

Moral Dilemmas in Greek Tragedies: a Discussion of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and Sophokles's *Antigone* ⁽¹⁾

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1. Introduction

In Anglo-Saxon philosophy lately there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in the subject of moral dilemmas, and much of the discussion has centred around a small number of now-classic examples. Two famous dilemmatic situations are those described in the *Agamemnon* and the *Antigone*. The dilemmas are quite different in the two plays, and in exploring them I hope to shed some light on what we mean by a dilemma, and how one might be able to deal with the different dilemmas. As such my discussion is not only about how Agamemnon, Antigone and Creon deal with their respective dilemmas, but indeed how anybody might handle the same situation.

I should point out right away that this will be a philosophical rather than a literary analysis; what interests me is a situation that is not peculiar either to ancient Greek society or to literature, but rather, something which might be faced in our society in the twentieth century. As such I will not discuss, unless directly relevant to my argument, the secondary characters, the plot, the author's intentions, let alone the vast world of Greek society, ethics and religious practise. Whenever such details do creep in, they must be seen as purely contingent and adaptable to other times and places. For example, it is sometimes held that we cannot really 'believe' in the Greek tragedies anymore since we lack the theological underpinnings on which so much explanatory power depended. However, the whims of the Homeric Gods can easily be re-interpreted as sheer luck ⁽²⁾ in the *Agamemnon*, while in the *Antigone* the Gods do not really figure at all.

After a brief theoretical examination of the different types of dilemmas, I will first discuss the *Agamemnon*, for the situation described is simpler than in the *Antigone*. But I hope to compare many features of the two plays throughout the discussion. Ultimately what I shall try to do is make the dilemma *intelligible*. It is tempting to see Agamemnon's situation, for example, as the mere cruelty of capricious Gods or simply as bad luck; what he needs to do, we might think, is to grit his teeth, make the decision and then get on with his life and not dwell too much on a painful episode. What I would like to show is that the dilemma can reveal certain crucial

information about the decision-maker (i) to us readers-spectators, (ii) to other characters in the play who witness, or are implicated by, the incident, (iii) as well as, and perhaps most importantly, to the protagonist himself or herself. Only through a dilemma is the character forced to acknowledge his own priorities, the 'price' he puts on certain values relative to other values, and the consequences that his value-system will have on the relationships to other people and institutions and the responsibilities inherent in such relationships. Ideally, the protagonist will acquire wisdom from the dilemma and the way he handles it.

2. The nature of moral dilemmas

While I perhaps should have considered half a dozen plays, since there are at least as many recognisable types of moral dilemmas, limitations of space will only allow me to do justice to two. Nevertheless, I felt it important to choose more than one, since the comparative aspect of dilemmas is crucial to understanding how to deal with them.

One important and trivial question to settle right away is whether a dilemma can actually be *solved*, since, paradoxically, if a choice has to be made in a dilemmatic situation, this very choice would seem to dissolve the dilemma. There are two ways around this. The first is to speak not of the perspective of the agent, who may very well not see himself as being in a dilemma (which indeed is the case with Agamemnon, Antigone and Creon) but of the perspective of the reader-spectator. *We* may see the situation as a little more complicated when imagining ourselves hesitating before such a choice. The second way around the paradox is to adopt a careful definition of 'dilemma'. Christopher Gowans (3), for example, prefers the term "inescapable moral wrongdoing," to stress that even if the choice is clear, the dilemmatic aspect is the fact that even a good person is effectively forced to commit a wrong.

A good way to start would be with MacIntyre's classification of dilemmas, featuring his distinction between the three types of *genuine* and two types of merely *apparent* dilemmas. In each case he describes how things appear from the standpoint of the agent involved.

1. Role responsibility:

"Someone -- a morally serious person -- who, having assumed or been assigned the responsibilities of more than one social role... discovers that to discharge the responsibilities of one will prevent him or her from discharging those of the other.(4)"

This corresponds to the classic notion of 'my station and its duties', where

my station could be a particular job (with a specific job description), a status such as parent or child (with a customary, looser set of duties), larger responsibilities associated with public office, the informal duties that come with fame and influence etc. For our purposes, Creon is a public official with a duty to promote the interest of the city he runs and the citizens who inhabit it. Agamemnon is a military leader responsible for his troops and for the prestige of his country, and indeed that of his family. Antigone's familial station is narrower, perhaps, but no less important to her. Notice that such stations can be entered voluntarily (politician) or can be thrust upon one (family).

2. *Generally-accepted norms*

"[Such norms] involve inescapable failure by some morally serious person, not in doing what role-responsibilities require, but in doing what generally-accepted norms for human beings as such, independently of their roles, require.(5)"

This involves such things as the conventions of keeping promises, repaying debts, trust in friendship or business etc. Here the dilemma arises from the heterogeneity and apparent incommensurability of the relevant norms. Actions which preserve confidentiality might threaten those precepts which forbid bringing avoidable harm upon the innocent; actions which avoid such harm will violate the norms which enjoin trustworthiness. This could be seen as a narrower version of the *freely-entered* 'station' typical of the first category. Rather than commit oneself to a whole list of duties associated with a particular job, one commits oneself to a single duty in the form of a promise. As such one could speak of a dilemma as being a co-instantiation of incompatible responsibilities to two different entities, either a concrete person or institution (representing concrete persons, e.g. Agamemnon's army), each of whom has a legitimate claim corresponding to that responsibility; one such claim will have to be frustrated.

3. *Alternative ideals of character*

"Someone is compelled by his or her analysis of what is required for supreme excellence of some kind... to conclude that at least for him or herself a ruthless single-mindedness is indispensable. But he or she also finds good reasons to conclude that such ruthlessness precludes the development of the qualities needed in a good friend or for compassion toward the needy.(6)"

This third category is particularly relevant to our second play, since Antigone could be accused of making a moral fetish (7) out of her duty to her dead brother at the expense of her genuine affection, at least at first, for her living sister Ismene. Similarly, Creon, to uphold the law, is

essentially willing to sacrifice (in his eyes) one member of his family after another. For each character the pursuit of their standard of excellence is partially constitutive of who they conceive themselves to be, and so such a pursuit cannot be simply abandoned when it seems to threaten relationships. This austere priority when dealing with this kind of dilemma, I will argue, results in a character that is defective in a very specific way.

2.1. *What moral dilemmas are not*

What these three types of example have in common, according to MacIntyre, differentiates them from two kinds of case, which have not always been clearly separate in the philosophical literature:

1. An everyday conflict of duties: my plans to attend a friend's concert conflict with my duty to correct and return a student's paper on time. There are always strategies available for managing or resolving such conflicts, either through compensation (I go to another of the friend's concerts) or compromise (I finish all the student's papers but am thus able to attend only half the concert) or apology (to the neglected party). This type of conflict is different because it is *foreseeable*, and therefore the agent can be blamed for allowing herself to end up in it. It is therefore morally important to minimise the occurrence of such conflicts and to become skilled in managing them. Importantly however, *no amount of skill* will allow one to avoid or manage the three types of dilemmas mentioned above; as such, it is not *our fault* if we find ourselves in a genuine dilemma.

