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978-0-521-51586-3 - Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy: Rationalism and Religion in Sophocles' Theban Plays

Peter J. Ahrensdorf

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Since the end of the secular, Cold War struggle between liberalism and communism, conflicts around the world have increasingly reflected a religious challenge to liberalism and its rationalist thesis that reason is our “only Star and compass” (Locke 1988, 182). The abiding political importance of religion is a central fact of our time, and yet that fact is surprising, not only given the hypothesis that the end of the Cold War would usher in an “end of history” – “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1989, 4) – but also, and more importantly, given the confidence of the Enlightenment founders of liberalism that, in Tocqueville’s words, “Religious zeal . . . will be extinguished as freedom and enlightenment increase” (2000, 282).<sup>1</sup> In the light of the apparent tendency of modern political theory to underestimate the power of religion, it seems reasonable to consider the pre-modern, classical analysis of religion and political enlightenment. As this book will show, that analysis is set forth with singular clarity and power in Sophocles’ Theban plays.

The importance of the issue of religious anti-rationalism and political rationalism in Sophocles has been recognized most emphatically in modern times by Nietzsche, the deepest philosophic source of post-modernism. Indeed, when Nietzsche launched his attack on the Western tradition of liberal, democratic rationalism – an attack so momentous for the post-modern world (see Rorty 1989, 27–30, 39–43, 61–6, 96–121; 1991, 32–3) – he did so in the name of the

<sup>1</sup> Tocqueville himself did not share that confidence. See 2000, 283–4, 510–11.

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tragic grandeur of Sophocles' and Aeschylus's heroes. Nietzsche argued that, in contrast to the cowardly, dogmatic rationalism and shallow optimism of the scientific world view, founded and embodied by Socrates, the tragic world view, set forth by Aeschylus and Sophocles, courageously and honestly faced the world as it truly is: chaotic, cruel, and ultimately impenetrable to human reason.<sup>2</sup> Yet the tragic human being was not broken by this vision of cosmic indifference and conflict, but rather lovingly affirmed "the infinite primordial joy of existence," as well as "the eternal suffering" at the heart of Being, and celebrated "the playful construction and destruction of the individual world as the overflow of a primordial delight" (1967, 105, 112, 142). The "pessimism of *strength*" of the tragic poets and their heroes enabled them to found and perfect a tragic culture, open to the sorrow of existence and the mystery of being and yet life-affirming, "saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems."<sup>3</sup> This tragic age of the Greeks constituted the most profound and noble culture human beings have ever created, one "sure of our astonished veneration" (1967, 88; see also 87; 93–4).

But that culture was destroyed by Socrates, who replaced it with a rationalistic culture, one based on the optimistic, anti-tragic, "faith" or "illusion" that reason "can penetrate the deepest abysses of being"; that happiness is the proper goal of life and that reason can lead human beings to happiness; and hence that the life based on reason is the best way of life for a human being (1967, 95–7; see also 86–8, 91). Socrates is consequently "the one turning point and vortex of so-called world history" (96). The culture he founded remains our culture, characterized by "the triumph of *optimism*, the gradual prevalence of *rationality*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, no less than democracy itself" (21, emphases in text; see also 109–14, 91). The triumph of Socratic political rationalism, however, foreshadows "*the over-all degeneration of man*," for Socratic culture is not only deluded in its rationalistic understanding of the world and in its self-contradictory "faith" in reason but, more importantly, is degraded by its incapacity to

<sup>2</sup> 1967, 17–8, 89–90, 94–7, 106; see also 1954a, 473–4, 478; 1969, 272–3.

<sup>3</sup> 1967, 17–18, emphasis in text; 1954a, 562–3; see also 1968, 434–5, 448–53.

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face and experience the ennobling tragedy of human existence (1989, 118, emphasis in text; see also 54, 103–4, 112–4, 158–9).

