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TRAGIC KNOWLEDGE AND KARMIC RELEASE

Mario Wenning

In her book *Pleasure and Guilt* Antonia Gruneberg argues for a radical revision of what we mean by and how we evaluate guilt. Gruneberg takes issue with the particular question of German guilt arising from a special responsibility for the Holocaust and the discourse of working through the past that has shaped much of post-war German identity. She criticizes those proclaiming an ethics of guilt as a moral demand that necessarily follows from standing within the shadows of a history marked by brutal atrocities and a genocide that needs to be called by its proper name. Gruneberg develops the provocative thesis that guilt became pathological when suffocating or standing in the way of developing a healthy moral identity that would take its responsibilities on the personal, national and international stages seriously. What she criticizes is a certain self-righteous pride in being the worst, the perverted integrity of a belated and radicalized guilt conscience that emphasizes the feeling of guilt over questions of objective responsibility. The pathos and pathology of confessing guilt consists, on that account, in the fact that the confessor stages him or herself as always already in the right. In accepting what was done or not done by him or his ancestors, the subject sees himself under an authoritative command he at once ushers and, qua having violated it, also denies. Guilt becomes the antithesis to its neighboring emotions of remorse and shame, which might be the appropriate responses, if it is at all legitimate to speak of “appropriate moral responses” in light of historical catastrophes which, in contrast to natural catastrophes or mythical events, have been executed by real actors.

Of course guilt complexes are not limited to the German postwar psyche and reach much further back. The economy of emotions in Western societies is marked by a mixture of guilt about major and minor historical and presently committed offenses, guilt confession and a sense of being in the right because confessing one’s guilt about them (Bruckner: Kaufmann). Rather than seeing guilt and a feeling of justice as incompatible attitudes, I would thus like to interpret them

as two sides of the same coin.

The seemingly incompatible emotions of having violated an accepted norm and of being sovereign subjects who acknowledge this violation form a combination that is prefigured in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. What interests me in going back to *Antigone* is that she might have been the first paradigmatic character in the Western canon who expresses her guilt conscience without showing a sense of remorse or shame. She is free from a sense that she should have acted differently or would act differently if she had a second chance or additional information.

That the particular connection of identifying with guilt and self-righteousness we find in *Antigone* and many of her more recent brothers and sisters is not without alternative can easily be seen when we contrast it to the discourse on guilt that we find in other traditions such as Indian Hinduism—and related arguments could be made for certain strains of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. For the purpose of this paper I would like to go back to two of the foundational documents that have shaped Western and the Indian moral and emotional imaginaries. I shall draw on *Antigone* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* in order to propose a dialogue that reveals respective blind spots, a dialogue that might help to bring to light a fruitful contrast. Through a transcultural detour it does become possible to shed light on one of the nastiest emotions and conceive of two radically different responses to its particular nastiness.

1. *Antigone and the Birth of Active Guilt Conscience*

As Aristotle observed, tragedy provides the spectator with a sense of finitude. Not a sense that he or she is finite, but that the nature of human agency is marked by what could be called the “impropriety” of action (Markell 6-38). By feeling pity and fear for the protagonists suffering from the consequences of their actions, the spectator of a tragic drama comes to understand that the significance of actions exceeds the original intention of the actor. *Antigone* embodies this nature of action only to a limited extent as her guilt is not essentially rooted in missing knowledge but rather in her very practices of holding herself accountable. From the very beginning she understands herself as engaging on a moral mission with fatal consequences. At the very end of the play she still believes that her initial action was the right one.

The explosive conflict between her and the king Creon over the burial of the corpse of *Antigone's* brother Polyneices has made an

astonishing comeback. During recent years we have witnessed a return of interest in Antigone by feminism (Butler; Jacobs; Irigaray; Johnson 369-398), political theory (Menke) as well as psychoanalysis (Lacan). While the post-60s generation was struggling to come to grips with the Oedipus complex, it might be legitimate to ask whether what we are really suffering from is an Antigone complex. This complex, or so I would like to suggest, is one of an entanglement of claiming justice and feeling guilt.

