THUCYDIDES

circa 460-400 B.C.

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Thucydides is the author of a single book, The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians. He is not generally thought of as a political philosopher, and for obvious and weighty reasons. Not only does he never use the term "political philosophy," but he doesn't address, at least not explicitly, its universal questions. Though he tells us what he regarded as the best Athenian regime during his lifetime, he never speaks of the best regime simply; and though he praises several men for their excellence, he never discusses the best or most excellent way of life as such.[1] Moreover, he presents the results of his "quest for the truth" (I 20.3) as an account of a single political event, the twenty-seven year war through which the Spartans and their allies brought down the Athenian empire. For these reasons, one is inclined to classify him as an historian. Yet unlike his predecessor Herodotus, Thucydides never uses the word "history." Nor, in fact, is his theme limited to the one particular war. He claims that his study of it will be useful for those who seek clarity, not only about the war, but more

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[1]VIII 97.2; IV 81.2; VI 54.5; VII 86.5; VIII 68.1

generally about the past, and even about the future, which in his view will again resemble the past that he has brought to light. Accordingly, he dares to call his work "a possession for all time."[2] Since, then, he sees his theme as a particular event that reveals the comprehensive and permanent truth, at least about human affairs, his focusing on that one event does not entitle us to regard him simply as an historian. Yet it is still hard to think of a man who says so little about universals, who indeed hardly even discusses his own claim for his work's universal significance, as a philosopher or a political philosopher. Perhaps it is best, then, instead of attempting to classify his thought, to turn to a closer look at the book's most distinctive features.

Thucydides' opening sentence tells us that he began to write about the Peloponnesian War from its outset, since he expected it to be a great one and the most noteworthy war there had ever been. He adds that the war did prove to be the "greatest motion," or change, that had ever occurred, at least among the Greeks. To support his claim, he observes that the antagonists were at a peak of wealth and power and also that the war was unequaled in the sufferings it occasioned.[3] But Thucydides does not restrict himself to these initial arguments to persuade us of the war's greatness or importance. More immediately compelling is the impact of the work as a whole, with its austere but vivid narrative that makes us witnesses to the actions and the sufferings it records. We feel the war's greatness because we feel its

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[2] I 22.4. All translations from the Greek are my own.
[3] I 1.1-2; 23.1-2

presence. This feeling is heightened still further through Thucydides' inclusion of political speeches, in direct discourse, by the participants themselves. We seem to hear the speakers as they argue in the name of justice or call upon the gods, as they appeal to the love of freedom or of imperial glory, and as they warn of the terrible consequences of mistaken policies. These speeches indeed make the war seem present to us. But still more importantly, they speak to our own moral and political concerns, and they call upon us to respond to the war, as the antagonists themselves did, in their light. The order of the accompanying narrative, and its choice of emphases, are also designed to appeal to these concerns. And it is primarily in this way, by fostering our own moral and political concerns, that Thucydides makes us receptive to his claim for the war's greatness and its universal significance.

The speeches in Thucydides' book, with their moral seriousness and their urgency, call upon us to take sides for or against them, and yet every reader must be struck by the contrast between the outspokenness of these speeches and Thucydides' own reticence. He does, to be sure, make some explicit judgments. But for the most part, he does not tell us what he would have us think of the warring cities and their leaders, or of the many speeches and actions that he relates. Now this silence does not mean that he is indifferent, or that he no longer responds to men and events, as he encourages us to do, with approval and disapproval. It shows, rather, that he is a skillful political educator. For the moral seriousness that he fosters in us remains immature, it does not sufficiently help us to promote the well-being of

our communities, which it necessarily wants to promote, unless it is guided by or culminates in political wisdom. And since political wisdom is primarily good judgment about unprecedented, particular situations, it is not so much a subject matter to be taught as a skill to be developed through practice. Accordingly, instead of telling us whether or not he approves of a given policy, Thucydides asks us to make our own judgments, and then to subject them to the testing that the war provides. He thus lets us hear speeches in the assemblies both for and against some course of action, and like the assemblymen we must take our own stand, one way or the other, without explicit guidance. Only subsequently, and in stages, as in political life itself, do we learn the aftermath of the actions that were in fact taken; and even then it is primarily up to us to weigh their true influence and to make the appropriate inferences as to their wisdom. To be sure, Thucydides' selection and ordering of narrative details, along with his explicit judgments, whose weight is all the greater for their rarity, help us to find our bearings in these reflections, to such a degree in fact that his translator Hobbes could say that "the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept."[4] But these helps become fruitful only when we accept the book's challenge to take positions of our own and to learn from our own mistakes. Indeed, an introductory statement such as this one would be worse than useless if it were to convey the impression of being a way to avoid this labor.

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[4]Schlatter, Richard, ed., Hobbes' Thucydides (New Brunswick; Rutgers University Press, 1975), p. 18

Now it is true, as we have already noted, that Thucydides' reticence extends not merely to particular questions, such as those regarding policy, but also, and especially, to universal ones, and this despite the fact that the speakers in his book make many and contradictory claims about the most important of these matters. But here too, we shall see, his reserve is not a sign of indifference, but rather an important element in his education of his readers. For mistaken positions with regard to universal questions can result in a pattern of erroneous particular judgments, and Thucydides' narrative helps his attentive readers to notice, and thereby to overcome, some of these deep-seated sources of error. In addition, the arguments themselves by which the various speakers support their universal claims often contain inconsistencies, which reveal difficulties in the speakers' own positions. If we think through these difficulties, as our own concern with the matters at issue compels us to do, they point in the direction of a more adequate understanding. On occasion, Thucydides does indicate his own answers to these universal questions, in part by criticizing the mistaken views of some of the leaders in the war. But even in these cases, where he explicitly guides our thinking, he first encourages us to take our own positions, which may well differ from his, and to approach his perspective through our own experience with the book. Moreover, his explicit judgments are always incomplete, and they raise further questions that we must answer on our own.

After his brief introductory account of the emergence and growth of Greek civilization, Thucydides begins his narrative

of the war itself by looking at its causes. In his view the truest cause, though it was least manifest in speech, was that the Athenians, by becoming great and thus arousing fear, compelled the Spartans to go to war. But he adds that he will also record the causes, or rather--as we may also translate the same Greek word--accusations, that were openly spoken.[5] Indeed, Thucydides seems to devote far more attention to these openly spoken causes than to the one he regards as truest. This impression is somewhat misleading, however, since these open accusations concerned instances of the very growth of Athenian power that Thucydides saw as the war's truest cause. But the main justification for his procedure is that it helps us to feel the impact of the war's beginnings as they actually appeared, openly and in public. If these appearances should be deceptive, as indeed Thucydides says that they were, his presentation encourages us to confirm this fact for ourselves, rather than simply accepting it on his authority. Moreover, it is only by beginning from these simplest appearances that we can properly appreciate the primary theme of Thucydides' study of the war, namely justice, or justice in its relation to compulsion.

