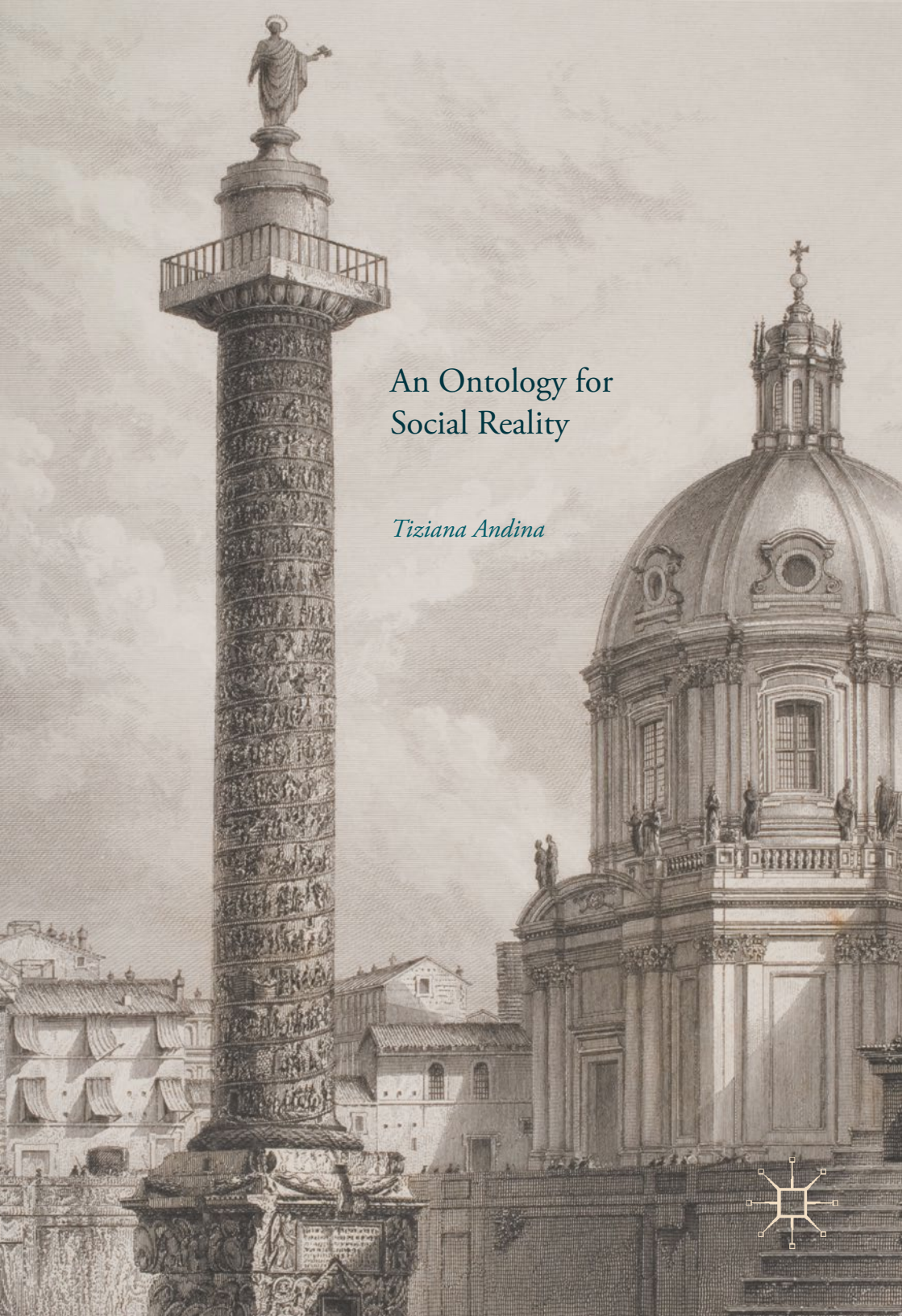

An Ontology for Social Reality

Tiziana Andina

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Contents

1 The Domain of Social Ontology 1
1.1 Conflicting Intuitions: Antigone's Paradox 1
1.2 Ontology 11
1.3 Social Ontology 22
1.3.1 The Stipulative Model and the Essentialist Model 22
1.3.2 The Origins of the Essentialist Model 27
1.3.3 Contra Hume: Reinach's Essentialism 29
Bibliography 52

