

The Origins of the Conflict Between Tragedy and Socrates

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In philosophy, tragedy as a genre of the ancient Greek dramas has been debated and analyzed throughout history because of Socrates' negative approaches to tragic dramatists and their works. The position of poets in Ancient Greek society and tragic dramatists' theological, ethical, and political approaches in their plays are crucial to comprehend what makes tragedy such an unavoidable subject of philosophical discussions in Socrates' period. In his famous dialogue "Politeia"¹, Socrates describes an ideal society, with a desire to remove the poets from his ideal society. Due to the strong link between the two disciplines, my aim in this essay is to thoroughly analyze the origins of the conflict between tragedy and philosophy. I shall do this under two main titles: The debate originating from the content of tragedies, and the debate over the ideal polis (the city-state). Owing to the two views I present, there is better insight as to what makes this conflict inevitable in Athens (5th BC).

The Debate Originating from the Content of Tragedies

One of the critical products of ancient Greek society is tragedy. It is a key cultural product in realizing the perception of the world by the traditional ancient Greek view. Tragedy originated as a ritual, but despite its seeming separation from the ritual, traces of the tradition in tragedy never vanished completely. Hence, in order to understand tragedy and its relationship with philosophy, it is important to examine the Greek's customs. Almost all the arguments about tragedy can be attributed to the custom, especially mythology and its branches in ancient Greek. Therefore, from the outset, tragedy bears hallmarks of its source, namely mythology. Thus, I suggest that examining tragedy, exploring references to its source, and investigating its relationships with the ancient Greek custom is significant. This will in turn enable the readers to adopt a clear position on the origins of the conflict between tragedy and Socrates.

The most essential component of tragedy is, as Aristotle states, narrative or "mythos" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a). These narratives were taken from mythology, especially from Homer's works. I will provide an example from Aeschylus to demonstrate how significant Homer's role in tragedy actually is. Aeschylus, the author of the earliest extant play, clearly expressed that his tragedies were parts of

¹ Also known as "Republic"

Homer's poems (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai*, 8. 347c). That is why I believe that if philosophy had any arguments with mythology, tragedy was clearly the inheritor of these arguments too. Frankly, ancient Greek philosophers often had problems with myths and their places in society. The responses of the ancient philosophers to these narratives were generally either to reject both gods and the poets, or just to disapprove of the poets. Naturally, studying this conflict should include presocratic philosophers and their arguments with mythology as well since the conflict between Socrates and tragedy was inherited. In his famous passage about Homer, Socrates also points out the previous conflict between poets and philosophers by claiming that "There is a long-standing antagonism between poetry and philosophy" (Plato, *Republic*, 607b-c). Subsequently, I shall first examine what the poets did wrong according to presocratic philosophers, and Socrates. Then it will be possible to answer why they were trying to undermine the authority of poets in society.

According to Laertius, Xenophanes ignored the gods described by the poets and objected to the place of poets in society (Laertius, 9. p.427). Heraclitus shares the same opinions as Xenophanes regarding the poets. When he alludes to Hesiod and his place in society, he expresses that "*Hesiod is the teacher of most. They think that he knows the most, but he is the one who did not recognize day and night—for they are one*" (Hippolytus, 9. p. 633). Finally, Socrates also considers the existing culture of the poet as a risk for society. In his famous dialogue "*Republic*" he also keeps his ideal state at a distance from Homer by advising that "*be aware that the only poetry (written by Homer) we can accept into our city are hymns to the gods and verses in praise of good men*" (Plato, *Republic*. 607a). He could not accept what they said about gods, and instead of rejecting the gods, he preferred to filter out the wrong side of the poets in line with his own perception of truth.

Now, in order to understand why Greek philosophers could not find the position of Greek poets in society feasible, I shall analyze what is wrong with the poets and mythology according to Socrates and early Greek philosophers. Firstly, the poets were not ordinary human beings in accordance with ancient Greek culture because the messages they told were not their ideas, but indirectly gods' ideas. They were inspired poets who would be called "vates" in the culture of ancient Rome. That is why they were considered teachers of the society. However, Socrates questioned whether these vates knew enough to teach anything or not. Secondly, the gods described by poets did not seem to be very fair or good; instead, they were imperfect like humans, and they might have made many mistakes that caused considerable damage to humankind. For instance, Homer states in his *Illiad* that:

*“There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus’s halls
and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings...
...When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only,
he makes a man an outcast-brutal, ravenous hunger
drives him down the face of the shining earth,
stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men”* (Homer, Iliad, 24. 525-535).

This section from the Iliad provoked adverse reactions amongst many philosophers, especially Socrates. He suggested these lines should neither be told to young people nor praised by the state in his “Republic” (Plato, 379d-380a). In addition, Plato generally pointed out these narratives’ places in society to support his rejection of them. For example, in the dialogue of “Euthyphro”, he uses Euthyphro to make his point. Euthyphro who prosecuted his father because of his guilt advocated himself by giving the battle between Cronus (the father of Zeus) and Zeus. He also argued that if Zeus overthrows his father because of his impious behaviors, there is no problem for society and his relatives who have gotten angry with Euthyphro. However, when he wanted to punish his father for his impious behavior, all the relatives got mad at him, and this was a contradiction according to Euthyphro (Plato, 5a-6b). These narratives were not good examples for the society because society’s education was crucial for the welfare of the state within the societies Socrates lived in or was exposed to. “Agoge” is the name of public education which was provided for the youth in Sparta. Athenian youth (epheboi) also received public education from the state, which is an indication of how critical it was for the Greeks that their youth gets public education (Aristotle, 42. para.1).

The narratives told also contradicted with philosophers’ understanding of the universe and gods. For instance, Socrates’ philosophy asserts that God is good, and this prevents him from causing evil (Plato, Republic, 379c). Plato also believes that the universe is the fairest thing, and its creator is excellent (Plato, Timaeus, 30, 92). On the other hand, tragedy, as mythology, adopted different approaches to gods. For example, Zeus disguises himself as Alcmene’s husband Amphitryon to seduce a virtuous woman according to the myth of the birth of Hercules (Felix, 1987). This was commonly not a virtuous action according to the philosophers at the time, but as indicated in tragedy, Amphitryon did not believe this was an unvirtuous act. Instead, he considered that event as something to be proud of (Euripides, Heracles 1, 150). The examples I have provided show that the philosophical understanding of the world and gods contrast sharply with the mythological understandings from which tragedy inherits its approach to the world and gods.

In addition, a contrast between the early Greek culture and Socrates had been highlighted by Nietzsche as well. I infer this from his writings about the Socratic equation. He states that “I recognized Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decay” and that “Socratic equation of reason = virtue = happiness: the most bizarre of all equations, which is opposed to all the instincts of the earlier Greeks” (Nietzsche, 2006, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 162-163). However, Socrates is the inheritor of this conflict as well. This conflict did not begin with Plato, but Xenophanes, who was both a philosopher and a poet. While Jaeger² was analyzing the critics of Homer by Xenophon, he proposed that “At this moment the latent antagonism between the new philosophical thinking and the old world of myth, which had dominated the earlier achievements of the Greek spirit, broke into open conflict” (1936, p.42). To sum up, tragedy was the inheritor of Greek mythology in terms of its approaches to the issues which philosophers also concerned. Still, philosophers disapproved of these approaches as harshly as they did of mythology. Therefore, the descriptions of the gods and the world in tragedy and its undesirable place in society started many philosophical arguments over tragedy.

