



The Tragedy of Cemeterial Work: Exploring Ethics Between Polis, Kinship, and Genos

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Abstract

Working in a cemetery carries ethical weight – getting it ‘right’ matters. How might tragedy help us to illuminate the meaning, nature, and ethical significance of this work? This paper draws from a feminist reading of the Greek tragedy *Antigone*, via the theoretical work of Adriana Cavarero, to show what we can learn about the ethico-political significance of cemeterial work as an enactment of grievability. It showcases the power of tragedy through vignettes drawn from a research project on cemeterial work in the UK and Italy, offering valuable insight into the ethical challenges such work entails, as well as its ethical importance. Bringing the empirical and philosophical concerns of the paper together, the analysis shows how cemeterial work is simultaneously ‘dirty’ and meaningful, imbued with ethical responsibility. In so doing, the paper contributes to debates surrounding the relationship between tragedy and business ethics, while also providing insights into a socially and culturally significant yet under-researched type of work.

Keywords Cemeterial work · Tragedy · *Antigone* · Cavarero · Ethics · Feminism

Introduction

Vignette I

Upon arrival at the cemetery, the coffin was entrusted to the care and vigilance of a man, referred to by the community as the “tentadore”. “Tentare” in Sardinian¹ also means to watch or to guard. The ‘tentadore’ had only one task: to keep watch over the coffin during the night following the funeral, within the cemetery walls. With the pit on one side and the coffin on the other, the tentadore spent the night there and, in return, received food and wine from the family of the deceased person. When asked if anyone had ever awakened during the fateful night of vigil, people of the village smiled and mentioned that it seemed to have happened; someone reportedly knocked to be let out of the coffin. How-

ever, they wouldn’t swear to the truth of this story...
(Author’s fieldnote at Berchidda’s cemetery).

This story, collected during our fieldwork as part of a research project on cemeteries in Italy and the UK,² conveys the complex interplay of fears, fantasies, and care surrounding death and cemeterial work. These themes have long animated literature and art, with Greek tragedy, especially Sophocles’ *Antigone*, offering a compelling lens through which to reflect upon the ethical complexities of cemeterial work.

These complexities have received relatively limited attention in organization studies thus far (see Jagannathan & Rai, 2022; Le Theule et al., 2020; Reedy & Learmonth, 2011; Smith, 2006). Further, the potential of tragedy as a lens for examining the epistemological and moral assumptions underpinning organizational action and experience remains similarly underexplored (Amiridis, 2018; Harding, 2013; Hoivik, 2009; Kopf et al., 2010). Seeking to understand the ethical significance and complexities shaping cemeterial work, and to explore the analytical potential of tragedy for

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¹ Sardinian is a Romantic language spoken in Sardinia, recognized as an official minority language in Italy.

² The vignettes presented here are drawn from a larger funded project in the UK and Italy, which began in January 2024 and encompassed 15 cemetery visits and interviews with 52 participants.

developing this understanding, the paper raises the following question: How might tragedy illuminate the complex ethical challenges involved in cemeterial work, while at the same time, enabling us to understand its ethical significance?

Responding to this question, we show how cemeterial work, often stereotyped as ‘dirty work’ (Mahalingam et al., 2019), carries profound ethical weight. By delving into Greek tragedy and stories like the one shared in the opening vignette above, we aim to uncover how cultural imaginaries shape and are shaped by our ethical understanding of death, and how they both help to illuminate hidden dimensions of work, in this case, cemeterial work, and to reimagine it. Our reading of *Antigone* is both our own and one that draws from Adriana Cavarero’s feminist interpretation of this tragedy (2024 [1995], 2023, 2010). We draw from Cavarero’s reading because it allows us to interrogate the ways in which cemeterial work complicates modern ethics, which she sees as grounded in the disembodied reason (*logos*) of an autonomous, independent (typically male) self. For Cavarero, this conceptualizes ethics as a set of rules that govern political life (*polis*) through the application of practical knowledge (*techne*). Modern ethics, she argues, tends, as a result, to marginalize the embodied, relational, and affective dimensions of ethics (see also Painter-Morland, 2010; Loacker & Muhr, 2009). These are dimensions that, we suggest in our reading of Cavarero and *Antigone*, and in our discussion of the vignettes we draw from in this paper, are essential to understanding grief, mourning, and death work.

Tragedy reveals ethics as contingent, relational, and unresolved: a site where opposing values and imperatives collide without clear resolution (Cavarero, 2024 [1995], 2023, 2010). Tragedy asks us to move beyond dualistic oppositions and to confront situations in which no morally correct decision can be rationally calculated. From this perspective, ethics emerges precisely in conditions of irreconcilable tension, where multiple, conflicting values remain equally valid.

In line with recent approaches that emphasize the bodily and relational dimensions of ethics (Fotaki, 2019; Kenny & Fotaki, 2023; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015), Cavarero’s reading of *Antigone* helps us rethink ethics beyond the bounds of rational subjectivity, moving toward a vitalist ethics rooted in *zoe*—the generative, relational force of life. This ethics challenges norms that position the human as defined by abstract, disembodied reason and place it in a hierarchical opposition to the body, nature, and femininity (Sayers et al., 2022; Tallberg et al., 2022; Willmott, 1998). Instead, the vitalist ethics that Cavarero espouses affirms a radical equality and the ethical salience of embodied and interdependent life.

Our primary interest in this paper is in showing how this reimagining of ethics is especially valuable for understanding the organization of death and the politics of mourning. Cemeterial work involves the ‘handling’ of death and dead

bodies in physical, emotional, and symbolic ways—sometimes in neglected, marginal spaces, other times in curated, landscaped sites. In all cases, it is embedded in a broader ethico-political terrain, particularly the politics of grievability (Butler, 2004, 2022). As Butler explains, to be grievable means “counting as a life ... being a body that matters” (Butler, 2022, 102, emphasis added), where ‘mattering’ is taken to refer to both having material form (substance) and the capacity to signify, through that same material form, something of value. In contrast, those individuals who are de-realized (Ahmed, 2024; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016) could die unnoticed, as their lives hold no value (Varman et al., 2021; Varman and Srinivas, 2023) – they are reduced simply to (material) matter or substance, without signifiatory power. Dead bodies on the streets, or piled up, during floods, famines, or pandemics embody this de-realization (Mahalingam et al., 2019).

In this paper, we assert that cemeterial work plays a vital role in recognizing the inherent value of human lives, reshaping our understanding of grievability, and social contours and hence, its uneven distribution. In other words, part of the ethical responsibility of cemeterial work is to ensure that all deaths, and hence lives, matter. It therefore holds ethical and political significance, particularly when this involves working against dominant norms of exclusion, and according recognition to those who are otherwise de-realized, to borrow from Butler.

To explore this, we intertwine our reflections on how *Antigone* illuminates the ethical dimensions of cemeterial work with vignettes from our fieldwork in Italy and the UK, and our reading of Cavarero’s writing, itself based on her own reading of *Antigone*. The national contexts we examine, shaped by differing religious traditions, cultural beliefs, and burial practices, offer a rich basis for understanding the diverse ethical dimensions of cemeterial work. Our sites include potters’ fields,³ monumental cemeteries,⁴ community and ecologically sustainable burial grounds, illustrating

³ The term “potter’s field,” which traces its roots to the Bible and its mention of clay-laden earth, came to signify a burial place for those who died unclaimed or in poverty, and is widely used in many parts of the world to refer to burial places consisting, e.g., of unmarked, and/or mass graves.