To avoid the final victory of the democratic, peaceful, subtragic, subhumanly happy “last man,” Nietzsche, who dubs himself “the first *tragic philosopher*,” calls for a rebirth of tragedy, the re-establishment of a tragic, warlike culture that is based on a rejection of political rationalism, an “affirmation of passing away *and destroying*. . . [and a] saying Yes to opposition and war” (1954b, 128–30; 1969, 273, emphases in text; see also 274). “Yes, my friends, believe with me in . . . the rebirth of tragedy . . . The age of Socratic man is over . . . Only dare to be tragic men; for you are to be redeemed” (1967, 124; see also 99, 106, 121–3). If the rationalist Socrates prefigures the subspiritual, subhuman last man, the anti-rationalist, “suffering hero of Greek tragedy, Oedipus or Prometheus, is the original model for Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, the superman.”<sup>4</sup>

The principal example Nietzsche gives of a human being who exemplifies the tragic world view is Sophocles’ Oedipus.<sup>5</sup> In the first place, Oedipus has the courage to confront the world honestly, “with intrepid Oedipus eyes” (1989, 161). Furthermore, “Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery but who eventually, through his tremendous suffering, spreads a magical blessing that remains effective even beyond his decease” (1967, 67). “The wise Oedipus” achieves the greatest wisdom and nobility because, through his suffering – an unjust suffering, unprovoked by “sin” – he comes to understand, to accept, and ultimately to affirm the utter cruelty and mystery of the world and the inability of reason to comprehend the world or to guide our lives (42, 68–9; see also 46, 73). Most importantly, “the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus,” also finds comfort, a metaphysical and pious comfort, in the mystery of being (1967, 67).

<sup>4</sup> Silk and Stern 1981, 296. See also Dannhauser 1974, 114–15. On the importance of Sophocles, and especially his Oedipus, for Nietzsche’s thought, see Silk and Stern 1981, 162, 255–7, 272.

<sup>5</sup> The other visionary tragic hero Nietzsche praises, Prometheus, is a god (1967, 69–72).

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For he “is confronted by the supraterrrestrial cheerfulness that descends from the divine sphere” (68). “In the Old Tragedy, one could sense at the end that metaphysical comfort without which the delight in tragedy cannot be explained at all. The reconciling tones sound purest, perhaps, in the *Oedipus at Colonus*” (108). Accordingly, “Sophocles in his *Oedipus* sounds as a prelude the *holy man’s* song of triumph” (70, emphasis in text). Nietzsche argues on the basis of his account of Oedipus in particular, as the tragic hero who rejects reason and ultimately finds hope and salvation through suffering (1974, 219), that Sophocles was an anti-rationalist. In this way, Nietzsche invokes the purported anti-rationalism of Sophocles, the poet traditionally regarded as the greatest of the tragic poets,<sup>6</sup> to support his overall thesis that a spiritual renaissance of humanity can be founded on the rejection of Socratic rationalism.

But was Sophocles truly an opponent of rationalism? Did Sophocles present his Oedipus as a model human being who wisely and nobly rejects reason? Did Sophocles anticipate Nietzsche in teaching that human life is fundamentally tragic and that the universe is fundamentally mysterious and hence impenetrable to the human mind? Or was Sophocles, like his younger contemporaries Socrates and Thucydides, a believer in the private, rational life of the mind but skeptical concerning the practical possibilities of a popular, *political* rationalism or enlightenment?

The brilliant, richly provocative, and deeply influential interpretation of Sophocles by Nietzsche is not as clearly grounded in convincing, detailed, textual analysis as one might expect. For example, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche bases his entire interpretation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the Tyrant* and *Oedipus at Colonus* on the claim that Oedipus’s solving of the riddle of the Sphinx proves that he is unequivocally wise and that his wisdom was the wisdom of a “holy man” (1967, 42, 46, 67–70). But, in the text of *Oedipus the Tyrant*, Oedipus claims that he solved the riddle of the Sphinx through unassisted human reason alone and consequently denies the claims to wisdom made by religious

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.4.3, as well as Segal’s helpful historical account of the reputation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the Tyrant* in particular (2001, 144–57).