2. One popular example in the recent literature about dilemmas involves two people drowning while I, standing on the riverbank, can only save one. If I cannot save both, the logic goes, I am forced to choose, but lack relevant criteria. And yet if I am required to attempt to save both, it is obvious that I must fail. But MacIntyre sees no dilemma at all. If there are no relevant differences, then it does not matter which I decide to save first: my moral obligation is to save *one of them* (by, say, first tossing a coin) and, if possible, to return to save the other. If there is a relevant difference between the two (for example, one of them is my wife), then there is no dilemma either.

However, it would be quite inappropriate to toss a coin to resolve any of the first three types of dilemmas. For in each case the decision seems to concern *me* much more closely. My station, for example, may be an integral part of how I see myself, and my particular choice in the event of irreconcilable conflict may very well change the way I see myself and make decisions in the future. When contemplating whom to save first in the lake, the case is more detached from the contemplating agent.

2.2. *The importance of regret, remorse or guilt* (8)

It should be noted in passing that there is much disagreement in the literature about the nature of moral dilemmas, indeed, about whether they exist at all. Conee (9) thinks they do not, and Sinnott-Armstrong (10) believes that although they exist, it need not be morally wrong to violate (i.e. be forced to violate) one of the dilemmatic requirements, and therefore it need not be appropriate to feel guilt. The advocates of monist theories such as Kant (11) and Mill (12) simply denied that dilemmas could occur at all. The problem of the apparent dilemma was usually the result of an either culpable or mitigating deficiency in the agent's knowledge, since, by their definition of morality, there could never be inconsistent, unrankable requirements placed upon a rational agent at a single moment.

If any of these critics are right, then anybody who finds themselves in any of the three types of dilemmas simply *misunderstands* his or her situation in some crucial way. It will be part of the purpose of this paper to examine whether the dilemmas of Antigone and Agamemnon are truly insoluble. But we must be careful. When dealing with specific examples from literature or history, it is often very easy to add conditions that allow one to defuse the dilemma, usually by offering some sort of opportunity for compromise or compensation (13). What the above critics claim, however, is that moral dilemmas are not even *conceptually* possible, for they would threaten the fabric of one or another moral theory, and could also threaten the underlying pre-supposition of moral realism. However -- and here's another purpose of this essay -- I believe the intuitive existence of moral dilemmas can *legitimately* threaten unified moral theories by reminding us that the moral life is sometimes just too damn complicated to be captured in a tidy system. The examples of Antigone and Agamemnon cannot be rejected as easily as the theorist would like.

Finally, it should be stressed that I am only discussing *moral* dilemmas, that is to say, dilemmas that must be dealt with one way or another if the agent is to *act* one way or another. Thus they are altogether different in kind from scientific or factual dilemmas, where one's agency is not engaged: the worst that can happen is that one adopts a false belief (14). This means that the peculiar moral experience of guilt and remorse is alien to factual deliberation, although of course a mistaken belief in a matter of non-moral fact may have moral consequences, which, if foreseen, could then constitute one horn of a moral dilemma.

3. Agamemnon

For the purposes of this essay, I will first present the barest outline of the

dilemma by considering only the relevant section of the plot and its constituent characters. More details will then be brought in as necessary when considering possible consequences, as will details about Greek culture and society that might perhaps explain a certain viewpoint. My contention remains, however, that with a minimum of modification of the details, these dilemmas are just as common and conceivable in this day and age, and do not intrinsically require any common beliefs in, say, Homeric Gods or martial valour to work.

The first choral ode of the play tells how a Greek naval expedition has been ordered by Zeus himself (55-62) (15) against the city of Troy to avenge the kidnapping of Helen by Paris (16). Agamemnon, son of Atreus, joint king of Argos, leads the expedition, and takes his daughter Iphigenia along with him. The goddess Artemis, however, is angry for unspecified reasons (17), and has becalmed the 1000-ship expedition at Aulis, out to sea. Not only will this prevent the fulfilment of Zeus's command (18), but there will eventually be problems with food and water (188-9) for the large marine army. The prophet Calchas (19), on Agamemnon's ship, divines that the only remedy for the situation is the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter to placate the goddess. The alternative is a slow death by starvation for everyone in the expedition (20). After deliberation, Agamemnon indeed has her sacrificed. Here is the crucial passage:

Then the elder king [Agamemnon] spake and said: "Hard is my fate to refuse obedience, and hard, if I must slay my child, the glory of my home, and at the altar-side stain with streams of a virgin's blood a father's hand. Which of these courses is not fraught with ill? How can I become a deserter to my fleet and fail my allies in arms? For that they should with passionate eagerness crave a sacrifice to lull the winds -- even a virgin's blood -- stands within their right. May it be for the best."

But when he had donned the yoke of Necessity, with veering of spirit, impious, unholy, unsanctified, from that hour his purpose shifted to resolve that deed of uttermost audacity. For mankind is emboldened by wretched delusion, counsellor of ill, primal source of woe. So then he hardened his heart to sacrifice his daughter that he might prosper a war waged to avenge a woman, and as an offering for the voyaging of a fleet! (205-226)

We must be careful about seeking full motivational explanations from the gods, for notice that Agamemnon has no desire to blame them for anything, however little he understands their will. In fact, he does not even mention Zeus's command to punish Troy, but only stresses the horror of the proposed sacrifice (21).

3.1. Assumptions and consequences

Discussions of moral dilemmas make several important assumptions about the situation and its participants, which we can address by looking directly at Agamemnon. Edwards begins his article with the following questions:

"Can we think of him as having a free choice between viable alternatives? If so, is it a choice between alternatives both of which are disastrous? Or has he no free choice, and does Zeus, or Necessity, force him to choose one way, and then later punish him for so doing? Is he *guilty* of anything, and if so, what? If he in fact makes a choice, and it leads to his death, is it because of his misjudgement, his *hamartia*, his personality, his folly (22), the guilt he inherited from his father? Is he a devout man, subordinating his feelings to undertake a mission ordered by his god? A patriot, sacrificing his daughter for the good of his country? Does Aeschylus even realise he is posing a problem? (23)"

Such questions are important to understand the nature of Agamemnon's specific dilemma, and to what degree he can be said to be free and therefore responsible for the consequences of his choice (24). Our first reaction is that Agamemnon is simply unlucky to have found himself between the wishes of two competing gods; we might think that he should see himself as the unwilling instrument of their feud, but that the result is morally the *same* as if Artemis herself had struck Iphigenia down without human involvement. The Chorus, however, while accepting her death as a "yoke of Necessity," also proceeds to *blame* Agamemnon for the sacrifice (25). They even call Agamemnon's state of mind "impious, impure, unholy" (219) -- because Greek emotive language exploited to the full the assumption that what is offensive to the speaker, or to man in general, is also offensive to the gods. And yet the crime was committed *for* the gods, for Artemis directly, and for Zeus indirectly (i.e. that the expedition might proceed) (26). This seems incompatible. But we have to look carefully at (i) the nature and the genesis of the "yoke" (does the necessity govern the choice of *one* of the options, or the actual *choice* to be made?) and also at (ii) what exactly the Chorus finds blameworthy in the conduct of their chief.