Following Hegel's influential reading, current interpretations of Antigone are based on assuming a clash between *oikos* and *polis*, the equally justified but ultimately one-sided demands of kinship and those of the public law, where Antigone stands for the former and Creon, the king, for the interests of the public. As a solitary woman defying the cruel and tyrannical king Creon by burying the corpse of her brother Polineices, she presents herself as a disobedient character in a battle in which right at least momentarily triumphs over might. Rather than opting for a less dangerous route of asking for pity or trying to convince the king to allow the corpse of her treacherous brother to be buried against all reasons to the contrary, she openly defies public authority and performs the burial (twice) herself. By defying the established male web of norms in a public and outspoken way (not only does she act but she is also not ashamed to admit her action), she presents a normative authority that could be characterized as the rule of acting conscience. Antigone just knows and feels that her obligations to her dead brother trump those of her civic duties of complying with Creon's interpretation of what is best for the polis of Thebes. The end of Antigone is at the same time the beginning of modernity in that all moderns have learned to follow Antigone by, at least potentially, saying no to gods, kings and other mortals including their respective normative paradigms. In contrast to her father Oedipus, Antigone knows very well what she is doing and what she is getting into when replacing the voice of her conscience for that of obedience. Whenever the voice of conscience dictates to us that we cannot do other, we see ourselves as in fact listening to the voice of reason and being in the right (even if the rest of the world disagrees and we acknowledge that disagreement) it is Antigone who speaks through us.

One major shortcoming of the current interpretations of the play is that they are exclusively focused on the character of Antigone without concentrating on the equally important depictions of Creon and other central characters such as the blind seer Tiresias or Antigone's sister Ismene. Furthermore, and as a consequence of the exclusive focus on Antigone, the tragic dimension of the play is being dissolved by

making Antigone into a moral heroine (Foley 172-200).

To counter the interpretation of Antigone as an agent of innovative normative protest against public authority and control, it is important to remember that, rather than providing for a final vindication of Antigone, in the play she suffers from anguished self-doubt and commits suicide shortly after her last speech, which is worth quoting here: “What justice of divinities have I transgressed? Why should I, a wretched one, still look to the gods? Whom should I call to as an ally? Since, while I have been pious, I have acquired impiety. But if, then, these things are noble in the eyes of the gods (her punishment), we, having suffered, will recognize that we have erred” (Antigone 921-926).¹ Antigone fully identifies with and laments her suffering which is underscored by “oi” and “ai” exclamations in the original Greek.

What is it that leads to Antigone’s suicide, which is anticipated by a final speech which culminates in a sense of self pity—“I wretched one”—and one of guilt—“having suffered, we recognized that we have erred”? The quoted speech leaves it intentionally ambiguous whether Antigone raises rhetorical questions to remind her of the tragic fate she has succumbed to or in fact acknowledges that her action has made her guilty. She knows that she has violated the publicly ordained law not to bury the corpse of her brother who betrayed and attacked the city, but it is not clear whether she also accepts that that violation was one she herself could see as a *moral* failure rather than a mere act of *legal* disobedience in the name of a higher, moral law dictated to her by her conscience (obligations arising from her commitment to her dead brother). By extension, it remains uncertain whether she indeed believes that she deserves to be punished because it would be the morally correct response or simply because she has violated the publicly ordained prohibition. She deduces her failure—or “erring”—from the fact of her suffering rather than suffering because of moral failure.

In contrast to Oedipus, Antigone does not strike out her eyes to blame herself for not having seen or known the full scope of her action. She punishes herself for and through what she has been doing. Rather than awaiting the punishment of her action, she decides to what the spectator could only have seen as a prolongation of her initial transgression of erecting herself as a solitary moral conscience, a sovereign judge of right and wrong. Although she is not fully autonomous in presenting herself as the author of the laws she has been following (by appealing to the eternal gods), she is sovereign

¹ Numbers in parentheses refer to line numbers in Hugh Lloyd-Jones’s edition. *Sophocles: Antigone, the Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994.

in executing them in front of herself and the world without consulting anyone else (including the gods).

Antigone's sin, as depicted in the play, consists in putting herself up as the judge and the victim and, ultimately, in the act of suicide, she unites the roles of perpetrator, victim, judge and executioner of the sentence. The act of suicide is born out of guilt and a sense of justice: of justice because she dies for what she believes she owes to her brother; and of guilt in that she increases her culpability because her death triggers the suicide of her fiancé (Creon's son) Haemon and his mother (Creon's wife) Eurydice. These chains of induced suicides will finally change Creon who, in contrast to Antigone, learns to feel ashamed and openly regrets what he has, even if unknowingly, done.

Even if attributing a certain guilt to Antigone in transgressing the prohibition, the tragedy never ultimately settles the question of who is right and who is wrong in an objective sense. The spectator is left with a sense that everyone is kind of guilty and not guilty in a tragic plot. The notion of tragic guilt sounds like an oxymoron. In everyday usage we often use the term tragic when we speak about unfortunate happenings that were not caused by intentional action and could thus not have been prevented by foresight. When we speak of "guilt," however, we usually refer to the connection between individual consciousness and an action. Tragic guilt, like the term moral luck, thus suggests that guilt does to a large extent depend on the contexts in which we were thrown without having chosen them.

Guilt feelings are not necessarily proportionate to the wrongs that have been committed by the person feeling guilty. They do not necessarily befall those who have committed morally wrong acts, nor do they necessarily provide the basis for overcoming guilt either through reparation (where possible), repentance or through forgiveness. Guilt feelings are rooted in a sense of suffering from normative violation whether justified or not. Antigone deduces from her suffering that she has done wrong rather than acknowledging that she has done wrong and then suffering for it. At the end of the tragedy, suffering, ensuing guilt conscience and destruction hover ubiquitous over the living and the dead. Tragedy wants to convince us that the nexus of guilt can be detached from individual acts of will as well as questions of objective responsibility.

When interpreting the intended moral message of *Antigone*, we have to keep in mind that Sophocles could presuppose far more background knowledge than the contemporary reader or spectator might have. Sophocles' Theban plays revolve around characters that are daringly disobedient and resolute in their disobedience. These

characters see themselves as engaged on a moral mission that involves the transgression of socially accepted normative frameworks. Antigone reveals herself as the daughter of patricidal and incestuous Oedipus, the daughter of Oedipus's mother and wife Jocasta, and the sister of treacherous Polyneices and Eteocles (Rutter 114). All of these characters are resolute in their convictions and actions independent of what other people think about them.

The same resoluteness is present in Antigone who, in Bernhard Williams's words, "is another who arrives decided" (Williams 6). Antigone's assertive decidedness becomes particularly apparent in her exchanges with her sister Ismene, perhaps the only family member who tries to escape the tragic family curse of the house of Laius by considering her options before acting on them resolutely. In contrast to the dialogical justifications of actions in other tragedies such as those by Electra and Clytemnestra and Euripides' tragedies, Antigone rehearses her own position as that of following an already predetermined mythic curse. When Ismene charges Antigone "of being in love with" and "hunting for what is impossible" (Antigone 90-92), she does not respond. This leads Ismene to regard her as "mad" (Antigone 98). When Ismene offers to share responsibility and is ready to die with her sister, Antigone insists that her own lonely death is sufficient and thus forfeits to accept any act of potential solidarity.

