



A Cross-Cultural Comparison of the Issue of Self-Knowledge in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the *Bhagavadgita**

Lourens Minnema
VU University

Greek and Shakespearean tragic truth emerges from pollution, moral brokenness, and pain. This also applies to the tragic truth of the Indian epics, except that this *karmic* kind of truth is not considered decisive. Crucial in the Indian case is cosmic truth, and Hindu cosmic truth is never produced out of pollution or pain. In Arjuna's case, Krishna's revelatory knowledge is religiously saving knowledge, whereas in Oedipus' case, Apollo's and Teiresias' revelatory knowledge is religiously dooming knowledge. In Hamlet's case, religiously saving knowledge is an object of theological speculation and of philosophical doubt. In the Hindu case, self-knowledge means absolute knowledge and ultimate liberation; in the Greek case, self-knowledge means self-discovery and the recognition of human fragility; in the Shakespearean case, self-knowledge means self-exploration and doubting oneself.

Keywords: self-knowledge, Greek tragedy, Shakespearean tragedy, *Hamlet*, *Bhagavadgita*, vision

1. Introduction

Some sense of self-knowledge may be common worldwide, similar vague notions having general currency everywhere, but cultures differ in their use and understanding of such notions. How does self-knowledge come about? What sources does it draw from? Do people reach similar degrees of self-knowledge? In what respects do different cultures reveal different patterns when it comes to raising the issue of self-knowledge? These questions will not be dealt with in general but by focusing on two cultures in particular, the Western and the Indian cultures. To be much more specific, this paper will describe and compare views of self-knowledge in three classical texts: in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and in the *Bhagavadgita*. The objective is to identify culturally significant similarities and differences between the views presented in these texts. Let us start with ancient Greece.

2. Self-Knowledge in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*

In general, moral achievement relies on both action and reflection. Moral choices demand deliberation and conscious reflection, that is, a certain *degree of knowledge*. But in tragic thought, human vision does not have the power to establish certainty. Tragic knowledge is constituted by the recognition that *reason faces its limits* when confronted with the blinding excessiveness of passionate madness, but also when confronted with the

* This paper contains sections of my book manuscript *Tragic Views of the Human Condition* (forthcoming).

Lourens Minnema, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Department of Philosophy of Religion and Comparative Study of Religions, VU University, The Netherlands; main research field: Comparative Religion.

lacking, on the part of finite mortals, of a complete overview of their destinies and the workings of time. Absolute knowledge is clearly beyond human reach.

“The central ethical [not ‘moral’ in the sense of choosing between good and evil! *LM*] problem of the hero is thus a *problem of rational knowledge*: the hero must continue to act while guided by an exact awareness of how little of his action is truly his own,” James Redfield argues (1994, 130-31). It is the *task of deliberation to determine the limits of power*, of what is possible (1994, 147). This implies, basically, that a slogan such as “knowledge is power” is not applicable. Instead, the slogan becomes “knowledge is generated by powerlessness.” The heroes are less in power and knowledge than the gods, but the gods have neither stable relations among themselves nor full foreknowledge. The gods complete the poem by providing the poet with actors who are involved in the action and yet finally unconcerned spectators, an audience’s point of view from which the tragic action can be comprehended (1994, 133, 135-38). It is the special privilege of the tragic hero that he meets his own limits (death) in the fullness of reflective self-knowledge.¹ This holds for both Hector and Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*. In the story, it means delay. Fullness takes time to complete, and to be realized by the audience. Not just the fullness of self-knowledge but also the fullness of action: “Error is known by its consequences, and the tragic pathos is evoked, not by the fact of error, but as the meaning of error is experienced through consequences” (1994, 155).²

Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* remains the most outstanding example of the dramatists’ exploration of the importance of human knowledge and responsibility in an ambiguous world order. According to Claude Calame (1998), *Oedipus Tyrannus* enacts a shift from verbal knowledge to visual knowledge. Whereas verbal knowledge and physical sight lead to suppositions, visual knowledge and physical blindness give access to truth. The entire prologue plays on the theme of sight. A narrative reversal takes place on two levels: firstly, human knowledge directed by the questions of a creature simultaneously divine, bestial, and feminine is replaced by divine knowledge which becomes the object of human questioning; secondly, knowledge based on words is replaced by knowledge based on sight; the Sphinx episode serves as a negative example of the nature of true knowledge. Oedipus’ self-blinding provokes an ironic reversal of the initial desire for knowledge and for face-to-face inquiry. Richard Buxton’s (1998) response to Calame calls into question the sharp opposition made by Calame between supposed knowledge and real knowledge. According to Buxton, in the world of *Oedipus Tyrannus* clear statements can be both true and false, human and divine. There is no certain access to the domain of truth and divine will. One simply cannot know. The divine world is opaque.

Charles Segal too considers Sophocles’ play dominated by anxiety, uncertainty, lack of control, and the problem of *self-knowledge* (1993, 71-72). The plot unfolds as the recovery of lost knowledge and a lost past. By introducing the hero’s hesitation at the moment of discovery, Sophocles makes the truth emerge as a deliberate act of will. The story-pattern of riddle and decipherment appeals to our desire for knowledge. Segal calls the play “the first detective story of Western literature.” He considers the play a tragedy not only of destiny but also of personal identity, of searching for origins and meaning. It dramatizes the lonely path of *self-discovery*. Segal goes on by saying that knowledge in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the reverse of that in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, where Prometheus’ gift to (technological) man is allowing man not to foresee the day of his doom. *Prometheus* takes us to beginnings still marked by man’s primordial struggle with nature for survival. *Oedipus* describes the tragedy of humanity at a later stage, when a *reflective awareness of the world within* becomes more important than domination of the world outside. This post-Promethean knowledge is tragic rather than technological; it is a knowledge that looks to ends and ultimate reality rather than to means and

immediate goals (Segal 1993, 12-13). What Ruth Padel says about madness also applies to Oedipus' self-knowledge: it articulates the issue of truth from pain.³

If tragedy developed from choral song, Page DuBois suggests, the occurrence of a single character standing out from the chorus marks the emergence of a Western sense of "character," the *persona* carved out in the separation of an individual from a collective (2004, 75). She agrees with Segal that there is a parallel between the invisible space on stage concealed behind doors and gates (the gates of the palace, of the mouth, or of the body) and the invisible graphic space of the tragic poet's text (hidden in the performance): the inner life of the self does not appear on the stage but in the behind-the-stage implied by the invisible text. Segal is quoted as saying that "this interplay between interior and exterior space parallels the increasing awareness of the interior realm of the psyche, the individual personality" (2004, 76). DuBois objects to the modern phrasing in terms of "awareness" and replaces it with a postmodern phrasing in terms of "construction" of the self: "Rather than see this as an increasing *awareness* of something already existent, as Segal and Bruno Snell do, I would argue that in tragedy we are witnessing the *construction* of that self, that interiority, that individualism, in a process concomitant with Athenian democratic ideology concerning equality and the interchangeability of citizens" (2004, 76).

My conclusion would be that in Sophocles, tragic self-knowledge is considered revealing of the human condition in general, it is the fruit of personal suffering, and it offers a disturbingly limited control of one's destiny.

3. Self-Knowledge in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In *Shakespearean* tragedy, notions such as "self-knowledge," "self-awareness," and "self-construction" all seem highly relevant in the case of Hamlet. But *self-knowledge and self-consciousness are not to be confused*. Self-consciousness can mean something quite different from self-knowledge. Does Hamlet achieve self-knowledge? Harold Bloom praises Hamlet for a capacity of self-consciousness.⁴

The crucial breakthrough in *Hamlet* did not involve developing new themes or learning how to construct a tighter plot, Stephen Greenblatt argues, but developing an intense *representation of inwardness* called forth by a new technique of radical excision (2004, 323 ff). By removing or obscuring the motive that makes the initiating action of the story make sense, refusing to provide himself or his audience with a familiar, comfortable rationale, Shakespeare could reach something immeasurably deeper. Substantially reducing, as a literary means, the amount of causal explanation and of explicit motivation that accounted for the action that was to unfold enabled the creation of a strategic opacity. But the creation of opacity as such was not the point. *Taking out a clear motivation allowed Shakespeare to shift his attention to a description of the inner life of human beings, to an unprecedented representation of tormented inwardness*. In the years after *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote *Othello* and *King Lear*. Again, in *Othello*, he refused to provide the villain Iago with a clear and convincing explanation for his behaviour, and in *King Lear* too, Shakespeare eliminated the motive: Lear sets up the love test so that he can divide the kingdom, while the play opens with characters discussing the already drawn up map of the division.

Shakespeare's work had long been sceptical of official explanations and excuses—the accounts of why people behave the way they do, Greenblatt suggests:

The excision of motive must have arisen from something more than technical experimentation; coming in the wake of Hamnet's death [Shakespeare's son Hamnet died in 1596, *LM*], it expressed Shakespeare's root perception of existence, his

understanding of what could be said and what should remain unspoken, his preference for things untidy, damaged, and unresolved over things neatly arranged, well made, and settled. The opacity was shaped by his experience of the world and of his own inner life: his skepticism, his pain, his sense of broken rituals, his refusal of easy consolations. (2004, 324)

The *psychological depth* in Hamlet's character is brought about, Bert O. States argues, by *recurring gaps* between the motive thrust upon him (revenge) and his delay to act upon it, between other characters and Hamlet's overreaction to them (intensity), between his words and his actions, and between circumstantial evidence and watertight evidence. These gaps are filled up with Hamlet's or other characters' speculations about the reasons for that, or even only filled up with Hamlet's anatomizing description of the issue instead of reasons and explanations.⁵ It is the very undecidability of these gaps in the interplay of represented parts that allows for as many psychological and other interpretations of Hamlet as the bridging of these gaps suggests necessary. States goes even one step further when stating his point in postmodern terms:

Indeed, I would argue that the true "unconscious" of a text, the undertow that is continuously felt by its readers, is not a findable meaning—even the primal Oedipal meaning—but the silent nagging of the possibilities one is always overlooking. This would be a corrupt version of Lacan's idea that "what truly belongs to the order of the unconscious, is that it is neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealized." The unconscious is what is always elsewhere, beyond the interpretation. It is the "ghostly" ground of diversity and otherness on which the figure is etched. It is the lure of the road not taken. (1992, 141)

The theory of humors offers a vocabulary of interiority which describes how a person's inner life works. Yet, according to John Lee, though capable of *explaining and describing interiority, the theory of humours does so in common, impersonal terms, and in physiological terms at that*, not in psychological terms. A similar situation is seen in relation to "soul," "the place in which Claudius locates Hamlet's possibly fertile melancholy. Used some forty times in *Hamlet*, it has many meanings but, although again an interior term, it lacks any sense of psychological or other individuation" (Lee 2000, 155). One of the few questions that Hamlet might be expected to ask at various moments throughout the play but never asks, Lee observes, is "Who am I?". "His questions are of the 'what' not 'who' variety" (2000, 156).

Hamlet's central reference to his interiority opposes a distrusted exterior to a defining interior:

"Seems", madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems".
 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
 Nor customary suits of olemn black, Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage,
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
 That can denote me truly. These indeed "seem";
 For they are actions that a man might play.
 But I have that within which passes show—
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (Shakespeare 2002, 22, I.ii. 76-86)

Lee argues that the meaning of Hamlet's "that within" remains vague; it could refer to his "melancholy" or to his "immortal soul"; it either betters, that is, surpasses show, or goes beyond show, and so is indescribable (Lee 2000, 158).

The use of "self" does not provide direct evidence of essentialist interiority either. Polonius' precept to his son, "This above all: to thine own self be true" (I.iii 78), means nothing more than his reprimand, 15 lines later, to Ophelia: "You do not understand yourself so clearly / As it behoves my daughter and your honour" (I.iii 96-97). To "understand your self" is the equivalent of "to know one's place," Lee points out (2000, 160, 188).

Lee also criticizes States' use of the concept of the gap to explain Hamlet's interiority in terms of character and of psychological depth. States' conception of character, with its insistence on consistency as the defining criterion of character, has no place for change. Besides, it is left to the literary critic's personal choice to decide which traits of Hamlet's character are dispositional, and which traits are aberrations and therefore not traits. Moreover, the psychological depth of Hamlet's character cannot plausibly be argued to stem from gaps (Lee 2000, 165-71, 184-87).⁶

Lee's alternative draws from George A. Kelly's *Psychology of Personal Constructs* and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (Lee 2000, 171-92, 200-03). What Kelly's approach helps us recognize in Hamlet's soliloquies, Lee argues, is how such general constructs ("to be/not to be," "seems/that within," etc.) are capable of expressing individual difference and how they constitute a unique personality, in much the same way as "fixed-role therapy encourages clients to represent themselves in new ways, to behave in new ways, to construe themselves in new ways, and thereby to become new people" (2000, 179). In the case of Hamlet, "the attempt to do so borders on madness," because his haunting past makes "Hamlet question his previous ways of construing his family and society" (2000, 179). The Ghost's confirmation of the murder of Old Hamlet actively "murders the Prince's past, by proving Hamlet's knowledge of the world false" (2000, 205). But a wholesale reconstruction is easier to state than carry out. With the Ghost's arrival, Hamlet states his wish "to cast off all his old values, experiences, and beliefs, founding a new construction of the world on the Ghost's commandment" (2000, 179):

