Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language has the following to say about karma:

1. the force generated by a person’s actions that is held in Hinduism and Buddhism to be the motive power for the round of rebirths and deaths endured by him until he has achieved spiritual liberation and freed himself from the effects of such force;

2. the sum total of the ethical consequences of a person’s good or bad actions comprising thoughts, words, and deeds that is held in Hinduism and Buddhism to determine his specific destiny in his next existence;

3. a subtle form of matter held in Jainism to develop in the soul and vitiate its purity, to lengthen the course of individual transmigration, and to postpone the possibility of final salvation.

This dictionary entry, inevitably, concerns the word *karma* as it is used in the English language. By and large this corresponds to the way—more precisely: one of the ways—in which the word is used in Sanskrit and other Indian languages.

In Sanskrit, the word can be used in many other ways as well. Ap­te’s *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, for example, gives the following fifteen meanings: (1) Action, works, deed. (2) Execution, performance. (3) Business, office, duty. (4) A religious rite. (5) A specific action, moral duty. (6a) Performance of religious rites as opposed to speculative religion or knowledge of Brahman. (6b) Labour, work. (7) Product, result. (8) A natural or active property (as support of the earth). (9) Fate, the certain consequence of acts done in a former life. (10) (In grammar) The object of an action. (11) (In philosophy) Motion considered as one of the seven categories of things. (12) Organ of sense. (13) Organ of action. (14) (In Astronomy) The tenth lunar mansion. (15) Practice, training.

This multiplicity of meanings is hardly exceptional in Sanskrit, where many words have a sometimes impressive number of unre-
lated or barely related meanings. In the case of *karma*, however, it has led some scholars to the mistaken assumption that the *karma* that is connected with the belief in rebirth (Apte’s no. 9) is historically a development out of *karma* in the sense of “religious rite” (Apte’s no. 4). In reality the two are quite independent of each other and originated in altogether different milieus.

As in Webster’s dictionary entry, then, the Indian word *karma* can be used in connection with the belief in rebirth. This is the use of the word that interests us in this book. In order to make clear that two different notions are involved, it will be useful to speak of “rebirth and karmic retribution,” using the adjective *karmic*, which, by the way, is not present in Webster’s dictionary (but has found a place in the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). The belief in rebirth in one form or another is widespread in religions around the world, but in most of them karmic retribution plays no, or no important role. Belief in rebirth can therefore very well exist without the notion of karmic retribution. This is an important point, for scholarly research into the origin of karmic retribution in India has sometimes mistakenly drawn conclusions from the observation that the belief in rebirth is (weakly) present in the oldest surviving literature of India, the Veda (see the boxed text titled “The Veda” in Chapter 3). Indeed, the prior (but incorrect) conviction that the origin of karmic retribution must be looked for in the Veda has led certain scholars to postulate, without supporting evidence, that this notion must be related to the religious rites, also sometimes called *karma*, that are the central concern of Vedic literature.

It is clear from Webster’s dictionary entry that karma is something that concerns individuals: a person will be reborn in accordance with his or her actions. This is indeed the kind of karma that is most often written and thought about in the surviving literature of India; we will call it *orthodox karma*. It is this orthodox karma that will be discussed in the first part of this book. The notion will be presented here in its historical development, a development that concerns the major religions of ancient and classical India, most notably Jainism, Buddhism, and Brahmanism, and involved intensive interaction between these and other religious currents. The presentation will require a certain amount of jumping forward and backward be-
between these movements, and also some jumping forward and backward in time, but I will try to reduce this to a minimum.

Once the historical presentation is in place, the remainder of the first part will discuss some of the ways in which different currents of thought tried to come to terms with this belief: how does karma work, and why? It will become clear that karma came to exert a profound influence on Indian philosophy in several ways.

The orthodox karma of authors and scholars did not always coincide with more popular notions related to but yet different from this literary and philosophical concept. To do justice to these alternative notions, the second part of this book will deal with variants of karma. These include the belief in the possibility of transfer of merit and in devotion to God as a means to circumvent karmic retribution.

The concluding reflections will briefly consider some developments outside the Indian subcontinent, and I will then propose some thoughts regarding how to make sense of the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution.