Hegel on the ethics of *Antigone*

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Characters in tragedy frequently find themselves in situations in which occupying all of the roles which they have occupied until that point becomes, or seems to become, impossible. Call such a situation an *ethical bind*. In this paper I will be interested in three general questions about ethical binds: (i) How, in general, does one come to be in an ethical bind? (ii) What, in general, does an ethical bind call upon one to do? and (iii) Why, in general, does being in an ethical bind have the capacity to cause such great suffering for those caught in them? By “in general” here I do not mean “for the most part” or “by and large”. Rather, I mean these as questions about the form of ethical binds: Questions about what an ethical bind looks like in any possible case. I will contrast two views of ethical binds, one which is implicit in Christine Korsgaard’s account of roles and duties in *Self-Constitution*, and one due to Hegel, as it shows up in his reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. If we think that *Antigone* depicts a situation that people could really find themselves in, then, I will argue, we have reason to prefer Hegel’s account of the nature of ethical binds over Korsgaard’s.

1 Korsgaard on role arbitration and self-constitution

According to Christine Korsgaard, living as a rational being requires constituting a practical identity by occupying a range of roles (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 21). Each role that we occupy gives us an associated set of duties, some more high-flown and others more mundane. As a parent, for example, one has duties to nurture and protect, as someone’s friend, one ought to listen to their gripes from time to time, as a scientist, one has a duty to be impartial in one’s pursuit of the truth. All of our duties, on Korsgaard’s account, have their source in one such role (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 21). Since our roles are drawn from sources as heterogenous as biological relationships, political affiliations and professional occupations, it is unsurprising that they will sometimes place conflicting demands on us. It is by occupying incompatible roles that we come to be in ethical binds (Korsgaard’s answer to (i)).

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1I will use the term “role” broadly in this paper as a catch-all for any sort of social position or relationship which is associated with a some characteristic obligation or set of obligations.
According to Korsgaard, we are generally free to step out of roles which cause a conflict among our duties (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 23). Remarkably, Korsgaard takes this freedom to extend not only to voluntarily adopted roles such as professional positions and membership in political organizations, but “even a factually grounded identity like being a certain person’s child” (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 23). If morality requires it, we can free ourselves of the duties we have in virtue being someone’s child simply by ceasing to identify with that role (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 23). The only non-contingent roles which we occupy, according to Korsgaard, are those entailed by being a human or a rational being (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 24).

When our practical identity becomes discordant, Korsgaard claims, we can determine which of our roles we ought to take as giving us continuing to give us genuinely binding obligations, and which we ought to amputate from our practical identity, by means of the categorical and hypothetical imperatives (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 25). The categorical imperative, which in the formula of universal law tells us what can be willed without contradiction, and the hypothetical imperative, which tells us how to obtain what we thereby will, provide the method and logic of practical reasoning (Korsgaard, 2013, p. 500). They therefore allow us to determine what roles we can adopt while remaining a unified agent.

The freedom we have in adopting and renouncing our roles in line with the dictates of morality means that escaping ethical binds will generally be possible, even if difficult, on Korsgaard’s account. For Korsgaard, the only circumstances under which navigating an ethical bind could be impossible would be one in which we find ourselves with conflicting commitments as a result of two roles that are constitutive of our being human or being rational. Otherwise, our freedom to renounce contingent roles, and thereby shed contingent duties, implies that we can always reconfigure our commitments in order to restore the unity of our practical identity by casting off as many discordant roles as morality dictates.

On Korsgaard’s account, then, the appropriate response to an ethical bind is to employ the categorical and hypothetical imperatives in order to determine a set of roles which will not place conflicting demands upon us. This is what we are called upon to do in an ethical bind (ii). This will generally be difficult because the roles which we occupy are constitutive of who we are. The navigation of ethical binds therefore requires a willingness to let go of any parts of ourselves which a universalizability test deems unfit to stay. Letting go of these roles is bound to be difficult (iii). The payoff for doing this, however, is that we will regain the integrity of our person, and be able to occupy those roles we retain with full dedication.
2 Antigone as a test case for Korsgaard’s account

If Korsgaard’s account succeeds in giving a general description of ethical binds, then it should apply to the ethical binds faced by characters depicted in Greek tragedy, and in particular the bind of Creon and Antigone as depicted by Sophocles. Reflection on the form of ethical binds depicted in tragedy, however, raises some serious questions for Korsgaard’s account. We can begin by noting that Korsgaard’s account attenuates the sense in which the agents caught in an ethical bind are really bound by their situations. Instead, Korsgaard’s account locates failings in the limitations of the agents in such binds. A perfect Korsgaardian agent would be resistant or immune to tragic situations: She would shed her recalcitrant roles as soon as they disrupted her practical identity, and would not let such a practical contradiction destroy her dignity or disrupt her capacity to act. Conversely, any discord in the ethical situation of a character faced with an ethical bind ought, on Korsgaard’s account, to show up as a subjective difficulty in her attempt to construct a practical identity.

This is hard to square with Antigone. Unlike Medea, whose tormented deliberation itself forms a large part of the tragic content of Euripides’ play, neither Antigone nor Creon seem internally conflicted at all. It is, in fact, hard to imagine two characters with a staunter sense of who they are what their duty is. It seems obvious to Antigone that her duty is to Polynices rather than the city of Creon’s rule, and Creon likewise the reverse. Yet there is little denying that they are each in a state of ethical turmoil. Adopting their roles wholeheartedly, Creon and Antigone nonetheless end the play steeped in regret. Despite his certainty regarding who he is and where his duties lie, Creon can still wail at the end of the play that “my planning was all unblest” (1262), while Antigone comes to view her suffering as a sign that she has gone wrong (926).

The Korsgaardian could respond that Antigone and Creon do not, in fact, possess flawless practical identities despite their resoluteness in their goals and duties. What each of them takes to be their role is really a combination of roles which are in fact incompatible. Hence the coherence of their practical identities is merely apparent, and they have in fact failed to do what they ought to in order

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2 One may doubt whether this is a fair test if one thinks that the situations in ancient tragedy are not situations which could really arise. In this paper I assume without argument that Antigone does present a situation which is really possible, but I welcome discussion of this on Friday.

3 Although Creon runs his decision past the elders of Thebes, they respond in the manner of yes-men (“This resolution, Creon, is your own, / in the matter of the traitor and the true. / For you can make such rulings as you will / about the living and about the dead”, 211–214). Creon does not seem interested in discussing the matter, and dismisses suggestion that he ought to reconsider his priorities.

4 At least, this is how Hegel interprets line 926 (παθόντες ἄν ξυγγνοῖμεν ἡμαρτηκότες), which he translates as “weil wir leiden, anerkennen wir, daß wir gefehlt!” (PhG, p. 348). Woodruff (2001, p. 65) takes issue with this translation, emphasizing that this line occurs as the consequent of a conditional by translating 925–26 as “If the gods really agree with this [Creon’s judgement], / Then suffering should teach me to repent my sin,” and adding that “[n]othing in the play suggests that the gods do agree with Creon’s judgement, and nothing Antigone says implies that she believes suffering implies guilt.” Whether or not Antigone is acknowledging wrongdoing at 926, however, it is hard to dispute that she ends the play in a state of ethical turmoil despite her staunch devotion to her role as a sister. This is all I require for my argument.
to reconstitute their identities. Even if we grant this, it is hard to take seriously the claim that Creon and Antigone could have avoided their difficulties by simply walking out on their identities. An Antigone who opted to say a silent prayer for her brother, or a Creon who threatened to give a stern talking to anyone who buried the body of Polynices, would scarcely be recognizable. There is a question whether these would, in any meaningful sense, be the same characters.

Still, if the Korsgaardian will allow that one should walk out on a factually grounded role such as being someone’s child when the categorical imperative requires it, she will presumably insist that Antigone and Creon also ought to forget their cherished roles as a sister and as a king, even if this would render them unrecognizable. Nevertheless, we might still view it as a cost of the Korsgaardian view that she must make this admission. It shows that her view does shed much light on how Creon or Antigone as we know them could navigate their dilemma, since it recommends they in effect replace themselves with entirely new characters. This is a cost of Korsgaard’s view, but not a fatal objection. A more serious problem for Korsgaard’s view is brought to light by a close examination of what Antigone and Creon’s bind actually consists in. This will call into question Korsgaard’s account of how the navigation of any ethical bind ought to proceed. To this end, I will begin by giving a reading of Antigone based on a perceptive remark Hegel makes about the play.

### 2.1 A Hegelian reading of Antigone

Sophocles’s tragedies, and Antigone in particular, occupied Hegel throughout his life. At sixteen, Hegel had already produced a translation of Antigone (Avineri, 1972, p. 2). In his first magnum opus, the Phenomenology of Spirit, Antigone punctuates the transition from the first, largely theoretical part of the book to Hegel’s engagement with culture, history and religion in the latter. Antigone appears again in his major political treatise, The Philosophy of Right, where it is used to explore gender roles. When late in life he came to formulate a theory of tragedy as part of his lectures on The Philosophy of Fine Art (VPK, p. 280), he employs Sophocles’s Theban plays as paradigms of the genre, and reserves his most ebullient praise for Antigone.

