

Abbreviations: S = Sophocles the playwright. A = Antigone the martyr. "A" = the play. C = Creon the king.

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THE VIRTUES & YOUR VOTE

Occasion: Tomorrow I'm to read the part of Teiresias, the blind old wiseman in Sophocles' play, "Antigone." Loree & I are to make the soup for this church Sunday evening "Soup & Conversation," a series aimed at (1) fun, (2) community building, & (3) improving Christians' ability to think-talk-walk as Christians in church & world (though not necessarily in that order).
Function: This Thinksheet is a take-home piece to aid participants' further reflecting on "Antigone" & the evening experience.

1 Having **no fear** that a demagog-despot will seize the White House/Washington/the USA beforehand, we have full confidence we'll get to vote in November. And we have **no fear** that war will break out between NYC & Boston, victimizing us Cape Codders in between. Both fears are so far "out of it," chimerical, unreal that we'd consider a paranoid schizophrenic anybody afflicted with either fear.

But in 5th-c. BCE/BC Greece you'd be abnormal if you didn't have *both* the fear of the anyday death of your democracy and the fear of being crushed by warring city-states vying for hegemony & territorial increase, + the fear of the persisting military pressure of the Persians. Yet in the little more than a century from the birth of Athenian democracy (in 510) to the execution of Socrates (in 399), Greece--& esp. Athens--experienced the most astonishing rapid cultural flowering in world history. All the arts burst new buds, including statecraft (esp. under Pericles) & drama (including Sophocles, who wrote his "Antigone" for the Athenian theater but, by a transparent displacement, located the religiopolitical action in another city, Thebes, 87 miles NW of Athens).

2 "Religiopolitical"? That's the adjective for the perennial-inevitable entwining of religion/politics (in our embattled Jeffersonian phrase, "the separation of church & state"). King Creon, whose rigidity destroyed both Antigone & himself, was for the strict separation of religion (specifically Antigone's & Teiresias') and government: he was, for that time & place, ACLU, secular humanism. While Sophocles is saying that this mindset is destructive, his portrayal of this king is not entirely unsympathetic. Looking back from the year of the play's composition (441), Creon saw generations of bloodshed; & looking around him, he saw his people under the heel of Sparta--& who could blame him for believing that his city-state at that time needed a strongman whose word was law with death for its breach? MORAL: In human power-relationships, things are always more complicated than they at first, on the surface, appear. So how decide how to vote? (And if you don't have it, how decide how to get the vote?)

3 Historical *note*: As the USA is now endeavoring to do, Pericles struggled to maintain empire (the Athenian League) without damaging, indeed while enhancing, democracy at home & abroad. Upon his death, Creon (of Athens: remember, Sophocles displaces to a Creon of Thebes!), a lesser man (importantly, less gifted in oratory), succeeded & tried to carry on the great Pericles' ideals of democracy & humane imperial governance. But because he could not inspire the respect Pericles had inspired by his very presence, Creon tried to compensate by creating that ever-tempting substitute for respect, viz. terror: he must kill Antigone quickly to train the people to fearful instant obedience to his word/command/"edict" (Sophocles' word for the command that Antigone's brother Polyneices was to remain unburied).

Historical *lesson*: Creon **overreached** (for which the Greeks had the word "hubris," violating the Greek virtue prudence). Briefly, the Athenian empire was the only game in the Mediterranean world: briefly (it doubtless will be), the USA is the only game on the planet (the mightiest monetary-military-political force, which all other nations must take serious account of). The overreacher is overexposed & underdefended, with rivals nibbling away at all the edges. Athens overreached disastrously in trying to take Sicily: the USA overreached tragically (not disastrously) in the Kosovo intervention. The greater the power (personal or political), the greater the temptation to hubris. Ergo, vote for candidates who practice prudence. (Sophocles was known for his moderation, a sub-virtue to prudence. Matt. Arnold well put Sophocles prudence-moderation: S. "saw life steadily and saw it whole.")

Economically as well as politically, Athens overreached, building more navies than it could afford. Now, in the USA, personal debt has reached \$20,000 per person, so the hubris of the buying frenzy will soon sit the bear on the bull. How far into economic unreality we've come from "Owe nobody anything"! (Ro.13.8) When greed

is a virtue, prudence is a vice. But prudence can wait it out: greed can't.

