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Karman-*theory* in the MBh **(A preliminary survey and a selective collection of source texts)**

Prefatory note:

The request to make a creditable draught version of the paper accessible for participants to read before (and as preparation to) listening to the oral presentation has motivated me to be almost indecently lengthy and to include a selection of source texts. My apologies for trespassing on your time!

This draught consists of two parts, a “paper” (18 pages) and an appendix (22 pages). The paper has six sections:

- 1 *Methodological reflections and procedures*
- 2 *Literary, stylistic characteristics*
- 3 *Theorems, axioms, domains*(constituent elements of a theory, “atomization”)
- 4 *Contexts* (collocations, constellations)
- 5 *Historical perspective*
- 6 *Conclusion*

1 *Methodological reflections and procedures*

1.1 Cultural, religious, intellectual, philosophical, textual history

There has been in my mind a preconceived model of the strands and the chronological framework that forms the background to statements about and research on the MBh. JLF’s footnote 1 in the introduction to vol. 7 of the MBh translation states it concisely by describing “Hinduism” as “comprehensive and multifaceted set of religious themes emerged from its Vedic past during the half millenium between the Mauryan Empire and the Gupta Empire” (and this covers rather exactly the period assumed for the formation of the MBh). This Hinduism is a “synthesis of different themes of the ancient Vedic, ritual religion of *dharma-karman*, as well as themes of the later developments of yoga (seeking absolute personal beatitude and escape from rebirth), and, eventually, themes of *bhakti*, salvation through loving devotion to God.” Thus, the three strands are chronologically ordered (“later developments”, “eventually”). Their brahminical themes “contended with the intense challenges and stunning successes of intellectual movements that were non-Vedic [...] Most noteworthy among these movements were the home-grown materialists (known as followers of Cārvāka), and the three very successful, self-consciously organized religious movements of the Ājīvikas, the Jains, and the Buddhists.” (p. 79) The choice of terminology seems important to me: “intellectual movement”.

When such models of cultural history are projected upon texts like the MBh themes become types or levels or layers of text or elements of content and theory within the text. (Cf. JLF, MBh7, footnote15 on p. 82 for a description and problematization of such a transposition//transfer.)

The occurrence (or non-occurrence) of “karma theory” (KT) in the MBh as well as the modalities of its occurrence, rejection, adaptation, contextualization etc. is likely to lead to insights (or hypotheses) about the cultural context of the authors/redactors and the audience (1) of the MBh, (2) of culture as a dominating influence on literature, and (3) about the function of theory (KT as the exemplary case) in defining culture(s). The three aspects are interconnected; and if “theory” falls in the domain of philosophy we are led to an inquiry about the role of philosophy in defining a culture and in describing the MBh. Culture is itself a theoretical concept: what does it explain?

1.2 *Research history*

If KT is philosophy, if further the MBh is a foundational text of Indian religion and culture, a search for KT in the MBh seemed to fulfill all the requirements of Jim’s programmatic conference statement.

On the other hand, to want to know more about KT in the MBh might seem like a hasty reaction. “Karman theory in the MBh” does not promise to be a topic that could lead to exciting and new results. Has not everything been said and collected about the topic given the fact that there are publications which are entitled “The concepts of human action and rebirth in the Mahābhārata.” (Bruce J. Long), or “Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahābhārata : A Study in the History of Ideas” (Peter Hill)?

I have renounced to the ambition to end up with something like a “Karma-bibliography”. The *dénouement* of *this* strand in the plot of my story consists in my simply omitting the bibliography.

And there is another unforgivable lacuna: I have not read or searched the whole MBh!

1.3 *Terminology*

Before proceeding it is necessary to agree upon the following terminological conventions:

Karman in the texts is translated by action, activity, act, deed, performance, depending on context and English idiom, as far as a foreigner can dare to get it right.

“Karman-theory” is used as an unspecific umbrella term or tag inherited from indological and everyday parlance to refer to everything and anything that has to do with teachings or reflections or illustrations of (human) action and with the totality of axioms, theorems, theories, questions and answers that I may discover and which I cannot yet define or anticipate. “Karman-theory” is abbreviated as KT to accentuate that I use it as a tag or token, not as a reflected and defined concept. I found no clear differentiation between “karma theory”, “karma doctrine”, “belief in karma”, “karma concept”. The tag is also used where the term does not occur in the source texts.

Rebirth, reincarnation, reembodiment – not definitely differentiated or defined.

Reembodiment seems most appropriate where a soul-principle is “reborn” by choosing or entering into another body (which undergoes conception, a period of pregnancy, birth, etc.).

Retribution is used exclusively if the moral quality of actions and correspondingly of the results as punishment or reward is meant or included. The question about the *effects* of action must be distinguished from the question about retribution. Retribution has a moral dimension: Bad or wrong acts lead to suffering or punishment, good acts lead to happiness or reward. Reflection about the effect of action can be morally neutral.

Effectiveness (principle) or causality (axiom) or purposefulness (of actions) are used where the connection between an act and its result is seen as something neutral, as something functioning, but not functioning according to moral criteria.

Axiom, theorem, element, item are undifferentiatedly used to designate the units of which a theory is or can be composed. Thus, retribution and rebirth are elements or axioms of KT. I have not (yet) made an effort to be consistent, I cannot say why a theorem cannot be a theory and I have not tried to develop a metalanguage to speak about theory (or even just about KT).

1.4 *Theory*

For methodological reasons I cannot and must not know at the start of my inquiry how “karman” is used in the MBh, I cannot know whether it represents a belief, a concept, a doctrine, an idea or a theory. My leading questions are:

Is KT really a theory? What makes KT a theory? How can KT occur (in the source texts) but *not* be a theory? (Only if and where KT is a theory does it qualify as philosophy; and thus the restriction implied by my questions is motivated by the topic of the conference.) Is KT sufficient to define a “culture”?

To meaningfully translate these questions into research requires a working definition. The only publication about KT which I read which defines “theory” is by Karl Potter (“The Karma Theory and Its Interpretation in Some Philosophical Systems.” In: Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, Delhi 1983, p. 241-267). The first sentence of the paper reads: “When reference is made to the Indian theory of karma and rebirth it is not usually clear what is being referred to.” (p. 241) I agree!

Potter begins by defining “theory”:

“A *theory*, as I use the term, is a set of connected hypotheses, involving postulation of unobservable or uncommensensical items, that purports to predict, postdict, or otherwise explain processes in the world.” (p. 241) Potter introduces *interpretation* to designate a second-order theory “about the assumptions operative in the thinking of those who, for example, propose a first-order theory” (p. 242) and *model* as an “extended metaphor, drawn from common sense or from accepted scientific understanding, that is purported to make intelligible the workings of a theory.” (p. 241)

When searching for karman-*theory* in a text like the MBh the “postulation of unobservable items” and the context of “explaining processes in the world” might be expanded to include taking into account the specific facts or problems (the “domain” of the theory) to be explained by looking for the questions answered by a theory. The distinction between theory and

interpretation is reflected in the search for implications (references to first-order theories) in what is stated in the text as application or extension of the first-order theory on the level of second-order theory. In order to recognize “connected hypotheses” they have to be formulated and they will (in the language of the text) be identifiable by terms and concepts. The connectedness of hypotheses as a characteristic of philosophy is likely to find expression in arguments or argumentation (giving reasons, answering objections, formulating criticism, etc.). Thus, what I am looking for are passages which argue about (hypothetical, non-empirical) explanations of specific facts or problems by creating concepts and by linking these concepts with empirical facts no less than with other, implied concepts or hypotheses. (I collapse first-order and second-order theory into one search process! Tricky!)

The distinction between “*karman* in the MBh” and “*karman*-theory in the MBh” is itself a theoretical question in a theory which indological research has about how to find out and how to describe what a text like the MBh has to say. I had to learn that there are theories about theory and that many intelligent people have reflected a lot (and written a lot) about what role theory plays in the controlled and systematic effort of human beings to describe and understand the world and for the methods employed to do so. To speak about theory means to enter the field of epistemology and *Wissenschaftstheorie* (which seems to have replaced epistemology as *Wissenstheorie*).

On any account, my title and my statement are aiming high, too high. But as my story has it, that insight comes too late.

1.5 *Karman*-theory

If it is methodologically necessary to begin the search for KT in the MBh by assuming that I do not know what this theory says or claims or explains (i.e., I do not even recognize the domain of KT) I need to clarify how I would recognize the text passages which speak about KT.

I could look for the occurrence of the word *karman*; but by doing so I would already fall prey to my antecedent knowledge: has anybody proven that one can talk and argue about KT only while and when using the word *karman*? (The string “*karm*” occurs 839 times in the Śāntiparvan alone.)

But there are other words used while speaking about acts, actions and acting. That I use three words to “translate” *karman* is part of the problem: Does KT, does the usage of Skt *karman* cover all of them (plus “activity, deed(s), performance, undertaking”, etc.)? Which of them corresponds to *cestā*, *vrt*-, *ārambh*- and derivatives like *vrtti*, *pravrtti*, etc.? (“*cest*” 60 times in MBh 12, “*vrtt*” 807 times, “*pravrtt*” 107 times, “*nivrtt*” 69 times.)

There does not seem to be an authoritative statement of what is called KT in any one (early) Sanskrit text; at least no secondary literature I read (but my reading has been sadly restricted) has quoted such a text on the authoritativeness of which the Indian tradition would agree unanimously. If I start my search for KT in the MBh on the basis of antecedent knowledge (about what others have claimed KT to be) I would have to restrict my search for a composite theory comprising the theory (or doctrine) of rebirth and the theory (or doctrine) of the retribution of all acts.

1.6 *Karman-theory*

I am not aware of a Sanskrit word that would spontaneously offer itself to translate “theory”. Among the compounds with *karman* as first member listed in MW there is none which could be equivalent of “karma-theory”. It is rare that those who pronounce themselves on KT define how they understand the word. Since there is no unanimity about the use of the word ‘theory’ in different academic disciplines and in everyday parlance, I am obliged to specify what I am trying to find in the MBh when looking for “karman-theory”.

It is not the same whether I look for *karman* in the MBh or whether I look for karman-theory. The MBh is an epic in which things happen and people act and react and interact. Is it karman when a flower blossoms, when a river flows or the wind blows (or is it karman only when the wind blows to lift the skirt of an enticing apsaras)? Is it karman-theory when a defeated king reflects about the circumstances, or about his conduct, or about his choices that led up to his plight? Are his reflections a contribution to my understanding of KT if and when they employ political wisdom, or only if and when they concern general ethical principles, or only if they circle around unhappiness and around how to deal with it psychologically?

