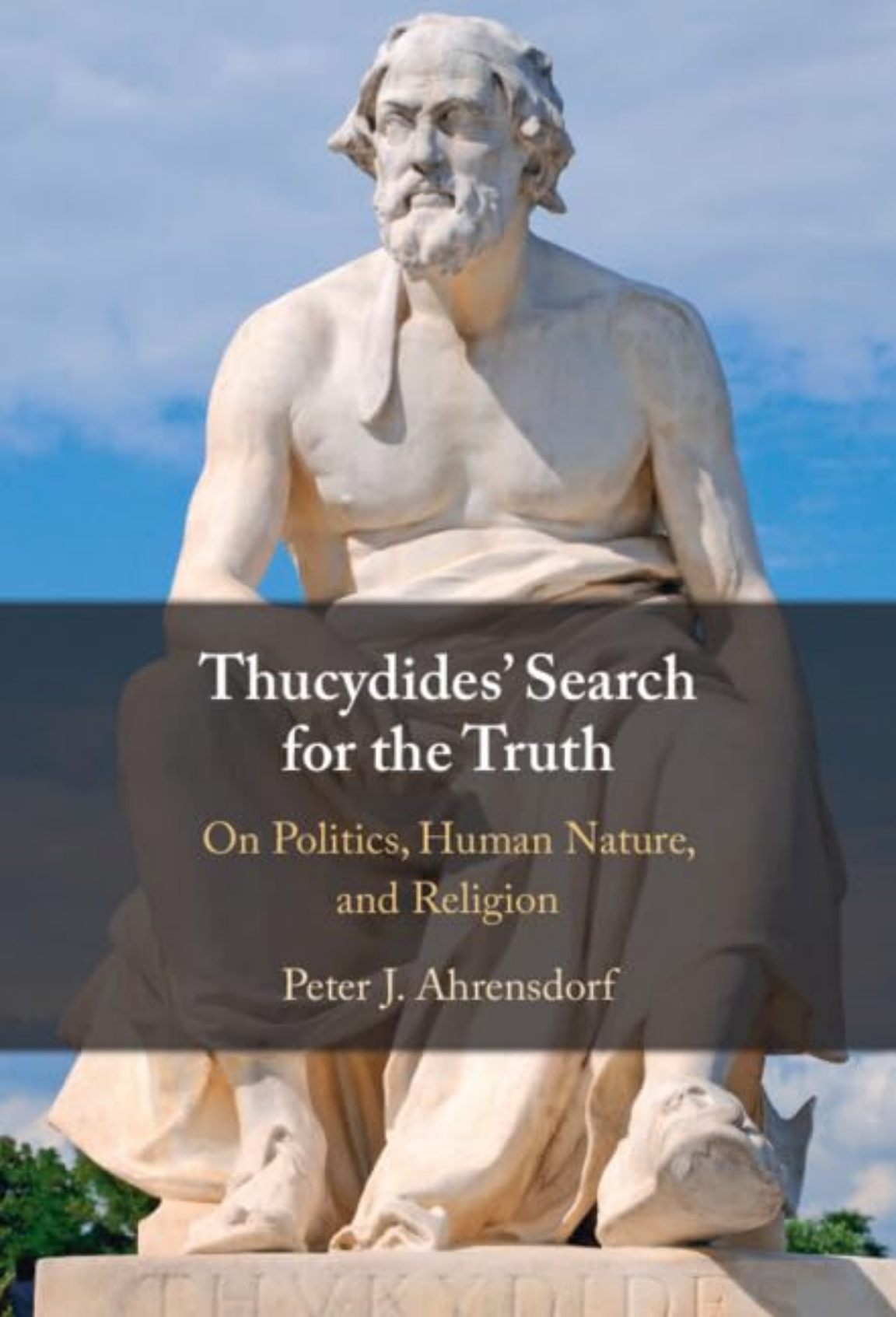




Thucydides' Search for the Truth

On Politics, Human Nature,
and Religion

Peter J. Ahrensdorf

THUCYDIDES' SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH

Thucydides' book on the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians has generally been considered a historical chronicle. By contrast, Peter Ahrensdorf here makes the case that it is better understood as a work of philosophy, inasmuch as it seeks to understand the permanent truth about human nature. Thucydides, he argues, focuses on this particular war because of its theoretical significance. It presents a clash, not only between military powers, but between two theoretical outlooks – Periclean Athenians' progressive and humanistic understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings, and the Spartans' traditional and religious understanding. Ahrensdorf leads us through Thucydides' examination of the case for and against both Athens and Sparta and shows how Thucydides ultimately offers for our consideration an account of himself as an individual who – unlike outstanding characters such as Alcibiades, the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Melos, Diodotus, and Pericles – ascends to a truly independent and genuinely philosophic understanding of the human condition.

Peter J. Ahrensdorf is James B. Duke Professor of Political Science and Affiliated Professor of Classics at Davidson College. The author of six books, he has received fellowships from the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, the Fulbright Commission, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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To Heinrich Meier

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 The Character of Thucydides' Book	1
A History?	3
A Philosophic Book?	9
The Search for the Truth about Human Beings I:	
Observation and the Problem of Previously Held Opinions	12
The Search for the Truth about Human Beings II:	
Observation and the Problem of Partiality	20
Thucydides' Second Sailing	28
Thucydides' Distinctive Focus on Politics	33
The Theoretical Significance of the War	41
The Different Stages of Thucydides' Investigation	44
Thucydides' Odyssey	51
2 The Case for Athens: The Natural City	55
Themistocles and the Liberation of Human Nature	58
The Power and the Problem of Self-Interest	64
Pericles and the Problem of Human Nature I: War as	
a Teacher of Reason	72
Pericles and the Problem of Human Nature II: The Harmony	
between Rational Self-Interest and Patriotism	79
3 The Case against Athens: The Power of Passion	
and Piety	89
Thucydides on the Tension between Self-Interest and	
Patriotism	89
Diodotus versus Pericles	96
Thucydides versus Diodotus and Pericles	105

	The Cause of the Savagery of Factional Strife	114
	The Utility and the Power of Piety	123
4	The Case for Sparta: The Righteous and Godly City	133
	The Limits of Demosthenes and the Ascendancy of Cleon	138
	The Rise of Brasidas and the Justice of the Spartans	149
	The Impiety of the Athenians and the Piety of the Spartans and Their Allies	157
	Reconsidering the Gods	163
	The Spartan Understanding of the Human and the Divine	166
5	The Case against Sparta: The Weakness of Justice	180
	Is the Victory of Sparta a Victory for Justice?	180
	Melian Dialogue I: The Moral Nadir of Athens	190
	Melian Dialogue II: The Theoretical Peak?	198
	The Question of the Self-Interestedness of the Spartans	207
	The Spartan Victory and the Limits of Sparta	216
	The Practical and the Theoretical Importance of Daring	219
6	The Character of Thucydides	232
	Thucydides and His Fellow Exile Alcibiades	232
	Thucydides and the Patriotic Athenian Ambassadors at Sparta	240
	Thucydides and the Envious Athenian Ambassadors at Melos	245
	Thucydides and Diodotus	249
	Thucydides, Pericles, and “Philosophy”	251
	<i>References</i>	255
	<i>Index</i>	261

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CHAPTER 1

The Character of Thucydides' Book

Thucydides, early in his account of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, expresses his intention to write a book that will reveal the truth about “that which is human” and then remarks that his book will therefore be “a possession for all time.”¹ While Thucydides means here that his book will be a possession for all time because of the timeless truth about the fundamental character and condition of human beings that it conveys rather than because it will actually be remembered and studied for all time, the fate of his book in both ancient and modern times does bear witness to its enduring renown as a source of instruction, not only among students of politics as a whole but among philosophers in particular. In our times, Thucydides has been greatly esteemed, far more than any other classical thinker, by scholars of international politics. In the twentieth century, Thucydides was widely identified by political scientists as “the founding father of Realism.”² More recently, his book has been looked to across the globe for clarity and insight concerning the principal great power

¹ 1.22.4. All translations are my own, based on the Greek text of H. S. Jones, with corrected and augmented critical apparatus by J. E. Powell (1942). I have especially benefited from consulting the translations of Thomas Pangle (2025), Thomas Hobbes (Greene 1989), and Jeremy Mynott (2013). As Finley notes, “No certain title of the work derives from Thucydides himself” (1942, 3n).

² Nye 1988, 235. Consider for example, Keohane 1986, 7; Gilpin 1986, 304–306, 308–309; Waltz 1979, 66, 127, 186; Waltz 1959, 159–160, 210–212, 216; Morgenthau 1978, 8, 39; Morgenthau 1958, 67; Morgenthau 1946, 42; Herz 1951, 208–210; Meinecke 1957, 25; Walzer 1992, 4–12; Bury 1958, 140–145; Romilly 1963, 125, 127–128, 256–257, 292; De Ste-Croix 1972, 11ff. For a variety of qualifications of or challenges to the identification of Thucydides with realism, consider Forde 1992a; Forde 1992b; Johnson 1993; Ahrens Dorf 1997; Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999; Schlosser 2023. The scholarship on Thucydides is so vast and so extraordinarily rich that my references to it are inevitably incomplete and inevitably fail to do justice to its richness.

rivalry of our century.³ Yet, even before the last two centuries, beginning with his own times, a number of philosophers have expressed a singular admiration for Thucydides. It is true that Plato, his younger contemporary, never refers to Thucydides. However, the philosopher Xenophon wrote a continuation of Thucydides' book on the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, the *Hellenica*, the only case in history of a philosopher writing a sequel for a book by another author.⁴ Lucretius' philosophic poem *On the Nature of Things* culminates and concludes with a vivid account of the plague in Athens that is unmistakably modeled on Thucydides' vivid account of that very plague.⁵ Thucydides' book is the only work of classical Greek antiquity in prose to have been translated into a modern language by a modern philosopher, Thomas Hobbes.⁶ While Hobbes was harshly critical of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle as teachers – “The natural philosophy of these schools was rather a dream than a science . . . Their moral philosophy is but a description of their own passions”⁷ – he praised Thucydides most highly as a teacher: “Digressions for instruction's cause, and other such open conveyances of precepts, (which is the philosopher's part), he never useth; as having so clearly set before men's eyes the ways and events of good and evil counsels, that the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept.”⁸ Accordingly, Hobbes dedicated much time and effort when in the prime of his intellectual life to studying Thucydides and to making his book available to his English-speaking contemporaries so that they, too, might receive “profitable instruction”

³ Allison 2017. Consider as well, for example, Zhang 2019; Mastro 2019; Chan 2020; Moosa 2020; Zhang 2021; Nye 2022. For an excellent interpretation of Thucydides as a whole that reflects the growing interest of Chinese scholars in Thucydides, see Wei 2010.

⁴ Pitcher remarks that the *Hellenica* is “almost unique in the thoroughness with which it seeks to join itself to its predecessor text” (2023, 238). According to Diogenes Laertius, “it is said” that Xenophon was responsible for bringing Thucydides' book out of obscurity and into “renown” (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 2.57).

⁵ Lucretius 6.1138–1285; see Thucydides 2.47.3–54. For an account of Lucretius' response to and use of Thucydides, see Foster 2009.

⁶ According to Grene, Hobbes's translation is, “by long odds, the greatest translation of Thucydides in English,” one that “has a timelessness like that of the work it translates” (1989, vii). Mynott remarks, “In general, Hobbes has probably succeeded better than anyone else in finding an appropriate ‘voice’ for Thucydides . . . in catching something of the rugged strength, rhythms and confidence of Thucydides' prose, as well as the intellectual sophistication” (2023, 321–322). Hobbes also translated Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* late in his life, when he was eighty-seven. He was forty when he published his translation of Thucydides.

⁷ Hobbes 1991, 461. ⁸ Grene 1989, 577.

therefrom and “draw out lessons” for themselves.⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau also celebrates Thucydides as a teacher in his work entitled *Emile or on Education*:

Thucydides is to my taste the true model of an historian. He reports the facts without judging them, and he omits none of the circumstances proper to make us judge them ourselves. He puts all he recounts before the reader’s eyes. Far from putting himself between the events and his readers, he hides himself. The reader no longer believes he reads; he believes he sees.¹⁰

Friedrich Nietzsche praised Thucydides in the highest terms as a seeker of the truth, one especially superior to Plato and his followers: “My recovery, my preference, my cure from all Platonism has always been *Thucydides*”; “*Courage* in the face of reality ultimately distinguishes such natures as Thucydides and Plato: Plato is a coward in the face of reality – *consequently* he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has control of *himself* – consequently he also maintains control of things.”¹¹ For these philosophers, Thucydides is exemplary as both a thinker and a teacher.

A History?

It is not, however, altogether clear how we should go about studying Thucydides’ book in order to discover for ourselves its intended teaching, for it is not altogether clear what kind of book it is. It is of course commonly known as a history.¹² One might therefore think that one should study the book as a chronicle of the twenty-seven-year-long war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians. Yet, in contrast even with Herodotus – whose book entitled *Histories* is, to be sure, far from simply being a chronicle of events, and who does not use the Greek word ἱστορία primarily to signify a chronicle of events, as Aristotle does, but rather to

⁹ Grene 1989, xx, xxii. Hoekstra suggests that “Hobbes sees in Thucydides a cautionary history fitted to the politics of his own times, as well as a model for his own actions” (2023, 280). For one account of the relation between the views of Thucydides and Hobbes on politics and human nature, consider Ahrens Dorf 2000.

¹⁰ Rousseau 1979, 239.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “What I Owe the Ancients,” in Nietzsche 2009, 2. Emphases in the text. The translation is mine.

¹² Cicero (*Brutus* 287, *De Oratore* 2.13.55–56, *Orator* 30–32), Diodorus Siculus (*Bibliothēke* 12.37.2), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Letter to Pompeius* 768ff., *On Thucydides*), all of whom wrote during the first century BCE, seem to be the earliest writers whose works we possess who refer to Thucydides as a “historian.”

signify a philosophic inquiry, as Plato does – Thucydides never calls his own book a history, nor does he ever even use the Greek word for “history” – ἱστορία – in his work.¹³ What is more, in contrast with Herodotus, who states in the very opening of his work that he is writing his book “so that neither what has come to pass as a result of human beings may fade with time, nor that the great and wondrous deeds set forth by the Greeks and the barbarians may come to be without glory,” Thucydides never states that his goal in writing is to preserve the glorious memory of the doings of human beings as a whole or of the deeds of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians in their war against one another in particular. When Thucydides does speak of chronicling certain events, he does so in what he calls a “digression [ἐκβολή]” in his book (1.97.2).

It is certainly true that Thucydides' work does resemble a history insofar as it chronicles an actual event, the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, in considerable detail. There are, however, four ways in which Thucydides indicates through the composition of his work that his primary intention is not simply to chronicle the Peloponnesian War. In the first place, and most importantly, he states (1.22.4) that his goal is to benefit his readers by enabling them to recognize for themselves the lasting truth about human beings and human affairs: “it will suffice if they [that is, the words he writes] are judged beneficial by as many as will wish to view with clarity both the things that have come to pass and the things that will be in the future, ever again such, or nearly such, in accordance with that which is human.” The phrase “that which is human [τὸ ἀνθρώπειον]” has a considerable and precise significance in Thucydides' writing. It appears only two other times in his book: when the Syracusan statesman Hermocrates explains to the Sicilians gathered at Gela with regard to the Athenians' imperial ambitions (4.61.5–6), “And it is very excusable that the Athenians grasp for more and think ahead regarding these things, and I do not blame them for wishing to have an empire,¹⁴ but rather those who are too ready to submit; for it is natural for that which is human [τὸ ἀνθρώπειον] always to rule the one who yields, but to guard oneself against the one who attacks”; and when the Athenian ambassadors at Melos explain to the Melian oligarchs (5.105. 2), “For we hold by opinion with respect to that which is divine and with certainty with respect to that which

¹³ See Herodotus, for example, 1.1, 2.9, 2.113, 2.118, 7.96; Aristotle *Poetics* 1451b3; Plato *Phaedo* 96a8. Edmunds (1975, 6) and Forde (1989, 111) refer to the use of the title of the work as “History” as merely “a useful convention.”

¹⁴ Or simply “to rule [ἄρχειν].”

is human [τὸ ἀνθρώπειον] that always, as a result of a necessity of nature, wherever anyone has the power to do so, one rules.” Both of these passages link the phrase “that which is human” to the key philosophic term “nature [φύσις]” and thereby suggest that the phrase “that which is human” means the lasting character of being human, a character which, according to Hermocrates and the Athenian ambassadors at Melos at least, is universal, necessary, and permanent. Thucydides also explicitly mentions the key philosophic phrase “human nature,” and discusses that key philosophic theme, five times in the book – twice indirectly, in a speech by anonymous Athenian ambassadors at Sparta (1.76.3) and in a speech by the (otherwise unknown) Athenian Diodotus (3.45.7), and three times directly, in his own name, when he is discussing the plague that ravaged Athens (2.50.1) and the factional strife that began in Corcyra and ultimately ravaged Greece as a whole (3.82.2, 3.84.2). Thucydides’ account of the war – his “history” – is, then, not intended primarily as a chronicle of this particular war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, but rather as a means to the philosophic end of revealing to his readers the true character of humankind always and everywhere.¹⁵

Secondly, Thucydides includes in his work speeches – moving and instructive speeches – that are not records of what was actually said, as a chronicler would, but that are composed by Thucydides himself, as a poet would: “but, in my opinion, as each would have spoken what especially was needed concerning the things that are always present,¹⁶ thus was it stated – holding myself as near as possible to the whole thought of what was truly

¹⁵ Consider Romilly’s remark: “Clearly this attempt to encompass reality and to meet it with the highest level of intelligence possible constitutes Thucydides’ overwhelming originality” (2009, 376). See also her statement about Thucydides that “Facts, with him, are subordinate to ideas” (1963, 258). Consider also Bruell 1974, 11; Bolotin 1987, 7. According to Thucydides’ biographer Marcellinus, who lived in the sixth century CE, Thucydides “philosophizes” in his book (*Life of Thucydides* 53). In his discussion of Thucydides in *The City and Man*, Strauss declares early on that “we have no right to assume that philosophy is present in Thucydides or for Thucydides,” and he raises the possibility that “Perhaps Thucydides’ ‘quest for the truth’ (1.20.3) antedates essentially, *i.e.* not temporally, the distinction between history and philosophy.” (1964, 143). Toward the end of his discussion, however, Strauss refers to Thucydides as “a philosophic historian” (236).

¹⁶ The phrase περί τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων might be construed to mean, in this context, “the circumstances on every occasion,” but the more literal meaning – “the things that are always present” – more clearly refers to what he proceeds to say in a few sentences is the purpose of his book: to make clear what the lasting character of “that which is human is,” that is, what the fundamental character and condition of human beings is, so that his book will be a possession for “always [αἰεὶ]” (1.22.4).

said" (1.22.1). Thucydides composes the speeches with a view to what is "needed" in order to enable the reader to understand both the thought of the speaker, in particular, and the lasting truth about the character and condition of human beings that the speeches and the deeds presented in his work point to, as a whole. It is, then, Thucydides himself who composes such speeches as the aforementioned ones by the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Melos, Diodotus and Hermocrates, that explicitly discuss the permanent nature of human beings.¹⁷

Thirdly, Thucydides does not present the events of the war, as a chronicler might, in the light of the outcome of the war. Remarkably, he hardly ever mentions who won this twenty-seven-year-long war and why. Instead, he presents the events of the war almost entirely as they unfolded for the participants in the war.¹⁸ As Plutarch observes, in words later echoed by Hobbes and Rousseau, "Thucydides, then, always strives for this vividness in his speech, desiring eagerly to make the auditor, as it were, a spectator, and to produce in the ones who are reading the stunning and confusing passions that encompassed the ones who were seeing."¹⁹ Indeed,

¹⁷ There has been much debate over how one should understand the speeches in Thucydides. See Pouncey 1980, 165–167; Palmer 1992, 4, 53; Orwin 1994, 207–209. On the one hand, Grene argues that the speeches are neither "free inventions" nor "literal reports" but "literary rewritings of actual speeches," on the grounds that, if, for example, Thucydides had done more than merely "embroider" the arguments of the Athenian ambassadors at Melos, he could not be trusted as "a truthful historian" (1965, 20–23). See also Cogan 1981, x–xvi. On the other hand, Romilly emphasizes the degree to which Thucydides composes the speeches, especially those given by anonymous speakers: for example, with regard to the speech of the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, "it is the voice of Athens herself which is speaking" (1963, 242). With regard to the speeches of the Athenian ambassadors and the Melian oligarchs in the Melian Dialogue, she maintains, "the dialogue itself is as much Thucydides' own work as one of Plato's dialogues"; she asks, "Can we really imagine a group of ambassadors carrying on this closely knit discussion in a manner unknown to Greek diplomacy or, for that matter, to diplomacy in general?"; and she concludes, "This way of arguing indicates Thucydides' own intervention and his desire to give his own treatment of the question of imperialism as a whole" (274). Even regarding the debate between Cleon and his "unknown opponent" Diodotus – whom she denies is "fictitious" – Romilly maintains that "The two speeches were thus composed by Thucydides in such a way that the systematic contrast between them, although improbable in an actual debate, brought out the wisdom of one solution compared with the folly of the other" (160). See also 163–164. Consider Greenwood's comment about the Melian Dialogue: "the author has become playwright" (2023, 66). See, too, Nichols 2015, 8–10, as well as Palmer 1992, 125n22.

¹⁸ By way of contrast, consider Herodotus' noteworthy allusions in his narrative to the eventual outcome and aftermath of the Persian War: for example, 5.97, 5.102, 7.5–19, 7.45–52, 7.57, 8.3, 8.109, 9.14, 9.73.

¹⁹ Plutarch *Of the Glory of the Athenians* 3 in *Moralia* 346f–347a. Hobbes remarks, after citing these words of Plutarch, "For he setteth his reader in the assemblies of the people

Thucydides refers to the end of the war only six times in the entire work;²⁰ he refers only three times to the outcome of the war – the crushing victory of the Spartans and their allies over the Athenians;²¹ and he does not refer to the defeat of Athens for the first time until over one-fifth of the book has been completed, some 33,000 words into this 151,679-word book (2.65.12). Thucydides' instruction of the reader concerning the lasting truth about human beings evidently requires a dramatic presentation of the war as it was lived by its participants rather than a synoptic bird's-eye view that takes in all at once the beginning, middle, and end of the war.²²

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, Thucydides does not end his work with the end of the war, as a chronicler of the war would, even though he clearly indicates that he lived to see the end of the war and beyond.²³ It is possible that Thucydides died before he was able to finish the book.²⁴ The strongest textual support for this view is his statement that “The same Thucydides, an Athenian, has recorded [γέγραφε] these” events of the war “until the time when the Spartans and their allies put an end to the empire of the Athenians and took the long walls and the Peiraeus” (5.26.1).²⁵ Thucydides' statement here may be interpreted to signify that he recorded the events of the entire war because he intended to write this book as a chronicle of all twenty-seven years of the conflict. However,

and in the senate, at their debating; in the streets, at their sedition; and in the field, at their battles” (Grene 1989, xxii; see also 377). Consider also Rousseau 1979, 239.

²⁰ 1.13.3–4, 1.18.1, 1.23.1–2, 2.65, 5.26, 6.15.

²¹ See 2.65.12, 6.15.3–4, and especially 5.26.1. Consider, for example, Thucydides' warning to the reader against underestimating the power of Sparta and overestimating that of Athens (1.10.1–2), where it might have seemed especially appropriate for him to refer explicitly to Sparta's final victory over Athens. In Forde's words, “the art of interpreting Thucydides is a matter of developing a sensitive eye for emphases and juxtapositions, as well as for those explicit judgments that Thucydides occasionally makes, and an ear even for silences, insofar as those things are useful in guiding us to an awareness of Thucydides' purpose” (Forde 1989, 3–4).

²² As Edmunds puts it, Thucydides generally narrates “events from the actor's point of view” – the actor who is “facing the unknown future” (Edmunds 1975, 4).

²³ See especially 5.26 and perhaps 2.100.1–2, as well as 2.65.12 and 6.15.3–4.

²⁴ For this claim, see Thucydides' sixth century CE biographer Marcellinus 45. According to W. Rhys Roberts, “Admirers of Thucydides were supposed by the later Greek critics to have been so carried away by fanaticism that they left their histories unfinished in imitation of him!” (1900, 454). On the other hand, according to the first-century BCE historian and literary critic Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Thucydides ended his book where he intended, though he left portions of the book as a whole insufficiently polished. See *On Thucydides* 12, 16.

²⁵ For purposes of clarity, I will substitute the text's use of “Lacedaimonians” with “Spartans.”

Thucydides appears to draw a significant distinction between recording – γράφω – the events of the war and putting the war together in writing – συγγράφω. When Thucydides speaks of himself as writing his book he almost always uses the word συγγράφω – “to put together in writing.” Of the sixteen times this verb appears in the book, fourteen refer to Thucydides putting the war together in writing.²⁶ Of the twenty times the verb γράφω appears, two times refer to Thucydides recording events of the war,²⁷ one refers to him recording events in what he calls a “digression” (1.97.2), one refers to him choosing not to record the number of those who died (3.113.6), one refers to him being unable to record accurately the numbers of soldiers at the battle of Mantinea (5.68.2), and three refer impersonally to the seasons of the war and the first ten years of the war being recorded – γέγραπται – by him.²⁸ Thucydides evidently means to distinguish between the act of recording the events of the war and the act of putting the war together in writing, that is, into a writing that does not simply chronicle events but that artfully – in part, for example, through speeches that he did not record but composed – shows how this war reveals the fundamental character and condition of human beings (1.22). In other words, Thucydides first recorded the events of the whole war for himself, as he lived it, and then, drawing on but not simply following that record, he put the war together in writing which, in his judgment, given his philosophic rather than historical intention in composing this work, did not require him to recount the final six years of the war.²⁹

By ending the book where he does, in 411,³⁰ during the twenty-first year of the war, Thucydides omits seven important developments during the remainder of the war: the return of Alcibiades to power in Athens in 411; the Athenian naval victory of Cyzicus in 410 that eliminated for a number of years the imminent threat posed by the Spartan navy; the revival of Sparta's navy thanks above all to Persian assistance; the removal of Alcibiades from power in Athens in 406; the Athenian naval victory at Arginusae in 406; the crushing Spartan naval defeat of Athens at

²⁶ 1.1.1, 2.70.4, 2.103.1, 3.25.2, 3.88.4, 3.116.3, 4.51.1, 4.104.4, 4.135.2, 6.7.4, 6.93.4, 7.18.4, 8.6.5, 8.60.3. For the other two appearances, see 5.41.3, 8.67.1.

²⁷ 1.22.2, 5.26.1.

²⁸ 2.1.1, 5.20.3, 5.24.2. For the other twelve appearances, see 1.133, 1.137.4, 4.50.2, 5.29.2, 5.29.3, 5.56.2, 6.55.1, 6.55.2, 7.8.2, 7.14.1, 8.50.5, 8.67.2.

²⁹ Consider Marcellinus 47; Hobbes's remarks in Grene 1989, 573; Pouncey 1980 163–164.

³⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, all dates in the text are BCE.

Aegospotami in 405; and the final surrender of Athens in 404.³¹ However, Thucydides' book anticipates or refers to what would seem to be the most important of these developments. Near the end of the book, he refers to Alcibiades' imminent return to power in Athens (8.97.3). The very end of the book describes Tissaphernes' journey to effect a reconciliation with the Spartans, a reconciliation that foreshadows the final Spartan–Persian collaboration that, as Thucydides explains earlier in his eulogy to Pericles, ended the war six years later.³² What is more, in a flashforward within Thucydides' narrative, in the middle of the Athenian debate over the Sicilian Expedition in 416 (6.15.3–4), he refers to the fateful removal of Alcibiades from power in 406 and the subsequent defeat and surrender of Athens in the war in 405–404. It therefore would seem that Thucydides completed the book as we have it because, in his judgment, he had fulfilled his intention of recounting as much of the war as was needful for his goal of enabling the reader to view the permanent truth about “that which is human.”³³

A Philosophic Book?

Thucydides' explicitly philosophic intention in writing this book in order to convey lasting truths about the character and condition of human beings suggests that his book is better understood as a work of philosophy than as a work of history. As we have seen, the book has commanded the interest and admiration of such philosophers as Xenophon, Lucretius, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. Moreover, in contrast with the term “history,” the term “philosophy” does appear in Thucydides' book, only once, and not in his own name, but prominently, in by far the longest speech in the book given by the speaker who speaks at greater length than any one else in the book: in the Funeral Oration of Pericles.³⁴ There Thucydides' Pericles

³¹ See Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.1.1–23, 1.1.25, 1.4.11–23, 1.5.2–11, 1.5.16–17, 1.6.29–34, 2.1.13–15, 2.1.21–32, 2.2.3–23.

³² 8.109; see 2.65.12.

³³ For other accounts in favor of the view that Thucydides may have ended his work as he intended, consider Strauss 1964, 227n89; 1983, 101; Pouncey 1980, x–xii, 38–39, 42–43, 139–150; Connor 1984, 217–219, 229–231; Forde 1989, 117n2, 171n53.

³⁴ Pericles' Funeral Oration, 2.35–46, is 1933 words. The next longest speech in the book is the speech by the Plataeans at 3.53–59, which is 1326 words. Pericles gives three speeches in direct discourse, for a sum of 4150 words (1.140–144 – 1212 words; Funeral Oration; and 2.61–64 – 1005 words). Three of the eight longest speeches in the book are by Pericles. The list of the longest eight speeches is as follows: (1) the Funeral Oration; (2) the Plataeans' speech; (3) Diodotus' speech, 3.42–48 – 1245 words; (4) Pericles' first

declares of his fellow Athenians, “we philosophize [or love wisdom – φιλοσοφούμεν] without softness” (2.40.1). As we have seen, Thucydides states, as a philosopher might, that he seeks to enable the reader to view with clarity enduring truths about “that which is human” (1.22.4). He indicates as well that he himself is engaged in “the search for the truth” (1.20.3). Thucydides, as we have noted, also explicitly mentions the key philosophic phrase “human nature,” and presents explicit discussions of that key philosophic theme, five times in the book.³⁵ What is more, Thucydides presents, in the seemingly philosophic, Socratic form of a dialogue, a discussion, not with long speeches but with brief exchanges, between anonymous Athenian ambassadors and Melian oligarchs, in which the Athenians discuss the “nature” of hope (5.103.1), especially hope in divine providence, and the “necessity of nature” that, as they argue, governs all human beings (5.105.2).³⁶ In the Melian Dialogue in particular but also in the speeches of the Athenian ambassadors in Sparta and Diodotus, characters address such crucial philosophic questions as, are human beings necessarily self-interested or not? Are human beings cared for by providential gods or not?³⁷ In these passages one sees most clearly the philosophic dimension of Thucydides' work.

Inasmuch, then, as it seeks to teach the truth about human nature, Thucydides' book is a philosophic book. It therefore resembles such works as the accounts of the great philosophers and philosophic thinkers who lived earlier than or contemporary with Thucydides – for example, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Epicharmus, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles,

speech; (5) the Thebans' speech, 3.61–67 – 1212 words; (6) Cleon's speech, 3.37–40 – 1174 words; (7) the Athenian ambassadors' speech at Sparta, 1.73–78 – 1089 words; and (8) Pericles' last speech. The next longest speaker in the book after Pericles is Nicias, who gives six speeches in direct discourse and writes one lengthy letter to the Athenians (which I count as a speech of his since it is written by Nicias in his capacity as a general, it is presented by Thucydides in direct discourse, and it was read aloud to the Athenians by the city clerk – 7.10), for a sum of 3349 words (6.9–14 – 968 words; 6.20–23 – 600 words; 6.68 – 177 words; 7.11–15 – 742 words; 7.61–64 – 600 words; 7.77 – 339 words).

³⁵ See p. 5, and also 2.64.3, 3.39.5, 3.43.5, 4.19.4, 4.61.5.

³⁶ See 5.85 and compare with Plato *Gorgias* 449b4–c6, 461c8–d7. Plato was younger than Thucydides and in all probability published all of his written dialogues after Thucydides published his book, but Socrates was a contemporary of Thucydides in Athens and his custom of engaging in philosophic dialogues may therefore have been familiar to Thucydides. According to Marcellinus (22), Thucydides was a student of the philosopher Anaxagoras, as was Socrates, according to Diogenes Laertius (2.19; see also Plato *Phaedo* 97b8ff.). According to Diogenes Laertius (3.48), philosophic dialogues were reportedly first written down by Zeno, a student of Parmenides.

³⁷ See 1.75–76, 3.45, 5.104–5.

Philolaus, Archytas, Diogenes of Apollonia, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Prodicus, and Antiphon – concerning the nature of things as a whole³⁸ and – in the cases of at least Epicharmus, Diogenes of Apollonia, Prodicus, Socrates, Xenophon, and Plato – concerning human nature in particular.³⁹ Yet, if Thucydides' book is properly understood as a philosophic book, it is a philosophic book of a most peculiar kind. For it seeks to reveal the truth about human nature, not by directly presenting Thucydides' own account of human nature, as the works of the philosophers characteristically do, nor by presenting the accounts of an explicitly philosophic figure, as the works of Plato and Xenophon do, but indirectly, by presenting the speeches and deeds of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians during the war that they waged against one another. Indeed, even though Thucydides lived and wrote in Athens during a golden age of philosophy and even though, according to the writings of Thucydides' younger contemporaries Xenophon and Plato, such key figures of Thucydides' book as Pericles, Alcibiades, and even, in some measure, Nicias, were close associates of philosophers, Thucydides never presents or even refers to a single philosopher by name in his entire book.⁴⁰ And again, he mentions the word "philosophy" only once and never in his own name and, what is most noteworthy, he never calls himself a "philosopher."⁴¹ In sharp contrast especially with Plato, Thucydides apparently hides the figure of the philosopher. While the end of his book is philosophic – to teach the permanent and universal truth about human nature – the means is historical – to give an account of a particular conflict between the alliance of the

³⁸ For references to their accounts of nature, see Diels-Kranz fragments of the pre-Socratics, Anaximander B 1, 2; Xenophanes A 28; Heraclitus A 5, 9, 16, B 123; Epicharmus B 2, 37, 40; Parmenides A 2, 11, B 10; Empedocles A 5, 9, 14, 23, 52, 73, 78, 86, 94, B 108; Philolaus B 1, 6, 9, 11; Archytas B 1; Anaxagoras B 1, 21 and Aristotle *Physics* 187a12ff., *On the Generation of Animals* 756b13ff., 763b3off., *Meteorologica* 365a14–27, Plutarch *Nicias* 23, Diogenes Laertius 2.7; Democritus A 33, 36, 47, 49, 59, 65, 66, B 5c, 33, 176, 267, 278; Prodicus B 3; Antiphon B 44. According to Marcellinus (22), Anaxagoras was Thucydides' teacher in philosophy, and Antiphon was his teacher as well.

³⁹ See Epicharmus B 10; Prodicus B 4; and, for example, Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.4.11–19, 2.8.19–29, 3.9.1–3, 3.11.11–15, 4.1–2; Plato *Republic* 370a7–c5, 374a5–376c5, 489e3–497c4, 514a1–521b11, and *Alcibiades* I, whose traditional subtitle is "On Human Nature."

⁴⁰ For Pericles' association with Anaxagoras, see Plato *Phaedrus* 269e1–270a8. See also Isocrates *Antidosis* 235–236; Plutarch *Pericles* 4, 6, 8, 16.5–7, 32; Diogenes Laertius 2.12–14. For Alcibiades' association with Socrates, see Plato *Alcibiades* I; *Alcibiades* II; *Protagoras*; *Symposium* 212c4–223a9; *Gorgias* 481d1–4; Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.2.40–46. For Nicias' association with Socrates, see Plato *Laches*.

⁴¹ We will discuss this very point in Chapter 6.

Peloponnesians, led by the city of Sparta, and the city of Athens. Why does Thucydides proceed in this manner?

The Search for the Truth about Human Beings I: Observation and the Problem of Previously Held Opinions

In order to understand why Thucydides offers his teaching about human nature through an account of the war between Sparta and Athens, let us return to Thucydides' account of the goal of the book. After identifying himself, indirectly, as one engaged in "the search for the truth" (1.20.3), he states that, "it will suffice if they [that is, the words he writes] are judged beneficial by as many as will wish to view [or observe – σκοπεῖν] with clarity both the things that have come to pass and the things that will be in the future, ever again such, or nearly such, in accordance with that which is human" (1.22.4). His goal is evidently to enable his readers "to view [or observe] with clarity" the enduring character of human affairs so that they may understand the truth about human beings and the human condition. But how is one to discover that truth? Thucydides' first answer is, apparently, through observing the "evidence" of human "deeds." By using the Greek verb "σκοπεῖν," which primarily means "to observe," "to view," or "to look at," but which also means, more metaphorically, "to look into," "to consider," or "to examine," Thucydides suggests that we are to find the truth about what is human through observation. And, to begin with, that is how he presents his own search for the truth. Thucydides stresses six times in the first twenty-two chapters – that is, in his account of "the ancient times" (1.3.1) or Archaeology – that his judgments are based on "evidence [τεκμήριον]"⁴² and four times he presents himself as "observing [σκοπεῖν]" first, "evidence" of the human condition in ancient times, and lastly, as an example of such evidence, the "deeds themselves" of human beings in this war.⁴³ He also portrays himself, indirectly, as observing the exhumed bodies on the island of Delos and drawing conclusions about human society in olden times therefrom (1.8.1). Thucydides presents himself as seeking to know human nature, then, by direct and detached "observation," just as a scientist might seek to know the nature of beings by observing them – just as, to cite two examples, Aristophanes presents the philosopher Socrates in the *Clouds* as seeking to know the nature of the sun by "observing it [σκοπεῖν]" (231) and Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* presents

⁴² 1.1.11, 1.1.3, 1.3.3, 1.9.4, 1.20.1, 1.21.1.

⁴³ 1.1.3, 1.21.2; see also 1.10.3, 1.10.5. Consider as well 1.8.1.

his youthful self as seeking to know the nature of the heaven and the earth by “observing [σκοπεῖν]” their properties.⁴⁴ At first glance, then, according to the apparent example of Thucydides at the beginning of his book, we come to know the truth about human beings and the human condition simply by examining them as they reveal themselves to our eyes.⁴⁵

Yet, upon more careful examination, we see that Thucydides clearly and purposefully demonstrates in these chapters that it is impossible to come to know the truth about human beings simply through direct and detached observation, for two related reasons. First, as Thucydides especially illustrates through his treatment of Homer, the conclusions that we draw from our observations of human beings about the fundamental character and condition of human beings are not simply based on our observations but tend also to be based on our previously held assumptions or opinions about the fundamental character and condition of human beings. We tend, that is, to interpret our observations in the light of our preexisting beliefs and hence tend to fit those observations into the framework provided by those beliefs. Secondly, as Thucydides indicates from the very beginning of the book, we human beings naturally encounter the world not as detached observers but as engaged observers. We have attachments to family and country, for example. As the first words of the book underscore, Thucydides is not, to begin with, a scientist or a philosopher but “an Athenian” (see also 5.26.1). As he later informs us as well, he is “Thucydides the son of Olorus” (4.104.4). Inasmuch as we begin as members of families and countries, we begin observing the world with previously held opinions about the fundamental character of human beings and of the world that we have inherited from our families and countries and that inevitably, at least to begin with, inform and shape our observations. Our path, then, to understanding human nature does not begin by simply observing humans but rather by identifying, examining, and testing the previously held opinions about the fundamental character and condition of human beings that shape us and even define us. Not only observation of the deeds of others but also, and above all, the examination of opinions that we ourselves hold – the speeches that are authoritative for us – constitute our first steps toward wisdom about

⁴⁴ 96b7–c2. But see also 99d4–e5. Romilly goes so far as to declare the *Archaeology* “a rationalist manifesto in every sense of the word,” one that introduces “diverse methods” “of a truly scientific quality” (2011, 151).

⁴⁵ 1.1.1, 1.21.3.

human nature.⁴⁶ Accordingly, at the end of the first twenty-two chapters, Thucydides adopts a new, second approach to the study of that which is human, one that focuses precisely on the authoritative speeches of the leaders and statesmen of the Athenians and the Spartans, together with their allies.

Thucydides begins the book by setting forth the thesis that the Peloponnesian War was the greatest war – as he puts it, the “greatest motion” – that has ever taken place, not only among Greeks but also among a certain portion of barbarians and, so to speak, among most of humankind” (1.1.2). This thesis – that, as he elaborates, the participants were the best prepared in every way for this war and that they represented a “peak” of human achievement and human development – makes a most significant claim about “that which is human,” that is, about the fundamental character and condition of human beings (1.1.1). For it holds that human beings have progressed over the past, that the history of humanity is one of movement from a lack of preparation to ever greater preparation, from smallness to ever more greatness, from valleys to ever higher peaks, from, to speak more broadly, an almost animalistic condition to ever greater civilization. But is this far-reaching thesis about human beings and the human condition sound?⁴⁷ What is it based on?

As Thucydides explains, “For though it was impossible, on account of the length of time, to discover clearly what happened before this [war] and what is still more ancient, nevertheless, from the evidence that I, having observed it to the greatest extent, came to trust,⁴⁸ I believe that nothing great came into being, either as regards wars or with respect to anything else” (1.1.3). He acknowledges here that his belief about the singular greatness of the Peloponnesian War must be based not only on knowledge of this war, which may be based on direct observation, but on knowledge of

⁴⁶ I therefore agree with those scholars who stress the importance of Thucydides' own beliefs and attachments – that he is, as Connor puts it, “a person of intense engagement with the events which he narrates” (1977, 291) and, in Low's words, “deeply embedded in 5th century BCE Athens” (2023, 4). Consider, for example, Parry 1972: Thucydides' book “is an intensely personal and tragic work. A careful reader feels this from the very first sentence” (47). Consider as well Rhodes 2023, 58–62. However, as I will argue in what follows, Thucydides is fully aware of those beliefs and attachments and of the problem they pose for his search for the truth, he purposefully draws his readers' attention to that problem in the opening chapters of his book, and he addresses that problem in his book.

⁴⁷ As Connor (1984, 21) remarks of Thucydides' account of progress in the Archaeology, “Nor are the arguments in support of this position always compelling.”

⁴⁸ Or “have faith in [πιστεύω].”

the past wars and, indeed, on an all-encompassing understanding of the past, that cannot be based on direct observation. But how is such a knowledge and understanding of such ancient times to be attained? Thucydides admits that a “clear” understanding is not within his grasp, but he contends that his understanding is based on “evidence” that, after lengthy observation and examination, he has come to have trust or faith in. What is the evidence? Thucydides’ understanding of the “weakness of the ancient” times, by his own initial account, is based on two kinds of evidence: direct observation of the Greeks and the non-Greeks – the “barbarians” – of his own times and the poetry of Homer. Thucydides proceeds to show, however, that neither kind of evidence forms the true basis of his belief in the inferiority of ancient times and the greatness of modern times.

Thucydides cites the current, observable, practices of Greeks and barbarians, such as regarding piracy as a respectable profession, as some mainland Greeks still do (1.5.2); carrying weapons at all times, as the barbarians and some Greeks still do (1.6.2); and wearing clothes during athletic competitions, as the barbarians still do (1.6.5); and claims that these practices all existed more widely in the past. As he puts it, “Someone might point out many other respects in which the way of life of Greece of old resembled the current barbaric way of life” (1.6.6). Yet how does Thucydides know that current practices of the barbarians resemble the ancient practices of the Greeks? Is his claim that they do based on evidence that he has observed or is it based on the previously held opinion that the Greeks of old must have been inferior in every way to the Greeks of his day – the very opinion he is purportedly trying to support with “evidence” that he has “observed to the greatest extent” (1.1.3)?

Thucydides’ citation of Homer’s poems as evidence for his belief that the ancient times were inferior in every way to modern times is even more problematic. To support his claim that before the Trojan War the Greeks never acted in common and hence were not unified, he cites as evidence from Homer the fact that he does not name the ancestors of the Greeks as Greeks in his poems but only as Danaans, Argives, and Achaians (1.3.3). To support his claim that Agamemnon, the leader of the expedition against Troy, was so powerful that he gathered all the warriors together “not so much by good will as by fear,” Thucydides cites as evidence a line from Homer’s *Iliad* (2.108) asserting the great extent of Agamemnon’s rule (1.9.3–4). To support his claim concerning the number of ships and men who went on the expedition to conquer Troy, Thucydides cites as evidence the account of the number of ships given by Homer in the

Iliad.⁴⁹ Thucydides also refers, without attribution, as evidence for his claim that piracy was widespread and considered respectable in ancient times, to lines from the *Odyssey*.⁵⁰ Most of the specific evidence that Thucydides cites to support his overall account of the ancient times as disunited, insecure, and relatively weak comes not from direct observation but from the poems of Homer, that is, from the authority of Homer. Indeed, Thucydides warns against relying on the evidence of observing the ruins of Mycenae “now” to conclude that it was never powerful, since it is not reasonable “to view [σκοπεῖν] the visible appearances of cities more than their power” (1.10.1–3). And in order to view the power of ancient Mycenae one should, Thucydides says, “view” the account – the evidently trustworthy account – of Homer (1.10.3–5). The principal basis of Thucydides’ far-reaching thesis that the olden times of humanity were weak and that the human condition is therefore one of progress is, then, not his own direct observations but the authority of Homer.

By invoking so prominently the authority of Homer’s poems in support of his thesis that the ancient times were in every way inferior to modern times, Thucydides invites the reader to consider to what extent Homer’s poems as a whole support that thesis. If one turns to Homer’s poems, however, one discovers that they present an overall account of the fundamental character of human beings and the human condition that flatly contradicts Thucydides’ thesis. For, according to Homer, the human beings of the past were markedly superior to those of today, and the human beings of the distant past were even more superior. For example, his aged hero Nestor goes so far as to declare that the men in his youth were the greatest of mortals and far superior even to Achilles, the son of a goddess and the man proclaimed by Homer, “the best of the Achaians.”⁵¹ What is more, Homer presents a religious and heroic account of humanity wherein humans beings were and are descended from and cared for by gods, humans are motivated by a noble concern for others as well as for themselves, and individual human beings are capable of outstanding feats of virtue and strength. Once one keeps Homer’s overall account of the character and condition of human beings in mind, one sees that, notwithstanding Thucydides’ invocation of the authority of Homer, Thucydides emphatically rejects that account. For example, Thucydides refers by name to three characters whom Homer identifies as children of gods – Achilles,

⁴⁹ See 1.10.3 and *Iliad* 2.484ff. ⁵⁰ See 1.5.2 and *Odyssey* 3.71–74, 9.252–255.

⁵¹ *Iliad* 1.259–273. For Achilles, see 1.407–412, 2.768–770, 22.158–159; see also 7.226–232, 16.21, 16.274, 16.707–709, 17.274–280.

son of Thetis; Minos, son of Zeus; Perseus, son of Zeus – without making any reference at all to their divine descent and thereby apparently denying that descent.⁵² Similarly, while Homer's heroes are said to be not only descended from gods but also cared for by the gods, especially by Zeus, whom Homer calls fourteen times in his poems "The Father of Gods and Men," Thucydides' account of the "olden times" of Greece in the first twenty-two chapters of his work is simply silent on both the divine origin of human beings and divine providence over human beings.⁵³ Furthermore, while Homer's poems as a whole apparently present an account of the past as markedly superior to the present, Thucydides' account of the Greek past simply asserts the superiority of the present to the past, in power, wealth, security, and civilization. As he declares at the beginning of his account of the olden times, "I believe that nothing great came into being, either as regards wars or with respect to anything else" (1.1.3). In the absence of the gods as Homer describes them, Thucydides portrays the overall condition of humans in the past as one of profound insecurity due to the lack of effective human fortifications, the continuous threat of violent attacks and raids from other human beings, and hence the need for everyone to be armed, everywhere and always, for possible mortal conflict.⁵⁴ The Greeks were so divided among themselves that they did not even have the common name of Greek, and when they did unite for the expedition against Troy, they were hampered by lack of wealth and lack of military expertise.⁵⁵ What is more, Thucydides refers to words spoken by Homer's Nestor himself in the *Odyssey* – and later repeated by Polyphemus the Cyclops – after the end of the Trojan War to show that the Greeks of old were so morally inferior to present day Greeks that they did not even regard piracy as a shameful practice.⁵⁶ The olden times of Greece then, in Thucydides' account, were weak in every way, and that weakness has apparently been followed by a steady growth in security and wealth, in artistic beauty and social trust, and in knowledge and the practical application of knowledge to military and political affairs.⁵⁷ In stark contrast with the account of Homer, then, Thucydides' account of the past here is

⁵² See 1.3.3, 1.4. 1.8.2, 1.9.2 and Homer *Iliad*, for example, 1.351–427, 13.450, 14.313–328.

⁵³ Homer *Iliad* 1.544, 4.68, 5.426, 5.764, 8.49, 8.132, 11.182, 15.12, 15.47, 16.458, 20.56, 22.167, 24.103; *Odyssey* (1.28). Odysseus twice declares that Zeus is the "Father of Gods and Men" (12.445, 18.137), the only human character in either poem to use that phrase, other than Homer himself.

⁵⁴ 1.2–3.1, 1.5–6.1. ⁵⁵ 1.3, 1.10.3–11.2, 1.13–14.1.

⁵⁶ See Thucydides 1.5.1–2 and Homer *Odyssey* 3.71–74, 9.252–255.

⁵⁷ See 1.4, 1.6.3–1.7, 1.8.2–3, 1.12.4–13.4, 1.15.1, 1.18.

altogether areligious and his account of the movement of the past to the present is one of continuous progress.

Finally, Thucydides simply replaces Homer's account of specific episodes that illustrate the great nobility and heroism of his characters with his own account of the self-interestedness and equality of the Homeric figures. While Homer's Achilles and Odysseus both affirm that the Achaians went on the Trojan Expedition in a spirit of generosity – out of “good will [χάρης]” for Agamemnon – Thucydides simply asserts that “in my opinion” they went “not so much by good will [χάρης] as by fear” – that is, fear for themselves.⁵⁸ And while, according to Homer, the Achaians did not build a wall around their camp at Troy until their greatest warrior Achilles withdrew from the fighting in the tenth year of the war, Thucydides simply asserts that “it is clear” that “once they arrived” at Troy the Achaians “built a wall” around their camp, on the apparently egalitarian assumption that no individual warrior could have been as important to the war against Troy as, according to Homer, Achilles was.⁵⁹ But these assertions invite the reader to ask: What is the basis of Thucydides' own account of these past events, of the olden times, and of the human condition as a whole? Is it any more reasonable to have faith in the veracity of his areligious, progressive, democratic account of the human condition than in that of Homer's religious, traditionalist, and heroic account?⁶⁰

Thucydides explains his rejection of Homer's account by sharply expressing his distrust for Homer and also for poets, writers, and most human beings as a whole. Even when citing Homer as evidence for the size of the Trojan Expedition, he remarks, “if one ought to trust the poetry of Homer again here too, which [expedition], being a poet, it is likely he would adorn so as to magnify it.”⁶¹ After calling into question the trustworthiness of

⁵⁸ See 1.9.3 and *Iliad* 1.152–160; *Odyssey* 5.306–7. ⁵⁹ See 1.11.1 and *Iliad* 7.336–343.

⁶⁰ Romilly characterizes Thucydides' overall discussion in the *Archaeology* as tendentious: “he only used poets when they provided information in an almost involuntary way” (2012, 147); he imposes a “realist” interpretation on Homer (159); “in his exposition of facts he is almost too rational” (166); “Thucydides risks being almost overly realist, and too rigidly projecting current models on past ones” – he is “too ready to accept progress in the direction of a single goal” (167); “Thucydides has, in the end, more or less consciously edited out, and dropped anything that might fall outside the of the system” (171). In somewhat similar language, Pouncey observes, “the deflation of the heroic is fairly systematic throughout Thucydides' account” in the *Archaeology* (1980, 47). Connor (1984, 21) describes the *Archaeology* as “polemical.” See also Pouncey 1980, 9; Hunter 2017, 32–36, 39–43.

⁶¹ 1.10.3; see 1.21.1, 1.22.4.

Homer, Thucydides goes on to call into question the trustworthiness of hearsay accounts as a whole – “it being difficult to trust in every piece of evidence” (1.20.1); “so unwilling are the many to trouble themselves in the search for the truth” (1.20.3) – and of the works as a whole of poets – who “adorn in order to magnify” – and prose writers – who compose “in order to attract the hearer more than to be truthful” (1.21.1). Yet Thucydides nonetheless concludes, in a seemingly self-contradictory way, that his own claims about the ancient times and about the human condition should be believed because they are based on “evidence” and that “this war . . . will make clear to those observing the deeds themselves that it nevertheless came to be greater than the ones before” (1.21.1–2). But given that Thucydides’ claims are based on the evidence of such works as those of Homer, which he has declared untrustworthy, why should one trust his claims?⁶² And even if one were capable of observing all the deeds themselves of the war between the Athens and Sparta, how could one reasonably conclude that “this war” was “greater” than earlier wars “before” if the accounts of the wars “before” are untrustworthy?

Thucydides’ explanation of his thesis concerning the human condition in the first twenty-two chapters of his book deliberately leads the reader to the following impasse: Thucydides both relies on Homer’s authority to support his thesis and rejects that authority. It is therefore unclear what the basis of his thesis is. Thucydides relies on Homer to support his claims regarding the disunity of Greece in olden times, the power of Agamemnon as king of Mycenae, and the number of ships in the Trojan Expedition as a whole, but he rejects Homer’s overall religious, traditionalist, and heroic account of the human condition. In these chapters, Thucydides relies on the authority of Homer’s poems insofar, but only insofar, as they support his own areligious, progressive, and democratic account of the human condition and he rejects that authority insofar as it does not support his own account. Therefore, it would seem, Thucydides’ account of that which is human cannot be based on the evidence provided by Homer’s poems, or on the evidence of his observation of the Greeks and the barbarians of his time, but simply reflects his own previously held belief in an areligious, progressive, and democratic account of the human condition. But is that belief sound?

⁶² Strauss appears to refer to this difficulty when he notes that, after explaining that Thucydides contends that Homer is “questionable,” “Yet it is precisely by trusting Homer that Thucydides succeeds in bringing to light the truth about the Trojan War” (1964, 157).

The Search for the Truth about Human Beings II: Observation and the Problem of Partiality

The other, related difficulty that Thucydides raises regarding the search for the truth about human nature through observation of human beings is that human beings are not naturally detached observers. We all begin as engaged observers, as human beings with attachments, for example, to family and country, that will inevitably tend, at least to begin with, to shape our observations of other human beings and of the world as a whole. Thucydides draws our attention to this difficulty at the very beginning of his book on the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians by identifying himself as “Thucydides an Athenian,” and therefore as a participant – as we later learn, a general (4.104.4) – in this war. The very first line thereby invites the question, is Thucydides not a partisan of Athens? Will his account of the war not tend to favor his homeland? Will his thoughts about the war not tend to reflect his feelings for Athens?⁶³

Thucydides clearly and purposefully reinforces this question by proceeding, as the author of the book, not only to inform us that he began to write the book at the beginning of the war but also, more notably, to explain *why* he began to write the book at the beginning of the war. As he reports, he was “hoping [ἐλπίζω] that it [the war] would be great and most worthy of account [or most worthy of reasoning – ἀξιολογώτατος] of the ones that had come to be before” (1.1.1). He begins his book, then, by drawing the reader’s attention to how he, Thucydides the Athenian, felt and what he thought at the beginning of the war between his city and the Peloponnesians. This statement of his feelings is unique within his book. While Thucydides shares his thoughts with his reader throughout the book, he never explicitly states how he felt at any other particular moment in his book. Thucydides does not even say what he felt, for example, when he discovered that he was infected with the plague or when the Athenians voted to exile him for twenty years or at the beginning of the Sicilian Expedition.⁶⁴ But he does tell us what he felt at the beginning of the war and he tells us, specifically, about his hope at the beginning of the war.

What might it mean that Thucydides hoped that the war would be great and most worthy of account? The word for “hope [ἐλπίζω]” and related words appear throughout Thucydides’ book 138 times, and most notably in such

⁶³ Consider Connor’s reference to “the recurring paradox of the *Histories*: the intense emotional power of a work ostensibly so detached” (1984, 6).

⁶⁴ See 2.47.3–54, 5.26.5, 6.1, 6.24, 6.31–32.

key passages of the book as the speech of Diodotus, the Melian Dialogue, the final speech of Nicias, and the opening of the book.⁶⁵ To be sure, the Greek word *ἐλπὶς* may mean either “hope” or “expectation.” If we translate the Greek verb *ἐλπίζω* as “to expect,” as the word in this passage is typically translated and as the word and its related forms fairly clearly appear to mean in thirteen passages in his work, the opening sentence suggests that Thucydides had a detached outlook at the beginning of the war.⁶⁶ He does not pass judgment on whether it would be good or bad for the war to be great and most worthy of account: He simply expects that it would be so. On this reading, Thucydides addresses us in the first sentence of the book as an Athenian, but only incidentally so, as a detached Athenian, not primarily concerned with the fortunes of his city in the war but rather with observing the magnitude of the war. This reading would present Thucydides as well as a disinterested human being – he expected that the war would be great and most worthy of account, without either welcoming or lamenting that it be such a war. But why, then, does he highlight the fact that he is an Athenian in the opening words of his book?

If, however, we translate the Greek word *ἐλπίζω* as “to hope,” as it clearly means the vast majority of times it appears in his book, 125 of 138 times, and in the key passages mentioned earlier, we must understand Thucydides to be presenting himself as, at the beginning of the war, a most interested and engaged observer.⁶⁷ He hoped that the war would be great and most worthy of account, and he welcomed that possibility, because he believed that it would be good if the war would be great and most worthy of account. How would that be good? For whom would it be good? It would seem,

⁶⁵ See 3.45.1, 3.45.5, 3.46.1, 5.102 (x2), 5.103.1, 5.103.3 (x2), 5.111.2, 5.113, 7.77.1, 7.77.3, 7.77.4, 1.1.1.

⁶⁶ See 2.59.3, 2.85.4, 2.102.3, 3.30.2, 3.30.3, 3.32.3, 4.9.3, 4.43.5, 5.7.3, 5.9.3, 6.34.2, 7.38.2, 7.61.2.

⁶⁷ I include 1.1.1 in this count, for the reasons indicated in the text: 1.1.1, 1.11.1, 1.65.1, 1.69.5, 1.70.3, 1.70.7, 1.74.3, 1.81.6, 1.84.4, 1.107.4, 1.127.2, 1.138.2, 1.143.2, 1.144.1, 2.7.1, 2.11.6, 2.20.2, 2.21.2, 2.42.4, 2.43.5, 2.43.6, 2.44.3, 2.50.4, 2.51.6, 2.53.4, 2.56.4, 2.62.5, 2.64.1, 2.75.1, 2.77.5, 2.80.1, 2.89.10, 3.3.3, 3.14.1, 3.20.1, 3.31.1, 3.39.3, 3.40.1, 3.45.1, 3.45.5, 3.46.1., 3.57.4, 3.62.4, 3.83.2, 3.84.3, 3.97.2, 4.8.4, 4.10.1, 4.13.1, 4.17.4, 4.28.5, 4.34.3, 4.62.3 (x2), 4.62.4, 4.65.4, 4.70.2, 4.76.5, 4.81.3, 4.85.2, 4.105.1, 4.108.4, 5.9.8, 5.14.1, 5.28.2, 5.39.2, 5.40.2, 5.102 (x2), 5.103.2 (x2), 5.111.2, 5.113, 6.15.2, 6.16.2, 6.17.8, 6.20.3, 6.30.2, 6.31.6, 6.33.4, 6.33.6, 6.56.3, 6.68.2, 6.69.3, 6.77.2, 6.78.2, 6.87.4, 6.90.3, 6.103.2, 6.104.1, 7.4.4, 7.21.2, 7.25.1, 7.25.9, 7.41.4, 7.46, 7.47.2, 7.48.2, 7.61.3, 7.66.3, 7.67.1 (x2), 7.71.7, 7.73.2, 7.75.2, 7.77.1, 7.77.3, 7.77.4, 8.1.1, 8.1.2, 8.23.4, 8.40.3, 8.44.1, 8.48.1, 8.48.3, 8.53.2, 8.54.1, 8.71.1, 8.81.2 (x2), 8.82.1, 8.86.7, 8.89.1, 8.94.2, 8.106.5.

most obviously, that Thucydides, who is after all an Athenian, hoped that the war would be great and most worthy of account because he was a patriotic Athenian, a public-spirited citizen of Periclean Athens, who hoped that Athens would win a great and glorious victory over the Peloponnesians. By articulating this hope at the very beginning of the book, then, Thucydides deliberately speaks in the voice of a champion of Athens and a believer in its greatness. But how, then, given this seeming partisanship for Athens, can he enable us, his readers, to attain, through his account of the war, a true, impartial understanding of the enduring character of human beings and the human condition?

One might argue that Thucydides hoped that the war would be great and most worthy of account – or most worthy of reasoning – of the ones that went before, not only because, as a lover of Athens, he hoped that Athens would win a great victory but also because, as a lover of wisdom, he hoped that he would learn from such a great war truths that are most worth reasoning about, permanent and universal truths about human nature. As we have seen, Thucydides obliquely identifies himself as one who engages in “the search for the truth” and therefore as one who, one might presume, loves the truth (1.20.3). Yet, by drawing attention to his attachment to Athens in the opening of his book, Thucydides deliberately raises the question, is his own love of the truth bound up with, and distorted by, his love of Athens? Insofar as Pericles claims that the Athenians as a whole philosophize without softness (2.40.1) and thereby identifies philosophy with Athens, and Athens with philosophy, might not Thucydides' attachment to Periclean Athens, his love of both Athens and the truth, lead him to approach the question of human nature with a predisposition in favor of the answer to that question offered by Periclean Athens?

Thucydides deliberately portrays himself, in crucial respects, as a partisan of Periclean Athens in the first twenty-two chapters of the book. Thucydides states in the first sentence of the book, in explaining why he hoped that the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians would be a great war and one most worthy of account, that, in his judgment based on “evidence” at the beginning of the war, both sides were at their “peak [ἀκμαζόντες]” in “every preparation” (1.1.1). Yet this proves to be a partisan, Athenian judgment because it proves to be true only of Athens, which at the beginning of the war already had its great navy of 300 ships (2.13.8) and had its population unravaged by the plague. As Thucydides later notes, Athens in particular was at its “peak [ἀκμαζούσα]” before the plague and he claims that, under Pericles, Athens, while still at peace, “came to be

greatest" (2.65.5).⁶⁸ But this judgment was clearly not true of the Peloponnesians, for at the outset they were "unprepared" for war with Athens, as the Spartan king Archidamus stresses in arguing against voting for war and as the Spartans continue to believe even after voting for war.⁶⁹ Even the pro-war Corinthians acknowledge that the naval power and the wealth of Peloponnesians will only grow "with more time" (1.121.2–4). Sparta did not have a navy at the beginning of the war, Sparta was never harmed by the plague, the Peloponnesian ally Syracuse had not yet grown to become a major military power on sea and on land, and the Persian Empire was not yet an ally of the Peloponnesians.⁷⁰ In his statement in the opening sentence of the book, Thucydides clearly and deliberately adopts the perspective of a patriotic Athenian who evidently disdains Sparta and hopes that Sparta was indeed at its peak at the beginning of the war and would be incapable of rising further as a military power since, as Pericles later declares in his first speech in the book, the Spartans "are not capable of manning ships or of frequently sending out armies by land" and "neither their building of forts nor their navy is worthy of being feared."⁷¹

In his ensuing account of the "olden times," in the first twenty-two chapters of the book, Thucydides portrays himself most emphatically as a Periclean Athenian. In the first place, as we have seen, his account of the past here is entirely areligious. Indeed, remarkably, in these chapters the word for "god" or related words never appear, even though such words appear sixty times throughout the rest of the book.⁷² There is also no mention here of the gods Zeus, Hera, Dionysus, Poseidon, Hermes, Artemis, Earth, Hephaestus, or Aphrodite, even though, all together, they (or words related to them) are mentioned forty-five times throughout the rest of the book.⁷³ The only time this section of the book mentions a god is

⁶⁸ 2.31.2; see also 2.20.2. ⁶⁹ 1.80.3, 1.125.2.

⁷⁰ Consider, for example, 1.80.3–4, 1.82.1, 2.54.4–5, 2.65.12, 3.86.2, 7.55–56, 7.87.5–6, 8.5.4ff.

⁷¹ 1.141.4, 1.142.2. As Connor observes, "Indeed, if the Archaeology were our only evidence, we might conclude that Athens should win the war with Sparta ... It focuses attention not on the fact of defeat, but on the potential for victory" (1984, 34).

⁷² 1.25.1, 1.71.5, 1.78.4, 1.86.5, 1.118.3, 1.123.1, 1.123.2, 1.126.2, 1.126.4, 1.126.11 (x2), 1.127.1, 1.134.4, 1.135.1, 2.13.5, 2.15.2, 2.15.4, 2.53.4, 2.54.4, 2.71.4, 2.74.2 (x2), 2.75, 2.77.3, 3.50.2, 3.58.1, 3.58.5, 3.59.2, 3.82.6, 3.92.5, 4.87.2, 4.92.7, 4.97.4, 4.98.6, 4.116.1, 5.30.1, 5.30.3 (x3), 5.32.1, 5.49.5, 5.70, 5.77.4, 5.104, 5.105.1 (x2), 5.105.2, 5.105.3, 5.112.2, 6.54.6, 7.50.4, 7.69.2, 7.71.3, 7.75.4, 7.77.2, 7.77.3, 7.77.4, 8.1.1, 8.53.2, 8.70.1.

⁷³ Zeus is mentioned thirteen times: 1.101.3, 1.126.5–6, 2.15.4, 2.71.2, 3.14.1, 3.70.4, 3.96.1, 5.16.2, 5.16.3, 5.31.2, 5.47.11, 5.50.1, 8.19.2; Hera eight times: 1.24.7, 3.68.3, 3.75.5 (x2), 3.79.1, 3.81.2, 4.133.2, 5.75.6; Dionysus and related terms seven times:

when Thucydides remarks that the tyrant of Samos, Polycrates, dedicated one of the islands he subjugated to Delian Apollo.⁷⁴ He also refers, obliquely, to Athena, by mentioning the Panathenaic procession in Athens at the time of the tyrant Hippias (1.20.2).⁷⁵ With the exceptions of these two references and a flashforward to the purification of Delos during the Peloponnesian War (1.8.1), Thucydides makes no mention of piety in his account of the olden times of Greece. The words for “oracle,” “prophecy,” “priest,” or “prayer” never appear here, and there is no mention of Delphi, even though, all together, those words together with Delphi are mentioned fifty-five times throughout the rest of the book.⁷⁶ Thucydides makes no references in the first twenty-two chapters to the piety of the Spartans, even though that piety figures prominently in his portrayal of the Spartans throughout the rest of the book.⁷⁷ Even though Thucydides gives an account in this section of the book of the rise of Athens and Attica from the “olden times [πάλαι]” (1.2.1) to the present, he makes no direct mention here, as he does in his later account of Athens and Attica “from the very ancient times [ἀπὸ τοῦ πάνυ ἀρχαίου]” to the present (2.15.1), of the founding festival established by king Theseus in honor of the goddess Athena; of the temples of Olympian Zeus, Pythian Apollo, Earth, and Dionysus in Athens; and of the places of worship in the surrounding Attic countryside.⁷⁸ Even though Thucydides speaks in chapters 18 and 20 of the tyrants of Athens, he does not mention there, as he

2.15.4, 3.81.5, 5.20.1, 5.23.4, 8.93.1, 8.93.3, 8.93.4; Poseidon six times: 1.128.1, 2.84.4, 3.20.1, 4.118.4 (x2), 4.129.3, 8.67.2; Hermes and related terms five times: 6.27.1, 6.28.1, 6.28.2, 6.53.1, 7.29.3; Artemis three times: 3.104.5, 6.44.3, 8.109.1; Earth once: 2.15.4; Hephaestus once: 3.88.3; and Aphrodite once: 6.46.3.

⁷⁴ 1.13.6; see also 3.104.1–2, 6.54.5–7.

⁷⁵ Athena and related terms are mentioned six times in the book: 1.20.2, 4.116.1, 5.10.2, 5.23.5, 5.47.10, 6.56.2. See also 2.14.5, 2.15.2.

⁷⁶ Oracles, prophecies, and related words are mentioned twenty-eight times: 1.25.2, 1.28.2, 1.103.2, 1.126.6, 2.8.5, 2.17.1, 2.17.2 (x2), 2.21.3(x2), 2.47.3, 2.54.4, 2.54.5, 2.102.5, 3.96.1, 3.104.1, 4.118.1, 5.18.2, 5.16.2, 5.26.3, 5.103.2 (x2), 6.69.2, 7.50.4, 8.1.1 (x2); priests and related words are mentioned five times: 2.2.1, 4.133.2, 4.133.3, 8.53.2 (x2); prayer is mentioned seven times: 2.43.1, 2.74.2, 3.58.5, 6.32.1, 6.32.2, 7.75.7, 8.70.1; Delphi is referred to fifteen times: 1.25.1, 1.28.2, 1.112.5, 1.118.3, 1.121.3, 1.126.4, 1.132.2, 1.134.4, 1.143.1, 3.57.2, 3.92.5, 4.131.1, 5.16.2, 5.18.2, 5.32.1.

⁷⁷ Compare 1.6.4, 1.10.2, and 1.18–19 with, for example, 1.86.5, 1.103.2, 1.118.3, 2.74 (x2), 3.92.5, 4.87.2, 4.116.2, 5.10.2, 5.30.1, 7.18.2–3.

⁷⁸ Compare 1.2.5–6, 1.6.3, 1.18.3, and 1.19.2 with 2.15.2, 2.15.4, and 2.16.2. At 1.10.2 Thucydides does indirectly refer in a general way to the “expensive temples and buildings” of Athens.

does later, the Athenian tyrants' purification of the sacred island of Delos, their religious sacrifices, and their dedication of the altar of the twelve gods in Athens and of the altar of Apollo at Delphi.⁷⁹ In his account of the olden times in the first twenty-two chapters of the book, human beings did not pray to the gods or look to them for guidance. Thucydides presents himself here as one who, in apparent contrast with Homer, flatly denies not only the truth of religion but also the importance of religious belief for human beings.⁸⁰

Now, this view of religion bears a marked resemblance to that expressed by the only other character in the book who mentions, and criticizes, Homer – Pericles. As Thucydides criticizes Homer as one who, “being a poet, it is likely he would adorn so as to magnify” the Trojan expedition (1.10.3) and predicts that his own composition, due to having nothing “mythic” in it, “will perhaps appear less delightful [ἄτερπέστερος]” (1.22.4), Pericles declares to the Athenians in his Funeral Oration regarding the power of their city, “With great proofs and not without testimony we present our power to be wondered at by those in the here and now and those hereafter; and we have no additional need for a Homer, to give praise, nor for whoever may delight [τέρπω] with epic poems the present time” (2.41.4). As Thucydides is silent regarding the gods in the first twenty-two chapters of his book, so Pericles never mentions the gods in any of his speeches given in direct discourse in Thucydides' book. Pericles' only reference to a god in the book is in a speech Thucydides presents in indirect discourse, in which Pericles irreverently proposes to the Athenians at the outbreak of the war that they might, in the future, remove the inlaid gold “of the goddess herself” – the statue of Athena – for additional revenue (2.13.5).⁸¹ Moreover, the vision of Athens that Pericles presents is one that is purely human, without any apparent element of divinity or piety. He calls on Athenians to behold “every day” and to become “erotic lovers” of, not the images of benevolent and just gods, but “the power of the city,” and his only references to anything religious in the speech are when he proclaims that “we have also provided the greatest number of occasions of relaxation of the mind from toils” by “enacting by law contests and festivals of sacrifices throughout the year” and

⁷⁹ Compare 1.18.1 and 1.20.2 with 3.104.1 and 6.54.5–7.

⁸⁰ See Strauss 1983, 89; Palmer 1992, 85.

⁸¹ Consider as well Pericles' remark that one should “endure” such “daimonic things” as the plague “as necessities” rather than regard them as expressions of divine will and divine justice (2.64.2; see 2.54).

when he remarks that the Athenians “ought” “to pray” for safety and for possessing a daring “intelligence” regarding their enemies.⁸²

Thucydides also portrays himself as holding, as we have seen, an emphatically progressive view of history in the first twenty-two chapters, just as Pericles does in his Funeral Oration. As Thucydides' account of the passage of time from the olden times of Greece to the present is one of progress from the weakness, instability, and barbarism of the past, so does Pericles offer an account of Athens that, though somewhat more respectful of past generations (see also 1.144.4), nonetheless underscores the ever greater superiority of the present to the past:

I will begin from the ancestors first: for it is at once just and fitting in such a matter to give this honor of remembrance to them. For they, having always dwelled on the land, handed it over free in succession to their descendants until this time through their virtue. And those ones deserve praise and still more our fathers: for they, having acquired, not without toil, in addition to what they received from them as much of an empire as we possess, they left it to us now. But we ourselves, now being still especially in the appointed prime of life, have enlarged and prepared the city with everything to be most self-sufficient both in war and in peace. (2.36.1–3)

In both his broadly areligious and progressive account of the olden times in the beginning of the book, then, Thucydides speaks in the voice of a Periclean Athenian.⁸³

In the first twenty-two chapters, Thucydides portrays himself as a partisan of Athens as a whole and Periclean Athens in particular in more specific ways. In Thucydides' telling here of the emergence of Greece out of the chaotic, “barbarian,” past, it was Attica that was the first to escape from factional strife and to become a haven for refugees from war torn lands; it was Athens that was the first city to overcome the insecurity and fear pervasive in the olden times and hence to grow and expand; and it was

⁸² 2.38.1, 2.43.1. As Grene observes, in speaking of Pericles' three speeches in direct discourse,

It is extraordinary in such speeches as these – one contemplating the city's engagement in a long war, one spoken in praise of the dead, one defending a leader suspected because of what was accidental mischance – that, with the exception of one insignificant and quite colorless reference, there should be no mention of divine guidance, divine blessing, or even, in a merely sentimental allusion, fatherland's gods. (1965, 88)

See also Edmunds 1975, 76; Orwin 1994, 19–20.

⁸³ See Nichols 2015, 47–49, as well as Edmunds 1975, 4.

the Athenians who were the first to lay down their weapons and become a community marked by mutual trust and love of beauty.⁸⁴ Moreover, in his account here of the Persian War, Thucydides seems to belittle the Spartan contribution, making mention of Marathon but not Thermopylae or Plataea, and mentioning Themistocles but not Leonidas or Pausanias.⁸⁵ Finally, while Thucydides does not mention any Spartan individual in this section of the book at all, he not only mentions Themistocles – the first Athenian individual he names in the book after naming himself and the first individual he will later praise, and praise most highly, in his own name (1.138.3) – but he also points out that it was Themistocles who persuaded the Athenians to build the ships with which they went on to fight and defeat the Persians who had come to enslave them and then to become one of the two great military powers in Greece.⁸⁶ By highlighting Themistocles here, Thucydides draws attention to the man more responsible than anyone for the Athenian power that Pericles brought to its peak.⁸⁷ In this way, too, does Thucydides present himself as a partisan rather than an impartial observer.⁸⁸

In the first twenty-two chapters of the book, then, Thucydides deliberately plunges his reader into a state of perplexity concerning how to seek for the truth about that which is human. He states that the purpose of his book is to enable us to grasp the fundamental character of human beings and the human condition, always and everywhere. He first appears to present himself as one who believes that one best grasps that truth by observing human beings, by viewing the “evidence” and especially the doings – the “deeds themselves” – of human beings, and by doing so in a detached manner. But Thucydides then shows that there are two decisive difficulties with this way of seeking the truth about human nature. In the first place, he presents himself as approaching the question of the character and condition of human beings with a ready answer to that question, one that is based

⁸⁴ 1.2.5–6, 1.6.3.

⁸⁵ Consider 1.14.3, 1.18.1, 1.23.1.

⁸⁶ 1.14.3; see 1.18.2.

⁸⁷ See 1.74.1, 1.90.3–93.

⁸⁸ After discussing the Archaeology as a whole and Thucydides’ focus on Minos “as a forerunner” of Athenian imperialism, Romilly concludes:

Thus the whole of the Archaeology tends to give the impression that the only real empires which ever existed were those based upon sea-power . . . It is a complete surprise when, at the end of the Archaeology, we suddenly meet the power of Sparta, and see the Spartans leading the rest of the Greeks . . . Sparta remains an isolated fact, independent of the main tradition which interests him. (1963, 67–68)

For an argument that “while Athenian power is clearly foregrounded” in the Archaeology, “there is also a coherent account of the growth of Spartan power,” see Jaffe 2017, 140, 146–159.

not on observation or evidence but simply on his own previously held opinion. In this way, Thucydides suggests that our opinions about human beings and the human condition are not derived from observation or from evidence but in fact shape our observation and our interpretation of evidence. And he raises the question, what, then, are our opinions about that which is human based on? In the second place, Thucydides presents himself as approaching the question of the character and condition of human beings as a partisan of Periclean Athens who embraces the Periclean answer to that question. In this way, he suggests that we humans, as members of families and societies, are, at least to begin with, inevitably partial to the opinions that we inherit from them regarding the character and condition of human beings. And he thereby raises the question, how can we ascend from those inherited opinions to grasp the truth about that which is human?

