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KARMA AND CAUSATION IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM: RETHINKING DETERMINISM AND EXTERNAL PHENOMENA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines the relationship between karma and causation in Theravāda Buddhism focusing on how karma is understood to cause external events attributed to agents. It argues against the deterministic view that karma directly determines external phenomena, suggesting instead that external phenomena serve as necessary and sufficient conditions for the arising of karmic results. The causal relationship between the arising of contact with external phenomena and the arising of karmic results operates bidirectionally. Narrative accounts in the Pāli suttas that link present experiences to past lives should not be interpreted as implying that the past deterministically causes present events. Rather, they suggest that a moral agent's feelings arise through present contact with conditions. The paper explores both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of karma, drawing from the Pāli Tipiṭaka, *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, and Western perspectives on causation. It emphasizes the phenomena of consciousness, *cetanā* (intention) and *vedanā* (feeling) as central to the experience and understanding of karma. Finally, it critiques deterministic interpretations commonly found in Thai Buddhist discourse and suggests a naturalistic and experiential approach that emphasizes present awareness and moral responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGES OF DETERMINISTIC VIEWS OF KARMA IN THAI BUDDHIST BELIEFS

In Thailand, *the concept of karma* is primarily influenced by Theravāda Buddhism and is also shaped by Hinduism and other Buddhist sects that incorporate beliefs in divine powers. Within the Theravāda context, the Buddha warned against metaphysical discussion, which has resulted in the absence of explicit explanations about how karma fully operates. When combined with divine-oriented interpretations of karma found in other religious traditions, this has led to the perception that karmic outcomes may be guided by higher forces. Moreover, a key factor reinforcing a deterministic view of karma is the temporal gap between an action and its karmic result.[1] Because karmic effects are not immediate, this temporal gap creates uncertainty which makes it more difficult for followers to connect outcomes with the actions in the past that caused the outcomes. This can lead to the belief that events are predetermined either by unknown past karma or by higher forces, thereby encouraging a passive attitude toward life. Such a deterministic view is commonly found in popular forms of Buddhism in Thailand.

As a result, this article reexamines the relationship between the notion of *Theravāda karma*[2] *and causation*, within the framework of Western causation theories, focusing on how karma influences external events attributed to agents. The explanation aligns with a naturalistic view[3] based on two assumptions: the objective reality of the law of karma and causation.[4] This paper argues that karma itself does not deterministically cause external phenomena; rather it serves as both a necessary and sufficient condition for the arising of karmic results. These results manifest as experiences of pleasure or pain within a moral agent, contingent upon contact with external phenomena. Such external phenomena may take various forms and are themselves conditioned by other causal factors. The specific narrative details accompanying their manifestation are best understood as expressions of conventional truth, not absolute explanatory accounts.[5]

Causation, broadly, refers to the explanation of a relationship in the form of X causes Y to occur. In the context of karma, this means that a past deed (X) brings about a resulting effect (Y). However, the manifestation of karmic results is complex and involves both the ontological nature of the manifestation

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[1] For example, in *Nibbedhika Sutta* (Penetrative), *Anguttara Nikaya, pañcaka-chakkanipātā*, explains that there are three types of karmic results regarding its duration of affecting: 1) affecting immediately, 2) affecting within this life, 3) affecting in the next life. See Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., *Nibbedhika Sutta (AN 6.63)*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 2018. Accessed July 12, 2022. https://suttacentral.net/an6.63/en/sujato.

[2] This paper focuses on Thai Theravāda Buddhism and uses the Pāli Tipiṭaka as its main authoritative reference. The Tipiṭaka includes the Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and Abhidhamma Piṭaka. In addition, the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, a comprehensive manual of Abhidhamma compiled by Ācariya Anuruddha and translated with commentary by Bhikkhu Bodhi, is also used (see Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*). Moreover, the paper deliberately uses both "karma" (Sanskrit) and "kamma" (Pāli). The term "karma" is used for its wider familiarity, while "kamma" is retained when referring directly to Pāli source texts.

[3] Naturalistically, reality can be fully understood and explained through natural phenomena alone, grounded in natural causes and ordinary sensory experiences, without the inclusion of anything supernatural. See David Papineau, "Naturalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2021 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/naturalism/.

[4] This suggests that the reality of karma and causation can be directly perceived by sensory experience, without the need for speculation or inference.

[5] An earlier version of the argument was presented at the XXV World Congress of Philosophy in Rome, 2024.

itself and its epistemological dimension—how moral agents perceive or come to understand it. To support this discussion, it is helpful to begin with a few imagined scenarios. These examples illustrate the complexity of the issue and serve as practical entry points for connecting real-life situations with the concept of karma. They also raise important concerns about the causal relationship between the manifestation of karmic results and objects or conditions external to the moral agent. There are four cases to consider. In *Case A*, a large stone falls and blocks the entrance of a cave. From a third-person, objective perspective, this can be explained by natural causes such as gravity or ground movement like a landslide or an earthquake (X), resulting in the stone falling and blocking the cave (Y).

