

Reason, Religion and Freedom of Speech: Socrates and Antigone as Democratic Heroes?

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Plato's Socrates and Sophocles' Antigone are often seen as models of free inquiry and expression in the face of unjust political power. In the *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates argues that he spent his life questioning the authoritative opinions that supported the laws of Athens. Socrates' philosophic life resulted in his trial for not believing in the city's gods and corrupting the young. He is found guilty and condemned to death, a death which Socrates' accepts rather than cease his unique way of speaking. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone defies Creon's decree to leave her brother Polynices unburied, accepting the penalty of death for her actions. Before being buried alive she speaks against Creon's tyrannical rule of Thebes, claiming that she gives voice to a citizenry too afraid to critique their ruler. Although both Socrates and Antigone can be viewed as ancient precursors to the democratic defence of freedom of speech, this paper also explores important ways in which they differ. Whereas Antigone puts loyalty to family and divine law above human law, Socrates acknowledges that he has not cared for the things of his family and, despite characterizing himself as a gift of the god to the city, gains a rational self-knowledge that can put military necessity ahead of the desire to give the dead a proper burial, coming to light in his defense of the generals of the Battle of Arginusae. This paper thus concludes that Antigone would be one of Socrates' accusers rather than defenders, but surprisingly more at home in a modern, liberal democracy than one guided by Socratic reason.

Democracy and Freedom of Speech

Scholars such as Arlene Saxonhouse turn to ancient Athens to explore the connection between democracy and freedom of speech. Although abstracted from the language of rights and protections that dominate our contemporary debates, Saxonhouse locates the freedom of speech that emerges with the transition to democracy in fifth and fourth century B.C. Athens as the ancient precursor to our modern, liberal democratic understanding of freedom of speech (Saxonhouse, 2006: 6-7, 12). Saxonhouse argues that freedom of speech in ancient Athens entailed opening public debate and deliberation to all citizens, granting everyone the freedom to say what one thought without shame or respect for traditional hierarchies (Saxonhouse, 2006: 2, 6; also see Ward, 2008: 108-09, 121-22, 125, 129). The expansion of who could engage in public deliberation and of what one could say, according to Saxonhouse, was not instituted to protect the private right of individuals but rather for the sake of self-rule (Saxonhouse, 2006: 5, 7). Moreover, in exploring the practice of free speech in ancient Athens, Saxonhouse finds Socrates, "the truly democratic man," to be its highest exponent (Saxonhouse, 2006: 8). Claiming that the Platonic dialogues, especially the *Apology of Socrates*, illustrate the crucial connection between philosophy and freedom of speech and therewith philosophy and democracy, Saxonhouse argues that in Plato we find someone, "sympathetic to a democratic Socrates struggling against the socially controlling power of a hierarchically based shame" (Saxonhouse, 2006: 8).

Considering Sophocles' *Antigone* Saxonhouse, although characterizing the perspectives of both Antigone and Creon as unifocal and lacking in complexity, nonetheless acknowledges that Antigone represents the "fundamental diversity of nature" that goes unrecognized yet confronts the masculine public realm of the city represented by Creon (Saxonhouse, 1992: 52, 64, 68-69, 71, 76). Saxonhouse argues that the tragedians of ancient Athens portrayed political leaders on stage who sought civic unity through the denial of difference and the subjection of

nature to the rational control of the human intellect (Saxonhouse, 1992: 51). In order to critique this vision of the Athenian *polis*, according to Saxonhouse, “playwrights often turned to the female, for in her difference from the male she revealed a diversity in nature that threatened the physical order and rational control at which the *polis* aimed (Saxonhouse, 1992: 52). Scholars such as Judith Butler go further. Arguing that in her act of burying her brother Polynices, and her verbal, public refusal to deny this act to Creon, Antigone, “appears to assume the form of a certain masculine sovereignty, a manhood that cannot be shared” (Butler, 2000: 9; also see Saxonhouse, 1992: 69). As Creon is reduced to the “feminine and inferior,” so, according to Butler, “neither [Antigone nor Creon] maintains their position within gender and the disturbance of kinship appears to destabilize gender throughout the play” (Butler, 2000: 10; but see Robert, 2010: 413-14). Moreover, as this passage indicates, not only does Antigone challenge and thus undermine traditional or culturally sanctioned gender boundaries, but she also challenges or transgresses kinship boundaries. Antigone does so, Butler argues, by expressing and eventually embracing in death her incestuous, erotic love for her brother. According to Butler, “perhaps [it is] the unlivable desire with which she lives, incest itself, that makes her life a living death, that has no place within the terms that confer intelligibility on life” (Butler, 2000: 23; also see Robert, 2010: 416, and Sjöholm, 2004: 102-06). Antigone, therefore, in Butler’s view, destabilizing gender identities and manifesting incestuous desire, can be seen as a symbol of the gender diversity and open sexuality that modern society increasingly seeks to celebrate.

Although Antigone represents difference and alterity in her actions, and hence the pluralism that is often embraced by modern liberal democracies, one may question how this is related to the freedom of speech that challenges authority and is at the core of Socratic philosophy. To address this question it is important to understand that Antigone’s defiance of Creon’s decree that Polynices go unburied and unmourned is not primarily in doing the deed, but rather in affirming in speech that she has done the deed in response to Creon’s questioning (*Antigone*, 492).¹ As Butler argues, “[t]o publish one’s act in language is in some sense the completion of the act,” and for Antigone, “[t]he claiming becomes an act that reiterates the act it affirms, extending the act of insubordination by performing its avowal in language (Butler, 2000: 10-11). Thus, of prime importance for Antigone is that she give expression to her defiance to Creon and the city of Thebes in the form of the Chorus. That Antigone’s act is primarily a speech act is brought into sharper focus by scholars such as Jennet Kirkpatrick who argue that we should consider that it is actually Antigone’s sister Ismene who performs the first burial of Polynices’ body (Kirkpatrick, 2011: 402-03). In the course of Sophocles’ play Polynices’ body actually goes through three different burials. The first is done hastily and in secret before the guards sent out to prevent such burial arrive (*Antigone*, 277-79). The second is done by Antigone in broad daylight in front of the guards by whom she is captured, and the third by Creon after having repented due to his exchange with the blind prophet Tiresias (*Antigone*, 475-79, 1323-26). If it is true, as Kirkpatrick suggests, that Ismene performed the first hasty burial in secret hoping not to be caught, then it is indeed Antigone’s very open performance of the deed with perhaps the hope of being apprehended that Sophocles sheds light on. For Antigone, her “deed” should be a form of expression. Further evidence that Antigone wishes her deed to be a form of expression occurs near the beginning of the play in her first exchange with Ismene. Unable to persuade her sister to obey Creon’s decree, Ismene counsels Antigone to keep her deed “a secret,” and she likewise promises not to tell anyone. In response, Antigone says, “Dear god, shout it from the rooftops.

¹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, Robert Fagles trans. (New York: Penguin Books), 1982. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

I'll hate you all the more for silence—tell the world!" (*Antigone*, 99-101). Moreover, after telling Creon that "[y]our moralizing repls me," and that she will have glory for her deed, Antigone claims that her speech represents the speech of the Theban citizenry who would express agreement with and praise for her, "if their lips weren't locked in fear" (*Antigone*, 565).

In associating Antigone and especially Socrates with the freedom of speech that is at the heart of democracy, Butler and to a greater extent Saxonhouse are building upon the philosophy of John Stuart Mill. In his famous work *On Liberty*, Mill argues that his main concern for the future is not protecting the rights of individuals against the potential tyranny of the state, but rather promoting the development of "individuality" in the face of what he says is, "a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression" (Mill, 1974: 59, 63). Social tyranny, "enslaving the soul itself," is characterized by Mill as, "the tendency of society to impose [...] its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them," thus preventing any "individual spontaneity" from arising (Mill, 1974: 63, 70). The type of liberty Mill is thus interested in is the freedom of each to construct their own unique, individual identity without fear of "the moral coercion of public opinion," or the social stigma that can result when we differ from our fellow citizens, provided we do no harm to others in the process (Mill, 1974: 68-69).

Mill argues that if individuality or the development of idiosyncratic and innovative ways of thinking and acting is to flourish, three freedoms are essential: the freedom of speech, or thought and discussion; the freedom of lifestyle, or tastes and pursuits; and the freedom to associate with like-minded individuals (Mill, 1974: 71). Interested in this paper primarily in the freedom of speech, Mill makes three arguments for why neither government nor society should suppress unorthodox or diverse opinions even if they are believed to be harmful or untrue. First, Mill argues that silenced opinions may be true as we can never be sure of the rightness of prevailing public opinion; the reason of individuals, communities and historical epochs is fallible (Mill, 1974: 77). Pointing out in this context that many beliefs and opinions condemned in the past are now accepted as true, Mill offers Socratic teachings as a prime example. Although Socrates is convicted and put to death for impiety and immorality by his fellow Athenians, according to Mill, "we know him as the head and prototype of all subsequent teachers of virtue... [as the] acknowledged master of all eminent thinkers who have since lived" (Mill, 1974: 84).

The second reason Mill provides for the necessity of near absolute freedom of expression is that, even if opinions are false, the contestation coming from bad or erroneous opinions strengthen, by grounding them in reason, the truthful opinions that we do hold (Mill, 1974: 79). Challenges to our most deeply held beliefs, Mill argues, force us to think through why we really believe something is true in the face of such challenges, thus enabling us to give a rational account of our beliefs both to our ourselves and others. Contestation, therefore, prevents what may be a true opinion from becoming, "an hereditary creed, [...] received passively, not actively [...] as if accepting it on trust dispensed with the necessity of realizing it in consciousness" (Mill, 1974: 102). The third reason for removing all restrictions on speech, according to Mill, is that conflicting opinions may not simply be a struggle between truth and falsehood, but each may represent a partial truth (Mill, 1974: 108). The example Mill gives is that political life in modern democracies is usually divided between two types of parties: one representing the desire for order and stability the other for progress and reform (Mill, 1974: 110). According to Mill, both have a claim to truth the expression and exploration of which is beneficial to society.

Mill warns that as scientific knowledge advances and expands, allowing humankind to improve with the progress of history, "the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or

doubted will be constantly on the increase” (Mill, 1974: 106). The danger of this “consolidation of opinion” at the end of history is that it may end what Mill perceives as the ongoing conflict of ideas which is ensured when one accepts the three bases for near absolute freedom of speech: silenced opinions may be true, challenges from false opinions strengthen true opinions, and conflicting ideas ensure access to the whole truth. In the absence of a natural foundation for the expression of a diversity of opinions, Mill hopes that the, “teachers of mankind [...] provide a substitute [or] some contrivance” for it (Mill, 1974: 106). The contrivance Mill looks to is Socratic philosophy. According to Mill:

Socratic dialectics, so magnificently exemplified in the dialogues of Plato, were a contrivance of this description. They were essentially a negative discussion of the great questions of philosophy and life, directed with consummate skill to the purpose of convincing anyone who had merely adopted the commonplaces of received opinion that he did not understand the subject—that he as yet attached no definite meaning to the doctrines he professed; in order that becoming aware of his ignorance, he might be put in the way to obtain a stable belief, resting on a clear apprehension both of the meaning of doctrines and their evidence (Mill, 1974: 106-07).

As the above passage indicates, Mill suggests that his advocacy of the ongoing conflict of ideas necessary for the development of individuality and resting on freedom of speech, is an analogy for or modern revival of the Socratic dialectical method, especially the Socratic skepticism and questioning of authoritative opinions illustrated in Plato’s *Apology*.

Saxonhouse and Mill both find a Platonic Socrates that speaks freely without deference to authority or regard to shame and traditional hierarchies. Socratic philosophy, therefore, for Saxonhouse and Mill plays a crucial political role in both ancient and modern democracies. Yet, this appears to contradict Socrates’ claim in the *Apology* that he questioned the opinions of his fellow Athenians in private as individuals, and avoided advising them collectively in the assembly because, according to Socrates, “a man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time” (*Apology*, 32a).² Scholars such as Catherine Zuckert take this claim in the *Apology* seriously and argue that Socratic philosophy or the examination of received opinions, from Socrates’ point of view, must go on in private rather than in public. Zuckert argues that a Socratic education aims at giving its participants a certain order and harmony to their souls that, if left to their own devices, would be riven with a conflict of desires, anger and practical cunning that can devise means to various undesirable ends (Zuckert, 2009: 744). Such psychic order as Socratic education provides requires the examination of our opinions and motives, and hence Socratic dialectic aims to give Socrates’ interlocutors a form of self-knowledge regarding what they truly want, and thus, from Zuckert’s point of view, what they truly believe is good (Zuckert, 2009: 743). Yet, most people are aware that sometimes what they genuinely want for themselves, such as an unjust profit at the expense of others, is at odds with the law which they themselves pass to check themselves on behalf of the common good (Zuckert, 2009: 743). For the sake of preserving the law that would otherwise be undermined if such motives and desires were brought to the surface, Socratic questioning which seeks to plumb the depths of our souls must remain private rather than public. Zuckert

² Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, in *Five Dialogues*, G.M.A. Grube trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.), 2002. All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

thus claims that, “Socrates did not question the wisdom of the laws directly or in public; on the contrary he obeyed the laws and urged others to do so as well” (Zuckert, 2009: 741). Such public deference to the laws meant that Socrates did not wish to address the Athenians together as a body politics, but rather, “questioned the integrity and wisdom of individuals, some (but only some) of whom participated in making Athenian laws” (Zuckert, 2009: 741).

In an alternative reading of the *Apology*, Lee Ward argues that Socrates’ characterization of philosophy as an essentially private activity is a reflection of the city’s assumptions, not that of the philosopher (Ward, 2009: 517). Indeed, throughout the *Apology*, Ward argues, Socrates displays a pattern of blurring the distinction between public and private. For instance, Socrates acknowledges that his questioning of leading Athenian politicians had a political impact among important segments of the public, that his military service at the battles of Potidea, Amphipolis and Delium are clear examples of civic courage in service of the city, and that his role as “gadfly”—being sent as a gift of the god to the city to prod his fellow Athenians every day to care for virtue and their souls rather than wealth and power—has an inescapably public dimension (Ward, 2009: 503-05). Socrates’ questioning of his fellow Athenians did go on in the marketplace (*agora*) rather than the assembly, but Ward argues, “to the extent that the *agora* is part of the public square, then Socrates’ philosophic activity was private only in the sense that it did not typically take place within the deliberative institutions of the Athenian state” (Ward, 2009: 503). Ward goes further, arguing that Socrates’ account of his role in the assembly during the trial of the generals from Arginusae and his refusal to participate in the arrest of Leon the Salaminian during the rule of the thirty tyrants, is intended to critique the narrow understanding of political life as the holding of public office for the purpose of domination and rule (Ward, 2009: 502). With respect to the trial of the generals in particular, Ward shows that in defending the rule of law against the proposals being supported by the assembly, Socrates indicates that philosophy promotes a form of public reason that supports military necessity against what seems to be the religious furor of the multitude (Ward, 2009: 507, 509). According to Ward, considering Socrates’ account of the trial of the generals, “we would [have to] be open to the possibility that philosophy is not in conflict with, but actually offers active intellectual assistance to the city as it works through the tension between civic commitment and the emotional attachments animating the city’s constituent parts” (Ward, 2009: 509).

Like Zuckert’s reading of the *Apology*, many scholars have read Sophocles’ *Antigone* as portraying the female lead as representative of the private rather than the public sphere. Focussing on G.W.F. Hegel’s reading of the play in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Butler argues that for Hegel Antigone articulates a prepolitical opposition to politics grounded in loyalty to kinship and blood relations, where, “Antigone represents the law of the household gods [...] and [...] Creon represents the law of the state” (Butler, 2000: 2-4; also see Robert, 2010: 418). According to Butler’s characterization of Hegel’s reading, the conflict between Antigone and Creon is resolved when, “kinship [...] give[s] way to state authority as the final arbiter of justice” (Butler, 2000: 4-5). Saxonhouse also roots Antigone firmly in the private sphere, arguing that her invocation of the uncreated and unwritten laws of nature and the gods stand opposed to the decrees of Creon that flow from a human intellect that controls the city (Saxonhouse, 1992: 68-69). Butler, however, like Ward with respect to Socrates, argues that Antigone’s speech is actually quite political, expressing public and not simply private concerns. In justifying her defiance of Creon’s decree by appealing to divine law and the justice which flows from the gods, Antigone, according to Butler, “assumes the voice of the law in committing an act against the law,” and thus, “emerges in her criminality to speak in the name of politics and the law: she

absorbs the very language of the state against which she rebels” (Butler, 2000: 5, 11). Butler also insightfully points out that in burying Polynices against Creon’s command that he go unburied and unmourned, Antigone, “refuses to obey any law that refuses public recognition of her loss” (Butler, 2000: 24).

I agree with Saxonhouse, Mill, Ward and Butler that Socrates and Antigone exercise a freedom of speech that critiques authority and is hence at the heart of democratic politics. Yet, when we turn to the texts of Plato and Sophocles below, we will see that there are also important ways in which Socrates and Antigone differ. In her invocation of the laws and ancient traditions of the gods, grounded in her desire to give the body of her dead brother proper burial, I argue that Antigone would more likely have been one of Socrates’ accusers in the *Apology* rather than his friend and defender. However, despite this opposition and her invocation of divine law and kinship loyalty, I argue that Antigone’s speech, perhaps surprisingly to Mill himself, would be more tolerated and valued in a modern democracy guided by Mill than a democratic polity guided by Socratic reason. Mill, fearing the rise of the tyranny of the majority as political institutions are democratized and the lack of legitimate opposition to public opinion once it is known, argues that “a strong barrier of moral conviction” must be raised against the power of society to impose its beliefs on individuals (Mill, 1974: 73-4). What Mill suggests, in other words, is that in modernity the greatest danger to human flourishing is conformity, and hence what is needed is cultivating the opinion that all opinions are equally valid and encouraged in the search for individuality. With tolerance as the key virtue, Antigone’s speech of defiance, even though grounded in religion and family, would be valued simply for its difference or uniqueness from reigning norms, not necessarily for its “truth,” so to speak. Socrates, on the other hand, would more likely seek to show that Antigone’s pietistic and familial claims are wrong and not constitutive of the political sphere, rather than celebrate them as unique expressions of individuality. Socratic speech, in other words, is reflective of a classical political rationalism that may not be as accommodating as a modern, liberal toleration.

Socrates and the questioning of authority

Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* tells the story of the quest for self-knowledge. This story begins when Socrates, on trial for his life, denies the longstanding public opinion against him reflected in Aristophanes’ comedy *The Clouds*, that he is a wise man who studies things in the heavens and under the earth, makes the weaker speech the stronger, and does not believe in gods (*Apology*, 18b-c, 19c). Socrates then raises the question that one of his reasonable listeners might ask given the opportunity: if this longstanding public opinion is wrong, where did your unique reputation for wisdom come from (*Apology*, 20c-d). In response to this hypothetical question, Socrates proceeds to give an autobiographical account of his quest for self-knowledge, beginning with the oracle given to his friend Chaerephon.

Socrates reports that Chaerephon once went to Delphi and asked the oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The Pythia, according to Socrates, “replied that no one was wiser” (*Apology*, 21a). Socrates’ initial response to the oracle is that the god Apollo has posed a riddle making it hard to understand what the god is saying. Socrates, contrary to the oracle, believes that he is “not at all wise, either much or little” (*Apology*, 21b). To discover the god’s meaning, Socrates sets out to refute the oracle and hence prove the god wrong. Socrates’ methodology in refuting the oracle involves questioning those in Athens reputed to be wise to show that they are in fact wiser than him, thus revealing the error of the god (*Apology*, 21b-c). In addition to the god Apollo himself, Socrates proceeds to question four other authorities within the city: the politicians, the poets, the artisans, and the fathers.

Upon examination the politicians fail miserably to meet Socrates' design. Having questioned one reputed to be wise, Socrates learns that this man is not as wise as he and his followers thought him to be. Socrates then tries to show him that he is not wise. Incurring the hatred of the politician and those present during the examination, Socrates concludes:

I am wiser than this human being. For probably neither of us knows anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do. I *am* likely to be a little bit wiser than he is in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know (*Apology*, 21d).

Socrates is thus wiser than the politicians because he has knowledge of his own ignorance, whereas they do not.

After the politicians Socrates then questions the poets, "those of tragedies [...] and the others, in order that there I would catch myself in the act of being more ignorant than they" (*Apology* 22b). It is possible to speculate that Socrates may have examined Sophocles at this time. The poets, however, like the politicians, fare badly under Socrates' questions. Because the poets "do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of nature and while inspired, like the diviners and those who deliver oracles," they are not as wise as they think they are (*Apology*, 22c). Guided by passion, divine or otherwise, the poets cannot give a rational explanation of what their poems and tragedies mean. Another problem with the poets, according to Socrates, is that because they think they are wise with respect to their poetry, they also believe they are wise in "other things" also, but they are not (*Apology*, 22c). Socrates leaves the poets in the belief that he is wiser than they for the same reason he is wiser than the politicians: unlike the poets and the politicians, at least he knows what he doesn't know, or has knowledge of ignorance.

The artisans are the next authority within Athens that Socrates questions. They fare better than the politicians and the poets, proving wiser than Socrates in one respect: they at least have knowledge of their art or trade (*Apology*, 22d). However, the artisans suffer from the same problem as the poets; because they are wise in their trade, they believe themselves wisest in the "greatest" things (*Apology*, 22d).

Although it is not explicitly stated, Socrates also questions the fathers of Athens (see Baracchi, 2006: 278-79). For instance, Socrates tells us that he questioned a father named Callias as to who had the knowledge to teach his sons the virtue of a human being and citizen. Having "paid more money to sophists than all the others," Callias responds that the sophist Evenus of Paros has such knowledge (*Apology*, 20b). Socrates' low opinion of this answer is indicated when he insists that he lacks the knowledge Evenus is said to have. More subtly, Socrates' questioning of the fathers surfaces when he denies the longstanding slander against him reflected in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Socrates, speaking to the jury, claims that those who spread this slander, "got hold of the many of you from childhood" (*Apology*, 18b). Thus, refuting the slander, Socrates is refuting the fathers of the jurors sitting in judgment of his case. He thus calls into question the wisdom of the older generation. Like the young who imitate him and examine others, Socrates, considering the fathers, "discover[s] a great abundance of human beings who suppose they know something, but know little or nothing" (*Apology*, 23c-d).