One thing is certain, that Agamemnon, as far as we know a hitherto blameless man and loving father, is not responsible for finding himself in the situation, and hence it cannot be reduced to MacIntyre's first *non*-dilemmatic situation. Secondly, we can see that the sacrifice of Iphigenia is indeed preferable with a view to Agamemnon's sense of self as primarily a military commander, to the reliably-anticipated consequences to the expedition and to the impiety of failing Zeus. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Agamemnon could rationally have chosen any other way. But both

courses involve him in inescapable moral wrongdoing (27).

However, Agamemnon must not be seen as a mere puppet; he is allowed to deliberate and to choose, he knows what he is doing, he is aware of all relevant aspects of the situation (except perhaps of the reason for Artemis's anger), and he is not being physically compelled or personally threatened. But he is under necessity insofar as his alternatives include no very desirable options. As such there does not appear to be any incompatibility between choice and necessity here.

Agamemnon's first reaction is anger and grief (203-4). His subsequent description (206-13) shows that he is fully aware of all the relevant consequences, but more importantly, already shows him *leaning* one way rather than the other (the rhetorical question "how can I become a deserter...?").

Nussbaum compares this situation so far (28) to the plight of Abraham, divinely ordered to sacrifice his son Isaac. If we ignore the impression we get of the cruel, vainglorious gods in both Agamemnon's and the biblical stories, and the whole question of the reliability of the source of the order (how does one recognise a divine command?), the comparison is valid up to a point: a good man is ordered to kill his own innocent child or incur the heavier guilt of disobedience and impiety. But here the comparison ends, for Abraham clearly attempted to fulfil the order only with the greatest horror and reluctance. Whereas in the *Agamemnon*, the Chorus describes the situation: "holding no seer at fault, bending to the adverse blasts of fortune" (186-8). Agamemnon does not blame either prophet or gods, but inwardly begins to co-operate with necessity, *arranging his feelings* with his fortune. It is a masterpiece of self-deception, typical of the toughest soldiers who must face the danger, carnage, and utter senselessness of war on a regular basis.

Instead of speaking of his pain and revulsion to himself or others, he talks about the rights of his soldiers to her death: "For that they should with passionate eagerness carve a sacrifice to lull the winds -- even a virgin's blood -- stands within their right" (214-217). How far is this self-deception, and how far has natural fatherly feeling been smothered? Whatever the extent, his attitude toward the decision itself seems to have changed *with the making of it*. Instead of thinking about the evil that he must commit, he hopes it turns out "for the best," as though he had genuinely resolved the conflict and justified the crime he is about to commit. And if it is right to obey the gods (both Zeus and Artemis), then it is right to *want* to obey them, and even to yearn for it with "passionate eagerness." The Chorus blames Agamemnon no such much for committing the necessary deed, but for changing his thoughts and passions with "uttermost audacity" (225). He

had to see her as a sacrificial beast, commanding his officer to lift her up "as it were a kid" (232) onto the altar and to stop her mouth with a "bit" (239). He simply does not see what the Chorus sees. Never do we hear the king utter a word of regret or painful memory. Nussbaum clearly thinks this reflects badly on Agamemnon's character, and that we the audience are also invited by the Chorus to condemn him -- not for his deed, but for his reactions.

3.2. *The cultivation of responsiveness*

Nussbaum brings up another interesting point concerning the *memory* of the good person who has been forced to commit wrong:

"Even if an agent comes to the dilemma with good general principles, the case does not present itself with labels written on it, indicating its salient features. To pick these out, he must interpret it; and since often the relevant features emerge distinctly only through memory and projection of a more complicated kind, he will have to use his imagination as well as perception. (29)"

As Nussbaum goes on to stress, Agamemnon, to lessen the Chorus's blame, would have to realise, when faced with the choice, all the consequences of each different option in the dilemma: this will involve a deep understanding of his own pluralistic theology and the price of disobedience (assuming reliably intelligible divine instructions), and the possibility of mutually-contradictory instructions. At the same time, Agamemnon would have to allow himself to really see his daughter as such, rather than the sacrificial goat that some querulous god has demanded. Most importantly, after the act, Agamemnon would have to remember the act itself as the murder of his daughter and not the destruction of an animal. If the Ancient Mariner was able to suspend the dead albatross on his neck, then Agamemnon should be able to buckle under the weight of his memories of what he has done, in the form of her face, her trailing yellow robes, the cries of 'Father', and the look of accusation in the silent eyes (228-247).

Above all, Agamemnon must allow himself to feel that he has committed wrong, and not be deceived by a choice well made (30). Though he must, to a certain extent, *act* like a resolute person, he will feel the deepest remorse and make every effort through the rest of his life to make reparations.

In tragedy, as in life, the experience of conflict could be said to have two *functions*, two ways of being rendered intelligible: it reveals to others and to the agent himself aspects of what the agent's character has been *all along*. It can also mark the beginning of a period of self-discovery and change,

both voluntary and involuntary. This has traditionally been one explanation for the caprice of the gods in bringing down misfortune on the undeserving. The condition, as described above, is that one really be allowed to experience them, that the shock will break through the interpretative curtain; Agamemnon of course knows that it is his daughter lying before him, in the sense that he can truthfully answer questions about her, but he does not seem to know that it is the *distinct person* who is Iphigenia, that it is *his* daughter, that she is just as much alive and individual as he. An honest effort to do justice to all aspects of a hard case, seeing and feeling it in all its conflicting many-sidedness, could enrich future deliberative efforts. The Chorus invites us to believe that Agamemnon denies himself this opportunity for growth out of fear of the pain that it would involve; but with the ensuing self-knowledge, he could reach a new understanding of piety and of the love he owes to the rest of his family:

"But even in trouble, bringing memory of pain, droppeth o'er the mind in sleep, so to men in their despite cometh wisdom. With constraint, methinks, cometh the grace of the powers divine enthroned upon their awful seats." (182-185) (31)

However, if Agamemnon is deficient in this sensitivity, in this capacity for understanding, in imagination, surely that deficiency is itself a piece of bad luck. How can we share the Chorus's condemnation? The assumption is that emotional responses are not subject to any sort of control and cannot form a character that an agent deliberately forms. But this would be to deny that an agent cannot cultivate responsiveness by working through the memory of the event. Nussbaum writes:

"[the Chorus's] patient work, even years later, on the story... reminds us that responsive attention to these complexities is a job that practical rationality can, and should, undertake to perform; and that this job of rationality claims more from the agent than the exercise of reason and intellect, narrowly conceived... We see... a two-way interchange of illumination and cultivation working between emotions and thoughts: we see feelings prepared by memory and deliberation, learning brought about through *pathos*. (At the same time, we ourselves, if we are good spectators, will find this complex interaction in our own responses).(32)"

The Kantian assumption that only the intellect and the will are appropriate objects for ethical assessment now begins to impoverish and distort our deeper understanding of tragedy.