In order to read as little as possible *into* the text it seems advisable to consciously and deliberately abstract from antecedent knowledge and to *isolate theoretical elements* as cleanly as possible. The effort to isolate elements requires to distinguish KT (composed of a theory of retribution and a theory of rebirth) from its elements (and possibly to find a different term for ‘retribution’ without rebirth and for rebirth without retribution). Because reflection about human actions and their effects might consider acts as ethically neutral (while the retribution theory presupposes acts as either good or bad and effects correspondingly). *Any* action has effects and a theory might try to discover the regularity without evaluating the acts. Texts which theorize about the effects of actions in general can be distinguished from texts which speculate about mistakes or wrong behaviour and about its effects as punishment. Both are KT, but different KTs. I attempt to avoid the complication of the plural by identifying what I call the “elements//axioms//theorems” of a theory (see below).

There is a story (or history) – my story – behind these questions, because I did not yet ask them when I started working on this paper and I cannot yet answer them now at the moment of being called upon to present this work to you.

1.7 *Operational steps, proceeding*

I work with classified lists of items of what I am looking for. These lists are not ‘closed’ and are constantly modified. Each item is supplied with text examples as my reading of the MBh continues.

The text examples (cf. Appendix) may be summaries, translations of selected passages, commentaries and interpretations. They rarely concern only one item on only one of the lists. A system of cross references has not yet been implemented.

At present there are two lists, concerning

- literary characteristics (the section on questions being the most elaborate)
- theoretical elements (axioms, domains)

Once I realize that KT refers to a composite entity I need to develop a strategy how to deal with the *absence* of elements. I do not have a complete and closed inventory of axioms, and I cannot decide whether it takes one or a minimum of three (or let it be ten) items to allow me to speak of theory.

These considerations are complicated by passages which do not formulate theory but which imply the acceptance of (logically) presupposed axioms. This type of negative evidence opens the path to over-interpretation and I have permitted myself to succumb to its temptation.

1.8 Selection, distribution

My search for KT in the MBh does not cover the whole MBh (see above on research history). Certain passages are identified in secondary literature as dealing with KT, e.g.,

- MBh 1,85 (about which Hill p. 10 says: “While the Uttarayāyāta is an intelligible account of transmigration, it is far less satisfactory as an account of the doctrine of karma’s other main component part: the ethical idea that all ‘action’ produces its consequent ‘fruit’.”)

- MBh 3,179-221 (“Mārkaṇḍeya provides a lengthy discourse on a considerable range of ethical and religious issues, including a detailed section on karma // and *samsāra*.” Hill, p. 11f.; Hill quotes from zitiert werden ch. 181, 198, 199, 205, 200)

- MBh 13,112

- MBh 14,16-18 (from Anugītā)

These four are considered by Hill “the only substantial discussions of karma and transmigration in the whole enormous bulk of the *Mahābhārata*.” (p. 29)

That the BhG as a textual unit is not considered evidence for “substantial discussions of karma” helps me to differentiate my approach. “Discussion” may not be as what the BhG presents itself (though it is, after all, a dialogue and a discussion), but the problem of action, its results and its qualities is yet something that underlies many of its doctrinal passages. The theory or the doctrine are underlying the literary form of the BhG. Hill restricts himself to the surface. I add the BhG to the texts to be studied in the perspective of KT.

It is evidently part of my own “prior knowledge” that I included the whole of the Śāntiparvan, and especially the Mokṣadharmaparvan in my reading list. The assumption is that liberation is from rebirth and rebirth means being bound by action, ergo liberation is from action; and if the MDhPar is about liberation it must therefore be about what one wants to be liberated from ... (Since I started by reading translations and since vol. 7 of the Chicago translation by Jim includes the Strīparvan, this parvan was part of my reading.)

I shall have to be selective not only with the source texts but also about each and every level of literary analysis and axiom of theory mentioned below; I could not carry out the identified methodological steps for all selected passages. I could not collect each and every occurrence of each item; I cannot even be sure to have identified all relevant items (theorems the most important among them). My conclusions therefore are not only hypothetical (they *are* hypotheses) but also provisional.

2 Literary, stylistic characteristics

Since this inquiry starts from the supposition that I do not know what KT is and is all about and since the source of my inquiry is an epic text, I must pay attention to the literary forms and stylistic characteristics that accompany KT. Even if I knew what makes a theory, how would I recognize it in a text? Which stylistic markers, which characteristics of outline, frame, terminology, etc., can alert the reader that the text contains theory?

It follows from the above definition of theory that a theory explains something not knowable from empirical evidence. An explanation would not be searched and offered if there was no felt need for it. The need for explanation is likely to be expressed and expressible in a question.

2.1 Questions

To which question or questions does KT offer an answer? The following examples are drawn from secondary literature and will most likely be recognized as questions to which KT offers an answer or an explanation.

- What explains the inequality of human beings (social standing, circumstances of life, life-span)
- How has it started? (What was before? What was at the very beginning?)
- What causes suffering?
- How to avoid suffering, misery, unpleasant experiences?
- Is it possible to influence or determine the future?
- Is there Free Will?
- Under which condition(s) can one be delivered (liberated) from the conditions of human life?
- How does the link between an act and its effect function? What guarantees continuity?

That these questions are admittedly more easily culled from secondary literature than from the MBh itself [fn: Pappu p. 4f. is useful as survey of philosophical questions that were or are discussed. :fn] draws attention to the methodological aspect and challenge which makes me postulate that we must read history backwards by abstaining from reading into the text what is not explicitly (verbatim) there but which later interpretations have claimed to be intended.

Methodological strictness further requires that each identified question should be searched for in all available sources (as my title is formulated, this would have to be the whole MBh; with appropriate modifications this might be just the Śāntiparvan (ŚP) or just the Mokṣadharmaparvan (MDhP) – but in no case could I and did I fulfill the methodological pledge for completeness of source material. Each newly identified question or axiom would require a new reading of the MBh.)

The above questions do *not* include rebirth//reincarnation//reembodiment//śamsāra//yuga-cosmology. I insist that the theory of karma as theory about human action and its effects needs to be distinguished from the theory of rebirth (even though this is as much a result of my investigation as a presupposition). Does the KT answer to questions raised by the doctrine (or theory) of rebirth? Or does the doctrine//theory//axiom of rebirth answer to questions

raised by the KT? The question, for example, about who or what is the substratum, the carrier of the effects (residues, impulses) of acts beyond death imposes itself only if and when KT and rebirth-theory are combined. Our idea about the history of ideas, our conclusions about the regional and chronological distribution of movements, schools, or religions, and our model of the contact between movements and ideas, all depends essentially upon how this question is answered (and upon *that* it is answered).

The operationalization of such an investigation into questions and answers concerning KT is “atomizing” insofar as it aims at smallest identifiable units (cf. below, section 3). The world may consist of atoms but to describe atoms (even all of them) does not describe the world. (I shall not spell out here what the analysis of the combination of the “atoms” and the steps towards a description of the world of the MBh and of the India into which the MBh belongs would imply methodologically, cf. below, section 4). The question how to act, answer(s) which prescribe or describe how to act, as well as the question why to act need not regularly occur in combination with a retribution theory and thus need not be essentially (and historically) linked.

Once a question has been identified (and formulated) one should ask next *who* poses the question, *who* raises the problem or could reasonably have an interest in solving it. Further one should investigate traces that would allow to recognize whom the answer formulated in the text was addressed to (which – even text immanently – may not be the same person or group who raised the question). This could be the group or the milieu to which the author belonged, but this could also be “others” to whom the answer is offered with polemical or apologetical intentions.

That the doctrines, tracts, arguments found in the MBh are in fact answers is documented by the structure of the MBh: questions *are* posed. Whether the tracts or isolated statements (verses) in fact answer the questions in the text, whether other questions (not actually put) can be inferred needs to be examined but is a method encouraged by the structure of the text and adequate for it.

As heuristic device the procedure is not as arbitrary and external to the text as it may seem, since the text records questions which can help to formulate my own deduced questions in a horizon or from a standpoint that is not totally foreign to the milieu of the text and its recorded questions. However, I have to allow for the fact that some explicit questions of the text are not answered, are inadequately answered (‘inadequate’ by which criteria?), or have (in the light of what is offered as answer) not been posed.

If theory answers questions I can recognize theory not only from the questions but also from the answers if I can infer from the answer to which question this answer is a response. As a heuristic device (derived from a description of theory) I therefore try to transform statements into questions. If a statement is theoretical it must answer to a question or solve a problem: *which* question, *whose* problem? (This procedure is painfully or embarrassingly subjective and whether the result will be deemed plausible will depend probably on the explicitness and frequency of the constellation of elements.)

Identified questions are (not in the words of the MBh):

- Why to act?

- How to act? (in a situation of decision taking; in a normative model or system of values)
- Which attitude to take towards past actions?

(Yudhisthira's remorse (e.g., 12.27, with regard to past actions)

- Which attitude to take towards future actions

(Arjuna's depression, BhG 1)

- What (of or in a human being) acts?
- What destroys merit?
- How are body and soul connected?
- Is there something permanent in or behind the (observable) transient?
- Why does action pollute?
- Does action pollute (the embodied soul)?
- Does action bind? Which action binds (the embodied soul to the body, to the world)?

That karman is a bondage is a thought which is not intrinsic to either karman nor rebirth. But it implies or entails a link with liberation. Thus it would seem plausible that (only) those who are interested in liberation are interested in KT. If bondage is a result, it is a logical application of the axiom of causality to ask which action leads to the loosening of the bondage.

- Why is karman binding?
 - due to ignorance (BhG 5.15)?
 - due to the gunas (BhG 14.5; 7.13)?
 - due to desire?
 - due to ahaṁkāra?
- Is living as a liberated person possible?
- What happens when Liberation has not been reached (at the moment of death)?
- Does the liberated person retain consciousness?
- Does the liberated person retain memory?
- Is it possible to modify the effects of actions already committed?

This question addresses the practice of expiation (*prāyaścitta*). Hill collects and classifies different means to modify the effects of actions.

- Can a god modify the effects of actions?
- Are there other instances that explain or determine the differences of human living conditions? (Fate, Time)
- Is fate or a divine power the driving force behind human destiny?

2.2 Citation, intertextuality

"Intertextuality" can be used to describe text-immanently the quality of a text that explicitly claims to incorporate passages or ideas from other texts. This need not be identifiable quotes, it is rather the reference to outside text as stylistic characteristic. In the context of investigating KT intertextuality might be relevant to decide whether KT (or any of its elements used separately) is likely to be an imported or adapted idea, further to evaluate the argumentative side of developing a theory as counterposition in comparison to an opposing theory or doctrine.