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws⁷ of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain. (Shakespeare 2002, 52, I.v. 98-103)

Lee points out that:

... it is as a commonplace book, here, that the Prince conceptualizes his mind... Commonplace books provided storehouses of *rhetorical knowledge*, memory-banks. They provided a way of anatomizing literature, ... a means of breaking down the information contained within a literary work into constituent parts and then of storing it, with the purpose of facilitating its retrieval and later use within one's own arguments or thoughts. (2000, 225)

Polonius exemplifies its use, particularly in his farewell to his son Laertes, Lee notices (2000, 225-26).

Disillusioned with rhetoric, Hamlet declares that he will wipe away this rhetorical system and body of knowledge which has filled his mind and which constituted the sixteenth-century rhetorical sense of self, Lee states (2000, 209-26). Shaping their thought, rhetoric was bound to structure Renaissance persons internally, to shape persons' constitution of the world and of themselves. But this could be considered either positively or negatively, he points out. The Renaissance image of man as Proteus, as a fluid shape-changer, multiform son of the Ocean, linked water, language, and human nature together in a positive sense. Shakespeare's Hamlet, however, dramatizes the troubling aspects of this Protean, rhetorical sense of self. Aware of rhetoric's powers, Hamlet is also aware of its deceits and tricks.

In Lee's own words, "Kelly's theory provided a model for seeing and describing interiority not as an expressive gap, but as *a verbally constructed possession*. In this way," Lee argues, "by focusing on the possessed nature of interiority, as opposed to its directly expressed nature, the absence of our contemporary

vocabulary for the description of interiority was not seen to be an insoluble problem” (2000, 187). Taylor’s theory provides Lee with a means of making Kelly’s construct theory descriptive both of *historical change* and of *relative degrees of innerness* (2000, 187). According to Taylor, every person feels the need to ask questions about what are their moral goods and in what relation he or she stands to those goods. The “self” is the point of perspective by which one’s relationship to one’s values is articulated. The “self” is not identity’s equivalent, but an area within identity, specifically verbal, and bound up with the interpretation of actions and events.

If applied to *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s *constructs* keep on *collapsing* their terms. His soliloquies and conversations make clear that the clarity of a single perspective never remains available to him for long. The soliloquies, in their repetitive return to the same object of description, Hamlet himself, become a form of autobiography, creating rather than mastering the story that is his life (Lee 2000, 199-200). Hamlet’s efforts at *self-exploration* are much closer to the autobiographic *Essays* of Montaigne than to the *self-mastering* thoughts of Descartes. Lee summarizes Taylor (1989, 177-84) as follows: “What Montaigne discovered in his interior was a landscape of terrifying inner instability.... The repetitive nature of the essay is the formal device by which Montaigne represents the truth, as he sees it, that life is not being—‘essence’—but becoming—‘passage’” (2000, 201-02). Part of that passage is the essay itself: a literary form of self-creation which is constitutive of one’s inner world. “Hamlet’s repetitions, his soliloquies, are essays which share in Montaigne’s techniques. They are his attempts to capture himself, showing his frustration at his inability to capture a solid picture of that self” (2000, 202). Hamlet does not achieve self-fashioning (too instrumental) or self-mastery (too stable and certain). Instead, he achieves self-exploration, self-mapping, and self-creation. His self is a story but it is a tragic story (2000, 206). As Hamlet lies dying, he regrets not being able to tell his story and he begs Horatio, his “recorder,” to tell his story instead (V.ii. 330-31, 340-43). “There is no sense in which the Prince has arrived at self-knowledge. There is no point at which the Prince tells us what he has learnt about himself. All the questions that he has raised remain. Indeed, his musings over the nature of man continue” (Lee 2000, 197).⁸

Such a self-portrait inaugurates the search for the self in order to come to terms with oneself, a search which has become one of the fundamental themes of our modern culture, Lee concludes with the words of Taylor (2000, 203).

