

The Ontological Status of Karma: The Jain Doctrine of Karma-Pudgala and the Vedāntic Theory of Adhyāsa**

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Abstract

The concept of karma is fundamental to Indian philosophical traditions, yet its ontological interpretation differs significantly across systems. Jain philosophy conceives karma as karma-pudgala, a subtle material substance that objectively binds the soul, whereas Advaita Vedānta, systematized by Śāṅkarācārya, explains bondage through the theory of adhyāsa, a superimposition arising from ignorance (avidyā). This paper undertakes a comparative ontological analysis of these two approaches in order to examine whether karma possesses real ontological existence or merely a phenomenal status.

Drawing upon primary Jain and Vedāntic texts as well as contemporary philosophical scholarship, the study argues that Jainism represents a form of ethical-metaphysical realism in which karma is an actual entity affecting the purity of the soul, while Advaita Vedānta adopts a non-dual epistemological framework that denies ultimate reality to karma. Rather than treating these views as mutually contradictory, the paper demonstrates that they operate at different metaphysical levels and address the problem of bondage through distinct philosophical lenses. By shifting the discussion from moral function to ontological status, this study contributes a novel perspective to comparative Indian philosophy and highlights the pluralistic depth of classical Indian metaphysics.

Keywords: Karma, Ontology, Jain Philosophy, Advaita Vedānta, Adhyāsa, Metaphysics

1. Introduction

The word karma is derived from the root kâ and means to act, to make, to do, a deed or action. Any action, either physical or mental is called karma. The word includes both the cause and the effect. It may be mentioned that the Sanskrit word karma includes both sacred as well as secular deeds. Thus the word includes the performance of religious rites, official duties, business, moral actions, and so on. The word is also sometimes understood as fate referring to certain consequences of acts in a previous existence. The general conception of karma is that good deeds bear good fruits, and evil deeds bear evil results. The law of karma conditions the course of transmigration and influences the state of life in each existence. Theoretically there is no escape from the results of karma. The inexorability of the law extends to all kinds of actions mental as well moral. It has to be admitted that the law of causality of karma cannot be verified on the basis of observed facts. It has to be believed in as a spiritual principle. The necessity of this doctrine assumes special importance in Jainism and Buddhism which do not postulate any creator and ordainer of the world. The principle of karma is immanent in the world, and beings are governed by it. The doctrine of karma presupposes transmigration or rebirth. The results of a person's deeds may not appear in his present life. In order to reap the results of his deeds he has to be born again. Thus karma regulates not only the present but also the future; the chain of moral causation links the three points of time in a being's existence, viz, past, present and future.

The problem of bondage and liberation has remained a central concern of Indian philosophy. Almost every philosophical system seeks to explain why the self is bound to suffering and how liberation can be attained. Among these systems, Jainism and Advaita Vedānta present two radically different interpretations of karma and its relation to bondage.



Figure:1 Karma, Intention, Rebirth

In Jain philosophy, karma is not merely a moral law or psychological tendency but a real, subtle material substance (pudgala) that binds the soul due to its actions and passions. In contrast, Advaita Vedānta, particularly as articulated by Śāṅkarācārya, regards bondage as a product of ignorance (avidyā) and superimposition (adhyāsa), thereby denying any ultimate ontological reality to karma.

Most comparative studies focus on ethical or soteriological aspects of karma, such as moral responsibility or liberation. However, the ontological status of karma itself has received comparatively little attention. This paper addresses that gap by examining whether karma should be understood as an ontologically real entity or as a phenomenal construct rooted in epistemic error.

1.1 Jaina Theory of Karma

Almost all systems of Indian thought except the Cārvāka accept the theory of Karma. In Jaina thought the karma theory is the pivotal point. The Jainas maintain that karma is the cause of bondage and its cessation leads to liberation. The Tattvārtha - Rājavārttika mentions that from the phenomenal point of view karma is the transformation of the material objects. Caused by the self and also at the same time it is the transformation of the self caused by the material objects. But from the noumenal point of view karma is the transformation of the self through the self which is caused by the subsidence-cum-destruction of its energy and knowledge-obscuring nature, and karma is the transformation of the material objects through the material objects.¹ The commentator of the Āptaparīkṣā explains karma as that which makes the self-dependent on others (paratantra), or in other words the performance of the self-caused by perverted knowledge, perverted faith, etc. is known as karma.² Thus according to Jainism, karma does not stand for deed, work and fate as understood by other systems of Indian thought, but it is an aggregate of the finest and minutest particles of matter which are not at all cognizable by our senses. Karma attracts the self and envelops it, which in turn produces pleasure and pain. It is a substantive force which binds the self to the consequences of its good and bad actions. It is also the cause of every change in the self like feelings of pleasure and pain, of birth and death and of bondage. The author of the Rājavārttika points out that which is performed out of the result of the vibrations of the self is called karma. It makes the self-dependent.³ Hence karma overpowers the essential and innate qualities of the self which are knowledge, faith, energy and bliss, leaving the self in bondage. In short, karma is "a complex of very fine matter, imperceptible to the senses which enters into the soul and causes great changes in it. The karman, then, is something material (karmapaudgalam) which produces in the soul certain conditions, even as a pill which, when introduced into the body, produces therein manifold medical effects. The law of karma is based upon the moral principle of causality. It is based on the series of acts and effects in which

each act is followed by its effect. This effect which is called the result of its antecedent act becomes the cause of its succeeding act in return. Thus an act is an effect from one point of view and the same effect is the cause of another act

from another point of view. So every new effect produces another effect for which it serves as a cause. This is called the law of karma:

“The law which regulates the action of karmas is based upon the principle of cause and effect, so that the saying 'as one sows so must he reap', presents the whole doctrine in a nutshell. Every action, whether mental or physical, is a sowing of the 'seed', or in the technical language of the Hindu philosophy, an engendering of karma. In the act of sowing the seed, or engendering the karma, the soul has the choice of acting or refraining from action, but when once the seed is sown or karma engendered, its freedom is replaced by an inevitable liability to bear its consequences. The harvest which is sown must be reaped, gathered, and assimilated in its unabated fullness. This is what constitutes the bondage of the soul. Karma, therefore, is a kind of force which compels the soul to bear the consequences of its right or wrong actions, and this force originates in the very action itself which is performed by the soul and at the very moment of its performance [5].”

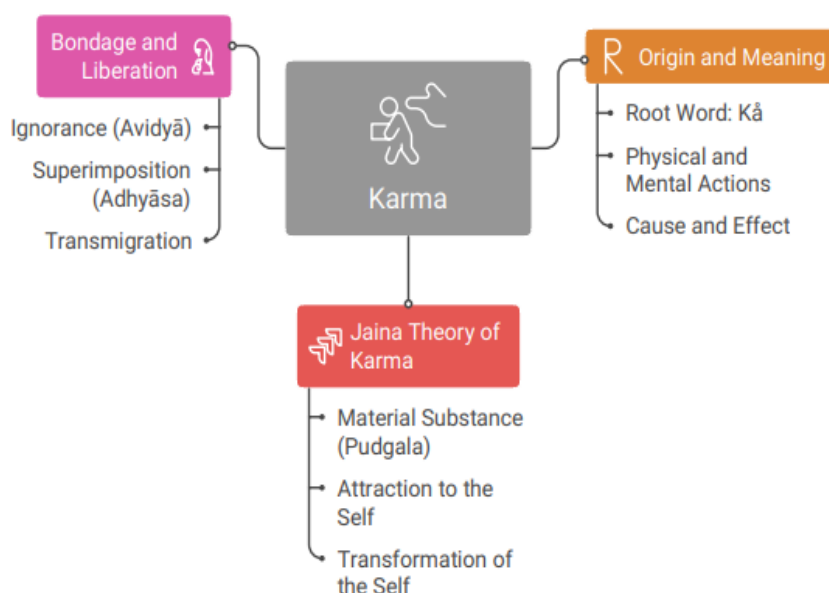


Figure:2 Karma: Concept and Jaina Theory

1.2 How The Karmic Particles Attract the Self

There is an objection, how the immaterial nature of self can attract material particles of karma? The answer to the above objection is that just as the power of consciousness although immaterial is obscured by taking intoxicating drugs and drinking alcohol, so the immaterial self can be attracted or obscured by material karma. Moreover, worldly selves are always associated with material karmas, since they are not perfectly immaterial. What is the basis of the belief in the material nature of karma? Karma produces pleasure, pain and sorrow etc, and that is why it is material in nature. It is possessed of material form and the effect of karma is material in nature, i.e. body, etc. Moreover, karma is only an instrumental cause while the principal cause of all our actions is the self. Karma cannot produce any effect if it is not associated with self. Truly speaking, karma is nothing if it is not associated with self. Hence karma is material in nature. A question may be asked how the most minute infinite number of indivisible atoms (paramānu) unite with self? Karma is that finest matter which an individual being attracts to itself by reason of certain impellent forces which are in the individual. It not only attracts but assimilates and changes the core of individuality. The self has the magnetic power to attract the karmic particles. Just as a magnet attracts the pieces of iron fillings, and the earth, due to its gravitational force, attracts the upward moving things, and a piece of cloth, when put into water, sucks the water, so an individual being (self) attracts the karmic particles. Therefore, there is a kind of magnetism in the self which attracts and assimilates the karmic particles. The self produces various kinds of effects when the particles of karma have once entered into it. Jaina thinkers hold that the association of karma with the self is from time immemorial. They hold that both avidyā and karma are beginningless.

Though the self is pure, completely free and potentially divine, yet it becomes subject to limitation by the power of karma. So long as the self is not liberated, it is gathering new karma at every moment. It is said in the Karmagrantha: "As heat can unite with iron and water with milk, so karma unites with the self.⁶ In the Tattvārthasāra it is also stated that the mundane self is obscured by karmic matter from the beginningless time, and on account of its bondage with the karmas, the self is united like the gold and silver when melted together, to become one mixture.⁷ According to Glasenapp, "through the vibration of the particles the pudgalas are attracted and are drawn to unite themselves to it, they become karman and enter into union with a Jiva more intimate than that between milk and water, than between fire and iron ball!" [8]

1.3 Classification of Karmas

Broadly speaking, there are two types of karma, physical karma (dravya-karma) and psychical karma (bhāva-karma). Jaina thinkers differentiate between the two. Physical karma is nothing but the particles of karmic matter. It is material in nature and enters into the self. The psychical karma is mostly the thought activity of mind. The psychical effects and states produced by the association of physical karma are known as.

The physical and psychical karmas are mutually related to each other as cause and effect [9] According to the nature of fruition (prakāti), duration of fruition (sthiti), intensity of fruition (anubhāga or rasa) and number of space-points (pradesas), the karmas are classified into major sub-types [10]

