
Antigone's Flaw

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Some theorists define politics as who gets what, when and how. Alasdair MacIntyre defines it as “civil war carried on by other means.” I prefer a more hopeful definition, and lean toward Michael Oakeshott’s definition as “attending to arrangements.” Or, Claes Ryn’s definition—“the peaceful settlement of disputes”—especially since Ryn correlates politics at its best with community. Such an emphasis would require the student of politics to examine not just who gets what, but how individuals arrange things, and how each takes into consideration the others who are trying to do the same.

At the very least, the peaceful conduct of affairs would require some sort of agreement on the rules. To get that agreement without actual violence, participants might still use threats based on superior power (natural or supernatural), although eventually a challenge may require executing the threat. Peaceful arrangements could also depend on deceit, bribes, persuasion and an endless variety of human tricks. The goal is to obtain sufficient agreement among enough of the individuals subject to the arrangements to give the rules stability. This is true even for political regimes based on some principle other than consent of the governed. Failure leads to chaos, rebellion, war or permanent and physical separation of contending factions.

How to attend to these arrangements and rearrangements? One choice is simply to vote, but the time-honored distrust of the tyranny of the majority would require something more. Ideally, the political community follows the advice of the wisest. But who is

Deliberation, compromise central to good politics.

wisest? Who decides who is wisest? Which decisions the wisest are to decide, which are for individuals, which should be left to habit or custom? The difficulty in answering such questions has led many thinkers to identify deliberation as essential to the political process. Political deliberation requires listening and persuading, engaging and being engaged. Success depends, above all, on compromise. That is, it requires yielding here and there to the opposition, and winning some concession here and there in return.

The greatest obstacle to this kind of deliberation is hubris. It should be no surprise that the first to become aware of politics and identify it as a discipline—the Greeks—were also the first to worry about hubris. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, hubris has a corresponding virtue:

*Hubris
greatest
obstacle to
deliberation.*

the old virtue of moderation, of keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues par excellence, just as the political temptation par excellence is indeed *hubris* (as the Greeks, fully experienced in the potentialities of action, knew so well) and not the will to power, as we are inclined to believe.

Implicit in Arendt's analysis, and in that of the Greeks, is the notion that politics is the peaceful tending to arrangements. For those who prefer to take a cynical view, the will to power is both the chief political virtue and the chief political vice. Those who take such a view need not worry about the qualities that allow one to engage in deliberation with others. For those who take the view adopted here, there is still much to be learned from the Greeks.

Just as no one among the Greeks stated the case for moderation better than Aristotle, no one stated the case against hubris better than Sophocles. One might object that Sophocles did not have politics in mind, and that he presented only legendary familiar relationships. This would be selling Sophocles short, and it fails to understand how pervasive politics can be. Within the family and the clan much human action may *appear* to lie outside politics. This is because such communities enjoy close and implicit agreement on basic premises and how they apply to most of the community's routine. The basic arrangements are often invisible to the outsider. For the most part, tradition and habit prescribe the action the community should take. But even families and clans engage in politics. New circumstances can challenge even the most insular and tradition-bound peoples. External threats may require new or modified arrangements; new decisions must be taken. Factions spring up,

*Politics
transcends
government.*

discussion takes place, and politics emerges, albeit on a small scale. Even so-called primitive tribes have tribal councils and engage in extended and serious political discourse when faced with a new problem. In larger democratic communities—those harboring individuals who differ in their fundamental approaches to living together—political discourse becomes yet more necessary, as well as more complex and more difficult.

*Sophocles
addresses
political vice
of hubris.*

Sophocles, as I have said, was concerned with the political vice of hubris. *Oedipus Rex* provides the most familiar example. Upon hearing the Delphic prophecy of patricide and incest, the well-intentioned Oedipus took radical steps to thwart fate—fleeing his parents and his home in Corinth. He did well on his own in the world. Strong and cunning, he proved himself many times, most of all when he solved the riddle of the Sphinx and saved Thebes. After Oedipus became King of Thebes, Delphi spoke again, suggesting that the only way to end a severe blight plaguing Thebes was to avenge the murder of the former king, Laius. With god-like certainty Oedipus set out to find the murderer and mete out justice.