⁴ Monumental cemeteries are sites of significant artistic and cultural value that were first established following the Edict of Saint Claude, which (for public health reasons, as urban populations across Europe grew) mandated that cemeteries be built outside of city limits. In France and Northern Italy, this decree led to the creation of major cemeteries, such as Père Lachaise in Paris (1804) and Staglieno in Genoa (1851), which replaced the rural cemetery that had been prevalent in the eighteenth century. In contrast to Italy, which became a center for monumental cemeteries, the UK retained, for a long time, the garden-style and community cemetery as the dominant model (Ross, 2020; Vaj, 2012).

how ethics is spatially and materially embedded in cemeterial work and practices. These vignettes are not presented as comprehensive empirical ‘findings’ as such, but as illustrative moments that reveal how tragedy can expose the ethical tensions inherent in organizational life. They show how cemeterial work involves the ongoing navigation of moral ambiguity, relational care, and the politics of memory and recognition.

The paper offers a twofold contribution. First, it contributes to current thinking on the relationship between tragedy and business ethics (Contu, 2014; Drascek & Maticic, 2008; Harding, 2013; Hoivik, 2009; Kenny & Fanchini, 2024; Kopf et al., 2010), highlighting the value of insights derived from the feminist work of Adriana Cavarero. We will argue that by proposing an innovative reading of Sophoclean tragedy, Cavarero helps us to move beyond a Hegelian view of ethics that opposes the logic of the state to that of the family, shifting our analytical orientation toward the development of a vitalist ethics. Second, the paper contributes to the limited body of work in organization studies that has investigated the ethical weight of cemeterial work (Bailey, 2010; Colombo et al., 2019; Jordan et al., 2019; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Pinheiro et al., 2012). It does so by exploring the role of cemeterial work in shaping an ethics of grievability, thus moving beyond a simplistic view of it solely as ‘dirty,’ by foregrounding its ethical significance and meaning.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After discussing how tragedy can help illuminate the ethical complexity of work, including cemeterial work, we focus on Antigone and its interpretations by proposing how Cavarero’s writing has the potential to show the ethical ‘vitalism’ of cemeterial work. A brief outline of our research is followed by a selection of vignettes that we have chosen as they provide insight into the ethical significance, and complexities, of cemeterial work, especially when read through, as we show, a feminist reinterpretation of Antigone inspired by Cavarero. Concluding reflections will follow, reconnecting our contributions to the extant literature on business ethics.

Understanding Work Tragically

While organizational scholars have long since explored the ethical power of stories and storytelling in organizational life (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2010), it is only relatively recently that management and organization scholars have recognized tragedy as a valuable source for understanding the epistemological and moral assumptions guiding organizational action and experience (Amiridis, 2018; Harding, 2013), highlighting its value particularly in business ethics pedagogy (Hoivik, 2009; Kopf et al., 2010).

Greek tragedies help to illuminate the complexity of ethics, both individual and institutional (Kopf et al., 2010).

They bring to light elements of lived experience marginalized by the rise of modern ethics, which focuses primarily on rationality (Nietzsche, 1872; Amiridis, 2018). In particular, tragedy highlights the constraints of modern ethics (Locker & Muhr, 2009; Painter-Morland, 2010), where rationally calculated, resolute interpretations are replaced by those revealing the contradictory, irresolvable, and indeterminable nature of ethics.

Tragedy is characterized by the opposition of ethical positions that are simultaneously right and wrong (Hegel, 1977). This tension between equally legitimate moral claims inherently excludes resolution. Tragedy represents a crisis triggered by disruptions of an ethical order often manifest as dichotomies that pit specific, individual claims and desires against the abstract rational laws constituting the institutions within which individual action takes place and derives meaning. By experiencing the inherent pain of this irresolvable tension, the figures in tragedy activate multiple identifications (von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009), continually challenging taken-for-granted understandings of reality (Harding, 2013).

The questions raised by tragedy are not simply ontological and epistemological, but political as well, for this dynamic of identification and compassion underpins the emancipatory power of tragedy (Kopf et al., 2010). Importantly, tragedy helps us to interrogate what it means to be human, inviting a reconsideration of the dichotomous opposition between humans and nature as it has crystallized in Western thought from the Greek polis to the present day. As for feminist speculative fiction, tragedy provides ‘imaginative resources that can be used to develop notions of subjectivity where zoe-centered egalitarianism can take root’ (Sayers et al., 2022, p. 607). It also calls for reimagining equality beyond the boundaries of political life, embracing the reproductive power of zoe (biological life) as a foundational principle of grievability beyond the exclusive domain of bios (political life).

Grievability refers to the fact that some losses can be ‘marked and valued,’ while others remain unrecognized (Butler, 2004, 2022). The socially situated nature of precarity means that there exists an unequal distribution of grievability, as only some lives are safeguarded and mourned, while others are not considered worthy of grief. As such, grievability is an organized – and organizing – process that, ‘through specific yet recurrent practices,’ constructs certain lives as disposable (Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016, p. 1909) – effectively rendering them already dead – so that harm and violence can be inflicted upon them without retribution or consequence (Ahmed, 2024; Varman & Srivinas, 2023).

For instance, in their discussion of the social contours of grievability and its relationship to social death or dispossession (Butler, 2004, 2022), Varman et al. (2021) explain how the lives of domestic service providers in India are made ungrievable through patriarchy and class-based consumption

norms. Clients perceive these workers as subhuman objects for their consumption and sexual gratification; in turn, the workers themselves internalize a sense of unworthiness (see also Derakhshan & Chowdhury, 2024). Similarly, Mahalingam et al. (2019)'s study of the Dalit people who cleaned the streets in the Indian city of Chennai in the aftermath of floods in 2015 showed how 'handling' death and dead bodies can involve working in 'appalling and unsafe conditions.' Their study foregrounds how, in a sector of work that is simultaneously undesirable and necessary (Jordan et al., 2019), the shame and stigma attached to 'handling' death often intersect with class and caste-based inequalities (Jagannathan & Rai, 2022). This means that the stigmatization that renders this occupational category 'dirty' rests on and reinforces wider cultural and economic circumstances (Pinheiro et al., 2012), and ethical contours. Another case in point is that of Hart Island, New York, a public cemetery used to intern the City's unclaimed or impoverished dead, in which those who work there 'absorb' the stigma associated with a public burial and the dehumanized treatment of those buried in its mass graves (Byers, 2022).

Contributing to this literature, we argue that the stigmatization of death and 'death work' (workspaces and practices associated with death and the handling of dead bodies) often leads to the underestimation of the crucial role that cemeterial work plays in the organization and process of mourning, not simply reflecting but shaping the ethico-politics of grievability. Further, we show how tragedy helps us to grasp this often-neglected ethical significance (the 'moral weight') of cemeterial work, enabling us to understand how this work shapes and is shaped by grievability, and to appreciate the ethical complexities and challenges that it involves as a result.

To add some clarity on this latter point, what we mean by this is that cemeterial work plays an important role in shaping how, and according to which criteria, certain lives and deaths come to matter and to be perceived (and treated) as grievable; that is, as having lives that have registered as a loss. e.g., by being marked and mourned, while others do not. In this sense, cemeterial work and practices associated with rites, rituals and memorials, entail a form of recognition work through which the de-realization of some lives can potentially be resisted, if not reversed, in death, while the disavowal or denigration of others is affirmed.

