

The Sovereign and the Tyrant

Boundaries and Violation in Oedipus

Elizabeth K. Markovits

Do not wish to have control in everything!

Power to control did not accompany you through all your life.

–*Oedipus Tyrannos*, 1522–23¹

Sovereignty is a multifaceted concept, connecting the question of the *extent* of authority with the question of in whose name or under whose authorization that power is used. In *popular* sovereignty, legitimacy is rooted in the consent of the governed; that is, the people are the proper sources of political authority. This power to make a presence felt in the world, recreating the world according to a collective vision of the people, is especially appealing in our era of “inverted totalitarianism,”² “devitalized agency,”³ and continued outright authoritarianism and oppression – and continues to animate struggles for democracy across the world.

Yet, the question of the extent of that authority is another matter. While the people might be the legitimating force in popular sovereignty, what are they legitimating? In recent years, the idea of sovereignty – long a staple concept for politics – has come under greater scrutiny. Conceived of as ultimate and final authority, some see sovereignty itself as a dangerous aspiration, no matter in whose name it is exercised. For critics, the ideal of sovereign power monopolizes our ideas about agency to the point where we cannot imagine a version of political freedom that is not bound up with the ability to *control* action – and

¹ Much thanks to the organizers and participants of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) meetings on popular sovereignty, particularly Matthew Longo and Thomas Bartscherer, as well as to Mount Holyoke College students Yiwen Bao and Molly Schiffer for research assistance.

² Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*.

³ Aslam, *Ordinary Democracy*.

thereby denying pluralism and tending toward illiberal violence.⁴ Thus, a major concern of this volume is the tension between liberal institutions and popular sovereignty – that is, the boundaries of legitimacy. Currently, pathological forms of populism appear to threaten liberal constitutional protections in even the most established democracies. When is sovereignty a necessary and useful fiction – a noble lie as in Bartscherer’s chapter, Chapter 1 – and when does it bleed into gross abuse of power? Or is it just not “sovereignty” when the claims violate particular boundaries, founded in either historical practice or abstract ideals? Even if we were to resolve the troubled problem of the *who* in *popular sovereignty* – as the contributions in Part IV examine – the danger of overreach remains. What determines “problematic?” Where is the line between a legitimate ultimate authority and an illegitimate one? Further, even if we acknowledge that these boundaries are highly contextual and subject to contestation – of the sort we see Martin Luther King, Jr. negotiate in *Letter from Birmingham Jail* – we should also understand the practical, universal boundaries that limit all attempts to hold ultimate authority. Such boundaries do not require arguments about conceptions of justice, but instead relate to basic features of reality.

In this chapter, I look to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos*, in which the author reveals the ambiguous boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate political authority, even as the text tries to stabilize them. In doing this, Sophocles contributed to a developing discourse around the difference between illegitimate and legitimate forms of power in post-Peloponnesian War Athens and helped to shape the view of both tyranny and sovereignty that we have inherited. I begin by laying out why an exploration of tyranny is so relevant to the study of sovereignty. From there, I examine the discursive history of tyranny in ancient Greece, revealing the political work the term accomplished. From there, I go on to explore exactly what makes Oedipus a tyrant, while also focusing on the real bounds of his seemingly unbounded power – and how that seeming unboundedness in fact contributed to the tragic reversal that must mark all aspirations to ultimate authority.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES: SOVEREIGNTY AND TYRANNY

In both academic and everyday usage, the sovereign is the *ultimate* authority. Whether the self, the demos, or the state, the sovereign is not accountable to others, as the sovereign legitimately occupies an authority over all others. For Hobbes, political sovereignty is bounded only by the original covenant

⁴ See especially Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, and Cocks, *On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions*. Jonathan Havercroft points out that critiques of sovereignty have arrived in waves over the last 130 years, most recently in their Arendtian (what Havercroft terms the *normative critique of sovereignty*) and Foucauldian forms (the *architectonic critique*). Havercroft, *Captives of Sovereignty*, p. 15.

regarding self-preservation and natural law; for Bodin, only the Christian god is above the sovereign. For these theorists, this human authority must be *final* in order to do the work of settling conflict and providing stability in the polity. Of course, this is a fiction – the potential for disagreement and conflict remains, no matter how divine-like the authority – but even as a fiction, the finality of sovereign power is seen as a necessary balm to the volatility of communal life. This modern conception was, as other contributors to this volume trace, worked out in the early modern era; the word does not exist in earlier sources. Yet, the idea of ultimate and unassailable authority stretches back much further. In fact, as Kinch Hoekstra has observed, the language used to build this conceptual framework by Bodin and others is strikingly similar to ancient descriptions of tyranny – with both ideals resting on the *unaccountability* of the ruler:

In particular, writers such as Bodin, Grotius, Hobbes and Pufendorf appeal to the essential unaccountability of sovereignty, which must be immune from review, veto or punishment. Some explicitly cast their theories of sovereignty in terms of the Greek notion of being *anupeuthunos*, unaccountable to any authority. Significantly, being *anupeuthunos* (or *aneuthunos*) was for ancient writers a characteristic feature of tyranny.⁵

While many ancient Greek specialists have noted the anachronism of referring to “sovereignty” in Athens, ancient tyranny nonetheless served as an inspiration for early modern conceptualizations of sovereignty. As both sovereignty and tyranny are essentially *unaccountable* forms of authority, what makes them different from one another? The simple answer is that tyranny is the *illegitimate* form of authority that, in its legitimate form, is called sovereignty. Yet, two complications arise.

First, tyranny itself was not a stable concept in Athens and gradually changed meaning over time. That is, it was not always considered an inherently *illegitimate* form of rule; it begins as a term that simply referred to how a ruler came to power. Even later, as it accrued associations with hubristic overreach and moral deviance, tyranny was still sometimes viewed as a laudable aspiration, a sense of freedom that anyone with good sense would crave.⁶ Indeed, Victoria Wohl discusses Athenians’ “intense erotic investment” in the tyrant, not merely as an object of hatred but also as an alluring vision of the self.⁷ Moreover, tyranny served as a model for Athenian democratic power, with the *demos* “appropriate[ing] the tyrant’s language and power.”⁸ Matt Landauer also links Greek tyranny and democracy through their *unaccountability*, showing the ways in which advisors, advice giving, and decision-making were more similar than not in the two forms of polity.⁹ Yet, by the close of the

⁵ Hoekstra, “Athenian Democracy,” 17.

⁶ Hoekstra. “Athenian Democracy,” 19.

⁷ Wohl, *Love among the Ruins*.

⁸ McGlew. *Tyranny and Political Culture*, 9.

⁹ Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel*.

classical period, tyranny's freedom comes to be associated with antidemocratic illegitimate boundary transgression, leading to tragic reversal for those who would try to wield such power and we are left with a more familiar, less ambiguous view of the tyrant as a figure of revulsion.

Second, while both sovereignty and tyranny can refer to ultimate and unaccountable authority, this is imprecise. Only the most *realpolitik* versions of sovereignty would maintain a total absence of outside standards or claim that the sovereign authority can do *anything* it deems appropriate. Yet, *popular sovereignty's* potential for descent into *majority tyranny* requires tempering institutions and mediating conceptual language. Absolute power is *sovereignty* when the commenter believes the power to be legitimate, and *tyranny* when it has overstepped some boundary. Some limit remains, although the practical enforceability is often questionable. In Bodin, for example, how exactly does god ensure absolutist rulers refrain from or repent for acts of murder? Who actually holds Hobbes's sovereign to account? We see this through to the twentieth century, as liberal institutions and populism come into conflict now. Do the people have the right to do anything they want? Or are they bound by liberal constitutional principles to protect minority rights and civil liberties? Although the sovereign is the final, ultimate authority, most theories in fact put some *other* ultimate authority over the sovereign. That is, there is something else that renders this enormous power acceptable and *legitimate* in a way that differentiates it from tyranny, even if it goes unspoken or remains a source of dispute and conflict. As other chapters in this volume show, constitutions, rights, and institutions provide the boundaries for popular sovereignty in the contemporary era. The tyrant is the only one who is truly free from other bounds and so when the people violate rights claims or ignore the rule of law, they act more as tyrants than sovereigns.

ANCIENT TYRANNY

In contemporary usage, tyranny signifies absolute, unbounded rule and carries a judgment about the (im)morality of this form of governance. A tyrant is a terrible and amoral thing, prone to cruelty and violence. Yet, these moral judgments were not part of the earliest Greek meaning. In this section, I read this development as a contest over the meanings of different forms of political life, with *tyrannos* serving as a useful and dynamic container for multiple meanings. We can see the literary record as a collective attempt to work out the practical political problem of the limits of legitimate but *unaccountable* power – authority endowed with the stability to maintain the polis, but which rejects the crude realism of unbounded power. Both sovereign power and tyranny have no higher authority; deferring to no one, they are not required to offer an account to any others. Yet, tyranny in Athens moves from a designation of a way of ascending to that sort of *unaccountable* power (which monarchs or the *demos* itself might wield) to a terrible state of enslavement, leading to tragic reversal.

Many commentators have pointed out that, for the ancient Greeks, tyranny was, at first, a relatively neutral term.¹⁰ The tyrant was one who came to power outside the conventional hereditary lines – as well as their heirs (thus, Peisistratos *and* his sons were considered tyrants). The term itself probably came from the Lydian word for king and the earliest usage appears in the work of the archaic poet Archilochus, who describes tyranny as something most men would want, with no negative inference. Tyranny there connotes the exceptional state of freedom and power of monarchs, but not necessarily depravity or cruelty. Although Archilochus is not Athenian, we see the same neutral-to-positive usage in Athens as well and a positive use of the term is “well-established by the fifth century.”¹¹ In other sources the meaning varies; Herodotus used it interchangeably with *basileus* (king) and *archon* (ruler), although he also uses it to refer to despotic rulers, particularly in reference to Eastern/Persian kings.¹² Regardless, the allure of tyranny never fully fades, even as anti-tyranny ideology took hold in Athens. Even Plato’s would-be tyrants speak of tyranny as so obviously useful and desired that Socrates’ critiques are clearly laughable. This makes sense given the origin of the word. The tyrant was an usurper, which meant he rejected – and so was released from – tradition and convention. This rejection was the source of his freedom, which would then expand to other realms. According to Arlene Saxonhouse, the tyrant was the ruler “without limits ... whether moral, physical, or historical ... [he was] the new ruler.”¹³ It did not necessarily mean he was despotic (*despotes* – the Greek here referring to mastership over slaves) or immoral, although a writer like Plato will link this unbounded freedom to a desire to enslave others.