The question of who murdered Laius fades to insignificance as Oedipus's search for truth unearths a history he never suspected, and would never want to know. The audience and all the other characters in the play, even the blind Teiresias, see the appalling truth long before the proud and cunning Oedipus. Creon exclaims, "I can see you are blind to truth." His mother-wife Jocasta cries, "My poor child! Those are the only words I shall ever have for you." No one has mastered dramatic irony better than Sophocles.

Two frightened servants at last yield the pieces of the puzzle to Oedipus. The former Theban king, Laius, and his queen, Jocasta, also hoping to avoid the Delphic prophecy, had abandoned their infant to die. A shepherd had rescued the child and sent him to Corinth. Oedipus killed a stranger on the highway; most likely, this was Laius. Unaware of his kinship, Oedipus claimed the widowed queen, Jocasta, as his wife. Oedipus the King believed that he could simply discover who killed Laius and mete out appropriate justice. Hubris blinds him. When at last he sees the truth, he wishes only to be blind again.

What is Sophocles up to here? An astute and early critic provides clues. According to Aristotle, tragedy requires, among other things, a character whom we admire greatly, but who possesses a flaw—*hamartia*, or some error in judgment. He falls from happiness

into misery as the play progresses through what is sometimes translated as “serious action,” action which is complete, noble, and poetical. The total effect invokes dismay and horror. In the end comes the *anagnorisis*: the recognition or uncovering of the error. In the naive form, a hero or heroine recognizes a person or thing previously mistaken in identity, through some scar or mark or other sign. Iphegenia, for example, recognizes her brother as she is about to sacrifice him to the gods.

In the more profound form of tragedy, the hero recognizes the flaw in himself and faces it. *Oedipus Rex* inspired Aristotle’s theory of tragedy and exemplifies it perfectly. On seeing the truth, Oedipus gouges out his eyes. The audience participates in the catharsis that follows. The human spirit prevails over the horror, accepts the truth and clings to a more humble bargain with fate. Oedipus gives up his determination to set the world straight and accepts fate, retaining his noble qualities despite the blows of bad fortune. The final irony may be the triumph of Oedipus over fate itself, although not in a way he ever imagined. We see him again, through Sophocles’s eyes, in *Oedipus at Colonus* where he lives his last years in the company of a loving daughter and dies a good death.

Antigone does not seem to fit the Aristotelian formula. Aristotle himself did not seem to know what to make of it. In the *Poetica*’s sole reference to the play Aristotle offers *Antigone* as an example of a poor plot for a tragedy. The least tragic plot, he avers, involves a character who resolves to do a fearful deed and does not do it. His example is Haemon who seems ready to slay his father, Creon, and does not. This may be one of those rare cases where Aristotle misses the point. First, after more than two millennia of experience with drama, one can imagine a situation where delay in doing the dread deed makes the tragedy. Nor is it clear that Haemon had resolved to kill his father; his veiled threat may have been to kill himself, an action which he finally takes. Most important, the conflict between Haemon and his father does not stir our emotions as much as the conflict swirling around Antigone.

The play strikes us as a fine one—Hegel thought it was the supreme example of tragedy, prompting him to pose a different theory for the form. Hegel sees a dialectical clash between two ideals of justice. A noble and wise Antigone fights for the justice of traditional belief, while a tyrannical Creon fights for a right based on might. Irving Babbitt has suggested a more subtle variation of dia-

Ethical imagination vs. “law of the community.”

lectic theory, hailing Antigone as the “perfect example of the ethical imagination” in contrast to her sister, Ismene, who knows merely “the law of the community.” Both Antigone and Ismene are ethical, but Ismene lacks ethical imagination. As Babbitt sees it:

This law, the convention of a particular place and time, is always but a very imperfect image, a mere shadow indeed of the unwritten law which being above the ordinary rational level is . . . infinite and incapable of final formulation.

