Human Utility and Refuge: Oedipus' Politics and Critical Antiquities

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Abstract:

Oedipus may be "modernity's favourite ancient subject," but modern interest in Oedipus has overwhelmingly concentrated on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In this article, I shift the focus to Sophocles' second extant Oedipus play—*Oedipus at Colonus*—to make visible forms of politics in both plays hitherto unrecognized. Oedipus' transformation from a radically dispossessed, monstrous figure to revered beneficiary of a hero-cult in Colonus highlights forms of authority that police the borders of a political community as an enduring problem in the history of political thought takes centre stage: what is the utility of the singular individual to the political community? I argue that two forms of political authority emerge from this problem of human utility. The first, which I call "Theban utility," presupposes the community's needs and attempts to determine an individual's utility in their terms. The second form of authority I call the "Athenian politics of human utility." I argue that this mode better attends to Oedipus' singular identity, the fluid nature of a community's needs, the expansive and indeterminate nature of human utility, and the kinds of commitment that govern attention to these elements of political association. I then seek to clarify the significance of these modes of utility for political and social actors situated in late modernity. Two strategies are employed to this end. First, I seek conceptual clarity on each mode of authority displayed in Sophocles' plays by turning to philosophy. Second, I seek to identify manifestations of these modes of authority in the modern era by examining some of the recent history of immigration, refugees, and Indigenous politics. I thereby reconceive utility as a resource for the dispossessed to move themselves across boundaries of exclusion. Governing the whole argument is a broadly Nietzschean interpretive strategy that advances the cause of "critical antiquities."

In her book *Antigone, Interrupted*, Bonnie Honig laments that the prolific turn to Antigone in theory—which has hardly abated since Honig's 2013 book[1]—testifies to the dominance of Oedipal politics. What goes under the sign of "Oedipal politics" varies but includes "rationalism (Oedipus the puzzle solver), rule, or governmentality (Oedipus, the king), or hierarchical, naturalized patriarchal power (Oedipus, the incest and parricide)."[2] Honig notes

[1] A non-exhaustive but representative list: Bergoffen 2015; Henao-Castro 2020, 2021; Holmes 2015; Honig 2013, 2021; Koulouris 2018; Moro 2021; Telò 2023. Cf. the articles assembled to discuss Honig's book in *Philosophy Today* 59.3).

[2] Honig 2013: 26.

that most political, critical, and gender theorists have agreed that Antigone rejects these Oedipal forms of politics and replaces them with a post-Enlightenment humanism that emphasizes the fact and importance of human mortality.[3] Rather than reject political sovereignty altogether, Honig discerns in Antigone what she calls a politics of "counter-sovereignty." Whatever the merits of her argument, in her revision of the Antigone vs. Oedipus thematic Honig leaves the matter of Oedipal politics untouched. In this article, I wish to examine Oedipal politics to consider anew what it could stand for. While I agree with Yopie Prins and Miriam Leonard that "Oedipus is modernity's favourite ancient subject,"[4] what is largely overlooked is that almost all of the received interpretations of Oedipal *politics* come from *Oedipus the King* (hereafter OT), the first of two extant Oedipus plays by Sophocles. My claim is that by attending to the second of these Oedipus plays—*Oedipus at Colonus* (hereafter OC)—we can observe another dimension of so-called Oedipal authority. This is an authority that manifests itself in policing the borders of the community according to a determination of a person's utility. Here I argue that, between the two plays, there are two variations of this authority as they mobilize two different approaches to utility. On the one hand, there is what I call "Theban utility," which presupposes the community's needs and attempts to determine an individual's utility in their terms. This is what characterizes the Thebans' repeated attempts to either incorporate Oedipus into or reject him from that city. On the other hand, there is an alternative mode of authority that we can see in the way Oedipus is incorporated into the Athenian polis in OC. This I call the "Athenian politics of human utility." In contrast to Theban utility, this mode better attends to Oedipus' singular identity, the fluid nature of a community's needs, the expansive and

[3] Honig 2013: 23.
[4] Leonard and Prins 2010: 7.

indeterminate nature of human utility, and the kinds of commitment that govern attention to these elements of political association. Identifying the two notions of utility in the Oedipus plays will be the first major aim of this paper.

There is a second major aim to this paper, however: to clarify the significance of these modes of utility for us, political and social actors situated in late modernity. Two strategies will be employed to this end. First, I seek to gain conceptual clarity on each mode of authority displayed in Sophocles' plays by turning to philosophy. Second, I seek to identify manifestations of these modes of authority in the modern era by examining some of the recent history of immigration, refugees, and Indigenous politics. In both strategies, a connection between differing cultures across time and space is established by way of a key and enduring question that the Oedipus plays raise: what is the utility of the singular individual to the political community? On my reading, the Theban and Athenian modes of utility, manifested not only in Sophocles but in various contexts and media, offer two different answers to this question.

On the back of these analyses, I argue that the refugee is, amongst other things, an ancient Greek problem and Oedipus its best ancient representative. More than that, however, I argue that the refugee so conceived discloses the presence, now and in the past, of these two modes of politics that have this key question of the relation between singular individual and political collective, configured in terms of utility, at their heart. More specifically, with the two modes of political authority he elicits, Oedipus the refugee allows us to diagnose the relative historical dominance of the Theban mode of utility's politics and orient us to an alternative—the Athenian politics of utility, a mode that may hold out a more democratic and less tragic politics of utility. What allows Oedipus the refugee to make these modes of politics legible is the transformation of the prevailing terms of utility's

conceptualization. While utility has been overwhelmingly conceptualized with reference to the use of objects, OT and OC—and thereafter the other materials examined in this article—refocus our attention on the use and utility of humans.

In the pursuit of this paper's two aims I build on what I call a Nietzschean interpretive strategy employed in some previous scholarship on the play that has found generative political resources in OC but that, I argue, has been incompletely developed and employed. There are three dimensions to this Nietzschean strategy that I merely outline here and discuss further in the next section. The first dimension consists of a concerted focus on the immanent plane of the play, meaning a move away from its religious, metaphysical, or transcendent dimensions and a move towards its social and political practice. The second is the attempt to transform philological insights into philosophical ones. The point here, then, is not to read the plays theoretically, where a preconceived theoretical framework is "applied" to the literary text, though there will arguably always be some element of that, including here. The point is rather—to anticipate the Nietzschean refrain I consider in what follows—to raise literary-philological analysis to the level of philosophy by letting the literary text ask the questions and set the terms of the philosophical discussion. Despite this reliance on Nietzsche, my focus on social and political philosophy in a non-psychological register arguably distinguishes my interpretation from some of Nietzsche's most distinctive philosophical concerns and methods.[5] That said, there is a third dimension of my Nietzschean interpretive strategy that aligns it with Nietzsche's distinctive and avowedly philosophical use of classical antiquity: leveraging the ancient past for a critical perspective on, and praxis in and for, the present. This largely overlaps with the

[5] On Nietzsche's psychology and its relationship to his philosophy, see Pippin 2010.

agenda Ben Brown and I have set out under the name "critical antiquities."[6] And yet my background concern to outline and affirm a democratic politics are rather inimical to Nietzsche's avowed politics.[7]

The article is structured as follows. In the first three sections I undertake a close reading of OC and OT. In section one I consider two promising scholarly treatments of OC that have attempted to interpret the play in political-theoretical terms and yet have incompletely followed through their important insights. Building on these scholarly treatments, I turn to OC in the second section to identify and examine the two forms of Oedipal authority mentioned above, the Theban and the Athenian. In section three I trace the Theban form of authority back into OT.

In order to get greater theoretical purchase on these two approaches to utility, I turn in the fourth section to ancient philosophy, including the "city of pigs" of Plato's *Republic* but most especially to Aristotle's discussion of political friendship in his *Eudemian Ethics*. There we see that the Theban approach to utility befits the exchange of inanimate objects but these require certain conditions that are illusory to the reality of policing the borders of a human community. Despite this, there are several indications that both political theory and political practice are resistant to seeing the differences between these two activities. On the one hand, there is a long tradition in political theory that explains political community in terms that echo the Theban, functional utility. On the other hand, the Theban

[6] This third dimension also qualifies the sense of "philosophy" that I cited in the second. The point is not to reach a contemplative and detached theoretical perspective, if that were even possible. In keeping with the critical antiquities agenda, the point is to reflexively and deeply consider what contributes to human flourishing in the present. See Bradshaw and Brown 2022 and forthcoming.

[7] Although there is a strand of Nietzsche scholarship that reads a certain egalitarianism in his work, as well as other democracy-adjacent phenomena, such as "agonism." See Warren 1988 and 1999; Honig 1993; Ansell-Pearson 1994; and Acampora 2013.

functional utility can be discerned in the recent politics of immigration and refugees, which I examine in section five. Thus, we can establish a lineage between the Theban treatment of Oedipus, the Western political theory tradition, and the recent plight of immigrants and refugees.

What we can also take from Aristotle, however, is a form of political friendship that is ill-suited to the exchange of objects but that greatly resembles the Athenian approach to utility in OC that is centred on the problem of human use and utility. Furthermore, I argue in sections six and seven that this approach to utility is illuminated by, and in turn further illuminates, the politics of gift exchange as it is related to us in anthropological and historical literature. I conclude with some considerations about how the shift of attention to the use and utility of humans can together reorient theory and praxis for an alternative and affirmative politics of utility that equips the dispossessed to move themselves across boundaries of exclusion.

Section 1 – Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and the Nietzschean Interpretive Strategy

When, at the beginning of OC, it becomes known that it is Oedipus—blind, destitute, polluted, and already infamous—who has stumbled into a sacred grove on the outskirts of Athens, the local people promptly attempt to drive him out of their sight.[8] At this point in the drama, one wonders whether what is attested to as Oedipus' fate at the end of Euripides' *Phoenissae* will really come to pass in Sophocles' reworking of the Oedipus myth. Euripides has Oedipus say that he will "die in Athens after a life of wandering."[9] By the end of Sophocles' play, however, Oedipus does not merely die there but is led off stage by the

[8] *OC* 226. I use the translation of Griffith and Most 2013 unless otherwise noted.
[9] *Phoen*. 1705.

call of the gods to his final resting place that most interpreters take to be the establishment of a hero cult.[10] Arguably the main question the play raises, then, is why and how Oedipus can go from being the vilest and most feared man in the Greek world to the prized member of the Athenian polis who is enshrined in a hero cult at the end of OC. Of course, this transformation has occupied many interpreters,[11] so much so that, according to Peter Burian, many commentators dismiss the intervening sections of the play as they selectively read it back-to-front in a teleological fashion.[12] The force of Burian's critique of such interpretations is that they have not so much explained Oedipus' transformation as they have presupposed it. That is, the play is read as though the transformation were already achieved from the beginning by some higher power lying behind the action and driving it to its inevitable conclusion. Burian attempts to counter this tendency by focusing on the middle sections of the play where he believes "Oedipus become[s] a hero before our very eyes."[13] Having done so, Burian concludes that OC is a variation of a suppliant drama in the vein of Aechylus' and Euripides' *Suppliants* and Euripides' *Children of Heracles*.[14]

To a certain extent, Burian's intervention has a distinctively Nietzschean quality. When Friedrich Nietzsche reflected on the themes that had run through his philosophical thinking up to and including his *On the Genealogy of Morality* in 1887, he wrote that already as a young man he had learned something that would underpin all of his philosophy: "to cease to look for the origin of evil *beyond* the world."[15] As the teenage Nietzsche put it, he believed that "we are responsible to ourselves alone, that we have only ourselves to blame

[10] For instance, see the case made by Nagy 2013: 497-524.
[11] E.g. "The central theme is the transformation of Oedipus into a hero." Bowra 1944: 309.
[12] Burian 1974: 408 and references; cf. Slatkin 1986: 211 n. 3.
[13] Burian 1974: 408.
[14] Burian 1974: 409.
[15] Nietzsche 2017: 5.

and not any sort of higher powers for our failings in life."[16] What made this approach novel and provocative, of course, was the way its account of agency renounced prevailing Christian ideas about supernatural agents. One can see an analogous objection to "higher powers" in Burian's concerns over existing interpretations of the play and his shift towards what is manifest to "our very eyes." This is the first of the Nietzschean qualities in Burian's interpretation of OC. What such a recognition achieves, however, leads to a second Nietzschean quality, which is an enabling of social- and political-philosophical interpretations of the world and its literature to boot. In the place of transcendent and religious agents, phenomena of the contingent, historical, and materially-embedded (if not materially-determined) kind take center stage. Such a shift illuminates at least one aspect of Nietzsche's self-proclaimed edict, which he adapted from Seneca: *philosophia facta est quae philologia fuit* ("philosophy emerges where there was once philology").[17] That is, from an early age Nietzsche saw in the philological practice of textual criticism and literary interpretation a means for philosophy, which he also considered to be philology's appropriate consummation. From Greek literature, and especially Homer, came Nietzsche's enduring interest in the agonistic, or confrontational, dimensions of human life, ancient or modern.[18] Burian could hardly sound more Nietzschean, then, when he declares, "*Oedipus at Colonus* is a drama of confrontation and contest, not a sacred pageant."[19]

In a volume whose title announces—and editor's preface confirms—a close affinity with the second of these Nietzschean qualities (i.e., its social- and political-philosophical

[16] Letter to Krug and Pinder, 27 April 1862, cited in Porter 2000a: 7.
[17] Nietzsche 1982, adapting Seneca *Ep*. 108.23. Cf. Porter 2000b for discussion. Thanks to Ben Brown for working with me on the translation of this.
[18] See Nietzsche 1988, 2017; Honig 1993: Chapter 3; Acampora 2013.
[19] Burian 1974: 408.

character), Laura Slatkin provides an interpretation that is especially illustrative of the first (i.e., a focus on the immanent plane).[20] Although—or rather *because*—she finds Burian's an appropriate interpretive strategy, Slatkin finds his reading wanting on its own (Nietzschean) terms. Slatkin argues that, despite his intentions, Burian ends up reading the play in terms of the final scenes such that, like other interpretations that read the play back-to-front, "the religious "solution" elucidates and encompasses what precedes it."[21] The resulting emphasis lies, Slatkin argues, on the religious aspects of the play to the detriment of the social and political ones.[22]

For her part, Slatkin sets her interpretation on a new footing by focusing on Oedipus' repeated invocations of his utility or benefit to Athens.[23] Slatkin identifies what she takes to be two different promises of utility that bear "distinct meaning[s], which ultimately converge."[24] One is political in nature while the other is religious. These are, first, the early promise of "benefit" (ὄνησις)[25] from Oedipus to the chorus, and then second, the prophesied "service" (ὠφέλησις) reported by Ismene.[26] In order to counter any preference for the religious aspects of the play, Slatkin avoids both Ismene's oracle and the final sections of OC and delimits her discussion to the very early scene where Oedipus attempts to convince the chorus to accept him. There Oedipus first exhorts the Athenians to do justice to their reputation as having the "power to save the wretched of other lands, [to]

[20] Euben 1986: ix ff.
[21] Slatkin 1986: 211, n. 3.
[22] Slatkin 1986: 211. Since then, numerous interpreters have attempted to overcome this interpretive shortcoming by emphasizing character and action in the unfolding of the drama. See Ahrensdorf 2009: chapter 2; Woodruff 2018b.
[23] Slatkin 1986: 212.
[24] Slatkin 1986: 212.
[25] OC 288.
[26] OC 401.

give them refuge."[27] As Slatkin duly notes, Oedipus recognizes that this reputation is coupled with Athens' self-identity as a pious polis.[28] The genius of Oedipus' speech, Slatkin argues, is that it persuades the Athenians that they risk ruining their reputation and their piety even as they attempt to uphold them. Oedipus first faults the Athenians for wrongly appointing themselves as judges of Oedipus' piety or impiety rather than recognize that this is the prerogative of the gods. [29] At the same time, Oedipus frames the question of his piety differently. He states that his actions and suffering cannot indicate his impiety since he acted in ignorance and was subsequently kept alive by the gods. These features of his life, respectively, absolve him of responsibility and show that the gods in fact deem him to be pious.[30] In so doing, Oedipus warns the chorus that they will make *themselves* impious as a consequence of ejecting him from the grove and so ruin their reputation for piety as they attempt to defend it.[31]

According to Slatkin, Oedipus' argument explains not only his transformation but also what constitutes his utility to Athens. It first consists of helping Athens "to make real their values by accepting him."[32] Connected to this is the second feature of his utility: enabling the Athenians to maintain their collective self-identity and reputation as pious and open in keeping with the "liberal ideal of enlightened democracy."[33] But this can only take place if they also maintain Oedipus' identity, of which he has newfound confidence:

[27] OC 261-2
[28] Slatkin 1986: 213-14, interpreting especially OC 256-7.
[29] Slatkin 1986: 216.
[30] Such an interpretation is at odds with the claims of Woodruff 2018b: 130n12— who aligns his position with Knox 1957: 39 and Dodds 1973: 70—that the Greek gods "can see what humans will do in the future without killing human agency" or "responsibility."
[31] Slatkin 1986: 214-15.
[32] Slatkin 1986: 217.
[33] Slatkin 1986: 217.

> The very understanding of his particular identity and his exemplary nature as a man, which the exiled wanderer has come to and by which he knows himself to be "righteous" (*eusebēs*) and "sacred" (*hieros*), reveals him as "bringing a benefit for these citizens (*pherōn onēsin astois*)."[34]

And so, according to Slatkin, the theme of individual and collective identity and the maintenance of its integrity highlights both the meaning of Oedipus' utility to Athens and Athens' utility to Oedipus.

Slatkin's identification and thematization of utility as a central mechanism of Oedipus' incorporation into Colonus is an important contribution to its interpretation, especially for understanding the political aspects and significance of the play. That said, there are a few difficulties that undermine its overall persuasiveness and make Slatkin's interpretation vulnerable to the same charge she levels at Burian; namely, that the religious comes to supersede the political. The first stems from the lynchpin of Slatkin's political interpretation: that Oedipus achieves his incorporation into Colonus in his speech to the chorus, which means prior to any revelation from the gods that Oedipus will in fact be incorporated. The problem is that the chorus are not nearly as convinced by Oedipus' argument as Slatkin's interpretation requires. The chorus leader only expresses his satisfaction that someone—in this case, Theseus—should judge his request to remain in Colonus.[35] Moreover, it is patent that this portion of the play alone cannot disclose to us the meaning of Oedipus' utility when, at the end of his speech to the Colonian elders, he says: "I bring advantage to this race, *as you may learn more fully when some lord of yours is here* (ὄνησιν ἀστοῖς τοῖσδ᾽· ὅταν δ᾽ ὁ κύριος/παρῇ τις, ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐστὶν ἡγεμών,/τότ᾽ εἰσακούων πάντ᾽ ἐπιστήσει)."[36] Slatkin, however, needs and indeed stresses Oedipus' interaction with the chorus as the

[34] Slatkin 1986: 217.
[35] OC 294-95.
[36] OC 288-90, my emphasis.

locus of obtaining protection because she takes the oracle that Ismene later reports to be about Oedipus' utility to Athens which confirms, but does not secure, the events that mark the play's end.[37] But if, as I argue, her claim about the importance of his interaction with the chorus does not stand, then all that is left to explain Oedipus' transformation on her interpretation of the play is Ismene's oracle. Given her opposition of the political and religious elements of the play's action, this nullifies the political valence of Oedipus' utility. That said, it is also difficult to affirm her interpretation of Ismene's oracle because it is in fact not about Athens at all. It is, rather, about the *Theban* solicitation of Oedipus because he will vindicate whomever he sides with in the Theban civil war. Ismene says, "you will be much solicited by our people [i.e., Thebans] before your death—and after—for their welfare (σὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ/θανόντ᾽ ἔσεσθαι ζῶντά τ᾽ εὐσοίας χάριν)."[38] In Slatkin's treatment, then, Oedipus' transformation remains unexplained, which by default leaves us looking to the apparently religious forces at work in the final scenes. Thus, Slatkin falls prey to the same accusation that she levelled at Burian and others. That is, in the end the political does not converge with the religious but is rather superseded by it.

Notwithstanding any shortcomings in Burian's and Slatkin's readings, the strategy to interpret OC in a broadly Nietzschean way is a generative one, which becomes especially clear when we push this line of inquiry further. So, Slatkin's focus on utility to identify the social and political force of the action is helpful, yet it can be significantly expanded. Like the targets of Burian's criticisms, Slatkin mostly limits her analysis to one part of the play and so misses seeing just how far utility runs through the whole of OC. At a superficial level, we

[37] E.g. "Here we begin to be shown the role Oedipus must assume in the welfare and ideals of Athens—well before Ismene ever arrives on the scene to tell him the prophesied significance of his tomb." Slatkin 1986: 214

[38] OC 389-90.

can first see this by noting the many—at least eleven—invocations of utility or benefit in OC that run right through the play and are not limited to the first section.[39]

Having expanded the consideration of utility in OC, we can better characterize the way or ways that utility operates there. For instance, we can see that utility not only defines Oedipus' relationship with Athens, it also defines his relationship with Thebes, which the middle and final sections of OC underscore. This expanded treatment of utility thus opens up the whole play for analysis and allows us to affirm its overall unity.[40] Indeed, I will argue in section three that expanding the treatment of utility also allows us to identify the utility theme through the whole Oedipus myth, allowing us to establish a unity between Sophocles' two extant Oedipus plays that are often treated quite separately. The unity—of both OC and of Sophocles' two extant Oedipus plays—is, however, constituted through difference, for upon closer analysis of these invocations, I will argue that there are important differences in the structure and nature of utility with respect to Athens and

[39] Here is a fairly comprehensive list of all the invocations of benefit or utility in OC:

ὄνησις 288
κέρδος 72, 92, 578, 579
ὠφέλησις 401
ἄρκεσις 73
δῶρον 577
προσφορά 581
δώρημα 647
ἄλκη 1524

Cf. Long 1968: 152 n. 15 on all the words denoting "help" in OC.

[40] Slatkin is not alone in mostly ignoring Thebes' role in OC. Many interpreters have felt that the middle sections of the play where Oedipus confronts Creon and then Polyneices were redundant. Carl Robert 1915: 1.469-80 suggested that the Polyneices scene was inserted on account of Sophocles' quarrel with his own son Iophon. R. G. Tanner 1966: 153-92 has propounded a similar idea. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1917 saw it as an intrusive attempt to link Oedipus' death to the Theban background and famously had a great deal of trouble reconciling Oedipus' status as hero and the curse he pronounces on his sons. What Slatkin 1986: 219-20 does say about Thebes further evinces the limits of her engagement with it from the perspective of political utility, for she claims that the difference between Thebes and Athens in the plays is between family and politics, not different kinds of politics.

Thebes. These differences centre on the relative determinacy of Oedipus' utility. With Athens, the substance or meaning of Oedipus' utility is constantly deferred such that it is radically indeterminate. Indeed, I argue that we never truly understand what his utility consists of. This, however, does not preclude the invocation of utility from being effective in securing his incorporation into Athens. Rather, utility's indeterminacy defines it. My goal in the following, then, is not to explain what Oedipus' utility vis-à-vis Athens is as Slatkin does, but rather to explain the significance of its indeterminacy.[41] To do so, I juxtapose Oedipus' relationship with Athens and his relationship with Thebes. I argue that the latter is defined by the fact that Oedipus' utility is repeatedly (and erroneously) presupposed by the Thebans and then *imposed* on him in a way that not only causes great harm to Oedipus, it also fails to realize the benefit the Thebans assumed they could derive from him. I believe all this is clear in the texts of the plays themselves, as I will show in the following two sections. In keeping with the Nietzschean edict to transform philology into philosophy, it will then be the task of the remaining sections to push the line of inquiry further still, such that the differences between the two forms of utility can be further examined and the *philosophical* significance of the Oedipus plays can be established.

There is, however, a third dimension to the Nietzschean interpretive strategy, one that is more encompassing because it includes the previous two dimensions in it and yet is not identified let alone thematized in Burian and Slatkin.[42] That is to use antiquity as a means for critiquing the present. From his earliest training and writing to his latest, Nietzsche

[41] If Easterling 2009: 151 is correct, then this enjoins my interpretation to a more general shift in dramatic interpretation in recent times.
[42] It does seem to inform Peter Euben's curation of the edited volume in which Slatkin's chapter appears, however.

evinced a critical engagement with antiquity whose nature I have explored elsewhere.[43] While the scope of this article means I cannot extensively discuss it and the method of its study here, we can nevertheless glean some of its defining characteristics in Nietzsche's enigmatic phrase, "Mihi scribere," which was written in his unfinished notes for a book titled "We Philologists (*Wir Philologen*)." As William Arrowsmith argues, this phrase means Nietzsche wrote "for his own age as one of his own age."[44] That is, Nietzsche saw his study of classical antiquity as characteristically "presentist" insofar as he was alive to the fact that he, the subject of the inquiry, was situated in and was a product of his own age. More than that, however, he was explicit about the fact that the object of his inquiry (the classical world) was to be used for the sake of his own age. Nietzsche, of course, had particular ideas about what his age needed, which we can leave to one side because what is more interesting for our purposes is the very specific way classical antiquity was to play a role in that. In short, it meant studying the ancient past with a view to its alterity so that it may cast a light on the particular and peculiar characteristics of his age *and* reorient that age for the sake of something better. This is a method that Nietzsche employs throughout his life's work, even though many readers have tended to divide Nietzsche's works between early and late stages.[45] If there is a difference between the early and late Nietzsche in the way he engages ancient materials, it is principally to be found in the degree of attention he gives to the methods of philologists and classicists. The early Nietzsche targets these methods because he is concerned to salvage antiquity from the philologists who, he claims, have

[43] See Bradshaw and Brown forthcoming for a sustained treatment.
[44] Nietzsche 1988: II.2, with Arrowsmith's footnote at Nietzsche 2011: 323n9.
[45] James Porter has thoroughly and, to my mind, convincingly demonstrated the extent to which there is continuity between the early and late Nietzsche, especially with regard to the overarching questions and problems that motivated his work. See Porter, 2000a and 2000b.

instrumentalized the classical past for thoroughly modern, and therefore for Nietzsche *debased*, ends. The later Nietzsche has largely dispensed with the field of classical studies and uses antiquity for a critique of his age more directly and innovatively.[46] The social criticism that this second Nietzsche undertakes is closely aligned with the agenda of critical antiquities that I, together with Ben Brown, have set out to thematize and further establish since 2020.[47] I have tried to build on that agenda-setting work in the foregoing—in my discussion of the first two dimensions of the Nietzschean strategy—and in the following by concretely demonstrating how it can work.

Section 2 – Two Forms of Utility: Theban and Athenian

Though Oedipus first invokes his utility early in the play because of an oracle,[48] a Nietzschean (immanent, political-philosophical, and thereby critical) interpretation of the play is possible precisely because no oracle from the gods ever plays an explicit role in Oedipus' incorporation into Athens. Oedipus confides in Antigone alone (besides us, the audience) that it is on the basis of an oracle of Apollo that Oedipus recognizes the grove in Colonus as the place where he "might round out…[his] bitter life."[49] But this cannot explain the forces at work in his incorporation, lest we succumb to saying that it is so because, in the frame of the play, the gods' will is always done. But this will not do, especially in this tragedy where the dissonance between the protagonist's will and the will of the gods is of

[46] By "directly" I mean without the broadside against philology of his early works. This is established in greater detail in Bradshaw and Brown forthcoming.
[47] See Bradshaw and Brown 2022 and forthcoming.
[48] *OC* 72.
[49] *OC* 86-93.

course one of the central aspects of the drama, if not of most extant Athenian tragedies.[50] Whether and how Oedipus will be incorporated remains the central problem of the play. To avoid reading the play back to front, we need to identify not only *what* works in effecting Oedipus' transformation but *why*. Anything short of this will end up falling back into the transcendentalist reading that thwarts, or mostly empties out, any social or political explanation. We must, then, look to the action to understand how and why Oedipus would end his life in a grove of the Eumenides in the way he proclaims: "conferring benefit on those who received me, a curse on those who had driven me away (κέρδη μὲν οἰκήσαντα τοῖς δεδεγμένοις,/ἄτην δὲ τοῖς πέμψασιν, οἵ μ᾽ ἀπήλασαν)."[51] While it is patent, at least at the level of sheer linguistic usage, that Oedipus invokes utility numerous times in his effort to win the chorus and then Theseus over to his cause, contrary to what we may expect, it is entirely unclear what Oedipus' utility is or from where it derives. The lack of clarity is registered in numerous ways. The first is the promissory quality of his repeated invocations of utility. For example, consider the moment I discussed in the previous section. When the group of elderly men from Colonus learn that it is Oedipus and his ill-begotten daughter who have ended up in the Colonian grove and renege on their earlier promise not to let anyone drive the old man away,[52] Oedipus responds by invoking his utility. This involves, as

[50] For instance, this is how Bernard Williams 1993 understands ancient Athenian tragedy. It is not within the scope of this work to enter into such a general discussion of tragedy and "the tragic," or the "will" for that matter, but in anticipation of the later sections of this article it is worth singling out recent histories of modern conceptions of tragedy, especially those that informed modern social and political theory. See Billings 2014 and Leonard 2015. On the will, see the classic essay by Vernant 1988. Cf. Leonard, 2005a; 2005b.

[51] *OC* 92-93; cf. 44-6. It may be that in light of the oracle that Ismene reports, Oedipus recognizes that he would be a curse on those who had driven him away (i.e. the Thebans) because a conflict would ensue on account of who possessed his body. But this remains largely speculative. What we can be more definitive about is how this fits with a more general trait of OC, namely a certain intimacy between Oedipus and the gods.

[52] *OC* 176-77; 226.

we have already seen in Slatkin's interpretation, Oedipus reframing the question of his and the Colonians' piety. But when he declares that the chorus will learn of his advantage "more fully when some lord of yours is here" (ὄνησιν ἀστοῖς τοῖσδ᾽· ὅταν δ᾽ ὁ κύριος/παρῇ τις, ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐστὶν ἡγεμών,/τότ᾽ εἰσακούων πάντ᾽ ἐπιστήσει),[53] not only does it show that the matter of pious reputation cannot exhaust the sense of Oedipus' utility,[54] we also see that this invocation of utility is promissory. This echoes and corroborates his earlier request to speak to Theseus so that he could reveal what benefit his incorporation would bring.[55] And so, even when there appears to be an isolatable content to his claim of benefit—such as maintaining Athens' reputation for piety—Oedipus enigmatically invokes yet more utility in a promissory manner. Crucially, however, when Theseus arrives Oedipus fails to make good on his promise. He neither actualizes in any obvious way the utility he promises, nor does he disclose to Theseus what his utility consists of or will consist of, meaning it simply remains promissory.

The consistently promissory quality of Oedipus' invocations of utility is connected to another feature that comes into view when he speaks directly to Theseus, which is the lack of clarity around the problem for which Oedipus claims to be the solution. When Theseus arrives to meet him, Oedipus, in his promissory fashion, first suggests that Theseus will not know his utility until he has died and been buried.[56] Then he lets on that his utility will become apparent in the face of some impending conflicts with Thebes.[57] This is puzzling, to say the least, because the basis of these conflicts is Oedipus' burial in Athens.[58] In other

[53] *OC* 288-90.
[54] As I claimed in the previous section.
[55] *OC* 72.
[56] *OC* 576-82.
[57] *OC* 585-9.
[58] *OC* 585-9.

words, Oedipus is the cause of the problem he is promising to solve! This is also puzzling because it cannot be the *original* reason for Oedipus promising aid. Oedipus spoke of his aid *prior* to his knowledge of the threat that came from Thebes.

Taken together, these two features of Oedipus' invocation of utility—its promissory quality and the ambiguity around the problem he's solving—suggest that we must take a lateral approach to the matter by looking beyond the determinate *content* of Oedipus' utility. That is because if the Athenians accept him on the basis of a promise of benefit then there is a *deferral* of the calculation of particular or determinate utility. This is the significant feature of the Athenian politics of human utility that I wish to highlight and thematize hereafter as the *indeterminacy* of utility. This indeterminacy cannot be dismissed or diminished in our reading of the play or the conceptualization of Oedipal, and utility's, politics but must rather be incorporated into it. The major step towards doing so is by shifting the nature of our investigation. It is not about disclosing what Oedipus' utility is but addressing why, despite a lack of determinate content, its invocation is still effective in his bid to be incorporated into Athens. That is, we must examine the nature and *force* of his claims to utility even when it seems his utility cannot be calculated precisely. Succeeding in this will require numerous intersecting moves. First, I contrast the Athenian politics of human utility with Theban utility in OC and then OT. Second, I find resources for further conceptualizing and analyzing both modes of utility in political theory and especially Aristotle's conceptualization of utility in exchange. Finally, I look for manifestations of the two modes of utility in relatively recent social and political history, specifically in the politics of immigration and then in gift exchange.

If the indeterminacy of Oedipus' utility with respect to Athens is one of its most patent characteristics, our effort to understand it makes gains when viewed against the foil of the

relationship between Oedipus and Thebes.[59] Utility is operative there, too, but in stark contrast to its vague and promissory character in his relationship with Athens, Oedipus' sought-after utility to Thebes is always predetermined. In OC, Creon and Polyneices, having previously exiled Oedipus from Thebes, each make separate attempts to take him back there. Why the change of heart? Each views Oedipus as a means of responding to the city's needs. That is a result, as we have seen, of Ismene's report that an oracle has stated whomever Oedipus sides with will win the ensuing civil war between Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polyneices.[60] Ismene sums it up when, reporting the content of the oracle, she says "you shall be much solicited by our people before your death—and after—for their welfare" (σὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ/θανόντ᾽ ἔσεσθαι ζῶντά τ᾽ εὐσοίας χάριν).[61] And yet apart from the oracle pronounced to Oedipus long ago, that he would "find home among the sacred Furies,"[62] intriguingly there is no word, as far as we know, on what is to be done with Oedipus himself, or how he is to be appropriated, and so the question of polis membership—and the means of policing the borders of the community—is still a problem to be solved. As far as Polyneices and Creon know, they must once again negotiate on the immanent plane the problem of Oedipus' inclusion. Their attempts follow a particular structure that reveals a uniquely Theban conception of Oedipus' utility. There is a predetermined need—i.e., winning the civil war—and a corresponding predetermined utility—being an "ultimate weapon" to hand one of them victory. In the case of Creon,

[59] Of course, the juxtaposition of Athens and Thebes is a recurring motif in Athenian tragedy. See Zeitlin 1990.
[60] *OC* 392. I leave aside the question of what significance there may be that an oracle (of supposedly transcendental origin) brings about the politics of determinate utility, here and in OT.
[61] *OC* 389-90.
[62] *OC* 90.

Ismene informs Oedipus that Creon plans to "settle you near the land of Thebes, and so to have you at hand; but you may not cross the border (ὥς σ᾽ ἄγχι γῆς στήσωσι Καδμείας, ὅπως/κρατῶσι μὲν σοῦ, γῆς δὲ μὴ'μβαίνῃς ὅρων)."[63] When Oedipus inquires what use he will be outside the city, Ismene replies, "It is merely that if your burial were unlucky that would be perilous for them" (κείνοις ὁ τύμβος δυστυχῶν ὁ σὸς βαρύς)[64] and clarifies that although Oedipus will be outside the city he will not be beyond its power, he will "not be free" (χώρας θέλουσι, μηδ᾽ ἵν᾽ ἂν σαυτοῦ κρατοῖς).[65] In short, it is to keep Oedipus within the realm of order and control of the city while constituting him as an outsider.[66]

Creon's attempt to take Oedipus fails on account of the heroics of Theseus, but immediately afterwards Theseus announces that a man has set himself up as a suppliant in the temple of Poseidon demanding an audience with Oedipus. It is, of course, Polyneices, and we can see the same sought-after relation operating between Oedipus and Thebes as in Creon's case. In Polyneices' appeal to Oedipus he says:

> ὅν, εἰ σὺ τήμῇ ξυμπαραστήσῃ φρενί,
> βραχεῖ σὺν ὄγκῳ καὶ πόνῳ διασκεδῶ.
> ὥστ᾽ ἐν δόμοισι τοῖσι σοῖς στήσω σ᾽ ἄγων.
> στήσω δ᾽ ἐμαυτόν, κεῖνον ἐκβαλὼν βίᾳ.
>
> If you should stand by me in my resolve,
> I'll waste no time or trouble whipping him [Eteocles];
> I'll then reestablish you at home,
> and settle there myself, and throw him out.
>
> Soph. *OC* 1340-3

[63] *OC* 399-400.
[64] *OC* 402.
[65] *OC* 405.
[66] This evokes Giorgio Agamben 1998 and the famous conceptualization of "bare life" as what is excluded by sovereign power but nevertheless remains included within its remit of power, but it is not my intention to subscribe to that notion here.

Both Polyneices and Creon desire to reinsert, or "reestablish (στήσω)," Oedipus into a pre-existing political and social order based on their need and his utility conceived narrowly in terms of that order. So while Polyneices and Creon are different in their means of removing Oedipus—one is supplicatory and the other is violent—and their plans for what to do with Oedipus—one sees him as an insider, the other an outsider[67]—there is commonality between them in terms of the perception of Oedipus' utility and their corresponding efforts to incorporate him.

We get a clearer sense of what this conceptualization of utility means and involves in practice through Oedipus' response to these attempts, where he forcefully articulates the damage he has suffered in Creon's and Polyneices' *previous* treatment of him. In Oedipus' words, that damage resulted from the Thebans using him in a way that neglects *what is his own* (οἰκείος). In this instance, Oedipus cites the Theban neglect for his own (evolving) feelings about his situation. He says to Creon:

> πρόσθεν τε γάρ με τοῖσιν οἰκείοις κακοῖς
> νοσοῦνθ᾽, ὅτ᾽ ἦν μοι τέρψις ἐκπεσεῖν χθονός,
> οὐκ ἤθελες θέλοντι προσθέσθαι χάριν,
> ἀλλ᾽ ἡνίκ᾽ ἤδη μεστὸς ἦ θυμούμενος
> καὶ τοὐν δόμοισιν ἦν διαιτᾶσθαι γλυκύ,
> τότ᾽ ἐξεώθεις κἀξέβαλλες, οὐδέ σοι
> τὸ συγγενὲς τοῦτ᾽ οὐδαμῶς τότ᾽ ἦν φίλον·
>
> That time when I was sick with my own life's
> evil, when I would gladly have left my land,
> you had no mind to give me what I wanted!
> But when at long last I had had my fill
> of rage and grief, and in my quiet house
> began to find some comfort: that was the time
> you chose to rout me out.
>
> Soph. *OC* 765-71

[67] Compare *OC* 943-9 and 1340-3.

Later he says to Polyneices:

> ὅς γ᾽, ὦ κάκιστε, σκῆπτρα καὶ θρόνους ἔχων,
> ἃ νῦν ὁ σὸς ξύναιμος ἐν Θήβαις ἔχει,
> τὸν αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ πατέρα τόνδ᾽ ἀπήλασας
> κἄθηκας ἄπολιν καὶ στολὰς ταύτας φορεῖν
>
> You scoundrel! When it was you who held
> throne and authority—as your brother now
> holds them in Thebes—you drove me into exile:
> me, your own father: made me citiless.
>
> Soph. *OC* 1354-57, translation amended.

In both speeches, Oedipus draws attention to the specifically affective dimension of his situation. When Oedipus regarded his own life with revulsion, he sought to escape Thebes but Polyneices forced him to stay and endure it. When he had come to terms with himself and *wanted* to stay, Polyneices and, claims Oedipus, Eteocles with him, now produced a newly desperate situation by forcing him out of the polis.[68]

To make further headway with this reading, however, we need to ask after this "own" that Oedipus claims the Thebans neglected and in so doing caused suffering to them all. Following this question leads us to a central problem in political and social theory, which is that of singularity. How, if at all, is the singular self, that which is irreducibly one's own and particular to itself, politically and socially related to the collective many? While the

[68] Oedipus' vociferous rejection of the pleas to return to Thebes represent a difficulty: in the separate speeches to Creon and Polyneices we see Oedipus singularly accusing different individuals for having exiled him. One advantage of folding both into the conceptual framework of determinate utility is that it allows us to explain this multiple attribution of blame. Each can be seen as having, from Oedipus' perspective at least, inadequately dealt with what is his own, which resulted in his exile, meaning that each were each tacitly responsible for it. But theirs is an inadequate treatment in terms of its consequences, too, for in the case of both Creon/Eteocles and Polyneices, where they sought Oedipus' help on the basis of a predetermined need to which they reduced him as a functional instrument, they instead find themselves cursed and thus in greater trouble than when they started (*OC* 1383-96).

concept of singularity has occupied numerous modern social and political thinkers, especially in the late twentieth century, [69] it was already a component of classical Athenian political thought, too, and here we can make our first appeal to philosophy to advance our understanding issues raised by philology.

Aristotle conceived of humans as singularities that are awkwardly related both to each other and to the many. That is because, in Aristotle's thinking, humans are singularities that are unlimited, meaning they resist subsumption under the general or universal.[70] What does that mean? For starters, it means that humans are not reducible to scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). So, Aristotle writes in his *Metaphysics*, "it is impossible to have [scientific] knowledge until we come to indivisibles…we cannot understand without making a stop."[71] Science, as Aristotle conceives it, cannot proceed without an indivisible thing with a determinate quality that makes all instances of it "one and the same thing."[72] By saying human beings are unlimited, then, Aristotle is saying that humans are *not* simple indivisibles. As indivisibles, humans would be unique in the sense of "separate and different"[73] but all countable as individuals. Aristotle is making a more radical claim. A human being is "odd," which means it "does not just stand out: it does not *fit in*."[74] It is, in Sam Weber's terms, a "singularity."[75]

[69] For example: Bakhtin 1993; Arendt, 1998; Nancy 2000; Cavarero 2000; Weber 2021.
[70] *Rh.* I.2. 1356b33.
[71] *Metaph.* II.994b21-24.
[72] *Metaph.* III.4.999a28; cf. II.994b21-22.
[73] Weber 2021: 1.
[74] Weber 2021: 1.
[75] Weber 2021: 1. Other places where Aristotle says that there is no scientific knowledge of particulars include: *An. Post.* 81a38-b9, 88b33-89a11, 89a35-89b2; *Metaph.* 999b1-9; *Eth. Nic.* 1180b13-23; *De An.* 417b17-23.

