

# Man as political animal and antigone essay



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## Introduction and Thesis Statement

It is a fact that beyond any point of controversy that Sophocles' *Antigone* is a tragedy that totally supports and goes hand in hand with Aristotle's standpoint that man is a political animal. The play was written about 442 BC. Though being the first to be written among the three Theban plays, it is acted as the third, while expanding on the Theban legend which had predated it. At the heart of the play is Antigone who commits suicide at the precipice of being buried alive, courtesy of Creon's edict. The edict is premised on Antigone's act of burying her brother Polyneices' body, against the verdict that had previously been reached at, following his revolt against Eteocles. The suicidal death of Antigone leads Haemon into committing suicide as it seems Haemon had been being in a loving relationship with Antigone. This leads to Eurydice committing suicide, thereby leaving Creon a man who has lost both his son and wife to suicide apparently because of his punctilious sticking to the insensitive verdict he had made that Polyneices' body should not be buried, but left as carrion for the fowl of the air, worms, scavengers and decomposition.

That the play *Antigone* is in total concomitance with Aristotle's man as a political animal is a matter that is to be seen forthwith.

First, by postulating that man is a political animal, Aristotle means that because of his gregarious tendencies, man is inherently poised to live together in a habitat as a community. This is in respect and agreement with the manner in which lions live in a pride, birds in droves, bees in swarms, wolves in packs and elephants and buffaloes in herds. These all coexist in

one big jungle which is one habitat. In respect to this, it emerges clearly that man needs certain laws that will govern him, in relation to his social and economic intercourse with his fellow. The need to govern this relation is premised on its ability to affect other human beings living in the society. This development is seen in Antigone in the incident of Eteocles and Polyneices who fighting each other. That this incident is of a magnitude great enough to affect other persons in the community is seen in it developing into the Theban civil war. It is against this backdrop that the decree is reached at to honor Eteocles and not Polyneices who is to be dishonored by not being accorded a burial. This is because it is the latter that is responsibly for the mutiny in the play. It is only that the decree that is made by Creon is too harsh and inhuman to stand the temptation of disobedience; and not the issuance of punishment which is wrong (Mulgan, 2000).

At the same time, man being a political animal is seen in the ability of man to ascertain and evaluate his action, the essence of the action, the consequences that action is supposed to herald and to take necessary actions in this respect. Animals too carry out this reconnaissance activity before embarking on a mission, albeit in a remote sense. A hyena will never attempt to whisk away a prey from a lion, not unless the hyena has gathered with it, a large pack. Smaller animals will always let the big five (the lion, the leopard, the elephant, the buffalo, and the rhinoceros) have way in at the river because of the appraisal they have done either through past experience or through instincts. It is against this backdrop that the ruling class in the Theban society in Antigone attempts to rein in lawlessness by setting stringent deterrent measures against the prospects of the

materialization of a mutiny by punishing Polyneices, even though this measure fails. Nonetheless, the move is an attempt to make humans living in Thebes to know that political rebellion is a serious matter and a capital crime, so that before engaging in it, any rational being must have been aware of the consequences thereof and behaved accordingly (Heyman, 2002).

Conversely, that the theme of the play *Antigone* is directly related to Aristotle's dictum that man is a political animal is well supported by the fact that just like animals, human beings are able to come together and to form the body politic. In this respect, animals are able to live together and form a pride, a herd, a flock or a swarm. It is upon acting in great numbers that animals are able to foster their efforts towards a certain end. In the same wavelength, it is by acting en masse that human beings as the body politic are able to chart forward, the political course and destiny of a state or a country. This is especially seen to be the case in the wake of a political process which may necessitate the application of a plebiscite (voting). In the case of *Antigone*, the situation is not at all remote, given that behind the failure to dissuade Creon from his inhuman verdict, is the very fact that those who are trying to do so are of very few numbers. It is only Antigone, Eurydice, Haemon and Tiresias who are concerned with telling the monarch Creon that his verdict is inhuman. Should the whole populace been concerned about the same and thus participated in the act of telling Creon the same, the punishment on Polyneices' body would have been reversed without Creon and the Thebans realizing the catastrophes incurred (the deaths of Eurydice the queen and Haemon the prince).

Like animals, human beings always act under the leadership of a leader. While some animal communities like the elephant are matriarchal and others patriarchal, the same is seen among human s to be the case, as both matriarchal and patriarchal communities have been seen to have been extant, with the Mayan society being an example. Nevertheless, that human beings have always coexisted and functioned under leadership is a matter worthy of credence, as far as both ascephalous states in the pre-colonial Africa and centralized states in the 19th century Europe are concerned. In a democracy, this is seen to be the case in Jean Jacques Rousseau Social Contract Theory where the people have ultimate and absolute sovereignty, but cede it away to enter a social contract with the state so that the state accords the people certain values that are essential to the running and maintenance of the society. The sovereignty in this case is partially handed over to the state so that it is the state which carries the mandate to execute the law.

The residual sovereignty on the other hand is seen in the community taking part in the universal suffrage to vote in competent, transparent and fair leadership in lieu of corrupt, dictatorial and moribund ones. In Antigone, there is clearly a leader, irrespective of his prudence or impudence towards the execution of the law. At the same time, like an animal, man coexists in an environment which is characterized by scarcity of resources. While this is the very reason why man enters into the Social Contract so that the state can provide laws which govern interpersonal relationship for the maintenance and realization of a civil society, in Antigone, it is apparent that it is the scarcity of resource which leads Polyneices and Eteocles to war

against each other. At the facade, they fight for political power, but behind politics is the power to appropriate and distribute values of economic worth.