

# The Ethics of Tragedy

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We tend to think that people are only fully culpable for the harm caused by actions they freely undertake. If my hand is forced, if I am severely deceived or psychologically impaired, then I am to that extent less blameworthy for the ills that result from what I do. In Sophocles' tragedies, characters must often make severely constrained choices, or have no choices at all, and their capacity to choose is often impaired: Ajax is deluded by Athena, Oedipus is ignorant, Antigone is bound by the clashing imperatives of civic harmony and familial piety. And yet the punishment these three characters each receive is unmitigated. What are we to make of this? Are they punished unjustly? Are they responsible for what they do? Is it possible to bear responsibility without moral culpability? What would this possibility mean for our practices of moral and ethical appraisal?

In this course, we will explore the ethical questions raised by the possibility of what we might call tragic action – action that one is responsible for without having freely chosen to do it. We will focus especially on Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. We will pay special attention to the specific type of predicament Ajax, Oedipus and Antigone each face, and consider how this bears in each case on their (i) blameworthiness, (ii) responsibility, and (iii) the justice of their demise. In doing so, we will draw readings from philosophers who have developed their ethical views in dialog with tragedy, including Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, Nussbaum and Williams. A key theme of the course will be the need to distinguish moral and ethical appraisals, and the way that the difference between morality and ethics is brought into focus for us by reflection on Sophoclean tragedy.

## Course objectives

This course is designed to encourage students to use literature as an occasion for philosophical reflection, and to consider how philosophical issues bear on the interpretation of a literary text. It is also a course in moral philosophy. Students will learn to reason abstractly about choice, blame and responsibility, while keeping in view their bearing of these arguments on the concrete situations described in our texts. It is thirdly a course in the history of ethics. Students will engage with demanding philosophical texts, learn to distill essential ideas and arguments, and bring them to bear on live philosophical issues.

## Course requirements

For the first assessment, worth 30% and due in week seven, students will be required to write a paper of ten to fifteen pages exploring one of the philosophical issues raised in connection with one of the four tragedies we will have read by that time.

For the second assessment, worth 55% and due at the end of exam week, students are asked to compare two translations or adaptations of *Antigone* (two will be screened in class but others are listed at the end of the syllabus). They will discuss how the choices made in translation, adaptation and/or dramatic direction reflect an interpretation of the play's ethical meaning.

The remaining 15% is awarded on the basis of class participation.

## Course schedule

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| 1 | <b>Introduction to Tragedy I</b><br><i>Introduce Sophoclean tragedy, draw attention to relevant aspects of cultural context.</i>   | Neil Croally, "Tragedy's teaching". Pp. 55–70 in J. Gregory (ed.), <i>A Companion to Greek Tragedy</i> . Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.                           |
| 2 | <b>Introduction to Tragedy II</b><br><i>Raise questions of interiority and subjectivity in Greek tragedy.</i>  | Bernard Williams, <i>Shame and Necessity</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Chapter 1 and 2, pp. 1–50.                                       |
| 3 | <b>Responsibility and conscience</b><br><i>Begin reading Ajax. Consider Ajax's response to his murder of his kinsmen in light of Bernard Williams' theses on the connection between guilt, shame and conscience.</i>   | Ajax: Lines 1–784<br>Bernard Williams, <i>Shame and Necessity</i> . Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Chapter 3, pp. 51–103.                      |
| 4 | <b>Responsibility and delusion</b><br><i>Finish Ajax. Continue to contemplate issues of subjectivity and conscience from the perspective of the play's language.</i>   | Ajax: Lines 784–1420<br>Edward T. Jeremiah, <i>The Emergence of Reflexivity in Greek Language and Thought</i> . Leiden: Brill, 2012. Chapters 5–6, pp. 127–154. |
| 5 | <b>Responsibility and knowledge I</b><br><i>The next three weeks focus on reading the Theban trilogy, so as to give us a solid foundation to discuss the ethical content Hegel and Nietzsche find in them. Begin Oedipus Rex; continue discussion of the language of tragedy and the concept of reflexivity.</i> | Oedipus Rex: Lines 1–706<br>Eric R. Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the 'Oedipus Rex'". <i>Greece &amp; Rome</i> , Vol. 13, No. 1 (Apr., 1966), pp. 37–49.          |
| 6 | <b>Responsibility and knowledge II</b><br><i>Consider whether, on the basis of Aristotle's criteria for the attribution of praise and blame, Oedipus is an apt target of such evaluation.</i>  | Oedipus Rex: Lines 707–1684<br>Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> III.1–5.  |