In *Case B*, the same physical event of an earthquake occurs (X), but this time it results in a person being trapped inside the cave by a falling stone (Y*). While the causal explanation based on the natural causes remains unchanged, the involvement of a moral agent introduces additional emotional and ethical dimensions. For observers, the situation evokes concern and a sense of moral responsibility, such as the impulse to assist the trapped individual. For the trapped individual, it may trigger both a search for external causes and an inward reflection on personal suffering, prompting existential questions such as, "why did this happen to me (or them)?" This illustrates how identical events can carry very different meanings depending on their relationship to sentient experience. In *Case C*, a person is repeatedly struck by falling objects. In *Case D*, another person wins the lottery nearly every time it is drawn. The unlikely patterns in both cases challenge simple natural causal explanations. When chance seems insufficient to account for such consistent outcomes, the law of karma may appear to offer a more meaningful interpretive framework, especially for those familiar with karmic thought. These *C* and *D* scenarios suggest that deeper necessary or sufficient conditions might be at work, which could make the karma framework more compelling when conventional explanations seem inadequate.

The law of karma holds that any experience, whether mental or physical, painful or pleasant, can be explained in relation to a moral agent's past intentional actions, based on the principle that like produces like. This concept is reflected in many texts within the Pāli suttas, particularly in the *Jātaka* tales (Stories of the Buddha's Former Births). For example, in the *Venasākhajātaka* (No. 353), *Khuddaka Nikāya*, it is stated:

> Each one shall fare according to his deed,
> And reap the harvest as he sows the seed,
> Whether of goodly herb, or maybe noxious weed.[6]

However, the manifestation of results of karma often involves a temporal gap between a moral agent's action and the eventual outcome, as discussed in texts such as *Nibbedhika Sutta*. This delay gives rise to two major challenges. *First*, from an epistemological perspective, the delay makes it difficult to find empirical evidence that clearly links past actions to present outcomes. *Second*, from an ontological perspective, it is unclear how a past intention causes a specific event in the present. For example, in *Case B*, if the entrapment of the agent is due to a past unwholesome deed, how exactly did that past intention cause the person to enter the cave and the stone to fall?

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[6] H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil, *The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, vol. 3, ed. E.B. Cowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), Jātaka No. 353, accessed via SuttaCentral, https://suttacentral.net/ja353/en/francis-neil.

Contemporary scholars have offered different interpretations of karma and its relation to causation, broadly falling into three camps. The first supports the objective reality of karma, the second critiques its ontological and epistemological problems, and the third presents a psychological or principle-based reinterpretation of karmic causation.

The first group defends the idea that karma functions as an objective law of causation in nature. Scholars such as David J. Kalupahana and K.N. Jayatilleke argue that the Pāli suttas provide a framework grounded in logical reasoning and empirical experience. This view includes both ordinary and extraordinary means of knowing, such as direct meditative insight or extrasensory perception.[7] It draws particularly on the principle of dependent co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), as found in *Paccaya Sutta* (SN12.20), where causality is explained through the twelvefold chain of conditions related to suffering and volitional actions.[8] From this standpoint, moral agents are seen as capable of observing karmic consequences as part of a broader causal structure. However, this perspective continues to face questions regarding the adequacy of verification and the nature of empirical support for extrasensory ways of knowing, as only fully trained meditators are believed to be able to perceive the thread of karma.

In contrast, the second group expresses skepticism about the metaphysical and empirical foundations of karma and rebirth. Scholars such as Karl H. Potter,[9] Eliot Deutsch,[10] and Jan Westerhoff[11] question the explanatory coherence of these doctrines, viewing them as useful fictions rather than verifiable truths. Bruce R. Reichenbach raises the question, "Does the universe operate according to the dictates of justice?"[12] framing it within his view that the law of karma is a special application of universal causation. However, the law of karma allows for a temporal gap between cause and effect, such as across lifetimes through rebirth, and emphasizes the role of intention in human agency. This differs from universal causation, which assumes a more immediate temporal connection and does not account for the moral agent's intention.[13] Given the absence of a clear explanation of karma in a naturalistic view, he notes:

> … the problems of explaining the causal operations of the law of karma and of accounting for the precise moral calculations it requires led to the appeal to a theistic administrator. But the theistic view has its own problems, not of causation, but of the status of the law of karma. If the law karma is inviolable, there seems to be no room for the divine grace and forgiveness essential to a religious system. If there is room for personal grace and forgiveness, the law of karma is not inviolable, but the ability of the law karma to provide a reasonable and compelling explanation of human pain pleasure is lost.[14]

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[7] David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1975), 99; K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 447–63.

[8] Bhikkhu Thanissaro, "Paccaya Sutta: Requisite Conditions (SN 12.20)," *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*, November 30, 2013, accessed January 1, 2024, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.020.than.html.

[9] Karl H. Potter, "The Naturalistic Principle of Karma," *Philosophy East and West* 14 (1964): 39–49.

[10] Eliot S. Deutsch, "Karma as a 'Convenient Fiction' in the Advaita Vedānta," *Philosophy East and West* 15 (1965): 3–12, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1397404.

[11] Jan Westerhoff, "Buddhism without Reincarnation? Examining the Prospects of a 'Naturalized' Buddhism," in *A Mirror Is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Jake H. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 146–65.

[12] Bruce R. Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study*, ed. John Hick (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1990), 138.

[13] Ibid., 24–25.