While such interpretations no doubt are true—with each uncovering layers of meaning—alone they reduce *Antigone* to a morality play. Such interpretations fail to explain the play’s more complex and turbulent moods.

So what drives the dramatic tension in *Antigone*? Consider the story anew: The two sons of Oedipus had shared the throne, alternating years as ruler. When Eteocles refused to turn over power at the end of his year, Polyneices attacked the city. The brothers died in single combat. Creon, their uncle, now king of Thebes, buried Eteocles with full honors as defender of the city. He left the body of Polyneices to rot, unmourned, outside the gates and decreed death to anyone who would honor the traitor with a burial. In the first lines of the play, Antigone has resolved to defy Creon’s decree. She has invited her sister to join her. Ismene has declined, recalling the family history of tragic defiance of both fate and lawful order. The stage is set.

Alone, Antigone slips out and scatters funeral oil and earth over her brother’s body. Creon discovers the violation of his decree, and carries out its terms with one concession to Antigone’s position as member of the royal family. He does not execute her forthwith, but walls her up in a cave, to let the gods dispose of her as they will.

In minor eddies within the play, the Aristotelian formula applies—especially to Creon, usually judged to be excessively harsh. Possibly, it also applies to Ismene, who may seem excessively timid. Both are noble and both are flawed. Both reach a moment of truth and change course. Ismene wishes to stand by her sister’s side in death. Creon softens his hard rule. But the play is not their story; Sophocles named the work *Antigone*. Antigone stands noblest and most heroic among all the characters, defiant of man’s rule and insisting on God’s justice. It is to her that we should look for the chief elements of the tragedy. And, if the Aristotelian formula applies, we must search for Antigone’s flaw.

The suggestion that Sophocles intended to present a flawed Antigone rubs against the grain. She is the paragon. The religion of the Greeks, like virtually all religions, required burial of the dead—even the enemy dead. The ancient tales in the *Iliad*, the bible to the Greeks, warn of the anger of the gods upon a failure to honor the dead. Besides, the restless shades of the unburied could cause trouble. Antigone stands for all that is right and for opposition to tyranny. Thus, we have only a play about Creon's excessive harshness and his tragically delayed conversion. Yet, Sophocles provides a fair amount of evidence that he intended to create something more complex than a morality play.

Consider first the parallels between *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Both stories begin with a problem facing family and polis, and with the central character resolving to make things right. Antigone proceeds with unswerving resolution in her judgement of the situation. She possesses complete confidence in her ability to choose and execute a just action. She does not see the full situation; she is blind to key elements of the problem. She is like her father in most respects. Both Antigone and Oedipus claim to know justice with the certainty of a god. Oedipus believes most in his cunning and strength, Antigone in her goodness.

The flaw of hubris is easy to spot in Oedipus, but Antigone's brilliance is so dazzling that we overlook her flaw. After all, she has formulated a great and noble truth and maintains it with courage. She asserts God's law over man's law. Especially in our own time, where we formally recognize the superiority, within specified spheres, of individual right over the demands of overly broad laws, Antigone seems a genius beyond her time.

Creon, by contrast, understands the needs of the polis. Following a civil war, he has placed a premium on order. He will do whatever is necessary, including the stern enforcement of harsh rules. He faces another dilemma in his role as leader: he forbade the burial of Polyneices and decreed this harsh punishment before he was aware of Antigone's guilt. To pardon his future daughter-in-law as his first serious act as ruler of Thebes would compromise all future claims to fairness in his rule. Yet Creon listens to the chorus of old men; he listens to the blind seer. After struggling with the issue, he reconsiders his judgment; he determines to bury the body of Polyneices and to unbury Antigone with his own hands.

