

A comparative study of moral and civil laws

Law



Saad Zaghlul Pasha, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr. , Henry David Thoreau, all are exemplary practitioners and proponents of civil disobedience. Civil Disobedience is the act of peacefully opposing a government through non-violent protests and non-cooperation. Should morality supersede the will of the state? This is Antigone's main dilemma of the eponymous character in Sophocles' play Antigone. The play itself does not strictly push towards a decision for either argument, both sides suffer tragedy, Antigone because she disobeys the laws of the king, Creon because he disobeyed the laws decreed by the gods.

Before the play's beginning, Eteocles and Polynices, two brothers leading opposite sides in Thebes' civil war, died fighting each other for control of the crown. Creon, the new ruler of Thebes by his relation, " Now, since they perished... sullied by mutual fratricide, I, as you know, in right of kinship closest to the dead, possess the throne" has declared that Eteocles shall be honored: " The foremost of our champions in the fray, they should entomb with the full sanctity of rites" while Polynices' body should not: " Him the while his brother... no man shall bury... his body shall be left to be devoured by dogs and fowls of the air" (8-9).

Considered the harshest punishment possible, leaving a body unburied would, by the laws of the gods, prevent him from moving on to Hades, the realm of the dead, cursing him to wander as a lost soul. This was considered a terrible punishment also because it was against the edicts of Olympus. Creon felt he was justified in overruling the common morality due to Polynices crimes against Athens. At the play's opening, Antigone and Ismene

argue over whether or not to bury, at least symbolically, their brother Polynices.

Antigony asks Ismene for help: " Look, will you join me? ... Help me lift the body up--" (2). Ismene realizes that her sister is breaking the king's direct order: " What, would you bury him? Against the proclamation? " (2). She is obviously very troubled by the thought. Antigone has no such misgivings and proceeds to claim that if Ismene will not help, she will do it alone. Ismene calls her " mad" not only for disobeying the law, but for stepping above her position as a woman (2). Antigone seems to feel it is her duty as Polynices' sister o provide a proper burial, regardless of her gender. She also claims to hold her honor above all else, " Be what seems right to you; him I will bury. Death, so met, were with honour; and for that capital crime of piety... I will lie by his side" (3). She holds her loyalty to her family above that of the state. Though technically the edict was " no man shall bury", it is left unsaid against women because the thought never crosses Creon's mind that a woman would be so bold as to place herself above men.

Even when he is first told of the burial by an unknown party (it is heavily implied to have been Antigone through her opening dialogue with Ismene, though the play never specifies if this was the case). When informed, Creon demands " What man dared to do it? " (10). Antigone may not have intended a stance against gender roles, though she certainly does a good job of it. Creon firmly believes that people have their place, and the thought of a woman winning angers him to the point of claiming that he would rather be a woman himself than to suffer the insult to his pride: " Truly if here she wields such powers uncensored, she is man!

<https://assignbuster.com/a-comparative-study-of-moral-and-civil-laws/>

I woman! ” (18). The variance between Creon and Antigone’s views with regard to laws higher than those of state show they have different opinions on civil disobedience. Creon demands obedience to the law of the state above all else, right or wrong. He says that there is nothing worse than disobedience to authority: “... stiffening uneasy necks against this yoke of mine. ... No such ill currency ever appeared, as money to mankind” (12). He feels that as king he should be obeyed, no matter the order or policy. His place in society is to rule, and the city’s is to follow.

Antigone responds with the idea that state law is not absolute and that it can and should be broken through civil disobedience in extreme cases, such as honoring the gods, whose rule and authority will always outweigh Creon's. So he decides to make a point by leaving her fate to the gods. Rather than execute her outright, he will both punish her and gain favor among the populace by sending her to a cave with enough food and drink to survive for awhile. If the gods intervene to save her then she was right: “ Away with her! Wall her up close in some deep catacomb... Leave her alone, apart, to perish if she will; or if she live, o make her tomb her tenement. For us, we will be guiltless of this maiden’s blood” (33).

Antigone takes it a step further by killing herself, taking her fate into her own hands rather than have it be left to other forces. Antigone died in defense of her beliefs; her loyalty and piety led to the tragedy of Creon who, justified he may have felt he was, defied the laws of nature and of the gods, bringing their wrath upon him. Antigony, like Ghandi and Martin Luther King, was a martyr who made the ultimate sacrifice to prove that some laws must be upheld even above those of the king himself.