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Sophists vs. Aristotle in Sophocles's *Antigone*

by Anum Zafar

(Honors English 1101)

Abstract

This essay examines the role of the Sophist philosophy, “man is the measure of all things,” Aristotle’s philosophy of the golden mean and the role of the Olympian divine beings in Sophocles’s tragic play, *Antigone*. The paper analyzes the roles of these very different perspectives in the world of ancient Greece in relation to the statements, actions and the tragic ends of the two main characters in the play: Antigone and Creon. The focus of the paper is how Sophocles uses the different philosophies to make a moral point in his famous piece of literature. The essay concludes with the idea that in this play Sophocles may have been trying to convey to his audience that the philosophy of the golden mean was a good measure for man to follow because man is fallible and is not the measure of all things, but by being a rational human being they can be that measure.

“Sooner or later/ foul is fair, and fair is foul/ to the man the gods will ruin” (696-698). This passage, from the Greek tragedy *Antigone* produced in the year 441 B.C.E. by the famous writer Sophocles, illustrates how unpredictable the Greek deities could be; there were no rules, except those of fate, governing their behavior. The divine beings dealt in any way they saw fit with the humans on earth and were often irrational and impulsive. Over time, this type of belief system was challenged by different philosophies that emerged in response to it, and some of the most important philosophical ideas that came up at the time were those of the Sophists and the idea of Aristotle’s virtue theory. These philosophical theories tried to present a new way of dealing with the volatility of the human world in a way that man could deal with. By presenting the divine beings as impulsive and irrational in this play Sophocles can be argued to examine the differences between Aristotle’s philosophy of the golden mean and the Sophists philosophy that “man is the measure of all things,” and show the audience, through the actions, statements, and tragic resolutions of the main characters, that in a world ruled by unpredictable deities it is best to follow the middle path.

In the world of ancient Greece a new kind of philosophy was emerging, distinct from the previously held polytheist beliefs of the time, and it was that of the Sophists. The Sophist philosophy was very popular with the Greeks during Sophocles’s time, mainly because there was a new need for education due to a number of things connected to the political situation at the time. The need for the Sophists mainly arose because Greece, a small number of city-states at the time, had won the war against the mighty Persian army. Winning the war subsequently brought them into contact with other cultures, and knowledge of new concepts became an important issue. Another significant reason for the rise of the Sophists was because of the new “democratic constitution of Athens, by virtue of which every citizen could aspire to some position in public administration and, with this end in view, the necessity of everyone's developing his personality through culture and education” (“Philosophy”). During that time period” the educational demand was partly for genuine knowledge, but mostly reflected a desire for spurious learning that would lead to political success” (“Sophists”) and because the new constitution gave more liberation to citizens of the state that wanted to seek political posts in government.

The Sophists were not genuine philosophers; rather, they were traveling teachers. They “taught any subject for which there was a popular demand. Topics included rhetoric, politics, grammar, etymology, history, physics, and mathematics” (“Sophists”). The Sophists appeared around 445 B.C.E. and the first of the Sophists is believed to have been Protagoras of Abdera. His well-known statement, “man is the measure of all things, of those that are in so far as they are, and those that are not in so far as they are not,” preserved by Plato, is the underlying principle of the Sophists philosophy (“Philosophy”). The ancient Greeks held a firm belief that their lives were completely ruled by the Olympian deities and the Sophists were one of the first to challenge this belief and instead focus on the human being. Since the divine beings were often irrational and unreliable, the Sophists sought a new way of understanding humanity, one that was not in relation to the divine world. They came up with the proposition that man, not god, was the “measure of all things,” because only man was ruled by rationality. This is an important concept in *Antigone* because the main characters in the play, Antigone and Creon, don’t follow this philosophy. Their disregard for this principle can be seen in the central conflict between Antigone and Creon: Creon will not bury Polyneices, Antigone’s brother, because he considers him to be a traitor to the state of Thebes and Antigone is determined to bury him at all costs because she claims that Hades demands burial for patriots and traitors alike. Both of these characters are extreme in their beliefs and in their actions and that is what leads them to their tragic conclusions.

