

Do both characters
deem their behavior
superior



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Do what you believe is right.

This is a phrase common to us all, brought to our attention by parents, reinforced by teachers, and preached by leaders. But how does one define what is right? Is it what we believe in our hearts, or is it what we know is acceptable? This is a predominant dilemma that can be traced throughout society, and is the main focal point of Sophocles play Antigone. Written in 441 B. C., Antigone is one of the earliest records of the conflict between Natural law and Positive law. Sophocles deftly exposes these two philosophical standpoints and their respective moral and political aspects by way of the two main characters, Antigone and Kreon. Antigone is a champion of Natural law, while Kreon practices the Positivist approach. Both characters deem their behavior superior towards the other, and both assume religious justification for their actions.

Sophocles ultimately proves that with so much support for each philosophical standpoint, a solution to the dilemma is hardly in sight. Natural law can be considered the morally correct approach to authority and justice. It is the idea that one should make decisions based upon what they deem morally appropriate within themselves. Antigones support of this approach is apparent in her refusal of Kreons order when she buries Polyneices anyway.

She loves Polyneices and believes in her heart that there is no other alternative. She is aware that by burying him she would be breaking the law and risking her own life for it. I will bury him myself. If I die for doing that, good: I will stay with him, my brother; and my crime will be devotion (87-90).

To her this is the only morally acceptable solution. Her support of Natural law resolves her to perform what she believes in her heart to be right, casting aside any social and political upholding that prove to be opposition. Positive law can be considered the politically correct approach to authority and justice. It encompasses the idea of a society and community with laws, and that those laws are necessary for everyone's well-being. Kreon evokes a Positivist attitude by shunning any morally appropriate notions brought on by his kinship with Polyneices, and pursuing a stance that he sees as politically necessary for the good of the society. This is the underlying reason for his decision to forbid the burial of his nephew.

He believes that if he succumbs to feelings of love, then he will be deemed weak and therefore weaken his city-state. This position becomes apparent when he utters the lines if I see disaster marching against our citizens I shall not befriend the enemy of this land. For the state is safety. When she is steady, then we can steer. Then we can love (224-229). This ultimately sums up the Positive law belief that society always comes before self, that once the society is safe, then you are permitted to allow for yourself.

With each philosophy located at opposite ends of the social spectrum, a dilemma is unavoidable when the two face each other. This is the backbone for the entire plot of Antigone. On one side is Antigone, who pursues her self-righteous beliefs whole-heartedly and without question. On the other side is Kreon, who acts in response to what he believes is best for the society. Both characters are justified in their behavior. It is their motives that set them apart from each other. Antigone knows that she will suffer personal anguish if she does not carry out her actions.

But if I had let my own brother stay unburied I would have suffered all the pain I do not feel now. And if you decide what I did was foolish, you may be fool enough to convict me (572-574). She acts in her own personal interest, concerned for her well-being. She believes that her motive is one that should be accepted, that love for a brother could never be viewed as foolish. Kreon, on the other hand, makes his decisions as a king rather than an uncle. He is concerned with keeping the city-state in order, and his public perception untarnished.

I caught her in open rebellion, her alone out of all the nation. I won't be a leader who lies to his people. No: I will kill her if I rear a disorderly family, I am feeding general disorder (798-802).

He cannot let feelings like love and kindness for Antigone prohibit him from ruling a nation. Both Antigone and Kreon believe the gods support their positions. Antigone believes that by Kreon denying Polyneices a proper burial, he is denying him a right granted by the gods: The living are here, but I must please those longer who are below; for with the dead he will stay forever these principles which the gods themselves honor (92-100). She believes that he will not be granted life after death if he is not buried, and that the gods permit all a chance at immortality.

Antigone also assumes the approval of Zeus, the king of gods, by believing he granted her justice to break the law: I did not believe that Zeus was the one who had proclaimed it (the denial of burial); neither did Justice. The laws they have made for men are well marked out (550-555). These lines state that she believes it is apparent that Kreon denying the burial of her brother

is deemed unlawful by the gods, therefore justifying her Naturalist behavior as not only acceptable but necessary. Kreon believes that Zeus has granted him power as king and permits his Positive law rulemaking. Zeus who sees all will see I shall not stay silent if I see disaster marching against our citizens (223-224). Kreon considers support for a rebel (Polyneices) as a disaster to his city-state. He also assumes that Zeus will support his decision against any disaster of his community. This is why he implicates the rule against Polyneices burial.

He sees him as a traitor and anyone showing support for him would be one as well. This is an obvious detriment to the good of his society and he assumes power granted by the gods to prevent it. This justification shows the gods supporting Positive law action as the social norm and fueling the decisions that Kreon makes. With both characters assuming religious approval for their actions, it is impossible to exploit any mistakes that may exist within the two philosophies, making a conclusion that much more difficult. When two dissenting viewpoints such as Positive law and Natural law convene amongst a central issue, there is hardly ever a just conclusion. Throughout the play, each character rattles off the reasons for their actions. Both also justify their actions religiously, believing they are the ones acting accordingly by the gods.

The entire plot is a construction of conflict between personal and social motives, a scene not uncommon in today's society. Sophocles attempts to answer the debate by ultimately showing that the gods approved of Antigone's motives and that Kreon should have buried his nephew. But with so much unnecessary bloodshed committed at the end of the story, it is

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impossible to believe that this is the final decision. The two contrary perceptions, Positive and Natural, are so built up against each other that violence is practically unavoidable. This is hardly a solution to the debate, the fact that everyone dies.

Rather, it is a sign that the debate will live on for all of eternity. The Positive law and the Natural law philosophies have been traced throughout history, and as this play suggests, hardly a conclusion has been made. It is much like a Socialist-Capitalist debate in many respects. Even though America is viewed as a Capitalist society and evokes Natural law morale, there are still people who preach the ways of Communism and Positivism. It is just the opposite in other countries such as China, where Communism and Positive law are rulers and people there fight for Natural rights. The debate will always be there, with people conflicting over actions done for themselves, and those done for the good of society.

Antigone was the first public display of the two dissenting philosophies. That is why it holds so much more importance than just a good piece of writing. Antigone should be viewed as one of the first politically powerful works created. It defines the notion of acting for individualism against pressures to conform.

To view it as something ancient would be a costly mistake, it sets the stage for radical thinking and rebellion, issues that will play a role in the future of our society. Bibliography: