

Karma Theory

Life as Trajectory, Causal Legacy, and Future Choice

A Conceptual Research Essay

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Abstract

Karma Theory begins from a simple view of life: a person moves through the world as a trajectory, but does not merely pass through it. Every interaction changes something—another person, a relationship, an organization, a physical object, an institution, a body of knowledge, or the conditions from which later events unfold. Some changes disappear quickly. Others persist, propagate, branch, combine with later events, and continue to shape future trajectories long after the initiating interaction has ended.

This essay develops that intuition through five questions: **Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What will I leave behind? How should I choose?** The first four belong to the descriptive core of Karma Theory. They treat the present as an inherited causal state, the self as an evolving trajectory, the future as a probability distribution over reachable paths rather than a predetermined destiny, and a life as a source of causal traces that can outlive the person who produced them. The fifth question is explicitly normative. It connects the framework to a personal philosophy of freedom and happiness: good decisions should, absent sufficient compensating value, avoid unnecessarily and irreversibly shrinking the set of valuable future options.

The term *karma* is used here as a technical and literary name. The framework makes no claim about rebirth, moral reward and punishment, cosmic accounting, or a metaphysical karmic force. Its subject is causal consequence: how completed interactions remain present in what the world has become.

1. A brief acknowledgement

One early imaginative source of this idea was Yukito Kishiro's *Gunnm (Battle Angel Alita)*. Its recurring treatment of karma, identity, history, and persistence left an intuition that stayed with me.

The theory developed here does not come from the manga, and it should not be attributed to Kishiro. I mention it only as an acknowledgement and a record of intellectual lineage. Ideas have trajectories too: they come from somewhere, encounter other ideas, change, and become something their original sources did not contain.

The question that eventually mattered to me was much simpler:

What becomes of an interaction after the interaction is over?

Karma Theory begins there.

The questions that organize this essay are much older than this framework and should not be attributed here to any single philosopher. One of their best-known modern formulations appears in Paul Gauguin's 1897–1898 painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Karma Theory does not pretend to provide final answers to those questions. It offers one causal-dynamical interpretation of them—and then adds two further questions that matter to the framework: **What will I leave**

behind? and **How should I choose?**

Part I — Where Do I Come From?

2. We are born into a world already changed

No one begins from zero.

By the time a person is born, the world already contains roads, languages, technologies, institutions, laws, habits, families, inequalities, opportunities, knowledge, expectations, and unresolved consequences of earlier events.

A human life therefore begins inside an inherited causal state.

Let W_t represent the surrounding world at time t . A person's starting conditions are not produced by that person alone. They are descendants of earlier interactions:

$$\mathcal{H}_{<t} \rightarrow W_t \rightarrow P_t,$$

where $\mathcal{H}_{<t}$ represents the relevant causal history before the person's present state P_t .

This gives a causal answer to the old question:

Where do I come from?

Not from one cause.

Not from one moment.

Not from one isolated lineage.

I come from a world that was already in motion before I entered it.

I inherit biology, but also institutions.

I inherit language, but also assumptions embedded in that language.

I inherit knowledge, but also the technological and organizational systems that made that knowledge accessible.

I inherit the consequences of decisions made by people I will never meet.

The present is not a neutral starting line. It is a historically produced state.

3. The past is not behind us in a simple sense

The phrase “the past” can make history sound spatially distant, as if completed events have simply moved away.

But an event can end while its consequences continue.

Suppose event E_t changes a state:

$$S_t \xrightarrow{E_t} S_{t+1}.$$

The event may last seconds, but later processes now begin from S_{t+1} , not from the unrealized state that would otherwise have existed.

So:

$$E_t \rightarrow \Delta S_{t+1} \rightarrow \Delta S_{t+2} \rightarrow \dots$$

The event has ended as an occurrence.

Its causal descendants may not have.

This is the first central proposition of Karma Theory:

The end of an event is not necessarily the end of its causal existence.

The past remains present whenever its surviving consequences remain part of the current causal state.

Part II — Who Am I?