1.4 Nature of Karma

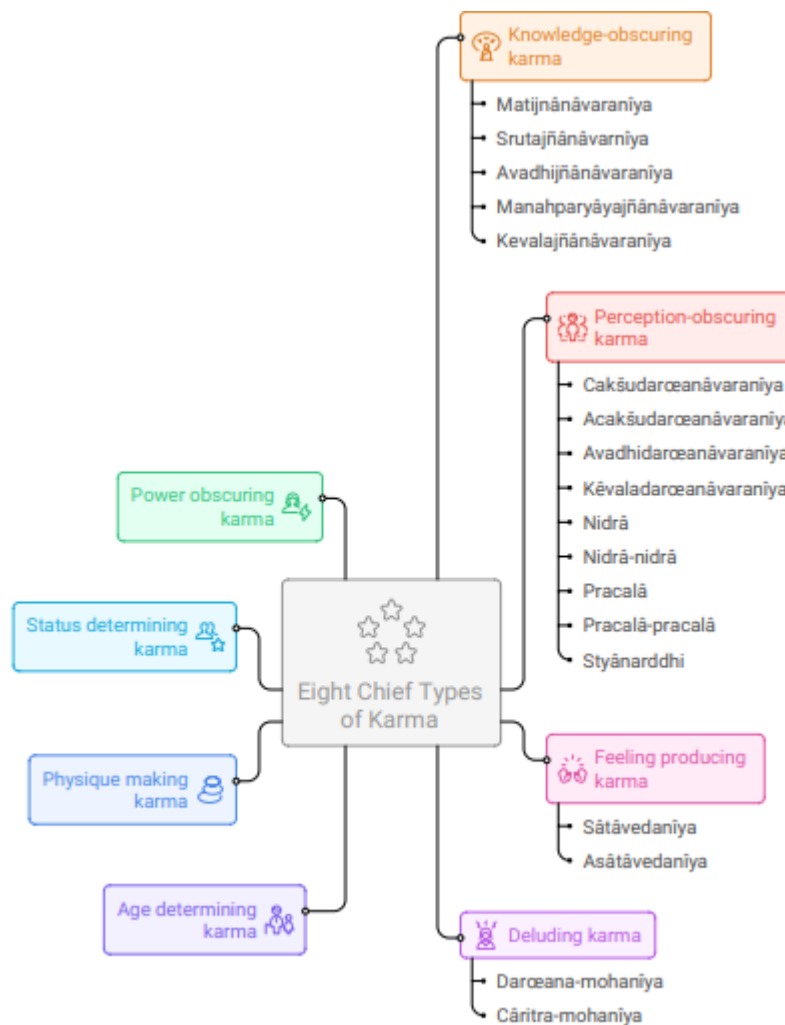


Figure:3 Types of Karma

The eight chief types of karma are:

- Knowledge-obscuring karma (JÑĀNĀVARANĪYA-KARMA)
- Perception-obscuring karma (DARĀANĀVARANĪYA-KARMA)
- Feeling producing karma (VEDANĪYA-KARMA)
- Deluding karma (MOHANĪYA-KARMA)
- Age determining karma (ĀYUṢE-KARMA)
- Physique making karma (NĀMA-KARMA)
- Status determining karma (GOTRA-KARMA)
- Power obscuring karma (ANTARĀYA-KARMA) [11]

The self retains its fundamental characteristics while being affected by sarvaghāti karma. The comparison of the sun and cloud is pertinent in this context. Just as light persists even when the sun is obscured by thick clouds, the self keeps fragments of pure or accurate knowledge, while being obscured by the impurities of karma. Thirteen Each of the eight principal categories of karma (mūla-prakāṭis) can be further subdivided into many subcategories (uttaraprakāṭis). Further subdivisions based on subtypes may result in an incredibly high number of karmas. Currently, we must examine eight primary categories, which are as follows:

- JÑĀNĀVARANĪYA-KARMA
 - ✚ Matijnānāvaranīya
 - ✚ Srutajñānāvarnīya
 - ✚ Avadhijñānāvaranīya
 - ✚ Manahparyāyajñānāvaranīya
 - ✚ Kevalajñānāvaranīya
- DARĀANĀVARANĪYA-KARMA
 - ✚ Cakṣudarceanāvaranīya
 - ✚ Acakṣudarceanāvaranīya
 - ✚ Avadhidarceanāvaranīya
 - ✚ Kēvaladarceanāvaranīya
 - ✚ Nidrā
 - ✚ nidrā-nidrā
 - ✚ pracalā
 - ✚ pracalā-pracalā
 - ✚ styānarddhi
- VEDANĪYA KARMA
 - ✚ Sātāvedanīya
 - ✚ asātāvedanīya
- MOHANĪYA KARMA
 - ✚ Darceana-mohanīya
 - ✚ Cāritra-mohanīya
- ĀYUṢKARMA
- NĀMA-KARMA
- GOTRA-KARMA
- ANTARĀYA-KARMA

2. Ontology in Indian Philosophical Thought

Ontology in Indian philosophy concerns the nature of reality (tattva or sat) [12]. Unlike Western metaphysics, Indian systems often integrate ontology with epistemology and soteriology. The question of what truly exists is inseparable from the question of how liberation is possible.

Realist systems such as Jainism and Nyāya affirm the objective existence of multiple substances, while non-dual systems like Advaita Vedānta emphasize the ultimate reality of a single principle Brahman. In this context, the ontological status of karma becomes a decisive factor in determining whether bondage is real or illusory [13].

3. Karma-Pudgala as Ontological Reality in Jain Philosophy

Jain philosophy presents one of the most distinctive theories of karma in Indian thought. Karma is conceived as a form of subtle matter (karma-pudgala) [14] that interacts with the soul (jīva). This interaction is not metaphorical but real and causal.

According to Jain doctrine, the soul is inherently pure, endowed with infinite knowledge and bliss. However, due to activities accompanied by passions such as attachment and aversion, karmic matter flows toward the soul and binds it. This binding obscures the soul’s intrinsic qualities and results in transmigration.

The classification of karma into various types such as knowledge-obscuring, perception-obscuring, and deluding karma demonstrates the systematic realism of Jain metaphysics. Karma directly affects the soul’s capacities, reinforcing the Jain commitment to an ontologically real universe governed by moral causality.

