

The Law of Cause and Effect

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I have explained elsewhere that what we usually call man's life is simply one day in the real and larger life, and that when what we call death comes to him he simply lays himself down to sleep at the conclusion of his life day. You will see very readily that the benefit to be derived from this scheme of development in successive lives is contingent upon the continued existence of the same great general laws. It is only because the great Law of Divine Justice is always the same, that the experience gained in one incarnation is useful in the next. So that belief in this law of cause and effect is in fact an integral part of the doctrine of reincarnation. Its influence in reality is even more far-reaching than the next physical life; it extends also into the after-death condition, and a full comprehension of its working is of the greatest importance to us.

As to this law of divine justice, there have been various opinions at various times. Some people; when they have looked out into the world, and seen what was happening, have wondered whether there was a law of justice at all. I do not deny that from a purely physical point of view we are sometimes unable fully to see the action of this great law. Yet I know that it exists, and that when we do not see its working the fault lies in our own blindness, and not in the action of the law. We may be quite certain that the law exists, and yet be fully prepared to admit that it is not always possible for us down here to see the whole of its working. Although I put this law before you as a hypothesis for your consideration, it is much more than a hypothesis for those who are studying from the Theosophical standpoint. Very many of them know by the use of faculties beyond the physical that reincarnation is a definite fact. In the same way there are very many students who know certainly that this law of cause and effect is in action. But we must realize that this law is working itself out upon other planes besides the physical, and so is not to be gauged only from one point of view. Suppose we were looking at the underside of some very beautiful tapestry; you will comprehend that, being only able to see the underside, we should have a very imperfect idea of the pattern. Suppose, further that the tapestry had not been finished, then still less should we be able to form a clear conception of the design. That is precisely how we stand with regard to the mighty law of karma. We only see the underside of it from the physical plane because so much of its action belongs to higher levels. Indeed, we might expect scarcely ever to be able to trace it fully from this side. Once more, as in the case of reincarnation, if you will provisionally accept this idea of divine justice, you will find that it is a more satisfactory theory of life than any other, and you may gradually come to hold it as firmly as we do.

You will observe that there are only certain hypotheses. Either everything is only blind chance, and we are ruled by caprice, or we are under a regular divine law, and our surrounding are the result of our actions, good or evil, in previous lives. You will admit that you would like to believe in a law of divine justice. There must be a reason for that feeling that man has of always desiring justice. If God is infinitely greater than we, He must surely have this quality. We believe in Theosophy that it is a rational necessity that this law should exist, and we see in every direction instances of its workings. I can explain it only to a limited extent, because it needs long and careful study. But the broad outline we ought to be able to give, and then the details can be gathered from the literature. Never think that when you have heard a lecture on a Theosophical subject you know all about it. You have only to take up some of our books to see how

very much more there is to be known, for in one lecture it is not possible to give all available information even on one point.

The first great characteristic that I should like you to grasp about this law is that it is automatic in its action, and that therefore there is no possibility of escape from it. Put aside all theories that man will be judged for his actions, and punished or rewarded for them. That inevitably suggests to us the thought of an earthly judge, who may be prejudiced or partially informed, or may be more lenient in one case and more severe in another. We prefer rather to speak of the law of cause and effect, because we hold that this is a law which brings us the result of our actions with an automatic precision. In mechanics we know that action and reaction are equal, and that no force can ever be lost, and we find that precisely the same rule obtains on these higher levels. If you put so much energy into a machine, you will receive back from it so much work as a result. If you put a certain amount of energy into a word, deed, or thought, you will obtain from that also a certain result, for the law of the conservation of energy holds good upon higher planes just as it does upon this.

If you put a certain amount of force into a steam-engine, you expect to get a definite proportion back in the shape of work - not all of it, naturally, because some goes in friction and some is thrown off in the form of heat, but still a fair proportion. If you do not receive back from your engine what you know you may reasonably expect, you at once look for a defect in your machine; it would never occur to you to say that the law of the conservation of energy is false. But when exactly the same law is working on higher planes, people who find an individual instance in which they cannot see that evil flows from evil and that good follows good, seem often to affirm wildly that no law of justice exists, instead of blaming themselves for their own short-sightedness, or tranquilly realising that we cannot expect always to see how this law works out its results, because they are not always immediate, and the time occupied may often extend far beyond our physical purview. Often forces set in motion in one life have not time to work themselves out in that incarnation or even in the next, but they will inevitably be worked out some time. We are, today, to a large extent, the products of the thoughts, surroundings, and the teachings of our childhood, even though the details of that life may be forgotten. Just as today we are bearing the results of yesterday, and the day before, so precisely is it with the larger day, the incarnation. We have made ourselves what we are, and we have made our circumstances what they are. As we have sown in the past, so are we reaping now; and as we are sowing now, so infallibly shall we reap in the future.

