

Moral Education in Plato's *Laws* & Sophocles' *Antigone*

Ceren Sevin | Boğaziçi University

Abstract

The following article investigates in what ways Plato's *Laws* and Sophocles' *Antigone* are relevant to moral education and tries to reveal what we can best learn about mature judgement — defined briefly as totality of skills acquired as a result of education— on the basis of these texts. In *Laws*, especially in Book II and III, Plato argues for an account of education that is not factual and that will nurture all virtues. While *Laws* is relevant to educating mature judgement in a theoretical level; Sophocles' play, as a tragedy, encourages the audience to engage in a both affective and intellectual scrutiny of the tremendous results of lack of mature judgement. I will argue that *Antigone* constitutes a great example for the necessity of proper education Plato advocates in *Laws*. The tragic fall of Creon persuades the audience and the readers to acquire the abilities to critically and self-critically assess a norm by demonstrating the shortcomings of strict adherence to a norm. To demonstrate this thesis, this paper first examines the importance given to education in *Laws* and then, provides an analysis of *Antigone* indicating Creon's simplifying moral principle as the cause of his consequent fall. Finally, the individual assessments are combined in order to reveal the joint result.

Keywords: mature judgement, education, legislation, tragedy, Plato, Sophocles, *Antigone*, *Laws*.

Mature Judgement: The Aim of Education

Before moving on, this paper is in need of a more detailed explanation of what mature judgement is and how it is related to education. The aim of education is to “inculcate the mastery of some subject matter” (Westphal 2003, pp.508). While the subject matter is clearly variable, there are certain abilities which are necessarily involved in the mastery. These core abilities can be understood with what Westphal defines as mature judgement. Here are some of the abilities involved in mature judgement which I will also point out while assessing the texts: “to discern and define basic parameters of a problem, to distinguish relevant from irrelevant and more relevant from less relevant considerations bearing on a problem, (...), to consider carefully the evidence or the arguments for and against proposed solutions, to accommodate as well as possible competing considerations bearing on the issue, through these reflections and inquiries to resolve a problem” (Westphal 2003, pp.508). These qualities are “norms of rational

inquiry and judgement" that guides our behavior (Westphal 2003, pp.508). In addition, they are acquired as a "side-effect" of education. This is the main reason why philosophy of education was considered as a crucial part of moral philosophy in Ancient Greece. Hence, educating mature judgement is a subtle undertaking and any investigation of it should involve insights about the acquisition of norms and how they guide our behaviors.

Plato's *Laws*: Legislation & Education

This encompassing understanding of moral philosophy brings into open why one of the first issues raised in *Laws* is education and why it continues to be present throughout the *Laws* interwoven with the discussions about legislation. Plato defines education at the beginning of Book II as "the initial acquisition of virtue by the child, when the feelings of pleasure and affection, pain and hatred, that well up in his soul are channelled in the right courses before he can understand the reason why" (Plato, 653b). The primary concern of education is not directly imposing the intellectual conceptions of good and bad, but cultivating our sentiments and habits by means of music, dancing, literature in a way that "makes us hate what we ought to hate from first to last, and love what we ought to love" (Plato, 653c). So, the proper reactions of love and hatred inculcated by this kind of cultural education will be the final determinant in deciding what is good and also what is bad. This will yield in the child "a keen desire to become a perfect citizen" and lead him/her "to accept right principles as enunciated by the law" (Plato, 643e-659d) which is utmost important for the well-being of a polity.

Apart from the cultural education which results in affective acquisition of the right principles, Plato seems to argue for an education that is undertaken by legislators for he explicitly states that "anyone who handles the law, (...), is tutoring the citizens" (Plato, 857e). Likewise, he asserts that in education they must adopt the same procedure they have adopted in legislation (Plato, 822d). The procedure of legislation consists of writing precludes that aims not only to explain a given law to citizens and but also to persuade them that the law is good and that it ought to be followed. The persuasion should "educate the citizens and insofar as possible, engage them in a dialogue" (Berges 2009, pp.127). The persuasiveness of the precludes can stem from their didactic or theoretical characteristics, as well as rhetorical characteristics. So, just as the affective learning of good and bad in cultural education leads the child to the "right courses" (Plato, 653b), the persuasion through preambles leads the citizen to "the paths of virtue" (Plato, 718c). Similarly, just as the person who has no understanding of the concepts of good and bad but gives appropriate emotional

responses when necessary is considered more educated than the person who is in the opposite situation, Plato thinks that the preludes are sufficiently effective if a person is more inclined to “listen to what the lawgiver recommends” even if he/she does not attain moral excellence (Plato, 653b-718d). It is crucial to bear these in mind because it demonstrates that Plato does not claim that this education will be ideal, on the contrary, he is aware that “no matter how good a program of education he sets up, people will not become fully virtuous, fully rational agents” (Berges 2009, pp.135).

