



ASSIGNMENT: Builders and Shapers: Sophocles: The Roots of Ethics

Young Sophocles was proud and excited. What greater honor could there be than to lead the young men of Athens in the celebrations of the victory of Athens over the Persians at the Battle of Salamis? For the 15 year old Sophocles, being chosen as the symbol of the city's youth was a moment to treasure all his life. Born in Athens in 496 BCE, Sophocles witnessed the city's years of greatness—as well as the beginning of the decline. While he was growing up, Athens was becoming a democracy. During the Golden Age of Athens, Sophocles became a prize-winning tragic poet. From age 65 until his death at age 90, he watched the bitter struggles of the Peloponnesian Wars that left his beloved Athens wrecked physically and morally.

The situation in Athens inspired him to write a tragedy called *Antigone*. In *Antigone* Sophocles explored the following ethical question:¹ what duty does an individual owe their country? *Antigone* is a courageous young woman from Thebes. Her city is torn apart by a civil war. She has two brothers—Eteocles and Polynices—who fight each other during the war. Both brothers are killed in the conflict. The new king, Creon, fought for the winning side led by the now deceased Eteocles. Creon forbids anyone from burying the body of the traitor, Polynices, upon pain of death. Antigone disobeys Creon's order because it goes against the law of the gods. She sprinkles dust over the Polynices's body as a symbol of burial. Caught in this illegal act, she is brought before Creon and condemned to death.

At the root of the conflict between Antigone and Creon are two questions:

1. What should a citizen do if their duty to obey the law conflicts with some other ethical duty?
2. Do people have any obligations that are greater than their nation's laws? laws of the state?

Assignment Purpose: to gain an understanding for the influence Greek philosophy has had on our current understanding of ethics.²

Procedure

1). Create a *Google Doc*. Name it Unit_5_Sophocles. Share the document with your teacher giving them full editing privileges (rdelaine@lcbi.sk.ca). Create written answers for each of the questions below. Ensure your answers are detailed (this means do not try to pass off single word answers and make sure you always write using complete sentences).

- 1). What is the difference between ethics and morality?
- 2). Which was greater: Antigone's obligation to follow the gods' laws or Creon's law? Explain.
- 3). In *Antigone* the main character sides with the gods. Describe an incident in history where someone has made the decision to defy a human created law for the sake of some sort of greater good.

Note: if you are struggling to find a topic to write about, consider the work of Ghandi in India, Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States, or Viola Desmond in Canada.

¹ An ethical question involves making some sort of moral choice. There are usually a number of different possible answers or paths to follow; however, none of the answers/paths is without some sort of problem or challenge.

² Ethics are the moral principles that govern a person's behavior and actions.