4. A life is a trajectory, not a point

We often talk about identity as if a person were a stable object moving through changing circumstances.

A more useful starting point is dynamical.

A life is a trajectory:

$$P_0 \rightarrow P_1 \rightarrow P_2 \rightarrow \dots \rightarrow P_T.$$

But even this is incomplete, because the person and the world are continually changing each other.

A minimal coupled description is:

$$P_{t+1} = F(P_t, W_t, I_t)$$

and

$$W_{t+1} = G(W_t, P_t, I_t),$$

where I_t denotes interaction.

The world changes us.

We change the world.

Identity is therefore neither a static essence nor a blank slate. The present self is a historically formed state that continues to evolve.

This gives a second causal answer:

Who am I?

I am not merely the current point P_t .

I am a trajectory whose present state carries the consequences of earlier interactions, while still remaining open to later change.

My past constrains me.

It does not exhaust me.

5. To live is to leave traces

A trajectory through the world is not only a sequence of places or internal states.

It also leaves changes behind.

Some traces are informational:

- a letter;
- a scientific paper;
- a remembered sentence;
- a database;
- a story.

Some are embodied in people:

- knowledge;
- habits;
- confidence;
- fear;
- technique;
- judgment.

Some are physical:

- a road;
- a building;
- a tool;
- a modified landscape;
- a damaged object.

Some are institutional:

- a company;
- a law;
- a procedure;
- a school;
- a precedent.

Some are relational:

- trust;
- distrust;
- a collaboration;
- an introduction;
- a broken alliance.

These traces differ in persistence, reach, visibility, and reconstructability.

A record may survive after its practical effect has disappeared.

A practical effect may survive after its historical origin has been forgotten.

Therefore:

What remains knowable about the past and what remains causally active because of the past are not the same question.

Karma Theory requires this distinction.

6. Causal descendants can outlive the actor

Death makes the structure especially clear.

Biological existence can end while causal descendants remain active:

biological existence ends $\nRightarrow$ all causal descendants end.

A teacher dies, but students continue to use what they learned.

A founder dies, but an organization continues to hire, invest, produce, and shape decisions.

A scientist dies, but an idea changes later experiments.

A writer dies, but a sentence enters the mind of someone born decades later.

Nothing metaphysical is required.

The person does not literally continue inside these consequences.

But the later world is different because that person once existed and acted.

This is one of the reasons I use the word *karma*.

A life can end while parts of its causal trajectory remain active in the world.

Part III — Where Am I Going?

7. Causation produces trajectories, not only outcomes

Causal analysis often asks whether A caused B .

Karma Theory takes a longer temporal view.

An outcome becomes a new condition:

$$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow \dots$$

with branches, feedback, noise, and new interventions entering at every stage.

The relevant question becomes:

How did an interaction reshape the trajectory from which later events emerged?

This does not mean that every distant descendant should be attributed to the original event.

The theory would become meaningless if all later history were assigned indefinitely to every earlier cause.

Attribution must remain counterfactual.

Conceptually, compare:

$$W_t^E \quad \text{with} \quad W_t^{E'},$$

where E' is a defensible alternative.

The contribution of the original interaction may decay.

It may persist.

It may amplify.

It may reverse direction.

It may matter strongly in one domain and disappear in another.

Causal legacy is therefore a trajectory problem, not a static label.

8. The future is a distribution, not a destination

The future is not one path waiting to be discovered.

At any moment, a person or system faces a distribution over possible trajectories:

$$P(T_{t:t+H} \mid \mathcal{H}_t, S_t).$$

History matters because it changes that distribution.

A past event can:

- make some futures easier to reach;
- make others more difficult;
- create new opportunities;
- close existing paths;
- alter costs;
- change relationships;
- change information;
- modify the response of the system to later events.

But:

historical constraint $\neq$ deterministic fate.

Every new interaction becomes part of history:

$$\mathcal{H}_t \rightarrow \mathcal{H}_{t+1}.$$

So the future distribution itself keeps changing.

This gives a third answer:

Where am I going?