The first accusation of the war was an accusation against Athens by Corinth, a naval power like Athens itself and an important member of the Spartan or Peloponnesian alliance. The Corinthians charged that Athens, by helping the Corinthian colony Corcyra in a sea battle against them, had violated the truce that bound the Spartan and Athenian alliances.[6] The Athenians had recently

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[5] I 23.5-6; cf. I 88
[6] I 55.2; cf. I 44

entered into a defensive alliance with Corcyra, which was threatened by war with Corinth, despite Corinthian warnings that this would provoke a general war, for they believed that the war was coming in any event, and they didn't want to allow Corcyra, with its large navy, to come under Corinthian control. Corcyra's location on the coastal route to Italy and Sicily was also a factor in the Athenians' decision, though we are not told whether this impressed them more from a defensive or offensive point of view. Soon after this first collision with Corinth there arose the occasion for a second Corinthian charge against Athens, to which the Athenians responded with a counter-charge of their own. The sea battle against Corcyra had ended disappointingly for Corinth, and the Athenians feared that the Corinthians would retaliate by persuading Potidaea, a city they had colonized but which was now an ally of Athens, to revolt from the Athenian alliance. Accordingly, Athens ordered the Potidaeans to tear down one of their walls, to give them hostages, and to expel their Corinthian magistrates. The Potidaeans, however, refused these demands, which prompted them instead to carry out the revolt that the Corinthians had indeed been urging, and which Sparta had also encouraged by promising to invade Athenian territory if Athens should attack them. The Corinthians sent an army to help defend Potidaea; and when the Athenians in turn dispatched a large attacking force, there was another battle in which Athenians and Corinthians, despite the general truce, fought against one another. When the Athenians, who were the victors in this battle, proceeded to lay siege to Potidaea, Corinth accused Athens of besieging its colony, with Corinthian troops inside. The Athenians,

for their part, charged Corinth with having brought about the rebellion of one of their tribute-paying allies and with having fought openly on its side.[7]

Soon after the siege had begun at Potidaea, the Corinthians summoned their allies to Sparta, where they accused the Athenians of having broken the truce and of doing injustice to the Peloponnese. The Spartans themselves invited the allies to make their allegations of Athenian injustice before a Spartan assembly, and we learn that a number of cities had charges of their own against Athens. The Corinthian speech at this assembly, which Thucydides presents in its entirety, argues that Athenian actions at Corcyra and Potidaea are merely the most recent instances of a long-continued policy designed to enslave all of Greece. Many cities, the Corinthians say, have already been enslaved by Athens, and now even Sparta's allies are being plotted against and deprived of their freedom. To help convey a sense of the danger to Greece, the Corinthians give a description of the bold, resourceful, and acquisitive Athenian character, a description which they summarize by saying that the Athenians "are of such a nature as neither to have rest themselves nor to allow it to the other human beings" (I 70.9). The Corinthians conclude by urging the Spartans to invade Attica before it is too late to help Potidaea and the other cities. Later, the final speaker at this assembly, a Spartan ephor, also urges his fellow-citizens not to betray their allies to the Athenian aggressors. The Spartan assembly then resolved, overwhelmingly, that the Athenians

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[7] I 66

had broken the truce and were committing injustice, and they prepared to ask the allies to declare war against them in common.[8] It appears, then, that the cause of the war was Athenian injustices, and the threat of future injustices, against the Greeks and in particular against Sparta's allies. And this impression was shared, Thucydides tells us, by the great preponderance of the Greek world, whose sympathies at the beginning of the war inclined towards Sparta, especially since it claimed to be engaging in a war of liberation.[9] Even the god at Delphi promised the Spartans that he would assist them, whether called or uncalled, thus suggesting that the Spartan war effort was to be in the service of punishing Athenian injustice.[10]

Thucydides has already told us, however, that Sparta's decision to go to war, and to try to crush Athenian power, was prompted less by the allies' accusations against Athens than by its own fear. Moreover, his narrative of the fifty-year interval between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars tends to support this claim, at least to the extent that it shows Sparta's failure seriously to oppose the emergence and rapid growth of an Athenian empire.[11] In keeping with this, the Corinthian speech at Sparta is at least as much a complaint about Spartan indifference as it is an accusation against Athens, and the Corinthians even threaten to desert the alliance if Sparta should continue to do nothing. Especially in the light of this threat, it does seem to be more a fear of losing their allies than a

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[8] I 87.2-4
[9] II 8.4-5
[10] I 118.3; cf. II 54.4-5
[11] I 89.1-118.2

desire to protect them, let alone to save the rest of Greece from Athenian tyranny, that brings about the change from the Spartans' habitual reluctance to go to war. And this impression will be confirmed by subsequent Spartan behavior during the war, in particular, by their treatment of Plataea and their agreement with Athens to accept the Peace of Nicias. Yet however little of generosity there may have been in Sparta's motives for declaring war, Athenian aggression would still appear to have been responsible for its outbreak.

The case against Athens is weaker than it appears, though, in at least one respect. Though the Corinthians and the Spartans accused the Athenians of having violated the truce between them, this aspect of their argument seems to have been quite unsound. The Athenians' defensive alliance with Corcyra, however provocative, was not clearly forbidden under the truce; and even the Corinthians never claimed that Athenian harshness toward Potidaea was in violation of it. Moreover, the Athenians offered, in conformity with the truce, to submit all controversies to binding arbitration, which the Spartans neither offered nor accepted. The Athenian leader Pericles relied largely on these facts to persuade the Athenians not to yield to last-minute Spartan ultimatums.12 Even the Spartan king Archidamus, who opposed the war in the Spartan assembly, acknowledged that it was unlawful to go to war against a city that offered arbitration; and he warned that Sparta, if it did declare a war, would be regarded as having begun it. Later, in fact, when the war was going badly for

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12I 78.4; 140.2; 144.2

them, the Spartans themselves came to believe that by their refusal of arbitration, and other such offenses, they had been guilty of first breaking the truce and thus starting the war.13

Thucydides, however, does not endorse this Spartan belief in their own guilt, nor the exoneration of Athens that it implies. According to him, we recall, the Athenians "compelled" the Spartans to go to war because of the fear that their growing power inspired in them. Though the Spartans' truest motive for waging war hardly deserves our praise, neither can they be blamed for having broken the truce, since they were compelled to do so (cf. IV 98.5-6). Their fear of Athens left them with no reasonable alternative, or so at least they had strong cause to believe. And we return, then, to our first impression that Athens, rather than Sparta, was guilty of having brought on the war.