Analytical, critical attention should therefore be paid to:

- quotations of text attributed to a source or author (e.g., Brhaspati);
- episodes or dialogues cited (which of course covers most of the ŚP, since Bhīṣma is rarely speaking on his own authority);

- statements which appear to be, look like citations (“Zitatcharakter”) by inserted formulaic expressions like *āhu.h*, *ucyate*, *smṛtam*.

“Intertextuality” could also mean what more oldfashionedly was called textual comparison. Our picture of KT in the MBh would greatly gain in depth and profile if a similar investigation was carried out for the Pali canon and for the Jaina canons. The frequency of occurrence and the distributions of the axioms identified in the MBh would certainly be revealing.

2.3 Episode, story

Any story in the MBh containing the motif of reincarnation//rebirth would need to be analysed.

1,70-80 and 1,81-88

The selection of texts (see Appendix) includes a few remarks about the Yayāti-episode and “The Latter Days of Yayāti”

12,263 (DS272)

Without quoting or summarizing I draw attention to the Kundādhāropākhyāna as an example for an episodic use and treatment of KT (retribution, dream visions, hell, etc.).

2.4 Allegory (and its interpretation)

This category remains empty (no example) for the time being.

MBh 11,5-7 might be considered here, as it occurs in the context of Vidura’s explanation of the “Mystery of Rebirth”.

Allegory could be a or the key to what Potter calls the model for KT (for Yoga philosophy he identified rice cultivation as the model, but I did not pay attention to references to rice cultivation in the MBh).

It strikes me that I cannot identify a clear reference to the axiom (attributed to Jainism) that karmic effects are a material substance (the chapter on the colours of the soul perhaps excepted). This makes me realize that I have taken the use of *phala* as a metaphor. But the fruit is something material and something different from the tree and its blossoming. Perhaps *phala* provides the basic “model” for KT and is not at all meant metaphorically. Yet, heaven as reward (“*phala*”) of behaviour is not the fruit of behaviour in a literal sense, nor is rebirth or worldly success, though they are “effects”.

The movement of certain personages (Nārada, Śuka) through cosmic worlds might illustrate a kind of liberty that is analogous to the path of the liberated towards the ultimate goal – or of the mastery of the soul over samsāra. – To be explored!

2.5 Tract (*Lehrrede, Traktat*)

This is another still empty category (cf. however, Appendix on 12,187), not because of lack of examples but because of lack of clear criteria to delimit textual units (*samvāda*, *upākhyāna*, *itihāsa*, tract, sub-tract, section -- defined by topic or subject matter?). Tracts on KT are, on the surface of the text, recognizable by the introductory question; but the dialogue which follows may include ‘tracts’; the problem of how to define textual units and by which terminology to describe them remains unsolved. (Variation of metre would certainly be one of the (formal) criteria, but is it relevant to a description of the literary garb of KT in the MBh?)

2.6 Discourse

Under this heading I should have collected instances of discussions in which argument and counterargument; statement and response; opposition and critique are clearly recognizable (and perhaps even identifiable in terms of philosophical schools, etc.). *Nāstikas* are mentioned in the context of KT; Buddhists, Jains, -Aj-ivikas (12,86.21?) not, as far as I can see.

2.7 cross reference; looking back on something told earlier

The most obvious example (from among the collected material) is the beginning of the *Anugītā*.

2.8 Persons, characters

Considering the question “whose problem” I would have to start another list in which to collect and to classify the material: the characters of a plot, the interlocutors of a dialogue, the quoted authorities in the texts are primarily literary realities. We encounter mostly kings and their family members, brahmins, renouncers, ascetics, rsis, but also hunters, animals, gods, mythological beings. Wherever their appearance is combined with KT the question about “whose theory” gains a dimension of the social, historical reality surrounding the text.

In terms of “whose problem” one obvious component is in most examples that we have to do with the problems of males, not of women, in a society which has rarely given voice to women or has rarely preserved what they surely said to the men around them. – cf. *Sulabhā*, *Draupadī*.

3 Theorems, axioms, domains (constituent elements of a theory, “atomization”)

My guiding methodological principle derives from the intention to at first better understand the MBh and then perhaps draw conclusions about its cultural setting. The reflections in the

MBh about human actions, its motivations, guiding norms, and goals show that it is inadequate to lump “rebirth and karmic retribution” together to form one theory (which does neither deny nor exclude that such lumping together did happen, even in the MBh itself). “Rebirth” and “retribution” are different axioms answering different questions and giving explanations for different aspects of reality. The application of this principle as a heuristic device was productive and (in that sense) successful enough to apply it as consequently as possible. In terms of textual analysis it means to look for smallest possible theoretical elements (or constituents of a theory, axioms) or, in other words, to “atomize” the text in search for the smallest theoretical units. Their context is the or a theory, *not* the context of the running text (the chapter or section or even verse). (On “context” see below, section 4.) Admittedly, I have not fully thought through neither the presuppositions nor the consequences of this procedure. Theories normally seem to be something which one construes as heuristic device to formulate an explanation. I am not construing but analyzing or dissecting text to make identifiable and describable what is theoretical about the contents of this text.

The attempt to summarize this procedure in form of a repertory of axioms that would all fall within the range of KT (in the above undifferentiated sense covering “karma”, “karma theory”, “karma doctrine”, “belief in karma”, “concept of karma”, etc.) has led to the following list. And I insist that it be read as documenting work in process, as incomplete and as not systematic (the decimal codes are only meant to facilitate cross referencing within this paper and on the way towards systematization).