Hegel draws our attention to the fact that that Antigone and Creon’s interests are intertwined in virtue of their mutual affiliation with the royal household of Thebes. Although Antigone is proud of her defiance of Creon’s decree in favour of the “unwritten laws” of family piety (456), and Creon delights in denouncing Antigone’s “wicked” preference for loved ones (φίλαι) over the city (182–183,

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5. Antigone first makes an appearance at the end of the third part of the book entitled “Reason”, which contains Hegel’s application of the “experiences” of consciousness to the history of science and the rise of individualism (PhG, p. 322). The drama is taken up again in his discussion of Sittlichkeit, or “ethical life” (PhG, p. 348), at the beginning of the part of the book entitled Geist or “spirit” – Hegel’s word for, roughly, the sphere of human culture and values.

650–654), their situation does not in fact display the independence from one another’s interests which each claims:

Antigone, for example, lives under the political authority of Creon; she is herself the daughter of a king and the affianced of Haemon, so that her obedience to the royal prerogative is an obligation. But Creon also, who is on his part father and husband, is under an obligation to respect the sacred ties of relationship, and only by breach of this can give an order that is in conflict with such a sense. In consequence of this we find immanent in the life of both that which each respectively combats, and they are seized and broken by that very bond which is rooted in the compass of their own social existence. (HT, p. 73)

In other words, the reality of Antigone and Creon’s ethical predicaments are not as simple as they each imagine them to be. It is important to Antigone that her burial of her brother be an act of public defiance. Rather than taking precautions to avoid getting caught, she chastises her sister for offering to keep her plan a secret (83–84). Thus, despite her constant contrast between her own devotion to the unwritten law of Zeus and the fleeting law of man, Antigone is under no illusions about her participation in the public sphere. In fact, a large part of her concern seems to be not just with her own devotion to unwritten laws, but with the civic consequences of disregarding such laws (450–459). It is fitting, therefore, that Antigone’s final speech is not a somber farewell to Ismene or Haemon, but a public address (“Men of my fathers’ land, you see me go…”, 810). Antigone seems keenly aware that her rejection of man-made law is itself a political statement.

Antigone’s callous attitude toward her sister Ismene also complicates the presumption that she is acting in the name of familial love. In suggesting a joint suicidal undertaking, we would expect a loving sister to at least be patient with her sibling and be ready to explain why she thinks there is no other option. Instead, Antigone confronts Ismene with a self-righteous tirade about nobility and betrayal. When Ismene expresses reasonable hesitation at the plan, Antigone shuns her (69–70), and when Ismene offers to keep the plan a secret, Antigone retorts sharply: “I shall hate you more if silent, not proclaiming this to all” (86–87). This cruel condition forces Ismene to choose between her sister’s hatred and causing her sister’s arrest. When finally Ismene attempts to take a share of responsibility for the crime, Antigone shows no signs of gratitude or sympathy, and denies Ismene’s involvement before Creon. We might suppose that Antigone is here only feigning distance in order to spare Ismene from Creon’s wrath. O’Brien (1977), however, makes an argument that Antigone is punishing Ismene for not complying earlier by consigning her to worse fate than her own:

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7This way of elaborating Hegel’s point, although not the specific textual evidence used to do so, owes a debt to Nussbaum (2001), Ch. 3.
Antigone cannot forgive Ismene’s earlier paralysis and coldly, even harshly, consigns her to continued existence with Creon (549). Is this only apparent coldness on Antigone’s part, as some claim? Nothing in the text suggests such “charity.” In fact, given Antigone’s belief that love constitutes life, and given Ismene’s avowals of love, Antigone must have known that Ismene’s fate was worse than her own. Ismene, too, would prefer physical death to death in life. (O’Brien, 1977, p. 37)

It is hard to resist the conclusion that Antigone is more preoccupied with her own honour (“What greater glory could I find than giving my own brother funeral”, 503) than her family’s welfare. It is notable in this respect how often Antigone refers to herself (“I shall never be found to be his traitor”, 46, “For me, the doer”, 72, “There I shall lie forever,” 77, “I shall suffer nothing as great as dying with lack of grace”, 96–97), and how seldom to any living members of her family. The fact that Antigone’s affections are directed almost entirely to dead members of her family, and the laws she fights for are “unwritten” (and hence provide no public standard to which she can be held) mean that she largely inhabits a world of her own construction. As a result, she shows signs of the tyrannical self-absorption that she despises in Creon. As she is walking to her tomb, the Chorus indicates that Antigone’s own desire for fame will at least be fulfilled. Although it is not clear whether the Chorus means to chide her at this point, it is telling that Antigone does appear to take it this way. She answers the chorus indignantly: “Laughter against me now. In the name of our fathers’ gods, could you not wait till I went?” (839–840)