4. Ethical and Metaphysical Implications of Jain Karma Theory

The realism of Jain karma theory carries strong ethical implications. Since karma is real and binding, moral responsibility becomes absolute. Every action, intentional or otherwise, produces karmic consequences [15]. Liberation (mokṣa) is achieved only through the complete destruction of karmic matter via ethical discipline, ascetic practices, and self-restraint.

Ontologically, this framework affirms pluralism: souls, matter, space, time, and motion are all real. Karma, therefore, is not an appearance but a fundamental constituent of reality [16].

5. Adhyāsa and the Phenomenal Status of Karma in Advaita Vedānta

In sharp contrast, Advaita Vedānta denies the ultimate reality of karma. Śaṅkarācārya explains bondage through the theory of adhyāsa, defined as the superimposition of the non-self upon the Self. Due to ignorance, the self identifies with body and mind, thereby assuming agency and experiencing the fruits of action.

From this perspective, karma operates only within the empirical realm (vyāvahārika satta). At the level of ultimate reality (pāramārthika satta) [17], there is neither bondage nor liberation, neither karma nor agent. Brahman alone is real.

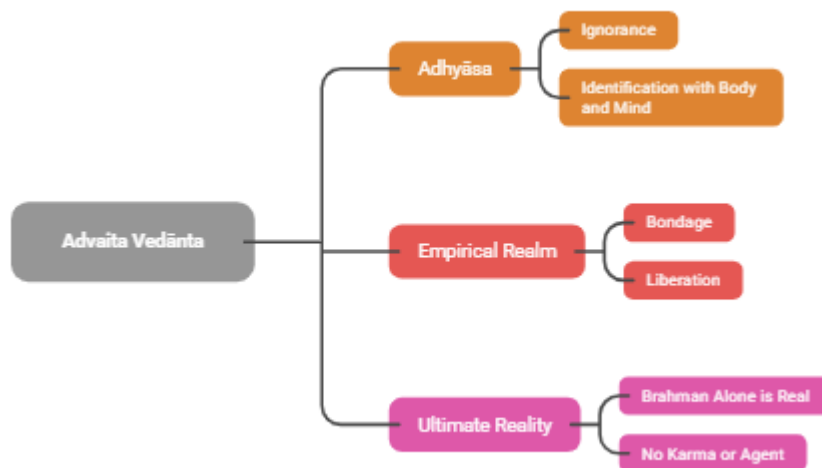


Figure:4 Advaita Vedānta's Perspective on Karma

Thus, karma in Advaita Vedānta lacks independent ontological status. It is a functional concept necessary for explaining empirical experience but dissolved upon the realization of knowledge.

6. Comparative Ontological Analysis

The divergence between Jainism and Advaita Vedānta lies in their metaphysical commitments. Jainism adopts a realist ontology in which karma is an actual substance, whereas Advaita Vedānta embraces a non-dual idealism that treats karma as a product of ignorance [18].

However, this divergence does not imply philosophical incompatibility. Rather, both systems operate at different explanatory levels. Jainism addresses bondage as an objective condition requiring ethical purification, while Advaita Vedānta addresses bondage as an epistemic error corrected through knowledge [19].

7. Philosophical Implications

The Jain view safeguards moral realism and accountability, making ethical action central to spiritual progress. Advaita Vedānta, on the other hand, emphasizes inner realization and freedom from existential fear by revealing the illusory nature of bondage.

Together, these perspectives enrich Indian philosophy by offering complementary insights—one grounded in ethical realism and the other in metaphysical non-dualism [20].

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that the Jain doctrine of karma-pudgala and the Vedāntic theory of adhyāsa represent two distinct ontological approaches to the problem of bondage. Jainism affirms karma as a real, material force binding the soul, while Advaita Vedānta denies any ultimate reality to karma, viewing it as a phenomenal construct rooted in ignorance.

Rather than viewing these positions as contradictory, the paper argues that they reflect different metaphysical frameworks addressing the same existential concern. This comparative analysis highlights the philosophical richness and pluralism of Indian metaphysical thought.

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- [12] *Tattvārtha-Rājāvarttika*, 6.1.7, p. 504, lines 26-28
- [13] *Āptaparīkṣā-tikā*, 113, 296
- [14] *Rājāvarttika*, 5.24.9. p 488, line 20, *ātmapariòāmena yogabhāva lakṣaòena kriyata it karma*.
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- [20] *Gommaœasāra*, karmakānda, 163.