After his examination of the politicians, poets and artisans, Socrates, having intended to prove the god wrong, concludes that the god is right. He, Socrates, is the wisest human being,

because he has knowledge of 1) his own ignorance, and 2) that, “really the god is wise, and that in this oracle he is saying that human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (*Apology*, 23a). Thus, as a result of his attempt to refute the oracle, Socrates gains knowledge not of his own ignorance, which he had prior to his investigations, but of universal human ignorance; human wisdom is worthless as only the god is wise.

After addressing this longstanding public opinion concerning him and his philosophic challenges to the city’s authorities, Socrates attempts to refute the present accusation that he corrupts the young and does not believe in the city’s gods but other, new *daimonia* (*Apology*, 24c). Apparently unsuccessful, Socrates is convicted and charged, and Meletus proposes death as the proper penalty (*Apology*, 36a-b). Arguing that he should get what he deserves, and this is something good, Socrates puts forward the incredibly audacious counter-proposal of free meals in the Prytaneum (*Apology*, 36d-e). Yet, he acknowledges that many in the jury may be perplexed that he does not propose exile. Socrates explains that if Athens, with its democracy and freedom of speech, cannot tolerate him no other city in Greece will and it would be no life for a man of his age to be driven from city to city (*Apology*, 37d-e). Socrates then raises the possibility that one of the jurors might ask, “if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking?” (*Apology*, 37e). Socrates is emphatic, however, that he cannot give up his unique way of speaking in order to make exile possible.

The first reason Socrates gives for being unable to cease his philosophizing to make exile possible is that this would be to disobey the god (*Apology*, 38a). Throughout his defense speech Socrates has presented his philosophic activity of questioning the opinions of his fellow Athenians as his obedience to the god Apollo. At one point, Socrates even presents himself as “the gift of the god” to the city (*Apology*, 30e). According to Socrates, “the god seems to have set me upon the city as [a gadfly]: I awaken and persuade and reproach each one of you, and I do not stop setting down everywhere upon you the whole day” (*Apology*, 30e-31a). Claiming that many in the jury will think he is being ironic and dismiss his reference to the god, Socrates gives an alternative explanation for why he will not stop philosophizing. Socrates asserts that it is, “a very great good for a human being—to make speeches every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me conversing and examining both myself and others” (*Apology*, 38a). The goodness of the life of rational inquiry into the self through dialogue with others means that for Socrates, “the unexamined life is not worth living for [human beings]” (*Apology*, 38a).

In arguing that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates seems to be accepting death rather than cease his philosophic way of life. Further indication that Socrates accepts death can be found in his third and final speech to the jury after being given the death sentence. Socrates denies that what has happened to him is a bad thing. Rather, Socrates argues that being dead is a very great good for a human being (*Apology*, 40c). The evidence Socrates gives for this argument is that his *daimon* or divine sign, a voice which always turns him away from something but never forward, did not oppose anything he said that day (*Apology*, 31d, 40c). Moreover, Socrates argues that the afterlife—being dead—is actually a highly desirable state (*Apology*, 40c; but see Leibowitz, 2010: 169, 171). To convince his listeners of the desirability of being dead, Socrates paints two images of the afterlife. In the first, death is envisioned as an endless, dreamless sleep (*Apology*, 40d). If this condition were true, Socrates declares, “death would be a wondrous gain” (*Apology*, 40d). In the second image death is envisioned as a migration of the soul from this world to Hades (*Apology*, 40e). In Hades Socrates’ soul would be able to examine the souls of all the great judges, law-givers, poets, and heroes of the past, discovering “who

among them is wise, and who supposes he is, but is not” (*Apology*, 41b). Of this state Socrates says, “[t]o converse and associate with [these souls] and to examine them there would be inconceivable happiness” (*Apology* 41c; also see Baracchi, 2006: 281-82).

The presentation of Socrates’ philosophic quest for knowledge of self and other as that which can lead to “inconceivable happiness” even in death, suggests that Plato supports Socrates’ belief that “the unexamined life is not worth living for [human beings]” (*Apology*, 38a). The uncompromising search for truth is the only fully human life; it is better to die than to live without it.

Antigone and the burial of Polynices

In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the story of the fate of the house of Oedipus continues. After Oedipus’ death, a quarrel over power-sharing arises between his male heirs, Eteocles and Polynices. Unresolved, Polynices leaves Thebes and returns at the head of an invading Argive army to retake his share in rule. Both brothers die in battle at each other’s hands on the same day, Eteocles defending Thebes and Polynices attacking it. Rule devolves onto Creon, brother of Jocasta, Oedipus’ wife and mother, and uncle to Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone and Ismene.

As the play opens, we learn that Creon’s first act as ruler is to decree that Polynices go unburied and unmourned (*Antigone*, 30-35). Creon explains and justifies his decree, commonly characterized in the play as law, in his first speech to the Chorus, an assembled group of elder Theban citizens (see *Antigone*, 53, 239, 497). In this speech Creon asserts, “our country is our safety,” and that, “whoever places a friend above the good of his own country, he is nothing” (*Antigone*, 203-04, 211). Creon thus implies that it is the city that gives us life and security, and hence is our true parent or real family, meaning that a fellow citizen is closer to us than any biological relative or friend can be. Creon, going further, claims that only when the city, “voyages true on course can we establish friendships, truer than blood itself” (*Antigone*, 212-13). He then reiterates his decree that Eteocles, “who died fighting for Thebes,” will be buried “with a hero’s honors,” whereas Polynices, “who thirsted to drink his kinsmen’s blood and sell the rest to slavery,” shall go unburied, “his corpse carrion for the birds and dogs to tear, an obscenity for the citizens to behold” (*Antigone*, 218-20, 225-26, 229-31). Creon explains at the end of his speech that, “[n]ever at my hands will the traitor be honored above the patriot. But whoever proves his loyalty to the state—I’ll prize that man in death as well as life” (*Antigone*, 231-35). Even after death, it appears, it is important to maintain the political distinction between patriot and traitor. Creon thus invokes the duty of an intense patriotism or dedication to one’s city and its rulers that overrides any possible familial and filial attachments. Later on in the play, when confronted with Antigone’s public justification for her defiance, Creon goes so far as to claim that he will kill his own blood relatives rather than see his decree disobeyed and the distinction between patriot and traitor undermined (*Antigone*, 543-48).