2 Theories 57
2.1 "P-Ontologies": People, Groups, Relations 57
2.1.1 Common Commitment and Plural Action 58
2.2 "I-Ontologies": Facts, Institutions, Procedures 68
2.2.1 The Relational Character of Social Ontology 68
2.2.2 The Fundamentals: Assignment of Function, Collective Intentionality, Constitutive Rules 70
2.2.3 Rules and the Normative Issue 84
2.3 "O-Ontologies" and the Role of Documents 90
2.3.1 The (Social) World in Eleven Theses 90
2.3.2 The Ontology of Social Objects 95

2.3.3 From the Letter to the Document: The Case of the European Community 96
Bibliography 103

3 State and Justice 105
3.1 That Thing Called State 105
3.2 Transgenerational Actions 112
3.2.1 Epistemology 113
3.2.2 Ontology 116
3.2.3 Three Theories of the State: A Comparison 122
3.2.4 The Prejudice Against the State: Anarchist Theories 134
3.2.5 Social Contract 2.0 145
Bibliography 153

4 A Cross-Section of Power 157
4.1 States and Meta-States 157
4.2 Jonas' Half-World 158
4.2.1 Energy 160
4.2.2 Power 163
4.3 The Macrostructure of Institutional Reality 167
4.3.1 Document Bureaucracy 167
4.3.2 Identity 178
Bibliography 187

Bibliography 189

Index 191

Introduction

Over the years I spent writing this book, I progressively developed the conviction that ours is a particularly interesting historical phase for those who deal with social ontology. I believe this for two reasons: first, because the discipline has perfected a series of important conceptual tools aimed at understanding the social world, and seems now ready to explore interdisciplinary fields; second, all civilizations appear to be traversing an extremely delicate historical dimension. We live in a globalized world where the relations between agents have been immensely enhanced and no social component—and, at a higher level, no civilization—can be conceived without making reference to the others. This is proved, for instance, by large-scale migrations and their economic, political and social consequences. Migration flows are always hard to control and have a deep impact on the target social structures: in fact, they bring out traits of society that only emerge through traumatic events but would otherwise might remain latent in the folds of everyday reality.

There is another element on which I believe it is necessary to reflect. Western culture has interpreted itself (at least since the eighteenth century) as a path of progress and growth, both in cultural and in economic terms. Indeed, cultural and scientific growth was often understood as a direct cause of economic development. The idea was that the future is always better than the present, and that children will live in a better world than their parents'. Immanuel Kant well expressed this view in his

political writings where he argues that the relation between generations is unbalanced towards the new ones. In fact, if we consider history as intrinsically positive and progressive, it follows that every generation will capitalize on the (material and immaterial) goods of the previous one, thereby living in conditions of greater wealth and prosperity.

However, this view of progress and future so typical of the Western culture has been disproved: transgenerational progress is not at all a given; Quite the opposite. If we do not fight for it, our society—in terms of ethics and law, but maybe also structure—is destined to change. I think this point is well worth considering as part of the social ontology to come, in collaboration with political and moral philosophy as well as demo-anthropological and economic sciences.

The book is structured in four chapters and has two main objectives: first, it presents the fundamentals of social ontology: it discusses the origins of the discipline, its basic concepts and some of the most representative theories of the recent literature in order to further develop them in a productive direction; second, it provides an essentialist social ontology that analyzes the concept of the state, reshapes social ontology, argues in favor of a realist approach and, finally, promotes better understanding of the dynamics of power as well as greater justice between generations.

The first chapter identifies two opposing theoretical models: the stipulative and the essentialist. An illustrative example of the former can be found in the position developed by David Hume, for whom social reality is a complex and completely constructed structure. The thesis that Hume supports in the *Treatise of Human Nature* identifies the origin of social reality in stipulation. In other words, according to this position, social reality exists because human beings, for utilitarian reasons and through an agreement, have decided that it should exist, in a manner functional to some purposes that they have established and shared. Therefore, from this perspective, social reality exists because human beings have conventionally decided for its existence and chosen the rules through which it functions. Hume's analysis of the promise is exemplary in this sense.