[14] Bruce R. Reichenbach, "The Law of Karma and the Principle of Causation," *Philosophy East and West* 38, no. 4

Similarly, Whitley R. P. Kaufman argues that the theory of karma is unfalsifiable and circular, as belief in karma often presupposes belief in rebirth, and vice versa. He further challenges the justice of karmic reward and punishment, stressing the importance of transparency in moral accountability.[15]

The third group offers a more moderate interpretation by treating karma not as a cosmic law, but as a psychological or moral principle. Paul Reasoner emphasizes that volition is essential for karma to arise, but not all actions produce karmic results. He suggests that karma is metaphysically shaped by the nature of elements, but ultimately must be understood within a broader context of intention.[16] Similarly, Noa Ronkin argues that the Abhidhamma's account is less an ontological system of causation than a phenomenological model focused on mental states and moral conditioning. Karma, in this view, is tied to the processes of bondage and liberation.[17] Potter suggests an alternative by framing both karma and causation as guiding principles rather than fixed laws. He writes, "For, just as the causal principle, as I shall hereafter call 'Every event has a cause', exhorts us to keep on seeking explanations for physical occurrences, so the karmic principle exhorts us to keep on seeking explanations for what I shall for the moment all 'moral' occurrences."[18] Potter's perspective allows room for human freedom: by recognizing the conditions that form habits and intentions, individuals can prevent themselves from being bound by those habits and thereby allow for complete freedom.[19] This third perspective reflects a pragmatic approach, offering a useful lens for exploring how karma might function in practical contexts for practitioners and in relation to Buddhism's aim of eradicating suffering.

The next section explores how Theravāda Buddhism explains the law of karma and causation, and how this might offer an alternative to deterministic views.

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF HOW THE LAW OF KARMA OPERATES IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

This section explores the law of karma in Theravāda Buddhism under the assumption that both karma and causation reflect an objective reality. It examines their relationship from two perspectives: firstly, the ontological connection between karma and causation; and second, the epistemological basis for how karmic results may be observed and understood.

ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KARMA AND CAUSATION

From the initial thought experiment, the recurrence of extraordinary events, such as repeated lottery wins or repeated head injuries from falling objects, raises questions about causal explanation. This section

(1998): 399–410, at 148, https://doi.org/10.2307/1399118.

[15] Whitley R. P. Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy East and West* 55 (2005): 15–31; idem, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics," *Philosophy East and West* 57 (2007): 556–60.

[16] Paul Reasoner, "Reincarnation and Karma," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 642–43.

[17] Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 193–94.

[18] Potter, "The Naturalistic Principle of Karma," 40.

[19] Ibid., 39–44.

illustrates that the operation of the law of karma is closely connected to other phenomena through the principle of conditionality (*idappaccayatā*), which allows for bidirectional causation.

What is karma? Most Indian philosophies define karma as actions—mental, verbal, or bodily. In Buddhism, however, karma is synonymous with *intention* or *volition* (*cetanā*).[20] In the Pāli suttas, *cetanā* is observable through moral intention, while in *Abhidhamma*, it is further elaborated as a mental factor. Intention cannot stand alone or be considered an independent substance, but it serves as a necessary condition for the arising of certain states of consciousness, co-arising with mental factors and material elements. These states of consciousness, in turn, support the arising of karmic results through conditionality. While there is no clear explanation of how karmic results are directly linked to external phenomena, what is evident is that both the law of karma and natural physical processes operate within the broader framework of conditionality. The following provides further explanation.

Western theories of causation are concerned with identifying specific causes behind events and analyzing the nature of their connection. As Jonathan Schaffer notes, this includes questions about what elements should count as causal relata and how these elements are linked.[21] Typically, Western thought seeks concrete, verifiable substances. In later developments such as the linguistic turn, causation is framed around facts that can be justified through language and logic. In contrast, early Buddhist thought, particularly in the Theravāda tradition, avoids metaphysical claims about external causes and instead focuses on explaining the conditions for suffering and its cessation. Ethical experiences, such as feelings of pleasure and pain, are understood as arising from the interaction of physical and mental factors rather than from fixed substances. Unlike type identity theory, which equates mental states with specific brain states, Buddhism views physical and mental processes as interdependent and impermanent.

Since early Theravāda texts do not provide an explicit ontological account of karmic causation, this paper adopts a philosophical approach to interpret causal relata in these texts as momentary phenomena composed of bundles of properties, rather than as enduring substances. Later Abhidhamma literature, interpreted through a reductionist lens, introduced the notion of ultimate realities (*paramattha dhamma*), which are bundles of mental and material components. These are still considered impermanent but are said to possess their own distinct nature (*sabhāva*),[22] perceivable only by trained individuals.[23] The five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*)[24] and the six elements (*chadhāturo*)[25] describe experience in early texts, while *Abhidhamma*

[20] As explained in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (AN 6.63): "It is intention that I call deeds. For after making a choice one acts by way of body, speech, and mind." See Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., *Nibbedhika Sutta*, accessed July 12, 2022, https://suttacentral.net/an6.63/en/sujato.

[21] Jonathan Schaffer, "The Metaphysics of Causation," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2016 Edition. Accessed May 1, 2020. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-metaphysics/.

[22] The concept of *sabhāva* is believed to have been influenced by Sarvāstivāda thought. See Y. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 40–41.

[23] Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 26.

[24] The five aggregates comprise the physical body or matter (*rūpa*) and the four mental components: perception and memory (*saññā*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and mental formation and volitional activity (*saṅkhāra*).