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prophets and oracles (390–8).<sup>7</sup> In this book, I assess the interpretation of Sophocles by Nietzsche on the basis of a detailed textual analysis of the Theban plays – *Oedipus the Tyrant*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* – the very plays on which Nietzsche bases his interpretation of Sophocles as a critic of rationalism. My approach to the plays does not assume that individual characters, such as Oedipus or Teiresias, are the spokesmen for Sophocles but rather that the poet's thought can only be uncovered by examining each character's speeches within the context of the overall drama of each play.

Since Nietzsche especially – whom Harold Bloom, for example, calls “the truest guide to *Oedipus the King*” (1988, 4) – the view of Sophocles as a proto-Nietzschean or religious enemy of rationalism has tended to prevail among a wide variety of thinkers and scholars.<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, for example, affirms that it is Oedipus's “passion for disclosure of being,” the “fundamental passion” of “the science of the Greeks,” that leads to his “downfall” (1980, 107). Bernard Knox claims that *Oedipus the Tyrant* “is a reassertion of the religious view of a divinely ordered universe” against the “rationalism” of “the

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars have offered fascinating and thought-provoking interpretations of the Theban plays, which are based in large part on the supposed content of the riddle of the Sphinx and Oedipus's answer (for example, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988, 113–40, 207–36; Benardete 2000, 71–82, 126–35; Schwartz 1986, 198–9; Wilson 1997, 14–18; Rocco 1997, 46–51). Benardete goes so far as to claim that “Any interpretation of Oedipus has to face this riddle: What is the necessary connection between Oedipus's solution to the riddle of the Sphinx and Oedipus's two crimes?” (2000, 126). However, since neither the content of the riddle nor Oedipus's solution appears in any of Sophocles' extant plays but only, as far as we know, in much later sources, I think it safer to interpret the Theban plays without reference to the riddle's supposed meaning. Regarding the classical sources for the content of the riddle, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988, 468. In Vernant's account, Diodorus Siculus, who lived in the first century B.C., seems to be our oldest known source for the content of the riddle: “What is that thing which, while still being the same, is two-legged, three-legged, and four-legged?” (4.64.3–4).

<sup>8</sup> As Segal observes more broadly, “From Nietzsche on, Greek tragedy has been felt to hold the key to that darker vision of existence, the irrational and the violent in man and the world” (1986, 45). According to Silk, Nietzsche represents “the very apex of modern theorizing about ‘the tragic’” (1996, 10).

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fifth-century philosophers and sophists" (1998, 47–8). Charles Segal is less sure of Sophocles' piety but nonetheless emphatic regarding his rejection of rationalism: "The verbal ironies of *Oedipus Tyrannus* reflect both the ultimate failure of Oedipus to solve the true 'riddle' of the play – the riddle of the meaning of life in a universe governed by chance or by distant and mysterious gods – and the very incoherence of a universe that *logos*, reason-as-language, cannot make intelligible" (1986, 73).<sup>9</sup>

Over the past two decades, trailblazing studies of Sophocles' political thought by J. Peter Euben (1986, 1990, 1997) and Arlene Saxonhouse, (1986, 1988, 1992) have challenged this scholarly consensus by stressing that there are important similarities and continuities between Sophocles and Socratic thought.<sup>10</sup> However, while I am indebted to their work in important ways, I go further than they do in arguing that, although Sophocles is cautiously critical of *political* rationalism – namely, the attempt to base political society on reason alone – he clearly points to the need for a *theoretical* rationalism – namely, the attempt to steer one's own life by the compass of unaided reason.<sup>11</sup> For example, Euben does suggest that there may be "an affinity between especially this tragedy [*Oedipus the Tyrant*] and Socratic political theory" (1990, 127n 72; consider also 30–1, 108, 202–3). But Euben tends to emphasize, more

<sup>9</sup> Consider also Reinhardt (1979, 130–4); Dodds (1968, 25–8); Gould (1988); Ehrenberg (1954, especially 66–9, 136–66); Lattimore (1958, 94–5); Walcock (1966, 168); Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988, 104–7); Wilson (1997, 171–2); and even Whitman (1971, for example, 146, 251 [but see also 123, 134]) and Rocco (1997, 34, 38–9, 43, 55–6, 64). For an older view, which stresses the affinity between the classical tragic poets and the classical philosophers, consider Racine's remark in his preface to *Phèdre*: "Their theater was a school where virtue was no less well taught than in the schools of the philosophers" (1965, 32).