Yet, what about the gods, in obedience to whom Antigone claims she will bury Polynices? Is not this a higher loyalty than the city and its human law? After hearing of the first unseen and hurried burial of Polynices’ corpse from the Sentry, the Chorus asks Creon, “My king [...] could this possibly be the work of the gods?” (*Antigone*, 314-15). Creon, however, angrily responds, “Stop—before you make me choke with anger—the gods! [...] Exactly when did you last see the gods celebrating traitors? Inconceivable?” (*Antigone*, 316-27). For Creon it is ludicrous to think that the gods would care for a traitor or fail to make a distinction between one who died fighting for his city and one who died fighting against it. The gods, Creon indicates, support the city and its rulers, meaning that there can be no distinction between divine law and

human law upon which one can base one's opposition to the city's laws (but see Robert, 2010: 415).

Before Creon's speech we learn that Antigone intends to act against his decree and bury Polynices herself. She initially asks her sister Ismene for help, but Ismene appears to decline (*Antigone*, 44-59, 66-81). Although, as discussed previously, some scholars argue that Ismene actually carries out the first secret burial of Polynices' body, it is agreed that Antigone carries out the second burial (*Antigone*, 469-79). As the play unfolds approximately four reasons are articulated by Antigone for why she acts against Creon's decree in this way, knowing that the penalty is death (*Antigone*, 42). The first is loyalty to family. At the beginning of the play Ismene asks Antigone, "You'd bury him—when a law forbids the city?" Antigone responds, "Yes! He is my brother [...] no one will ever convict me for a traitor" (*Antigone*, 53-56). It appears that for Antigone, who opens the play referring to her sister Ismene as, "[m]y own flesh and blood," loyalty to family or biological relatives is more important than obedience to the city's laws. Thus, in contrast to Creon's claims, Antigone indicates that the family is a human group more important than the city and its political distinction between patriot and traitor, and gives justification to the individual for being at odds with their city. Connected to her loyalty to family is Antigone's loyalty to the gods and their laws that she believes provide her second justification for defying Creon's command (also see Meltzer, 2011: 171, 173, 179-80, 185). After being captured in the act of burying Polynices' body, Antigone is brought before Creon to whom she confirms that she knew of the decree forbidding such burial. In response to Creon's question, "And you still had the gall to break this law?", Antigone says:

Of course I did. It wasn't Zeus, not in the least, who made this proclamation—not to me. Nor did that Justice, dwelling with the gods beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men. Nor did I think your edict had such force that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods, the great unwritten, unshakable traditions. They are alive, not just today or yesterday: they live forever, from the first of time, and no one knows when they first saw the light. These laws, I was not about to break them, not out of fear of some man's wounded pride, and face the retribution of the gods (*Antigone*, 498-511).

Like Socrates who appeals to the god Apollo at Delphi, Antigone makes a pietistic appeal to the gods understood as distinct from the city and its laws to critique and act against the authority of the city. Moreover, for Antigone who, unlike Creon, believes divine law is higher than human law and the source of real justice, the laws of the gods are unwritten and pre-rational, as it were. In this case divine law, commanding burial for all, is indifferent to the political distinction between patriot and traitor and affirms our universal character as human, involving submission to the gods and emotional connection to biological family members; our human sameness seems to take precedence over our citizenship.

The third motive for Antigone's defiance of Creon's law, as discussed above, appears to be her desire for glory or fame. Before doing the deed, Antigone asks Ismene to, "shout it from the rooftops," and to, "leave me to my absurdity, leave me to suffer this—dreadful thing. I will suffer nothing as great as death without glory" (*Antigone*, 100, 111-13). After being caught and sentenced to death by Creon, she pleads with Creon to leave Ismene alive and kill her quickly, claiming, "[y]our moralizing repels me [...] Enough. Give me glory! What greater glory could I win than to give my own brother decent burial?" (*Antigone*, 557-62). Why does Antigone think

she will earn glory for burying Polynices' body? Going back to Ismene's initial attempt to dissuade Antigone out of such an act of defiance, among several things she says, "[r]emember, we are women, we're not born to contend with men. Then too we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands, so we must submit in this, and things still worse" (*Antigone*, 74-77). It would appear, therefore, that Antigone believes she will earn glory in doing and speaking the deed because, despite being a woman meant to serve men, she exercises a manly and independent free will against Creon's wish that Polynices' go unburied.

The final reason for Antigone's defiance comes to the surface near the end of the play. Being led to the cave on the side of the mountain where she is to be entombed and suffer a slow death by starvation, Antigone, in her last speech, re-examines, almost to herself, her motives for her actions. Surprisingly, she claims:

Never, I tell you, if I had been the mother of children
or if my husband died, exposed and rotting—I'd never
have taken this ordeal upon myself, never defied our
people's will. What law, you ask, do I satisfy with what
I say? A husband dead, there might have been another.
A child by another too, if I had lost the first. But mother
and father both lost in the halls of Death, no brother
could ever spring to light again (*Antigone*, 995-1004).