Antigone, on the other hand, recognizes the demands of true

*Tenderness
only for the
dead.*

justice and champions it. She spurns Ismene, who initially hesitated to assist her but soon after wished to share in her sister's punishment and death. Antigone refuses the offer. When Ismene asks whether her sister has cast her aside, Antigone's answer ignores Ismene's change of heart: "Yes. For you chose to live when I chose death." Antigone seems to speak not to spare Ismene, but to wound her to the quick. Antigone leaves Haemon, her betrothed, in the cold, as she left Ismene. She never seeks him out, nor even mentions his name.* Yet Haemon is ready to defy his father for Antigone's sake, and he refuses to live without her. Ironically, this may be what he must do to win her affection, for Antigone reveals no tenderness for anyone except those already dead.

Despite the solicitous love of Ismene and the fierce love of Haemon, Antigone complains of being alone and friendless:

I call upon Thebes' grove in the armored plain,
to be my witnesses, *how with no friend's mourning,*
by what decree I go to the fresh-made prison-tomb.

She compares her fate to Niobe's—alluding to the stone image weeping on a cliff near Thebes. Significantly, Antigone overlooks the fact that hubris destroyed Niobe. Niobe had boasted that her six (in some versions seven) sons and six (or seven) daughters made her the equal of the goddess Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis. Apollo and Artemis took offense on hearing of this interesting assertion of quantity over quality. They resolved the issue by killing the hapless children and turning Niobe to stone.

The chorus, often the truth-sayer for Sophocles, provides more clues. Of Antigone, they tell us:

The girl is bitter. She's her father's child.
She cannot yield to trouble; nor could he.

In perhaps the most revealing exchange, the chorus turns to Antigone and tells her, plainly:

You showed respect for the dead.
So we for you: but power

*There is one line that some translators, such as Townsend, attribute to Antigone that mentions Haemon, perhaps to soften her one-sidedness. *Antigone*, line 572: "Poor Haemon! See how much your father cares." Wyckoff notes, however, that all extant Greek sources give the line to Ismene. Creon responds to the comment with a reference to "your marriage" which provides some argument for attributing the line to Antigone, but, as Wyckoff points out, Creon's remark could mean "the marriage of which you speak." Wyckoff ed., 227.

is not to be thwarted so.

Your self-sufficiency has brought you down.

The last line is key: “σὲ δ' αὐτόγνωτος ὤλεσ' ὄργᾶ.” The above quotation is from Wyckoff’s translation. But all translations seem to head in the same direction: “A self-determined impulse hath undone thee” (Campbell). “You were self-willed. That has been your undoing” (Townsend). “And thee, thy stubborn mood, self-chosen, layeth low” (students of the University of Notre Dame, 1983). In any translation, it seems the chorus has identified Antigone’s flaw. She follows a truth that springs only from her self: It is αὐτόγνωτος, or *autognotos*. She will not consult with others. We could call it self-certainty or, perhaps even better, self-righteousness. It is a form of hubris.

At another point, the chorus tells Antigone she is *autonomos*. Literally, this means “a law unto yourself.” The English word autonomy does not convey quite the right meaning, as individual autonomy was a condition the Greeks viewed with discomfort and suspicion. The autonomous being is either beast or god, living only within the horizons of its own laws. Most English translators of *Antigone* do not choose to place unfavorable connotations on the word. They tend to choose softer terms to describe the self-certain heroine. The best rendering is probably from Wyckoff, who translates it as “of your own motion you go.” Antigone is the lone individual, refusing to sway or be swayed by any in the community. She is *autognotos* and *autonomos*. For Antigone, both knowledge and judgment are an individual affair.

Rather than see any flaw or limitation in her own understanding, Antigone only becomes more extreme in her certainty. Those who would make her a saint should reconsider her lack of perspective:

And yet the wise will know my choice was right.
Had I had children or their father dead,
I'd let them moulder. I should not have chosen
in such a case to cross the state's decree.
What is the law that lies behind these words?
One husband gone, I might have found another,
or a child from a new man in the first child's place,
but with my parents hid away in death,
no brother, ever, could spring up for me.