Aristotle is especially helpful for discussing singularity in OC, however, because he connects singularity to politics and then singularity to use and utility thereafter. He does so by discussing singularity in the practical and productive sciences. For Aristotle, practical and productive sciences such as medicine, rhetoric, or politics, cannot take humans as singularities for their objects any more than the strictly theoretical sciences (ἐπιστήμη or θεωρία) can. They work with what is true for the most part but with a different goal than the strictly theoretical sciences, which try to explain the causes that have already brought given objects into being. Practical and productive sciences are rather concerned to *make* something good. Aristotle's political science, for instance, is a practical science and therefore more like a craft, one that aims to make people good, its instrument being good law. But in applying itself, political science, along with rhetoric and other craft-like activities, cannot get a "theoretical grasp on (θεωρήσει)" what is good for or persuasive to the "singular (τὸ καθ᾽ἕκαστον)," such as "to Socrates or to Hippias." It can only consider "people of such-and-such a sort (τὸ τοιοισδί)."[76] In short, the sciences deal with *types* of people, not singular individuals.

Through Aristotle's conception of politics, singularity is also connected to use and utility, however. It has not been widely noted or appreciated but Aristotle conceives of politics itself as the use of humans, as when he states "politics (ἡ πολιτική) takes humans from nature and uses (χρῆται) them."[77] This claim helps explain Aristotle's well-known view of political friendship as utility friendship, which will be further discussed below. For now, we can simply note that Aristotle's conception of individuals as singularities also means that humans are a problem of collective life that calls for a political response. That is, if humans

[76] *Rh.* I.2.1356b32-34, Reeve translation, amended.
[77] *Pol*. I.10.1258a22-23.

are singularities because there is no determinate quality that makes them all "one and the same thing,"[78] then that means each singularity represents something indeterminate in relation to the collective, which is determinately conceived according to a kind or number of kinds. This indeterminacy means that human beings will always exceed the determinate uses and functions to which they are put as part of collective existence. Put differently, any use of humans underdetermines singularities, and the indeterminate remainder means humans have the capacity to reflexively consider, contest, renew, and repurpose their uses. This excess or remainder of human use also means it is a problem that demands attention and a response that Aristotle thinks will continually concern politics. In sum, human use is a problematic fact of human life that generates more human use in a political process that dynamically and continually unfolds.

This problematic of human use, mediating between the singularity of what is one's own, other singular humans, and the collective purposes of social and political forces, appears to be on display in Oedipus' relation to Thebes and Athens, too. It is explicitly identified in Oedipus' account of his relationship to Thebes. With no regard for his self-conception, the Thebans constituted Oedipus within the terms of their polis' perceived needs, to the detriment of Oedipus and their own emancipatory ambitions. One question that remains to be considered is whether and how the vague and promissory features of Oedipus' utility in his relationship with Athens is connected to the problem Oedipus articulates in his relationship with Thebes: their lack of sensibility for Oedipus' own, his singularity. Before moving on to consider this, I wish to further establish the nature of Oedipus' relationship with Thebes as related by the earlier and more famous of Sophocles'

[78] *Metaphy.* III.4.999a28.

Oedipus plays, OT. I will argue that it is possible to interpret this relationship along the same lines as Oedipus does in OC. From there, I will return to Aristotle to further conceptualize the forms of utility and politics at work in Oedipus' relationships with Athens and Thebes.

Section 3 - Theban Utility in OT

Rather than being a novel feature of Thebes' treatment of Oedipus, what we see in OC is a repetition of what has come before it as presented in OT.[79] Yet in the long history of interpretation of this play, OT's famous sequence of events has never been read in terms of need or utility. Because of the irony of the fact that it is Oedipus' own intelligence and inquiry that leads to his tragic downfall, critics of the Enlightenment cited Oedipus as a parable of the Enlightenment's limitations and a cautionary tale of his failure to acknowledge the limits of human understanding and our ability to master the world.[80] In the words of Bernard Knox, Oedipus represents the tyrannical man, by which he means, "man the master of the universe, self-taught and self-made ruler who has the capacity to...'conquer complete happiness and prosperity.'"[81] It was this mastery and its resultant catastrophe that first drew Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno to write about Oedipus, not Odysseus, in what later became the second chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[82] The

[79] It is quite rare for readers of Greek tragedy to read the two Oedipus plays together, perhaps for the historically-informed reason that they were not originally performed in a trilogy. For example, in the recent book devoted to philosophical interpretations of the Oedipus plays (Woodruff, 2018a), only Woodruff's chapter (2018b) reads the two plays together, while the rest of the book is divided into halves devoted to interpretations of *either* OT *or* OC.

[80] Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: Ch. 1; Segal 2000.

[81] Knox 1957: 107.

[82] Tragedy here is understood as Peter Szondi 1987 defines it, where the thing employed to evade disaster is actually what ensures it. I thank Christoph Menke for the detail about Horkheimer and Adorno's plans to use Oedipus, not Odysseus, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

usual conclusion from these readings is that humans have unsurpassable limits in our understanding and capacity to control ourselves and the world.

Consider, however, the background of the story.[83] It seems that rather than simply being about the tragic limits of human inquiry, the tragedy of Oedipus is largely a result of its tardiness. This is the case in two senses. First, the death of Laïus was inadequately investigated. For while it is first reported that the Thebans did not look into it,[84] later Creon states that they did in fact conduct a search for the killer but found nothing.[85] This leads to the second point, and that is the failure of the Thebans to inquire into Oedipus' identity before incorporating him into the city by marrying him to their queen.[86] Had either investigation been performed adequately, Oedipus may have been found out earlier and his relationship to the city would surely have been different.[87] These are, however, results of a more fundamental problem to which we can trace these epistemic limits: Oedipus' singularity—understood now not in terms of his existential feelings (as in OC) but in terms of his own familial identity—is obscured by his constitution in terms of immediate utility based

[83] While much of the background would have been familiar to the audience since Oedipus formed part of the mythic context of the Greek world, the details are made explicit in the course of the action. On the wider mythic life of Oedipus, both in and beyond Greece, see Edmunds 2020, and on Sophocles' own innovations, see Markantonatos 2007: chapter 2.
[84] *OT* 132.
[85] *OT* 567.
[86] As we will see, OC then further reveals that elements of Oedipus' singularity can be revealed and then dealt with politically with non-tragic consequences. This suggests that understanding who Oedipus is is not, in itself, a reason to rule out his political and social inclusion.
[87] I do not mean to trivialize Sophocles' tragedy but rather to point out the way the OC motif of utility and identity presses us to consider more ways that the tragic in Sophocles is generated. Specifically, I see Sophocles' tragedies consistently displaying possible or probable ways the actors in the drama *could* have avoided tragedy and the fact that they did *not* avoid tragedy. My emphasis on the former is in keeping with the social and political perspective adopted in this article.

on supposed need.[88] In the beginning, this need is to be freed from the curse of the Sphinx.[89] In the action of OT, it is the need to save the city from the plague. In OC, this need is to win the rule of the city. In each case, Oedipus is narrowly understood as a means to solving these problems. Ultimately, however, this characteristically Theban constitution of Oedipus' utility is revealed to turn an epistemic limit into a source of further suffering for both Oedipus and the city. This is because the Thebans fail to see Oedipus' identity and therefore the effect that incorporating him will have, both on Oedipus and on the community. There is always this dual transformation in the forging of a new political association, and yet both Oedipus and the Thebans perceived the community's immediate needs to pre-exist Oedipus and to have addressed them in the same move as solving the Sphinx's riddle or finding the cause of the later plague. In these instances, all participants take the community's needs to be somewhat static and not to shift and change in the dynamic process that constitutes political beginnings such as the incorporation of outsiders into a community. In other words, the community, its needs, and the utility Oedipus represents have been reified although all of these are abstractions that are a product of ongoing human actions. By deeming Oedipus useful to these supposedly static needs and inserting him into the community as king, the Thebans quite literally make this form of utility the ultimate principle of political authority in the way it polices the community's borders.

[88] Mine is not, in the end, a psychologizing interpretation even if in OC it is the affective dimension of the relationship between the singular and the collective that Oedipus articulates. Oedipus' singularity is a problem for the polis even when he is not affectively attuned to it, as is abundantly clear in the case of OT.

[89] Which, by the way, we don't even know was so severe. Was this a case of trumped-up fear? Of a merely supposed need?

Seeing the fate of Oedipus and Thebes as a result of the overdetermination of need and utility means that we should not understand OT to be only about the inherent limits in human understanding, but a commentary on a mode of calculating the inclusion and exclusion of outsiders that imposes certain limits on our thinking, understanding, and practice. While the former interpretation (about inherent limits) borders on quasi-transcendental fatalism—strikingly in keeping with the majority of interpretations of OC—the interpretation offered here has attempted to situate the tragedy of Oedipus on a thoroughly immanent social and political plane by looking for mutable modes of thinking and acting.

We can now take stock of the two approaches to utility that emerge out of the two plays. The Theban approach works with an oversimplified notion of need that attempts to predetermine the utility that individuals represent. The Athenian approach, by virtue of its promissory character and its capacity to work with and through indeterminacy, holds out the possibility of being more attuned to the dynamic and changing nature of need, especially when new associations are in the making, and the expansive character of human utility, all of which comes down to the matter of human singularity encountering others in community.[90] Yet these approaches to utility, especially the Athenian one, need further fleshing out.

[90] Cf. McCoy 2013: chapter 2, who reads OC in terms of a uniquely Athenian conception of the polis as a συνοικισμός that includes the idea of receptivity to the outsider, which may be construed as a position of weakness but is for the ultimate good of the city. But McCoy tends to attribute this feature of the play to the character of Theseus, rather than seeing it as an outworking of the *interaction* between Oedipus and Theseus, as I have attempted to do here. Ahrensdorf 2009: 80 does something similar, this time with specific reference to the utilitarian dimension of the play.

There are numerous ways one could do this, especially because utility is an increasingly prominent feature of Athenian, if not Greek, social thought and practice in the late fifth century. For instance, one could track, over the course of the fifth century, the language of Athenian funeral inscriptions, which appear to decreasingly describe the deceased as ἀγαθός (good) and increasingly call them χρηστός/χρηστή (useful). Indeed, it is patent that in the same period Athenian citizens are commonly referred to as οἱ χρηστοί (the useful ones), which prior to the reforms of Ephialtes was principally, though not exclusively, used to refer to Attic elites.[91] Or, one could consider the use of medical metaphors in ethical and political reasoning at the end of the fifth century, for example in the Socratic circle as reported by Xenophon,[92] or in Thucydides' figuration of the relationship between Corinth and Athens and specifically what Athens owes Corinth for their utility to them in the past.[93] Or, one could think about the political events proximate to the performance of OC, most especially the civil war of 404-403 B.C., between the oligarchs and democrats whose recombination in the wake of the amnesty of 403 can readily be considered in terms of OC's theme of receptivity to potentially hostile others.[94] But to

[91] Regarding the period before the reforms of Ephialtes, see Pritchard 1994: 114-119. For after the reforms, see Pseudo-Xenophon, *The Old Oligarch*, who most often refers to the social group he prefers (the elites) as οἱ χρηστοί. On this, see Sealey 1973, especially pp. 256-257, who also implies that the term is a way of preserving class distinction without drawing attention to its basis in aristocratic nobility.
[92] Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.51-55.
[93] 1.41.1-3. I thank Liz Irwin and Ben Brown for discussion on these points. In keeping with the point about Corinth and Athens, in his discussion of utility friendship Aristotle repeatedly quotes an unknown source that comments on the utility or disutility of Athens' relationship to Megara. See, for example, Arist. *Eth. Eud*. VII.2.14.1236a37.
[94] On the historical context of OC's performance and a consideration of their connection to the play, see Markantonatos 2007. A more sweeping and encyclopaedic treatment of the OC along with the rest of Sophocles' plays and his life is Jouanna 2018. For a sophisticated consideration of the interpretive significance of context and referentiality in Greek literature, however, see Brown 2016, especially the Introduction.

accomplish all this would likely require a book-length treatment, and while providing breadth of coverage, it still may not yield conceptual depth or precision and therefore not greatly illuminate the features of Sophocles' Oedipus plays I have identified so far. Instead, I turn in the following section to political theory and especially Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* in order to get greater theoretical purchase on the Theban and Athenian approaches to utility. That is because in Aristotle's treatment of political friendship I argue that the two approaches are articulated especially clearly in terms congruous with the language of Sophocles' Oedipus plays. Furthermore, for reasons that will become apparent, I take Aristotle to be representing a broader Greek understanding of utility in social relations. Moreover, since I go on to highlight the lineage between what we have seen in Sophocles' Oedipus plays and contemporary political theory and practice, the mediating influence of an intellectual giant such as Aristotle is also pertinent to the overall argument. But, as I hope to show in the final sections when I return to OC to understand in greater detail what I have called the Athenian approach to utility, the illumination between Sophocles and Aristotle is also mutual.

Beginning with the following section, then, I concertedly shift to turn the philological and literary analysis undertaken so far into deeper philosophical claims by further drawing on Aristotle to think about the plays within the context of classical Athens. In the section after that I draw on the contemporary politics of immigration and, in sections six and seven, philosophical anthropology to further consider what kind of politics utility and, by extension, Oedipus stands for. In all this I seek to further characterize the way utility operates in the plays and bring the analysis, philological-turned-philosophical, into our political present in a way that is both critically illuminating and practically informative.

Section 4 – Utility in Theory

Plato's Socrates, at the outset of creating the "city in speech" in the *Republic*, states, "I think a polis comes into being because each of us is not self-sufficient but rather has many needs (πολλῶν ὢν ἐνδεής)."[95] Together, the interlocutors then determine the members of the polis, discriminating on the basis of one's ability to fulfil the stipulated and predetermined needs; in other words, based on an individual's utility. In so doing, Plato inaugurates in political theory a mode of political authority with a very long afterlife in that tradition and that, we will see, awkwardly relates to certain exigencies of social and political practice, as we have already seen staged in Sophocles' Oedipus plays.