The broader political context also shaped and was shaped by this discursive development. Tyranny “provide[ed] the analytical framework for understanding constitutional forms,” allowing Athenians to criticize or praise various forms of political life.¹⁴ That is, it was not necessarily opposed to a *particular* form of government and history shows that a tyrant like Peisistratos paved the way for the democracy, as he weakened oligarchic (conventional) power.¹⁵ As political norms shifted, so did the understanding of tyranny, its advantages, and the threats it posed. While Athenian literature often contrasts monarchy (and, later, democracy) with tyranny, the historical rise of tyranny was more of a “twist in an intra-aristocratic drama” than the usurpation of monarchical dynasties.¹⁶ That is, there were no monarchs displaced by tyrants, despite

¹⁰ For an overview of the use of the term throughout various ancient sources, see Morgan (ed.), *Popular Tyranny*.

¹¹ Parker, “Τύραννος,” 154.

¹² Dewald, “Form and Content,” 41, 47.

¹³ Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason,” 1261.

¹⁴ Mitchell, “Tyrannical,” 178.

¹⁵ For the link between democracy and tyranny across the ancient Greek world, see Fleck and Hanssen, “How Tyranny Paved the Way to Democracy.”

¹⁶ Morris, “Imaginary Kings,” 9.

the stories of Greek tragedy. Instead, tyrants provided transitional moments between the aristocracies that ruled archaic poleis, besting the oligarchs at “the very same games” they themselves played but without the lineage to claim legitimacy.¹⁷ Thus, alongside the positive connotations already noted, negative associations sprang up quickly – not because tyrants were immediately viewed as inherently *bad*, but because tyrants threatened established power structures. The earliest known anti-tyranny law appear to be from the Draconian era, thus predating the radical democracy of the late sixth century.¹⁸ Later, with the rise of democracy in Athens, tyrants remain the object of approbation, even as the tyranny of Peisistratos did much to give rise to democratic forces within the polis. By the time of the Cleisthenic reforms, anti-tyranny sentiment becomes part of the *bouleutic oath*.¹⁹ So rather than a stable meaning rooted in conceptual ideals, *tyrannos* and its cognates were first relatively value-free indicators of the mode of ascension for particular rulers, and then underwent a transformation whereby opponents layered further meanings onto the term in order to disarm the threat tyrants posed to entrenched authority, whatever form that took. The very development of the term is a story of political struggle.

The addition of immorality came about after the so-called age of tyrants (650–510 BCE). Confusing matters, it was often retroactively imputed to earlier tyrannies as a result of “anachronistic prejudices and assumptions.”²⁰ Thus, the cruelty of archaic tyrannies is historically questionable, although it does reveal much about these later discursive constructions. In order to ensure the lines between *legitimate* and *illegitimate* final authority (i.e., it is legitimate for the *demos* to wield this authority, but not for a single man to do so), the lone tyrant is made into a deviant, someone who violates the natural order. This was an easy move since the tyrant’s release from convention (of hereditary succession) could also be pushed to mean release from other human and divine norms. Tyranny moves from indicating a ruler who gained his title not through lineage to end up indicating a ruler who would violate even the most basic sexual taboos because of his refusal of any restraint. Parker notes the earliest negative uses appear with Solon in the first half of the sixth century, although the meaning is not an outright condemnation: he notes tyranny may appear desirable but actually will lead to ruin.²¹ It is only later with Thucydides that we get a consistent negative valence to the term and it becomes fully distinct from legitimate kings and other rulers. From this point, tyranny is seen as a threat to be contained, not merely unconventional but dangerous. In Book VIII of Plato’s *Republic*, the tyrant comes after democracy because the love of freedom without rule dominates to such an extent that the city becomes

¹⁷ Anderson, “Before Turannoi Were Tyrants,” 215.

¹⁸ Martin, “The Athenian Legislation.”

¹⁹ Martin, “The Athenian Legislation,” 109.

²⁰ Anderson, “Before Turannoi Were Tyrants,” 175.

²¹ Parker, “Τύραννος,” 155.

disordered, leading to the demagogic usurper taking power. He himself is lawless and unjust – preferring his own freedom to pursue his base appetites rather than submit to the rule of wisdom. This leads to hatred and instability, thus ironically causing his own loss of freedom in the end.

The anti-tyranny stance eventually becomes a crucial part of Athens' democratic ideology, even as oligarchs were also critical of tyrants since they threatened their power in the archaic polis. According to James McGlew, it was an "important and flexible conception for moments of political resistance," used to criticize those, like Alcibiades, who might be gathering too much power.²² Athens had laws against the promotion of tyranny, as well as mechanisms like ostracism to guard against any single man from becoming powerful enough to attempt to establish a tyranny. The story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was largely myth but was promoted by the city as way to shape and reshape Athenian "constitutional history" and define the democracy as restoration of an earlier form of rule in the city and against tyranny.²³ The story also helped solidify the notion of tyrants as despotic criminals who lacked self-control and so veered into moral perversion, rather than simply new leaders who took power by unconventional/illegal means (and perhaps took it from the oligarchs who likewise threatened democratic norms). Moreover, the tyrant is linked to *despotes*, the slave-master, which means those living under tyranny were themselves slaves, which was a violation of the democratic equality (*isonomia*) and freedom (*eleutheria*) so important to Athenians' self-conception (and which helped justify their imperial tyranny).²⁴ Thus, the "defense of the democracy tended to be equated with resistance to tyrants."²⁵

While the dominant ideology in fifth century democratic Athens portrayed tyranny as an undesirable problem, its earlier roots and this link with democratic freedom suggest a deeper ambivalence. The fact that comedy and tragedy continued to ponder questions about tyranny and freedom – and not always negatively, or else double-negatively (ridiculing Cleon for stirring up fears of tyranny) – also attests to this ambivalence. The "tragic tyrant embodies the Athenian experience of tyranny, belong to the aetiological past, and is adapted to the needs of the polis in the present ... [and] projects anxiety about the autonomy of the individual citizens 'onto its most extreme embodiment, the horrible isolated autonomy of the tyrant.'"²⁶ That anxiety is rooted in the unavoidable tension between anti-tyranny ideology and democratic freedom. Tyranny is not simply a threat to democracy because it rejects equality, putting one person above all others; it is also the fullest bloom of the other animating force of democratic life – freedom. This sort of freedom ultimately requires one

²² McGlew, "The Comic Pericles," 164.

²³ Anderson, "Before Turannoi Were Tyrants," 214.

²⁴ Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 3.

²⁵ Ober, "Tyrant Killing," 216.

²⁶ Morgan, "Introduction," xvii.

person to control all others, to refuse the possibility of their freedom. Much of the Athenian ideology denied the link between freedom and tyranny, instead it focused on how the individual tyrant would enslave the *demos*. But these relations are more entangled than binary; predating democracy, tyranny also serves as a model for the *demos*' own authority. As James McGlew argues, "those who had political rights ... collectively [shared] in possession of the tyrant's unfettered personal power." Rather than opposition, this is appropriation – making the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate usage of that unfettered power even more crucial. Along similar lines, Hoekstra details the ways in which the Athenian *demos* viewed itself as holding tyrannical power, meaning it was unaccountable to a higher authority.²⁷ This was not necessarily illegitimate in the context of dealing with unequal others – it was only the threat of a tyrant holding power over fellow citizens that was a problem.

Yet, what if it is not the would-be tyrant out there in Persia or one ambitious man lurking among the *demos* but is in fact the Athenian *demos* – and its legitimate authority – that poses a danger to the polis itself? My gloss is that Sophocles' play *Oedipus* is not just a warning about tyrannical power and the individual tyrant, nor it is about the blindness of the *demos* in its dealings with other *poleis* – Athens seemed generally unbothered by that – but a comment on the dangers of claims of unaccountable authority more generally and the internal threats it could pose. A site of contestation itself, tyranny's meaning fluctuated, depending on the political context; it was not a stable, unitary anti-ideal, as we now think of it. Instead, it could refer to power that is used for any number of things, not necessarily bad, immoral, or cruel. The fact that it was considered to be *ultimate* power – just as sovereign power is considered to be – is what leads writers to draw tyranny to what they see as its inevitable outcome – tragic reversal – because no human power can escape some limits and because the aspiration to such power makes one particularly apt to rush headlong into those limits.

OEDIPUS AND THE BOUNDS OF POWER

In Sophocles' version of *Oedipus* (c. 429 BCE), we first encounter the leader of Thebes as he tries to comfort citizens lamenting the *miasma* (pollution) that has left the women unable to bear children and the crops to die. Years before, *Oedipus* had come to power by answering the riddle of the Sphinx and being made tyrant (i.e., nonhereditary monarch) by the grateful citizens, whose king had been murdered while traveling. Thus, the current problem seems to be one well within *Oedipus*'s power to solve. He discovers that the source of the pollution is the city's failure to bring the previous king's murderer to justice and so *Oedipus* embarks on the path that will ultimately reveal him

²⁷ Hoekstra, "Athenian Democracy," 24, 41.

to be his own father's murderer and to be the son of his wife, brother to his own children. At the close of the play, his mother/wife Jocasta has committed suicide, Oedipus has blinded himself with her cloak pins, and Jocasta's brother Creon assumes the throne.

Many readers of the play take it to be about the inescapability of fate and a classic Aristotelian tragic story of someone with high status meeting a horrible end. Oedipus's status as ruler seems more important than the particular character of that leadership as a tyrant, probably because he is not a tyrant in the recognizable sense of the word – he is not cruel and he offers explanations of his actions on repeated occasions – he is not obviously unaccountable (*aneuthunos*). Moreover, the *tyrannos* of the title was added later to distinguish it from *Oedipus at Colonus* post-Aristotle – and that title then gets transformed into Latin *Oedipus Rex*. Many translations stick with “king” throughout the text, perhaps to avoid imputing to Oedipus the wickedness we have come to associate with tyrants. Given the flexibility of the term, particularly at the moment Sophocles is writing, I do not think one should take the meaning of tyrant or the character of Oedipus's tyranny as self-evident. Nor should we assume it was mere carelessness or poetic license on Sophocles' part. As Bernard Knox had already clarified in 1954, the Greek terms – *tyrannos* and *basileus* – are not in fact interchangeable in this way – although they also were not distinct in the ways that led to the mistranslation (wicked tyrant vs. beneficent ruler). That is, *tyrannos* had not yet been fully *de-habilitated*, and still primarily indicated that – ironically – Oedipus did not (appear to) inherit his throne. Sophocles' use of the word was not casual, nor an oversight: “fifth century Athenians understood perfectly well the difference between a king and a tyrant,” as their most recent past was in fact an “age of tyrants” (and, before that, oligarchies), not the mythical monarchical past.²⁸ At the same time, we must also *not* assume that the difference between king and tyrant was the same for Athenian spectators as it is for later readers. Within this frame, it makes sense that when later translators and commentators wanted to capture the idea of Oedipus as a benevolent (yet, terribly unfortunate) ruler, they jettisoned tyrant because of the by-then pejorative implications of the term. But those did not exist in the same way for Sophocles' audience, at least not completely. I want to suggest here that it was Sophocles' portrayal that helps to cement the tyrant as morally perverse and politically deadly (although once expunged from the city, he serves as *pharmakos* for the future Athens at Colonus).²⁹ As the fifth-century democracy deepened its anti-tyrant ideology, this interpretation makes a lot of sense. Oedipus is technically a tyrant in the older sense of the term – having arrived new to a city and been made ruler. He also seems to possess godlike powers of intellect – having bested the Sphinx and released the city from her plague. These are both neutral-to-positive versions of tyranny