3.1 Life (birth, life, and death) is a repeated event (rebirth, reembodiment, revivification)

3.2 All actions serve a purpose, have an effect (axiom of effectiveness, causality)
((This might comprise more than one axiom if effectiveness and causality are applied to involuntary actions and natural events.))

3.3 The effect of actions is determined by the moral quality of the action (“retribution”, without rebirth).

3.3.1 Misery is punishment for evil done.

3.3.1.1 Evil deeds are punished on descendants (1,75.2-3).

3.3.2 Evil will be punished in future, later in this life, or in hell(s).

3.3.3 Good deeds will be rewarded in future, later in this life, or in heaven(s).

3.3.4 Happiness is reward for having done good.

3.3.4.1 Merit is destroyed by wrong behaviour.

3.3.4.2 Merit is destroyed through rewarding experience(s).

3.4 Fate explains biographical events, different conditions of life.

((Perhaps to be distinguished from “by chance”; cf. 12,32.))

3.5 Time explains biographical events, different conditions of life. ((a matter of terminology?
daiva, *diṣṭa* vs. *kāla*))

3.5.1 Time repeats itself (cyclically)

3.5.2 Time can be measured (--> transitoriness)

3.6 The decree of a divine Arranger explains biographical events, different conditions of life

- 3.7 Retribution operates in a next life (rebirth).
- 3.8 Effects of action are reaped only by the agent.
- 3.9 Effects of action can affect others (“transfer of karman”).
((cf. 3.3.1.1))
- 3.10 Actions are binding.
- 3.11 Actions are polluting.
- 3.12 A theory is proven by:
 - 3.12.1 empirical observation (dream state of consciousness, process of birth, process of dying, constituents of the body);
 - 3.12.2 appeal to authorities (Veda, Ṛṣis, intertextuality);
 - 3.12.3 asking the right questions;
 - 3.12.4 arguments.
- 3.13 Action presupposes a body.
- 3.14 Body and soul can be distinguished. ((cf. 3.16.1 – constituents of the body))
 - 3.14.1 The soul is essentially pure.
- 3.15 The effects of actions attach to the soul
- 3.16 Action presupposes plurality:
 - 3.16.1 constituents of the body (e.g., senses);
 - 3.16.2 three guṇas.
- 3.17 Plurality emanates from a common source through a process of emanation.
 - 3.17.1 Concepts of a Beyond (heaven, hell).
 - 3.17.2 Levels of (metaphysical) reality.
- 3.18 Ethical norms must determine actions (*dharma*).
- 3.19 Liberation, deliverance, freedom is possible (“salutology” or “soteriology”).
- 3.20 Liberation can be reached by certain actions (liberating techniques, yoga).
- 3.21 Liberation is brought about by knowledge or in Consciousness.
- 3.22 The effect of actions can be modified:
 - 3.22.1 by *prāyaścitta*;
 - 3.22.2 by mental detachment.
- 3.23 Knowledge (“theory”?) should accompany actions.

4 Contexts (collocations, constellations)

Looking for smallest possible constituents of a theory (“atomizing”) means in terms of textual analysis to isolate statements, lines, verses from their context. In a second step I look at the context mainly in order to add to the collection of theoretical elements. But the contexts (a merely descriptive term for the surface of the text, its sequence, outline, terminology, etc.) – when compared – do reveal what I call collocations or constellations of theoretical elements (terminological co-occurrence, episodic or rhetorical techniques, doctrinal parallels, etc.)

The step which looks at the immediate as well as the larger context of the smallest constituents must supplement atomization. For example, questions (being literary or theoretical elements) have answers as their context. Answers may lead to new questions. A passage which purports to answer a question may at first sight not fit the question. Such evidence would, in the context of another investigation, be taken as indicating redactional border lines. But by “contextualizing axioms” I do not mean “redaction criticism”. If an axiom stands next to a passage with apparently disparate content, the juxtaposition or collocation or constellation may indicate a theoretical link.

That such a collocation was achieved by author or redactors means that the redactors knew about or wanted to create or express the theoretical link – and analysis of theoretical links comes to include or lead to redaction criticism. This is a methodological reservation due to the fact that reading the text sequentially from beginning to end and finding a “theoretical logic” in the sequence of topic and their connectedness must assume that such a logic was already the guiding principle of those who wrote or redacted the text. A redaction criticism on the basis of content analysis and theoretical logic is in any case ‘higher textual criticism’; a redaction criticism undertaken with attention to exclusively literary, stylistic, or linguistic criteria, or one guided by a different theoretical interest might come to other results or might at least not stumble upon the theoretical logic of a KT.

Identification of theoretical elements can only supplement literary analysis. To accept collocation of elements as relevant for a theory (i.e., for the literary manner of construing and presenting theory, its presentation in a text like the MBh) operates on a fundamentally synchronic presupposition.

The comments to 12,187.45 in the appendix might serve as an example (and are not repeated here).

5 Historical perspective

When I said (in my abstract) that studying KT means reading history backwards I was thinking of a period of the reception history of KT which takes its existence (and many a trait of its scope and content) for granted. This may already be true for certain occurrences in the MBh. The (mostly just inferred) presuppositions or assumptions of a statement in the text should be identified (even if they are a kind of negative evidence) in the attempt to be clear about what is in the text and what is read into the text from a historically later standpoint (the researcher’s standpoint and perspective included). The sheer fact that there are assumptions in one place but not in others, where everything seems to be spelled out, might be used for chronological sequentiation.