Athens' guilt is perhaps brought into still sharper focus by the manner in which the Athenians responded to the accusations against them. Some Athenians, for example, who happened to be in Sparta on other business when they heard of the Corinthians' and the others' charges against Athens, asked for and received permission to address the assembly on their city's behalf. They spoke, not to defend themselves against the allies' charges, as if the Spartans were judges in a court of law, but to dissuade the Spartans from a hasty decision to go to war. The core of their argument, however, was the claim that they didn't deserve to be so hated for their empire, and that it was not unreasonable, or perhaps not unfair, for them to possess it. To support this

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13I 81.5; VII 18.2; cf. IV 20.2

claim, they argue that they were compelled to establish the empire and to expand it, in the first place by fear, and then also by honor, and later also by benefit--compulsions that they later speak of together as "the greatest things." But if actions done for the sake of honor and benefit, as well as those done from fear, can be regarded as compulsory, and excused on that account, is there anything that is forbidden? In its way, then, the Athenians' defense of their empire is indeed no defense, since it attacks the very presupposition of all accusation, namely, that there is voluntary wrongdoing. The Athenians add that they are not the first to yield to the temptation of empire, but that it has always been established for the weaker to be kept down by the stronger, and that no one with a chance to acquire something by force has ever yet been dissuaded by the argument from justice. These Athenians seem to have believed that the shocking bluntness of their argument would intimidate the Spartans, since only a powerful city would dare to say such things, and that they would thereby deter Sparta from war. They do, however, go on to claim that they rule more justly than their power requires, or than others in their place would do; and they also warn the Spartans not to violate the truce, but to accept their offer to resolve the differences between them through arbitration. Now as these concessions of sorts to justice may perhaps suggest, the Athenians were not so powerful as to force Sparta to tolerate their empire, and all that they were doing to increase it, through fear of that power alone; and yet they admitted openly that justice would never restrain them from seeking such power in the future. It is hardly surprising,

then, that this speech failed to avert the war, for it reveals clearly what it was about Athens that so angered and frightened the Spartan alliance.14

The argument for empire that these Athenians gave at Sparta was repeated on a number of occasions by Athenian spokesmen during the war. Pericles, under whose leadership the Athenians entered the war, later tells them, when they are beginning to grow weary of it, that their empire is "like a tyranny, which is believed to be unjust to take, but which is dangerous to let go" (II 63.2-3). He also holds out to them the prospect of all but limitless advantages from the empire, and he urges them to defend it, despite the hatred it arouses, for the sake of the honor it brings them, and especially for the sake of ever-remembered glory in the future.15 Much later in the war, this imperialistic thesis is repeated by Athenian ambassadors, from an armed force that is already present at the small and independent island of Melos, who are trying to persuade the Melian leaders to submit voluntarily to their rule. These ambassadors don't even pretend to justify Athens' empire, nor its decision to subdue Melos, because, as they claim to know, justice has no place in human reckoning unless there is an equal power to compel on both sides.16 And when the Melian leaders keep refusing to yield, in their trust that good fortune from the divine will sustain them, since they stand "free from sin against men who are not just," the Athenians reply as follows:

14I 72-78
15II 62.1-3; 64.3-6
16V 89

> As for good will from the divine, neither do we suppose that we will fall short. For we are neither claiming as our right nor are we doing anything outside of human belief with regard to the divine nor human wish with regard to themselves. For we think, on the basis of opinion, regarding the divine, and on the clear basis of a permanent compulsion of nature, regarding the human, that wherever they have the might they rule. And we neither laid down the law nor are we the first to have used it as laid down, but we received it in existence and we will leave it behind us in existence forever; and we use it in the knowledge that both you and others, if you came to have the same power as we have, would do it too. (V 105.1-2)

This dialogue between the Athenian ambassadors and the Melian leaders is the most notorious passage in Thucydides. Yet the Athenians' statements at Melos are merely a fuller disclosure and clarification of what had long been the central thought of Athenian imperialism, and as such they offer the most powerful inducement for us to see the war as a war against Athenian injustice.

If we look at the war from this anti-Athenian perspective, we are prepared to notice, and to be moved by, the two most dramatic juxtapositions in Thucydides' work, and also to see the work as having a unified theme. Pericles' Funeral Oration, in which he celebrates the beauty of Athenian power and even boasts that the Athenians have established everlasting memorials everywhere of bad things as well as good ones, is immediately followed by a horrible and devastating plague at Athens.[17] And the Melian dialogue - - which shocks all the more because the Athenians, having failed to persuade the Melians, later slaughtered their adult men and enslaved the women and children

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[17] II 34-54

- - is immediately followed by the Sicilian expedition, in which Athenian ambition finally went too far and which ended in a disaster that all but sealed Athens' eventual doom. Thucydides thus invites us to think of both 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.18

Thucydides himself, however, seems not to have shared this interpretation of the war as a divine or cosmic punishment of Athens. Though he refuses to speculate on the causes of the plague, he tells us that it was also widespread in Africa and Asia before coming to Athens, and he all but ridicules the credulity of those who thought it had been foretold by an ancient oracle.19 As for the Sicilian expedition, Thucydides says that in spite of its immoderation it could have succeeded with better leadership and more support from home for the army.20 Moreover, since the narrative breaks off some six years before the end of the war, with the Athenians having recently established a superior regime and having just won an important naval victory, which restored their confidence that they could still prevail against Sparta, we are led to wonder whether the war's final outcome was in any sense destined.