4. Self-Knowledge in the *Bhagavadgita* and the West

In ancient India, the search for the self is a spiritual search. The *Bhagavadgita* is a relatively late text illustrative of this religiously inspired development which is already evident in the early *Upanishads*. The spiritual search for the self is a matter of mystics achieving absolute knowledge, and is known as the Way of Knowledge: The one who acquires absolute knowledge realizes his true self, beyond his empirical ego, beyond his individual identity. One’s self is nothing personal in the sense of “individual.” One realizes it in a process of de-individualization. The self is cosmic by nature. In the *Bhagavadgita* too, it is absolute knowledge that makes the difference, also on the battlefield. It enables access to ultimate freedom, not to social responsibility, in the first instance. But how does a mortal human being like Arjuna acquire access to absolute knowledge in the first place? Arjuna’s failure does not just consist in lack of will-power (weakness of the will) but in ignorance, lack of self-knowledge. In the story, Krishna teaches Arjuna the knowledge and nature of the self. Krishna does so by using rational arguments but also by revealing His own divine nature to Arjuna in an overwhelming vision. Krishna philosophically arguing and Krishna supernaturally appearing in a vision, however, represent two very different dimensions to this Hindu story about self-knowledge. Let me try to explain.

For a start, it may be helpful to recall the role of vision in Western thinking. In Plato's philosophy, Taylor argues, reason is the capacity to see the right order; reason is a matter of perception, of vision, of grasping the vision of the natural order and act accordingly, that is to say, virtuously. Vision, reason, and virtuous action go hand in hand—except that they do not automatically lead to “external success.” Lack of vision, ignorance, and vicious action also constitute a sequence; ignorance and vice are undone by vision, by a vision of the Good or Truth. “Reason reaches its fulness in the vision of the larger order” (Taylor 1989, 121-23). It is “not a matter of internalizing a capacity” of vision but a matter of “conversion,” of “turning the soul's eye around to face in the right direction,” towards the truth and away from illusion (1989, 123).⁹ On the *narrative* level of the story plot of the *Bhagavadgita*, in Arjuna's case too, ignorance is undone by vision, by a philosophical picture taught by his *guru* Krishna and by a revealing vision of the agency of the Lord of the Universe, his *god* Krishna. At first, this vision is transmitted along the traditional paths of teaching (Krishna as *guru*), but then Krishna replaces his didactical and imaginative traditional teachings with an actual vision that takes the palpable form of an overwhelming appearance (Krishna as Lord of the Universe) and which commands personal surrender.

In the *Bhagavadgita's teachings*, however, on the *philosophical* level, one of the traditional Hindu methods of acquiring absolute knowledge is called the Way of Knowledge (*jñānayoga*). This is one of the options recommended by the *Bhagavadgita*. It envisages a liberated state of mind through advanced meditation, that is to say, the internalization of the capacity of vision, a shift inwards from viewing to knowing. This shift inwards is already depicted in the oldest *Upanishad*, the *Brhad Aranyaka Upanishad*, in BU 4.3 (Olivelle 1998, 111-19), where Yājñavalkya teaches Janaka, the king of Videha, how the self (*ātman*) is that transcendent inner light of a person that witnesses the person, thus travelling through the person's outer world of the senses lit by sun, moon, fire, and voice, the realm where one is awake, then travelling around in the transitory world where the person creates for himself an entire world as his pleasure ground, the realm of dream, before retreating into the other world where nothing from what he sees when he is awake or dreaming follows him, the serene realm where as he sleeps he has neither desires nor dreams; in this serene realm, the self is a light without objects, consisting of knowledge oblivious to everything within or without, a seer left with his capacity to see.

In the West, Taylor argues, the epistemological shift from looking outward towards the objects to looking inwards towards the seer's inner capacity to see can be traced in Augustine's writings on memory, search for knowledge, and love of God. Augustine directs our focus onto the activity of striving to know, and off the objects (Plato's) reason knows. He takes a first-person perspective: I see “that God's is the power sustaining and directing this activity,” “the Master within” directing my activity of striving to know, the One behind my eye, God as “the most fundamental ordering principle in me” (Taylor 1989, 136).

In both cases, the shift from looking outward to looking inward leads to the religious discovery of being empowered to see—in the case of Yājñavalkya, by the person's transcendent self within that witnesses the person's inner and outer worlds and is his transcendental light and desirelessness (equalling the fulfilment of all desires); in the case of Augustine, by the person's transcendent God within who directs the person's outlook and desire (good will through divine grace) and is his transcendental light and love.

