

The Ethics of Antigone Claudia Hauer

Sophocles' play *Antigone* remains one of the most compelling and oft-performed of the Greek tragedies, and is a regular on common core English class syllabi. Students, who can certainly feel the *Antigone's* timeless power, are asked in class to explore many elements: plot, character, and moral issues, for example. As a graduate student instructor, I was taught to ask 'Who was right, Creon or Antigone?' and let the class divide into groups and proceed debate-style to argue the relative merits of Creon's and Antigone's position. We would never resolve this question, but wear ourselves out in the process and move on to other works, satisfied with the play's elusiveness because it is a great work after all.

When I was at the Air Force Academy, one of my English students told me he was studying Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in his fine arts class, and asked me what I thought. I told him that I liked the music, but found the story frustrating. What distinguishes the good guys from the bad guys? Why is Sarastro good and the Queen of the Night bad? The opera makes no attempt to answer these questions. My answer disappointed the cadet, who looked at me rather pityingly and said "great works are never simple."

True enough. Great works are worth repeated study, but they do need to offer us something coherent each time. Our interpretations can deepen or change, but they need to have meaning for us. Great works are obviously not simple, but they should repay with generosity our effort to understand them.

The play *Antigone* does repay its audience this way, undoubtedly. Antigone's resistance to the tyrannical authority of the state resonates with audiences everywhere. In the opposition between Creon and Antigone we can find the outlines of a timeless and urgent conflict between the laws of the state and the laws of conscience. Such was the French playwright Jean Anouilh's famous restaging of the play in France in 1944, during the Nazi Occupation, as Antigone's rejection of, and Creon's embracing of authority. These are powerful themes and they offer a good 'hook' to get students initially to take up the play.

Yet there are problems with building an interpretation around this opposition between the laws of the conscience and the laws of the state. Both Creon and Antigone say things that contradict any notion of their principled commitment to their purported cause. In Creon's case, this takes the form of wild conspiracy theories. Antigone also undermines our expectation of her universal commitment to the burial of the dead. Lamenting to the Chorus after hearing her death sentence, Antigone says, "Had I had children or their father dead, I'd let them moulder. I should not have chosen in such a case to cross the state's decree." (905-7). This passage troubled Goethe so much that he said "I wish that one day some scholar will reveal to us that this passage is a later addition" (as cited in Lacan, p. 255). Combined with other passages in which Antigone confesses to an explicitly erotic

longing to unite with Polyneices in death, a tendency Ismene calls “showing a hot mind over cold bodies,” this passage that Goethe hated cannot be simply written off as the confusion of a young and innocent girl. Rather, such passages suggest that Antigone is not acting on principle at all, a possibility that would undermine any moral interpretation of the play.

Tonight I want to look at both Antigone the character and *Antigone* the play by setting aside the entire interpretive apparatus that approaches the play as a showdown between Creon and Antigone as the representatives of two conflicting ideologies. Instead of asking ‘what does Antigone think?’, and ‘what does Antigone make us think?’, we will ask what Antigone feels, and what she makes us feel. Interestingly, our feeling of ‘horrified attraction’, as we confront this daughter of unnatural incest, so sure of herself, so articulate, and so terrifyingly alone, offers some basis for approaching the play not morally but ethically (I will define how I am using these terms in just a moment). Although Antigone may not be moral, she is unquestionably ethical. In her extremity, Antigone has a lesson for us in ethics, in particular in how the sphere of ethical conduct can and will occasionally transcend the conventional social boundaries on human behavior. Through the extension of ethics that she represents, Antigone shows us a truth about our own human nature that is both troubling and compelling.

First, some background. The debate-style interpretive approach to the play *Antigone* that works from the question ‘who is right?’, is justified by no less a figure than the German philosopher Georg Hegel. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel argues that *Antigone* is the greatest of the Greek tragedies because it so perfectly pits the characters of Antigone and Creon against each other. In this ‘perfect storm’, the mutual destruction of these characters illustrates the notion of dialectical progress that Hegel introduces in his philosophical writings. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel presents his theory that the human condition proceeds through a process of opposition and destruction, in which opposites confront one another, but neither can overcome the other, and the only way forward is through the destruction of both, a destruction which creates a space for something entirely new.