The prohibition of burial had automatically triggered the suffering and the violation of the prohibition. From the outset Antigone rehearses her wish to suffer to the point of a desire for death: "Let me and my rashness suffer this awful thing! I shall suffer nothing so dire that my death will not be one of honor" (Antigone 95-97). What is intended here is not that the family curse of transgenerational revenge is reenacted blindly. Antigone is "destroyed by self-willed passion" (*autognotos oles orga*) (Antigone 855-875). In contrast to ideological or blind tragic consciousness, Antigone knows very well that she is engaged in tragic action, which she consciously commits.

Rather than acknowledging or scrutinizing the justification of Creon's interpretation of what is best for the city, Antigone speaks the language of moral authority in a world she sees herself as being excluded from. In that proclaimed impossible space, she does not acknowledge any other authoritative voices from those who are alive—not even from those on her side including her sister Ismene and her fiancé Haemon—and thus refuses sanctions that she has not always already accepted as her due. By being "self-willed" and taking her and her dead brother's fate into her own hands, she erects a sovereign moral and emotional tribunal. Perhaps we could call her the first conscientious mind of the Western canon. The portrayed

vanity or “uncanniness” (Heidegger 55-74) of setting herself up as unconditionally daring to question accepted limits does thus not only undermine the very possibility of trustworthy Gods and kings, but also undermines the unforced force of the better argument in a shared space of reasons. The unwillingness to conceive of a mediation between the interests of others and those of her and her dead brother makes any form of reconciliation with Creon eternally impossible: “An enemy is never a friend, even when he is dead” (Antigone 522).

Rather than reducing the play to being about politically disobedient action, I would like to take a different route by reading it as a play of an emotion in the sense of the objective genitive. The play is one that issues from self-willed passion, in which the true protagonist is not Antigone or Creon, but the nasty emotion of guilt. For the ancients it is not the subjects that have their emotions, but rather the emotions that take their subjects hostage (Brune Snell, Sloterdijk). Characters are understood essentially as aggregates of emotions passing through them. This much was captured by Aristotle when he argued that the point of tragedy consists in a cathartic act in which the spectators at the same time suffer with and purify themselves from the emotions of the protagonists. Rather than limiting the emotions to pity and fear, we could add guilt as a major affective catalyst.

In Antigone as well as in Creon we find embodied both a sense of self-righteous justice and a sense of experienced guilt. Antigone’s fearless willingness or daringness (*tolma*) to transgress inherited boundaries is rooted in the desire to reestablish justice. The Greek term for guilt, “hamartia,” attests to the ambiguity inherent in that emotion. It can refer to indebtedness—Antigone’s debt to her dead brother—as well as to guilt as a violation of a law—Antigone’s disobedience (Ritter 1442-1472). It is only with the Roman distinction between *debitum*, what we owe to others, and *culpa*, moral culpability for having violated the rights of others, that we learned to see these dimensions as separate rather than connected.

Individuals can feel guilty without being blamed by others for anything. This is one of the striking differences with the emotion of shame which presupposes an imagined audience. In fact guilt often occurs in characters that seem to be quite self-sufficient. Whereas the nasty emotion of shame creates a tendency in its bearer that he or she would like to remain invisible from the imagined audience or, if possible, entirely disappear from the face of the earth, guilt is an emotion that calls for an exposure on a public stage.

Antigone’s guilt makes her incapable of experiencing shame. In contrast to shame, which often appears suddenly, guilt can build

itself up and continue to exist for an infinite period of time. Although guilt requires that an actor has caused harm to others in the past, it can coexist independent of the evaluation of that action by the other. A sense of guilt can easily be increased over time and with public exposure, while a sense of shame, when being intensified, reveals a tendency to lead to shyness and introversion or, when being voluntarily exposed might disappear. Shame disappears quickly, especially when made public, whereas guilt might be amplified by becoming public and gives rise to being blamed not only by oneself but also by others (Demmerling, Hilge 219-244; Taylor). The guilty consciousness is not interested in overcoming the joy inherent in guilt.