At this stage, I would like to point out several things. First of all, the West reached this kind of internalization with regard to self-knowledge around the early fifth century CE; India reached a similar kind of internalization around the seventh to sixth centuries BCE. This *difference in time* might suggest that India was simply 1,000 years ahead in time. But such a comparison assumes that all cultures follow the same evolutionary development at a different pace. A cross-cultural comparison should stress, instead, that even if this is the case,

the cultural contexts of similar processes of internalization with regard to self-knowledge differ substantially. This can be illustrated by my second point: the role of desire is a different one. In the Augustinian case, desire is embedded in the *social context* of a love relationship between God and man; in the Indian case, desire is embedded in the *ascetic context* of an individual relationship between the true self and its desirelessly contemplating presence in a person. Thirdly, the *Bhagavadgita's teachings* recall this mystical and epistemological shift by recommending the Way of Knowledge as one legitimate approach to ultimate liberation, but the *Bhagavadgita's story plot* sidetracks this shift from looking outward to looking inward, by turning to a revelatory vision of Krishna as the Master of the Universe directing my outward activity, as one's decisive source of knowledge. The *Bhagavadgita's* philosophical concepts and its plot pattern do not necessarily confirm each other. Moreover, Krishna preaches an additional option which turns out to be the final one: the Way of Submission or surrender (*bhaktiyoga*). *Bhakti* devotion aims at a personal experience of the one God. This Way of personal devotion opens up, in turn, the possibility of a new shift from looking outward to looking inward, in the form of henotheistic or monotheistic mysticism.

On the narrative level of the *Bhagavadgita*, the one god turns out to be Krishna. And Krishna does not just preach this message to Arjuna, He also allows Arjuna a personal experience of Himself as the one god. This *bhakti* experience is exactly what happens to Arjuna while being taught by Krishna. According to the *Bhagavadgita*, chapter 11, Krishna shows him his divine physical form (*mūrti*), in much the same way as is suggested by the late *Upanishads*. The devotional approach is an emotional approach. *Feelings of devotion and love* play an important role in the relationship between Krishna and his devotees. Krishna repeatedly states, "He who is devoted to me is dear to me" (11.44, 12.14-20). In the *bhakti* experience of the devotee, such feelings mediate and accompany the experience of God. But the crucial turning-point in the *bhakti* experience is that God takes the initiative, in an act of grace which expresses his divine feelings of love for the devotee, to reveal himself to the devotee as the supreme Self. The devotee reaches at his personal knowledge of God because God makes himself known to his devotees. Krishna does so verbally. His verbal revelation awakens in Arjuna the desire to actually see the cosmic appearance of the Lord of the Universe. He is allowed Krishna's appearance by Krishna's grace. Arjuna is unable to see Krishna with his natural vision: Krishna has to endow him with a divine eye to see the divinity (11.8). *Bhakti* knowledge turns out to be *revelatory knowledge*. That is to say, the *Bhagavadgita* makes the truth emerge as a deliberate act of revelation on the part of Krishna, not of Arjuna. This *revelatory truth* is not a wise advice. It is simply overwhelming. It disarms Arjuna's unwillingness to fight, elucidates his mind and liberates his heart from the burden of potential guilt feelings and depression. Arjuna does not arrive at his conclusions through a rational and investigative search for the truth. He is taught the truth by his spiritual teacher, and he is shown a vision by his spiritual teacher as the Lord of the Universe. As the truth breaks through, it overrules the empirical knowledge of mortal human beings. It is more than Arjuna can bear. Arjuna is terrified.

For Arjuna, the revelatory knowledge turns out to go far beyond moral issues. His very existence and essence, his true identity is involved in the revelation. Knowledge turns out to be *self-knowledge*. For Arjuna, the question is no longer whether to fight or not to fight but whether *to be or not to be*, that is to say, to be or not to be *truly immortal and act accordingly*.

5. Cross-Cultural Comparisons and Conclusions

Notions of self-knowledge draw from different sources in different cultures. Tragic knowledge is knowledge