Before we set the Hegelian interpretation aside, let me outline it as I understand it, so that we can keep it in mind as we proceed. Creon has issued an edict forbidding the burial of the traitor Polyneices. “Leave him unburied,” he orders. “Leave his corpse disgraced, a dinner for the birds and for the dogs. Such is my mind. Never shall I, myself, honor the wicked and reject the just.” (206-9) From Creon’s political point of view, his logic is irrefutable – the basis for the state is eroded if the state treats its friends and enemies equally. This logic is the basis for the Kantian categorical imperative, which Kant intended to support positions like Creon’s here by making it clear that a state cannot function if the treacherous and the loyal are treated alike.

The fact that the penalty Creon has decreed is the barbaric mutilation of the corpse is of no consequence to the political, or Kantian logic of his position, but it is the trigger that brings Antigone to act. Because Antigone is so offended at the treatment of Polyneices' body, she resolves to bury the body herself, an act she defends with an argument based on natural right. She asserts there are some behaviors, like the burial ritual, that are universally right, and which the gods expect all humans to observe. Antigone doesn't think Creon has the authority to forbid burial to Polyneices. She tells Creon:

For me it was not Zeus who made that order.
Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below
mark out such law to hold among mankind.
Nor did I think your orders were so strong
that you, a mortal man, could over-run
the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws. (450-6)

Clearly Antigone's and Creon's statements are in opposition. Why can they not compromise or persuade each other? Well, they are not the compromising type. Hegel discusses the importance of considering not just the external circumstances, but the inner life of the character that leads him or her to act as he or she does. Hegel writes,

For a drama does not fall apart into a lyrical inner life and an external sphere as its opposite, but displays an inner life and *its* external realization. It follows that in that case the happening does not proceed from external circumstances but out of an agent's inner will and character... (Lectures on Aesthetics, 1160)

This union of character and deed is what we call ethics, following Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* defines 'ethical' as the conjunction between action and desire. While moral actions can and often do involve overriding one's desires with the rule of reason, ethical actions are identified as those that coincide with and reveal the quality of the character's desire. This union of desire and deed in the protagonists is nowhere found so strongly in Greek tragedy as in the *Antigone*. Creon, who has come into power after the ruling family of Thebes, the family of Oedipus, has dramatically self-destructed with the mutual slaughter of Oedipus' sons at the 7th gate, is desperate to reestablish political stability and the rule of law in the battered city-state. Antigone's very identity rests on her ability to accept the incestuous nature of her birth and to find some redemption for her shattered family. Creon's edict forbidding Polyneices' burial goes against Antigone's need to assert that she and her family are human beings, not monsters, and challenges the very essence of her identity as one of Oedipus' incest-tainted offspring. Thus Antigone and Creon come into opposition, creating the 'perfect storm' to fulfill the terms for Hegel's irreconcilable conflict. This aspect of the Hegelian reading is important, for it is in this alignment of character and action that we have the basis for an ethics of Antigone.

This understanding of 'ethics' (as opposed to 'morality', a term I am using to designate the use of a principle to determine right action even when it goes against our feelings) dates back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and has to do with how an action emerges as a reflection of its agent's character. Thus 'ethics' has less to do with whether the action can be assessed as good using a strictly rational formula, and more to do with whether the character chooses it wholeheartedly, or as Hegel would say, 'wills it with all of her being'. By these terms, Antigone is unquestionably ethical, in fact, her ethics emerge as one of the things that distinguish her from Creon, for Antigone's will remains unbroken throughout the play, while Creon is psychologically shattered by the suicides of his son and wife.