While Antigone addresses the masses, Creon stays confined to his palace, where he becomes increasingly preoccupied with his son’s obedience. The way that he informs Haemon of his intention to sentence Antigone to death calls into question Creon’s claim to be acting for the public good alone. If Creon’s motivation for sentencing Antigone were purely political, we would expect him to show at least a modicum of sensitivity in telling Haemon that he has decided to kill his future wife. Instead, Creon announces his decision proudly, and insists that he has his son’s best interests at heart, since he will be saved from a “wicked wife” (γυνὴ κακὴ, 651). He cites explicitly the need to maintain domestic order when he explains his decision: “If I allow disorder in my house,” he says, “I’d surely have to license it abroad” (658–659). That he sees Antigone as a threat to his own household shows that Creon does not hold her merely in political contempt. He sees her equally as a personal enemy, and is unable to maintain a distinction between political and personal reasons for sentencing her. He recognizes only one blanket category of bad action, “disobedience”, which both “ruins cities” and “tears down our homes” (673).

In lecturing Haemon about the virtues of obedience, Creon not only destroys his son’s respect for him, he also allows civic order to degenerate outside the palace. Evidently the city is unhappy with Creon’s decision: Haemon relates that “the whole town is grieving for this girl [Antigone]” (693). We should keep in mind that Creon is related to Antigone through Oedipus, and so the town may
well view the affair as a family feud rather than a genuine matter of justice. If Creon were really still committed to maintaining civic order, he might drop the charges so as to placate the people. His personal vendetta against Antigone, however, trumps any such considerations. As Haemon points out, Creon’s willful attitude is childish (735) and has ceased to have any legitimate claim to be in the service of the civic good (737). Despite his lofty talk, Creon’s motivations at this point include little beyond personal spite and a desire to teach his son a lesson. Though he claims to act in service of the civic good alone, most of his effort seems to be directed towards “governing” his own family.

Hegel’s remark is therefore perceptive. Neither Creon nor Antigone succeed in limiting their interests to the family or to the city. Antigone finds herself isolated and occupies the public stage, while Creon becomes embroiled in a petty family dispute. Although Antigone sees herself as fighting on the side of the unwritten laws of familial piety against the civic tyranny of Creon, her struggle is at the same time an internal family dispute: Creon is, after all, her uncle. Likewise, although Creon sees himself as an upholder of civic order, quashing foolish upstarts in the name of the civic good, most of his effort is directed towards disciplining his own son and his niece.

2.2 Hegel on the political and familial spheres

Hegel thinks that the Creon and Antigone’s inability to hold apart their private and public obligations is not simply an artifact of their situation, but rather represents an actualisation of a deep tension which exists universally between the family and the political sphere. Hegel holds that familial and political duties inherently tend to pass over into one another and resist strict segregation. He makes the remarkable claim that all ethical conflicts are the particular expressions of this underlying instability in the separation of “the state, the general ethical life in the form of generality, and ethical life as subjectivity, as the family”.

Hegel takes Antigone to be the most “complete” tragedy because it lays bare these “most pure forces” of ethical conflict (VPK, p. 280) To see why Hegel sees the ethical bind of Creon and Antigone to be an exemplar of a broad range of ethical conflicts, we need to examine Hegel’s theory of the family and the state.

Hegel takes the defining characteristic of the family to be that family members belong to a single cohesive unit, held together in the first instance by loving relationships rather than legal duties (EPR, §158). The loving relationships that structure the family are not entered into by choice: Parents and children bond instinctively, and partners fall in love despite themselves. However, being relationships between rational animals, these relationships cannot structure the lives of family

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8His claim here seems to be about the source of all ethical conflict in tragedy, but the structure of the Philosophy of Right, which suggests he might hold this claim to be generally true. Nothing in my argument hangs on whether Hegel takes the claim to be true generally, or just true of all conflict in tragedy.
members for long before being brought to self-conscious awareness. When this happens, loving relationships become formalized into legal contracts (EPR, §159). Partners get married, and children, when they become aware of themselves as members of a family, come to expect their parents to fulfill their duties of care.