On the other side, the essentialist model was introduced by Edmund Husserl in a paper entitled *Soziale Ontologie und deskriptive Soziologie*, where he coined the phrase "social ontology" and indicated the main lines of contemporary social ontology. As is known, in phenomenology

reality it is composed of things that have invariable essences, whose being is also normative. In social reality, the description of which was mainly addressed by Reinach (hence the definition of the essentialist model, Husserl–Reinach), this means that if the action we call promise has a precise and stable structure, this structure does not depend on the fact that humans have conventionally decided to agree to commit some acts of the will. Rather, it means that promises, when they exist, exist only in ways that correspond to their essence *a priori*.

After showing the reasons for the adoption of the essentialist model, the chapter presents and discusses the basic concepts of social ontology: relation, social action, covenant, promise, emotion. Relations and actions are identified as the two constituent elements of social reality; as for actions, in particular, I describe the properties that identify social actions and, within the latter, I identify one particular type of action: the transgenerational action that identifies social reality over time. The concept of transgenerational action is introduced in the first chapter and is developed and defined throughout the book.

In the second chapter I discuss three paradigmatic theoretical positions that belong to the category of contemporary social ontology: P-ontologies, I-ontologies, and O-ontologies which, respectively, focus on People, Institutions and social Objects. These positions are largely represented by the works of Margaret Gilbert, John Searle and Lionel Hart, and finally Maurizio Ferraris. The theories discussed are paradigmatic because they build social ontology, each basing it on different assumptions: they all have strengths and weaknesses and, in different ways, have contributed to the significant progress of the discipline. What emerges from a comparison between these different theses and methodologies, firstly, is that a good social ontology, to be effective, must coordinate very different explanatory components, ranging from the need to have a good taxonomy of the elements that make up social reality, to the analysis of its agentive, regulatory and institutional structures.

Secondly, it is quite clear that, under the methodological profile, ontologies tend to investigate the social world as if it were a complex articulation *given at a time t*. However, I believe they lack reflection on an element that characterizes and constitutes social reality: persistence over time. To understand social reality it is not enough to understand

the individual elements that make it up, nor is it sufficient to understand its normative and document apparatus and the agentive and relational dynamics of the subjects; it is also necessary to understand how it is possible that this complexity can last over time, or what guarantees its duration and preservation in time.

The third chapter deals with precisely this question and proposes reflection on the state as the most appropriate theoretical key through which to address such issues. I then pose some questions relating to the nature of the state: does the thing we call the state exist or should it be rather regarded as a conceptual fiction? And, if it does exist, what is it? The ontological question is tricky, because it seems hard to reduce the state to some material entity, but it also appears reductive to consider it a mere regulative concept. My analysis will show that the temporal property is what best characterizes the state: in other words, the state is not primarily something that takes up some space, but rather something that has a certain—and relevant—duration in time. I will define the state as an emerging entity that has the property of lasting over time. To exist in time, a state must correspond to a precise ontological structure involving: (a) the individuals' intentional will that has brought the state into being; and (b) "something" which preserves and maintains the intentional will of the individuals, namely its redefinitions in time, which can be defined as the *vehicle of institutionality*.

As we shall see, the analysis of the second point (b) is the main issue as regards the definition of the concept of state. In fact, if it is true that the concept of state is temporally connoted, it is also true that the state cannot be reduced to a physical object. I will argue that what keeps and maintains in being the intentional will, namely the vehicle of institutionality, are the actions taken by the state. After outlining an initial taxonomy of these actions and analyzing their structure in terms of ontology, I show that there is a particular type of action, the transgenerational action, which exhibits two main characteristics: first, it is the necessary condition for the existence of societies (that is, there cannot be societies without transgenerational actions); and, second, it can only be taken by states. Furthermore, transgenerational actions are characterized not only by having an extension in time, but also by the fact that this time involves *more than a generation*. I will show in detail that the actions taken by states

have a complex ontological structure, since they have a double temporal dimension: they have at the same time a simple and a transgenerational temporal extension.

After defining the institutional actions, I will show the ontological differences between simple and transgenerational actions. Institutional actions, in fact, are not all the same, and their duration is an important variable. Let us assume that Mr. Smith is the commander in chief of the armed forces of a state. Imagine that Mr. Smith finds himself in a particularly delicate situation: he must decide, in his capacity as commander in chief, whether to respond militarily to an attack aimed at his country by a neighboring state. Mr. Smith's decision can have two consequences: (1) a negative action, where commander in chief Smith avoids responding militarily to the neighboring state and asks a third institution to take action, solving the conflict situation; or, (2), commander in chief Smith, perhaps after consultation with the institutional bodies of his country, can opt to declare war on the neighboring state. The hypothesis that I will examine assumes that temporality determines in constitutive and specific ways the act of "declaration of war". I will consider, with respect to ontology, how this action is structured and what components it implies.