Antigone's ethical strength manifests in her ability to unite her passion and her action. In her confrontation scene with Creon, Antigone displays total resolve. All is on display. She has chosen an action that she knew carried the death penalty, carried out this action, earned the penalty, and now goes to her death lamenting but unbroken in spirit. Rather than accept Creon's punishment of being buried alive, Antigone kills herself as soon as she enters the tomb, and dies on her own terms, defiant to the end. This is what makes Antigone so compelling to witness, for she represents a limit for us, an ethical limit that comes into focus around Antigone's extraordinary personal strength and resolve.

Why is Antigone so extraordinary? By the conventional definitions of what is human, Antigone should not have come into being at all. This is made clear in the legend both as a divine mandate and by the abomination of incest. Apollo had prophesied that Laios would have to die childless to keep Thebes safe, but Laios has a baby boy, whose feet he sews together and who he then sets out to die by exposure, but whom is instead spirited away by a servant and raised in Corinth under the name of Oedipus ('swollen foot'). Oedipus later receives an oracle confirming the gods' role in his eventual patricide and maternal incest. "Not to have been born is best" laments the chorus in *Oedipus Colonus*, reflecting on a family which by rights should not have come into being at all.

Thus Antigone challenges the audience and those within the text to reposition the conventional border between human and nature, now stretched to its limits by this display that the incest taboo is not the absolute barrier, by this evidence that nature will collude to produce a human being even when human convention is overthrown. In this way Antigone is at the limit for the community who views the play – whatever is concealed within her or beyond her, we do not want to see it; it would threaten the ethical basis of our community to see it.

Antigone is forbidden. As the daughter of Oedipus' terrible incest, she should not by the terms of society exist. Yet she does exist, and unlike Ismene, she does not efface herself, or deny herself the power of her passion for the brother who is equally the product of a broken taboo. In her intensity of spirit, Antigone asks us not to turn away, but to experience through the squirming feeling of shame that we are in the presence of something that really should be forbidden. For all these reasons, the

audience sees Antigone at the opening of the play with a shudder of fascination, what the French call a frisson.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued in 1960 that the hold Antigone has over us can not be understood in terms of a dry and intellectual analysis of elements like character or moral principle, but by acknowledging that we are attracted to Antigone, that we are fascinated by her, even that we desire her. Lacan writes,

We know very well that over and beyond the dialogue, over and beyond the question of family and country, over and beyond the moralizing arguments, it is Antigone herself who fascinates us. Antigone in her unbearable splendor. She has a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us. (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis Lectures*, 1959-60, p. 247)

Lacan preserves the Aristotelian combination of value and desire as the basis for ethical character, but instead of sharing in Aristotle's assumption that it is our values that reveal our quality, Lacan finds the more interesting element to be desire. As I mentioned, Lacan was not a philosopher but a psychoanalyst.

Lacan takes seriously the original context of the play, namely the Dionysian festival which drew all Athenian citizens together for the ritual performance of tragedy and comedy. In this ritual context, the audience was asked to vote on their favorite tragedy of the festival, a prompt and public vote by acclamation, in which the audience's emotional engagement with a play was surely far more indicative than their intellectual judgments about its themes or issues. Lacan goes so far as to assert that the audience's fascination with Antigone is an erotic response, and condemns Hegel for being too prudish to admit that he is aroused by Antigone – because that is the truth of Antigone for Lacan, that everyone is aroused by her. Lacan is supported in this conviction by a little known fact about the Greek language. In Greek, the word for 'shame' is the same as the word for 'genitals'. Shame is a feeling that something is forbidden, or out of bounds. For the Greeks, shame originates not as an intellectual but as a physiological response, in a blush, or if more concealed, as a sensation in the loins. Thus Lacan's insistence that Antigone arouses us is connected to the way we feel her flawed birth to be something shameful, something that our genitals apparently instinctively know is not meant for us.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche loved to make fun of scholars who build their self-image around the notion that they have met the Cartesian challenge – that they are rational, considered thinkers who have carefully screened out the irrational impulses of the body. Nietzsche hated arid, rationalist theories. In Nietzsche's view, to overlook the indelible effect of the irrational psyche, the domain of the subconscious, is to display an utter lack of self-knowledge, the mark of the fool.

Although Nietzsche doesn't comment directly on Sophocles' *Antigone*, his argument supports Lacan in its reframing of the question of Antigone's ethics. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche critiques the idea of a unified will: "Philosophers are accustomed to speak of the will as if it were the best-known thing in the world... Willing seems to me to be above all something *complicated*, something that is a unit only as a word." (para 19). Nietzsche goes on to question whether the exercise of will should be understood as an example of the individual's freedom, the very notion of free will which is at the heart of Hegel's reading of *Antigone*. Nietzsche writes,

"Freedom of the will" – that is the expression for the complex state of delight of the person exercising volition, who commands and at the same time identifies himself with the executor of the order – who, as such, enjoys also the triumph over obstacles, but thinks within himself that it was really his will itself that overcame them. (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, paragraph 19).

The passage goes on to deride those romantics such as Hegel who "believe with a fair amount of certainty that will and action are somehow one." In Nietzsche's opinion, philosophers have overlooked the powerful role of sensations in the willing process. The sensations involved cannot be unified because the respective ruling and obeying portions will feel different feelings, including delight on the part of the commanding role, and constraint and pressure on the part of the obeying role. By focusing on the contradictory sensations that constitute the agent's 'will', Nietzsche dismisses the unity of will and action on which Hegelian interpretations depend in their study of *Antigone's* dialectical opposition to Creon.

Nietzsche's suggestion that a conglomerate of desires might work together, or 'add up' to be motivation is a helpful way to account for the way *Antigone* is wholly resolved, yet makes contradictory statements about why she has buried Polyneices. By *Antigone's* account, she a) understands Creon's prohibition on burial is not sanctioned by any law of the gods; yet b) would not risk death to bury a husband or a child; c) happily risks death to bury Polyneices because she desires death, in which she will d) have the apparently erotic union with her brother that she longs for. While this combination of statements baffles us as long as we approach the play philosophically, it is consistent with the Nietzschean understanding of the will as a cluster of contradictory impulses.

In her birth and in her family history, which has developed in her a desire for death rather than the customary desire for life, *Antigone* takes her place at the limits of what we can accept a human being to be. We are unsettled at *Antigone's* all-too-apparent place at the limits of human society, and in order to get a look at her, we also rely on her to protect us from what she still conceals from us. We do not want to deal with the fullest truth of what she might represent, we may not be able to deal with it. The playwright, who wants us to watch the play, and not leave the theater because the play is too intense, assures us from the opening lines of *Antigone's* ability to protect us, to do what she does on her own without our help. As the play

opens, Antigone has brought her sister outside the palace to talk without being overheard because Antigone is ready to act— she is on fire, really - she intends to bury Polyneices' body despite Creon's forbidding edict. She knows the deed will result in the death penalty, but is determined in spite of this, or perhaps because of this. A bit unkindly, she assails the gentle, cautious Ismene with her pent-up energy and challenges Ismene to match her daring:

“Anyone who dares attempt the act will die by public stoning in the town. So there you have it and, and you soon will show if you are noble, or fallen from our descent.” (37-8).

Ismene responds by invoking a metaphor from weaving: “If things have reached this stage, what more could I do, poor sister, either to untie it or bind it tighter?” Ismene uses the knot metaphor to illustrate the impasse she recognizes in the situation, and her feminine powerlessness in the face of the masculine authority of the state. Initially, the Chorus takes this view as well, and condemns Antigone's defiance as aggressive and unseemly.

A modern audience may differ with the Chorus over how to view Antigone's defiance. For us moderns, Antigone's defiance is heroic and in many stagings, such as by the French dramatist Jean Anouilh's, Antigone is cast as a symbol of resistance to fascism. The ancient audience almost certainly did not feel this way, and would more likely have seen Antigone's defiance early in the play as an offense to Greek notions of what Martha Nussbaum calls “proper civic maleness” (Nussbaum, p. 61). The chorus initially condemns Antigone in harsh terms. As Antigone stands defiantly before Creon, the chorus says “the raw birth of this girl out of her raw father is clear. She does not know how to yield to her troubles.” (471-2) Antigone may be ‘raw’ in the chorus' opinion because she has not been tempered by life. The Chorus wants Antigone to recognize that she is ‘cooked,’ but she won't. Yet the word ‘raw’ has more repugnant connotations.

The Greek word used here (*omos*) means something that is “raw, uncooked, or undigested”. For a sense of what it evokes here let us look at its usage in Homer's *Iliad*. In book 4 of *The Iliad*, Zeus responds to Hera's hatred for the Trojans with this remark:

Dear lady, what can be all the great evils done to you
By Priam and the sons of Priam, that you are thus furious
Forever to bring down the strong-founded city of Ilion?
If you could walk through the gates and through the towering ramparts
And eat Priam and the children of Priam raw, and the other
Trojans, then, then only might you glut at last your anger. (4. 31-6)

A similar exchange occurs between Priam and Hecuba in book 24, when Priam has decided to appeal for Achilles' mercy against the wishes of Hecuba, who says of Achilles, “I wish I could set teeth in the middle of his liver and eat it. That would be vengeance for what he did to my son.” (24. 213)

The *Antigone* play contains similarly graphic representations of raw flesh, particularly when Teiresias is describing Creon's desecration in permitting birds and dogs to carry chunks of raw flesh from the unburied Argive warriors into the sacred precincts of Thebes. In describing Antigone as "raw", the chorus seems to suggest that Antigone has something in common with other usages of this term, something having to do with being eaten.

This prospect introduces something sadistic into the play. According to the Wikipedia definition: **Sadism** is the derivation of pleasure as a result of inflicting pain, cruelty, degradation, humiliation, or watching such behaviors inflicted on others. Early in the play, the chorus' comment about Antigone's "raw" nature shows their condemnation of something excessive in her, something that in the chorus' opinion may justify at this point Creon's own excessive wrath and fury.

Yet the punishment Creon has devised invokes a certain sadism of its own. In describing her live burial, Creon imagines, even savors, the prospect of the dying Antigone learning the error of her ways:

There, if she prays to Death, the only god
Of her respect, she may manage not to die,
Or she may learn at last and even then
How much too much her labor for the dead. (776-80)

Creon's misogynist rants are all over the play. While some of Creon's wrathful comments have the tone of an outraged ruler disobeyed, others are gratuitously sexist. Comments like "I am no man and she the man instead if she can have this conquest without pain (485)," "No woman rules me while I live (525)" and "I must not allow myself to be beaten by a woman (677)" are not justifiable from Creon's purportedly simple point of view of law and order, and they are drawn into high relief by the fact that Antigone is related to Creon and betrothed to Creon's son. When Ismene asks Creon, "Will you kill your own son's promised bride?" Creon responds quite hatefully, "Oh, there are other furrows for his plough." (568-9). Creon's misogyny contributes to his sadistic interest in using his own power to organize Antigone's suffering in the tomb. The chorus finds something excessive about this punishment, something that Hegel takes to be their disagreement with his decree of the death sentence, but which could just as easily be explained by the chorus' impression that Creon is enjoying himself a little too much.

Creon's punishment captures the symbolic way that Antigone has been in a sense already dead from the beginning of the play, when she declared her intent to bury Polyneices despite its carrying the death penalty. The sense in which Antigone is already dead evolves over the course of the play. First, there is her intent. Then, an action mysteriously completed, and finally, a defiant captive announcing her deed. By the time Creon utters the actual death sentence, there is some truth to his comment to Ismene, "don't mourn for her, she is already gone."

If Antigone is already dead, if her flesh is likened to the raw flesh of the corpse, does this mean we feel repugnance? Not necessarily. I'd like to draw a comparison here with a modern protagonist from pop culture who may help us understand the sort of heroine I am arguing that the audience finds in Antigone. Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of *The Hunger Games*, has a lot in common with Antigone. Both are girls on the verge of womanhood, both are marked for death from the moment we meet them. Both reserve their love for a sibling, a sister in Katniss' case, a special brother for Antigone. Both have men who love them, men who will die for them, yet men whom they may or may not be capable of loving in return. Both display a cold-blooded concentration, a ruthlessness, and a disregard for relationship that inspires our horror as well as our sympathy. Yet given how many of the girls I know love to role-play as Katniss Everdeen, the audience's shudders appear only to increase their fascination with this character, and their desire to have something of her, to be something like her. This may be true for Antigone as well.

In being 'already dead' while alive, Antigone represents an extreme version of the truth of mortality that defines all human beings. Yet most of us shield ourselves from the certainty of our demise. As a dramatic character, Antigone offers us a safe way to confront a truth about ourselves we prefer not to look too closely at, but only if Antigone can simultaneously shield us from the full extent of her experience. Antigone's capacity to shield us from the full extent of her experience is a central theme of the play, established both in the radical isolation that her utter rejection of Ismene's offer of company represents, and the bizarre way in which she carries out the first burial undetected. When Creon first hears of the burial, he asks the messenger "What man has dared to do it?" and the messenger has this to say:

I wouldn't know. There were no marks of picks,
No grubbed-out earth. The ground was dry and hard,
No trace of wheels. The doer left no sign. (248-250)

While we assume Antigone did this deed, since she has declared her intention, she has left no sign, prompting the chorus to wonder "Isn't this action possibly a god's?" For whatever reason, Antigone entirely evades our perception in her initial performance of the deed.

Antigone commits suicide rather than suffer between the worlds in the way dictated by Creon. Hers is not the suicide of the zealot, rather, Antigone tells us repeatedly how much she longs for death. In the messenger's description, the knot imagery is used:

In the far corner of the tomb we saw
Her, hanging by the neck, caught in a noose
Of her own linen veiling.
Haemon embraced her [swaying body] as she hung, and mourned...

The suicide image is of Haimon clinging to the slightly swaying body of Antigone as it hung from the knotted noose of her veil. The strands of the knot are Haemon's

clinging, the swaying body, the knotted noose, and the veil Antigone wears because of the ritual in which Creon married her to death by sending her to be buried alive. Antigone's final words to the chorus indicate that the veil was important to her both as a symbol of her parents' corrupted marriage, and of the marriage she would not have:

My mother's marriage-bed.
Destruction where she lay with her husband-son,
My father. These are my parents and I their child.
I go to stay with them. My curse is to die unwed.

Although Antigone is engaged to Haemon, she was not destined for an ordinary life as a married woman. Her love for Polyneices has given her a death wish: "I knew that I must die; how could I not?" she asks Creon defiantly. "If I die before my time, I say it is a gain. Who lives in sorrows many as are mine how shall she not be glad to gain her death?" (460ff)

Antigone's headlong determination makes her more attractive to Haemon, not less. This is illustrated by his clinging, which entwines him with her swaying body. The image here is of a sailor clinging to his ship's knotted rigging. Haemon is a good man as well as a smart man, as we learn from his diplomatic attempt to talk his father out of putting Antigone to death. Haemon loves Antigone, and does not want to live without her. His clinging represents a desire to join with her in where she has gone. In his romantic love for Antigone, Haemon reassures us that we do not need to think of Antigone as beyond the limits of humanity. This is important because Antigone's raw bluntness and her own apparent indifference to Haemon (she does not speak to him or mention him at all) might leave the impression that Antigone lacks human feeling. Creon, for example, calls her a "wicked girl" (566) and urges Haemon to remember "what a cold thing he takes into his arms who has a wicked woman for a wife." (650-1) Haemon's embrace of her corpse may be a somewhat gruesome fulfillment of Creon's formula, but Haemon's behavior throughout the play has established that Antigone is worthy of love.

To conclude. Antigone is situated in every way at the limit of our conventional social formulations. What should we as an audience take away from the brief glimpse we have been given of her? Antigone is a human being who threatens our conventional agreements about what a human being is. How could we accept her? Lacan suggests that the Chorus gives us the clue about how to respond to Antigone. Lacan believes that the Chorus serves to mediate between Antigone and the audience, by being more immediately in Antigone's presence, yet available to articulate her impact on them. In Lacan's interpretation, the Chorus does the difficult and most honest work of responding to Antigone so that the audience can filter and mute their own responses as they encounter the play in the midst of their busy days and stressful lives. In this manner, the Chorus makes it possible for us to endure Antigone, to have a genuine response to her that does not overwhelm us. Surprisingly, when the Chorus hears the punishment, they erupt not with horror but

with expressions of desire for Antigone: “The desire of our eyes is now made manifest in this lovely bride.” (795; Lacan p. 268) Why would the Chorus say this at this moment? In what sense does Antigone on the verge of her death make manifest the Chorus’ desire?

In order to understand this, we need to go back to the connection between ethics and desire. For Aristotle, the alignment of action with desire delineates the domain of ethical action. Aristotle set out a scale of how desire should overlap onto right action, ranging from deficiency (too little desire), through the realm of moderation, into excess (too much desire). From Aristotle’s point of view, Antigone is excessive. But in her immoderation she illustrates a limit of a different sort, one that highlights just how fragile and ambiguous is our self-knowledge, our understanding of the boundary between ourselves and nature. Antigone’s story represents a life lived at the outer edges of the human, both in the monstrous terms of her birth, and the ruthless determination with which she pursues her wish to join her brother in death.

The chorus finds in Antigone their desire made manifest. The “desire” part seems to indicate that they see in Antigone a human being, while the “made manifest” part suggests she is a symbol of our need to get what is human out into the open. Antigone can endure something that would break the rest of us – namely the realization that the line between humanity and nature is not as clear as we like to think, and that some people, such as Antigone, are not destroyed by having experienced the way the borders that we have constructed around our humanity begin to dissolve at the outer edges. It is with the realization of the human limit that Antigone’s self control represents that the Chorus marvels “Many the wonders but nothing more wondrous than man.” Despite their being something barbaric about her, Antigone controls her world - the world does not control her – and by exerting this control, Antigone shows us that she is human after all. The work of each human being is to confront, each to the limit of her ability, the uncomfortable truths of our uncertainty about who we are. Antigone has accepted the horror of her life: “do you know of any suffering from our father sprung that Zeus does not achieve for us survivors?” she asks Ismene in the opening scene.

Antigone cannot be undone by anything she experiences in life. This makes her singular and unique, and I argue that Hegel was wrong to see her as essentially in dialectic with Creon, a character who, unlike Antigone, could and was undone by a contingency he failed to anticipate. From the way Antigone arouses desire made manifest in the Chorus, I believe Antigone represents something we all desire: namely, the assurance that we would hold together as human beings even if taken to the extremity of experience.

Where does this leave us in our understanding of the ethics of Antigone? My use of the term ‘ethics’ to refer to the quality of the agent’s desire is not radical by any means. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* famously begins with the line “all men by nature desire the good.” While philosophers tend to focus on the word ‘good’ in this

sentence, I have followed Lacan in asking if the key word might not actually be 'desire'. Aristotle himself suggests that our relationship to the truth of who we are is one of desire. Aristotle's teacher, Plato, and Plato's teacher, Socrates, take this possibility even more seriously, in Plato's *Phaedrus* for example, in which Socrates teaches the young Phaedrus that sexual fulfillment is trivial compared to the pleasure of experiencing and studying one's own desire. Socrates repeatedly says that we do not know what a human being is. For Socrates this tension revolves around not knowing whether he is man or beast. While Socrates may hope that a human being turns out to be something limited by reason, order, and unity, in his own lack of self-knowledge, he sometimes wonders if his pursuit of such a definition of the human might be based on an illusion. Socrates says,

I look... into my own self: Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typho, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature? (*Phaedrus* 230A)

While the play *Antigone* does not answer Socrates' question, I have argued that it does show us that it is a question we all need to ask.