As this occurs, being a member of a family ceases to be a simple matter of being enveloped by familial love. Rather, the family comes to make a normative claim in its own right. In opposition to the rights that family members have as legal individuals, the right of the family consists in the right to refrain from entering into public life; as Hegel puts it “a right against externality and against stepping out of this unity [the family]” (EPR, addition to §159, translation modified). And yet, even for Hegel the family makes a kind of normative claim that is ultimately incoherent. By demanding that the individuals who make up the family are allowed to remain absorbed in a single loving unit, the family in effect demands that the individuals who make up the family be allowed not to be individuals at all. But family members, having become conscious of themselves as such, cannot simply renounce their status as separate beings. This is not only a theoretical contradiction, Hegel thinks, but one which plays itself out practically in the gradual dissolution of families (EPR, §173–§180). When children grow up, they leave the home, and as passions dampen, a marriage of love may become one of convenience. The bonds of familial love become eclipsed by the legal rights that family members bear as individuals.

This does not mean, however, that Hegel takes the domain of caring, altruistic relationships extends only as far as the family. On the contrary, in Hegel claims that a society based purely on legal relationships is as incoherent as one based solely on the demands of love. He seems to have two principal reasons for this. Firstly, because we do not come into the worlds as fully self-conscious beings, we need to be initially be reared by the family before we can enter into political relationships. Secondly, Hegel holds that relationships which treat subjects merely as abstract bearers of duties and rights (a condition he associated with the bourgeois society of his own day) fail to thereby treat rights holders as subjects at all. Instead, Hegel thinks that any legal relationship presupposes that the interested parties recognize each other as members of a community with joint interests and mutual dignity, and that this recognition cannot itself be legally instituted. Ultimately, public institutions must accommodate forms of normative relationships which treat subjects as more than just individuals, and include them in a way which resembles inclusion in the family.¹

The upshot of this is that private and public life are, for Hegel, mutually interdependent and yet make opposing demands upon individuals. The family presupposes relationships of love, but makes no room for the individuals between whom this love is supposed to exist, while the public sphere treats individuals as such, but does not provide for the preconditions of their recognition of one

¹These claims stand in need of a more detailed argument, but see, e.g., Hegel’s discussion of the corporation in EPR §250–256 for some examples of the sorts of claims I am basing this reading on.
another as individuals. The parental love which nourishes children in the family has its end in allowing children to grown into autonomous adults. But the more the family succeeds in rearing children who are independent individuals, the more it undermines its own existence as a principle of inclusion and absorption. Conversely, the legal institutions which allow subjects to retain their individual integrity only function in so far as individuals recognize one another as fellows in a community, and yet being an individual is a matter of recognizing oneself as essentially separate from others.

This means that the both the separateness and the unity of family and state is inherently unstable. The family and the state present themselves as opposing claims upon an individual, and yet neither can exist without the other. This allows us to see why he might view the conflict of Antigone as exemplary of more pervasive form of conflict between the public and private spheres. To see in more detail how Hegel makes the connection, we need to turn to his discussion of tragedy and social roles in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

### 2.3 Hegel on the ontology of social roles

Hegel compares the ethical world depicted by tragedy to the “thing of many properties” (PhG, p. 328).

> As the consciousness of abstract, sensual being passes over into perception, so also does the immediate certainty of real ethical [sittlichen] being; and just like simple being becomes a thing of many properties [Ding vieler Eigenschaften] for sense perception, so too in ethical perception does a given action become a reality [consisting] of multiple ethical relationships” (PhG 328, *my emphasis; my translation*).

Hegel’s mention of the “thing of many properties” is a reference to the second chapter of the *Phenomenology*, “perception [Wahrnehmung]”. There “consciousness” is engaged with understanding the nature of the objects of its immediate experience. At this point, consciousness has already experienced the shortcomings of understanding its experience as a sequence of independent sensations, and now realizes that it must suppose the objects it perceives have persistent properties. It thus comes upon the empiricist idea that objects are collections of associated properties or ideas, which are separate and do not effect one another. Correspondingly, to perceive an object is to perceive all of the properties that constitute this one object: That to perceive a *cube of salt*, for instance, is just to perceive *cubicity, sharpness of taste, whiteness, hereness*, etc.

“Thinghood as such,” on this view, simply becomes a matter of individually separate and distinct properties coexisting (*ein einfaches Zusammen von vielen*, PhG, p. 95). The view cannot explain
how the list of properties that supposedly constitute this salt (white, sharp tasting, cubically shaped, and ...) is at once a single thing before me (ein einfaches Hier, PhG, p. 95). In other words, this view has no answer to the question “in virtue of what are these all properties of one single object?” This proves fatal to the view, since without this we lose our grip on what it means for properties to co-exist at all. If we have no account of what makes the colour, taste, shape and weight all properties of a single object, then there is no use in saying that a single object is a multiplicity of properties, since this gives us no grip on why one existing property any more a part of this object than another.

