Antigone Essay, Research Paper

Positive Law vs. Natural Law; Do what you believe is right; This is a phrase common to us all, this is the main focal point of in the play Antigone, written by Sophacles. But how does one define what is right? Is it what we believe in our hearts, or is it what we know is acceptable? Antigone is one of the earliest records of the conflict between Natural law and Positive law. Sophocles exposes these two philosophical standpoints and their respective moral and political aspects by way of the two main characters, Antgone and Creon. Antigone believes in Natural law, while Creon 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. Antigone’s support of this approach is apparent in her refusal of Creon s order to let polyneices body out in to open to decay. She defies his law and 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.

Positive law can be considered the politically correct approach to authority and justice. It represents a society and community with laws, and that those laws are necessary for everyone s well being. Creon 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 weakens 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). He believes that people will not respect him if he does not uphold his own laws.

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-heatedly and without question. On the other side is Creon, 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 believes that her motive is one that should be accepted, that love for a brother could never be viewed as foolish.

Creon, on the other hand, makes his decisions as a king rather then an uncle. He is concerned with keeping the city-state in order, and his public perception untarnished. I wont 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 Creon believe the gods support their positions. Antigone believes that by Creon 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.

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 Creon should have buried his nephew. But with so much unnecessary bloodshed committed at the end of the story, it is 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.