But even apart from the question of what caused the Athenian sufferings, the more one reads Thucydides, the less one feels that Athens' suffering was fitting or deserved. And more generally, our first response to the book as a whole is not satisfaction

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18cf. I 23.3-6
19II 48; 54.1-3; cf. V 26.3-4
20II 65.11; cf. VI 15.3-4

at justice having been done, but is far more likely to be a feeling of sadness. This sadness arises, in large measure at least, from a growing sense that the defeat of Athens is not the victory of justice, but that justice itself is among the chief victims of the war. Whether or not we are attentive to the fact that Athens' defeat came too late to save the Melians and the other helpless victims of Athenian power, we cannot help noticing that the victorious Spartans became, if they had not always been, at least as oppressive as the Athenians. For instance, it was the Spartans and their allies who attacked Plataea, in spite of the oath they had sworn, in honor of Plataean heroism in the Persian War, to protect Plataea's independence, and although Plataea had been compelled to ally itself with Athens by Sparta's own indifference to the threat from nearby Thebes. And after besieging the city, the Spartans killed all the Plataeans who surrendered, not because they believed the savage accusations against them by the Thebans, but just about entirely, as Thucydides says, in order to gratify the Thebans, whom they regarded as beneficial to them in the present war.[21] Later, in order to recover a mere three hundred prisoners, including a hundred or so from their first families, the Spartans agreed to the so-called Peace of Nicias, in which they betrayed, among many others, the cities that had relied on the generous promises of the Spartan leader Brasidas to revolt from Athens.[22] And these are only two of the many examples that confirm what the

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[21] III 68; cf. II 71-74; III 55.1

[22] Compare V 18.5-8 and 32.1 with IV 86.1; 114.3-4; 120.3. See also IV 81.2; 108.6-7; 117; and V 14.3-15.1

Athenian ambassadors at Melos had said about the Spartans, that in their relations with others they most transparently hold that whatever is advantageous is just (and that whatever is pleasant is noble).23 Yet it is not merely the Spartans and the Athenians whose behavior gives evidence of the weakness of justice in the war. To take only one telling example, in his extensive catalogue of the many cities and nations that fought against Sicily or for it, Thucydides says of all of them in general that they didn't take sides because of justice or kinship so much as because of advantage or else from compulsion.24

Men disregarded, moreover, the apparent restraining power of law or justice even when such behavior served no interest of their own, except perhaps to satisfy an immediate passion. This we can at least understand during the plague at Athens, when the imminence of death freed men from all restraint coming from fear of gods or from any law of human beings, and people also thought it fitting to reap their profits quickly, and with a view to pleasure, since they regarded their lives and their property alike as ephemeral.25 It is harder to understand, however, the bloodthirsty Thracian mercenaries who slaughtered, on their way home from Athens, the men, the women, the children, and even the beasts in the small town of Mycalessus. This was a calamity, Thucydides tells us, as worthy of being lamented, given its size, as anything that happened in the war.26 And most horribly of all, there is Thucydides' account of the civil

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23V 105.4
24VII 57.1 ff.
25II 53
26VII 29.4-5; 30.3

war in Corcyra and of the civil wars that subsequently convulsed all of Greece. The cause of these uprisings was the desire to rule, rooted in acquisitiveness and the love of honor, but after a time the violence seemed to take on a life of its own. Revenge was in greater esteem than not to have suffered oneself, and its scope was limited not by justice and the advantage of the city, but only by the immediate pleasure of whichever faction had the upper hand. The citizens who remained neutral, moreover, were killed by the partisans on both sides, whether because they didn't join with them or else from envy that they might survive.[27]

This saddening spectacle of the powerlessness of justice in the face of selfishness and violence is not merely a feature of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides shows, by his account of ancient times, both in Greece and in Sicily, and by his description of the emerging powers in Macedonia and Thrace, that the fate of justice in this war had been its fate before, and that it was so elsewhere.[28] Above all, he tells us that harsh things such as those that happened in the cities during the civil wars have happened before and always are going to happen in the future, for as long as the same nature of human beings exists.[29] This uncompromising statement about human nature is Thucydides' clearest echo of his opening promise to reveal the comprehensive and permanent truth about human affairs. And, indeed, the most obvious lesson of the work as a whole, both for statesmen and

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[27] III 82
[28] I 2-17; II 97-99; VI 2-5
[29] III 82.2

others alike, is the sobering one that as long as our species remains, we must reckon on a human nature that will again and again, when given the chance, overpower the fragile restraints of law and justice. Thucydides does not say, however, that everyone became equally depraved as a result of the civil wars. And it is true that the Spartans, for example, unlike the Athenians, had not exploited their supremacy in Greece to establish an empire, and that they became, in Thucydides' words, prosperous and moderate at the same time, as did the Chians. But it is also true, as Thucydides later tells us, that the Spartans and the Chians surpassed all other cities in the number of their slaves.30 In other words, the Spartans' moderation, such as it was, in foreign affairs was rooted in their fear of a slave revolt. ~~and so this~~ Their behavior does not contradict the general rule of the powerlessness of law and justice in themselves, and so it does to relieve the sadness with which we first respond to Thucydides' work as a whole.

For the Athenians, who claimed however, before the war began that no one had ever yet been dissuaded from acquisition by considerations of justice, what we have loosely called the weakness of justice in the war would have been less the cause for sadness than a further confirmation of their fundamental thesis that the stronger must always subdue the weaker. The Athenians endorsed this thesis, and thus rejected the dedication to virtue as it had traditionally been understood (II 63.2; V 101), on the grounds that such virtue was incompatible with man's natural and compelling desires for some security, for honor, and for benefit. Now we think that the Athenians were too quick to excuse the

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30VIII 24.4; 40.2

past behavior of the powerful, and their own behavior, in terms of natural compulsion; for even if those with the power to acquire or to rule have always done so, it doesn't follow from this that they were compelled to. But the Athenians did not rely on this inadequate evidence for their argument. To see this most clearly, we must look again at what the Athenian ambassadors said in the Melian dialogue, where their great superiority in power encouraged them to be most outspoken. The Athenians intend to add Melos to their empire, and they tell the Melian leaders that they shouldn't expect to dissuade them by arguing that they have done Athens no injustice. For the Melian leaders themselves, as the Athenians assert, also know that justice is decided, in human speech or reckoning, on the basis of an equal power to compel, while the superior do what they can, or what is possible, and the weak yield.[31] The Melians think, as they indicate in their response, that they are being forbidden to speak of justice, and ordered to limit themselves to considerations of interest, if they want the Athenians to listen to them. Yet they misunderstand the Athenians, who mean instead that there is no justice, ~~is not even possible.~~ and hence ~~that there is~~ no possibility to speak truly of it, and no need to forbid such speech, in any situation where the good of the one party is incompatible with that of the other. For aren't we all compelled, by our nature as rational beings, to pursue our own good? After all, doesn't the argument of justice itself acknowledge that this good is a compulsory power, by claiming that it is in our

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own interest, at least in the long run or in the truest sense, to be always just? The Melians, at any rate, later in the dialogue, when they accuse the Athenians of not being just, also warn that Athens will not succeed in subduing them, since they, who are free from sin, will be aided by fortune from the divine as well as by their kinsmen the Spartans.[32] Indeed, the claim that justice is always in one's own best interest is ~~implicit~~ contained in the very notion of justice, since we think of justice as the common good, and the common good would include one's own. The Melians themselves, in fact, when compelled by the Athenians to argue on the basis of interest, also argue, at least implicitly, from this notion of justice. They say it is useful for the Athenians, who may some day be in danger themselves, that they not dissolve "the common good," but that fairness and justice be of service to the one in danger at the moment, and that he receive some benefit from arguments that are less than precise.[33] The Athenians, however, are able to show that it is not in their own interest to allow the Melians to remain independent. More generally, the Athenian thesis recognizes that a common good, or rather, a coincidence of interests, cannot always be found in every situation among men. Moreover, it asserts that in cases where this coincidence cannot be found, we are compelled, once we understand the situation, to pursue our own good as distinct from that of the others; for it is costly to us not to, and even the counter-argument on behalf of justice must ultimately admit that no true justice could oppose the power of our natural wish for

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32 V 104
33 V 90

our good.[34] Furthermore, if we are compelled, for the reasons indicated, to pursue our own good, we are also compelled to pursue whatever we believe to be our own good, though it is indeed costly to us to misjudge what it truly is. Now the Athenians thought that it was good for them to acquire and expand their empire, even at the risk of war with Sparta, and it is ultimately for this reason alone that they acknowledged no guilt for doing so.

One is tempted to reject this entire Athenian argument, especially because its utterance by the ambassadors at Melos is followed by the butchery of the Melian citizens. But this would be an inadequate response, and not merely because the killings, and even the ambassadors' own threats of these killings if the Melians should refuse to submit, were not necessary or appropriate consequences of the argument itself. It may well be true that the Athenian argument contributed to their willingness to acquire and maintain an empire. But it is also true of the Athenians, or at least of the best among their leaders, that they showed an extraordinary concern to be worthy of their imperial rule, and to be noble. Indeed, their imperialistic thesis itself is in large measure the result of their concern with justice, and with nobility, for it is these concerns that required them to give to themselves a defense of their empire, and a defense without the usual hypocrisies. Furthermore, it appeared to the Athenians that to accept their defense of empire, and of selfishness, was not necessarily to repudiate what is

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[34]Consider V 25.3. Contrast, however, VII 57.1.

truly highest or most noble. It may well, then, become a matter of serious interest to us to see on what grounds the Athenians believed that they were noble, or more broadly, that they were superior, and to examine whether their view of themselves was true.

The Athenians speak of their superiority, and especially their superiority as individuals to the citizens of other cities, in a number of ways. The Athenians at Sparta, in defending their empire, combine the argument from compulsion, which would equally excuse any other ruling power, with the claim that they in particular are worthy to rule, largely on the grounds, it seems, of their superior intelligence and zeal. The Athenian speakers do not pretend, of course, that these excellences, which had contributed so greatly to the Greek victory in the Persian War, are still in the service of Greek freedom, if indeed they ever were. But they nevertheless treat them as a title to their empire, or at least as grounds for deserving less hatred for it.[35] What the Athenians say at Sparta is further elaborated in Pericles' Funeral Oration, in which he speaks of the Athenian people as lovers of beauty and of wisdom. Moreover, he praises the Athenians for their willingness to be brave in battle, without their needing to rely on long and arduous training, and more generally for their active involvement in political life, a life which does not require, in Athens, the neglect of private concerns, but rather which completes the graceful development of the many-sided individual's highest powers. According to

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[35] I 73.2-74.4; 75.1; 76.2

Pericles, Athenian power is the achievement of such an outstanding citizenry that only Athens allows its subject cities no room to make the reproach that they are not ruled by worthy men.[36]

That the Athenians have freely chosen to use their intelligence and their other gifts on behalf of the city, as they are also ready to risk their lives for it, is a crucial aspect of their view of themselves as being noble. Pericles can arouse their patriotic zeal by asking them to consider not through calculation alone the well-known benefits that come from resisting one's enemies, but rather to behold the power of the city and to become lovers of it, and to be ready as its lovers to emulate the fallen soldiers who gave to it the most noble offering of their virtue.[37] Pericles uses the word noble, or beautiful, in referring to the soldiers' deaths because he regards their dedication to Athens as having transcended mere calculation or selfishness. Similarly, when he implicitly claims that Athens itself is so beautiful or noble as to inspire erotic love, he does so not merely on the grounds of its power, but also because of what he sees as its superiority, even in foreign relations, to selfish calculation. This does not mean that he believes Athenian policy is guided by considerations of justice; ~~indeed~~ he boasts that Athens has established everlasting memorials everywhere of evils as well as goods. But Pericles does say that the Athenians are the only ones who benefit others more from a fearless trust in their own liberality than from calculations of advantage.[38]

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[36] II 37-41
[37] II 43.1
[38] II 40.5; 41.4

And even when he speaks of everlasting memorials of evils and goods, he has in mind the evils that Athens has suffered, as well as the harm it has done to others. Precisely the unlimitedness of Athens' ultimate ambitions, and its willingness to suffer greatly for the greatest ends, is evidence for Pericles of its noble superiority to mere calculations of profit and loss. Especially as individuals in their relation to the city, but even as a city in relation to others -- or at least so it seemed in their own eyes -- the Athenians gave freely of themselves for noble and great ends. And in this connection, we should not forget that the Athenian ambassadors at Sparta had spoken of their city's praiseworthy restraint in the use of its power over its subjects, a restraint that Athens had practiced even though this seemed to be encouraging complaints and thus making it more difficult to rule.[39]

Because they regarded themselves as being noble, and worthy to rule, the Athenians also regarded the honor or glory that they anticipated from their empire not merely as a great good for themselves, but also as something greater. _Pericles had said to them that they were well-advised to pursue a boundless empire, in spite of the hatred this aroused, on the grounds that the hatred would be short-lived, whereas the empire's brilliance and its future glory would be left behind in memory forever. But he also went on to add that this glory would be something noble, by which he meant, in part, a reflection of their noble superiority to narrow or merely calculating selfishness.[40]

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[39] I 76.3-77.5
[40] II 64.5-6