<sup>10</sup> Consider as well Bolotin (1980) and Tessitore (2003).

<sup>11</sup> It is striking that Nietzsche himself on occasion seems to wonder whether Sophocles is not closer to Socratic rationalism than he is to Aeschylus's (purported) anti-rationalism: "in tragedy from Sophocles onward . . . we are already in the atmosphere of a theoretical world, where scientific knowledge is valued more highly than the artistic reflection of a universal law" (1967, 108; consider as well 85, 87, 92).

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than Sophocles' theoretical rationalism, the extent to which his play presents Oedipus as "living proof of the limits of rationality and the presence of the divine" (115; see also 26–7, 101, 105, 122–3; 1986, 28, 35; 1997, 194–6, 199–201). Moreover, although I completely agree with Saxonhouse's argument that the play is a warning against *political* rationalism – that is, "attempting the transformation of the world on the basis of abstract, calculating reason alone" – I am inclined to disagree with her suggestion that the play is also, at least partially, a critique of the theoretical, Socratic pursuit of wisdom through reason alone (1988, 1272; see especially 1263, 1265, 1270–3).

My own study of Sophocles leads me to conclude that Sophocles is not a critic of rationalism, that he does not endorse the denunciations of reason made by such characters as Teiresias and the blind Oedipus, even though he also does not simply endorse the secular, anti-conventional, political rationalism represented by Oedipus's "tyrannical" rule. I argue, for example, that Sophocles believes that the downfall of Oedipus in *Oedipus the Tyrant* is ultimately caused, not by his dedication to reason, but by his abandonment of reason and his turn to piety. But Sophocles also believes that political rulers will inevitably abandon reason in favor of pious hopes when confronted with such mortal political crises as Oedipus faces at the beginning of that play. Similarly, I show that it is not the religious, anti-rationalist Oedipus who is the hero of *Oedipus at Colonus*, but rather the humane and enlightened Theseus, whose statesmanship constitutes a middle way between an immoderate political rationalism that dismisses the power of religion – exemplified by Oedipus the Tyrant – and a piety that rejects reason – exemplified by Oedipus at Colonus. Finally, I argue that Antigone ultimately demonstrates her superiority to Creon, not only through her heroic piety but also through her heroic willingness to question her most cherished convictions about justice and about the possibility of an immortal happiness. The *Antigone*, I suggest, invites one to ascend from the pious heroism of Antigone to the humane wisdom of Sophocles. The true model of rationalism to be found in the Theban plays, I conclude, is Sophocles himself, who presents the problem of politics, reason, and piety with a genuinely philosophic clarity, calm, and depth, but whose rationalism differs from Socrates and even from Thucydides, most notably, in its somber reserve. I close my study with an examination of the teachings of

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Nietzsche, Socrates, and Aristotle concerning the relation between tragedy and philosophy. I argue that, notwithstanding the claims of Nietzsche to the contrary, the rationalism of Socrates and Aristotle is not simply optimistic, that it is indeed sensitive to the tragic dimension of human existence, and that it therefore resembles in fundamental ways the somber rationalism of Sophocles.



