

# Ethics and Philosophy

These are the concepts that are central to the center of pagan belief and magical working. They are the concept of Karma, the Law of Multiple Returns, the Witch's Rede, Perfect Love and Perfect Trust, and All Acts of Love and Pleasure are the Gifts of the Goddess. I will discuss these notions and the idea of morals as these ideas relate to the above concepts. Inclusive in this paper is another that discusses the tenet of Karma as viewed by the Neo-Pagan movement. This view varies somewhat from the more commonly known view held by Eastern Religions on the same topic.

Before I start on these beliefs, however, I'll talk about another concept that frequently gets overlooked in the rush of explanations. This is the relatively simple idea of responsibility. Most people speak of responsibility as though its something that you can take or leave at will. The truth as it exits for most Neo-Pagans is that responsibility is there, it is yours and any denial is only self deluding. The responsibility for any act rests solidly upon your shoulders. Refusing to take it then is a denial of personal control and a dis-empowering of yourself. The phrase "It wasn't my fault. It was just Karma." is ridiculous in the sense that Karma is only a result of your decisions.

Christianity believes that responsibility for an act can be absolved by asking for (and therefore receiving) forgiveness from God through Christ. Pagans believe that an act which is perceived by the doer as "wrong", whether accidental or purposeful, is an act that imbalances the soul so to speak. The only way to achieve balance once again is to act in a way that will tip the scales in the other direction. This takes us into Karma. The following is a paper written by a very good friend<sup>1</sup> of mine who was kind enough to allow me to use it here in tact.

## KARMA

(Author's note: Much of the following comes primarily from a series of personal insights and intuitions. I cannot defend it on the basis of "traditional lore", although some of these concepts occur in the lore of several traditions. Some of this is just what makes the most sense to me. I hope that readers will discover through their own experience whether these ideas make sense to them also.)

Karma is a name that we use for what many consider to be a natural law of the universe. The word itself is Indian, but our European ancestors had similar words, like "fate" and "wyrd", which describe some of the same ideas. Still, most people in the Craft have some idea of what "Karma" means, which makes it as useful a word as any. Though we borrowed the word from the Eastern religions, Karma, being a natural law, applies as much to us as it does to Hindus and Buddhists.

Despite the fact that many Witches and Pagans believe in the idea in one form or another, just what is meant by "Karma" can be confusing. Part of this is due to a lack of information. Many teachings, for instance, contain references to Karma, but seem to assume that the reader already understands what Karma is.

The essence of Karma is very simple: Karma is cause and effect carried out on large scales as well as small ones. Another way of saying this is that one's choices in the past govern what choices one will have in the present and future. What distinguishes the actions of Karma from ordinary reality is that Karmic effects are not limited to mundane notions of causality or to ordinary time scales. Most people who believe in Karma also believe in reincarnation, which allows for many lifetimes for causes and effects to be acted out.

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Capps is an elder in the British traditions and has training in NROOGD as well.

Another related idea that of connection. How we interact with others will certainly affect our Karma; how others interact with us will affect theirs. It often happens that these will be complementary effects, as if there were some sort of agreement. While we are responsible for working out our own Karma, for making our own choices, others will aid us, and we will aid them.

Inherent in the concept of Karma is the idea of balance. If the choices you make and actions you take upset the balance in your life, then the action of Karma will be to present you with choices that will allow you to create a new balance. Such imbalances are not necessarily bad; without them we literally could not go anywhere, since even the simple act of walking requires momentarily unbalancing the body between steps. Beyond this, Karma acts to balance the entire universe. In this way, Karma is a counter to another natural force called "entropy", which this is the tendency of matter and energy to break down into simpler, less ordered forms. Karma is the opposite to this tendency, causing more spiritual balance and harmony over time. On the mundane plane, we call this action "evolution" and see it in material as well as spiritual lifeforms.

In our own lives, we can also describe the action of Karma as a series of lessons. Each time we depart from perfect balance and harmony, we will receive, through the action of Karma, new opportunities restore that balance. It is an error to think of Karma as a system of rewards and punishments. There is no such thing as "bad Karma." When events challenge us with difficult choices, it is not necessarily because of "evil" behavior in our past; it might just as easily be because we have reached a new level of spiritual evolution and are thus ready for more significant lessons. As in any course of study, when one lesson is completed, another is presented to the student. In the school of Karma, though, there are no failures. We will continue to receive the same lesson until we get it right!