Antigone is not ashamed of what she has done. She does not try to hide it and bears her convictions openly. Her confessed guilt is complex. It undermines the distinction between criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical guilt. And it undermines the distinction between the subject and the object of guilt, between who judges and who is being judged (Jaspers), since Antigone sees herself as unifying all of these roles. She embodies the perspective of perpetrator (burying the corpse and violating the law), victim (of the prohibition as well as the penalty for resisting the prohibition), judge (she holds herself sovereign interpreter about what she has done) and even executioner (in the end she decides to die by her own hand rather than being subjected to a potential death sentence). Because combining all of these roles, she does not need any other living soul. Her love is exclusively dedicated to death, her own and that of her brother.

Having erected herself as the sole authority and source of mourning, Antigone sees her ultimate doom in the absence of other significant sources who could mourn for her: "Unwept, friendless, unwedded, I am conducted, unhappy one [...] my fate, unwept for, is lamented by no friend" (Antigone 876-882). Her self-effacement is not one of repayment or remorse, but the only logical consequence left to her in a world emptied of other sources of love and meaning. While on a surface level Antigone vindicates justice in a world of injustice, the play reveals that the protagonists, and Antigone in particular, are destroyed by stubbornly holding on to one interpretation of what guilt and justice require. Antigone takes leave from society when relying exclusively on her unconditional commitment to her dead brother and the unconditional authority of her active guilt conscience.

2. Arjuna's Karmic Release

Let me now turn to the account of guilt in one of the founding documents of the Hindu tradition. The *Mahabharata* is an epic to be

compared to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* not only in size but also in its constitutive role in determining the moral and emotional imaginary of an entire cultural tradition. It was written roughly at the same time as *Antigone* in the 5th or 4th century BC while the content reaches further back. The story revolves around five brothers who are married to the same woman by the name of Draupadi. Their kingdom is contested by the jealous Kaurava cousins. The plot consists of a series of trials and battles not so different from those found in the Western epics and tragedies. The most famous and most influential part of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a document that is still considered to provide for moral cultivation in contemporary Indian society and was a central guide for Gandhi's non-violent activism (Gandhi). Arthur Danto rightly refers to the *Mahabharata* in his *Mysticism and Morality* as "a contribution to the spiritual consciousness of mankind" (Danto 85).

The *Gita*, which is inserted in the *Mahabharata*, presents the story of the prince Arjuna who is about to engage in an important battle against the Kaurava cousins. When being confronted with the sight of his enemies who are also his "fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons and grandsons, as well as companions," he feels the bite of conscience in the form of a physiological reaction: "my limbs quail, my mouth goes dry, my body shakes and my hair stands on end" (Radhakrishnan 104).

Before engaging in battle, Arjuna engages in a dialogue with his charioteer, Krishna, who reveals himself in the course of the conversation as Vishnu, the god of preservation, who in turn becomes a spiritual guide (*guru*) of Arjuna. In contrast to *Antigone*, Arjuna does thus not arrive on the scene decided, but engages in a debate before acting. In the *Gita* we witness an in an important sense differing depiction of guilt from that of tragic guilt as we find it in *Antigone*. While *Antigone* is concerned with pursuing her path whatever it takes, Arjuna is troubled by anticipatory guilt about engaging in battle. Moral scruples make themselves heard. The threatening potential of guilt overcomes Arjuna in light of the destruction he is about to create as part of his duty to defend the kingdom and live up to the obligation prescribed by his caste, i.e. be a good warrior.

Arjuna's moral scruples are rooted in the following consequentialist observation. If he were to kill his family members, even if they had committed treachery, he would not only ruin the family, but the "ancient laws [would be] destroyed: and when the laws perish, the whole family yields to lawlessness" (Radhakrishnan 105). He goes on to state that the consequence of a war within the family would be sexual freedom and an interbreeding of castes (*varnas*). Arjuna does not want to live in a world that would be stained by his action. By

slaying his kin and teachers, he argues, “I would enjoy in this world delights which are smeared with blood” (106). Overwhelmed by sorrow about the stain his actions could cause, Arjuna turns down his weapons until Krishna convinces him otherwise.