In keeping with the Athenians' attitude toward honor or glory, when their ambassadors at Sparta spoke of the "greatest things" that compelled them to acquire and expand their empire, they spoke of honor as being distinct from, and apparently irreducible to, mere benefit.41 It is true that Alcibiades later spoke of his own desire for honor as an aspect of his desire for benefit. But even in his case, as Thucydides makes clear, he sought honor not merely as the greatest or most pleasant benefit, but as his noble reward for noble deeds, for deeds that, in his eyes, were both of intrinsic greatness and of benefit to the city as a whole.42

That the Athenians were outstandingly noble or admirable was not merely their own claim about themselves. Even the hostile Corinthians, in order to warn their Spartan allies of the danger from Athens, had to praise the Athenian manner, and they said, among other things, that the Athenians "use their bodies, which are most alien to them, for the sake of the city, and their intelligence, which is most their own, in order to do something on its behalf" (I 70.6). Now it is true that the Corinthians had an incentive to exaggerate the degree of Athenian zeal, just as Pericles and the other Athenian spokesmen had their own incentives for exaggeration in their praise of Athens' beauty and its glory. But the truth about the Athenians, as it becomes manifest from their deeds, is in some ways even more beautiful than Pericles' splendid, but clearly boastful, speeches would have led us to believe. Early in the war, for example, Phormio's

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41I 75.3; 76.2
42VI 16.1-3; 16.5-6; cf. VI 15.2

two naval victories against vastly greater Peloponnesian fleets in the Gulf of Corinth were brilliant testimony to his daring and intelligent leadership and to the zealous initiative of the Athenian sailors.43 We later see a manifestation of democracy at its best when Demosthenes, at a time when he wasn't even an officer, boldly proposed to fortify Pylos, on the Peloponnesian mainland, and prevailed with the Athenian troops to do so, simply because they didn't want to remain idle there while waiting for favorable winds. This action, which was followed by further instances of Demosthenes' skill and of Athenian valor, led to the previously unheard-of surrender of three hundred Spartans and thus allowed Athens to end the first phase of the war on favorable terms.44

The finer side of Athenian democracy is also evident in the aftermath of a rebellion at Mytilene, which Athens had crushed after a lengthy siege. Although the Athenians had initially resolved upon the death penalty for all the male citizens, and had even sent a ship to convey these orders, the next day they had a change of heart. They reflected that it had been a savage decree and a great one, i.e. an excessive one, to destroy the entire city, and not just those who had been responsible for the rebellion. Accordingly, they held a second assembly that very day, at which they determined not to kill the great majority of the Mytileneans. A second ship was sent out at once, and thanks in part to the eagerness of its oarsmen, and the reluctance of those on the first ship, the new orders arrived in time to

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43II 83-92
44IV 2.4-5.2; cf. IV 6-41

save Mytilene from annihilation. The Athenians' change of heart on this occasion is an unparalleled example, at least during the war, of an entire people showing mildness of character. The Athenians knew better than to believe Cleon's argument in the assembly that justice demanded the punishment of all Mytilene. The same sensitivity to justice and nobility that led the Athenians to defend their empire with such freedom from hypocrisy was also at the root of their remarkably moderate and relatively decent behavior toward Mytilene.45

The most splendid instance, however, of Athenian nobility is the one in which Athens showed itself at its most immoderate, namely, the expedition against Sicily. To add Sicily to their empire had long been an Athenian dream, a dream that Pericles himself had nourished by telling the Athenians of the limitless possibilities from their supremacy over the sea. Yet Pericles also warned against trying to expand the empire during the war with Sparta, and he would presumably have opposed the Sicilian expedition, had he lived, as being recklessly premature. Pericles' vision of Athens was of a city that loved the noble, but with thrift or economy, whereas the Sicilian expedition was lavishly expensive and an unprecedented risk. Still, Pericles himself would have had to admit that there is something especially beautiful, even if it is not the beauty of health, in this very unsparingness. All the Athenians alike, according to Thucydides, fell in love with the Sicilian expedition. The erotic love that Pericles had merely asked for from the Athenian community took hold of

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45III 36; 49

it in fact ~~only~~ on the eve of the Sicilian campaign.[46] And the men in the prime of life were inspired, not by a desire for wealth or power, or even glory, but "by a longing for the faraway sight and contemplation" (VI 24.3). Nor should we entirely disregard, as a mere pretence, the Athenians' statements that their aim in Sicily was to help their kinsmen the Leontines and their Egestaean allies.[47] Furthermore, when the initial expedition had met with g ve reverses, and the Peloponnesians were also causing distr s at home by occupying a fort near Athens, the Athenians n only persevered in Sicily, but they sent a second fleet almost as large as the first. No one, Thucydides tells us, could have believed beforehand that such tenacity was even possible. And even after Athens' terrible defeat in Sicily, it showed a resiliency in pursuing the war with Sparta that astonished the entire Greek world.[48] Sparta was indeed more moderate in prosperity than Athens. But no other city even rivalled Athens, as we see above all in the Sicilian campaign and its aftermath, for the grandeur of its ambition and for its strength in adversity.

The Sicilian campaign ended in failure. Yet Pericles had told the Athenians years earlier that they would be famous in the future for having ruled the greatest of Greek empires, even if they should fail in their immediate war aims. Failure, he implied, was always possible, since, as he went on to say, all things by nature also decline.[49] Indeed, Pericles' enlightened

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[46]VI 24.3; cf. I 143.5-144.1; II 62.2; 65.7; and also II 40.1
[47]VI 6.1; 18.1-2; 19.1
[48]VIII 1-2; 24.5; cf. VII 28.3 and 42.2
[49]II 64.3

awareness that everything must eventually decline seems to have helped nourish his belief that the Athenians were well-advised to pursue ever-remembered glory as the greatest good.[50] We also recall that Pericles celebrated everlasting memorials even of Athenian failures. Yet it is hard to celebrate Athens' defeat in the Sicilian campaign, even though this was the most memorable and in some ways the noblest of Athens' failures; and one cannot help but feel that here, at least, the pursuit of imperial glory was ill-advised, and not worth its terrible price. For not only do we feel the greatness of the army's sufferings, but also we see an ugliness in Athens that comes to light as a major cause of its defeat. Despite Athens' amazing perseverance in a bold campaign that Thucydides himself regarded as feasible, the entire army at Sicily was destroyed, because of the near-sighted pursuit of private interests, or what appeared to be private interests, at the expense of the public.