So significant is Plato's form of political authority in political theory that Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century, diagnosed it as a proclivity of so-called "genealogists" to mistake present utility for origin. According to Nietzsche, in lieu of a better explanation for our communities' existence, these genealogists have a tendency to essentialize what we do find—present utility—and project it into the past as a founding principle.[96] This conceptualization, however, also exhibits a fallacy: it presupposes society as the theorist-genealogists know it, but in so doing they fail in their avowed attempt to explain its becoming. They also make another presupposition: the imagined individuals that populate the community of these theories are blank slates, or a perverse kind of "unencumbered" individual, who can be constituted entirely in terms of the community's needs.[97] It is on this basis that the interlocutors of the *Republic* can constitute individuals forming the city in

[95] Plat. *Resp.* II.369b, my translation.
[96] Nietzsche 2017: II.12.
[97] I say "perverse" because the idea of the unencumbered individual usually comes with the idea of a choice the individual has to pursue a life that they deem to be good (e.g., Sandel, 1984). But that is precisely a choice that Plato's *Republic* denies these individuals. I explore this at greater length in Bradshaw 2021, chapter 2.

terms of that community, as though already a part of it. In other words, the community is presupposed and the individuals are merely instruments that populate it to fulfill its purported needs. These theorists (the interlocutors) therefore assume a luxury that is illusory for real political entities that decide on the inclusion or exclusion of outsiders. In modern states, for instance, the prospect of including outsiders means including people who have an identity and history apart from their anticipated place in the community as imagined, and hoped for, by those on the inside deciding on their inclusion. Moreover, the terms on which political powers establish inclusion and exclusion may well misalign with the hopes, aims, and actual effects that individuals have in these communities. That is, as in the foregoing interpretation of the Oedipus plays, what is irreducibly one's own, one's singularity, results in a complex and protracted process of individuals relating to others in community. Among the questions that are raised are: why should individuals be included in a community? If they are included, how and when can singularity be accounted for and included in the terms in which we establish our coexistence with them? The stakes of answering these and related questions are raised even more when we acknowledge that this process is not only pertinent to the question of incorporating foreign nationals. Rather, if each and every human being represents a singularity, then every human birth raises these questions again.[98]

These questions also represent a great political challenge since we face many epistemic limits as we work out these questions. For instance, given that the outsider is exactly that, can we even know what the nature of their singularity is? Indeed, if we follow Aristotle, then singularity cannot be known at all, at least not scientifically. If we do not

[98] This is what Arendt gets at with her term "natality." See Totschnig 2017.

know what it is, how can we take account for it in any meaningful way? As we have seen, these are central to the Oedipus myth as Sophocles represents it to us and so we can seek in political theory the resources for gaining greater clarity on the two approaches to utility that we saw at work there.

In what sounds like a rare point of agreement between Plato and his divergent student, Aristotle makes some pertinent remarks in a little-noted[99] passage in his *Eudemian Ethics* regarding the proper form of exchange for the maintenance of political order. These appear in his discussion of friendship, of which Aristotle has advanced a tripartite schema, differentiating his types by what attracts and binds together the people in question.[100] The options are pleasure, utility, and virtue. In terms that echo what we have already seen in the Oedipus plays, Aristotle writes, "political friendship exists because of utility above all else."[101] This is because "people seem to come together because they are not self-sufficient."[102] The close alliance between utility and political community that Aristotle here asserts makes these passages highly relevant for our topic and I will focus on these in what follows.

At one point Aristotle makes an important and—for my reading of the Oedipus plays—important qualification. He writes: "there are two forms of utility friendship, one legal and the other based on character (ἔστι δὲ τῆς χρησίμου φιλίας εἴδη δύο, ἡ μὲν νομικὴ ἡ δ᾽

[99] Derrida 2005 discusses this passage but does not account for the presence of object exchange here. By contrast, Hénaff has written that "The old vocabulary of gift exchange is omnipresent in these writings [on friendship]." Hénaff 2010: 107.
[100] It is perhaps worth pointing out here that *philia* in the Greek world encompassed a larger array of relationships than it does for us today. It included relations between family members and even between buyers and sellers, amongst others.
[101] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.2.1247a7
[102] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.2.1242a8. Cf. Plat., *Resp.*II.369b.

ήθική)."[103] The difference between them is the form of exchange that mediates the relationship.

In the case of the legal kind, Aristotle sets out that (A) an agreement is to be made between the exchangers, (B) on the basis of utility, (C) according to carefully and immediately established terms and mediated by money.[104] This, Aristotle says, is the exchange of buyers and sellers. Aristotle sums up this activity when he writes, "political friendship looks to the agreement (ὁμολογία) and the object."[105] As Jill Frank points out, "looks to the…object" means that the exchangers determine the relative value of the objects being exchanged based on their knowledge of them in use.[106] It is therefore the utility of the objects, not understood psychologically as producers of pleasure or satisfaction as in modern utilitarian and economic thought, but understood through their use, that their price can be established and a just agreement made. It can be added that this takes place according to the immediately perceived needs of the exchangers. This is how (B) is satisfied. In the end, the exchanged object's utility is simply to be determined between the parties to the exchange, in accordance with (C). (C) entails the careful attention to "the agreement (ὁμολογία)"[107] and is critical for the very stability and maintenance of the polis just in case the exchangers fall into disagreement over the exchange down the track.[108] That is because where careful attention to the objects and the agreement has taken place, justice is

[103] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.16.1242b32-33.
[104] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.16-19.1242b34-1243a14.
[105] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.24.1243a32.
[106] Frank 2005: 86-89.
[107] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.24.1243a32.
[108] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.18-32.1243a2-1243b30.

calculable, and thus can be resolved appropriately in the law courts (in the rare case that a disagreement will result from this form of exchange).[109]

The calculability of justice is very important to Aristotle and forms the basis of his distinction between two kinds of political/utility friendship. We can see this in the following description of the other form of utility friendship. While Aristotle had earlier said that the other form is "based on character," in actual fact it involves a mixed form of exchange and is thus a mixed form of friendship. Aristotle points out that in this mixed political friendship, people "entrust (ἐπιτρέπωσιν) things to each other" in a more "comradely (ἑταιρική)" fashion[110] as though they were friends of the character type when in actual fact they are friends on account of utility. It is a result of this that the potential for trouble is greater and that disagreements are most numerous. The problem, for Aristotle, is that there is a difference between the actual reason for the friendship (utility) and the way that the friendship is conducted—through trust, which is only appropriate for the pure character-based friendship.[111] Disagreements arise because those engaged in the mixed friendship do not have the attributes necessary for the virtue friendship although they appear to take on, for a time, its traits.[112] When these attributes are absent, it is then that the close attention

[109] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.19.1243a7.
[110] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.17.1242b36-37.
[111] "...there are accusations most of all in this form of friendship, the reason being that it is contrary to nature. Friendship based on utility and friendship based on virtue are in fact different, but in this case the parties want to have both things at the same time: they associate with each other for the sake of utility, but they base the friendship on character since they are decent people. And so since they trust each other they do not base the friendship on law." *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.17.1242b37-1243a2.
[112] These attributes necessary for pure character friendship Aristotle has already said are being good (*Eth. Eud*. VII.2.16.1236b1-2) which means that the friends choose each other for the other's sake (*Eth. Eud*. VII.2.24-5.1236b27-33). This friendship will involve trust and reciprocity but it will also be stable (*Eth. Eud*. VII.2.39-40.1237b8-18), owing to the goodness of the individuals and, furthermore, to their wealth (*Eth. Eud*. VII.10.25.1243a39-40),

to the object and the agreement is above all necessary—as he prescribes for utility exchange and utility friendship—but in the mixed form, this careful attention is absent, as are the attributes necessary for virtue friendship proper. What results are cases where an individual gives something to another without any explicit conditions or terms attached, as though an altruistic and unconditional gift, but since the basis of the friendship is really utility, the giver has an underlying expectation that the receiver will reciprocate in such a way as to be useful for the giver. Because none of this has been made explicit, the chances of this being realized, according to Aristotle, are slight and irresolvable conflict will ensue because the principle of justice will be opaque to the law courts.[113]

Despite Aristotle's protestations against the mixed form of friendship, Aristotle also testifies to its common occurrence throughout the Greek poleis. So much so, Aristotle points out, "sometimes there is a law that people whose association is based on this sort of [mixed] friendship must not bring lawsuits over voluntary contracts; *and rightly so*" (my emphasis). The mixed form of association is at least as widespread as it is legislated against, that is.[114] It is common practice, therefore, for the sake of the existing order of the law and its institutions, to spurn the mixed form of friendship and exchange that we will see bears great resemblance to gift exchange and the Athenian mode of utility in OC.[115] What

presumably because these can afford to lose what they stake on the relationship based on trust.

[113] Aristotle's view could be seen as an elaboration on the third inscription above the oracle at Delphi: Ἐγγύα πάρα δ'Ἄτα, which can be translated as "ruin follows a pledge". That said, the interpretation of this saying is not straightforward. For a survey of differing interpretations in the ancient world, see Wilkins 1927.

[114] *Eth. Eud*. VII.10.19.1243a8-10. Understanding Aristotle in terms of the third Delphic maxim, as I suggest in the previous footnote, may also explain the breadth of concern about this phenomenon in Greek law.

[115] This turns out, however, to have its own ill effects, as we will see in OT and OC: disutility and foregone utility.

Aristotle's discussion tells us, then, is that his prescribed form of utility friendship is preferable precisely because it reinvests authority in the existing polis institutions, especially the law courts.

There are a few salient points to be taken out of Aristotle's discussion. The first is that Aristotle's judgments about the proper forms of utility/political friendship may be appropriate in the case of inanimate objects that are commonly used but on this very basis are highly unsuited to policing the borders of a community. I say this for two main reasons. First, because the objects are known through frequent use, it is reasonable to believe that exchangers can come to agreement on price on the basis of expected utility.[116] Second, inanimate objects are usually appropriated or created for the sake of utility and can therefore be reduced to it without fear that something essential about the object—equivalent to human singularity—has been overlooked or misunderstood and may make it incompatible with its user. So much cannot be said about human beings, especially in the case of outsiders. Outsiders are often not yet known to the community and cannot realistically—as singular human beings marked by a particular background culture and story—be reduced to their utility, predetermined or otherwise, without great violence being done to them.[117] In the case of outsiders, more than a commensurability of utility—which is what Aristotle's theory amounts to—has to be calculated. Elements such as culture, identity—including existing relational ties—, affects, and values also have to be accounted for somehow and failure to do so can result in the tragedy that Sophocles so powerfully

[116] Notwithstanding the complex ways that humans creatively repurpose objects, as explored in Sara Ahmed's recent work. See Ahmed 2019.
[117] We could think about this through the paradigmatic case of slavery, a special kind of "use of humans" in Aristotle's thought. For a recent and prominent consideration of this, see Agamben 2016 and critical discussion in Bradshaw 2021: Introduction and Chapter 1.

relates in his Oedipus plays. The danger, therefore, of thinking in terms of buying and selling objects as we encounter the outsider is that the singularity of the individual—what is the individual's own—is ignored. This entails the further risk of obscuring the transformative effect that the incorporation of an outsider has on the community, both in the present and the future. In sum, the evidence of the Oedipus plays and Aristotle's account of friendship display that a distinction must be made between the use of objects and the use of humans.[118]

As we saw, Aristotle preferred one form of utility friendship for the fact that it reinvests proper authority in the institutions of the polis, especially the law courts. But here we should note that this is effective only so far as it pertains to buying and selling objects. The unsuitability of this form of calculation for policing the borders of a community cautions against institutional complicity in this and recommends that an alternative framework be found. Yet the recent politics of refugees and immigration displays the extent to which political institutions continue to be guided by conceptions of utility in a Theban and object-oriented mode. In the following section, I consider some salient moments in the post-WWII European, U.S., and Australian contexts, especially the discourse around refugees and immigrants in the last ten years, a time during which the extent and severity of displacement among peoples has drastically increased. After that, I will turn to anthropological and historical literature on the gift in order to develop our understanding of the alternative mode of policing the borders of the community: the Athenian politics of human utility.

[118] For an extended exploration of this, see Bradshaw 2021.

Section 5 – Immigration Politics Today

Describing unskilled immigrants in France in the wake of WWII, Didier Fassin writes:

> their bodies were instruments in the service of the host country and their labour conferred upon them a legitimacy that the law often only confirmed *a posteriori*, as their work permit actually constituted their legal documentation.[119]

According to Fassin, immigrants were accepted on the basis of their utility to the growing post-WWII French economy.[120] This analysis forms part of Fassin's work on the politics of immigration and refugees and in particular the way that the granting of asylum has changed in Western nations over the course of the last seventy years.[121] According to Fassin, a pronounced change took place in the 1970s and 80s[122] whereby refugee status was not conferred on the basis of economic utility but granted almost exclusively to asylum seekers with health problems that could not be treated in their home countries.[123] For Fassin, this all but confirms Giorgio Agamben's theory that bare life is the operating assumption of state sovereignty. But Fassin's characterization is only possible in so far as one focuses on the processes behind the *official* granting of asylum. What it does not give due attention to is the ongoing presence and participation in the economy of many despite not being granted either refugee status nor work permits, and often with the complicity of the respective governments. Taking stock of this invites further scrutiny of the changes in attitudes and policies with respect to immigrants over the last seventy years.

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[119] Fassin 2001: 5

[120] Cf. Arendt 1958, especially Chapter 9, 'The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man.'

[121] For instance, in France in 1976, 95% of asylum seekers were granted refugee status, compared with 6% in 2006. Fassin 2011: 220.

[122] For an analysis of the longer cycles, going back to the end of the 18th century, see Fetzer 2000.

[123] Fassin 2001.

For instance, Fassin does not note the coincidence of this apparent change in the treatment of immigrants with the major transformations in global economics represented by the crisis of Bretton-Woods style global capitalism and the subsequent transformations of the major Western economies. In light of this, rather than abandon the economized logic that made immigrants welcome, the transformation of immigration politics seems to underscore it. Looking at the contemporary rhetoric and action of both state and non-state actors seems to reinforce this thesis. Proponents of immigration either explicitly argue for the ways in which immigrants are good for the economy since, for one, they increase demand for goods, thus providing the impetus for more production, which amounts to jobs and growth. This is represented, for instance, in the 2007 book by Phillip Legrain with the telling title, *Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them*.[124] Or, more recently, proponents have referred to our obligations to uphold current conceptions of human rights, but this normally pertains to people fleeing a crisis. Even then, as we have seen in the European Union not just in response to the latest Russo-Ukrainian war but in response to Middle Eastern crises preceding and indeed since then, the discussion quickly moves to distributing responsibility for refugee intake among several countries. This centres the debate once again on an economic metric. Moreover, there is reason to believe that even under the auspices of protecting human life, the distribution of people is calculated in terms of their capacity to contribute to the destination country.[125] In a widely reported instance from a few years ago, Turkey blocked the resettlement of 1000 Syrian refugees to the US on the grounds that they had university qualifications. Turkey took exception to the US for supposedly cherry picking

[124] Legrain 2014.
[125] As Fassin 2016 has called it, refugees are traded in a "market of compassion."

the best of the bunch.[126] The subsequent plight of refugees in Turkey further supports my argument. While many of the 2.5 million refugees did not have work permits, many ended up working on the black market for terrible wages and no rights,[127] a situation that harkens back to the early days of industrial capitalism. Lastly, even Donald Trump seemed to make concessions to illegal immigrants on the grounds of their utility to society, as revealed in his bizarre town hall meeting with Fox News' Sean Hannity in 2016.[128] So much for arguments in favour of immigration.