Antigone has a single mission which excludes all else. She is also fully self-centered:

Look, leaders of Thebes,
I am the last of your royal line.

These final words deny the existence of the still-living Ismene.

*Creon sees
his error;
Antigone
never sees
hers.*

The movement of the drama follows that of *Oedipus Rex* with respect to most elements of the Aristotelian formulae. It deviates only in the continued blindness of Antigone. The stage shifts to Creon, who also suffers from hubris, or self-certainty, but who sees his error. It is difficult to identify any such clear moment of truth for Antigone. Or perhaps *hamartia* is not a key element of the Greek tragedy. Aristotle spoke of it only rarely (book 13: 1453a, 10, 16); nor did he emphasize the discovery of the error. On the other hand, the lyrical playwright Maxwell Anderson believes the notion is essentially correct; he believes one can find a recognition scene, if ever so subtle, "in the plays we choose to remember." Perhaps the Aristotelian formula can encompass a shift from one character to another. Or perhaps Antigone's moment comes in these words as she nears her end:

No marriage-bed, no marriage song for me,
and since no wedding, so no child to rear.

She begins to understand that she has fallen victim to her own hubris. She hints at the possibility that she may be wrong in some way.

One must acknowledge, however, that she dismisses the idea at once. She ends on a harsh and vengeful note:

But if it is the others who are wrong
I wish them no greater punishment than mine.

Our last view of her on stage comes as her guards lead her away. The chorus reminds her of three examples in which those imprisoned within the earth forbore and ultimately survived their rocky prisons. She will pay no attention to their advice. Neither forbearance nor the ability to take advice is among her virtues.

Sophocles has told the story of both father and daughter, and more than once the chorus compares the two, in particular, their temper, their stubbornness, and their individuality. Both are strong; both self-certain. Both stories construct similar tensions—between rival claims of justice; between individual and familial claims and the needs of the polis; between human striving and human weakness; between human individual conscience and human communal judgment; between seeing and blindness.

Sophocles created works that balance tensions in many dimensions. Each drama is different, of course. The tragedy of Oedipus seems unavoidable. Political deliberation would not have helped him much; the drama serves only to reveal the extent to which hubris can blind one to the truth. Antigone, on the other hand, might have avoided her tragic fate had she paid attention to and entered into discussion with others. To remain tragic, her story depended on a weak and inadequate recognition of her own failing.

While they plainly ask “what is justice?,” the tragedies of Sophocles also ask the yet more difficult question, “how do we know it?” If Sophocles is right, there is something to learn from Antigone’s fate. When it comes to seeing the issues surrounding our understanding of justice, Creon may have something to offer after all. He believes justice requires him to give priority to the order of the polis, overruling individual judgments based on conscience. He believes in equal application of the laws, with no exceptions for the royal family. He is at least partly wrong, by the judgment of most. Yet, he is ready to discuss the issue, to listen, to question, to entertain self-doubt. Although he believes that in a time of emergency the order of the polis may require harsh punishment for those who create disturbance, he is willing to reconsider. He listens to the chorus, to Teiresias, to others; and, although he seems adamant at times, he changes his mind. With his own hands he will unearth Antigone and bury the body of Polyneices.

*Creon willing
to entertain
self-doubt.*

Antigone, on the other hand, has found a higher justice. Most commentators agree that she is right. But she will not discuss her judgment; she remains unyielding. She never doubts the wisdom of her course. She isolates herself. She acts under the illusion that only she is able to grasp the meaning of higher justice. She can only conclude that she does not belong in this world, which so misunderstands the nature of right action.

Antigone’s self-certainty and self-isolation cut short all possibilities for full deliberation. Yet full deliberation was needed to persuade Creon to change his mind. Had Antigone not isolated herself from her sister, Ismene would have stood by her side. Had she sought out Haemon, she would have had another ally. It seems likely that Eurydice, Haemon’s mother and Creon’s wife, would have joined the children’s revolt. She did register her objection to events in the end, through suicide. Had Antigone been ready to engage in politics, Creon would find himself facing the open opposi-

tion of all whom he loved. He has the capacity, as we know from his actions in the play, to yield.

