



Natural Law Thought and Political Philosophy Criticism in the Ancient Greek Tragedy *Antigone*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, providing an in-depth analysis of the natural law thought and political philosophy criticism embedded in its core conflict. The study points out that *Antigone's* act of defying Creon's edict to bury her brother Polynieces, based on "sacred duty" and "eternal heavenly laws," constitutes the harbinger of ancient Greek "natural law" thought. Its core lies in the supra-positive norms established by blood ethics and sacred traditions. The intense confrontation between *Antigone* and Creon in the play is interpreted as a classic paradigmatic conflict between the Natural Law School (appealing to divine laws and fundamental ethics) and Legal Positivism (emphasizing the supremacy of the ruler's decrees). The article further reveals that the root of Creon's tragedy lies in the alienation of power—placing his personal will above divine will, tradition, and family ethics, ultimately leading to the disintegration of the city-state's order. The study also reviews the academic controversy regarding whether *Antigone's* actions truly belong to the category of "natural law," and emphasizes that the core value of the play lies in its eternal questioning of the legitimacy of ruling authority and its powerful warning against autocratic politics, making it a timeless field for jurisprudential thought experiments.

Subject Areas

History

Keywords

Sophocles, *Antigone*, Natural Law

1. Introduction: The Master of Ancient Greek Tragedy, Sophocles, and His Era

Sophocles (c. 496-406 BC) was one of the three great ancient Greek tragic poets and possessed remarkable artistic talent. His primary achievement throughout his life was playwriting. Aristophanes praised him as “complete in life, flawless after death.” Due to his immense achievements and honors, he was revered by the Athenians as the “singer of world harmony and peace.” Yet, no writer has depicted human suffering and conflict, as well as the choices made amidst such suffering and conflict, as profoundly and truthfully as he did. It is said that he wrote a total of 123 plays and won prizes 24 times. The seven surviving complete tragedies are *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

He believed both in the supreme power of gods and fate, and demanded that humans possess an independent spirit and be responsible for their own actions. This is a characteristic of the ideological consciousness during the prosperous period of Athenian democratic politics. He shaped character images based on his ideals; even when under the grasp of fate, they did not lose their independent and strong character. Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles believed that fate was no longer a specific god, but an abstract concept.

***Antigone*: The Tragic Interweaving of Fate, Kingship, and Ethics**

Antigone is one of Sophocles’ “Theban plays.” In terms of plot development, it is the last of the trilogy, but it was the earliest to be written (442 BC, preceding *Oedipus at Colonus* in 411 BC and *Oedipus Rex* in 431 BC). The protagonist, Antigone, is the daughter of the famous figure in Greek mythology, Oedipus. The background of this work is also based on the unfortunate experiences and curse of Oedipus.

The core narrative of this play is constructed upon the ethical and political crisis triggered by the transfer of Oedipus’s royal power. After Oedipus abdicated the throne, the dispute over inheritance rights among his offspring triggered a deep fission in the city-state’s order. The eldest son, Eteocles, died heroically as the guardian of the city-state, while the second son, Polynices, based on the legal principle of blood inheritance, launched a coup by forming an external military alliance and ultimately perished on the battlefield. The ruler, Creon, implemented differential funeral regulations for the two after the war: honoring Eteocles with a state funeral, but punishing Polynices by exposing his corpse and issuing an edict forbidding burial under penalty of death. This decree directly triggered the ultimate confrontation between “Heavenly Law” and “Human Law.”

As the sister of Polynices, Antigone resolutely violated the ban to bury her brother based on the sacred duty of kinship, thereby triggering a violent conflict of dual authorities between the divine and the king. Creon, as the embodiment of the city-state’s sovereignty, saw the absoluteness of his decrees deconstructed under the warning of the prophet Tiresias’s oracle—the blind prophet revealed the severe consequences of overstepping the sacred order through divine prophecies.