My search for KT and my collection of source texts at no point goes as far as proposing a historical interpretation. But I consider the historical perspective as much too important to simply bypass or avoid it (even in the provisional draft of a preliminary paper). My two examples are indebted to the work of Angelika and John.

MBh 12,189-193

Insofar as these chapters discuss the effects of certain acts (social duties, religious practices) they a priori concern KT; rebirth, hell, exchange (giving and receiving differently) of the effects of practices, the evaluation of salvific paths in the light of the postulated sameness of effects, yoga and yogic dying as the ‘norm’, the evaluation of action/practices with regard to (the prediction of) future (and not for an explanation of the past) – these are among the elements of these chapters that need to be considered with regard to KT.

John’s in depth investigation of the Jāpakopakhyāna (MBh 12,189-193) (and I profit from the fact that John had made his paper accessible while I was still collecting material and ideas for mine) moves from textual analysis (observations concerning distribution of vocabulary, theistic orientations, ruptures and transitions, repetitions, parallelism and variations) to textual history and to the history of thought. John proposes three stages:

- a) *japa* as recitation of Vedic texts
- b) reoriented to Brahman//Brahmā (“upaniṣadic-style concepts”) – using a model of stages or worlds to be reached, developing towards a substitution of Brahman by Nārāyaṇa, linking Vedic religious practice to Pāñcarātra
- c) homologation with yoga techniques

Such proposals of stratification and the criteria for distinguishing them need to be applied to the passages dealing with KT (and I quote John because I consider the Jāpakopakhyāna such a passage). If it is accepted that effectiveness-of-actions and morally-determined-retribution are theorems that fall within the purview of KT, any passage of text announced or concluded by stating that the “acquirement of results” (*phalāvapti*, etc.) is/was its theme must be accepted as candidate for KT in the MBh. The Jāpakopakhyāna is an example.

Historical interpretation may remain speculative (as John emphasizes). Yet, the observed peculiarities of a text (vocabulary, style, content, concepts, etc.) do call for some kind of interpretation and the historical interpretation assumes simply *that* the MBh and the Indian culture of the period of its creation *did* have a history and are not a timeless synchronic block. Historical perspective is another heuristic tool to avoid seeing KT as a monolithic synchronic block (which instead of defining Indian culture appropriately might rather block the view on it).

If what happened in the evolution of thought documented by the textual history of the Jāpakopakhyāna is a “reorientation of the jākapa’s practice and goal” those who effected it had accepted a model of human action based on the effectiveness-axiom, i.e., a KT that looks at action in the light of its goal. ((I might have to include *gati* and *mārga* in the list of key words.))

BhG

The second example concerns the BhG, in any case a text that cannot be bypassed in a study of KT in the MBh. The following remarks are based on the article by Angelika, “Yoga and Yogin in the Bhagavadgītā” (her contribution to the last DICSEP), accessible to me as ms. of a draft version. If KT has to do with soteriology (I am getting accustomed to calling it “salutology” – from Latin *salus* – due to a remark by Jim) and if yoga is a head concept for techniques of liberation, a treatment of yoga in text historical perspective should help to contextualize KT as well. Angelika’s contribution evidently deals also with *karmayoga*. I do not want to give the impression that AM shares my views about KT; but to me the term *karmayoga* can be adduced as additional evidence that the topic and context “yoga” is intrinsically linked to reflection about *karman* and to that extent to KT.

According to this paper the BhG presents different notions of Yoga; an analysis of the compositional structure allows a text-historical perspective in three steps:

- a) a general knowledge about Yoga as a doctrine and practice of liberation (BhG 2.54-72, 5 and 6);
- b) doctrines of *buddhiyoga* and of *karmayoga* (“original and new interpretations of Yoga”);
- c) “all these notions as well as ideas not mentioned are used in the chapters in which Kṛṣṇa is depicted as the Lord of Yoga and the highest self”; theology of *bhakti*; Kṛṣṇa as Lord of Yoga.

The discussion of BhG 6 assumes and shows that the “general knowledge” yoga as way of liberation stood in contact with Buddhism (terminology, ideas). The influence seems to have been mutual (cf. on *brahmabhūta*, p. 22). The core *bhakti*-doctrines presented in BhG 4.9-11 can be dated between the 2nd-1st cent. BCE (p. 3, fn6).

The following quotes document that and how different types of Yoga deal with KT:

“According to Sāṃkhya, liberating knowledge is brought about by a clear, knowledge-oriented *buddhi*, which allows the practitioner to discern everywhere the principles of being (*tattva*) taught in this school. Ideally, this means that all activities, imaginations and desires are viewed as being produced by the agency of *prakṛti*, the cause of all activity, only and that the ever liberated self has nothing to do with it. [fn24: This process is described in BhG 5; see below and Malinar (2007:108-120).] However, in the context of BhG 2.4-53 this goal of obtaining liberating knowledge of the self through the discerning activity of *buddhi* is not central for the definition of *buddhiyoga*. Rather, *buddhi* serves to ensure that no karmic bondage arises from one’s actions. *Buddhiyoga* thus implies a reinterpretation of the ultimate purpose which *buddhi* is ascribed to in Sāṃkhya texts.” (p. 14)