Antigone, facing her death chamber, admits she would not have defied Creon for a husband or children, but only for a brother who cannot be replaced since both parents are dead. Leaving aside the possible incoherence of Antigone's reasoning—her brother Polynices is already dead and she is not saving him or bringing him back to life or getting another brother—this motive seems to be at odds with the first two reasons she gives for defying Creon's decree. With respect to loyalty to biological family, although Polynices is her biological brother what could be closer to a woman in terms of blood than her own children that came out of her own body? Could it be that Antigone does not want to marry her intended, Haemon, Creon's son, and have children with him? Ismene did implore Antigone that as women they would have to submit to things still worse than obeying Creon in not burying Polynices' body. With respect to her second reason for defying Creon, would not piety or obedience to divine law require that a husband and children also be given proper burial if, according to the gods, all human beings deserve this treatment upon death? If Antigone does not act primarily for reasons of family or piety, why does she bury Polynices? Perhaps in the final analysis, as Butler suggests, truly her father's daughter Antigone is driven by her incestuous love for her brother (see Butler, 2000: 16, 18, 23). She would prefer to lie with a dead brother than to marry the living man apparently chosen for her. Evidence for this occurs in opening line of her last speech when she compares her tomb to her bridal chamber, and using very erotic language toward both dead brothers, she says she hopes her death is, "dear to you, my loving brother Eteocles—When you died I washed you with my hands, I dressed you all, I poured the sacred cups across your tombs. But now, Polynices, because I laid your body out as well, this, this is my reward" (*Antigone*, 988-93).

Antigone asks the gods just before her entombment what law of theirs she has transgressed such that it is their pleasure that she suffer death for her deed (*Antigone*, 1013-18). Yet, prior to this both the Chorus and Antigone herself suggest that she chooses or at least accepts death rather than obey Creon's decree, and indicates that death will be a great gain. Thus, when Creon advises the Chorus never to side with those, like Antigone, who disobey his orders, they respond, "only a fool could be in love with death" (*Antigone*, 246). In response to Ismene's

plea to let her die with her, Antigone says, “You chose to live, I chose to die” (*Antigone*, 626). Perhaps most emphatically Antigone asserts during her first speech to Creon defending her actions as obedience to divine law:

Die I must, I’ve known it all my life—how could I keep
from knowing?—even without your death sentence ringing
in my ears. And if I am to die before my time I consider
that a gain. Who on earth, alive in the midst of so much
grief as I, could fail to find his death a rich reward (*Antigone*, 512-18).

Ancient Rationalism, Modern Individuality

In this brief summation of Antigone’s motives we can see important similarities with Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*. Both Antigone and Socrates appeal to divine authority to act against and critique in speech the authorities of their city. Moreover, both Antigone and Socrates appear to accept death as the price of doing so. Yet, despite these important similarities, there are also significant differences between the two. First, unlike Antigone who would rather die than see the corpse of her brother go unburied, Socrates acknowledges that in order to persuade his fellow citizens to behave virtuously has not cared for the things of his family (*Apology*, 31b). Second, Socrates may not actually be as robustly pious or dedicated to the gods as Antigone is. For instance, upon first learning of the oracle given to Chaerephon that no one is wiser than he, Socrates tries to refute the oracle. The means by which Socrates proceeds with his attempted refutation—questioning the reputedly wise men of Athens to show that they are wiser than he—does not appear to be commanded by the god but is rather Socrates’ own device (see Leibowitz, 2010: 64-65, 87, 101, Baracchi, 2006: 277-78, Saxonhouse, 2006: 106-09, Zuckert, 1984: 283-87, 384, and Strauss, 1983: 42, 44; but see Ward, 2009: 504). Also, even if Socrates eventually comes to accept the correctness of the oracle, he does not do so simply on its authority as divine, but only after it passes the test of his own rational inquiry into its truth. Thus, unlike Antigone who appeals to mysterious and non-rational divine commands, for Socrates revelation must be made consistent with reason if the word of the god is to be accepted as true.

We can further question Socrates’ obedience or loyalty to the traditional gods of his city when we consider his direct response to the present accusation of, “not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things” (*Apology*, 24c). Socrates’ primary method of answering this charge is to confuse Meletus and get him to contradict himself by asking, “[do] you mean that I teach that there are some gods [...] not, however, the gods in whom the city believes, but others, [...] Or [do] you mean that I do not believe in gods at all, and that this is what I teach to others” (*Apology*, 26c). Meletus asserts that he means to charge Socrates with the second alternative, that he is an atheist, offering as proof that Socrates believes and teaches to others that the sun and moon are not gods, as most Athenians believe, but stone and earth respectively. Socrates attempts to refute this charge in two ways. First, he claims that it is Anaxagoras who teaches and writes that the sun is stone and the moon is earth, not him (*Apology*, 26d-e). Second, he points out that if, as in Meletus’ written indictment, he believes in other new spiritual things or *daimonia*—children of gods—he must also believe in spirits or gods from whom their children come (*Apology*, 27d-e). Meletus has thus contradicted himself and is incoherent in his charge. It is important to note, however, that Socrates never argues in this exchange with Meletus that Anaxagoras is wrong in teaching that the sun and moon are not gods, but simply asserts that Anaxagoras is the source of this opinion. Moreover, Socrates later characterizes the *daimonian* referred to by Meletus in his indictment as a voice that has come to him since childhood that, when it speaks, always turns him away from something he is about to

do but never forward (*Apology*, 31d). If we do not believe that Socrates has actually introduced a new god into the city with his *daimonian*, we can suspect from this exchange with Meletus that Socrates does not in fact believe in the gods in whom the city believes. Antigone, therefore, who appeals to such gods to act against and critique the city's ruler, would more likely be one of Socrates' accusers at his trial rather than a defender.