In his eulogy of Pericles, Thucydides attributes the Athenians' defeat in the war, and at Sicily in particular, to private ambitions for honor and gain, ambitions that were no longer restrained, after Pericles' death, by the intelligent and public-spirited guidance of the leading citizen.[51] There was no longer the harmony between the leaders' private ambitions and the public good that had been characteristic of Athens under Pericles. This analysis reminds one of Nicias' charge, in his attempt to dissuade the Athenians from the Sicilian campaign, that his fellow-commander Alcibiades was urging it from entirely selfish

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[50] II 64.5-6 and context
[51] II 65.7-12

motives.[52] Now one might say, in Alcibiades' defense, that his private ambition for honor and wealth from the Sicilian expedition was in full harmony with the wishes of the Athenian assembly. But one must add that the people's wishes, as expressed in the assembly, were no true measure of the city's interests, and not merely because of their ignorance of those interests.

That even the Athenian people subordinated the public good to a kind of private interest becomes evident above all in their savage response to mutilations of the Hermes statues, which occurred while the departure for Sicily was being prepared. The Athenians believed that these mutilations were an ill omen for the expedition, and also, though it was hardly plausible, that they were done as part of a conspiracy against the people.[53] ~~Perhaps the Athenians~~ Some of them may have believed that they deserved to fail in Sicily, or to be conspired against by tyrannical individuals, as a punishment for being a tyrannical city. At all events, their morbid fear of oligarchic or tyrannical conspiracies fueled what was, for them, an uncharacteristic passion to avenge offenses against the gods. They arrested many respectable men and even killed some of them, merely because they had been accused. They even recalled Alcibiades from his command in Sicily to face the capital charge of having profaned the mystery rites -- this too, they claimed, in connection with a conspiracy against the people.[54] Now there were reasons, to be sure, to suspect Alcibiades of having tyrannical ambitions, ~~and he betrayed Athens~~

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[52] VI 12.2
[53] VI 27
[54] VI 53; 60.1-61.1

~~to Sparta after he had fled from prosecution.~~ Yet he was Athens' most capable general, and his dismissal from the Athenian command, together with the able counsel that he gave to Sparta, led directly to Athens' failure in Sicily. The Athenian people or, more precisely, the class of mostly poor Athenians who called themselves the whole community, were so eager to conquer Sicily that those of their fellow-citizens who opposed the campaign were afraid to raise their hands against it. And these Athenians were not deterred from the expedition by what they themselves regarded as an ill omen. And yet these same Athenians cared so little for the army's safety or even the city's survival in the war, as compared to their own rule within the city, that they tried to condemn their most capable general to death, for an impiety that he may or may not have committed. As for the danger that success in Sicily might have helped Alcibiades to become a tyrant in the future, this is a risk that the Athenian democracy would have had to accept as a price for conquering Sicily. Moreover, Thucydides indicates, in an apparent digression, that the earlier Athenian tyrants had practiced "virtue and intelligence" throughout most of their rule, and that they upheld most of the customary laws, including especially the sacred observances.[55] This behavior is in striking contrast, of course, to that of the populace, who were then in the grip of a foolish partisanship, and whose actions were all the more heedless because they believed, apparently, that their chief concern was for the whole city and for the gods. In accordance with all this, Thucydides concludes not

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[55]VI 54.4-6; cf. VI 24.4

that it was Alcibiades, but rather the many among the Athenians, each of whom was privately annoyed at his practices, who brought about the city's fall.56

After Alcibiades' dismissal from Sicily, one of the two remaining Athenian generals was Nicias, a moderate and pious man, who had opposed the expedition but whose loyalty, at any rate, the Athenians believed they could trust. Thucydides shows his own sympathy for Nicias by commenting, on the occasion of his surrender and his death at the hands of the Syracusans, that "he deserved least among the Greeks, during my time, to come to this degree of misfortune because of his full devotion to virtue as established by custom" (VII 86.5). This ~~remark~~ praise of Nicias' virtue however, may surprise some readers since Thucydides' account has already indicated that Nicias' own weaknesses of character and judgment played a large part in Athens' defeat. Let us look, then, at some of the ways in which Nicias contributed to Athens' failure, and we will then be in a better position to explain the apparent inconsistency between Thucydides' narrative and his explicit judgment. Nicias' hope against hope to prevent the expedition, which the Athenians had already resolved upon, together with his wish to sail as safely as possible, if he were to be compelled to go, led him to advise the Athenians to send a much larger force than they were intending. His tactics failed to prevent the expedition, but he did succeed in convincing the Athenians to send this larger army. Indeed, it is only after his advice had made them confident of the expedition's

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56VI 15.3-4; cf. II 65.8-10

safety that they fell in love with it. The reluctant Nicias' concern for safety, and for the safety of his reputation as a successful general, was thus directly responsible for the size of the Athenians' stake in Sicily, as well as for their enthusiasm.[57] Yet the gravest, and most revealing of Nicias' mistakes, occurred much later in the campaign, when even with Demosthenes' reinforcements the Athenians failed to capture Syracuse. The ships and their crews were steadily deteriorating, the enemy was gathering strength, and it should have been clear that the Athenians ought to return home at once, while their naval superiority still allowed them to do so. But Nicias was unwilling to return to Athens without orders from home, on the grounds, as he said, that the Athenians, including most of the soldiers who were then clamoring to return, would convict the generals of having been bribed by the enemy. "Knowing the natures, [he said], of the Athenians he preferred to risk perishing, if he must, at the hands of his enemies, and privately, rather than to perish on a shameful charge and unjustly at the hands of the Athenians" (VII 48.4). Nicias had good reason, given the democracy's suspiciousness of its own leaders, to fear banishment, and perhaps even death, if he had returned home with the army. Yet the fact remains that his choice to die "privately" in Sicily led directly to the army's ruin and cost the lives of thousands of his troops. One might say, in partial defense of Nicias, that he still believed there was a chance to capture Syracuse, and that when the arrival of fresh enemy troops persuaded