I will show how this type of actions creates a normative sphere that is both required by and derived from transgenerational actions: they bring into being some obligations that relate to the consequences of transgenerational actions, that is, they relate to actions that depend, more or less directly, on transgenerational actions. This normativity—as well as the completion of the transgenerational action—is entrusted to generations who have not wanted or decided for the transgenerational action in the first place. So, as I shall point out, the problem is twofold: on the one hand it concerns the foundation of the claims made by the state, or by supranational organizations, that the completion of this type of actions and the consequences arising therefrom should be entrusted to people who have not decided for them; on the other hand, and conversely, it involves the obligations to which the state must adhere and which constitute such actions. Finally, I will show that if governments fail to consider the particular structure of transgenerational actions—that is, the fact that they require the collaboration of several generations—states risk taking constitutively *unjust* actions.

In the first three chapters, therefore, I will claim that the state and its evolutions (like meta-states) are necessary both to the preservation of the political sphere and to the realization of a politics whose objective is justice. This is true not only for practical reasons—that is, because individuals and societies need mechanisms for institutions and representational systems to work—but also for ethical reasons: in fact, governments cannot operate neglecting the transgenerational nature of some of their actions. If transgenerational actions are, as I assume, social actions, then they can only be taken in a framework that includes the presence of the state.

Finally, Chapter 4 is dedicated to completing the framework outlined in the previous ones through a discussion of the ontology of institutional reality. To do so, I draw on the film *The Giver* to make a sort of cinematic thought experiment. The film describes a dystopian social reality in which peace and harmony are reached at the cost of manipulating the history, identity and memory of the people. In that world, knowledge of history legitimizes a certain use of power; the chapter therefore dwells on the notion of power, analyzing it both in terms of energetics (as the biological–animal dimension of the living) and in terms of political power. I do so by looking at some of the most important definitions that have been given in literature (Dahl, Foucault, Dean, Lukes, Arendt, Searle), in order to propose the Lockean thesis that power is both active and passive. Thus, I do not consider power as a property that a person may or may not have, but rather as a predisposition.

The idea of power as predisposition is developed within the theoretical framework offered by the thought of Max Weber, articulating what I call the macro structure of institutional reality, that is, the document bureaucracy. The document bureaucracy is analyzed and described by proposing a taxonomy of the documents that it make up, which are passive and active custodians of power, according to two main categories: normative documents and testimonial documents. In conclusion, I go back to the abovementioned thought example to show why both types of documents are a necessary condition for the existence of institutional reality.

1

The Domain of Social Ontology

1.1 Conflicting Intuitions: Antigone's Paradox

The origin of the story we are about to tell can be found in two things: a natural predisposition and a conflict of intuitions. The predisposition was captured and described by Aristotle in his *Politics*: human beings are by nature "political animals"—in other words, they are oriented, by natural inclination, to live a common life.[1] Forcing them to live a life in isolation is equivalent to imposing an unnatural condition on them. Aristotle does not delve into too much detail, but imagines that if there were a human being who chose to stand outside of the social forum, such a person would resemble a god or an animal.

It is not hard to imagine what Aristotle had in mind. It is sufficient to think of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan stories. Tarzan was born on the edge of civilization, to a young English couple who found themselves in the African forest after the mutiny of the crew of the ship *Fuwalda* that was taking them to the African continent. Extremely weakened by

[1] *Politics*, I, 2–8.

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childbirth, Tarzan's mother died after a few months, while his father was forced to defend himself and the child from the attack of a group of gorillas. The man did not survive, but Kala, a giant gorilla, saved the baby. Tarzan was then raised as an ape: he learnt how to move, to survive in the jungle and to speak ape language. At the end of many vicissitudes caused by encounters with humans, Tarzan will choose to return to the animal dimension, as if to symbolize that once the path of socialization is inhibited or interrupted, this fracture will remain open forever.

So, if the disposition to social life is very natural, social reality is complex and much more than "instinctive". It is made up of objects, relations, relationships, structures and superstructures that are intimately connected. Some parts of this structure are invariant and necessary, that is, constitutive of the part of reality we call "social"; others, instead, are the result of contingent choices and options. Therefore, one of the tasks of social ontology is to distinguish the first from the second, identifying the elements of the social world that are not subject to negotiation and those with a stipulative character. Following a research of this kind, it will be possible to discuss to the so-called normative aspects of social reality.

As much as human beings are predisposed to social life, some see the latter as the cause of profoundly conflicting dynamics. While it is true that man is a social animal, it is also true that a non-accessory character of his being is defined by freedom, that is, his right/duty to self-determination. Freedom is the reason for his ethical and moral responsibility, both as a single and as a social individual. Now, these two traits, both constitutive of human nature, often seem to be opposed. The task of social ontology is also to identify the causes of this conflictuality and, possibly, find a remedy.

The main agents of social reality are people, and its most important objects are relations and boundaries: between people, between people and institutions, and between institutions. Relationships can be of different kinds: some are little binding while others are extremely binding. They depend on the structure of social reality.

A significant example is that of the stipulation of pacts. It is no coincidence that Dante Alighieri, in his *Divine Comedy* (cantos xxxii, xxxiii

and xxxiv), places the betrayers of trust and pacts[2] in the depths of Hell, in a place far away from sight and memory: namely, the Cocytus, a frozen lake divided into four concentric zones. Traitors to their own relatives (the case is of two brothers of the lineage of the Alberti who slew each other) are immersed up to their necks in Caina. In Antenora, in a similar position, but with the head raised up so that it is more exposed to frost, are located the traitors to the homeland. In Ptolomea the betrayers of guests lie supine. Finally, in Judecca, completely immersed in the ice and in the most diverse poses, we find the traitors to benefactors.

Dante's disdain unfolds in the harsh and unforgiving description that runs through these pages: there is no room for mercy. Justice is manifested in the sentence that the poet chooses to inflict upon those souls. It is easy to imagine that the reasons for Dante's severity are not only of a moral order: those who betray trust and break pacts put social stability to a serious test, as it is based on trust between people in the first place, among people and institutions in the second place, and finally between institutions themselves. So, what simply cannot be tolerated in a social system is that people should not honor deals.

Dante seems to be certain that deals require absolute respect. It seems that he really knows in all cases what it means to comply with a pact, just as he seems to know *a fortiori* what we are talking about when we talk about pacts. However, even this matter, which seems so fundamental to social reality—*pacta sunt servanda* said the ancients—is somewhat controversial. So let us ask ourselves what a pact is, and if respecting a pact is always equivalent to doing justice. Things are not as simple as Dante takes them to be, and it is not difficult to show how this matter hides conceptual as well as ethical conflicts.

In this respect, it might be useful to recall Sophocles' *Antigone*, which presents an exemplary case. At the very beginning, Sophocles makes it clear that this is a situation in which the private and public spheres intertwine and are at one. Affections are tied to power in an inextricable tangle. *Antigone* exemplifies the essence of the conflict hiding between the lines of social

[2] *Inferno*, xi, vv. 61–66: "In the other way forgotten is the love/which Nature makes, and that which afterward is joined thereto, whence special trust is born;/hence in the smallest ring, where the universe/its center hath, and on which Dis is seated,/whoe'er betrays is spent eternally."

reality: on the one hand there is the search for sociality as a constitutive dimension of human life, on the other hand there is the loss of individual self-determination, which has also consequences under the moral profile. This is a sharp conflict that invests the very foundations of social reality.

We are in Thebes, and the curse that fell on Oedipus does not appear to have ceased to be: this time it is his sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, who are affected by it. The facts are simple. Following Oedipus' exile, due to the devastation he inadvertently caused, Creon—brother of Jocasta, Oedipus' mother and wife—became regent of Thebes for a short period. As soon as the two twin sons of Oedipus come of age, being unable to claim a priority in the succession to the throne, they established a diarchy: each would rule for a year, on a strict rota basis. Everything seemed to work well, until Eteocles broke the pact. The day came in which his brother Polyneices was entitled to succeed to him, but Eteocles expelled his brother, accusing him of incompetence and wickedness. Polyneices' exile led to serious violence, and the city of Thebes was beset by a bloody war. The brothers came to a final direct confrontation, and the outcome of that fight, leading to the death of both brothers, provides the background for the story of *Antigone*.