Not toward a predetermined endpoint.

I am moving through a future whose possibilities are continually shaped by inherited history, present state, new interaction, and choice.

A short formulation is:

Karma shapes probabilities, not destiny.

This statement is descriptive: it says nothing by itself about which future should be preferred.

9. Reachable futures

It is useful to think not only in terms of probabilities but also in terms of a reachable set:

$$\mathcal{R}_t = \{\text{future states or trajectories still realistically reachable at time } t\}.$$

A decision changes this set.

Some choices expand it.

Some shrink it.

Some exchange one family of possibilities for another.

Some create irreversible lock-in.

Some open paths that did not previously exist.

Some expose the person to ruin.

Some preserve the ability to recover and try again.

This is still descriptive.

Karma Theory does not yet say which reachable futures are morally better.

But it makes one thing visible:

Every meaningful choice changes not only what happens next, but also what can still happen after that.

Part IV — What Will I Leave Behind?

10. The world after you is partly built from what you touched

Suppose person A changes the world by ΔW :

$$A \rightarrow \Delta W.$$

Later, person B encounters that changed world:

$$\Delta W \rightarrow B.$$

Then part of A 's trajectory has become part of the conditions from which B 's trajectory begins:

$$\mathcal{T}_A \rightarrow \Delta W \rightarrow \mathcal{T}_B.$$

Then B changes the world again:

$$\mathcal{T}_B \rightarrow \Delta W'.$$

This gives a fourth answer:

What will I leave behind?

Not one thing.

A distributed set of changes.

Some may be visible.

Some may be forgotten.

Some may persist for decades.

Some may vanish tomorrow.

Some may help other people.

Some may constrain them.

Some may become independent causal systems.

The world inherited by later people is partly made from what earlier people touched.

11. Institutions as extended causal descendants

Institutions are especially important because some traces become causally active systems in their own right.

A person creates an institution:

$$P \rightarrow I.$$

Then:

$$I \rightarrow E_1, E_2, E_3, \dots$$

The institution hires people, allocates resources, teaches routines, creates incentives, builds artifacts, and shapes later decisions.

The founder may disappear while the institution continues.

But the institution also changes.

It can mutate beyond the founder's intention.

It may eventually produce consequences the founder neither predicted nor approved.

This matters because Karma Theory is not a theory of intention.

The causal question is not only:

What did the actor mean to do?

It is also:

What entered the world, and what happened afterward?

12. Small lives matter too

Causal legacy should not be confused with fame.

Most human influence is local.

A parent changes a child.

A teacher changes a student.

A colleague changes how a team works.

A stranger changes someone's confidence.

One person introduces two others who later build something together.

A routine remains in an organization after the person who created it leaves.

These changes may have:

small reach, short persistence

or:

large reach, long persistence.

Both are real.

Visibility is not causal significance.

Fame is not causal significance.

Reconstructability is not causal significance.

A life can matter causally without becoming historically famous.

Part V — How Should I Choose?

13. From description to a personal philosophy

Up to this point, the argument has been descriptive.

Karma Theory asks how interactions alter trajectories, how traces persist, and how history reshapes future possibilities.

The next step is different.

It is a **personal normative implication**, not a scientific law of Karma Theory.

If today's decisions reshape tomorrow's reachable futures, one reasonable philosophy of life is to care about the quality of the future choice set itself.

This suggests a personal view of happiness in which freedom matters not merely as present permission, but as continued access to futures one genuinely values.

The value of freedom is therefore not exhausted by what I can choose today.

A deeper question is:

After I make today's choice, which worthwhile paths will still remain genuinely open tomorrow?

14. Happiness and choice

Many things usually associated with a good life can be reinterpreted through this lens.

Money is not happiness itself.

But money can preserve options.

Savings can make it possible to leave a bad job, survive a period without income, move, study, start something new, care for family, or refuse a coercive demand.

Money can therefore function, in part, as stored capacity for future choice.

Education does something similar in another dimension.

Skills expand the number of problems a person can solve and the number of environments in which they can adapt.

Health preserves physical possibility.

Reputation preserves social possibility.

Legal freedom preserves institutional possibility.

Psychological stability preserves decision capacity.

The common structure is:

resource or capability → larger set of viable future options.

This is why two people can appear to live the same external life while experiencing it very differently.

One stays because there is no alternative.

The other stays despite having alternatives.

The external action is identical.

The freedom is not.

15. Do not maximize the number of options blindly

A life cannot be lived by keeping every door open forever.

Some worthwhile choices require commitment.

Marriage closes some paths.

Having children closes some paths.

Building a company closes some paths.

Devoting years to a craft closes some paths.

A decision can reduce the number of future options and still be excellent.

Therefore, the objective is not:

$$\max |\mathcal{R}_t|.$$

A better target is something like:

preserve valuable and viable reachable futures.

The key word is **valuable**.

A meaningful commitment may sacrifice many low-value alternatives in exchange for one deeply valuable trajectory.

The problem is not narrowing itself.

The problem is **unnecessary, irreversible narrowing without sufficient compensating value**.

That gives a practical decision rule:

If a choice substantially and irreversibly shrinks your future set of worthwhile options, and does not create enough compensating value, it is usually a poor choice.

This is especially important when decisions create:

- ruin risk;
- severe addiction;
- irreversible health damage;

- legal loss of freedom;
- destruction of reputation;
- extreme financial fragility;
- unnecessary dependence;
- premature path lock-in.

The central question becomes:

Does this decision make my future world wider or narrower—and if it narrows it, is what I gain worth the price?

16. Freedom as future optionality

Freedom is often described as the absence of present constraint.

That is only part of it.

From a trajectory perspective:

Freedom is not only what you can choose today. It is also how many worthwhile choices remain after today's choice has been made.

This makes freedom inherently temporal.

A person can feel free today while making decisions that systematically destroy tomorrow's freedom.

Another person can accept temporary constraint—study, saving, training, discipline—in order to enlarge future freedom.

So short-term constraint can sometimes be the price of long-term optionality.

The useful distinction is not:

constraint vs. freedom,

but:

constraint that builds future reachability vs. constraint that destroys it.

17. The five questions form one loop

The five questions now connect.

Where do I come from?

From a world already changed by prior interactions.

Who am I?

An evolving trajectory carrying inherited history while continuing to change.

Where am I going?

Into a future that is constrained but not predetermined.

What will I leave behind?

Changes that become part of the world inherited by later trajectories.

How should I choose?

By avoiding needless destruction of valuable future possibility, and by committing when the value created is worth the optionality sacrificed.

The structure forms a loop:

past people → the world I inherit → my trajectory → the traces I leave → the world others inherit

We inherit a changed world.

We live inside it.

We change it again.

Others inherit what follows.

This is the human form of the Karma Theory intuition.

18. CT, FSP, and Karma Theory

Karma Theory overlaps with two other frameworks I have developed: **Connection Theory (CT)** and the **Flow Shaping Principle (FSP)**.

Their motivations differ.

CT and FSP emerged primarily from problems in artificial intelligence, adaptive systems, and organization.

Karma Theory began from thinking about life, history, trajectory, and causal legacy.

A useful distinction is:

CT asks about pathways of connection.

FSP asks how flows reshape the adaptive organizations through which they pass.

Karma Theory asks what becomes of interactions after they have entered history.

CT can help explain where influence can travel.

FSP can help explain how the system carrying the influence may itself be changed.

Karma Theory takes the longer temporal view: how those changes become inherited conditions for later trajectories.

The theories therefore overlap in mechanism without sharing the same primary question.

19. The world has memory, but not necessarily a memory system

To say that the world “remembers” is metaphorical.

There need not be a central store.

History persists when present conditions are descendants of earlier conditions.

A scar carries the consequence of injury.

A road carries the consequence of repeated movement.

A constitution carries the consequence of political history.

An organization carries former decisions through routines and architecture.

A language carries migrations and contact.

These forms of memory are not identical.

The common principle is simply:

Past interactions have altered present conditions.