- 7     **Responsibility and knowledge III**     Oedipus at Colonus: Lines 1–1000.  
*Focus on Oedipus’ defense of his crime: That he acted in self-defense. Consider the significance of the Chorus’s decision to suspend judgment on his culpability.*
- 8     **Responsibility and knowledge IV**     Oedipus at Colonus: Lines 1000–2001.  
*Consider Oedipus’s blame of Polynices, and the significance of Polynices’ rebellion. Consider the motif of looking, and Oedipus’ death.*
- 9     **Responsibility, duty and self I**     Antigone (Mulroy translation): Lines 1-626  
*Begin reading Antigone. Why does Hegel claim that it represents “the purest forces of tragic action”?*     A. and P. Paolucci (eds.), *Hegel on Tragedy*, pp. 62–79.
- 10    **Responsibility, duty and self II**     Antigone (Mulroy translation): Lines 636-1353  
*In what sense (if any) is the tragedy of Antigone inevitable? How are choices constrained and unconstrained by social roles?*     Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Chapter 3, pp. 51–83  
Jocelyn B. Hoy, “Hegel, *Antigone*, and Feminist Critique: The Spirit of Ancient Greece”. Pp. 172–189 in K. Westphal (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. West Sussex: Blackwell, 2009.
- 11    **Nietzsche on Tragedy I**     Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (selections)  
*Having read the four main plays we will consider, we now turn to Nietzsche’s and Hegel’s appraisal of their ethical significance. We first consider Nietzsche’s views on the connection between tragedy, morality and slavery, and compare this with what we have seen in Williams.*     Robert Pippin, “Williams on Nietzsche on the Greeks”. Pp. 285–305 in Billings and Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*.
- 12    **Nietzsche on Tragedy II**     Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (selections).  
*Consider Nietzsche’s idea that tragedy offers an alternative to the institution of morality.*
- 13    **Hegel on Tragedy: Morality and ethical life I**     H. B. Nisbet (trans.), *G.W.F. Hegel. Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 135–156  
*Begin discussion of Hegel’s view of the value of tragedy. Introduce Hegel’s distinction between morality and ethical life, and compare with Nietzsche’s views on the relationship of tragedy to morality.*     Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Chapter 3, pp. 65–91.

- 14     **Hegel on Tragedy: Morality and ethical life II**  
*Consider Hegel’s idea that Oedipus bears responsibility for his wrongdoing without being morally culpable.*  
H. B. Nisbet (trans.), *G.W.F. Hegel. Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 187–220  
Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Chapter 8, pp. 210–238.
- 15     **Hegel on Tragedy: Self-deception**  
*Consider whether and in what way the ethical outlook of tragedy requires a religious framework.*  
Terry Pinkard (trans.), *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. “A.II. Perception; or thing and illusion”, pp. 97–115, (BB) *Spirit*, pp. 383–388  
Jonathan Robinson, *Duty and Hypocrisy in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind: An Essay in the Real and Ideal*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977 (selections).
- 16     **Hegel on Tragedy: Piety and the polis**  
*Consider Hegel’s idea that the actions of Antigone and Creon are self-deceptive and thus self-undermining. Consider the relationship of self-undermining action to possibility of moral and ethical appraisal respectively.*  
Terry Pinkard (trans.), *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. “(BB) VI.A.a. The ethical world, the human and divine law, man and woman”, pp. 388–421  
Terry Pinkard, “Tragedy with and without Religion: Hegelian Thoughts”. Pp. 137–158 in Billings and Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*.
- 17     **Film screening**  
*Compare the way that artistic decisions in production bear on the ethical message of Antigone in two performances.*  
*The Theban Plays: Antigone*. Directed by Don Taylor. Starring Juliet Stevenson, Gwen Taylor, Patrick Barr. 1986.
- 18     **Film screening**  
*Antigone at the Barbican*. Directed by Ivo van Hove. Starring Juliette Binoche, Obi Abili, Patrick O’Kane. 2015.
- 19     **Free session**  
*Pursue further topics according to student interest.*
- 20     **Free session**  
*Retrospective; discuss final assessment.*

### **Translations and adaptations of *Antigone***

Jean Anouilh. *Antigone*. Translated by Barbara Frey. London: A&C Black, 2000.

Anne Carson and Bianca Stone. *Antigonick (Sophokles)*. New York: New Directions, 2011.

Reginald Gibbons and Charles Segal. *Antigone*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Friedrich Hölderlin. *Hölderlin's Sophocles: Oedipus and Antigone*. Trans. David Constantine. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2001).

David Mulroy. *Antigone. A Verse Translation by David Mulroy, with introduction and notes*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013.

Diane J. Rayor. *Sophocles' Antigone: A New Translation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Slavoj Žižek. *Antigone*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

### **Video recordings of *Antigone***

*Antigone at the Barbican*. Directed by Ivo van Hove. Starring Juliette Binoche, Obi Abili, Patrick O'Kane. 2015.

*The Theban Plays: Antigone*. Directed by Don Taylor. Starring Juliet Stevenson, Gwen Taylor, Patrick Barr. 1986.

*Antigone*. Directed by Bruno Coppola. Starring George Siena, Lisa Stuart, Kathryn Carpenter. 2011.