²⁸ Pope, “Addressing Oedipus,” 157.

²⁹ Vernant and DuBois, “Ambiguity and Reversal.”

and very well fit with Oedipus at the start of the play. There he is presented as an admirable and kind figure, steward of Thebes and beloved by the people. He is gifted the throne – “though I had not asked it” (384) – coming much closer to elected leader than the tyrant who takes power by force, deception, or wealth. But he also fulfills – although unwillingly – the other, negative characteristics of the tyrant that are growing in influence during this period – murder of kin and violation of sexual taboos. He also grows suspicious and paranoid over the course of the play, losing the democratic posture of the opening and threatening those he sees as adversaries. The figure of Oedipus is *not* actually a tyrant in the older sense but is *in fact* a tyrant in the new sense. Oedipus himself personifies this discursive development. Moreover, the play also highlights the difficulty of making clear distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate unaccountable (*aneuthunos*) authority. In the end, he does offer an account of himself and his actions; he sacrifices for the good of his city, exiling himself. That is, he *is* accountable. Yet, he can never shake the horror of his actions nor account for them, no matter how unintended. The blurry lines between good and bad forms of political authority sharpen and the dangers of claims to *ultimate* authority – no matter how benevolent – are cemented for the *demos* watching and judging the play.

By making Oedipus a generally sympathetic tyrant while also including the second stasimon that blames hubris, and the tyranny engendered by it, for the downfall (763–910), Sophocles pushes the *demos* to think about the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate power and what exactly separates one type of ultimate authority from another. That is, the playwright not only uses language but also does something to it, changing the word and the political discourse, helping to move the understanding of tyranny away from a distinction between hereditary and nonhereditary rule and trying instead to carve out conceptual boundaries that have more to do with the quality of rule, providing bounds for even supposedly *unbounded* authority. Given the historical moment, it is *not* clear how different legitimate hereditary rule (whether monarchical as in the play or aristocratic, as in actual Athenian history) had been from tyrannical rule, especially in its most benevolent appearances – Oedipus (or perhaps one might think of Peisistratos – while a more complex case, not a tyrant who was thought to enslave the people). By embedding these moral crimes into the tyrant’s identity, regardless of his intent, Sophocles is making those lines more clear. At the same time, the particular details of Oedipus’s downfall reveal how even the tyrant – whether Oedipus or the *demos* – remains bounded by material conditions of human life – here, knowledge and time – and how the claims of absolute power engender tragic reversal because of the hubristic blindness to those constraints.

So what does *tyrant* mean in this play and how does it change? Both Knox and Arlene Saxonhouse note that the term is key to the play, as the drama revolves around Oedipus’s claim to the Theban throne – there is a world of difference between *basileus* (hereditary king) and *tyrannos* (ruler who comes to

power by other means). In the end, of course, he turns out to be the *basileus*, which is why the final reference to Oedipus as king uses that word (1202), after consistently referring to Oedipus with some form of *tyran-* (six times from 380 to 939). Interestingly, Oedipus is *not* introduced to the action with either *tyrannos* or *basileus*, but ones that reference his power – *kratunon* (14) and *kratiston* (41). The first use of *tyran-* in reference to Oedipus is only after the first encounter with Tiresias leaves him angry and suspicious of both the prophet and his brother-in-law Creon. Oedipus is first identified by his strength, although it is not a cruel use of power for self-gain. Instead, Oedipus refers to the city as his *tekna*, his own children, and wrestles with finding a solution to the blight currently afflicting Thebes – his power will be used to aid them, not to indulge his own appetites. As Knox notes, the interactions between Oedipus and the citizens are direct – not mediated by an armed retinue – and seem more like a democracy led by a first citizen than any of the sort of tyranny we see with Creon later in *Antigone* or Aegisthus in the *Oresteia*.³⁰ His power comes from his intellect, which was able to free the city from the curse of the Sphinx. Now he endeavors to do the same once again. As the action develops, though, and Oedipus comes to feel increasingly threatened (first by individuals he believes covet his power, then by historical fact), he is consistently referred to as *tyrannos*. This only changes again near the end of the play, when the Chorus refers to Oedipus as *basileus* (line 1202), after his true biography has been revealed.