When the ruling authority attempted remedial measures, an irreversible chain of tragedy had already been forged: Antigone committed suicide in the prison; her fiancé Haemon (Creon's son) died for love amidst the tearing apart of ethical emotions and political loyalty; subsequently, Eurydice (Creon's wife) exacted a double revenge (for her offspring and family ethics), ultimately completing the deconstructive judgment on the kingship. This series of deaths constitutes a typical paradigm of classical tragedy, highlighting Sophocles' political philosophy criticism—how the absolute will of power of a ruler alienates into a destructive force, ultimately leading to the total disintegration of political and religious order, family ethics, and individual lives.

2. Antigone's Burial of Her Brother as a "Sacred Duty"—The Harbinger of Greek "Natural Law"

The interpretation of natural law in *Antigone* can be traced back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Aristotle's explanation of the origin of the concept of natural law, as well as the view of its special connection with the rule of natural law, has been confirmed by some scholars). The opening of the play constructs the narrative of the natural law spirit through the dialogue between Antigone and Ismene, wherein the differences in ethical cognition already possess the embryonic form of a philosophical proposition [1].

When Ismene falls into the value dilemma between city-state decrees and blood ethics due to the "shame of the father and the death of the brothers," showing submission and anxiety towards the discipline of power, Antigone demonstrates a conscious recognition of "sacred duty" with the absolute statement, "I will do my duty to my brother, and also to you." This duty is not based on the contractual relationship of the city-state community ("human affairs") but is rooted in the responsibility of blood ties—as she declares, the "human feeling" possesses non-constructive characteristics, which is precisely the core feature of unwritten law in natural law theory: it exists independently of human agreements and political authority, residing within the subject's inner moral consciousness [2].

In the climax of the dramatic conflict, the debate between Antigone and Creon constitutes a paradigmatic confrontation between the Natural Law School and Legal Positivism.

When Creon asks, "Do you dare to violate the law?" Antigone replies, "I do; for it was not Zeus who had published me that edict; not such are the laws set among men by the Justice who dwells with the gods below; nor did I deem your edicts so strong, that you, a mortal, could override the unwritten and unyielding statutes of heaven. For their life is not of to-day or yesterday, but from all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth. Not for dread of any man's pride was I to leave them unpunished, and so incur the wrath of heaven."

Antigone defends her violation of the ban based on "divine law." She refers to the responsibility of burying her brother as "eternal and unchanging heavenly laws," which is essentially an appeal to a moral standard that transcends the exist-

ing power order—the belief that certain fundamental ethical obligations (such as the burial of relatives) should override the decrees enacted by rulers.

In contrast, the ban issued by Creon in the name of “city-state authority” essentially equates law with the commands of the ruler—the belief that “legality” depends entirely on the will of those in power (similar to the later political logic of “might makes right”). The “heavenly law” insisted upon by Antigone represents a moral standard that transcends real-world power, believing that the rules of human society should conform to basic human needs (such as the burial of relatives) and sacred traditions.

The conflict between the two not only demonstrates the profound contradiction between real political power and traditional ethical values but also touches upon a fundamental question: What exactly is the foundation of legal authority? Is it the decision of the ruler based on real interests (such as Creon using the order to expose the corpse to maintain ruling stability), or is it rooted in the moral consensus formed by society over a long period (such as the kinship obligations appealed to by Antigone)?

This debate has occurred throughout history: from ancient Greek city-states to modern nations, the tension between power and justice has always been a key clue to understanding political conflicts. The opposition between Creon and Antigone can be seen as a dramatized portrayal of the collision between the expansion of kingship and clan ethics in early civilizations. This passage has been regarded by many successors as a classic in the debate between the Natural Law School and Legal Positivism.

This jurisprudential debate unfolded through dramatic action makes *Antigone* an eternal field of thought experiments for testing the nature of law—just as John Finnis, the founder of contemporary natural law theory, pointed out, “The vitality of natural law is embodied in its guardianship of the ‘basic conditions of human flourishing’ (that is, ‘basic goods’)” [3].