Thucydides' Second Sailing

Given this impasse, Thucydides abandons the approach to the search for the truth that he presents himself as pursuing in the first twenty-two chapters by observing directly evidence of the human condition and "the deeds themselves" of human beings (1.21.2). He drops his focus on observable "evidence": After the first sentence he never in the rest of the book speaks of himself as "judging from the evidence," and, after using the word for "evidence" – τεκμήριον – and related words six times in the first twenty-two chapters in his own name, he only uses them six times again in his own name in the rest of his book.⁸⁹ Instead he adopts a second, new approach to the search for the truth about human nature, one that focuses on speeches as well as on deeds.⁹⁰ He signals this shift at the end of the twenty-third chapter, when he explains that he will focus his account of the causes of the war on what was claimed in speeches by the participants – by the Corcyreans, the Corinthians, the Athenians, the Spartan king Archidamus, and the Spartan ephor Sthenelaidas – even though he judges that "the

⁸⁹ See 1.1.1, 1.1.3, 1.3.3, 1.9.4, 1.20.1, 1.21.1; and 1.132.5, 2.15.4, 2.50.2, 3.104.6, 4.123.2, 6.28.1. For the appearance of such words in speeches see, 1.34.3, 1.73.5, 2.39.2, 2.87.1, 3.53.2, 3.66.1.

⁹⁰ Consider Saxonhouse's comment on Thucydides' warning against judging the power of Mycenae in the past by the sight of its present condition rather than the testimony of Homer (1.10.1–2): "So much for the reliability of sight as the basis for accurate knowledge of the power of cities. Instead, Thucydides offers speech as the tool for revealing the true power of cities" (2006, 148).

truest pretext . . . was least manifest in speech": "the causes spoken in the open, from each side, were these" (1.23.6). Indeed, speeches, which are entirely absent from the first twenty-two chapters, dominate much of the remaining narrative: In the remainder of the book over 21 percent of the words (31,669 of 151,679) are in direct discourse, and there are, in addition, many accounts of speeches – by such prominent figures as Themistocles, Pericles, Cleon, Hermocrates, Gylippus, Nicias, Thrasybulus, Thrasyllus, and Alcibiades – in indirect discourse, as well as the texts of treaties.⁹¹ By focusing on speeches, Thucydides suggests that, even though speeches can be misleading, they nonetheless shed light on human nature, in two ways. First, speeches shed light on the inner thoughts and passions of the speakers, and hence on the inner workings of human nature, in a way that deeds alone cannot. For example, we learn about Thucydides' hope at the beginning of the war because he tells us; we would not learn about that hope as clearly from simply observing his actions. Secondly, speeches present comprehensive opinions about the fundamental character of human beings and the human condition as one sees, for example, in the Funeral Oration of Pericles with its progressive and areligious outlook; in the speeches by the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Melos and by Diodotus; and also, to an important extent, in the speeches by Archidamus, the Spartan ambassadors at Athens, and the Melian oligarchs at Melos.⁹² Studying speeches enables us, then, to pursue wisdom about human nature in a way that is more conscious of how our passions and our opinions may affect that pursuit, and hence in a more self-conscious manner, than studying deeds alone. And by becoming more conscious of how our passions and our opinions may influence our thinking, we may become more capable of limiting that influence and even of overcoming it.

Thucydides' turn from focusing on deeds alone to focusing also on speeches reminds one of Plato's Socrates' account in the *Phaedo* of his "second sailing," that is, his turn from "observing [σκοπεῖν] the beings" directly to "fleeing into the speeches to observe in them the truth of the

⁹¹ Consider 1.90.3–5, 1.91.4–7 (Themistocles); 2.13 (Pericles); 4.27.3–28.4 (Cleon and Nicias); 4.97.2–99 (the Boeotian and Athenian heralds); (6.72, 7.21.3–4 (Hermocrates); 7.5.3–5, 7.21.2 (Gylippus); 7.69.2 (Nicias); 8.76.3–7 (Thrasybulus and Thrasyllus); and 8.81.2–3 (Alcibiades). See also speeches in indirect discourse during deliberations among leaders: 6.47–49, 7.47.4, 7.48.3–6, 7.49.2–6, 8.27.1–4, 8.45.2–46.4, 8.48.2–7, 8.53.2, 8.86.6–7. For the texts of armistice agreements and treaties, see 4.118–119, 5.18–19, 5.23–24, 5.47, 5.77, 5.79, 8.18, 8.37, 8.58.

⁹² Consider especially 1.75–76, 2.72.3, 3.45, 4.17.4–19.1, 5.104–105.

beings" (99c8–e6).⁹³ Both Thucydides and Plato's Socrates seek to attain wisdom about human nature by investigating human speeches. For both, examining and testing fundamental opinions about such themes as human nature and justice, beginning most emphatically with our own cherished opinions, is the true path to wisdom – in Platonic language the true ascent from the cave of opinion to the light of knowledge.⁹⁴ Yet, while Plato – with the exception of his *Apology of Socrates* – presents for our examination Socrates or the philosophic Athenian Stranger or some other philosophic character engaging in a private exchange of speeches, or dialogue, with individuals, in which that philosophic character typically tests their individual opinions and his own – for even when Plato presents such statesmen who appear in Thucydides as Alcibiades, Nicias, and Laches, he presents them as speaking only in a private capacity – Thucydides exclusively presents political speeches – public speeches or deliberations about public matters – for our examination. Why does Thucydides examine human nature through political rather than private speeches?

Thucydides indicates why he proceeds in this way by the manner in which he introduces himself in the book, in its opening words: "Thucydides, an Athenian, put together in writing the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians." Thucydides here identifies himself simply by the political community to which he belongs. He thereby draws attention to the importance Athens has for him and to the predominant authority that Athens has over him. The importance and authority of his political community, evidently eclipse even those of his family, for Thucydides does not introduce himself with his patronymic, as the son of Olorus, as he identifies himself once later in the book, and as he habitually introduces the characters of his book, but simply as an Athenian.⁹⁵ Thucydides indicates here, in the opening words of his book, that, in his own self-understanding, he is not, to begin with, an independent thinker who may attain wisdom about human nature by his independent reason. He is, to begin with, a citizen of Athens, living under the laws of Athens, a city that has formed him, a city in service of which, as we will learn, he will interrupt his writing of this book to fight and act as general in this war, and a city whose severe punishment of a twenty-year exile he will accept

⁹³ For an interpretation of Plato's Socrates account of his "second sailing" in the *Phaedo*, see Ahrens Dorf 1995, 161–177.

⁹⁴ See *Republic* 514a1ff.

⁹⁵ Compare 1.1.1 with 4.104.4. He refers to himself as an Athenian once more, at 5.26.1. He refers to himself simply by his name fourteen times: 2.70.4, 2.103.2, 3.25, 3.88.4, 3.116.3, 4.51, 4.105.1, 4.106.3, 4.135.2, 6.7.4, 6.93.4, 7.18.4, 8.6.5, 8.60.3.

without defiance.⁹⁶ The authority of Athens, initially at least, shapes his character and, more importantly, shapes his mind. For he is a citizen of a city that offers, indeed constitutes, as Pericles says, an “education” for all of Greece and therefore also for him (2.41.1). Thucydides lives, then, under a regime which presents to him, as authoritative, its own account of human nature, as we see most clearly in the speeches of the Athenians at Sparta, Pericles, and the Athenian ambassadors at Melos.⁹⁷ Therefore, Thucydides’ thoughts about “that which is human” are inevitably shaped, to begin with, by the political community to which he belongs and to which he feels attached.⁹⁸

Now, just as the Athenian regime provides, through its education of its citizens, an authoritative teaching concerning the character of human beings and the human condition, so do such other regimes as Sparta’s also provide such an education to its citizens. Indeed, the words for “being educated” and “education” – *παιδεία* – appear only four times in the book: twice in the first speech given by the Spartan king Archidamus at Sparta, when he speaks of the way in which Sparta’s citizens have been “educated,” and twice in the Funeral Oration of Pericles at Athens, when he speaks of the Athenian “education” of its citizens and of all of Greece.⁹⁹ By using the term “education” in this way, Thucydides suggests that our first education as human beings is that which we receive as citizens from our political communities. We are fundamentally shaped in character and mind by the political communities we belong to and the regimes we live under. We are, in this respect, at least, political animals. Accordingly, the first four speakers of Thucydides’ book – and fourteen of the fifty characters who give speeches in the book in direct discourse – are nameless individuals whom Thucydides simply identifies as members of their political communities: first the Corcyreans, the Corinthians, and the Athenians, and then later the Plataeans, the Mytileneans, the Thebans, the Spartans, the Melians, and a Syracusan general.¹⁰⁰ Individuals first come to sight in

⁹⁶ 4.104.4–107.1, 5.26.5; cf. 6.92.2–4.

⁹⁷ See 1.75–77, 2.36–43, 2.60–64, 5.89, 5.101, 5.103, 5.105, 5.111.2–3.

⁹⁸ Consider Nichols 2015, 169–171; Jaffe 2017, 206.

⁹⁹ 1.84.3–4, 2.39.1, 2.41.1. The word for “want of education” – *ἀπαιδευσία* – is used twice in the book: once by Diodotus (3.42.1) and once by Thucydides in his own name in his account of factional strife (3.84.1).

¹⁰⁰ For the fourteen speeches in direct discourse given by nameless members of cities, in order of appearance, see 1.32–36 (Corcyreans), 1.37–43 (Corinthians), 1.68–71 (Corinthians), 1.73–78 (Athenians), 1.120–124 (Corinthians), 2.71.2–4 (Plataeans), 2.73.3 (Plataeans), 3.9–14 (Mytileneans), 3.53–59 (Plataeans), 3.61–67 (Thebans), 4.17–20 (Spartans), 5.85–113 (Athenians and Melians in the Melian Dialogue),

his book as parts of a larger whole, as members of a community to which they naturally belong.¹⁰¹ A fundamental contention of Thucydides' book, then, beginning with its opening words, is that, insofar as we human beings are born and live under the laws and regime of a political society, our authoritative guide to our self-understanding – to understanding our character and our condition as human beings – is, to begin with, the political regime we live under.

We can now see why Thucydides does not explore the question of human nature by presenting individuals engaged in private conversations, as Plato does. In the *Republic*, for example, Plato presents Socrates as investigating the question of the relation between human nature and justice in private conversation with his fellow Athenians Glaucon and Adeimantus. But Thucydides contends that, in order to approach that question properly, one must first recognize that we all begin our conscious lives with opinions about justice and human nature. From where do we receive those opinions? From where do Glaucon and Adeimantus, and, for that matter, Socrates, receive their initial, formative opinions about justice and human nature? Thucydides' answer is: their regime. Thucydides of course acknowledges the importance of the poets, especially of Homer, in broadly providing humans with opinions about human nature and the

6.41.1–3 (a Syracusan general). The case of the last speech of the Plataeans, in 3.53–59, is complicated, however, for while Thucydides simply identifies the speakers as “the Plataeans” at the end of the speech, he identifies the speakers as two individual Plataeans, Astymachus and Lachon, at the beginning of the speech (3.60, 3.52.5). For the thirty-six speeches in direct discourse given by named individuals, in order of appearance, see 1.80–85 (Archidamus), 1.86 (Sthenelaidas), 1.140–144 (Pericles), 2.11 (Archidamus), 2.35–46 (Pericles), 2.60–64 (Pericles), 2.72.1 (Archidamus), 2.72.3 (Archidamus), 2.74.3 (Archidamus), 2.87 (Cnemus and Brasidas), 2.89 (Phormio), 3.30 (Teutiaplus), 3.37–40 (Cleon), 3.42–48 (Diodotus), 4.10 (Demosthenes), 4.59–64 (Hermocrates), 4.85–87 (Brasidas), 4.92 (Pagondas), 4.95 (Hippocrates), 4.126 (Brasidas), 5.9 (Brasidas), 5.10.5 (Brasidas), 6.9–14 (Nicias), 6.16–18 (Alcibiades), 6.20–23 (Nicias), 6.33–34 (Hermocrates), 6.36–40 (Athenagoras), 6.68 (Nicias), 6.76–80 (Hermocrates), 6.82–87 (Euphemus), 6.89–92 (Alcibiades), 7.11–15 (Nicias' letter to the Athenians), 7.61–64 (Nicias), 7.66–68 (Gylippus and Syracusan generals), 7.77 (Nicias), 8.53.3 (Peisander). On the challenges of counting the number of speeches in direct discourse, consider West (1973). He counts fifty-two in direct discourse in all (1973, 5), counting the Melian Dialogue as one speech, adding the letters of Pausanias (1.128.7) and Xerxes (1.129.3) and a few short statements (1.53.2, 1.53.4, 1.87.2, 1.139.3), and excluding the Plataeans (2.73.3), Brasidas (5.10.5), and Peisander (8.53.3).

¹⁰¹ With regard to Athens in particular, Saxonhouse points out that “In Book I we are not told of any dissenters after Pericles urges the Athenians to stand firm and face war, should it be the consequence of such a stance . . . We know only what Thucydides chooses to tell us, and at this point in his narrative he chooses not to tell us about divisions in the city” (1996, 153n12).

human condition. But he also indicates that a regime may choose to disparage and therefore diminish the importance of poets to its citizens, as Pericles does regarding Homer (2.41.4). Through its authoritative speeches and laws, the regime is what provides us with our specific understanding of such matters as human nature and justice. In order to assess and possibly liberate ourselves from that authoritative understanding we must first be aware of it. It must be brought to the forefront of our attention. That is what Thucydides does in the book by presenting us with political speeches and political debates. Thucydides' focus on politics is, therefore, for theoretical purposes, to help us become aware of our fundamental opinions about human nature, so that we may examine them with precision and rigor, and ultimately question them. It is, Thucydides suggests, only by first focusing on political speeches that we can most effectively ascend from the cave of opinion to the light of truth.¹⁰²

Thucydides' Distinctive Focus on Politics

While the goal of Thucydides' book is to enable its reader to recognize the truth about the nature of human beings always and everywhere, from the beginning the book focuses the reader's attention on the importance of particular political attachments. The book begins by introducing its author as a member of a particular political community – Athens – and then focuses on a particular event involving that community and therefore involving the author – a twenty-seven-year-long war among Greeks, between the Peloponnesians led by the Spartans, and the Athenians. By proceeding in this way, Thucydides suggests that our path to understanding the universal character of human beings requires us first to be aware of our own particular outlooks that we naturally inherit as members of our particular political communities and then to reflect on the case for and the possible difficulties with those outlooks, as they are tested through conflict with other outlooks.

All of the explicit discussions of the theme of universal “human nature” and “natural necessity” in the book emerge either out of debates over particular, urgent political questions – Should Sparta vote for war with Athens or not? Should Athens vote to kill all the adult men of its rebellious

¹⁰² Thucydides also indicates the limits of focusing on political speeches in the Melian Dialogue, as we will discuss in Chapter 5.

ally Mytilene or not? Should the neutral island of Melos agree to become a subject of Athens or not? – or from reflections on particular ills – plague and factional strife – that devastated the particular political communities of Greece. It is in the course of defending their city's empire so as to dissuade the Spartans from going to war against Athens that the Athenian ambassadors proclaim, "they deserve to be praised who make use of human nature in such a way as to be more just in ruling over others than their power would allow them be" (1.76.3). It is apparently for the sake of persuading his fellow Athenians to reverse their angry decision of the preceding day to put to death all of the adult males of Mytilene that Diodotus contends, "It is simply impossible and a sign of much naiveté, if someone supposes that, when human nature is zealously set on doing something, it can be turned away by the strength of laws or some other terrible thing" (3.45.7). It is in response to the Melian oligarchs' profession of faith that they need not surrender to the overwhelming military might of Athens because the gods will defend Melos against such unjust imperial aggression that the Athenian ambassadors argue:

For we hold by opinion with respect to that which is divine and with certainty with respect to that which is human that always, as a result of a necessity of nature [φύσεως ἀνάγκαις], wherever anyone has the power to do so, one rules; and we neither laid down this law nor were the first to make use of it as laid down, but having accepted it as existing, we make use of it and will leave it to last forever, knowing also that you and others, if you came to have the same power that we have, would do the very same thing. (5.105.2)

And it is prompted by the plague that ravaged Athens and by the factional strife that ravaged Greece that Thucydides himself presents his own explicit statements concerning human nature: "For the form of the disease was stronger than reason [λόγος] and in other respects it fell upon each one more harshly than human nature could endure" (2.50.1); "And many harsh things befell the cities through factional strife, things that have come to be and will always be, as long as the nature of human beings is the same" (3.82.2); "Life in the city being thrown into confusion at this time, human nature, which is accustomed to acting unjustly against the laws, held sway over the laws; it showed itself glad in its lacking sway over anger, mightier than justice, and an enemy to whatever is preeminent" (3.84.2). For Thucydides, the path to wisdom about human nature evidently begins with the study of political life – for example, the political life of Periclean and post Periclean Athens – at its most intense, as it is lived by fully

engaged citizens, in the most demanding and challenging times, for example, during a war for freedom and empire.¹⁰³

A comparison of Thucydides' book with Herodotus' *Histories* on the Persian War and Homer's *Iliad* on the Trojan War – its two most obvious antecedents, two other famous books about wars, each of which he refers to, implicitly and explicitly¹⁰⁴ – highlights the distinctive theoretical approach that Thucydides follows in his book, one that deliberately and self-consciously begins with the perspective of one who is devoted to one's own political community, broadly and narrowly understood.¹⁰⁵ Even though Herodotus and Thucydides are both Greeks who wrote about wars of great importance to their fellow Greeks, Herodotus adopts, from the beginning, a considerably detached, synoptic bird's-eye view of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians.¹⁰⁶ As he remarks at the opening:

Here is the setting forth of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that neither what has come to pass as a result of human beings may fade with time, nor that the great and wondrous deeds set forth by the Greeks and the barbarians may come to be without glory, both regarding other matters and for what cause [αἰτίαι] they warred with one another. (1.1)

His focus from the beginning encompasses both Greeks and non-Greeks, and he begins by focusing on the non-Greeks. Herodotus immediately turns to explain what the learned Persians say the cause of the “barbarians” quarrel with the Greeks was, and then what the Phoenecians say (1.1–5). Herodotus then goes on to place that war within a vast, non-Greek, “barbarian” context, one which encompasses all of humanity as he knew

¹⁰³ All appearances of the phrase “human nature” or “the necessity of our nature” in the book occur in speeches of Athenians and in remarks in his own name by the Athenian Thucydides. Other references to human nature in the book are linked to Athens: by the Spartans, speaking at Athens (4.19.4), and by Hermocrates, speaking to the Sicilians about the Athenians (4.61.5).

¹⁰⁴ Thucydides never mentions Herodotus' *Histories* but may allude to that work at 1.97.2. As Mynott observes, Thucydides there refers to others who have composed accounts of the Persian War and then describes his own account of how the Athenian Empire was established as a “setting forth” or an “exposition [ἀπόδειξις],” the very word that Herodotus uses in the opening of his *Histories* to describe his account of the Persian War (2013, 59n1). For another possible allusion to Herodotus in Thucydides, consider, for example, 1.20.3 and Herodotus 6.57 and 9.53. For Herodotus' influence on Thucydides, see also Rutherford 2012; Stadter 2012; Blösel 2012. As for the *Iliad*, Thucydides explicitly refers to it at 1.3.3, 1.9.4, and 1.10.3.

¹⁰⁵ As Forde puts it, Thucydides has “an unremittingly political approach to things” (1989, 47n42; see also 28n18).

¹⁰⁶ For an account of Herodotus and Thucydides that emphasizes the similarities between the beginnings of their works, see Stadter 2012, 53–56.

it, ranging from northern Europe (4.16–32) to the southern coast of Africa (4.42); from East of India (4.40) to West of the Pillars of Hercules;¹⁰⁷ and from India, whose population is the most numerous known to him (3.94), and Ethiopia, wherein dwell “the greatest and most beautiful and longest-lived men” (3.114), to Egypt, whose kings have ruled for 11,340 years (2.142). Within Herodotus’ account, Greece appears small indeed, dwarfed in space, time, and almost every other way by the “barbarian” world, a world of which, in decisive respects, it is the product. For Herodotus stresses how much of what might seem to define Greece comes from the non-Greek world, especially Egypt: the names of all of the Greek gods (from Egypt);¹⁰⁸ the religious image of and practices concerning the goddess Athena (from Libya – 4.189); the Greek oracles (from Egypt – 2.54–57); the Greek art of prophecy (from Egypt – 2.58); the Greek religious festivals, processions, and pageants (from Egypt – 2.58); the Athenian religious festival of Thesmophoria (from Egypt – 2.171); the Greek, and especially the Spartan, contempt for artisans (from Egypt – 2.167); an important law of Solon (from Egypt – 2.177); Greek hoplite shields and helmets (from Egypt – 4.180.4); the Greek alphabet (from the Phoenicians – 5.58); and even, in some measure, democracy.¹⁰⁹

Thucydides’ account of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians is, by contrast, remarkably Hellenocentric and, as we have seen, initially focused especially on his own city of Athens and its regime at the beginning of the war. In his account, Greece is not at all dwarfed in time or space by the non-Greek world (though, as the book proceeds, it is, in some measure, dwarfed by the forces of the natural world).¹¹⁰ His account of the olden times in the first twenty-two chapters of the book is almost exclusively an account of Greece. In contrast with Herodotus’ book, it offers no account of the genesis of the great Persian Empire that proves to play such an important role in the outcome of the Peloponnesian War.¹¹¹ Thucydides is entirely silent here concerning Egypt and nearly so

¹⁰⁷ 1.203, 2.33.4, 4.43. ¹⁰⁸ 2.52, 2.145, 2.178.

¹⁰⁹ Consider the Persian Otanes’ argument for democracy at 3.80, as well as the Persian Mardonius’ overthrow of the tyrants of Ionia and his establishment of democracies in their place (6.43.3).

¹¹⁰ Over the course of his book, Thucydides refers to such natural events as earthquakes, eclipses, storms, and, of course at greatest length, the plague, by my count, twenty-five times: 1.23.3, 1.101.2, 1.128.1, 2.8.3, 2.27.2, 2.28, 2.47.3–54.5, 2.57.1, 2.58.2–59.2, 2.102.3–4, 3.87, 3.88.3, 3.89, 3.116.1–2, 4.52.1, 5.45.4, 5.50.5, 6.95.1, 7.50.4, 7.79.3, 8.6.5, 8.31.3–4, 8.32.1, 8.34, 8.41.2.

¹¹¹ Compare 1.13.6–14.2, 1.16, 2.65.12 with Herodotus 1.95ff.

concerning Phoenecia, for example.¹¹² His first mention of Egypt occurs when he recounts the Athenian conquest of that land,¹¹³ and his third mention of Phoenecia occurs when he recounts the Athenian destruction of the Phoenecians' 200 ship fleet (1.100.1). In his book as a whole, Thucydides says almost nothing about "barbarian" influences on the Greeks,¹¹⁴ and he rarely speaks of the "barbarian" world until the final section of his work.¹¹⁵ His writing focuses so intensely on the war in which he and his city fought that he goes so far as to claim – with a hyperbole that anticipates such claims of Pericles as that "we [Athenians] have compelled every sea and land to yield to our daring, and we have established everywhere everlasting memorials of evil and good deeds" (2.41.4–5) – that this war between two Greek cities, Athens and Sparta, "came to be the greatest motion for the Greeks and for a certain part of the barbarians and, so to speak, as regards most of humankind" (1.1.2). Broadly speaking and to begin with – but only to begin with – Thucydides apparently adopts the perspective of a Greek passionately concerned with Greece rather than that of a detached theoretical observer.

A comparison of Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War with Homer's account of the Trojan War, as well as with Herodotus' account of the Persian War and with other writings that touch on the Peloponnesian War itself, also underscores Thucydides' distinctive focus on political life in particular, to the exclusion of private life.¹¹⁶ Homer vividly presents his heroes' and heroines' love of their beloveds, families, and friends, not only in the *Odyssey* – focused as it is on Odysseus' return to his wife, son, and father – but also in the *Iliad*. The friendship between Achilles and Patroclus, as well as Achilles' friendships for Odysseus, Phoenix, Ajax, Antilochus, Automedon, Alkimos, and even, in some measure in the last

¹¹² 1.8.1, 1.16. ¹¹³ 1.104–105, 1.109.

¹¹⁴ An exception is his somewhat general remark that "Someone might point out many other respects in which the way of life of Greece of old resembled the current barbaric way of life" (1.6.6). See also 1.9.2.

¹¹⁵ Thucydides' narrative marks the beginning of its treatment of the key role of Persia in the war with the first appearances in the book of the Persian satraps Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus and their efforts to promote an alliance between the Persian King and Sparta at 8.5.4–8.6. For earlier references to Persia and its importance, see 1.128.3–129, 1.137.3–138, 2.65.12, 6.59.4.

¹¹⁶ According to Rutherford, "Ancient criticism was in no doubt that Homer was the prime model for historiography" (2012, 14). See his essay as a whole on the influence of Homer on both Herodotus and Thucydides.

book of the poem, Priam;¹¹⁷ the love between Hector and Andromache;¹¹⁸ and, of course, the passion between Paris and Helen, all play central roles in the wartime epic.¹¹⁹ Indeed the *Iliad* opens and closes with memorable portrayals of the love of fathers for their children: the priest Chryses, who grieves over the seizure of his “beloved” daughter Chryseis and prays to Apollo for aid in her recovery; and king Priam, who grieves, along with queen Hecubae, over the killing of their “beloved” son Hector and the continuous desecration of his corpse and prays to Zeus for aid in the recovery of his body.¹²⁰ And over the course of the *Iliad*, Homer’s dramatic portrayals of the love of Achilles for his beloved Patroclus and of Priam, Hecubae, and Andromache for their beloved Hector, and especially their lamentations over their demise, constitute the most moving scenes of this moving poem.¹²¹

Thucydides, by contrast, offers virtually no account of the private lives, that is, the family lives, the friendships, or the love lives, of his characters. In Thucydides we find no equivalents of Andromache, Patroclus, or Helen. He never even mentions the children or wives or friends or beloveds of such leading figures as Pericles, Nicias, and Alcibiades. His sole mention of such private passions as erotic love in the entire book occurs somewhat late in the book, in a digression, when he explains that the passionate love of Aristogeiton for Harmodius led him, with the help of his beloved, to assassinate the brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias, not out of a hatred for tyranny but out of “erotic anger.”¹²² Thucydides’ focus on the public lives of his characters, to the exclusion of their private lives, distinguishes him not only from Homer but also from Herodotus, the tragic and comic poets of Athens, Xenophon, and Plato. Herodotus, for example, almost begins his *Histories* by telling of the erotic passion the ruler of Sardis, Candaules, conceived (ἡράσθη – 1.8.1) for his wife, a passion that led to his overthrow by his wife and his spearman Gyges (1.8–12); and he almost

¹¹⁷ *Iliad* 9.197–198, 9.204, 23.555–557, 24.574–575, 24.650. See Crotty 1994, 83; Schein 1984, 159–162; and, more broadly, Ahrensdoerf 2014, 77–84, 132–133, 149–150, 158–163, 170–181, 186, 196–197, 213, 252.

¹¹⁸ *Iliad* 6.359–496. ¹¹⁹ *Iliad* 3.121–180, 3.441–460.

¹²⁰ *Iliad* 1.446–447, 1.8–42, 1.430–457; 24.237, 24.619, 24.159–706.

¹²¹ See, for example, 22.37, 22.405–409, 22.437–445, 24.1–13, 24.476–480.

¹²² 6.57.3. Thucydides mentions “eros” and related words five times in this section on Harmodius and Aristogeiton, more than all the other mentions of that word in the rest of the work: 6.54.1, 6.54.2, 6.54.3, 6.57.3, 6.59.1. In the four other appearances of the word, eros signifies something other than the passionate love for a human being: the eros for “the power of the city” of Athens (2.43.1); “for everything” (3.45.5); and for the conquest of Sicily (6.13.1, 6.24.3).

ends his book by telling of the erotic passion that the Persian king Xerxes conceived (ῥῆρα – 108.1) for his brother's wife, a passion that led to her mutilation at the hands of Xerxes' wife and to his brother's revolt and death (9.108–113). The writings of Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon especially suggest that Thucydides deliberately excludes references to private relations that might have affected the great political figures of his book since those writings discuss the private relations of those very figures. For example, in his *Achamians*, Aristophanes' hero Dikaiopolis claims that a cause of the Peloponnesian War was the influence of Aspasia on her lover Pericles (509–543). In Plato's *Menexenus*, Socrates claims not only that Aspasia was Socrates' own "teacher" of rhetoric but also that she "has produced many other good orators and one outstanding among the Greeks, Pericles, the son of Xanthippus" and that "she composed the funeral speech" – the Funeral Oration – "that Pericles gave."¹²³ Xenophon, in his *Memorabilia*, discusses the association between Alcibiades and Socrates and recounts a conversation between Pericles and his young ward Alcibiades concerning the nature of law.¹²⁴ And Plato presents his Socrates in conversation with Nicias and in numerous conversations with Alcibiades, including one that takes place on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition.¹²⁵ These accounts of Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon may be, in varying degree, fictitious, but they derive some measure of credibility from the simple fact, also acknowledged by Homer, the tragic poets, and Herodotus, that citizens and their leaders have families, friends, and beloveds and those private attachments ordinarily affect them even in their political lives.¹²⁶

Thucydides' exclusive focus on the public, political life of his characters means that he does not simply portray political life as it is lived by citizens and statesmen. What Thucydides portrays in his book is, to begin with, the outlook of the citizen insofar as the citizen believes in and defers to the

¹²³ See the *Menexenus* as a whole, but especially 235e3–236b6. Consider as well Plutarch *Pericles* 24. According to Plutarch, both of Pericles' sons by his wife perished in the plague and eventually he so perished as well (36, 38). Plutarch also reports that Pericles' illegitimate son, apparently by Aspasia, was later one of the Athenian generals who were victorious at Arginusae but who were later executed by the city of Athens (37.5; see Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.7).

¹²⁴ 1.2.12–26, 1.2.39–46.

¹²⁵ See *Laches*, *Alcibiades I*, *Alcibiades II*, *Protagoras*, and *Symposium* 172a1–173a8, 212d3–223a9. Consider Forde's suggestion that Thucydides' presentation of Alcibiades is to some extent an exception, and that his presentation of Pausanias may be a partial exception, to the overall "reticence about details of private life" in the book (1989, 73n4).

¹²⁶ Thucydides offers glimpses of the power of the attachment to family at, for example, 7.68–69, 8.74.3–75.

authority of his political community, loves the common good of his political community, and believes that the common good is higher than and encompasses most fully the good of the individuals who make up the community. The outlook that Thucydides deliberately adopts in his book, especially at the outset, is the outlook of the patriotic citizen who identifies himself first and foremost, not as an individual or the member of a family but as the member of the community that he regards as the most authoritative community: the political community. So emphatic is the priority Thucydides gives to public over private life that, as we have noted, at the opening of his book, Thucydides introduces himself, not with his patronymic, not as the son of Olorus, but simply as an Athenian.¹²⁷

Now, Thucydides evidently focuses our attention on politics as a means to the theoretical end of enabling us to grasp the truth about human nature. By focusing on the importance of our own political communities, and of the authoritative opinions concerning the fundamental character and condition of human beings that we inherit from them, Thucydides' book encourages us, in the first place, to examine those opinions with greater clarity and precision, to question them, and to ascend from them to a true understanding of that which is human. The question arises, however, what justifies such a questioning of the authoritative opinions about human nature that we inherit from our political communities? What justifies Thucydides' questioning of the understanding of human nature that he has received from the Athenian regime? As we have seen, Thucydides suggests that our first education as human beings is that which we receive as citizens from our political communities, in his case, from Periclean Athens. Accordingly, even when philosophy is explicitly mentioned in the book, it appears within an emphatically political context: in the most famous political speech by the most famous political figure of the book, Pericles. In the statement, "we philosophize [or love wisdom – φιλοσοφοῦμεν] without softness" (2.40.1) Pericles speaks of philosophizing, not as a free, private, individual activity but as one engaged in by the Athenian citizenry as a whole, and of the love of wisdom as a passion felt not individually but collectively by the whole political community of Athens.¹²⁸ Moreover, Pericles suggests that the Athenians' love of wisdom is and ought to be combined with their love of Athens and its glory, for he

¹²⁷ Compare 1.1.1 with 4.104.4.

¹²⁸ In contrast, the one time the word for philosophy appears in Herodotus, Croesus speaks of it as an individual activity engaged in by Solon, "as one who philosophizes [ὡς φιλοσοφῶν]" (1.30).

calls on them to “[behold] every day the power of the city in action and [become] erotic lovers of it” (2.43.1). Therefore, if Thucydides, an Athenian, is to engage in his own individual search for the truth about human nature, guided solely by the light of his own mind, if he is to offer his readers a philosophic education of his own, he must first justify that search and that education by showing why and how the authority of Athens over him, and the understanding of human nature taught to him by his political community, are fundamentally questionable.¹²⁹

The Theoretical Significance of the War

Now, the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians itself dramatically raises a question about the truth of the Athenian understanding of human nature. For the Peloponnesians are led by a city, Sparta, which offers an education to its citizens that is substantially different from that which the city of Athens offers to its citizens, and which offers therewith a different understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings.¹³⁰ The Athenian regime, as embodied by Themistocles and Pericles, teaches that human beings are naturally left on earth to their own devices and are naturally fulfilled through their participation in and devotion to a community that is governed by human intelligence and that allows for the fulfilment of the natural desires for pleasure, wealth, and glory. Citizens in such a community strive to combine private passion with patriotism – they are erotic lovers of the power of their city – and philosophic reason with political and military might – they philosophize without softness.¹³¹ The Spartan regime, however, as embodied by Archidamus, Sthenelaidas, Brasidas, and Gylippus, but also as reflected by such allies or quasi-allies as the Thebans at Delium, the Melians, and the Laconophile Athenian Nicias,¹³² believes that humans thrive under the wise and just guidance and restraint of the gods. Therefore citizens must unquestioningly follow divine laws and strive to be moderate and pious in prosperity and hence worthy of divine favor, and to avoid the injustice and insolence that might provoke divine wrath.¹³³

¹²⁹ See Pangle and Ahrensdorf 1999, 13. ¹³⁰ 2.39.1; see also 1.84.3–4.

¹³¹ 2.15, 2.36–43, 2.60.2–6, 2.61.4, 2.64.

¹³² 5.16.1, 5.43.2, 5.46, 7.86.2–3. Strauss describes Nicias as “an Athenian gentleman” with a “half-Spartan turn of mind” (1983, 98; see also 1964, 200, 208–9).

¹³³ See 1.84–85, 1.86.5, 2.74.2–75.1, 4.18.1–4, 4.85–87, 4.92, 4.97, 5.9.9–10, 5.104, 5.112.2, 7.66–68, 7.77.1–3, 8.24.4.

The war, then, presents not only a clash of political powers but also a clash of teachings concerning “that which is human.” While the Athenian regime under Pericles teaches that there is a fixed natural order, independent of human and divine will, and therefore its citizens speak of “human nature” and the “necessity of nature,”¹³⁴ the Spartan regime teaches that the world as a whole and the human beings within it are subject to the supernatural and formidable power of divine beings.¹³⁵ Hence the Spartans believe that earthquakes signal divine punishment of their actions and divine disapproval of their military campaigns,¹³⁶ the Spartan Brasidas believes that his victory at Lecythus was due to divine intervention,¹³⁷ and the Laconophile Nicias believes that an eclipse of the moon reveals divine disfavor for his intended course of action and that the gods reveal their will through prophets (7.50.4). The war between these two cities thereby raises the question, are humans properly understood as flourishing within united, self-governing communities where they place their hopes in themselves and their ingenuity, or within communities reverent to the gods and their laws where they place their hopes in divine favor? Should humans seek to live in a natural city that allows them to fulfil their natural desires under the guidance of natural reason? Or should they seek to live in a righteous and godly city wherein they are guided and cared for by the gods? The clash between the Athenian and Spartan outlooks reaches a theoretical peak in the Melian Dialogue between the Athenian ambassadors and the Melian oligarchs, but it is a clash that is explored throughout the book.¹³⁸

Thucydides investigates these two understandings concerning “that which is human” through his book in order to arrive at a true understanding. It might seem that Thucydides the Athenian would inevitably favor the more philosophic, Periclean Athenian understanding of human nature

¹³⁴ 1.76.3, 2.64.3, 3.45.3, 3.45.7, 5.105.2.

¹³⁵ The only time in the book that Spartans speak of “nature” is in their single speech in Athens, after their initial defeat at Pylos, when they are eager to persuade the Athenians to make peace. They may invoke the Athenian idea of human nature in order to appeal to the Athenians’ own outlook, declaring that human beings “by nature yield with pleasure to those who relent of their own accord” (4.19.4). And even in that speech, the Spartans mention “nature” only once but use words related to “fortune” or “chance” (τύχη), through which they may mean to allude to the sway of the gods, seven times (4.17.4 [x2], 4.18.3, 4.18.4 [x2], 4.18.5, 4.19.1; consider 7.18.2). As they remark, for example, “moderate men . . . believe that the war will turn out to be, not as one would wish to take it in hand, but as the fortunes [αἱ τύχαι] would lead them” (4.18.4).

¹³⁶ 1.128.1, 3.89.1, 6.95.1, 8.6.5. ¹³⁷ 4.115–116; see 5.10.2.

¹³⁸ See Jaffe 2017, 209.

over the more pious Spartan understanding of the human character and the human condition.¹³⁹ After all, as we have noted, he introduces himself as an Athenian, he uses the philosophic term “human nature” three times in his own name,¹⁴⁰ he speaks of “nature” on three other occasions,¹⁴¹ and his statement announcing the intention of his book – to reveal “both the things that have come to pass and the things that will be in the future, ever again such, or nearly such, in accordance with that which is human” (1.22.4) – suggests that human affairs and human behavior are characterized by a certain regularity and therefore might seem to imply that “that which is human” is subject to “a necessity of nature,” as the Athenian ambassadors at Melos contend, rather than divine will, as the Spartans and their allies believe (5.104–105). However, the fact that, to begin with, Thucydides refrains from using the philosophic term “human nature” but uses instead the more open-ended phrase “that which is human” when stating the intention of his book (1.22.4) suggests that he intends his book to be a genuine investigation into the possible truth of either the Athenian or the Spartan accounts.¹⁴²

What is more, even though Thucydides primarily portrays himself as a partisan of Periclean Athens in the first twenty-two chapters, he does offer praise there for Sparta as well.¹⁴³ He points out that, after the end of the Peloponnesian War, Sparta achieved a hegemony over the Peloponnesus and over “many allies outside” (1.10.2). He singles Sparta out for being “under good laws from the oldest times”; he notes that it was “always free from tyranny[αἰεὶ ἀτυράννευτος]” and that it overthrew the tyrannies in the

¹³⁹ For this view, see especially Romilly 1963: Thucydides nourished “a whole-hearted admiration for Pericles” (235); “the Athenians have a realistic way of looking at things ... that is typical of Thucydides himself” (256); “it is obvious that the idea of divine providence helping the pious through the medium of chance is quite foreign to his very realistic attitude, which had certainly been influenced, though we cannot say to what extent, by the materialistic ideas of Leucippus and Democritus” (292). See also 128, 139–140. Consider as well Cochrane 1929, for example, 35–37, 176–177; Parry 1972, 48, 60–61; Edmunds 1975 – “Pericles’ praise of Athens is Thucydides’ praise of Pericles” (52); “Pericles is the historian in the History. His analysis of the Greek world at the time of the Peloponnesian War echoes Thucydides’ own” (210; see also 4, 76); Hornblower 1992; Rhodes 2023, 58–59; Irwin 2023 – Thucydides is “an author ever averse to allowing religion into his text” (121).

¹⁴⁰ 2.50.1, 3.82.2, 3.84.2.

¹⁴¹ 1.138.3 (x2), 3.74.1. Thucydides attributes the word “nature” to speeches in indirect discourse by Themistocles (1.93.3), Demosthenes (4.3.2), and Nicias (7.48.4).

¹⁴² See Strauss’s reference to “the fact that taking enlightenment for granted is tantamount to transforming enlightenment into superstition” (1964, 180; see also 208n70).

¹⁴³ See Orwin 1994, 31–32; Bartlett 2001, 71–74.

rest of Greece – including Athens; and he stresses that it became preeminent “in power” because of its “regime” (1.18.1–2). Furthermore, and more importantly, in chapter 23, Thucydides suddenly calls into question the progressive, Periclean Athenian, outlook that he had apparently adopted heretofore by declaring that there was more suffering in the Peloponnesian War than in previous wars (1.23.1–3). And at the end of that chapter, Thucydides contends that Athens rather than Sparta was responsible for the outbreak of the war: “For I believe that the truest pretext, though it was least manifest in speech, is that the Athenians, having come to be great and inspiring fear in the Spartans, compelled them to wage war” (1.23.6). He thereby suggests that it was Athens that was responsible for the unparalleled suffering in this war.¹⁴⁴ In these ways, Thucydides indicates that, even though his book will begin by focusing on the case for Athens, it will ultimately also consider the case against Athens and for Sparta.

The Different Stages of Thucydides' Investigation

Thucydides investigates the outlooks of both Athens and Sparta in the book, comparing and contrasting them but also indicating the interplay between these outlooks, especially within Athens, where the pious, “Spartan” belief concerning that which is human emerges more clearly as the war proceeds, as is evinced, for example, by the rise of Nicias within Athens after the death of Pericles and also by the intense religious passion that breaks out in Athens on the eve of and also during the Sicilian Expedition.¹⁴⁵ Now, Thucydides' investigation proceeds in stages and to mark these stages, Thucydides adopts different perspectives and focuses.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus evidently refers to this passage when he accuses Thucydides of “spitefully [φθονερῶς]” blaming his own city for causing the war when he could have offered “many” other possible causes for the war. He attributes Thucydides' lack of patriotism to bitterness over his exile. See *Letter to Pompeius* 770–71, 774.

¹⁴⁵ 3.51, 3.91, 4.27.5–4.28.5, 5.16.1, 6.8–6.28, 6.53.1–2, 6.61–62, 7.50.4, 8.1.2, 8.53.2.

¹⁴⁶ Beginning in 1846 with the essay by Franz Wolfgang Ulrich, scholars – dubbed “Separatists” – have attempted to explain these different perspectives within Thucydides' book by means of the assumption, as Connor puts it, “that all tensions within the work were the result of different periods of composition (and of a remarkable forgetfulness about what had been written in earlier drafts)” (1984, 10). Beginning in 1940 with the work of Finley (1940) and then Romilly (1963 [1947]), there has been a renewed appreciation by scholars – dubbed “Unitarians” – of the unity of Thucydides' book – that, in Finley's words, it “is in a fairly finished state as we have it and was essentially composed in one period of the author's life” (1940, 10–11; see also 161–162). For an overview of these different approaches to Thucydides, see Rusten 2015. Among those who recognize the unity of Thucydides' work, there is a division among those –

Broadly speaking, the book first focuses on examining the case for Athens as a whole – the Athens of Themistocles and Pericles – and therewith for the Athenian understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings on which the regime of Athens is based, as well as the problems therewith. The book then shifts to focus on examining the case for Sparta and its understanding, as well as the problems therewith.¹⁴⁷ For example, as we have seen, at the beginning of the book, Thucydides writes

consider for example, Romilly (1963, 47–48, 161–171, 180–182, 200–203, 229, 256, 344–354) and Grene (1965, 72–73, 76–78) – who tend to downplay the significance of the apparent shifts in perspective within the book – “to smooth over the difficult shifts in tone or divergences in assessment” (Connor 1984, 10–11) – and those, like Connor, who identify those shifts as part of the thought process through which Thucydides intends to lead his readers. As Connor suggests, “the work leads the reader – ancient or modern – far beyond the views and values it seems initially to utilize and affirm” (15), and, as he proceeds to explain, “we should be prepared to consider the text as a progression, that is the first part of the work may reflect attitudes, assumptions, and ideas that are eventually modified, restated, subverted or totally contraverted. The text need not be homogenous to be systematic. The tensions, apparent inconsistencies, and variations may be part of a progression of thought and feeling” (18).

¹⁴⁷ Forde suggests that Thucydides “seems to begin with greater sympathy with Sparta, the bastion of the conventional moral outlook, and gradually moves toward a greater appreciation of Athens” (1989, 10). See also Bruell: “The anti-Athenian view seems to be primary for Thucydides” (1974, 12). The position of Strauss on this question seems ambiguous. On the one hand, in the Thucydides chapter of *The City and Man*, he presents “The Case for Sparta” (Strauss 1964, 145–154) before “The Case for Athens” (154–163); he states with respect to Thucydides’ statement regarding the truest cause of the war (1.23.6) that “One sees again how much Thucydides’ primary point of view is Spartan”; and he contends in note 68 that Thucydides’ “work is best understood if one reads it as addressed to the Nicias of the future generations” but “Among those primary addressees” are those whom Thucydides leads to ascend from the Spartan-like Athenian (200, 208–209) – whose “ascent will be guided by Thucydides’ explicit praise of men other than Nicias: of Themistocles, Pericles, Brasidas, Pisistratus, Archelaus, Hermocrates, and Antiphon” (202n68). On the other hand, in his presentation of “The Case for Athens,” Strauss devotes almost all of it to a discussion of the Archaeology – the first twenty-two chapters of Thucydides’ book – and the speeches of Pericles in the first and second books whereas, in his presentation of “The Case for Sparta,” Strauss refers to Thucydides’ praise of Sparta in the Archaeology but “most clearly” to “what he says about Sparta near the end” of his work in the eighth book (8.24.4) – that Sparta was “moderate also in prosperity” – and to Thucydides’ oblique praise of Sparta in his account of the civil wars in the third book (3.82–83); Strauss states that, through “the unforgettable sentences about the Athenians love of beauty or nobility and their love of wisdom” in the “resplendent” and “brilliant” Funeral Oration, Thucydides “almost irresistibly” tempts the reader simply to admire Pericles’ praise of Athens there (219, 151); and, in note 68 on page 202, Strauss shows that “Thucydides’ explicit praise of men other than Nicias” begins with the praise of the founders of Athens, Themistocles, in the first book, and Pericles, in the first and second books. In these ways, Strauss indicates that Thucydides’ text presents the case for Athens before the case for Sparta.

as though democratic Athens, when led by Pericles, was at its peak at the outset of the war with the Peloponnesians: In the opening sentence he expresses his own judgment at the beginning of the war that both the Peloponnesians and Athenians “were at their peak [ἀκμάζοντες]” and in the middle of the second book he declares of Pericles that “as long as he presided over the city in peace, he led it in a measured way and he guarded it in safety, and under him it came to be greatest.”¹⁴⁸ Near the very end of the book as a whole, however, Thucydides states that the mixed regime of the 5000 – a mixture of democracy and oligarchy – provided the first good government in Athens during his lifetime up until then: “And to no small extent, for the first time, in my lifetime, at least, the Athenians were manifestly well governed; for the measured mixing of the few and the many came into being and this first lifted up the city from the wretched affairs that had come to pass” (8.97.2). Here, then, Thucydides suggests that Athens was not simply at its peak when it was led by Pericles.¹⁴⁹

Similarly, at the very beginning of the book, Thucydides identifies himself with the Periclean Athenian areligious view that human beings progress in every way by offering an account of the “olden times [πάλαι]” (1.2.1) of Greece in the first twenty-two chapters that opens with the affirmation, “I believe that nothing great came into being, either as regards wars or with respect to anything else” before the war between Athens and Sparta (1.1.3); that is silent on both the divine descent of such human beings as Achilles, Minos, and Perseus – who are identified by Homer as the sons of the gods – and divine providence over human beings; and that criticizes Homer and the poets for embellishing the past with accounts of the gods and their heroic offspring.¹⁵⁰ But later in the book, Thucydides suddenly appears respectful of the past, of the gods and of Homer. For, in the course of discussing the factional strife that pervaded virtually all of Greece in the course of the war, with the apparent exception of Sparta,

¹⁴⁸ 1.1.1, 2.65.5. See also 1.139.4.

¹⁴⁹ Consider the contention of Parry that Thucydides is, to begin with, “a passionate admirer of Periclean Athens,” but that the experience of the war “changes his mind” (1972, 48, 51) and the account of Pouncey according to which Thucydides, to begin with, feels an “enthusiasm” for the war and for “the Periclean view of Athens’ destiny” but “Thucydides’ point of view shows signs of development in the course of the war” (1980, 3) and “it is quite possible . . . that as the war proceeded he became increasingly disillusioned with it, and saw it as a squalid and destructive force, and that he let his prior judgments emerge in the text and allowed the reader to follow the same course of disillusionment he had followed himself” (164, emphases in the text).

¹⁵⁰ See 1.3.3, 1.4. 1.8.2, 1.9.2 and Homer *Iliad*, for example, 1.351–427, 13.450, 14.313–328; 1.10.3, 1.22.4.

Thucydides speaks respectfully, first, of "divine law," and then, a bit later, of the "olden times [πάλαι]" (3.104.3) of Greece, and of Homer and his pious hymn to Apollo and Artemis.¹⁵¹ What is more, in his second reference in the book to the end of the war, Thucydides goes out of his way to mention that an oracle accurately predicted its length (5.26.3–4). It may also be significant that, while the first word of the book is "Thucydides," the human author of the work, the last word of Thucydides' book, as it has come down to us, is "Artemis," a goddess.

To give another example of his shift of perspective and focus, at the beginning of the book, Thucydides offers superlative praise for the founders of enlightened, democratic, imperial, Periclean Athens, Themistocles and Pericles,¹⁵² but later he goes on to single out for praise the Spartan Brasidas and the Laconophile Athenian Nicias, as well as the Spartan ally Hermocrates, the Athenian tyrants who preceded the democracy in Athens, and the Athenian oligarch Antiphon who overthrows the democracy.¹⁵³ In all these ways, Thucydides leads the reader through a thought process, first to consider the case for the more philosophic Athenian understanding concerning that which is human, most clearly – but not only – in his narrative encompassing most of the first three books up to his account of the factional strife in Corcyra (1.1–3.69), and then to consider the problems with that understanding, most clearly – but not only – in his account of the factional strife in Corcyra (3.70–3.85).¹⁵⁴ He then leads us to consider the case for the more pious Spartan understanding, most clearly – but not only – from his account of the factional strife in Corcyra to the end of the Sicilian Expedition (3.86–7.87), and then to consider the problems with that understanding, most clearly – but not only – from his account of the Athenian response to the Sicilian disaster through to the end of the book (8.1–109).

Finally, over the course of leading us through this examination of the case for and against both Athens and Sparta, Thucydides offers for our

¹⁵¹ 3.82.1 (cf. 1.18.1), 3.82.6, 3.104.3–6. Consider Burns's argument that Thucydides' "rhetoric . . . particularly in the first few books, seems designed to appeal to non-believers or doubters of traditional pious accounts of the causes of things" but that "he signals his rhetorical shift" to a more respectful treatment of piety "by turning back to Homer . . . in his account of the Athenians' purification of Delos" (2010, 33, 45–46).

¹⁵² 1.136.3, 1.139.4, 2.65.5–11. ¹⁵³ 4.81, 6.72.2, 7.86.5, 6.72.2, 6.54.5–6, 8.68.1–2.

¹⁵⁴ As Connor puts it, "The optimistic view of the Archaeology with its presentation of man's progress toward ever greater accomplishment collides with the implications of the Corcyrean *stasis*. The illusion of progress is shattered" (1984, 104, emphasis in the text).

consideration the possibility that an individual may question the education regarding human fulfilment of one's own political community, may free one's mind from the authority of the political community, and may thereby ascend to a truly independent, supra-political understanding of that which is human. This possibility is presented most obviously through the example of Alcibiades. Alcibiades comes to have a singularly transnational political career, shifting from commanding his fellow Athenians in Athens and in the Athenian camp in Sicily to advising the Spartans and their allies in Sparta, then to advising the satrap of the Persian Emperor, Tissaphernes, and finally to returning to lead Athens. For throughout these remarkable shifts and journeys, Alcibiades appears to act and think independently of not only his native city of Athens but also of the Sparta with whom he allies for a time, and of Tissaphernes, to whom, Thucydides reports, Alcibiades himself becomes "a teacher in all things" (8.45.2). Indeed, while Thucydides declares that war is a violent "teacher [διδάσκαλος]" (3.82.2), the only individual human being he ever identifies as a "teacher [διδάσκαλος]" in the book is Alcibiades.¹⁵⁵ In this way, Alcibiades seems to free his mind, or to attempt to free his mind, from the education of Athens regarding human fulfilment and arrive at an education of his own. However, the clearest examples in the book of individuals who successfully achieve a supra-political understanding of human beings and the human condition are not Alcibiades but, in the first place, apparently, the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Melos and ultimately Diodotus and Thucydides himself. Thucydides' overall narration points in a very simple way toward such an understanding that is beyond any particular political community. For while, as we have seen, at the beginning of his book, the first four speeches are made by individuals simply identified as members of their

¹⁵⁵ The word for teacher appears only four times in Thucydides: the two passages mentioned in the text, 3.42.2, where Diodotus criticizes Cleon for disputing that "speeches [or arguments – λόγοι] should come to be teachers concerning matters of action" and 5.30.1 where the Spartans believe that the Corinthians are "teachers" of the Peloponnesians who were unhappy with the Spartan alliance with Athens. Words related to teaching appear, altogether, forty-two times in Thucydides, four times describing Alcibiades as teaching the Spartans (6.93.1, 7.18.1) and then Tissaphernes (8.45.2, 8.45.3), four times in the speeches of Brasidas (2.87.7, 4.126.1, 4.126.4, 5.9.2), three times in the speeches of Pericles (2.40.2, 2.42.1, 2.60.6), twice in the first speech of the Corinthians at Sparta (1.68.2, 1.68.3), twice in their second speech at Sparta (1.120.2, 1.121.4), twice in the speech of the Spartans at Athens (4.17.2, 4.17.3), and twice in the remarks of the Melians (5.86, 5.98). The other appearances are 1.32.1, 1.86.4, 1.90.4, 1.136.3, 2.93.1, 3.42.2, 3.71.2, 3.82.2, 3.97.1, 4.46.5, 4.83.3, 4.118.9, 5.27.3, 5.30.1, 6.9.3, 6.38.4, 6.64.1, 6.80.3, 7.29.5, 8.54.1, 8.72.1, 8.75.1, 8.86.1.

political communities – Corcyreans, Corinthians, and Athenians – by the end of the book, after the Melian Dialogue, virtually all of the speeches are made by named individuals.¹⁵⁶ While Thucydides begins the book treating political communities as the highest authorities, and while his book immerses its readers in political life, his book ultimately leads the reader beyond politics toward a genuinely philosophic understanding of that which is human.

Thucydides' account of the war, then, is marked by shifting perspectives and focuses. What is more, Thucydides interrupts his chronological narrative of the war with great leaps backward and forward in time.¹⁵⁷ For example, after presenting in indirect discourse Pericles' speech at the very outbreak of the war with Sparta and the Spartan invasion of Attica, Thucydides' narration dramatically shifts many centuries back in time with a description of "the very ancient times [ἀπὸ τοῦ πάνυ ἀρχαίου]" of Attica and the founding by King Theseus of Athens as a great city, encompassing not only the acropolis but all of Attica (2.15). Similarly, after recounting a series of events that occurred after the outbreak of factional strife in Athens' ally Corcyra, Thucydides notes that the Athenians purified the sacred island of Delos and first instituted a festival there and then suddenly describes at some length an Ionian festival that took place centuries before, "in olden times," that was witnessed and described by Homer (3.104.3–6). Later, right after the Melian Dialogue which concludes with the killing of all the men of Melos and the enslavement of the women and children, Thucydides gives an elaborate account of the history of Sicily, beginning from "the ancient time [τὸ ἀρχαῖον]."¹⁵⁸ And immediately after recounting the Athenians' judicial recall of Alcibiades from Sicily, near the beginning of the Athenian expedition to conquer Sicily, which he conceived of and led, Thucydides gives an account of the tyrants of Athens who ruled almost a century before and explains that, at first, "these tyrants practiced virtue and sagacity to the greatest extent, and, exacting payment from the Athenians of only one twentieth of their income, they adorned their city beautifully, maintained wars, and offered sacrifices" (6.54.5).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ See note 100. Consider Pouncey's argument that Thucydides' book presents a "disintegration" of the "worlds" of Athens and Sparta, or, as he also puts it, a "progression" from political communities to individuals – "the descent to the particular" (1980, xi–xii).

¹⁵⁷ Consider Rusten 2023; Munson 2023. See also Connor 1984, 219–221; Palmer 1992, 7–8.

¹⁵⁸ 6.2.1; 5.116.4–6.5.

¹⁵⁹ For other notable examples of flashbacks, see 1.89–117 and 1.126–138.

Perhaps even more strikingly, Thucydides at key moments leaps forward in time. After stating what he thought and how he felt about the war at the moment when it broke out, “hoping [ἐλπίζω] that it would be great and most worthy of account [or most worthy of reasoning – ἀξιολογώτατος] of the ones that had come to be before” (1.1.1) and then explaining his reasons for so thinking and feeling (1.1–22), he suddenly and dramatically explains that the war, when viewed after it was over, was indeed greater than all previous wars, especially the Persian War, but specifically in the extent of the suffering due to the military conflict and also due to such natural occurrences as the plague:

But the length of this war exceeded it greatly, and the sufferings in it that befell Greece were such as none other in an equal period of time. For never before were so many cities seized and laid waste, some by barbarians and some by the ones who were warring against one another (and there are some which, once captured, changed their inhabitants), nor so much banishing and slaughter, both on account of the war itself, and because of the factional fighting. Earlier things reported by hearsay but more rarely confirmed were made not incredible, concerning earthquakes, which spread to the greatest part of the earth and were themselves strongest, and eclipses of the sun, which occurred more frequently than were remembered from the times before, and great droughts were among them and from them also famine, and not least harmful and destructive to a certain part, the devastating plague: for all these things joined together in attacking at once together with this war. (1.23.1–3)

Similarly, at three moments in the book – at the end of assessing the statesmanship of Pericles on the occasion of his death in the third year of the war, after presenting the treaty between Sparta and Athens that ended the first ten years of war, and in the very middle of the debate between Nicias and Alcibiades over the Sicilian Expedition in the seventeenth year of the war – Thucydides jumps ahead in time to discuss, for the only three times in his work, the defeat of Athens at the end of the twenty-seven-year war.¹⁶⁰ And after describing the deadly violence of the factional strife in Corcyra, in which “Every form of death presented itself,” Thucydides proceeds to explain that over the course of entire war such strife engulfed virtually all of Greece:

Thus did the savage factional strife progress, and it seemed greater, because it came to be first among them, since later even all, so to speak,

¹⁶⁰ 2.65.12, 5.26.1, 6.15.3–4.

of Greece was convulsed, divisions being everywhere, the leaders of the populace bringing in the Athenians and the few the Spartans . . . And many harsh things befell the cities through factional strife, things that have come to be and will always be, as long as the nature of human beings is the same. (3.81.5–82.2)

Thucydides' complex narrative, with its shifts of perspective and its flashbacks and flashforwards, underscores that his purpose in writing is not the chronological and complete narration of this particular war. The guiding purpose of the book is rather always to reveal "that which is human," the truth about what kind of beings we are and what our condition is, "as long as the nature of human beings is the same."

Thucydides' *Odyssey*

In its complex narrative, Thucydides' book resembles Homer's *Odyssey*, the poem about a man who voyages to many lands in search of his homecoming. To be sure, it is Homer's *Iliad*, the poem on the ten-year-long war between the Trojans and the Achaeans that constitutes the more obvious antecedent to Thucydides' book about the twenty-seven-year-long war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians. Thucydides explicitly refers to Homer more times than to any other author and he refers to his *Iliad* three times at the beginning of his book.¹⁶¹ There are indeed a number of striking similarities between Thucydides' book and Homer's *Iliad*. Like the *Iliad*, Thucydides' book focuses on a war and is composed after the end of the war.¹⁶² Just as Homer's *Iliad* ends, not with the final defeat of the Trojans by the Achaeans but with an event that foreshadows that defeat – the death and funeral of Hector, the greatest warrior of the Trojans – so does Thucydides' book end, not with the final defeat of the Athenians by the Spartans, but with a turn of events that foreshadows that defeat – the incipient reconciliation of the Persian satraps Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus with the Spartans, a reconciliation that foreshadows the crucial assistance provided by Cyrus, the son of the king of Persia, to the Spartans for the strengthening of their navy and therewith the final defeat of the Athenians.¹⁶³ Like Homer's *Iliad*, Thucydides' book contains

¹⁶¹ 1.3.3, 1.9.4, 1.10.3.

¹⁶² Consider, for example, *Iliad* 12.8–35; Thucydides 2.65.12, 2.100.1–2, 5.26, 6.15.3–4.

¹⁶³ See Homer *Iliad* 22, 24, especially 22.405–411, 22.475–507, 24.804; Thucydides 8.109, 2.65.12. Consider as well Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.1.9, 1.4.1–7, 1.5.1–9, 2.1.14–15, 2.3.7–10.

dramatic speeches given by characters other than the author that are composed by the author. In the *Iliad*, almost 45 percent of the lines (7018 of 15,690)¹⁶⁴ are in direct discourse; in Thucydides' book almost 21 percent of the words (31,669 of 151,679) are in direct discourse. Moreover, just as Homer seems, at first glance, overshadowed by his heroes and heroines and gods and goddesses, especially by the five characters who speak the most in the poem – Achilles, Agamemnon, Nestor, Hector, and Zeus¹⁶⁵ – so might Thucydides seem, at first glance, overshadowed by the great characters of his work, especially the five characters who speak the most in his book – Pericles, Nicias, Hermocrates, Alcibiades, and Brasidas.¹⁶⁶ In the light of these similarities, Thucydides might appear as one who sought to imitate Homer, especially the Homer of the *Iliad*, by composing a dramatic account, albeit in prose, focused on humans at war and on the lessons that war might teach about human nature and the human condition.¹⁶⁷

However, inasmuch as Thucydides' book, as we have seen, has a complex narrative that departs from a simply chronological narrative, with shifting perspectives and flashbacks, it resembles more the narrative of the *Odyssey* than that of the *Iliad*. For while the *Iliad*'s narrative is simply chronological, covering approximately fifty-three days, from Agamemnon's refusal to return Chryseis to her father to the conclusion of Hector's funeral, the *Odyssey*'s narrative is not. The surface narrative is chronological, covering approximately forty days, from an assembly of the gods and the visit of Athena to Telemachus in Book I to the triumph of Odysseus and his family, with the aid of Zeus and Athena, over the relatives of the slain suitors in Book XXIV. However, like Thucydides' book, the narrative structure is not simply chronological, for it recounts in an extended flashback, in Books IX–XII and in scattered remarks throughout the poem, the

¹⁶⁴ See Griffin 2004, 156.

¹⁶⁵ See Ahrens Dorf 2022, 85n9.

¹⁶⁶ For the number of words and speeches given by the two characters who speak the most, Pericles and Nicias, see note 34. The third longest speaker in the book is Hermocrates, who gives three speeches in direct course for a sum of 2685 words (4.59–64 – 961 words; 6.33–34 – 782 words; 6.76–80 – 942 words). The fourth longest speaker is Alcibiades, who gives two speeches in direct discourse for a sum of 1927 words (6.16–18 – 975 words; 6.89–92 – 952 words). The fifth longest speaker is Brasidas, who gives five speeches in direct discourse, counting a speech he gives together with the Spartan admiral Cnemus at 2.87 and his brief remarks at 5.10.5, for a sum of 1612 words (2.87 – 286 words; 4.85–87 – 622 words; 4.126 – 327 words; 5.9 – 338 words; 5.10.5 – 39 words).

¹⁶⁷ Consider 3.82.2. It is therefore not altogether surprising that the "Life of Thucydides" by Marcellinus should describe Thucydides twice as an "emulator [ζηλωτής]" of Homer (35, 37).

voyaging of Odysseus during the previous ten years, from the time “once he sacked the sacred city of Troy” (1.2) to the opening of the *Odyssey*, when Zeus decides that all the gods must come to Odysseus’ aid and bring him home.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, like Thucydides’ book, the poem contains significant shifts of perspective, most notably in Books IX–XII where Odysseus narrates rather than Homer himself. Furthermore, the story of the *Odyssey*, about the voyages of a man who “saw the towns and came to know the mind of many human beings” (1.3), is more obviously theoretical than the *Iliad*, and in that respect, at least, resembles more Thucydides’ book that critically examines the cities of Athens and Sparta and their teachings concerning “that which is human.” And even though Thucydides does not mention Homer by name after the third book, he does speak of Odysseus in the fourth book (4.24.5) and his last allusion to Homer, when he speaks of the Cyclopes and the Lastrygonians in his account of the olden times of Sicily, is to the *Odyssey* (6.2.1).¹⁶⁹

Thucydides leads the reader through a journey or odyssey of sorts, an intellectual odyssey in search of the truth about human nature.¹⁷⁰ The beginning point of this intellectual odyssey is the case for Athens, the case for the greatness of the Athens of Themistocles and Pericles. The clearest reason that Thucydides begins here is that he himself is the child of that Athens. In chapter ten, however, Thucydides points to an additional reason for beginning his book by focusing on Athens and its greatness. In a remarkable passage (1.10.2) in which he envisages that, in the distant future, both Sparta and Athens will be left in ruins and all that will remain is the bare foundations of their buildings, Thucydides warns the reader against underestimating the power of Sparta and overestimating the power of Athens. For, he explains, the reader, surveying the ruins of each city, will be tempted to infer from the remnants of its modest edifices that Sparta was greatly inferior to what it was, and from the remnants of its grand edifices that Athens was far superior to what it was. Thucydides suggests here that

¹⁶⁸ See *Odyssey* 1.326–327, 3.83–95, 3.132–134, 3.162–192, 3.276–312, 4.181–182, 5.105–111, 13.314–321; Ahrensdoerf 2014, 228–234; Said 2011, 110–116.

¹⁶⁹ See Connor on the allusion to the *Odyssey* at the beginning of Book 6 as well as “the culmination of the *nostos* theme” in “the next to last sentence of Book 7” (1984, 162n9). In an earlier allusion to the *Odyssey*, Thucydides refers to words spoken there by Nestor – and later repeated by Polyphemus the Cyclops – to show that the Greeks of old were so morally inferior to present day Greeks that they did not even regard piracy as a shameful practice. See Thucydides 1.5.1–2 and Homer *Odyssey* 3.71–74, 9.252–255.

¹⁷⁰ See Connor on “our journey through the text” (1984, 11) and Nichols on “The issue of homecoming in the last books” of Thucydides’ work and in his work as a whole (2015, 165; see 139–184).

his future readers will naturally be predisposed to think more highly of Periclean Athens than of Sparta, for two reasons. First, they will be so impressed by what Athens has left behind, even long after it has been destroyed, not only in what remains of its great buildings but also in what remains of the writings of its great poets and philosophers, its great writers such as Thucydides himself, who compose "possession[s] for all time," that they will feel a powerful prejudice in favor of Athens over the far less artistically and intellectually accomplished Sparta. Secondly, precisely insofar as future readers are drawn in particular to read a book as long and as intellectually challenging as Thucydides' book – precisely insofar as they are particularly fond of studying such books – his readers are likely to feel a greater affinity to Athens over Sparta, which has left us no such books because it never produced such books.¹⁷¹ By beginning with the case for Athens, then, Thucydides begins with the natural beginning point of us, his readers.

¹⁷¹ Consider Connor's remark that "Although the opening chapters ... are especially revealing, the work throughout evokes a fiercely intellectual readership, one that is intolerant of cliché and of all that is maudlin and old-fashioned" (1984, 13).

CHAPTER 2

The Case for Athens

The Natural City

Thucydides indicates in five ways that the section of his book from its beginning up until the account of the factional strife in Corcyra presents the case for the greatness of Athens over Sparta – of Athens' regime and its education, and of the understanding of human nature and the human condition on which Athens is based (1.1–3.69). First, as we have seen, in the Archaeology, he presents himself as a partisan of Periclean Athens.¹ Second, Thucydides presents a comparison of the two “who had come to be the most illustrious Greeks of their time,” “Pausanias the Spartan and Themistocles the Athenian,” a comparison that highlights the violent, tyrannical, and foolish character of Pausanias but that culminates with Thucydides' first eulogy of an individual in the book, his eulogy of Themistocles for his outstanding practical wisdom.² Third, this section of the book presents what is by far Thucydides' longest eulogy of any individual in the book, of the Athenian statesman Pericles, more than triple the length of Thucydides' next longest eulogy, that of the Spartan Brasidas.³ Thucydides' eulogy concludes a discrete, relatively compressed subsection of the book, that is introduced by Thucydides' praise of Pericles as “a man at that time first of the Athenians, most powerful at both speaking and acting,” a subsection that is 8.1 percent of the book as a whole, and that is

¹ See Chapter 1, pp. 21–28.

² 1.138.6. Compare 1.94.1–95.7 and 1.128.3–132.5 with 1.138.3. Themistocles is first mentioned at 1.14.3 and last mentioned at 1.138.6, fourteen times in all (see 1.74.1, 1.90.3 [x2], 1.91.1, 1.91.3, 1.91.4, 1.93.3, 1.135.2, 1.136.1, 1.137.3, 1.137.4, 1.138.3). See Cox 1992, 95, 97, 100, 103–104.

³ The eulogy of Pericles, at 2.65.5–13, is 395 words. The eulogy of Brasidas, at 4.81.1–3, is 125 words. See also 2.25.2.

entirely dominated by Pericles.⁴ This subsection contains four unanswered speeches by Pericles – three in direct discourse, and one in indirect discourse – including three of the eight longest speeches in the book and by far the longest speech of all, the Funeral Oration.⁵ That oration presents Pericles' eloquent account of the greatness of Athens and specifically its superiority to Sparta in the enjoyment of life and in intelligence.⁶ Fourth, this section of the book presents the Athenians' two naval victories over the vastly more numerous Peloponnesian forces, led by Sparta, victories presented by Thucydides as due to the Athenians' superiority in skill, judgment, and daring.⁷ Finally, this section presents the Athenians' thoughtfully compassionate treatment of the rebellious Mytileneans – the greatest act of compassion in this harsh war – in stark contrast with the seemingly thoughtless and cruel treatment by the Spartans of the Plataeans.⁸ Thucydides in this section of the book portrays Athens as a city with the most sagacious statesmen, the most ingenious and energetic citizenry, and the most thoughtfully humane character.

What ties this pro-Athenian section of the book together is the theme of nature. Thucydides emphasizes in his eulogy that the Athenian Themistocles exhibits the "strength" and the "power" of "nature" (1.138.3). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles presents Athens as a city that allows its citizens "freely" to satisfy their inner, evidently natural desires for pleasure, beauty, and wisdom (2.37.2–40.1). And Diodotus persuades the Athenians to adopt a policy of (relative) compassion toward the Mytileneans by offering them an account of the inevitable irrationality and irrepressible self-interestedness of "human nature" (3.45.3–7). The idea of nature – of a necessary character to beings, independent of human or divine will – is especially connected to Athens in the book.

⁴ The subsection, 1.139.4–2.65.13, contains 12,297 out of 151,679 words in the book as a whole. Pericles is mentioned in this subsection fifteen times and, in the book as a whole, twenty-four times. See 1.139.4, 1.145.1, 2.12.2, 2.13.1, 2.13.9, 2.21.3, 2.22.1, 2.31.1, 2.34.8, 2.55.2, 2.58.1, 2.59.2 (x2), 2.65.1, 2.65.13 and also 1.111.2, 1.114.1 (x2), 1.114.3, 1.116.1, 1.116.3, 1.117.2, 1.127.1, 6.31.2.

⁵ See Chapter 1, note 34. ⁶ 2.37.2–2.39.4, 2.40.1–3.

⁷ 2.83.2–2.84.4, 2.89.1–2.92.6. See Strauss 1964, 170; Bolotin 1987, 21; Forde 1989, 155n41; Bartlett 2001, 91.

⁸ Compare 3.36–50 with 3.52.3–4 and 3.68. See Strauss 1964, 215–217; Nichols 2015, 74. Forde goes so far as to suggest that, "If we look at what Diodotus accomplishes, rather than at what he says, we might well conclude that the outcome of the Mytilenaeen affair represents the Athenians' finest hour" (1989, 44; see 43–46).

Of the thirty-one times that the word or related words appear in the book,⁹ sixteen are in words attributed by Thucydides to Athenians.¹⁰ On six other occasions Thucydides – the Athenian – uses the word in his own name.¹¹ Moreover, the Corinthians use the word when describing the Athenians (1.70.9), the Spartans use the word when speaking to the Athenians (4.19.4), and the Syracusan Hermocrates – who appears to embrace the understanding of human nature as necessarily self-interested expressed by Diodotus and the Athenian ambassadors at both Sparta and Melos – uses the word five times.¹² The greatness of Athens, in Thucydides' account, is, in contrast with that of Sparta, based on nature rather than on law, on liberating what is inherent in human beings rather than on restraining and molding human beings, on what is independent from human and divine creation rather than on what is dependent on them.¹³ One can see this naturalness of the Athenians in Thucydides' initial account of the growth of each city. The Spartans, he reports, originally “suffered factional strife for the longest time of all of whom we know” but then came to be under good laws (1.18.3), laws which have lasted for 400 years and which evidently imposed a lasting order in place of the chaos the Spartans had previously endured. Athens and its surrounding lands, on the other hand, Thucydides claims, “were for the longest time . . . free of factional strife” (1.2.5). The Athenians, in his account, attracted refugees from less fortunate lands, sent out colonies to other lands, and were the first Greeks to lay down their weapons, to trust one another, and to embrace a more relaxed way of life, all of which they apparently achieved freely, without the compulsion of law.¹⁴

⁹ 1.70.9, 1.76.3, 1.93.3, 1.121.4, 1.138.3 (x2), 2.35.2, 2.45.2, 2.50.1, 2.64.3, 3.39.5, 3.45.3, 3.45.7, 3.64.4, 3.74.1, 3.82.2, 3.84.2, 4.3.2, 4.19.4, 4.60.1, 4.61.3, 4.61.5, 5.103.1, 5.105.2, 6.16.3, 6.17.1, 6.79.2 (x2), 7.14.2, 7.14.4, 7.48.4.

¹⁰ 1.76.3 (Athenian ambassadors at Sparta); 1.93.3 (Themistocles in indirect discourse); 2.35.2, 2.45.2, 2.64.3 (Pericles); 3.39.5 (Cleon); 3.45.3, 3.45.7 (Diodotus); 4.3.2 (Demosthenes in indirect discourse); 5.103.1, 5.105.2 (Athenian ambassadors at Melos); 6.16.3, 6.17.1 (Alcibiades); 7.14.2, 7.14.4 (Nicias); 7.48.4 (Nicias in indirect discourse).

¹¹ 1.138.3 (x2 – on Themistocles); 2.50.1 (on the plague); 3.74.1, 3.82.2, 3.84.2 (on factional strife in Corcyra and Greece).

¹² 4.60.1, 4.61.3, 4.61.5, 6.79.2 (x2). Compare 4.61.5 with 3.45.2–7, 1.76.1–3, 5.105.1–2.

¹³ Diodotus (3.45.3, 3.45.7), Thucydides (3.84.2), and Hermocrates (4.60.1) draw attention to the distinction between nature (φύσις) and law (νόμος). On the other hand, the Athenian ambassadors at Melos describe “a necessity of nature” as a “law” (5.105.2). See also 1.76.2, where the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta identify “the human way” with “what is established.”

¹⁴ 1.2.3–6, 1.6.3.

Themistocles and the Liberation of Human Nature

But how can a political community be based primarily on the forces of nature rather than on the discipline of law? Thucydides offers an initial explanation through his account of Themistocles, whom he presents as a quintessential Athenian. Themistocles is the first Athenian individual mentioned in the book, apart from Thucydides; he is, in contrast with Pericles and even with Thucydides, never referred to by his patronymic; and the last reference to him in the book is simply as, in Thucydides' words, "Themistocles the Athenian" (1.138.6).¹⁵ In his eulogy of Themistocles, Thucydides mentions "nature" twice, the first time he uses the word in his own name in the book:

For Themistocles was one who showed most steadfastly the strength of nature, and who was surpassingly, in this respect, more deserving than any other of being wondered at: for through his own understanding,¹⁶ which he did not acquire by instruction either before or after,¹⁷ of the immediate things he was the best judge through the shortest deliberation, and of the things that will be in the future he was the best guesser of what would come to pass to the greatest extent; and what he fully grasped he was able to explain, and where he lacked experience he did not fail to judge adequately; he foresaw especially what was better or worse in what was yet obscure. And, to sum up, through the power of his nature and the brevity of his practice this man was the mightiest at improvising what was needed. (1.138.3)

Nature, in Thucydides' account here, manifests itself in the first place as an intellectual faculty or virtue, a form of reason rather than of instinct or passion, and therefore a faculty that is distinctively human. Themistocles makes full use of "his own understanding," an understanding that he arrives at naturally, independently of his passions and also independently of instruction from political or religious authority or of deliberation with other human beings. Themistocles' excellence is to arrive at a sound judgment without learning from others or deliberating with others but on his own and therefore, if need be, quickly. Thucydides emphasizes that his judgment is

¹⁵ For Pericles, see 1.111.2, 1.127.4, 1.139.4, 2.13.1, 2.31.1, 2.34.8. For Thucydides, see 4.104.4. Herodotus introduces Themistocles in the following way: "There was a certain Athenian man, who had recently come to be among the first of them: his name was Themistocles, but he was called the son of Neocles" (7.143).

¹⁶ Or "sagacity [*ξύσεις*]." The Athenian ambassadors at Sparta call Themistocles their "most sagacious [*ξυνετώτατος*] general" (1.74.1).