Tragic dramatists discussed the political or theological issues through their plots. Therefore, their plots are fertile grounds for understanding their approaches to the issues which Socrates also debated. In tragedies’ plots, the characters generally display negative approaches to gods. They believe the world has many serious flaws, which opens up the possibility for human beings to face unbearable problems within the world. Thus, the gods who created an imperfect world that causes trouble to human beings should not be trusted. I believe this very notion is what leads the characters in tragedies to have skeptical and pessimistic views towards gods. On the other hand, Socrates did not reject evilness like tragic dramatists did, but he believes God cannot be the cause of the evil since God is good and the good cannot be the cause of evil (Plato, *Republic*, 379c). Then, I propose the first problem with the plot of tragedy is its negative approaches to gods and the world, which is inherited from older Greeks’ thoughts. I shall now illustrate this traditional negativity via examples.

Firstly, when Croesus, King of Lydia asked Solon³ who the happiest person on the earth was, Solon responded that “you ask me concerning the lot of men; well I know how jealous is Heaven and how it loves to trouble us. In a man's length of days he may see and suffer many things that he much dislikes” (Herodotus, 1. 32). He also believes that in order to call someone happy, the end of this person’s life must also be

² Werner Jaeger (1888-1961) was a famous classicist who studied ancient Greek philosophers and their theological understandings.

³ Solon was a lawmaker and was considered as one of “the seven sages”. He also played a very critical role in the development of Athenian democracy. He is credited with his reforms in ancient Greek history.

good (Herodotus, 1. 32). This last deduction of Solon became a proverb amongst tragic dramatists, and it was stressed by Sophocles in his "Women of Trachis" (1-10) and in his "Oedipus Rex" (1530) and by Euripides in his "Andromache" (100). As it was shown through the examples, ancient Greek tradition held pessimistic views about the world like tragic dramatists. As a result, tragedy was not only the follower of mythology, but it was also a follower of traditional Greek thoughts, which were popular among the public.

In addition, by performing on stage and showing the narratives directly to the audience (instead of merely telling them as mythology and traditional thoughts do), tragedy became more influential in society. It wielded great influence over the society through its tragic plots and the components, such as music. In the dialogue of "Minos", Socrates also emphasizes this point by saying that "Tragedy is the most popularly delightful and soul-enthraling branch of poetry" (Plato, 321a). To comprehend how influential tragedy was in society, I shall now examine one of Phrynichus' plays.

According to Herodotus, Phrynichus wrote a tragedy about the capture of Miletus, which was a contemporary event (6th century BC), not a religious or traditional event. This portrayal of Miletus' fall was so powerful that it led the entire audience to weep. Moreover, it saddened the audience deeply by reminding them of this unfortunate event. As a result of this, Phrynichus was sentenced to pay drachmas⁴ (Herodotus, 6. 21). By adding political issues to the content of tragedies, tragedy no longer had purely religious or traditional impacts on society. Yet, it also had political impacts on society, making it an inevitable subject for philosophers while they were talking about the state or society. That is why, by linking the plots with contemporary events, the public and tragedy have a very close connection with each other and have significant effects on each other.

However, it should not be forgotten that tragedy was the teacher that introduced the traditions and myths, or even sometimes political events as Phrynichus' and Aeschylus' plays to the public through its plots. Plots were the ways of teaching the public. Therefore, while philosophy was analyzing some public ideas, it inevitably faced tragic dramatists' doctrines. One of the main functions of philosophy is to criticize the public's ideas, as Socrates announced in the dialogue of "Apology" . It is in this respect that the links and conflicts between philosophy and tragedy are unavoidable again.

Another problem that Socrates has with the content of tragedies is the portrayal of suffrage within it. The tragedies' characters become noble or wise human

⁴ Silver coin of ancient Greece.

beings through their sufferings, or despite their sufferings (πάθει μάθος). Aeschylus stated that “There is a benefit for men to learn control through suffering” (Eumenides, 520). Nietzsche also stressed this point by saying that “Oedipus, as the noble man who is destined to error and misery in spite of his wisdom, but who finally through his great suffering casts a beneficial spell on those around him, a spell which endures beyond his death. The noble man does not sin” (Nietzsche, 2008, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 54).