On the other hand, there are the opponents of immigration who argue for immigrants' disutility. In May 2016, the then Australian Minister for Immigration, Peter Dutton, claimed immigrants were largely illiterate, uneducated, and unskilled.[129] Often this is captured in a more simplified form when people say "foreigners are taking our jobs."[130] When membership is configured in these terms—whether for immigration or against it—, borders appear not to be physical lines or the presence or absence of legal status, but are rather drawn in terms of social and economic participation.[131] I venture, then, that what prevails in contemporary immigration politics is another instance of borders being policed according to a reductive conception of utility: that is, whether a person is the bearer of human capital that can serve the growth of the economy.

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[126] Kingsley 2016b.
[127] Kingsley 2016a.
[128] Schwartz 2016.
[129] Bourke 2016.
[130] The latter is as widespread as it is unfounded. See Pritchett (2010). And for the dual character of utility/disutility of immigrants in the context of German media in the early twenty-first century, see Bauder 2008.
[131] On the notion of borders, I wish to follow Martina Löw in saying that borders are not physical, but rather social (or economic). Löw 2001: 130. Cited in Wessel 2016: 49-50.

This seems to confirm what Hannah Arendt wrote about refugees in the first theoretical treatment of the stateless in the history of political thought. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Arendt notes that what distinguishes the stateless from the plight of other oppressed people—such as slaves—is that they are not even deemed worthy of exploitation. In other words, Arendt suggests that a person's exploitability usually constitutes the basis of their inclusion or exclusion from community with others.[132] But as Arendt goes on to point out, this need not only be understood in narrowly economistic terms (as one might think my one-sided analysis above assumes). She writes:

> The crimes against human rights, which have become a specialty of totalitarian regimes, can always be justified by the pretext that right is equivalent to being good or useful for the whole in distinction to its parts. (Hitler's motto that "Right is what is good for the German people" is only the vulgarized form of a conception of law which can be found everywhere and which in practice will remain ineffectual only so long as older traditions that are still effective in the constitutions prevent this.) A conception of law which identifies what is right with the notion of what is good for—for the individual, or the family, or the people, or the largest number—becomes inevitable once the absolute and transcendent measurements of religion or the law of nature have lost their authority."[133]

Here Arendt argues that the crime of totalitarian regimes is a symptom of a conception of law that identifies what is right with what is good for x. In other words, it is a function of a certain awareness of a majority group, whereby the whole becomes distinguished from the parts and the law becomes its instrument for reducing everything to what is "good or useful." To translate that into the terms of my analysis above, the economization of contemporary life persists on account of a certain hegemony of thinking that what is right is what is good for the economy. This, then, becomes the principle that the law is wielded to uphold. Moreover, Arendt points out that all of this is bound to result once a society has

[132] Arendt 1958: 297.
[133] Arendt 1958: 299.

effectively established itself on the immanent plane, that is "once the absolute and transcendent measurements of religion or the law of nature have lost their authority." We can also point out, however, that there is one more step to account for. As we saw in Aristotle and in other theoretical attempts to get at the origins of political community, the hegemonic conception of the good as what is useful for x can also, in turn, become a legitimizing principle for the law and its institutions.[134] In both Fassin's and Arendt's cases—and this is the main point—there is a mode of political authority that constitutes membership in terms of a reductive conception of utility. That makes it a species of Theban utility.

In this and the previous section we have seen the persistence of what I called Theban utility in Sophocles' Oedipus plays. Its early appearance in the political theory tradition showed us that Theban utility is only suitable for the buying and selling of inanimate objects in a way that constitutes a reinvestment in a particular form of political authority; namely, that of the polis' institutions. These are institutions that, in Aristotle's account at least, cannot deal with singularities such as human beings. But we have also seen that this form of authority has been operative in constituting the plight of exiles and refugees, first in the Oedipus plays and then in our contemporary political context. Thus we come to one of the major conclusions of this article. In light of the lineage of this form of authority, traced back to Sophocles and a range of political theorists and actors, the contemporary refugee appears to be an ancient Greek problem and Oedipus its most representative ancient example. Or, rather, Oedipus in Theban hands is its most representative ancient example, for we began to see some kind of alternative in OC. Just as we can see in immigration

[134] See Brown 2015 for her analysis of the transformation of discourses of state legitimization into the language of business.

politics a realization of what is staged by Sophocles and theorized in Aristotle, I believe we can see something of a realization of the Athenian alternative in Aristotle's report on mixed utility friendships—which for buying and selling Aristotle rejected—but also in anthropological studies of the gift, to which I will momentarily turn. On the back of this, we will see that both Aristotle and OC are instructive yet again. When considering the incorporation of the outsider—under real conditions, not those particular to theory—the so-called "mixed" form of utility friendship (the one that Aristotle rejects) precisely seems to be in order. In that form of friendship, what utility the *person* who exchanges represents is not reducible to the fact that they bear an *object* of utility. In that case, the object bears witness to a commitment between the exchangers that holds them together such that the need for the other and their utility—utility taken in the alternative and open way—can be worked out in a way that better attends to the singular individual, the fluidity of needs, and the expansive nature of human utility. In other words, objects are transmitted in the context and for the sake of indeterminate human utility. We have already seen this process represented in Sophocles' OC, where Oedipus gives his "own beaten body" as a gift[135] and this is enough to bind him to the Athenians without them reducing him to a narrow calculation of their need or the functional utility that Oedipus represents. Thus, they radically depart from the kind of reductive utility calculation that the Thebans display on numerous occasions, which I argued constitutes the basis of the tragedy of Oedipus. In order to make sense of both Aristotle's mixed utility friendship and the Athenian mode of utility in OC, I turn now to theorists and historians of gift exchange.

[135] *OC* 577.

Section 6 – Gift Exchange and OC

Turning to the phenomenon of gift exchange in order to illuminate utility's politics may seem counterproductive. In *Essai sur le don,*[136] arguably the most famous theoretical treatment of the gift, Marcel Mauss was drawn to the gift because he believed it was essentially anti-utilitarian, which may lead one to think the gift is antithetical to any notion of utility, whether utilitarian or other. For his part, Mauss revealed the relatively narrow conception of utility he had in mind when he considered how the gift might operate in contemporary societies against the socially destructive practices involved in contemporary exchange that had so-called economic science at its base.[137] For Mauss, utility appears to mean what it did to so-called "neoclassical" economists in the wake of the "Marginalists,"[138] which leaves open the idea, unexplored by Mauss, that other conceptions of utility may befit gift exchange.[139]

Other treatments of the gift, however, are more drastic in counterposing the gift with *any* conception of utility. Jacques Derrida all but ruled out the gift in contemporary societies because he argued that anything that is not the gift in its pure, unconditional form—marked by pure generosity and therefore also radical asymmetry between giver and recipient that has no discernible utility to the former—is not a gift at all.[140] Derrida went so far as to say that giving a gift will always—except in the singular case of given time—be

[136] Mauss 1990. Translated into English with the title *The Gift*.
[137] Mauss 1990: 75 ff. This project has been continued by the group *Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales (*M.A.U.S.S.)
[138] For a useful and concise account of utility and utilitarianism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the Marginalists, see Welch 1987. For a history of the Marginalists within the context of the so-called "Austrian school of economics," see Wasserman 2019.
[139] The same could arguably be said about the discussion of "the accursed share" in Bataille 1991.
[140] Derrida 1992: 7.

reciprocated somehow, even if only by recognizing the generosity of the giver. For Derrida, this amounts to a return to the economic realm of calculation, self-interest, and utility, which he opposed to the moral conditions of the gift.[141] The impossibility of giving a gift proper is what Derrida called the "aporia of pure giving" and so claimed that Mauss "speaks of everything but the gift" and opposed Mauss' hope that the gift may operate productively in modern social contexts.[142] Marcel Hénaff has, to my mind, convincingly shown why we should be wary of Derrida's affirmative deconstruction in the case of the gift and so I will not make an extended discussion of it here.[143] Suffice it to say that Derrida unnecessarily establishes one conception of the gift—a conception that is quite alien to the logic of gift exchange in many societies, as we will see—as the rule by which all others are to be measured. A similar analysis problematically governs Derrida's reading of OC, too. In his book, *Of Hospitality,* Derrida reads the play in terms of hospitality, which he understands as an open and infinite ethical demand, one that nevertheless paradoxically occurs alongside the need to police borders.[144] Such an approach must separate Oedipus' invocations of utility from hospitality, then, rather than let us reconceive use and utility on the basis of their ability to be at work *in and through hospitality*. Most significant for our purposes here, however, is that Mauss' and Derrida's varying conceptualizations of the gift have made utility a central feature of the debate over the social significance of the gift by virtue of excluding it. Yet even as the debate over the conceptualization of the gift has evolved and

[141] Derrida 1992: 23.
[142] Derrida 1992: 24.
[143] Hénaff 2009: 215-34.
[144] Derrida 2000. Derrida's reading has been very influential in the literature on refugees and especially the ordinary people who illegally protect them. See Taylor and Lefebvre 2022, who helpfully substantiate the fact that there are other reasons people commit "*délit de solidarité*," crimes of solidarity, as the French press has called them, but who don't consider that the precise reasons for hospitality may be indeterminate.

gained in sophistication and rigour, conceptualizations of utility have remained relatively narrow.

Consider Hénaff's account. Hénaff also departs from Mauss but for very different reasons than Derrida. Hénaff rejects Mauss' idea that gift exchange represents an alternative to modern economic exchange because Hénaff theorises gift exchange solely in terms of creating social bonds, and not as economic exchange at all. To do so, Hénaff points to the fact that utility exchange, narrowly understood in terms of buying and selling, often exists in tandem with gift exchange. For instance, in the case of the communities in the Trobriand Islands, gifts—restricted to certain precious objects—circulate in one direction around the islands. Meanwhile, utility objects are exchanged in the opposite direction and often involve fierce barter. This, according to Hénaff, indicates that gift exchange is serving a different function than an economic one. In the end, however, the gift's function in forging social bonds is never considered in terms of utility and is rather counterposed to it, which therefore reaffirms Mauss' and Derrida's view that the gift is antithetical to utility. Moreover, while Hénaff's account is promising for the purpose of social and political philosophy insofar as it foregrounds the role the gift plays in establishing social bonds, Hénaff enervates the Nietzschean interpretive strategy of immanent analysis when he unreflectively shifts the discussion away from his careful analysis informed by anthropological, historical, and literary analysis and into a metaphysical register. He does so when, having lauded Mauss for pointing out *how* the gift works, he also criticizes him for failing to explain *why* the gift works. To address the latter, Hénaff proposes that the gift is a necessary condition for all human association, one that also distinguishes humans from

every other species on earth.[145] But Hénaff fails to correct for Mauss' shortcoming with his move into a metaphysical register because he does not address the question of why humans associate at all. There is, rather, an essentializing—and therefore metaphysical—assumption as to the necessity of human association and therefore of the gift. Given how central the issue of human association is to metaphysical (political) thinking in the Western tradition—a tradition that encompasses a range of alternatives to the standard interpretation of Aristotle according to which humans are essentially *polis*-dwellers—this is a difficult premise to accept.[146] Yet Hénaff's reliance on metaphysics could be seen as a function of a more general characteristic of analyses of the gift, one shared by Mauss, Derrida, and Hénaff. These theorists of gift exchange only examine successful and ongoing cases of gift exchange, meaning the specific circumstances in which association was *first* sought, which may reveal the local and contingent reasons for which association was sought and successfully established at all, are effectively lost. The subsequent essentialization of gift exchange detracts from a philosophical understanding of both the gift and of utility. As we have seen with the discussion of Nietzsche in the first section, we are not likely to gain clarity on the gift and why it works in terms of social and political theory so long as we remain in the metaphysical register. And by essentializing human association in terms of the gift, Hénaff simultaneously essentializes the meaning of utility in the narrow terms of buying and selling, as evinced by his account of the Trobriand Islands' communities, a meaning that effectively makes the concept of utility useless for meaningful social and political explanation. As with Derrida but unlike Mauss, in Hénaff's terms of analysis we are prevented from considering gift exchange as itself useful in a more expansive sense, such as making social bonds

[145] Hénaff 2010: 133-134, 138-40.
[146] Perhaps the most famous and polarizing of positions being those of Aristotle and Hobbes.

possible where they may be absent otherwise. This is revealed to be a problem in light of Oedipus' ostensibly complementary claims that he is useful *and* that his own body is a "gift" (δῶρον, 577). The exclusionary relationship between utility and the gift is also unnecessary in light of Aristotle's discussion of mixed utility friendship, which Hénaff himself acknowledges is replete with the language of gift exchange.[147] We can only begin to appreciate and learn from this connection if we de-essentialize both the gift and our conception of utility. To do so, we need a more historicized account of gift exchange.

There are two complementary strategies we can pursue to achieve this. On the one hand, we can look more closely at the concrete conditions in which gift exchange occurs. On the other hand, we can historicize our own conception of utility so that we do not turn one contingent conception of utility into a transhistorical principle or value according to which everything else should be measured. Both strategies are in keeping with the critical antiquities agenda, which seeks to establish the historical specificity and therefore the alterity of other forms of life in order to gain theoretical purchase on and newly perceived practical choices in our own conditions (and its concepts, such as utility). In doing so, we can better explore both the deleterious and laudatory features of our lives in an emergent present as we pursue human flourishing.[148] Within the scope of this article, a deep historicization of either the gift or utility cannot be performed adequately, but even a small dose of it displays how the strictures of our historically particular ideas and forms of life can be relaxed and an opening onto alternatives may become possible. Ancient worlds and so-called traditional Indigenous communities can provide resources for perceiving such alterity,

[147] See note 99 above.
[148] For a more detailed elaboration on these ideas, see Bradshaw and Brown 2022.

though we must be cautious about this, too.[149] I have already attempted to historicize one currently dominant conception of utility. On the back of that, I now wish to understand the concrete conditions under which gift exchange occurs, something that I believe can inform our understanding of the social force that invocations of utility can have despite their lack of determinate content.