¹⁷ Literally, "not having learned it before nor having learned it after."

a practical one, of particulars rather than universals, and of contingencies rather than necessities.¹⁸ Themistocles excels at discerning swiftly the immediate situation, at guessing what will come to pass, at foreseeing the obscure future, at judging what he lacks experience in, and at improvising what is needed. He excels, in a word, at the prudence of a statesman, who must be capable of making supremely important judgments without consultation, on the fly, in an emergency, when the stakes are highest, on the basis of imperfect information, and of doing all of this soundly, clearly grasping what is “better or worse” for oneself and one’s political community and “what is needed” by each.¹⁹

Themistocles’ intelligence or wisdom, in this account, appears entirely practical and not at all theoretical. And yet Thucydides points to a theoretical aspect of Themistocles’ singular practical wisdom by highlighting his outstanding ability to conjecture and to foresee regarding the still obscure future. At first glance, this ability might seem simply uncanny. How can one guess accurately and see what is obscure? However, Thucydides indicates that the ability to see into the future is not inexplicable. For by stating that “of the things that will be in the future [τῶν μελλόντων]” Themistocles was the “best guesser of what would come to pass to the greatest extent,” Thucydides echoes his earlier statement regarding the intention of his book: “it will suffice if they [that is, the things he writes] are judged beneficial by as many as will wish to view with clarity both the things that have come to pass and the things that will be in the future [τῶν μελλόντων], ever again such, or nearly such, in accordance with that which is human” (1.22.4). In his earlier statement, Thucydides suggests that it is by understanding the permanent, universal, and necessary character of human beings, that is, by understanding human nature, that it is possible to see clearly, with all due allowance for the uncertainty of contingent events, “the things that will be in the future.” In this way, Thucydides suggests that Themistocles’ practical intelligence, which is a manifestation of the force of his nature, also depends on his having some understanding of human nature, so as to enable him to judge accurately “the things that will be in the future . . . in accordance with that which is human.” The strength and power of nature that Themistocles possesses and displays,

¹⁸ Consider Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1143a5–8.

¹⁹ Jaffe goes so far as to suggest that Thucydides’ “encomium of Themistocles . . . is the highest praise showered upon any individual in the History” (2017, 177). See also Nichols 2015, 178–179.

then, is his practical intelligence and, in some measure, his theoretical insight.²⁰

But how can the force of nature exhibited by Themistocles form the basis of a whole political community? How can his seemingly exceptional sagacity arise among a whole people? Now, the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta do make the remarkable claim that such sagacity did indeed manifest itself among the Athenians as a whole. For after declaring that Themistocles was the “most sagacious general” during the Persian War, they suggest that the Athenians as a whole displayed at that time “sagacious judgment,” as well as “zeal.”²¹ Thucydides indicates that it is Themistocles himself who is responsible for the genesis of the Athenians as a practically intelligent people, a people that come to recognize, have confidence in, and cultivate the power of their own natural reason. For before Themistocles, the Athenians were a people who had habitually, for many centuries, since well before the Trojan War, lived a rural life, governed by their pious traditions, and who therefore looked to the gods rather than to their own independent minds for guidance.²² Themistocles rises to prominence among such a people, some years after the Spartans overthrew the Athenian tyrants that had recently established themselves.²³ And through his energetic and effective statesmanship, Themistocles liberates the natural powers of the Athenians from the restraints long imposed by hallowed tradition. His principal achievements as an Athenian statesman are four. First, Themistocles persuades the Athenians to build up the Peiraeus as their port city, due to its “having three natural harbors” (1.93.3). Then, during an Athenian war with the neighboring island of Aegina, Themistocles, foreseeing the looming Persian invasion of Athens, persuades the Athenians to build the ships with which they later vanquished the Persians.²⁴ Thirdly, when the vast Persian armament arrives by land and sea, Themistocles persuades the Athenians to abandon all their land and their city, to go onto their ships, to become a nation of seamen, and to fight the Persians on the sea, in the straits of Salamis, rather than yield to the Persians or flee.²⁵ Finally, after the decisive defeat of Persia,

²⁰ Herodotus says that Themistocles was reputed “wise [σοφός]” and was “truly wise and of good counsel,” that Themistocles describes himself as “best and wisest of all” in a message to Xerxes, that Themistocles “was reputed to be the wisest man by far of the Greeks throughout all of Greece,” and that they crowned him “for his wisdom and shrewdness” (8.110, 8.124). For Themistocles’ capacity to persuade by appealing to elements “in the nature of a human being,” see 8.83.

²¹ 1.74.1, 1.75.1.

²² 2.14–17; see also 1.126.

²³ 1.18.1–2, 1.14.3.

²⁴ 1.14.3; see Herodotus 7.144.

²⁵ 1.74.1; see also 1.18.2, 1.73.4, 1.74.2–4.

Themistocles persuades the whole people of Athens – “men, women, and children” (1.90.3) – to join in building up mighty walls around Athens and the Peiraeus to enable virtually all the Athenian citizens, henceforth, to become seamen, and “he taught” them how to build the walls effectively, through guile and deception, in the face of the militarily superior Spartans’ opposition (1.90.3–93.7).

Taken together these measures effect a dramatic transformation of Athens. In the first place, as Thucydides explains, the Athenians had “always been accustomed . . . to living their lives in the countryside . . . from great antiquity” (2.14.2–15.1). They had not been a seafaring people as were the Corinthians, who first constructed modern warships – triremes – some 300 years before the end of the Peloponnesian War, who first among Greeks engaged in overseas as well as overland commerce, and who cleared the seas of piracy; the Samians, who subjugated the surrounding islands with their navy; the Corcyreans, who engaged in the first known naval battle, with the Corinthians, 260 years before the end of the Peloponnesian War; the Phoceans, who founded Marseilles, far west of Greece, and who fought and won a naval battle against the Carthaginians; and the Sicilians, who, along with the Corcyreans, constructed a multitude of triremes some time before Xerxes’ invasion of Greece. All of these peoples acquired significant navies before the Athenians did (1.13.3–14.2). Before Themistocles – according to Pericles – the Athenians did not practice the naval art (1.142.6–7). As Hermocrates later remarks, the Athenians before the Persian War were not seamen but “landsmen” (7.21.3). Themistocles changes all that by inducing the Athenians to abandon their land and to become a city of seamen, not only to prevent the Persians from enslaving their homeland but also, after the Persian War, to become a great naval power. Indeed, after the Persian War, Themistocles urges the Athenians to value their new port city of Peiraeus more highly than the ancient city of Athens and its surrounding countryside, and to be willing to abandon Athens and Attica again in the future, if need be. When Pericles later urges the Athenians to abandon the countryside and to withdraw within the walls of Athens in anticipation of the Spartan invasion at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, he invokes the examples of their “fathers” who “abandoned” the lands they had.²⁶ But when Themistocles persuades the Athenians to abandon not only their lands in the surrounding countryside but also the city of Athens itself, and

²⁶ 1.144.4; see also 2.36.2, 2.62.3.

to take to the sea, he persuades them to do something entirely without precedent in their history. As Thucydides says of Themistocles, “for he was the first who dared to say that they must cleave to the sea” (1.93.4).²⁷

What is the significance of Themistocles’ persuading the Athenians to abandon the land for the sea? The act of abandoning the land marks a shift away from what is fixed, not only in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense. It marks a break from what the Athenians inherited from their fathers: their lands, dwellings, and “paternal” temples and places of worship (2.16.2). In speaking of the extraordinarily nomadic Scythians, Herodotus recounts that they were willing to retreat from all their lands in the face of the Persians’ invasion, except for “the graves of their fathers.”²⁸ These they would do battle for rather than abandon. But Themistocles persuades the Athenians to abandon all the lands of Athens and Attica and therewith the graves where they had always buried their fathers, including those fallen in battle who were buried “in the most beautiful suburb of the city,” in accordance with “paternal law” (2.34.1–5). In this way, he inspires the Athenians to break from the past, and to look to the future without seeking guidance from the past but trusting instead in their own judgment and ingenuity. Abandoning the land marks more specifically a break from the centuries-old, pious way of life of the Athenians, whose city was founded by their king Theseus with a religious festival in honor of Athena, and who built temples throughout the surrounding countryside, as well as in the acropolis and its environs.²⁹ Even the establishment of a tyranny in Athens in the century before the Persian invasion did not mark such a significant change in Athens as that marked by Themistocles’ statesmanship, since, as Thucydides explains, the tyrants not only “made use of the previously established laws” but also “provided the temple sacrifices.”³⁰ Themistocles’ attempt to shift Athens away from the land and toward the sea, then, signifies an attempt to liberate human energies and human reason from many centuries of religious tradition. Rather than build temples to honor the gods and establish festivals to honor Athena, the Athenians should henceforth build ports, ships, and walls and establish an empire to empower and glorify their city and themselves. The shift from the land to the sea marks a liberation of reason, one may say, from the

²⁷ See Romilly 1963, 59, 63, 200–201; Orwin 1994, 51. Consider as well Cox 1992.

²⁸ 4.127; see also 7.50. ²⁹ 2.15.2–16.2; see also 2.21.3.

³⁰ 6.54.5–6; see also 3.104.1. On the possible connection between piety and tyranny in Thucydides’ account, see Palmer 1992, 82, 83–86.

tyranny of tradition and piety, a spiritual liberation that builds on the political liberation of the people from their tyrants.³¹

By persuading the Athenians to abandon the land in response to the Persian invasion, Themistocles gives all of the Athenians the personal experience of breaking away from the authority of their fathers and their gods and of guiding themselves by their own reason rather than by the traditional and pious beliefs they have inherited. As the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta suggest, by becoming a city of seamen, the Athenians redefine their city, for the city of temples to the gods both in the acropolis and in the surrounding countryside “was no more” (1.74.3). What is left is the city of the Athenians themselves who look not to the gods but to their own efforts, their own devices, and their own intelligence, to defend and govern themselves.³² As Pericles declares in his first speech, when urging the Athenians to abandon their lands in the face of the Spartan invasion and not to lament the loss of their paternal and sacred dwellings: “For it is not these that acquire men but men who acquire these” (1.143.5). And as Nicias declares, echoing Themistocles and Pericles, at the end of the final public speech in direct discourse in the book, “For it is men who are a city, and not walls or ships empty of men” (7.77.7).³³

The broad, intended political result of this experience is to foster a spirit of “daring” among the Athenians as a whole, that is, a willingness to go beyond the limits imposed by tradition and piety, confident in their own

³¹ According to Euben, “The victory at Salamis made political theory possible . . . insofar as the Athenian triumph and the subsequent legend enshrined a daring of mind and action that regarded the world as susceptible to human design”; “Salamis made political theory possible and necessary because Themistocles’ temporary strategy there helped shape a permanent way of life . . . it is probable that Themistocles’ strategy helped loosen the hold of place and land. Certainly it established Athens as a naval power and set a precedent that Pericles followed when he convinced his compatriots to abandon their land to the Spartans and to take refuge behind the city’s walls and the fleet” (1986, 380, 384).

³² See Forde 1989, 22–25. As Forde remarks, we may go so far as to say that the Athenian regime in Thucydides’ account is revolutionary because it is based to an unprecedented extent upon the discovery of nature and the liberation of natural impulses as far as possible from traditional restraints . . . It is appropriate . . . to speak of the Athenian regime and Athenian imperialism as a great and unprecedented political experiment. It is an experiment in “enlightenment.” (47)

Forde later speaks of “The fantastic Athenian experiment” (151) and “the Athenian experiment in politics” (201–202).

³³ The last speech in direct discourse in the book is by Peisander, but Thucydides reports that he delivers these words privately: He “took each of those speaking against him aside” (8.53.2–3).

capacity to overcome seemingly insuperable obstacles on their own and for themselves. This spirit is first exemplified by Themistocles, who “dared” to urge the Athenians to detach themselves from the land and “cleave” to the sea (1.93.4), and is then repeatedly displayed by the Athenians. As the Athenian ambassadors say at Sparta regarding their willingness to abandon their land and take to the sea in the Persian War:

We displayed by far the most daring zeal, we who, when no one was helping us by land, and the others up to our borders were enslaved, resolved to abandon our city and destroy our homes, not so as to desert the common cause of the remaining allies, nor to scatter and become useless to them, but to take the risk of going on to our ships without getting angry because you did not help us before. (1.74.2)

But if we had gone over to the Persian³⁴ before, as others did, fearing for our land, or later, if we, as though already destroyed, had not dared to embark on our ships, you would no longer have needed to fight a naval battle at all, since you would have had insufficient ships, but he would have advanced his affairs with ease, just as he wished. (1.74.4)

Themistocles himself says, in Thucydides’ account, that once the Athenians decided that it was better “to abandon” their city and “to embark on their ships,” they “dared” to do so (1.91.5). And Thucydides notes that, after the Persian War, the Spartans attempt to discourage the Athenians from building their city wall because the allies of Sparta were “fearing the size of their navy, which did not exist before, and the daring that had come into being during the Persian War” (1.90.1). The daring of the Athenians reflects the strength of their nature, for when abandoning their lands to fight the Persians on the sea, they do not rely on their traditions or gods or allies or even on the numbers of their ships but on their own ingenuity and grit.

The Power and the Problem of Self-Interest

The liberation of human nature from the attachment to land, tradition, and piety that Themistocles seeks to inspire among the Athenians has a problematic moral dimension, one evident in Themistocles’ own deeds. For he not only lies to the Spartans in order to enable the Athenians to build their

³⁴ For purposes of clarity, I will substitute the text’s use of “Mede” with “Persian.” The Greeks often refer to the Persians by the name of the Persians’ neighbors and former rulers, the Medes.

wall but also flees the Athenian authorities when they recall him to face charges of treason, blackmails a ship captain, lies to the Persian king, and then offers to betray the freedom of the Greeks to that very king in order to benefit himself.³⁵ These deeds of his are impressive insofar as they display great enterprise, resourcefulness, and independence of mind and spirit. Nevertheless, these deeds reflect Themistocles' apparent willingness to subordinate all moral considerations of truthfulness, justice, and devotion to one's political community to considerations of self-interest.³⁶ The liberation of human nature evidently entails not only the liberation of one's reason and one's energy from the shackles of tradition and religion but also the liberation of one's self-interestedness from the restraints of justice.

The political manifestation of this liberation of human self-interestedness is most evident in Athenian imperialism. The goal of the measures that Themistocles advocates – the building up of the Peiraeus with its three natural harbors, the building of the navy, the erection of massive walls that enable the city to be protected with very few people, and the inculcation of a spirit of daring in Athens – is to free the Athenians to become seamen, not merely to defend themselves, but to acquire the power, wealth, and fame of an empire. As Thucydides remarks, Themistocles believed that becoming seamen thanks to all of these measures “would contribute greatly to the acquisition of power” and “he at once joined in preparing for the empire” (1.93.3–4).

The Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, during the debate there over whether to go to war against Athens, offer a defense of the Athenian Empire that invokes the natural self-interestedness of human beings. Indeed, their speech offers the first mention and account of “human nature” in the book (1.76.3). The Athenians dare to admit that they have acquired their empire not only out of what would seem to be the morally acceptable fear of losing what they already possess – their city and lands – but also out of the amoral desire to acquire more – more land, wealth, and honor. They contend, however, that in doing so they have simply yielded to the necessities of human nature, the compelling motives of fear, honor, and interest or, as they put it, “benefit”: “From the deed itself [that is, the

³⁵ 1.91–92, 1.135–138. For an account of the ambiguity of Thucydides' narration of Themistocles' apparent treason, consider Cox 1992 as a whole. Cox notes that “Thucydides reports not a single deed of Themistocles, after he went to Persia, that would help the king subjugate the Greeks” (104). See also Nichols 2015, 177–179.

³⁶ Consider as well Herodotus' account of Themistocles' self-interestedness at 8.4–5, 8.58, 8.109–112. For a comparison of Herodotus and Thucydides on the question of Themistocles' patriotism and its possible limits, see Blösel 2012, 229–236.

Spartan withdrawal from the war against Persia], we were compelled by necessity first to advance our hegemony to this point, especially by fear, then also by honor, later also by benefit" (1.75.3); "In this way we have done nothing wondrous nor at variance with the character of human beings³⁷ if we accepted an empire that was given and did not let it go, having been overcome by the three greatest things, honor and fear and benefit; nor in turn are we the first who have been so dominated, but it has been established always for the weaker to be subdued by the more powerful" (1.76.2). These Athenians therefore boldly contend that the Spartans, too, and all other political communities, necessarily follow their self-interest as the Athenians do, that they are all equally selfish, and therefore that none are more just than the Athenians:

O Spartans, you exercise hegemony to manage the cities in the Peloponnesus for your own benefit; and if, at that time, by remaining hegemonic throughout, you had incurred hatred, just as we do, we well know that you would have become no less painful to your allies and have been compelled by necessity either to rule as an empire with force or else to put yourselves in danger. (1.76.1)

Moreover, the Athenians claim that they deserve their empire, in the first place, because of their "zeal" in pursuing their self-interest and their "sagacious judgment" (1.75.1). Insofar as all political communities are self-interested, the main distinction among them would seem to be, in their view, not between the unjust who are selfish and the just who are unselfish, but between the intelligent who recognize what their interest is and how to pursue it, and the foolish who do not, and also between those who are zealous or energetic in pursuing their interest and those who are sluggish. Their defense of their empire would seem, then, to be an amoral defense. Their empire reflects the natural self-interestedness common to all humans and the natural intelligence and also zeal or energy evidently especially powerful in them.

It is true that the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta also offer a moral defense of their empire, for they claim that they deserve their empire because they are "more just" in their imperial rule than they need to be, given their "power." In this way, the Athenians contradict their own amoral defense, for they claim that they are not simply compelled by natural self-interestedness, that they "make use of human nature" rather than simply

³⁷ Literally, "the human way."

being subject to it (1.76.3).³⁸ This self-contradiction on the part of these Athenians reveals that, however persuaded they might seem by their contention that humans are naturally compelled to follow their self-interest, they, at least, are uneasy with that contention, and that uneasiness expresses itself in most significant ways among other Athenians as well over the course of Thucydides' narrative, as we will see.³⁹

The Corinthians' speech at the Spartan debate, which precedes the Athenians' speech, bears eloquent testimony to the Athenians' energetic pursuit of their interest and their tremendous confidence in their ability to do so successfully:

Prevailing over their enemies they go furthest and being vanquished they fall back least. They make use of their bodies as though they were least their own, for the sake of their city, but their judgment as though it were most their own, for doing something for the sake of their city. And what they contrive but would not arrive at, they believe themselves to be deprived of, and what having gone after they acquire, [they believe] meager compared to the future things they will obtain by acting. If, then, they fail in their attempt, they make up their loss with other hopes: for they alone simultaneously hope for and possess what they conceive, on account of the speed with which they accomplish what they resolve. And for all these things with labor and dangers, throughout their lifetime, they toil, and they enjoy least what they already have because of always acquiring more; and they believe that there is no other holiday than busying themselves with what their interest requires and that rest without activity is no less a misfortune than laboring without leisure. (1.70.5–8)

Indeed, even though the Corinthians are allies of the Spartans, and even though they do accuse Athens of "injustice" and "hubris" in their speech at Sparta (1.68.2–3), they also praise many aspects of the Athenian character over the Spartan character and they implicitly urge the Spartans to imitate the Athenians in their energy and confidence in themselves:

They innovate and are keen to devise plans and to fulfill in deed what they resolve; you are keen to preserve what you have and to devise nothing and not even to accomplish in deed what is necessary. They again are daring⁴⁰ beyond their power and run risks beyond their judgment and in the midst of dangers are of good hope; but you act beneath your power and do not

³⁸ In Bruell's words, "The Athenians thus sought to have it both ways" (1981, 28-29).

³⁹ We will discuss the significance of this self-contradiction in Chapter 6.

⁴⁰ Literally, they are "daringers [τολμηταί]," the only time this word appears in the book. Strauss describes Athens as "the city of daring" (1964, 202n68).

trust your sure judgment and you suppose that you will never be delivered from dangers. And indeed they are unshrinking while you are hesitant, and they go away from home while you prefer most to stay at home: for they suppose that they would acquire more by being away, you that by going after something would damage what you possess. (1.70.2–4)

The Corinthians do complain that the Athenians cause trouble, not only for others but also – apparently unreasonably – for themselves: “So that, if someone, summing them up, would say that they were by nature born neither to have rest themselves nor to allow other human beings to have it, he would speak rightly” (1.70.9). But the fundamental criticism the Corinthians make in this speech is of the Spartans, for being unreasonably passive.⁴¹ They do fear losing what they possess, not unreasonably, but, most unreasonably, they do not even do “what is necessary” to keep what they possess (1.70.2). What might be the cause of such passivity? The Corinthians do not attribute cowardice to the Spartans, though they do charge them with “a lack of spiritedness” (1.71.4). Instead, the Corinthians maintain, the Spartans trust in “fortune” to protect what they have and to see that justice is done rather than in their own “power” and “judgment.”⁴² And the Corinthians imply that the Spartans lack such confidence in their own powers because, under the influence of their “old-fashioned” practices and “unchanging lawful customs,” they believe that their fate, and indeed the fate of all humans, is in the hands of powers other than and superior to their own, namely, the gods.⁴³ The passivity of the Spartans, then, the Corinthians hint, is not a fault of character but a fault of understanding. They mistakenly believe that their fate is not in their hands and therefore they do not do, reasonably and energetically, even what is necessary in order to secure their own good. In contrast, in the account of the Corinthians, the Athenians’ constant activity, energy, striving, and acquisitiveness reflect their tremendous confidence in themselves. They place their hopes not in divine power but in their own human power.⁴⁴ The nature of the Athenians reflects what human nature is capable of when liberated from the limits of tradition and piety.

The growth of Athens as an imperial power after the Persian War bears powerful witness to the daring and energy described by both the Corinthians and the Athenians themselves at the Spartan debate. For Athens, from having been a relatively minor power with no navy in the

⁴¹ 1.70.4, 1.71.1.

⁴² 1.69.5, 1.70.2–3, 1.71.1.

⁴³ 1.71.2–3; see 7.18.2.

⁴⁴ 1.70.3, 1.70.7. See Jaffe 2017, 110–112.

period prior to the Persian War, rises rapidly thereafter to become the leading naval power in Greece and the leading rival to Sparta overall.⁴⁵ Athens first acquires its empire by expanding dramatically throughout Eastern Greece, on land and sea, as far as Cyprus and Egypt.⁴⁶ Such eastward expansion could be understood as intended to weaken the still formidable Persian Empire, lest it invade Greece and threaten Athens again. However, Athens also expands in some measure to Western Greece, acquiring bases in Naupactus and Chalcis, far from the Persian Empire – possibly with a view ultimately to reaching Italy, Sicily, and Carthage.⁴⁷ The Athenians become the leaders of the Greek cities and islands of the Aegean Sea; win crushing land and sea victories against the Persian Empire on a single day at Eurymedon; take possession of a number of Greek cities throughout Greece; defeat Corinth on sea and land; defeat the Boeotians on land; and wage campaigns in Cyprus and Egypt.⁴⁸ And even though they suffer tremendous setbacks at the hands of the Spartans, the Boeotians, and especially the Persians in Egypt, they nonetheless persist in expanding their empire and in suppressing revolts in Naxos, Thasos, Aegina, Euboea, and Samos.⁴⁹ In this expansion in all directions, we see the explosive power of Athens' natural, energetic self-interestedness.⁵⁰

By liberating the Athenians from their centuries-old attachment to the land and its pious customs and outlook, Themistocles, as a new Theseus, refounds Athens as a humanistic city, with a people who look to human reason rather than religious tradition for guidance and who zealously pursue their self-interest in achieving security, honor, wealth, and power rather than adhere to paternal and divine law. It is thanks to him that Athens first draws on the power of nature, of natural reason and natural self-interestedness, to become eventually a great imperial, naval power and, as Pericles later declares, “a model” and “an education for Greece.”⁵¹ It is thanks to Themistocles that Athens first rises to the “acme” of political and human greatness that Thucydides mentions in the opening lines of his book.⁵²

⁴⁵ 1.14.3, 1.18.2. ⁴⁶ 1.96–100, 1.104.

⁴⁷ 1.103.3, 1.108.5; see also 1.111.3, 1.36.2, 1.44.3, 6.15.2, 6.90.2. Consider as well Hermocrates' claim that the Carthaginians “are always in fear lest the Athenians come against their city” (6.34.2). Romilly goes so far as to suggest that “a concern with Sicily could certainly claim to be the tradition of Themistocles” (1963, 200).

⁴⁸ 1.96–97.1, 1.98, 1.100, 1.103.3–4, 1.105–106, 1.108.2–5, 1.104, 1.109.1–2, 1.112.2–4.

⁴⁹ 1.107.2–108.1, 1.113.2–4, 1.109–110, 1.98.4, 1.100.2–101, 1.111, 1.114–117.

⁵⁰ Consider Bruell 1981, 26–27. ⁵¹ 2.37.1, 2.41.1.

⁵² Cox suggests that, insofar as, according to Thucydides (1.23.6), the growth of the Athenian Empire was the cause of the war between Athens and Sparta, and insofar as “Themistocles, by Thucydides' account . . . is the single political actor most responsible

The question arises, however, is it possible to base a political community on the forces of human nature rather than the restraining power of law? Are human beings as a whole sufficiently reasonable to follow their interests wisely? Does reason always support loyalty to one's particular political community? Does the interest of the individual always coincide with the interest of the political community? In their speech at Sparta, the Corinthians suggest that there is a perfect harmony between the Athenians' independent spirit as individuals and their devotion to their city: "They make use of their bodies as though they were least their own, for the sake of their city, but their judgment as though it were most their own, for doing something for the sake of their city" (1.70.6). However, Thucydides indicates that there was no such perfect harmony in the Athens of Themistocles. For, after Themistocles persuades them to build a navy, to abandon their land and city and fight the Persians on the sea, and to build mighty walls to enable them to become a city of sailors, the Athenians turn against him. First, Thucydides reports, some years after the Persian War, they send him into exile. Then, on the basis of a mere accusation by the Spartans that he was guilty of treasonously conspiring with the Persian king against all of Greece, as the Spartan Pausanias had done, the Athenians hunt Themistocles across Greece, from Argos to Corcyra across Northern Greece to Macedonia and then to Ephesus in Ionia, with the apparent intention of executing him.⁵³ Thucydides never explicitly states why the Athenians turn against Themistocles. On the one hand, it would seem not only ungrateful of the Athenians to exile and then hunt down and try to execute their greatest benefactor but also contrary to their own interest to dispense with the services of their most sagacious commander and risk making him their enemy.⁵⁴ The Athenians' imprudent treatment of Themistocles thereby calls into question the claim of the Athenian speakers at Sparta that the Athenians as a whole possessed in Themistocles' time a "sagacious judgment" (1.75.1). On the other hand, Themistocles proves himself here remarkably free of loyalty to or even of sentiment for Athens. For, in contrast with Pausanias, he does not allow himself to be recalled to his homeland by his fellow citizens and, in contrast with Alcibiades, against whom the Athenians later also turn, he never expresses any indignation or anguish at experiencing the

for" that growth, "one might say that Themistocles is the distant but underlying cause of the war" (1992, 96).

⁵³ 1.136.4; see 1.94-95, 1.128-134, 1.135.2-137.

⁵⁴ Consider 1.136.1, 1.74.1.

“wickedness” and “injustice” of his native city.⁵⁵ Instead Themistocles not only successfully eludes the Athenians but also wins the favor of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, whose father King Xerxes invaded Athens and sought to enslave it, impressing him with his intelligence and his promise to help Persia finally succeed in enslaving all of Greece. And even though Themistocles dies without fulfilling that promise, he does become an able servant of the Persian king, learning the Persian tongue and the practices of the land and acting as the governor of the city of Magnesia on behalf of the king (1.137.3–138).⁵⁶ Themistocles demonstrates the strength of his nature most clearly through his capacity to secure his own well-being, calmly and shrewdly, not only apart from his city but in opposition to it. It may well have been because they recognized his independence of mind and spirit that the Athenians distrusted Themistocles, perhaps out of envy of such independence and perhaps out of fear that, if his self-interest were to conflict with theirs, he would turn against them without hesitation and do so most effectively.

The case of Themistocles suggests that there is a grave practical problem with the attempt to base a political community on nature. In order for any particular political community to last, it must command the loyalty of its citizens. Nature, however, belongs to no particular political community but transcends it. The power of nature that Themistocles possesses is one that he possesses not as an Athenian but as a human being. He therefore displays that strength universally, abroad and at home, in service to his homeland and in opposition to it, in Persia as well as in Greece. For just as fire burns in Persia as well as in Greece, so may a wise human being flourish in Persia as well as in Greece. By liberating the Athenians from their attachment to their particular homeland and urging them to cleave to the open sea, Themistocles frees their minds and their passions to range freely across the horizon and enables them to achieve great power and honor with breathtaking ingenuity, energy, and speed. But by doing so does

⁵⁵ Compare 1.136ff. with 1.95.3–5 and 1.131 and 1.137.4 with 6.92.2–4 and also 8.81.2. Thucydides reports that “some say” that Themistocles committed suicide because he deemed it impossible to fulfil his promise to help Persia enslave Greece and that “his relatives . . . say” that he bid them bury his bones in Attica. But Thucydides declines to pass judgment on the veracity or plausibility of these claims, as he had when remarking that Themistocles “falsely” claimed to have helped Xerxes escape with his army from Greece after the defeat at Salamis (1.138.4, 1.138.6, 1.137.4).

⁵⁶ Consider Cox’s reference to “the fact that Thucydides gives a double, unresolved account of Themistocles’ death” as well as Cox’s “conjectural excursion” suggesting that “only his [that, is, Themistocles’] untimely death prevents his sagacity from being used to guide a Persian subjugation of the Greeks” (1992, 92, 96).

he not inevitably weaken the Athenians' loyalty to their political community and also weaken their trust in one another's loyalty, including most emphatically their leaders? Does the Athens of Themistocles not risk producing citizens who, contrary to what the Corinthians claim, make use of their bodies and minds for their own sake instead of for their city's sake? Does the fact that the Athenian who attempts to refound Athens as a city based on nature himself ends up as first a fugitive from Athens and then the servant of Persia, Athens' greatest enemy, not reveal the folly of that attempt?

Pericles and the Education of Human Nature I: War as a Teacher of Reason

The Athenian statesman who apparently reconciles the reasonableness and self-interestedness of human nature with devotion to Athens is Pericles. When the Corinthians describe the Athenians as simultaneously independent-minded and patriotic, they are describing the citizens of the Athens led by Pericles, not Themistocles. Pericles is certainly, in important ways, the heir of Themistocles.⁵⁷ He shares Themistocles' vision of a city that is detached from the land and focused on the sea, and goes so far as to urge the Athenians to think of themselves as "islanders" and of their dwellings, land, and temples as a mere "decoration and ornament of their wealth."⁵⁸ Moreover, Pericles stresses that Athens is open to all other lands, offering "an education for Greece," enjoying "all" good things "from the whole earth," refusing to hide their debates from foreigners, penetrating "every sea and land," establishing "everywhere everlasting memorials of evil and good deeds," and projecting their power across all the seas of the earth.⁵⁹ Pericles also advances Themistocles' vision of a city that looks to reason rather than piety for guidance, emphasizing the importance of reason guiding actions, declaring that the Athenians as a whole "philosophize," and omitting any mention of gods in his speeches except when speaking of the possible need to melt down the inlaid gold of the statue of

⁵⁷ Consider Romilly's statement that "Both the admiration which Thucydides shows for Themistocles and the way he expresses it prepare the way for his admiration for Pericles and confirm it" (1963, 119).

⁵⁸ 1.143.5, 2.62.3. As Connor remarks, Pericles' "strategy derives from the Themistoclean transformation of Athens into a walled naval power" (1984, 50). See also Jaffe 2017, 125, 188–189.

⁵⁹ 2.41.1, 2.38.2, 2.39.1, 2.41.4–5, 2.62.2.

Athena to fund military operations against Sparta.⁶⁰ What is more, Pericles appeals to the individual desires of the Athenians, for wealth, pleasure, wisdom, beauty, and honor, and argues that those desires can best be satisfied through devotion to Athens.⁶¹ Finally, Pericles, too, seeks to base the city primarily on a liberation of the inner forces of human nature and on a shared understanding of human nature rather than on the compulsion of law and a pious reverence for the law. At the opening of his Funeral Oration, he dares to criticize “the paternal law” of the city that requires a funeral oration in praise of those fallen in battle, for he suggests that any human being will typically feel envy “if he should hear” someone praised “beyond his own nature.”⁶² He thereby judges, and urges his fellow citizens to judge, even the most venerable laws by the extent to which they are in harmony with human nature. Pericles does not mean to suggest thereby that laws should simply be discarded but rather that they should be reformed so as to bring them into accord with the natural passions of human beings. Laws should be based not on a reverence for their antiquity or a faith in their sanctity but rather on a rational understanding of their suitability to such beings as ourselves.

Yet even though Pericles shares Themistocles’ vision of Athens and seeks to build on it, he differs from Themistocles in one crucial respect. He excels at persuading the Athenians to follow and trust him and to devote themselves to their city.⁶³ Thucydides explicitly states that, in three of his four speeches – including the speech presented in indirect discourse – Pericles succeeded in persuading the Athenians: first to maintain their resolution to go to war with Sparta; then to abandon their dwellings, lands, and temples in the countryside in the face of the Spartan invasion; and finally, through his last speech, to persevere in waging war against Sparta even in the aftermath of two Spartan invasions and the plague that killed up to one quarter of the Athenian population.⁶⁴ This power to persuade, through both his speeches and his actions, is one that

⁶⁰ 2.40.2–3, 2.40.1, 2.13.5. As Euben notes, thanks to Pericles especially, “the Athenians saw the world as a series of opportunities for the exercise of political and theoretical power” (1986, 375).

⁶¹ 2.37.2–40.1, 2.41.3–43.4. ⁶² 2.34.1, 2.35.2.

⁶³ Cicero notes (*Brutus* 28) that Themistocles was known for his eloquence as well as his prudence, but that Pericles was especially praised for his eloquence.

⁶⁴ 1.145, 2.14.1, 2.65.2. For the apparently typical toll of the plague on the Athenians, consider 2.58.3. Remarkably, the only occasion that Thucydides omits stating that the Athenians were persuaded by Pericles is regarding his longest and most famous speech, the Funeral Oration. See 2.47.1.

Thucydides highlights in both of his eulogies for Pericles: “a man at that time first of the Athenians, most powerful at both speaking and acting” (1.139.4): “that one, being powerful through his merit and his judgment and his manifest incorruptibility, freely checked the majority; and he was not led by them but rather led them himself. On account of not acquiring the power improperly by speaking to please them, but having it on the basis of his recognized merit, he was able to speak against them even when they were angry . . . In speech a democracy, it [Athens] came to be in deed rule by the first man” (2.65.8–9). While Thucydides singles out Themistocles for his sagacity and foresight, he singles out Pericles for his persuasiveness. Thucydides also underscores Pericles’ persuasiveness by always having him speak alone, unchallenged by any opponent, in contrast with Archidamus in Sparta, Hermocrates in Syracuse, and Cleon, Diodotus, Alcibiades, and Nicias in Athens. As a consequence of his persuasiveness, he is never exiled or marked for death, as Themistocles and Alcibiades are. As a consequence of his persuasiveness, Athens is, in Thucydides’ account, effectively united under the rule of Pericles.⁶⁵

Pericles excels at persuading because he understands his audience. In order to move the Athenians, in order to know how to temper and embolden them so effectively, he must have considerable understanding of human nature as a whole and the nature of the Athenians in particular. Most simply, Pericles’ excellence at persuasion means that he understands, even more than Themistocles evidently did, the need for persuasion. He sees, apparently more clearly than Themistocles, the power of humans’ passions – for example, the power of their envy – and the weakness of their reason. He recognizes the dangerous tension between the natural self-interestedness of human beings and devotion to their political community. He understands that the harmony between individual self-interest and the interest of the political community is far from being self-evident or reliable. His response to these difficulties, however, is not to seek guidance from piety rather than reason, or to strengthen traditional constraints on natural self-interestedness, but rather to provide an education for the Athenians. Pericles is the only Athenian statesman to speak of education, and while he stresses that Athens “is an education for Greece,” it is, as he also states, a

⁶⁵ Connor observes that, in Thucydides’ presentation early in his work, “While Sparta is divided in its counsels and subject to the persuasive manipulations of Sthenelaidas, Athens seems unified behind the leadership of Pericles” (1984, 48). But consider also Saxonhouse 1996, 153n12.

city whose citizens are themselves formed by an education.⁶⁶ That education is one that Pericles himself devises for them, one that aims at strengthening the natural reason of the Athenians and at guiding their natural self-interestedness toward devotion to the community. There are two parts to Pericles' education of the Athenians: First is the education through the experience of war, a war that Pericles persuades the Athenians to undertake and persist in throughout three of the four speeches presented by Thucydides; second is the education through his account of Athens as set forth in his speeches, above all in his Funeral Oration.

Although Pericles declares in the Funeral Oration that the Athenians as a whole philosophize, he clearly recognizes the weakness of their reason and the power of their passions (2.40.1). Thucydides underscores Pericles' appreciation of their often unreasonable and passionate character in his eulogy: "When, at any rate, he would see them emboldened through untimely hubris, by speaking he would strike fear into them, and when he would see them in turn become unreasonably afraid, he would restore them to boldness again" (2.65.9). Pericles himself twice contrasts the passionate inconstancy of the Athenians with his own reasoned constancy. In the first words of his first speech, he declares: "I always hold myself to the same judgment [γνώμη], Athenians, not to yield to the Peloponnesians, even though I know that human beings do not feel the same anger [ὀργή] when they are persuaded to wage war and when they practice it in deed, since they change their judgments with events" (1.140.1). In his last speech, he makes the same point more sharply:

And I myself am the same and I do not change my stance: but you are altered, since it happened to you to be persuaded [to go to war] when unscathed, but to repent when suffering evils, and my reasoned speech [λόγος] does not appear correct to you, in your weakness of judgment, because each of you already feels pain, but the evidence of the benefit for all is far away. And now that a great and sudden alteration has befallen you, your intellect is too downcast to persevere in what you resolved.⁶⁷

But how can the Athenians pursue their interests intelligently and effectively if they are so inclined to yield to their passions?

The most powerful and dangerous passion that Pericles must grapple with is anger. Pericles addresses the anger of the Athenians in the opening

⁶⁶ 2.41.1. See his reference to the "educations" of the Spartans and Athenians on 2.39.1. Consider as well 3.42.1 and 3.84.1.

⁶⁷ 2.61.2; see also 2.13.2.

words of both his first speech in the book and his last speech. In his first speech, he warns that the anger the Athenians feel against the Spartans will wax and wane over the course of the war (1.140.1), but he warns especially lest, “being angered” (ὀργισθέντες) by the Spartans’ invasion of their ancestral lands and temples, the Athenians recklessly risk a land battle with them (1.143.5). When the Spartans proceed to invade Athenian lands, the Athenians, inspired by “anger [ὀργή] rather than judgment,” seek to attack the powerful Spartan forces on land and turn against Pericles for restraining them (2.21.2–22.1). Later, when the Athenians endure both a second Spartan invasion and the devastating plague, “in the grip of anger” (ὀργιζόμενος) and “bereft of judgment,” they blame Pericles for persuading them to go to war and also for the coming of the plague (2.59.2–3).

Pericles declares to the Athenians in the opening words of his final speech, “Your anger toward me is not unexpected, for I perceive the causes” (2.60.1). What are the causes? Anger would seem to be a moral passion inasmuch as it is provoked by the perception of injustice.⁶⁸ The Athenians are evidently angry with Sparta at the beginning of the war because they perceive Sparta and the Spartan invasion to be unjust and their own defense of their city to be, as Pericles describes it in his first speech, “just.”⁶⁹ They are, then, angry with Pericles because they perceive his restraint of their desire to wage a righteous battle on land against Sparta as unjust (2.21.2–3). Even though the Athenians are persuaded by Pericles that the Spartans are superior to them on land, they evidently believe, in their righteous anger, that, with justice on their side, they will prevail.⁷⁰ Later, the Athenians are angry with Pericles because they apparently perceive the war against Sparta to be unjust and they therefore perceive his advocacy of that war to be unjust. For the Athenians apparently interpret the fact that the plague afflicted Athens but not Sparta as confirmation that not Athens but Sparta is in the right in this war, and that Sparta will therefore prevail. The Athenians are consequently, at that point, eager for peace (2.54.4–5).

Anger in both cases threatens to be destructive to Athens, at least in the judgment of Pericles. It risks impelling Athens either to confront Sparta in a land battle, which will lead to a devastating defeat, or to make peace with Sparta on terms that reduce Athens to being subordinate to Sparta and vulnerable to its resentful imperial subjects.⁷¹ In each case the destructive nature of the Athenians’ anger is intensified by their piety – a piety that has

⁶⁸ Consider 3.42.1–3, 3.44.4. ⁶⁹ 1.144.2; see 1.145, 1.140.1–141.1.

⁷⁰ 1.145, 2.14.1. ⁷¹ 1.143.5, 2.13.2, 2.22.1; 1.140.2–141.1, 2.63.

persisted notwithstanding the efforts of Themistocles and Pericles to free them of it⁷² – and specifically by the pious belief that, thanks to the gods, right makes might. The Athenians to begin with evidently believe that the gods are on their side in their just war against Sparta and are therefore emboldened to attack Sparta on land recklessly, confident that the gods will favor them with victory against the invader. In Thucydides' words,

Collectors of oracles recited oracles of all sorts, which each one listened to as he was moved. The Achamians, supposing what was theirs to be not the least portion of Athens, as their own land was being ravaged, were especially insisting on the sally. In every way the city was roused up to strife, and they laid hold of Pericles in their anger. (2.21.3)

Later, the Athenians believe that the gods are punishing them by sending the deadly plague to Athens in particular, but sparing Sparta, for they recall that the oracle at Delphi told the Spartans that, if they waged war against Athens with all their might, “the god” – Apollo, who for example, according to Homer, sent the plague against the Achaeans at Troy⁷³ – would “himself” join them and ensure their victory (2.54.4–5). They evidently surmise that they therefore must be guilty of wrongdoing in this war, and thus disheartened, that they must make peace at any price to spare themselves from even more devastating divine punishment.⁷⁴ Pericles seeks to check their anger, in the short run, in the first case, by avoiding an assembly and then by accommodating their anger – through a skirmish on land and then a large naval raid against the Peloponnesus – and, in the second case, in what may be his most impressive speech given how discouraged the Athenians are on account of the plague, by an extraordinary appeal to their confidence in the power of their navy – “you are in sovereign command” of all the seas and “neither a king nor any other nation” can challenge you – and an extraordinary appeal to their fear of vengeance from their imperial subjects – “for what you already have is like a tyranny, which is reputedly unjust to lay hold of, but is dangerous to let go.”⁷⁵ But in the long run Pericles seeks to check their anger by weakening the piety that intensifies their anger through the war itself. For the war removes them from their ancestral lands and temples and focuses their energies on building up and deploying their navy. It gives them all –

⁷² And notwithstanding the seemingly areligious outlook of the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta. As Palmer notes, there are “two sides of Athens” (1992, 20–21).

⁷³ *Iliad* 1.35–61, 1.450–457. See Thucydides 2.54.1–3.

⁷⁴ Consider Palmer 1992, 31.

⁷⁵ 2.22, 2.25, 2.62.2, 2.63.2.

Pericles hopes – the experience, over time the habitual experience, of trusting in their own wits and efforts, and in those of their enlightened commanders, to defeat their enemy rather than placing their hopes in the gods. In this way, Pericles seeks to sustain and deepen the spiritual transformation begun by Themistocles, to detach the Athenians from the land and the piety of the land and to forge a humanistic rather than a pious city. In this light, Pericles “always,” as he says, seeks war with Sparta and urges the Athenians to wage war by abandoning their ancestral lands, not only to gain power and status for Athens but also to educate them by habituating them to look for guidance to their own reason and the reason of their most sagacious leaders rather than to the gods and their oracles (1.140.1).

The war, then, for Pericles, as for Thucydides, is a teacher (3.82.2). But for Pericles it is, while a violent teacher, primarily a teacher of reason, of the power and beneficence of reason, to the Athenians as a whole. The war with Sparta and, later, imperial wars as well, will enlighten the Athenians more fully and completely than the relatively brief Persian War did (see 1.23.1). For this reason, Pericles chooses this war and makes every effort to persuade the Athenians to choose this war (2.13.9). Unlike the war against the Persian invader, the war against Sparta is, in Thucydides’ account, more a war of choice than a war of necessity.⁷⁶ While Thucydides explicitly states his belief that the alarming rise of Athens to greatness “compelled” the Spartans to go to war, he never explicitly states in his own name that the Athenians were compelled to rise to greatness.⁷⁷ In Thucydides’ account, the actions taken by Athens that led to that war, most notably the alliance with Corcyra, appear to have been more freely taken than the actions the Athenians took in the face of the Persian attack on and conquest of Attica.⁷⁸ The war and the actions that lead to the war are championed by Pericles, who persuades the Athenians to undertake them for the enhancement of their power and for the cultivation of their intelligence and of their trust in intelligent commanders and leaders. As Thucydides’ account of the first Spartan invasion of Attica indicates, even under Pericles’ rule, the

⁷⁶ Nichols argues that Thucydides does not present the decision by Athens to go to war as a “necessary” one (2015, 28). On the other hand, Orwin goes so far as to contend that, according to Pericles at least, in his final speech, “What justifies the war is its necessity and only that” (1994, 21).

⁷⁷ 1.23.6. See 1.75.3, 1.76.2, 3.45, 4.61.5, 5.105.1–2, 6.87.2. But see 5.25.3.

⁷⁸ Consider 1.44. Thucydides’ account omits entirely the seemingly voluntary actions by the Athenians, such as their participation in the raid on the Persian held city of Sardis, that, according to Herodotus, provoked the Persian invasion of Greece and attack on Athens. See Herodotus 5.99–105 and also 7.1, 7.8–9, 7.11.

Athenians were primarily a pious people rooted in the land (2.14–16). It is Pericles' hope that the experience of war will weaken the enduring hold on them of that ancestral piety and will realize the goal of making of the Athenians a people, if not one that philosophizes, at least one that looks for guidance to a set of commanders and speakers who are sagacious and rely on their own reason, such as Themistocles, Pericles, Phormio, and, later, Diodotus, Demosthenes, and Alcibiades.⁷⁹

Pericles and the Education of Human Nature II: The Harmony between Rational Self-Interest and Patriotism

The second part of Pericles' education of the Athenians addresses the problem of incipient faction within Athens in the wake of the liberation of human reason and natural self-interestedness from traditional religious and moral restraints initiated by Themistocles. The most visible example of such political division is the Athenians' ostracism of Themistocles himself, and their subsequent pursuit of him with the intention of executing him (1.135–136). It is also apparent when, a few years after Themistocles' death, in the wake of the Spartan victory over Athens in the battle of Tanagra, a number of Athenians secretly urge the Spartans to attack Athens in the hope that they would "put a stop to the democracy and the long walls being built" from Athens to the Peiraeus (1.107.4). These two examples suggest that the principal sources of faction in Athens lie in the envy and distrust of the majority of Athenians for such outstanding leaders as Themistocles, whose "nature" surpasses their own (2.35.2), and in the disloyalty to Athens of self-interested individuals who may betray Athens to Sparta or, as Themistocles promises, to Persia, to advance their own individual interests. Pericles seeks to accommodate the Athenian many's envy of the outstanding with an ostentatiously self-effacing patriotism and an egalitarian rhetoric. When he recognizes that the Spartan king Archidamus may, sincerely or mischievously, single his country estate out for favorable treatment during the Spartan invasion of Attica, Pericles is quick to announce to the Athenians that, if the invading Spartans spare his private lands, he will donate them all to Athens (2.13.1). Thus does he show his "manifest incorruptibility" (2.65.8). Pericles also takes care, in his account of the greatness of Athens in the Funeral Oration, to avoid any mention at all of Athens' great statesmen, in dramatic contrast with the Athenian

⁷⁹ Orwin goes so far as to speak of Pericles' vision of Athens "as the first 'atheistic' society" (1994, 20).

ambassadors at Sparta who proclaim the greatness of Themistocles, “the most sagacious general” (1.74.1).⁸⁰ Nor does Pericles make any reference in that speech to his own greatness as a source of Athens’ greatness, in contrast to what Alcibiades will later say regarding himself (6.16–17.1). Thus does Pericles reassure the Athenian majority that he is content to accept that Athens is, at least in speech, a democracy.

In response to the potentially disloyal self-interestedness of individual Athenians, Pericles seeks to persuade them that, if one properly understands one’s own individual good, one will do all one can to advance the good of one’s political community. Pericles states this thesis most clearly in his final speech:

For I believe a city that is, on the whole, successful, benefits its private individuals more than when it fares well as regards each citizen, but fails collectively. For a man who is doing well in his own affairs, while his country is destroyed, perishes with it, but one who suffers ill fortune in a country that enjoys good fortune is saved much more. (2.60.2–3)

Here Pericles boldly contends not only that the destruction of a political community will destroy all within it, as a ship that sinks will drown all on it, but that the prosperity of one’s political community will more than compensate for the sufferings of the individual. But how can living in a flourishing country more than compensate, for example, for one’s own death or the death of a loved one?

Pericles addresses this question in his Funeral Oration in honor of the first Athenians who died in the war. In the first place, he argues that the Athenian regime gives free scope to the individual’s pursuit of “pleasure.” In contrast to the Spartans in particular, the Athenians need not curb or repress that pursuit in order to serve their country, but may “freely,” “in a relaxed manner,” and “with an easy spirit,” seek their own “benefit” and “delight” and enjoy all “good” things “from the whole earth” (2.37.2–39.4). By freeing Athenians from the moral restraints of traditional piety, the regime of Themistocles and Pericles allows them to live a life in harmony with their nature. It allows them to satisfy the whole range of their natural desires, for beauty and wisdom as well as for pleasure and wealth. Athens is an education for Greece because it is the best regime for human beings and it is the best because it alone allows humans to fulfil their nature

⁸⁰ As Collins and Stauffer note regarding the Funeral Oration, “Pericles does not single out any particular actions or battles in which individual Athenians displayed their virtue” (1999, 5). Consider also Orwin 1994, 24.

(2.41.1). Therefore, he suggests, it is only reasonable for Athenians to defend the political community that enables them to pursue and enjoy their happiness most fully.

Among the pursuits that Athens allows its citizens, Pericles mentions prominently the pursuit of wisdom. Here he maintains that the Athenian regime gives free scope to human reason and allows for its fulfilment, and therefore that it is reasonable for those who cherish reason to defend Athens. But, in contrast with his account of the pursuit of pleasure, Pericles also argues that the pursuit of wisdom and the cultivation of reason require a full engagement in political life and an active devotion to the political community.

Pericles' statement that "we philosophize [or love wisdom] without softness" suggests that philosophy benefits the city as a whole, because only human reason can provide proper guidance in human affairs. As Pericles explains, the Athenians love wisdom because

we ourselves judge, at any rate, or reflect on affairs correctly, believing that speeches [or arguments – λόγῳι] are not harmful to actions, but rather not to have been taught beforehand by speech⁸¹ before proceeding to the action that is needful. For we are also distinguished from others in this respect, that we are both especially daring and calculating⁸² in what we undertake, but for others boldness comes from ignorance and hesitation from calculation.⁸³ And they would be justly judged mightiest in their soul who know most clearly what is terrible and what is pleasant and do not on account of this turn away from dangers.⁸⁴

Pericles argues here that reason does not harm political life by calling into question citizens' devotion to and hopes for their country. Reason does not replace the daring of the hopeful citizen warrior with the somber detachment of the philosophic thinker who views all regimes as imperfect and all political ambitions as problematic. In Pericles' account, philosophy unleashes human daring by challenging the truth of the pious view that it is the gods who control the destinies of humans. Philosophy reveals to all human beings what they can achieve, in all realms of human life, and most emphatically in politics, if they will only recognize the goodness and power of reason. Philosophy, then, both unleashes human daring – the confidence that humans can achieve their own good in this life on their own and for themselves, if they trust in their own powers – and guides it. For

⁸¹ Or "argument" or "reason" – λόγος. ⁸² Or "reason out" – ἐκλογίζεσθαι.

⁸³ Or "reasoning" – λογισμός. ⁸⁴ 2.40.2–3; see also 2.62.4–5.

Pericles, then, philosophy, properly understood, does not constitute a threat to the political life of action but rather serves only to benefit it.

Pericles' statement that "we philosophize without softness" also suggests that philosophy needs politics. Pericles is evidently aware that there are philosophers and followers of philosophers who believe that political life is inevitably a realm of ignorance and injustice and therefore that it is reasonable to withdraw from the harsh political arena and to lead a private, apolitical life.⁸⁵ These human beings, in Pericles' view, "philosophize with softness." But to philosophize "with softness" is unsustainable, for two reasons. In the first place, Pericles suggests, philosophizing requires political freedom – living free from subjection to a tyrant – and therefore requires the stoutness of soul and toughness of body to fight for the freedom of one's political community as an engaged and spirited citizen.⁸⁶ As he notes, "For the minding of one's own business [τὸ γὰρ ἀπραγμον] does not preserve itself without being arrayed together with one who is active, nor is it expedient for a city that rules, but only for a subject who lives safely as a slave" (2.63.3). Without the freedom afforded to them by Athens, such philosophers as Anaxagoras or Socrates would, Pericles suggests, be enslaved in their minds as well as their bodies. Secondly, philosophizing with softness is unsustainable because truth is hard. For example, the truth that "for all things by nature also decline" (2.64.3) would seem to contradict the pious belief in immortal gods and the broad human hope for immortality.⁸⁷ Philosophizing requires a toughness of mind to pursue and face the truth, since philosophizing requires at least questioning and perhaps even rejecting long cherished and comforting beliefs. And such hardness of spirit and mind, Pericles suggests, is nourished above all by active engagement in political life. For while the apolitical life of a philosopher may tempt one to "play . . . the good man through minding his own business [ἀπραγμοσύνη]," the sobering realities of politics teach one to recognize the power and value of truth (2.63.2).

In passages from the Funeral Oration and from his final speech, Pericles criticizes repeatedly private, apolitical philosophers who "mind their own

⁸⁵ For Pericles' association with the philosopher Anaxagoras in particular, see Plato *Phaedrus* 269e1–270a8. See also Isocrates *Antidosis* 235–236; Plutarch *Pericles* 4, 6, 8, 16.5–7, 32; Diogenes Laertius 2.12–14. For Pericles' broader intellectual associations, consider Wallace 2007, 225–226, as well as Plato's *Menexenus*, especially 235e3–236b6.

⁸⁶ As Euben puts it, the Periclean Athenian "is a lover of wisdom, without forgetting the imperatives of the world" (1986, 377).

⁸⁷ Consider, however, 2.64.5–6 and also 2.43.2, 2.41.3. We will discuss this evident contradiction in Pericles' thought in Chapter 6.

business,” using the very term that Socrates uses at the end of Plato’s *Republic* to describe the happy, philosophic life – the “life of a private man who minds his own business [ἀπράγμων]” (620c6). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles declares, “for we alone believe the one who has no share at all in these things [that is, the political affairs of Athens] is, not minding his own business [ἀπράγμων], but useless” (2.40.2). In his final speech, Pericles states, in another apparent reference to the reticent, retiring philosopher: “For he who knows and has not clearly taught is in an equal state as if he had not thought within himself; and one having both capacities, but is ill disposed toward the city, would similarly not speak out as though he were devoted to what is his own” (2.60.6). Pericles then goes on to warn the Athenians against imitating the philosophers and withdrawing from the dangerous and harsh political arena into the soft, merely private life of reflection: “It is no longer possible for you to stand outside of it, if someone, even being afraid of this present situation, plays the good man through minding his own business [ἀπραγμοσύνη]; for what you already have [that is, an empire] is like a tyranny, which is reputedly unjust to lay hold of, but is dangerous to let go” (2.63.2–3). Finally, Pericles affirms that the political life of the Athenians is the most enviable life and hence, it might seem, the most fulfilling of lives: “And indeed these things [that is, the acquisition of the ‘greatest power’ and ‘everlasting . . . memory’] the one who minds his own business [ἀπράγμων] would blame, but the one who also wishes to accomplish something will emulate: and the one who has not acquired them will be envious” (2.64.4). Pericles maintains, then, that the full cultivation of reason both benefits the political community and benefits from serving it.

Pericles argues that it is reasonable for individuals to care for Athens and to defend it since it enables them to fulfil their natural desires for pleasure and for wisdom and to perfect their natural reason.⁸⁸ Their private individual desires should therefore inspire a patriotic love for Athens. Accordingly, he calls on Athenians to “[behold] every day the power of the city in action and [become] erotic lovers of it” (2.43.1). Their erotic passion, which is ordinarily a private passion, should lead Athenians to love their city and seek to benefit it.⁸⁹ Yet, the question remains, how is it reasonable for individuals to sacrifice their lives or the lives of their loved ones for Athens,

⁸⁸ As Collins and Stauffer put it, “Pericles praises the Athenian empire as the highest expression of human striving and as a goal in which human beings can find their full satisfaction” (1999, 5).

⁸⁹ See Forde 1989, 30–32.

as is necessary in war? For would it not be reasonable for them to love the power of Athens not as an end in itself for which they should selflessly sacrifice but as a means to the end of satisfying their own individual pleasure, wisdom, and happiness, which they would embrace only insofar as it serves that end?

What renders the sacrifices of individual Athenians for Athens reasonable and in accord with their self-interested nature, Pericles contends, is honor.⁹⁰ Every one of his fellow citizens should take those who, “fighting in battle, met their end,” as their model (2.41.5). For, even though the dead freely faced “this noblest of risks,” they received honor as their reward: “they fled the shame of what would be spoken, but endured with their body what would be done, and through the chance of the shortest moment, at the peak of their glory rather than fear, they departed” (2.42.4).

For giving their bodies to the community, they received individually the praise that is ageless and the most distinguished tomb, not that in which they lie but that in which their glory is left behind, forever, on every fitting occasion, both in speech and in deed, eternally remembered. For of famous men the whole earth is a tomb, and an epigraph is inscribed not only in monuments of stone in their own [land], but also in the one not their own, there lives an unwritten memory in the mind of each rather than in any work. (2.43.2–3)

By dying for Athens, the Athenians reasonably exchange their inevitably limited, mortal lives for an undying glory. In this way, they may be said to live on in the memory of others, not only in their own lands but, Pericles claims, in other lands as well.

Pericles’ argument here reminds one of the choice that Homer’s Achilles is fated to make, between a long and inglorious life or a short life of eternal glory.⁹¹ Remarkably, however, Pericles here argues, more unequivocally and emphatically than Achilles ever does, that the choice for glory is the reasonable choice.⁹² But his specific argument is that this is a reasonable choice for the Athenians in particular, far more than it was for Homer’s heroes. For, in the only mention of Homer by anyone in the book other than Thucydides, Pericles argues that what renders the praise that Athenians will win for themselves most valuable, in contrast to the praise that Homer offers to such heroes of his as Achilles, is that the praise won by

⁹⁰ See Romilly 1963, 79, 138–139; Palmer 1992, 10–11, 26. ⁹¹ *Iliad* 9.410–416.

⁹² See Ahrens Dorf 2022, 90–99. In Orwin’s words regarding Pericles’ Funeral Oration, “The speech combines the rationalism characteristic of him with a fervent praise of glory as the ultimate object of human striving” (1994, 28).

the Athenians will be based on the truth: “With great proofs and not without testimony we present our power to be wondered at by those in the here and now and those hereafter; and we have no additional need for a Homer, to give praise, nor for whoever may delight with epic poems the present time, while the truth will damage the thought underlying the deeds” (2.41.4). Pericles here, as it were, echoes the thought expressed by Thucydides early in the book that such poets as Homer magnify and adorn the deeds they recount for the sake of delighting their listeners rather than displaying the naked truth.⁹³ Pericles suggests that therefore the praise that Homer offers to his heroes for their heroic deeds will not prove lasting, since it is not based on the truth. Only that which is based on truth, be it one’s glory or one’s wisdom, is genuinely a possession for all time.

The clearest example of Homer’s poetic embellishment, in Pericles’ eyes, would seem to be his ascription of divine descent to, and divine love for, his heroes. Achilles, for example, is the son of the goddess Thetis and the great grandson of Zeus, he is said to be loved especially by Athena and Zeus, and that divine descent and love evidently account for his heroic feats in war and his singular success on the battlefield.⁹⁴ But such divinization of human beings and divine providence are sheer fabrications, Pericles suggests, and therefore a glory based on such lies will ultimately prove fleeting. Athens, however, truly is a great city, one whose regime is based on the permanent and universal truth about human nature. Athens and its citizens will therefore be praised on rational grounds, as long as human nature remains the same and is understood by humans, and, one must add, as long as Athens itself is remembered. There will be no need to invent myths about Themistocles or Pericles being the sons of gods and beloved by gods; they will be praised for the genuine power of their nature, for their sagacity and foresight, for the excellence of their speeches and deeds, and their praise will therefore prove enduring.⁹⁵

Pericles’ claim that the glory of Athens will live on in other lands across the whole earth may seem to exhibit the exaggeration that he criticizes Homer for indulging in. But what Pericles may mean to suggest here is that the regime of Athens, insofar as it is based on the power of human nature, is a model and education – an object of admiration and emulation – for all human beings, not merely for those who are Athenians or even Greeks.

⁹³ 1.10.3, 1.21.1, 1.22.4.

⁹⁴ See, for example, *Iliad* 1.350–361, 21.184–189, 19.340–356, 22.214–226, as well as 2.768–770, 17.274–280, 22.158–159.

⁹⁵ Palmer goes so far as to declare that, “According to Pericles, . . . Athens needs no Homer, because Athens . . . needs no gods” (1992, 32).

And Thucydides' book offers considerable evidence in support of this suggestion. As we have seen, the Corinthians at Sparta offer great praise of Athens and suggest that the Spartans should imitate their daring and energy. Moreover, the great Spartan general Brasidas exhibits and, at times, hails the qualities of "daring" and "sagacity" celebrated by the Athenians.⁹⁶ The Syracusan statesman Hermocrates embraces the understanding of human nature as inevitably self-interested set forth by the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta (and later at Melos) as well as by the Athenian Diodotus.⁹⁷ When the Athenians attack Syracuse with a great naval armament, Hermocrates urges the Syracusans to defeat the Athenians by imitating them: "to daring men, such as the Athenians are, those who are daring against them would show themselves the most formidable" (7.21.3). Thucydides himself suggests that Syracusans were, in contrast with the Spartans, the most effective opponents the Athenians faced precisely because they resembled, and imitated, the Athenians (8.96.5).⁹⁸ What is more, just as the Persian king was an admirer of the sagacity of the fugitive Athenian Themistocles, so later are the Persians, as well as the Spartans, eager pupils of the political wisdom offered by the fugitive Athenian Alcibiades.⁹⁹ The enemies of Athens triumph over it, then, in large measure by following its example and counsel. Their very triumph over Athens is, in important ways, a tribute to Athens and therefore to the lasting glory of Athens. The Athenians of Themistoclean and Periclean Athens evidently impart an education in human nature and human excellence, both practical and theoretical, that appeals to humans far and wide. Accordingly, Pericles suggests, the Athenians and their city will enjoy a future glory that will be widespread as well as long-lasting, not to say universal and eternal. Therefore, it is in the interest of even its most self-interested citizens to

⁹⁶ Thucydides attributes "daring" to Brasidas three times (2.25.2, 5.7.1, 5.10.6) and "sagacity" once (4.81.2). See also 2.93–94, 4.85.6, 4.120.3, 4.123.2, 5.9.2. At 4.126.4 he speaks of a daring based on ignorance. Consider as well Connor 1984, 129–130, 134n67; Nichols 2015, 105.

⁹⁷ Compare 4.61.5 with 1.75.3, 1.76.2, 3.45, and 5.105.1–2. See Strauss 1983, 94.

⁹⁸ Consider, for example, the remarkable ingenuity the Syracusans display in their first naval victory against Athens (7.36–41). For an argument that Syracuse defeated Athens in Sicily because Syracuse, like Athens, was a democracy, see Balot 2023, 207–212. Balot goes so far as to maintain that, when the Athenians "confronted another energetic democracy, Syracuse, they were confounded; they confronted another, equally daring city; they could not destabilize Syracuse's democratic government, which was itself resolute; nor could they discover material advantages, since Syracuse was also a large and wealthy democracy" (212).

⁹⁹ 1.138.1–2, 1.138.5, 6.93, 8.45–46.

serve Athens, to sacrifice for it, and even to die for it, inasmuch as their reward will greatly compensate for their sacrifice.

It is important to recognize that Pericles' argument for the reasonableness of Athenian patriotism apparently persuades the great majority of Athenians to a very considerable extent. Even though, at the end of his Funeral Oration, Pericles declines to lament the loss suffered by the grieving parents of the fallen soldiers but rather urges them to have more children, if they can, for the good of Athens as well as for their own good, there is no evidence from Thucydides' account that the Athenian population as a whole were lacking in a willingness to risk their lives, or their children's lives, for the sake of Athens. For example, even after the devastating plague suffered by Athens and even though they are greatly outnumbered, Phormio's men in the two naval battles at the entrance to the gulf of Corinth, and Demosthenes' men in the first battle of Pylos, bravely fight, and defeat, the Peloponnesians.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, after the defeat of the Athenian forces at Sicily, in which Athens loses tens of thousands of men, the Athenians do not despair or shrink from fighting for their city but proceed to raise another armed force (8.1). What is more, even when they are punished, on dubious grounds, by their own city with fines and with exile, such Athenians as Pythodorus, Sophocles, Eurymedon, and Thucydides himself accept those penalties without turning against Athens.¹⁰¹ So enduring did the patriotism that Pericles sought to nourish among Athenians prove to be.

The case for the greatness of Athens, then, as expressed especially by Themistocles and above all by Pericles, is that the Athenian regime fits best the nature of human beings. Athens alone allows humans to live freely and fully, and to realize the potentialities of human nature. Rather than submit humans to the discipline of laws and traditions that are sanctified by gods, Athens liberates its citizens to pursue their individual happiness – to satisfy their individual natural desires for wealth, power, wisdom, beauty, and honor – effectively, by seeking guidance from their own reason and from the reason of their wisest leaders.

The most tangible evidence for the greatness of the Athenian regime is the power of Athens. Under the guidance of Themistocles and then Pericles, the Athenians grow from being a minor Greek city to being a Greek superpower, equal to the combined strength of the Peloponnesians, capable of vanquishing the mighty Persian Empire on land and sea and of

¹⁰⁰ 2.80–92, 4.9–14. On the remarkable resilience of Athens after the plague, see Balot 2023, 200–201 and especially 201–202.

¹⁰¹ 4.65.3–4, 5.26.5.

challenging their hold on the ancient kingdom of Egypt, with an empire growing both East and West. By tapping the power of nature, a power that manifests itself through their daring, zeal, and intelligence, the Athenians create an empire second to none, and one that proves to be to a considerable degree a model for their rivals.

The question arises, however, if the power of Athens demonstrates the greatness of Athens' regime, does its eventual defeat in the war against the Peloponnesians not call that greatness into question?¹⁰² One might argue in response that Athens' defeat is due not to any defects in its regime but to chance. For example, if Brasidas had not singlehandedly foiled the Athenian attempt to capture Methone, near Sparta, in the first year of the war, Athens might well have achieved a decisive victory right at the beginning, similar to what it achieved at Pylos several years later.¹⁰³ If the plague had not devastated Athens so early in the war, Athens might well have deterred the revolt of its subject allies that caused it considerable damage (3.1–3). If Pericles had not died so early in the war, Athens might well have avoided the costly land battle at Delium and the increasingly large interventions in Sicily that evidently contradicted the seemingly prudent strategy he championed of avoiding both land battles and expansions of the empire during the war.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, as we have seen, the Athenians are to a considerable extent defeated by adversaries who imitate their distinctive qualities of daring and ingenuity and who are instructed by the Athenian Alcibiades. So great is Athens, one might say, that it can only be defeated by its own virtues, its own imitators, and its own citizens. And yet, does the fact that so consequential a citizen as Alcibiades turns against his city – the fact that he is not persuaded by Pericles' education in Athenian patriotism and specifically by his argument for the reasonableness and self-interestedness of devoting oneself to Athens – not point to a grave defect essential to the Athenian regime?

¹⁰² Consider Connor's remark that "The reader begins the account of the war's origin with an unanswered question in the back of his mind: What goes wrong? How does Athens fail?" (1984, 34).

¹⁰³ Compare 2.25.1–2 with 4.6, 4.15, 4.40–41. Consider as well 4.55.3–4.

¹⁰⁴ 1.143.3–144.1, 2.65.7. Romilly goes so far as to claim that Thucydides "indicates complete and absolute approval on his part of the policy carried out by Pericles" (1963, 111). But consider Bruell's observation that, although "Perikles' policy may have been militarily sound," through it "and perhaps other ways, Perikles may have unwittingly contributed to the political decline [of Athens] which, in the end, undid his work" (1981, 25). Consider as well the question that Palmer raises: "Could even Pericles have kept the restless Athenians at rest for much longer, let alone for twenty-five years?" (1992, 39).

CHAPTER 3

The Case against Athens

The Power of Passion and Piety

Pericles seeks to provide the Athenians with an education that will liberate their natural reason from the constraints of piety and tradition and guide their naturally self-interested passions toward devotion to their community. In this way he hopes to secure for Athens a regime that is based on the natural energy of human beings – the “power of nature” (1.138.3) – rather than on subservience to human and divine law. Thucydides’ account indicates, however, that Pericles’ effort runs afoul of the divisive and violent character of human passion and the abiding power of piety within the human soul and, possibly, beyond it. In this way, Thucydides’ account calls into question whether any political society can be based on the liberation of human nature and hence whether human nature must not be subordinated to a higher power of some kind if political society is to endure and flourish.

Thucydides on the Tension between Self-Interest and Patriotism

Thucydides’ explanation of why Athens lost the war indicates that Themistocles’ and Pericles’ project of establishing Athens as a city that successfully bases itself on the self-interestedness of human nature ultimately fails. Pericles in particular attempts to persuade the Athenians that their individual self-interest will naturally and reasonably lead them to support and even sacrifice for the good of Athens. Thucydides indicates, however, that the Athenians ultimately were not only unpersuaded by Pericles but that they had good reasons to be unpersuaded.

Thucydides provides two accounts of the reasons for Athens’ defeat in the war: a detailed account in his eulogy of Pericles (2.65.6–12), and a brief one in his preface to Alcibiades’ speech in favor of the Athenian expedition to conquer Sicily (6.15). In both accounts, Thucydides stresses the role of

“individual” or “private” – ἰδιος – self-interestedness in the downfall of Athens. After Pericles died, the “private” desires of the Athenians led them to harm the public good. Their “private love of honor” and “private gain” led them to reject the policy that Pericles advocated of avoiding land battles and imperial expansion during the war (2.65.7). These Athenians sought to challenge Sparta on land and expand the empire even though success would benefit them individually – apparently by enhancing their individual honor and power – more than Athens as a whole, and failure would do great harm to Athens. Then, during the Sicilian Expedition, the Athenians’ “private slanders” of their leaders blunted the effectiveness of the expedition – by removing Alcibiades as commander – and caused “for the first time” disorder within the city (2.65.11). As Thucydides later explains regarding Alcibiades in particular, even though Alcibiades was “best” at leading Athens during the war, “in private” each of the Athenians was offended by his manner of life, they consequently turned the leadership of the city over to other, inferior hands, and “not long after they brought about the downfall of the city” (6.15.4).¹ Thucydides concludes his eulogy to Pericles by highlighting that the Athenians,

having suffered a failure in Sicily with the rest of their force and the greater part of the navy, and being already in factional strife throughout their city, nevertheless held out for three years against their former enemies and those who joined them from Sicily,² and against most of the allies who revolted, who were later joined by Cyrus, the son of the [Persian] king, who provided money to the Peloponnesians for their navy. And they did not give in before they themselves, falling upon one another in private disputes, collapsed. (2.65.12)

Thucydides emphasizes here that, after Pericles’ death, neither the Athenian people as a whole nor Athenian leaders in particular believe that it is simply in their self-interest to serve Athens but primarily think of their own individual good as something separate from the good of Athens. Thereafter the Athenian people apparently do not feel an overriding erotic love for the power of the city, since they are led by their private feelings of resentment and envy to replace effective but offensive leaders with ineffective but inoffensive leaders.³ And such prominent Athenians as Alcibiades are no longer convinced by Pericles’ argument that, by giving of themselves

¹ See Forde 1989, 36.

² Thucydides here apparently refers to the overthrow of the democracy in Athens in 411, roughly three years after the defeat in Sicily. See 8.65–68.

³ 2.43.1, 2.65.11, 6.15.3–4.

whole-heartedly to the city, they would receive “individually” the reward of “the praise that is ageless” (2.43.2). For Alcibiades does not curb or mask his desire to benefit his “individual” interest in glory and wealth, as Pericles had curbed or masked his, in order to safeguard his effective rule over Athens.⁴ Pericles’ attempt to persuade the Athenians that there is a harmony between their individual self-interest and the public good proves to be a failure. The distinctively rational and self-interested patriotism that he sought to inculcate among the Athenians does not long survive his death. It depended on the power of his individual leadership and once he passes from the scene, the natural passions of the Athenians soon turn them against one another.

The divisions that come to the fore in Athens after the death of Pericles point to a problem with the education he provides the Athenians. Pericles is fully aware of the difficulty of founding a political community on the natural self-interestedness of human beings. He is fully aware that the passions of humans – for example, the envy of the many for the talented few and the selfish ambition and greed of the talented few – tend to splinter political communities. He recognizes that man is not simply a political animal by nature. As we have seen, he attempts to address this problem in two ways: by appeasing and defusing the envy of the many with an ostentatiously egalitarian rhetoric and by taming the ambition of the talented few with an argument that their meritorious devotion to Athens will be recognized and rewarded with an everlasting glory.⁵ There is, however, a contradiction between his democratic rhetoric and his meritocratic argument, and therefore a contradiction at the heart of the Periclean education. On the one hand, he reassures the many of his devotion to Athenian democracy by donating his private lands to the city and by studiously avoiding any mention of the greatness of outstanding Athenians leaders, such as Themistocles and himself, in his praise of the greatness of Athens (cf. 1.74.1). On the other hand, he argues to the ambitious and talented few that, if they give of themselves to the Athenian political community, they will “individually” (or “privately”) receive lasting glory and be “eternally remembered” (2.43.2–3). But how can the envious multitude be counted on to pay homage to the outstanding

⁴ 2.13.1, 2.65.9, 6.15.2–4. As Forde observes regarding Pericles, “He is practically invisible in the Funeral Oration, a speech in which he praises virtually everything else in the city” (1989, 83). Forde goes so far as to contend that “Pericles’ self-effacing style, to the extent that it is a conscious concession to democratic envy, might legitimately be viewed as a kind of slavishness by someone like Alcibiades” (84). Consider as well 91–92.

⁵ See Chapter 2, pp. 79–87.

few? How can they be relied upon to recognize and remember the qualities of great individuals, when such qualities will always appear “beyond [their] own nature” and, as Alcibiades later points out, “painful” to them?⁶ One might argue that the example of Pericles himself demonstrates the capacity of democratic Athens to honor human greatness. Yet, the hallmark of Pericles’ democratic statesmanship, the price he pays for his tremendous influence with the people, is his willingness to curb his desire for honor: He is content to rule Athens “in deed” as “the first man” while maintaining the appearance of, and therefore respecting, the democratic rule of the majority “in speech” (2.65.9). But by hiding his political primacy, does he not sacrifice his very honor for the sake of Athens? One might argue that, by curbing his desire for honor in his lifetime in order to safeguard his political primacy, Pericles effectively wins lasting honor posthumously, when envy has faded and the memory of his greatness remains.⁷ It is, however, noteworthy that, in contrast even with Themistocles, who is praised by the Athenian ambassadors of Sparta as “the most sagacious commander” some decades after his death, no one in Thucydides’ book ever praises or even mentions Pericles after his death, other than Thucydides himself.⁸ Even though Pericles declares that Athens will need no Homer to memorialize it, with regard to Pericles himself, at least, it is Thucydides rather than the Athenians as a whole who memorializes him (2.41.4). It is therefore unclear whether lasting honor is to be won by serving the emphatically democratic community of Athens.

It is also not altogether clear how reliable a motive the desire for honor – on which Pericles bases so much of his argument for a reasonable and self-interested patriotism – is among human beings. As we have seen, in the Funeral Oration, Pericles argues that those who risk and sacrifice their lives in battle for Athens will win individually “the praise that is ageless” (2.43.2). But even if that is true, how can such a desire inspire patriotism among those who do not fight in battle, but nonetheless make sacrifices for Athens, such as the parents and widows of the dead? Pericles sternly and even harshly urges the bereaved parents who are still young to have more children, since doing so will benefit Athens and also will help them, “in private, to forget the ones who are no more” and hence will help them forget their own grief and sacrifice for the city (2.44.3). To the bereaved parents who can have no more children and the widows of the dead, Pericles offers no hope that they will forget their grief and sacrifice. For

⁶ 2.35.2, 6.16.5.

⁷ See 2.45.1, 6.16.5.

⁸ 1.74.1; see 6.31.2.

them there is no individual reward or palliative. It is therefore not at all clear, even in Pericles' own understanding, that it is in the interest of significant segments of the Athenian population to sacrifice for the political community.⁹

What is more, Thucydides' account of the deadly plague and its effect on the Athenians – immediately following in his narrative the Funeral Oration – calls into question how strong and also how reasonable a motive the desire for honor is. For the effect of the plague is to unleash among the Athenians a tremendous, lawless desire for individual pleasure:

And first the disease began also in other respects for the city a lawlessness to a greater degree. For one dared more easily to do what was before being hidden so as not to act according to pleasure, seeing the rapid change in the condition of the happy, who suddenly died, and the ones who before had no possession, who immediately had the property of the former. They consequently thought that they deserved to make for themselves a quick enjoyment of the fruits of their goods and with a view to delight, believing that their bodies and their wealth were similarly ephemeral. And no one was eager to toil beforehand for a noble reputation, believing it unclear if they would be destroyed before reaching it: but whatever was immediately pleasant from any source and what was profitable itself, this was set down as noble and beneficial. No fear of gods or law of humans restrained them, since, on the one hand, they judged that the outcome of being pious and not being pious was similar, seeing that all were perishing equally, and, on the other hand, no one hoped that they would live long enough to have to pay a penalty after a judicial trial for their failings, since a much greater one already had been voted against them and was hanging over them, and that it was only reasonable, before it fell, to enjoy something of life. (2.53)

What is striking, in the light of the Funeral Oration, is that the plague undermines not only the fear of divine or human punishment but also the concern for honor.¹⁰ Given the omnipresence and immediacy of death, the desire to be reputed noble and hence the desire for honor virtually vanishes (but see 2.51.5). Thucydides' account of the plague thereby invites one to ask, how natural is the desire for honor? Now, one may

⁹ In Strauss's words regarding Pericles, "The callousness with which he speaks of, or rather alludes to, the grief especially of the aged parents who lost their only son, cannot easily be surpassed" (1964, 195). Connor notes that, while Pericles identifies greatness with a fame, "not dependent upon . . . its conformity with justice," that constitutes "the compensation for the losses of the war," "As the work progresses, this view of greatness is explored, subverted, and finally repudiated" (1984, 73–74). See also Palmer 1992, 27–29.

¹⁰ See Saxonhouse 1978, 471.

object that the extreme and exceptional circumstances of the plague are not at all revealing of the natural power of the desire for honor in ordinary circumstances. However, in one key respect the circumstances of the plague may be most revealing. For the plague forces those who experience it to face a truth about human nature that humans ordinarily overlook or forget – the apparent truth of our inevitable death and of the inevitable death of all those around us, indeed, of all human beings. Thucydides' account of the plague therefore suggests that, when brought face to face with our mortality and the mortality of all humanity, vividly and concretely, our concern for honor, which ordinarily figures so prominently in human affairs, largely disappears. In this way, Thucydides' account raises as a question whether the desire for honor is not conventional rather than natural, and imaginary rather than rational, dependent as it is on overlooking the fundamental, defining truth of our nature.

On the other hand, Thucydides' account of the plague invites one to wonder if there may not be a basis in human nature for piety. For even though Thucydides states that humans were not restrained by a fear of the gods from pursuing their immediate individual pleasure, even in violation of divine laws concerning burial, because they saw that "all" were dying equally, pious and impious alike, Thucydides indicates that the Athenians did in truth still retain a certain fear of the gods and even a hope for their favor.¹¹ In the first place, as Thucydides clearly shows, although the plague killed up to one quarter of the Athenian population, it did not kill "all" Athenians, and the ones who survived would naturally wish to take measures to ensure their future survival (see 2.58.3). Secondly, immediately after stating that "fear of gods" was not restraining the Athenians, Thucydides remarks that:

those who knew of it remembered the oracle of the Spartans to whom, when they asked the god if they ought to wage war, he answered that victory would be theirs, if they waged war with all their might and he himself said he would join them. They [that is, the Athenians] surmised that what had happened was the same as what the oracle said: once the Peloponnesians invaded, the plague immediately began, and it did not go into the Peloponnesus, to a significant extent, but spread to Athens especially, and then also to other places where there were many human beings. (2.54.4–5)

Thucydides here reveals that the Athenians as a whole interpreted the plague as a punishment of Athens in particular by "the god" of the

¹¹ 2.52.2–4, 2.53.4. See Palmer 1992, 31; Orwin 1994, 90.

Delphic Oracle – the god Apollo, the god, whom they would know from the beginning of Homer's *Iliad*, sent a deadly plague to punish the Achaians for their injustice.¹² All of the death that the Athenians were suffering, then, was not a result of natural forces but of a purposeful god who judged that Athens “ought” to be chastised. Accordingly, presumably motivated by fear of ongoing punishment by Apollo for continuing to wage war against Sparta and by the hope of putting an end to such punishment by appeasing the god, the Athenians blame Pericles for persuading them to go to war, blame him for the subsequent plague, and press for peace with Sparta (2.59). And even though Pericles succeeds in persuading them to continue the war, at least for the time being, they do punish him with a fine for his advocacy of the war against Sparta and Apollo. Thucydides' account of the plague suggests, then, that while the omnipresence and immediacy of death may undermine and even almost erase the desire for honor from human beings, it may intensify among them the pious hope of avoiding death by winning the favor of the gods.

Even though the plague devastates Athens, Athenian patriotism does not simply disappear in the wake of the plague. The Athenians continue to fight bravely and effectively against the Peloponnesians, led by such shrewd commanders as Phormio and Demosthenes.¹³ The patriotism Pericles nourishes is based on self-interest broadly and, in his view, rightly understood. It is based on the thesis that the natural desires of the Athenians – for honor but also for wealth, power, security, pleasure, wisdom, and beauty – are best satisfied by devotion to the political community. While he lived, Pericles was able to persuade the Athenians of this thesis, by appealing to their self-interested desires, by appealing to their reason, and by accommodating their envy. After his death, however, Athens is increasingly divided, as Thucydides emphasizes through his narrative. For while Thucydides never presents a debate in Athens between Athenians as long as Pericles is alive, after his death he presents a series of vehement debates, in direct and indirect discourse, beginning with the debate between Cleon and Diodotus over the proper treatment of their Mytilenean imperial subjects of Athens in the aftermath of their failed rebellion and then continuing with the debates between Cleon and Nicias over the Athenian campaign in Pylos and between Alcibiades and Nicias over the Athenian expedition to Sicily.¹⁴

¹² *Iliad* 1.34–65.

¹³ See 2.83–92, 3.105–113, 4.3–14, 4.29–40.

¹⁴ See 3.36–49, 4.27.3–28, 6.8–25.

Diodotus versus Pericles

Diodotus' speech during the debate regarding Mytilene – the second longest speech by a named individual and by an Athenian in the book, after the Funeral Oration¹⁵ – offers a powerful challenge to Pericles' hope that an enlightening education will liberate the Athenians' reason from pious tradition, guide their passions toward a devotion to the political community, and result in a powerful and flourishing city, whose citizens love their city, but not blindly, and philosophize, but without softness. To be sure, Diodotus follows Pericles in arguing that anger as well as haste most often accompany folly and a lack of education, and that reasoned speeches should be the guides – as Diodotus puts it, the “teachers” – of actions.¹⁶ Indeed, Pericles and Diodotus are the most visible champions of reason in the book. Pericles is the only speaker in the book who mentions the word “philosophy,” the only mention of the word “sophist” in the book is when Cleon suggests that Diodotus and his allies are “sophists,” and Diodotus is the only named individual, other than Thucydides himself, to use the philosophic term, “human nature.”¹⁷ However, while Pericles claims that Athenians as a whole philosophize, Diodotus contends – with a remarkable and seemingly self-contradictory candor – that reason among the Athenian people is so weak that it is “impossible” to benefit the city “without deception” and specifically without deceiving and lying to “the multitude.”¹⁸ And while Pericles maintains that Athenians combine a freedom to pursue their individual well-being with obedience to the laws, Diodotus argues that “it is natural for all, both in private and in public, to err, and there is no law that will prevent this.”¹⁹

The principal thesis of Diodotus is that human passions always tend to overwhelm human reason.²⁰ In Athens, for example, the majority are

¹⁵ Diodotus' speech, at 1245 words, is the third longest speech in the book, following Pericles' Funeral Oration (1933 words) and the speech of the Plataeans at 3.53–59 (1326 words).

¹⁶ Compare 3.42.1 with 1.143.5, 2.22.1, 2.60.1, and 2.60.5, and 3.42.2 with 2.40.1–3.

¹⁷ 2.40.1, 3.38.7 (see 3.41), 3.45.7. Nichols goes so far as to suggest that “Thucydides gives Diodotus language that echoes Pericles, language that by way of contrast highlights not only the anti-intellectualism of Cleon's speech but its anti-Athenian character” (2015, 59). See also Parry's claim that “Pericles is the essence of Athenian intelligence” (1972, 60).

¹⁸ 2.40.1, 3.43.2–3. Consider Connor's remark: “The bold Periclean directness has been replaced by a new deceptiveness of language and argument” (1984, 88).

¹⁹ 2.37.2–38.1, 3.45.3.

²⁰ Orwin goes so far as to conclude that, “for Diodotus, to achieve a rational comprehension of the world is to achieve an understanding of the weakness of reason in the world” (1994, 171; see also 205).

dominated by “envy” of the ambitious few who offer the city advice in public assemblies. The majority oppose all advice by speakers that appears self-interested, “for the sake of gain,” because the majority assume – unreasonably, as Diodotus suggests – that there is always a conflict between the self-interest of the individual and the overall interest of the political community and also because the majority, with their resentful temperament, quite simply cannot tolerate that an individual might profit from a policy, even if the city should profit from it as well (3.43.1). Moreover, since, as Diodotus suggests, all human beings are inevitably self-interested – since “it is natural for all” individuals to violate the laws they live under if they believe it is in their self-interest to do so – speakers to the multitude who hope to persuade it are compelled to lie to it by concealing their own self-interestedness and pretending to be selflessly concerned for the good of the city (3.43.2–3). The majority in Athens is also led by their pride, love of power, and “anger” to threaten with harm those they disagree with or find offensive and, when a policy they initially supported results in failure, they blame, not themselves, but those who persuaded them to pursue that policy.²¹ Fear of the majority terrifies the citizens and harms the city, “for fear deprives it of advisors” (3.42.4). In Diodotus’ account, Athens is not, as Pericles would have it, a meritocratic democracy – much less a philosophic and patriotic city – but a tyranny, not only over its imperial subjects, as both Pericles and Cleon acknowledge, but over its very own citizens, a tyranny of an often foolish and capricious majority.²² And even though Diodotus muses that, in a “moderate” democracy, those who found disfavor with the multitude would not be punished, he holds out no hope that the Athenian people may be led by an enlightening education to become so moderate (3.42.5).

More broadly, Diodotus contends that all human beings are not only led by their natural desires – their “erotic desire for everything” – to be concerned above all with their own individual self-interest, but are also led by their “hope . . . for everything” to overestimate their ability to satisfy their desires and hence to miscalculate what is in their self-interest (3.45.5). Their desires, then, do not go hand in hand with their reason but shunt it aside. It is therefore unreasonable for Pericles to hope for a city that philosophizes, that is, for a political community that is guided by reason. Indeed, by stressing as he does the natural power of hope over reason, Diodotus may hint that piety in particular – insofar as it is characterized by

²¹ 3.43.5. See, for example, 2.60, 8.1.2.

²² See 2.37.1, 2.63.2, 3.37.2. Consider the fear of the Athenian multitude felt by Demosthenes (3.98.5), Alcibiades (6.61.6), and Nicias (7.8.2, 7.48.3–4). Romilly notes that “Diodotus does not deny that the city is a tyrant” (1963, 161).

the hope that there are gods who may protect us from the ills of our human condition – has a permanent root in human nature that cannot be eliminated by education.²³

Given his seemingly anti-Periclean argument that humans will always tend to be ruled by passions that overwhelm reason, one might think that Diodotus would argue in favor of a regime that resembles Sparta, in which the rule of law, strengthened by tradition and piety, compels humans to keep their passions in check. Diodotus, however, instead offers a searing critique of the rule of law in his speech, specifically arguing twice that the Athenians should not deliberate on the question of how to treat the Mytileneans who tried and failed to revolt from the Athenian Empire as though they were judges in a court of law.²⁴ In the first place, the rule of law assumes that human beings are morally free beings who have it within their power to choose to obey the law or not. But Diodotus maintains that humans are compelled by their nature to act in what they perceive to be in their individual self-interest, “and there is no law that will prevent this”; “It is simply impossible and a sign of much naiveté, if someone supposes that, when human nature is zealously set on doing something, it can be turned away by the strength of laws or some other terrible thing.”²⁵ Human beings are simply incapable of obeying the law, then, unless they believe that it is in their self-interest to do so. Therefore, when they do violate the law, they are not to blame, since, at worst, they did so out of ignorance, supposing incorrectly that it was in their self-interest to do so. Individuals who commit unlawful actions should therefore be thought of more as being “without understanding” than as “unjust,” since they know not what they do (3.42.3).²⁶

In Diodotus’ view, as in the view of the Athenian ambassadors in the debate at Sparta, we human beings are compelled by our nature to act in what we perceive – correctly or incorrectly – to be our own good (1.75.3–76.2). What Diodotus emphasizes, in contrast with the Athenian ambassadors, is that this compulsion applies to individuals as well as political communities and that human beings generally “err” in their calculation of their own self-interest, as the Mytileneans erred in thinking that they could successfully revolt from the Athenian Empire (3.45.3). Therefore, humans cannot reasonably be held morally responsible and blamed for violating the law.²⁷

²³ Consider 5.103, 5.111.2, 5.113. ²⁴ 3.44.4, 3.46.4, 3.45.3, 3.45.

²⁵ 3.45.3, 3.45.7. ²⁶ See Bolotin 1987, 29–30; Orwin 1994, 156.

²⁷ Diodotus, evidently in order to mask the shockingly antimoral implications of this thesis that human beings are not morally responsible for their actions, concludes his speech by

But could not the strength of law – that is, law armed with powerful sanctions – make it so manifestly in the self-interest of one and all to obey the law in order to avoid punishment that all subject to the law will obey it? This is the argument that Cleon makes in calling on Athenians to maintain their resolution of the preceding day to impose the death penalty on all the Mytileneans who revolted – on the few who led the revolt and also on the many who acquiesced in the revolt until Athens besieged Mytilene, the few took the extraordinary measure of giving heavy arms to the many, and the many at that point forced the few to surrender.²⁸ Cleon's argument is that, if the Athenians make a "clear example" of the Mytileneans by executing all adult Mytilenean males, and enslaving the women and children, all other imperial subjects of Athens will be so afraid of suffering such a fate that they will not dare to revolt.²⁹ Diodotus, however, argues that, not only are humans led by their passions to miscalculate their self-interest, but they are especially led by their hopes and desires rather than their fears:

In the cities, then, penalties of death are prescribed for many things, some not equal to this one here [that is, the rebellion of the Mytileneans], but for lesser failings; nevertheless, exalted by hope, they [that is, human beings] take the risk, and no one yet has done something terrible while recognizing that he would not succeed in the plot . . . So either some fear more terrible than this [penalty of death] must be discovered or this will not restrain them . . . The hope and the erotic desire for everything – the one leading, the other following, the one thinking up the plot, the other suggesting that fortune will be bountiful – do most harm, and being invisible they are mightier than visible terrors. (3.45.1–5)

Diodotus maintains here, then, that human beings simply cannot be deterred from violating the law by the threat of punishment. They are invincibly hopeful, they are compelled by their nature to overestimate their own powers, and they will inevitably engage in daring and risky undertakings – for example, the violation of laws or the revolt against established authorities – in the hope that they will succeed.

Given this argument, Diodotus would seem to regard political life as hopelessly chaotic, ruled by irrational hopes and destabilizing passions. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Diodotus himself appears to lead an

making, in contradiction to his thesis, a moral distinction between the Mytilenean oligarchs who organized the revolt, whom he calls "unjust" twice, and the Mytilenean multitude who forced the oligarchs to surrender to Athens, whom he calls "not" unjust (3.47.3, 3.48.1). See Bolotin 1987, 30.

²⁸ 3.39.6; see 3.27–28.

²⁹ 3.40.7; see 3.36.2–4.

almost wholly private life: he only appears on this one occasion in the book, he evidently held no office, and we know of him from no one other source, either as a political figure or as an author who sought to instruct his fellow citizens, Greeks, or human beings as a whole by writing, as Thucydides does. To paraphrase Pericles, Diodotus seems to be an Athenian who minds his own business and does not – except for intervening in the Mytilenean debate – partake in the political affairs of his city at all (2.40.2). In this way too – in his generally private, apolitical way of life wherein he ponders such philosophic themes as the nature of human beings – Diodotus poses a challenge to Pericles, his vision of Athens, and his understanding of the mutually beneficial relation between politics and philosophy. Yet one might wonder, why would Diodotus bother to intervene at all, even this one time, if law, which would seem to be the very basis for a free, non-tyrannical, political order, is so powerless before human nature?

Diodotus' specific advice concerning the case of Mytilene suggests that he does believe that human affairs can achieve a certain measure of order if, as is occasionally possible, they are governed by wisdom rather than by fixed laws. Cleon's argument that the Mytileneans' revolt was unjust and that they deserve the death penalty is based, in large measure, on his identification of justice with law. Cleon declares three times that the Mytileneans' revolt against the Athenian Empire was "unjust," apparently in the belief that they violated formal, legal agreements they had made with the Athenians by revolting.³⁰ After all, the Mytileneans themselves acknowledge that they had legal obligations to Athens inasmuch as they enjoyed a "previous alliance," a formal and legal agreement with Athens "with the lawful name of alliance," when they revolted.³¹ Cleon champions the rule of law in his speech, going so far as to argue that "a city that makes use of worse laws that are unchanging is stronger than one having noble laws that lack authority" (3.37.3).³² Rule of law is not only just, insofar as it applies a clear and fixed standard of punishment to all crimes, but also beneficial to the political community, insofar as the certainty of punishment will deter would-be criminals from committing crimes. Accordingly, Cleon attacks those who "wish to appear wiser than the laws" and praises those who

³⁰ 3.38.1, 3.39.1, 3.39.6. ³¹ 3.9.1; see 4.60.1.

³² Consider Strauss's suggestion regarding Cleon here that, "Like a Spartan he condemns the generous desire of the Athenians to spare the lives of the Mytileneans by appealing to the moderation that shows itself in unquestioning submission to the wisdom of law, *i.e.* to unchangeable laws of questionable goodness" (1964, 214).

“distrust their own sagacity and deem themselves more ignorant than the laws,” for the former undermine the rule of law and the latter strengthen it.³³ Cleon proceeds to argue, in a legal spirit, that, given the specific nature of their crime, the Mytileneans deserve the penalty of death. For unlike other imperial subjects, who revolt because they find the yoke of Athenian imperial rule unbearable, the Mytileneans have enjoyed considerable independence within the Athenian Empire: Unlike all the other imperial subjects except the Chians, they have retained their own naval force and “they live under their own laws and are honored among the first by us.”³⁴ Furthermore, unlike other imperial subjects, they were not compelled by Athens’ enemies to revolt, but did so freely and voluntarily, coldly plotting and preparing to revolt before doing so openly. Therefore, Cleon argues, “let them be chastised also now as they deserve for their injustice” (3.39.6); “For they did not harm us unwillingly, but wittingly plotted against us” (3.40.1). Let the punishment fit the crime, as is just and also expedient: For, “if you impose the same penalties on the ones compelled by the enemies and the ones who willingly revolt, who do you suppose will not revolt with a slight pretext?” (3.39.7).

Now, as we have seen, Diodotus’ contention that humans are naturally and inevitably led by their hope and desire for their own benefit to act as they do denies the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions, a distinction at the heart of justice and law. Diodotus’ shocking claim is that human nature itself compels humans to commit crimes. His thesis therefore implies that punishing any of the Mytileneans – either the many or the few – is not, strictly speaking, just, since, as he maintains, they were not morally responsible for their actions but were simply compelled by their natural self-interestedness to act as they did (3.45).³⁵ Diodotus’ rhetorical goal in making this argument in this particular context is, in Cleon’s words (3.38.1), to make the Athenians’ anger at the Mytileneans “duller” and to put the Athenians in a forgiving mood. For if the Mytileneans were simply forced by the self-interestedness and folly essential to their nature to revolt against Athens, how reasonable is it for the Athenians to blame them?³⁶ However, while Diodotus inserts this boldly antimoral thesis in his speech in order to defuse the moral indignation of the Athenians, he does not insist on this thesis throughout the speech, presumably lest he inflame the very moral passion he seeks to dull. After all, Cleon’s appeal to the Athenians’ anger at the “injustice” of the Mytileneans is so effective that, even though

³³ 3.37.4. Consider 1.84.3.

³⁶ See Bolotin 1987, 30.

³⁴ 3.39.2; see 1.19, 3.10.5.

³⁵ See Mara 2001, 831.

Thucydides tells us that the Athenians felt remorse over their previous day's "savage" decision to inflict the death penalty on all Mytilenean adult males and were consequently generally predisposed before the debate to vote against Cleon, he – being, as Thucydides says twice, the "most persuasive" Athenian at that time – still almost succeeds in persuading the majority to side with him.³⁷ Accordingly, while calling into question the moral responsibility of human beings and therewith Cleon's identification of justice with the rule of law, Diodotus, throughout much of his speech, prominently – and deceptively – adopts the position that violations of law are always "injustices": "human beings have gone through all the penalties, having made additions, if somehow they would suffer injustice less from the evil doers. And it is likely that in olden times softer penalties were laid down for the greatest injustices" (3.45.3). More specifically, Diodotus adopts Cleon's position that those who revolt against the imperial rule of Athens are "unjust" insofar as they violated legal agreements they had made with the Athenians by rebelling.³⁸ Diodotus goes so far as to claim that Cleon's speech is "juster" than his own, apparently because it argues for a course of action that it proclaims "just" as well as "expedient" and also because Cleon identifies justice with the rule of law (3.44.1).

Diodotus argues, however, that the Athenians should focus, not on the justice of the punishment for the crime that was committed, as though they were judges in a court of law punishing morally responsible criminals, but on the possible consequences for Athens of the punishment of the Mytileneans. Diodotus explains that it would not be beneficial for Athens to follow the law and do what is "just," for two reasons. First, he argues that, since human beings will tend to err on the side of optimism, overestimate their powers, and hope that they will succeed in such lawless actions as rebelling, punishing the Mytilenean rebels harshly, with death, will never simply deter others from rebelling. However, once it is clear that their rebellion has failed, it is important to give the rebels an incentive to repent and surrender by appealing to their hope for mercy. For if the rebels know that they will face certain death, whether or not they surrender, they will fight to the death, at great cost to the Athenians. "Therefore," Diodotus maintains,

we ought not harm ourselves by being strict judges of the offenders. Instead, we ought to see how in the future, by punishing in a measured

³⁷ 3.36.4, 4.21.3; 3.49.1. Orwin describes Cleon's speech here as "a masterpiece of populism" (1994, 144).

³⁸ 3.47.3–5, 3.48.1.

way, we will be able to make use of cities strong enough to supply wealth, and to judge it worthwhile to build our security not in the terror of the laws but in the providence of our actions. (3.46.4)

Secondly, Diodotus argues, since the multitude, who form the democratic parties throughout Greece, tend to ally with democratic Athens, it would be bad for Athens to execute all of the Mytilenean multitude, as might seem “just,” even if they had enthusiastically supported the rebellion, lest doing so discourage the popular factions of other Greek cities from allying with Athens.³⁹ As he explains,

You ought, even if they did injustice, to pretend they did not, so that the only party still allied to us does not become our enemy. And I believe this will be far more expedient for the retention of our empire, for us willingly to suffer injustice, than justly to destroy the ones whom we ought not. And as for the claim of Cleon, that revenge is both just and expedient, such a combination is found to be impossible in this case. (3.47.4–5)

In this way, Diodotus invokes the good of Athens as being of greater importance than the justice of punishing those who revolted against Athens. The punishment of criminals should fit, not their crime, but the greater, common good of one’s country.

Now, even though Diodotus’ overall speech seems to suggest that, in his view, humans are never deterred by fearsome punishment from acting lawlessly, the specific policy Diodotus advocates regarding the Mytileneans indicates that he does indeed recognize that human beings are at times motivated by fear as well as hope. For the specific policy that Diodotus

³⁹ For five examples that support, in some measure, this particular argument of Diodotus, consider, in the first place, the demos of Megara, who are embroiled in factional strife with exiled oligarchs and subsequently attempt to betray their city, hitherto allied with the Peloponnesians, to the Athenians, with initial success (4.66–69). The defection of Megara to Athens is, however, ultimately prevented due to Brasidas (4.70–74). In the second place, the Athenian commanders Demosthenes and Hippocrates conspire with democratic leaders throughout Boeotia to overthrow the oligarchies there, which are allied with the Peloponnesians, and establish democracies, which will be allied with Athens (4.76). The Boeotian commanders, however, thwart this conspiracy and lead their forces to inflict on the Athenians a great defeat in the battle of Delium (4.89–101.4). Consider also, for example, Thucydides’ remark that “the majority of the Thessalians were always well disposed toward the Athenians” (4.78.2), as well as 4.130.3–4, where the demos of Mende ultimately side with Athens, and 5.84–85, where the Melian oligarchs indicate that they fear that the Melian multitude may side with Athens. For an argument that “Thucydides, for example, by no means encourages the notion that the common people were universally well disposed to Athens,” especially in Mytilene, see Connor 1984, 87–88.

recommends toward the conclusion of his speech is to spare the lives of the Mytilenean many – in order to incentivize future rebels to surrender rather than fight to the death and in order to encourage the many throughout Greece to continue to ally with Athens. Diodotus does not argue there for sparing the lives of the “few” – the oligarchic party within Mytilene – who led the rebellion.⁴⁰ And Thucydides reveals at the end of the debate that these “few” amounted to over a thousand men!⁴¹ Diodotus therefore advocates a policy that entails considerable harshness, presumably, at least in part, in order to inspire fear in the hearts of future would-be rebels. The principal practical thrust of his argument is not to argue that hope is always more powerful than fear in human nature but rather to replace a fixed policy wherein the Athenians, like “strict judges,” follow fixed rules and impose fixed penalties on all who violate those rules under any circumstances, with a flexible policy wherein the wise assembly or ruler ponders the various motivations embedded in human nature – fear in addition to hope – as well as the particular political alliances in Greece at this time; enjoys the discretion to depart from fixed rules and penalties; and adroitly uses mercy and severity – thereby appealing to both hope and fear – in order to minimize the cost of future rebellions for Athens and maximize the number of allies it will retain.⁴² In this way Diodotus suggests that the rule of wisdom is better capable than the rule of law to minimize the harm caused by human passion and human unreason. If philosophers could rule Athens, or if the Athenians could truly be philosophic, the evils that beset them could, if not cease, at least be contained. And Diodotus does indeed succeed in this case, albeit barely, in persuading the Athenians to follow the rule of wisdom rather than law.⁴³ Yet, Diodotus’ speech itself indicates how very unlikely, given the power of such passions as envy and hope are in

⁴⁰ 3.47; cf. 3.46.6.

⁴¹ 3.50.1; cf. 3.68. On the full severity of the Athenian punishment of the Mytileneans that is evidently supported by Diodotus, including their virtual reduction “to the status of serfs,” see especially Connor 1984, 86–87. See also Orwin 1994, 150–151, 155.

⁴² As Strauss puts it, “The case for gentleness or rather for discrimination is made by Diodotus” (1983, 92). Romilly argues that Diodotus recognizes that the Athenian Empire is a tyranny but seeks “to keep the supporters of the tyrant city faithful” by advocating a policy that entails the prudent use of force rather than the “brutal and unreflecting use of it” advocated by Cleon. She therefore concludes that “a former supporter of Pericles should have supported” Diodotus here, though she acknowledges that “it is the words put into Cleon’s mouth” by Thucydides “that echo those used by Pericles” (1963, 161–163).

⁴³ Consider Mara’s statement regarding Diodotus that, “while his speech acknowledges the power of the passions, his speech act recognizes the education that his argument seems to rule out” (2001, 830).

the human soul, the rule of wisdom is, even in so sophisticated a city as Athens. And in the absence of the rule of wisdom, how is it possible to avoid the political chaos that the passions of human nature seem to lead to?

Thucydides versus Diodotus and Pericles

Like Diodotus, Thucydides himself offers an account, in his own name, of the relation between human nature and law at the conclusion of his description of the factional strife – or stasis (στάσις) – in Corcyra and throughout Greece. Indeed, Thucydides here offers his longest account of the relation between human nature and politics in the book, employing some 872 words and using the phrase “human nature” twice in his own name.⁴⁴ The only other time he speaks of human nature in his own name is in his account of the plague, where he says that the disease was harsher than “human nature” could endure (2.50.1). There, too, Thucydides gives an account of human nature and law, but while his account of the plague as a whole is 1355 words long (2.47.3–2.54), his account of its political consequences is only 318 words long (2.53–54). Thucydides’ account of the factional strife in Corcyra, Greece, and human nature is, all in all, 2280 words long (3.69.4–3.84) and his account of factional strife and human nature in particular is approximately 872 words, beginning from his general account of the political consequences of the strife (3.81.5–3.84).

Thucydides’ account of factional strife supports Diodotus in his challenge to Pericles’ hope for a thriving city based on natural self-interestedness and guided by reason, but it also departs from Diodotus’ account of human nature and politics. Thucydides agrees with Diodotus’ emphasis on the power of passion and the weakness of reason. Indeed, Thucydides goes further than Diodotus, insofar as he highlights the weakness of reason in the face of the power of such diseases as the plague – “For the form of the disease was stronger than reason [λόγος]” (2.50.1) – and also the vulnerability of those apparently superior in intelligence to the violence of the apparently less intelligent – “And the ones inferior in judgment for the most part prevailed,” while their seemingly smarter opponents, “being insufficiently vigilant, were destroyed” (3.83.3–4).⁴⁵ However, in contrast with both Pericles and Diodotus, Thucydides emphasizes the tremendous violence and cruelty of human passions. Thucydides’ statement at the

⁴⁴ 3.82.2, 3.84.2.

⁴⁵ In Connor’s words regarding Thucydides’ accounts of the plague and stasis, “In each case *logos* is overpowered” (1984, 100).

beginning of his general account of factional strife, that “every form of death presented itself,” is not quite accurate, for he describes no deaths due to natural causes in this account. All deaths here are inflicted by the violence of human beings, without any apparent reluctance or regret and even with gusto. The word which Thucydides uses to characterize such violence is “savage [ὠμός].” The word “savage” appears only three times in his book: once when describing the Athenians’ remorse over their “savage” resolution “to destroy a whole city” – namely, Mytilene (3.36.4) – and twice in his account of human beings’ cruel deeds during the factional strife that engulfed Greece.⁴⁶ After describing that, “as is wont to happen in such circumstances,” fathers killed their sons and suppliants in sacred sanctuaries were seized and murdered with such cruelty that many killed themselves rather than surrender, Thucydides comments that “Thus did the savage factional strife progress.”⁴⁷ He later remarks that human beings in the midst of such strife attacked one another “savagely and implacably” as “human nature held sway over the laws” (3.84.1). Thucydides stresses here that the “power of nature” does not simply manifest itself in the intelligent and energetic pursuit of one’s self-interest and in the effective satisfaction of one’s desires for pleasure, wealth, honor, beauty, and wisdom, as Themistocles, the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, and Pericles would have it.⁴⁸ Nor does the power of nature simply manifest itself in the erotic desire and hope for “freedom or rule over others,” as Diodotus stresses (3.45.5–7). The power of nature also manifests itself as the power of anger, vengefulness, and envy, passions that cause untold savagery (3.84.2).⁴⁹ What is more, human nature, in Thucydides’ words,

⁴⁶ See Connor’s discussion of Thucydides’ use of this word at 3.36.4 (1984, 82n5) as well as Saxonhouse 2005, 152n9. While Saxonhouse characterizes 3.36.4 as initially “leaving us uncertain as to whether it is Thucydides himself who describes the decree as ‘savage’ or the Athenians,” she concludes on the basis of Thucydides’ reference to “the horrible deed (*pragma allokoton*, 3.49.4)” of destroying Mytilene that it is Thucydides himself who deems the decree “savage.”

⁴⁷ 3.81.2–82.1; see also 4.48.1–3. See Connor 1984, 103–104.

⁴⁸ 1.138.3, 1.74–76, 2.37–43.

⁴⁹ The Greek word “ἄγριος,” which also means “savage,” appears only once in the book, when Thucydides recounts the harsh and deadly religious persecution by the Athenians of those suspected of impiety in the aftermath of the mysterious mutilation of the statues of Hermes on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition. Here, too, the savagery is, in Thucydides’ account, prompted by anger: “And as they were angered [ὀργιζομένων] on account of such a thing [that is, their suspicion of impiety and a conspiracy to overthrow the democracy], many human beings worthy of account were already imprisoned and no cessation was apparent but every day they grew more savage and arrested still more” (6.60.2). For the role of the desire for revenge in this context, see 6.60.5.

“showed itself glad [ἄσμενος]” to unleash such savage passions. Here Thucydides suggests that, just as the power of nature as a whole, as evinced in the plague, is harshly indifferent to human reason and well-being, so is human nature itself similarly indifferent. Human nature does not point human beings more toward philosophy than toward fury, or more toward compassion than toward cruelty. While the sage seeker of the truth and the sagacious statesman may be more deserving of admiration than the murderous partisan and the pitiless fanatic, they are not, according to Thucydides, more natural.

Thucydides’ account of human nature is, then, harsher, than that of Diodotus. While Diodotus mentions the human passions of anger and vengeance, he focuses more attention on the passions of erotic desire and hope and he never stresses that human passions may lead to savage factional strife.⁵⁰ And while Diodotus highlights the danger and indeed the inevitability of lawlessness, he seems to suggest that such lawlessness can be managed and contained, at least on occasion, by the intervention of wise individuals and the wise decisions of rulers, as occurs, albeit barely, in the case of the Mytilenean debate, wherein Diodotus persuades the Athenians to reverse their “savage” decision to destroy the whole city of Mytilene. Thucydides, on the other hand, underscores the danger that the natural passions of anger, vengefulness, and envy will lead to the collapse of society into a frenzy of killing, a war of factions and individuals, if not of all against all. And he offers no hope in his account here that the intervention of wise individuals can prevent factional strife or minimize the harm caused by such strife. Thucydides does, however, hold out hope that law may check or prevent stasis. For while Thucydides highlights the weakness of law, affirming that human nature may hold sway over the laws and that it is “accustomed” to act unjustly in violation of the laws, he never declares in his own name as emphatically as Diodotus does that “it is simply impossible” for the “strength of laws” to hold back human nature (3.45.7). Thucydides also suggests that the weakening of belief in “divine law” – which he only mentions here in the book – contributed to the atmosphere of pervasive distrust during the civil conflicts, and thereby points to the value – the political utility – of belief in such a law that is enforced by gods (3.82.6). Furthermore, Thucydides concludes his account of factional strife by stressing the goodness of the rule of law, insofar as it offers human beings “hope” that they may “be saved” if they ever suffer some injury at the hands

⁵⁰ See 3.42.1, 3.43.5, 3.44.4, 3.45.4, 3.46.6, 3.47.5, and 3.45.5–46.1.

of others (3.84.3). Finally, Thucydides is careful, at the beginning of his account of factional strife, to state, in a qualified way, that “savage factional strife” convulsed “so to speak all of Greece” (3.82.1). For, in his account, it did not engulf every Greek city. It did not engulf Sparta, the city that “has been governed by good laws from the oldest times” and whose citizens revere the laws.⁵¹ In Thucydides’ account, man without law is certainly savage, perhaps the most savage of the animals, but law, especially divine law, may at least contain our violent natural selves.⁵²

Thucydides suggests that political life is more important, in part because it is more inescapable, than Diodotus appears to believe. Unlike Diodotus, Thucydides – in his book – never addresses an assembly of his fellow citizens. On the other hand, Thucydides is evidently far more engaged in politics, in his deeds and thoughts, than is Diodotus. Thucydides is a general in Athens, he is a writer, and his one writing is entirely focused on the war between Athens and the Peloponnesians, and more broadly, on politics and war, both foreign and domestic. By comparison with Thucydides, Diodotus appears to keep, almost always, an Olympian distance from the inevitably lawless and ignorant world of politics. By comparison with Thucydides, Diodotus appears to live, almost always, a wholly private life, minding his own business. Now, like Diodotus, Thucydides sharply challenges the hopes Pericles expresses that a whole political society can be truly enlightened, that it can philosophize without softness. But in agreement with Pericles, and in apparent disagreement with Diodotus, Thucydides suggests, through his own example, that the philosophic mind benefits from the hardness of spirit and toughness of mind nourished by both participating in political life and contemplating it.⁵³ Inasmuch as war, by revealing the depths and also the heights that human beings are capable of reaching when the restraints of law and peaceful association are strained or shattered, is an invaluable teacher about human nature, it is especially a teacher for those who study it, ponder it, and live it, as does Thucydides.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Orwin 1994, 183. See also 76.

⁵² 1.18.1, 1.84.2–3. See Saxonhouse 1978, 464, 473; Bolotin 1987, 17.

⁵³ Edmunds contends that, “With all his rationalism, Thucydides is equally on the side of the active life” of politics as on the side of the theoretical life, but Edmunds overlooks the possibility that, in Thucydides’ view, participation in and reflection on the political life may be indispensable for the pursuit of wisdom (1975, 213–214; see also 209–210).

⁵⁴ Consider Strauss’s remark that “War is a violent teacher not only of everyone except Thucydides but also of Thucydides himself. Taught by that teacher, Thucydides presents the war as it unfolds . . . In doing this he could not help presenting his own conversion

Thucydides' account of factional strife contradicts in two ways the hopeful belief of Themistocles and especially of Pericles in the possibility of progress toward an enlightened political society that satisfies the self-interested desires of our nature while inspiring loyalty in its citizens. First, even though, in the first twenty-two chapters of his book, Thucydides apparently adopts the Periclean belief that Athens, thanks to its daring and ingenuity, has achieved a lasting progress from political instability to a thriving political community that marks a "peak" of social trust, prosperity, intelligence, and power, Thucydides now reveals that such lasting progress is impossible. The passions of anger, vengefulness, and envy that dwell within human nature always threaten to burst forth into savagery, and when they do they destroy the trust not only among citizens but even among family members. For while the family might seem to be the most natural of social institutions, Thucydides stresses the importance of law, especially divine law, in holding not only society but also families together. As he explains,

the ties of family became less close than those of party, since the partisan was more ready to dare without explanation. For such associations were not formed to provide benefits in accordance with established laws, but to acquire more for oneself against the established laws. And the pledges of trust among themselves were strengthened less by the divine law than by acting in common to break the law. (3.82.6)

Once the natural passions break free from the restraint of law, the daring and ingenuity celebrated by the Athens of Themistocles and Pericles only serve to intensify the factional conflict. Thucydides mentions the "daring [τόλμα]" of those who engaged in such conflict six times in his account, explaining that "irrational daring" was hailed as a "courage that loves party comrades," that both the partisans of oligarchy and of democracy "dared the most terrible" deeds, that those "inferior in judgment" "daringly" struck first against their seemingly cleverer but improvident adversaries, and that the women of Corcyra in particular "daringly" joined in the civil conflict, fighting "beyond their nature."⁵⁵ And as the factional strife spreads throughout Greece, the participants bring all their intelligence and imagination to bear on the goal of inflicting pain and death on their

from the peace time view to the war time view or his most advanced education" (1964, 162). See also Connor's observation that, for Thucydides, "readers had to be led to reexperience the war, to live through it again, seeing it fully, without averting their eyes from the most unpleasant or revealing episodes" (1984, 16).

⁵⁵ 3.82.4, 3.82.8, 3.83.3, 3.74.1. See also 3.82.6 and 3.84.1.

enemies, bringing “to a still greater excess the inventiveness of their thoughts, both in the surpassing artfulness of their attacks and the outlandishness of their revenges” (3.82.3). It is not, then, as Pericles proclaimed, the case that Athens, as a model for Greece, progressed toward an enduring peak of natural fulfilment, power, and glory, but rather that “savage factional strife” – rooted in the enduring passions of human nature – “progressed” throughout virtually all of Greece, including most emphatically Athens herself.⁵⁶

The second way in which Thucydides’ account of factional strife challenges Pericles is by calling into question Pericles’ belief that it is possible for a political community to liberate the individual natural desires of its citizens while inspiring an individualistic, “erotic” patriotism and thereby maintaining unity. As we have seen, Pericles himself recognizes a certain fragility to the political cohesion of Athens in the aftermath of the liberation of the power of its natural reason and its natural desires that resulted from the statesmanship of Themistocles and the experience of the war with Persia. Nevertheless, Pericles’ confidence that the enlightening “education” provided by his speeches and the experience of the war with Sparta will result in a unified and flourishing city reflects his belief that there is an underlying harmony between human nature and political society, that human nature, in large measure, points us toward political society and political life, and that political communities are therefore, in large measure, natural wholes. As we have seen, Thucydides apparently adopts this Periclean belief in the early part of his book, inasmuch as the first four speakers of Thucydides’ book are nameless individuals whom Thucydides simply identifies as members of their political communities.⁵⁷ Thucydides’ account of the war, however, culminating in the strife between the democratic and oligarchic factions in Corcyra and beyond, sharply challenges this belief in the natural wholeness of political communities and in the harmony, potential or actual, between human nature and political society. As Thucydides explains,

And many harsh things befell the cities through factional strife, things that have come to be and will always be, as long as human nature is the same, but greater and calmer, and in different forms, depending on the turns of the fortunes. For in peace and good times cities and private individuals have better judgments on account of not falling into unwelcome

⁵⁶ 3.82.1; see 2.65.12, 6.15.4, 6.27–29, 6.53.1–2, 6.60–61, 8.47.2–49, 8.65–76, 8.89–92.

⁵⁷ See Chapter 1, note 100.

necessities. But war, taking away daily prosperity, is a violent teacher, and makes the angry passions [ὀργαί] of the many similar to their circumstances. (3.82.2)

Thucydides stresses here that, even though the circumstances of war play a crucial role in weakening the rational judgment and strengthening the anger of the great majority of citizens, the principal cause of the factional strife lies in human nature. For Thucydides, as later for James Madison, the seeds of faction are “sown in the nature of man.”⁵⁸ Human beings are always potentially factious, for they contain within them passions that always threaten to impel them actively to harm their fellow citizens. War unleashes those passions, not only insofar as each side in the conflict aids the domestic factions within each community – Athens aiding the democratic parties and Sparta the oligarchic ones – but also because the violence of war intensifies the angry passions of citizens and weakens the ordinary restraints of law. Hence, for example, factional strife erupts in Athens later in the war, without the intervention of a foreign power.⁵⁹ It is the angry passions themselves, rooted in our nature, that make factional conflict, potential or actual, a permanent feature of political life. According to Thucydides, war – the phenomenon of war as a whole – teaches that political communities are not natural wholes but rather collections of factions and individuals who are themselves always in a potential state of war with each other.

Thucydides’ narrative first explicitly raises the question concerning the natural wholeness of political communities through the speech of the Thebans regarding how Sparta should treat the Plataeans who have surrendered, a speech that comes immediately before Thucydides’ account of the stasis in Corcyra and Greece.⁶⁰ In their preceding speech, the Plataeans denounced the Thebans for having allied themselves with the Persians in their attempt to conquer Greece.⁶¹ The Thebans respond by drawing a distinction between their city and their regime:

⁵⁸ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, 2003, 73. ⁵⁹ See 6.27–29, 6.53.1–2, 6.60–61.

⁶⁰ Thucydides’ narrative implicitly raises the question concerning the natural wholeness of political communities in the Mytilenean debate, where Cleon champions the view that cities are natural wholes – as Saxonhouse puts it, “Cleon wants to see the city – any city – as a unified body” (2016, 176; see also 1996, 72–73) – but Diodotus views them as a collection of factions and individuals. Consider Pouncey’s suggestion that Thucydides’ accounts of the plague, the factional strife in Corcyra, the final stages of the Sicilian Expedition, and the oligarchic uprising in Athens all clearly show “Thucydides’ interest in the internal disintegration of a society under pressure” (1980, 32–33).

⁶¹ 3.54.1–3, 3.56.

For our city at that time happened to have as a regime [πολιτεύω] neither an oligarchy with equality under the law nor a democracy. Its condition was rather one most contrary to laws and to what is most moderate, but nearest to tyranny – the dominion of a few men. And these men, who hoped to have still more individual power if the Persian would prevail, held down the multitude with force and brought him in; and the whole city, not being master of itself, did this, and it does not deserve to be upbraided for errors it made when it had no laws. (3.62.3–4)

The Thebans here argue that the city is only responsible for its actions when “the whole city [ἡ ξύμπασα πόλις]” is “master of itself.” When the city is governed merely by a portion of the citizens who rule for the sake of their individual power – when it is a tyranny – the city is not responsible for its actions. Yet, by referring to oligarchy or rule of the few and democracy or rule of the multitude as the alternatives to the “dominion of a few men,” the Thebans here implicitly acknowledge that the city is always governed by a part or party, never by a whole. For even when the city lives under laws, the laws are laid down by the ruling element or regime – the few or the many – and not the whole. The question Thucydides raises here, then, is, are political communities properly understood as collections of parts rather than as natural wholes, parts or parties which always tend to rule for their own advantage and hence tend to rule tyrannically?

It is important to note that Thucydides never offers a teaching regarding a best regime, within which the political community as a whole and all individuals within it are fulfilled. Instead, almost at the very end of his book, he offers singular but qualified praise for the “regime” established in Athens, which constituted “the measured mixture of the few and the many,” as a result of which “for the first time, in my lifetime, at least, the Athenians were manifestly well governed” – or “had a good regime [εὖ πολιτεύσαντες]” (8.97.2). In this way, Thucydides might seem to suggest that, given the factious nature of human beings, the most reasonable political goal is a settlement among selfish factions so as to prevent savage civil strife.⁶² On the other hand, by stating that this mixed regime was the first good one enjoyed in his lifetime among the Athenians in particular, Thucydides leaves open the possibility that Sparta – whom he states “lived under good laws” (1.18.1) – enjoyed a good regime, and even a better regime, in his lifetime.

⁶² As Grene puts it, “the Constitution of the Five Thousand . . . tried to cure, in root-and-branch fashion, the basic disease of the Athenian state, the conflict between the few and the many” (1965, 78).

Thucydides' account of factional strife marks a significant shift in his narrative away from focusing on political communities as unified wholes to focusing on the individual leaders within those communities. Of the twenty-four speeches that Thucydides presents prior to his account of stasis, he presents nine as given by nameless individuals simply identified by their political communities: the Corcyreans, the Corinthians (three times), the Athenians, the Plataeans, the Mytileneans, and the Thebans, and one, at first by two named Plataean individuals but in its conclusion as simply by "the Plataeans."⁶³ Of the twenty-six speeches that Thucydides presents after his account of factional strife, he presents only four as given by nameless individuals identified simply by their cities: the Spartans, the Melians and Athenians in the Melian Dialogue, and a Syracusan general.⁶⁴ What is more, although Thucydides generally identifies the nameless speakers as either members of their community or ambassadors sent out by their community, in the case of the Melians who speak in the Melian Dialogue, and only in their case, he identifies them as "the few" and hence as a faction, in contradistinction to the "multitude," the opposing faction.⁶⁵ In the remainder of the book after his account of factional strife, even though Thucydides retains his distinctive focus on the speeches and doings of political communities – without encompassing the private lives of

⁶³ See 1.32–36 (Corcyreans), 1.37–43 (Corinthians), 1.68–71 (Corinthians), 1.73–78 (Athenians), 1.120–124 (Corinthians), 2.71.2–4 (Plataeans), 2.73.3 (Plataeans), 3.9–14 (Mytileneans), and 3.61–67 (Thebans), and, for the last speech of the Plataeans, 3.52.5–60. For the fourteen speeches given by named individuals, see 1.80–85 (Archidamus), 1.86 (Sthenelaidas), 1.140–144 (Pericles), 2.11 (Archidamus), 2.35–46 (Pericles), 2.60–64 (Pericles), 2.72.1 (Archidamus), 2.72.3 (Archidamus), 2.74.3 (Archidamus), 2.87 (Cnemus and Brasidas), 2.89 (Phormio), 3.30 (Teutiplus), 3.37–40 (Cleon), and 3.42–48 (Diodotus).

⁶⁴ See 4.17–20 (Spartans), 5.85–113 (Athenians and Melians in the Melian Dialogue), and 6.41.1–3 (a Syracusan general). For the twenty-two speeches in direct discourse given by named individuals, in order of appearance, see 4.10 (Demosthenes), 4.59–64 (Hermocrates), 4.85–87 (Brasidas), 4.92 (Pagondas), 4.95 (Hippocrates), 4.126 (Brasidas), 5.9 (Brasidas), 5.10.5 (Brasidas), 6.9–14 (Nicias), 6.16–18 (Alcibiades), 6.20–23 (Nicias), 6.33–34 (Hermocrates), 6.36–40 (Athenagoras), 6.68 (Nicias), 6.76–80 (Hermocrates), 6.82–87 (Euphemus), 6.89–92 (Alcibiades), 7.11–15 (Nicias' letter to the Athenians), 7.61–64 (Nicias), 7.66–68 (Gylippus and Syracusan generals), 7.77 (Nicias), and 8.53.3 (Peisander).

⁶⁵ See 5.84.3 and the Athenian ambassadors' reiteration of this point at 5.85. Compare with, for example, 1.72.1, 3.8.1, and 4.16.3, where Thucydides refers simply to "ambassadors." In all other cases of nameless individuals speaking, with the exception of the Plataeans, he simply refers to them by their political communities: for example, "the Corcyreans spoke such things" (1.31.4); "Such things did the Corcyreans say; but after them the Corinthians such things" (1.36.4).

individuals⁶⁶ – he overwhelmingly presents those communities as collections of competing factions and individuals rather than as natural wholes. In this way, after his account of the savagery of stasis, Thucydides leads the reader away from the Periclean view of politics – a generous, hopeful, patriotic view of politics – to what is, apparently, by his lights, a truer view.⁶⁷

The Cause of the Savagery of Factional Strife

What causes the savagery of the factional strife that Thucydides describes? One might suppose that the overall triumph of passion over reason is the primary cause. The domestic wars that convulsed Greece demonstrate the power of “angry passions [ὀργαί]” and the weakness of reasoned “judgment” (3.82.2). Thucydides’ account, however, indicates that reason plays an important role in the factional strife. By considering that role, we may identify with greater precision which passions lead to the horrible cruelty evident in stasis and how they do so.

In the first place, as we have noted, those engaged in the civil conflict displayed “inventiveness” in “their thoughts” and “surpassing artfulness” in “their attacks” and “their revenges” (3.82.3). The overall, collective rational judgment of human beings declines insofar as that conflict is destructive to society as a whole. However, a certain form of individual reasonableness does not decline but persists and even thrives. One can discern this form of reasonableness in the qualities that came to be praised and condemned during the factional strife. Thucydides explains that “irrational daring,” “impulsive sharpness,” “being harsh,” “plotting successfully” “suspecting” plots, and “anticipating future evil by acting first” were all praised, whereas such qualities as “thoughtful hesitation,” “moderation,” “sagacity with regard to everything,” condemning harshness, deliberating regarding the security of oneself and of others, and avoiding engaging in plots were denounced (3.82.4–5). Overall, swift and violent action was esteemed over reasoned deliberation. And yet, within the context of intense factional strife, is such esteem simply unreasonable?⁶⁸ Treating one’s fellow citizens

⁶⁶ With the exception of Harmodius and Aristogeiton – see 6.54–59.

⁶⁷ Consider Connor’s remark in his discussion of Book 8 that, “In *stasis*, however, narrative units, as well as political coherence, disintegrate. We can no longer consider the Athenians as a unit” (1984, 214; see also 215).

⁶⁸ In a similar vein, Demosthenes, albeit in the context of war rather than factional strife, on the eve of the opening battle at Pylos, warns his soldiers against focusing on deliberation at the expense of swift action:

with suspicion, plotting against them, and preemptively attacking them surely intensify factional strife and destroy the trust necessary for community. Such behavior during the factional strife effectively reverses the laying down of arms by the Athenians that Thucydides earlier identified as the crucial first step away from the primordial, “barbaric” condition of domestic strife, wherein all were always and everywhere armed, and toward communal trust and solidarity (1.6.1–3). Nevertheless, once communal trust and solidarity have collapsed, is it not safer and therefore more prudent to treat those around one with distrust, deception, and even possibly with violence?

Thucydides himself stresses how lamentable but also how reasonable such distrust was. On the one hand, he declares, “Thus every form of evil disposition presented itself on account of the factional strife in Greece, and the good disposition, of which nobility most partakes, was ridiculed into oblivion.” Here he clearly condemns the scorn that was expressed for generous and trusting souls. But on the other hand, Thucydides acknowledges that the collapse of trust was a brute fact that could not be wished away. All within Greece “were largely divided into camps judging one another without any trust, for no speech was so powerful and no oath so frightening as to reconcile them” (3.83.1–2). Under these circumstances, to put one’s faith in others would seem only to accomplish one’s ruin. For example, at the beginning of the factional strife in Corcyra, the democratic leader and council member Peithias and his supporters put their faith in their oligarchic opponents’ adherence to the rule of law – mistakenly – and were subsequently murdered by them, in public, while the council of Corcyra was in session (3.70). Therefore, as Thucydides explains, “all who were stronger, through their rational calculation [λογισμός] that security was hopeless, rather made provision for avoiding suffering themselves than proving themselves capable of placing their trust in others” (3.83.2).

What is more, in Thucydides’ account, the factional strife reveals that trust in the power of reason itself can be unreasonable. Thucydides states, in a riddling manner, that those “inferior in judgment for the most part prevailed” over their more “sagacious” and “wily” opponents. For those inferior in judgment, recognizing their own inferiority and the superior

Men, you who are sharing this danger with me, let none of you wish to seem to be sagacious in such a necessity, rationally calculating [ἐκλογίζομαι] every terrible threat that surrounds us, rather than engaging with our enemies, without careful thought, but with good hope that from this you will prevail. For so great a necessity allows least for rational calculation [λογισμός] but requires encountering the danger most swiftly. (4.10.1)

intelligence of their opponents, attacked first, and “daringly” struck them down in deed rather than relying on speeches. But if their opponents were truly superior in judgment, if they were truly “sagacious” and “wily,” why were they defeated by their intellectual inferiors? Thucydides explains that “they, contemptuously assuming that they would perceive things well in advance and that they would not need to take by action what it would be possible for them to take by their own intelligence,⁶⁹ being insufficiently vigilant, were destroyed” (3.83.4). Unlike their opponents, the ostensibly intellectually superior do not recognize their own vulnerability. They are blinded, not only by their confidence in their own intelligence and by their contempt for the intelligence of their opponents but also by their confidence in the overall power of reason. They evidently believe that their brains will always vanquish the brawn of their adversaries, and that clever speeches and schemes are more than a match for violent deeds. For example, like the Corcyrean Peithias, who defeats his opponents twice in legal proceedings, they assume both that they can consistently outwit their opponents in a court of law and that their opponents will let themselves be outwitted. But just as Peithias’ opponents eventually refuse to obey the law, burst into his council chamber with daggers, and murder him together with sixty of his supporters, so do the opponents of the “sagacious” and “wily” act against them violently and effectively (3.70). The ostensibly inferior in judgment, then, are ultimately revealed, in Thucydides’ account, as superior in judgment to their enemies, inasmuch as they recognize their own weaknesses and the strengths of their enemies and recognize that, in conditions of civil strife, it is reasonable to eschew thorough deliberation in favor of swift decision and lawless and violent action. By initially adopting in this passage the point of view of those who overestimate the power of their reason – who think themselves “sagacious” and “wily” and their opponents “inferior in judgement” – and then revealing the fatal consequences of their contempt and lack of vigilance, Thucydides attempts to teach his readers to avoid a similar folly.⁷⁰

Does Thucydides mean to suggest, then, that reasonable actions taken to avoid suffering and destruction – actions motivated by a fear of death and poverty – are the cause of the savagery of factional strife? Thucydides offers

⁶⁹ Or “judgment [γνώμη].”

⁷⁰ For similar reasons, Thucydides highlights the case of Mycalessus, a small city with temples and schools for children, whose inhabitants, “on account of their lack of fear,” fail to guard their city adequately and are subsequently massacred by murderous Thracian mercenaries (7.29.3–5).

a complex psychological account of the cause of such savagery, an explanation that identifies two psychological stages of the violence in the conflict. In his statement that war is a violent teacher, he suggests that war first takes away “daily prosperity” and thereby arouses fear of poverty, and then that it intensifies “the angry passions of the many” (3.82.2). The original cause of the strife, and therewith of the savagery, apparently, is the impoverishment caused by war, an impoverishment that prompts human beings to take violent actions to protect their property and lives that they would not have taken in times of peace and prosperity. But how would such an explanation account for the instances of seemingly wanton cruelty presented in his account of the Corcyrean civil strife – for example, the torture and slaughter by the democratic party of the oligarchic partisans who had sought sanctuary in temples to the gods, or the slaying by fathers of their sons?⁷¹ The example that seems to fit his explanation best is the killing by the oligarchic party of Peithias and his allies (3.70.3–6). The oligarchic partisans first accuse Peithias in a court of law of seeking treasonously to enslave Corcyra to Athens, but Peithias is acquitted. Peithias then accuses five of his richest opponents of religious crimes, and they are convicted and sentenced to pay apparently huge fines. The five, apparently fearing impoverishment, then murder Peithias and sixty of his supporters in the council chamber of Corcyra. Similarly, the killing of creditors by debtors may be plausibly attributed to the fear of impoverishment (3.81.4). But how would fear of impoverishment lead more broadly to the killing – wherein “every form of death” appeared – that culminated with the savage and implacable slaughter in the factional strife?⁷²

In his particular account of the cycle of violence in Corcyra between the democrats, aided by Athens, and the oligarchs, aided by Sparta, Thucydides highlights the role played by fear, mentioning it nine times, and never mentioning anger, vengeance, or envy.⁷³ On the other hand, in his more general account of the factional strife in Greece and its relation to human nature, Thucydides highlights the role played by anger – mentioning it twice; envy – mentioning it three times; and especially vengeance – mentioning it seven times – but mentions fear only twice.⁷⁴ Inasmuch as fear

⁷¹ 3.70.6, 3.81. ⁷² 3.81.5, 3.84.1.

⁷³ 3.74.2, 3.75.3, 3.75.5, 3.77.1, 3.78.1, 3.78.2, 3.79.1, 3.79.2, 3.80.1.

⁷⁴ For anger (ὀργή), see 3.82.2, 3.84.1; envy, 3.82.8 (x2), 3.84.2; vengeance (τιμωρία), 3.82.3, 3.82.7 (x2), 3.82.8, 3.84.1, 3.84.2, 3.84.3; fear, 3.83.2, 3.83.3. Consider Bruell's reference to “the compulsion of anger and revenge . . . which had rendered the Corcyrean civil war so terrible” (1974, 17).

evidently triggers the factional strife, how do the spirited passions of anger, envy, and vengeance come to play such an important role?

To return to the example of the oligarchic partisans who murder Peithias and his supporters after he threatens to impoverish them, it is important to note that those partisans go on to explain their actions to the people of Corcyra, not in terms of their self-interest in avoiding impoverishment but in terms of the common good of Corcyra: "Having done this and having summoned together the Corcyreans, they said that these things were for the best and would make it least likely that they would be enslaved by Athens" (3.71.1). In this way, the oligarchs justify their actions by invoking the ostensibly just goal of preserving the freedom of Corcyra. Similarly, when the democratic partisans "fear" that the Peloponnesians will kill them and install the oligarchic party as rulers, the democrats not only kill the oligarchs out of fear for their lives but justify their killing in the name of preserving democracy, "bringing the accusation that they [that is, the oligarchs] were overthrowing the people," even though, as Thucydides adds, some oligarchs were killed "for the sake of private enmity" and others because they were owed money (3.81.4). Thucydides suggests that human beings, even though acting from self-interested motives, feel the need to justify their actions, not only to others but also to themselves, perhaps especially when taking the lives of others. They need to elevate and moralize their actions. They need and desire to derive a moral satisfaction from their actions by thinking themselves just, and hence thinking of themselves as acting for a cause higher than their own individual self-interest. And from this need and desire arise humans' passions of anger and vengefulness, especially. For anger and vengefulness are passions aroused by perceived injustice, injustice that one rages at and seeks to punish. Envy, too, even though it is not strictly speaking a moral passion, is an easily moralizable passion, insofar as one's pain at the good fortune of another can easily lead one to justify that pain by convincing oneself that the envied do not deserve their good fortune. The moral passions arise, then, out of the passion to convince oneself and others that one is not merely self-interested.

Now, once these moral passions are aroused, they take on a life of their own, and may eclipse even the fear of the loss of property and life. As Thucydides explains, in the middle of the factional strife, "To take revenge against someone in retaliation was valued more than not to have suffered beforehand" (3.82.7). Surprisingly, even though the fear for one's "daily prosperity" and the desire to protect oneself from harm initially cause the killing of one's fellow citizens, once the killing begins humans would

rather risk suffering the loss of their lives and property, if they might thereby feel a righteous satisfaction in punishing injustice, than enjoy their safety without such a feeling of righteousness. The desire to feel righteous emerges as a desire distinct from and as powerful as the desire to feel safe and secure. Anger at and vengeance against perceived injustice provide pleasures – the pleasures of moral exultation and superiority – that, once experienced, may rival and even surpass the pleasures of life and safety. As Thucydides goes on to remark, those who took revenge against others by first deceptively winning their trust and then betraying it “would take revenge with more pleasure on account of exploiting such trust than from doing so openly” (3.82.7). Here Thucydides highlights the *pleasure* of taking revenge, the pleasure of punishing those one believes are unjust and hence deserve to be punished. And he suggests here that that pleasure is enhanced, in this case, by effectively deceiving those one perceives as unjust, not only because one feels intellectually as well as morally superior to the trusting victims but also because one inflicts even greater harm – the humiliation of betrayal in addition to the punishment of death – on the unjust.

To be sure, anger and revenge may appear to be noble passions, insofar as they may inspire one to risk one’s own safety and life for the seemingly higher goal of opposing and punishing injustice. But, as Thucydides emphasizes, those passions may also inspire one to act more cruelly than the mere desire to protect oneself would. For example, in the case of the Athenian response to the revolt of their imperial subjects the Mytileneans, Thucydides explains that the Athenians are led “by their anger” to kill “all the Mytileneans, as many as were adult men, and to make slaves of the women and children, accusing them because they contrived their revolt even though they were not in subjection as others were; and also that the Peloponnesian ships dared to venture into Ionia to help those ones contributed not least to their impulse” (3.36.2). Thucydides indicates here that the Athenians’ “savage” impulse “to destroy the whole city” of Mytilene is inspired by two passions: One is anger at the perceived injustice of the Mytileneans, who revolted against Athens even though they were treated more generously than their fellow imperial subjects; and second is fear that the revolt exposed Athens and its empire to an unprecedented naval threat from Sparta and its allies. Now, fear alone would not seem sufficient to inspire the Athenians to kill all the adult males in Mytilene. As Diodotus demonstrates, a calculation of the security of Athens and its empire would seem to produce a policy that offers hope for repentant rebels and spares the democratic supporters of Athens within their subject cities (3.46–47).

On the other hand, the anger at the perceived injustice of the Mytileneans – an anger that Cleon repeatedly appeals to⁷⁵ – leads to the conclusion that punishment of that injustice is a just act, one that affirms the righteousness of the Athenians and provides them with the pleasure of feeling that they are acting righteously.⁷⁶ And the pursuit of that pleasure of avenging a wrong inspires in the Athenians the “savage” impulse to destroy all of Mytilene for that wrong.

It is precisely the pleasure of feeling that one is righteous that provides the link between anger and vengeance, on the one hand, and savagery, on the other. For the pleasure of fighting and punishing those one perceives to be unjust entails a pleasure in harming others. This is not a sadistic pleasure. It is not a pleasure simply in the act of inflicting pain or harm but rather a pleasure in affirming one’s own righteousness by the act of inflicting pain or harm. It is a moral pleasure, inasmuch as it is a pleasure one derives from feeling that one is moral. It is a pleasure that may eclipse the pleasure of enjoying prosperity and life, because it is the pleasure of feeling that one deserves to enjoy prosperity and life. Yet that moral pleasure, in contrast with the desire for the pleasures of security and property, is what may inspire savagery. For the person who fears poverty and death may well kill others, but such killing is merely instrumental, a means to the end of securing one’s property and life. But, in Thucydides’ account, the pleasure in punishing injustice necessarily encompasses a pleasure in inflicting harm on others. And insofar as one seeks to enjoy that grim pleasure, one will seek out opportunities of enjoying it, by finding and punishing those one believes unjust, be they members of an opposing faction, suppliants in a sacred temple, or one’s children. The moral exultation that one experiences from punishing injustice is what leads to the cruelty that Thucydides describes as savage: not only the inflicting of pain and harm but the actual enjoyment thereof.

⁷⁵ Consider, for example, his warning to the Athenians that they not let “anger” become “duller” and that they take up their “vengeance” “most closely” following the wrong against the one who inflicted it upon them (3.38.1), and his declaration that “the Mytileneans have done you greater injustice than any other city” (3.39.1).

⁷⁶ Cleon accordingly calls on the Athenians twice to punish the Mytileneans “as they deserve” (ἀξίως) “for their injustice” (3.39.6, 3.40.7) and in order for the Athenians to affirm their own justice in holding their empire by doing so: “for if these ones were right to revolt, you ought not to rule your empire” (3.40.4). Consider Saxonhouse’s remark that “Cleon’s most powerful appeal to the past comes in his call for the execution of justice” and that “demand for justice” is the “core” of his speech (2005, 154, 155).

Thucydides goes on in his account of stasis to highlight the role played by not only fear of impoverishment and death but also greed and ambition. Yet a spirit of self-justification and moral exultation arises in his account here as well. He explains that the “cause of all” the killing was, in the first place, “the desire for more and the love of honor,” and then “the zeal” that arises from them once human beings “enter into a love of strife” (3.82.8). “For,” he goes on,

those in authority in the cities, each with a splendid name, giving higher honor to political equality under the law for the majority and moderate aristocracy, pretended in speech that they were competing for the community; but contesting with one another in every way to prevail, they dared the most terrible things and went through with the revenges that were still greater, not giving priority to what was just and expedient for the city, but limiting themselves to what was always providing pleasure for each; and either by condemnation through an unjust vote or acquiring dominion by force, they were ready to satisfy their immediate love of strife.

Now, Thucydides highlights here the injustice of the partisans who claim to act for the common good but truly act for their own “pleasure.” But he also indicates that the pleasure that the oligarchs and democrats seek is not merely the pleasure of having wealth, power, and honor but the pleasure of believing that they justly deserve to have those things. For the partisans pretend, not only to others but also to themselves, that they are just. They do not kill in the name of greed and ambition but in the name of “political equality under the law” and “moderate aristocracy.” Above all, they kill in the name of vengeance, that is, in the name of punishing those they deem unjust. And it is that zealous pursuit of moral satisfaction, rather than a calculated pursuit of wealth or honor or power, that inspires them to dare the most terrible and cruel deeds.

At the end of his overall account of factional strife, Thucydides explains that the desire for revenge among citizens at large was, in some measure, provoked by the oppression of their rulers:

In Corcyra, then, many of the things were dared beforehand, as many things as people would do in retaliation, when ruled with hubris more than with moderation by ones who give occasion for vengeance. And some, wishing to be delivered from the habitual poverty, and especially desiring, on account of their suffering, to possess the property of their neighbors, would resolve to act in violation of justice. (3.84.1)

Thucydides here suggests that much of the violence of faction is due to a desire for freedom from oppression, a desire to escape poverty, and avarice.

But while the satisfaction of those desires may require killing, the desires themselves do not entail enjoying such killing. Accordingly, Thucydides does not claim that those desires are the source of the cruelty evident in factional strife. That cruelty results from other desires: “And others would especially attack their equals, not out of a desire for more, but, carried away most of all by an anger untouched by education, would turn on them savagely and implacably” (3.84.1).

Later in the book, Thucydides describes another example of apparent savagery – the killing by Thracian mercenaries of the inhabitants of Mycalessus. Those mercenaries are so murderous that they spare neither old nor young, neither women nor children, nor “beasts of burden and as many other living things as they might see” (7.29.4). By describing this killing with a similar phrase – “every form of destruction presented itself” (7.29.5) – that he used in describing the killing in the stasis at Corcyra – “every form of death presented itself”; “every form of evil disposition presented itself”⁷⁷ – Thucydides invites the reader to compare the two cases of tremendous cruelty. Thucydides’ account suggests that, in contrast with those who kill in the factional fighting at Corcyra, the Thracian mercenaries butcher every living thing in Mycalessus without distinction and they do so not out of greed, nor out of anger or revenge, but simply out of a sheer pleasure in killing: “for the race of the Thracians, just as those who are especially barbaric, when emboldened, are most murderous” (7.29.4). Now, Thucydides stresses that the slaughter suffered by the Mycalessians was as “deserving of lamentation” as any that occurred in the entire war (7.30.3). On the other hand, Thucydides never declares that such killing sheds light on the nature of human beings as a whole, as he does twice regarding the killing in the civil strife that engulfed Greece.⁷⁸ Evidently, according to Thucydides, even though the suffering of the Mycalessians was as horrible and deserving of compassion as that of the victims in the civil strife, because the cruelty in the civil strife is motivated by the distinctively human passions of anger and vengeance – because it is fueled by the distinctively human desire to justify oneself and to enjoy feeling that one is just – that cruelty reflects more clearly the distinctive nature of human savagery than the apparently senseless and blind cruelty at Mycalessus.

The anger at injustice, and the desire to punish injustice are passions that are necessary to any political community. Every political community

⁷⁷ 3.81.5, 3.83.1.

⁷⁸ 3.82.2, 3.84.2.

must inspire its citizens to defend it from enemies abroad and at home, even at the risk of their own comfort and security. Political communities must therefore appeal to the satisfaction of acting righteously, in a cause ostensibly higher than one's own individual comfort and security. Thucydides teaches, however, that anger at injustice and the desire to punish injustice are the very passions which may cause savagery, a savagery that in turn can lead to the moral and physical destruction of a political community. Inasmuch as those always potentially factious passions are both necessary for political society and inherent in human nature, deadly faction is a permanent feature of the human condition.⁷⁹ Through his analysis of the causes of savagery, Thucydides challenges especially powerfully the hope of Pericles that a political community, following the example of Athens, can achieve a lasting progress over instability and ignorance and toward a united and flourishing society governed by reason.

The Utility and the Power of Piety

Thucydides' discussion of factional strife and his subsequent narrative also challenge Pericles' vision of an increasingly areligious and enlightened city, in which the citizens as a whole philosophize without softness, by highlighting the political utility and psychological power of piety. By describing all the horrors of lawlessness, Thucydides' account of stasis clearly underscores the value of the rule of law and the importance of strengthening obedience to law. And one clear way of doing so is by nourishing the belief that the laws are handed down and enforced by the gods.⁸⁰ Diodotus argues that the death penalty, as it is inflicted by human authorities, has proved incapable of preventing violations of the law, and he muses that "some more terrible fear than this" must be found if laws are to be generally obeyed (3.45.4). But might not the awe-inspiring belief in powerful supernatural beings who may, for example, continue to punish

⁷⁹ In contrast, James Madison, writing in *Federalist* #10 under the alias of Publius along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, contends that the principal causes of faction are fallible reason, self-love, and the "unequal faculties of acquiring property" rather than the moral passions of vengeance and anger (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2003, 73). Abraham Lincoln, on the other hand, in his 1838 Lyceum Address, like Thucydides, identifies the passion to punish injustice, which leads human beings "to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of justice," as the principal cause of civil strife (1989, 29).

⁸⁰ See Saxonhouse 1978, 465.

human beings after death, inspire such a fear?⁸¹ As we have seen, Thucydides only mentions divine law in his discussion of the factional strife and he laconically alludes to the fact that, while factional strife convulsed “so to speak” all of Greece, it did not convulse Sparta, which has “lived under good laws,” reveres them, and evidently believes their regime and laws to be supported by the gods.⁸² The Athens founded by Themistocles and Pericles, that builds ships and walls rather than temples to the gods, looks to reason rather than pious tradition for guidance, and relies on the natural and reasonable self-interestedness of its citizens to inspire an energetic and patriotic devotion is, by contrast, increasingly afflicted by factional strife and ultimately brought low by it (2.65.11–12).⁸³

Furthermore, Thucydides’ narrative highlights the striking and surprising growth of piety among the Athenians over the course of their war with the Peloponnesians. As we have seen, Thucydides explains that, even up to the outbreak of the war, the majority of the Athenians had dwelled in the countryside of Attica and adhered to their pious traditions (2.14–16). Pericles sought to wean the Athenians away from that piety by going to war with Sparta and persuading the Athenians, as Themistocles had done, to abandon their ancestral temples and to become a seafaring people who place their hopes in their own ingenuity and daring rather than in the favor of providential gods. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Athenians evidently continue to adhere to their piety when they interpret the plague that afflicts Athens, but not Sparta, as a sign that Apollo favors Sparta in the war, and consequently they sue for peace (2.54). Now, one might suppose that this example of Athenian piety is a relic of their rural and agricultural past rather than a harbinger of their naval imperial future. Yet Thucydides’ narrative after his account of stasis shows that religious feeling in Athens not only persists but grows over the course of the war. In the first place, he informs us that, in the sixth year of the war, “the Athenians purified Delos” – the island sacred to Apollo – “in accordance with a certain oracle” and restored features of the festival in honor of Apollo that they had let

⁸¹ Consider, for example, Homer *Odyssey* 11.567–600; Plato *Republic* 330d1–331b6.

⁸² 3.82.6, 3.82.1, 1.18.1, 1.84.3. For the overall piety of the Spartans, see 1.118.3, 1.128.1, 2.74, 3.89.1, 3.92.5, 4.116.3, 5.16.2–3, 5.54.2, 5.55.3, 5.116.1, 6.95.1, 8.6.5, and also 7.18.2–3. For the Spartans’ belief in divinity of their laws, see, for example, Herodotus 1.65–66; Plato *Laws* 624a1–5.

⁸³ For an argument that Thucydides judged Theseus superior to Pericles in practical wisdom precisely because of Theseus’ “most conspicuous attention to piety,” see Bartlett 2001, 104.

lapse (3.104).⁸⁴ Thucydides goes on to recount that the Athenians purify Delos again in the tenth year of the war in order to expiate their “guilt [αἰτία]” in the eyes of Apollo, and once more in the eleventh year of the war “because the god at Delphi” – Apollo – “commanded it in an oracle.”⁸⁵ The Athenians evidently come to be far more concerned with obeying the gods than when they were led by the man whose only reference to a god was when explaining that they might melt down for revenue the inlaid gold on “the goddess herself” – Athena (2.13.5). Secondly, the emergence of the singularly pious Athenian statesman Nicias as a leading general from the fifth to the nineteenth year of the war – the principal opponent of Cleon, the architect of the peace treaty with Sparta, the principal opponent of Alcibiades, and then a principal leader of the Sicilian expedition – evinces a powerful and enduring surge in religious feeling in Athens.⁸⁶ Finally, the outburst of factional strife in Athens “for the first time,” a factional strife that is primarily religious in character – the hysteria over the mutilation of the statues of the god Hermes on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition, the subsequent effort to purify Athens of all impiety, and the religious persecution of all Athenians suspected of impiety, culminating with the architect of the Sicilian Expedition, Alcibiades, who consequently defects to Sparta near the outset of that expedition – indicates not only the tremendous power of religious sentiment in Athens but also its destructive character there.⁸⁷ For since the regime established by Themistocles and Pericles offers no clear political outlet for religious sentiment – since Pericles’ education of the Athenians does not attempt to contain and channel the power of religious passion by, for example, nourishing a belief that the gods stand behind the city and its laws – that passion erupts in disorganized, contradictory, and divisive ways. Accordingly, even though the Athenians condemn to death the architect of the Sicilian Expedition for impiety, they do not cancel that expedition but rather fervently pray

⁸⁴ Indeed, as early as the third year of the war, the Athenian forces under Phormio consecrate a ship to Poseidon after a victory against the Peloponnesians (2.84.4).

⁸⁵ 5.1.1, 5.32.1.

⁸⁶ For Nicias’ piety, see especially 7.50.4, 7.77.2–4. Consider as well 6.69.2. For his emergence and prominence in Athens, see 3.51, 3.91, 4.27.5–4.28, 4.42–45, 4.53–57, 4.129–133, 5.16.1, 5.44–46, 6.8.2–4, 7.86.

⁸⁷ 2.65.11, 6.15.3–4, 6.27–29, 6.53, 6.60–61, 6.88.9–93. Consider Strauss’s remark: “In this case at any rate the fear of gods which restrained the Spartans from savagery drove the Athenians into savagery” (1964, 217).

to the gods for its success and embrace the oracles that promise such success.⁸⁸

The growth of Athenian piety, notwithstanding the areligious character of its regime under Pericles, suggests that such piety is natural to human beings. What might be the natural causes of piety, in Thucydides' account of the Athenians? They appear to be twofold. In the first place, the hope that their natural desires will meet with satisfaction, a hope that, as Diodotus especially argues, is so powerful in human hearts, leads the Athenians to hope that there are gods who will come to their aid in their quest for such satisfaction. As Diodotus explains, "The hope and the erotic desire for everything, the one leading, the other following, and the one thinking up the plot, the other suggesting that fortune will be bountiful" impel human beings in all of their undertakings (3.45.5). And while Diodotus does not explicitly state that erotic desire and hope may fuel pious sentiment, Thucydides' narrative offers a striking example of them doing so. During the final debate over the expedition to conquer Sicily, the pious Nicias, who opposes the expedition, makes one last attempt to dissuade the Athenians by proposing that they virtually double the size of the armament, in the hope that the prospect of devoting such a huge number of soldiers and vast amount of resources to the expedition would dishearten and deter the Athenians (6.19.2–24.1). However, Thucydides recounts, Nicias' effort has the opposite effect on the Athenians from that which he intended:

yet they were not drawn out of their desire to sail by the massiveness of the preparation, but were rather feeling far more eager, and it turned out the opposite for him; for he seemed in their opinion to advise well and now there would be both safety and abundance. And an erotic desire fell upon all similarly to sail away; upon the older ones, for they supposed that either they would subjugate those against whom they sailed or, with such a great power, they would suffer no failure; upon the men in their prime out of longing for the sight and contemplation of what is far off and being of good hope that they would be saved; and upon the great multitude of soldiers, supposing that they would get money in the present and would acquire in addition a power from which would they would obtain an eternal wage. (6.24.2–3)

At this moment, the Athenians, brimming with self-confidence, appear to hope that their erotic passion to conquer Sicily will be fulfilled thanks

⁸⁸ 6.27–29, 6.32.1–2, 6.53.1–2, 6.60–61, 8.1.1.

simply to their own powers. But at the key moment of their departure, when they recognize the sheer and perilous magnitude of the expedition, the Athenians' hope – "the greatest hope for the future" – turns to higher powers: "And in the present critical moment, as they were taking leave of one another under impending dangers, the awe-inspiring terror of these dangers came home to them more than when they had voted to sail" (6.31.1).

And once the ships were manned and all things laid in that they were going to take with them, silence was signaled by the trumpet; and they offered the prayers that were practiced according to the law before putting out to sea, not ship by ship but all together, led by a herald. Throughout the whole armament the men on board and their officers mixed bowls of wine and poured libations with golden and silver cups. And the rest of the crowd from the shore joined them in prayer, both the citizens and anyone present who wished them well. And having sung the paean [a sacred song to Apollo] and completed the rites of libation, they put out to sea.⁸⁹ (6.31.6–32.2)

At the moment of the Athenians' greatest daring, at the moment when they set out to add to their imperial city the greatest prize yet – the great island of Sicily – at the very moment that the Athenians apparently meet Pericles' demand that they become "erotic lovers" of the "power" of their city, their "erotic desire and hope for everything" move them, in opposition to Pericles, to look beyond the power of their city to the gods for the satisfaction of that desire and the fulfilment of that hope.⁹⁰

In the second place, the Athenians' piety appears to be fueled by a guilty fear that they may be acting unjustly and hence may deserve punishment from the gods. For even though the Athenians are zealous in their quest for empire, they also question the justice of their own actions insofar as they are harshly enslaving and killing their imperial subjects. For example, as we have seen, the Athenians interpret the plague as a possibly divine punishment for their imperialism – an imperialism they have publicly "justified," in large part, by their self-interested desire to acquire more power and wealth and to leave "everlasting memorials of evil and good deeds" in "every sea and land."⁹¹ Similarly, on the very day after condemning all the Mytilenean men to death for revolting against them, the Athenians "immediately experienced a certain change of mind and a reflection that

⁸⁹ As Saxonhouse notes, "Thucydides describes the departure of the Athenian fleet with express emphasis on the obedience to religious practices" (1978, 484).

⁹⁰ 2.43.1, 3.45.5. See also 7.75.7 and 8.1.2. ⁹¹ 2.41.4; see also 1.75.3–76.2, 2.54.

judged the outcome of their deliberation savage, on a grand scale, to destroy a whole city rather than only the ones who were guilty" (3.36.4). Now, since the Athenians go on to appease their feelings of guilt by sparing the common people of Mytilene, they do not experience in this case a guilty fear that the gods will punish them. But their later efforts to appease the god Apollo three times, by purifying Delos in the sixth, tenth, and eleventh years of the war, do evidently reflect their moral self-doubt and guilty fear of divine disfavor.⁹² Thucydides indicates this doubt and fear most clearly when he recounts the Athenians' destruction in the eleventh year of the war of the whole city of Scione for rebelling against them – the very "savage" act they initially resolved on regarding Mytilene in the fifth year of the war but then from which, moved by remorse, they recoiled – as being immediately followed by their third purification of Delos in obedience to Apollo: "At about the same time this summer the Athenians took Scione by siege, killed the adult males, and made slaves of the children and women; and they gave the land to the Plataeans to reside in, and they restored the Delians to Delos, taking to heart the misfortunes in their battles" – an apparent reference to their defeats at Amphipolis and Delium (5.14.1) – "and also because the god in Delphi commanded it in an oracle."⁹³ What is more, Thucydides explicitly states that, the second time the Athenians purified Delos, they did so to remove "a certain ancient guilt [αἰτία]" that they were associated with (5.1.1).⁹⁴

⁹² 3.104, 5.1.1, 5.32.1.

⁹³ 3.36.2–4, 5.32.1. Lateiner observes that "Scione was no less an atrocity than Melos to the next generation" (1977, 46n12). Connor comments that "the ultimate destruction of Scione was one of the most notorious events in the war" (1984, 136). In Xenophon's words, when the Athenians heard of the decisive defeat of their fleet at Aegospotami, "they were mourning, not only for the men they had lost, but much more for themselves, believing that they would suffer what they had done to the Melians, the colonists of the Spartans, after they prevailed in their siege, and to the Histiaeans and Scioneans and Toronaean and Aeginetans and many others of the Greeks" (*Hellenica* 2.2.3; see also 2.2.10). See also the defensiveness of Isocrates with regard to the moral denunciations of the Athenian treatment of Scione at *Panegyricus* (4) 100, 109; *Panathenaicus* (12) 63–107.

⁹⁴ It is possible that, by recounting the battle of Delium, during which the Boeotians specifically accuse the Athenians of impiety because "they acted unjustly by violating laws of the Greeks" when they occupied a temple of Apollo for military purposes in the eighth year of the war, before recounting the Athenians' purification of Delos, the island sacred to Apollo, in the tenth year of the war, Thucydides means to indicate here as well that the Athenians feared that they had incurred the just wrath of Apollo and were seeking to appease him (4.97.2). See 4.90.1–2, 4.92.7, 4.96.1, 4.97–98, 5.1.1. The defeat at Delium evidently weighs on the minds of the Athenians, according to Thucydides. See 5.14.1, 5.15.2, and also, it seems, 5.32.1.

Thucydides also suggests, in three ways, that the first purification of Delos, in the sixth year of the war, was inspired by a guilty fear of divine punishment. In the first place, Thucydides recounts, prior to his account of the first purification of the island sacred to Apollo, that the plague returned to strike Athens for a second time, for a full year – the very plague that the Athenians had earlier interpreted, in the second year of the war, as a punishment by Apollo.⁹⁵ In the second place, when recounting the Athenians' purification of Delos "in accordance with a certain oracle" – an event Thucydides mentioned near the opening of the book as the first example of piety in his work (1.8.1) – he also recounts that "the tyrant" of Athens, Peisistratus, purified the island before, presumably out of a guilty fear of divine disapproval for his unprecedented seizure of absolute power in Athens (3.104.1).⁹⁶ Thucydides adds here that Polycrates, "the tyrant of Samos," dedicated the neighboring island of Rhenea to "Delian Apollo."⁹⁷ By juxtaposing the pious acts of these two tyrants – who may feel a guilty fear of divine retribution for seizing and possessing absolute and extralegal power in their cities – with that of the Athenians, Thucydides invites the reader to consider the possibility that, like those tyrants, Athens – whom the Corinthians denounce as a "tyrant city" that seeks to "enslave" the Greeks, and whose own leaders, Pericles and Cleon, publicly compare its empire to a "tyranny" – also seeks to purify Delos out of a guilty fear of divine retribution.⁹⁸

Finally, Thucydides precedes his account of that purification with a detailed narration of the Athenians' very first naval expedition, of twenty ships, to Sicily "with the pretext" of aiding their kinsmen "but wishing to prevent grain from being brought from there to the Peloponnesus and also to test the possibility of taking the affairs of Sicily into their own hands."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ 3.87.1–3, 2.54.

⁹⁶ While Thucydides ascribes "virtue and sagacity" to the tyrants Peisistratus and his son Hippias, he also indicates that Hippias, at least, ruled somewhat harshly even before the assassination of his brother Hipparchus by speaking of "the habitual fear" the Athenians felt toward Hippias and his bodyguards and by stating that, after the assassination, Hippias' "tyranny" was "harsher for the Athenians" than before (6.54.5, 6.55.3, 6.59.2; see also 6.53.3 on the Athenian belief that Peisistratus' tyranny was "harsh").

⁹⁷ See 3.104.2 and also the reference to the piety of the "tyrant" Polycrates early in the book, at 1.13.6.

⁹⁸ See 1.68.3, 1.69.1, 1.122.3, 1.124.3, 2.63.2, 3.37.2. The Mytileneans and, later on, the Thebans, Brasidas, Pagondas, and the Melians also repeatedly accuse the Athenians of seeking to "enslave" Greeks, as a tyrant might. See 3.10.3–5, 3.13.6, 3.63.3, 4.86.1, 4.87.3, 4.92.4, 4.92.7, 5.9.9, 5.86, 5.92, and 5.100.

⁹⁹ 3.86.4. See 3.86, 3.88, 3.90, 3.99, 3.103. See also 3.115.

This initial attempt to conquer Sicily is most significant because, unlike the Eastern Empire of the Athenians, encompassing the Aegean Sea – which was first acquired to defend Athens against the renewed Persian invasion they feared – the move against Sicily is the first major overt act by Athens that is almost entirely aggressive and expansionist, an act to acquire an entirely new Western Empire while also encircling the Peloponnesus.¹⁰⁰ The fact that the Athenians need a “pretext” for this attempted conquest – here and later¹⁰¹ – to justify it to others but also to themselves, coupled with the fact that they proceed to purify Delos for the first time (since the purification by the tyrant Peisistratus) suggests that they undertake that purification out of a certain guilty fear of divine disfavor regarding their unbridled imperialism. Indeed, many of the events surrounding the third,¹⁰² final attempt by the Athenians to conquer or, as the Syracusans and Spartans charge, to “enslave” Sicily¹⁰³ – the naming of the pious general Nicias as one of the three commanders of the expedition, even though he opposed it; the religious hysteria in response to the mutilation of the statues of Hermes on the eve of the expedition and the subsequent campaign to purify Athens of all impiety and to prosecute Alcibiades, the mastermind of the expedition, on the charge of impiety; and the outburst of piety during the expedition, when the Athenians interpret an eclipse of the moon as a commandment by the gods to halt all military actions – suggest that the Athenians are haunted by a guilty fear that the gods condemn this most bold act of imperial ambition and threaten them with an all too deserved punishment.¹⁰⁴

Thucydides’ narrative suggests that the guilty fears of the Athenians during the Sicilian Expedition may reflect as well a gnawing self-reproach in the wake of their treatment of the Melians. For at Melos, as at Scione, the Athenians commit the deed that they ultimately recoiled from committing at Mytilene: They perform the “savage” deed of destroying a whole

¹⁰⁰ See 6.15.2, 6.90. One might interpret the Athenian alliance with Corcyra, motivated in part by its location on the way to Sicily, as the first step by Athens toward a Western Empire (1.44.3; see 1.36.2). On the other hand, the Athenians appear to make that alliance primarily to prevent the Corcyrean navy from falling into the hands of the Peloponnesians and they do insist on making the alliance a defensive one. See 1.44.1–2, and also 1.33, 1.35.5, 1.36.3. One might also interpret their earlier acquisition of bases in Naupactus and Chalcis as steps toward a westward imperial expansion, but they are, in comparison with the attempts to conquer Sicily, quite modest steps. See 1.103.3, 1.108.5.

¹⁰¹ 6.6.1, 6.8.4. See also 6.33.2, 6.76.2.

¹⁰² For the second attempt, see 4.1–2.2, 4.5.2, 4.24–25, 4.58–65. Consider also 5.4–5.

¹⁰³ See 6.76.2, 6.76.4, 6.77.1, 6.80.5, 6.88.1, 7.66.2, 7.68.2, 7.75.7.

¹⁰⁴ See 6.8.4, 7.50.4, 7.77.2–4; 6.15.2, 6.27–6.29, 6.53, 6.60–61.

people by killing all the men and making slaves of the women and children.¹⁰⁵ Thucydides' narration does not directly indicate that the Athenians felt remorse over this act, as it does in the case of Mytilene by presenting their change of mind and in the case of Scione by presenting their purification of the island sacred to Apollo immediately after their destruction of that city. However, by presenting, immediately after the Athenians' destruction of Melos, the Athenians' Sicilian Expedition, with its numerous instances of their guilty fear of divine punishment, Thucydides' narration indirectly suggests that the Athenians did indeed fear that they deserved retribution, not only for their imperial ambition as a whole but for their cruelty toward the Melians in particular.¹⁰⁶

Thucydides' account suggests, then, that the Athenians' abiding piety is a reflection of their hopes and fears, and also of their thoughtfulness. Their robust ambition and self-confidence prompt them to dare to reach for goals that, at least at times, seem to exceed their grasp. And when they recognize the possible uncertainty of their plans for success, they prayerfully turn their hopes to the gods for assistance. On the other hand, their intelligence leads them not only to devise plans for fulfilling their soaring ambition but also to question the justice of their ambition. And such questioning leads them to ponder the possibility that mysterious but just gods may inflict on them a defeat they well deserve.

Indeed, Thucydides' own narrative invites the reader to consider seriously the possibility that the Athenians' fear of divine justice may be a reasonable fear. By presenting his account of the plague in the second summer of the war immediately after his account of the Funeral Oration during the first winter of the war, and by explaining the Athenians' fear that the plague was a divine punishment for Athenian daring, or hubris, and impiety, he invites the reader to wonder whether that fear is not warranted (2.54). After all, it is in his Funeral Oration in particular that Pericles pointedly omits any reference to the gods – as one might naturally expect in a funeral oration – only mentions piety in the context of public entertainment, and proudly proclaims that the emphatically humanistic city of Athens is “most self-sufficient in war and in peace,” that it enjoys “all things from the whole earth,” and that the Athenians “have compelled every sea and land to yield to our daring and we have established

¹⁰⁵ 3.36.2–4, 5.116.3–4.

¹⁰⁶ Saxonhouse notes that “The entire expedition is touched by the demands of the traditional religion which they had rejected in the Melian dialogue” (1978, 484). Consider also Rawlings 1981, 243–249.

everywhere everlasting memorials of evil and good deeds.”¹⁰⁷ Might the deadly plague, a plague that killed up to one-quarter of the Athenians, sent against Athens during the second and third years of the war and again during the fifth year, a plague that afflicted Athens but not Sparta, not be a just punishment inflicted by the gods on the hubristic Athenians? What is more, might the eclipse of the moon that took place at the very moment that the Athenian armament in Sicily was to withdraw from enemy encirclement and destruction at Syracuse, that was interpreted by the Athenians as a sign from the gods, and that inspired them to postpone that withdrawal, with disastrous consequences, not be an example of intervention by the mysterious gods who sought to punish Athens for its unjust imperialism?¹⁰⁸ Finally, might the final defeat of Athens in the war at the hands of the pious Spartans indicate not only the political utility of piety as a way of maintaining social cohesion and channeling religious sentiments of fear and hope in ways beneficial to the community but also the truth of piety, the truth that there is in the world a divine order that sooner or later, somehow or other, ensures that the unjust are punished and the just vindicated?¹⁰⁹ In order to investigate these questions, raised by Thucydides’ narration, let us turn to the case for Sparta, the city that fixes its gaze on divine rather than human power, the city that looks to the gods rather than to humans for guidance and assistance.

¹⁰⁷ 2.38.1, 2.36.3, 2.38.2, 2.41.4. See Connor 1984, 74n54, on the “amorality” of Pericles’ “idea of greatness.”

¹⁰⁸ 7.50.3–51.

¹⁰⁹ See 1.118.3. For an argument that Thucydides is, in a complicated way, “religious” – that he believes that the gods are moral beings who punish moral offenses, possibly through such “discarnate passions” as the *eros* that takes possession of the Athenians when they resolve to conquer Sicily – see Cornford 1907, 213–215, 230–231, 237, 242, and 201–243 as a whole. Connor offers a respectful critique of Cornford (1984, 167n22) but also acknowledges the morally satisfying character of the surface, at least, of Thucydides’ overarching narrative: “The Athenians will receive in Sicily what they gave in Melos. And they will deserve it. We assent; perhaps we even feel some pleasure in the foreknowledge of such a punishment” (168). In Bolotin’s words: “Thucydides thus invites us to think of the plague and the Sicilian disaster, along with the ultimate defeat of Athens in the war, as the destined punishments for its insolence and injustice” (1987, 15). Consider also Bruell’s characterization of this feature of the book as the “beauty in the movement of the work as a whole” (1974, 14).

CHAPTER 4

The Case for Sparta

The Righteous and Godly City

Thucydides presents the case for Sparta in an appropriately laconic manner.¹ There is no Spartan equivalent in his book of the Funeral Oration – the longest and most famous speech – nor of the Athenians' speech at Sparta – the seventh longest speech and the first to offer an explicit account of "human nature" (1.76.3). We find no speech here in which a Spartan statesman or citizen gives an eloquent, elaborate, and theoretically sophisticated account of the greatness of Sparta, its education and regime, and its understanding of the character and condition of human beings. Of the nineteen longest speeches among the forty-eight in the book, ten are by Athenians but none are by Spartans, and it is a Spartan, Brasidas, who gives the shortest speech in the book.² Of the nineteen

¹ For the customary brevity of Spartan speech, see 4.17.2, 4.126.1, 5.9.1, 5.69.2. Consider as well 4.40.2.

² The speeches in the book, in direct discourse, not counting the Melian Dialogue, in order of the number of words, are (1) Pericles' Funeral Oration, at Athens (2.35–46), 1933 words; (2) the Plataeans' speech, at Plataea (3.53–59), 1326 words; (3) Diodotus' speech, at Athens (3.42–48), 1245 words; (4) Pericles' first speech, at Athens (1.140–144), 1212 words; (5) the Thebans' speech, at Plataea (3.61–67), 1212 words; (6) Cleon's speech, at Athens (3.37–40), 1174 words; (7) the Athenians' speech, at Sparta (1.73–78), 1089 words; (8) Pericles' final speech, at Athens (2.60–64), 1005 words; (9) Euphemus' speech, at Camarina (6.82–87), 990 words; (10) the Mytileneans' speech, at Sparta (3.9–14), 976 words; (11) Alcibiades' speech, at Athens (6.16–18), 975 words; (12) Nicias' first speech, at Athens (6.9–14), 968 words; (13) Hermocrates' speech, at Gela (4.59–64), 961 words; (14) the Corinthians' first speech, at Sparta (1.68–71), 952 words; (15) Alcibiades' speech, at Sparta (6.89–92), 952 words; (16) the Corinthians' speech, at Athens (1.37–43), 950 words; (17) Hermocrates' speech, at Camarina (6.76–80), 942 words; (18) the Corinthians' second speech, at Sparta (1.120–124), 914 words; (19) the Corcyreans' speech, at Athens (1.32.36), 879 words; (20) Archidamus' speech, at Sparta (1.80–85), 853 words; (21) Athenagoras' speech, at Syracuse (6.36–40), 787 words; (22) Hermocrates' speech, at Syracuse (6.33–34), 782 words; (23) Nicias' letter, read at Athens (7.11–15), 742 words; (24) the Spartans' speech, at Athens (4.17–2), 626 words; (25) Brasidas' speech, at Acanthus

named individuals who give speeches in the book, ten are Athenian and the sum total of their speeches is 13,639 words, whereas five are Spartan and the sum total of their speeches is 3,673 words.³ Of Pericles, the man whom he praises most extensively in the book, Thucydides says that he was “most capable [or most powerful – δυνατώτατος] at both speaking and acting” (1.139.4).⁴ Of Brasidas, the man to whom Thucydides devotes the second most extensive praise in his book and the Spartan whom Thucydides praises most, he remarks that “he was not without a capacity [οὐδὲ ἄδύνατος] for speaking, for a Spartan” (4.84.2).⁵ The Spartans are men of few words and therefore, inevitably, in contrast with the case for

(4.85–87), 622 words; (26) Nicias’ second speech, to Athenians, at Syracuse (7.61–64), 600 words; (27) Nicias’ second speech, at Athens (6.20–23), 523 words; (28) Gylippus and Syracusan commanders, to Syracusans and their allies, at Syracuse (7.66–68), 501 words; (29) Phormio, to Athenians, at Rhium (2.89), 415 words; (30) Pagondas, to Boeotians, at Delium (4.92), 353 words; (31) Nicias’ final speech to the Athenians, at Syracuse (7.77), 339 words; (32) Brasidas’ first speech to the Peloponnesians, at Amphipolis (5.9), 338 words; (33) Archidamus’ speech, to the Peloponnesians and their allies, at the Isthmus (2.11), 333 words; (34) Brasidas’ speech, to the Peloponnesians, at Lyncus (4.126), 327 words; (35) speech of Cnemus and Brasidas, to the Peloponnesians, at Rhium (2.87), 286 words; (36) Demosthenes’ speech, to the Athenians, at Pylos (4.10), 227 words; (37) Nicias’ first speech, to Athenians, at Syracuse (6.68), 177 words; (38) Sthenelaidas’ speech, at Sparta (1.86), 153 words; (39) Plataeans’ speech, to Archidamus and Spartans, Plataea (2.71.2–4), 151 words; (40) Teutiaplus, to Alcidas and fellow Peloponnesians commanders, at Embatus (3.30), 119 words; (41) Hippocrates’ speech, to Athenians, at Delium (4.95), 105 words; (42) a Syracusan general’s speech, at Syracuse (6.41.1–3), 94 words; (43) Archidamus’ first speech, to Plataeans, at Plataea (2.72.1), 90 words; (44) Archidamus’ speech, to gods and heroes of Plataea, at Plataea (2.74.3), 71 words; (45) Archidamus’ second speech, to Plataeans, at Plataea (2.72.3), 60 words; (46) Peisander’s speech, to each of his opponents, at Athens (8.53.3), 57 words; (47) speech of Plataean ambassadors to Plateans, at Plataea (2.73.3), 42 words; (48) Brasidas’ speech, to Spartans, at Amphipolis (5.10.5), 39 words. In the Melian Dialogue (5.85–113), the Athenians speak 1003 words and the Melians 613.

³ The named individuals who speak, in order of the number of words, are (1) Pericles (three speeches: 1.140–144, 2.35–46, 2.60–64), 4150 words; (2) Nicias (six speeches, including one letter: 6.9–14, 6.20–23, 6.68, 7.11–15, 7.61–64, 7.77), 3349 words; (3) Hermocrates (three speeches: 4.59–64, 6.33–34, 6.76–80), 2685 words; (4) Alcibiades (two speeches: 6.16–18, 6.89–92), 1927 words; (5) Brasidas (five speeches, including his speech with Cnemus: 2.87, 4.85–87, 4.126, 5.9, 5.10.5), 1612 words; (6) Archidamus (five speeches: 1.80–85, 2.11, 2.72.1, 2.73.3, 2.74.3), 1407 words; (7) Diodotus (3.42–48), 1245 words; (8) Cleon (3.37–40), 1174 words; (9) Euphemus (6.82–87), 990 words; (10) Athenagoras (6.36–40), 787 words; (11) Gylippus, with Syracusan commanders (7.66–68), 501 words; (12) Phormio (2.89), 415 words; (13) Pagondas (4.92), 353 words; (14) Demosthenes (4.10), 227 words; (15) Sthenelaidas (1.86), 153 words; (16) Teutiaplus (3.30), 119 words; (17) Hippocrates (4.95), 105 words; (18) Peisander (8.53.3), 57 words. Cnemus, who speaks with Brasidas at 2.87, is the nineteenth named individual who speaks.

⁴ The eulogy of Pericles, at 2.65.5–13, is 395 words. See also 1.127.3.

⁵ The eulogy of Brasidas, at 4.81.1–3, is 125 words. See also 2.25.2.

Athens presented in the book, the case for Sparta here is understated and indirect. But that case is no less powerful for being austere rather than dazzling, pithy rather than eloquent, and implicit rather than explicit.⁶

The overall case for Sparta almost spans the entire book. Early in the book, Thucydides briefly offers exceptional praise for Sparta – as a city that dissolved most of the tyrannies in Greece and that “from the oldest times lived under good laws and was always free from tyranny” (1.18.1). Thucydides identifies in particular the legal office of the ephor as a check against tyranny, for the ephors have the power to arrest, imprison, and apparently even execute a Spartan with kingly authority, as they do in the case of the tyrannical regent Pausanias.⁷ Toward the end of the book, Thucydides remarks with similar brevity that, “For the Chians alone – together with the Spartans – of those I myself have observed, were moderate when they were happy, and the more their city advanced toward greatness, the more securely did they bring order to themselves” (8.24.4). Taken together these two statements portray Sparta as a city that is great in virtue rather than power. For it is free of the passion either for tyranny at home or empire abroad. Its prosperity does not lead it to expand, as the prosperity of Athens, after its victory at Pylos, leads it to attempt the conquest of Boeotia and, after its full recovery from the plague, to attempt the conquest of Sicily.⁸ Its prosperity, according to these statements of Thucydides here, leads Sparta to become more orderly and more moderate – more free from the tyranny of the passions for power and wealth – and to help other cities free themselves from tyranny (1.18.1). Sparta, then, comes to sight in these passages as a city that, through its good laws, has apparently overcome the self-interested passions that, according to the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Melos, and Diodotus, are natural and invincible.⁹ But how is such a triumph of law over nature possible, given the power of nature, as these Athenians and also, apparently, Thucydides portray it?¹⁰ In order to examine this question, let us consider the case for Sparta as Thucydides presents it after his account of stasis in Corcyra.

⁶ Consider Strauss 1964, 151–152. See also Orwin’s remark on the “inconspicuous” character of Sparta’s achievement and power (1994, 183).

⁷ 1.131–134. For the power of ephors especially in foreign policy, see 1.87.1–2, 5.36, 5.38.3, 5.46.4, 6.88.10, 8.11.3–12. It is noteworthy that, in the only debate in the book at Sparta, the debate between the king Archidamus and the ephor Sthenelaidas, over whether or not to declare war on Athens, the ephor wins.

⁸ See 4.21.2, 4.41.4, 4.65.4, 4.76ff., 6.1.1, 6.6–8, 6.26.

⁹ 1.76.2, 3.43.3–7, 5.105.2. See also 4.61.5. ¹⁰ See 3.84.2.

As we have seen, the first section of Thucydides' book, from the opening up to the account of factional strife, sets forth the case for the greatness of the Athens founded by Themistocles and Pericles as a city that successfully liberates and taps the power of human nature as a whole and of natural self-interestedness and reason in particular (1.1–3.69). Thucydides' narrative then challenges that case, most clearly – but not only – in the account of civil strife in Corcyra and throughout Greece (3.70–85). In the next section of the book that follows the discussion of stasis and continues through his accounts of the battles of Pylos, Delium, and Thrace, the Peace of Nicias, the Melian Dialogue, up through the end of the Sicilian Expedition, Thucydides shifts from presenting the case for the greatness of Periclean Athens to presenting the case for the superiority of Sparta (3.86–7.87). His narrative then challenges that case, most clearly – but not only – in the final section of the book, from his account of the Athenian response to the Sicilian disaster to the end of the book. Thucydides indicates his shift toward making the case for Sparta in three ways: through the individuals he singles out for praise, through comparisons of the two cities that are now clearly favorable to Sparta, and through his strikingly respectful account of antiquity, of Homer, and of the belief in gods. The overall effect of this shift is to encourage the reader to consider the case for the greatness of Sparta and to consider justice and piety as the core of its greatness.

The clearest case for the greatness of Sparta in this section of the book is a moral one. While, in the first section of the book, Thucydides had offered explicit praise only for the Athenian statesmen Themistocles and especially Pericles, he now offers explicit praise only for the Spartan Brasidas and the Athenian friend of Sparta, Nicias, as well as for the Spartan ally Hermocrates, the Athenian tyrants who preceded Themistocles and Pericles, and – in the final section of the book – the Athenian oligarch Antiphon who overthrows the democracy in Athens.¹¹ Furthermore, in contrast with his earlier praise of Themistocles and Pericles, Thucydides explicitly praises Brasidas, Nicias, the Athenian tyrants, and Antiphon in moral language, for their “virtue.”¹² Indeed, Thucydides singles out Brasidas in particular, among all those he praises in the book, for his apparent justice: “For by showing [παρεσχών] himself, at the present time,

¹¹ See 1.138.3, 1.139.4, 2.65.5–13, 4.81, 7.86.5, 4.58, 4.72.2, 6.72.2, 6.54.5, 8.68.1–2. Thucydides does offer praise in this section of the book for Alcibiades, since “his public management of the war was best” but he simultaneously criticizes him for behavior that provoked fear and resentment from the Athenian multitude, who then “brought about the downfall of the city” (6.15.4).

¹² 4.81.2, 7.86.5, 6.54.5, 8.68.1.

just and measured towards the cities [under Athenian imperial rule], he caused most to revolt" (4.81.2). The justice of Brasidas and of Sparta as a whole would seem to manifest itself most clearly in its freedom from what the Athenians claim is the compelling power of self-interest. For the Spartans appear concerned for the good of, and especially the liberty of, the Greeks as a whole and not merely for their own. Before the Persian War, Sparta liberated the Greeks from their domestic tyrants (1.18.1). During the Persian War, Sparta led the Greeks to prevent the Persian Empire from enslaving them. And in the Peloponnesian War, Sparta leads the Greeks – whom they treat as allies, not as imperial subjects – to prevent the Athenian Empire from enslaving them.¹³ Sparta is just, then, inasmuch as it is not simply self-interested. Brasidas testifies most clearly to the justice of Sparta through his stirring campaign in Northeastern Greece, where he liberates some fourteen cities under the imperial rule of Athens and is subsequently crowned "as the liberator of Greece."¹⁴ Indeed Brasidas sacrifices his life and dies heroically and gloriously fighting in an amazingly successful defense of the liberated city of Amphipolis against a formidable Athenian army, led by a Cleon evidently bent on that rebellious city's reconquest and destruction.¹⁵ It is, moreover, the Spartans, along with the Laconophile Athenian Nicias, who seek an end to the war in which so many Greeks have suffered and who, together with Nicias, successfully establish a peace after the deaths of Brasidas and Cleon at Amphipolis.¹⁶ However, when the Athenians reignite the conflict by attempting to conquer and enslave Sicily, as a first step to the conquest of Italy, Carthage, and all of Greece, the Spartans – commanded by Gylippus – together with their Syracusan allies, lead the Greeks to inflict on the Athenians in Sicily a decisive defeat, one that apparently foreshadows their final defeat in the war.¹⁷ As Thucydides puts it on the eve of the final defeat and surrender of the Athenian armament at Sicily, "For this was the greatest reverse that came to pass for a Greek army: coming to enslave others, it came to pass that they were instead going away afraid lest they themselves suffer this very

¹³ See, for example, 1.18.2, 1.124.3, 2.71–72.

¹⁴ 4.121.1. See 4.88, 4.105–107, 4.109, 4.113–116, 4.121.1, 4.123.1.

¹⁵ 5.6–11. See 4.122.6 and 5.32.1. Ferrario notes that Brasidas "does indeed display some of the qualities of a Homeric hero" (2023, 195). See also Connor's remark that Brasidas "has the potential for heroic stature, to be an Achilles among men, as Alcibiades speaks of him in Plato's *Symposium* (221c)" (1984, 129–130). Pouncey argues that, "Apart from Aegospotamoi and the Sicilian debacle, the loss of Amphipolis might well be the worst military setback suffered by Athens in the war," (1980, 5).

¹⁶ 4.16–20, 4.108.6–7, 5.16.1.

¹⁷ 6.88.9–93, 7.87.5–6. See also 6.15.2, 6.34.2.

thing" (7.75.7). In this section of the book, the Spartans, hitherto overshadowed by the brilliant intelligence and rhetoric of Themistocles and Pericles in the first section of the book, now come to the fore, led by Brasidas and Gylippus, as the just and effective champions of "the liberation of the Greeks" against the Athenians who seek their "enslavement."¹⁸

The Limits of Demosthenes and the Ascendancy of Cleon

While Thucydides offers in the first section of the book comparisons between Athens and Sparta that are clearly favorable to Athens – explicitly, between the sagacious Themistocles and the ineptly tyrannical Pausanias and, implicitly, through the juxtaposition in his narrative between the thoughtfully compassionate Athenian treatment of the Mytileneans and the seemingly thoughtlessly inhumane Spartan treatment of the Plataeans¹⁹ – he now offers implicit comparisons that increasingly favor Sparta: the juxtaposition of Brasidas' war of liberation in Thrace with the growing influence of Cleon in Athens and also with the Athenians' campaign to subjugate Boeotia, to reconquer Thrace, and, later, to conquer and destroy the neutral island of Melos;²⁰ and the juxtaposition of Gylippus' defense of the freedom of Sicily with the Athenian campaign to conquer it.²¹ It is true that Thucydides' account of the military conflict between Athens and Sparta following his discussion of stasis is first dominated by the smashing Athenian victories over the Spartans and their allies in Ambracia in Northwestern Greece, led by Demosthenes, and then by the decisive Athenian victory over the Spartans near Sparta itself, at Pylos, the greatest Athenian victory in the war.²² Moreover, Demosthenes – to whom the Spartans attribute their defeat at Pylos, regarding him as "their worst enemy" (7.86.3) – is, in a number of ways, an extraordinarily impressive general.²³ He is a remarkably energetic, ingenious, and patriotic Athenian, who, throughout his career, constantly devises plans to win victories for his city in such particular theaters of the war as Aetolia, Ambracia, Pylos, Boeotia, and Sicily, as, for example, Pericles devised an overall plan to

¹⁸ 4.86.1, 7.66.2.

¹⁹ See 1.128–138 (especially 1.130–133, 1.138.3, and also 1.95) and 3.36–68.

²⁰ 3.36.4. Compare 4.78–88, 4.102–116, 4.120–123, 4.129–5.11, and 5.34.1 with 4.76–77, 4.89–101, 4.122.6, 5.32.1, and 5.116.2–4.

²¹ Compare, for example, 6.1.1, 6.15.2, 6.90.2–3, and 7.75.7 with 7.66.2 and 7.68.3.

²² 3.105–114, 4.3–41, especially 4.40.1, and 7.86.3. ²³ See Connor 1984, 191–193.

win the overall war.²⁴ Demosthenes also displays considerable intelligence as a commander: for example, by appreciating the military utility of a naturally strong location, as Themistocles does when advocating the fortification of the Peiraeus; by correctly anticipating what his opponent will do, as Brasidas later does at Amphipolis with regard to Cleon; and by recognizing, contrary to conventional opinion, that the Athenians' own experience of launching amphibious assaults themselves will enable them to defend themselves effectively against the attempted amphibious assault of the Spartans.²⁵ In these ways, Demosthenes reminds one of such sagacious Athenian statesmen as Themistocles and Pericles. On the other hand, by failing to block the entrances into the harbor at Pylos to prevent the Athenian navy from anchoring there, as they had intended to, and thereby allowing the Athenians to win their initial victory at Pylos, the Spartans display an extreme ineptitude that reminds one of the extremely inept efforts of the Spartan Pausanias to become a tyrant and to betray all of Greece to the Persian King.²⁶ At first glance, then, insofar as Thucydides attributes the victory at Pylos to Demosthenes, his account appears to be a continuation of his earlier praises of the superior intelligence and public-spiritedness of Themistocles and Pericles.²⁷

Upon closer examination, however, Thucydides' account does not simply or even primarily attribute the Athenian victory at Pylos to Demosthenes. For, unlike Themistocles – before his ostracism – and Pericles, Demosthenes does not inspire confidence among the Athenian people and therefore lacks influence with them.²⁸ This political weakness appears to be due to two defects on his part. First, for all of his intelligence as a military commander, Demosthenes is at times excessively daring because he is excessively hopeful: for example, in his first Aetolian campaign, when, “hoping in fortune,” he attacks the enemy without waiting for necessary reinforcements and suffers a terrible defeat;²⁹ after Pylos, in the seemingly overly complicated and ambitious plan – requiring a simultaneous surprise attack “on the appointed day” by two forces in widely separate locations in Boeotia – that he, the Athenian general Hippocrates, and their confederates devise through which “they hoped easily” to conquer all of Boeotia, when Demosthenes makes the “mistake” of launching his attack

²⁴ See 3.94.3–98, 3.105–114, 4.3–16, 4.29–41, 4.76–77, 7.42.3–49.3. See also 1.143.3–144.2.

²⁵ See 4.3.2 and 1.93–94; 4.9.2–4, 4.11.2, and 5.6.3, 5.7; 4.10.5 and 4.12.3.

²⁶ See 4.8.7–9, 4.13.4–14, and 1.95.1–3, 1.128.5–133. ²⁷ 1.138.3, 2.65.4–10.

²⁸ See Westlake 1968, 99. ²⁹ 3.97.2–98.

“early,” without coordination with the other Athenian forces, thereby enabling the Boeotians to thwart them;³⁰ and in Sicily, when he attempts the only night attack involving “great armies” in the entire war, an attack that leads to utter confusion and disarray among the Athenian forces and ends in a disastrous defeat of Athens and the overall collapse of Athenian morale (7.43.2–47.1).³¹ Accordingly, after his defeat at the hands of the Aetolians, even though he proceeds to win three victories in Ambracia, Demosthenes is demoted from general to a “private individual” and, in that lowly capacity, apparently stripped of all military authority, he accompanies the Athenian forces on their way to Corcyra and Sicily when a storm induces them to land at Pylos (4.2.4). And even after the Athenians’ initial victory at Pylos, in which Demosthenes plays such an important role, the Athenians, though elevating Demosthenes again to general, entrust the overall command of the forces there to Nicias, and thereafter to Cleon, rather than to him.³²

Secondly, in contrast especially with Pericles – who was “most powerful at both speaking and acting” (1.139.4) – Demosthenes’ powers of persuasion are all too limited. In the one speech of his that Thucydides presents in direct discourse, he does ably exhort the Athenians to stand their ground against the numerically superior Spartan forces disembarking at Pylos (4.9.4–11.1). But every time in Thucydides’ narrative that Demosthenes attempts to persuade the Athenians to adopt a specific course of action, he fails. He is unable to persuade the Athenian commanders to land their forces at Pylos; it is only “by chance [κατὰ τύχην]” that a storm compels them to land at that very place (4.31). Demosthenes then proves incapable of persuading the Athenian soldiers stranded at Pylos to build a fort there; it is only thanks to the “impossibility of sailing” due to the persistence of the storm and the restless energy of the soldiers that the fort at Pylos is built (4.4–5). During the Sicilian Expedition, after the failed night attack by the Athenians, when Demosthenes recognizes that the massive Athenian armament at Syracuse can no longer conquer the city but is rather itself in danger of being encircled and destroyed, he is unable to persuade the

³⁰ 4.76–77, 4.89.

³¹ Connor remarks regarding the defeat at Sicily that “Demosthenes’ brilliant strategy has failed, and inadvertently recreated not Pylos, but the Aetolian disaster of 426 BC” (1984, 193). Westlake observes that, in his book as a whole, Thucydides “creates the impression that Demosthenes tended to indulge in over-elaborate and over-optimistic planning” (1968, 271).

³² 4.27.5, 4.29.1. Consider Strauss’s statement concerning Pylos: “Thanks chiefly to Kleon the Athenians win a splendid victory” (1983, 93–94). See also 1964, 220–221.

Athenians, led by his fellow Athenian commander Nicias, to sail away (7.47–49). Once Nicias finally recognizes the need to sail away from Syracuse, an eclipse of the moon induces him and the majority of the Athenians to delay the departure for twenty-seven days, in accordance with the dictates of the prophets, a delay which leads directly to the defeat and ultimately the destruction of the Athenian armament (7.50.3–55).

Why is Demosthenes so unsuccessful in persuading his fellow Athenians? In order to address this question it is helpful to compare the three examples of his failures with the successful examples of Alcibiades later persuading the Spartans to establish a fort near Athens and to send aid to Syracuse, and of Pericles earlier persuading the Athenians to refuse Spartan offers of peace even after having suffered so many deaths from the devastating plague. In order to persuade the Athenians to land at Pylos, Demosthenes simply “urged” them to do so, apparently hoping, incorrectly, that they would defer to his judgment, even though he is accompanying the Athenians as a mere private citizen (4.3.1). Then, when the storm induces the Athenians to land at Pylos, Demosthenes briefly points out to them that the Athenians “would do the most harm” to Sparta by building a fort at Pylos and garrisoning it with rebels from the ancient inhabitants of the region who would use it as a base for raids (4.3.3). What Demosthenes omits here is a vivid, detailed, and compelling explanation of how establishing a stronghold on the territory of one’s adversary will do great damage to that adversary and bring great benefit to themselves, such as Alcibiades later gives to the Spartans:³³

You ought also to fortify Deceleia in Attica, the very thing which Athenians always fear most, and believe is the only test in the war they have not faced. This is the surest way of harming one’s enemies: to observe what they fear most, and, learning this with certainty, to inflict it on them. As for the benefits that will come to you and you will deny to your opponents through this fortification, I pass over most of them and will summarize the greatest. For most of what the land has furnished to them will come to you, either by capture or of their own accord. And they will be immediately deprived of the revenues from the silver mines at Laurium and the benefits from the land and the courts of, and above all of the revenues from the allies, who will pay less tribute and pay them less heed once they believe that you are waging war with all your might. (6.91.6–7)

³³ Connor comments on the parallel between Pylos and Deceleia (1984, 193n22).

Alcibiades spells out here vividly how damaging establishing a fort nearby will be for the Athenians and how beneficial it will be for the Spartans.

Now, Thucydides' own later narrative indicates how Demosthenes might readily have made a comparably compelling case that fortifying a stronghold near Sparta would terrify Sparta by inspiring the large slave populations of the Messenians and also the Helots to revolt and thereby threaten the very survival of the Spartan regime, and that it would benefit Athens by inducing Sparta to desist from invading Athenian land, to sue for peace on terms favorable to Athens, and to weaken or even undermine its alliances with Corinth and Thebes by revealing its willingness to negotiate a peace unilaterally with Athens. Thucydides himself spells out a number of the consequences for Sparta of the Athenians' fort at Pylos:

They established a garrison at Pylos, and the Messenians from Naupactus, as though going to the land of their fathers (for Pylos is in the land that once was Messenia), sent out their most effective soldiers to plunder Laconia and, being speakers of the same language [as the Helots], they were causing the greatest harm. The Spartans were previously inexperienced with being plundered and with such a war. What is more, once the Helots deserted on their own, they [that is, the Spartans] feared a more extensive uprising throughout their land, and grew uneasy. But even though they did not wish to reveal this to the Athenians, they kept sending ambassadors to them and were attempting to recover both Pylos and their men [captured on Sphacteria, near Pylos]. (4.41.2–3)

Demosthenes might have readily spelled out all of these favorable consequences of fortifying Pylos to persuade the Athenians to do so. Why did he not?

Later, in his attempt to persuade Nicias of the need to abandon the siege of Syracuse and withdraw the Athenian armament at Sicily back to Athens, Demosthenes states succinctly that doing so will benefit Athens because it “would be more beneficial for the city to make war against the ones building a fortification in their own land than against the Syracusans, whom it would no longer be easy to worst; nor in turn was it suitable, spending much money in vain, to go on with the siege [of Syracuse]” (7.47.4). Nicias responds that the commanders should not discuss publicly, in an assembly with the soldiers, a possible withdrawal since that would embolden the Syracusans to thwart a withdrawal; that, if they were to withdraw to Athens, the Athenian people would condemn the commanders to death, with the approval of many of their own soldiers in Sicily now urging a withdrawal; and that, in any case, there was still a reasonable hope that the Syracusans would surrender their city to the Athenians (7.48).

Now, according to Thucydides' narrative, Demosthenes is unmoved by Nicias' analysis of the Athenians' overall military position at Syracuse. He argues that, at the very least, the Athenians should withdraw to another part of Sicily, and persuades his fellow commander Eurymedon. But he still fails to persuade Nicias (7.49.2–3). What is most striking in this episode is that Demosthenes yields completely to Nicias' demand that the commanders not address the soldiers concerning the withdrawal and therefore does not even attempt to persuade them.³⁴ He does not spell out, as he readily might, either to Nicias, or to the soldiers as a whole, in a vivid and compelling manner, all the catastrophic consequences for the individual soldiers and commanders and for Athens as a whole, all the destruction and disgrace that looms for them, if they do not withdraw back to Athens immediately and, on the other hand, all the possibly great benefits of the massive Athenian armament returning to Athens, expelling the Spartans from Deceleia, and threatening the Spartans in the Peloponnesus.

In order to discern how Demosthenes might have addressed Nicias and the Athenian soldiers at this absolutely crucial moment in the struggle against Sparta, let us consider how Pericles addresses the Athenian people in his final speech when the Athenian people, devastated by the deadly plague, turn against the war and sue for peace with Sparta. Pericles dissuades them by explaining, with terrifying clarity, that abandoning the war will be perceived as weakness by their imperial subjects and will consequently embolden them to rise up and inflict vengeful destruction upon their Athenian overlords:

do not believe that you are contesting over a single thing alone, slavery instead of freedom, but also over the loss of empire and the danger from those whose hatred you have incurred in the empire. It is no longer possible for you to stand apart, if someone, being afraid of this very thing in the present situation, plays the good man through minding his own business: for what you already have is like a tyranny, which is reputedly unjust to lay hold of, but is dangerous to let go. (2.63.1–2)

On the other hand, Pericles encourages the Athenians to persevere by offering an intoxicatingly hopeful vision of the power and glory that will crown their efforts: "For you suppose you rule over the allies alone, but I proclaim that of the two parts of the world of manifest use, land and sea, you are in sovereign command of all of one, on as much as you now

³⁴ Consider Orwin's suggestion that "Thucydides' crucial lesson to the Demostheneses of the world is not to trust the Nicias" (1994, 122).

administer and on more if you wish; and there is not anyone with your naval resources, neither a king nor any other nation of the ones in existence, who will prevent you from sailing" (2.62.2); "Know that it [that is, Athens] has the greatest name among all human beings because it has not yielded to misfortunes, but has lavished the greatest number of bodies and labors upon war, and has acquired the greatest power until this time, the memory of which will be left everlasting for posterity" (2.64.3). In contrast with Pericles, Demosthenes fails even to attempt to appeal to the individual fears and hopes of the Athenians.

What these cases show is that Demosthenes fails to persuade the Athenians because he does not recognize the need to persuade them. More specifically, he does not recognize the need to show the Athenians how the course of action he recommends will benefit them individually. He does not recognize the need to appeal to their individual hopes for security, wealth, and honor and to their individual fears of destruction and disgrace. Demosthenes himself apparently cares most of all for what is good for Athens and he evidently assumes that the Athenians are similarly patriotic. Accordingly, to his mind, his evidently brief invocations of what "would do the most harm" to the Spartans and what "would be more beneficial for the city" of Athens should suffice to persuade the Athenians, and when those patriotic invocations fail, he is at a loss over how to appeal to them further.³⁵ Demosthenes displays the patriotism that Pericles seeks to nourish, grounded in the belief in an identity between the good of the individual and the good of Athens, and he evidently takes for granted that the Athenians also cherish such patriotism (2.60.2–4). In this respect, paradoxically, Demosthenes stands in contrast with Pericles. For while Pericles calls on the Athenians to be devoted to Athens, he always strives to show how they will individually benefit by such devotion – for example, by partaking in "pleasure" and "delight," by enjoying "all things from the whole earth," and by receiving "individually the praise that is ageless."³⁶ Pericles understands that Athenian patriotism is not simply natural, and that he must therefore appeal to the individual hopes and fears of the Athenians, as he does especially in his Funeral Oration and his last speech. It is for this reason that Pericles is most powerful in speeches while Demosthenes is not.

Demosthenes' inability to persuade the Athenians to follow his counsel renders him entirely dependent on Cleon, the Athenian who is, as

³⁵ 4.3.3, 7.47.4.

³⁶ 2.37.2, 2.38, 2.43.2.

Thucydides notes twice, the most persuasive of his time, first during the Mytilenean debate – he was “most violent of the citizens and by far the most persuasive with the demos at that time” (3.36.6) – and then during the Athenians’ consideration of the Spartans’ peace proposal – “and Cleon was especially leading them on, the son of Cleanetus, a man who was a demagogue and was at that time the most persuasive with the multitude” (4.21.3). The only other character whose persuasive power Thucydides similarly emphasizes, as we have seen, is Pericles.³⁷ However, while, in Thucydides’ account, Pericles’ outstanding powers of persuasion are accompanied by his outstanding “judgment” and reasonableness, Cleon’s are accompanied by a temperament that is superlatively violent and unreasonable (2.65.8). Thucydides characterizes Cleon as the “most violent of the citizens” of Athens and, alone among all the characters of his book, as “crazy [μᾶνιώδης].”³⁸ In these ways, the Athenian Cleon reminds one of the “violent” and ineptly tyrannical Spartan Pausanias.³⁹ But how is it possible to combine persuasiveness with a lack of intelligence and a lack of self-control regarding his own harsh passions, as, according to Thucydides, apparently Cleon does?

In order to address this question, let us consider Cleon’s actions that culminate with what Thucydides calls his “crazy” promise to the Athenians that, within twenty days, he will capture or kill the Spartans on the island of Sphacteria at Pylos, whom the Athenians have besieged but failed to capture or kill over the previous thirty days.⁴⁰ When the Athenians cut off and besiege over 420 Spartan soldiers on Sphacteria after the initial Athenian victory at Pylos, the Spartans immediately send envoys to Athens to sue for peace in order to secure the return of their men (see 4.38.5). The Athenians, however, believed that, since they had the Spartan soldiers surrounded on the island, they could have peace from Sparta at any time, and “were grasping for more” – evidently, more territory, wealth, power, and honor (4.21.2). According to Thucydides, “Cleon was especially leading them on” in this confident desire for “more,” and consequently persuades them to make the extraordinary demand that, in return for peace and their surrounded soldiers, the Spartans surrender territory that the

³⁷ 1.39.3, 2.65.1–9. See also Athenagoras, whom Thucydides describes as, at that time, the “most persuasive” to the majority in Syracuse (6.35.2).

³⁸ 3.36.6, 4.39.3. More precisely, the promise Cleon makes is “crazy.” But that promise reveals his character, as we will see.

³⁹ 1.95.1, 1.128.3–13. Nichols points out that Pausanias and Cleon are the only two individuals in the book whom Thucydides calls “violent” (2015, 54n3).

⁴⁰ 4.26–28, 4.39.

Athenians had ceded to them over twenty years before and hence well before the war.⁴¹ When the Spartan envoys propose that they negotiate with designated Athenian envoys in private – in order to avoid public negotiations that might strain their relations with their allies – Cleon accuses them of injustice, induces them to leave Athens, and consequently causes the war to continue (4.23). However, after thirty days of an unexpectedly prolonged siege of the men on the island, with no end in sight, and winter weather coming that would force them to lift the siege and accept defeat, the Athenians “repent that they had not accepted the treaty” proposed by Sparta for peace, and they begin to blame Cleon for their error (4.27.2–3). Cleon responds to this threat in three successive stages. First he simply asserts – without any reason whatsoever, and without believing his own assertion – that the messengers reporting that the Athenian siege of the island of Sphacteria is failing are lying. Cleon must make this knowingly false assertion simply in the desperate hope that his Athenian audience will turn its ire away from him and against the messengers. However, when the messengers persuade the Athenians to send Cleon himself to Pylos to see with his own eyes whether or not their reports of the failing siege are true, Cleon, evidently knowing all along that the siege was in truth failing, takes the second step of demanding that the Athenians waste no more time but send additional forces to capture or kill the men on the island, and he then accuses the Athenian commander at Pylos, Nicias, of failing to do so simply because he is a coward. It is not entirely clear whether Cleon believes this accusation against Nicias, but he evidently sincerely hopes, again, to induce the Athenians to turn their ire away from him and toward Nicias. At this point, much to Cleon’s surprise, Nicias resigns his command to Cleon, urging him to assume command of the Athenian forces at Pylos and to try to conquer the island of Sphacteria himself. The Athenians demand that the reluctant Cleon take command, and finally, Cleon takes the third step of not only accepting the command but, to much laughter from the Athenians, makes what Thucydides later calls the “crazy” promise that he will go to Pylos with reinforcements and take the island within twenty days, evidently because he sincerely hopes that he will be able to do so (4.27–28). Each step that Cleon takes here reflects a tremendous hopefulness that he will succeed, somehow, first, in defending himself from the anger of the Athenians, and secondly, in securing for himself all the prestige and power of winning a great and speedy victory against the Spartans.

⁴¹ See 4.21.3, 1.115.1.

It might seem that Cleon's promise is not, in truth, "crazy," since he does actually succeed in conquering the island and capturing 292 Spartan soldiers within twenty days. This success is in part due to Cleon's seemingly reasonable choice of Demosthenes as his fellow commander, who has a plan for attacking the island and who takes the lead in executing the plan skillfully, although Cleon and Demosthenes make a number of important decisions together during the battle, and a Messenian commander plays a key role as well.⁴² There is, however, no indication that Cleon knew of this plan when he made his promise, and Demosthenes only is inclined to act on his plan due to purely chance events: A fire breaks out on the island of Sphacteria, first caused unintentionally by some Spartan soldiers on the island, who, when cooking a meal on the island, accidentally set fire to a small part of the woods on the island, whereupon a blast of wind causes the fire to burn down most of the woods, thereby revealing where best to land Athenian troops on the island to conquer it (4.29.2–30.3). Since the swift victory at Pylos that Cleon promised was due to a plan that he did not know of and to the chance events of fire and a blast of wind that he could not know of, his promise was indeed reckless and in this sense, one might say, "crazy."⁴³

Throughout this whole episode, Cleon reveals himself to be willfully and irrationally hopeful. When the Spartans sue for peace, he indulges in the seemingly rash hope that the Athenians will keep acquiring unlimited amounts of territory, power, and honor through war and therefore opposes the peace negotiations. When the Athenians' efforts to conquer Sphacteria appear to be failing, he hopes against hope to divert the Athenians' anger at him onto the Athenian messengers from Pylos and Nicias. And when those hopes are dashed, he embraces, without any evident reason, the hope that he will conquer Sphacteria within twenty days. Cleon's "craziness" consists in his dismissal of reason and his indulgence and embrace of his own desire to acquire more and his own hope that he will succeed.

This embrace of his own passions as a whole, not only his hopeful acquisitiveness but also, in the case of Mytilene, his violent anger, explains

⁴² 4.29.1–2. See 4.32.4, 4.36–38. Plutarch attributes the victory at Pylos to Cleon's "having experienced good fortune and having commanded in the best way along with Demosthenes" (*Nicias* 8.1) but he, too, describes Cleon's promise of a swift victory as a reflection of his "madness" (7.4). For an admittedly "speculative" hypothesis that Cleon's craziness here is merely apparent, see Connor 1984, 116–117. For a more emphatic defense of Cleon here, consider Marshall 1984, 20–23.

⁴³ Westlake notes that the focus on "the element of chance . . . is a feature of the whole narrative describing the course of events at Pylos" (1968, 107). See Romilly 1963, 174; Rhodes 2023, 58.

why Cleon is so effective in persuading the Athenian people. For he feels deeply the passions that burn in their breasts. Like them, he rejects the Spartan peace offer out of the sheer hope that the Athenians can have peace whenever they wish and can always satisfy their desire for “more,” a hope that leads him to promise to defeat Sparta at Pylos with twenty days. Similarly, in the earlier case of Mytilene, Cleon, like the Athenians, led by a violent anger, claims, apparently contrary to reason, that both the Mytilenean supporters and the opponents of the rebellion took part in the rebellion, and therefore calls for the destruction of the entire city, that is, the killing of all the adult male population and the enslavement of the women and children, as punishment for its “injustice.”⁴⁴ Finally, like the Athenians who almost follow his policy in his lifetime in Mende, and do follow his policy, after his death, in Scione and Melos, Cleon is led by his anger to call for the destruction of whole cities if a number of their citizens rebel against Athens.⁴⁵ Cleon feels most powerfully the passions of the Athenians – above all their hopeful acquisitiveness and their anger – and it is by expressing and appealing to the passions that he shares with them that he persuades them.

Now, Pericles also persuades the Athenians by appealing to their passions, but the goal of such an appeal is a rational pursuit of their own good.⁴⁶ Accordingly, he appeals to certain passions in order to check other passions. He appeals to their long-term desire for security, power, and honor in order to check their anger and hopeful acquisitiveness, passions that risk leading them recklessly to fight a land battle with Sparta and its allies and to expand their empire while at war with Sparta.⁴⁷ In this way, Pericles leads the Athenians, in some measure, toward reason rather than being simply led by them and their passions (2.65.8). In contrast, Cleon leads the Athenians because he himself is led by the passions that hold sway over them. Even though Cleon does attempt to appeal in some measure to the Athenians’ long-term interest in preserving their empire in the

⁴⁴ Compare 3.39.6 with 3.27–28 and 3.36.4.

⁴⁵ See 4.122.6, 4.123.3, 4.130.6, 5.32.1, 5.116.3–4. Melos is neutral rather than a rebellious imperial subject of Athens and therefore its destruction would seem to be, by ordinary standards, brazenly unjust. But, led by the spirit of Cleon, Melos is treated exactly as Athens threatened to treat Mytilene and did treat Scione.

⁴⁶ As Thucydides observes of Pericles, “When, at any rate, he would see them emboldened through *untimely* hubris, by speaking he would strike fear into them, and when he would see them in turn become *unreasonably* afraid, he would restore them to boldness again” (2.65.9, my emphases).

⁴⁷ See 1.143.4–144.1, 2.21–22.1.

Mytilenean debate,⁴⁸ and even though he does make use of Demosthenes' intelligence as a commander to defeat the Spartans at Pylos, his overall appeal is to the Athenians' unvarnished anger and reckless desire for unlimited imperial expansion.⁴⁹

The ascendancy of Cleon represents the triumph of passion over prudence, hope over calculation, and anger over rational self-interestedness in Athens. Accordingly, the legacy of Cleon may be seen in the un-Periclean policy of expansion that is evident, while Cleon is alive, in the attempt to challenge the Spartan alliance on land by attempting to conquer Boeotia, and after Cleon's death, in the attempt to conquer Sicily.⁵⁰ And it may be seen in the un-Diodotean policy toward Scione and Melos, where the Athenians perform the very "savage" act that Cleon almost persuades them to perform at Mytilene.⁵¹ Cleon's buffoonish, even "crazy," victory at Pylos, then, marks his unchallenged sway at Athens.⁵² After that victory Athens follows almost entirely the policies and the spirit of Cleon. While Diodotus successfully challenges Cleon in the Mytilenean debate and Nicias attempts, ultimately unsuccessfully, to challenge him in the debate over Pylos, no one even challenges Cleon or his policies in Athens again as long as he remains alive.⁵³ And although Nicias successfully persuades the Athenians to make peace with Sparta after Cleon's death, neither he nor any other Athenian successfully dissuade the Athenians from yielding to their desire and hope for unlimited imperial expansion in Sicily and beyond, a desire and hope based to a considerable degree, as Thucydides stresses, on sheer ignorance and gullibility.⁵⁴ The victory of Pylos, then, signals the apparent descent of Athens from the sagacity of Themistocles and Pericles to the savagery and recklessness of Cleon.

The Rise of Brasidas and the Justice of the Spartans

Brasidas is in certain respects the most impressive character in Thucydides' book. Thucydides praises him more extensively than any other character,

⁴⁸ See 3.31.2–3, 3.39.7–8, 3.40.4.

⁴⁹ See Romilly 1963, 180–182 (but see also 233–234); Saxonhouse 1996, 73–75; Nichols 2015, 57.

⁵⁰ Compare 1.143.4–144.1 with 4.21.2, 4.76–77, 6.1.1, 6.15.2, 6.90.2–3.

⁵¹ 3.36.4. Compare 3.46–47 with 5.32.1, 5.116.3–4. See also Torone, where Cleon enslaves the women and children and sends all the men as prisoners to Athens (5.3.4).

⁵² See Romilly 1963, 108; Connor 1984, 79n1. ⁵³ 3.41–49.1 and 4.27.5–28.

⁵⁴ 5.16.1, 6.8–26. See 6.1.1, 6.8.2, 6.46.

except Pericles.⁵⁵ But while Thucydides praises Pericles more extensively, he praises Brasidas – but not Pericles – for his “virtue,” he apparently attributes to Brasidas alone – in his entire work – the virtue of justice, he portrays Brasidas alone as being crowned the liberator of the Greeks, and he also attributes to him a number of the very qualities for which he praises Pericles as well as Themistocles.⁵⁶ Brasidas comes to sight, then, as one who, alone among the galaxy of Thucydides’ heroes, combines what is best in both Athens and Sparta.⁵⁷

If the ascendancy of Cleon marks a decline from the Athens of Themistocles and Pericles, the contemporaneous rise of Brasidas marks the emergence in Sparta of a general who strikingly resembles those Athenian statesmen. Like Themistocles, Brasidas is, according to Thucydides, “sagacious,” or practically wise, as one can see from his campaign in Thrace that effectively liberates fourteen cities subjugated by the Athenians, inflicts a decisive defeat on Athens at Amphipolis – including the death of their general Cleon – and thereby does tremendous damage to their empire as a whole.⁵⁸ Indeed, while Thucydides judges such Athenians as Themistocles, Theseus, the Athenian tyrants, Peisander, Antiphon, Phrynichus, and Theramenes as “sagacious,” as well as the Syracusan statesman Hermocrates, and while he claims that King Archidamus was “reputed [δοκῶν] to be sagacious,” Brasidas is the only Spartan in the book of whom Thucydides states, without qualification, that he was “sagacious.”⁵⁹ Thucydides also praises Brasidas for being “measured,” a quality he only ever attributes to Pericles and to the regime later established in Athens that constituted a “measured mixing of the few and the many” and that Thucydides deems the best in Athens in his lifetime.⁶⁰ One may observe Brasidas’ “measure” in the prudent forbearance he

⁵⁵ See Chapter 2, p. 55. Pouncey suggests that Thucydides feels such “admiration for the Spartan” that “Thucydides rewards Brasidas with the only truly romantic, and perhaps epic, death in the work” (1980, 5). For an account of the strengths and also the limitations of Brasidas as a general, consider Wylie 1992, especially 92–95.

⁵⁶ 4.81.2, 4.121.1. See Orwin 1994, 79.

⁵⁷ Chapter 2, note 96. Connor observes that “In a surprising number of passages” Thucydides describes Brasidas as running – “as a man of rapid motion” – a characterization “all the more striking when the reader remembers the repeated criticism of the Spartans for their slowness” (1984, 128n45). This feature of Thucydides’ narrative reminds one of Homer’s frequent epithet for Achilles – “swift-footed” – beginning with *Iliad* 1.58.

⁵⁸ 4.81.2. See note 14 in this chapter and 5.10–11.

⁵⁹ See 1.138.2–3, 2.15.2, 6.54.5, 8.68 (also 8.27.5), 6.72.2, 1.79.2. Thucydides suggests that Pericles was reputed among the Athenians to be “not unsagacious” (2.34.6).

⁶⁰ 2.65.5, 8.97.2, 4.81.2.

displays toward the imperial subject cities of Athens as a whole (4.108.2). For example, when besieging Amphipolis, he offers the inhabitants a “measured agreement,” eschewing vengeance and allowing the Amphipolitans and the Athenians within who had been fighting against him, if they surrendered, either to remain in the city with their property and lives secure or to leave the city unmolested, with their property (4.105.2). Thucydides attributes “measure” to Brasidas three times, more than to any other individual in his book, including Pericles. Finally, like the Athenians as a whole – who are, in the words of the Corinthians, “daring beyond their power” – Brasidas shows himself capable of great “daring,” as he displays, for example, in his first appearance in the book, when, early in the war, he single-handedly saves the fort Methone near Sparta from capture by the Athenians (thereby avoiding the harm that the Athenian fort in Pylos later causes Sparta); when he later joins in launching a surprise attack on the Athenian port of Peiraeus that is almost successful; and when, in his last battle and final act of “daring,” he successfully launches a surprise attack on the Athenian army at Amphipolis.⁶¹ In all these ways, Brasidas exhibits what might seem to be the best qualities of the Athenians: their shrewd intelligence, their thoughtful self-restraint, and their audacious but reasonable self-confidence. It is therefore not surprising that the Athenians themselves express admiration for Brasidas at Pylos and at Amphipolis.⁶²

It is noteworthy that the Spartan commander Brasidas performs two acts of religious devotion to Athena, the goddess traditionally associated most closely with Athens.⁶³ Indeed, with the exception of Theseus, the ancient founder of Athens, he is the only individual said to worship Athena in Thucydides’ entire narrative (2.15.2). First, he donates money to a temple of Athena and sanctifies ground to the goddess, out of gratitude for her assistance in his victory at Lecynthus (4.116.2). Then, he offers a sacrifice to Athena at another temple of hers before his victory at Amphipolis (5.10.2). These expressions of worship for Athena may appear to identify Brasidas especially as an Athenian in spirit, as, one might say, an Athenian Spartan.⁶⁴ Paradoxically, however, these acts of piety sharply distinguish

⁶¹ See 1.70.3, 2.25.2, 2.93–94.1, 3.79, 5.7.2, 5.10.6. Consider also 4.11.4–4.12.1. Brasidas frequently praises “daring”: See 2.87.4–5, 4.120.3, 4.123.2, 4.126.4, 5.9.2. For the “daring” of the Athenians, see, for example, the account of the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta (1.74.2, 1.74.4); Pericles’ account (1.144.4, 2.39.3, 2.40.3, 2.41.4, 2.43.1, 2.62.5); and Thucydides’ narrative at 1.90.1, 1.91.5, 1.93.4 (on Themistocles’ “daring”), 1.102.4.

⁶² 4.12.1, 5.7.1–2. ⁶³ 4.116.2, 5.10.2. See 1.20.2, 2.15.2, 5.23.5, 5.47.10.

⁶⁴ Strauss calls Brasidas “the Athenian among the Spartans” (1964, 213).

Brasidas from the Athens of Pericles. For Pericles himself never performs any such act of piety: As we have noted, his only reference to Athena or indeed to any deity is to observe that the Athenians may melt down the inlaid gold on her statue to fund military operations (2.13.5).

The clearest contrast between Brasidas and Pericles is a moral one. Although Pericles proclaims that Athens offers itself as a “model” and an “education” to Greece, he himself is devoted above all to the greatness of Athens – “under him it came to be greatest” – and of its empire, an empire, he declares, whose scope is virtually unlimited, thanks to its sway over the seas of the earth, and an empire that, by his own account, resembles a “tyranny” – a reputedly “unjust” tyranny – over its Greek subjects.⁶⁵ Brasidas, on the other hand, is devoted, not only to the good of Sparta but to the liberation of the Greeks as a whole. Indeed, he evidently identifies the good of Sparta, not with empire, but with justice: that is, with the greater, moral, “common” good of Greece – the freedom of the Greeks to rule themselves (4.87.4). As he proclaims to the Acanthians, the first people he seeks to free from Athenian imperial rule, he is not coming to them to bring “an unjust freedom” but rather, he implies, a just one (4.85.6). As Sparta has been “always free, on account of its stoutness of soul,” so do the Spartans seek to help the rest of the Greeks become similarly free (5.9.1). He declares to the Acanthians: “The Spartans have sent me and this army out here to verify that the cause of our waging war, which we proclaimed when we began the war, is to liberate Greece from the Athenians” (4.85.1). Brasidas goes on to explain in this speech, which he will repeat to the other Greek cities subject to Athenian imperial rule,⁶⁶ that the goal of the Spartans, therefore, is not selfishly to acquire an empire and impose their preferred form of government onto other Greeks but truly and unselfishly to liberate the Greeks so that they may live under laws of their own devising: “I myself have come here, not for evil, but for the liberation of the Greeks – I have bound the magistrates of Sparta with the greatest oaths that the allies whom I have brought over to us will be autonomous – and, moreover, not that we might hold you as allies, whom we have added, by force or by deception, but, on the contrary, to join you, who have been enslaved by the Athenians, as allies” (4.86.1); “For I have not come to join in factional strife, nor do I believe that I would bring a sure liberation if, having disregarded your ancestral practices, I should enslave the majority to the few or the minority to all” (4.86.4); “Nor do

⁶⁵ 2.37.1, 2.41.1, 2.65.5, 2.62.2, 2.63.2.

⁶⁶ 4.114.3, 4.120.3.

we long for empire, but rather strive eagerly to stop those of others” (4.87.5). And, as the Spartans are willing to sacrifice their selfish desire for dominion for the sake of liberating the Greeks, so is Brasidas willing to fight, and ultimately to die for that just goal. In his willingness to sacrifice himself for justice, Brasidas reveals that the freedom he is fighting for is not merely freedom from enslavement by other human beings. He is also fighting for freedom from enslavement within the soul to the selfish passions for power that tempt all human beings. If, as the Athenian ambassadors at Melos contend, those passions are natural to human beings, then Brasidas is fighting for freedom from “nature” itself (5.105.1–2). Or rather, as an admirer of Brasidas might say, he is fighting for the thesis that humans are free to resist and overcome their selfish desires, that they are free to choose justice over self-interest, that they are morally free and hence morally responsible for their actions.⁶⁷ And by sacrificing his life in the just cause of the liberation of the Greeks, Brasidas would seem to vindicate that thesis.

Brasidas takes most seriously the historic mission of Sparta – the city that deposed the tyrants of Greece, led the Greek forces against the Persian Empire, and now leads them against the Athenian Empire – as “the liberator of Greece.”⁶⁸ All Spartans, it must be acknowledged, have not taken that mission so seriously.⁶⁹ Before Brasidas’ speech to the Acanthians, which mentions the word for “freedom” and related words eight times and the word for “slavery” three times, the only Spartan speaker who mentions “freedom” is Archidamus, who mentions it twice, but only because he is responding to the Plataeans’ accusation that, by attacking them, the Spartans are violating their ancestors’ oath to fight for the freedom of the Greeks rather than their enslavement.⁷⁰ There is no reference to the

⁶⁷ Consider Orwin’s formulation: “The Spartan substitute for necessity, *nomos* as sanctioned by the divine, is compatible with choice: one is not constrained in one’s choice between justice and injustice; instead (as is appropriate only where a choice is free) one is held to account for it and punished or rewarded accordingly” (1994, 62). See also Nichols 2015, 5.

⁶⁸ See 1.18.1, 1.122.3, 1.124.3, 2.8.4, 2.71.2, 2.72.1.

⁶⁹ Jaffe goes so far as to contend that “The only Spartan to act as if this” – the liberation of the Greeks – “is Sparta’s true war aim is Brasidas” (2017, 194n6).

⁷⁰ For the appearances in Brasidas’ speech to the Acanthians of “freedom [ἐλευθερία]” and related words, see 4.85.1, 4.85.5, 4.85.6, 4.86.1, 4.86.4, 4.87.2, 4.87.4, 4.87.6. For appearances of “slavery [δουλεία]” and related words, see 4.86.1, 4.86.4, and 4.87.3. For the appearances of the word “freedom” and related words in Archidamus’ reply to the Plataeans, see 2.72.1 (x2). The Plataeans mention “freedom” and related words twice (2.71.2 [x2]) and “slavery” and related words twice in their speech to Archidamus (2.71.2, 2.71.3).

liberation of the Greeks nor even a mention of freedom and slavery in the first two speeches of Archidamus and in the speeches of Sthenelaidas, of Cnemus and Brasidas given jointly, and of the Spartans at Athens.⁷¹ The Corinthians chide Sparta for having failed to check Athenian imperial expansion even though it claims for itself “the outstanding virtue of being the liberator of Greece” (1.69.1). Pausanias, the Spartan commander who led the Greeks to vanquish the Persians in the greatest land battle of the Persian War, acted violently and tyrannically toward his Greek allies when he was commanding them in Byzantium and attempted “to make Sparta and the rest of Greece subject” to the very Persian Empire he had previously combatted so effectively.⁷² The Spartan commander Alcidas, when leading a naval campaign to aid the Greeks in Ionia, ends up thoughtlessly slaughtering the very Greeks he ostensibly intends to liberate (3.32.1–2).

The cases of Pausanias and Alcidas raise a troubling question about the strength of the Spartans’ justice. Thucydides’ praise of Sparta for living under good laws suggests that, insofar as the Spartans are just – insofar, that is, as they successfully follow justice rather than their own selfish passions – they are just due to the education they receive from their laws (1.18.1). It would seem, then, that it is the moral education they received in Sparta – referred to by King Archidamus – that enables the Spartans to become truly moral human beings (1.84.3–4). However, the fact that both Pausanias and Alcidas act unjustly when away from Sparta – by acting against rather than for the freedom of the Greeks – invites one to wonder whether the justice of the Spartans does not depend on their living in Sparta, under the eyes of the watchful guardians and enforcers of the laws, and hence on the threat of punishment. In other words, the cases of Pausanias and Alcidas suggest that, insofar as the Spartans are just, they are just because they selfishly fear punishment for their injustice rather than because they nobly choose justice over their selfish passions. The Spartans themselves seem to suggest as much, for, as Thucydides reports, after Pausanias acted violently and tyrannically toward the Greek forces under his command at Byzantium, “the Spartans no longer sent others abroad [to command the Greek forces] later, fearing lest the ones going out become corrupted, the very thing which they saw in the case of Pausanias” (1.95.7). However, insofar as Brasidas, when abroad, displays his justice so splendidly, he would seem to vindicate the justice of the Spartans at their best. As Thucydides remarks of him, “For since he was the first to go abroad and enjoy the reputation of

⁷¹ 1.80–85, 2.11, 1.86, 2.87, 4.17–20. But consider 2.8.4.

⁷² 1.94–95, 1.128.7–133.

being good in all respects, he left behind a firm hope that the others were also such" (4.81.3).

Brasidas does not exhibit the violence of character that Pausanias and Alcidas do when they are away from the taming effects of Spartan laws. Nor does he exhibit the violent character of Cleon, the Athenians at Scione, and the Athenians at Melos, whose angry passions lead them to support the destruction of whole cities, guilty and innocent alike. Thucydides ascribes to Brasidas, and to Brasidas alone in his book – which recounts so much violence and which presents war as "a violent teacher" – the quality of "gentleness."⁷³ Brasidas is gentle insofar as he fights to liberate rather than to conquer and insofar as he seeks to liberate with a minimum of violence. As would seem to befit a liberator, Brasidas attempts to liberate the Greeks primarily by persuasion rather than by force.⁷⁴ Indeed, he stakes his life on the hope that he may liberate them in this way, for he enters the potentially hostile city of Acanthus, which is still under the imperial rule of Athens, all by himself, and therefore at great personal risk to himself, in the hope that he may win them over with just and measured words rather than with savage threats and violence (4.84.2). What is more, Brasidas does not attempt to divide the cities subject to imperial rule by appealing to oligarchic parties and democratic parties against one another, and thereby risk unleashing the horrors of factional strife, as Diodotus suggests that the Athenians should do to advance their interests.⁷⁵ Instead Brasidas promises to let the Greeks he liberates settle their affairs on their own, and live according to their own laws and their own traditions. In his measured spirit of reconciliation, Brasidas foreshadows the measured mixing of oligarchy and democracy that Thucydides praises in what he regards as the best regime in Athens of his lifetime, in large part, it would seem, because it contained the violent spirit of faction with which the city was threatened.⁷⁶

Thucydides invites the reader to compare the gentle Brasidas and the violent Cleon most clearly by juxtaposing them in his account of Scione, which Brasidas seeks to liberate and protect and Cleon to destroy, and in his account of the battle of Amphipolis, where the two commanders directly oppose one another and both die.⁷⁷ Thucydides also indicates a certain contrast between the legacies of the two. As we have seen, the

⁷³ *πραότης* – 4.108.3. This is the only appearance of this word in the book.

⁷⁴ For an account of Brasidas that highlights the excellence of his speeches as well as his deeds, see Ferrario 2023, 192–195.

⁷⁵ Compare 4.86.1–4 with 3.47.

⁷⁶ See 4.81.2, 4.105.2, 4.108.2, 8.97.2. See also 8.96.1–4 and 2.65.12, 6.15.3–4.

⁷⁷ 4.120–123, 5.6–11.

legacy of Cleon in Athens is evident, most clearly, by the violent and angry destruction wrought by the Athenians upon Scione – which Cleon called for in his lifetime but did not live to witness – and Melos, since, in both cities, the Athenians inflict the very destruction that Cleon tried to persuade them to inflict upon Mytilene. The legacy of Cleon is also evident in the hopeful imperialism of the Athenians, which Cleon displayed through his unreasonably hopeful promise to defeat the Spartans at Pylos within twenty days, and which the Athenians go on to display especially in their hopeful expedition to subjugate the entire island of Sicily. In contrast, the legacy of Brasidas is apparent insofar as the Spartans continue to fight for the liberation of the Greeks. In the first place, his deputy commander Clearidas steadfastly refuses to hand over Amphipolis – the city whose freedom Brasidas died defending – to the Athenians' imperial rule, even though the Spartans had apparently agreed to its surrender.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the Spartans, in contrast to their past behavior, honor their promises to the Helots, evidently supported by Brasidas, that they would win their own freedom by fighting in the Thracian campaign for the freedom of the Greeks.⁷⁹ Finally, even though Brasidas is never explicitly linked to Gylippus, the Spartan commander who supports, organizes, and leads the Sicilian forces in their victorious campaign against the invading Athenian forces, Gylippus, alone among Spartans, resembles Brasidas, in three important respects. First, like Brasidas, but unlike all the other Spartan commanders, he proclaims, along with the Syracusan commanders, the goal of their fighting to defend their “freedom” against “enslavement” at the hands of Athens.⁸⁰ Moreover, like Brasidas, Gylippus displays considerable sagacity and daring, launching effective surprise attacks against the Athenians, training and encouraging the Syracusans, and persuading other Sicilians to join the alliance against Athens.⁸¹ Finally, like the virtuous Brasidas and in contrast especially with the violent and tyrannical Pausanias, Gylippus leads his forces with apparent moderation as well as justice, even when abroad, away from the directly taming influence of the laws of Sparta. By following the example of Brasidas in these ways, Gylippus would seem to embody in large measure the spirit and legacy of the Spartan honored as the liberator of the Greeks.

⁷⁸ See 5.11, 5.18.5, 5.21, 5.35.3, 5.46.2, 5.83.4, 6.10.5, 7.9.

⁷⁹ See 4.81.2–5, 5.34.1.

⁸⁰ 7.66.2, 7.68.2–3.

⁸¹ See, for example, 7.1.3–4.3, 7.5–7.2, 7.21–24, 7.37.2, 7.43.6, 7.46, 7.53, 7.65–69.1, 7.74.2.

The Impiety of the Athenians and the Piety of the Spartans and Their Allies

Thucydides also invites the reader to compare Brasidas' campaign in Thrace with the Athenians' campaign in Boeotia by interweaving his narrative of the two.⁸² The clearest contrast between the two campaigns is a moral one: While Brasidas seeks to liberate Thrace from Athenian imperial rule, the Athenians seek to subjugate Boeotia to that very rule. Thucydides' account of the two campaigns, however, highlights an additional, and most significant, contrast between the Athenians and the Spartans together with their allies, namely, regarding the gods.

This contrast is first pointed to by the Boeotian commander Pagondas when attempting to persuade the Boeotians to fight the Athenians near Delium. According to the Athenian plan hatched by Hippocrates and Demosthenes to conquer Boeotia, on the same day that Demosthenes was supposed to attack Boeotia from the southwest with the cooperation of Boeotian confederates, Hippocrates was supposed to seize the strategically located temple of Apollo at Delium, which is in northeastern Boeotia, near the border with Attica and, most importantly, on the sea, so that the Athenians might use their navy to move forces and supplies there. In this way, attacked by surprise from separate directions, the Boeotians would, it was hoped by the Athenians, be so scattered and confused that they would be unable to defeat either Athenian force. Once the overall plan fails due to Demosthenes' mistake in attacking from the southwest too early, Hippocrates nonetheless leads an Athenian army to seize the temple at Delium and fortify it, digging a trench around the temple, building a high wall with towers, and placing a garrison there, with the intention of using the fort to raid and to inspire democratic uprisings in Boeotia.⁸³ Once the fortification of the temple is mostly completed, the bulk of the Athenian forces prepare to withdraw back to Athens. Ten of the eleven Boeotian commanders favor letting the Athenians depart, but the Theban Pagondas argues in favor of attacking and succeeds in persuading the Boeotians, notwithstanding the seemingly overwhelming majority against him. Most of his speech is devoted to explaining that it is prudent and just to attack the Athenian forces, even though they are departing for the moment. It is prudent because, inasmuch as it is the Athenians' intent "to destroy"

⁸² Thucydides presents the Athenians' Boeotian campaign at 4.76–77 and 4.89–101 and Brasidas' Thracian campaign at 4.78–88 and 4.102ff.

⁸³ 4.76–77, 4.89–90.

Boeotia, for the Boeotians to fight the Athenians' forces only when they are attacking but to leave them unmolested when they are temporarily retreating would be tantamount to giving them the tremendous military advantage of choosing when to attack without having to fear preemptive attacks by their intended victims (4.92.1–6). It is just because the Boeotians are fighting against those who plan to invade and subjugate their country: As Pagondas concludes, let us show the Athenians that “those for whom it is noble always to fight for the freedom of their land and never to enslave unjustly the land of others will not let them get away without a struggle” (4.92.7).

Near the end of his speech, Pagondas makes an additional argument to the Boeotians for fighting the Athenians – they have revealed themselves to be enemies of the gods through their impious actions: “we have faith that the god, whose temple they lawlessly fortified and occupy, will be with us, and that the sacrifices we have offered appear propitious.”⁸⁴ This grave impiety charge – that the Athenians have violated divine law – is the second of three such charges in the book made against the Athenians by the Spartans and their allies. The first impiety charge is made by the Spartans just before the outbreak of the war, in order, according to Thucydides, that they would have “the greatest pretext for waging the war” and in the hope of driving Pericles, their greatest enemy, from power or at least weakening his power.⁸⁵ Seeking to “avenge the gods,” the Spartans demand that the Athenians expiate the curse of Athena – imposed on the Athenians 200 years ago for having deceived and killed supporters of the would-be tyrant Cylon who had sought the protection of sanctuary in the temple of Athena – by expelling the descendants of the killers, including Pericles.⁸⁶ The Athenians respond by demanding that the Spartans expiate two divine curses from the more recent past and otherwise ignoring their impiety charge (1.128–139.2). The third impiety charge made against the Athenians is by the Melians, who are colonists of the Spartans but officially neutral in the war, when the Athenians demand that they surrender to their imperial rule (5.84.2). The Melians refuse to surrender and contend that the gods will side with them against Athens in their fight to defend their freedom: “because we stand here as pious men against men who are not just” (5.104). The Athenians respond, in speech, by arguing that the gods will not intervene on either side and, in deed, by eventually killing all the Melian men and enslaving the women and children.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Literally, “noble” or “fair [καλός].”

⁸⁶ 1.126–127. See also Herodotus 5.71

⁸⁵ 1.126.1, 1.127.

⁸⁷ 5.105.1–3, 5.116.

The impiety charge of the Spartan allies Pagondas and the Boeotians against the Athenians is in certain respects the most revealing of the three, since, in contrast with the first charge, it cites a current act of impiety rather than one perpetrated centuries in the past and, in contrast with the third charge, it is a detailed charge, one that is elaborated upon after the Boeotian victory over the Athenians near Delium by a Boeotian herald who, speaking on behalf of the Boeotians as a whole, responds to an Athenian request to recover their dead (4.97.2–4). The Boeotians contend that the Athenians have violated the laws of the Greeks – ones that are supported and enforced by the gods – by using the temple of Apollo at Delium as a military base and therefore using for their own military purposes a building and its surrounding grounds dedicated to the worship of Apollo. For, according to the laws of the Greeks, humans evidently should devote themselves to the gods even more than they devote themselves to their military advantages and hence more than to their own self-interest. Therefore, by brazenly transgressing these laws, and using a sacred building and sacred land, as though they were ordinary and profane things – for example, camping, eating, and performing other bodily functions on sacred ground, and drinking and bathing with sacred water – the Athenians have shown that they place themselves above not only other human beings but the gods themselves, and have thereby incurred the just wrath of humans and gods. As Thucydides reports (in indirect discourse), the herald concludes his speech to the Athenians: “The Boeotians therefore, on behalf of the god and of themselves, invoking Apollo and the other deities sharing the temple cult, call on them first to depart from the temple before they can bear away their dead” (4.97.4).

The Boeotians here implicitly draw a contrast between themselves and their Spartan allies, who are godly, and the Athenians, who are impious, and this contrast appears to be substantiated by the behavior of Brasidas toward the gods in his Thracian campaign. In contrast with the Athenians he is fighting, but like the Boeotians, Brasidas invokes the gods of the lands he is liberating against those who resist him (4.87.2). What is more, Brasidas attributes his victory over the Athenians at Lecynthus to the goddess Athena and offers tribute to her (4.116.2). Finally, and most strikingly, before the climactic battle with Cleon and his Athenian army at Amphipolis, it is the Spartan Brasidas, and not the Athenians, who offers a sacrifice to Athena, at a nearby temple, even though Athena is the divinity especially associated with Athens (5.10.2). In contrast with the Athenians at Thrace and at Delium, Brasidas not only respects the sanctity of the two temples of Athena rather than using them for his own purposes and to his

own advantage but also piously trusts in the just favor of Athena and humbly honors the goddess as a higher being who, notwithstanding his own sagacity and virtue, will determine his fate.

The Athenians' response, through their own herald, to the impiety charge of the Boeotians, has two parts. First, "they claimed that they did not do injustice to the temple nor would they in the future," since they are not "willingly doing harm" to the temple but are willingly fortifying the temple of Apollo as a military base for the just purpose of defending Athens, and not for the unjust and impious purpose of desecrating the temple (4.98.1). The Athenians here emphasize that they are freely choosing to make use of the temple in the just cause of self-defense rather than wantonly insulting Apollo or seeking to attack Boeotia simply to acquire more land and wealth. The Athenians assume here, however, that Apollo would regard their free choice to use his sacred temple for the profane purpose of defending Athens as just. But what is the basis of that assumption? Might the Boeotians not object that the gods demand that humans choose to subordinate their desire for the safety of themselves and their homelands to their devotion to the gods?

Perhaps with this possible objection in mind, the Athenians proceed to offer a different response to the impiety charge. They maintain, twice, that their use of the temple for the purpose of defending Athens – including, for example, the use of the sacred grounds and sacred water to tend to the bodily needs of their soldiers – is done by "necessity [ἀνάγκη]" (4.98.5–6). The Athenians thereby imply that their use of the temple is not a free moral choice, made in the just cause of defending Athens, but an action they are compelled to take by an irresistible passion, presumably their fear for the safety and independence of their homeland. The Athenians here echo the broader claim earlier set forth by the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, that the Athenians were "compelled [κατηναγκάσθημεν] . . . especially by fear, then also by honor, later also by benefit" to acquire their empire (1.75.3). What the Athenians at Delium add to the thesis set forth by the Athenians at Sparta is the suggestion that the gods, as well as humans, may be subject to necessity. For the Athenians go on to argue that "it is likely⁸⁸ that everything done under the pressure of war and danger" – that is, not only what is done in the just cause of self-defense but "everything" done out of fear and other passions in war – "comes to have some forgiving understanding from the god" (4.98.6). The Athenians here set forth two key theses:

⁸⁸ The word here – εἰκός – may also be translated as "reasonable."

first, that human beings are not free to choose to devote themselves to the gods more than to their own self-interest because humans are compelled by their passions – especially the passion of fear of threats to their own well-being – to act as they do, at least under the stressful conditions of war; and secondly, that, since the gods are understanding beings who will not hold humans morally responsible for actions for which they are not truly morally responsible – since, that is, the gods are evidently wise and just beings – they will understand that the Athenians are not morally responsible for their actions in desecrating the temple of Apollo and will forgive them rather than punish them.⁸⁹ These two theses would seem to be based on a deeper and more far-reaching thesis concerning the existence of a natural order that encompasses and governs both human beings and gods. For the Athenians here imply that, given the natural necessity of humans to follow their passions, they are not free to rise above their passion for their well-being, and given the essential nature of the gods as wise and just beings, they are not free to depart from that nature – without losing their essential character as gods, their godness – by, for example, holding the Athenians responsible for doing what they cannot help but do.

The clash here between the Boeotians and the Athenians concerning the gods points to the most important question raised by the war between the Spartans with their allies and the Athenians, that is, the very question that Thucydides wrote his book in order to clarify: the question concerning “that which is human” (1.22.4). What is the fundamental character and condition of human beings? Are human beings morally free to choose to oppose their concern for themselves and are they ruled by gods who are themselves free and who, following their will, justly hold humans responsible for their actions, rewarding and punishing them in accordance with their desert? Or are human beings subject to the natural necessity of pursuing what they perceive to be their own good and are the gods themselves bound by their nature as wise and just beings to recognize that human beings are not morally responsible and to treat them as such? This momentous debate concerning humanity and divinity is first introduced in the exchange of views between the Boeotians and the Athenians, but it is not yet fully clarified here for two reasons: First, in contrast with the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, Diodotus, and Thucydides himself, the Athenians at Delium do not explicitly discuss or even mention the “nature” – that is, the essential and necessary character – of human beings,

⁸⁹ Consider Orwin 1994, 92–95; Bartlett 2001, 86–88.

nor that of divine beings;⁹⁰ secondly, there is no genuine theoretical confrontation or dialogue between the pious Boeotians and the Athenians. For a clearer treatment of the all-important question of the fundamental character and condition of human beings and of the gods, we must await what is, with regard to this question, the theoretical peak of Thucydides' book: the Melian Dialogue between the pious Melians and the Athenians.

The Boeotians are evidently not persuaded by the Athenians' argument that Apollo forgives their desecration of his temple as an act that is driven by an irresistible compulsion to defend their homeland. As Thucydides remarks, the herald who spoke on behalf of the Athenians here "went away without accomplishing anything," and the Boeotians proceed to besiege and recapture Delium from the Athenians (4.99–101.2). What is more, the Athenians themselves are not clearly persuaded by their own argument concerning necessity. As we have seen, the Athenians first make the different argument that they have acted justly by freely choosing to fortify the temple for the sake of defending Athens rather than for the sake of desecrating the temple or expanding their empire, an argument that contradicts their later argument concerning necessity (4.98.1). Furthermore, their claim that Apollo will exhibit a forgiving understanding is stated tentatively – "it is likely" – but evidently not certain – "that everything under the pressure of war and danger comes to have *some* forgiving understanding" – but perhaps, then, not a completely forgiving understanding – "from the god" (4.98.6, my emphasis). Finally, when the Athenians accuse the Boeotians of committing impiety by refusing to return the corpses of the Athenian soldiers after the battle is over, they declare that the Boeotians "are far *more* . . . impious" than the Athenians, thereby tacitly conceding that the Athenians are, or may be, somewhat guilty of impiety as a result of their desecration of the temple (4.98.7, my emphasis).

The Boeotians are confident in their belief that Apollo and the other gods support them against the Athenians. On the eve of the battle at Delium, they express their faith that Apollo is backing them, during the battle they sing the paean – a hymn to Apollo – and after the battle they invoke Apollo and other deities to demand that the Athenians evacuate his temple.⁹¹ Armed with such pious confidence, the Boeotians win the battle of Delium, and then recapture the temple from the Athenians and expel

⁹⁰ 1.76.3, 3.45.7, 2.50.1, 3.82.2, 3.84.2. See also 4.61.5–6, 5.105.1–2.

⁹¹ 4.92.7, 4.96.1, 4.97.2–4.

them from the region. Do the Boeotians win, according to Thucydides, because their pious confidence inspirits them in their struggle against Athens? Or do they win, in Thucydides' view, because their pious confidence is justified, because Apollo does in truth back them in their war against the impious Athenians, as that god purportedly claimed at the beginning of the war that he would back the side of Sparta against Athens and as that god may, at least according to many Athenians, have backed Sparta by inflicting the plague upon Athens, but not Sparta?⁹²

Reconsidering the Gods

One may wonder, how could Thucydides be understood to take seriously the possibility that the gods support Sparta, given his generally sympathetic focus on Periclean Athens and its areligious understanding of the human condition, from the beginning of the book up to his account of the stasis in Corcyra?⁹³ Yet, as Thucydides turns to consider the case for Sparta as a whole after that pro-Periclean Athenian account, so does he turn to consider the case for Sparta's pious understanding of humanity and divinity in particular.⁹⁴ After recounting the savage factional strife that engulfed Corcyra in the fifth year of the war and, later, Greece as a whole, and after recounting the second outbreak of the plague in Athens in that same year, in his account of the sixth year of the war, Thucydides describes, for the first time since the outbreak of the war, an act of piety by the Athenian people as a whole:⁹⁵ "And the same winter the Athenians purified Delos" – the island sacred to Apollo – "in accordance with a certain oracle" (3.104.1). As we have noted, Thucydides' narrative suggests that the Athenians undertook this act of propitiation in response to the outbreak of the plague, which they had attributed to the wrath of the god Apollo.⁹⁶ Thucydides follows his description of this extraordinary act of piety by the Athenians with an extraordinary account of a great gathering in Delos in the distant past by Ionian Greeks in honor of Apollo. He bases his account of this gathering entirely on the testimony of Homer. He cites thirteen lines of Homer's poetry – the most extensive citation in his book of poetry and

⁹² 1.118.3, 2.54.4–5. ⁹³ For this view, see Chapter 1, note 139.

⁹⁴ For Thucydides' theoretical interest in the possible truth of piety, see Bartlett 2001; Burns 2010.

⁹⁵ During the third year of the war, the Athenian forces under Phormio – but not the Athenian people as a whole – perform an act of piety after a victory by consecrating a ship to Poseidon (2.84.4).

⁹⁶ See Chapter 3, pp. 129–130.

indeed of the work of any author (3.104.4–5).⁹⁷ And the lines that Thucydides cites are exceedingly pious: In the first five, Homer addresses Apollo, describing the pleasure the god feels at being honored by the Ionians:

But when in Delos, Phoebus, your spirit was especially delighted,
There the Ionians with tunics that trail are gathered
With their offspring and wives on your concourse;
There you, with boxing and dancing and song,
They delight by invoking you, when they hold a contest.

Then, in the next two lines, Homer prays that Apollo and Artemis may bless the maidens who dance at Delos in honor of the gods:

But come, be gracious, Apollo, together with Artemis,
And may all you maidens enjoy their favor.

The only other time in the book we hear words addressed to the gods is when the Spartan King Archidamus addresses the gods and heroes of Plataea (2.74.3).⁹⁸ By adopting a respectful posture toward Homer's piety here, Thucydides reveals an apparent respect for Spartan piety as well.

Thucydides' account here signals a dramatic change from the account of the past, of Homer, and of the gods that he offered at the beginning of the book. While he declares there that he believes that there was nothing "great" in the past, he here states twice that the gathering at Delos was "great" and he makes it clear that it was great not only or primarily in numbers but in the joyful character of the gathering.⁹⁹ What is more, in the first twenty-two chapters of the book, Thucydides sharply and repeatedly criticizes Homer and the poets as a whole for magnifying and embellishing the human condition for the sake of pleasing their audience, evidently by portraying the human condition as one in which humans are cared for by the gods, rather than teaching the truth, that the human condition is one in which humans are left on their own to fend for themselves, as he presents it in his own account of the past in the *Archaeology*.¹⁰⁰ Thucydides now, however, cites Homer as an authority – "Homer gave so much evidence" – without stating as he had before, "if he is sufficient for anyone to give evidence," for the apparently true account of the great gathering at Delos in

⁹⁷ Consider Lateiner's comment that "The quotation is not relevant to the war, but it does create a contrast between the quiet, stable past and the disturbed present" (1977, 46).

⁹⁸ See Orwin 1994, 58. ⁹⁹ 1.1.3, 1.3.1, 3.104.3, 3.104.6.

¹⁰⁰ 1.9.4, 1.10.3, 1.21.1, 1.22.4.

the past in honor of Apollo.¹⁰¹ And he cites, without a note of skepticism, Homer's verses addressed to Apollo stating that the god was pleased by the festival in his honor and his verses addressed to the maidens who dance to the songs of Homer in honor of Apollo, stating that he wishes for Apollo and Artemis to favor them and for the maidens to offer Homer himself honor.¹⁰²

By suggesting here that the human condition in the past may have been greater than the present, Thucydides challenges the Periclean view, which he had himself apparently adopted in the opening of the book, that contemporary humans have progressed in all ways over the past thanks to their liberation from religious tradition and their own ingenuity and daring.¹⁰³ By treating here the religious poetry of Homer with apparent respect, Thucydides also challenges the Periclean view that such enlightened societies as Athens need no religious beliefs and need no Homer in order to flourish (2.41.4). Thucydides' account of the Athenians' act of piety toward Apollo at this moment in the war suggests that Athenians may well need a Homer in order to offer them hope for divine favor from the god who, they fear, is punishing them with a plague, and to remind them of the need to propitiate that god.¹⁰⁴ Finally, and most importantly, Thucydides' uncritical, and apparently respectful citation of Homer's religious poetry here suggests that, at this point in his narrative, Thucydides now adopts an outlook that is, at least, open to the possible truth of the pious understanding of the human condition, according to which there are gods who care for human beings, who favor us when we are just and who punish us when we are unjust.¹⁰⁵ In other words, Thucydides here signals a certain shift in his narrative away from the areligious, Periclean Athenian

¹⁰¹ 3.104.6, 1.9.4; see also 1.10.3. Consider Burns's remark: "The disparagement of Homer that had marked the archaeology is now replaced by admiration" (2010, 46).

¹⁰² Consider 2.54.2–3.

¹⁰³ According to Connor, Thucydides' account here "subverts and refutes all facile notions of progress, not least the assurance that in Greek history there was a dynamic at work that led gradually to growing material greatness and thereby to higher levels of civilization" (1984, 107). See also Burns 2010, 46–47.

¹⁰⁴ See 2.54.4–5 and 1.118.3.

¹⁰⁵ As Hobbes points out, Thucydides appears in his book at times pious and at times not: In some places in his history he noteth the equivocation of the oracles; and yet he confirmeth an assertion of his own, touching the time this war lasted, by the oracle's prediction. He taxeth Nicias for being too punctual in the observation of the ceremonies of their religion, when he overthrew himself and his army, and indeed the whole dominion and liberty of his country, by it. Yet he commendeth him in another place for his worshipping of the gods, and saith in that respect, he least of all men deserved to come to so great a calamity as he did. (Greene 1989, 571)

understanding of “that which is human” and toward the understanding of Sparta and its allies.

The Spartan Understanding of the Human and the Divine

Central to the Spartan understanding of the world is the belief that it is ruled by powerful divine beings who concern themselves particularly with human affairs. Human beings must therefore take their bearings, above all, not from their own independent minds but from the will of the gods. But how does the will of the gods manifest itself? The gods express their will through their human mouthpieces – oracles and prophets – and also through events that take place in the world. According to the Spartans, the divine will is evident in the outcome of battles: They apparently believe that they lost at Pylos because of divine disfavor, their Boeotian allies believe that they won at Delium thanks to the gods, Brasidas believes that he won at Lecythus and perhaps at Amphipolis because of divine support, and the Laconophile Nicias believes that the disastrous defeats that the Athenians suffered at Sicily were due to divine jealousy.¹⁰⁶ What is more, such extraordinary events as earthquakes and plagues, for example, are not properly understood as natural phenomena – as necessities to be endured, as Pericles suggests (2.64.2) – signaling nothing more than the harsh indifference of the world to human beings, but rather as signs of divine will and purpose. The Spartans believe that, because they once violated divine laws protecting suppliants in a temple of Poseidon by slaying the Spartan Helot slaves who had sought sanctuary there, Poseidon sent “a great earthquake” to Sparta – just over thirty years before the Peloponnesian War – that almost destroyed the city, causing tremendous devastation and sparking a massive uprising by the Helots that was only suppressed with the aid of allies after ten years.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, as we have seen, even the Athenians themselves wonder if the plague that devastated their city was sent by Apollo as a divine punishment (2.54).

Given such awe-inspiring divine power, the Spartans make great efforts to discern and interpret evidence of the will of the gods. When earthquakes occur at the beginning of a military campaign, as Thucydides reports occurring three times, the Spartans interpret them as signs of divine disapproval and either cancel the campaign (in two cases) or reduce the forces

¹⁰⁶ 7.18.2, 4.92.7, 4.97, 4.116.2, 5.10.2, 7.77.2–4.

¹⁰⁷ See 1.128.1, 1.101.2, 2.27.2, 3.54.5, 4.56.2. Consider also 1.126.7–12, 1.134, 4.97.2–98.7.

sent out by half (in one case), in contrast with the seemingly areligious Periclean Athenians who either ignore earthquakes or take minimal notice of them by delaying a political assembly for a single day.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, when undertaking a military campaign, the Spartans offer sacrifices to the gods in order to determine whether they approve or disapprove of the campaign, and, on three occasions that Thucydides recounts, when the sacrifices are interpreted as signaling divine disapproval, the Spartans immediately abandon their campaign.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, Thucydides only reports the Athenian armed forces under the pious commander Nicias and under the oligarchs who overthrow the Athenian democracy as making religious sacrifices.¹¹⁰ In Thucydides' narrative sacrifices to the gods are otherwise performed only in pre-Periclean Athens, by the Athenians of old at a festival in honor of Zeus and on the island of Delos in honor of Apollo, and by the tyrants Peisistratus and Hippias; Pericles, on the other hand, speaks of religious sacrifices in nonreligious terms, as examples of "relaxation of the mind from toils."¹¹¹ Finally, in Thucydides' account, the Spartans consult the oracle at Delphi more than five times in order to determine the will of Apollo in particular, while the Athenians ignore that oracle once and heed it once.¹¹²

The will of the gods, then, is of supreme importance. But to what end do the gods will what they will? What is their purpose? For the Spartans, as for the Greeks as a whole, there is no authoritative text, revealed to humans by the gods, that offers an account of their commandments and instruction. Such poets as Homer shed some light on the doings of the gods, but in Thucydides' account Homer is less an interpreter of the gods' purposes than a model of reverent prayer to the gods (see 3.104.4–5). How, then, is one to discern the purpose of the gods behind such events as victories or defeats in battle or earthquakes and plagues? The first explicit example of Spartan piety in the book is the conclusion of the ephor Sthenelaidas' successful speech to the Spartans in favor of going to war against Athens: "together with the gods, let us proceed against the ones who are doing injustice" (1.86.5). A fundamental feature of the Spartans' piety is the belief that the gods are just. If you act unjustly, the Spartans surmise, the gods will punish you, as they are believed to have done to Sparta, with the great earthquake (1.128.1). But if you act justly, they will support you. As we have seen, the Spartan commander Brasidas is convinced that Athena

¹⁰⁸ 3.89.1, 6.95.1, 8.6.5, 3.87.4, 5.45.4. See as well 5.50.5. ¹⁰⁹ 5.54.2, 5.55.3, 5.116.1.

¹¹⁰ 6.69.2, 8.70.1. But see also 6.32.1–2. ¹¹¹ 1.126.6, 3.104.6, 6.54.5, 2.38.1.

¹¹² 1.103.2–3, 1.118.3, 1.134.4, 3.92.5, 5.16.2, 2.17.1–2, 5.32.1.

supports his just campaign for the liberation of Thrace from the Athenians and the Boeotians allied with Sparta are convinced that Apollo supports their just defense of their homeland against the invading Athenians. And, armed with that conviction, both Brasidas and the Boeotians prevail in their battles against the Athenians, inflicting on them their greatest defeats in the first ten years of the war.¹¹³ The Spartan colonists, the Melians, too, are convinced that the gods support them – “because we stand here as pious men against men who are not just” (5.104) – and this conviction inspires them to resist, all by themselves, the enormous might of the Athenian Empire. The Spartans and their allies, then, interpret the will and purpose of the gods in the light of their own understanding of justice. Insofar as the Spartans and their allies are convinced of the justice of their cause, they are convinced that therefore their cause aligns with the will of the mighty gods. Their piety, then, provides a tremendous incentive to fight for their cause and a powerful hope that their cause will prevail.

To be sure, another fundamental feature of the Spartan’ piety is an awareness that, since we human beings are greatly inferior to the gods, we may not fully understand what justice in their eyes is, and therefore we must beware of proudly assuming our righteousness and our worthiness of divine support but rather be sober and humble in our self-estimation, even when we triumph. As King Archidamus, “a man reputedly both sagacious and moderate” (1.79.2), explains in his speech at Sparta against going to war against Athens, even in the name of justice, at the present moment: “And it is possible that this [that is, a delay in going to war] is, most of all, prudent moderation; for on account of this [moderation] we are not hubristic as a result of our successes” and “reverent shame [αἰδώς]¹¹⁴ has the greatest share of moderation” (1.84.2–3).¹¹⁵ The Spartans’ belief in and awe before the gods inspire in them at the same time justice and moderation, a desire to strive to be righteous and a wariness of becoming self-righteous.

The clearest example of the Spartan belief that the ways of the gods, including their justice, may in some measure be mysterious, is the question of the justice of going to war against Athens. The majority of Spartans that vote for the war are evidently persuaded by the Corinthians and Sthenelaidas that, since the Athenians are seeking to deprive the Greeks

¹¹³ 4.109.1–6, 4.117, 5.14–16.1, 5.32.1.

¹¹⁴ This is the only appearance in the book of this word – a key religious term – or related words. See, for example, *Iliad* 24.503, *Odyssey* 9.269.

¹¹⁵ Consider Bartlett 2001, 78–79.

as a whole and the allies of Sparta in particular of their freedom, it is just for Sparta to wage war against Athens and the gods will support Sparta in that war.¹¹⁶ Justice, in their view, evidently means benefiting others and the clearest way for Sparta, which “was always free from tyranny,” to benefit others is by fighting for their freedom (1.18.1). Indeed, Thucydides reports that, when the Spartans asked “the god” at Delphi “if it would be better for them to wage war, he responded to them, as it is said, that victory would come to the ones waging war with all their might and he said that he himself would join them, bidden or unbidden” (1.118.3). The Corinthians interpret the oracle as declaring that “the god bids them to wage war” (1.123.2). What is more, at the beginning of the war, as Thucydides puts it, “the good will of human beings was, for the most part, rather on the side of the Spartans, especially since they proclaimed that they would liberate Greece . . . Such was the anger that most felt toward the Athenians, some wishing to be delivered from their empire, others fearing lest they be subjected to their empire” (2.8.4–5). The Greeks as a whole, then, interpret the will and the purpose of the gods at the beginning of the war in the light of their own conviction that the goal of freedom for the Greeks is just.

On the other hand, King Archidamus expresses doubt that the decision of Sparta to go to war is just on the grounds that it may violate the peace treaty – the peace treaty that was sworn to in the name of the gods by the Spartans – that calls for judicial arbitration of disputes before resorting to military force, a doubt that would seem to be supported later by Sparta’s Theban allies attacking Athen’s ally Plataea first, thereby marking the outbreak of war.¹¹⁷ Justice, in this view, evidently means following the law – in this case the peace treaty – rather than benefiting the Greeks by possibly violating the law to fight for their freedom. By expressing doubts about the justice of Sparta going to war, Archidamus implicitly raises doubts about divine support for Sparta in the war. He implicitly suggests that the gods view adherence to the law as the core of justice, rather than fighting for the freedom of the Greeks. This suggestion would seem to be supported by the Spartan belief that Poseidon punished the Spartans with the great earthquake for violating the laws protecting suppliants at his temple. And yet Apollo apparently endorses Sparta’s war for the liberation

¹¹⁶ 1.68.3–69.1, 1.86–87.4.

¹¹⁷ See 1.83.3, 1.85.2, 2.2.1–3, 2, 2.7.1, 7.18.2. See Bartlett 2001, 79–80. For the custom of swearing to uphold treaties with oaths to gods, see, for example, 1.71.5–6, 1.78.4, 5.18.9–19.1, 5.23.4–24, 5.47.8–48.1, 5.79.1–80.2. As Orwin points out, “Honoring treaties was thus a requirement of divine law” (1994, 58).

of the Greeks as just both through the pronouncement of the Delphic Oracle and also through the deadly plague – believed even by some Athenians to be sent by Apollo – that strikes Athens but not Sparta.¹¹⁸ In the Spartan understanding, the gods give evidence of supporting two different understandings of justice: Justice means benefiting others by fighting for their freedom and justice means obeying the law – either laws such as those protecting suppliants in temples or laws sworn to in the name of the gods, such as peace treaties. According to the first understanding, of Sthenelaidas, the Spartan war effort is just and will be rewarded by the gods. According to the second understanding, the Spartan war effort is unjust and will be punished by the gods. How are the Spartans to determine which is the correct understanding?

The majority of Spartans support the justice and piety of the war to begin with, and would presumably feel vindicated in that support by the plague that strikes Athens but not Sparta. Archidamus, however, the commander of Peloponnesian forces, continues to evince doubt in his debate with the Plataeans over the justice and piety of the Spartan attack on their land during the third year of the war. The Plataeans send out ambassadors who, invoking the gods, denounce the Spartans for unjustly invading “with a view to the enslavement” of Plataea and thereby impiously violating the oath sworn in the past by the Spartan commander Pausanias – after defeating the Persian host for the sake of liberating the Greeks – to Zeus the Liberator to grant the Plataeans freedom and never to enslave them (2.72.2–4). This denunciation is especially powerful because it bases itself on the principle, invoked by the Spartans as a whole, that the goal of liberating the Greeks is a just goal supported by the gods. By attacking Plataea, along with the Thebans, the Spartans are seeking to enslave Plataea and thereby are betraying their purported, sacred goal of liberty for the Greeks.

Archidamus begins his response to the Plataeans by appearing to agree with their denunciation: “You say just things, men of Plataea.” He goes on to argue, however, that, by fighting the imperial Athenians as they had fought the imperial Persians in the past, the Spartans are continuing to fight for the freedom of the Greeks. Moreover, he now urges the Plataeans, apparently for the first time, to keep the oaths they themselves swore in the past to work for the freedom of the Greeks, either by joining the Spartans as allies against Athens or, at the very least, staying neutral in this war (2.72.1).

¹¹⁸ 1.118.3, 1.123.2, 2, 2.54.4–5.

And he later, in response to Plataean fears of Athenian reprisals and Theban treachery if they were to ally with Sparta, offers to evacuate the Plataeans to a safe location and to protect their city for the duration of the war (2.72.2–3). Here, Archidamus appears to make Spartan policy toward the Plataean more conciliatory – not simply attacking them without negotiation but offering them an alliance and protection – in order to maintain the belief that the Spartan war on Athens is just because it is fought for the liberation of the Greeks. The Plataeans themselves are apparently sufficiently impressed by his response that they no longer dispute the justice or piety of the Spartans but, after deliberation and consultation with Athens, where their wives and children have already been evacuated, they decide on prudential grounds to remain allies of the Athenians (2.73.1–74.1). Archidamus then responds to the Plataeans' decision with what would seem to be a superlative expression of confidence in the justice and piety of the Spartan cause. He gives a speech addressed to the gods – the only wartime speech addressed to divine beings in the book – in which he invokes them with apparent confidence:

You Gods, who possess the land of Plataea, and heroes, be our witnesses that neither did we come unjustly against this land in the beginning, but these men first forsook the alliance sworn to under oath, in which our fathers prayed to you that they would prevail over the Persians and you provided a spirit favorable to the Greeks in their contest; nor now, if we take some action, will we act unjustly: for we have proposed many reasonable terms, but do not chance upon success. (2.74.2)

However, at the end of the speech, he expresses a marked hesitation about the justice and piety of the Spartan cause: “Show a forgiving understanding [ἐυγνώμονες δὲ ἔστε]¹¹⁹ in the punishment of the ones who first began this injustice, and in the vengeance of the ones who act lawfully.” By requesting a forgiving understanding of the gods regarding the punishment of who began the conflict, rather than simply affirming, as Sthenelaidas had, that the gods support Sparta because they are fighting injustice or, as the Corinthians had, that the gods also support Sparta because the Athenians broke the peace treaty, Archidamus apparently admits that Sparta may have begun the war unlawfully and therefore unjustly.¹²⁰ In this way, he hints that he retains the view that he originally expressed during the debate at Sparta about going to war, that Sparta violated the treaty by going to war and that the gods believe that obedience

¹¹⁹ See 4.98.6.

¹²⁰ 1.86.5, 1.123.2. Consider Bartlett 2001, 82–83.

to law rather than fighting for the freedom of the Greeks constitutes the core of justice.

The Spartans as a whole apparently come to join Archidamus in his doubt about the justice and piety of the Spartans' cause as a direct result of their initial defeat at Pylos. During the seventh year of the war, after the Athenians successfully cut off the 420 Spartan soldiers on the island of Sphacteria at Pylos, the Spartans ask for a truce and send envoys to Athens to propose a peace agreement to end the war and secure the safe return of the men on the island (4.13–16). The mere fact that they propose an end to the war would seem to signal their abandonment of the belief that the war to liberate the Greeks is a just cause supported by the gods. At the conclusion of their speech in Athens, the Spartans argue that the Greeks will attribute the greater responsibility to Athens for the end of the war and “the cessation of evils” that it will signify. As the Spartans explain here, “For they” – the Greeks – “wage war uncertain as to which side began it, but for the settlement of it, which is now for the most part in your hands, they will offer gratitude to you” (4.20.2). By admitting, without objection, that the Greeks are uncertain who is to blame for the war, the Spartans here tacitly admit that they themselves may be to blame for starting the war, that they may be guilty of this injustice, and therefore that the gods may be punishing them by inflicting on them the defeat at Pylos. Later in his work, when discussing the second outbreak of war between Sparta and Athens, Thucydides indicates that the Spartans interpreted the defeat at Pylos as such a punishment:

For in the previous war the violation of the law came to be more theirs because the Thebans went into Plataea in the time of the sworn treaty, and although it was stated in the previous agreements not to bear arms against one another, if they were willing to give judicial satisfaction, they themselves did not heed them even though the Athenians were calling them forth to a judicial arbitration. And on account of this they believed that they had quite reasonably suffered an evil fortune and were taking to heart the calamity at Pylos. (7.18.2)

Even though the Spartans began the war largely convinced that their cause was just and that the gods were on their side – a conviction that must have been strengthened by the apparent endorsement of Sparta by the Delphic Oracle of Apollo and the plague possibly sent by Apollo against Athens – as a result of their defeat at Pylos they come to the conclusion that they misunderstood the gods and their understanding of justice. Their mistake, the Spartans apparently believe, was not only in believing that justice

meant primarily fighting for the liberty of the Greeks rather than lawfully obeying the peace treaty with Athens but in presuming to understand clearly the mysterious ways of the divine.

The Spartans' speech at Athens sheds crucial light on their understanding of the human condition in relation to the gods. Even though this speech never explicitly mentions the gods, it articulates the Spartan understanding of the gods as powerful, mysterious, and just beings. The word the Spartans use to refer to the divine in this speech is "fortune": The word and related words appear seven times in the speech, more than in any other speech in the book.¹²¹ The Spartans speak of fortune rather than the gods in this speech, in part because the Spartans are seeking to persuade the areligious Athenians and also in part because, in their understanding, the gods manifest themselves not only through such oracles as the oracle at Delphi but also in the guise of fortune. Later in the book, the Melians – who are Spartan colonists – speak twice of their faith in "that fortune that comes from the divine" and Nicias – the Athenian supporter of Sparta – explicitly links fortune to the gods.¹²²

Fortune is, by the lights of the Spartans, extremely powerful in human affairs. The Spartans argue that it is in the best interest of the Athenians to conclude the war and make peace with Sparta now, after their victory at Pylos:

For it is possible for you to make a fine use of your present good fortune, keeping what you have won, and also obtain honor and renown, and not to suffer the very thing that human beings do who obtain in an extraordinary way something good. For they always, with hope, grasp for more because they enjoy at the present time a good fortune they did not expect. But those to whom many changes, in both directions, have befallen are just and most distrustful of their success. And experience indicates that this would apply especially your city and to ours, as is only likely. (4.17.4–5)

According to the Spartans, all the principal victories and setbacks on either side in the war so far – presumably, the Athenian victories in the gulf of Corinth, at Ambracia in Northwestern Greece, and at Pylos; the plague that devastated Athens; and the Spartan success at Plataea – have been due

¹²¹ 4.17.4 (x2), 4.18.3, 4.18.4 (x2), 4.18.5, 4.19.1. The word "fortune [τύχη]" and related words appear four times in Pericles' Funeral Oration (2.42.4, 2.44.1–2, 2.44.4), four times in his last speech (2.60.3 [x2], 2.61.1., 2.62.5), and four times in the Melians' portion of the Melian Dialogue (5.102, 5.104 [x2], 5.112.2).

¹²² 5.84.2, 5.104, 5.112.2, 7.77.3, 7.86.3. As Jaffe puts it, the Spartans "believe that by avoiding injustice they armor themselves against the blows of fortune" (2017, 111).

to fortune. In this way, they suggest in particular that the Athenians' victory over Sparta at Pylos was due, not to the power of their superior intelligence and daring but to the power of fortune. The Spartans acknowledge that, at Pylos, they lost because they erred in judgment, but they immediately add that such errors may befall anyone (4.18.2). Sagacity is evidently powerless before fortune, which may inflict lapses of judgment by military commanders as well as deadly plagues.¹²³ The Spartans go on to argue that, if the Athenians make peace now, while they enjoy good fortune, they will receive honor for their successes in the war, but if they decline to make peace, they will lose that honor. They warn the Athenians, "if you are not persuaded by us and then suffer a setback, which is possible in many ways, it will be believed that your present successes have been won by fortune. But it is possible for you, without danger, to leave behind in the future a reputation for strength and sagacity" (4.18.5). The Spartans suggest here that the Athenians will retain the honor that they have received for their success in war if they make peace now, before they suffer misfortune. But the Spartans also imply that the honor the Athenians receive for their success is unwarranted. Their success, as is true of all successes in war, is due not to sagacity and strength but to fortune.¹²⁴ If the Athenians decline to make peace now, and suffer misfortune in the future, as they inevitably will, people will think that the Athenians' earlier successes were due to fortune and, according to the Spartans, they will be right to think so.

Fortune, however, is not simply all powerful, according to the Spartans. It is not within our power to win victories for ourselves through ingenuity and determination. Those victories are due to fortune. But it is within our power either to "act hubristically" in good fortune and to "grasp for more," or to recognize the fragility of good fortune, to see that our good fortune may not continue, and therefore to act moderately and justly while we enjoy it:

Moderate men treat their goods safely with a view to what is uncertain (and the same men bear themselves with better sagacity in adversity) and they believe that the war will be, not limited to the part that someone would wish to take up, but as the fortunes will lead them; and such men would be least likely to blunder, because they would not trust in their present success, but would especially come to terms when lifted up in good fortune.¹²⁵

¹²³ Archidamus remarks in his first speech that "the fortunes that befall us are not discernible by reason" (1.84.3). See Jaffe 2017, 111–112.

¹²⁴ Consider Edmunds 1975, 91. ¹²⁵ 4.18.2, 4.17.4, 4.18.4.

Therefore, rather than continue to wage war in the hope that their good fortune will persist, the Athenians should pursue the genuinely sagacious, moderate, and just course of recognizing the fleeting character of good fortune, reining in their selfish greed, and benefiting others as well as themselves by bringing about “a cessation of evils for the rest of the Greeks” and making peace (4.20.2). It is up to fortune whether or not humans succeed in war, but it is up to humans whether or not they act greedily and arrogantly in success and continue to wage war or whether they act moderately in success and make peace.

The Spartans indicate here that fortune is not, in their view, identical to blind chance. Fortunes “lead” human beings (4.18.4), but not in a random way. For fortune evidently tests the moral character of human beings. Good fortune comes to us to determine whether we will respond by indulging in pride, believing falsely that we have created our good fortune through our own sagacity and strength, and in hope, that we will continue to succeed in the future, and hence to determine whether we will be guilty of hubris, or whether we will resist the temptation to indulge in such pride and such hope, remember that our good fortune is not due to ourselves, and act in such a way that all will benefit. Moreover, the Spartans contend that such noble and just behavior will inspire “virtue,” “gratitude,” and “honor” from other human beings, and that these will prove, not fragile goods for the peacemakers, as continued military success would be for those who continue war, but lasting rewards (4.19.2–20.4). In this way, the Spartans intimate that fortune is purposeful, that it smiles on the just and the moderate, as it frowns on the hubristic and greedy. In other words, fortune, they intimate here, is identical to the divine. The Spartans only intimate the identity of fortune with the divine, partly because of their seemingly areligious Athenian audience but also partly because the Spartans here are wary of presuming to know too confidently the will of the gods. They evidently presumed heretofore that, insofar as they were fighting for the freedom of the Greeks, the gods were on their side, and they were evidently heartened in this belief by the Delphic Oracle’s apparent endorsement and by the plague. But now their sharp setback at Pylos leads them to conclude that they themselves overreached in their confidence that they understood the will of the gods. Perhaps they violated the peace treaty and that violation is decisive in the eyes of the gods. Perhaps that violation evinces a kind of hubris, a presumption that they knew that justice means fighting for the freedom of the Greeks rather than obeying such laws as peace treaties, and that they knew the gods would back them. To be sure, the Spartans

do not lose their faith that the gods are just. Later in the war, Thucydides contends that they are “zealous” in fighting because they are convinced that the Athenians violated the peace treaty and now will be punished by the gods as the Spartans were in the past (7.18.3). But, in their understanding, that faith is or should somehow be tempered by their recognition of how mysterious the gods can be. The speech of the Spartans at Athens suggests that what enables the Spartans to be moderate in prosperity, when they are moderate in prosperity, is their awareness of the power of gods and their awareness of their own limited understanding of how the gods may wield that power (8.24.4).

When the Athenians reject the peace offer of the Spartans, the Spartans proceed to suffer a defeat on the island of Sphacteria at Pylos, the capture of 292 men there, and the further loss of the island of Cythera. The Spartans are at first convinced that the overwhelming power of the gods, as expressed by fortune, has decisively turned against them:

At the same time the blows from fortune, so many and coming close together and beyond reason, caused them the greatest stupefaction, and they feared lest a disaster should again come upon them by fortune, like the one on the island. And they were consequently even more lacking in daring in the battles, and they were supposing that whatever move they should make would fail, because, unaccustomed to suffering evils, they lost confidence in their judgment. (4.55.3–4)

However, the belief of the Spartans and their allies that their cause is just eventually appears to recover and grow thereafter. The Boeotians and Brasidas inflict severe defeats on the Athenians, defeats that the Spartans would presumably interpret as divine punishments for the Athenians’ greediness and hubris in the midst of their good fortune. Indeed, Thucydides’ narrative describes the Athenians as rejecting the Spartan peace offer because “they were grasping for more” (4.21.2), and as possibly showing themselves guilty of a certain overconfidence in their sagacity, if not hubris, in their exceedingly complicated campaign to conquer Boeotia and in their fortification of the temple at Delium in particular. Nevertheless, even though Brasidas clearly embraces the belief that justice means fighting for the liberation of the Greeks rather than obeying such laws as peace treaties and truces – going so far as to violate the truce with the Athenians sworn to by the Spartans when he encourages the Scioneans and the Mendeans to revolt – the Spartans evidently continue to believe that the gods deemed them guilty of violating the peace treaty by starting the war, and punished them with their defeats at Pylos, and therefore seek

to restore peace with Athens at the earliest convenience.¹²⁶ And later, as we have seen, the Spartans return to fighting Athens zealously only when they are convinced that the Athenians are beginning to lose the war – a change that the Spartans would seem to attribute to the gods; that the Athenians have violated the peace treaty with Sparta; and that therefore the Spartans may wage war confident in the justice and piety of their cause (7.18.2–3). In Thucydides' account, Spartan piety strives to combine a belief in the justice of the gods with a belief that the gods are in large measure beyond comprehension, but his overall account suggests that, ultimately, the Spartan belief in the justice of the gods and their belief that they can, in the end, understand that justice are more fundamental to their piety than their belief in the mystery of the gods.

The final expression of the Spartan understanding of humanity and divinity in the book is by Nicias, the leading supporter of peace with Sparta and the Athenian “most friendly” to the Spartans; the leading opponent of the Athenian expedition to conquer Sicily and the reluctant commander of the Athenians in Sicily; and a man who, by his own account, has “spent his life in many lawful services to the gods and many just acts, not provocative of jealousy, toward human beings.”¹²⁷ In his final speech, Nicias offers his own understanding of the justice and the mystery of the gods. In that speech, which takes place after the Athenians have suffered two decisive defeats at the hands of the Syracusans and are withdrawing from Syracuse in the hope of avoiding the annihilation of the army, Nicias attempts to encourage his soldiers by arguing that it is now reasonable for them to hope for a miraculous intervention by the gods to save them from destruction. He explains that their “enemies have enjoyed sufficient good fortune” and the Athenians “have now suffered evils beyond what you deserve” (7.77.1–3). This, Nicias contends, is especially true of himself, who has lived his life in lawful obedience to the gods, when he enjoyed a good fortune that might well have tempted him to succumb to hubris. While the Athenians may well have deserved the “jealousy” of the gods, now that they “have already suffered enough of their vengeance,” they now “are more deserving of pity from them than jealousy” (7.77.3–4). Therefore it is reasonable for the Athenians to place their hopes for salvation in the gods.

What is striking about Nicias' speech is that his attempt to balance a confident faith in divine justice with a cautious awareness of the mystery of

¹²⁶ 4.108.6–7, 4.117–123.

¹²⁷ 5.16.1, 7.86.3, 6.8.4, 7.77.2.

the gods inclines so heavily toward confidence. It is true that, on the one hand, by using nonmoral language in describing the gods, as beings who are jealous and pitying rather than just, he acknowledges that, in human eyes, the gods' justice is not readily intelligible because it resembles more the inconstant human passions of jealousy and pity than the constancy and clarity of wise and just judgment. But, on the other hand, he claims confidently to know what humans deserve from the gods – what their just deserts would be from beings who are just – and to know the nature of the gods – they are just beings who will reward and punish human beings according to their desert. Similarly, when an eclipse of the moon occurs earlier, just as the Athenians are initially planning to withdraw from their camp at Syracuse, Nicias does not consider it as an entirely or even partially mysterious sign from the gods but acts on the firm conviction that the prophets accompanying his army know the will of the gods (7.50.4).¹²⁸ The example of Nicias suggests that, notwithstanding the pious belief that the will and justice of the gods are beyond our full comprehension, pious human beings will inevitably incline toward the hopeful belief that either they themselves or authoritative spokesmen for the gods do indeed know the justice and the will of the gods.

The attempt to combine a confident faith in the justice of the gods with a cautious and humble recognition of the mystery of the gods is a hallmark of the pious outlook in Thucydides' book. At its best such a combination would appear to result in a just devotion to the good of others and moderation in prosperity, as the overall examples of Brasidas and the Spartans might appear to suggest. On the other hand, as the example of Nicias shows, such a pious outlook risks engendering an unwarranted belief that one knows the justice and will of the gods, an overconfident over-reliance on the gods, and a self-destructive hope that the gods will miraculously intervene to save humans from destruction when they might have saved themselves through their own efforts. When Nicias decides to lead the Athenian armed forces away from Syracuse, he acts on the basis of his own rational understanding of the military situation he faces in order to save them and himself from destruction. Once the eclipse of the moon takes place, however, Nicias subordinates his reason to his piety, and acts

¹²⁸ Both Pouncey (1980, 126) and Connor (1984, 194n27, 199n39) stress that the Athenian soldiers themselves interpret the eclipse as a sign from the gods and urge Nicias to delay in the withdrawal, but it is important to note that, according to Thucydides, it is Nicias alone who insisted on following the prophets' interpretation calling for a delay of twenty-seven days and who insisted that "there would be no deliberation" at all about a withdrawal in the meantime.

without hesitation in the pious conviction that the prophets accompanying his army properly understand the eclipse as a divine command to halt the withdrawal for twenty-seven days, and in the pious hope that the gods will intervene to save the Athenians, who have suffered enough, and punish their enemies, who have experienced sufficient good fortune. As a result of this momentous delay, the Athenian armament in Sicily is destroyed. The case of the pious Nicias, along with the case of the pious Melians, who also act, in vain, in the hope of salvation from the gods, invites the reader to wonder whether the pious outlook of Sparta and its allies leads human beings less to justice and moderation than to needless suffering and ruin.

CHAPTER 5

The Case against Sparta

The Weakness of Justice

Is the Victory of Sparta a Victory for Justice?

Thucydides' account of the demise of the Athenian expedition to conquer Sicily appears to vindicate the Spartans' understanding of that which is human, that is, of the fundamental character and condition of human beings, as one according to which we are morally free beings who are ruled by just gods. In response to the attempt of the Athenians to conquer and enslave Sicily, the Spartans send vital aid to the island, challenge Athens directly by establishing a fort on its territory, and thereby fight for the freedom of the Greeks. These deeds are rewarded with resounding success, a success that seems eminently just. In the last speech by a Spartan in the book, after the first Syracusan and Peloponnesian naval victory over the Athenians and just before their second one, Gylippus, along with his fellow commanders, explains to their forces:

For the Athenians came to this land to enslave first Sicily, then, if they succeeded, the Peloponnesus and the rest of Greece, after already acquiring the greatest empire possessed by any Greeks, present or past. But you were the first human beings to withstand their navy – which has subjugated all – you have already been victorious in naval battles, and you will now, in all likelihood, be victorious again. (7.66.2)

As Thucydides puts it, after the second naval defeat of Athens and on the eve of the final destruction of the Athenian armament: “For this was the greatest reverse that came to pass for a Greek army: coming to enslave others, it came to pass that they were instead going away afraid lest they themselves suffer this very thing” (7.75.7). The would-be conquerors and enslavers are themselves conquered at Sicily, and this morally satisfying outcome would seem to reflect the support of the gods who, for example, helpfully cause an eclipse of the moon that paralyzes the Athenians at a

critical moment, prompts them to delay the withdrawal that might have saved them, and thereby seals their doom (7.50.4). As the Spartan colonists on Melos declare in response to an earlier Athenian effort to conquer and enslave an island, they have faith that the gods will aid them “because we stand here as pious men against men who are not just” (5.104). At Sicily that faith appears vindicated. Even the Athenian commander Nicias suggests that the crushing defeats suffered by the Athenians in Sicily constitute a divine punishment of imperial Athens (7.77.3). The triumph of Sparta and its allies over Athens would seem, then, to constitute the triumph of freedom over enslavement, justice over injustice, and piety over impiety.

At the very conclusion of his account of the defeat of the Athenians on Sicily, Thucydides makes a remarkable claim in praise of Sparta and its Syracusan allies:

This happened to be the greatest Greek deed of this war, and, in my opinion, of those that we know of from hearsay among the Greeks – with the greatest splendor [λαμπρότατος] for those who prevailed and the greatest misfortune for those brought to ruin. For being completely vanquished in every way, and suffering an unmitigated evil, with a complete destruction, as it is said, their army and ships perished, and few of the many returned home. These were the events in Sicily. (7.87.5–6)

Thucydides here offers what would seem to be the greatest praise of Sparta and its Syracusan allies in his book. Their achievement in defeating the Athenians in Sicily dwarfs not only all the deeds in the Peloponnesian War but all the great deeds ever accomplished by the Greek people in their past: for example, the Greek victory in the Trojan War, and especially, what Thucydides has described as the “the greatest of the previous deeds” – the victory by the Greeks over the Persian Empire (1.23.1). Through their victory in Sicily, Sparta and its Syracusan allies have achieved a grandeur and splendor surpassing such triumphs over Persia as that of Plataea, hailed by the Plataeans as “most splendid [λαμπρότατος]”; surpassing the “present splendor [λαμπρότης]” of Athens that will be left “in everlasting remembrance” according to Pericles in his final speech; and surpassing the “splendor [λαμπρότης]” of what Thucydides himself had called “the greatest voyage,” launched with “the greatest hope” – the Sicilian Expedition itself.¹

Yet Thucydides’ claim here is, at first glance, baffling. Militarily, the Greek victory over Persia was unquestionably a greater achievement,

¹ 3.59.2, 2.64.5, 6.31.6.

inasmuch as the Greeks defeated a much more powerful adversary than Athens, and did so by means of a series of such impressive victories as those of Marathon, Salamis, Plataea, and Eurymedon. At Eurymedon, for example, the Athenians vanquished the Persians on sea and land in a single day, and captured and sank up to 200 ships of the Persian fleet, a number greater than that of the Athenian ships captured and sunk at Syracuse.² One might argue that the victory by Sparta and its allies over Athens at Sicily was more conclusive than the victory by the Greeks over Persia, since that victory left the vast Persian Empire more or less intact, while Athens, as Thucydides stresses here, suffered an apparently complete and thorough defeat. Yet the Greek victory at Troy was more conclusive, ending as it did with the destruction of that city, whereas Athens, as Thucydides goes on to narrate, not only survived the end of the Peloponnesian War but kept fighting after the Sicilian disaster for some eight more years.

Might the victory of Sparta and its allies in Sicily have been the greatest Greek deed because of its moral greatness? By decisively crushing the Athenian Empire aiming to conquer and enslave Sicily, the Peloponnesians and Syracusans strike a decisive blow for the freedom of the Greeks. Yet the Greek victory over Persia might seem to be a morally greater achievement because it was a victory achieved by a (more or less) united Greece against an empire that sought to conquer and enslave all the Greeks, Athens and Sparta alike.

The greatness of the victory of Sparta and its allies over Athens in Sicily would seem to lie most clearly in its theoretical significance, just as the overall greatness of the war between Sparta and Athens lies in its theoretical significance. As we have seen, this war marks a clash between two fundamentally different understandings of the character and condition of human beings. Are we human beings morally free and ruled by just gods, as the pious Spartans contend? Or are we compelled by our natures to care above all for our own well-being, and left on our own to care for ourselves through our reason and our enterprise, as the enlightened, Themistoclean and Periclean Athenians contend? The victory of the Greeks over the Persian Empire does not apparently vindicate a particular understanding of the human condition precisely because that victory was won by an alliance of Sparta and Athens and it is not clear which city played the decisive role: Was it the daring, zeal, and sagacity of the Athenians led by Themistocles, as the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta

² See 1.100.1, 7.60.4, 7.70.4, 7.71.5–72.3. See as well 1.73.4–74.4, 2.71.2–72.1, 3.54.1–4, 3.59.2.

contend, that were primarily responsible for the defeat of Persia (1.74)? Or was it the justice and piety of the Spartans, led by Pausanias and aided by the gods led by Zeus the Liberator, that were primarily responsible (2.71.2–4)? The conflict in Sicily might seem greater insofar as it is more clarifying and hence more instructive: It apparently pits these two world-views against one another, the righteous and godly Spartans and their allies against the daring, sagacious, and areligious Athenians. Therefore the defeat of Athens in Sicily might seem to be the greatest Greek achievement because it might seem to constitute the clearest vindication of the truth of the Spartan outlook concerning the human and the divine against the outlook of enlightened Athens. Thanks to the justice of their cause and thanks to the just gods, it might seem, the Spartans and their allies triumph over the unjust and impious Athenians.

But is the triumph of Sparta and its allies at Sicily truly a triumph of justice and therefore a triumph supported by gods? In the final section of his book, from the Athenian response to the Sicilian disaster to the imminent reconciliation between the Persian satrap Tissaphernes and Sparta at the very end of the book, Thucydides encourages the reader to reconsider the justice of Sparta, and thereby to reconsider the soundness of the Spartan understanding of that which is human (8.1–109). In the first place, this section challenges the apparent finality of the Athenian defeat at Sicily. The Athenians continue to fight, the Spartans' lack of daring prevents them on one crucial occasion from ending the war there and then, and the book almost ends with a notable Athenian naval victory.³ However, Thucydides has already told us that the Spartans did eventually win the war.⁴ Whatever setbacks they experienced and mistakes they made, their strength was at least sufficient to defeat Athens. Therefore, the key question the end of the book bids us to consider is, what is the moral, and therewith the religious, significance of the Spartan victory?

The end of the book reveals that the triumph of Sparta will not entail the liberation of the Greeks from imperial subjugation. For, after the defeat of the Athenians on Sicily, Sparta becomes an ally of the Persian Empire, the historic enemy of Greek freedom.⁵ Sparta signs and swears to an agreement that recognizes the right of the Persian Empire to all the Greek lands it conquered in the past, thereby agreeing in principle – as the Spartan Lichas indignantly points out – to the re-enslavement of much of

³ 8.96.4–5, 8.101–106. ⁴ 2.65.12, 5.26.1, 6.15.2–4.

⁵ 8.5.4–6.2, 8.12.2, 8.17.4–19.1, 8.36–37, 8.43.2–4, 8.52, 8.57.2–59.

Greece.⁶ Sparta's ally Syracuse also helps to crush a rebellion against the Persian Empire.⁷ What is more, Thucydides informs us here, for the first time in the book, that, along, with Chios, Sparta had the largest number of slaves of any political community in Greece (8.40.2).⁸ The book ends with the incipient renewal of the alliance between Sparta and the Persian Empire, an alliance which, we learned earlier, led to the final victory of Sparta (2.65.12). Given this alliance, and given the exceptional importance of slavery in Spartan society, how can its victory signify the just victory of freedom? And do the gods, then, truly stand behind that victory?

One might defend the justice of the Spartan victory by denying that justice simply means benefiting the Greeks by liberating them. As we have seen, the Spartans also understand justice to mean following the laws they have sworn to obey, both at home and abroad. They begin the war apparently convinced that justice meant primarily fighting for the freedom of the Greeks, even if that entailed violating the peace treaty with Athens, and they consequently believe that the gods support that conviction. But as the war proceeds, especially after their defeat at Pylos, they come to believe that justice means primarily upholding the law and they consequently believe that the gods support that belief (7.18.2–3).⁹ It is, however, true that, throughout the war, they evince both beliefs. Even in the first part of the war, King Archidamus and the Spartan ambassadors at Athens point to their belief that justice means obeying the treaty with Athens.¹⁰ And even in the second part of the war, after the Peace of Nicias, Gylippus speaks of fighting to prevent the enslavement of Sicily and Lichas condemns the alliance with Persia on the grounds that it sacrifices the freedom of the Greeks.¹¹ The Spartans then have two distinct understandings of justice, both of which they retain throughout the war.

Thucydides' narrative as a whole suggests that it is reasonable for the Spartans to embrace each understanding of justice because there is a strong case for each understanding. The goal of benefiting others by fighting for their freedom seems eminently noble. Thucydides' book as a whole bears powerful witness to the goodness of political freedom, inasmuch as the great speeches in the book are the expression of free political life, where humans may publicly reflect on and debate great questions of peace and war, justice and self-interest. What is more, Brasidas' campaign for the freedom of others, to the extent of dying for others, might seem the peak of

⁶ 8.37; see 8.43.3, 8.52. ⁷ 8.28.2–4; see 8.5.5.

⁸ In Nichols's words, "Sparta is not simply free of tyrants" (2015, 5).

⁹ See Chapter 4, pp. 169–173. ¹⁰ See 1.84.3–85.2, 2.74.2, 4.20.2. ¹¹ 7.66.2, 8.37.

justice in the book. It therefore seems fitting that Thucydides apparently singles out Brasidas as the only individual in the book he calls “just” and that Brasidas alone is crowned by Greeks as “the liberator of Greece.”¹²

On the other hand, Thucydides’ book, most emphatically in his account of stasis, highlights the importance of law by describing how a collapse of law leads not only to death and destruction but to the descent of humans into a savage enjoyment of inflicting harm against others. Accordingly, Thucydides suggests in that account that justice should be identified with adherence to law: “Life in the city being thrown into confusion at this time, human nature, which is accustomed to acting unjustly against the laws, held sway over the laws; it showed itself glad in its lacking sway over anger, mightier than justice, and an enemy to whatever is preeminent” (3.84.2). The rule of law would seem fundamental to even a minimally humane existence. It would also seem fundamental to freedom itself, since the absence of law may lead, not only to factional strife but to tyranny and therewith the enslavement of all. Accordingly, Thucydides praises Sparta both for living under good laws and always being free from tyranny (1.18.1). Thucydides’ book as a whole, then, offers powerful support both for the Spartan belief that justice means benefiting others by fighting for their freedom and for the Spartan belief that justice means obeying the law.

However, as Thucydides’ book shows, these two beliefs necessarily tend to come into conflict with one another. The belief that justice means fighting for the freedom of others evidently impels the Spartans to violate the law governing their relations with Athens – the peace treaty – in order to reverse the Athenians’ subjugation of their imperial subjects in, for example, Potidaea.¹³ And once war breaks out, it penetrates political communities in the form of factional strife, and obedience to law gives way to violence. For inasmuch as war is “a violent teacher,” it is a teacher of violence and hence a teacher of lawlessness (3.82.2). Insofar as Thucydides’ book bears witness to the horrors of war – most memorably in its account of the “savage factional strife,” but also in its accounts of the butchery of school children in Mycalessus and the Athenians’ abandonment of their wounded at Sicily – it highlights how precious the rule of law is and thereby supports the belief that justice means obedience to the law.¹⁴ More broadly, insofar as peace is characterized by the rule of laws in the form of treaties, Thucydides’ narrative links justice with the cause of peace. It is therefore not surprising that the individual in the book who is most

¹² 4.81.2, 4.121.1. ¹³ See 1.56.2–58.1, 1.67, 1.79.2, 1.81.5, 1.83.3–1.85.2.

¹⁴ 3.82.1, 3.84.1, 7.29–30, 7.75.2–6.

clearly a champion of peace, Nicias, is apparently praised by Thucydides for having what is believed conventionally or lawfully to be virtue.¹⁵

On the other hand, the belief that justice means obeying the law and therefore working for peace leads the Spartans to betray the Greek cities subject to Athenian imperial rule to whom Brasidas promised freedom and who consequently revolted from Athens. Those cities are exposed to the merciless reprisals of the Athenians and Scione, the city that revolted against Athens in clear violation of the legal agreement between Athens and Sparta, suffers the “savage” destruction at the hands of the Athenians that Mytilene escaped.¹⁶ Moreover, as we see in the final section of the book, according to their legal agreement made with Persia, the Spartans recognize the right of Persia to reconquer and re-enslave much of Greece. The Spartan belief in justice, then, is beset with an inner contradiction, between the bellicose cause of benefiting others through liberation and the pacific cause of replacing the strength of arms with the rule of law, between opposing the savagery of tyranny and opposing the savagery of war.¹⁷ One may see this contradiction in the case of the Spartan Lichas.¹⁸ On the one hand, animated by the identification of justice with the liberation of the Greeks, he is outraged by the treaty according to which Persia may reconquer and re-enslave much of Greece (8.43.3):

he declared that neither the treaties of Chalcideus nor of Therimenes were composed in a noble manner, but it would be terrible if, as many territories as the King and his ancestors ruled in the past, he would now be deemed deserving of ruling over as well; for it would even be possible for him to enslave all the islands again and Thessaly and Locris and everywhere up to Boeotia, and instead of freedom the Spartans would confer upon the Greeks Persian rule.

On the other hand, evidently animated by the belief that justice means adherence to law, Lichas demands that, in accordance with the agreement made with Persia (8.58.2), the Greek “Milesians and others in the land of the King [of Persia] ought even to serve [the Persian satrap] Tissaphernes as

¹⁵ 5.16.1, 5.43–46, 6.9–14, 6.47, 7.86.3–5.

¹⁶ 4.81.2, 4.117, 4.120–122, 4.122.6, 4.130, 5.32.1, 3.36.4.

¹⁷ Of the three appearances of the word “savage” in the book, one refers to the “savage” destruction that the Athenians almost inflict on Mytilene (3.36.4) and do later inflict on Scione and Melos and two refer to the “savage” killings in the factional strife that engulfed Greece (3.82.1, 3.84.1).

¹⁸ Consider Connor 1984, 219.

slaves, in a measured way, and to attend to him, until they had brought the war to a good conclusion" (8.84.5).

Insofar as the Spartan understanding of justice is contradictory, it is impossible for there to be a triumph of justice in the war. For to the extent that the war results in a peace treaty which all obey, it seems inevitable that the cause of freedom will at least to some extent be sacrificed. But to the extent that the war is fought on to benefit others by fighting for their freedom, the violence and resultant lawlessness would inevitably persist. The problem of justice is that the desire to benefit others inevitably threatens the existing order enshrined by the rule of law, but the rule of law inevitably entails harm to those who suffer under the existing order. The failure of a Spartan victory to achieve justice, then, is due not merely to the failings of the Spartans but to the problematic character of justice itself, at least as they understand it. Even were they to continue to fight for the just cause of the freedom of the Greeks oppressed after the war by Persia rather than Athens, the ensuing conflict would fuel the injustice of lawlessness within Greece. But insofar as they triumph over Athens in alliance with Persia, the resultant legal order will at least entail the ongoing enslavement of Persia's Greek subjects.

The problem of justice thus understood has theological implications. Do the gods support and enforce the belief that justice means the liberation of the Greeks, as the Spartans in the Persian War believed that Zeus the Liberator did, the Spartans at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War believed that Apollo did, the Boeotians at Delium believed Apollo did, and Brasidas believed Athena did?¹⁹ Or do the gods support and enforce the belief that justice means obeying the law, as the Spartans believed that Poseidon did when he punished them for violating the laws of sanctuary with a great earthquake and as they evidently believed that the gods did when inflicting the defeat of Pylos upon them for violating the peace treaty with Athens?²⁰ The problem here is not one of polytheism but of the complex, problematic, contradictory character of justice itself. If justice itself is contradictory, then a simply just rule is not possible, either for humans or gods. Therefore, the triumph of Sparta is not, and cannot be, a triumph of justice.

A defender of Sparta might argue that, even if the triumph of Sparta over Athens does not represent a triumph of the just cause of liberating the Greeks, it does at least signify a vindication of the rule of law and the belief

¹⁹ 2.71.2-4, 1.118.3, 4.92.7, 4.115-116.

²⁰ 1.128.1, 4.55, 7.18.2.

that justice means above all the adherence to law. For, as the Spartans believe, they themselves had violated the peace treaty with Athens in the first part of the war, for two reasons: Their Theban allies attacked Plataea while the peace treaty was in force and, even though the peace treaty required that no one should take up arms as long as the other side was willing to go to judicial arbitration to settle their disputes, as the Athenians were willing to do, the Spartans invaded Attica nonetheless. Therefore, the Spartans believed, “in the previous war the violation of law [τὸ παρανόμημα] was indeed more on their side.” Accordingly, it was reasonable that they suffered their defeat at Pylos, apparently as a divine punishment for their injustice (7.18.2). In the second part of the war, however, the Spartans believe that it is the Athenians who are violating the peace treaty, for two reasons: They are raiding the outlying territories of Sparta at Epidaurus Limera, Prasiae, and Pylos; and they are refusing to go to judicial arbitration to settle their disputes, even though the Spartans are willing to do so. The Spartans therefore believe that Athens is now guilty of a “violation of law” and, emboldened by the belief that justice and the gods are now on their side, the Spartans are “zealous” in their prosecution of the war and consequently not only send aid to their allies in Sicily but invade Attica as early as possible and establish a permanent fort on Athenian territory, eleven miles from Athens (7.18.3). In their understanding, then, the Spartans are fighting for justice in the second part of the war, to punish the Athenians for transgressing the peace treaty, and therefore their final victory is a victory of justice.

But is it true that it was the Athenians rather than the Spartans who violated the peace treaty in the second part of the war? Although the Spartans claim that they, but not the Athenians, are willing to submit their disputes to judicial arbitration, Thucydides’ narrative is silent about any efforts by either the Athenians or the Spartans to go to arbitration after they make peace in the tenth year of the war. In contrast, in the case of the beginning of the war, Thucydides – especially through the speeches he presents of the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, King Archidamus, and Pericles – explicitly mentions the willingness of the Athenians to submit to arbitration half a dozen times.²¹ Thucydides does explicitly state that, when the Spartans invaded Argos and the Athenians sent thirty ships to assist the Argives, “they violated the treaty with the Spartans in a most manifest way” by attacking the Spartan territories of Epidaurus Limera and Prasiae, and

²¹ 1.78.4, 1.85.2, 1.140.2, 1.141.2, 1.144.2, 1.145.

thereby – he adds – “they brought it about that the Spartans, with a far better pretext, had cause to defend themselves against the Athenians” (6.105). Yet, in Thucydides’ narrative, the “most manifest [φανερώτατα]” Athenian violation of the treaty here comes after the Spartans have already resolved “to wage war outright more manifestly [φανερώτερον]” and hence to violate the treaty by invading Attica and fortifying Deceleia.²² Thucydides explicitly states in his own name that neither side complied with the terms of the treaty (5.26.2). What is more, Thucydides suggests that it may well have been Sparta, and not Athens, who first took up arms against its opponent in what would seem to be a clear violation of the treaty against doing so (5.18.4). For he states of both sides, quite specifically, that “for six years and ten months they refrained from sending armies into each other’s land” (5.25.3). Now, since Thucydides states that the peace treaty was signed at the beginning of the summer of the eleventh year of the war, six years and ten months later would apparently take us to the winter of the seventeenth year of the war, when, at the urging of Alcibiades, the Spartans resolve to invade Attica and fortify Deceleia, rather than the summer of the eighteenth year of the war, when the Athenian ships attacked the outlying Spartan territories.²³ It would therefore seem that it was the Spartans who first clearly violate the peace treaty by preparing to invade the territory of the Athenians and then proceeding to do so. Thucydides thereby implicitly raises the question, do the Spartans deceive themselves into believing that they did not violate the peace treaty at the beginning of the second part of the war, just as they – with the notable exception of Archidamus – deceived themselves that they did not violate the peace treaty at the beginning of the war?²⁴

Thucydides, however, does not blame the Spartans for violating the peace treaties – that is, the laws – in either case, because, in his view, they had no choice but to do so: They were “compelled.” With regard to the opening of the war, Thucydides states, “For I hold that the truest pretext, though it was least manifest in speech, was that the Athenians, by growing great and inspiring fear in the Spartans, compelled them to go to war” (1.23.6). In the case of the second part of the war, he remarks of both sides that, after refraining from attacking each other’s land for six years and ten months but doing as much harm to one another as they could in other ways, “they were compelled to break the treaty concluded after ten years and again waged open war” (5.25.3). With regard to the Spartans, Thucydides suggests that they were compelled to violate the treaties in

²² 6.105.1, 6.91.5, 6.92.5–93. ²³ 5.24.2, 6.93, 6.105. See 6.91.5–7, 7.19.1–2.

²⁴ 1.81.5, 1.83.3, 1.85.2. Consider 1.118.3, 123.2.

both cases by their fear of the growth of the Athenian Empire – already dominant in Eastern Greece – toward the west, thereby encircling Sparta, as was manifested most clearly first by the Athenian alliance with the western Greek island of Corcyra and then by the Athenian expedition to conquer the further western island of Sicily.²⁵ But by stating that the Athenians, too, were compelled to violate the peace treaty at the beginning of the second part of the war, Thucydides suggests that they were compelled not merely by fear but by their desire for more land, power, and glory. In these two passages, Thucydides suggests that, contrary to the Spartans' belief, human beings are not morally free, since they are compelled, presumably by their nature, to follow their self-interest. The Spartan triumph over Athens, then, is not and cannot be a triumph of justice because justice is weak in the nature of human beings. It always yields to the power of self-interest, as the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Diodotus have contended.²⁶ In these passages, then, Thucydides suggests that the triumph of Sparta over Athens signifies neither the triumph of justice nor the vindication of the Spartan understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings but, rather, the vindication of the Athenian contention that we human beings are compelled by our nature to pursue what we regard as our self-interest. But what is the argument for this understanding of human nature? That argument is presented most clearly by the Athenian ambassadors at Melos.

Melian Dialogue I: The Moral Nadir of Athens

The deeds and speeches of the Athenians at Melos would seem to constitute the moral nadir of Athens in the book. Not only do the Athenians commit the “savage” deed at Melos that they recoiled from committing at Mytilene by destroying an entire city – those who opposed them and those who did not, killing all the adult males and enslaving the women and children – but they do so without any pretense of justice or legality, since Melos was not, like Mytilene or Scione, a city that revolted against Athens even though it had legally agreed to be a member, ostensibly an “ally,” of the Athenian Empire.²⁷ Melos was a Spartan colony that had been neutral throughout the war. The Athenians do not even claim that they have any legal or moral right to subjugate the island but apparently dismiss any such claims as “incredible,” at least for those who are “knowers”:

²⁵ See especially 6.90–93.1, 7.66.2. ²⁶ 1.75.3–76.2, 3.45.4–7.

²⁷ 3.36.4. Compare 3.9.1 (see also 4.60.1) and 4.120–122 with 5.84.2, 5.94, 5.96.

Accordingly, we for our part will not present long speeches that are incredible, with noble phrases, that we justly hold our empire because we overthrew the Persians, or that we are now attacking because we have suffered injustice. Nor do we expect that you suppose that you will persuade us that you did not join us in the war effort because you are colonists of the Spartans, or that you have done us no injustice; but we expect that your concern is with what it is possible to accomplish, on the basis of what each of us truly thinks, as knowers speaking with knowers – that justice, in human reasoning, is judged to be the result of an equal compulsion, while the superior do what they can, and the weak give way. (5.89)

The Athenians here contend that justice is primarily a consequence of power and that it is reasonable to take it under consideration only when both sides in a conflict are equally powerful and therefore neither can simply take what it wants but both must come to an agreement that is mutually beneficial. Given the imbalance of power between Athens and Melos, the Athenians have no need, by their own lights, to consider justice. They seek to subjugate the island because they have the power to do so and it is “for the benefit . . . of our empire” to do so (5.91.2). In the course of attempting to persuade the Melians to surrender without fighting, the Athenian ambassadors repeatedly threaten the Melians with “suffering the most terrible things,” namely, destruction.²⁸ When the oligarchs of Melos refuse to yield, the Athenians first conquer the island and then execute not only those few but all of the adult male citizens.²⁹ In their open dismissal of legal and moral concerns and in their wholesale destruction of Melos, the Athenians would seem to represent a moral decline from Pericles, who stresses the adherence of Athens to the peace treaty even on the eve of war; from Diodotus, who argues effectively for reversing the “savage” decision to destroy the rebellious city of Mytilene; and even, perhaps, from the violent Cleon, inasmuch as he does give at least some consideration to moral and legal concerns.³⁰ And yet, as we will see, the Athenian ambassadors at Melos also present the clearest case in the book for the Athenian understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings and the clearest challenge to the Spartan understanding.³¹

²⁸ 5.93. See 5.87, 5.91, 5.101, 5.111.2. ²⁹ 5.84.3, 5.116.4.

³⁰ See 1.140.2, 1.141.1, 1.144.2, 1.145, 3.46–49, 3.37.3, 3.38.1, 3.39.1, 3.39.6. Finley goes so far as to assert that in “this, the terrible Melian Dialogue,” Athens emerges “as frankly and simply the tyrant city” and that “the nature of both the dialogue and the punishments casts a baleful light on the leaders and people of Athens as a whole” (1942, 209, 212).

³¹ Bruell notes that “the slaughter [of the Melians] is not required by the dialogue” (1974, 16) and Bolotin points out that “the killings, and even the ambassadors’ own threats of

To be sure, Thucydides does not present the Athenian ambassadors at Melos as wise human beings, or even as human beings who are consistent in their thinking. Their very choice to engage in a dialogue with the Melian oligarchs evidently reflects a contradiction in their overall approach to the Melians. Their goal at Melos, as they state, is to gain control of the island through persuasion, “without trouble, so that you may be preserved in a way that is useful for us both” in order that “you would submit before suffering the most terrible things and we would profit by not destroying you.”³² Yet, if this alone were the Athenians’ goal, it would seem reasonable for them to insist on speaking not to the oligarchs alone but to the multitude, who, according to the ambassadors, “would be deceived by us through hearing in an uninterrupted oration seductive and unrefuted things” and who, according to Diodotus, are “in all the cities well disposed” toward the democratic Athenians.³³ Why do the Athenian ambassadors agree to speak only to the oligarchs? What is more, given that they do speak to the oligarchs, it would seem reasonable for them to present to the oligarchs themselves “in an uninterrupted oration seductive and unrefuted things.” Instead they instruct the oligarchs to adopt the following “safer” procedure so as to avoid being deceived by the Athenians: “Regarding each point, do not, for your part, answer in a single speech, but, instead, by interrupting right away when something is said that is not satisfactory” (5.85). The Athenians propose here, instead of giving a deceptive speech to a friendly and gullible multitude, to engage in a logically rigorous and transparent dialogue with unfriendly and less gullible oligarchs. Why do they choose what would seem to be this more difficult and challenging path to achieving their goal of inducing the Melians to submit to their rule?

The Athenians’ ostensible thinking behind their choice to engage in a dialogue with the Melian oligarchs is revealed by their later account in the dialogue of the generally destructive nature of hope. As they explain to these Melians, hope gives human beings encouragement when they are in danger. Such hope is not necessarily ruinous if one has sufficient power. But hope naturally leads humans to overestimate their power, to spend, as it were, beyond their means – “for it is by nature extravagant” – and finally to stake everything they have on the belief that the power at their disposal is

these killings, are not necessary or appropriate consequences of the argument [of the Athenians] itself” (1987, 19). Consider also Strauss 1964, 210–211; Palmer 1992, 73; as well as Orwin’s emphasis on the distinction between the Athenian ambassadors at Melos who threaten the destruction of Melos and the Athenians who decide on the actual destruction of Melos (1994, 112–113).