[25] The six elements consist of the earth element (*paṭhavī-dhātu*), representing extension and solidity; the water element (*āpo-dhātu*), representing cohesion and liquidity; the fire element (*tejo-dhātu*), representing heat or radiation; and the air element (*vāyo-dhātu*), representing vibration or motion. See P.A. Payutto, *Buddhadhamma: The Laws of Nature and Their Benefits to Life*,

analyzes them further into various types of mental and material components[26]. In the 28 material components, there are the four primary elements (*mahābhūta-rūpa*) which their properties are described for epistemic purposes.[27] These mental and material elements are impermanent and constantly changing and when they combine, they form *dhammas*—momentary events of consciousness and matter. As Y. Karunadasa explains, "the definition of *dhamma* as that which bears its *sabhāva* means that any *dhamma* represents a distinct fact of empirical existence that is not shared by other *dhamma*-s."[28] In this way, both mind and matter function as interdependent conditions within a dynamic process of causation.

In Theravāda thought, mind and matter are understood to coexist as mutually dependent aspects of human existence. This interdependence is extended to all phenomena, which are said to arise and persist due to specific causes and conditions, and to cease when those conditions fall away. This principle is known as *idappaccayatā* (conditionality). Accordingly, when the Buddha refer to *cetanā*, it may appear to refer to the mind alone, but this is interpreted within a framework that assumes the presence of interconnected material conditions. The operation of *cetanā* is interconnected with the other aggregates and is necessary to the processes of rebirth and liberation. This is illustrated through the concept of dependent co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*),[29] which explains the cyclical nature of human existence within the framework of conditionality. Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa clarified, "*paṭiccasamuppāda* and *idappaccayatā* are really one and the same, in truth there's only one Law of Nature, but if we're dealing with human *dukkha* (suffering) in particular, then it's called *paṭiccasamuppāda.*"[30] Noa Ronkin echoes this perspective, asserting that *paṭiccasamuppāda* differs from a law of universal causation because it signifies a relationship between psycho-physical processes as constructed by the mind.[31] Hence, the causal relation of all phenomena in Buddhist view works under conditionality.

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ed. The Buddhadhamma Foundation, trans. Robin Moore (Bangkok: The Buddhadhamma Foundation, 2017), 38.

[26] Matter (*rūpa*) is divided into 28 physical factors; the four mental components (*nāma*) are classified into 89 or 121 types of consciousness (*citta*) and 52 mental factors (*cetasika*). The bundles of *cetasika* are mental phenomena that occur in immediate conjunction with *citta*. They assist *citta* by performing specific tasks in the total act of cognition. The mental factors cannot arise without consciousness, nor can consciousness arise completely segregated from the mental factors. While they are functionally interdependent, consciousness is considered primary as the principal cognitive element. See Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 76.

[27] When the Buddha explains the phenomenon of human beings in the Pāli suttas, he introduces two additional elements: the space element (*ākāsa-dhātu*) and the element of consciousness (*viññāṇa-dhātu*), as illustrated in the *Dhātu-vibhaṅga Sutta* (Analysis of the Properties), *Majjhima Nikāya* 140. See Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., *Dhātu-vibhaṅga Sutta: An Analysis of the Properties (MN 140)*, 1997. Accessed January 1, 2024. https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN140.html.

[28] Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma*, 42.

[29] *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, also known as dependent origination or dependent co-arising, describes the causal nexus and recurrence of causality among twelve constituent factors within the context of the five aggregates. See Payutto, *Buddhadhamma,* 435. The cycle begins with ignorance (*avijjā*), followed by volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*), mentality and corporeality (*nāmarūpa*), the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (*upādāna*), becoming (*bhava*), birth (*jāti*), and ultimately aging and death (*jarāmaraṇa*). This cycle encompasses the origin of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*), which includes sorrow (*soka*), lamentation (*parideva*), pain (*dukkha*), grief (*domanassa*), and despair (*upāyāsa*).

[30] Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Idappaccayatā: The Buddhist Law of Nature*, Commonly Misunderstood Buddhist Principles Series No. 1 (Bangkok: Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives, 2015), 3.

[31] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*, 202.

Looking at the function of karma and its causal relationship with other elements, karma serves as a central condition in the arising and shaping of *states of consciousness*. From a phenomenological perspective, karma is associated with mental formations or volitional activity (*saṅkhāra*), while from a reductionist perspective, it is explained through four interrelated factors: consciousness, mental factors, matter, and conceptual objects.[32] The functions of karma are further elaborated through the twenty-four types of causal connections (*paccaya),*[33] which will be discussed shortly. According to the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the analogy of a chief pupil to illustrate the central role of *cetanā*, the volitional force identified as *kamma* (karma). *Cetanā* coordinates associated mental factors and determines the moral quality of the deed, as he explains:

> *Cetanā*, from the same root as *citta*, is the mental factor that is concerned with the actual ization of a goal, that is, the conative or volitional aspect of cognition. Thus it is rendered volition. The commentaries explain that *cetanā* organizes its associated mental factors in acting upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, its function is to accumulate (*kamma*), and its manifestation is co-ordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a chief pupil recites his own lesson and also makes the other pupils recite their lessons, so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their own tasks as well. Volition is the most significant mental factor in generating *kamma*, since it is volition that determines the ethical quality of the action.[34]

In theory, each state of consciousness is accompanied by the seven universal mental factors,[35] which *cetanā* being one of them. Back to the opening thought experiment in *Case B*, for example, the experience of distress triggers an unwholesome state of consciousness of the agent. This state is illustrated by the presence of the seven universal mental factors, the four universal unwholesome mental factors,[36] and possibly others such as aversion (*dosa*) and worry (*kukkucca*). These mental states are also associated with conascent material phenomena, including bodily reactions, expressive movements (speech or gesture), and changeable physical conditions.