“This doctrinal distinction [between *jñānayoga* = Sāṃkhya, and *karmayoga*] provides the basis for the presentation of *karmayoga*, which has rightfully become the label for one of the core teachings of the BhG. It advocates the performance of ritual and social duties by drawing on ideas of sacrificial cycles. It is argued that a yogic sacrificer does not accumulate *karman*, because he offers up his activities (*karman*) in the sacrificial cycle of reciprocity and consumption (see Malinar 2007:84ff). Thereby the sacrificial cycle is “fuelled”, while *karman* is burned down as it is sacrificed for the sake of maintaining the sacrificial order and the “welfare of all beings” (*lokasaṃgraha*). The only fruits a person should expect from his yogic performance are the “remnants of sacrifice” (3.2), which have no negative karmic potential. Offering up, throwing *karman* away in consuming fires is also recommended to Yogins carrying out different types of yogic sacrifices in BhG 4.25.” (p. 17)

“The Yogin does not produce *karman* because he acts like the cosmic cause of all actions (*brahman/prakṛti*), whose products only turn into karmic baggage, if they are appropriated by an egoistic agent. Therefore, the Yogin is well-prepared when his detachment and his knowledge are put to the test in [the] hour of death because he already abandoned any personalized attachment or understanding of his existence (5.23) and all along has been very close to *brahmanirvāṇa* which awaits him upon death.” (p. 19, on *karmayoga*)

“The one who follows the god by taking refuge in him and becomes like Kṛṣṇa himself, free from attachment, will also be free from karmic bondage (4.10, 14-15). The god will favour the one who resorts to him and follows his course of upholding *dharma* by acting for sake of all beings (4.11).” (p. 31)

“The reinterpretation of Yoga as *buddhiyoga* – the Yoga-discipline of determination – and *karmayoga* – the Yoga-discipline of performing social and ritual tasks – are both presented by way of contradistinction from other doctrines, such as those proposed by Vedic scholars or the doctrine of renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*). In both cases, the interest is not in Yoga as a way of dying, of stopping all activities including thinking or of final liberation, but as a method to avoid the consequences of *karman*.” (p. 37, summary)

These excerpts do not do justice to the article as a whole but are really just focussing on the KT. The fact that KT is connected to Yoga is established quite consistently. Stages in the development of Yoga correspond to different solutions of how to deal with *karman* – and vice versa.

6 Conclusion

Have I come full circle by tediously arriving at the conclusion that the MBh contains KT since and where it talks about Liberation? This is hardly news, considering that the title of a major part of the ŚP is “Mokṣadharmaparvan”. And yet, even in the light of the painfully fragmentary presentation, KT has turned out to be a topic that does indeed tell us something about the MBh. It is the pivotal point for many passages that have been considered to contain philosophy. Do they contain philosophy because they speak of Liberation and the conditions of liberation? Or do they contain philosophy because and when they explore KT?

Liberation may be sought from transitoriness or from suffering (which is not the same), from ignorance or nescience, from pollution by acts, from the effects of acts, from bondage created by the effects of acts, from the activity of the senses and the resulting greed, from the functioning of the *gunas*, from rebirth, from bodily functions and needs. Is KT a derivative of the belief that Liberation is possible? Or is reflection about and practical striving for Liberation a derivative of KT as a philosophy of life, human existence and the world surrounding it? – To want to deal with such a packet of problems on the basis of selected texts many of which present unsurmountable problems on the philological level is indeed an ambition bound to lead to frustration. I hope that my frustration will at least not prevent my convincing you that KT in the MBh is a problem worth pursuing.

KT has turned out to be a conglomeration or constellation (collocation) of elements which occur theoretically connected but also separately and independently of each other. Logically (if not also historically) this makes the elements into something prior (if not older) than their collocation. The elements may answer different questions when considered in isolation than when used in a composite theory.

What difference does it make to our idea about the development of concepts whether retribution is considered a theoretical consequence of belief in rebirth, or whether belief in rebirth is considered the theoretical consequence of belief in retribution? Which theorem presupposes the other theorem by applying within it? Rebirth ‘develops’ the application of the axiom that deeds have effects to include the case that the effects are unseen and occur in a yonder world (in a cosmological scheme) or in another life (on the temporal scale). Or, the axiom of retribution explains that continuity between all forms of life at all times (even without memory of earlier lives) is possible. The question to which each theory answers is a different one. The domain of the axiom of retribution is wider. Retribution explains (or is applicable) also to models of life, individuality, soul, ethics, cosmology with or without a Beyond without the specific element of rebirth as part of it.

The doctrines of rebirth and of retribution are inseparably embedded in a cultural and conceptual (or theoretical) continuum. KT (plural) defines the philosophy of the MBh because this philosophy is “moksadharmā”. And Moksadharmā is “Freedom-from-karman-Dharma”. It may very well have been those who search for liberation who started to talk and reflect about rebirth because of their insight that simply dying would not change the structure of reality and its perception fundamentally enough to warrant the separation from that reality.

If an other world, a heaven etc. is to be attained, action is the means to attain this goal. Action and effect are linked and correspond to each other. Therefore there can be retribution and there can be atonement (*prāyaścitta*). Who does *not* want to attain a yonder world (temporarily or eternally) must avoid any effect of any action. Sacrifice, the norms of dharmic behaviour, asceticism, renunciation, liberation, samnyāsa as stage of life, techniques of liberating death are linked differently to their social context, but they share the same theoretical assumptions.