³² 5.91.2, 5.93.

³³ 5.85, 3.47.2.

far greater than it actually is (5.103.1). Once one has acted on such irrational hope, and then recognizes how ruinous it is, one can no longer save oneself. The destructive hopefulness of the Melians, then, the Athenian ambassadors believe from the beginning, is the chief obstacle that they must overcome in order to induce the Melians to recognize and accept their powerlessness in the face of the Athenian forces. But what, according to the Athenians, do the Melians hope will even their odds against mighty Athens? The Athenians explain to the Melian oligarchs that they must beware of the irrational hope of overcoming their actual weakness through invisible powers, a hope that will lead to their destruction:

which you who are weak and hang on a single turn of the scale should not wish to suffer; nor should you wish to resemble the many, who when they still might be saved by human means, when they are under pressure and hopes based on what is visible abandon them, turn to what is invisible, to the art of prophecy and oracles and many such things that, through hope, bring ruin. (5.103.2)

The Athenians here reveal that the hope that, in their estimation, will ruin the Melians is not the hope based on their evident strength – in ships and soldiers, for they can clearly see that there they are outmatched – but the hope that counts on an invisible strength – on the assistance of invisible beings, revealed to them by prophets and oracles, that is, on the gods. The Athenians believe, then, that, in order to persuade the Melians to yield, they must overcome their pious hopes, pious hopes that, the Athenians contend, are stronger among the Melian people at large – “the many” – than among the few oligarchs. By engaging in a rigorous, logical dialogue with the relatively enlightened oligarchs – “as knowers speaking with knowers” (5.89) – the Athenians plan to appeal to their fears, by compelling the Melians to acknowledge that they are powerless to avoid destruction at the hands of the overwhelmingly superior Athenians forces, and to appeal to their reason by compelling them to acknowledge that, since all human beings are necessarily self-interested, they are as self-interested as the Athenians and hence are their moral equals, and if there are gods who are just – as the Melians themselves believe – they will therefore favor neither side in the conflict. The Athenian ambassadors themselves, then, hope to persuade the Melian oligarchs to submit to them by appealing to their fear of Athenian power, by convincing them that their pious hopes for divine assistance have no foundation – that their belief in providential gods is indeed false – and hence by refuting their piety.

This hope of the Athenian ambassadors at Melos, however, proves to be an unreasonable one. In response to their threats of destruction and their challenge to the Melians' belief that they are just rather than merely self-interested, the proud Melians dig in their heels, and in response to the Athenian argument against their pious hope, the Melians reaffirm all the more vehemently their hope that the gods will assist them and also profess their faith that the just and pious Spartans will come to their aid.³⁴ The Athenians here – in contrast with Diodotus, who suggests that hope is irresistible – evidently underestimate the power of hope, not only in the Melians but also in themselves.³⁵ They also underestimate the power of pride, failing to anticipate that the Melians will stubbornly resist them, and they overestimate the power of reason, not only in the Melians but in themselves. For if the Athenians' goal were simply to induce the Melians to yield peacefully to their imperial rule, it would seem to have been more reasonable for the Athenians to insist on addressing the gullible and friendly multitude and, if they had to speak only to the oligarchs, to avoid making explicit threats of destruction, lest they make them feel that yielding would constitute a humiliating confession of cowardice; to avoid challenging their moral self-esteem, lest they stiffen their pride; to avoid attempting to argue against the reasonableness of their pious hopes – it is the Athenians who first mention religion in the dialogue (5.103.2) – lest they provoke the Melians to embrace those hopes all the more intensely; and to offer the Melians a face-saving way of yielding by stressing – as they do briefly at the very end of the dialogue – that they are offering the Melians “measured” terms, namely, “to become allies, keeping what you have, subject to tribute” (5.111.4).³⁶ But is the Athenians' goal here simply to induce the Melians to submit peacefully?

The clearest mistake that the Athenian ambassadors make is to bring up the subject of religion and then to challenge explicitly the Melians' belief in their own justice – that is, in their devotion to justice over their own self-interest – and in just gods who will reward them for their justice. For the

³⁴ 5.100, 5.102, 5.104, 5.106, 5.108., 5.110, 5.112.2.

³⁵ 3.45.5–7. As Orwin puts it, “That they fail to persuade the Melians suggests that the envoys' project of ‘enlightenment’ itself rested on unreasonable hopes” (1994, 110).

³⁶ By way of contrast, consider Ferrario's contention that Brasidas successfully persuades the cities he is seeking to liberate from Athens of his “measured” terms because, in her words, “Brasidas offers his new subjects the chance to tell themselves that they are determining their own destiny” (2023, 194; see 4.81.2, 4.105.2, 4.108.2). See also Wylie's reference to Brasidas' “undoubted gift for conciliating captive native populations – always recognizing the need to allow the coerced to save face” (1992, 93).

Melians proceed to reaffirm that belief and also their belief in the justice of their Spartan kinsmen, through to the very end of the dialogue.³⁷ Why do the Athenians make this tremendous miscalculation? It would seem that they do so because they have a second goal at Melos, in addition to the goal of gaining control of the island without destroying the people: namely, to persuade the oligarchs, through truthful and irrefutable arguments, that they are not, as they believe, morally superior to the Athenians and hence that the gods will not save them. This goal, of refuting the moral self-esteem and religious beliefs of the Melians, is distinct from the goal of gaining control over the island without destroying the people and even contradicts it, insofar as it leads the Athenians first to attempt a genuinely rational persuasion of the oligarchs rather than a deceptive speech to the multitude, and then, in apparent frustration with their failure to persuade the oligarchs, to destroy the people of Melos and thereby to abandon their goal of gaining control “without destroying you” (5.93).

Why do the Athenian ambassadors at Melos seek to refute the oligarchs’ belief in their own justice? Why do they seek to refute the oligarchs’ piety? It is possible that they seek simply to enlighten the oligarchs, to share the truth about the fundamental character and condition of human beings with them, as Thucydides seeks to share that truth with his readers through this book. It is possible that they simply engage in this dialogue with the Melian oligarchs, in their own words, “as knowers speaking with knowers,” or at least with potential knowers (5.89). Yet, unlike Thucydides, the Athenian ambassadors at Melos exhibit a marked frustration and anger with the Melians for what they deem to be their folly. In their remarks to the Melians before they make their final decision, the Athenians express surprise that they cling to their pious hopes rather than embrace reason, since they themselves evidently hoped that the Melians would prove to be more enlightened and less pious than they are:

We conclude, however, that, while you claimed that you would deliberate concerning your salvation, you have mentioned nothing in so long a discussion that humans would trust in to believe that they would be saved; but your strongest points are what is to be hoped for in the future, while what you actually have is too slight to prevail against what is arrayed against you. And you will show much irrationality of thought, unless, once you have dismissed us, you come to a more sensible understanding than what you have said. (5.111.2)

³⁷ 5.103–6, 5.108, 5.110, 5.112.2. Cf. Strauss 1983, 96. In Connor’s words, “as the Athenian arguments become stronger, the Melian resistance intensifies” (1984, 150).

Yet, rather than attempt to accommodate their rhetoric to what they deem to be the irrational, pious beliefs of the Melians, the Athenians themselves dig in their heels and simply denounce the Melians for their “irrationality.” Then, when the Melian oligarchs give their final answer and refuse to yield, firm in their hope that the gods and the Spartans will save them, the Athenians respond by again expressing surprise and even anger at their piety. They make what would seem to be the wildly exaggerated claim that the Melian oligarchs are the only human beings who base their decisions on pious hopes rather than on a rational analysis of evident facts: “But then you alone, as you seem to us from these decisions, judge what is in the future to be clearer than what you see for yourselves, and through your own wishing, you contemplate what is invisible as though it had already come to pass.” The Athenians then predict, with evident and grim satisfaction, that the Melian oligarchs will suffer as a result of their irrationality: “and having staked so much and put your faith in the Spartans, and in fortune, and in hopes, by so much will you fail” (5.113).³⁸ Subsequently, after the Melians resist the Athenians by force but ultimately surrender, the Athenians, in an apparent fit of anger, kill all of the adult male Melians, even though the multitude played no role whatsoever in the Melian oligarchs’ decision not to yield to the Athenians and even though their destruction of Melos contradicts their stated goal of profiting from Melos as a result of “not destroying you.”

Rather than pity the Melian oligarchs for their self-destructive folly, the Athenians are evidently angry with them for being so foolish, and seek to punish their folly, as though, *per impossibile*, the Melians were morally responsible for their folly. The Athenians’ anger at the Melians for foolishly maintaining their belief that they are just and that the gods will reward them for their justice and their subsequent punishment of the Melians by destroying their entire city reveal that the Athenians themselves are less than fully rational here. They are not motivated here by a love of the truth and a generous desire to share the truth. But neither are they motivated by a coldly calculating desire to gain control of the island by fair means or foul, a desire which would naturally lead them to persuade the Melians to yield by deceptive speeches and, if that failed, to conquer the island with a minimum of violence, especially to the multitude who play no role in

³⁸ 5.116.3–4, 5.93. Consider Orwin’s suggestion regarding the Athenian ambassadors: “In their anger they display a peculiar kind of retributiveness, that of the debunker of justice (and thus of retribution) angry because his debunking has been rejected” (1994, 117).

the dialogue and who may well favor the Athenians, and thereby leave as much of the island intact so as to be profitable to them.

The fact that what the Athenians themselves regard as the destructive “folly” of the Melians – their irrational conviction that, because they are just human beings who are morally superior to the self-interested Athenians, the just gods and the just Spartans will come to their aid – provokes their anger rather than pity indicates that the Athenians do not regard the Melians as simply self-destructive here. The Athenians evidently suspect that the Melians deliberately hold on to their irrational conviction because there is something attractive, indeed something good, about that conviction. But what could be good about a foolish and destructive conviction? The Athenians point to an answer when they make the bitterly sarcastic but nevertheless revealing remark, in response to the Melians’ profession of faith in the justice of their kinsmen the Spartans, that “while we bless your innocence” – literally, “your lack of experience with evil [ἀπειρόκακον]” – “we do not envy your folly” (5.105.3). Why might the Melians’ innocence be a blessing, in the eyes of the Athenians? The Melians believe that they are morally superior to the self-interested Athenians, that they freely choose to be just rather than pursue their self-interest, and therefore that they are worthy of the care and protection of the just gods as well as of the devotion of their just Spartan kinsmen. And even though this belief is irrational, according to the Athenians here, it is a blessing because, the Athenians evidently suspect, it gives the Melians a certain happiness, a pleasing moral self-esteem. The belief in their own justice shields them from experiencing the evil of believing themselves merely self-interested and therefore no worse but also no better, morally speaking, than any other human being. Therefore, although the Athenians do not envy the Melians’ belief in their moral superiority insofar as it is self-destructive, the Athenians do envy the Melians’ belief in their moral superiority insofar as it is pleasing to them.

The Athenians evidently wish that they still enjoyed that innocent moral and pious belief, the belief of their ancestors, the belief that their enlightenment has deprived them of. Even though the Athenians have acquired great wealth, power, and glory, they no longer cherish what they now regard as the illusion that they deserve those goods because of their justice. They evidently regard themselves as wise – as knowers of the truth about the nature of humans and gods – but that wisdom has not made them happy, for it has robbed them of the pleasure of moral self-esteem. The loss of that pleasure has evidently left the Athenians bitterly resentful of those, like the Melians, who continue to enjoy that pleasure. For, since they are

unhappy in their loss of innocence, and since they cannot recover their innocence, they spitefully seek to strip the Melians of their innocence. In retrospect, they seek this dialogue to induce the Melians to surrender, not only their political independence, but above all their belief in their own justice. The Athenians seek, through the stern logic that the dialogue form makes possible, to refute the Melians' belief in their moral superiority. First they issue harsh threats of destruction in the hope of prompting the Melians to yield to them and thereby acknowledge their own craven fear of death.³⁹ Then, when the Melians continue to resist, the Athenians bring up and challenge their religious beliefs and provoke them to state explicitly their belief in their own justice and worthiness of divine favor and Spartan aid (5.103–104). Finally, when the Athenians present the argument which they believe refutes the Melians' belief in their own justice and hope for divine and Spartan assistance, and the Melians remain unmoved and even more unyielding, the Athenians denounce them and finally carry out their threats to kill them (5.104–116). The Athenians thereby reveal that their primary goal throughout the dialogue is in truth to deprive the Melians of their innocence and of the blessedness that such innocence, according to the Athenians, brings.⁴⁰ In their desire to deprive the Melians of a happiness that they wish they possessed, in their desire for the spiteful pleasure of depriving the Melians of an admittedly greater pleasure, the Athenian ambassadors display a savagery comparable to the Athenians' subsequent physical destruction of Melos. In this sense, the Athenians at Melos do indeed represent the moral nadir of Athens in Thucydides' book.

The Melian Dialogue II: The Theoretical Peak?

Given the morally repulsive behavior of the Athenians at Melos, it is tempting to dismiss the arguments the Athenian ambassadors make in their dialogue with the Melians. But Thucydides indicates in three ways that the Melian Dialogue – including most emphatically the Athenian arguments in it – represents a, not to say the, theoretical peak of his book. First, it is the only dialogue in his book, and the dialogue is a philosophic format, as we know from the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon.⁴¹ As the Athenian

³⁹ 5.87, 5.91, 5.93, 5.101.

⁴⁰ Bolotin refers to "the ambassadors' brutal attempt to destroy the innocence of the Melians" that "made them if anything more determined not to submit to Athenian rule" (1987, 28). See also Burns 2010, 4; 2011, 521.

⁴¹ See Chapter 1, note 36.

ambassadors explain when proposing the dialogue format, in words that resemble what Socrates suggests, for example, in Plato's *Gorgias*, the dialogue form is the most rational format for speeches, since it avoids long, uninterrupted orations that may present questionable and deceptive claims that go unchallenged and instead allows each participant, on the one hand, to interrupt to raise immediate objections regarding each particular point that is made and, on the other hand, to respond to those objections.⁴² The dialogue form is therefore the proper way in which rational human beings would speak with each other in order to arrive at clarity and truth, "as knowers speaking with knowers" (5.89).

The example of the Melian Dialogue suggests a possible hierarchy of the forty-eight other speeches presented in direct discourse in Thucydides' book with regard to their transparency and reasonableness. If we take the sole dialogue, the Melian Dialogue, as the least deceptive and most rational set of speeches in the book, the second least deceptive and most rational set of speeches would be speeches in a debate, wherein speeches are long and uninterrupted but directly challenge one another, albeit with less specificity and clarity than the dialogue form allows. There are nine such debates in the book: between the Corcyreans and Corinthians at Athens; the Corinthians and Athenians at Sparta; Archidamus and Sthenelaidas at Sparta; the Plataeans and Archidamus at Plataea; Cleon and Diodotus at Athens; the Plataeans and Thebans at Plataea; Nicias and Alcibiades at Athens; Hermocrates and Athenagoras at Syracuse; and Hermocrates and Euphemus at Camarina.⁴³ One might object that, in the central debate, between Cleon and Diodotus, Diodotus offers an exceptionally illuminating account of human nature that apparently rivals in clarity and truth the account offered by the Athenians in the Melian Dialogue.⁴⁴ However, Diodotus himself states with remarkable candor, in that very speech addressed to the multitude, that it is "impossible" to benefit Athens without "deceiving" the multitude (3.43.3). Therefore his speech would seem to be more deceptive than those in the Melian Dialogue. The twenty-nine speeches in the book to which there are no responding speeches would seem to be, compared to the other speeches, the most deceptive and least rational speeches, including, for example, all

⁴² See 5.85 and compare with Plato *Gorgias* 449b4–c6, 461c8–d7.

⁴³ 1.32–43, 1.68–78, 1.80–86, 2.71.2–72, 3.37–48, 3.53–67, 6.9–23, 6.33–40, 6.76–87. These nine debates include nineteen speeches in all, since Nicias responds to Alcibiades' response to his first speech in the debate over the Sicilian Expedition.

⁴⁴ 3.45, 5.105.1–3.

of Brasidas' speeches – Thucydides himself says of Brasidas that, in his speeches in Thrace, he said things that were “alluring and non-existent [οὐ τὰ ὄντα]” (4.108.5) – and all of Pericles' speeches – including the one in which he declares that “we [Athenians] philosophize without softness” (2.40.1).⁴⁵ Thucydides portrays himself early in the book as one who seeks for the truth, and his “search for the truth” in speeches would seem to lead him beyond the great unanswered speeches of his book, such as the Funeral Oration, and even beyond the great debates, such as the Mytilenean Debate, to the least deceptive and most rational speeches, in the Melian Dialogue (1.20.3).

Thucydides does indicate that the Melian Dialogue is not the most rational form of dialogue possible. As the Melians point out, it is a dialogue between enemies – in “the presence of war” – and unequals – since the Athenians are themselves “judges” of “what is said.”⁴⁶ The powerful Athenians dictate the terms of the dialogue – the Melians are supposed to speak only of their salvation and not about justice, for example – and the Athenians have the power to terminate the discussion at any time. A more fully rational dialogue, one between knowers animated by a passion for the truth, would take place in an atmosphere of friendship and free of the threat of force. For the sake of the utmost clarity, it would take place between two individuals. Thucydides offers a glimpse of such a dialogue between individuals who are friendly and equal in the last speech in the book that he presents in direct discourse, when, at a moment of extreme weakness in Athens in the wake of its defeat in Sicily, the Athenian Peisander proposes to the demos that Athens overthrow its democracy and recall the treasonous and allegedly impious Alcibiades and thereby provokes loud and passionate opposition. Peisander thereupon “took each of those speaking against him aside, and asked him, if he had any hope for the salvation of the city,” if the mighty Persian Empire were to continue to be allied with the Peloponnesians against Athens. Once each said, “No,” Peisander drew the logical and, for each of the individual interlocutors, the

⁴⁵ 1.120–124 (Corinthians), 1.140–144 (Pericles), 2.11 (Archidamus), 2.35–46 (Pericles), 2.60–64 (Pericles), 2.72.3 (Archidamus), 2.73.3 (Plataean envoys), 2.74.3 (Archidamus), 2.87 (Cnemus and Brasidas), 2.89 (Phormio), 3.9–14 (Mytileneans), 3.30 (Teutiaplus), 4.10 (Demosthenes), 4.17–20 (Spartans), 4.59–64 (Hermocrates), 4.85–87 (Brasidas), 4.92 (Pagondas), 4.95 (Hippocrates), 4.126 (Brasidas), 5.9 (Brasidas), 5.10.5 (Brasidas), 6.41.1–3 (Syracusan general), 6.68 (Nicias), 6.89–92 (Alcibiades), 7.11–15 (Nicias' letter read to the Athenian assembly), 7.61–64 (Nicias), 7.66–68 (Gylippus and commanders), 7.77 (Nicias), 8.53.3 (Peisander).

⁴⁶ 5.86. See 5.87–90, 5.98.

compelling conclusion that Athens would not be saved unless it replace the democracy with an oligarchy, “in order that the King may trust us,” and unless “we bring back Alcibiades, who alone of those now existing is able” to persuade the Persian king to ally with Athens instead of Sparta (8.53.2–3). Peisander may succeed in persuading the Athenians, in contrast with the Athenians at Melos who fail to persuade the Melians, in part because he presents his reasoned argument with greater clarity and purity, in a dialogue between equal individuals who, as fellow citizens, are friends rather than enemies. Through this brief example, Thucydides points to what form a more rational dialogue between “knowers speaking with knowers” might take.

The second way in which Thucydides indicates the singular theoretical importance of the Melian Dialogue is the appearance there of the phrase “that which is human [τὸ ἀνθρώπειόν].” Thucydides explains early on that his goal in writing the book is to benefit readers by revealing the permanent and universal truth regarding “that which is human” (1.22.4). That phrase appears only twice in the rest of the book: in Hermocrates’ speech at Gela and in the words of the Athenian ambassadors in the Melian Dialogue.⁴⁷ What is more, only in the Melian Dialogue is there an argument concerning that which is human, that is, concerning the fundamental character and condition of human beings, in relation to “that which is divine [τὸ θεῖον]”⁴⁸ (5.105.2). Indeed, the phrase “that which is divine” is spoken six times in the Melian Dialogue, twice by the Melians and four times by the Athenians, and appears only once in the rest of the entire book.⁴⁹ The Athenian argument in the Melian Dialogue, then, addresses the central theme of the book and offers an answer to the central question of the book, the question of the nature of human beings and the nature of the gods.

Thirdly, and finally, only in the Melian Dialogue does Thucydides present a confrontation between the Spartan understanding of “that which is human” and the Athenian understanding. For even though the Spartans do not directly participate, the Melians are their colonists, their kinsmen, and, insofar as they believe in the justice of the Spartans as well as of the gods and stake their very lives on that belief, their champions.⁵⁰ Thucydides thus here allows the reader to examine for oneself the case for the fundamental outlook of each of the two cities, the righteous and godly city and the natural city.⁵¹

⁴⁷ 4.61.5, 5.105.2. ⁴⁸ Or, as I translate it mostly, “the divine.”

⁴⁹ 5.104.1, 5.105.1 (x2), 5.105.2, 5.105.3, 5.112.2. See 5.70.1.

⁵⁰ 5.84.2, 5.104, 5.106, 5.108, 5.110, 5.112.2. ⁵¹ Consider Jaffe 2017, 209.

The crucial exchange takes place after the Athenian ambassadors offer their account of the generally destructive nature of hope and, bringing up the subject of religion for the first time in the dialogue, urge the Melians not to abandon the reason that may save them “by human means” and “turn to what is invisible, to the art of prophecy and oracles and many such things that, through hope, bring ruin” (5.103.2). The Melians respond by acknowledging for the first time that they do hope that they may successfully resist the attempt of the powerful Athenians to conquer them but insisting that their hope is not unreasonable:

We too believe, know it well, that it is hard to contend with your power and fortune, unless it would be on equal terms. But nevertheless we have faith that we will not be inferior in that fortune that comes from the divine [τὸ θεῖον], because we stand here as pious men against men who are not just, and that, with regard to the power that we are lacking, our alliance with the Spartans will compensate, which will by necessity compel them, if for no other reason, for the sake of kinship and out of shame, to come to our aid. And so we are not altogether irrational in our boldness.⁵² (5.104)

The Melians contend here that the gods will come to their aid against the Athenians because the gods are just, they justly treat human beings according to their desert, the Melians deserve their support, and the Athenians do not. By the Athenians’ own admission, they are unjust since they are attacking Melos simply for the sake of their own “benefit” and “profit,” whereas the Melians, the oligarchs imply, inasmuch as they are pious, follow the gods and their laws, rather than their own benefit and profit.⁵³ The Melians, then, are morally superior to the Athenians. They are just rather than selfish, the Athenians are simply selfish and therefore unjust, and since the gods themselves are just, they will reward the Melians with their favor by punishing the Athenians with their wrath, perhaps as, for example, they punished Athens earlier in the war by sending a devastating plague and as, some years before the war, they punished Sparta for its injustice by sending a great earthquake.⁵⁴ Furthermore, since the Spartans are (now) just, they, too, will come to their aid – “for our sake” (5.108) – against the Athenians. Their adherence to the law – their alliance with the Melians – will, as a moral “necessity [ἀνάγκη],” compel them to intervene to defend the Melians, as will their just devotion to their kin and their sense

⁵² Once the Athenians openly waged war on them by ravaging their land, the Melians evidently abandoned their neutrality and formed an alliance with the Spartans, to whom they were already bound by ties of kinship. See 5.84.2.

⁵³ 5.91.2, 5.93. ⁵⁴ 2.54, 1.128.1.

of shame were they to hold back (5.104). The Melians count on the just character of the Spartans to compel them to come to the aid of their allies and kinsmen – perhaps by sending out a fleet led by a commander of the caliber of Brasidas, whom they mention later, or by invading Attica directly (5.110) – as they count on the just character of the gods to prompt them to come to the aid of the pious against the unjust.

Now, it must be said, the Melians are evidently not entirely confident in their faith in the gods and the Spartans and their hope for assistance. For they do not profess this faith and this hope right away but rather wait until their ninth of thirteen speeches in the dialogue to do so. They might therefore well seem, in the earlier words of the Athenians, “to resemble the many” who, only “when they are under pressure and hopes based on what is visible abandon them, turn to what is invisible,” and embrace the hope that the invisible gods and the distant Spartans will save them (5.103.3). Their hope here might, then, seem to be a desperate hope against hope. And yet, is this hope simply unreasonable? Might the just gods not, for example, send a plague to Athens to aid the pious Melians, and might the just Spartans not send out a fleet to defend Melos?

The Athenians, however, claim to “know [οἶδα]” “with certainty [σφαλῶς]” that the Melians are not their moral superiors and therefore that the gods will not intervene to help them:

With regard to the favor of the divine, we do not suppose that we will fall short. For we do not demand as our just right or do anything apart from human beings’ belief regarding the divine or their wish regarding themselves. For we hold by opinion with respect to that which is divine and with certainty with respect to that which is human that always, as a result of a necessity of nature [φύσεως ἀνάγκαιας], wherever anyone has the power to do so, one rules; and we neither laid down this law nor were the first to make use of it as laid down, but having accepted it as existing, we make use of it and will leave it to last forever, knowing that you too and others, if you came to have the same power that we have, would do the very same thing. And so, with respect to the divine, given what is reasonable,⁵⁵ we do not fear that we will be inferior. (5.105.1–3)

The Athenian response to the Melians consists of a thesis concerning the gods and a thesis concerning human beings. The Athenians contend, on the basis of “human beings’ belief regarding the divine” – that is, on the basis of what all human beings, including the Melians themselves and the

⁵⁵ Or “given what is likely” – ἐκ τοῦ εἰκότος.

Spartans, believe about the gods – that they are just. Humans also believe, the Athenians imply, that the justice of the gods is essential to them – apparently, as a “necessity” of their “nature” – and that it is reasonably clear and intelligible: The gods will favor only those who are morally superior – who freely overcome their selfishness – and they will only punish those who are voluntarily unjust – who freely choose to be selfish. Therefore all the Athenians demand as their just right is that they be treated justly, according to the belief that the gods reward humans for voluntarily acting justly or unselfishly and punish them for voluntarily acting unjustly or selfishly.

However, according to the Athenians, all human beings are compelled not by their just character to act justly, as the Melians contend, but by their nature as human beings to seek their own advantage. Accordingly, the Athenians, “knowing that you too and others, if you came to have the same power that we have, would do the very same thing” as we do – knowing, that is, that the Melians are not morally superior to the Athenians but are indeed morally equally to them and to all human beings because they are all necessarily self-interested – boldly declare that, precisely if, as humans believe, the gods are just, they will favor neither side in this conflict. Similarly, since the Spartans, too, are compelled by their nature to act in their self-interest and since, as the Athenians go on to explain, it is not clearly in their self-interest to violate the peace treaty with Athens and reignite war in order to save the Melians, they, too, will not come to their assistance. The Athenians also go on to give more particular reasons for doubting that the Spartans will nobly and justly aid the Melians, reasons that focus on the Spartans’ particular penchant for identifying what is noble with what is pleasing to them and what is just with what is advantageous to them.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the basis for the Athenians’ confidence that the Spartans will not intervene to save the Melians is the same as that for their confidence that the gods will not intervene: their thesis that human beings are subject to a necessity of their nature to pursue their advantage – and the Athenians identify that advantage with ruling where they can. But what, in turn, is the basis of this thesis? What gives the Athenians such confidence in this thesis, that they believe it “with certainty” and, indeed, “know” that it is true of human beings, always and everywhere?

This thesis has, as we have seen, been set forth twice before in the book. The Athenian ambassadors at Sparta contend that the Athenians, in

⁵⁶ 5.105.4, 5.107, 5.109.

accordance with “the way of human beings [ὁ ἀνθρωπείος τρόπος],” were “compelled [κατηναγκάσθημεν]” by “fear,” “honor,” and “benefit” to acquire their empire (1.75.3–76.2). They speak of “compulsion” or “necessity,” but not, in this immediate context, of “nature.”⁵⁷ Diodotus later contends that “it is natural for all” human beings, “both in private and public, to err,” that they are led on by “the hope and the erotic desire for everything,” and “no law will prevent them” (3.45.3–7). He emphasizes “nature” rather than “necessity.”⁵⁸ What is distinctive about the Athenian ambassadors at Melos is three things. First, they speak of the “necessity of nature” and thereby clarify that nature means that which exists by necessity rather than by the will of any being (though by identifying necessity with an eternal “law” they obfuscate what both necessity and nature are, since a law would seem to require a lawgiver). Secondly, they explain the religious implications of the thesis that humans are necessarily self-interested. These implications are far-reaching, for, insofar as the Athenians “know” “with certainty” that the gods do not favor either side in their conflict with the Melians because all human beings are by nature necessarily self-interested and therefore morally equal, they know with certainty, for example, that Apollo did not send the plague to punish Athens and support Sparta and that Poseidon did not send a great earthquake to punish Sparta and support the Helots.⁵⁹ They know with certainty that the gods do not ever intervene in human affairs but rather, if they exist at all, leave humans to act entirely on their own and for themselves. In their explanation of the religious implications of their understanding of the character and condition of human beings, the Athenian ambassadors echo the reflections of the Athenian herald at Delium, who defends the Athenian desecration of the temple of Apollo by arguing that the Athenians are acting under the “necessity” of acting “under the pressure of war and danger” and that the gods will have “some forgiving understanding” for their action insofar as it is “involuntary” (4.98.6).⁶⁰ However, while the Athenian herald anticipates the overall argument of the ambassadors at Melos regarding the nature of both humans and gods, he does not mention “nature,” he is tentative in his account of the character of both humans and gods, and his reflections therefore lack the precision and clarity of the ambassadors’ argument.

The third distinctive feature of the presentation of the thesis concerning human nature by the Athenian ambassadors at Melos is that they indicate with considerable precision the basis for this thesis. They contend, on the

⁵⁷ But see 1.76.3.

⁵⁸ But see 3.45.4.

⁵⁹ 2.54.4–5, 1.128.1.

⁶⁰ See Chapter 4, pp. 159–162.

basis of “human beings’ . . . wish regarding themselves,” that “always, as a result of a necessity of nature, wherever anyone has the power to do so, one rules” (5.105.1–2). The entire thesis regarding the necessarily self-interested nature of human beings rests on their understanding of humans’ “wish regarding themselves.” What do humans wish for themselves? The Athenians speak here as though all humans wish to rule, but given their subsequent reference to the Spartans’ concern for what is “advantageous” to them, their previous references to the Melians’ concern for their own “salvation,” and their previous references to their own concerns for “profit” and for “benefit,” what the Athenians here evidently have in mind is that all humans wish, more broadly, for what is beneficial or advantageous or good – for what they perceive to be good – for themselves.⁶¹ Their fundamental thesis, then, is, not only that we human beings wish for what is good for ourselves but that we cannot help but so wish given our nature as human beings.

The Athenians’ whole understanding of the human condition and indeed of the world as a whole, of whether it is ruled by gods who intervene in human affairs or not, is based not on observation of the world but on the inner beliefs and wishes of human beings, on what human beings believe regarding the gods and wish regarding themselves. These inner beliefs and wishes are revealed not only by observation of the world and of the doings of humans but also and above all by human speeches, by human beings’ speeches about the gods and about themselves. In this respect, there is an important kinship between the Athenians’ thesis and Thucydides himself in their understanding of how to seek the truth about “that which is human.” The Athenians’ thesis points to the paramount importance of studying speeches as our path to wisdom about the fundamental character and condition of human beings, just as Thucydides’ book focuses on the differing speeches of the Athenians and the Spartans concerning the human and the divine in our own search for the truth.⁶² What is more, the Athenian thesis indicates that our inlet to understanding the nature of the world as a whole is human nature. For by grasping that we human beings are, by a necessity of our nature, primarily concerned with our own good, equally self-interested, and therefore morally equal, we may recognize that, precisely if there exist just gods as pious humans believe, they must not – given their own nature – intervene in human affairs at all but rather leave us on our own to fend for ourselves. In this respect, too, there is

⁶¹ 5.105.4, 5.87, 5.91.2, 5.93.

⁶² See Chapter 1, pp. 28–33.

an important kinship between the Athenian ambassadors and Thucydides himself. For of the thirty appearances of the word “nature” or related words in his book, twenty-seven are to the nature, not of plagues or earthquakes or all the beings in the universe, but of human beings.⁶³

Is the Athenians’ understanding of human nature true? What elements of human nature might compel us to wish for our own good? There would seem to be two in particular: our lack of divinity, that is, of self-sufficiency, and our reason. As beings who, unlike gods, are mortal, needy beings, who, as the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Diodotus note, naturally feel such passions as fear and erotic desire, we are in need of goods external to ourselves in order to live and thrive and therefore wish for those goods.⁶⁴ Moreover, as rational beings, we are aware that we are needy, and therefore naturally wish, in a conscious, rather than merely an instinctive way, for the good things that we need. But do our natural neediness and our natural rational awareness of our neediness constitute a compulsion of our nature to wish for our own good and to act on that wish? Are human beings not free to overcome that self-regarding wish and, for example, sacrifice their own good for the good of others, as the Melians and Spartans, for example, contend? The dialogue between the Athenians and Melians ends in a standoff. The Athenians are evidently confident that their thesis is true. On the other hand, the Melian oligarchs are evidently unmoved by that thesis and continue, through to the end of the dialogue, to profess their faith that the just gods and the just Spartans will reward their own justice and come to their rescue.⁶⁵

The Question of the Self-Interestedness of the Spartans

The Athenian thesis concerning the inevitable self-interestedness of human beings poses a powerful challenge to the Spartan thesis that human beings are free to choose justice over their self-interest. There are, however, three

⁶³ Of the three references to nonhuman nature, two are to the “nature” of sites (1.93.3, 4.3.2). The other is to the nature of all things – “for all things by nature also decline” – made by Pericles in his final speech (2.64.3). This unique reference in the book to the final goal of philosophic inquiry – the understanding of the nature of all that is – by Pericles is fitting, inasmuch as he alone mentions “philosophy” in the book – “we philosophize without softness” – in another speech (2.40.1). The Athenian ambassadors refer to a “natural necessity” to which both humans and gods are subject (5.105.2). For the references to the nature of human beings, see 1.70.9, 1.76.3, 1.121.4, 1.138.3 (x2), 2.35.2, 2.45.2, 2.50.1, 3.39.5, 3.45.3, 3.45.7, 3.64.4, 3.74.1, 3.82.2, 3.84.2, 4.19.4, 4.60.1, 4.61.3, 4.61.5, 5.103.1, 5.105.2, 6.16.3, 6.17.1, 6.79.2, 7.14.2, 7.14.4, 7.48.4.

⁶⁴ 1.75.3, 1.76.2, 3.45.3–5. ⁶⁵ See 5.106, 5.108, 5.110, 5.112.2–3.

examples in the book, all Spartan, that apparently contradict the Athenian thesis concerning the necessary self-interestedness of human nature: the Melians – Spartan colonists – insofar as they choose to die rather than surrender to Athens; the Spartans, insofar as they fight for the liberty of the Greeks and insofar as, in contrast to the Athenians, they choose not to have an empire; and Brasidas, insofar as he not only fights for the liberty of the Greeks but sacrifices his life in that fight. Let us consider each of these examples in relation to the Athenian thesis.

The Melians in the Melian Dialogue refuse to yield to the Athenians and consequently all the Melian men are killed. These Melians, then, might appear to choose their own destruction rather than slavery. Does their example not therefore refute the Athenian contention that humans are incapable of acting selflessly? A defender of the Athenian thesis would note, however, in the first place, that the Melians in the Melian Dialogue are, specifically, the ruling oligarchs of Melos (5.84.3). They refuse to allow the Athenians to speak to the multitude not only lest they deceive the Melian demos but also, presumably, lest they persuade the demos to overthrow the oligarchy and establish a democracy.⁶⁶ It is, accordingly, not the Melian people as a whole who refuse to yield to the Athenians but the oligarchs, who presumably fear that they would lose their rule, a rule which, according to the Athenians, they are compelled by their nature to cling to whenever possible (5.105.2). One might still wonder, do the Melian oligarchs not ultimately act selflessly, insofar as they refuse to submit even when all hope of retaining their power has been lost? Yet, by their own account, the Melian oligarchs insist that there is hope that they may yet defeat the Athenians with the aid of the gods and the Spartans. They insist that their hope is rational – “And so we are not altogether irrational in our boldness” (5.104) – and hence that they are acting rationally, not self-destructively, by resisting. Indeed, the fact that, by their own admission, the Melians hope for aid from the gods as a reward for their justice proves that they are self-interested. Rather than choose to die instead of surrendering, the Melians insist that the gods and Spartans will come to their aid and hence that they are choosing victory rather than surrender. The Melians, then, like all those who hope to be rewarded for their justice, by gods or humans, evidently wish – and, the Athenians would say, cannot help but wish – for their own good. What is more, the Melians’ hope for divine rewards contradicts the very basis for that hope. For the Melians

⁶⁶ 5.85; see 3.47.

hope that the just gods will reward them because, as they believe, they are morally superior to the Athenians. They would not do what the Athenians are doing even if they had the power to do so and even if they thought it was in their self-interest to do so. The Melians then are, in their own understanding, morally superior to the Athenians because they are just rather than self-interested, and for this reason, they hope, they will be rewarded by the gods. And yet the very fact that they hope for divine rewards shows that they, too, are self-interested, that they are not morally superior but rather morally equal to the Athenians, and therefore that they have no reason to hope that they will be rewarded by the gods.⁶⁷ The example of the Melians therefore, upon reflection, would seem to vindicate rather than contradict the Athenian thesis, as would the example of all human beings who hope for divine rewards.

But what of the Spartans, who apparently fight for the good of others – the liberty of the Greeks – rather than their own good, and who, though powerful, choose not to have an empire? Do they not constitute within the book a living refutation of the Athenian thesis regarding the necessarily self-interested nature of humans? A defender of the Athenian thesis would argue, however, that the Spartans never even intend to fight for the liberty of the Greeks but rather for their own good. The clearest example of a Spartan campaign for liberation is Brasidas' campaign in Thrace, in which he liberates some fourteen cities from Athenian imperial rule.⁶⁸ Yet, according to Thucydides' account, the Spartans send Brasidas to Thrace to liberate these cities "so that there came to be for the Spartans, when they wished to come to terms, the very thing which they did, a giving back and receiving of lands and a respite from the war" (4.81.2). The Spartans initiate their campaign of liberation, then, simply in order to press Athens to make peace and to trade those "liberated" cities back to Athens in order to recover the 292 Spartans whom the Athenians captured at Pylos. The Spartans therefore deliberately and, one must say, ruthlessly, deceive the fourteen cities liberated by them in Thrace and then expose those that are returned to Athens to its angry reprisals and, in the case of Scione, to utter destruction.⁶⁹ Even before returning the liberated cities to Athens, the Spartans send out young men "so as to establish them as rulers of the cities and not to entrust matters to those who happened to live there"

⁶⁷ Consider Jaffe's formulation: "It is the gods, in the Spartan view, who harmonize justice with advantage by punishing the unjust and rewarding the just" (2017, 111).

⁶⁸ See Chapter 4, note 14. ⁶⁹ See 4.122.6, 5.32.1.

(4.132.5).⁷⁰ The Spartans do send vital aid to help the Syracusans defend their freedom from the Athenians; but they do so only after Alcibiades explains to them that, if the Athenians conquer Syracuse, they will then proceed to conquer Sicily, Italy, Carthage, and finally the Peloponnesus itself.⁷¹ The Spartans send aid to the Syracusans not for the sake of Syracusan liberty but for the sake of Spartan security. What is more, Thucydides indicates that the Spartans' simultaneous invasion of Attica constitutes a violation of the peace treaty with Athens, just as their earlier invasion, along with the allied Theban attack on Plataea, constituted violations of the then operative peace treaty with Athens.⁷² Both invasions are inspired by the Spartans' fear of Athens, a fear that, according to Thucydides, compels the Spartans to act.⁷³ Finally, the Spartans' alliance with the Persian Empire, the enemy of Greek liberty – an alliance that proves crucial to their victory over Athens (2.65.12) – indicates that their priority is their own good rather than the good of their fellow Greeks.

Still, one might wonder, if the Spartans are so self-interested, why do they not have an empire, as the Athenians do? Thucydides himself points to an answer when he reveals, just before his account of their Thracian campaign of “liberation,” that the Spartans lived in constant fear of a revolt by their Helot slaves and when he reveals, late in the book, that the Spartans had more slaves than any other city except the Chians.⁷⁴ Given their fear of the numerous Helots, the Spartans are naturally wary of sending troops abroad to acquire an empire over others lest their slaves – whom one may call their domestic imperial subjects – seize the opportunity provided by the absence of troops in Sparta to revolt. The abiding fear of a slave revolt helps to explain why the Spartans are moderate, rather than greedy for empire, in prosperity.⁷⁵ For they are always aware that their prosperity may be shattered at any moment, if any opportunity arises for the slaves to revolt, as was provided by the great earthquake some years before the Peloponnesian War, when the Helots held out in their revolt for ten years, and as may be

⁷⁰ Connor notes that, insofar as the reader would know of “the last years of the war and the period of Spartan domination that followed,” Thucydides' brief account here would be “powerful and ominous” (1984, 138).

⁷¹ 6.90.2–91.7, 6.93.1, 7.66.2.

⁷² See pp. 188–189.

⁷³ 1.13.6, 5.25.3.

⁷⁴ 4.80.3, 8.40.2.

⁷⁵ See Strauss's comment regarding Sparta (1964, 191–192): “the Helots made her moderate.” Consider as well Edmunds 1975, 84–85; Forde 1989, 153; Orwin 1994, 85.

provided by the stresses and strains of continued war with Athens.⁷⁶ Thucydides' account of the Spartans, then, would ultimately seem to support the Athenian thesis.

But what of Brasidas, the Spartan who fights so effectively for the liberation of the Greeks and who is the one human being whom Thucydides, apparently, calls just (4.81.2)? Does his individual example not refute the Athenian thesis regarding the necessarily self-interested nature of human beings? It is certainly true that, of all the characters Thucydides presents in his book, Brasidas seems the most passionately devoted to the good of others – the liberty of the Greeks – liberating some fourteen cities from Athenian rule, risking his life on a number of occasions for the sake of that goal, and ultimately dying for that goal.⁷⁷ But it is also certainly true that he fails to benefit a number of the liberated cities, and even causes them harm, for they are betrayed by the Spartans to the vengeful Athenians and Scione, the city that hailed Brasidas most enthusiastically as the liberator of the Greeks, is destroyed by Athens.⁷⁸

Did Brasidas know all along that the Spartans planned ruthlessly to deceive and betray the Greek cities he liberated? Was he a willing instrument of this destruction and betrayal? Was his goal all along to fight, not for the good of the Greeks as a whole, but simply for that of his fellow Spartans? Thucydides' narrative invites one to consider this possibility by interweaving stirring accounts of Brasidas' campaign to liberate the Greeks with passages that raise questions about his sincerity in waging that campaign. Thucydides prefaces his great praise of Brasidas for his apparent justice and measured character with a shocking revelation concerning the harsh brutality of the Spartan regime: The Spartans at times ruthlessly deceived and murdered their Helot slaves because they lived in constant fear of a slave revolt – “for always most of what the Spartans do is with a view to guarding against the Helots” (4.80.3). What is more, Thucydides interrupts his praise of Brasidas' apparent justice and virtue by revealing that the effect of his campaign was to enable the Spartans to give back – that is, to betray – to Athens the cities that he liberated: “For by showing himself, at the present time, just and measured towards the cities, he

⁷⁶ 1.84.2, 8.24.4, 1.101.2–103.1. The Spartans may also cultivate alliances in order to be able to call on their allies to help them suppress a slave revolt, as they called on the Aeginetans and the Plataeans during the Helot revolt sparked by the great earthquake. See 2.27.2, 3.54.5, 4.56.2.

⁷⁷ For examples of Brasidas' physical courage, see 2.25.2, 4.11.4–12.1, 4.84.2, 4.125.3, 4.135.1, 5.10.6–11.2.

⁷⁸ 4.81.2, 4.120–121.1, 4.122.6, 5.32.1.

caused most to revolt and took some by the betrayal of the inhabitants, so that there came to be for the Spartans, when they wanted to come to terms, the very thing which they did, a giving back and receiving of lands and respite from the war for the Peloponnesus" (4.81.2). Was Brasidas' apparent justice, then, merely for show, in order to inspire the cities subject to Athens to revolt so that they could ultimately be returned to Athens, in exchange for the Spartan prisoners held by Athens, and hence to secure the narrow self-interest of the Spartans? Furthermore, when later recounting how Brasidas won over the Greek cities subject to Athens in Thrace by his speeches promising to liberate them and by his gentleness, Thucydides remarks that those cities "were especially roused" to revolt, "for it appeared to them that there was no cause to fear, since they were lied to regarding the magnitude of the Athenians' power, as was shown later," and that Brasidas told them "alluring and non-existent things" – namely, that the Athenians were weaker than they truly were (4.108.3–5). Brasidas' lies, then, encourage the Greeks to revolt, at the enormous risk of suffering terrible reprisals at the hands of the still formidable Athenians. Finally, in his last speech, Brasidas praises the use of deceit: "those acts of treachery have the noblest repute by which, in deceiving one's enemies, one benefits one's friends" (5.9.5). Does Brasidas ruthlessly deceive the Greek cities with his calls for the liberation of Greece in order to benefit his "friends" – his fellow Spartans – at their expense?⁷⁹

While these passages invite one to consider the possibility that Brasidas never believed in the goal of liberating Greece but only pretended to in order to advance the interests of Sparta, Thucydides' overall narrative suggests that Brasidas did indeed believe in that goal and pursued it, but not wisely and not selflessly. For Brasidas strives for that goal, admittedly with deceitful speeches but also with courage and energy, going so far as to urge the Spartans to send another army to reinforce him and to build, on his own authority, ships in order to liberate the islands under Athenian control, perhaps beginning with Scione, a city at the end of a narrow peninsula, whose inhabitants he describes as virtual "islanders."⁸⁰ Brasidas himself evidently hopes that, notwithstanding Athens'

⁷⁹ Woodruff goes so far as to suggest that Thucydides' narrative indicates that Brasidas is "far from being a moral exemplar" and that "Brasidas cultivated a reputation for virtue in order to exploit it" (2023, 224, 225). Wylie maintains that it "seems unlikely" that "Brasidas believed his own rhetoric" (1992, 81). For a discussion that highlights the "doubts and questions" Thucydides raises about Brasidas, see Connor 1984, 134–140; see also 236. Consider as well Westlake 1968, 164–165.

⁸⁰ 4.108.6, 4.120.3.

unchallenged naval dominance at this moment, it may not be powerful enough to withstand both a widespread revolt in its empire and a naval challenge by the Spartans in the Aegean Sea. In this respect Brasidas himself may well believe, in some measure, the falsehoods he tells the cities he seeks to liberate that portray Athens as a power no longer to be feared (4.108.3–5).⁸¹ Furthermore, and more remarkably, Brasidas continues to strive for the liberation of the Greeks even after Sparta has agreed to a truce with Athens as a preparation for a treaty that would return the liberated cities in order to recover the Spartans taken prisoner at Pylos and establish peace. For, when Scione revolts from Athens, and the Scioneans crown Brasidas as “the liberator of Greece,” he claims, contrary to “the truth,” that the revolt took place before the truce had gone into effect and takes steps to defend Scione (4.120–122.6). He thereby provokes the Athenians to vote, “having been persuaded by the judgment of Cleon, to seize the Scioneans and kill them” (4.122.6). Then, when Mende joins Scione in revolting from Athens, in clear violation of the truce, Brasidas defends that city, “believing it was not unjust” to do so (4.123). Finally, in an even clearer violation of the truce, Brasidas attacks Potidaea in order to induce it to revolt from Athens.⁸² In all these ways, Brasidas acts in defiance of both Athens and Sparta, continuing to wage the war to liberate Greece even though Athens and Sparta have signed an agreement to pause that war and are on the verge of ending that war.⁸³ Brasidas evidently hopes that he can continue to achieve the liberation of the Greeks subject to Athens, not only against the armed might of the Athenians but also against the will of the Spartans themselves, who now seek to come to terms with the Athenians.⁸⁴ That hope, however, proves to be unfounded, for Brasidas

⁸¹ In Burns’s words, “we come to see that Brasidas himself was not consciously deceiving the cities that he liberated . . . Brasidas was compelled to lie to himself” (2011, 518; see also 519).

⁸² 4.135.1. See 4.121.2. Consider Westlake’s explanation of this attack as “the outcome of desperation on the part of Brasidas” (1968, 158).

⁸³ As Orwin puts it, Brasidas “and Sparta are on a collision course” (1994, 80), and as Nichols explains, “Brasidas is a man without a city, eventually refusing to follow Sparta’s orders” and “acting as an independent agent” at Scione (2015, 18, 97). One may see Brasidas’ defiant spirit in his fellow, deputy commander Clearidas who, even after the Spartans and Athenians make peace, and Sparta agrees to return Amphipolis to Athens, refuses to hand Amphipolis over (5.9–10, 5.21, 5.46.2). The Athenians, bent on the conquest of Sicily, do not effectively respond to this violation of the treaty (6.10.5, 7.9).

⁸⁴ Wylie raises the question concerning Brasidas, “did he dream of a new empire ruled by Sparta – or by himself?” (1992, 94–95). Consider Orwin’s suggestion that “Brasidas’s ambitions may exceed those of Sparta. He may well intend a vast extension of her influence, through a new confederation of former Athenian allies, as much Brasidean

proves incapable of protecting Mende, Scione, and Torone from the vengeful Athenians, and of inducing Potidaea to revolt from them, even though he does succeed in evacuating the women and children from Mende and Scione and in protecting Amphipolis, albeit at the cost of his life.⁸⁵

Even though Thucydides praises Brasidas for his “sagacity,” that sagacity – or practical intelligence – is evidently limited to the battlefield (4.81.2). Brasidas excels at anticipating Cleon’s military maneuvers, for example, but he evidently fails to anticipate the power of Athens in defending its empire and the determination of Sparta to betray the cities he has liberated for its own selfish ends.⁸⁶ Brasidas does not deceive the Greek cities under Athens with regard to his evidently sincere desire to liberate them but rather deceives them, and himself, with regard to his power to liberate them and to protect them once liberated. What leads such an intelligent man to err in this way? What leads him to hope that he can succeed in liberating the Greeks in the teeth of opposition from both Athens and Sparta? Brasidas must believe that, precisely because he is fighting for the just cause of Greek freedom – for, in addition to all the other revolts he has inspired, the revolt of Mende is, in his view, “not unjust” (4.123.1) – the gods will intervene to reward him with their assistance against the imperial Athenians and even against his selfish countrymen. After all, he believes that the goddess Athena rewarded him with her assistance for acting “more justly” than the Athenians by defending the liberated Toronaeans against them, and he hopes that Athena will reward him again by defending the liberated Amphipolitans against the Athenians, now led by the violent Cleon.⁸⁷ Like the later example of the pious Melians, then – and also, like the later example of the pious Nicias, who faces odds as seemingly hopeless as the Melians at the end of the Sicilian campaign – the pious Brasidas counts on the gods to reward him for devoting himself to justice rather than self-interest, by aiding him against selfish men who are “not just.”⁸⁸ But like the Melians, Brasidas reveals his own self-interestedness by hoping to be rewarded by the gods for his devotion to justice over his self-interest and thereby contradicts the very basis for his hope. For if he is as self-interested

as Spartan” (1994, 80). Nichols contends that “Brasidas’s ‘crusade’ for freedom attempts to force Sparta to live up to her noble reputation” (2015, 80).

⁸⁵ 4.123.4, 4.129–133, 5.3.1–3, 5.10.11, 5.32.1. ⁸⁶ 5.6.3, 5.7.1.

⁸⁷ 4.114.4–116.2, 5.10.2. See 3.36.6. ⁸⁸ 5.104, 7.50.4, 7.77.1–4.

as his adversaries, how would he deserve the favor of the gods more than they do?

What individual reward might Brasidas seek for himself? Thucydides states, in his own name, that Brasidas “opposed the peace” between Sparta and Athens, “on account of enjoying good fortune and being honored from the fighting of the war” (5.16.1). Thucydides seems harshly critical of Brasidas here, for he states that Brasidas opposed the peace, not because he truly cared about the freedom of the Greeks, but because he cared about continuing to win honor for himself.⁸⁹ But would it not be possible for Brasidas to combine his love of honor with a concern for the freedom of the Greeks? The moment that Thucydides portrays Brasidas as receiving the greatest honor, at least while alive, is when he persuades the Scioneans to revolt from Athens: “they received Brasidas in a noble fashion in other ways, and they publicly crowned him with a crown of gold, as the liberator of Greece, while they individually decked him with garlands and approached him as though he were an athlete.”⁹⁰ What would be pleasing to such a man as Brasidas about such honor is not merely the praise of the Scioneans but the inner conviction that he deserved their praise, because he truly did contribute more than anyone else to the liberation of Greece. Just as an athlete cherishes the honor that is deserved, for a victory that is fairly won and that truly demonstrates athletic excellence, so does Brasidas cherish the recognition of the Scioneans for his genuine achievement and his true merit. And just as an athlete would enjoy the inner satisfaction of athletic achievement in itself as well as the external honor received for that achievement, so would Brasidas enjoy the inner satisfaction of helping the Greeks win their freedom as well as the external honor received for that achievement. The self-interested love of honor that animates Brasidas, then, is not at all incompatible with a genuine desire to fight for the freedom of the Greeks and a genuine pleasure in doing so.

Yet, insofar as Brasidas cherishes the belief that he is devoted to justice rather than to his self-interest, and on the basis of that belief hopes that the gods will reward him in his quest to liberate the Greeks even against the wishes of Athens and Sparta, he is profoundly deluded. That delusion, by leading him to inspire reckless hopes in the Scioneans and Mendeans, has

⁸⁹ Connor goes so far as to suggest that Thucydides, in his “last significant comment about Brasidas,” identifies him with Cleon, since both are driven by “personal and self-interested motives” (1984, 139–140).

⁹⁰ 4.121.1. After his death, the Amphipolitans honor him every year as their “founder,” “savior,” and “hero” or demigod. See 5.11.1. Burns contends that Brasidas longed “for the immortality of a hero” (2011, 520).

terrible consequences for them and would presumably have had terrible consequences for him, had he lived to see all that befell those he liberated. The example of Brasidas illustrates the blessings but also the fragility of the innocence the Athenian ambassadors at Melos later speak of, and, apparently, envy (5.105.3). Even more than the Melians, Brasidas enjoys a blessed innocence, innocently believing that he is morally superior to his enemies and that he is worthy of the favor of the just gods – who will reward him – as well as of his human admirers. Brasidas apparently dies with this blessed innocence intact, at the moment of a glorious victory in defense of the city – Amphipolis – he liberated, against the vengeful Athenians, a victory he prayed for from Athena and would presumably have attributed to her (5.10.2). He dies, presumably cherishing the hope of such divinely assisted victories in the future. Brasidas also has the good fortune of dying before witnessing the savage destruction of another city he liberated – Scione – at the hands of the vengeful Athenians – a horror that would presumably have destroyed his pleasure in the honor the Scioneans gave him as their liberator, and might have shaken his faith in the just gods and in his worthiness of their assistance, though his experience of that evil might also have enabled him to acquire a measure of wisdom about the human condition and about himself (5.32.1).

The Spartan Victory and the Limits of Sparta

As we have seen, Thucydides' narrative ultimately supports the Athenian understanding of that which is human – as it is articulated by the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, Diodotus, and the Athenian ambassadors at Melos – according to which human beings are compelled by their nature to pursue their own good, and therefore, since all human beings are equally self-interested and, in that respect, morally equal, if just gods exist, they must not intervene in human affairs.⁹¹ Thucydides' portrayal of the Melians, Spartans, and Brasidas supports this understanding as does, most emphatically, Thucydides' statement that both Sparta and Athens “were compelled to break the treaty concluded after ten years and again waged open war” since it indicates that not only the fear that motivated the Spartans, but also the acquisitiveness that motivated the Athenians, compel human beings to act as they do (5.25.3). Yet even though the Athenian understanding of that which is human turns out to be, in Thucydides' judgment, the true

⁹¹ Consider Strauss 1964, 190, 209. But consider as well 1983, 101.

understanding, it is – as Thucydides indicates three times in his book – Sparta who wins the war.⁹² Enlightened Athens wins the war theoretically, one may say, but pious Sparta wins practically.⁹³ But how are we to understand that victory? If Sparta does not win because it is more just and therefore favored by the gods, why does it win? Is its victory due, not to the superiority of its theoretical understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings but rather to the practical superiority of its regime?

Almost at the end of the book, Thucydides offers a singular praise of the regime in Athens that replaced the Periclean democracy: “for the first time, in my lifetime, at least, the Athenians were manifestly well governed; for the measured mixing of the few and the many came into being and this first lifted up the city from the wretched affairs that had come to pass” (8.97.2). This praise of the post-Periclean regime in Athens constitutes a clear, indirect criticism of Periclean Athens for, in general, resulting in a “wretched” factional strife between the many and the few. But it also may constitute an indirect praise of the Spartan regime, since Thucydides’ carefully worded praise of the post-Periclean regime in Athens does not preclude the possibility that Sparta – which he had earlier stated, “lived under good laws and was always free from tyranny” (1.18.1) – was well governed throughout his own lifetime. What is more, Sparta may be properly understood as a kind of mixed regime, that is, a regime that mixes elements from different forms of government, in order to avoid both tyranny and factional strife, mixing especially, monarchy – embodied by its kings – and oligarchy – embodied by its five ephors, who are powerful enough to persuade the citizenry to outvote a king, as one sees in the case of Sthenelaidas and Archidamus, and to recall, arrest, and put to death a royal regent (and even a king – 1.131.2), as one sees in the case of Pausanias.⁹⁴ By contrast, the eruption of factional strife in Athens plays a crucial role in its final defeat, as Thucydides explicitly states in two of his three accounts of that defeat – “being already in factional strife throughout their city,” the Athenians “did not give in before they themselves, falling upon one another in private disputes, collapsed” (2.65.12); the citizens, fearing and resenting Alcibiades, even though “his public management of the war was best,” entrusted other, inferior leaders with the government of

⁹² 2.65.12, 5.26.1, 6.15.4.

⁹³ As Edmunds puts it, “For the most part, the Athenians’ rationalism and pride meet practical defeat” (1975, 188).

⁹⁴ 1.87, 1.131–134.

Athens and “not long after they brought about the downfall of the city” (6.15.4) – and as he also shows when describing the religious hysteria and savage persecution that erupts in Athens at the beginning of the Sicilian Expedition and the violent factional strife that breaks out in Athens in the two years after its defeat in Sicily.⁹⁵ To be sure, there are tensions within Sparta as there are within the Athens founded by Themistocles and Pericles. For example, just as the Athenian majority evidently resented, distrusted, and envied Alcibiades, and also, it seems, Themistocles, so does a powerful faction within Sparta – consisting of “the first men” – envy Brasidas.⁹⁶ But the mixed regime in Sparta, along with the reverence for law and piety encouraged by the regime, evidently temper that envy. For in contrast with the envy of the Athenians for Themistocles and Alcibiades, the envy of the Spartans for Brasidas does not lead them to condemn him to death or him to betray his city to its enemies.⁹⁷

Thucydides refers to the Spartan victory in the war three times in his book. However, and surprisingly, he only states once that Sparta positively defeated Athens, declaring that “The same Thucydides, an Athenian, has recorded [γέγραφε] these” events of the war “until the time when the Spartans and their allies put an end to the empire of the Athenians and took the long walls and the Peiraeus” (5.26.1). The other two times he states, as we have seen, that the Athenians “collapsed” due to factional strife among themselves and that by rejecting the leadership of Alcibiades “they brought about the downfall of the city.”⁹⁸ Taken as a whole, these three passages suggest that Sparta won the war less by its own efforts and more thanks to the self-destructive actions of the Athenians. Thucydides evidently agrees with the fear expressed by Pericles just before the outbreak of the war in his first speech in the book: “For I am more afraid of our own errors than of the plans of our opponents” (1.144.1). Now, Thucydides’ suggestion that the primary reason for Athens’ loss is that Athens defeated itself in the war certainly constitutes a praise of Sparta. It is to Sparta’s enormous credit that it did not defeat itself, that factional strife did not erupt there, and that it did not alienate its most talented general who then gave crucial advice to the enemy. Nevertheless, that suggestion certainly does qualify his praise of Sparta. In the end, only Athens could defeat itself.

⁹⁵ See 6.53, 6.59–61, 8.47.2–8.98. See also Orwin 1994, 77, and especially 183: “Nothing bespeaks Sparta’s greatness like the evils her regime averts.”

⁹⁶ 1.135.2–136.4, 6.15.3–4, 6.16.3, 6.61.4, 4.108.7. ⁹⁷ 6.61.4–7, 6.88.10–93.

⁹⁸ 2.65.12, 6.15.4.

The Practical and the Theoretical Importance of Daring

Thucydides' sharpest criticism of Sparta is to be found almost at the end of the book, in his account of the Peloponnesian naval victory over Athens at Eretria and the subsequent revolt of Euboea, the Athenians' imperial subject vitally important to them as a source of food, "from which they derived more benefit than from Attica."⁹⁹ Thucydides explains that the revolt frightened the Athenians even more than the destruction of their forces in Sicily, since at the time of the revolt their army in Samos was also in revolt, they had virtually no navy nearby, and there was fierce factional fighting taking place within Athens itself. Thucydides underscores the singular vulnerability of Athens, and therefore the singular opportunity for Sparta, by, for only the second time in the book, directly addressing the reader and directly asking in his own name a question of the reader: "how could they not but feel dispirited, and reasonably so?"¹⁰⁰ Thucydides then explains:

And what especially threw them into an uproar was that, since their enemies were so nearby, they might dare, after winning their victory, to sail directly against the Peiraeus now that it was bereft of ships; and they [the Athenians] believed that they [the Spartans] were already as good as there. This very thing, if they were more daring, they would easily have done, and either have brought the city into still greater factional strife by mooring their ships next to it, or, if they stayed and besieged it, they would compel the ships from Ionia, even though they were hostile to the oligarchy, to come to the aid of their own families and the city as a whole; and in that case the Hellespont would be theirs and Ionia and the islands as far as Euboea and, so to speak the entire empire of Athens. But not only on this occasion did the Spartans prove to be the most advantageous of all human beings for the Athenians to wage war against; for being most different in their character, the one keen, the other dull, the one enterprising, the other without daring, the Spartans benefited them, especially with regard to their naval empire. And the Syracusans showed this. For since they were most like them [the Athenians] in their character, they warred best against them.¹⁰¹

As he brings his book to a close, Thucydides reveals his judgment that the Spartans were singularly ineffective opponents of the Athenians because, as

⁹⁹ 8.96.2; see 2.14, 7.28.1, 8.1.3, 8.95.2.

¹⁰⁰ 8.96.2. See 7.44.1 and Parry's comment on it (1972, 47n1).

¹⁰¹ 8.96.3–5. Consider also 7.55.2.

he states here three times, they lacked the necessary “daring” to defeat Athens by their own actions, as they could have “easily” on this occasion simply by attacking the undefended Peiraeus.¹⁰² The Syracusans were the most effective opponents of the Athenians because they were the most like them – they exhibited the daring, energy, and ingenuity of the Athenians in turning themselves into a seafaring people, devising and deploying new naval tactics and technologies, and challenging them effectively at sea as well as on land.¹⁰³ The Syracusans were also led by a general whose sagacity and theoretical understanding of human nature resembled those of the Athenians.¹⁰⁴

One might object that, in Thucydides’ narrative of the events in Sicily, he attributes to the Spartan Gylippus a crucial role in reversing the Athenian advance on Syracuse by rallying the Syracusans, training them, and leading them with vigor and enterprise.¹⁰⁵ Doesn’t Sparta, then, deserve some credit for the effective performance of the Athenian-like Syracusans in the war? And yet, that question points to the even more crucial role played by the Athenian Alcibiades in the war effort of the Syracusans and indeed of the Spartans as a whole. For it was due to him alone that the Spartans sent Gylippus to Syracuse, along with other forces, in a timely fashion, and that the Spartans attacked Athens itself so effectively and thereby indirectly provided encouragement and assistance to the Syracusans. Indeed, it is Alcibiades who provides the Spartans with their winning strategy: Aid the Syracusans, build a permanent fort on Attic territory, and, later, send a navy to Ionia to cause the Athenian imperial subjects there to revolt.¹⁰⁶ The most effective opponents of Athens in the war, then, prove to be the Athenian-like Syracusans and the Athenian Alcibiades. It is true that the Spartan Brasidas was also an effective opponent of the Athenians, but it is also true that he exhibits in some measure the daring that is characteristic of the Athenians but not the Spartans.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Consider the Athenian ambassadors’ remark at 5.107 that the Spartans “are, for the most part, the least daring” of human beings.

¹⁰³ See especially 6.34.8–9, 6.68.2, 6.69.1, 7.21.3–4, and 7.67.1, where the daring of the Syracusans is mentioned. See also, more generally, 7.21–24, 7.36–41, 7.43–46, 7.51–54, 7.70–71. Consider as well Connor 1984, 172–176, 190–191; Balot 2023, 208–209.

¹⁰⁴ See 6.72.2, 4.61.5.

¹⁰⁵ See especially 6.103, 7.1–7, and also 7.21–24, 7.37.2–3, 7.46, 7.50.1, 7.53.1, 7.65–68.

¹⁰⁶ 6.88.9–93, 7.18.1, 7.19.1–2, 7.27.3–28, 8.5.4–6.3, 8.11.3–12.1, 8.14.1–2, 8.17.1–2, 8.26.3.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter 4, pp. 150–151.

Thucydides' criticism of Sparta here constitutes his greatest criticism in the book of the lack of daring and, indirectly, his greatest praise of daring. But what exactly is his praise of daring? What is the nature of daring and of the lack of daring? How and to what extent does daring benefit those who have it, and how does its absence cause harm? In order to address these questions, it is helpful first to look back and consider the first account in the book of the Spartans' lack of daring and the Athenians' daring in the comparison of the characters of Athens and Sparta made by the Corinthians in their speech at Sparta, a comparison that Thucydides clearly refers back to in this passage.¹⁰⁸ Like Thucydides, the Corinthians identify the Spartans' lack of daring as their cardinal weakness in war. As the Corinthians bitterly observe to the Spartans regarding the Athenians:

They innovate and are keen to devise plans and to fulfill in deed what they resolve; you are keen to preserve what you have and to devise nothing and not even to accomplish in deed what is necessary. They again are daring beyond their power and run risks beyond their judgment and in the midst of dangers are of good hope; but you act beneath your power and do not trust your sure judgment and you suppose that you will never be delivered from dangers. (1.70.2–3)

According to the Corinthians here, the daring of the Athenians is good because it enables them to act “beyond their power,” while the lack of daring of the Spartans is bad because it leads them to act “beneath their power.” But this account raises a number of questions: How is it possible for the Athenians to act “beyond their power”? And why do the Spartans act “beneath their power” and fail to do even “what is necessary”? Why, for example, do they fail to attack the undefended Peiraeus after the revolt of Euboea and thereby end the war with Athens seven years earlier than they did?

To begin with the Spartans, the reason that they do less than they are capable of is that, due to their piety, they do not recognize their own capacity and they fear testing the limits of their capacity. As we have seen, the Spartans believe that it is the gods who determine the fortunes of war rather than their own efforts, and hence that, for example, they lost the battle of Pylos not because of their own errors but because of “fortune” from the gods.¹⁰⁹ This belief accordingly leads them to underestimate their own power. Even the daring and sagacious Brasidas evidently attributes at

¹⁰⁸ See Connor 1984, 41.

¹⁰⁹ See Chapter 4, pp. 173–179.

least one of his victories to the goddess Athena.¹¹⁰ What is more, the Spartans evidently believe that the gods view human daring with disfavor. The Spartans identify daring with “hubris,” that is, the arrogant overconfidence that inspires humans to transgress the limits on human behavior that the gods lay down through their laws.¹¹¹ Indeed, Archidamus proclaims that the Spartans “alone” – due to their “prudent moderation,” which in turn is based on their “reverent shame [αἰδώς]” before the power of the gods – “do not become hubristic through their success” (1.84.2–3). The Spartans, then, especially fear overestimating their own power lest it lead them to incur the wrath of the gods, as they evidently believe they did when violating the sanctuary of Poseidon, thereby provoking the great earthquake, and when violating the peace treaty with Athens, thereby provoking their defeat at Pylos.¹¹² Accordingly, the Spartans repeatedly underestimate their power throughout the war. They fail, over and over again, to make full use of their power and to act effectively against Athens: most notably, when they fail to attack the “unguarded” Peiraeus, which they “easily” could have done, in the third year of the war; when they fail to block the passages into the harbor at Pylos and thus enable the Athenians to win their greatest victory against them in the seventh year of the war; when they fail to build a permanent fortification on Attic territory at Deceleia – “the very thing which the Athenians always fear most and believe is the only test in the war they have not faced,” according to Alcibiades, and a possibility that both the Corinthians and Pericles refer to even before the war begins – until the nineteenth year of the war; and when they fail to attack the undefended Peiraeus in the twenty-first year of the war.¹¹³

The cause of the Spartans’ lack of daring, then, is their piety. Now, Thucydides’ overall narrative shows that the piety of the Spartans is in important respects a great practical strength of their regime. As the

¹¹⁰ See 1.70.3, 2.25.2, 2.93–94.1, 3.79, 5.7.2, 5.10.6; 4.81.2; 4.116.2.

¹¹¹ Thucydides provides two other examples of the pious identification of daring with hubris: When Sparta’s allies, the Boeotians, accuse the Athenians of desecrating the temple of Apollo at Delium in violation of divine law, the Athenians defend themselves against this impiety charge by explaining that they acted out of necessity and not out of “hubris” (4.98.5); and when pious Athenians emerge after the mutilation of the Hermæ to make accusations of impiety against their fellow citizens, they charge that some “acted out the sacred mysteries with hubris” (6.28.1).

¹¹² 4.18.2, 1.128.1, 7.18.2.

¹¹³ 2.93–94; 4.13.2–15; 1.122.1, 1.142.2–4, 6.91.5–7, 6.93.2, 7.19.1–2, 7.27.3–28; 8.96.2–5. Romilly comments that, even though the idea of fortifying Deceleia “was a fairly obvious one,” “probably, the Spartans delayed so long in putting [it] into practice for no other reason than their lack of energy” (1963, 143).

singularly pious Archidamus – the only wartime character in the book who gives a speech addressed to the gods – claims in his first speech, the Spartans’ reverence for the gods moderates their passions and their education in justice and piety strengthens their devotion to law, and Thucydides’ account of the war largely supports that claim.¹¹⁴ Most significantly, Sparta never succumbs to the lawlessness and factional strife that engulfed the rest of Greece, including Athens, during the war.¹¹⁵ The lawful and habitual piety of the Spartans also evidently allows them to contain and temper their religious passions of fear and guilt, in contrast with the Athenians, who oscillate between the extremes of, for example, the antireligious speeches of the Athenian ambassadors at Melos and the antireligious acts of certain Athenians – the mutilation of the *Hermæ* and the profanation of the mysteries – on the one hand, and the religious hysteria following, first, the discovery of the mutilation of the *Hermæ* in Athens and, then, the eclipse of the moon in Sicily, on the other.¹¹⁶

But what Thucydides stresses at the end of his book is that daring is also a great and even indispensable source of strength. For had the Spartans been daring after the revolt of Euboea, he stresses, they would have “easily” won the war at that moment (8.96.4). But, again, how, exactly, does daring benefit those who have it? As we have noted, the Corinthians claim, in apparent praise of the Athenians, that they “are daring beyond their power.” Similarly, Pericles declares to the Athenians on the eve of war, “Our fathers withstood the Persians, starting with fewer resources, and giving up those they had, with more judgment than fortune and with greater daring than power they repelled the barbarians and brought us to our present state” (1.144.4). Daring, then, would seem to constitute the willingness to act “beyond” one’s “power.” But that cannot be literally true since what one is capable of doing is, necessarily, within one’s power, and that which is beyond one’s power is that which is beyond what is possible. What the Corinthians and Pericles would seem to mean, then, is that, insofar as daring is praiseworthy, it constitutes the willingness to go beyond the merely apparent limits of one’s power – to test those limits in order to determine whether or not they are genuine limits. Daring, then, is the willingness to go up to the very limits of what is possible, in order to make full use of the power one truly has.

Thus understood, daring is rational, for it reflects a desire to go beyond what is conventionally thought to be the limits of human possibilities in

¹¹⁴ 2.74.2, 1.84. ¹¹⁵ 3.82.1; see, for example, 2.65.12, 6.15.3–4, 8.63.3–76.6, 8.86.

¹¹⁶ 5.103, 5.105, 5.111.2, 5.113, 6.27–28, 6.53.1–2, 6.60–61, 7.50.4.

order to ascertain what the true, natural limits are. Daring entails the willingness to question those conventional beliefs that lead one to underestimate what human beings are capable of, for example, beliefs that identify what is customary with what is possible, what has not been heretofore with what cannot be, and what is said to be forbidden by the gods with what is impossible. It is the willingness to act beyond the limits apparently imposed by tradition, piety, and even, in some measure, nature. Athenian daring “came into being” when the Athenians, faced by the threat of enslavement by the mighty Persian Empire, dared to abandon the way of life that they had always lived, to forsake the land of their ancestors and their temples, to take to the sea, and to transform themselves into a seafaring people so as to challenge and vanquish the apparently more powerful Persians.¹¹⁷ As the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta explain, during the Persian War,

We displayed by far the most daring zeal, we who, when no one was helping us by land, and the others up to our borders were enslaved, resolved to abandon our city and destroy our homes, not so as to desert the common cause of the remaining allies, nor to scatter and become useless to them, but to take the risk of going on to our ships. (1.74.2)

Daring entails facing the risk of failure, since one cannot know with certainty beforehand if what one is attempting is truly within one’s power. But, insofar as it is rational, such daring is based on a calculation of probable success, as, for example, the Athenians, led by the sagacity of Themistocles, reasoned that they had a good chance of defeating the much larger Persian naval forces within the enclosed space of the straits of Salamis (1.138.3). As Pericles explains in the Funeral Oration, “For we are also distinguished from others in this respect, that we are both especially daring and calculating in what we undertake, but for others boldness comes from ignorance and hesitation from calculation” (2.40.3). It is this rational daring that enabled the Athenians to fight effectively, even when outnumbered, and hence to overcome what might seem their natural debility – their inferior numbers – just as, for example, the women of Corcyra “daringly” fought “beyond their nature,” that is, beyond what might be conventionally thought to be the limits imposed on them by their natural weakness (3.74.1). Without such rational daring, then, the Athenians would not have saved themselves from slavery and destruction, defeated the Persian Empire, and acquired their own empire. Similarly, without the

¹¹⁷ 1.90.1, 2.14–16.

rational daring of the Syracusans, Alcibiades, and, in some measure, Brasidas, the Spartans would not have defeated the Athenian Empire in the end.

Daring, on the other hand, is harmful if it is irrational, that is, if it fails to calculate carefully whether what is being undertaken truly is within the capacities of the darer or goes beyond the limits of what is possible. Insofar as daring strives to do what is apparently impossible, there is, even in the case of rational daring, inevitably a possibility of failure, given the contingencies of life that are always so difficult to calculate. For example, had Xerxes heeded the advice of his general Artemisia and declined to fight the Greeks in the straits of Salamis, thereby avoiding a devastating naval defeat, the Athenians might well have been conquered, notwithstanding their rational daring in defying the Persians, abandoning their lands, and taking to their ships.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, under the circumstances they found themselves in, the risk they ran would seem to have been a reasonable one, since, given their forces and allies and given the forces of the enemy, the defeat of the Persians was within their power. But Thucydides suggests that what he calls “irrational daring [ἀλόγιστος τόλμα]” entails a failure to calculate as carefully as one might before acting and therefore undertaking what is foreseeably beyond one’s power. What might cause such a miscalculation? Thucydides offers two explicit examples of “irrational daring” – acts of vengeance undertaken during the factional strife that engulfed Greece and the attempt by Harmodius and Aristogeiton to overthrow the tyranny in Athens – and what would seem to be one implicit example, an act of “daring” that “was undertaken with the greatest hope for the future in comparison with what at present they possessed” – the attempt by the Athenians to conquer Sicily.¹¹⁹ Let us consider what light these examples shed on what causes daring to be irrational.

As we have seen, the savage killings during the stasis that erupted in Corcyra and then throughout Greece were fueled above all by the anger and hatred of factions for one another and the passion for revenge. Thucydides remarks that a consequence of such strife was that human beings “changed the habitual value of names for deeds through their

¹¹⁸ Herodotus 8.68. Consider also Xerxes’ rejection of Demaratus’ apparently shrewd advice that the king send his fleet to seize Cythera and pin down the Spartans at home while conquering the rest of Greece at 7.234–237. Consider as well the question regarding the relation between daring and prudence that Jaffe raises: “The Athenian victory at Marathon against a numerically superior Persian land force, for example, brought great glory but was the battle really so prudent?” (2017, 191).

