

Student Activity 1: Answer Key, Close Reading Exc 1; (eng30/ReadingComp/Student Activity 1
Answer Key: Close Reading Exc 1)

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide what is right and wrong, but conscience? Must the citizen even for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience, to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right...If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go...If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you can consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil: but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.

Close Reading, Level 1: Paraphrase and Interpret

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide what is right and wrong, but conscience?...

Is it possible to be governed in such a way that one can decide for oneself what is right or wrong, based on one's own ethical sense of right and wrong, rather than having a government dictate what is right or wrong based on what most people think?

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Individual citizens should never, under any circumstances or at any time, give up what they know to be ethically right and instead allow legislators to decide what is right. Why do people have the intellectual ability to figure out what is right and wrong if they are not willing to live in accordance with their sense of what is right? Doing what one deeply judges to be right takes precedence over doing what governments say we should or must do.

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It is much more important for people to develop a new respect for and understanding of what is right than to uncritically adhere to laws (which may be unjust). The only thing that people are really obligated to do is what they think is right, not what the law says is right. (of course, this assumes that people understand ethics, and can distinguish it from cultural norms and values)

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Some situations and circumstances are inherently unjust to some people no matter what is done to reduce injustice within systems. It may be the case, for example, that reducing injustice leads to even greater injustice. If this is likely to happen, don't try to change the system. Let it keep functioning as it is.

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But, if the problems within the government are so great that by adhering to laws, you deny someone a fundamental human right, you are ethically obligated to break the law. In that case, stand up against the government. Do whatever you can to stop the government from unjust actions.

Level 2: The Thesis

Statement of Thesis: People need to behave more in accordance with their conscience than in accordance with the law. If a law requires you to behave in an unjust way toward another, you are ethically obligated to break the law.

Elaboration of Thesis: Some laws might be considered necessary evils, because to change such laws would lead only to greater injustices than the original law. But if the only way to change a truly unjust law is to refuse to abide by the law, a persona of conscience will refuse. People should be willing to sacrifice themselves to reduce injustice caused by unfair laws.

Exemplification of Thesis: For example, in the US during the 1800x, after slaves in the north were freed, many people helped slaves in the south escape to the north. Though they risked imprisonment of helping free slaves on southern plantations, many people were willing to do this rather than abide by an unjust law.

Illustration of Thesis: Think of how we teach children to behave with respect to their peer group. Often a peer group will expect everyone in the group to accept

an unjust act. For example, it is common for bullying to be practiced toward outsiders of children's peer groups. Bullying, then, becomes the accepted practice. Those in the group who object to bullying are usually subjected to penalties from the group – for example, they may be ridiculed. Nevertheless, we have taught children well only when they are ready to rebel against the authority of the peer group. So too should adults rebel when dealing with unjust laws passed by their government.