Yet, it would be too much to read *tyrannos* as consistently negative or only indicating an increasingly fearful king, even here in the play. In fact, the first appearance of the word is not in reference to Oedipus, but his (bio-) father – although in reference to his throne after his death at line 128. The usage is logical since the office would become a tyranny in the most-conventional-at-the-time sense – occupied by someone other than Laius' heir (as he was thought to have no heirs). The next reference to Laius is as *basileus* (257), which makes sense as he was the rightful heir to Labdacus, heir of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. The final reference to Laius is again as *tyrannos* – in that case, Oedipus is beginning to recount the incident at the crossroads to Jocasta, when Laius struck Oedipus in response to his own attack on Laius' driver. This particular instance is more vexing than the others – the audience knows that Laius is the rightful king (his father's son) and, at that point, he still occupied the throne. Yet, this is one of those moments where I think Sophocles is being very deliberate – there is something about Laius' behavior that makes him *tyrannos*, rather than *basileus*. What I am trying to show is that I agree with Knox – the terms are used quite deliberately, but it is also the case that *tyrannos* does not *simply* refer to a ruler who came to power through unconventional means – if that were the case, it should never apply to Laius. Instead, there is something about the quality of the rule that Sophocles invokes in various places. At the

³⁰ Knox, 99.

same time, the usage is not always in reference to the quality of rule either – as the term is also used causally and non-pejoratively with Oedipus at various points in the middle of the play. Moreover, while Oedipus has a great downfall and at times appears paranoid and rash (like those we later understand to be tyrannical) and inadvertently violent and sexual without limits (also some of the connotations eventually firmly affixed to tyrants), he is never deliberately cruel.

Maurice Pope suggests that perhaps Sophocles was trying to “defuse the title of its ill association” by creating such a sympathetic and kind protagonist.³¹ Given Sophocles’ place in the discursive development of *tyrannos*, I think this is less likely than the possibility that Sophocles was pushing the term to its immoral valence, rather than retreating to the earlier, more neutral one. The connection with the patricide and relations with his mother are specific to later views of tyrannical excess; Sophocles chose Oedipus’s story and left none of that out for a reason. Yet, this is unlike the way in which Gyges moves from king’s victim/queen’s avenger in Herodotus to unjust tyrant in Plato. With Sophocles’ Oedipus, it was inadvertent and fiercely resisted (and then lamented). Oedipus is the tyrant who unintentionally violates the most sacred limits, forgetting there are bounds to his authority – if only because bounds are hidden from view. The only real culpability lies in his arrogance in not foreseeing such possibility. It is arrogance – *hubris* – that engenders tyranny, according to the second stasimon of the play (873–882) and leads the tyrant to cross boundaries that should not be crossed.

This opens the questions of exactly which boundaries Oedipus crosses. What propels political authority in this case from unaccountable (and therefore sovereign) to unjust? The most obvious explanation is natural law and religious order; he hubristically tries to escape his own decreed fate. But I want to take a *realist* view of the question here and focus on universal, material conditions that constrain claims to tyrannical power, ones that do not require discursive foundations like a shared understanding of religion or law. That is, I will not rely on “political moralism,” in Bernard Williams’s words, “legalism,” in Judith Shklar’s, or “politics-as-applied-ethics,” in Raymond Geuss’.³² Of course, the Thrasymachuses of the world may not find this realist view to apply to them either (until it does, and it always will) but the argument I am making does not depend on some shared cultural or religious background.

Anyone with the *hubris* that tends to undergird one’s faith in the legitimacy of unbounded power – autocratic or democratic – is bound to fail because power is *never* truly unbounded. A true belief in the possibility of ultimate authority leads to two tragic realist errors³³: (1) ignoring the limits of one’s own knowledge and foregoing a form of democratic knowledge and (2) ignoring inheritance (this is different from not believing in fate; I am referring to

³¹ Pope, “Addressing Oedipus,” 160.

³² Williams, *In the Beginning*; Shklar, *Legalism*; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*.

³³ This is distinct from provisionally acting as if it is true with full awareness that it is not.

trying to get around hard facts of history and the passage of time). Oedipus does these things, which lead him to miss boundary lines he should have seen, not because he explicitly desires tyrannical power, but because that is the result of a faith in the legitimacy and power of ultimate authority, whether sovereign or tyrannical. In these cases, freedom comes very close to an attempt to control, to act with final authority and remove vulnerability. Tyrants, with their freedom from convention, are perhaps most likely to ignore other boundaries as well, but these dangers afflict all those claiming ultimate authority. That this is not simply about the dangers facing would-be tyrants and instead extends to other forms of power is supported by the democratic framing of the play. The fact that Sophocles is speaking to a *demos* is evident in the ways that Oedipus interacts with the Chorus at first – strikingly democratic and not despotic. It is the experience of holding such ultimate power that leads the possessor to make particular errors, mistaking freedom in one realm for power and control in others. Hubris engenders the tyranny – but it is not simple overreaching arrogance. Instead, it may be born from a justifiable faith in one’s project – as Oedipus understandably has, given his victory over the Sphinx. This blind spot, born of his own faith in both his intellectual and temporal freedom, leads to the tragedy – as it can for any political actor, across space and time.

DEMOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE AS BOUNDARY

While classic readings of Oedipus focus on Sophocles’ religious thought (e.g., Nietzsche’s interpretation in *The Birth of Tragedy*), recent political theory tends to focus on the rationalism embedded in Sophocles’ play.³⁴ That is not to say that interpreters dismiss Oedipus’s downfall but they instead tend to put this not as a religion versus human wisdom problem, but as a commentary on the insufficiency of reason more generally. That is, the play shows the limits of human reason, not necessarily because religious law is inviolable, but because human reason, with or without religion out there in the universe, is itself always partial. It is the blind confidence in it that is the problem, not a rejection of the gods or religious authorities.