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[32] Concepts (*paññatti*) refer to the objects of consciousness that a moral agent identifies and names, such as mountains, caves, east, west, and so on. See Bodhi, A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, 327–28.

[33] The concept of twenty-four types of *paccaya* explains the causal connections that exist among conditioned relata through twenty-four distinct forms or conditions. These are: root, object, predominance, proximity, contiguity, conascence, mutuality, support, decisive support, prenascence, postnascence, repetition, *kamma*, result, nutriment, faculty, *jhāna*, path, association, presence, absence, disappearance, and non-disappearance. See Bodhi, A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, 304.

[34] Ibid., 80.

[35] The seven universal mental factors (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa cetasika*) consist of contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention or volition (*cetanā*), one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*), life faculty (*jīvitindriya*), and attention (*manasikāra*). According to Bodhi, without these seven universal mental factors, the cognitive consciousness of an object is impossible. See Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 78.

[36] The four universal unwholesome mental factors consist of delusion (*moha*), lack of shame (*ahirika*), disregard for consequence (*anottappa*), and restlessness (*uddhacca*). These four factors arise in twelve types of unwholesome consciousness, which belong to the sense-sphere and are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. See Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 95.

However, complications arise when natural phenomena and karmic phenomena appear to intersect. In the imagined scenarios, *Case A* represents a purely natural event, while *Case B* raises uncertainty about whether the cause lies in natural forces or in karma. Moreover, when a temporal gap is involved, explaining the causal connection between a moral agent and external phenomena becomes even more complex. In the Pāli suttas, numerous stories illustrate the consequences of karma, such as the account found in *Pubbakammapilotikabuddha Apadāna, Khuddaka Nikāya.* In this story, the Buddha recalls a past life in which, while riding an elephant, he encountered a solitary sage seeking alms. Driven by unwholesome intentions, he directed the elephant to attack the sage. As a result of this past karma, in his present life, the Buddha faced the fierce aggression of Nāḷāgiri the elephant in a different town.[37] This story clearly shows that the events of the Buddha's past life and present life are separate and occur at different times.

This paper argues that the occurrence of a karmic result should not be understood as determining external events, but rather as arising from interdependent conditions particularly intention, contact, and experience shaped by mental and physical factors. This view is further supported by passages in the Pāli suttas and Abhidhamma, which suggest that karmic results influence a moral agent's feelings through dependent co-arising at the moment of contact. In *Sīvaka Sutta* of *Saṃyutta Nikaya* (SN 36.21), the Buddha states that pain and pleasure are not always due to past karma. He identifies seven other possible causes: bile, phlegm, winds, a combination of bodily humors, seasonal changes, uneven care of the body, and harsh treatment.[38] Thanissaro and Payutto both emphasize that the Buddha introduced multiple causes to challenge a narrow or deterministic reading of karma.[39] Therefore, when examining events from a third-person view—such as "the stone traps a moral agent" (Y*)—one cannot assume karma is the sole cause. Physical factors like seasonal conditions or personal negligence, such as entering an unsafe cave, may also contribute. The cause (X) may involve a complex interplay of conditions, not limited to karma. However, the boundary between natural and karmic causes is often unclear. Kaufman critiques the strategy proposed by Reichenbach, who suggests that the results of karma account only for evils not caused by wrongful human choices.[40] Kaufman argues that this approach is problematic because, in many cases, the categories of moral and natural evil tend to collapse into one another. He writes:

> First, there are innumerable cases where the categories of moral versus natural evil seem to break down: harm caused or contributed to by human negligence (negligent driving of a car, failing to make buildings earthquake-proof); harm that was not directly caused but that was anticipated and could have been prevented (starvation in Africa); harm caused in cases of insanity or diminished mental capacity; harm caused while in a state of intoxication (drunk driving); and so forth. In such cases it is doubtful that we could draw a clear distinction between moral and natural evil, but the strategy fails if one cannot draw the line.[41]

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[37] Jonathan S. Walters, "Pubbakammapilotikabuddhaapadāna," *SuttaCentral*, 2017. Accessed January 1, 2024. https://suttacentral.net/tha-ap392/en/walters?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false.

[38] Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., *Sīvaka Sutta: To Sivaka (SN 36.21)*, *Access to Insight* (BCBS Edition), November 30, 2013. Accessed January 1, 2024. https://accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.021.than.html.

[39] Thanissaro, *Sīvaka Sutta (SN 36.21)*; Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 378.

[40] Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 25.

[41] Ibid.

The difficulty in distinguishing between natural and moral causes is illustrated in *Case C*; for example, a falling object might result from a friend's mischief rather than nature. Both Kaufman and Reichenbach ultimately question whether karmic consequences can be meaningfully linked to external events like natural disasters or acts of violence.[42] At this point, Pāli suttas offer no definitive explanation for such cases.