Part of the burden of responsibility borne by cemeterial work, then, lies in precisely the ways in which it organizes grievability, thus making such work not only emotionally and physically challenging, but also ethically significant, 'vital' in the sense that it has the capacity to (re)imbue meaning into otherwise de-realized, negated lives. For instance, cemeterial work can potentially play an important role in challenging and 're-organizing' the grievability of those whose lives have previously registered as a loss, but whose

right to be recognized as such has been called into question in the context of, e.g., post-colonialism. Collaborative work between activists, community groups and cemeterial workers to remove or revise, or add reflexive notes to, for instance, memorials of slave traders can be understood as an example of this aspect of cemeterial work's ethico-political capacity to function as 'recognition work' (see Ashley, 2015). And by the same token, mass graves containing, for instance, the bodies of sex workers or women accused of witchcraft, historically cast out from consecrated burial grounds and denied individual grave markers, have been 're-organized' by cemeterial workers and community activists, with memorials and historically reflexive explanations about the nature of their deaths and burial being introduced, in places such as Crossbones cemetery in London, for instance.

While work and organizational scholars have only recently begun to engage with such complexities, and to understand the ethico-political significance of this kind of work, Greek tragedy has long provided an interpretative lens through which to reflect on them. We therefore turn to *Antigone* in the following sections, exploring how, among the Greek tragedies, it is especially capable of helping us to understand the ethical significance and complexities of cemeterial work, and potentially, of inspiring new approaches to organizational ethics.

Rethinking *Antigone*

Before engaging with the multiple interpretations of Sophocles' *Antigone*, it is worth providing a brief summary of the play's characters, narrative, and thematic concerns. It is set in Thebes after the deaths of Oedipus' sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, who killed each other in battle. Creon, their uncle, becomes king and decrees that Eteocles will receive an honorable burial, going 'with glory down among the dead,' while Polyneices' body must remain unburied as a punishment for waging war against Thebes, 'to be left unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure for birds.' Acting as a warning against defiance of the new order, Polyneices' exposed body will remain as an obscenity for the citizens to behold, while his brother's remains shall be 'crowned with a hero's honors.' *Antigone*, their sister, defies Creon's order and buries Polyneices despite the threat of punishment by death. Creon sentences her to be buried alive. His son Hemon, *Antigone*'s fiancé, pleads for her life, but Creon refuses. Later, after warnings from the prophet Tiresias, Creon changes his mind, but *Antigone* has already hanged herself. Devasted by *Antigone*'s death, Hemon tries to kill Creon but ends up taking his own life. Creon's wife also kills herself, leaving Creon alone (Sophocles 1891).

This tragedy has inspired countless interpretations and readings across numerous disciplines, such as philosophy

and psychoanalysis (Harding, 2013). It has also provided important theoretical frameworks for understanding organizational phenomena. For instance, Antigone herself has been identified as an emblematic figure of the ethical challenges faced by whistleblowers (Contu, 2014; Kenny & Fanchini, 2024). Contu (2014) refers to Antigone to explain the allure surrounding these figures and the ambiguity of their motivations for reporting organizational wrongdoing. In her analysis, she revisits both Hegel's and Lacan's interpretations of Antigone, showing how the former offers a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the state and the family (see also Drascek & Maticic, 2008), while the latter complicates this reading by attributing new motives to Antigone's actions. Both interpretations retain the tragic nature of the story, emphasizing its aporetic character – the undecidability and irresolvable opposition and intertwining of two moral positions.

This tragic character is particularly evident in Hegel's interpretation, which sees Creon as the personification of the rule of law, representing the authority that is traditionally associated with the realm of the masculine. In contrast, Antigone embodies the feminine domain of loyalty to family. From a dialectical perspective, the state needs its antithesis to transform and actualize into a social-ethical order (Contu, 2014). Contu (2014) also revisits Lacan's interpretation, which sees Antigone as the expression of 'pure desire' that escapes any norm or universalizing category⁵, a reading she uses to argue that whistleblowers might not be driven by a sense of duty to the public, community, or state, but rather by a pure, uncategorized desire.

Contu's interpretation has recently been problematized by Kenny and Fanchini (2024), who draw inspiration from another reading of Antigone developed by Judith Butler (2000). Kenny and Fanchini (2024) draw from Butler to explain how female whistleblowers, like Antigone, challenge and displace structures of gender and power. As Harding (2013) also shows, Butler's feminist interpretation of Antigone is particularly useful for understanding the dialectical nature of gendered power dynamics in organizations. For Butler (2000), by occupying a myriad of gendered subject positions, Antigone reveals how familial power structures can be subverted to develop new imaginaries of togetherness (hinted at when, for instance, Ismene says of her sister that she is 'in love with impossibility' – see Honig, 2021).

Antigone's ability to question established power structures and norms stems from her position of radical exclusion. As a woman, she is already outside of the polis, and

in this sense, she is 'already dead.' Her tragedy invites us to reflect on how those at the margins can help to rethink power structures, including those governing rites and rituals associated with social recognition, even though this can sometimes come at a high price – in this case, Antigone's own life (Harding, 2013; Kenny & Fanchini, 2024). In this sense, not only does Antigone reveal to us the ethico-political burden borne by those who commemorate others; it also foregrounds the (in this case, gender) power dynamics shaping this burden and the actions through which it may or may not be realized.

Cavarero's Reading of Antigone

In this study, we propose an alternative feminist interpretation of this tragedy drawing from that developed by philosopher Adriana Cavarero, an interpretation that has not yet been explored in organization studies. This reading is particularly important because it helps to problematize some of the basic assumptions of previous interpretations of cemeterial work noted above, which largely foreground the stigmas associated with it. Instead, thinking about cemeterial work through Antigone enables us to better appreciate its ethical significance and complexities, especially via a feminist reading of Antigone which highlights the power dynamics shaping the ethical burden such work carries.

Traditional interpretations share a conception of Antigone's story as 'a moment of singularity' (Contu, 2014, p. 398) – the emergence of an individual who challenges power (Drascek & Maticic, 2008). This reading fits well with the modern problematization of whistleblowing (Contu, 2014; Kenny & Fanchini, 2024). However, for Cavarero (2024 [1995]), Antigone can be analyzed in a more nuanced way, as an archaic tragedy. In Cavarero's interpretation, a modern reading (as in a Hegelian interpretation i.e., in terms of a conflict between state and family), does not capture the full extent or complexity of the tragedy (Butler, 2000). Recognizing the archaic nature of this tragedy also means rethinking an interpretation that sees Antigone as either an exaltation of individuality and autonomy or as the personification of the family (Cavarero, 2024 [1995]). Antigone's story unfolds not within the confines of the family but within the genus – a bloodline rooted in generation and maternal corporeality that goes beyond polis and kinship.