Arlene Saxonhouse’s seminal essay on Oedipus argued for the close relation between tyranny and reason; both are claims to transcend limits (*metra*) – history/convention and the physical world, respectively. “On the one hand the tyrant and the rational individual express our freedom to do and be anything; on the other, they reveal the dangers of such freedom.”³⁵ With Oedipus, we have both tyrant and rational individual; or, rather, the latter leads to the former. He is a new kind of Greek hero, one who achieves greatness through his intellectual achievements, rather than physical ones (indeed, his is physically

³⁴ See Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*; Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason”; Ahrens Dorf, “The Limits of Political Rationalism.”

³⁵ Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason,” 262.

diminished because of his ankle piercings as an infant). As Peter Ahrensdorf points out, Oedipus ascended to the throne not by vanquishing the Sphinx through violent force like other Greek heroes (although the throne *was* empty because of his physical violence).³⁶ Instead, it was an intellectual defeat, solving her riddle. The play opens with his quest to figure out the source of the *miasma* in Thebes, couched in his concern for the well-being of his “children,” the people of Thebes; he is suspicious of oracles and soothsayers – understandable given his past and his seeming ability to overcome it – and only sends Creon to Delphi when there seems to be no other option – after “wanderings of reflection” and “careful thought” (67–68). Still, his intellectual superiority cannot cross all boundaries. As Saxonhouse continues:

Oedipus, as ruler, tragically portrays the limits of human knowledge as against our arrogant assumptions of a boundless capacity for insight ... The tragedy of Oedipus is not the fall of a helpless and faultless ruler or the weakness of man subjected to divine laws but the dashed hopes of the power of the mind to rise above the limits imposed by nature, by our biology, and by our past. It is a tale of boundaries overstepped not because of divine prophecies and a divine world hostile to mortal man but because of the freedom that characterizes the tyrant as the tragic hero.³⁷

Yet, it is still not quite clear *why* he cannot; true, *hubris* leads one to ignore the limits, but what is the precise mechanism? What exactly does he ignore? In this first case, I want to emphasize the problem with faith in *one's own* knowledge. It was not theoretically *impossible* to get the information – Oedipus was not *bound* to fail. But as individuals we are prone to partiality, bias, and are limited in our ability to know. Coupled with *hubris*, it leads Oedipus to not consider the possibility that *HE* does not have the information. Others do, and a more thorough investigation, earlier on, could have avoided setting down the path he did. He gets a particular piece of information from the drunk Corinthian (you are not your parents' child; 779–80), then another piece from the Delphi (you will kill your father and marry your mother; 787–93), but then never puzzles out the two seemingly related pieces of his history, nor does he look for further information – he solves the problem, as he sees it, and moves on confidently. As anyone who has taught Oedipus to a class of undergraduates will find familiar, why does he never ask Jocasta her age (or just make a guess)? Why didn't he investigate the death of the former king before the *miasma*? His belief in his own intellectual power leads to his dismissal of Teiresias and oracles when they seem to not fit with what he thinks he should be hearing. He cannot hear Jocasta's entreaties to stop the investigation when it has become apparent to her who Oedipus really is. He even mis-numbers the “killer” after the Chorus repeatedly refers to “killers” (124) – although in that case, Oedipus is unwittingly correct. Moreover, there can be facts

³⁶ Ahrensdorf, “The Limits of Political Rationalism,” 776.

³⁷ Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason,” 1263.

and perspectives one cannot help but ignore, even in the least blameworthy way, because they simply cannot be made apparent until other things change to reveal them. Political entities must act, but they must also leave open the possibility of new unknown unknowns.

Oedipus's hubristic faith in his own reason might not be universal for all humans, but the unpredictability of actions and the difficulty of knowing all historical facts without relying on others *is* universal. And the dangers for popular sovereignty might be even more acute, as any constitution of *the people* always remains partial, as many of the chapters in this volume show. For example, when semi- and noncitizens are excluded from information networks and decision-making processes, crucial pieces of knowledge might not find their way into the calculus. Moreover, the belief in the legitimacy of *popular* sovereignty might be analogous to Oedipus's faith in his powers of rational calculation, blinding *the people*, however constituted, to the fact that its knowledge is indeed (and must always be) limited. That is, the people do not even realize what they do not know. The boundary Oedipus oversteps here is not some simply hubristic faith in reason – but *one's own* – versus a more expansive, collaborative – and ultimately humble and democratic – conception of politically relevant knowledge.

TIME AS BINDING

The other way in which Oedipus oversteps bounds is temporal. Saxonhouse does a great deal to elucidate this from the action in the play, with a focus on his relations with his parents and children/siblings. I want to add some crucial details and make the connection to questions of sovereignty. One thing that falls out of most contemporary readings of Sophocles' version is the larger framing of Oedipus's story.³⁸ Admittedly, the best sources for these longer myths are Pausanias (9.5.1–11) and Apollodorus (3.3.1–3.5.7), much later writers. But fragments related to Oedipus appear in Homer as well and, even more importantly, the story below is supported by lines mentioning Laius' command from Apollo to remain childless in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (690–92; 742–57; 801–802; 832–43), indicating these aspects of the myth predate Sophocles and would have been familiar to Athenian audiences. Great grandson of Cadmus and son of Labdacus, the young child Laius is exiled after his father's death and grows of age with King Pelops in Elis. Overcome with lust, he kidnaps and rapes the king's son Chrysippus, leading to the boy's suicide and Pelops' curse on Laius' house – his line will not continue. After Laius returns to Thebes and takes his rightful throne, he grows careless in his relations with Jocasta, conceiving a child, although he had been warned not to do so. His hubris literally engenders a tyrant! He then sends the infant off to die of exposure. It is into this context that Oedipus tries to live a free life,