It is especially important to emphasise the truth that this Divine Law is inexorable, because a good deal of the religious teaching of the present day distinctly includes a theory we may escape from the consequences of our actions. In Theosophy we consider that a very dangerous doctrine, not only because it is fundamentally inaccurate, but because of the many unsound conclusions which are deduced from it. The idea suggested is that by doing wrong the man has simply incurred a debt, and that this debt may just as well be paid by someone else as by the sinner himself - or rather that the sinner cannot himself pay, and so must shuffle off his responsibility. This simile of the debt is one that we have sometimes employed in Theosophical writing, but it seems to me liable to very serious misunderstanding. A much truer analogy would be that of a man who wishes to be an athlete and is training himself for a race. In order to acquire sufficient strength and agility he must develop certain muscles, and for that purpose he needs a certain training. It would not at all serve that purpose if someone else did it for him. If we wish to become perfect men physically we must take much trouble to develop those parts of the body which we have hitherto neglected, and we must rest others which we have over worked. The physical condition of the average man is no inapt symbol of his moral condition. Many muscles are almost

atrophied for want of use, while other parts of the body - the nervous system, for instance - have been seriously injured by improper use. From the standpoint of the physical we have committed many sins against our own bodies, and we must atone for them; if we want to become perfect men physically we must go through many wearisome exercises and trials, which would not have been necessary if we had kept our bodies properly and evenly develop. Others can help us, by telling us what to do and how best to do it, but others cannot take the exercise for us. It is not like the liquidation of a debt, because in addition to bearing the result of wrong done in the past, the man must in bearing it develop strength for the future. He must develop perfect moral qualities in the same way as he would develop perfect muscles - by exercising them. He must make the necessary effort to put things right again. No one else can do it for him, but happily many may help him by advice and sympathy and affectionate encouragement. This law of cause and effect works just as do other laws of Nature, and if we can recognise that it will save us much trouble. If you put your hand into the fire, and it is burnt, you do not say "God punished me for putting my hand into the fire". You consider it a natural consequence of your action, and you know that anyone who understands physics could explain to you along scientific lines exactly what had happened to you, and why you suffered. He would tell you that incandescent matter is vibrating at an exceedingly rapid rate, that such a rate of vibration impinging upon the tissues of your hand had torn them apart, and so had produced the wound that we call a burn. But there is no special Divine interposition in that, though it takes place under the operation of those laws of Nature which are the expression of the Divine Will on the physical plane.

We hold that sorrow and suffering flow from sin just precisely in that way, under the direct working of natural law. It may be said, perhaps, that obviously the good man does not always reap his reward of good result, nor does the wicked man always suffer. Not always immediately; not always within our ken; but assuredly eventually and inexorably. If we could see the future, if we could even see the whole of the present, we should understand this fully. We shall see more clearly that this must be so if we define exactly what we mean by good and evil. Our religious brothers would tell us that that was good which was in accordance with God's will, and that that was evil which was in opposition to it. The scientific man would say that that was good which helped evolution, and whatever hindered it was evil. Those two men are in reality saying exactly the same thing; for God's will for man is evolution, and when that is clearly realised all conflict between religion and science is at once ended. Anything, therefore, which is against the evolution of humanity as a whole is against the divine will. We see at once that when a man struggles to gain anything for himself at the expense of others he is distinctly doing evil, and it is evil because it is against the interest of the whole. Therefore the only true gain is that which is a gain for the race as a whole, and the man who gain something without cost or wrong to anyone is raising the whole race somewhat in the process. He is moving in the direction of evolution, while the other man is moving against it.

Take a simple illustration. Suppose that I have here a great weight suspended from the ceiling by a rope. If I exert a certain force in pushing against this weight, we know by the laws of mechanics that it pushes back against my hand with exactly the same amount of force. We find that that same law of mechanics holds good on the higher planes just as it does here. If a man exerts his strength against the Divine order, he disturbs the equilibrium of nature, and that equilibrium infallibly readjusts itself at the expense of the man who disturbs it. The power of the current of the Divine will is so much greater than that of any human will which may attempt to deflect it that it sweeps him inevitably on, and it is only he who suffers, not the Divine scheme. He cannot delay the current, but he may cause a little temporary disturbance and foam upon its surface. He is swept along with it in any case, but he can go on in two ways. He can intelligently observe its direction and swim with it, and by doing so he will not only progress

with ease and comfort himself, but will also (which is much more important) be able to extend a helping hand to others. On the other hand, he may set himself against it, through a foolish misunderstanding of his own interests. He will still be carried on in spite of his struggles, but with a great deal of trouble and pain to himself, and perhaps of hindrance to others also. That is precisely what the wicked man is doing. He will be swept along more slowly and with a great deal of sorrow and suffering for himself and others, but he must evolve.