Commenting on the Hegelian interpretation of Antigone, Cavarero (2010) explains that the use of the concept of 'family' with reference to Antigone is problematic. As she puts it:

Still more complicated is our recourse to the word family, a single term we use to translate two Greek nouns (domos and oikos) characterized by semantic slippage. At first, they denote the social group connected

⁵ The Lacanian concept of 'pure desire' highlights that Antigone's actions are not driven by calculation; rather, they are independent of the 'consensual order' in which she exists (Contu, 2014, p. 299). In this sense, Antigone exemplifies an ethical stance that goes beyond the rationality and abstraction typical of modern ethics.

by extended kinship and occupying the same “house.” But they soon assume the meaning of “building” or the habitat shared by the master’s family and his slaves. This semantic shift, in which a genealogical term is absorbed by a nomenclature of territorial division, deals precisely with the emergence of the polis. [...] In the figure of Antigone, in fact, the family, although it is indicated sometimes with the term *domos*, is rooted in the notions of *genos* or *philia*, or rather in the concept of that consanguineous chain linking those who belong by birth to a common breed and who therefore share not only the same house, but also the same blood inscribed in generation. [...] It is thus the power of blood that moves Antigone (p. 49).

This ‘corporeal lineage’ (Cavarero, 2024 [1995], p.37) provides the essential framework for understanding Antigone’s narrative. Although alone, she is not independent; she is deeply connected to others, and her actions reflect this – her actions are anti-egoic.

The centrality of the body and blood in an archaic reading also redefines the meanings of the relationship opposing Antigone and Creon, which Cavarero reinterprets as an opposition between the body and the polis, between the feminine symbolically inscribed in nature and generation, and the removal of the body dominating the masculine world of the polis (and constitutive of the modern approach to ethics – see Loacker & Muhr, 2009). This reading is made possible by Cavarero’s brilliant analysis of the context within which the tragic story unfolds, a context that is generally downplayed in organization studies’ readings of Antigone tragedy to date. As mentioned in the summary above, the story revolves around the issue of the (denied) burial of a body, so the meanings inscribed in this body and how they question our understanding of life and death are not secondary but central – as Cavarero shows – to understanding the narrative.

From this perspective, the ethics of the polis embodied by Creon does not differ much from a familial and patriarchal ethics that recognizes people only to the extent that they occupy a certain role, typically that of wife and/or mother, which Antigone rejects. The family thus falls into the same sphere as the polis in perpetuating a virile logocentrism – that is, the ideal of (familial) organizing centered on a typically male individual driven by (espoused) rationality – asserting itself through the removal of the body, materiality, and nature, and ultimately of death itself from the political sphere. Both the state and the family oppose the vitalistic ethics embodied in Antigone’s feminine mask. Echoing post-human feminism (Sayers et al., 2022; Tallberg et al., 2022; Willmott, 1998; Wolfe, 2010), the latter finds a principle of

interspecies community and solidarity in the power of generation, or critical vitalism (Cavarero, 2023).⁶ As Cavarero (2010) explains:

In the relationship of Antigone to the animal world, therefore, exists a complex ambivalence that seems to push the system of bodily imagery to its profoundest depths [...] The dramatic absoluteness of a body that evokes female generative potency thus broadens through the allusion to animal origins implied by that potency (p. 54).

This also explains why, when family roles are discussed in the tragedy, Antigone chooses to fulfill not the traditional roles of mother and wife but rather the roles of daughter and sister,⁷ the only positioning to which she feels a deep moral obligation (Cavarero, 2024 [1995]).

Whereas Honig’s (2021) reading highlights how Antigone’s ethical inclination serves as an agonistic response to the verticality of the polis and family, Cavarero’s interpretation exalts the radical alterity of Antigone’s figure. Antigone’s exclusion is radical because her character is not only apolitical but also inhuman, given her exclusion from the polis which of course not only exists prior to the narrative but frames it. Cavarero (2023, 2024 [1995]) explains how the generative power of the maternal body is uncanny (*deinon*)⁸ due to its complicity and proximity to animality and nature, to *zoe* (biological life), in contrast to *bios*, which is on the contrary aligned with the polis and defined in terms of the life of a unique being capable of action (Cavarero, 2000). Cavarero thus traces back the origin of the uncanny to the Greek *deinon*, which then becomes *unheimlich* in German in the interpretation of Antigone by Heidegger.⁹ In the case of Antigone, this is represented by her dwelling at the

⁶ Cavarero (2023) also refers to Euripides’ *Bacchae* to further develop this point.

⁷ Honig’s (2021) dialogue with Cavarero is important in this respect, building as it does on the latter’s reinterpretation to emphasize how Antigone’s relationship with her sister can be understood as an example of ‘agonistic sorority’ (p. 72), or critical friendship. While Antigone has traditionally been depicted as embodying the masculine ethical standard of independence—expressed through an upright, vertical posture—in contrast to her sister, who is seen as the personification of feminine care, Honig invites us to recognize how *both* Antigone and her sister incline toward one another, united in their conspiracy against authority. Antigone’s (almost rhetorical) question to her sister, at the point in the play when she reveals her plan to bury her brother in defiance of Creon’s prohibition, is telling in this sense: ‘will you share the labor, share the work?’.

⁸ Notably, *deinon* reappears in another Sophoclean tragedy, *Electra* (Cavarero, 2023), in reference to childbirth: *Deinon to tiktein estin* (‘terrible is giving birth’). In proposing the Greek meaning of the uncanny, Cavarero highlights its ethical dimension thus extending the conceptualization of the uncanny rooted in the Freudian tradition and dominant in organization studies (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013; Orr, 2023).

⁹ Karamercan (2021) argues that Heidegger uses this term to define Antigone’s actions as fearful, powerful, ‘inhabitual’ or unfamiliar.

limits of the human because of her womanhood and, crucially, on the periphery of the polis. This concept, that of the *deinon*, which Cavarero emphasizes as being untranslatable into modern language, helps us to better understand the complexity of ethics that pushes the human ‘beyond’ the human, inviting us to reconsider its boundaries through a focus on death and, as we consider it here, the ethical significance of cemeterial work.

Cavarero’s reading, which recovers corporeal and vitalistic ethics in outlining the archaic nature of the tragedy, is particularly valuable for a study like ours, which aims to foreground how an ethics of grievability underpins cemeterial work, shifting the focus of our understanding of the latter away from a concern with its ‘dirty’ associations, and instead, enabling us to appreciate the weight of moral responsibility it bears as a form of work. Hence, for us, the value of Cavarero’s reading of *Antigone* lies in how it expresses a tension between moral understandings akin to those highlighted in Sophocles’ tragedy. i.e., between the ‘taints’ associated with cemeterial work, and its ethical significance, as well as highlighting the power dynamics shaping that tension. We now consider and explain this in more detail, focusing more closely on cemeterial work through our reading of (Cavarero’s reading of) *Antigone*.

Understanding the Ethical Significance and Challenges of Cemeterial Work

Research Context and Data Collection

Cavarero’s reading of *Antigone* unveils both the ethical importance and complexity of cemeterial work as it emerges in confrontation with death and mourning. To illustrate how tragedy can illuminate ethical aspects of organizational life and work that typically remain unseen, we ground our theoretical reflections in vignettes drawn from a research project conducted over several years in Italy and the UK.

The research project began in December 2023 across four types of cemeteries identified as paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that we examined in order to gain insight into the nature, meaning and significance of cemeterial work. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), paradigmatic cases possess ‘metaphorical value’: they represent ‘specific cultural paradigms [...] that highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question’ (p. 232). In our case, we selected typologies that speak to the history of cemeteries in Europe, anticipating that different cemetery typologies would embody distinct ethics of recognition and grievability (Butler, 2022). Therefore, we examined: (a) ‘traditional/monumental’ cemeteries where famous and celebrated people are interred, and which are visited by tourists and other interested parties (e.g., historians); (b) cemeteries that are

more ‘everyday’ and which are visited primarily by people with a personal connection to those buried there; (c) cemeteries, often known as potters’ fields, which are home to unnamed, unrecognized dead; and (d) cemeteries that offer ‘alternative’ modes of burial (e.g., sustainable methods, often in woodland or on green field sites).