Further indication that Socrates does not believe in the gods in whom his fellow citizens and Antigone appear to believe surfaces in Socrates' account of his actions during the trial of the generals who led the naval battle at Arginusae. In an effort to explain why he has not actively sought public office and to illustrate that he fears injustice more than death, Socrates harkens back to the one instance in which he served on the council as one of the 50 prytanies chosen by lot from his tribe Antiochus, who were responsible for administering to and chairing the Assembly. This single instance of official public service coincided with, "the time when you wanted to try as a body the ten generals who had failed to pick up the survivors of the naval battle. This was illegal, as you all recognized later" (*Apology*, 32b). Socrates here refers to the actions by those commanding the Athenian fleet at the battle of Arginusae in 406 B.C., and the reaction of the Athenian public to the military measures taken. After winning a major victory over Spartan and allied forces, the generals in command split the Athenian fleet, taking the bulk of their ships to chase and hopefully destroy the Spartan fleet while leaving the remainder to rescue the wounded and retrieve the bodies of the dead from the water (see Ward, 2009: 506). However, a violent storm arose preventing those tasked to do so from rescuing the survivors and the fallen. When the Athenians discovered what had happened they were furious and, stirred up by demagogues, were persuaded to ignore the law guaranteeing every individual their day in court and try the generals as a group, ensuring swift conviction and execution. Socrates now reminds his hearers:

I was the only member of the presiding committee to
oppose your doing something contrary to the laws, and
I voted against it. The orators were ready to prosecute me
And take me away, and your shouts were egging them
on, but I thought I should run any risk on the side of the
law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison
and death, when you were engaged in an unjust course (*Apology*, 32b-c).

Although Socrates does not address directly the motives of the Athenians at the time of the trial and execution of the generals, it is worth considering why they were persuaded to break the law in this instance. Why were the Athenians so angry at the generals? Military considerations could not have been at the root of their anger as the generals had been victorious over the Spartans and the plan to damage or destroy the enemy fleet surely would have served the public good of Athens. If not military considerations it would appear that emotional considerations were fueling the outrage of the Athenian public. More specifically, the actions of the generals after the victory prevented the Athenians from giving their loved ones proper burial; their fathers, sons, husbands and brothers were left in the sea to become food for fish. Not only tearing into the emotional ties between family members, such actions also prevented the Athenians from observing the proper religious rites of burial due to the dead and apparently commanded by the gods. It would appear, therefore, that certain familial and pietistic concerns, centered around the proper behavior toward dead bodies, was the root of Athenian fury (also see Ward, 2009: 507-08).

What does it mean that Socrates did not share this fury, opposing the multitude in his failed attempt to have the generals tried individually? Individual trials would undoubtedly have slowed the process down allowing for calm, rational reflection to eventually replace the passionate fury felt by the Athenians. On a deeper level, it would appear that Socrates, sympathizing with and defending the generals, does not share the anger that his fellow Athenians feel at being denied the ability to give their dead friends and loved ones a proper burial. Socrates, it seems, adheres to a rational commitment to civil law and military necessity against the passionate commitment to blood ties and the pietistic desire to bury the dead in observance of divine law (see Ward, 2009: 508-09). Where would Antigone stand if she were in Athens at this time? Burying Polynices because he is her brother and it is required by the mysterious and timeless laws of the gods, Antigone would no doubt share the fury of the Athenians toward the generals who left the bodies of their loved ones in the water as food for fish. Moreover, in preventing proper burial of the dead, the generals, defended by Socrates, act toward the Athenians, even if more justified in doing so, as Creon acts toward Antigone. Thus, even if, at bottom, Antigone's incestuous love may be at the root of her actions, in being denied the ability to bury the body of her brother Antigone would still more likely be an accuser of Socrates rather than his defender.

Despite this possible tension between Socrates and Antigone and in an alternative to Mill's own reading of Socratic dialectics, Antigone, I believe, would more likely find a home in a modern, liberal democracy infused with the principles of Mill than Socrates would. If we recall, Mill's chief concern is the social tyranny or enforced conformity imposed by public opinion on individuals as institutions are increasingly democratized. Given this threat Mill advocates and defends a near absolute freedom of speech that will ground innovative and unique ways of thinking and living. Tolerance, or the treating of all opinions as equally valid, becomes the key virtue as individuality is promoted against society's attempt to impose its beliefs and codes of conduct on its members. In this sense, even though she appeals to familial and religious conceptions of the good, Antigone's actions and speech in defiance of Creon and her incestuous desires for her brother would be embraced and celebrated in a "Millian" democracy as expressions of individuality against reigning norms (also see Sjöholm, 2004: 108).

Is Socratic philosophy, although premised on the freedom of speech, about the search for individuality, as in Mill? Or, is it more properly about the search for truth? It would appear that the latter is the case, as Socratic questioning seems to aim not simply at ensuring that one's opinions are unique and one's own, but rather that they come closer to approximating the truth than they did before. For instance, in the *Apology* when Socrates questions the politicians, poets and artisans, he is not simply trying to show them and his fellow Athenians that all opinions are equally valid but rather that some opinions are wrong; the politicians, poets and artisans do not know what they think they know. Again, when Socrates indicates that one should fear doing injustice more than death, he does not seem uncertain about the truth of this opinion. Finally, Socrates asserts to the jury that the trial and judicial murder of the generals at Arginusae was simply wrong and should not have happened, not that it was a valuable expression of their own unique understanding of justice. For Socrates, the desire to bury the bodies of the dead stemming from passion for our loved ones and pietistic concern for divine law, when appropriate needs to be subordinated to the rationalism of military necessity. Socrates, in other words, exercises a classical rationalism that seeks to show erroneous opinions as erroneous, or perhaps would reveal Antigone's concern for Polynices' dead body as misguided and not properly constitutive of the public sphere.

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