³⁸ For more, see Vernant and DuBois, "From Oedipus to Periander."

avoiding the inheritance his unjust forefathers firmly bound to him. In the end, his effort is apparent in the contrast – never intending to do harm to the next generation, he gives it life, literally begetting children *and* solving the mystery of the *miasma* – and thereby destroys it because he too readily destroyed the generation that preceded him (Laius). Moreover, he treated everyone as his own children – the city (including the elders; *tekna* – children, as in offspring – is the first line of the play; later on, the language shifts to *paides*, children, without the genetic implication), losing the boundaries that separate one moment in time from the next, collapsing it all into a single moment. He ignores the temporal flow that *fixes* some facts into place, rendering them later unchangeable by even the most ambitious tyrant. Political actors – even those aspiring to (provisionally) unbounded power must face the reality of the passage of time, which locks human life and the physical world into finitude, even when that timeline crosses multiple generations.

It is not simply that Oedipus is trying to avoid his fate – which is too often read as an unfortunate whim of callous Greek gods. Instead, Oedipus has a family history and inherits the crimes of his fathers, yet does not know it (at least in part because of the belief in the sufficiency of his own knowledge). He is born into the world and tries to avoid this generational inheritance that binds his life to one of relative unfreedom. This sort of inheritance is a deeply undemocratic notion to most of us. Oedipus rightfully aims to reject his past and foretold future, fleeing his childhood (but not ancestral) home. He tries to begin anew, armed with his powerful intellect and nothing more. Once we extend the view of inheritance beyond familial lines and across political communities, the political import becomes even more clear. Tyranny – both in *Oedipus* and the actual historical record of Athens – begins as a release from convention, a rejection of past modes of governance, in favor of creating a new world. Note the similarity to Sheldon Wolin’s description of democracy:

Revolution might be defined for our purpose as the wholesale transgression of inherited forms. It is the extreme antithesis to a settled constitution ... democracy was born in transgressive acts, for the demos could not participate in power without shattering the class, status, and value systems by which it was excluded.³⁹

Both democratic forms of sovereignty and tyranny require an untethering from the past, “a freedom to transcend the limits inherited from the past.”⁴⁰ This emphasis on temporal freedom is not just the tyrant’s wish; it is evident in Thomas Jefferson’s claims to generational sovereignty: “we seem not to have perceived that, by the law of nature, one generation is to another as one independent nation to another.”⁴¹ Each generation may enter into agreements – such as taking on debt from France – but such obligations would only

³⁹ Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” 17.

⁴⁰ Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason,” 1261.

⁴¹ Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 596.

last nineteen years, ensuring that “succeeding generations are not responsible for the preceding.”⁴² In this view, democracy requires that each generation has the freedom to make its own decisions and not be bound by the contracts or legal arrangements of its forebears. Yet, as contemporary debates around reparations and climate change make clear, political life has clear intergenerational dimensions, which cannot be escaped simply because of a faith in the power of freedom, whether conceived of as the tyrant’s unitary authority or the *demos*’ collective authority.

The fact that Sophocles wrote *Oedipus* for a democratic audience in Athens is also worth dwelling upon. Why should they care about the tragic realism of the tyrant? My point is that Sophocles was not simply warning good Athenian democrats to be on the lookout for would-be tyrants lurking in the shadows, somewhere out there in the city. Instead, Sophocles was – or he was also – revealing the practical limits of all claims to ultimate human authority, whether the *good* kind, or the *bad* kind – *and however those norms and evaluations may be set and transform over time*. These are the realist constraints on this sort of political power – the real, practical boundaries, without moral or idealist law (not that those are powerless or problematic, but this is a link across any human context – and which applies to popular sovereignty as well as ancient tyranny). The history of claims to legitimate authority reveals a wide range of boundaries and justifications – heredity, religion, ancestral law, natural law, popular consent, institutions, constitutions. Many of these bases and boundaries rely on abstract ideals and norms to both justify and limit the sovereign’s authority – democracy, versions of morality, a belief in nobility or birthright. Yet, conflict over those justifications continues on and depends critically on context and political persuasion. That is, there is no abstract ideal that has proven able to consistently limit and expand claims to sovereignty in a settled way. The case of *Oedipus* illuminates some of the universal boundaries on all forms of authority, whether popular or unitary, tyrannical or sovereign. These are neither grounded in claims about moral truth or human nature, nor do they depend on healthy institutions or respect for democratic norms – but instead are the practical and material limits to all claims to authority. I leave it to others in this volume to explore contemporary, historically conditioned normative boundaries applicable to particular cases, which can also provide boundaries for popular sovereign power. Sophocles’ contribution – in which tyranny is not characterized by the innate perversion of the tyrant, but will *lead* to the most terrible crimes nonetheless – centers on the epistemological and temporal limits of authority. No matter how well intentioned, claims to ultimate authority must practice some level of humility in the face of these inescapable bounds. Sophocles’ work does the work of revealing the fiction of ultimate power, providing an affective civic education about the dangers of forgetting the real boundaries on all power.

⁴² Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 596.