As Flyvbjerg further notes, intuition, interest, and pragmatic considerations all play a key role in identifying such cases, as there is no standard method for their selection; in a certain sense, paradigmatic cases ‘shine’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 232). This was very much the case in our own study, in which, for these very reasons, within these typologies, we selected particular cases based on their historical and/or contemporary significance and relevance to our research aims and interests. The selected cases were paradigmatic in that they provided insight into certain characteristics (Flyvbjerg, 2006), for example, the connection with the local community in the case of ‘everyday’ cemeteries. Similarly, potters’ fields revealed dynamics of neglect and (retrospective) recognition. As such, these cases allowed us to explore their ‘potentiality for different frames of signification’ (Cavarero, 2021, p. 181).

A research diary was maintained for all four types of cemeteries mentioned above, documenting reflections on meetings and observations conducted at each site. In addition, photographs and meetings’ recordings were collected during each field visit. During our visits, we met a range of cemeterial workers, including gravediggers (who handle entombment and exhumation); administrative and front office employees (who welcome, guide, and support grieving clients in navigating the bureaucracy of death); and managers/supervisors, and in some cases, the owners of the cemeterial settings we studied. Sometimes we talked with them while walking through the cemetery during the field visit, so that thoughts and reflections about the work, and the cemetery as a workplace, could be evoked and expressed in contact with the space. Other times, we met with people who work in the cemeteries in their offices, usually located next to the cemeteries.

The questions we asked them in our discussions focused on cemeterial workers’ views on the ethical issues shaping their work, drawing from the few previous studies on the topic (Bailey, 2010; Colombo et al., 2019; Jordan et al., 2019; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Pinheiro et al., 2012). We asked them what they find most rewarding, difficult, and challenging about their jobs, and about how they deal with these challenges. Additionally, we explored how they relate to mourners and whether they feel that their work contributes to the process of mourning and grievability, and (if so), in what ways, asking them to reflect on their experiences of this and of the challenges involved. Finally, we explored their experiences of the cemetery space itself, and the values

and imaginaries they attach to it (see the Interview Guide in the Appendix).

Data Analysis

Following the field visits, we exchanged our research diaries, which detailed our individual experiences, each of us having visited cemeteries in both the UK and Italy. These diaries included accounts of our encounters with participants and their narratives. Since each visit was conducted separately, the intention behind the diaries was to communicate the richness of our experiences to one another through vivid, thick descriptions of the cemeteries, the individuals we met, and the stories we heard.

As we read each other's reflections, we were struck by how these experiences evoked broader ethical questions surrounding death and cemeterial work, as well as by the diverse practices of cemeterial work and the spatial organization we observed during our visits. We were particularly drawn to the narratives shared by participants, which appeared to illuminate key tensions around death, memory, and care. These narratives sparked a dialogical reflection about the ethical dimensions of cemeterial work. For instance, our visits to monumental cemeteries prompted reflections on the relationship between power relations, politics, and death, and how such settings reshape mourning practices. These impressions, in turn, evoked resonances with classical tragedy, particularly passages from *Antigone*, as interpreted by Cavarero (2010). Her reading emphasizes the ethical complexity embodied in the conflict between *Antigone* and *Creon*, which offered us a compelling lens through which to reflect upon our field experiences. In this sense, our analytical process was informed by our notes and reflections on the immersive field visits to cemeteries and discussions with cemeterial workers that we undertook and our reading of *Antigone*, and of Cavarero's reading, as we moved iteratively between empirical and theoretical insights.

Motivated by the connections that we began to see and discuss, we turned to *Antigone* not as a mechanism for empirical coding or thematic categorization, but as a source of analytical insight and resonance. The comparison between the tragic figures and the ethical tensions we observed in the field, and which were shared with us during our conversations with cemeterial workers, struck us as metaphorically rich, not systematically derived. Part of the allure of tragic figures lies in their ability to embody archetypes that are ideals and values that never present themselves in real life, but from which our lives always draw meaning and significance, and this has been the case with our paradigmatic cases.

In this spirit, we decided to rearrange passages from our diaries into vignettes to explore the ethical stances embodied by figures in tragedy that resonated with our own experiences and the insights we gained during fieldwork at each

of the cemeteries we visited. Vignettes, as brief narrative 'snapshots' (Bryer, 2020, p. 648), allow for the expression of the layered meanings found in 'everyday scenes' (Ammann, 2018, p. 6). They are not intended to be generalized or used as evidence for universally valid theories; nor are they intended to provide a representational account of 'findings.' Rather, they offer moments of experiential and conceptual resonance that invite reflection (Galuppo et al., 2024), and which provide insight, sometimes poignantly so. As such, rather than proposing them as empirical findings, we offer these vignettes as occasions for reflection on how *Antigone* resonated with our research encounters with cemeterial work, and the insights that these provided.

We selected vignettes that we felt most clearly and emblematically captured the distinctive features important to our understanding (Galuppo et al., 2024), such as the opposition and intertwining of the ethics of the polis, the family (kinship), and the vitalistic ethics (based on *genos*) at the center of *Antigone*. By developing analytical reflections aimed at revealing these ethical tensions, we can understand how ethics operates in organizational dynamics that are seemingly removed from the 'traditional' domains of work and organization studies, or from the established critical gaze, but which are central to the work that many people do, especially those concerned with the management and organization of death and dead bodies.

Understanding Cemeterial Work Through *Antigone*

Antigone illuminates a variety of issues that help us to understand the ethical significance of cemeterial work and the many ethical challenges shaping it. In particular, it highlights how different ethical criteria shape this work and how their intertwining defines the contours of grievability (Butler, 2022). *Antigone* draws our attention to three ethical criteria of grievability that correspond, respectively, to the polis, kinship, and genus, as defined by Cavarero. In the following sections, we aim to reflect on how the coexistence and intertwining of these ethical approaches are illuminated by *Antigone* and are given organizational form and meaning in the cemeteries we visited, providing insights into the ethics of cemeterial work and highlighting the value of this reflection for the wider study of business ethics.

The Ethics of Polis

Vignette II

Verona Cemetery is replete with intricately carved, imposing statues and other memorials like a monu-

ment for the Veronese entrepreneur, Callisto Zorzi, reminding us of Nuala Johnson's (1995, p. 63) observation that monumental statues serve as 'points of physical and ideological orientation'. In this case, the sculptor has depicted ('fixed') his subject with bricks, trowel, and pulleys, the tools of the trade in which he made his fortune, stacked on the left. On the opposite side, two children eagerly await the coin that Zorzi is offering them in what could be read as either a flattering depiction of Zorzi as a generous philanthropist, or of his avarice as the coin will (of course) never actually pass into the hands of the children but is forever fixed in his grasp. Michela, who has worked there first as a tour guide and now in an administrative role, smiles when she recounts Callisto's story. She holds a degree in art and the conservation of cultural heritage and loves to spend time lingering in the cemetery, observing its artistic beauty and its many works of art. We sense that her longing to be outside, in the cemeterial space itself rather than in her office, walking, observing, photographing ("Even the photos amaze me a lot," she says. "It's really interesting to focus on the faces") reflects her immersive sense of comfort in the space. She says she hopes that one day she will lead guided tours again to be able to share her love for this setting with others. (Author's fieldnote at Verona's Monumental Cemetery, Italy).