3. Power Alienation and City-State Crisis: Political Philosophy Reflections on Creon’s Tragedy

Through the design of the tragic characters’ fates, Sophocles clearly conveys a value inclination towards the sacred traditions and blood ethics at the source of natural law. Creon’s tragic ending and the “heroic” shaping of Antigone highlight the playwright’s ethical stance: what she guarded at the cost of her life was not just an abstract rule, but the unshakable sacred foundation in ancient Greek civilization—the duty of burying the dead, loyalty to blood ties, and reverence for the contract between gods and men. Through the destructive power of tragedy, Sophocles endows this persistence with a transcendent moral victory: when Creon’s rule disintegrates due to deviating from tradition, Antigone’s death transforms into an eternal confirmation of the community’s value order [4].

This writing bias is closely related to Sophocles’ own living environment. The Sophists, in the debate between nature theory and convention theory, preliminar-

ily expounded the ancient idea of natural law. In the mid-to-late 5th century BC, Greek city-state politics reached a glorious period, and the city-state democratic system developed to its peak, providing a relatively relaxed environment for the emergence of the Sophists and their theories. At that time, there were long-standing expositions on natural law in Athens. Heraclitus said, “All human laws are nourished by the one divine law.” Pericles said in a speech that failing to fulfill such laws would bring recognized disgrace. Therefore, Sophocles’ tragedy essentially identified with the worldview of the general Athenians at that time—being pious to the gods and obeying the will of the gods. Thus, in the end, Creon finally realized that one must never commit the sin of impiety, “No mortal can escape destined disaster.” The principles expounded by the tragedy were first inherited and developed by Greek philosophers, and during the subsequent Hellenistic period, the Stoic school developed and formally pioneered the natural law tradition. Through the development of Cicero and others, the status of natural law was formally confirmed in Roman law. Since then, the natural law tradition has been unceasing. The greatest significance of *Antigone* for today lies in: how to achieve a benign relationship between law and citizens, and how citizens should treat bad laws [5].

However, viewing Creon’s tragedy merely as “the consequences of violating divine law” does not seem to align with a complete understanding of the character of Creon. Creon is described by Sophocles, at least at the beginning, not as a vulgar tyrant, but as a leader of the people. Creon is a legitimate ruler; his authority is acknowledged by all Thebans, and what he insists upon also conforms to the principles of justice prevalent in the city-state.

Creon’s initial principles of justice were indeed based on the city-state, politics, and human law, possessing a certain degree of rationality and merit. However, when he deviated from his understanding of his own principles of justice and stubbornly refused to repent, his tragic ending was perhaps already destined. What led Creon to his ultimate tragedy was not merely the decree to expose the corpse, but also his hysteria when he feared any challenge to his authority appearing: “If she wins this victory, she is the man, not I.” It was also his disregard for the potential influence of the gods in order to maintain his absolute authority: when the Chorus Leader suggested the conjecture that “this matter might be the work of the gods,” Creon immediately retorted fiercely: “Hold your tongue! Before your talk drives me quite out of my mind, and shows that you are old and foolish [6].”

The playwright shaped Creon as a typical microcosm of ancient Greek tyrannical politics—he replaced the consensus of the city-state with his personal will, placing political power above divine oracles and family obligations. This extreme desire for the “supremacy of the king’s law” ultimately made him a victim of power alienation: the ending of being deserted by all implies a warning against the expansion of secular authority.

In the interpretation of *Antigone*, the core political message Sophocles hoped

to convey to the readers of the 5th century BC was to warn his audience of the autocratic crisis that might threaten the established social and political order of 5th-century Athens. Tyranny stems from hubris and the lawless behavior of unrestricted political rulers. When Sophocles wrote this play, he seemed to have already considered such a question: even those democratically elected could implement tyranny, much like the “tyranny of the majority” in 5th-century Athens. It can be said that in *Antigone*, Sophocles was eager to point out that even in a democratic country, the ancient constitution and the rule of law connected with tradition should be respected equally by all, including rulers and the ruled [7].

