GREEK TRAGEDY AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Rationalism and Religion in Sophocles’ Theban Plays

In *Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy*, Peter J. Ahrensdorf examines Sophocles’ powerful analysis of a central question of political philosophy and a perennial question of political life: Should citizens and leaders govern political society by the light of unaided human reason or religious faith?

Through a fresh examination of Sophocles’ timeless masterpieces – *Oedipus the Tyrant*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* – Ahrensdorf offers a sustained challenge to the prevailing view, championed by Nietzsche in his attack on Socratic rationalism, that Sophocles is an opponent of rationalism. Ahrensdorf argues that Sophocles is a genuinely philosophical thinker and a rationalist, albeit one who advocates a cautious political rationalism. Such rationalism constitutes a middle way between an immoderate political rationalism that dismisses religion – exemplified by *Oedipus the Tyrant* – and a piety that rejects reason – exemplified by *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Ahrensdorf concludes with an incisive analysis of Nietzsche, Socrates, and Aristotle on tragedy and philosophy. He argues, against Nietzsche, that the rationalism of Socrates and Aristotle incorporates a profound awareness of the tragic dimension of human existence and therefore resembles in fundamental ways the somber and humane rationalism of Sophocles.

Peter J. Ahrensdorf is professor of political science and adjunct professor of classics at Davidson College. He is the author of *The Death of Socrates* and *The Life of Philosophy: An Interpretation of “Phaedo”* and the co-author of *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace*. 
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Peter J. Ahrensdorf
Davidson College
To Alejandra
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Acknowledgments

Many have contributed to the genesis of this book, and it is a pleasure to express my thanks to them. Chapters 1 and 2, which were published previously in somewhat different versions, have been revised and expanded for this book. Chapter 1 originally appeared as “The Limits of Political Rationalism: Enlightenment and Religion in Oedipus the Tyrant,” Journal of Politics, 66:3 (August 2004), pp. 773–99, copyright © 2004 Southern Political Science Association, and is used here with the permission of Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2 originally appeared as “Blind Faith and Political Rationalism in Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus,” Review of Politics, 70:2 (Spring 2008), pp. 165–89, copyright © 2008 Review of Politics, and is used here with the permission of the editors of Review of Politics and University of Notre Dame. I thank Journal of Politics and Review of Politics for kindly granting me permission to use this material.

I thank Davidson College, the Earhart Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for their generous financial support. My thanks also go to Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge University Press, who provided me with most valuable and timely advice, encouragement, and assistance. I also wish to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers at the Press, who offered me extraordinarily judicious and beneficial suggestions and criticisms, and helped me improve the manuscript in crucial ways.

I thank Kristen Schrauder of Davidson College and Shari Chappell of Cambridge University Press for their assistance, and Ronald Cohen, whose conscientious and meticulous editing helped polish the manuscript and prepare it for publication.
It was my tremendous good fortune to study Sophocles at the University of Chicago with Allan Bloom. Through his classes, his writings, and his example, he taught me the importance of seeking wisdom from the great poets, as well as the great philosophers, of the past. It was also my privilege and pleasure to study Sophocles at Chicago with David Grene.

I thank the lively, engaging, and energetic students of Kenyon College and Davidson College who took my classes on Sophocles and taught me much about his plays. I also learned a great deal from my fellow teachers of Sophocles at both institutions, especially Stephen Wirls. I am grateful as well to Fred Baumann, David Bolotin, Werner J. Dannhauser, Steven J. Kautz, Rafe Major, Judd Owen, Richard S. Ruderman, Brian J. Shaw, and Devin Stauffer, who graciously read portions of my manuscript and offered me exceptionally incisive comments, salutary advice, and friendly encouragement.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to my family for all the help they have given me. My wonderful children, Lucia and Matias, have helped me more than they can know, especially by supporting me with such love, patience, and good humor. My wife, Alejandra Arce Ahrensdorf, has offered me the most constant, generous, and indispensable support of all. Throughout the many years of this project, she has always given me the benefit of her wise counsel, her courageous spirit, and her loving heart. She is always an inspiration to me, and I owe her more than I can possibly say. I dedicate this book to her.
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