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HOW ANTIGONE'S WAY OF CHALLENGING THE REGIME DIFFERS FROM THAT OF SOCRATES

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This essay was originally submitted to POLS 130: Great Political Ideas with Dr. Siobhan Moroney on October 31, 2017. The topic of this essay involves political philosophy.

The history of mankind has witnessed people who decided to act against ruling regimes. People, who were inspired by ideas of fighting for their beliefs, worshiping divine powers, or preserving their lives, used different means to change the systems. Antigone in Sophocles' play *Antigone* and the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates were two such people. This essay will explore how Antigone's way of challenging the regime differs from that of Socrates by discussing the hierarchy between political laws, the will of gods and personal interests, the issue of reality and appearance, and the intentions of the above-mentioned individuals who acted against ruling regimes. Antigone's and Socrates', attempt to challenge the regime was motivated by the idea to fulfill their duty defined by gods; however, Socrates does not perceive his actions as civil disobedience, whereas Antigone acknowledges that she goes against the accepted political law.

Sophocles' play *Antigone* tells the story about how a young girl named Antigone acted against the king of Thebes in order to fulfill her divine duty. Antigone's brothers Eteocles and Polyneices had a battle for the crown of the city, where they both killed each other. The king of Thebes, Creon, declared Eteocles as a hero and ask to bury him appropriately, while he left Polyneices unburied because he was a traitor, who made an alliance with the enemy in order to take the power. The punishment for anyone who went against his order would be execution. "Anyone who dares to attempts the act will die public stoning in the town"(Sophocles 2013, p. 22). The play shows how Antigone, motivated by the idea that according

to the gods, every human deserves to be buried, went against the command of Creon and buried her brother. As an expected punishment, she was placed in a jail where she was supposed to die from hunger (Sophocles 2013).

Contrary to Sophocles' fictional *Antigone*, the story of Socrates is a real history described by his student Plato in *The Apology* and *Crito*. The Greek philosopher Socrates was charged by the court of Athens for violating two laws: not believing in the gods and corrupting the youth of the city. *The Apology* tells how the trial was conducted: the charges that Socrates had, the arguments which he used to justify himself and the verdict (Plato 2017). *Crito* shows how Socrates' friend Crito tried to convince him to flee from the jail, where he was placed before his execution (Plato 2012, p. 1-10).

For Antigone as well as for Socrates religious laws were superior to both political laws and their personal interests. Antigone went against the command of Creon to fulfill the will of the gods. In the act where the guard brings her to the king for breaking his order, Antigone clearly states: "Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a moral man could overrun the gods' unwritten and unfulfilling laws." To explain, she tells Creon that she was aware of his command; however, she decided to go against it because it was her duty defined by gods to respect the dead and bury them appropriately (Sophocles 2013, p. 37-42). Antigone's action is a clear example of civil disobedience motivated by the desire to follow something more powerful than political authority (Ferguson 1974, p. 1-10). To clarify, she decided to break the law made by the king to enforce the will of the gods. It shows vividly that for her, religious laws were superior to political ones. Moreover, her divine duty was more important than her personal interests. It was the reason why she was ready to be executed as a punishment for burying her brother. Antigone's actions show her attitude toward religious and non-religious powers; however, we cannot see the

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hierarchy between her personal and family interests and the interests of Thebes; therefore, we cannot say how she would act without her duty towards the gods (Sorum 1982).

In the case of Socrates, the hierarchy between religious and political laws is not as clear as it is for Antigone but we still have enough evidence to claim that for him religious laws are superior to political. In the Apology during Socrates' speech on the court process he says that it is pointless to give him freedom under the condition that he stops philosophizing, because he is not going to change his way of living at any price (Plato 2017, p. 18-20). That is to say, if the court of Athens declares philosophizing as corrupting for the youth and deems it illegal, Socrates is ready to disobey this political law. The reason why he is ready to go against the laws of Athens is the fact that he was created by the gods as a philosopher. According to Socrates, people have different natures defined by the gods and it was their duty to live accordingly (Plato 2009).