4. Controversy and Reflection: Re-Examining “Natural Law” in Antigone’s Actions

Aristotle proposed that Sophocles’ *Antigone* is an early example of the application of the concept of natural law in political debate, and Antigone’s resistance is an early source of natural law consciousness, which has been analyzed above. However, there are still some controversies in academia: Did Antigone act according to “natural law”?

The basis for the opponents is that, looking at the entire play, there is no reliable evidence to support this argument; there is no mention of “nature” anywhere in the text, and Antigone does not treat divine law as natural law. In their view, Antigone is actually making an appeal from the king’s legislation to sacred customs, and it is argued that it has long been confused with natural law. The burial of her brother executed by Antigone involves religious and ritual laws, rather than an appeal to nature. Antigone’s disobedience is because family responsibility in the spiritual realm must triumph over secular civic values [8].

Regarding such issues, I believe that a further analysis of Greek divine law is needed. “The Greeks had no authoritative biblical canon, no canon law, no Ten Commandments, no dogma. They had no idea what orthodoxy was. Nor did they have theologians to define the ‘eternal’ and the ‘infinite’ with inviolable definitions; they always expressed or hinted at it.” Combining the actual Greek spirit, I believe that one cannot simply judge that Antigone was opposing the overall justice of the city-state with the family responsibility of burying her brother in accordance with divine law. Only by stepping out of the ideological limitation that “Creon is the public” can we better understand this issue.

“Human law, in terms of its universal objective existence, is the community; in terms of its general activity, it is the male; and in terms of its actual activity, it is the government. The reason why human law exists, moves, and preserves itself is entirely because it eliminates or dissolves the disintegrating tendency of the family guardian gods [9].”

Human law does not dismantle the family, but prevents the divisive forces within the family structure from destroying the social whole. The family is not destroyed, but sublated (*aufgehoben*)—its ethical value is preserved while being integrated into a more universal public order. Therefore, from the sympathy peo-

ple have for Antigone, we can recognize that Creon's atrocity essentially violated the human law's principle of "avoiding the tendency of the family guardian to disintegrate society," because he opposed the burial of the dead returning to the human world (the basis of family existence) to the laws of the city-state. The decree he promulgated was entirely aimed at Antigone, and such a decree cannot be the "unchanging law" recognized by the gods.

From her courageous confession of "going towards death," we see more clearly a political figure saying "no" to tyranny. At the cost of her life, Antigone transformed an individual event belonging to the family domain into a public event, using the blood ethics under divine law to reveal Creon's violation of divine law and the political original sin of alienating royal power [10]. Therefore, I believe that Antigone's actions can still be regarded as a practice under the observance of a higher natural law.

5. Conclusion: An Eternal Field of Thought Experiments

Sophocles' *Antigone* transcends its appearance as an ancient Greek tragedy to become an eternal field of thought experiments, constantly testing the nature of law, morality, and power in human society. The intense conflict between Antigone and Creon in the play not only dramatically presents the ultimate confrontation between "Heavenly Law" and "Human Law" but also profoundly explores how the ruler's will to power alienates into a destructive force, ultimately leading to the total disintegration of political and religious order, family ethics, and individual lives. This classic paradigm makes *Antigone* still possess powerful practical significance thousands of years later, prompting us to reflect on whether the foundation of legal authority is the command of the ruler or the moral consensus rooted in society over a long period. As John Finnis, the founder of contemporary natural law theory, pointed out, "The vitality of natural law is embodied in its guardianship of the 'basic conditions of human flourishing' (that is, 'basic goods')." Therefore, *Antigone* is not only a masterpiece of art but also a living textbook of jurisprudential debate, continuously inspiring future generations to think about justice, good laws, and civic responsibility, making it an inexhaustible treasure trove of thought in the fields of jurisprudence, political science, and even ethics.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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