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## I *Oedipus the Tyrant* and the Limits of Political Rationalism

### CRIME AND PUNISHMENT?

On the very surface, *Oedipus the Tyrant* appears to be a story of the triumph of justice over injustice. As the title of the play emphasizes, most unmistakably to its democratic Athenian audience, Oedipus is a tyrant – a man who ascends to power and rules outside the limits imposed by human and divine law.<sup>1</sup> He violates the most sacred of laws – the laws that protect the family – and commits the most atrocious and monstrous of crimes by killing his father and sleeping with his

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Thucydides 6.15, 53, 59–61; Xenophon *Hiero* 4.5, 7.10; *Hellenica* 5.4.9, 13, 6.4.32, 7.3.4–12, especially 7; Isocrates *Nicocles* 24. These passages call into question Knox's suggestion that Oedipus's "title, *tyrannos* . . . must have won him the sympathy of the Athenian audience" because Athens aimed to become the tyrant of Greece (1998, 99; see 58–77). Oedipus is consistently referred to as a tyrant throughout the play (380, 408, 514, 535, 541, 588, 592, 873, 925, 1096). The only time that he is referred to as a king is immediately after it is discovered that he is the son of King Laius (1202). The Corinthian messenger does say that Oedipus will also be named the tyrant of Corinth, even though he is ostensibly the son of the former ruler Polybus (939–40). But perhaps it is already known there that he is not the true son of Polybus. Oedipus does call Laius a tyrant (128, 799, 1043), but he also calls him king and clearly indicates that Laius was a member of the royal family and the heir to the throne of Thebes (257, 264–8). The fact that Oedipus refers to Laius as tyrant as well as king may indicate that the word "tyranny" has a somewhat broad meaning in the play. But it also would seem to be in Oedipus's interest to blur the distinction between a ruler who is heir to the throne by birth, as Laius is, and one who is not, as he is not.

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mother.<sup>2</sup> Through such crimes, Oedipus seems most clearly to violate those divine laws, which, the chorus declares, are “lofty ones, through heavenly aether born, whose only father is Olympus; nor did any mortal nature of men give birth to them, nor will forgetfulness ever put them to sleep; great is the god in them, and he grows not old.”<sup>3</sup> Through such crimes, Oedipus seems most clearly to exhibit the *hubris* that, the chorus explains, begets a tyrant (873).<sup>4</sup> The downfall of Oedipus the tyrant, therefore, seems, at first glance, eminently just and specifically a triumph of law over tyranny.

Yet a more careful reading of *Oedipus the Tyrant* calls into question this initial impression of the play as a simple condemnation of Oedipus. For Oedipus seems to be a truly great ruler, one who combines what no other Sophoclean hero combines: genuine wisdom with a genuinely noble devotion to others.<sup>5</sup> When a cruel monster, the Sphinx, threatened Thebes with destruction unless someone could solve her riddle, it was Oedipus alone who had the wisdom to solve a riddle that even the soothsayers could not solve (390–400). But by saving Thebes, Oedipus displayed not only his wisdom but also his nobility. For Oedipus saved Thebes from destruction even though he was a foreigner and a wayfarer who had no evident interest in or obligation to Thebes. Later in the play, Oedipus appeals to Teiresias's self-interest and sense of civic duty by urging him to help the city to which he belongs and “which reared you” (310–3, 322–3). But Oedipus's original intervention to save Thebes cannot have been motivated by any such self-interest or sense of duty. It seems rather to have been an act of sheer generosity, free of any self-interest or obligation, a vivid expression of Oedipus's conviction

<sup>2</sup> Consider Plato *Republic* 568d4–569c9, 571a1–575a7, especially 571c3–d4; *Laws* 838a4–e1. See Wohl 2002, 250.

<sup>3</sup> 863–71; see also 899–910.

<sup>4</sup> See also Benardete 2000, 72–3. As Wohl puts it, “Oedipus's tyranny . . . represents a metaphysical position, an illegal relation to being and power . . .” (2002, 259).

<sup>5</sup> Oedipus seems to combine the intelligence or wisdom characteristic of Sophocles' Odysseus, Ismene, and Chrysothemis with the nobility characteristic of his Neoptolemus, Ajax, Antigone, and Electra.