Different kinds of sufferings can be observed in tragedies, but the most unbearable sufferings characters experience revolved around ethical troubles or dilemmas. The ethics problems were indispensable in most dramatic tragedies. For example, Oedipus had killed his father and had children from his own mother, which resulted in him being cursed even though he performed these actions unknowingly. These types of ethical dilemmas in tragedies render it difficult to decide whether a character has committed a sin or not. And this is precisely what makes tragedy so inseparable from philosophy in terms of ethics as well.

The Debate Over the Ideal Polis

Aristotle famously states that “man is naturally a political animal” (Politics, 1253a). The literal meaning of “πολιτικὸν” (politikon) is not “political” but rather it translates as “to do with a polis or civic”. Thus, it can literally translate as “man is a civic animal”, which helps to comprehend how much polis or city-states played a critical role in ancient Greek society.⁵ Contrary to *ástu* (city), the definition of polis implies that society lives in the city, not the buildings. In defining what the polis is, Alcaeus⁶ focused on the fact that human beings are the ones who constitute the polis, it is not buildings that make the polis. Alcaeus points out this idea by stating that “*a polis is composed not of timber and stone but of men*” (Sakellariou, 1989, p.109). In light of the definition that Alcaeus gives, the polis is inseparable from society.

From the early interactions with other civilizations to the time of Socrates, many debates have arisen about how an ideal polis should be. Some of them tried to stress that their existing system of polis is the best in comparison to other civilizations. For example, Aeschylus compared the Greeks with Persians in his famous play, “Persians” where Atossa (the wife of Darius) asked who is the master of the Greeks,

⁵ However, being a political animal is not related to the buildings, or cities according to Aristotle because he also sees some sociable animals as political animals, but human beings are more political in comparison to them. Therefore, while translating the passage in this way is useful for the topic, it is not suitable for understanding the actual meaning behind the passage. For the criterion of being a more political animal, I really suggest Refik Güremen’s outstanding analysis of this passage, “In What Sense Exactly Are Human Beings More Political According to Aristotle?”.

⁶ Alcaeus of Mytilene was a famous poet (7th -6th century BCE).

and the Chorus answered that “they are no man’s slaves or servants” (Persians, 240-42). Thus, the majority of Greek citizens in Socrates’ time exemplified an intensive communal and political life because they did not have any masters. Instead, they were their own masters, which in turn resulted in giving every citizen serious responsibility in deciding what to do in political affairs. Therefore, the public, was the decision-maker about the political affairs, which caused potential risks for the society Socrates lived in. If one has the power to manipulate the public, then one can do whatever he wants by directing the public because the public is also the decision maker.

The point that warrants Socrates’ attention was that the truth about the political affairs in the polis was not as important as the art of manipulating or arguing. This is because orators, rhetoricians, poets, or tragic dramatists could direct the public to their own ideas, even if their ideas are not valid. Therefore, people who desired to hold power over the public would prefer to manipulate the public instead of educating them. As a result, the public would stay ignorant, which evidently created problems for theorists and philosopher who wanted to create or develop the ideal polis.

As Socrates pointed out, tragedy was the most influential kind of poetry (Plato, *Minos*, 312a). In addition, it had a position in society that enabled it to direct the public to do whatever it wanted. While criticizing sophists, he frequently emphasized that they did not teach people how to be a virtuous man, how to do good things, or even what the good itself is. Rather they taught people the art of manipulation. In this respect, I propose sophists and tragic dramatists were of the same kind of danger for the state in terms of their manipulative effects over the public in the eyes of Socrates. I now turn to an important matter. That is, how Socrates proposes that the public be saved from manipulations.