about the vulnerability of the human condition. *Greek and Shakespearean tragic truth emerges from pollution, moral brokenness, and pain.* In Greek tragedy, Padel argued in a previous note, madness articulates the emergence of truth from pain. Truth about the human condition emerges from the experience of human suffering. It does not benefit the tragic characters who suffer from madness but their audience. Madness also takes illusion for reality, thus reinforcing the audience's awareness that both the human power of reason to establish moral transparency and the divine power of oracles and prophecy to establish past or future certainty are beyond human control. Greek madness draws its prophetic truth from the mind's daimonic possession. Shakespearean madness draws its ingenious truth from melancholic blackness; Christian folly draws its simple truth from the soul's purity, Padel observes (1995, 92-94). Hindu wisdom draws its cosmic truth from the vision of Vedic seers and from the undisturbed state of mind in pure meditation. *Hindu cosmic truth is never produced out of pain. Only karmic truth, Yudhishthira's wisdom of non-cruelty,* according to Alf Hiltebeitel (2002, 177-214), *emerges from pain.* No Hindu truth emerges from madness. Madness does not play a significant role in the epic, to my knowledge. It is surely never, as it is in the early Renaissance, a *speculum*, "mirror," where human nature sees its own self-hurt.

But many tragic characters do not fall victim to madness. One of them, Oedipus, beats everybody when it comes to solving daimonic riddles and using his reasoning capacities to trace the murderer of Laius. Oedipus' successful self-discovery leads to complete self-knowledge. But it also brings social death, mental darkness, and physical blindness. His genuine desire for knowledge turns out to be fatal.

In the Hindu case, does Arjuna acquire sufficient knowledge to make a moral decision? In fact, he acquires far more than that. He acquires absolute knowledge, and absolute self-knowledge at that. But this is not the fruit of his reasoning capacities. It is thanks to Krishna's grace. Krishna not only preaches the Way of Submission to the one god (*bhaktiyoga*), He also reveals Himself as the one god who holds Arjuna's destiny in a cosmic vision. His revelatory knowledge allows Arjuna access to experience Krishna as the one Lord of the Universe and to experience himself as a mere instrument of Krishna's divine agency. That is to say, unlike *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Bhagavadgita* makes the truth emerge as a deliberate act of revelation on the part of Krishna. This revelatory truth makes Arjuna "cross the hairline from uncertainty to certain knowledge" in a way very different from that of Oedipus. Arjuna does not arrive at his conclusions through a rational and investigative search for the truth. He is taught the truth by his spiritual teacher, and he is shown a vision by his spiritual teacher. Unlike Oedipus, Arjuna is not making a final decision to face the truth for himself. Yet, in both these cases, the truth is hidden from its witnesses who dwell in confused ignorance or blindness. And as the truth breaks through, it overrules the empirical knowledge of mortal human beings. It is beyond their imagination. It changes their entire perception of the world, either positively or negatively.

For both Oedipus and Arjuna, the revelatory knowledge turns out to go beyond moral issues. Their very existence is involved in the revelation. Knowledge turns out to be self-knowledge. But there is one tremendous difference. *Whereas the revelatory knowledge is religiously saving knowledge in Arjuna's case, it is religiously dooming knowledge in Oedipus' case.* Whereas true knowledge leads to a decisive release from time, mortality, unhappiness, and suffering in the Hindu case, in the Greek case true knowledge leads to a decisive immersion in time, mortality, unhappiness, and suffering. In both cases, however, true knowledge, revelatory knowledge is religious knowledge. For Oedipus, his dramatic conflict becomes tragic as it necessitates for its resolution the suffering of the protagonist, yet in terms of a world view that grounds the ethico-political in the divine, as Rainer Friedrich puts it (1998, 275). Reginald Pepys Winnington-Ingram points out that Oedipus recognizes

Apollo as the divine power that has led him to know himself, in accordance with the motto “Know yourself” on Apollo’s temple in Delphi (2002, 176-78). For Arjuna, the question is not anymore whether to fight or not to fight but whether to be or not to be, that is to say, to be or not to be truly immortal and act accordingly. Not ethics but anthropology turns out to be the true issue. Ethics is grounded in spirituality. Matters of action and non-action are grounded in the spiritual identity of the agent. The *Bhagavadgita* offers a theory of human action within the framework of a religious anthropology that focuses on the immortal de-individualized self.

In the case of *Hamlet*, Bloom praised Hamlet for a capacity of self-consciousness, not to be confused with self-knowledge. According to Lee, Hamlet’s attempts to capture himself show his frustration at his inability to capture a solid picture of that self. Hamlet does not achieve self-fashioning (too instrumental) or self-mastery (too stable and certain). Instead, he achieves self-exploration, self-mapping, and self-creation. His self is a story but it is a tragic story. As Hamlet lies dying, he regrets not to be able to tell his story and he begs Horatio, his “recorder,” to tell his story instead. “There is no sense in which the Prince has arrived at self-knowledge. There is no point at which the Prince tells us what he has learnt about himself. All the questions that he has raised remain,” as Lee put it (2000, 197). The *religiously dooming knowledge* of divine punishment does not preoccupy Hamlet too much but there is *no religiously saving knowledge* in sight.