What is wrong with this view, in other words, is that it fails to account for the fact that having access to these as an object of knowledge involves recognizing them to be properties of a single underlying thing. We experience various properties of a salt cube not just as a collection, but as related in virtue of their involvement in the constitution of a unified object: The hereness perceived is the location of that which is white, which is the color of what tastes sharp, which is the taste of that which has a cubic shape, etc. Hence, to describe our knowledge of a salt cube as simply consisting in knowing a bundle of properties is to leave out the important sense in which these properties are expressions of an underlying unity.

In transitioning to the Spirit chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel suggests that we are liable to commit a similar error in our attempt to grasp the nature of an “ethical world” (PhG, p. 328). When we try to grasp a society, we first notice the multiplicity of ethical relationships that it contains. But this multiplicity is parasitic on an underlying unity: Political life and the family can only be properly understood in terms of their relation to one another.

As regards Antigone, Hegel’s suggestion seems to be that Antigone and Creon treat their choice of roles as if one’s place in an ethical community were akin to an object conceived as a bundle of properties. Antigone’s certainty that she can cast off her civic duties for the sake of family piety, and Creon’s conviction that family virtues are totally subordinate to civic virtues, indicates that they imagine their choices of roles as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antigone</th>
<th>Creon</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old role (incoherent)</td>
<td>{Sister, Royal}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New role (coherent)</td>
<td>{Sister}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet Creon and Antigone’s roles are not well described by a simple list of royal offices and familial memberships. To do so would be to make the same error about their situation as we make when we try to think of a cube of salt as the collection of properties which characterizes it. The point of conflict is rather that they are in a single situation which places both familial and civic demands
on them. For Antigone, being a sister is being a royal sister, and for Creon, being a king is being a member of the household of Thebes. The interwovenness of their familial and civic duties means that Antigone and Creon’s choices are more restricted than they appear to them, and that they do not divide along the lines each takes them to. Hence, by discarding the role they see as inimical to their true identity, they also destroy their ability to fulfil the role which they intend to. Their attempt to arbitrate between their roles by giving sole preference to their public or private duties has the effect of putting it into conflict not only with one another, but also with themselves. Their “individuality”, as Hegel says, “is destroyed through the one-sidedness of their goals” (die Individualität wird durch die Einseitigkeit ihres Zwecks zerstört, VPK, p. 278).

2.4 Consequences for the Korsgaardian account

Korsgaard’s view, we will recall, presupposes that a certain structure is in place whenever we are called upon to act ethically: We have open before us some selection of roles. Obviously, these roles must be distinct, otherwise the supposed choice would be no choice at all. Likewise, although incompatibilities will arise (Antigone cannot be a pious sister and a law-abiding citizen), some solution to the problem of choosing roles must exist if the procedure is to be adequately described as a problem of choice. There may of course be epistemic difficulties in knowing what our moral choices are, and which choices of role are compatible, but all this belongs to the difficulty of making ethical choices. The important point is that some such coherent set of alternatives must exist if choice between roles is to be an adequate description of acting ethically in the face of competing ethical demands.

Antigone draws our attention to the fact that we cannot always assume that the roles which present themselves as possible components of our practical identities to us are genuinely distinct. For Antigone to step out of her role as an affiliate of the royal family is, eo ipso, for her to step out of her role as an affiliate of the family. As a result, while she could, as Korsgaard suggests, simply “walk out” on her identity, she could not walk out on her obligations to her city (given by her affiliation to the royal family) without doing violence to her obligations to her family as such. She would have to give up both, or neither.

Likewise, Creon fails to recognize that as the ruler of a city whose peace has been destroyed by a family feud, his civic duty requires him to remedy his family situation. By instead trying to rule his son with an iron fist, he does further damage to the integrity of his family, resulting in the destruction of the city. He cannot be a good king without being a good member of the family. Hence, it seems that Creon, too, can not choose to be just a king or just a father.

If this is right, then the Korsgaardian must claim that Creon and Antigone must give up both their civic and familial roles. Yet it is hard to imagine how they could do so in such a way that this
would bring about an ethical outcome. If they each resolve to retire to a quiet life of reflection in separate cabins in the woods, then what is to happen to the city of Thebes? Perhaps there is a neutral, peace-loving candidate in a better position to rule to whom Creon can abdicate his throne. But suppose there is not: According to Korsgaard’s account, Creon still ought to walk out on his role as king, and leave the war-torn city of Thebes to sort out itself. Even though Creon is a terrible ruler, it is hard to stomach the conclusion that this would be the ethical thing for Creon to do. This, then, is the first major problem with Korsgaard’s account which Hegel’s reading of Antigone brings to light: It counsels us to just walk out on obligations when fulfilling them would be too dangerous for our practical integrity.

Hegel’s reading also brings to light a second problem with Korsgaard’s account. According to Korsgaard, the employment of the categorical and hypothetical imperatives are sufficient to know what to do in any ethical dilemma precisely because they tell us what sort of things we can will without contradiction. Yet in a situation rife with contradictions like Creon and Antigone’s, the capacity to know which roles are contradictory will not help one determine what to do.

Here we must be careful not to overstate the case. Hegel’s argument does not show that the family and the state are incompatible in the sense that it is impossible for anyone ever to satisfactorily fulfil her public and private duties. In fact, he takes the chorus of Ancient tragedy to depict the possibility of ethical forces coexisting in harmony (HT, p. 279). Yet the harmony depicted by the chorus is a fragile one. The ethical forces which it represents only exist in harmony because the chorus hovers above the action with dispassionate distance, “merely expresses its judgement as a matter of opinion” (HT, p. 66) without “practically co-operating in the action” (HT, p. 66). Thechorus lives in fear of action, because it knows that engaging in action would risk bringing the ethical forces which exist dormant in it into conflict. This fear is realized in the contending heroes, who individualize ethical forces and consequently are “incited to enmity [zur Feindschaft gereizt] [279]”. They represent the ethical forces in their active aspect, where there is no escaping the contradictions latent within the various ethical claims. Hence, Hegel’s point is not that a harmonious coexistence of state and family is literally impossible, but that it is inherently fragile owing to the latent contradictions among the obligations it imparts.

That is, Hegel’s point is that the family and the state display tensions which mean that any familial obligation stands potentially in contradiction with a public obligation. Circumstances will determine whether one can implement both kinds of duties while ensuring that their latent contradictions remain dormant, or whether one’s circumstances mean that the contradictions among one’s roles become actualized. Without consideration of one’s circumstances, a universalizability test will not help to arbitrate between roles with latent contradictions. For suppose that Antigone runs a universalizability test and asks:
Can I consistently will that I am a pious Greek sister and a member of the city?

What is she supposed to conclude? On the one hand, she could consider the question in the abstract, as having the force of “can a typical person in ordinary circumstances be both a pious Greek sister and a member of the city?” In this case, the answer is yes: Typically, the latent tensions between family and state will not present such great threats to a person’s practical coherence that one needs to choose between one or the other. But Antigone is not a typical person and her circumstances are far from usual. In her situation, the contradictions between the family and the state are not only potential but actual. So then, suppose she takes the force of the question to be “Can I (daughter of Oedipus, sister of Polynices, fiancé of the prince of Thebes) consistently will that I be a pious Greek sister who buries her Polynices and a member of the city under Creon’s rule which forbids the burial of Polynices?” In this case, the answer is obviously “no.” Yet if Antigone chooses this level of specificity, there is a question as to whether she is really employing a universalizability test at all. There are few people who fit the relevant description. The relevant domain of quantification might well consist of one. The fact that she is considering this as a universal maxim is at least doing no work in this case. She is simply observing that, she, in particular, cannot both do something and not do it. That is hardly something we need a universalizability test to teach us.

The categorical imperative is insufficient here to give Antigone any guidance, then, for two reasons. First, it does not tell her how many of her specific circumstances to take into account, yet in a situation like hers, the outcome of the test is depends crucially upon this choice. Second, it does not tell her anything about which of the roles within her sphere of considered alternatives are preferable. At best, it tell her to do something else entirely. But this is hardly any advance on recognizing that one is in a bind, and the capacity to recognize that one is in a bind hardly amounts to the capacity to navigate an ethical bind.

3 An Hegelian alternative

If it is right that Hegel thinks the situation of the characters in Antigone represents an actualized contradiction, then we might assume that Hegel thinks that there is no way at all for them to arbitrate between their roles; that characters in their situation must throw their hands up and surrender themselves to fate, since no one can do anything to help the situation. Hegel might be taken to be saying so in passages such as the following:

In all these tragic conflicts, however, we must above all place on one side the false notion of guilt or innocence. The heroes of tragedy are quite as much under one category as the other. If we accept the idea as valid that a man is guilty only in the case that
a choice lay open to him, and he deliberately decided on the course of action which he carried out, then these plastic figures of ancient drama are guiltless. (HT 70)

Yet, as Hegel goes on to make clear, he is not out to excuse tragic heroes. “One can in fact urge nothing more intolerable against a hero of this type”, he proclaims, “than by saying that he acted innocently” (HT 70). Hegel is not trying to excuse the characters of tragedy, but instead making a point about the conditions of the applicability of moral concepts. What Hegel sees as characteristic of concepts like guilt and innocence is that they treat the worth of individual intentions in abstraction from their broader situation. In passing moral judgements, we locate a wrong in the choice of a particular individual, rather than distributing blame over a group or seeing a situation itself as to blame.⁹ Hegel wants to draw our attention to the conditions which must hold if we are to perform this sort of “moral abstraction” and dish out blame individually. He summarizes the conditions in the passage above: “Only in the case that a choice lay open to him, and he deliberately decided on the course of action which he carried out” can we strictly speaking call someone guilty or innocent. As I have argued, Antigone and Creon did really not have the choices that they took themselves to have, and so Hegel takes it to be misleading to apply moral categories to them.