One of the hardest concepts for many people to understand is that THERE IS NO ONE CONTROLLING THIS PROCESS BUT OURSELVES. Karma comes from within, not without, and though we may not always recall the choices we made, it up to us to deal with their consequences. In fact, taking responsibility for our Karma is most important use we can make of these teachings. Theoretical ideas about Karma would be useless unless we can use this knowledge to improve our lives. Often this means rethinking our ideas about our limitations. The more that we are willing to take responsibility for, the more power we will have over the course of our lives. Despite appearances, no one else is preventing us from having the things we desire or doing the things we want to do. To release ourselves from obstruction or move into new areas of opportunity, we must realize that only we are the cause of what happens to us.

On the other hand, it is also wrong to confuse responsibility with blame. When our choices cause us to do things that we regret afterwards, we tend to feel bad and not trust ourselves. We often try to avoid making any choices at all in the area that caused the problem. This is a mistake, because the situation requires more responsibility, not less. If you fall off your horse, the thing to do is get right back on.

If blaming ourselves for our Karma is wrong, blaming others for theirs is as bad or worse. To do so is to ignore the connections we all share. Some people use Karma as an excuse to disparage those suffering some misfortune. Not only is such fault-finding unwarranted, such people ignore the fact that this same situation contains choices for them also: an opportunity to offer aid, perhaps, or possibly a warning not engage in the same behavior that caused the problem for the other person. It is simply impossible to isolate oneself.

Another error often made by witches is thinking that magic and spellworking can somehow "short-circuit" Karma. We cannot change someone's else Karma, only our own. Indeed, attempting to cast a spell which goes against the Karma in a situation is one of the principal reasons that spells sometimes fail. The thing to remember is that any time we become aware of any kind of power available to us, the choices we make regarding how we use it will affect Karma. The practice of magic is no exception.

Karmic ideas also provide an explanation for divination. Through our connections with the universe, we can learn as much of the state of others' Karma as we are willing to take the responsibility to know. Because of these connections the results of any action that we take, even shuffling a deck of cards or tossing some coins, will to some extent reflect the totality of the state of the universe. If we can teach ourselves to read these influences, we can indeed discover the influences that will shape our future and others'.

Most importantly, though, with time, intent and the use of meditation, we can slowly learn the shape our Karma has taken over the ages up to our present life. We will find how seemingly accidental occurrences, large and small, belong to a larger pattern, one with a unique meaning for ourselves alone. Once we begin to grasp this pattern, we may place ourselves in harmony with it, to actively cooperate in learning the lessons Karma teaches. In this way, we come to be the conscious agents of our own spiritual evolution.

One important thought to keep in mind is that sometimes things happen that are not a part of Karma, yours, mine or anyone else's. In other words, Shit happens. Karma may not be the cause of a person's being injured in an auto accident but the decision that lead to being in the car involved may have been a part of Karma. The simple fact that the decision to act leads to other often unforeseen circumstances, effects unpredictable change in the outcome of Karmic circumstance as well, and we must recognize this. Thus saying that a victim must have "wanted" the crime to happen or that his/her Karma caused the event is not necessarily a true statement.

### THE THREE FOLD RULE

The "Three Fold Rule" simply stated, says that what goes around comes around, and around, and around. It says that whatever you put out in the way of energy will return to you not once but multiple times. There is some argument about the number three. I look upon it as more of a poetic device than a hard and fast rule. This applies not only to the destructive or negative energy but to the positive energy.

The implications here are pretty clear. Please bear in mind that no one is telling you not to use the energy that is available, nor is anyone telling you how to use it. What we are saying is that you must be prepared to deal with the consequences whatever they might be. These consequences are actually a combination of Karma and responsibility as explained above. The Chinese say that a deed is like a pebble thrown into a still pond. The ripples spread out and out effecting many things in their path. Eventually they hit the sides of the pond, if it is small enough, and begin the trip back again to the place of origin. I like to think of this as the slosh theory of energy disturbance. (OK you think of a better name.) We believe that the energies that we are tapping into are similarly confined.

### AND IT HARM NONE

In the same way that no one can make you use the power for one purpose and not another no one can make you abide by the rule "and it harm none do what you will." If you have reached the age of

consent without the development of some idea of ethics and morals then no one can help you develop them now and no amount of lecturing and/or threats will change your outlook. In order to understand this tenant of the Craft you must have developed some sense of what you believe is right and what would “harm” others.