This vignette captures one of the many moments and monuments we encountered during our visits to the cemeteries we studied. The organization and esthetics of these spaces reveal a central challenge of cemeterial work that Antigone exposes: the task of granting political recognition to the lives, and, by extension, the deaths, of those buried within the cemetery. As Antigone reveals, the issue of burial is a political one, transforming the cemeterial space into a political arena that can either reproduce or unsettle the differential distributions of value that have crystallized in social life. Cemeterial work confers political value in various ways: by assigning a name, a specific spatial location, a temporality, and an esthetic form to each burial. In this sense, the city of the dead becomes a mirror image, another reflection, of the city of the living.

Recalling the figure of Creon, we can say that there are political norms governing burial practices that delineate "the contours of grievability" (Butler, 2022) through the lens of modern ethics that relate death to logos, techne, and the polis. Within this framework, certain deaths are considered worthy of mourning only insofar as their lives held political significance, and their burials are organized to reflect that significance.

The burial that Creon grants to Eteocles follows this logic of seeing burial in terms of recognition of a political life.

This understanding of the dead body, death, and the tomb also transforms the nature and meaning of cemeterial work, as well as being materialized in the distinctive esthetics of the places where this work is carried out. For instance, this political dimension (of individual recognition) materializes in the burial ground for illustrious citizens (*Ingenio Claris*) and for benefactors (*Beneficis in Patriam*), characterizing Verona's cemetery.

The ethical challenge faced by those, like Michela, who maintain and curate monumental cemeteries lies in preserving their artistic heritage as it manifests through the lives that embody the ideals a given society seeks to uphold in the present and for the future. Within this framework, those deemed worthy of mourning are often figures who have played a political role: artists, entrepreneurs – as in the case of Zorzi's monument.

This ethical approach asserts the continuation of political identity in the corpse, which thus carries with it the criteria of recognition that govern life in the polis, even (perhaps especially) beyond death. Within this ethical perspective, the tomb takes on a dual significance. First, the time here is the linear time of bios, not the cyclical time of nature, zoe (Cavarero, 2023). Second, the tomb, in the form of a coffin and loculus, is the final artifact through which humanity asserts its superiority over the non-human and the differential value of human lives (Cavarero, 2010).

Cemeterial work understood through this lens is configured as a labor of vigilance and control, preoccupied with the preservation of political order in line with Creon's view that "there is no evil worse than disobedience. This destroys cities; this overturns homes; this breaks the ranks of allied spears into headlong rout. But the lives of men who prosper upright, of these obedience has saved the greatest part. Therefore, we must defend those who respect order, and in no way can we let a woman defeat us" [Antigone, 670–680].

In monumental cemeteries, a highly individualistic desire for recognition prevails. The lives remembered in these cemeteries are primarily those of individuals, predominantly men, who distinguished themselves in life, and this remembrance is crystallized in the materiality of marble, a medium that endures and consecrates these lives and deaths for eternity. Privilege in life becomes materialized in death, in perpetuity. The esthetic of these places is tied to the logos (which transforms zoe into bios) and techne, art that is primarily artifact, hence man-made (masculine as well, as the term suggests). Here the logos is expressed in the ability to shape a material, i.e., the marble, onto which the political body of the deceased is inscribed for posterity, so that the material dematerializes into names that repeat themselves in the epigraphs, becoming 'fixed.'

Furthermore, as Antigone teaches us, politics is gendered, and this is reflected in the 'place' (not) reserved for women in these types of space, restricting grievability only to those

who are considered ‘human’ in any given society. Historically constituted through exclusions, of women in particular, the polis becomes a space of public mourning from which women are (literally) carved out.

The Ethics of Kinship

Vignette III

This girl came because her mother was very ill and then passed away, and she wanted to secure a burial niche (loculo) right away, but it wasn’t possible. So, I explained to her that the administration no longer allows the purchase of a loculo before a person’s death because, in the past, all the loculi ran out very quickly. [...] Then, I told her what options she had, because she wanted to place her mother with her father, who had passed away years ago. So, I explained the possibilities. We have very few niches available, and the issue is arising of where to place people, one parent rather than the other. So, I said: here’s the solution — to be close to your husband, your father, your mother — you could choose cremation. You don’t take up another space, and at the same time, you’re close to the person you want to be near (Claudia, Community Cemetery, Italy).

As Antigone reveals, the ethical complexity of cemeterial work concerns not only the political dimension of death but also the extent to which this work intertwines with familial bonds. The organization of cemeterial space responds to the need to preserve affective ties beyond death, including those shaped by kinship, which we take to refer to embodied and originary bonds that ground relational existence. This organizing principle is particularly evident in (though not exclusive to) community cemeteries, where the spatial layout reflects, above all, the relationships that hold communities together.

In these contexts, burial ceases to be an individual matter and instead assumes a primarily (largely) familial dimension. Family tombs dominate these spaces and so inscription commemorating the familial role, such as ‘devoted mother,’ ‘beloved father.’ The individual becomes grievable insofar as they belong to a family and occupy a familial role, as someone’s daughter, father, or sister. Spatial arrangement follows this criterion, reflecting the persistence of kinship as an ethical and affective structure. In the small cemetery where Claudia works, family tombs are neatly aligned, concealing the ground burials behind them and forming a clear boundary. Their arrangement turns its back on the modest graves, which remain confined to a narrow square of earth and grass. To reach this enclosed patch, one must slip

through the narrow gaps between family tombs, as if crossing from one realm of belonging to another.

The vignettes above provide insight into the ethical responsibilities associated with cemeterial work as a negotiation of the challenges associated with preserving family bonds, including when these may be in tension (e.g., when relatives have different priorities or ideas). They each shed light on how the cemeterial worker’s job involves, at least in part, navigating the ties that grieving relatives need to maintain, and their desire for recognition (e.g., in the form of burial space, proximity, and/or grave markers), and what a cemeterial space is able to provide (e.g., in terms of capacity, and esthetics). This is of ethical significance not only to those interred in the cemetery where she works, but also for those who visit the place and who have emotional ties to it. Regular visitors frequent the cemetery referred to in this vignette daily, often at regular times, exchanging greetings and forming supportive acquaintances.

Cemeterial work performed in such settings thus embodies and revolves around practices that aim to preserve the centrality of kinship, the same force that, in Hegel’s interpretation, compels Antigone to bury her brother Polynices, with cemeterial workers understanding their role as, in part, enacting a preservation of kinship bonds. In this reading, Polynices represents an ungrievable life when viewed through Creon’s political lens, as his life has lost political value. Yet his death is reinscribed within an ethics of kinship that renders it grievable through his familial ties to Antigone. In this sense, tragedy helps us to understand what is at stake in the ethical responsibilities shaping cemeterial work, namely (at least in part), a recognition of kinship ties.