Further insights into the arising of feelings from karmic results are found in Abhidhamma and *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha.* From a first-person perspective, Abhidamma outlines how sensory experience and thought process operate under certain causal principles. Within the framework of dependent co-arising, *Paṭṭhānapakaraṇa* presents twenty-four modes of causal connections (*paccaya*), each describing how mental, material, and conceptual phenomena function as causal relata. These twenty-four connections are further categorized into six types of relational applications.[43] For example, consciousness and mental factors may be linked through *association* (*sampayuttapaccaya*). However, these relations primarily address internal mental processes and do not extend to external physical events. Given the complexity of the concept of *paccaya*, this paper will focus on only three types: *kammapaccaya, hetupaccaya*, and *vipākapaccaya*, to illustrate how actions and their results arise through dependent co-arising, where a form of bidirectional causation can be observed without implying determinism.

Among the twenty-four causal connections, karma is represented as *kammapaccaya*, a condition that causes other factors to co-arise either immediately or as prerequisites for future results. It operates in two modes: (1) conascent (*sahajātā kammapaccaya*), alongside mental and physical factors and leads to immediate effects, such as bodily movement or speech; and (2) asynchronous (*nānākkhaṇika kammapaccaya*), where karmic results arise after a temporal gap, often at rebirth or later in the same life.[44]

Two other key conditions for understanding the arising of karmic results are the *root condition* (*hetupaccaya*) and the *kamma*-resultant conditioned (*vipākapaccaya*). The root condition involves six morally significant mental factors: greed, hatred, delusion, non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. *Vipākapaccaya* refers to mental factors shaped by past actions that become active when there is contact with external objects and the arising of feeling. Resultants manifest as karma matures, maintaining a passive and calm nature, as seen in *bhavaṅga* consciousness (life continuum or sub-consciousness). During sleep, *bhavaṅga* arises without conscious effort or awareness of external objects. In sensory experience, karmic resultants also arise through contact with external objects, conditioning pleasure or pain, but they do not actively engage with those objects. Active engagement begins only when volitional actions are initiated, continuing the karmic cycle.[45]

The temporal gap between action and the result of karma is illustrated through the *kamma condition* (*kammapaccaya)* among the twenty-four types of causal connections. This condition reflects a delay between a past volitional act and the arising of its result. When a karmic result manifests, its explanation

[42] Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 26; Reichenbach, "The Law of Karma and the Principle of Causation," 400.

[43] The six ways are: mind for mind; mind for mind-and-matter; mind for matter; matter for mind; concepts and mind-and-matter for mind; and mind-and-matter for mind-and-matter. See Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 305–24.

[44] Ibid., 312.

[45] Ibid., 313.

centers on the association between the *kamma*-resultant conditioned state and external phenomena, though it does not include specific narrative details about those phenomena. When a moral agent comes into contact with an external phenomenon, feelings arise, with the *kamma*-resultant state serving as a necessary condition. In this way, a form of bidirectional causation can be observed between contact and feeling, consistent with the principle of conditionality (*idappaccayatā*). Put differently, the manifestation of the result of karma—the arising of contact with an external phenomenon—can be seen as both a sufficient and necessary condition for the arising of the *kamma*-resultant conditioned (*vipākapaccaya*).

Within the framework of Buddhist conditionality, bidirectional causation is evident between conditioning and conditioned phenomena. The result condition (*vipākapaccaya*), involving resultant consciousness and mental factors, can serve as both a necessary and sufficient condition for the arising of similar mental states and associated material phenomena. In *Case B*, the maturation of a karmic result leads to suffering through sensory experiences, such as being trapped or exposed to harmful noise and air pressure, even when the agent is initially unaware of the cause. Moreover, as outlined in the *Ñāṇavibhaṅga* (Analysis of Knowledge), [46] the ripening of karma is not isolated but depends on multiple factors, including one's physical condition, present action, and even contextual elements such as time and place.

When considering *cetanā* alone, it serves as a necessary condition for the arising of consciousness and mental factors, which in turn condition karmic results under the law of conditionality. However, this explanation only shows how karmic results coexist with object conditions; it does not explain how those external conditions come to be in relation to the agent. Therefore, the Abhidhamma does not suggest that *kamma*-resultant states determine the arising of external phenomena. Rather, it indicates that the arising of karmic results depends on contact with external phenomena, and vice versa. This mutual dependence illustrates the principle of bidirectional causation.

Following the ontological examination of how karma functions, the focus now shifts to a more experiential dimension: the possibility of understanding karma through the observation of intention (*cetanā*) and the direct experience (*vedanā*) of its results.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE WAYS OF KNOWING THE LAW OF KARMA

Building on the earlier ontological analysis, this section argues that understanding karma epistemologically in Theravāda Buddhism does not focus on linking external events to specific past actions. Instead, it focuses on the internal or subjective dimension of experience, particularly the roles of intention (*cetanā*) and feeling (*vedanā*) within consciousness. From this perspective, justifying the law of karma as true knowledge may be more appropriately framed within either the coherence or pragmatic theories of truth. This section also considers how such doctrinal understanding interacts with everyday interpretations and practices of karma.

[46] Paṭhamkyaw Ashin Thiṭṭila, trans., *Ñāṇavibhaṅga (Analysis of Knowledge)*, *Vibhaṅga*, Tenfold Exposition (VB 16), n.d. Accessed January 22, 2024. https://suttacentral.net/vb16/en/thittila?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false.