Furthermore, Crito clearly distinguish Socrates' priorities for the interest of Athens and his own. His friend, Crito, visited him in the jail to convince him to escape but the philosopher rejected the offer. Socrates reasoned that breaking one law would mean breaking all laws and by doing that he would "do nothing other than destroy Athenians, the laws, and the civic community" (Plato 2012, p. 7). Restated, he claimed that his escape would harm Athens and this was the reason why he rejected Crito's offer. This example clearly shows that for him, the interest of Athens is superior to his own. The Apology and Crito helps us understand the priorities for Socrates. The Apology shows that the law of the gods is superior to that of Athens when Crito suggests that Athens is more important than his personal interests.

Antigone, as well as Socrates, sees the reality when their opponents are blinded by the appearance. The idea that reality cannot be seen only through physical senses is a common theme in ancient Greek literature and philosophy (Prus 2004). It is one of the central issues in Sophocles' Oedipus and Plato's The Republic as well as in the texts analyzed in this essay (Harsh 1958; Haymond 2009). According to these works, one can claim that the authors define reality as something which is objectively true for everyone in every condition while appearance is the understanding based on subjective motives (Rappe 1995). With this in mind, one can argue that in Sophocles' play, Antigone is able to see the reality, but Creon is blinded by his personal desires. Antigone looks at the situation through the law of the gods, which are universal and objectively true (Sophocles 2013). Contrastingly, Creon's perception of the same situation is radically different. In the beginning of the play, the king says "Polyneices ... broke his exile to come back with

fire and sword against his native city," which motivated him to make the command that "no man is to touch him or say the least prayer for him; he shall lie on the plain, unburied" (Sophocles 2013, p. 27). By analyzing his words, we can argue that his main motivation is the desire for revenge. Moreover, another possible reason behind this relentless punishment is to protect his authority. By leaving Polyneices's body unburied, he demonstrated his power to act against anyone who threatens Thebes or his authority (Sophocles 2013, p. 27, 28). Antigone and Creon use different judgment mechanisms to understand the situation. As a result, Antigone sees the objective reality when the king is blinded by his desire for retaliation.

Plato describes the conflict between appearance and reality in Crito. Socrates sees reality by using reasoning which is an objective mechanism while Crito is blinded by his self-interests. When Crito visits Socrates in the jail and offers the plan to escape Socrates replies: "We must examine whether we should do this or not, because as always, and not just now for the first time, I am the sort of person who is persuaded in my soul by nothing other than the argument which seems best to me upon reflection" (Plato 2012, p. 5). In other words, Socrates states that the motivations behind his decisions are the results of his reasoning, which helps him to objectively understand the reality. We also see the reasons why Crito tries to help Socrates. As he says, if Socrates will not escape, everyone will think that his friends did not try hard enough (Plato 2012, p. 44-46). From Crito's words, we can argue that one of his main motivations was to maintain the reputation of a good friend. In contrast to their opponents, Antigone, as well as Socrates, use objective means to understand the reality which becomes the reason of the conflict in Antigone and the reason of misunderstanding in Crito.

Antigone acknowledges that she breaks the laws of Creon when Socrates does not interpret his actions as corrupting the youth. American philosopher Henry David Thoreau defines the term "Civil Disobedience" as an act of willful resistance, achieved by not obeying the political laws (Thoreau 2002). A clear example of this definition can be found in Antigone. The book starts with the conversation in which Antigone tries to convince her sister, Ismene, to go against the unjust law of Creon (Sophocles 2013, p. 21-25). The conversation shows that Antigone is aware of the law of the king regarding her brother and the punishment for lawbreakers; however, she still engages in the act of civil disobedience.

Socrates' actions, namely philosophizing, was declared by the court of Athens as an act of corrupting the youth, which breaks the law of the city; however, the philosopher's understanding of his behavior was different. He claims that Athens is already a corrupted city, focused on reputation and wealth instead of wisdom and truth. The

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motivation of Socrates' actions was to change this way of Athenians' lifestyle (Plato 2017, p. 11-15). Furthermore, he states during his speech in court: "For know well that if you kill me, since I am the sort of man that I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves" (Plato 2017, p. 13). By way of explanation, he means not only is he an obedient citizen, but that he is also someone who benefits the city with his actions. By analyzing these examples, we can argue that the philosopher does not perceive his behaviors as civil disobedience because he thinks his actions benefit Athens.

The conflict between the ruling regime and the individual is a common theme described in literature as well as in history. Socrates as well as Antigone challenged the ruling regimes. For both, the superiority of religious laws, which let them see the reality, motivated them to go against the system. Antigone acknowledged that her actions were civil disobedience while Socrates thought that he was helping corrupted Athens.

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