In contrast, Cavarero’s reinterpretation of Antigone sheds light on how the ethical principle of the polis and that of kinship are not opposed to or in tension with each other but are co-participants in the affirmation of virile logocentrism (Cavarero, 2024 [1995]). Polis and kinship together delineate the contours of what can be recognized as ‘human,’ and thus of a life worth mourning. Those who do not belong according to these criteria are rendered out of place, both materially and symbolically. It is precisely toward these lives that Cavarero’s Antigone turns, to imagine a form of grievability beyond both polis and kinship, as we show in the following section.

Antigone: Ethics Beyond Polis and Kinship

Vignette IV

Hidden in the backstreets of Southwark, Crossbones Graveyard was once a burial ground for the unclaimed poor and the Winchester Geese, medieval sex workers who were licensed by the Bishop of Winchester

to work in the brothels situated in the Liberty of the Clink, which lay outside of the laws of the City of London. Over 15,000 people, many of them children, were buried here in unmarked graves before its closure in 1853. Since the 1990s, local residents, sex workers, poets, and activists have reclaimed the site, transforming it from dereliction into a garden of remembrance. On the cold, overcast day when we visited the cemetery, the garden felt both tender and insurgent: ribbons and scraps of poetry hung from the gates, small memorials marked the paths. It felt that this was a space where we should pay respects and reverence. At the same time, it was characterized by a (retrospective) sense of communities in defiance, raising awareness of who is interred there, and in what circumstances they lived and worked. The space evokes a feeling of respect, but not of/for the ‘great men’ of monumental cemeteries, but rather, for the commitments and achievements, and work, of those involved in creating these spaces as a living monument to collective care and commemoration, reflection, and recognition (Author’s fieldnote at Crossbones Graveyard).

Cavarero’s interpretation of Antigone helps us recognize an additional ethical criterion shaping cemeterial work, one that resonates in the potters’ fields we visited, such as Crossbones in London. In the previous sections, we have problematized how the intertwining of the polis and of kinship in the configuration of cemeterial spaces also produces exclusion for those whose lives simultaneously violate familial and political norms. Those who find no recognition within these frameworks of value are deemed unworthy of mourning, as was the case for the medieval sex workers buried in mass graves at Crossbones.

This is the apolitical space in which the unburied body of Polynices and the entombed-alive Antigone find themselves. Their shared state of exclusion becomes the ground of their alliance: they recognize one another through this lack of recognition (Butler, 2004, 2022). In this sense, Crossbones illuminates how cemeterial work is also a work of recognizing the dignity of mourning beyond politics and beyond family, beyond (hetero)normative kinship ties, or marks of ‘greatness.’

In Antigone, Creon opposes order and the polis to the indistinct and disordered carnal, leaving Polynices’ body unburied, making it prey to scavenging animals (Cavarero, 2010). Thus, Creon emphasizes that the corpse does not belong to the civilized world or the polis of men; it remains an enemy even after death (Cavarero, 2024 [1995]) – abject in its urge to persist in material form that Creon seeks mastery over, exerting his power over nature by exposing Polynices’ corpse ‘for the birds that scan the field and feast to their heart’s content.’

While the dialectical relationship between Antigone and Creon has been extensively debated, Cavarero’s reading of the tragedy is especially important because it brings to the fore precisely the role and significance of Polynices’ unburied body (Cavarero, 2024 [1995], 2010), a feature of the narrative that is key to our analysis of the ethics of cemeterial work.

Polynices’ body is unburied, not by chance, near the walls of Thebes; this lack of recognition becomes topological, much like in cemeteries, particularly monumental ones, where specific areas (in the Italian cases, symbolically outside of the cemetery walls) are designated for those whose ‘political body’ is unacknowledged.

In the Hegelian interpretation, Polynices is both a brother and an enemy, but his unburied state brings us back to the story of those who are not recognized in any role, as a possible fate for those denied any form of belonging or recognition. In Cavarero’s reinterpretation of the Sophoclean tragedy, Antigone and Polynices are not simply brother and sister, and Antigone’s action is not solely driven by familial affection. Their bond also lies in their shared status as outsiders, derelicts, inhuman, and monstrous; both born from an incestuous love that subverts the laws of family, politics, and civilization (Cavarero, 2024 [1995], 2010; Butler, 2000). Antigone is in a condition of extreme exclusion, which places her in the realm of the inhuman, or ‘non-human.’ In this reading, the unburied state of Polynices also deprives him of his masculinity, a necessary condition for belonging to the world of the polis. Antigone’s gesture is thus that of someone sharing the status of non-existence, of political and social non-recognition, embodying and articulating a radical alterity as it were. As the tragedy unfolds, Antigone will be buried alive, but her condition is already that of being ‘already dead’ from the start (Contu, 2014). Thus, the story will soon revolve around an unburied dead man and a buried alive woman, sharing a common condition within this contrasting state (Cavarero, 2024 [1995]).

In the context of our study, Antigone’s most authentic gesture has particular resonance with the work undertaken in cemeteries such as Crossbones that take care of and seek to recognize the poignancy (and politics of) potters’ fields. Crossbones is managed by an informal network of sex workers, poets, activists, and local community members that set out to raise awareness of the site’s historical, cultural, and political significance, and to organize services of remembrance for those buried there. Since mourning and burial occur outside of the physical and symbolic-discursive space of the polis and kinship, there is no need for specialized training; instead, there is a moral duty to be present and to assemble, ‘accompany’ one another as a community. Antigone appeals to this duty of accompaniment in her request to bury her brother Polynices, acknowledging (to her sister

– see above), the challenge as well as the value of the work involved.

This type of recognition work is a distinctive and important aspect of cemeterial work, different from that carried out in monumental and community cemeteries, which materialize ethical approaches based, respectively, on polis and kinship. It is a work of testimony and a reminder not to forget; cemeterial workers and other community activists and campaigners who engage in it make a claim for recognition of the existence of those rendered invisible and who have, therefore, lived a social death, rendering otherwise negated lives (and deaths) meaningful. This recognition-based cemeterial work consists of giving names to people and of sharing their life stories ('relating their narratives,' to borrow from Cavarero, 2000), by granting them the social existence in death that was denied to them in life.

For us, this work is also a reminder that every society has its own Polynices. Cemeterial work consists in giving them a 'proper' burial, restoring dignity to them in the name of a third ethical principle: *genos*.

In Antigone's perspective, burial and mourning are governed by a moral obligation dictated by blood, the body, matter, and the principle of generation, or vitalism (Cavarero, 2010). This moral obligation, and the ethical relationship animated by it, transcends the boundaries of a singular body, encompassing matter as *zoe*. Re-signifying death as natality (in the way that Cavarero's ethics does) also means embracing the individual body as a universal body, without history, and thus without differences that justify placing it on a hierarchical scale of value. This moral understanding translates into a radical equality (Sayers et al., 2022).

In this regard, drawing on Zambrano (1967), Cavarero (2023) suggests that, in her tomb, Antigone did not commit suicide but rather experienced a rebirth; similar in this sense to Hamlet's Ophelia, whose floating on the reflective waters ends up resembling her rebirth more than her death, Cavarero (2024 [1995]) argues.¹⁰ This rebirth reaffirms the anti-egoic nature of Antigone's action and we would suggest, of cemeterial work, which seeks to reinstate the self as *bios*, as political life, but also as a return to *zoe*, thereby affirming a radical and corporeal relationality based on shared vulnerability, such as the vulnerability of the women and children buried in Crossbones. In this sense, the work that takes place

manifests the ethical vitalism that Cavarero reads in Antigone, and which we see taking place in this particular kind of commemorative setting and work, namely one that reaffirms an intertwining of life and death, and of humanity and nature, beyond hierarchy and egoism.