This does not mean that, absent the conditions of morality, we can make no normative assessment of people’s actions at all. Hegel recognizes a broader category of normatively significant relationships than those of morality. He uses the term “ethical life [Sittlichkeit]” to denote the sort of ethical relationships which can exist even in the absence of the possibility for meaningful individual choices required for morality. His point here, however, is that in forms of Sittlichkeit which do not satisfy the conditions of morality, we must distribute blame between individuals and broader social factors. Neither Antigone nor Creon are blameless, but nor can their blame be located exclusively in their ill will or their malfunctioning capacity for choice. Instead, we must view their blunders in the context of the cruel and unfair situation that Theban society placed them in. The ultimate target of ethical evaluation in Antigone must therefore be the complex whole containing them, their choices, the presumption that a king’s decrees must be followed, the presumption that a sister has a special duty to her brother, etc. It is in this complex whole, rather than the actions of any individual, where the ultimate ill of their situation must be located.

Hegel therefore urges us to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the duties and obligations that one has in virtue of the role she identifies with, and on the other, the structures which determine what obligations various roles determine: which social roles are separable, and which come as a package. The latter are generally socially determined and outside of any single agent’s control. Thus, while Hegel has no intention of exculpating the characters of Antigone, he also wants to

⁹Cf. EPR, §106.
draw attention to the respects in which they are forced into situations which make acting flawlessly impossible.

Still, even though Antigone and Creon are indeed between a rock and a hard place, nothing in Hegel’s account forces us to ignore the fact that they deal with their situation especially badly. Creon and Antigone both do excessive violence to their loved ones with the stubborn certainty and simplicity of their self-conceptions.\(^{11}\) Hegel’s point is only that their fault is not lack of moral resolution, but, if anything, too much of it. Korsgaard’s model of role choice, which recommends picking a role and sticking with it, is realistic only when the role choices a situations offers us are genuine. In a situation where we are offered a faux choice, the opposite virtue is called for: Distance from one’s roles, flexibility, willingness to hear the other point of view. Having a less rigid self-conception does not guarantee that we will act ethically, but it does give us better prospects for mitigating the damage that we will do in a situation that undermines ideal action.

Hegel’s view therefore recommends that individuals caught in an ethical bind do what they can to maintain the integrity of their ethical community in the consciousness that their situation makes having a flawless practical identity impossible. This view does not preclude the applicability of the categorical imperative in the service of navigating ethical binds such as Creon and Antigone’s, but it severely limits its scope. Antigone and Creon go wrong in assuming that their situation makes it possible to find roles which are free of all contradiction, and hence by trying to renounce and embrace inseparable roles, they are really attempting to embrace and renounce a single role under two different descriptions. No wonder the attempt does damage to their practical identities. Nevertheless, the categorical imperative might still might be employed in order to find roles which are free of \textit{local} contradictions even if eliminating all contradictions is infeasible. There is no reason one ought not consider what maxims we will probably be able to act on without their latent contradictions becoming actualized. However, such a test will not always be of help, and it will seldom be the last word on our ethical decisions.

Even if we are unmoved by Hegel’s argument that familial and political roles are \textit{always} latently contradictory, reflection on the predicament of characters in Antigone still provides a powerful objection to Korsgaard’s view if think that these characters are faced with a situation that makes acting in a perfectly consistent way unfeasible. Korsgaard’s exclusive focus on the subjective requirements of an agent to consistently self-constitute herself ignores the way that objective facts about the incompatibilities between one’s roles can undermine role choice. Paying heed to these objective incompatibilities does not require greater consistency in choosing, but rather a willingness to acknowledge the limits of our capacity for choice in ethically difficult situations. Such situations call upon us to limit the havoc we wreak by our infelicitous action rather than attempting to leave our ethical difficulties behind by some heroic act of self-reconstitution.

\(^{11}\)Cf. Nussbaum (2001, Chapter 3).
Abbreviations


All translations from VPK and PhG are my own.

References