The cultural education Plato advocates provides us with remarkable insights about what is involved in acquiring a norm and being governed by a norm. Being governed by a norm involves “caring to use the norm correctly” (Westphal 2003, pp.509). In other words, it requires the subject to be critical about both the norm itself and whether he/she uses the norm in an appropriate context. Cultural education is mainly concerned with the affective aspect of acquiring a norm. It is already mentioned that cultural education inculcates the child’s sentiments in a way that he/she understands affectively what are the things that are valued in his/her social environment. In addition, when the cultivated sentiments of love and hatred are turned towards the subject, they result in the feelings of shame, guilt as well as pride. In this way, cultural education forms a self-critical voice in the child even before he/she grasps why a certain way of acting results in a more or less certain sentiment. Cultural education accomplishes these by providing the child with “objects of approval or disapproval” such as pieces of poetry, songs or dances (Westphal 2003, pp.510). The child engages with these objects constantly and actively so that the norms are embedded in his/her actions. This habituation enables the child to experience with the norms, to observe in what situations and to what extents a certain norm is applicable. So, habituation nurtures the child’s abilities to act accordingly to the norm and also assess other actions on the basis of the norm. Clearly, Plato is very aware that without the forming of this critical voice and the habituation of the norms, the acquisition of norms would be assimilated to simply knowing a norm which would not be adequately authoritative in guiding one’s behavior.

While the cultural education concerns with the affective aspect of acquiring a norm, the education that is undertaken by the legislators is concerned with encouraging the citizens to engage in an intellectual scrutiny of the norms, the laws they ought to obey. In order to avoid the discussions about whether rhetoric preludes are manipulative, it should be stressed that the use of rhetoric is entirely compatible with the expected effects of preludes and it should not be dismissed as propaganda in a well-governed polity. The most important feature of the preludes, whether they are rhetoric or not, is that they demonstrate ways of explaining and assessing the norms.

They consider relevant details bearing on an issue, follow certain lines of inquiry to reveal arguments for the necessity of the law to regulate that issue and give reasons for why their proposed solution to that issue deserves obedience. These are, as mentioned above, the abilities involved in mature judgement. So, making these precludes known to public is, in fact, educating the citizens' mature judgement. With this it is apparent that Plato conceives education consisting in developing both affective and intellectual aspects of normative governance. Without one or the other, the well-being of the polity would be at risk.

Sophocles' *Antigone*: Tragedy & Education

In *Antigone*, Sophocles reveals an internal critique of Creon's ruling principles by showing in detail the results of his erroneous and insistent compliance to a simplifying moral principle. When Creon ascends to the throne and declares his edict concerning Polyneices' burial, he states, "But those who wish the city well/ both living and dead, will be honoured by me" (Sophocles, 210-11). By assimilating all evaluative terms, such as honourable, just, pious and also their opposites; he posits the well-being of the polity as the single intrinsic good (Nussbaum 1986, 69-70). For him, the only criteria in determining whether an action is good or bad is its appropriateness to the well-being of the polity. Throughout the play, Creon makes two revisions in his ruling principles, each of which becomes more rigid and more insufficient to understand the relevant aspects of the problems he is facing. The first occurs while he is debating with his son, Haemon, about his verdict to punish Antigone to death. During the debate, Creon states, "It is essential to obey in both small and great matters/ the man the city appoints, whether his demands are just, / or quite the opposite." (Sophocles, 666-8). The second follows almost immediately and he states, "Does not the city *belongs* to he who rules?" (Sophocles, 738). While the former is partially open to criticism insofar as it acknowledges that it is the public who appoints him, the latter leaves no ground to criticize or intervene Creon's ruling. Expectedly, Creon interprets any criticism or even advice addressed towards his ruling as bribery or insubordination. Nevertheless, the course of events forces him to see his narrow-mindedness and admit that "the best way to live, (...)/ is in obedience to the customary laws" (Sophocles, 113-4). Creon fails to rule Thebes in a good way mainly because he uses his principles like an algorithm, that will produce the correct moral judgements, independently from the occasion. This "rule-following model" overlooks that using a principle requires "identifying which principles are appropriate to which occasions" and "which ways of using the relevant principles are appropriate in those circumstances" (Westphal 2003, pp.25). These crucial requirements are also matters of mature judgement. If Creon, at any point of

the play, reconsidered how and how well he uses his principles, he would have avoided his tragic end. However, his stubbornness leads him to do the opposite, to revise his principles in a way that results in even more inadequate principles to rule a polity. His last declaration that the city belongs to its ruler does not contain any insights whatsoever about how to rule. Judging from a meta-theatrical point of view, Sophocles uses Creon's stubbornness as a strategy to demonstrate in depth the consequences of the lack of critical assessment of principles and self-critical attitude towards their use. Just as he is incapable of critical assessment, Creon does not give proper emotional responses to the situations he is confronted with until the end of the play. It is only when he loses Haemon and Ismene that he gives an emotional response other than anger. It is this overwhelming feeling of guilt and sorrow that leads Creon to change his principles. This consequence by itself is enough to show that such appropriate emotional responses contribute tremendously to acting correctly.

Conclusion

It is remarkable to see that *Laws* and *Antigone* share a huge common ground in their understanding of educating mature judgement. First and foremost, both Plato and Sophocles are aware that education should initially aim at nurturing the subject's abilities to critically and self-critically assess a norm, an issue or a problem. In *Laws*, first by the cultural education of the child then by the education through preambles, Plato tries to give the best possible account of education that will lead citizens to embrace and assess norms properly. In *Antigone*, Creon lacks all these abilities of mature judgement. That is why, although *Antigone* does not seem to address any issues about education, by enabling the audience to witness the internal critique of Creon's ruling principles; it brings about both an immediate emotional response and also encourages an intellectual scrutiny in the public to understand what Creon did wrong. In this respect, while the content of the play constitutes a great example to show the necessity of educating mature judgement, the play as a tragedy, in fact, actualizes this education.

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