Discussion: the Ethical Complexity of Cemeterial Work

Although cemeterial work is central to everyone's life, we hardly reflect on its ethical significance. With this study, we sought to shed light on it through interrogating Antigone by drawing from Cavarero's feminist reading of this tragedy. Cavarero (2024 [1995], 2023, 2010) fosters an understanding of ethical experience as uncanny (*deinon*), disrupting the assumptions of modern ethics that reduce ethics to the rational calculation of the autonomous and independent human subject.

Following this analytical line, we observed how cemeteries manifest and materialize a variety of ethical meanings shaping grievability. We showed how monumental and community cemeteries respond to an ethics centered on polis and kinship. In contrast, the cemeterial work carried out in potters' fields such as Crossbones is akin to an act of testimony, representing the vitalist ethics that Cavarero identifies in Antigone's anti-egotistical gesture.

The power of tragedy lies in confronting us with irreconcilable yet legitimate positions. A dualistic, oppositional reading of the story that pits Creon against Antigone would strip the tragedy of its power. This dilemma helps us to understand something important about the ethical complexities of cemeterial work considered here and their bodily and relational dimensions (Fotaki, 2019; Kenny & Fotaki, 2023; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). Both positions – the one that understands grievability through *genos*, and the one that affirms the laws of the polis and kinship through *logos* and *techne*, which exalt the uniqueness of each political body – coexist in an irreducible and necessary tension, one that shapes the ethical landscape of cemeteries as organizational (organized, organizing) spaces, and of the work of those responsible for them.

While Honig (2021) explained the relationship between the different ethical postures considered here in terms of agonism, Cavarero (2021) characterizes it as a radical separation. We instead highlight the persistent and dynamic tension between these perspectives. Both vitalist ethics and those that respond to the polis or familial bonds are terrible or uncanny (Cavarero, 2024 [1995]). In one case, there is a leveling that nullifies the individual's unique narrative history (thus *logos*) (Cavarero, 2000), while in the other, the production and preservation of difference make it impossible to comprehend existence more broadly, in a sense, its

¹⁰ For a beautiful illustration of this interpretation of Ophelia's death as a rebirth, see John Everett Millais' (1851–1852) painting, on permanent display in the Tate Britain, and also accessible online. Here, through the use of reflective tone, and Ophelia's immersion in the natural elements of water and flora, Millais portrays death as a 'return to life,' in a similar way that some cemeterial workers evoke a sense of their work as assisting not in the passage from life to death, but in the 'vitality' of a regenerative, ecological ethic. For us this bears an important similarity to the way that Cavarero describes death as anti-egoic in her reading of *Antigone*.

deepest truth that sees us leveled by death, exposed, fragile, part of a ‘beyond human’ whole (Kenny & Fotaki, 2023).

At the same time, the unburied body of Polynices serves as a warning to us, as it does in Antigone’s own narrative, of a possible breakdown within this tension; it is the case of the polis that becomes tyranny in a single gesture lacking the kindness that makes us alive. Cemeterial work is thus continually confronted with the challenge of equality and recognition and embodies this existential experience in the care and allocation of spaces, as well as in preserving an esthetic of beauty that is salvific. Far from being ‘dirty work,’ cemeterial work thus appears to us as the material expression of our most inner ethical life, of the meanings we attribute to our own lives and those of others.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the understanding of cemeterial work’s ethical significance in three ways that respond to the question, ‘How might tragedy illuminate the complex ethical challenges involved in cemeterial work, while at the same time enabling us to understand its ethical significance?’

First, drawing on Cavarero’s interpretation of Antigone, our account of cemeterial work underscores the significance of Greek tragedy for the analysis of business ethics (Contu, 2014; Harding, 2013; Kenny & Fanchini, 2024). Tragedy invites us to question modern ethics in light of an ethical understanding that reminds us of our mutual dependency and vulnerability (Cavarero, 2023; Kenny & Fotaki, 2023). Tragedy exposes the situated, contested, and interconnected nature of ethics, offering a lens through which to reconsider subjectivity and equality beyond traditional political boundaries. By engaging with extreme cases like those in Antigone, we can cultivate new imaginaries of hope, unlocking alternative ways of making meaning and envisioning alternative possibilities of recognition. As the Greek term ‘deinon’ reminds us, ethics ‘dwells’ at the limits of the human.

While ethics has often been framed in terms of progress and civilization epitomized by the intertwining of polis, logos, and techne, the feminist perspective that Cavarero brings to her (and our) reading of Antigone helps us to rediscover an ethics, rooted in the very body and matter of every living being. And in this sense, it also helps us to understand how cemeterial work is simultaneously ‘dirty’ and meaningful, imbued with a contingent and evolving ethical responsibility that renders it a ‘vital’ form of labor.

Second, we have shown how cemeterial work contributes to shaping the social and material contours of grievability. Through tragedy, we have unpacked the multiple ethical criteria (polis, kinship, and genos) attributing value to death and the dead body, a value that also materializes in the esthetics and organization of cemeteries.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we have proposed that cemeterial work organizes grievability by navigating the tension between a vitalist ethics (Fotaki, 2019; Kenny & Fotaki, 2023; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015) and the power of universalizing norms and categories characteristic of modern ethics. Most studies define an ungrievable life as a subhuman existence in which individuals are de-realized and stripped of their humanity (Ahmed, 2024; Derakhshan & Chowdhury, 2024; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016; Varman et al., 2021; Varman & Srinivas, 2023). In this study, we posed a different, but nevertheless related question: How might tragedy help us to illuminate the meaning, nature, and ethical significance of cemeterial work, and to shed light on its ethical complexities and challenges?

To the question posed above, our answer is that cemeterial work plays a role in defining the contours of grievability beyond polis and kinship in ways that problematize how the boundaries of the human are constructed in ways that are both violent and arbitrary. The very concept of humanity is often predetermined, grounded in an ethics that recognizes only rationality (logos), political agency (polis), and kin-based belonging as defining features of a life worthy of mourning. In contrast, Antigone invites us to embrace a reversed process – one in which we ascribe value to lives acknowledging life itself as worthy of mourning by virtue of the shared condition of vulnerability that defines it, even before it is categorized as ‘human.’

While Varman et al. (2021) highlight how both exploiters and the exploited struggle to subvert the frames of recognition governing grievability, our analysis invites a reconsideration of ‘the schema of the human’ (Wolfe, 2010, p. 99, cited in Sayers et al., 2022) and the norms that restrict grievability to polis and kinship, navigating the need for equality and recognition, ‘in love’ with the impossibility of reconciling the two, and embracing this as a defining – perhaps the defining – aspect of their work and of the ethical imperatives underpinning it.

With this in mind, we hope that future studies might explore how a vitalist and post-human ethics (Sayers et al., 2022; Tallberg et al., 2022) also entails embracing a broader conception of grievability that attributes value and recognition not only to humans but also to nature and non-human animals that the continuity between Antigone and the animal world helps us to glimpse. In this paper, we have only begun to hint at the importance of this for business ethics, and we hope that others may take up this challenge in future work.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval We confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it under consideration at any other journal. We have no conflict of interest to disclose. The paper focuses on topology with no reference to human participants. Ethical standards established by our institutions have been followed throughout the data collection process.

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