If we can grasp the grand idea that there is no possibility of final destruction, but the certainty of final success for all, because that is God's will for them, we shall at once recognise the utter futility and madness of selfishness. There is no feeble hope that a few may be saved, but the magnificent certainty that none can by any possibility be lost.

I have sometimes wondered how modern orthodoxy can speak of Christ as the Saviour of the world, and yet in the same breath assert that He does not save it, that He does not succeed in saving one in ten thousand of its inhabitants, and has to yield all the rest to the Devil! Would that be considered a successful effort if we were speaking of any kind of human attempt? Such a doctrine is a blasphemy; cast it out from your stock of religious ideas. We bring a grander gospel and we preach a nobler creed than that; for we know that this evolution will succeed and not fail - that it will be a grand and glorious success, and that every soul in it shall eventually attain its goal.

It is only the ignorant who struggles, and even he must yield in the end. He will struggle against the evolutionary current in one life - perhaps even in more than one, but his soul will learn its lesson, will observe the inevitable connection between cause and effect, and will strive to control its vehicles more efficiently. Let us see a little how this works. In the first lecture I mentioned the planes of nature, and explained that man had bodies corresponding to them. We have to remember that this law of cause and effect is acting with regard to those planes as well as to this. If the man has strong emotions, those represent forces which are producing their effect in the astral body. If he has good mental development, that represents a force belonging to his mental body, which is inevitably producing results also.

Suppose a man finds himself what we call an emotional person, easily swayed either by feeling of affection or by annoyance. That man has an emotional nature, a readily impressible astral body which he brought over from a previous life. He need not, however, carry it on with him to another. A man who finds himself and train himself definitely with a view to the future. If he lets himself go and allows his passion to dominate him, he encourages his astral body to indulge in those violent vibrations, he sets up a habit in it which becomes every time more difficult to conquer. If, on the other hand, he sets himself to try to curb his anger, he gradually gets those vibrations under his control, and each time it is a little easier than before. It often happens that a man who is irritated says something which he afterwards regrets. He resolves not to do this again, but when the next provocation comes, he does not remember in time; perhaps for several more times he will pull himself up just as he has spoken the angry word. But there comes a time when he remembers in the very act of speaking and checks himself abruptly, and then his victory is half won. Presently he stops himself just before he speaks the word, and then he has won the victory as far as the physical plane is concerned, though he has still to go on and control the feeling itself - to prevent even the vibration in the astral body. That is the way in which a man learns to break through a bad habit.

Fortunately we may set up good habits as readily as bad ones, if we will only take the trouble. We may try definitely to set up within ourselves good habits of helpfulness, unselfishness, perseverance, punctuality, and so on; and then we shall be born with these as inherent qualities upon our next return to earth. That is a little bit of character-building which anyone may undertake, and the trouble it costs him will be the best investment he ever made. When we understand that the mental body and astral body are only expressions of the man, we shall realize that in learning to control them he is acquiring definite qualities and building them into the causal body, so that next time he will have those qualities as part of his stock-in-trade, as it were, with which he recommences his business of evolution. The man sows certain thoughts and actions, and later on he reaps the results. Between the spring sowing and the autumn reaping he may have worn out one suit of clothes and put on another in the shape of a new body, but he remains the same and he reaps his harvest just the same.

We find by investigation that, broadly speaking, the man's thoughts in one life build his character for the next, and that his actions in the one life produce his surrounding in the next. A strong desire along certain lines which remains entirely unfulfilled during one life will often produce a capacity along those lines in the next. For example, I have known people who are very musical in the sense that they enjoy music intensely, but yet have no faculty for producing it, no facility in performance and no opportunity for acquiring it, although they earnestly wish for it. Now that strong desire will certainly produce its results in the next incarnation. Assuredly those people will next time bring back with them the capacity for musical training, and will have the opportunity for it. They will not be born with the training already acquired, as Mozart was, he must have had that training in his previous life; but at least it will bring them back with a vehicle which will readily respond to the training. Thus aspirations or desires of one life are transmuted into capacities in the next.