¹¹⁹ 3.82.4, 6.59.1, 6.31.6.

judgement of what is just. For an irrational daring was believed the courage that loves party comrades" (3.82.4). Thucydides goes on to explain that, in the midst of factional strife, faction – or party – commanded more loyalty even than family (3.82.6), and he indicates that parties were identified with justice: the democrats identified themselves as champions of "political equality under the law for the majority" and oligarchs identified themselves as champions of "moderate aristocracy" (3.82.8). Human beings, then, insofar as they believed that what was in truth "irrational daring," according to Thucydides, was "the courage that loves party comrades," transformed irrational daring into a moral virtue – the virtue of courage that fights for justice by fighting for one's party. Accordingly, the vengeance that the partisans seek to inflict on one another is, from their perspective, a punishment of the injustice of their enemies. And their zeal to punish injustice is daring because it undertakes to do so regardless of custom or law – the killing of sons by their fathers and of suppliants by their persecutors (3.81). Now, what renders this daring irrational, most simply, is that, under the circumstances of Greece at this time, with the Athenians supporting the democrats and the Spartans supporting the oligarchs, neither faction was capable of decisively defeating the other. "They dared the most terrible things" in order to defeat decisively their enemies but succeeded only in devastating their societies as a whole (3.82.8). Why do they keep attempting to do what is clearly beyond their power to accomplish? What prompts them to hope that they will succeed? What evidently sustains them is the belief that their cause is just, the attendant pleasure of affirming their own righteousness through their acts, and their hope, apparently grounded in an implicit belief that gods will ensure that justice prevails, that their cause will triumph over the unjust. Their righteous confidence inspires in them an overweening confidence – "a hubris" – that leads, overall, to their ruin (3.84.1). In the stasis of Corcyra, then, human beings' daring – their willingness to challenge the apparent limits of human power – is not governed by a rational calculation of what is possible but rather by a moral zeal that insists that what they deem just must be possible.

The "irrational daring" of Harmodius and Aristogeiton is governed as well, in part, by a confidence in their righteousness, but also, and above all by the intense, erotic passion of Aristogeiton for the beautiful Harmodius, who is "in the prime of his splendid youth" (6.59.1, 6.54.2). For, when Hipparchus, the brother of the tyrant Hippias, conceives an attraction for Harmodius, presses his attentions on him, and, when rebuffed, angrily insults the sister of Harmodius in public, Harmodius is morally indignant at this humiliation, "bearing it hard," but Aristogeiton was "far more

provoked” on behalf of his beloved.¹²⁰ “In the manner of lovers [ἐρωτικῶς],” Thucydides explains, Aristogeiton is “surpassingly pained and terrified of the power of Hipparchus lest he take” Harmodius “by force,” and consequently he seeks to eliminate that threat from the tyrant’s brother by organizing a conspiracy to overthrow the tyranny as a whole (6.54.3). He and his fellow conspirators “hoped” that, once the tyrant Hippias and his brother were slain, on the day of the Panathenaea – the great festival in honor of Athena and the one day on which many citizens were allowed to bear arms so that could take part in the processions – other citizens who were not part of the conspiracy but were taking part in an armed procession would “join in liberating themselves” (6.56.3). However, at the moment that Harmodius and Aristogeiton are going to kill Hippias, they see one of the conspirators conversing in a seemingly friendly way with Hippias, they are overcome by “a surpassing fear” that their plot has been exposed, and, rather than calculate whether their fear is warranted, “without circumspection,” they seek “to revenge themselves on the one who had caused them pain and the very one on account of whom they were risking all” – Hipparchus. They kill him in a fit of “erotic anger,” on the part of Aristogeiton, and indignation at being insulted, on the part of Harmodius, and, without any of their fellow citizens joining to help them, are in turn themselves killed by guards (6.57.2–4).

There are three aspects of their daring attempt to overthrow the tyranny that render it “irrational.” First, according to Thucydides, “the irrational daring” of Harmodius and Aristogeiton arose “out of a sudden, surpassing fear” that their conspiracy had been discovered, an unwarranted fear that led them to be discovered and killed (6.59.1). Secondly, Aristogeiton’s fear that Hipparchus would use his power as the brother of the tyrant to take Harmodius by violence was unwarranted, not only because, in Thucydides’ account, Hipparchus did not wish to use violence against Harmodius, but, more broadly, because the tyrants of Athens did not rule very harshly until after the assassination of Hipparchus.¹²¹ Before then, Thucydides reveals, they were virtuous and sagacious and ruled Athens in accordance with established laws. Thirdly, precisely insofar as the rule of the tyrants of Athens was not oppressive – for they levied few taxes and “beautifully adorned the city” – the hope of Harmodius and Aristogeiton that their attempt to overthrow the tyrants would enjoy widespread popular support was evidently unreasonable (6.54.5). After all, they themselves are not

¹²⁰ 6.54.3–4, 6.56.1–2.

¹²¹ 6.54.4–6, 6.59.2–4. But see Chapter 3, note 96.

attempting to overthrow the tyrants out of hatred for tyranny, or hatred for the tyrant Hippias for depriving them of their political freedom, but rather out of hatred for the brother of the tyrant for private reasons, on account of “an erotic misfortune” and “an erotic suffering.”¹²² It is therefore not surprising that there is no indication in Thucydides’ account of any popular sympathy for Harmodius, Aristogeiton, and the other conspirators when they are all killed. The hope of the lovers for success would seem to reflect their confidence in the justice of their cause – they seek to take revenge on what they regard as the hubristic behavior of Hipparchus (6.57.3). It is also possible that they hope that, by overthrowing the tyrants during the Panathenaea, they would enjoy the support of the goddess herself in their endeavor. But what Thucydides stresses throughout this account of the conspirators is above all the role of erotic passion in their daring act. He mentions *eros* and related words five times here, more than all the other appearances of that word in the rest of his book.¹²³ It is Aristogeiton’s intense love for his beautiful beloved that leads him to fear excessively that he will lose him to Hipparchus and to hope excessively that, with the help of his fellow citizens and perhaps the help of the gods, he will safeguard his beloved and thereby protect their love for one another by overthrowing the tyranny. As Diodotus remarks: “The hope and the erotic desire for everything, the one leading, the other following, the one thinking up the plot, the other suggesting that fortune will be bountiful, do the most harm” (3.45.5). The intense desire for an object, even if it is beyond one’s power by any rational calculation, tends to give rise to the hope that one will secure it for oneself, be it freedom, empire, or, as in the case of Aristogeiton, his beloved Harmodius.

Now, the Athenians’ attempt to conquer Sicily would also seem to be an example of “irrational daring.”¹²⁴ To be sure, Thucydides never explicitly states that it was “irrational.” He goes so far as to remark in his eulogy to Pericles that that attempt “was not so much an error of judgment regarding the ones they went against” though, as he goes on to explain, it was an error of the subsequent judgment of “those who sent it out but did not give adequate support to the ones who went” (2.65.11).¹²⁵ What is more, the

¹²² 6.54.1, 6.59.1.

¹²³ 6.54.1, 6.54.2, 6.54.3, 6.57.3, 6.59.1. For the other appearances in the book, see 2.43.1, 3.45.5, 6.13.1, 6.24.3.

¹²⁴ See Connor 1984, 179. See also 159–160.

¹²⁵ Forde remarks that “Thucydides insists throughout his presentation of the expedition that Athens could have easily prevailed if it had not removed from command and exiled Alcibiades,” but Forde also stresses “the inevitability of the Athenians’ reaction against

Athenians, even without the leadership of Alcibiades, come tantalizingly close to capturing Syracuse and therefore, it would seem, to succeeding in conquering all of Sicily.¹²⁶ On the other hand, in Thucydides' account, it seems foreseeable that the Athenians are likely to fail, for three reasons. First, Alcibiades, the one who according to Thucydides, was very superior in the public management of the war, was given only one third of the command of the expedition – and the more influential of the other two commanders, Nicias, was a bitter opponent of Alcibiades and of the expedition, and was not very superior in the public management of the war, in part because of his belief that the fortunes of war are determined by the will of the gods rather than by the efforts of humans.¹²⁷ Second, Alcibiades is removed from his command, at the very beginning of the expedition he masterminded, because of the distrust and envy he inevitably provoked among the Athenian many due to his unconcealed ambition, lawless behavior, and impious reputation.¹²⁸ Thirdly, once he is condemned to death by the Athenians in absentia, Alcibiades inevitably goes to Sparta and, as we have seen, gives it excellent advice as to how to defeat Athens in Sicily and in the war as a whole.¹²⁹ What inspires the Athenians to undertake and to continue this daring expedition without the services of their most gifted general is their intense, “erotic desire,” for conquering Sicily and their hope for doing so – their “greatest hope” – a hope that is evidently religious.¹³⁰ In order to win the favor the gods for the expedition, they pray collectively for its success, they appoint their most pious general – Nicias – as one of its leaders, they attempt to purify their city of all impiety, they sacrifice their most gifted general once he is accused of impiety, and they defer to the pronouncements of their prophets.¹³¹ Rather than submit their daring willingness to attempt something beyond the apparent limits of their power to the scrutiny and guidance of reason, their intense erotic passion leads them ultimately to trust in the power and guidance of the gods.

him” and that “his exile in retrospect seems so inevitable” (1989, 14, 7, 96). Consider also Bolotin 1987, 26–27.

¹²⁶ 6.91.3, 6.96–103, 7.2.

¹²⁷ 6.8.2, 5.16.1, 5.43–46, 6.8.4, 6.12.2, 7.50.4, 7.77.2–4. Grene goes so far as to state that “The total failure of the expedition and the loss of close to forty thousand men killed, wounded, and prisoners, is very largely attributable to the stupidity, timidity, and incompetence of Nicias” (1965, 71).

¹²⁸ 6.15, 6.28, 6.53, 6.60–61.

¹²⁹ See p. 220.

¹³⁰ 6.24.3, 6.31.6.

¹³¹ 6.31.1–2, 6.8.2, 6.28, 6.53, 6.61, 6.69.2, 8.1.1.

These three examples highlight the importance of reason in guiding daring. Insofar as daring entails testing the apparent, conventional limits of what is possible for human beings, daring requires one to brave uncertainty and the possibility of failure but also to calculate as carefully as possible regarding one's undertaking. Reflection on Thucydides' praise of rational daring at the end of the book highlights the crucial importance of the type of practical reason displayed by Themistocles discussed by Thucydides near the beginning of the book: the capacity to judge accurately, without relying on the conventional guidance of custom and piety; to determine a course of action that takes into account the Athenians' strengths and weaknesses; to anticipate the decisions of his Persian enemies, his Spartan allies, and of his own fellow Athenians; and to recognize not only the risks of acting but also the risks of not acting (1.138.3). For daring, without such sagacity to guide it, proves ruinous.

Thucydides' praise of daring also highlights the importance of daring in the search for the truth concerning the fundamental character and condition of human beings. For in his account, it is the daring Athenians – the ambassadors at Sparta and Melos, and Diodotus – along with the daring Syracusan Hermocrates, who attain knowledge of that truth. Daring would seem to be indispensable for the search for the truth, for that search inevitably confronts one with a pious tradition that simultaneously insists that it provides all the knowledge one needs and warns human beings against challenging that knowledge. For only a spirit of daring will lead one to take the many risks of testing the limits pious tradition seeks to impose on the quest for the truth. Moreover, the seeker for the truth cannot know before seeking whether a truth beyond the conventional answers can be founded, or whether finding that truth will be good for the seeker. The seeker for the truth runs the potential risk, not only of incurring the wrath of gods or of human beings acting in the name of the gods but also of discovering – too late – that the search for the truth has destroyed the blessed innocence that may be the most genuine form of happiness available to human beings. Nevertheless, although the spirit of daring is necessary for the search for the truth, it is not sufficient for bringing that search to a successful conclusion. For, as the examples of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, and also of the Athenian Sicilian Expedition, indicate, and as Diodotus suggests, the daring quest to test what are conventionally thought to be the limits of what is possible tends to be accompanied by an intense, erotic desire and hope for a beautiful and pleasing outcome for that quest, a desire and hope that may not be supported by reason. In the case of the daring quest for the truth, such erotic desire and hope for a beautiful and

pleasing answer may lead one to avert one's eyes before the genuine, but not so beautiful or pleasing, truth. The search for the truth requires all the strength of daring, as well as of eros and hope. But, in the end, it requires, above all, the even stronger and harder desire to know the truth, and the willingness to face the truth, no matter what it is. Such is the character of Thucydides' own search for the truth.

CHAPTER 6

The Character of Thucydides

Even though Thucydides is the first character to appear in the book, he is extremely reticent in his account of himself in his book as a whole. Although he tells us how he felt at the beginning of the war, when he “hoped” that it would be a great war since Athens and Sparta were, he then believed, both at the peak of their greatness, Thucydides never tells us how he felt at any point later in the war, most notably, when he learned that he was afflicted with the deadly plague; when he failed to defend Amphipolis from Brasidas and was subsequently condemned to exile for twenty years by his fellow Athenians; or when, during his years of exile, his fellow Athenians set out to conquer Sicily.¹ However, his book offers glimpses of his character through implicit contrasts with five other characters, all Athenian, whom he resembles: his fellow exile, Alcibiades; the three characters – or groups of characters – who share, in varying ways, his understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings – the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and at Melos, and Diodotus; and the only character in the book who claims to be a lover of wisdom – that is, a philosopher – Pericles (2.40.1). By comparing and contrasting Thucydides with these figures, we may come to see his distinctive nature more clearly.²

Thucydides and His Fellow Exile Alcibiades

Thucydides’ statement, near the end of the book, that the installation of the rule of the 5000, which mixed the regimes of oligarchy and democracy, marks “the first time in my lifetime” that “the Athenians were manifestly

¹ See 2.47.3–54, 4.104–107, 5.26.5, 6.1, 6.24, 6.31–32. See also Beasley 2023, 31.

² As Beasley remarks, “Thucydides defines himself in contradistinction to others” (2023, 37).

well governed,” signifies a sharp critique of the Athens of most of his lifetime, the democratic Athens ruled by Pericles and his successors (8.97.2). Not only does Thucydides express the judgment that Athens was not well governed prior to the mixed regime established in 411, but he also apparently allows for the possibility that other cities had been well governed in his lifetime. This statement therefore signifies a dramatic departure from the opening of the book, where Thucydides introduces himself as one who identifies himself as an Athenian and regards Athens under the rule of Pericles as constituting a peak, if not the peak, of political and human greatness (1.1.1). Thucydides’ search for the truth about that which is human, which he presents in this book, evidently leads him, in his mind, beyond the Periclean Athens of his birth. But to what does knowledge of the truth about the fundamental character and condition of human beings lead him?

That knowledge clearly does not lead Thucydides to embrace Sparta. As we have seen, Thucydides evidently concludes that the Spartan understanding of the character and condition of human beings is untrue.³ Moreover, he almost ends the book with a harsh criticism of Sparta’s characteristic lack of daring (8.96.5). Thucydides’ stance, at the end of his search for the truth, is independent of both Athens and Sparta. In order to understand the distinctive character of his independence, it is helpful to compare him with his fellow Athenian exile – Alcibiades.

On the surface, Alcibiades appears far more independent of Athens and Sparta than Thucydides. Like Thucydides, Alcibiades is forced into exile by the Athenians. Thucydides is condemned for his failure as general to defend Amphipolis against Brasidas during the eighth year of the war and is sentenced to 20 years of exile.⁴ Alcibiades, while serving as one of the three commanding generals of the Athenian armament sent to Sicily during the seventeenth year of the war, is accused of the impious act of profaning the sacred rites – the mysteries – of Athens and of conspiring to overthrow the democracy in Athens; when he refuses to return to Athens for his trial – for, Thucydides informs us, the Athenians “were wishing to bring him back for trial and then kill him” (6.61.4) – the Athenians condemn him to death in absentia.⁵ Yet, although the sentence he receives

³ See Chapter 5, pp. 207–217.

⁴ 4.104.4–106.3. 5.26.5. Consider Pouncey’s comment that Thucydides received “a steep sentence for an officer, who, whatever his delinquencies, saved one town (Eion) and was only secondarily responsible for the loss of another” (1980, 5).

⁵ 6.27–28, 6.53, 6.61.

from his fellow citizens is even harsher than that which Thucydides receives, Alcibiades' political career continues, while Thucydides spends his exile in apparent obscurity. Indeed, Alcibiades' career flourishes while he is in exile and, in certain respects, reaches dizzying heights.⁶ First he goes to Sparta for three years, where he successfully "teaches" the Spartans how to win the war against Athens – by sending timely aid to Syracuse, fortifying Deceleia, and, later, sending ships to Ionia to cause the Athenian imperial subjects there to revolt.⁷ Then, during his third year of exile, and the twentieth year of the war, Alcibiades, having fallen under suspicion in Sparta and been condemned to death, finds refuge among the Persians, becoming the "teacher of all things" to the Persian satrap Tissaphernes and successfully advising him and the Persian King himself how to maximize their power over Greece – by inducing the Spartans and Athenians to prolong their war against one another, thereby dividing and wearing down the Greeks.⁸ Finally, during his fourth year of exile, and the twenty-first year of the war, Alcibiades persuades the Athenians to recall him and entrust their affairs to his leadership by offering them an alliance with Persia, thereby saving them from ruin following their defeat in Sicily (which he orchestrated) and the revolt of Euboea.⁹ Thucydides' book ends with the imminent return to power of his fellow exile in Athens, even while he remains in exile himself.

What makes Alcibiades' amazing, transnational political success possible is his tremendous practical wisdom and his ability to make that wisdom visible to others.¹⁰ Alcibiades adopts the perspective of, first, the city of Sparta and, then, the empire of Persia and sees clearly what is in the self-interest of each, given the situation each faces. Alcibiades' success in both offering superb advice to Sparta and Persia and in persuading them to follow his advice demonstrates in important respects the excellence of his mind and, especially, the independence of his mind from his native

⁶ Palmer goes so far as to suggest that Alcibiades "elevates himself to the status of a city" (1992, 99).

⁷ Thucydides says twice that Alcibiades "taught" the Spartans how to prosecute the war and Alcibiades urges the Spartans twice to "learn" from him (6.93.1, 7.18.1, 6.90.1, 6.91.1). See also 8.6.3, 8.12.

⁸ 8.45–8.47, 8.87.4. Thucydides says twice that Alcibiades "taught" Tissaphernes (8.45.3, 8.56.2) and once calls him Tissaphernes' "teacher [διδάσκαλος]" – the only time in the book that Thucydides calls an individual human being a "teacher." See Chapter 1, note 155.

⁹ 8.47–54, 8.82.3, 8.97.3.

¹⁰ Grene suggests that Alcibiades shows "the same wisdom" as Themistocles and Pericles "in assessing the future" (1965, 66–67).

Athens. For it shows that he is capable of transcending the perspective of the Athenians, of understanding the best interests of each of these hostile powers, and of discerning how best to appeal to the passions as well as the reason of these very different audiences so that they may recognize their interests clearly.

Alcibiades' practical wisdom falters, however, in the case of his own city, both in the strategy he proposes and in his attempt to win its support for that strategy. While Alcibiades makes a powerful case for the Sicilian Expedition at Sparta, arguing that Athens is quite capable of conquering Syracuse, and thereafter all of Sicily, Italy, Carthage, and the Peloponnesus, the fact that Alcibiades makes that case as an exile in Sparta in order to do the greatest harm to Athens highlights the imprudence of that expedition (6.90.2–91.6). From the beginning of the expedition, Alcibiades underestimates the powerful distrust the Athenians harbor toward him, a distrust that arises from their belief that so talented a man, who recognizes his own greatness, must desire tyranny and therefore must seek to remove all impediments to that goal, such as democratic rule and divine law.¹¹ This distrust leads them to appoint his chief opponent as his co-commander – the pious general Nicias; to support the vast increase of forces that Nicias recommends and that energizes and solidifies Sicilian resistance to the Athenians;¹² to suspect Alcibiades of impiety and conspiracy to overthrow the democracy; and eventually to recall him near the beginning of the expedition to defend himself against those charges in court. Yet, up to his recall, Alcibiades evidently cherishes the hope that his fellow Athenians will trust his leadership and will continue to support him, notwithstanding the grave charges hanging over him even before sailing for Sicily.

The clearest sign of this hope is the strategy toward Sicily that Alcibiades advocates during the deliberation among the three Athenian commanders upon their arrival there with their armament. Nicias contends that the Athenians should sail along the coast of Sicily to display their “power” and then sail home (6.47). Lamachus favors an attack on Syracuse “as quickly as possible” while their opponents “are still unprepared and their panic is greatest” (6.49.1). Lamachus goes on to explain in considerable detail why humans fear armies when they first see them; how the Athenians would catch many Syracusans with their goods still out in the fields with a sudden attack and would consequently have ample resources for a siege and final

¹¹ 6.15.3–4, 6.28, 6.61.

¹² 6.19–24, 6.33.2–4. See also 6.10.

assault on Syracuse; and how such a decisive attack would encourage other Sicilians to join Athens opportunistically as allies (6.49.2–4). This advice is clearly endorsed later by Thucydides and especially by Demosthenes, who both remark that the Syracusans' initial fear gave way to contempt once the Athenians delayed their attack, with, as Demosthenes stresses, harmful consequences for the Athenians.¹³ Alcibiades, however, argues for a strategy of delay, on the grounds that the Athenians should first attempt to win over allies among the Sicilians by persuasion before attacking Syracuse (6.48). Alcibiades' strategy here may appear prudent, insofar as it avoids contradicting Nicias, who is after all the senior of the three commanders, too directly.¹⁴ It also enjoys an initial success when the Sicilian city of Catana is induced, by a combination of speech and force, to ally with Athens (6.51). However, the key assumption of Alcibiades' inevitably long-term strategy is that he can rely on the long-term support of the Athenians while negotiating with the other Sicilians before striking at Syracuse, an assumption that proves to be disastrously mistaken. Given the foreseeable danger that Alcibiades would be recalled as a result of the charges he faced even before the armament left Athens (6.28–29), it would seem that the best strategy for Athens and for Alcibiades would have been to attack Syracuse immediately upon arriving in Sicily, on the assumption that, if he succeeded, as he well might have, the Athenians would not recall a general who had just conquered Syracuse.¹⁵ Why does Alcibiades make this mistake? Why does he fail to recognize the power of the Athenians' distrust for him? Why does he misunderstand the Athenians in this way?

Alcibiades misunderstands the Athenians, quite simply, because he loves them. He speaks explicitly of this love to the Spartans. As Alcibiades boldly tells them, he responds to the Athenians' death sentence by plotting to "recover" his city – that is, to return to Athens in a position of leadership:

I feel a love for my city, not for the one in which I suffered injustice, but for the one in which I participated in political life with safety. Nor do I believe that I am going against a fatherland¹⁶ that still exists but much more that I am acquiring again one that does not exist. And the one who

¹³ 6.63.2, 7.42.3.

¹⁴ Consider Nicias' later success in overruling his fellow commanders Demosthenes and Eurymedon (7.47–49). Nicias' relative authority may, however, be greater at that point in the expedition than it was at the beginning, since at that point he has been in command in Sicily for almost two years, whereas Demosthenes and Eurymedon have just arrived.

¹⁵ Consider Forde 1989, 129n17, 190–191; Orwin 1994, 119n6.

¹⁶ Or "country [πατρίς]."

rightly loves his fatherland is not the one who refrains from attacking it when he lost it unjustly, but rather the one who attempts to recover it in every way on account of his desire for it. (6.92.4)

Now, as we see by the end of the book, Alcibiades does succeed in “recovering” Athens (8.97.3). Yet, as we know from Thucydides’ indications earlier in his book, Alcibiades’ impressive success proved to be temporary, for the Athenians turned against him yet again and he was forced into exile yet again.¹⁷ Why does Alcibiades seek to return to Athens after it condemned him to death, given the likelihood that it will turn on him once again?

As Alcibiades tells the Spartans, he seeks to return to Athens because he is a lover of his city. While this statement seems preposterous, inasmuch as it is made within a speech which offers excellent advice to Sparta for defeating Athens and which thereby inflicts untold harm on his city, the statement also makes a certain sense. For Alcibiades loves the Athenians insofar as he seeks their honor most intensely.¹⁸ He evidently believes that, if honor is to be worth having – if it is truly to be honor and not mere flattery – it must constitute a genuine recognition of one’s genuine excellence. Accordingly, Alcibiades displays himself in all his pride and candor to the Athenians, unlike the more discreet and self-effacing Pericles, for he wishes their honor for who he truly is, and not merely for a deceptive mask.¹⁹ What is more, if honor is to be worth having, it must come from those who give honor to those who deserve honor, whether or not it is in their self-interest to give such honor. Honor must be accorded justly and must reflect the giver of honor’s devotion to justice. Therefore, those who give honor must be worthy judges of one’s excellence and must be, themselves, just. Accordingly, in his first speech in the book, on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition, Alcibiades argues that the Athenians should honor him not only because it is in their interest to do so but also because it is just to do so. He opens his speech by declaring, “It is fitting for me much more than for others, O Athenians, to rule” (6.16.1). And even though he knows that he provokes the painful envy of his fellow citizens by his evident self-regard, he nonetheless avows that “it is not unjust for me to think highly of myself as more than equal” (6.16.3–5). Because Alcibiades loves the Athenians and seeks their honor, then, he expects them to be just, and

¹⁷ See 2.65.11–12, 6.15.3–4; Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.4.11–17, 1.5.11–17, 2.1.25–26.

¹⁸ See 5.43.2, 6.15.2–3. Consider also 6.12.2. ¹⁹ See Forde, 1989, 167.

hence to rise above their envy and even their self-interest.²⁰ When they deprive him of the honor due to him by removing him from his command, Alcibiades is disappointed in their injustice. But because he loves Athens he seeks to punish his city so that it will become just again – so that it will once again be the city in which he may participate in political life secure in his belief that he will receive the honor he deserves (6.92.4). In this way does Alcibiades hope to “recover” his city.

Yet, as Thucydides indicates, given the weakness of reason and also the compelling power of self-interest, the Athenians, and indeed humans as a whole, are incapable of honoring Alcibiades in the way that he seeks. In the first place, precisely insofar as it is “not unjust” for Alcibiades to think highly of himself “as more than equal,” how are the Athenians as a whole – whom he implies are his inferiors – to be capable of judging whether or not the policies he proposes are truly excellent (6.16.4)?²¹ Furthermore, given the evident talent and self-regard of Alcibiades, and given that he does go on to provide crucial assistance to Sparta against Athens and even to play a key role in the overthrow of Athenian democracy, is it unreasonable for the Athenians to fear that his ambition may harm them and to turn on him rather than support him?²² Alcibiades evidently displays great understanding of the self-interest of particular political entities – especially of Sparta and Persia – but what he fails to grasp is the inevitably self-interested nature of human beings as a whole. Therefore, his desire for a just honor, beyond self-interest, from his beloved Athenians is bound to go unsatisfied because such honor is beyond human nature. When Alcibiades says, in describing the Athens that he seeks to return to where he will be justly honored, that he seeks to acquire again a country “that does not exist [τὴν οὐκ οὔσαν],” he would seem to mean that he seeks to acquire again a country that is no longer his (6.92.4). But the literal meaning of his words here is the true meaning – by seeking a country that will honor him out of justice rather than self-interest, he seeks a country that, given the nature of human beings, does not and cannot exist.

In contrast with Alcibiades, Thucydides evidently accepts his sentence of exile with equanimity. Even though he indicates that the Athenians’

²⁰ As Orwin observes of Alcibiades and the Athenians, “He appeals not only to their interests, but also to their justice . . . [H]e calls on them to be just enough to swallow [their] envy” (1994, 125).

²¹ Forde notes regarding the Athenians that Alcibiades “is morally an unknown quantity, and putting the city in his hands is a leap of faith on their part” (1989, 169).

²² See 8.47–54, 8.97.

condemnation of him for failing to defend Amphipolis from Brasidas was unfounded, since, once he heard of Brasidas' surprise attack on that city, Thucydides sailed there "with all speed" and "wished to arrive first," he never calls the Athenians' treatment of him "wicked" or "unjust," or blames them for his suffering, as Alcibiades does.²³ The fact that Thucydides is not angry indicates that he recognizes and accepts their short-sighted, their capricious, and, above all, their necessarily self-interested character. He does not seek to punish his city by aiding its enemies or to recover it for himself because, even though, as we have seen, he presents himself as devoted to his city at the beginning of the war, in his account, by the time of his exile, at least, he is no longer so devoted. He is no longer a lover of his city. Indeed, Thucydides indicates that he welcomes his exile, insofar as "on account of my exile I was present at the affairs on both sides, not least those of the Peloponnesians, and I had the leisure to learn somewhat more about them" (5.26.5). His search for the truth about the fundamental character and condition of human beings through his study of the war between Athens and Sparta evidently takes the place of Alcibiades' search for a return to Athens so that he may win or regain the honor of his beloved city.²⁴ Thus do we see Thucydides' greater independence from Athens, in mind and in heart.²⁵

What distinguishes Thucydides from Alcibiades is not only his search for the truth about that which is human but his understanding of that truth. Alcibiades expects human beings to be different from what they are – to honor him from justice rather than self-interest. Thucydides' understanding of the necessarily self-interested nature of human beings frees him from such an expectation, and from both the love that gives rise to that

²³ 4.104.4–5, 5.26.5, 6.92.3–4, 8.81.2. Pouncey points out the remarkable fact that, although Thucydides "must have shown some degree of military competence" for him to be elected general, "all he gives us is the moment of his failure," that is, his failure to defend Amphipolis, for which he was punished so severely by his fellow citizens (1980, 4).

²⁴ Hobbes translates the end of 5.26.5, not quite literally but persuasively: "I could at leisure the better learn *the truth* of all that passed" (Greene 1989, 328, my emphasis). See also his not quite literal but persuasive translation of 1.22.4, also adding the word "truth": "But he that desires to look into *the truth* of things done and which (according to the condition of humanity) may be done again, or at least their like, he shall find enough herein to make him think it profitable" (Greene 1989, 14, my emphasis).

²⁵ As Nichols notes regarding Thucydides, "Like Alcibiades, he is an exile who does not hesitate to go among the Peloponnesians when it suits his broader purpose" (2015, 22). Forde observes that Thucydides "seems remarkably dispassionate about the exile," whereas Alcibiades in exile "holds to the most intense political ambition" (1989, 113n33; see also 43n39).

expectation and the anger that results when that expectation goes unfulfilled. But Thucydides apparently shares that understanding with the three characters in the book who articulate that understanding: the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta and Melos, and Diodotus. How, then, might Thucydides differ from those characters?

Thucydides and the Patriotic Athenian Ambassadors at Sparta

The Athenian ambassadors at Sparta present their understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings in a speech intended to persuade the Spartans to vote against war with Athens.²⁶ Now, given the Athenians' recognition that human beings are compelled by their nature to pursue what they believe to be their own "benefit," one would expect that they would focus their speech on the benefit for Sparta of voting for peace over war with Athens (1.75.3–76.2). Furthermore, given the Spartan belief that the gods punish those who violate the law as unjust – as, according to the Spartans, Poseidon punished them with a great earthquake for violating the divine laws protecting suppliants in his temple²⁷ – one would expect that the Athenians would argue that, by voting for war with Athens, the Spartans will violate the peace treaty, sworn to by the gods, between Athens and Sparta, and will thereby provoke the punishment of the gods. The Athenians do indeed make this argument in their speech, powerfully, but briefly and only at the very end: "do not break the treaty or transgress your oaths, but resolve our differences by judicial arbitration, according to our agreement. Otherwise, we will call on the gods by whom we have sworn as our witnesses and we will attempt to defend ourselves against you who, by beginning the war, would lead the way" (1.78.4).²⁸

Instead, the speech of the Athenians focuses on why they have their empire, giving two explanations: one invoking necessity, the other justice. The Athenians explain, with regard to their empire, that they "have been necessarily compelled to advance it to its present point" – that is, not only to their Eastern Empire, including Thrace, the Hellespont, Ionia, and the islands in the Aegean Sea, but also to the west, with their recent alliance with Corcyra – "especially by fear, then also by honor, later also by benefit"

²⁶ 1.72.1, 1.78.

²⁷ See 1.128.1, 1.101.2. Consider also 1.126.7–12, 1.134, 4.97.2–98.7.

²⁸ See Jaffe 2017, 99, 112.

(1.75.3). They then go on to identify all three passions as compulsions rooted in the “way of human beings,” that is, in “human nature” (1.76.2–3). According to this account, what the Athenians have done in pursuing their self-interest is the same – no better and no worse – as that which all human beings necessarily do, such as the Spartans, who only helped Athens in the Persian War because “you feared for yourselves” and inasmuch as “you exercise hegemony to manage the cities in the Peloponnesus for your own benefit.”²⁹ Yet, while, as we have seen, Thucydides evidently regards this account of human nature as true, the Athenians’ presentation of this account in this speech is unwise, for two reasons.

First, insofar as they proclaim their own belief here that humans are compelled by their nature to pursue their self-interest and that this compulsion has led their empire “to advance to its present point,” the Athenians imply that their empire – already encompassing most of Greece (1.88) – will, necessarily, continue to advance and to expand, for example, from Corcyra to Sicily, then to Italy and Carthage, and finally to the Peloponnesus itself.³⁰ They therefore offer no assurance here that, if the Spartans vote against going to war, Athens will no longer pose a threat to Sparta. Thucydides has told us what in his judgment caused the war to break out: “I hold that the truest pretext, though it was least manifest in speech, was that the Athenians, by growing great and inspiring fear in the Spartans, compelled them to go to war” (1.23.6). By explaining that they are compelled by their interest to expand their empire, the Athenians only intensify that compelling fear of the Spartans. Secondly, by offering this account of the fundamental character and condition of human beings, according to which we are all necessarily self-interested and therefore all morally equal, the Athenians directly challenge the Spartans’ understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings, according to which we are free to devote ourselves to justice rather than our self-interest, and the just gods will reward us for doing so and punish us for failing to do so. The Athenians thereby contradict the very Spartan moral and religious beliefs that they themselves appeal to at the end of their speech, when they attempt to appeal to the Spartans’ fear of divine punishment for unjustly violating the treaty. But furthermore, they thereby offend what would seem to be the natural pride of the Spartans, who cherish the

²⁹ 1.74.3, 1.76.1.

³⁰ See 1.36.2, 1.44, 3.86.1–4, 4.1–2.2, 6.8.1, 6.15.2, 6.90.2–91.4, 7.66.2.

belief that they are morally superior to their rivals. The Athenians thereby risk provoking the Spartans to affirm their moral superiority by going to war in the name of justice, as the ephor Sthenelaidas proceeds to argue that they should: "Vote, then, Spartans, for war, as is worthy of Sparta, and do not allow the Athenians to grow greater or betray our allies, but, together with the gods, let us proceed against the ones who do injustice" (1.86.5). Why, then, do the Athenians here offer an explanation of why they have their empire that undercuts the ostensible purpose of their speech, to dissuade the Spartans from voting for the war? Why do the Athenians here offer any explanation at all regarding their empire?

The Athenians reveal their other purpose in this speech through the other explanation they give of why they have an empire. In this explanation, they suggest, three times, that they have their empire because they deserve to have their empire and therefore, they imply, because it is just that they have their empire. As they ask the Spartans, rhetorically, "Do we not deserve, O Spartans, the empire we possess on account of our zeal at that time [during the Persian War] and our sagacious judgment, without lying under the extreme envy of the Greeks?" (1.75.1). The Athenians then declare that they believe themselves indeed deserving of their empire and that the Spartans shared this belief in the past (1.76.2). Finally, the Athenians assert of themselves, "They deserve to be praised who make use of human nature in such a way as to be more just in ruling over others than their power would allow them to be" (1.76.3). Now, by explaining here that they deserve to hold their empire by virtue of their superior zeal in fighting for their liberty against Persia, their superior intelligence, and their superior justice in governing their imperial subjects, the Athenians affirm their own moral superiority. And they thereby reveal that another purpose of their speech, in addition to persuading Sparta to vote against going to war, is to justify their possession of their empire. However, their justification of their empire would only seem further to intensify the Spartans' fear of Athenian imperial expansion, since their justification of having their empire would also seem to apply to its expansion. What is more, the Athenians' explanation that they acquired their empire because they deserve it contradicts their explanation that they acquired their empire because they were compelled by their natural self-interestedness. For the Athenians would only deserve praise for ruling their empire justly if they freely chose to rule their empire justly. But if they were naturally compelled by their concern for their own benefit to rule their empire in the way that they do, they would deserve neither praise nor blame. Inasmuch as the account of human beings as necessarily self-interested by nature affirms the

moral equality of all human beings, it denies the moral superiority not only of the Spartans but of the Athenians as well.³¹

Why, then, do the Athenian ambassadors devote the bulk of their speech to justifying their empire? They are evidently led to do so by their love of Athens. This love moves them to speak up in Sparta, when they are there on other business, in response to hearing their city denounced (1.72–73.1). As lovers of their city, they wish to praise their beloved Athens, not only for its naval power but also for its daring spirit, its zeal in defending its liberty, its superior intelligence, and its justice.³² In their eloquent praise of Athens, they foreshadow Pericles' praise of Athens in the Funeral Oration.³³ Accordingly, they argue that the intellectual and moral superiority of the Athenians renders their imperial rule deserving of honor because it is just.

The very intelligence of these Athenians, however, contradicts their patriotic love of Athens, for it reveals to them that they, like all human beings, are compelled by their nature to pursue their self-interest regardless of justice. If as Athenians they appear to act justly, it is because they seek the honor of being considered just, and if they are zealous in defense of their freedom, it is because they seek to enjoy the benefit of being free and the honor of fighting for their freedom. The truth about human nature discovered by their intelligence reveals that their moral superiority is an illusion. Yet their patriotism prevents them from simply accepting that truth but leads them, in some measure, to contradict it. The Athenians are, then, in the grip of an inner conflict between their rational understanding of human nature and their passionate love of their city, between their enlightened minds and their patriotic hearts. As a consequence of that inner conflict, the Athenians try to justify the Athenian Empire to Sparta in two contradictory ways: by persuading the Spartans that the Athenians deserve to rule over others – including, they hint, the Spartans themselves – because of their intellectual and moral superiority; and, more modestly, by persuading the Spartans that they, too, like the Athenians and like all human beings, are necessarily self-interested and therefore that, if the imperial Athenians are not morally superior to other human beings, they are also, at least, not morally inferior. By trying to justify their empire to the Spartans, these Athenians try to justify it to themselves. However, their patriotic desire to justify their empire completely undermines their ostensible goal of persuading the Spartans to vote for peace. Thucydides states, only after the speech of the Athenians, that the majority of the Spartans

³¹ See Bruell 1981, 28–29; Orwin 1994, 196; Jaffe 2017, 99.

³² 1.74.1–2, 1.75.1, 1.76.3–77. ³³ See especially 2.39–43.

judged that “the Athenians were already acting unjustly and that they must be warred upon with all speed” (1.79.2). And even after their respected king Archidamus argues against going to war, the majority of the Spartans vote for war. The speech of the enlightened and patriotic Athenian ambassadors at Sparta proves, then, to be intellectually self-contradictory and practically harmful to their city.³⁴

As we have seen, Thucydides quietly but clearly indicates – not only through his statement that both Athens and Sparta were “compelled” to violate the peace treaty and wage war but also through his accounts of the self-interestedness of the Melians, the Spartans, and Brasidas – that, in contrast with the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta themselves, he fully accepts the understanding of human nature as necessarily self-interested that they set forth.³⁵ Even though he, too, is an Athenian, Thucydides never presents the Athenians as morally superior, that is, as being “more just in ruling over others than their power allows them to be” (1.76.3).³⁶ While his narrative does portray the Athenians as being more thoughtfully compassionate than the Spartans in its juxtaposition of the Athenians’ treatment of Mytilene and the Spartans’ treatment of Plataea, it also indicates that, inasmuch as the Athenian Diodotus argues that their compassion is advantageous to Athens, their compassion is perfectly compatible with their self-interestedness (3.45–47). Yet, it is important to note that, while the patriotism of the Athenian ambassadors especially prevents them from fully and consistently acknowledging the truth of their account of human nature, Thucydides’ acknowledgment of that truth does not at all prevent him from acknowledging the greatness of a number of his fellow Athenians. Most notably, like the Athenian ambassadors, Thucydides praises most highly the Athenian statesman Themistocles. Indeed, the only praise for Themistocles to be found in the book is by the ambassadors and Thucydides. Moreover, like them, Thucydides praises Themistocles for his sagacity.³⁷ The Athenian ambassadors, however, attribute the greatness of Themistocles’ sagacity to the greatness of Athens: During the Persian War, they declare, “we made the three most beneficial contributions to” the

³⁴ Consider Jaffe’s discussion of the “palpable tension” in the Athenians’ speech at Sparta between “the manifest pride that the Athenians clearly take in their city,” on the one hand, and their “doctrine of necessity” and their “prudence,” on the other hand (2017, 99–101).

³⁵ See 5.25.3 and Chapter 5, pp. 207–217.

³⁶ As Hobbes emphasizes, Thucydides wrote “not as a lover of his country but of truth” (Greene 1989, 580).

³⁷ 1.74.1, 1.138.3.

Greek cause – “the greatest number of ships, the man who was the most sagacious general, and the most unshrinking zeal” (1.74.1). They suggest here that the Athenians as a whole are responsible for Themistocles’ sagacity and they proceed to speak, collectively, of “our sagacious judgment” at the time of the Persian War (1.75.1). In contrast, Thucydides attributes the greatness of Themistocles’ sagacity to the “strength” and “power of nature,” a nature that is independent of Athens (1.138.3). Accordingly, Themistocles displays his sagacity in Athens, in other Greek cities when exiled by the Athenians, and even in Persia. He exercises his sagacity on behalf of Athens and the rest of Greece against Persia but also promises, at least, to exercise it on behalf of Persia against Athens and the rest of Greece (1.137.4–138.2). While Thucydides emphatically identifies Themistocles as an Athenian (1.138.6), he stresses that the greatness of Themistocles reflects the power not of Athens in particular but of nature itself. It is Themistocles who confers greatness on Athens and who in large measure is responsible for the contributions made by the Athenians of ships and of daring.³⁸ The greatness of Themistocles is not, however, a moral greatness, according to Thucydides, but a greatness of mind. He, too, is self-interested, but he surpasses other human beings in the prudence and foresight with which he pursues his self-interest, as one sees in his amazing ingenuity in escaping both the Athenian and Spartan forces who are hunting him, and then in persuading the Persian emperor to offer him hospitality and even power as a local governor (1.135–138). Thucydides’ acceptance of the truth about the self-interested nature of human beings, then, does not at all prevent him both from recognizing human greatness and from recognizing the greatness conferred, in some measure, on his native city of Athens, thanks to the natural greatness of a number of her citizens.

Thucydides and the Envious Athenian Ambassadors at Melos

By comparison with the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, the Athenian ambassadors at Melos appear to grasp more clearly the account of human nature they both articulate. They identify what the Athenians at Sparta speak of as “necessities” as, more precisely, “a necessity of nature,” and they explain that the thesis that human beings are necessarily self-interested is based on what human beings cannot help but wish for themselves –

³⁸ 1.14.3, 1.93.3–8.

namely, their own good.³⁹ What is more, the Athenians at Melos evidently accept the account of humans as necessarily self-interested more consistently and fully than the Athenians at Sparta do. The Athenians at Melos never claim to be “more just in ruling over others than their power would allow them to be,” and they never claim that they are “deserving” of their empire or of praise. Accordingly, they do not attempt to persuade the Melians, or themselves, “with noble phrases, that we justly hold our empire because we overthrew the Persians” (5.90).⁴⁰ It is true that, by boasting that the Athenians have never abandoned a siege out of fear, and by declaring that they, unlike the Spartans, dare to take risks for their empire, these Athenians hint that their countrymen may well be above the self-interested passion of fear and therefore may well be morally superior to their adversaries.⁴¹ Still, overall, and far more than the Athenians at Sparta, the Athenians at Melos evidently understand themselves to be, like all human beings, compelled by a necessity of their nature to pursue what they perceive to be their own good and therefore to be morally equal to all human beings.

However, as we have seen, these Athenians’ fuller understanding of what Thucydides regards as the truth about human nature leads them to envy the Melians precisely for their ignorance of that truth.⁴² The Athenians tell the Melians, “while we bless your innocence, we do not envy your folly,” but they reveal here that they do, in a certain sense, envy even the folly of the Melians (5.105.3). For what the Athenians envy the Melians for is their belief in their own moral superiority, a moral superiority that makes them believe themselves deserving of the assistance of both the just gods and their just kinsmen, the Spartans. But that belief is the consequence of both their innocence and their folly, that is of their ignorance of human nature and therefore of themselves. The Athenians evidently wish that they could still believe in their own superiority to self-interest, in their own nobility and justice, and in their own worthiness of divine love and protection. Their wisdom, however, has deprived them of such pleasing, gratifying, and, in their eyes, beneficial self-esteem. Therefore, they experience their wisdom as an evil. Accordingly, insofar as they identify the Melians’ “innocence” – or literally, their “lack of experience with evil [ἀπειρόκακον]” – with their “folly” – or literally, their “lack of intelligence”

³⁹ Compare 1.75.3–1.76.2 with 5.105.1–2. ⁴⁰ See Romilly 1963, 298–299.

⁴¹ 5.111.2, 5.91, 5.99–101, 5.107. See Orwin 1994, 114–115.

⁴² See Chapter 5, pp. 196–198.

or “lack of wisdom [ἄφρον]” – they identify their own wisdom with the experience of evil, with suffering evil, and hence as an evil itself. The innocence that the Athenians identify with happiness is, however, a blessing that, once lost, cannot be recovered. The regret these Athenians experience at their discovery of the truth about human nature leads them not only to envy the Melians but also to attempt to deprive the Melians of their innocence. And when they fail in this attempt, the Athenians punish the Melians for their innocence by killing and enslaving them.

The example of the Athenians at Melos raises a grave objection to what Thucydides is attempting to achieve in this book. For, as the Athenians at Melos are seeking to impart knowledge of the fundamental character and condition of human beings to the Melians, so is Thucydides seeking to impart that knowledge to his readers. As he states, the purpose of his book is to enable one to see clearly the truth about “that which is human,” the very truth that the Athenians at Melos – who are the only other characters in the book besides Hermocrates to use the key phrase “that which is human” – apparently see clearly.⁴³ But is such knowledge good for human beings, or does it deprive them of their blessed innocence? By seeking to enlighten his readers, one might wonder, is Thucydides himself expressing a certain envy of the blessed innocence of his not yet enlightened readers?

The clearest sign that Thucydides does not feel envy for the innocence of his readers is his reticence. While the Athenian ambassadors loudly declare their understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings, Thucydides only quietly indicates his agreement with that understanding. While the Athenian ambassadors challenge most aggressively the Melians’ – and the Spartans’ – moral and pious understanding of the human and the divine, Thucydides only raises questions about that “innocent” understanding indirectly in the book, for example, through the mouths of the morally repulsive Athenian ambassadors whom the reader may, if so inclined, easily dismiss.⁴⁴

Throughout his book, Thucydides is notably respectful and supportive of the Melian and Spartan belief that humans are free to choose to be just or unjust and that they are ruled by just gods who reward or punish them according to their desert. For example, in the construction of his narrative, Thucydides artfully places the plague that devastated Athens and not Sparta immediately after the seemingly amoral and areligious Funeral Oration of

⁴³ See 1.22.4, 5.105.1–2, and 4.61.5–6. See also Chapter 1, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁴ See Chapter 5, pp. 190–207.

Pericles, and the disaster the Athenians suffer at Sicily immediately after the Melian Dialogue. In this way, he invites the reader to conclude that the plague and the Sicilian Disaster are divine punishments of Athenian injustice.⁴⁵ Thucydides also offers notably emphatic praise in the book for the pious and virtuous Spartan Brasidas and for the pious and conventionally virtuous Laconophile Athenian Nicias.⁴⁶ Even his praise of the virtuous Athenian tyrants may appear as a praise of their piety as well, insofar as they adorned the city with religious buildings and provided it with religious sacrifices (6.54.5–6). As we have seen, his book does obliquely raise powerful and, apparently for Thucydides, decisive arguments against the overall outlook of the Spartans, but they are not at all forced upon the reader. Thucydides leaves it up to the reader to see, as clearly as one wishes, the truth about that which is human.

What is more, one clear goal of the book is to impart numerous useful lessons about politics – concerning the power of passion and piety and the weakness of justice as a whole, and concerning the evils of war and factional strife in particular.⁴⁷ In this way, Thucydides attempts to benefit the innocent – who lack experience of evil – by warning them against such evils but also by arming them with a variety of lessons they might learn from experiencing such evils indirectly, through the study of his book. By combining his instruction with reticence, however, Thucydides shows his respect for the distinctive nature of each reader. Thucydides allows each reader to search for the truth about the fundamental character and condition of human beings in the manner and to the degree that one chooses, for he recognizes that, ultimately, such a search can only be undertaken on one's own and for oneself.⁴⁸ It is through his combination of restraint and

⁴⁵ See Bruell 1974, 14; Bolotin 1987, 14–15. ⁴⁶ 4.81, 7.86.5.

⁴⁷ See especially 3.82–84 and also 7.29–30.

⁴⁸ Hobbes praises Thucydides most highly as a teacher on this very point: rather than offer his teaching openly – as Thucydides presents the Athenian ambassadors at Melos as doing and as, according to Hobbes, philosophers typically do – rather than, as Hobbes puts it, make use of “Digressions for instruction’s cause, and other such open conveyances of precepts (which is the philosopher’s part),” Thucydides deliberately makes it difficult for the reader to uncover his teaching (Greene 1989, 577). Thucydides’ narrative only instructs the reader “secretly” and therefore only with the reader’s active effort (577; see also 584 where Hobbes cites the sixteenth-century Flemish humanist and scholar Justus Lipsius’ praise of Thucydides for “everywhere secretly instructing [*occulte ubique instruens*]” – Lipsius 2004, 732; see Hoekstra 2023, 273–274). For, as Hobbes, citing Thucydides’ sixth-century biographer Marcellinus (35), explains, Thucydides “was obscure on purpose” so that, for example, ordinarily careless readers “might not understand him” (Greene 1989, 584). Hobbes stresses that Thucydides writes in such a way that the reader “may” – and therefore, if the reader is so inclined, *may not* – “from the

generosity as a teacher toward the reader, then, that Thucydides bears witness most clearly to his own lack of envy for innocence and his own quiet satisfaction with his own enlightenment.

Thucydides and Diodotus

Of those who set forth the Athenian understanding of the fundamental character and condition of human beings, Diodotus most resembles Thucydides. Unlike the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta, but like Thucydides, Diodotus exhibits a remarkable freedom from devotion to Athens. Like Thucydides, he portrays Athenian democracy as governed by an often unreasonable majority.⁴⁹ Indeed, according to Diodotus the Athenians are so unreasonable that one can only benefit their city by “deceiving” them (3.43.3). It is true that Diodotus insists that his only purpose in this speech is to benefit Athens with regard to “the greatest things, freedom and empire over others.”⁵⁰ Yet, given his unflattering portrayal of Athens overall, and his emphasis on the natural concern for one’s individual well-being (3.45.3), one cannot but wonder if such protestations of patriotism do not constitute at least a part of his deception, a deception necessary to prevent Athens from alienating her democratic allies throughout Greece and thereby weakening herself in her war against Sparta – possibly an even more imperfect city, in Diodotus’ view, than Athens – and also to prevent Athens from committing a savage act that may be followed by a self-destructive religious feeling of guilt, as we see later in the book.⁵¹

Unlike the Athenian ambassadors at Melos, but like Thucydides, Diodotus is reticent with regard to the moral beliefs of his audience. Even though he calls into question the reasonableness of Athenian patriotism – indeed, of all forms of patriotism – going so far as to suggest that all human beings are compelled by their nature to pursue their individual self-interest and not simply or primarily the interest of their political community, Diodotus nonetheless presents himself as a patriotic Athenian devoted wholeheartedly to the interest of the city.⁵² And even though he calls into question the belief that human beings are morally free and hence morally

narration draw out lessons for himself” (xxii). It is above all because Thucydides writes with such a prudent and humane sensitivity to the different natures of his readers that Hobbes calls him “the most politick historiographer that ever writ” (xxii).

⁴⁹ See 3.43 and, for example, 2.65.7–12, 6.15.3–4, 8.1.2, 8.97.2.

⁵⁰ See 3.44.1–2 and 3.45.6, as well as 3.42.1, 3.43.4.

⁵¹ See 3.36.4, 5.32.1, and Chapter 3, pp. 124–131.

⁵² See 3.45 and 3.44.1–2.

responsible for their actions by setting forth the thesis that all human beings are compelled by their nature to follow their own self-interest rather than the demands of justice, he mutes that thesis by repeatedly speaking of just and unjust human beings throughout the speech.⁵³ Through such reticence, Diodotus not only displays his freedom from the envy for “innocence” that afflicts the Athenian ambassadors at Melos but he also proves to be more persuasive with his audience than they are with theirs.

Finally, as Thucydides’ narrative seeks to direct the compassion of readers to the sufferings of the Greeks during this terrible war – especially in its account of the plague, the factional strife in Corcyra and Greece as a whole, the slaughter in Mycalessus, and the final battle and retreat of the Athenians from Syracuse⁵⁴ – so does Diodotus offer a vision of humanity as a whole that evokes compassion. It is true that Diodotus insists that he argues that the Athenians should reverse its decision to execute all the men of Mytilene because it is not in their interest to do so rather than because those men deserve their compassion.⁵⁵ And Diodotus does not even attempt to argue that Athens should refrain from executing the one thousand oligarchs of Mytilene (3.50.1). But it is also true that, according to Thucydides’ narrative, Diodotus’ sole intervention in public affairs in Athens is to argue that Athens should refrain from wholesale savagery in Mytilene and spare the lives of the great majority of men there (3.36.4). What is more, unlike the other characters in the book who present the thesis concerning the necessarily self-interested nature of human beings, Diodotus suggests that one who recognizes the truth of that thesis will naturally feel compassion for human beings. For, as Diodotus alone stresses, human beings as a whole pursue their self-interest unwisely and are led by their desires and hopes to commit acts that prove self-destructive.⁵⁶ Accordingly, Diodotus not only argues that punishment of humans is futile but also implies that, to the extent that it holds humans responsible for their actions, it is unjust. Since human beings are not responsible for their actions and since they suffer for their actions, they deserve pity rather than blame.⁵⁷

⁵³ See, for example, 3.44, 3.45.3, 3.47.3–48.1.

⁵⁴ 2.47.3–2.53.1, 3.81.5–84, 7.29–30, 7.70–72, 7.75. See Lateiner 1977, 45, 51. Connor observes, “Perhaps no passage of ancient prose narrative is as powerfully written or as immediately accessible to the modern reader as the account of the Athenians’ withdrawal after their defeat in the harbor at Syracuse” (1984, 198). He reports that “T. B. Macaulay called this section ‘the *ne plus ultra* of human art.’”

⁵⁵ 3.44, 3.46.3, 3.47. ⁵⁶ 3.45–46.2. See also 3.42.1.

⁵⁷ See especially 3.45.3, 3.45.7. See Orwin 1994, 113.

As we have noted, however, Thucydides differs from Diodotus in highlighting the savagery of human nature and the utility of law in curbing that savagery.⁵⁸ What is more, Thucydides evidently regards politics as more important than does Diodotus. While Diodotus appears, on the whole, to lead a private life – to mind his own business – Thucydides serves as a general in the war, he spends the entire war thinking and writing about it, and he devotes his sole book to explaining what light it sheds on human nature. For Thucydides, at least, politics is of theoretical importance: His search for the truth concerning that which is human takes the form of the study of a war not only between two political communities but also two understandings of that which is human. This particular war is both a violent and a truthful teacher, for it reveals especially clearly the often harsh truth about the fundamental character and condition of human beings.

Thucydides, Pericles, and “Philosophy”

Thucydides’ book would seem to be a work of philosophy. Thucydides presents himself early on as one who is devoted to “the search for the truth” (1.20.3). More specifically, he seeks to understand “that which is human,” that is, as he calls it later, “human nature.”⁵⁹ As a seeker of the truth about human nature, then, Thucydides himself would seem to be a philosopher, one who loves wisdom and has an erotic passion for the truth, as Plato’s Socrates describes the philosopher.⁶⁰ And yet Thucydides never calls himself a “philosopher” or even uses the term “philosophy” in his own name. Why not?

Thucydides addresses this question through the example of the one man who does use the word “philosophy” in the book, Pericles. Pericles says, on behalf of all Athenians, “we love beauty with economy and we love wisdom [φιλοσοφοῦμεν] without softness” (2.40.1). By speaking of the love of beauty and the love of wisdom together, Pericles suggests that the two loves are akin to one another. The lover of wisdom loves wisdom in the way that a lover of beauty loves beauty, or an erotic lover may love one’s beloved. Pericles thus speaks here of the philosopher in the same way that Plato’s

⁵⁸ See Chapter 3, pp. 105–108.

⁵⁹ 1.22.4. See 4.61.5, 5.105.2, and especially 2.50.1, 3.82.2, 3.84.2.

⁶⁰ See, for example, *Republic* 474b1–476d7, 479a1–e9, 485a9–e2; *Symposium* 203c1–206a10, 209e5–212e2.

Socrates does. But conceiving of the passion for wisdom in this way – in the language of love – may be profoundly misleading with regard to the nature of wisdom. For wisdom about the fundamental character or condition of human beings, as Thucydides' book demonstrates, may not be beautiful or pleasing. For example, even though, in his final speech, Pericles states what would seem to be the harsh truth that "for all things by nature also decline," he evidently recoils from facing that truth. For while that truth signifies that nothing – apart from truth itself – is everlasting, in the very sentence in which he states it Pericles declares that "the memory" of Athens "will be left" "everlasting for posterity." He goes on to insist that "the present splendor and the renown in time to come are left in everlasting remembrance."⁶¹ In these passages Pericles echoes the belief he expressed in the very speech – the Funeral Oration – in which he identifies himself as a "philosopher," that the Athenians "have established everywhere everlasting memorials of evil and good deeds"; that the Athenians who died in battle have received "praise that is ageless"; and that their "renown is left forever remembered."⁶² Thus does the only character in Thucydides' book who claims to be a "lover of wisdom" cling tenaciously to the beautiful and pleasing belief in the possibility of an eternal glory. For thinking of the pursuit of truth as motivated by a "love" of wisdom evidently does not adequately prepare him to face the truth of the perishability of all things squarely, "without softness."

The passages in which Thucydides speaks most vividly and eloquently in his own name are, if not the ugliest, certainly the grimmest in the book: his account of the plague, which he reveals he suffered from, and which immediately follows the Funeral Oration; and his account of the factional strife that began in Corcyra and engulfed all of Greece.⁶³ These are the only passages in which Thucydides speaks in his own name about human nature. And what he reveals about human nature is its vulnerability to such evils as the plague – the disease was harsher than "human nature" could endure (2.50.1); the harsh suffering that human nature itself causes – "And many harsh things befell the cities through factional strife, things that have come to be and will always be, as long as human nature is the same" (3.82.2); and the terrible passions that human nature unleashes – when "human nature . . . held sway over the laws" (3.84.2) – especially the anger and vengefulness that cause such savagery and destruction.

⁶¹ 2.64.3, 2.64.5.

⁶² 2.40.1, 2.41.4, 2.43.2.

⁶³ See Saxonhouse 1978, 470.

Thucydides emphasizes the frailty, violence, and cruelty of human nature that a seeker of the truth must be willing to face. But the term “love of wisdom” or “philosophy” risks encouraging the seeker to flee from that truth. Thucydides himself seeks and faces the truth, but facing the truth may entail facing the possibility that, however satisfying a life based on truth may be, the truth is not, at least in the ordinary sense, lovable.

The clearest example of Thucydides’ own passion for the truth is in his account of the plague. Thucydides informs us that he was afflicted by the plague and then he gives an account of what sort of thing the plague was or what he calls the “form” of the plague.⁶⁴ Thucydides describes here, in extensive and excruciating detail, what those who were afflicted by the plague suffered in body, soul, and mind: the unbearable fever; the painful retching; the blisters all over one’s body; the unceasing thirst; the raging diarrhea; the loss of genitals, fingers, and toes; the loss of sight and memory; the loss of all hope; and, for those who survived, the deranged joy of hoping that they were henceforth invulnerable to any disease whatsoever.⁶⁵ Through this account he presents the appalling fragility of human nature, revealed by the plague to him, as one who experienced all of its afflictions from within or witnessed them in others. But this passage also shows one other aspect of human nature. Thucydides reports that, as a result of the deadly plague, all sought to enjoy a portion of “pleasure” before they died and consequently identified pleasure “from any source” as what was genuinely “noble and beneficial,” as what was truly worthwhile and good for them (2.53). Now, while others found their pleasure in other ways, Thucydides himself, when afflicted by the plague, evidently found *his* pleasure in observing what he was experiencing – what he was suffering and what he was witnessing – as a result of the plague (2.48.3). He found *his* pleasure in knowing the truth about the plague, no matter how grim, not primarily in order to cure the plague – though he is not indifferent to that concern⁶⁶ – but above all in order to know the truth, in itself and for itself. It is to this austere passion for the truth – a passion that reflects the strength and power of *his* nature – that Thucydides bears witness, in this passage and in this book.

Thucydides offers this book not only to kindred spirits who may share his austere passion for the truth but to all who seek greater clarity concerning the fundamental character and condition of human beings. With balance

⁶⁴ 2.48.3, 2.50.1.

⁶⁵ 2.49.2–8, 2.51.4–6.

⁶⁶ See 2.48.3.

and sympathy, he presents the case both for and against the Athenian and the Spartan understandings of that which is human. With gentle forbearance he seeks to share his own understanding of human nature with his readers, for their benefit, for those – but only for those – who would welcome that understanding. With a generous humanity, Thucydides allows us all the opportunity to share in his instructive search for the truth.

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Index

- Ahrens Dorf, Peter J., 1n2, 3n9, 3on93,
38n117, 41n129, 52n165,
53n168, 84n92
- Alcibiades, 8–9, 11, 11n39, 11n40,
29–30, 29n91, 32n100, 38–39,
39n125, 48–50, 48n155, 52,
52n166, 57n10, 70, 74, 79–80,
86, 88–90, 91, 91n4, 92, 95,
97n22, 113n64, 125, 130,
133n2, 134n3, 136n11, 137n15,
141–142, 189, 199–201,
199n43, 200n45, 210, 217–218,
220, 222, 225, 228n125, 229,
232–239, 234n6, 234n7, 234n8,
234n10, 238n20, 238n21,
239n25
- Allison, Graham T., 2n3
- Anaxagoras, 1on36, 11, 11n38,
11n40, 82, 82n85
- Anaximander, 10, 11n38
- Antiphon, 11, 11n38, 45n147, 47,
136, 150
- Aphrodite, 23, 24n73
- Apollo, 24, 38, 47, 77, 95, 124–125,
127–129, 128n94, 131, 157,
159–170, 172, 187, 205,
222n111
- Archidamus, 23, 28, 31, 32n100, 41,
74, 79, 113n63, 133–134n2,
135n7, 150, 153–154, 153n70,
164, 168–172, 174n123, 184,
188–189, 199, 200n45, 217,
222–223, 244
- Archytas, 11, 11n38
- Aristogeiton, 38, 38n122, 114n66,
225–228, 230
- Aristophanes, 12, 39
- Aristotle, 2–3, 4n13, 11n38, 59n18
- Artemis, 23, 24n73, 47, 164–165
- Aspasia, 39, 39n123
- Athena, 24–25, 24n75, 36, 52, 62, 73,
85, 125, 151, 158–160, 167, 187,
214, 216, 222, 227
- Athenagoras, 32n100, 113n64,
133n2, 134n3, 145n37, 199
- Balot, Ryan, 86n98, 87n100,
220n103
- Bartlett, Robert C., 43n143, 56n7,
124n83, 161n89, 163n94,
168n115, 169n117, 171n120
- Beasley, Tom, 232n1, 232n2
- Blösel, Wolfgang, 35n104, 65n36
- Bolotin, David, ix, 5n15, 56n7,
98n26, 99n27, 101n36, 108n52,
132n109, 191n31, 198n40,
229n125, 248n45
- Brasidas, 32n100, 41–42, 45n147, 47,
48n155, 52, 52n166, 55, 55n3,
86, 86n96, 88, 103n39, 113n63,

- 113n64, 129n98, 133–134,
133–134n2, 134n3, 134n5,
136–139, 137n15, 149–157,
150n55, 150n57, 151n61,
151n64, 153n69, 153n70,
155n74, 157n82, 159, 166–168,
176, 178, 184–187, 194n36,
200, 200n45, 203, 208–209,
211–216, 211n77, 212n79,
213n81, 213n82, 213n83,
213n84, 215n89, 215n90, 218,
220–221, 225, 232–233, 239,
244, 248
- Bruell, Christopher, 5n15, 45n147,
67n38, 69n50, 88n104, 117n74,
132n109, 191n31, 243n31, 248n45
- Burns, Timothy, 47n151, 163n94,
165n101, 165n103, 198n40,
213n81, 215n90
- Bury, J. B., 1n2
- Chan, Steve, 2n3
- Cicero, 3n12, 73n63
- Cleon, 6n17, 10n34, 29n91, 29,
32n100, 48n155, 57n10, 74,
95–97, 96n17, 99–103, 100n32,
102n37, 104n42, 111n60,
113n63, 120n76, 125, 129, 133n2,
134n3, 137–140, 144–150,
145n38, 145n39, 147n42,
148n45, 149n51, 155–156, 159,
191, 199, 213–214, 215n89
- Cochrane, Charles Norris, 43n139
- Cogan, Marc, 6n17
- Collins, Susan, 80n80, 83n88
- Connor, W. Robert, 9n33, 14n46,
14n47, 18n60, 20n63, 23n71,
44–45n146, 47n154, 49n157,
53n169, 53n170, 54n171,
72n58, 74n65, 86n96, 88n102,
93n9, 96n18, 103n39, 104n41,
105n45, 106n46, 106n47,
109n54, 114n67, 128n93,
132n107, 132n109, 137n15,
138n23, 140n31, 141n33,
147n42, 149n52, 150n57,
165n103, 178n128, 186n18,
195n37, 210n70, 212n79,
215n89, 220n103, 221n108,
228n124, 250n54
- Comford, Francis, 132n109
- Cox, Richard H., 55n2, 62n27,
65n35, 69n52, 71n56
- Crotty, Kevin, 38n117
- De Ste-Croix, G. E. M., 1n2
- Democritus, 11, 11n38, 43n139
- Demosthenes, 32n100, 43n141,
57n10, 79, 87, 95, 97n22,
103n39, 113n64, 114n68,
134n2, 134n3, 138–144,
140n31, 147,
147n42, 149, 157, 200n45, 236,
236n14
- Diodorus Siculus, 3n12
- Diodotus, 5–6, 6n17, 9n34, 10, 21, 29,
31n99, 32n100, 34, 48, 48n155,
56–57, 56n8, 57n10, 57n13, 74,
79, 86, 95–108, 96n15, 96n17,
96n20, 97n22, 98n27, 103n39,
104n41, 104n42, 104n43,
111n60, 113n63, 119, 123, 126,
133n2, 134n3, 135, 149, 155,
161, 190–192, 194, 199, 205,
207, 216, 228, 230, 232, 240,
244, 249–251
- Diogenes Laertius, 2n4, 10n36,
11n38, 11n40, 82n85
- Diogenes of Apollonia, 11
- Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 3n12,
7n24, 44n144
- Dionysus, 23, 23n73
- Edmunds, Lowell, 4n13, 7n22,
26n82, 26n83, 43n139, 108n53,
174n124, 210n75, 217n93

- Empedocles, 10, 11n38
 Epicharmus, 10–11, 11n38, 11n39
 Euben, J. Peter, 63n31, 73n60, 82n86
- Ferrario, Sarah Brown, 137n15,
 155n74, 194n36
 Finley, John H., Jr., 1n1, 44n146,
 191n30
 Forde, Steven, 1n2, 4n13, 7n21,
 9n33, 35n105, 39n125, 45n147,
 56n7, 56n8, 63n32, 83n89,
 90n1, 91n4, 210n75, 228n125,
 236n15, 237n19, 238n21,
 239n25
 Foster, Edith, 2n5
- Gilpin, Robert G., 1n2
 Greenwood, Emily, 6n17
 Grene, David, 1n1, 2n6, 2n8, 3n9,
 6n17, 7n19, 8n29, 26n82,
 45n146, 112n62, 165n105,
 229n127, 234n10, 244n36,
 248n48
 Griffin, Jasper, 52n164
 Gylippus, 29, 29n91, 32n100, 41,
 113n64, 134n2, 134n3,
 137–138, 156, 180, 184,
 200n45, 220
- Harmodius, 38, 38n122, 114n66,
 225–228, 230
 Hephaestus, 23, 24n73
 Hera, 23, 23n73
 Heracleitus, 10, 11n38
 Hermes, 23, 24n73, 106n49, 125, 130
 Hermocrates, 4, 5–6, 29, 29n91,
 32n100, 35n103, 45n147, 47, 52,
 52n166, 57, 57n13, 61, 69n47,
 74, 86, 113n64, 133n2, 136, 150,
 199, 200n45, 201, 230, 247
 Herodotus, 3–4, 4n13, 6n18, 35–39,
 35n104, 35n106, 36n111,
 37n116, 40n128, 58n15, 60n20,
 60n24, 62, 65n36, 78n78,
 124n82, 158n86, 225n118
- Herz, John H., 1n2
 Hipparchus, 129n96, 226–228
 Hippias, 24, 38, 129n96, 167,
 226–228
 Hobbes, Thomas, 1n1, 2, 2n6, 2n7,
 3n9, 6, 6n19, 8n29, 9, 165n105,
 239n24, 244n36, 248–249n48
 Hoekstra, Kinch, 3n9, 248n48
 Homer, 2n6, 13, 15–19, 17n52,
 17n53, 17n56, 18n60, 19n62,
 25, 28n90, 32, 35, 37–39,
 37n116, 46, 47n151, 49, 51–53,
 51n163, 52n167, 53n169, 77,
 84–85, 85n95, 92, 95, 124n81,
 136, 150n57, 163–165,
 165n101, 167
 Hornblower, Simon, 43n139
 Hunter, Virginia, 18n60
- Irwin, Elizabeth, 43n139
 Isocrates, 11n40, 82n85, 128n93
- Jaffe, S. N., 27n88, 31n98, 42n138,
 59n19, 68n44, 72n58, 153n69,
 173n122, 174n123, 201n51,
 209n67, 225n118, 240n28,
 243n31, 244n34
 Johnson, Laurie M., 1n2
- Keohane, Robert O., 1n2
- Lateiner, Donald, 128n93, 164n97,
 250n54
 Lichas, 183–184, 186
 Lincoln, Abraham, 123n79
 Lipsius, Justus, 248n48
 Low, Polly, 14n46
 Lucretius, 2, 2n5, 9
- Madison, James, 111, 111n58, 123n79
 Mara, Gerald M., 101n35, 104n43

- Marcellinus, 5n15, 7n24, 8n29,
 10n36, 11n38, 52n167, 248n48
 Marshall, M. H. B., 147n42
 Mastro, Oriana Sklar, 2n3
 Meinecke, Friedrich, 1n2
 Moosa, Imad A., 2n3
 Morgenthau, Hans, 1n2
 Munson, Rosaria Vignolo, 49n157
 Mynott, Jeremy, 1n1, 2n6,
 35n104

 Nichols, Mary, 6n17, 26n83, 31n98,
 53n170, 56n8, 59n19, 65n35,
 78n76, 86n96, 96n17, 145n39,
 149n49, 153n67, 184n8,
 213n83, 214n84, 239n25
 Nicias, 10n34, 11, 11n38, 11n40, 21,
 29–30, 29n91, 32n100, 38–39,
 41–42, 41n132, 43n141, 44,
 45n147, 47, 50, 52, 52n166,
 57n10, 63, 74, 95, 97n22,
 113n64, 125–126, 125n86, 130,
 133–134n2, 136–137, 140–143,
 146–147, 149, 165n105,
 166–167, 173, 177–179,
 178n128, 181, 184, 186, 199,
 199n43, 200n45, 214, 229,
 229n127, 235–236, 236n14,
 248
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 3, 3n11, 9
 Nye, Joseph S., Jr., 1n2, 2n3

 Orwin, Clifford, 6n17, 26n82,
 43n143, 62n27, 78n76, 79n79,
 80n80, 84n92, 94n11, 96n20,
 98n26, 102n37, 104n41,
 108n51, 135n6, 143n34,
 150n56, 153n67, 161n89,
 164n98, 169n117, 192n31,
 194n35, 196n38, 210n75,
 213n83, 213n84, 218n95,
 236n15, 238n20, 243n31,
 246n41, 250n57

 Pagondas, 32n100, 113n64, 129n98,
 134n2, 134n3, 157–159,
 200n45
 Palmer, Michael, 6n17, 25n80,
 49n157, 62n30, 77n72, 77n74,
 84n90, 85n95, 88n104, 93n9,
 94n11, 192n31, 234n6
 Pangle, Thomas L., ix, 1n1, 1n2,
 41n129
 Parmenides, 10, 10n36, 11n38
 Parry, Adam, 14n46, 43n139,
 46n149, 96n17, 219n100
 Pausanias, 27, 32n100, 39n125, 55,
 70, 135, 138–139, 145, 145n39,
 154–156, 170, 183, 217
 Peisander, 32n100, 63n33, 113n64,
 134n2, 134n3, 150, 200–201,
 200n45
 Peithias, 115–118
 Pericles, 9, 9–10n34, 11, 11n40,
 22–23, 25–27, 25n81, 26n82,
 29, 29n91, 31, 32n100, 32n101,
 33, 37–42, 39n123, 43n139,
 44–47, 45n147, 48n155, 49–50,
 52–53, 52n166, 55–56, 55n3,
 56n4, 57n10, 58, 58n15, 61, 63,
 63n31, 69, 72–93, 72n57,
 72n58, 73n60, 73n63, 73n64,
 74n65, 78n76, 79n79, 80n80,
 82n85, 82n87, 83n88, 84n92,
 85n95, 88n104, 91n4, 93n9,
 95–97, 96n15, 96n17, 100,
 104n42, 105–106, 108–110,
 113n63, 123–127, 124n83, 129,
 131, 132n107, 133n2, 134,
 134n3, 134n4, 136, 138–141,
 143–145, 148–152, 148n46,
 150n59, 151n61, 158, 166–167,
 173n121, 181, 188, 191, 200,
 200n45, 207n63, 218, 222–224,
 228, 232–233, 234n10, 237,
 243, 248, 251–252
 Philolaus, 11, 11n38

- Phormio, 32n100, 79, 87, 95,
113n63, 125n84, 134n2, 134n3,
163n95, 200n45
- Pitcher, Luke V., 2n4
- Plato, 2–4, 4n13, 6n17, 10n36,
11–12, 11n39, 11n40, 29–30,
30n93, 32, 38–39, 82n85, 83,
124n81, 124n82, 137n15,
198–199, 199n42, 251
- Plutarch, 6, 6n19, 11n38, 11n40,
39n123, 82n85, 147n42
- Poseidon, 23, 24n73, 125n84,
163n95, 166, 169, 187, 205, 222,
240
- Pouncey, Peter R., 6n17, 8n29, 9n33,
18n60, 46n149, 49n156,
111n60, 137n15, 150n55,
178n128, 233n4, 239n23
- Prodicus, 11, 11n38, 11n39
- Rawlings, Hunter R., 131n106
- Rhodes, P. J., 14n46, 43n139,
147n43
- Roberts, W. Rhys, 7n24
- Romilly, Jacqueline de, 1n2, 5n15,
6n17, 13n44, 18n60, 27n88,
43n139, 44–45n146, 62n27,
69n47, 72n57, 84n90, 88n104,
97n22, 104n42, 147n43,
149n49, 149n52, 222n113,
246n40
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 3, 3n10, 6,
7n19, 9
- Rusten, Jeffrey S., 44n146, 49n157
- Rutherford, Richard B., 35n104,
37n116
- Saïd, Suzanne, 53n168
- Saxonhouse, Arlene W., 28n90,
32n101, 74n65, 93n10, 106n46,
108n52, 111n60, 120n76,
123n80, 127n89, 131n106,
149n49, 252n63
- Schein, Seth L., 38n117
- Schlosser, Joel Alden, 1n2
- Socrates, 10n36, 11–12, 11n40,
29–30, 30n93, 32, 39, 82–83,
199, 251–252
- Stadter, Philip A., 35n104,
35n106
- Stauffer, Devin, 80n80, 83n88
- Sthenelaidas, 28, 32n100, 41, 74n65,
113n63, 133n2, 134n3, 135n7,
154, 167–168, 170–171, 199, 217,
242
- Strauss, Leo, 5n15, 9n33, 19n62,
25n80, 41n132, 43n142,
45n147, 56n7, 56n8, 67n40,
86n97, 93n9, 100n32, 104n42,
108n54, 125n87, 135n6,
140n32, 151n64, 192n31,
195n37, 210n75, 216n91
- Themistocles, 27, 29, 29n91, 41,
43n141, 45, 45n147, 47, 53,
55–56, 55n2, 57n10, 57n11,
58–65, 58n15, 58n16, 59n19,
60n20, 63n31, 65n35, 65n36,
69–74, 69n47, 69n52, 71n55,
71n56, 72n57, 73n63, 77–80,
85–87, 89, 91–92, 106, 109–110,
124–125, 136, 138–139,
149–150, 151n61, 182, 218,
224, 230, 234n10, 244–245
- Theseus, 24, 49, 62, 69, 124n83,
150–151
- Tissaphernes, 9, 37n115, 48, 48n155,
51, 183, 186, 234, 234n8
- Ulrich, Franz Wolfgang, 44n146
- Wallace, Robert W., 82n85
- Waltz, Kenneth, 1n2
- Walzer, Michael, 1n2
- Wei, Chaoyong, 2n3
- West, William C., III, 32n100

- Westlake, Henry Dickinson, 139n28,
140n31, 147n43, 212n79, 213n82
Woodruff, Paul, 212n79
Wylie, Graham, 150n55, 194n36,
212n79, 213n84
Xenophanes, 11n38
Xenophon, 2, 2n4, 9, 9n31,
11, 11n39, 11n40, 38–39,
39n123, 51n163, 128n93, 198,
237n17
Zeno, 10, 10n36
Zeus, 17, 17n53, 23, 23n73,
38, 52, 85, 167, 170,
183, 187
Zhang, Biao, 2n3
Zhang, Falin, 2n3