The philosophy of the Sophists is also extreme in the sense that it alienated the religion that the Greeks believed in and “one of the chief functions of tragedy was to present in concrete form issues that concerned men in their relations with the gods and one another” (Bowra 34). The divine beings were a large part of Sophocles’s play and in ancient Greek society,” and “the traditional belief of the Greeks had been that their cities had received their laws from some divinity, protector of the city, and that good (happiness) consists in conforming one’s life to these laws, accepted as divine and eternal. The Sophists shook this faith to its very roots” (“Philosophy”). The Olympian divine beings, high on the sacred mountain Olympus, were very important to the ancient Greeks even if the divine beings that inhabited it were irrational and often displayed erratic behavior in almost every myth that existed about them. Indeed, the divinities are an important dimension in Sophocles’s play and seem to represent the idea of the inescapable curse. The idea that man was responsible for his actions is a key element in Sophists philosophy and in Sophocles’ work the theme fate verses free will is a constantly reoccurring one. The Greeks were firm believers of fatalism, but in *Antigone* many of the characters seem to be exerting a lot of free will throughout the play. It can be said that “the lesson as well as the art of Sophocles is that man’s fate, though determined by the gods, depends on his actions, and his actions on himself and his circumstances” (Jevons 61). Although the divinities ultimately determine man’s fate, in Sophocles’s play it is man himself that sets that fate into motion by his own actions which are determined by his circumstances, because “choice, action, suffering, and death are the domain of humanity. The gods do not enter it—at least, not in Sophocles” (Whitman 112). Human beings in Sophocles’s plays, compared to that of his contemporaries, are shown in a very different light, not as merely puppets of the divine but individuals that are responsible for their own actions (Jevons 59). A primary example is King Creon; even though Creon is cursed by the divine, he is responsible for the consequences of his actions. Creon seems to be very much on the side of the Sophists, as evident by his resolute, rhetorical question to his son Haemon, “am I to rule this land for other—or myself?” (823). Even though he is completely illogical and irrational, like the divine beings, he still takes measures into his own hands.

Creon’s irrationality goes against everything that is taught by the philosophy of the Sophists and that is what plays such an important part in *Antigone*. The main characters Antigone and Creon completely abandon their rationality and rather, follow their emotions which lead them to stubbornly exert their extreme principles. Although the audience has always sided with Antigone and realized that she is in the right, she has to die in order for this view to be completely accepted and for her to

make her moral point (Knox 38). Her story would not have had the same tragic appeal without her tragic demise. We realize, as audience members, that Antigone's actions are right and approved by divine authority, she is following the "laws/ the gods hold in honor" (91-92) those of burying the dead. While Antigone has the right values and beliefs she follows them in a fit of passion that she maintains to the end. Creon's values and edicts are in the same vein; he also believes in the same sense of extreme loyalty that Antigone clings to. Her very first words in the play are to Ismene, her sister, "my own flesh and blood..." (1) and from the beginning illustrate her intense commitment to her family. Creon also has the same sense of filial fidelity, as he says to his son Haemon that a good son should be a "loyal, unflinching comrade at your side" (745) who obeys the father's will in every way" (714).

The extremist beliefs and actions of the two main characters in the play can be contrasted with that of Ismene and Haemon. These two minor characters can be viewed as foils to Antigone and Creon because they are both calm and rational thinkers and they try to talk Antigone and Creon out of their extreme actions. In the beginning of the play, while they are still serene and sensible characters, Ismene and Haemon represent the rationality that is such an important aspect of Aristotle's virtue theory. The middle path, or the concept of the golden mean, was the central point of Aristotle's ethical theory ("Aristotle"). The mean was a virtue that was "rationally determined, based on the relative merits of the situation" and it was to be found between two extremes, or vices ("Aristotle"). The most common example is that of the virtue of courage. Courage in Aristotle's virtue theory lay between the two vices of cowardliness and foolhardiness; both of these are considered a vice because they are not moderate modes of behavior, but they are two extremes. By applying Aristotle's theory to *Antigone* we can see that the philosophy that "man is the measure of all things" does not really fall through. Man is fallible and as such not the measure for all things, but according to the golden mean theory he can be. By following the middle path humans can be rational beings that can be the measure for all things because the divine beings cannot be expected to be so, and in a world ruled by such beings, humans can persevere by following the middle path, which Creon and Antigone seem to have abandoned. Creon sides more with the extreme philosophy of the Sophists with his belief in absolute control and loyalty to the state. When Haemon tries to tell Creon about the way the citizens feel about his actions he questions him, "am I to rule this land for others-or myself?" (823). Creon does not stick to his original words of consulting with the people, but wants to rule on his own. Antigone also believes in absolute rulership, but for her the absolute rules are those of the divine, "the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions," (506) that she chooses to die for.

The great traditions, that motivate Antigone to do her deed, were an essential part the Greek belief system, since "it was believed by the Greeks that unless a body was buried, literally or symbolically, the soul of the dead man could no find rest in Hades; this explains why such importance is given [by Antigone], to the burial of Polyneices" (Kitto 52). For Antigone, burying her brother is of the utmost importance because she stresses an extreme version of loyalty to her family and the deities that she reveres. Creon also believes in extreme loyalty to the king and the city by his family and all other people. Antigone and Creon have the same values when it comes to their family, but their values differ on certain points. Antigone prioritizes her commitment to her family and the divine laws over those of mortal laws; Creon stresses the importance of family ties and kingship over divine laws and personal commitments. Both of these follow an extreme system of values and through the tragic ending of the Creon and Antigone, Sophocles may have been trying to show that it is best to follow a middle path and that man is not really the measure of all things because man is prone to imperfections just like the divine beings that the Greeks believed in.

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