And those alterations can decay.

Forgetting, repair, turnover, degradation, redesign, extinction, and new intervention can overwrite old traces.

Karma is not guaranteed to persist forever.

20. Branching, amplification, and decay

Future formal work may distinguish several dimensions of causal legacy:

Persistence: how long a consequence remains causally relevant.

Reach: how many systems or people it affects.

Depth: how many causal generations remain meaningfully attributable to the initiating event.

Branching: how many distinct pathways the influence enters.

Amplification: whether a small initial change generates a much larger later divergence.

Feedback: whether the changed world later acts back on the initiating actor or its descendants.

Traceability: whether later observers can still identify the origin.

Counterfactual contribution: how different the later trajectory would have been under a defensible alternative history.

These are research directions, not a finished metric system.

They point toward a future scientific program.

21. Why call it Karma Theory?

The word *karma* is used here as a technical and literary name for persistent causal consequence.

The theory does not claim rebirth, moral recompense, cosmic justice, or an invisible karmic force. It does not attempt to scientize Buddhist doctrine.

The name points to a simpler intuition:

actions can continue to matter after the moment of action has passed.

The scientific task is to replace inevitability and metaphysics with causal structure, dynamics, uncertainty, and counterfactual reasoning.

So:

Karma is not destiny.

And:

Karma is not a moral score.

In the language of this essay:

Karma is the way completed interactions remain present in what the world has become.

22. Conclusion

A life is a trajectory through an evolving world.

But it is also a source of changes that become part of that world.

We begin from conditions created before us.

We are reshaped by what we encounter.

We reshape other people, institutions, relationships, objects, and environments.

Those changes alter the starting conditions of later trajectories.

Some vanish.

Some persist.

Some become independent causal systems.

Some outlive us.

The future remains open because new interactions keep arriving.

History constrains without fully determining.

And choice matters not only because it selects what happens now, but because it changes which futures remain reachable afterward.

The descriptive core of Karma Theory can therefore be stated simply:

We inherit a world changed by prior interactions, move through it as evolving trajectories, and leave further changes that later trajectories inherit.

The personal philosophy that follows is equally simple:

A good life should not needlessly destroy its own future freedom.

Happiness is not the possession of every possible option.

It is partly the freedom to retain access to futures that matter, and to enter them by choice rather than by the absence of alternatives.

The past does not determine the future.

But once an interaction has changed the world, the future is no longer being chosen from the same world as before.

Related Frameworks

- **Connection Theory (CT):** pathways and consequences of connection, developed primarily for AI and adaptive systems.
 - **Flow Shaping Principle (FSP):** how flows reshape the adaptive organizations through which they pass, also developed primarily for AI and adaptive systems.
 - **Karma Theory:** trajectories, causal traces, inherited consequences, and future possibilities across lives, organizations, and historical processes.
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Brief note on scientific neighbors

The local mechanisms discussed here have substantial prior art. Structural causal models formalize interventions and counterfactual dependence (Pearl, 2009). Path-dependence research studies how earlier events alter later trajectories (Arthur, 1989; Pierson, 2000). Adaptive-network theory studies reciprocal changes between state and interaction topology (Gross & Blasius, 2008). Niche-construction theory examines how organisms modify environments inherited by later populations (Laland, Odling-Smee, & Feldman, 1999). Prediction and retrodiction research formalizes forward and backward informational questions without assuming that history is fully recoverable (Ellison, Mahoney, & Crutchfield, 2009).

Karma Theory does not claim these local mechanisms as new discoveries. This essay organizes them around a different motivating question:

How do completed interactions continue to participate in the world that follows them?

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Publication note

This is a **conceptual research essay**, not a peer-reviewed research article and not a claim of a completed new causal calculus or fully validated scientific theory. Its purpose is to state the motivating intuition, conceptual scope, and personal philosophical implications of Karma Theory in a form suitable for public discussion, citation, and later formal or empirical development.

The descriptive claims of Karma Theory and the explicitly labeled personal normative implications should be read separately.