In the rare cases where we can examine the historical circumstances in which gift exchange first took place, the reasons are both telling for understanding why the gift works and useful for reconceptualizing it in terms of utility (now alternatively conceived). For instance, in an important yet little-noted study Helen Codere has shown that potlatch developed in response to dramatic changes resulting from the colonization of North America.[150] Most relevant for our discussion here was the ban on warfare imposed by the occupying forces. This ban meant that previously warring communities were forced to forge new social and political communities in order to associate peacefully. Gift exchange, in the form of potlatch, was their mode of facilitating that and successfully so. Codere's finding entails numerous important lessons.

The first, further illuminating for the discussion of critical antiquities, concerns methodology. If the case examined by Codere is indicative of the circumstances in which the gift forges socio-political bonds, then we can also understand why theorists have been prevented from analyzing these moments of initial social constitution. These kinds of external and existential crises are often sudden and unanticipated. Furthermore, given

[149] In his landmark book, Castro-Gómez 2021 reveals the real possibility of erroneously attributing alterity to what is just another construct of our own particular concepts and normative commitments, especially in the effort to understand Indigenous communities in the Global South and their relationship to so-called "Western modernity."
[150] Codere 1966.

these circumstances, it seems that analyzing failed cases will also be difficult. If the existential threat is real, and the gift failed to facilitate association, then there would be few people, if any, around to testify to it. This represents a problem for our understanding of the gift. Since the gift is credited with facilitating this association, not knowing the full picture of why association was sought means we are likely to have an incomplete understanding of what the gift does and why it works. These difficulties therefore result in a blind spot in analyses of the gift.

This blind spot may not only afflict theorists of the gift, however. The same limitation is no doubt behind Nietzsche's ridicule of those who believe that humans associate for the sake of utility as it is understood in one's *present* circumstances.[151] Paying attention to contextually specific reasons for people coming together to associate can correct for (some of) our essentialisms and anachronisms. It need not, however, mean we entirely reject utility as a pertinent factor. We can see with Codere that there is some obvious and relatively determinate utility to gift giving in the case of potlatch: survival instead of annihilation, although that needs to be carefully considered, which I attempt to do in the next section. For now, I will only say that rather than dispense with utility, our conception of utility needs to be adjusted according to a shift away from metaphysics and ahistorical analysis.

That said, given the difficulty of examining the incipient moments of social constitution, we also have good reason for turning to other sources, such as literature, to conceptualize both the gift and utility as they feature in social and political beginnings. And here we especially see the value of attending to literature and philology for the sake of

[151] Nietzsche 2017 II.12: 53 claims that this attribution of a function is a sign of a will to power having imposed one.

philosophy since in the case of the gift, at least, it better attunes philosophy to the messy world of praxis, rather than the reified realm of high theory. This observation we can add to the methodological claims of critical antiquities, then. That is, we see how beneficial it is to turn to ancient literary artefacts such as Greek tragedy to think about a deep past that appears to be inaccessible to historical analysis. That is because, in keeping with the earlier comments, to avoid anachronism in our effort to study new social and political beginnings, the alterity—relative to our own—of the forms of life and thought from ancient worlds may help us develop alternative and more appropriate explanations. More than that, ancient worlds may also disclose immanent but alternative forms of life in the present that hold out better prospects for us in the social and political realms, which is their critical promise. In the remaining section of this article, I take the first lesson from Codere's analysis—the methodological one—and attempt to build on Mauss' conceptualization of the gift with Codere's insights in hand. To do so, however, means bringing Mauss together with the features of the Athenian politics of utility found in OC and touched on by Aristotle.[152] By doing so—and this is the real goal—we are also able to reconceptualize utility and better account for the peculiar, not just the familiar, form of political authority Oedipus the refugee represents in OC.

[152] As we will see there are several characteristics of ceremonial gift exchange that provide an incisive set of concepts to understand these important interactions between Theseus and Oedipus. It is worth noting, however, that Hénaff has conceded the difficulties of discerning any one gift or form of gift exchange that can be found everywhere the same, an admission that tacitly discloses the metaphysical aspirations of his inquiry that I find dissatisfying for the reasons articulated above. In sum, then, finding commonalities in all forms of gift exchange should not even be our goal. I have rather sought to discern some minimal synergies between three or four discreet cases in a way that abides differences while searching for commonalities. This could be called a "structure of comparability" after May 2001: 123.

Part 7 – The Athenian Politics of Human Utility

Although not the first to treat the gift seriously, Mauss is distinguished from earlier theorists because he was the first to think of the gift as a problem to be explained.[153] One of the problems that particularly vexed Mauss—but for which he never proffered a solution—stemmed from his claim that the three key movements in ceremonial gift exchange (giving, receiving, and giving in return) are all characterized by an irreducible mix of freedom and obligation.[154] If that's the case, Mauss asked, where does the obligation to give in the first place come from?[155] Moreover, how does giving also entail freedom? Codere's account, by foregrounding the fact that potlatch was a response to a threat, suggests an answer to both questions.

Responding to a threat with a gift presupposes both an awareness of a problem and the belief that coexistence in community—where it does not already exist—is a reasonable response to it. But these also amount to a choice in the end, both to acknowledge a threat as real and coexistence as a solution to it.[156] Hence we can account for the freedom involved in gift exchange. If both of these are in fact acknowledged, then insofar as there truly is an existential threat, we can also appreciate the great obligation to take the step of giving first, which will be tantamount to communicating the desire to coexist to address it.

Understood in terms of a threat, we can further account for the simultaneous freedom and obligation to *accept* the first gift and why it constitutes a challenge to *reciprocate*, which Mauss called its "agonistic" element.[157] Giving must first be *received*

[153] Hénaff 2010: 116.
[154] Mauss 1990: 39-44.
[155] Mauss 1990: 3-5; 13-14.
[156] Lear 2006 testifies to the historical reality of this situation for Native Americans and also the extent to which this really does represent a choice.
[157] Mauss 1990: Chapter 1 and 35-36 especially accounts for these features.

because of what it is communicating—the desire to coexist. Gift giving must then be *reciprocated* because it signals the other party's willingness to coexist and thereby match what has already been expressed by the first giver. Codere then also helps us account for the social prestige associated with giving and giving the *most*. Giving garners prestige because it represents awareness of an existential threat to one's current community and a decision to address it by building a new one. Giving the *most*, by extension, amplifies all these features. It appears that in the case of gift exchange, the more one gives away, the more likely community is going to be established. Conversely, the more one retains, the less likely new associations will be forged. We can now better understand the peculiar trait of gift exchange that led Mauss to deem it antithetical to modern commodity exchange. Rather than compete over who could accumulate the largest quantity of wealth—an ostensive goal underpinning economic exchange—, the challenge was to see who could give the most away, either by destruction or donation.

Approaching the problem of gift exchange solely with Mauss and Codere only gets us so far, however. For having addressed the question of freedom and obligation in this way, new questions arise. For instance, given this operation of gift exchange arose under the imposition of the settler-colonial state, what threat is it, exactly, that instigates potlatch? Is it the threat of state punishment for ignoring its ban on warfare? Is it the threat of losing an existing way of life in the face of further foreign interference? Or something else? Moreover, in light of the role of the settler-colonial state, can we even account for the resulting association as an effect of the gift? That is, might not the heavy lifting in the forging of new associations have been performed by the state as an effect of its preponderant power, penal or other? While I am unlikely to give entirely satisfactory answers to all these questions here, we can at this point return to OC with them and the

foregoing methodological points in mind—specifically, the difficulty of observing the incipient moments of gift exchange. Bringing the analysis of OC to bear upon these questions allows us to see how gift giving and the Athenian politics of human utility mutually illuminate each other. Then, emboldened by the historical case of potlatch, we can advance to the main goal: to draw further conclusions about the Athenian politics of human utility.

As we saw, it is not clear what problem Oedipus' purported utility would address. That is, there is no *specific* threat that explains the transformation of Oedipus' membership status in Athens. This does not, however, detract from the power anticipated utility has to produce new social bonds. If we analogize OC and the case of potlatch, then, being unable to specify the exact source or nature of the threat or threats that inform gift exchange does not detract from either the force of the gift or the promise of utility. That is true even though the cases of potlatch also reveal *some* determinacy to human utility. There is *some* determinacy to this utility in terms of what is *hoped for*: survival instead of destruction as a result of the association being forged. But aiming for survival is *minimally,* not exhaustively, determinate. For starters, it would be a mistake to presuppose that the continuation or pursuit of life or a form of life is better than its absence. Understanding why life is pursued in the face of difficulties and threats, or not, is a complex matter since it is inextricably bound up in the question of human needs and the very value of human life. Short of accounting for these in depth, we cannot get at the determinacy people's uses and utility in new associations represent. More importantly when thinking about the use of humans, survival cannot go far in disclosing or explaining why and how humans are useful to each other because of what we saw in the examination of OC with Aristotle. To begin with, we have seen that quite apart from the matter of an external and existential threat, forging

new political associations generates its own problems because of singularity, which does not inform Codere's account. This could only be perceived because of the way OC shifted the terms of analysis away from the use and utility of objects and towards the use and utility of humans. With the change in focus, we saw, in combination with Aristotle, that indeterminacy of utility arises not only because of the indeterminacy of an external problem but because singular individuals encountering each other is itself a problem that requires ongoing attention. When we are adequately attuned to the complex and dynamic qualities of needs (social and personal), human singularity, and human uses, a final determination of utility escapes us.[158] Despite that, we can still see that the gift is capable of facilitating human association.

Having seen that OC's Athenian politics of human utility is capable of illuminating gift exchange and vice versa, we need to push the analysis further because the task still remains to explain how social and political transformation can issue from indeterminate needs, the giving of a gift, and the indeterminate utility that results from the encounter between singularity and collectivity. In light of the foregoing, and especially how a consideration of human singularity deepens the analysis of gift exchange, I want to posit two further elements of the Athenian politics of human utility.

I venture that association is achieved by the Athenian politics of human utility not only because of the decision that I have already considered—the decision to recognize a threat and pursue new association as a means to overcome it. Association can be achieved because of a concomitant commitment that this decision entails, a commitment to the practices of forging a life together. Concretely, that means working out the terms and

[158] We can here add that there is a definitive lack of finality to the goal (when can you say you've achieved survival? When can you say the association's forging is complete?)

quality of human utility in association, impelled by the desire to survive that is made more conspicuous and urgent in the face of a threat. This commitment is required because it will be very difficult to establish the exact terms of coexistence and it will be riddled with contestation as singularities and collectivity encounter one another. For these are features of working together in the face of epistemic limitations akin to what we saw in OT and OC. The gift represents the necessary commitment that flows from the decision to associate and to work out the emergent community's needs and, correlatively, the way in which human utility can and should be manifested. But it is through this decision and commitment that gift exchange allows the calculation of precise utility—the exact terms in which communities come to understand their existence, even if not the original terms[159]—to be deferred. A common commitment to peacefully coexist constitutes the social bond that allows human utility in all its manifestations to emerge—or rather, to be *created*—in time. In contrast to the exchange of objects or Theban utility, the need to work out human utility through a protracted process, rather than presuppose its content, has already been made explicit and has not been foreclosed by the original mode of establishing coexistence.

We see the central role of decision and commitment in OC quite explicitly. Oedipus abruptly announces early in the play that he will not leave the grove. By promising utility in the absence of a determinate problem and an acute awareness of his singularity, this can only amount to a commitment to work out his utility in a process involving the local Colonians if not the rest of the Athenians, too. For his part, Theseus' early response to Oedipus evinces a reciprocal commitment. Having declared him a citizen, Theseus tells

[159] It seems that the initial reasons for associating are effaced over time, as people believe the association is based on other reasons, such as utility for subsistence. So much supports the views of Nietzsche 1989 and Rousseau 1992.

Oedipus, "You can be sure of me; I'll not betray you"[160] in response to Oedipus' claim he will now "prevail over those who banished" him from Thebes.[161] Although Aristotle does not report any decision or commitment like this, and despite the fact that it does not feature in his analysis, it is not hard to imagine a commitment like this at work in the case of mixed-utility friendships, at least in those that do not result in irreconcilable conflict.[162]

In addition to the commitment the gift evinces, there is one more feature of the Athenian politics of human utility that I venture emerges from the consideration of singularity in gift giving. Gift giving involves an attempt to disclose, while also surrendering, one's singularity insofar as one can and is willing to for the sake of association. This is intelligible against the background of OC's and Aristotle's accounts of the way that what is one's own relates to the community. Both accounts show us the ways that singularity cannot go into collectivity without remainder. In the case of Oedipus, we see how both the self and the community suffer when people presume this can be done in the form of Theban utility. No gift or other phenomenon can entirely modify that situation. What the gift can do is work to transform social life so that singularity may be liberated from it as far as it is desirable and possible to do so. Such an achievement, however, means the singular self must first be prepared to *deny* itself *insofar as it is useful for peaceful association*. That is what it means for the gift to disclose and surrender one's singularity in the politics of utility. One gives a gift to deny one's singularity for the sake of redeeming, by socially liberating, it once again in a community that is useful for doing so.

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[160] *OC*: 649.
[161] *OC*: 631-646.
[162] Indeed, even in the cases of conflict Aristotle reports, I do not see why we cannot understand the wish to settle conflicts in court not only as a desire to receive what one is owed but also to reconcile for the sake of continuing the friendship.