4 A none-of-the-above sardonic book just out is titled IF THE GODS WANTED US TO VOTE, THEY WOULD HAVE GIVEN US CANDIDATES (implying we've got no good ones). G.Washington was *doubly good* (i.e., effective & moral); J.Carter was singly good (ineffective, but moral), as is B.Clinton (effective, but immoral: the recent poll of 58 historians of the US presidency has him one of our most effective presidents &, of the 41, the least moral). Creon's morality was collapsed into his consuming desire to be effective, with the result that he was "good" in neither sense--in our judgment, but Sophocles is not so neat: Creon is more tragic than evil.

5 Religion was the root of drama, & the Greek dramas were enacted during a religious festival. Religion is about divine/human relations, which is the central theme of the Greek tragedies (the comedies, coming later, reflecting only contemporary human life). So we're not surprised that the central characters, & the chorus, in "Antigone" refer to the divine, esp. to Zeus ("dzeus," the Lat. not having the z), who's above the other deities (though all of them, including Zeus, are subject to the **moral order of the universe**, variously called Dikē [justice], Moira [fate], Anankē [necessity]). In writing & producing "Antigone," Sophocles can assume this orthodox Athenian theology, which he shares. The theology's canon of scripture contained little other than Homer, which is full of stories revealing canonical virtues & their flipsides, the vices--on which see Helen F. North's learned "Canons and Hierarchies of the Cardinal Virtues [prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance] in Greek and Latin Literature" (in THE CLASSICAL TRADITION, ed.by Luitpold Wallach, Cornell U.P./66).

When we Christians, in evolving our ethics, married the four cardinal-primary-principle Greek-Latin virtues to our own faith-hope-love (e.g., 1Cor.13.13), & added humility & perseverance,* aided by memories of Jesus & by the guidance of Scripture & the Holy Spirit we came up with a vision of the ideal **character**, & we'd like to vote for candidates who (as is said in another connection) "have it all." And we should not be surprised that candidates variously claim it (e.g., Jn.McCain's current slogan "Duty, Honor, Courage"). * + obedience.

6 As the Bible tells stories to teach the virtues, the fact that the Greek tragedians do the same is nothing new to us. Sometimes a single word will sum up, in a drama, the virtues. In "Antigone," it's "loyalty," to which the central characters specifically appeal (cp. Hab.2.4, "The righteous shall live loyally" [in the NT, "by faith"]). The US judge, defying the US Supreme Court by refusing to remove the Ten Commandments from the wall behind his court-chair, claims biblical loyalty for himself, his court, & the USA. Claiming loyalty to divine law & family duty, in defiance of law (Creon was the law!) A. buried her brother & was martyred for it--as were early Christians who remained loyal to Christ & were martyred for refusing to pay ritual loyalty to Caesar. (The court transcripts of the Christian-martyr cases show the eight virtues in action, as though dancing around a burning love for & loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.)

7 Euripedes, younger than Sophocles, let the **community**-produced/oriented virtues decay in favor of **individual**, self-seeking virtues (powers, strengths). As today in the USA, this individualism correlated with the gradual conversion of heaven into sky: E. slid down into secularism, Zeus being replaced by the imperial ego & "self-esteem."....Implicit in Sophocles, explicit in Plato, is an additional virtue: piety (eusebeia, hosiotes), a support for self-control (enkrateia [prominent in NT]). Plato: In the good person, the virtues converge. He thought of Antigone; we think of Jesus. In 1Cor.1.30, Jesus became for us wisdom, righteousness--two of the four cardinal virtues, + -- "hagiasmos" (sanctification) & "apolutrosis" (redemption). Then the Church Fathers show (Wallach, 180) "the vitality and adaptability of the [four-virtues] canon." As the Gospels became a four-fold canon (limit), the classical virtues were limited to four--so a new one (commonly "piety") would bump off an old one (often "courage"); but sometimes eloquence was added to prudence-wisdom, justice, courage, & moderation-temperance--civic virtues, which Barbara Jordan honored with her bon mot "What people want is simple. They want an America as good as its promise," the promise codified by our country's virtuous FF (founding fathers).

8 What filled our FF with the moral fiber to attempt (as our Great Seal says) "a new order of the ages"? The biblical heritage, certainly, with the so-called

"theological virtues" (faith, hope, love). But also their training in the cardinal virtues as dramatically displayed in Plutarch's PARALLEL LIVES (of noble Greek/Roman statesmen & generals). Toqueville was right: if you want to understand America, read the Bible & Plutarch. To underline this truth, let's negativize it: Don't think you can understand America without reading the Bible & Plutarch! The latter (d.ca.CE/AD 120) sang what our FF called the republican virtues, the moral character necessary to create & sustain a republican democracy (which is what the US governmental mode is: while the people make some decisions by voting, most decisions are made by representatives whom they elect & judges whom the reps appoint).

Two problems from our schools' neglect of Plutarch: (1) We don't have virtuous candidates (not that they're immoral, but virtue is more than morality); (2) If we did have virtuous candidates, they'd not have (to use the current buzz-word) electability (the citizenry having a taste for likeable instead of virtuous leaders).

What does "Antigone" have to do with all this? She--Sophocles story of the fictional she--was a shaper of the cardinal virtues, which were (& always will be!) taught by story (as in the Bible & Plutarch). (Did you notice I'm talking school-reform? But not just schools: recently we attended an "Antigone" performed by a continuing Cape Cod youth drama group.)

9 In "Antigone," virtue is **gender-transcendent**, not just for the guys (such as Plutarch's 50 statesmen & generals). The ancient Greek woman was even more house-bound than, much later, the Victorian woman. Antigone's sister, resisting A.'s plea for her to help bury their brother, says we're "only women": "I can do nothing" (line 40; line 61: "Remember that we are women....I have no power"; so to resist makes "no sense"). A's counter (line 47): "[King]Creon can't keep me from the one I love." This fortitude of conscience reappears in the words of Christian women about to be martyred for their defiance of Caesar. Irony: While most other virtues are represented by more than one Greek word, fortitude--courage by only one, which literally means "manliness": A. was manly! (Though Lat. "virtue" is literally manliness, the usual Gk. equivalent* is not sexist, though some Gk. authors--Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Isocrates, Demosthenes--use the word literally meaning "manly-goodness.") Though the sexes perceive differently, they do not differ morally (good virtue/vice analysis show that men are as bad as women, women are as good as men: voila! equality!). Realistic feminism does not disparage THE LIVES OF THE NOBLE GREEKS AND ROMANS (the usual title of Plutarch's LIVES) on the ground that it was written by an old dead white male. The stories/comparisons of "the 'great biographer of antiquity'" (HARVARD CLASSICS 50.449) are as valuable, in moral formation, for the gals as for the guys (all 1296pp of it, in my Modern Library copy).

* ἀρετή *arete* is so good a fit for Antigone that I wonder if S. crafted her as a personal symbol of the panoply of virtues, as we broadly use the word "goodness" (e.g., 2P.1.5 NRSV: "make every effort to support your faith with *goodness*"). The word bespeaks such excellence (especially moral) as to (1) elicit praise & even (2) convince the praisers that the divine has been at work in the human (so in some contexts, "miracle" is the best translation)--on which see the only Bible verse in which human beings are invited to become "participants of the divine nature" (the previous vs. in 2P., NRSV)....In TEV, NIV, & NRSV, the word in 2P.1.3 & 5 is translated "goodness." The seven Eng.tr.s. before the RSV follow the Vulgate in both verses: "vertue/virtue." RSV has "virtue" in v.5 but "excellence" in v.3.

10 As do we, the ancient Athenians wanted leaders who exemplified the virtues & eschewed the vices. (My Great Books copy of Plutarch [series 1 because of his importance] has my marginal indications of the particular virtues/vices on narrative display--in red, for quick-reference in teaching.) And as does the Bible, Plutarch has some virtue/vice lists; but in both, the primary vehicle of moral education is story, not manual (such as the young B.Franklin virtue list, reviewed nightly upon retiring). Antigone's story teaches, as the supreme virtue/value, **storgic** (duti-ful) **love**, the fourth in C.S.Lewis' THE FOUR LOVES. Commandable love, as the biblical "Thou shalt love" God & neighbor (including enemies: A. must not hate Creon). What of the other loves? (1) No sex: like Bonhoeffer, she died engaged but unmarried; (2) No friendship; she dies friendless except for her fiancée; (3) Agapē (love from the other's point of view) only in the desire to put to rest her unburied brother's ghost.