If a general conclusion is to be drawn, it would be that in the process of identifying some culturally significant similarities and differences between views of self-knowledge in three classical texts, several aspects were highlighted; but the most striking similarities and differences were those related to the issue of the role of human suffering as a (valid or invalid) source of self-knowledge and those related to the issue of religion as a (positive or negative) condition for self-knowledge.

Notes

1. Cf. Rosset, 1991, 9; Chirpaz, 1998, 4, 20.

2. Cf. Rosset, 1991, 16.

3. Madness produces truth out of pain. The pain is physical agony, grief, or simply being on the point of death. An Athenian slave’s testimony was not believed unless he was tortured. Physical pain also accompanied prophetic possession. The innards were “knowing” and “prophesying” (cf. entrail divination). (Padel 1995, 244-46).

4. “What matters most about Hamlet is his genius, which is for consciousness itself. He is aware that his inner self perpetually augments, and that he must go on overhearing an ever-burgeoning self-consciousness. Only annihilation is the alternative to self-overhearing, for nothing else can stop Hamlet’s astonishing gift of awareness” (Bloom 2003, 118-19).

5. States, 1992, 45-49, 95-97, 101-02, 104-05, 118-19, 123, 130-31.

6. “To picture interiority as a gap is the equivalent of picturing interiority as a well; this equivalent image makes sense of, and is derived from, gap-critics’ attachment to terms such as depth. Yet a gap is an unusual well; it is bottomless, having only sides. Its depth is unknowable—gap-critics would say profound. The possibility of that latter sense has suited critics who wish to protect and emphasize Prince Hamlet’s inner life. To picture gaps as unsoundable wells makes clear that they cannot exist in a cumulative relationship to each other. More wells, contrary to Muir’s and others’ suggestion, do not equal deeper. Also, such a picture of interiority as a well is static. A well or gap cannot change; it either is there or it is not” (Lee 2000, 186). Unlike a gap, a gesture, as for instance a metaphor, provides a “bottom” in the shape of a vehicle, Lee argues. This struggles both to locate and suggest the scope of the tenor. A gesture might be thought of as putting its audience at the bottom of a well, in order to focus their attention on, and give a sense of, the light at the top (2000, 186). Uniqueness is the product of a recognition both of familiarity and difference. A gap cannot generate the simultaneous recognition of familiarity and difference that uniqueness requires (2000, 169).

7 Saws: (usually somewhat derogatory) wise sayings, platitudes.

8. This tragic outcome would, I think, only boost Hegel’s conviction that the spirit of the age was destined to move beyond tragedy’s psycho-ethical conflicts in order to solve them and achieve absolute Hegelian self-knowledge, that is to say, self-produced self-consciousness and self-mastery.

9. Kant will cut through the natural continuity from inner intention to external action by assuming a good will regardless of external action.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.
- Buxton, Richard. "What can You Rely on in *Oedipus Rex*? Response to Calame." 1996. *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Ed. M. S. Silk. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 38-48.
- Calame, Claude. "Vision, Blindness, and Mask: The Radicalization of the Emotions in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*." 1996. *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Ed. M. S. Silk. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 17-37.
- Chirpaz, François. *Le tragique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998.
- DuBois, Page. "Toppling the Hero: Polyphony in the Tragic City." *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004): 63-81.
- Friedrich, Rainer. "Everything to Do with Dionysos? Ritualism, the Dionysiac, and the Tragic." 1996. *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Ed. M. S. Silk. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 257-83.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Kelly, George A. *Psychology of Personal Constructs*. 2 vols. 2nd. ed. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Lee, John. *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Olivelle, Patrick. *The Early Upanishads: Annotated Text and Translation*. New York; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Padel, Ruth. *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.
- Redfield, James M. *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*. Expanded Edition. Durham; London: Durham UP, 1994.
- Rosset, Clément. *La philosophie tragique*. 1960. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991.
- Segal, Charles. *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. 1980. Ed. T. J. B. Spencer. With an introduction by Anne Barton. London: Penguin Books, 2002.
- States, Bert O. *Hamlet and the Concept of Character*. Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Winnington-Ingram, Reginald Pepys. *Sophocles: An Interpretation*. 1980. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2002.