Just so if the man is constantly thinking some thought over and over again, he sets up a habit or tendency of thought. Whenever a man thinks strongly he creates a thought-form - that is to say, he sets up a certain rate of vibration, and the energy thus generated draws round itself a vehicle of finer matter which it ensouls, and thus creates a sort of storage battery of force. Now that thought-form hovers about the man and constantly reacts upon him. We know from telepathic experiments what is the tendency of a thought when it acts upon another person. It will work upon the corresponding matter of his matter body and tend to set up in that its own rate of vibration, so that it provokes in the mind of the recipient a reproduction of the thought which was in the mind of the sender. That would be the action on another person; but we often forget that a man is constantly producing a very similar action on himself. Clairvoyants see every man surrounded by a cloud of his habitual thoughts, and of course these thoughts are all the while reacting upon him. To every man there come times when he is not thinking strongly, when for the moment his mental activities are in abeyance; and at all such times ever present thought-forms would react upon him, so that any strong thought which the man has once sent forth will always tend to reproduce itself and make him think a similar thought whenever his mind is for the moment vacant.

You can see how this might work in the case of a sensualist, and how very likely the man would be to yield to such a returning thought because he has been in the habit of giving way to similar impressions before. The man himself sent out the idea in the first place, and perhaps has never thought of it since, but when the opportunity occurs it reacts upon him. So it may become a sort of tempting demon like those invented by the diseased imagination of medieval monks. Most unfortunately it may act upon others as well as upon himself, and that is the awful responsibility of yielding to evil thought. He may

become the centre of moral contagion and do grievous harm to thousands of whose very existence he is ignorant.

Again, if a man dwells often upon a certain thought it will presently translate itself into action. By thinking it so often he sets up a decided tendency, and if circumstances prevent him from carrying it out in action in this life, he will probably do so in his next incarnation. Thus it is that we find some children born with criminal tendencies, with an apparently instinctive desire to steal or to be cruel - because they indulged in covetous or revengeful thoughts in the dim distance of the past. Happily the same law holds with regard to good thoughts. How often we long to do some good deed, but from lack of means or time or strength we are utterly unable to accomplish it. Yet the earnest desire is not without its effect and the opportunity which is denied to us in this life, because our past was not such as to deserve it, will assuredly be ours in the future, won for us by the very energy poured out in the yearning of today.

Along the very same lines is conscience built up in the man. He does a wrong or foolish act, and through the inevitable action of the law he suffers for it sooner or later, and through that very suffering the soul acquires the knowledge that that action is wrong, and must not be repeated. Thus out of painful experiences the conscience in man is formed, the soul learning perhaps a different lesson in each of its lives, and so gradually developing a comprehensive and educated conscience. Usually he cannot impress upon his physical brain the detailed history of his previous mistake not the reason for his conclusion; but he is able to send through very definitely that conclusion itself, in the shape of a firm conviction that a certain action is to be avoided.

It is necessary to realise that we have all of us had many lives, not only one or two; and that since we have gradually raised ourselves to this level, those previous incarnations were all probably less advanced in many ways than our present one. We must all have been savages in the past - and probably not once, but many times. So we must have done a great many evil and undesirable things, and we must each one of us have a tolerably heavy bill to pay. So there arises the question how we are to clear off such an accumulation of evil results. In such lives as the more thoughtful among us are living now, we may reasonably hope that there is a preponderance of good over evil; but undoubtedly the reverse must have been the case in very many of our earlier existences, and if we had to bear in any one life the whole of the suffering due to us on the entire account, we might well find it sufficient to crush us to the earth, and prevent us from evolving at all. Since the object of the whole scheme is man's evolution, that obviously cannot be permitted; and consequently we find that there comes into operation here a certain law of distribution or adaptation assigning to each successive life such proportion of the debt as can best be paid in it. This modification does not in the least change or reduce the results of our past deeds, but it does so apportion them as to prevent them from overwhelming us.

The Hindus give to this law of cause and effect the name of karma, and they also apply the same term to the results which under it follow from action of any kind. They say that of this karma there are three kinds:

1. There is the Sanchita or 'piled-up' karma - the whole mass that still remains behind the man not yet worked out - the entire unpaid balance of the debit and credit account.

2. There is the Prarabdha or 'beginning' karma - the amount apportioned to the man at the commencement of each life - his destiny for that life, as it were.

3. There is the Kriyamana karma, that which we are now, by our actions in this present life, making for the future.

That second type, the Prarabdha, is the only destiny which can be said to exist for man. That is what an astrologer might foretell for us - that we have apportioned to us so much good and evil fortune - so much of the result of the good and evil actions of our past lives which will react on us in this. But we should remember always that this result of previous action can never compel us to action in the present. It may put us under conditions in which it will be difficult to avoid an act, but it can never compel us to commit it. The man of ordinary development would probably yield to the circumstances and commit the act; but he may assert his free will, rise superior to his circumstances, and gain a victory and a step in evolution. So with a good action; no man is forced into that either, but an opportunity is given to him. If he takes it certain results will follow - not necessarily a happy or a wealthy life next time, but certainly a life of wider opportunity. That seems to be one of the things that are quite certain - that the man who has done well in this life has always the opportunity of doing still better in the next. That is nature's reward for good work - the opportunity to do more work. Of course wealth is a great opportunity, so the reward often comes in that form, but the essence of the reward is the opportunity, and not the pleasure which may be supposed to accompany the wealth.

Sometimes when men first realise the inexorability of the Divine law of cause and effect, they feel themselves helpless in the grasp of a destiny against which it is useless to struggle. Yet this should not be at all the result of increased knowledge. The more we know the laws of nature, the more intelligently we can use them; and remember, it is only because they are invariable and inexorable that we are able to depend upon them and utilise them. Where would be the use of the magnificent power-works at Niagara if the law of gravitation were only occasional in its action - if water sometimes ran downhill and sometimes did not? So it is just the invariability of this law of karma which enables us to employ it in character-building. If a man finds an impure thought arising unbidden within his mind now, he knows that it is because he allowed such thoughts to play through his mind long ago; and in that very knowledge lies his hope for the future. If he keeps his thought high and pure in this life, in the next he will assuredly reap the result of his effort, and will have a mind-body incapable of responding to the vibrations of the low and impure.

Along the same line of action we can modify not only character but circumstances, and can arrange for ourselves the certainty of plenty of opportunities to do good. If we devote ourselves earnestly now to doing all the good work within reach, we shall certainly have all the more opportunity next time.

Remember that although we can never recall the force which we have thrown into any thought or action, we can often modify its effect by sending out a new force of different type. If you strike a ball, for example, as at croquet, you set it rolling in a certain direction with a certain amount of energy. No human power can take that force out of the ball, but of course you may stop it, by opposing to it a new force of equal power in the opposite direction. Supposing that, while the ball is rolling, we strike it from one side, it will then adopt a new path, which is neither that of the original force nor that of the newly-appointed one, but a diagonal between the two, the exact direction of which can be determined by means of what is

called the parallelogram of forces. It is exactly the same with karma. We cannot take away one iota, one least ounce of the force which we have already sent forth; but we can always endeavour to improve matters by setting in motion a new force of opposite character. If you have sent forth an angry thought, it is true that you cannot recall that, but you may swiftly send after it another which will to a large extent neutralise its effect upon the person to whom it was directed - a thought of affection and brotherliness, a strong, loving wish for his good and his progress.

It is important not to forget that the law is acting upon all planes simultaneously, upon the astral and mental as well as upon the physical. It is only in this way that perfect justice is assured. For example, it is only when we remember this that we can at all understand how a man's intentions can be taken into account. A man may set out in some matter with the best intentions, thinking out his plan carefully, and putting a great deal of energy and good-will into it, yet on the physical plane he may make some foolish mistake, or his plans may miscarry, and he may do much harm instead of good. The world sees only the failure and laughs at him, and he feels himself unjustly treated. But the law meets him at all points and its adjustment is perfect. On the mental plane he has poured forth much energy for good, and upon that plane good flows back upon him in unstinted measure; upon the physical plane he has done harm, and consequently on that plane he receives the result of his mistaken action. But the action of force upon the mental plane is so much more rapid and far-reaching than on the physical that there is no comparison between the value of the results. So it is true that the intention is by far the most important thing, though absolute justice will be done on each plane.

We may see that this is so in every-day life. Law on the physical plane takes no account of intention. If you seize a red-hot bar it will burn you, whether you seized it in order to kill somebody, or in order to save a child from injury. On the physical plane the result will be precisely the same, but on the plane of intention it is very different. In the one case there could be nothing but shame and remorse, and the evil result of an outpouring of hatred and malice; in the other there would be the happy consciousness of a brave deed done, and the good which flows from a strong thought of heroic self-sacrifice.

Let us then remember that just because of its inexorability we can use this Divine Law, and that with regard to it we must never permit ourselves to feel any sense of helplessness but only absolute serenity and perfect fearlessness; for we know that the good must triumph, and that our individual future is entirely in our own hands.