This speaks to the question of what it is that the gift represents in exchange, a question that has occupied scholars since at least Mauss. For Mauss, the gift was entirely distinct from legal objects, the *res* of Roman law. Rather, the gift contains something of the giver himself, blurring the lines between the giver and the thing given.[163] But the analysis here demands that we say even more. It is only if the thing given represents the disclosure and surrender of singularity, where it is where possible and desirable, that singularity may be denied or even sacrificed in a socially salient way for the sake of going on together. As such, the gift testifies to the promise and commitment to associate at a most fundamental level—at the expense, even if partial and temporary, of one's singular self. Gift exchange does so while acknowledging that the need to do so, or the desirability of doing so, depends on needs subject to a state of flux that represent an epistemic limit to its principal actors.[164]

One may be dubious about this idea, because to what extent, if at all, *can* one's singularity, what is one's own, be denied or sacrificed? If we think about singularity metaphysically—meaning as a claim to what is and necessarily so—then it seems impossible for it to be denied or sacrificed short of sacrificing one's very life. But in keeping with Aristotle, I believe nothing can be said in response to the question in terms of metaphysics because nothing scientific—i.e., strictly philosophical—can be said about singularity. Still

[163] Mauss 1990: 12.

[164] Understanding gift exchange in terms of the disclosure and possible surrender of singularity allows us to further explain why gift giving is about recognition, another feature identified by Mauss. On this analysis, it is a dual recognition: first, of the attempt to disclose the singular identity of the giver and his community that abides in the objects given; second, recognition of the willingness and commitment to surrender and sacrifice that, at least in part, in the face of the common threat, as is it necessary to the common benefit of both communities. Hénaff 2010 and Godelier 1999 discuss the interesting fact that many communities involved in gift exchange have objects that cannot ever be exchanged. On my reading, we should understand these as representing the irreducible and non-sacrificial elements of an individual's or community's singular identity.

following Aristotle, all one can do is consider how singularity is *related to.* There are two salient dimensions to such a consideration, an *intra*personal dimension and an *inter*personal dimension. OC shows us the power of narrative for both dimensions.[165] In the intrapersonal dimension, Oedipus tells us he changed his mind over time about the significance of his actions in light of learning his own familial identity. He was at first repulsed, which is evinced by his act of self-mutilation and his willingness, reported in OC, to leave Thebes.[166] But in the same speech of OC, Oedipus also tells us he then "began to find some comfort" after what had happened. Oedipus cannot deny that he killed his father or fathered children with his mother, but he can relate to that, *own* it, in different ways. In his articulation of that relationship, he can make it more or less salient, more or less of an obstacle, for associating with others, as evinced above all in OC. So much displays to us the importance of self-narration and the mutable ways of relating to oneself and one's actions.

But we can also see how this process of self-narration is so intimately bound up in the way one relates to others, that is, the interpersonal dimension of relating to singularity. Oedipus not only changes the narrative about how his past deeds can and should be understood. When he gives himself as a beneficial gift to Athens for the sake of a new association, Oedipus also *posits* a new narrative for what he will *become*. That is, he posits

[165] The role of narrative and self-narration not only in Oedipus but in understanding singularity is something that Adriana Cavarero 2000 has written about. I largely agree with her reading insofar as it concerns OT, but Caverero does not consider OC. My reading of OC displays the drastic transformation of Oedipus' relationship to narration from OT to OC. If in OT, as Cavarero 2000: 11 claims, "Oedipus does not embark on any introspective journey into the *interior* of his self, but rather comes to know his identity from the outside, through the story that others tell him," in OC we hear Oedipus reclaiming the power to narrate his own identity and in doing so *socially constitute it in new ways*. It is the latter that is interesting to me about narrative's role in the social and political consideration of singularity.

[166] *OC* 765-71.

himself in an experimental act of giving in order to see what will be made of him. It is this ability and willingness to posit himself as relating in new and indeterminate relations with others that is the ultimate condition for his transformation. In the case of potlatch, we see that this positing can also take a much more material form that evinces the materiality of what is one's own and how it figures in the forging of new associations.

Success in the Athenian politics of human utility is not guaranteed. Rather, gift exchange is *risky*.[167] As we saw in section four, for some, such as Aristotle, this feature means that gift giving only represents a threat and therefore a problem to be solved, for which Aristotle advocated delimiting and foreclosing the indeterminate and expansive aspects of human utility through a certain practice of object exchange. By determining the object's utility through knowledge of it in use, stipulating in a contract the terms of exchange, and mediating the transaction with money, human use is channeled and thereby constrained into a mode of relating that reinvests authority in the existing political institutions as it makes human use subject to its regulation and adjudication. In other words, the collective relates to human singularity by definitively subordinating it. But gift exchange so conceived is also risky because it is entirely possible that one's singularity fails to be liberated and so redeemed in the society that eventuates, or at least to the extent that would be most conducive to human flourishing. There has been and continues to be a multitude of ways that human utility is determined according to the logic of Theban utility, and the success of the Athenian politics of human utility does not at once and forever put paid to those forces. As it is, however, a process of by which new associations are forged, it does nevertheless have a role to play in the transformation of existing social orders.

[167] On this in the ancient context and with a view to its gendered dimensions, see Lyons 2012.

Although the indeterminacy of the terms on which humans used each other was Aristotle's reason for rejecting mixed friendship, in the case of newly associating singular individuals, it turns out to be its apogee, for it recognizes the fact that the basis on which these judgments will be made is not yet known. Gift exchange can thus establish a relationship that is not only new but is enduring, yet another feature identified by Mauss (and Aristotle).[168] In other words, when it is successful it also establishes bonds that last.

If, as Aristotle relays it, exchange that is focused on object use and utility involves the *commensurability* of exchange, exchange that is focused on human use and utility involves the *incommensurability* of what is exchanged due to the singularity of humans. Further, if monetized object exchange constrains human relations in order to solve, by dispensing with, the problem of human singularity, gift exchange poses a question about human singularity and in what ways it can exist in relation to other singularities and the collective body of the community. More than that, in the practice of politics that the gift facilitates, it also provides a vehicle to answering the question.

Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavoured to reconsider the politics that Oedipus stands for. This has proved to be a formidable task and not only because of the entrenched and one-sided reception history of the Oedipus plays. I have argued its partiality is also due to the dominance of the Theban mode of authority and its particular conception of utility in both the Western political-philosophical tradition and in recent immigration and refugee politics. This dominance has arguably desensitized us late-modern subjects to the particularity and

[168] Mauss 1990: 5; Arist. *Eth. Eud.* VII.10.18.1242b5-6.

contingency of Theban utility and made it especially difficult to discern other kinds of politics, either in the Oedipus plays or in other and more recent contexts. But having delineated the Theban and Athenian modes of utility in Sophocles' plays, in philosophy, and in various modern insider-outsider encounters, this analysis has attempted to make legible some complex dynamics in various modes of exchange and thus of political community both ancient and modern. Several conclusions follow from this analysis.

Owing to the historically dominant and ongoing presence of the Theban mode of utility, the refugee is an ancient Greek problem and Oedipus its best ancient representative. By connecting contemporary refugees to Oedipus, we are able to see the unstable and tragic way that the Theban mode in both cases configures political relations. I explained this in terms of its inadequate treatment of what was Oedipus' "own" and therefore human singularity. But the connection, against the foil of the Theban mode, also allows us to see OC's Athenian politics of human utility as an alternative politics of utility and therefore an alternative way for existing political communities to relate to refugees and immigrants. Furthermore, because the problem of human singularity and political community also occupies the political philosophy tradition that appears in OC's wake, I have been able to take the analysis further into philosophical conceptualization. In doing so—with the support of historical and anthropological literature—we especially see the significance of the shift from thinking about utility in terms of objects to thinking about it in terms of interpersonal *human* use. Use and utility must be characterized differently in the case of humans than in the case of objects. To begin with, singularity means that people exceed the determinate uses they are put to, which means the use of humans is an ongoing problem that constantly demands a political response. But it also means that social needs are fluid. In response to both phenomena, new and different forms of association are possible and indeed required.

Moreover, the shift in terms when we talk about human use and utility also loosens the strict opposition between utility and forms of gift exchange that Aristotle and many modern theorists have maintained. With the use of humans, gifts can be useful and what is useful can also be a gift. So much is patent when we see, as we do in OC and in potlatch, that gifts can be given with the effect of forging new human associations, which makes the gift useful for such a purpose even if utility—of both the gift and of the association—is indeterminate. This has required, however, that we abjure the transhistorical, if not outright metaphysical, approach to use and utility and the gift to boot. Because by treating gifts and relationships of use and utility in more historically sensitive ways, not only can we nuance our understanding of gifts and utility but an important conclusion for social and political life follows directly from it: singularity does not have to be either ignored or sacrificed in the creation and outworking of political relationships. Those forging new associations may need to surrender singularity—meaning they are *prepared* to sacrifice aspects of their singularity where it obstructs or threatens the community—but this surrendering is done on one's own terms and with a view to its subsequent liberation. If and when singularity's sacrifice is required will be worked out in a horizontally political and therefore more democratic process that is rooted in a mutual commitment to work out human use and utility. This kind of commitment and resulting process is what the gift can, under certain circumstances, signify and achieve. That is how utility becomes a resource for the dispossessed to move themselves across boundaries of exclusion.

But my analysis here also leaves us with further questions. For while I have looked for and found Theban utility in very recent social and political relations, I have not done the same in the case of the Athenian politics of human utility. Potlatch mostly, though not entirely, ceased to be practiced in the early twentieth century in the wake of a government

prohibition on the practice.[169] That means I have not identified any contemporary or very recent examples of the Athenian politics of human utility.

In at least one respect this omission in my argument is surprising, since it seems likely that this alternative mode of politics is manifest in many places and occasions given it appears to be an immanent possibility wherever singularities and collectivities encounter one other. And yet in other respects this omission is entirely unsurprising. The first reason is that it is exceedingly difficult to find concrete examples of Athenian utility owing to the evident dominance of Theban utility in the contemporary politics of immigration and refugees. The second and related reason is the *modern state's* own dominance and degree of control over immigration and refugees, factors that, I have argued, align with the Theban mode of utility that reinvests authority in the established political institutions. For both reasons, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to detect the Athenian politics of human utility in the domain of contemporary immigration and refugees.[170]

It may yet be possible to find examples of Athenian utility in our current context, but it will require a shift in focus from the immigrant and refugee to other and arguably more ordinary political subjects. This analysis has partly prepared the way to such a turn because it has raised questions beyond the domain of immigration and refugees. The way that Aristotle and especially Plato conceptualized political community suggests that these two

[169] Cole and Chaikin 1990. This ban is another factor that evinces the presence of the Theban and Athenian forms of authority and their opposition in the modern era.
[170] See Taylor and Lefebvre 2022 for an excellent empirically-based examination of the reasons for radical hospitality in the case of refugees in France, where hosting undocumented migrants is illegal. But insofar as the authors wish to determine the precise reasons for this hospitality, they resist understanding it in terms of indeterminacy as I have here. Moreover, the reasons they discern (care for others, care for the world, care for the self) are never articulated in terms of use or utility, though one could construe these in terms of an expansive conception of use and utility.

modes of authority—and particularly the Theban one—do not only pertain to the inclusion of outsiders but govern political subjects more broadly. In that case, could the immigrant and refugee, as understood in the Theban and Athenian modes of utility, be emblematic of social and political relations *within* communities?[171]

There is some external evidence to suggest this. In the modern era, there is a rich seam of political theorization, for instance in Max Weber but in many antecedent political theorists too, on two distinct forms of politics in the modern era. One form centres on government and its institutions while the other centres on human action that is more diffuse than the first form and stands in an uneasy relationship to it.[172] These two forms of politics broadly align with the Theban and Athenian modes of utility. Where the Theban mode reinvests authority in the city's established institutions as they configure communal life in terms that conduces to the maintenance of the state as a whole, the Athenian mode operates according to broader and more nebulous logics and principles of sociality despite the state's institutional politics. If this alignment is correct—something that remains to be demonstrated but falls outside the scope of this article—then it means we can also look to internal political relations for current examples of both modes of politics but, in light of the dominance of Theban utility is the case of immigrants, will be especially necessary in the case of the Athenian politics of human utility. Success in this may further shed light on the

[171] For an extended study of this and related questions see Honig 2001.
[172] Weber 2020, Wolin 2018, and Vatter 2014. Vatter, for instance, draws on Michel Foucault's lectures on governmentality at the Collège de France to argue that government is a specific function of civil society, which should be understood as a modern domain constitutively divorced from politics as conceived, for instance, by older republican or democratic traditions of political thought and practice. Arguably the earliest and, for its time, most influential opposition between these two loci of politics is Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and elaborated on in his *Rights of Man*. But Paine is at pains to talk about the opposition in terms of *society* and politics rather than two forms of politics.

multiple presences of and possibilities for this mode of relating today. In doing so, we may better fulfill the major aim of critical antiquities: to disclose alternative ways of thinking, acting, and becoming in the present for the sake of human flourishing.[173] And yet this, too, will be difficult, since I am under no illusions about the many deep and pervasive ways that buying and selling determines and constrains human utility in the present. It may just allow us to say that the refugee does not experience the politics of utility uniquely, even if she allows us to see it more clearly and the consequences in her case may be more pronounced and severe. But these questions will have to be explored further elsewhere.

To finish, I'd like to turn finally to a prominent theorist of the modern political condition who was especially sensitive to the ways that material concerns intersect with democratic politics. So, consider Alexis de Tocqueville who, building on the famous analysis of the rise of the equality of conditions that opens the first volume of *Democracy in America*, writes with the characteristic pessimism of Volume II:

> There is no power on earth that can prevent the growing equality of conditions from bringing the human spirit toward searching for the useful and from disposing each citizen to shrink within himself.
>
> One must expect that individual interest will become more than ever the principal if not the unique motive of men's actions; but it remains to know how each man will understand his individual interest.[174]

In a way that is characteristic of modern conceptualizations of use and utility, Tocqueville here conceives of "the useful" as self-serving and socially isolating to the detriment of

[173] The work of Jacques Rancière is especially fruitful for thinking about internal social exclusions and his unique conception of politics as the act of disrupting and transforming them. See, for example, Rancière 2004 and Chambers 2014. Rancière may also advance our understanding of how the Athenian politics of human utility intersects with democratic politics, which I have announced is one of my background concerns.
[174] Tocqueville 2000: 503.

politics and democracy. But if, as Tocqueville claims, it remains to be known how each will understand their interest, then surely it remains to be seen how “the useful” will be known, too. With the Athenian politics of human utility, it is my view that we have at least one more conceivable option, one that I hope is practicable, too.

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