3.3. *Agamemnon and moral dilemmas*

What light does the tragedy of Agamemnon throw on our understanding of

moral dilemmas? It would be worthwhile considering Sartre at this point (33), for whom the moral of such hard cases is that it is useless for an agent to form an ordered system of ethical principles and to try and live by that system. Since principles clash, it is no good trying to live by principles at all, since to be bound in general to what cannot guide one in extreme cases is foolish *mauvaise foi*. If Agamemnon were a Sartrean hero, he would, at the moment of perceiving the conflict and understanding it as unresolvable, dissociate himself altogether from both of the competing principles, and regard himself as entirely, radically free to make an unregretted choice. Although this approach is correct in regarding the choice as a key moment in Agamemnon's life, the solution seems arbitrary and strange, like the tossing of the coin advocated for the second type of MacIntyre's *non-dilemmas* (the two people drowning).

The standard response to existentialist invention is that it attempts to deny continuity in character, and this is neither possible nor commendable. As Nussbaum puts it:

"All our judgements about the appropriateness of certain kinds of emotional and imaginative activity in our two cases has presupposed a background of ongoing character and value commitments (the agent's own, or, where that proves deficient, the Chorus's) against which action and response can be assessed. The very possibility of moral assessment seems here to be bound up to the idea of on-going character. We do not know how we would talk about an agent who keeps improvising himself from moment to moment and was never willing to identify himself with any general commitments.(34)"

It is not even clear, in Agamemnon's dilemmatic situation, that his duties as military commander and as father (and, as human being, the duty to respect innocent life) do offer him bad guidance. The guidance they offer is that he should feel bound to each of two contingently incompatible actions. He will be forced to go against his commitment, but "insofar as such thoughts and feelings both express and further strengthen a virtuous and committed character, the guidance seems to be good (35)." Again, Nussbaum's main point is the educational aspect of moral dilemmas. Agamemnon ultimately does not need any help to decide what to do; but he does need help in deciding how to feel.

I tend to sympathise with Nussbaum's analysis, but I think she simplifies things a little, and is too quick to blame, partly because there would be no *point* to blame. In the context of a slightly different argument over Agamemnon's *rationality*, Williams wrote that it would be "a glib moralist who said, as some sort of criticism, that he must be irrational to lie awake at night. (36)" Similarly, it would be a glib moralist who tried to enter the

situation and admonish Agamemnon for his lack of *outward* feeling. In one sense, that is all we have to go by; in another, we have insufficient *warrant* to speculate about the inner feelings, especially those of a military commander. I would suggest that the text allows enough room for a skilled actor to flavour his apparently cold words with a hint of desperate irony, to show that he is acting out the part in an almost blind frenzy and rage, as if to throw the deed back in the faces of the playwright and the gods. Indeed, Nussbaum also seems to accept the possibility that when he suppresses his initially accurate judgements, „his shift may be inspired by horror at the situation confronting him, which he can endure in no other way than to deny that it exists.(37)" But it is Bernard Williams again, who I think sums up a very plausible alternative judgement:

„One way we might understand this is as a man's being driven mad with extremity. Equally (and indeed in no conflict with that) we might see the rage as something that was necessary to Agamemnon if he was to do this thing at all. This is not a text that invites us very far into psychological interpretation, but still less does it beckon us towards blame. The Chorus is laying before us what happened, and this horror, the father's fury, is part of it. A sense of the work requires a suspension of moral comment at this point, and so does a sense of the event that it describes.(38)"

4. Antigone

It is now time to consider the second of our dilemmatic situations from Greek drama, quite different from that in which Agamemnon found himself. The latter, through no fault of his own, was forced by feuding gods to choose a woeful alternative in order to save his fleet and fulfil his divine mission. Whatever his reaction to the choice and the murder of his daughter, the situation seems to us, the audience, to warrant revulsion, remorse, painful memory and a life-long desire to amend what will always remain, in the eyes of the agent himself, a crime.

That dilemma involves one person with two conflicting options, both of which are painful. The contrast with the situation of Antigone is clear, for in this case there are two people (Antigone and Creon) who represent two incompatible *specific* commitments which form part of two larger, otherwise often compatible *systems* of values. The other difference is the attitude that we the audience are invited to have toward the two titular heroes. Are the two characters to represent polar moral opposites, or is there a sense in which they are both wrong? Both can be accused of having too narrow a vision of moral duty, of elevating their perceived duty into a moral fetish. Agamemnon's situation offered no easy way out, since his decision concerned irreparable damage done to one person or to many. Antigone's,

on the other hand, is marked by what some of us would perceive as an irrational stubbornness that ultimately concerns nobody's life except her own. We may admire her for a supererogatory gesture, but would not blame her for failing to perform it. I propose looking at the dramatic situation, then at Creon's dilemma, then at Antigone's.

4.1. *The situation in Antigone*

Oedipus's two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, ended up on opposite sides of a near-civil war surrounding Thebes, which resulted in both their deaths. Creon, the new king of Thebes and uncle to the two brothers and to Antigone, orders a full state burial for Eteocles who was defending the city, and condemns Polynices to the fate of traitors (39): his body is to be left to rot, unburied, outside the city gates. Antigone and Ismene are both sisters to the two brothers, and therefore nieces to Creon. Antigone resolves to bury the corpse of Polynices symbolically, by sprinkling earth on it. She is caught by the guards and sentenced to death by Creon for breaking the law, a sentence that she was well aware of. At first glance, then, we have two incompatible desires: to bury a brother, in accordance with religious and family custom and fraternal sentiment, and to prevent the burial of a traitor, in accordance with prudential principles of government -- a government which Antigone considers legitimate and whose laws she acknowledges, and a adroitly-preserved civic order from which she benefits.

In the *Antigone* there are no gods directly relevant to the dilemmatic situation, although they are frequently invoked by both protagonists in partial justification of their priorities. It is a drama that could easily be imagined taking place today, between the people and the institutions they support and represent (40). In addition, *Antigone* portrays a more protracted conflict than in *Agamemnon*; there is plenty of room for softening and relenting before Creon is forced to make good his threat by Antigone's firmness of purpose. We shall see two different attempts to close off the prospect of conflict and tension by *simplifying* the structure of the agent's commitments; we shall examine what motivates such attempts, and what becomes of them within the context of the tragic crisis. Finally, as with *Agamemnon*, we shall ask whether practical wisdom is to be gained, if nothing else, from such a conflict.

Just as the situation in the *Agamemnon* did not appear like a classic dilemma, since the hero knew what he had to do, so in the *Antigone*, the two protagonists are so clear in their minds, have their priorities so carefully ordered, that they do not *experience* their dilemmas with the same urgency as we the audience. Antigone and Creon can approach problems of choice with unusual confidence and stability, and seem unusually safe from the

ravages of luck. As such, it is again difficult, at first, to speak of choice. Both Creon and Antigone have freedom to do what they want, of course, but they only want one thing, and the alternatives (not attempting to bury her brother, or, making an exception to a city edict) are seen as too much of a sacrifice to the values with which they firmly identify. And yet each, we are invited to see, is somehow defective in vision. Each has omitted recognitions, denied claims, called situations by names that are not their most relevant or truest names.

4.2. Creon's dilemma

Creon believes that the most important thing a man can have is practical wisdom (1050-1), and that the healthy mind is devoted to civic safety and civic well-being (41); he is either the consummate unimaginative bureaucrat, or, less charitably, the Machiavellian tyrant, seeking to justify his maintenance of power with moral labels. As such he is able to forestall confusion and inconsistency by a 'healthy' rearrangement of evaluations, so that positive ethical terms apply uniquely to those who promote, by effort or opinion, the good of the city, which Creon has established as the single intrinsic good. Antigone's badness becomes civic disloyalty, and Eteocles's goodness is his honourable defence of his native town (42). To give burial to the city's enemy would be, he argues, to give equal share to the good and the bad (520). As Santirocco points out in a discussion of the concept of justice:

"At different times and in different contexts the word can signify custom or usage, law-enforcing authority, penalty and of course 'justice' as a higher standard. Its precise semantic range is wide and fluctuating. Thus tragedy becomes, in a sense, a matter of vocabulary. In the *Antigone*, the characters appeal to justice, but each defines it differently, so that the conflict is not so much between justice and injustice as between one sort of justice and another... . Sophokles's vision... is austere. Although he acknowledges the existence of an ideal of justice, he exposes the tensions and ambiguities inherent in it and thereby questions whether that ideal can ever be realised in the lives of men. (43)"

Civic order and prospering is the highest good, to which, Creon believes, even the gods would aspire. As such he feels justified in defying religious custom to promote this good, in "spurning the due of Heaven" (743). "Why would the gods honour someone who came to destroy their temples and their laws?" (287) "Do you see the gods honouring bad people? It cannot be" (289-90).

In addition to words like 'justice', 'respect' and the 'good', Creon also shifts the meanings of 'love' (44) and 'piety' (Nussbaum 57). We would expect

him to have numerous obligations to members of his family, for example to his son Haemon, to his nephew's body lying outside the city gates, and to his niece Antigone herself. And yet he is determined, *for the sake of consistency*, to conceal from deliberative view the claims of both familial and affective ties, at least insofar as they clash with civic interest. So "an enemy is never a *philos*, not even when he dies" (522). So when Creon is presented with the claims of piety and *philos*, he cannot recognise them and sees not a dilemma but merely insurrection. Any other description would be misguided. Like Mill's utilitarian, every object or concept of value can be coined in a single currency and then easily measured against each other. It does not contain conflicts within itself, and can recognise no rival source of value and commitment.

The play is partly about Creon's discovery of a more complicated deliberative world; his supreme end, once properly conceived, is not so simple as he thought it, and it fails to do justice, finally, to all his concerns. The clearest rupture is Haemon's presumably trustworthy statement that the people support Antigone (733), even though it is still possible that her actions threaten the city unbeknownst to its inhabitants. As Nussbaum puts it:

"A city is a complex whole, composed of individuals and families, with all its disparate, messy, often conflicting concerns that individuals and families have, including their religious practises, their concern for the burial of kin. A plan that makes the city the supreme good cannot so easily deny the intrinsic value of the religious goods that are valued by the people who compose it"(45).

In the end, it is his own recalcitrant humanity that Creon fails to subdue. He is forced to acknowledge his love for his son and to see its separate value:

Oh errors of my ill-reasoning reason... Oh, how impoverished my deliberations were... You have died, [my son], you have gone away, through my bad deliberations, not your own" (1261-9) (46).

4.3. *Antigone's dilemma*

While most commentators agree that Creon is morally defective and superficial, the situation with Antigone and her dilemma is more controversial. There has been a lamentable tendency to see her in saintly terms, dying for truth, resisting tyranny (47). However, it seems more plausible to suggest that, like Creon, Antigone *also* engages in a ruthless simplification of the world of value in order to effectively eliminate conflicting obligations. And like Creon, she can be blamed for narrowness of vision, even though she still remains morally superior to Creon. (48)

Antigone's prime concern is for her family and the duties she sees as

incumbent upon her, whether she likes it or not; and she is Ismene's sister, Antigone reminds her, whether she [Ismene] likes it or not (45). Although the 'family' as a value-concept is not so all-encompassing as the 'city' (fewer value words can be realigned), Antigone's effort can easily be seen as a direct parallel to Creon's. For her, there is no 'enemy', 'traitor to the state' or 'friend to the state' among her brothers, there are merely *philoï*, to whom she is related and therefore bound. If one listened only to Antigone, one would not know that a war had nearly taken place, or that Thebes, *her* city and the location of all she claims to hold dear, had been directly attacked by the brother she is now trying to sanctify through burial. What is important, however, is that this duty does *not* seem to be backed by natural sentiment; she loves her duties more than she does her brothers: "I shall lie with him as a loved one with a loved one," (73) she proclaims, without any sense of closeness, personal memory or particularity animating her speech (49). Ismene, the one person to whom she might be drawn after the deaths of their two siblings, is treated from the beginning with remote coldness, and is even called "enemy" (93) when she takes the 'wrong' stand on matters of pious obligation. Whereas it is Ismene whom we see weeping "sister-loving tears", and who asks, with an intensity of feeling that never animates her sister's piety: "what life is worth living for me, bereft of you?" (548) (50).

Duty to the family dead is therefore the supreme law, passion and value, and Antigone structures her entire life and her vision of the world in accordance with this simple, self-contained system of duties. Indeed, she is just as obsessed about what she conceives as justice as is Creon about what *he* conceives of justice, only she claims to equate it with the gods and their desires as manifest in religious customs. It reflects the central question of Plato's *Euthyphro*: is an act good because it is pious, or is it pious because it is good? For Creon, civic justice governs the gods themselves; for Antigone, the customs sponsored by the gods define goodness and justice, to which the sublunary world must succumb. Even within her system, Antigone is ready to handle any conflicts with her fixed priority ordering to dictate her choice without regret. So all-consuming is her interest that one wonders what she has been doing to entertain herself before her brothers went to war.

I am not so sure about Antigone's attempts to justify her act by appeal to religious custom. Like Creon, she claims allegiance to Zeus when convenient (e.g. 950) while considering her general commitments to be themselves above the gods. The very expression of her devotion is suspect: "Zeus did not decree this, as far as I am concerned" (450). Antigone is a 'maker of her own law' (*autonomos*, 821) and her defiance is a 'self-invented passion' (*autognotos orga*, 875). If we ask of Antigone the same question she asked of herself: "What divine justice have I

disobeyed?" (921), we must answer: "none". But as Santirocco explains:

"in a very real sense this is the wrong question. Although Antigone's actions coincide with the requirements of *diké* (i.e. that the dead should not go unburied) they are not the result of any conscious concern for *diké*. Antigone's motive was personal, and this, in some way, qualifies her response since it leads her to ignore the claims of society just as dramatically as Creon ignores the claims of the gods."
(51)

Like Creon, she comes to recognise the complexity of life as her own demise grows imminent. She comes to see that the service of the dead requires the *polis*, that her own religious aims cannot be fulfilled without civic institutions. In her last speeches, she laments not her imminent death, but rather, her isolation from her community of offspring, from friends and mourners. How is it, therefore, that we can admire Antigone over Creon, if they are so similar? Nussbaum gives three reasons: first, in the world of the play, it seems clear that Antigone's choice is preferable to Creon's.

"The dishonour to civic values and the inherent prudential risk is far less radical than the violation of religious custom involved in Creon's act. Antigone shows a deeper understanding of the community and its values when she argues that the obligation to bury the dead is an unwritten law, which cannot be set aside by the decree of a particular ruler." (52)

This view will be shared by the audience and emerge even despite the criticism of Antigone's single-mindedness. Second, Antigone's pursuit of virtue is her own, and involves nobody else and commits her to abusing no other person (although Ismene might justifiably expect better treatment). Third, and perhaps most importantly, Antigone is ready to risk and sacrifice her ends in a way that is not possible for Creon. There is room in Antigone's system for a genuine sacrifice *within* the defence of piety. She dies recanting nothing.

4.4. The importance of the Antigone

The main dramatic dilemma is the conflict between the two of them. Interestingly, the conflict is highly personal. Creon's 'victory' in destroying Antigone does not represent a victory for civic duty, and Antigone's relative 'victory' in *our* eyes does *not* represent the defeat of the city by the family. And yet it is hard to speak of a real conflict, since the two speak such different languages (with similar terminology, to be sure) that they never really *engage*, and never really listen. As Blundell points out, Sophokles could have achieved far more interaction and dramatic excitement in two ways: Creon's case could certainly have been much stronger, since

Classical Greek sympathies would definitely be with him and his devotion to the city. On the other hand, Antigone could have tried to persuade him on his own terms that, for example, both brothers had been responsible for the war. Rather, the two remain narrow and self-absorbed (53).

The simplistic hagiography of modern versions of the play does detract from an important dramatic question. We, the spectators, can imagine ourselves in Antigone's predicament, and ask: "are there any values I personally would be willing to die for in conditions of sufficient adversity?" In modern western democratic society, such adversity has been scarce since the system allows dissent to be voiced and indeed, if voiced by sufficient numbers, heeded. But the question of adversity remains relevant in two contexts: first, in questions of integrity and compromise in the face of any form of authority making specific rules perceived as unjust: a teacher, boss or local politician. Second, in more extreme political regimes as many will remember in Europe this century. Anouilh was not particularly original in seeing the parallels with defiance to the Nazi occupation of France, but in portraying his heroine as a guiding ideal he lost not only much of the subtlety of Sophokles's dramatic portrayal, he also failed to capture fully the individual experience during those terrible years in France. While it is true that many emerged from the occupation with a definite feeling of moral stigma for what they themselves perceived as craven collaboration with an unambiguous enemy, the choice that French individuals faced on a daily basis was mostly a moral and not a moral-prudential dilemma.

A moral-prudential dilemma involves one moral horn and one prudential horn. In such dilemmas, one knows what one morally ought to do, but one is afraid or one does not consider the risks to be worth taking. This need not be cowardice: it does not seem blameworthy for me to refrain from jumping in to save somebody when I cannot swim; although I will feel awful if I therefore have to watch them drown. No doubt I will feel a similar stigma as the self-described collaborator for not having fulfilled what I myself considered a moral requirement: to resist the enemy by all means at my disposal. Antigone's conflict with Creon is not really a moral-prudential dilemma, and it would not be interesting if it were. Rather, the two horns of her dilemma are both moral requirements, and I as an audience member have to decide -- regardless of the way Antigone resolves it -- what I would do in her situation. Similarly, Sartre's student faces a moral dilemma in that he cannot decide between two moral requirements he himself acknowledges: filial duty versus patriotic duty. This is far more characteristic of the dilemmas typical of occupation.

The important point is that Antigone is not a revolutionary. She does not attempt to incite or persuade others to lobby the government, she does not write passionate letters to the media about her grievances, she does not

even bother to really engage her own sister in rational argument about the point of dissent. She is utterly alone, and well recognises the *futility* of her gesture in terms of long-term change, and Ismene is careful to explain this to her -- in the same way resistance to a military occupier is also likely to be futile. Were it not for Creon's wife's and son's support for her desperate act with a likewise desperate protest, it is unlikely that Creon would have been moved to reconsider his policy, or his way of viewing Antigone's transgression.

Again, though, it is one thing to be provoked into thoughts of integrity and resistance, and quite another to see the *Antigone* purely in such terms. We have no strong reason to assume that Creon's rule is otherwise unjust, and that Antigone suffers unduly. If anything, her special position as relative to the king might give her privileges. We never hear her complain of other constraints on her desires, beyond the widespread and unquestioned patriarchal thinking of a woman's place and role in society. In one sense, Antigone is not a very effective role model when portrayed as an unswerving saint because her behaviour is too demanding for the rest of us, who have ambitions and hobbies that we take delight in, who have relationships with people whom we care about and who depend on us, and who, ultimately, only have one life to lead. Antigone did not have to live with her choice after she had made it in the way Agamemnon did, she did not have to *become* a person capable of killing his own daughter. As such it may be said that although Antigone loses her life at the end, she did not have much *else* to lose.

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Note

(1) I wish to thank Christine Tappolet, and two anonymous reviewers from *Etica e politica*, who all commented on earlier versions of this paper. If I have not adopted all their recommendations it should not be interpreted as ingratitude. [back](#)

(2) One very obvious feature of moral dilemmas, if genuine, is the element of luck. This will be particularly relevant to our discussion of the *Agamemnon*, since, in Aeschylus's version, Agamemnon finds himself in the dilemmatic situation through no fault of his own. This is counter-intuitive, since we like to believe that luck should play no role in morality, that moral responsibility should be ascribed only for consciously chosen acts. Nevertheless, the cruel truth is that mere circumstances will often bring out the worst. Drunk driving is punishable in most countries by a fine or the temporary annulment of the driver's license. Manslaughter as a result of negligent drunk driving is a much more serious offence usually resulting in incarceration. And yet the difference is only a question of whether a pedestrian happens to stray into the path of the car. See the classic article of Williams, B., 'Moral luck' in his: *Problems of the Self*, CUP, 1973. This article also prompted Nussbaum's more extensive treatment

from which I will be quoting at length. [back](#)

(3) Gowans, C., *Innocence Lost*, OUP, 1994, introduction. [back](#)

(4) MacIntyre p. 368 [back](#)

(5) Ibid. [back](#)

(6) Ibid. [back](#)

(7) I borrow the term from Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, OUP, 1994, Ch. 3, which features a discussion of 'internalism' and 'externalism' between moral beliefs and motivation. The internalist will be motivated directly by his beliefs of what is right and wrong, whereas an externalist will choose to act because of his more fundamental desire to act rightly. Smith calls this fetishist, because intuitively, one should be motivated, say, to be generous by one's concern (i.e. beliefs) for the other person's plight, and not by a desire to do the right thing, as instantiated on this particular occasion by an act which could be described as generous. [back](#)

(8) These three terms are often conflated in the literature. 'Regret' does not usually involve a belief in personal wrongdoing or involvement; one may regret the war in Bosnia, or one may regret a misjudgement that resulted in a loss of time and energy. By 'guilt' I mean a personal sensation of blameworthy culpability; I do not mean causal or legal responsibility. This seems to be the same thing as 'remorse' in the context of discussions of moral dilemmas. There is much disagreement over whether the subjective experience of remorse indicates the presence of a moral dilemma; there may be other explanations for the experience, or it may be considered irrational. As we shall see, I consider it not only rational, but a key feature of dilemmas, and indeed of the moral 'health' of the agent. [back](#)

(9) Conee, E., 'Against moral dilemmas', in: Gowans, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 243 [back](#)

(10) Sinnott-Armstrong, W., *Moral Dilemmas*, Basil Blackwell, 1988. [back](#)

(11) Even though Kant put forward three formulations of the categorical imperative, he insisted that they were merely different formulations of the same basic principle. As such, there could never be dilemmas if a rational agent legislated for himself, since principles of reason cannot be internally inconsistent. These leads, however, to such counter-intuitive imperatives as telling the truth even to a would-be murderer seeking a friend whom you are hiding.

One could argue that Kant's belief in treating persons as ends rather than means might involve a stress on one's responsibilities to persons, responsibilities which could then conflict. However, Kant's understanding of

the moral law has the effect of significantly displacing persons as direct objects of moral concern, and this is exactly which I shall criticise of Antigone's behaviour. [back](#)

(12) Utilitarianism, by postulating a supreme value (happiness, desire-satisfaction, interest-satisfaction, or welfare) denies the possibility of moral dilemmas since there will always be a single best course to promoting the greatest value. There are, of course, *empirical* or technical difficulties in discovering that single best course since we cannot imagine all the consequences of the respective contemplated actions. Consequentialism, of which utilitarianism is but a narrow form, would admit certain kinds of moral dilemmas based on a value pluralism to be promoted among the consequences. [back](#)

(13) Maybe Agamemnon could sacrifice a goat to Artemis instead of his daughter, for example. These suggestions, however, get us nowhere. The non-believer in moral dilemmas can continue to add more possibilities for a resolution by compromise or compensation, while the believer can stipulate his own further conditions that preserve the dilemma of his example. [back](#)

(14) Examples of scientific dilemmas are legion: could Copernicus and Ptolemy both be right? Could Darwin and the Bible? Could Einstein and Newton? These three *explanatory* dilemmas are interesting because the first case eventually resulted in the full rejection of one account; the second in the partial rejection of one account (partial in the sense that there have been attempts to reconcile them, as well as stubborn 'irrational' refusal to reject the scientifically unpopular account); and finally the third dilemma, where the two accounts have been shown to be compatible, one reducible into the other, so that each is empirically valid for a different scale of description. [back](#)

(15) Whenever numbers are given alone in brackets, reference should be understood to have been made to whichever of the two works, the *Agamemnon* or the *Antigone*, is under discussion. [back](#)

(16) It is important to stress that he is fighting in a just cause, and a cause that he could not desert without the most serious impiety. [back](#)

(17) In other versions of the same story, the goddess's wrath was caused by a previous offence of Agamemnon's (Nussbaum p. 34). This omission in Aeschylus's version is important for it absolves Agamemnon of responsibility for finding himself in the unforeseeable dilemma; the necessity to choose to commit a crime comes upon him from without. As for the real reasons of her anger, some critics have suggested her general pro-Trojan sympathies, others the future offences against the innocents at Troy -- she being the protector of the young. In 'The Guilt of Agamemnon',

Lloyd-Jones points out that in the *Iliad* and in the whole poetical tradition, Artemis, together with her brother Apollo, appears as a loyal partisan of Troy against the invaders. Perhaps she realises she cannot stop an expedition sponsored by Zeus himself; but she can at least punish its leader, and, more ingeniously, make his hand and will the instrument of his own punishment. [back](#)

(18) He would become a *liponaus* (212), a 'deserter' in a very pejorative, shameful sense. [back](#)

(19) Standing between the laymen and the mysterious intentions of the gods, the seer is often far from trustworthy, let alone reliable, especially in such matters as human sacrifice. Perhaps Agamemnon could have waited for a few days to check that the wind wouldn't pick up without any bloodshed. It does not really affect our discussion, however, since what is important is that *Agamemnon's troops* believed the seer, believed in the justness of their cause, and that all that was involved was the life of a non-combatant before a battle where many more were soon to be slain to fulfil the prophecy of a god's instructions. The classical audience would not even have paused to ask questions about reliability. [back](#)

(20) It is not without interest that in another drama about the same story, *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides, Agamemnon seriously considers cancelling the expedition and returning to Greece with his fleet. [back](#)

(21) If Zeus ordered the expedition, and is himself more powerful than Artemis, why could he not prevent her? Are we to assume some heavenly politics whereby Artemis was to be allowed her way in exchange for some other favour, such as her support of the assault on Troy? And similarly, why does Zeus allow Agamemnon eventually to come to a bad end at the hands of his wife and her lover? Is it for having consented to his daughter's sacrifice? Or perhaps he had the wrong *attitude* to the sacrifice, both before and after? Perhaps he overdid it when attacking Troy, for example, by sacking the temples? Or perhaps it is in retribution for the wrongs committed by his father, Atreus. Luckily, these questions do not bear directly on our thesis, and it is doubtful whether such a contrived riddle can be 'solved' by our modern eyes without a vast understanding of Greek lore and legend. We must also remember that it is a work of theatre, not of logic. And yet the dilemma that is central to the play is part of the play's world of justice, guilt and retribution. [back](#)

(22) Lloyd-Jones in his 1962 article argues that Zeus punishes him for his father Atreus's guilt by sending Ate to take away his wits and making him choose to sacrifice his daughter. At the same time, this would placate Artemis and allow the expedition to proceed as Zeus desires. [back](#)

(23) Edwards p. 17, italics original. [back](#)

(24) Importantly, Edwards (p. 18) warns us against „questioning the poet in a way he could not have understood, or bringing in logical ideas of fate and free will which only developed later," but suggests that we may nevertheless „attempt to define the areas of vagueness and inconsistency." Dover (p. 60) suggests that the lack of clarity about the springs of human action is intended by the poet, who regards such actions as inherently irrational, though this does not absolve the agents from responsibility for them. [back](#)

(25) And Agamemnon eventually comes to a bad end at the hand of his wife, Clytemnestra, to avenge the sacrifice. [back](#)

(26) Although, as Dover points out (p. 67), these could have been understood as emotional expletives by an enraged chorus, rather than an evaluation by theologians. [back](#)