*Failure to
deliberate
brings doom.*

Antigone's belief that she and only she understood justice and how it must apply in the particular situation before her left her with no choice but martyrdom. If she had only some portion of self-doubt, she may have waited just a few moments before her suicide. In that event, Haemon would have rescued her. Had she waited a few moments more, Creon would have done so. A happy ending required her to consider the position of others, to adjust to their views, and to hold her individual judgment of justice with some humility. It required an Antigone who could anticipate the gradual acceptance of her position by those around her. Her self-certainty brought her down.

If all human beings suffer from short-sightedness, there is no certain source for a human grasp of truth. The best humans can do is to share insights in the hope of gaining a larger view of truth. The search for truth requires each

to talk and consult with others, even such as come short . . . in capacity, quickness and penetration; for . . . no one sees all and we generally have different prospects of the same thing according to our different . . . positions to it.*

It is no accident that the author of these words, John Locke, was a leading advocate of government by consent. His remarks formalize the idea that mutual consultation is needed before formulating a vision of justice and choosing the right action for each particular case.

*True believers
confuse
politics with
eternal
principles.*

Antigone's flaw—the flaw of self-certainty—is the chief obstacle to this kind of deliberation. I probably do not need to draw attention to the fact that politics in our time suffers from the same flaw. True believers, religious or secular, seek to replace deliberative politics with eternal principles. Such persons admit of just one right answer. Premises are beyond questioning. Defining political questions as exclusively governed by immutable principles of right eliminates all need for further, often troublesome debate. Only the process of arriving at conclusions—whether the right principle was applied—can be questioned.

It is easy to spot Antigone's flaw in the character of an antagonist one believes to be dead wrong. The rational mind easily identi-

*John Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* § 3 (iii).

fies religious fundamentalists as blinded by self-righteousness. This same rational thinker may fail to perceive his own blind spots. Antigone's flaw has a subtle quality. She has indeed discovered a great truth. We must agree with her. We must admire her. We identify with her.

Her story reminds us, however, of how difficult it is to recognize hubris in our heroes or in ourselves. Upon the discovery of a certain truth, there is a great temptation to believe one has access to *all* truth. To say it in traditional religious terms, it is a weakness of human beings to believe that, once they have access to one of God's truths, they know the full mind of God. From here it becomes ever so easy to mistake one's own will for the will of God.

Most true believers tend to enlarge their premises, leaving little to deduction. If one has determined that a particular action, and only that action, is the right thing to do, there is no choice but to take it, or to enter the realm of the immoral. Action based on such unquestioned belief lies beyond the realm of politics. I once suggested to a participant in what might be described as secular and left-leaning politics that a few leaders from that person's organization hold a quiet, unpublicized retreat with selected leaders who are religious and right-leaning on an issue of common concern: the public school curriculum. The response was, "Whatever for?!" If I understand Sophocles correctly, such abrupt closing of the opportunity for conversation could lead to a contemporary tragedy.

If an individual as brilliant and noble as Antigone can succumb to hubris, anyone can. Antigone pursued goodness with a singular insight and courage. Discovering a flaw in a near-perfect character suggests a universal human weakness. Antigone's flaw is a special kind of hubris that afflicts those who possess the greatest insights. Political modesty requires a recognition that one individual or group alone is likely to come up short in the search for truth: "something is left out which should go into the reckoning . . ." "No one knows the whole truth, although each may know a part of it. All human beings are "shortsighted and very often see but one side of a matter From this defect . . . no man is free. We see but in part and we know but in part, and therefore it is no wonder we conclude not right from our partial views."* Antigone's flaw may be the plague of our times.

**Of the Conduct of the Understanding § 3 (iii).*