

Materials to Guide Reading

LECTURE THREE

Antigone:

The subject of this play is represented in the text by the Greek word *philia*, whose root appears in such words as "*philosophy*" and "*Philadelphia*". Most texts translate it as "love", and so "love" figures prominently in your translation of the *Antigone*. (Thus "philosophy" is supposed to mean "love of wisdom", since "sophia" means wisdom; and Philadelphia was named in honor of "brotherly love".) But "philia" does not have a direct English equivalent; it means the deepest and most important bonds that tie you to another person or group of persons. The English word "loyal" derives from the Latin "ligare", which meant "to bond, to tie down", and Creon is talking about "philien" when he talks about loyalty (or allegiance).

What is Creon's position at the outset of the play? In answering, bear in mind (a) that it is the very next day after an unsuccessful attempt to conquer his city; (b) the usual attempts at conquests always tried to enlist the aid of any group within the city who were disaffected or at odds with the leadership and normally secured this aid before any campaign was launched (modern equivalents are called "fifth columnists" and "traitors within"), so that Creon's fears about traitors within are not entirely unreasonable; (c) the person whose burial he forbids (Polynices) is his own nephew, who has turned against his family, and the duty to bury such a person would normally fall upon him.

What is Antigone's position at the outset of the play? Granted that the ritual burial of kin is a sacred obligation, but only a ritual (it need only be a token sprinkling, which is all that Antigone can supply), why is it so important to her? Is Ismene (caught-in-the-middle Ismene) an ethical weakling, a mere fence-sitter, or does she represent a reasonable position? Is it ever a good idea to say about someone that they are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem?

Antigone represents "family values" but at the same time something "deeper" (if not higher), connected with religion—the unwritten dateless laws. Why unwritten? Why dateless? Explore the connection between family values and "greater", other-than-general values—for example, the way in which Albert Carr insistently draws a connection between the kind of objection to business practices made from an ethical standpoint and religion. Take a modern case of the quarrel between the duties of office and the imperatives of religion: a doctor is devoted to reducing pain and preserving life but Christian Science parents refuse permission to let the doctor give a necessary bone-marrow transplant; in their view, faith alone does the healing and what is more, permitting the treatment would endanger the child's life because it would issue from lack of faith. (A case of this sort was in the papers about three years ago. In this case, the child died and the parents were tried by the law for criminal neglect.) Is the doctor being stubborn, or betraying weakness, or is he just being a doctor? How about the other side? One wants to follow the precepts of "getting to yes" by giving each side their due, but to compromise here by giving half a transplant would defeat both sides and accomplish nothing.

Consider three kinds of loyalty: (1) To an absolute or transcendent obligation. Abraham was instructed by God to sacrifice Isaac, his son, as a test of faith, and Abraham proceeded to do it. Did he do well? Compare his response to Antigone's (2) To a group and (perhaps) to the values that it stands for. Would you die for America? Democracy? Free Trade? The English writer John Ruskin offered the notion of a "due occasion of death" attendant upon any vocation. The doctor, the soldier, the minister had each a due occasion of death—a moment when they might be called upon to sacrifice their lives for the health of their fellow human beings, the safety of the nation, the spiritual well-being of the congregation. What, he asked, was the due occasion of

death of the business person? (Poor Ruskin) (3) And finally: To one's history. How important is it to defend the values of our ethnic origins?

Crito:

Crito urges Socrates to escape from prison and not abide an unjust sentence of death leveled by the Athenian assembly. What are his specific arguments? Does Socrates answer them? Two of them are: "You are choosing the easy way out and not the way of a good and brave man" and "You are playing into the hands of your enemies, giving them exactly what they want". How effective are these arguments? What is their general character? Socrates urges a discussion of fundamental points, arguing that it will be harder to cope with an anxiety that has no rational basis. What assumptions lie behind this point of view. He also insists that it is the gravest of errors to consider the opinions of those who are not experts in ethics. How reliant should we be on expert opinion in making decisions about ethical conduct? Socrates also says that the important thing is not living but living well. His abiding the decision of the assembly might be viewed as a form of suicide; just as a life in a pain-wracked body is not worth living (and in the ancient world, it was considered noble to end one's life under such a circumstance and rather ignoble to carry on), so it is still more true where the health of the soul is concerned. What do you think of this view? Does the analogy hold up? Finally, there is the Socratic view, which serves as the turning-point in Socrates's argument. "Never act unjustly--therefore, never repay injustice with injustice". (Or "never repay harm with harm". The maxim is susceptible of alternative interpretations.) One might counter with the view that one is morally obliged not only to resist evil but also to extirpate it-the "sword of the righteous" argument. Consider the issues involved here. Is Socrates urging a Christian view here-the meek shall inherit the earth, turn the other cheek?