In the 5th century BC, the existing education system of Athens was built around the poems of traditional Greek poets. Some of these poets included Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, and many other tragic dramatists. However, Socrates objected to this system by arguing that poets do not have knowledge about the matters they talk about, they merely have inspirations (Plato, *Ion*, 534d). For example, they do not have any authority to decide what the truth is about an art in their story, but the artists who are related to that art can do that. He gives charioteer as an example of this. Socrates proposed that when Homer talked about chariot-driving, he cannot be sure whether he says true or not because Homer is not a charioteer. With this example, Socrates asserts that poets talk about many things, but they actually do not know whether they say true things or not. They only know the art of writing poetry (Plato, *Ion*, 534d, 538b). As a result of this, in the education of the youths, the poets including tragic dramatists

cannot take a primary role because they do not know anything but their art. However, this was a new radical perception for the society that Socrates lived in because, as I have mentioned above, they believe poets were indirectly messengers of the gods. Not only ordinary people but also philosophers other than Socrates could not imagine any education system without poets. For example, Protagoras recommended that every boy who learns the letters and can understand what was written in ancient Greek should learn the great poets, which would enable the disciples to imitate these virtuous men depicted in the poems (Plato, Protagoras, 326a-b). In this respect, Socrates and Protagoras' ideas were overtly conflicting. As a matter of fact, according to Socrates, there is no difference between seeing a sophist as a teacher and seeing a poet as a teacher. He supposes that "rhetoric is an agent of the kind of persuasion which is designed to produce conviction, but not to educate people, about matters of right and wrong" (Plato, Gorgias, 455a). Thus, I propose that both tragic dramatists and sophists were not enough to educate the society to create an ideal or healthy society according to Socrates.

In fact, Socrates describes the poets as a corrupting factor for the ideal state by saying that "In exactly the same way, we shall say, the imitative poet sets up a bad regime in the soul of each individual, gratifying the senseless part of it..." and he adds that "He is nothing but an image-maker (He talked about the poets), and he stands far removed from the truth" (Plato, Republic, 605c). Perhaps with the intention of showing similarity between Sophists and poets, Plato also had Protagoras say that Homer, Hesiod, and other great Greek poets were frankly sophists and still, they disguised themselves under the title of poets (Plato, Protagoras, 316d).

As I have mentioned above, citizens of Socrates' time had undertaken responsibility for the polis. This means tragic dramatists as teachers of the society, also believed that they have primary responsibilities for the welfare of the polis. Most tragic dramatists rendered services to the city by expressing their views about political affairs through their plays. Then, tragic dramatists have their own notion of an ideal political state as well. For example, almost all Aeschylus' tragedies stressed the needs of the order and the nous for the welfare of the state or city and reflected clues as to what happens in Athens. Probably because of that, he was even introduced as a philosopher by Athenaeus in his "Deipnosophistae" (book 8. 347c). However, Socrates did not accept that tragic dramatists were the teachers of the society (Plato, Apology, 22a-e). In this respect, in fifth century BC, the conflict between Socrates and tragedy in Athens became inevitable because Socrates also believed he has some responsibilities given by God for the polis. He expresses that in his defense, "For (I)

know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god” (Plato, *Apology*, 30a-b)

To sum up, Socrates believes what he strongly objected to in the culture of Athens in his time for creating ideal polis was not his own desire, but the god’s desire, and he just followed that as he pointed out in his defense. With this belief, he had to contest with every cultural Greek element of his time to eliminate every potential risk from the ideal polis in his mind. In this respect, sophists and tragic dramatists were of the same obstacles in his way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tragedy and philosophy were critical elements of Greek society. Tragedy was the inheritor of the mythological and traditional thoughts of the Greeks, which early philosophers, such as Xenophanes, Heraclitus and so on rejected. This means that in fifth century BC, there was already a longstanding conflict between philosophers and poets. Because of that, a conflict between tragedy and philosophy was also inevitable. Although tragedy was the inheritor of the older Greek thoughts and mythology, it was not limited to them. Tragic dramatists added some to their plots to show their understandings regarding the world, gods, society, and state. It also had a place in society to direct the public, and dramatists used this power to teach society in accordance with the combination of mythology and older Greek thoughts. For Socrates, this puts a serious obstacle in the way of creating the ideal polis. As a result, there was another teacher for the public as well, and it was philosophy. So, in the time of Socrates, both tragedy and philosophy as teachers of the society have inevitably contested with each other to establish their ideal polis in their minds.

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