Scholars such as Bernard J. Terwiel and Julia Cassaniti distinguish between a textual, scholarly Buddhism and a popular Buddhism, which is widely practiced by laypeople and blended with animistic and Brahmanic-Hindu beliefs. In rural communities, popular Buddhism often expresses itself through ritual and karmic interpretations of life events.[47] Jaruwan S. Engel and David M. Engel observe that villagers tend to avoid legal systems, interpreting injuries as tied to spirits or past karma.[48] Similarly, Cassaniti shows that villagers use Buddhist teachings—especially karma, impermanence, and non-attachment—as practical tools for navigating socio-economic pressures.[49] In such contexts, karma is accepted less through empirical reasoning and more through its coherence with other beliefs. Thus, its justification may align more closely with either the coherence or pragmatic theories of truth.

In the Indian tradition, karma is sometimes accepted based on a coherence-based view of truth, where it fits within a larger belief system rather than being independently verifiable. In Advaita Vedānta, for example, karma is considered valid knowledge not through direct observation, but through postulation (*arthāpatti*), which permits inferring an unseen cause to explain an observed fact. Deutsch notes that D. M. Datta supported this approach, treating karma as a necessary assumption to make sense of human experience.[50] However, Deutsch argues that karma does not meet the requirement of *arthāpatti*, since other explanation like divine will or heredity are also possible. He concludes that karma is better understood as a "convenient fiction."[51]

Considering Theravāda epistemology, ordinary sensory faculties cannot support direct knowledge of karma. Human cognition is explained as the five aggregates, physical and mental phenomena that constitute human existence. The five sense organs act as doorways for external stimuli, functioning alongside the four mental aggregates. Within this framework, individuals without advanced meditative insight are said to be unable to perceive karmic traces from past lives. According to the Theravāda tradition, direct knowledge of kammic causality requires cultivating *chaḷabhiññā,* or the six higher powers, particularly *dibba cakkhu* (the divine eye),[52] which arises through intensive meditation practice. As illustrated in several Sutta accounts,[53] the Buddha is described as perceiving karmic links across lifetimes through his ability. For instance, in the *Nāḷāgiri elephant* episode and in *The Story of Three Groups of Persons*,[54] the Buddha recalls

[47] Bernard J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand*, first published 1975 (Thailand: NIAS Press, 2012); Julia Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[48] Jaruwan S. Engel and David M. Engel, *Tort, Custom, and Karma: Globalization and Legal Consciousness in Thailand* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 151–56.

[49] Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism*, 2015.

[50] Deutsch, "Karma as a 'Convenient Fiction," 8.

[51] Ibid., 4, 10.

[52] *Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., Dasuttara Sutta (Groups of Six), Dīgha Nikāya 34, 2018. Accessed July 12, 2022. https://suttacentral.net/dn34/en/sujato.*

[53] Many stories illustrating the fruits of karma appear in the *Atthakatha* (commentaries) on the *Pāpa Vagga* (Section on Wickedness) in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Collection of Minor Discourses). They also appear in the *Apadāna*, a section of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* that recounts past life stories of the Buddha and his disciples.

[54] In *Atthakatha* (commentaries) of *Pāpa Vagga* (section of Evil) in *Khuddaka Nikāya* (the Minor Collection).

past lives of individuals to explain current conditions and offer guidance on purification.[55] While the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* does not explicitly mention *dibba cakkhu*, it classifies six types of sensory cognition (*viññāṇa*): eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind-consciousness.[56] These sensory cognitions reflect an experientialist framework, emphasizing moment-to-moment direct knowing. In this broader context, pre-Buddhist experientialists, including the Buddha, valued direct personal knowledge, often involving extrasensory perception, as a means of understanding reality.[57] However, possessing the divine eye does not guarantee a correct understanding of karma. In the *Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta*,[58] the Buddha cautions against relying solely on insights gained through the divine eye, as they may lead to wrong views due to a partial grasp of the truth. For instance, monks and brahmins with deep concentration might observe cases where good deeds result in suffering, or harmful actions lead to happiness. Such limited observations could wrongly suggest that there is no connection between actions and their consequences, thereby undermining the law of karma. The Buddha clarifies that such limited observations are just one part of the broader truth.

At this point, it appears that possessing the divine eye may not, by itself, guarantee a direct or accurate understanding of the law of karma, as this may depend on the depth or level of one's insight. This raises an important question: are there other ways for ordinary individuals to understand how karma works? This paper suggests that the answer lies in the ability to observe one's own intentions and feelings. The Pāli texts provide guidance from the Buddha on how self-observing moral agents can discern the quality of their intentions by examining states of consciousness shaped by wholesome or unwholesome mental factors. The Buddha also highlights the central role of feeling (*vedanā*) in experiencing the fruits of karma.

Building on this, the explanation of karmic results is closely tied to the sensory experience of pain and pleasure. In *Kammavagga Vitthāra Sutta*[59] (Deeds in Detail), the Buddha presents four categories of karmic actions: dark, bright, both, and neither. Each karmic action produces distinct consequences, particularly in terms of feelings (*vedanā*) experienced by moral agents and these outcomes operate on a like-to-like basis. When a moral agent becomes aware of recurring painful experienes, as in *Case C* (repeated head injuries), or pleasurable outcomes, as in *Case D* (winning the lottery), and refrains from engaging in intentional deeds driven by moral valuation, the process of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent co-arising) suggests that the agent ceases to generate new karma. This marks an important stage in the mental cultivation process, where *vedanā* becomes central role in cultivating insight. In particular,

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[55] As shown in the *Naḷakapāna Sutta* (MN 68) of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. See Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., *Naḷakapāna Sutta (MN 68)*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, 2018. Accessed July 12, 2022. https://suttacentral.net/mn68/en/sujato.

[56] Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 150.

[57] According to Jayatilleke, the ways of knowing in the pre-Buddhist background can be categorized into three groups: the traditionalists, the rationalists, and the experientialists. The *traditionalists* derive their knowledge solely from scriptures, while the *rationalists* rely on reasoning and speculation without any belief in extrasensory perception. On the other hand, the *experientialists* depend on direct personal knowledge and experience, including extrasensory perception. See Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 170–72.

[58] Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., *Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 136)*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, July 3, 2010. Accessed January 1, 2024. https://suttacentral.net/mn136/en/thanissaro.

[59] Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., *Vitthārasutta (AN 4.233)*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 2018. Accessed January 1, 2024. https://suttacentral.net/an4.233/en/sujato.

the practice of contemplating feeling (*vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*)[60] involves observing feelings with equanimity (*upekkhā*), aiming to understand their nature without attachment or aversion. This approach is seen as a way to interrupt the formation of new karmic conditions.

From this perspective, the Buddha's ability to perceive past events and describe their connection to present experiences does not imply that past karma deterministically causes present external phenomena. Rather, based on other sources cited in the suttas, it is suggested that a moral agent's feelings arise from present contact, co-arising with *vipāka* or a result linked to past actions of a similar kind. When such a result arises, the Buddha can perceive which past *vipāka* is associated with the current experience. Therefore, there is no clear basis for concluding that karma directly determines external events. Instead, the emphasis lies in the agent's ability to observe present intentions and feelings, and to respond with awareness. This perspective is supported by the explanation in the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, which describes seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking as states of consciousness that arise through conditioning factors.[61] When consciousness arises through the six doors of cognition, it impacts the mind to varying degrees. At the five sense doors, the presentation of an object is classified as *very great*, *great*, *slight*, or *very slight*; at the mind door, it is categorized as either *clear* or *obscure*. These classifications refer not to the physical size of the object, but to its effect on consciousness. The intensity of this impact depends on various conditions, such as the brightness of light or the sensitivity of the relevant sense organ. For example, a bright light and a highly sensitive eye produce a stronger impression, classified as *great* or *very great*. The same principle applies to mental objects at the mind door, which are classified based on their clarity or obscurity.[62]

This implies that the manifestation of karmic results depends not only on *vipākapaccaya* (the *kamma*-resultant condition) but also on other co-arising conditions present at the moment of contact. The explanation in the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* does not suggest that *kamma*-resultant conditioned states determine the arising of external phenomena. Rather, it indicates that the arising of karmic results depends on contact with external phenomena—and, conversely, that such contact depends on the arising of karmic results. This mutual dependence illustrates the principle of bidirectional causation.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: KARMA BEYOND DETERMINISM

This paper has shown that the Pāli suttas and Abhidhamma do not portray karma as a force that deterministically causes external events. Instead, karmic consequences are primarily internal experiences such as pleasure and pain, which arise through intention, sensory contact, and multiple co-arising conditions

[60] Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22)*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, 2018. Accessed January 1, 2024. https://suttacentral.net/dn22/en/sujato.

[61] Bodhi describes the cognitive process as a series of discrete events occurring in a regular and uniform order, known as *cittaniyāma*, meaning the fixed order of consciousness. These processes arise as sequential phases in response to objects perceived through the sense doors or the mind door. Each sensory door requires certain conditions to initiate cognition. For example, to initiate an eye-door process, specific conditions must be present, such as eye-sensitivity (*cakkhupasāda*), visible object (*rūpārammaṇa*), light (*āloka*), and attention (*manasikāra*). See Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 151–52.

[62] Ibid.

including external phenomena. This interpretation helps counter the fatalistic view commonly found in popular Thai Buddhism, where life experiences are sometimes believed to be entirely fixed by past karma. When suffering is viewed as entirely predetermined and deserved, it probably leads to passivity and may discourage personal reflection and meaningful action.

Within the canonical framework, greater emphasis on present awareness. Rather than interpreting all experiences as results of past lives, practitioners are encouraged to observe their current intentions and mental states. Karma is understood as one aspect of the broader principle of conditionality, in which events arise from a network of physical, mental, and environmental conditions. For example, if a person enters a cave and is struck by a falling stone, it would be inaccurate to attribute the incident to karma alone; the individual's decision, environmental factors, and physical circumstances all contribute. This illustrates that karma operates alongside other causes, rather than independently controlling external phenomena.

This perspective allows for a more naturalistic understanding of events, in which not all experiences need to be explained solely in terms of karma. Some situations may be more effectively approached through practical reflection. Interpreting karma as a moral and psychological principle rather than as a hidden force behind every outcome, helps clarify its function in ethical development. Under this view, karmic causation highlights the importance of present intentions and responses, shifting focus away from fixed past determinants. Such a reading aligns with canonical sources that emphasize awareness and agency in the present.

ABBREVIATION

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*
DN *Dīgha Nikāya*
MN *Majjhima Nikāya*
SN *Samyutta Nikāya*
VB *Vibhaṅga*

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