Storgic love is the heart of honor/honesty (two wds. from the same Lat. root). What the FF considered sacred (as the Declar. of Indep. states) was not their "fortunes" or even their "lives": it was "our sacred honor." They were & remain honorable because they were dependable, storgic, love-dutiful to God/people/nation.

But since the early Christians didn't use "storge," they let "agape" function for duty-love in addition to other-centered love. In 2P.1 (again), a virtue-ladder (each rung dependent on the previous rung) extends from faith-as-ground through goodness/knowledge/self-control/endurance/godliness/mutual affection to duty-love; "make every effort" to ascend the ladder, "for in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you" (NRSV). Jesus saves, but those who trust & love him strive to advance in Christian character.

11 "We don't obey people. We obey God," said "Peter and the apostles" (Ac.5.29). Antigone (as do the early Christian martyrs) considers her life less important than her obedience to the higher (divinely sanctioned moral) law when the lower (civil/criminal) demanded her to violate the higher. Family duty (the usual context of "storge") to bury her brother had priority over Creon's "man-made""edict." Partly because of Sophocles (esp. his "Antigone"), Plutarch accented this priority of the higher, God's will-&-pleasure. "God": P. was a monotheist, using God-titles as contextually appropriate (e.g., "Zeus" when God's power was in view, "Apollo" when God's wisdom [P. was a priest of Apollo at the temple of the Pythian oracle,* where supplicants came for the wisdom of divine guidance; & his LIVES is a fruit of his own search for wisdom in research & meditation on historical characters])). * At Delphi.

12 A current sardonic saying well expresses Greek-tragic literature: "No good deed goes unpunished." For doing a good & pious deed (burying her bro.), A. pays the death penalty. (In Christianity, our Lord's resurrection redeems his death penalty, & participation in his death/resurrection redeems his devotees from death.) The best the pagan Greeks had to offer was the nobility of hopeless death for a worthy cause & the sometimes resulting social δόξα *doxa* (high reputation/esteem, [the regular word for] glory): A.'s case is hopeless, but not her story-traditioned cause. (In traditional Judaism, the dominant hope facing death is "the immortality of influence.")

But while in Greek tragedy good deeds are sometimes punished & then rewarded with *doxa*, bad deeds are always punished twice (viz., with the immediate penalty, then with the continuing negative *doxa* [remembered as a bad example])). (Parallel in Judaism: At the festival of Purim, celebrants cheer Esther & boo Haman.) Blind wise old Teiresias, led by a boy, prophesies against King Creon (lines 1000-1050): "This boy was my eyes. As I am yours....Tyrants! All you think of is power....You have lost the meaning of the life above and of the life below....The Furies will track you down." Creon has combined spiritual blindness (line 278: "The gods care nothing for this corpse") & absolutism (line 140: "No king can expect complete loyalty from his subjects until he shows his control over government and the law"--not long thereafter, the Chorus [lines 330-31] comments "Human laws are frail. Divine laws live in truth").

13 In his tragedies, S. opened mouths with terror so he could stuff in moral ed. Paul similarly used the terror of the story of Jesus, whose suffering has brought us "undeserved" salvation (Gal.5.1-6 CEV): "So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds **character**, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love....God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful."

14 If nothing worth dying for has you, you have nothing worth living for. The opera ain't over until the fat lady not only sings but also dies. Life, true life, begins with the acceptance of death as not too high a price to pay for something higher than life, this embodied life. A.'s is, in her eyes, an honorable death (line 74): "Mine will be a holy crime." Line 890: "In the eyes of the wise, what I did was right. (she turns to the Chorus) What law of God have I broken? I have done no wrong! Why, in my grief, do I look to the gods for help? They care nothing for me. I followed the laws of god and yet I am condemned [as was Socrates 42 years after S. wrote "A."] for ungodliness." Now look at the 9 virtues later in Gal.5.