(27) As such, we may find no solace in a *better* course of action, nor in the *certainty* of having chosen the best course:

„One peculiarity of [extreme cases of moral conflict] is that the notion of ‘acting for the best’ may very well lose its content. Agamemnon at Aulis may have said ‘May it be well’, but he is neither convinced nor convincing. The agonies that a man will experience after acting in full consciousness of such a situation are not to be traced to a persistent doubt that he may not have chosen the better thing; but, for instance, to a clear conviction that he has not done the better thing because there was no better thing to be done.... Rational men no doubt pointed out to Agamemnon his responsibilities as a commander, the many people involved, the considerations of honour, and so forth. If he accepted all this, and acted accordingly: it would seem a glib moralist who said, as some sort of criticism, that he must be irrational to lie awake at night, having killed his daughter. And he lies awake, not because of a doubt, but because of a certainty." (Williams, B. ‘Ethical consistency’ in his: *Problems of the Self*, CUP, 1973, p. 173) [back](#)

(28) Nussbaum, p. 35 [back](#)

(29) Nussbaum p. 42 [back](#)

(30) Williams (p. 135) thinks that I and Nussbaum have put the cart before the horse: „rather than telling him what he should have felt, we should be prepared to learn what was involved in getting through it." [back](#)

(31) However, it could work the other way; such extreme situations may exacerbate an already self-delusional character into simplifying future

dilemmas even more, making him hard and insensitive not only to the needs of others, but to his own. [back](#)

(32) Nussbaum p. 47. [back](#)

(33) Sartre's famous dilemma was that faced by a student of his during the French occupation, between remaining to tend his ailing mother or leaving for England to fight for the French resistance. Because no way could be found to resolve the dilemma either according to the obligations to one's family or according to obligations to defend one's country, one's only response could be to 'invent' one's own morality, boldly making the choice, regretting nothing, and becoming a new person. What is not clear is whether the invention is to be counselled only for such hard cases or, more in keeping with Sartre's existentialist agenda, to invent morality anew every day. See Sartre, J.-P., *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris, 1946. One of the anonymous referees of this paper correctly pointed out that Sartrean existentialism is *atheist*, and in this respect the student's dilemma is very different than that of Agamemnon, in that the latter would certainly not have felt much radical freedom in the presence of capricious deities. [back](#)

(34) Nussbaum p. 48. [back](#)

(35) Ibid. [back](#)

(36) See note 27. [back](#)

(37) Nussbaum, note 53., p. 433. [back](#)

(38) Williams p. 134. [back](#)

(39) Notice that treason is considered far worse than being a mere enemy. As Nussbaum points out (p. 55), the corpses of enemies may be returned to their kin for honourable burial. Under Attic law, burial of traitors within Attic territory was strictly forbidden. As such, Creon must uphold the law as a visible deterrent to others, for neglecting it would subvert civic values as a whole ('the law') and encourage further treachery. However, the law did not prevent the dead traitor's family from burying it *far* from the city; and as the last surviving male family member, Creon even has a specific responsibility to do so. It is thus a very strange and impious decree to forbid the burial from taking place *anywhere*. The audience is very much aware, right from the start, that Creon is stretching the law for the sake of practical governing. [back](#)

(40) Some aspects of the present liberalism-communitarianism debate are relevant to our discussion, and to our view of its two protagonists. Creon's devotion to civic duty, for example, would be seen as much more natural by

a Greek audience. At the same time, Antigone's apparent devotion to family and family honour are also typically Greek. As Mendus points out:

„... the tragic nature of Antigone's situation is evident only if we assume (as [modern] liberalism does not) that individuals are not merely selves, but also occupiers of roles... that the very nature of tragedy presupposes a non-liberal conception of human nature as dependent, not controlling, ... [and] that the concept of community plays a central role in generating and explaining the tragedy." (Mendus p. 54) [back](#)

(41) On this see Gellie p. 33. [back](#)

(42) On this see Blundell p. 115ff. [back](#)

(43) Santirocco p. 181. [back](#)

(44) By which should be understood both *eros* (sexual passion) and *philia*, which includes family ties (with or without felt affection) and love of friends. It is worth noting in the context of the play that *philia* imposes valid obligations even in the absence of felt affections (Nussbaum, note. 18, p. 438). [back](#)

(45) Nussbaum p. 60. [back](#)

(46) The suicide of his wife Eurydice ('wide-justice') confirms and intensifies the bitter learning. [back](#)

(47) Annouilh's adaptation can be understood as a symbol for the French resistance to the German occupation in 1940-44. As such Antigone is painted in a very positive light. Kaufmann (*Tragedy and Philosophy*, Doubleday, 1968, p. 216) sees „no blemish" on her, and says „our sympathies are not divided between her and Creon." Lloyd-Jones (*The Justice of Zeus* 116), is very much a fan of Antigone, who „is contrasted with a sister in no way cowardly or contemptible, but not cast in the same heroic mould." She is motivated by „natural indignation" and „loyalty to a male member of her own family." He quotes Perrotta, who writes:

„that terrible heroine is by no means the woman of love that some have wished to see in her; she is an indomitable character who can be admired and loved only by those who have a sense of the heroic." (Perrotta, G., *Sofokle*, Messina-Florence, 1935)

This is an interesting quotation because it can be interpreted two ways. Nussbaum refers to the same quotation and uses it to reveal a *negative* feature in Antigone -- „She is exclusively animated by her passion for the duties of family religion, and she has no tenderness for individuals." (Nussbaum, note 41, p. 439-40) [back](#)

(48) It might be tempting to lurch toward the opposite extreme, and denigrate her efforts as arising from questionable motivations, ranging from a death instinct to necrophilia and incest to self-glorification and a sulking martyr complex. But it is dangerous to import psychological models (talk of unconscious motives etc.) and Christian morality (monotheism, a just and merciful god, moral responsibility for moral choices, either in this world or the next, forgiveness of sins) into the ancient world, and, in any case, the problem is less one of psychological analysis than of dramatic focus: in the course of the action one reason for Antigone's behaviour is made to stand out and is consistently developed by Sophokles on several levels. [back](#)

(49) Kaufmann believes that she „loves Polynices with all her heart, has little desire to go on living now that he is dead, and is scarcely tempted by Haimon's wish to marry her. Why should a normal love life, marriage, and children fill her with hope? ... Further reflection on Antigone's motives will confirm that her decision is not prompted by any theory." (Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. 219-20). In general, his opinions are clear: „Antigone is great-souled in the sense of Aristotle's *megalopsychia*, and her ethos is that of the heroic age." It is difficult for me to stress how much I disagree with this shallow reading. [back](#)

(50) Nussbaum points out another contrasting example in the character of Hecuba in Euripides's *Trojan Women*, as she mourns the corpse of her grandchild, where each part of the loved body conjures up a new memory of shared affection. (Nussbaum, note 41, p. 440) [back](#)

(51) Santirocco p. 190. [back](#)

(52) Nussbaum p. 66. [back](#)

(53) Blundell p. 14. [back](#)