The next thing that is necessary is the realization that it is impossible to live one’s life and make decisions every day without “harming” someone. For instance, if you decide to take a job, someone else won’t get that job and you have “hurt” them. Therefore, you must decide what causes the least harm, not what would do no harm at all. We do not necessarily advocate a turn the other cheek policy and we certainly don’t wish to paralyze the practitioner into doing “nothing” out of fear. When harm is threatened we absolutely believe that the right of defense is yours. Though, this sounds like an easy thing to decide there are constant arguments even among the members of the craft as to what constitutes the exact extent of this tenant. Let’s look now at a real case and see how all of these “rules” effect a situation.

There is a loose cannon in the community who is doing something horrendous and the police and other authorities cannot catch him/her. So far the responsibility and Karma belong solely to this person. Now a group get together and decide to do “work” to bring this person in. Here things get picky. If they decide to work for something harmful to happen to this person because they feel that it is deserved, they are running the risk of bringing to themselves the responsibility of action against another and violating the “harm none” law. In this case least force is best. What they can do is work to bring the consequences of this person’s own actions back upon him/herself. They might work for the police to find more clues, the perp to make an error or a binding for the person to do no more harm. (All of these techniques have had demonstrably successful results in the past.) These works also allow the violator’s own Karma to catch up.

Aside from the concepts as stated above we make very few value judgments as a group. Some of us are more activist and militant than others. There are some who believe that we should do no harm even if it means harm to us and there are others of us who would willingly “do harm” to the fool who confronts us in our own space. Actually the whole point of the Craft is to avoid violence through a higher awareness and control of our environment and situations before they can become explosive.

One of my favorite stories explains this simply. A young man came to my Karate Master, his face beaten badly, and asked to sign up for classes. My master asked him why he wanted the classes. The young man looked at him like he was crazy and asked, “Can’t you see man? I need to learn to defend myself.” Still my teacher persisted in asking why. (He’s heavily into Asian philosophy.) “Man, what’s wrong with your eyes? Can’t you see my face?”

“But how did you get beat up?”

“Four hoods jumped me in the K street mall at 2:00 in the morning.”

“Let me save you a \$100 lesson. Don’t go to the K street mall at 2:00 in the morning”. (Like I said heavily in Asian philosophy.) Still and all true. We function on something of the same principle. Don’t put yourself in a position that leaves none but desperate means. Hopefully we practice magic so that we don’t need to resort to more mundane (if equally effective) methods.

A friend of mine who shall remain nameless in order to avoid undue embarrassment in case of disagreement, suggested (actually insisted upon) these models for an ethic that most pagans could agree upon.

#1 Do not use force except in self defense

#2 Do not take or use property which is not yours, except by permission

#3 Keep your promises and don’t lie

#4 Conduct your sex life with respect for your partner(s) and with regard

#5 Treat others with the respect that you would expect for yourself

## THE REST OF THE STORY

Somewhat rapped up in this idea of “And It Harm None” is the pagan concept of “All Acts of Love and Pleasure Are the Gifts of the Goddess”. This is not the excuse for continuous orgies that some of Neo-Paganism’s detractors have construed it to be. Rather it steps beyond the Christian concepts of morality and into a morality of its own making. What this means is that man *as well as* woman was not born in sin and that there is no sin in loving and/or sex. Remember that responsibility for one’s own acts is paramount to this belief system and that includes responsibility for procreation, and the spread of disease. Also “And it Harm None” clearly states that unsafe sex or irresponsible acts are out of the question.

The Last issue also weaves itself inexorably around this issue. It is the ethic of Perfect Love and Perfect Trust. This means that these traits must be present before involving yourself with another person for any type of relationship. All persons initiated into a circle are initiated only with the full consent of *each and every person* in that coven and then only when each of those people feel that they can say without reservation that these traits are present for the initiated.

In order to fully appreciate what each of these elements of ethic and philosophy mean, it will be necessary to view them from new and unbiased ground. This is a major undertaking for those who have never had a point-of-view challenged. It sometimes painfully stretches the mind and often leads to confusing and conflicting thoughts. It is however, a necessary step in the evolution of the human spirit. Good Luck