Divine Law Vs Human Law Essay, Research Paper

Divine Law vs. Human Law

Sophocles’ famous play, Antigone, can be perceived as a conflict between individual conscience and state policy. Yet the issue of the play goes beyond that conflict and touches the universal conditions of suffering, religion, and loyalty. Through Antigone’s character–which represents the spheres of family loyalty, divine law, and human suffering, Sophocles conveys the idea that a law of man that violates religious law is not a law at all. He expresses this idea by having Antigone dutifully bury her brother’s body although it is against King Kreon’s ruling. Antigone’s action is not only an act of family loyalty but is an act of piety demanded by the gods.

The play commences with Antigone announcing her decision to bury her dead brother, Polyneices, although Kreon, the King of Thebes, declared that Polyneices’ body will remain unburied. He said, “[...] Polyneices, the exile, [...] will have no ritual, no mourners,/will be left unburied so men may see him/ripped for food by dogs and vultures” (Sophocles 237-242). This goes against Greek religion in which if a body is not given proper burial rites, the body’s soul is condemned to torment and will wander aimlessly through space. When Antigone sprinkles dust three times over her brother’s dead body, it is equivalent to burial and Polyneices’ soul can take its place in the realm of Hades (Sophocles 522-3). Antigone defends her actions by saying that man-made laws are not dominant over the laws that the gods made: “I didn’t suppose your decree had strength enough,/or you, who are human,/to violate the lawful traditions/the gods have not written merely, but made infallible.” Antigone’s actions suggest that divine law in this context is superior over moral law. She tells Kreon that “[...] Death is a god/who wants his laws obeyed” (Sophocles 634-5). By saying this, Antigone shows that she would rather sacrifice her life to devotion to higher principles that to human law and suffering.

Suffering is a universal condition that the characters in the play must deal with. Since the day Polyneices and Eteokles died, Ismene suffers by not being capable of having emotions. She says to Antigone: “Nothing makes me happy, nothing hurts me anymore” (Sophocles 22). The loss of loved ones can cause one to suffer but to not honor those who died can cause a vast amount of distress. Because Eteokles was honorably buried and Polyneices was not, Antigone suffered for her brother; the guilt built every second he remained unburied. She does not regret burying her brother by saying, “But if I had let my own brother stay unburied/I would have suffered all the pain I do not feel now” (Sophocles 572-3). She would rather bury her brother and go against the state than live her life in pain. She is independent in her decision because she would is willing to suffer her own death so she won’t suffer her brother’s death any longer: “I’m ready to suffer for it and to die./Let me. No suffering could be so terrible as to die for nothing” (Sophocles 120-3). She is conveying that no matter what, she will suffer. If she does nothing for her brother she will suffer and if she does, she will suffer the death penalty. It is better, she concludes, to suffer and die out of loyalty to her own family.

Although Ismene reminds Antigone of how their family’s name is tainted in lines 56-72, Antigone believes that family loyalty is principle and will be loyal to Polyneices even after his death. She says to Ismene, “I will stay with him, my brother;/and my crime will be devotion” (Sophocles 89-90). Family loyalty and state law is conflicted in this play. Antigone chooses family over law and brings honor to her brother’s soul, even if she strips honor from herself by committing a crime. By burying her brother, Antigone shows the country her loyalty and faithfulness in her family. By the gods, it is also an obligation for family members to see that a body is properly buried and Antigone sees to it that her brother is.

Sophocles may be using Antigone to convey the idea that noble deeds are often done for pride. Antigone shuns her sister, Ismene, when Ismene wants to die with her for her crime. Antigone claims that Ismene took no part in the burial and should not have the honor to die with her. When Ismene argues, Antigone says, “No, you have no right. You weren’t willing to,/and even if you had been I wouldn’t have taken you with me” (Sophocles 659-60). Antigone did not want Ismene to take part of the plan because she wanted all the glory to herself. But this is not true because Antigone only said this to Ismene to prevent her from dying with her when she still had a fresh life to live. By hurting Ismene, Antigone subconsciously saves her life because Ismene would not want to die anymore.

Antigone represents the idea that family and divine law is more important than law of the state. By burying her brother and defying Kreon’s ruling, she pleases the gods’ wishes and alleviates her suffering. Her nobility could be seen by the citizens but not by Kreon who believed that nations belonged to men with power and not to gods. It was his greed that destroyed Antigone and the aspects of divine law, family loyalty, and suffering that she represented. “All the same, time after time, greed has destroyed good men” (Sophocles 260).