communing with the invisible, a disabling factor for one who shall grow through suffering, and so on, factor by factor, the Lords distribute the karma of men. With infinite compassion and with infinite wisdom, but swerving not one hair's breadth from justice, they build for one soul a body suited for genius, and for another a body which is as a log. It is not theirs to make the man happy or discontented, good or evil; their one duty is to guide the man one step nearer to his Archetype. Helps and handicaps, joys and pains, opportunities or privations, are the bricks of the ego's own making for his temporary habitation; the Lords of Karma add nothing and take nothing away; they only adjust the forces of the soul's making, so that his ultimate destiny, his Archetype, shall be achieved as swiftly as may be, as he treads the round of births and deaths.

³ The first cell of the embryo, made by the union of the two germ-cells contributed by the parents.

We must not, however, imagine that this "fate" selected for the individual is absolutely rigid and immutable; a man can, and does, change his "fate" sometimes, by an unusual reaction to circumstances. For instance, suicide is not in a man's fate, though his visible and invisible circumstances may, seemingly to us, be too much for his strength; the plan for the individual is always to struggle through his "pains" and "griefs" and "worries", and not "go under". Similarly, an individual may take an opportunity not specially arranged for him; some religious teacher, for instance, whose appearance is not specially related to him, may affect him, and he may make for himself a new opportunity. Not infrequently too, a man's karma may be as it were put out of gear by the actions of others which are not calculated for in his karma. In all these cases, whether the event be of service or disservice to the individual, there is always a large reserve of karma not actually in operation, and the new karma is deducted from or added to this reserve, so that there is no final favoritism or injustice.

It is also interesting to note that there are several types of karma, and that individuals can be related by one, or more, of them, but not necessarily by all. The commonest "karmic link" is of love or hatred; but there are also links of caste, or of race. A man born, for instance, into a priestly caste shares to some extent in the good or the evil done by the caste as a whole; an individual born among a particular people is handicapped or helped by the karma which that people has made for itself throughout the centuries. There is also the karma attaching to a special type of work; the henchmen of a Pericles or the lieutenants of a Caesar will be drawn by karmic links to their chief whenever that chief is in incarnation and works again at his life's dream. In such cases, there may or may not be any emotional links at all between those united in the common work; the link which binds them, so that they help or hinder each other and the common work, is a karmic link of work.

This vast subject of the soul's karma, or the soul *at work*, can only be suggested in outline in such a brief summary as this. To understand Karma in its fullest operation and significance requires the wisdom of an Adept; but to understand the principle of Karma is to revolutionize one's conception of the possibilities of life and of oneself. As Theosophy is intensely ethical in its outlook, there perhaps is no more useful way of summarizing what we know of Karma than as done in Fig. 44.

THE LAW OF KARMA		
<i>"Karma" = Activity</i>		
OF PAST LIFE		OF PRESENT LIFE
SERVICEABLE ACTIONS	<i>make</i>	GOOD ENVIRONMENT
HURTFUL ACTIONS	..	EVIL ENVIRONMENT
ASPIRATIONS AND DESIRES	..	CAPACITIES
SUSTAINED THOUGHTS	..	CHARACTER
SUCCESSSES	..	ENTHUSIASM
EXPERIENCES	..	WISDOM
PAINFUL EXPERIENCES	..	CONSCIENCE
WILLS TO SERVE	..	SPIRITUALITY

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."
Gal. VI. 7.

FIG. 44

Ah, Love, could you and I with Him conspire,
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits, and then
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire!

There is indeed One who has made this "scheme of things entire" according to a Plan of Love and Beauty; but, at the present stage of human evolution, that Plan is "in heaven", and not "on earth". But He is waiting till the day when His Will shall be done "on earth, as it is in heaven"; and that day cannot come till each one of the myriads of souls who are Fragments of Him is ready to work with Him to shatter His present scheme and remould it nearer to His "heart's desire". He is the great Reconstructor, who shatters what He erstwhile built, and rebuilds nearer to His heart's desire. For the whole world is His Karma, His Action. And we need only to follow His guidance, as He whispers in our inmost hearts how to shatter our scheme of things entire, and then make it nearer to our heart's desire. When each of us has indeed the vision of his heart's *true* desire, and wants to shatter his scheme of things entire, so that a better, diviner scheme shall exist *for all men* and not for himself alone, then he will inevitably know how so to fashion his Karma that each action of his shall be the action of the Logos, according to His Heart's Desire.