Krishna advises Arjuna to fulfill his duty rather than to dwell on sentimental sorrows: “Those who are wise do not grieve for the dead or for the living” (107). To understand Krishna’s advice that Arjuna should not be concerned with feelings of mourning and guilt we need to keep in mind the assumption of a cosmic law referred to as karma. Karma, which could perhaps best be translated as “fateful deed,” is a cosmic principle that interprets the relationship between actions and the consequences for the actor. Hindus do not rely on divinity or the call of conscience as a judge over their actions. Karma functions like a natural law. The totality of who we are and what we do is strongly determined by the (thought-, speech-, and deed-) actions we have been undertaking previously, including and, perhaps most importantly, those performed in our previous lives. Everything we have been and are doing in previous lives and this life will determine who we will be and in what kind of circumstances we find ourselves in the next life. Sanskrit does not differentiate between good and bad karma. There is only karma. Since for Hindus the worst that could happen to someone is to be born and the second worst, by extension, is to be born again, the best possible option left is to escape the law of karma by interrupting the process of rebirth or rather of redeath, since the emphasis is on the threatening idea that actors have to die again and again. Because of this process of re-dying, Krishna argues, Arjuna is not about to kill the souls of his family members but only their bodies.

This is not the place to discuss what seems like a questionable theory of metempsychosis and one of the most radical theories of mind-body dualism. The advice not to mourn and hold on to our desires and aversions, however, is directly relevant to a transcultural philosophy of guilt in that it presents us with an alternative to the account seen in Greek tragedy. Actors stand under the law of karma only as long as they are emotionally attached to the goals of their actions, including the feelings they hold about these goals and these actions. Through the performance of physical and spiritual purification practices, an actor may hope to escape from the law of karma and consequently from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*).

The Hindu belief in karma perceives true souls (*atman*) as being immutable and radically distinct from their physical manifestations serves as the justification that guilt does not emanate from killing as long as the killing is committed, in Kantian terminology, out of duty. The Gita presents us with a dispute between two different theories of

relating to nasty emotions. There is, first, Arjuna's initial identification with his moral scruples according to which an actor is responsible for the foreseeable long term consequences of his or her actions. The second theory is developed by Krishna who advocates a theory of detached action out of duty. Rather than identifying himself with the desires of his actions, Krishna argues, wise people understand that all emotions become nasty to their actors in continuing their falling under the law of karma when being the object of direct identification. Arjuna thus ultimately gives up his attachment to guilt as well as pleasures.

The cultivation of a sense of equanimity and detachment in action is the primary purpose of moral self-cultivation for a Hindu. "Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat" (109) is supposed to provide a calm and balanced mind. Only a mind that learns to not hold on to desires, the argument states, is eventually relieved from having to suffer further emotions giving rise to yet further emotions and future lives. Purification from attachment to emotions provides the antidote to cosmic boredom which is the natural consequence of endless processes of re-creating and the suffering springing from the constantly changing world of emotions.

However, the purpose of moral instruction is not to become inactive—which is impossible for human beings—but rather to establish a different relationship between the actor and his or her emotions (Framarin). What the *Gita* presents us with is a call to detached action. Arjuna is redeemed or redeems himself through abstracting from the consequences of his action. However, rather than becoming attached to inaction, he learns to act while abandoning any attachment beyond those prescribed by the logic of that respective action. What might appear as an unbearable dissociation of action from responsibility for outcome is seen as the ultimate liberation from being a sentimental soul that is hostage to the incessant flow of dooming emotions. The attained level of stability is rooted in wisdom (*Samadhi*) and insight (*yoga*) while it can also be positively influenced through purification practices ranging from charity and sex to meditation.

In contrast to the account of tragic knowledge that emphasizes an insight into the impropriety of human action, karmic insight is an insight that provides for a sense of self-release. Holding on to what one aims for or what one believes to have lost are seen as forms of dependencies to objects of a desire, which are depicted as inherently unstable, insatiable and leading to loneliness. What is promised to him who engages in the seemingly paradoxical enterprise of cultivating a state of desirelessness is "the sorrowless state" (Radhakrishnan 110).

After having been convinced of the futility of holding on to desires including the pleasure in guilt, Arjuna rides over the battlefield with a solemn smile on his face. Free of primary emotions, he is also free of guilt conscience. The only meta-attachment he holds is to gaining equanimity in action rather than to that action's underlying desires and perceived consequences. Whereas Antigone is consumed by her active guilt conscience, the liberated Arjuna has no judging conscience at all, leaving him in a sorrowless state beyond good and evil. Let me conclude by briefly comparing the two accounts introduced.

3. Comparison and Conclusion

We have looked at the logic of a pleasure in guilt as it plays out in *Antigone* and in the *Gita*. Antigone's downfall, I have argued, in contrast to current political, feminist and psychoanalytic readings, is not to be seen in her particular action of transgressing the law but rather in her taking leave from public practices of exchanging reasons and responsibilities. She embodies a resolute guilt conscience by seeing herself as at once a tragic victim and as someone who is engaged in actively standing in for a just cause that ends up privileging death over life and the impossible over the possible. Tragic guilt, on that account, consists in feeling guilty and as undergoing a justified mission while the just cause is identified by Ismene as a mad search for the impossible.

In the case of Arjuna, on the other hand, we witness how he is purified from guilt feelings by engaging in a form of action that is inward-directed and detached from emotions directed at the consequences of that action. Whereas the death-loving Antigone holds on to her perceived sovereignty as a moral agent and is confronted with doom the moment she realizes that she will not be mourned by any living creature, Arjuna is liberated from his concerns for the karmic fruits of his action and the emotions accompanying them. The insight into the limits of guilt is portrayed as a knowledge that allows for liberating action and, as an indirect consequence, karmic release from the world of moral and emotional differentiations.

At the risk of overgeneralization, we could say that if Hindus commit acts of wrongdoing, they will most likely not dwell on guilt conscience the way it has been paradigmatic in Western contexts. If having done something wrong, a Hindu would also admit it to himself, but there would be no emphasis on confession and no pathos of claiming justice but the metadesire to perform the duty prescribed by an action in a detached way (Katchadourian 237).

Interestingly, for the Hindu account there is then no essential difference between the *moral* significance of pure and impure emotions. Emotions become nasty whenever the actor clings to them. Attachment and aversion to either one is seen as a means of becoming enslaved and caught up with karma and the logic of illusion (in the form of attaching oneself to the changing world of emotions). Purity of spirit is attained only by learning to free oneself from the control springing from attachment to valued and the aversion with regard to disliked emotions.

While this image of an unperturbed, desireless, non-judgmental and yet active self has been the object of desire for many searchers of Eastern wisdoms, it is also disturbing as it provides a counter foil against some of our most deeply seated intuitions about responsible agents. Most importantly, it dispenses with the notion that to be human means to be vulnerable to emotional upheaval since humans are irreducibly bound by emotional ties which will undergo severe challenges.

In spite of obvious differences, both Arjuna's ethics of release and Antigone's ethics of conscience converge in an attitude that is motivated by a concern for the self and structurally immune from engaging in concrete and always endangered practices of blaming or taking responsibility in dialogue with other living and dead creatures. We are left with the insight that if tragic actors like Antigone suffer from too much self-assertive pride in their nasty guilt conscience, karmic detachment is motivated by the questionable promise of dying one last time, free of any emotion.

Mario Wenning
University of Macau
and Sun Yatsen University, Guangzhou
CHINA

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