Antigone and Creon—respectively, the sister of Eteocles and Polyneices, and the new king of Thebes—in addition to being the protagonists of the narrative, express two opposite but (at first sight) equally well-founded insights. Now, imagine we had the opportunity to ask the two about the foundations of social life. From Antigone we could get an answer like this:

> The social world as seen by AntigoneWhat is the foundation of social reality? People, of course. To expand, social reality is based on both the respect for the written and unwritten agreements of men, and on the respect for other agreements: those between men and their gods. Not complying with this basic principle is equivalent to showing arrogance and contempt for the gods. If ever a king, a father who should administer public life and pursue justice for the welfare of his subjects, failed to comply with those laws, he would also show that he did not care for justice, nor for his subjects' future. Woe to the city that should know a king of such kind. He would give rise to irreconcilable tensions in the hearts of his citizens; contradictions so radical as to force them to choose between the freedom to

determine their own moral principles and the need to obey the laws of the state. Thebes had the misfortune to be ruled by such a king and underwent injustice and pain. You certainly recall the story:

What, hath not Creon destined our brothers, the one to honored burial, the other to unburied shame? Eteocles, they say, with due observance of right and custom, he hath laid in the earth, for his honour among the dead below. But the hapless corpse of Polyneices—as rumour saith, it hath been published to the town that none shall entomb him or mourn, but leave unwept, unsepulchred, a welcome store for the birds, as they espy him, to feast on at will.

Such, 'tis said, is the edict that the good Creon hath set forth for thee and for me, —yes, for me, —and is coming hither to proclaim it clearly to those who know it not; nor counts the matter light, but, whoso disobeys in aught, his doom is death by stoning before all the folk.[3]

The world that Antigone bears in her mind and heart has three characteristics: (1) it is founded on the idea of justice; (2) it is based on a relationship between individuals (and their memory) that, as such, precedes the relationship with the state and its institutions; and (3) this relationship is primarily based on the respecting of pacts, invisible but very real constraints that develop between people and, in the case of Antigone, between people and gods.

Justice is achieved in compliance with the laws, and the laws of the gods precede and ground the laws established by people. Therefore, no human decision, no political power, although inspired and descending directly from the gods, can justify breaking them. No political power may limit the individual's right/duty to self-determination, especially when it comes to ethically delicate matters. For this reason, the way the king treats one of the two brothers, in Antigone's view, is intuitively unfair, whatever the wrong he may have committed.

Now let us see how things are for Creon, for whom Antigone's actions foreshadow an open threat to his power.

The social world seen by Creon

You ask for what reasons I decided to put Antigone to death? Do you believe I cannot imagine what pain this will bring to Haemon, my hapless

[3] *Antigone*, vv. 26–47.

> son betrothed to her? Antigone has committed serious wrongs that no king could forgive. The main lies in having deliberately violated my commandment. In doing so, not only has she called into question the authority and the power of her king, but even worse, she has questioned the reasons for my commandment, namely my commitment to the good of the community. And what reasons could there be that pushed me to act as I did, other than a concern for the fate of my people? Thebes has already unjustly suffered too much, and a king, if worthy, always prefers the good of the community to his own or that of his friends and relatives.
>
> For since I have taken her, alone of all the city, in open disobedience, I will not make myself a liar to my people—I will slay her. So let her appeal as she will to the majesty of kindred blood. If I am to nurture mine own kindred in naughtiness, needs must I bear with it in aliens. He who does his duty in his own household will be found righteous in the State also. But if any one transgresses, and does violence to the laws, or thinks to dictate to his rulers, such an one can win no praise from me. No, whomsoever the city may appoint, that man must be obeyed, in little things and great, in just things and unjust; […] But disobedience is the worst of evils. This it is that ruins cities; this makes homes desolate; by this, the ranks of allies are broken into head-long rout; but, of the lives whose course is fair, the greater part owes safety to obedience.[4]

The arguments presented by Creon are interesting. Disaster is a step away, but he does not notice. The world that the sovereign has undertaken to defend has two characteristics: (1) it is founded, just as is the "Antigone-world", on justice; but (2) unlike Antigone, Creon does not believe that the agreements between people should have precedence over the institutions and the state; rather, unlike Antigone, Creon holds that the basic agreement is the one that binds the king to his citizens insofar as they have fully delegated to the sovereign their right to self-determination.

This is what Haemon points out to Creon, in a dense dialogue in which the former scolds the absoluteness of a power that deprives people of any political representation.

> Haemon: Father, the gods implant reason in men, the highest of all things that we call our own. Not mine the skill—far from me

[4] *Antigone*, vv. 705–727.