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[57] VI 19.2; 24-26

him that he had been mistaken, he agreed to lead the army home. But then, when an eclipse of the moon so troubled the majority of the Athenians that they urged, or ordered, the generals to postpone the departure, Nicias said that he wouldn't even consider deliberating about how to depart until the "thrice nine days" prescribed by the soothsayers had passed. "For he was somewhat excessively attached," observes Thucydides, "to divination and the like" (VII 50.4). Nicias may well have believed that the fleet's best hopes for safety, and not merely his own, required them to remain at Syracuse for the prescribed period; but it is hard to excuse a general for giving in to such superstitious fears and hopes. Because of this foolish delay, the Athenian army lost its final opportunity to return home safely. After a final naval defeat, in their desperate attempt to break out of the Syracusan harbor, the Athenians were so overwhelmed by the greatness of their present evils that it didn't even occur to them, not even to the pious Nicias, to ask for the return of the corpses of their dead comrades[58]. Tearfully, and with much self-reproach, the fleeing Athenians also abandoned their wounded comrades, but the army was nevertheless unable to save itself. In the light of this narrative, we are prepared to notice that when Thucydides says of Nicias that his misfortune was so undeserved, he says that this was because of his devotion to "virtue as established by custom," that is to say, conventional virtue, as distinct from virtue simply. Though Nicias' devotion to conventional virtue helped make him a highly decent man,

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[58]VII 72.2; cf. VII 75.3, and contrast IV 44.5-6

and one whom the Athenians could trust, in most ordinary circumstances, both he and also virtue, as he understood it, were unequal to the extreme test of the Sicilian campaign. Nicias was fully devoted to conventional virtue; at all events, he never willingly did any harm to his fatherland. Yet conventional virtue is an unreliable thing, for it is dependent upon, and in part guided by, hopes that have no other support than the belief in conventional virtue itself. Nicias' devotion to conventional virtue was at the root of his trustful hope that he, or at least his good name, could have the security that this same devotion led him to think he deserved.59 And yet this blind hope for personal security was largely responsible, we know, for his own death and his city's disaster.

The Sicilian campaign was a grave mistake. Athens' prospects for success, or even for the army's safe return, were dependent on its power to reconcile private and public interest, and yet the expedition stretched the city too far beyond the limits of this power. Admittedly, the Athenians might have succeeded in Sicily if they had had better luck -- for instance, if there had been no mutilation of the Hermes statues. But the attempt was nevertheless immoderate and unwise. And more importantly, the tremendous costs of the expedition, along with the disharmony within the city that it brought so clearly to light, may help us toward a more sober view of Athenian imperialism altogether. For had we not ourselves been deceived by the charm that deceived the Athenians, we might already have seen that their imperialism

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59cf. V 16.1

was flawed from the beginning by a fundamental lack of wisdom. The Athenians, and the best among their leaders, devoted themselves to building a great and noble empire. ~~They defended this empire~~ Accordingly, they felt obliged — defen
against ~~the all but inevitable~~ these accusations and they did by arguing that they their
like all men, were compelled by nature to ~~be selfish, or to~~ put their own good before all other considerations. On the other hand, since ~~Since~~ they thought of their empire, and of themselves, ~~however,~~ as being noble, they did accept some ~~accepted certain~~ risks and hardships, in connection with their rule, that would seem to be at odds with their own self-interest. Now it must have troubled them to do this, for in view of their own argument for empire, these additional risks and hardships would appear to have been senseless sacrifices. But the Athenians apparently regarded these risks and hardships less as sacrifices than as a price worth paying, on the grounds that all of their sufferings in connection with the pursuit of empire would be more than compensated by the reward of everlasting glory. ~~But~~ Yet ~~here, however,~~ in this thought they were mistaken. For what they "experienced" with regard to glory, or with regard to the prospect of it in the future, was colored by their belief that glory was not merely a good, but also something noble, that is to say, an acknowledgment of their superiority to mere ~~selfishness.~~ self-interest and of their willingness, on occasion, to sacrifice. In other words, they had not squarely faced their own argument in defense of empire, for this argument leaves no room for superiority to ~~selfishness,~~ self-interest or for anything more important than one's own good. And had they ~~understood~~ truly accepted this argument, ~~more thoroughly,~~ they would not have been moved, or not in the same way, by the prospect of glory, and they would hardly have felt that their sufferings in its pursuit would

Since, however, they thought of themselves as noble, they could not help feeling the weight of the accusations against them for presuming to rule over others against their will.

be so sufficiently and lastingly repaid. Long before the disaster in Sicily, then, the Athenians and their best leaders were already led astray by their failure to understand themselves and the object of their wish.

The Athenian argument, rightly understood, teaches that there can be no nobility that would be superior to self-interest. One might therefore be tempted to draw the disturbing conclusion that the wisest of all Athenians in Thucydides' account were the ambassadors at Melos, whose vindication of the rule of the stronger was least colored by any continuing or explicit concern for nobility. Yet this conclusion would be false, and not merely because the ambassadors' brutal attempt to destroy the innocence of the Melians made them if anything more determined not to submit to Athenian rule. For there is one Athenian speaker who shows a considerably deeper understanding of the Athenian argument. This Athenian is Diodotus, a remarkable man of whom we know nothing from other sources, and who appears only once in Thucydides' narrative. Although he seems not to have been a political man, his single intervention in Athens' political life was highly skillful. He succeeded in helping Athens to maintain its empire, and to maintain it by means of relatively humane treatment of a subject ally. Moreover, his speech is characterized by a gentleness, and even serenity, that are unparalleled within Thucydides' work and that seem to mirror these qualities in Thucydides himself.

Diodotus spoke at the assembly, to which we have already referred, where the Athenians were reconsidering their decree to kill all the men of Mytilene, and he urged them to rescind

that decree. His task was a difficult one, even though the assembly had been convened in response to a change of heart among the people, since Cleon, who at that time had by far the most influence over them, had spoken before him and had opposed any change. Cleon had argued strongly that justice and Athenian interest alike required the severest punishment of the rebellious Mytileneans. But of more immediate concern to Diodotus, Cleon had attacked the Athenians' habit of often reconsidering their own decisions. He had attributed this habit not at all to concern for the public good, but mostly to the speakers' wish to appear wiser than the laws and to display their intelligence in regard to public affairs, since these are held to be the greatest of matters. Anyone, said Cleon, who would speak against the previous day's decree must be moved to do so by his vanity as an orator, or perhaps also by bribes.[60] In the face of these attacks, Diodotus begins, as he must, by defending the propriety of frequent deliberation about the city's affairs, which he too calls "the greatest things". And he warns especially that the city is harmed when speakers accuse one another of being corrupted by money, since fear then deprives it of counsellors. A city would do best, he says, if the kind of citizens who made such accusations were not permitted to speak. And in "the moderate city," he continues, an unsuccessful speaker would never even be dishonored, let alone accused of injustice and punished. In such a moderate city, apparently, all those who addressed the assembly would be so wholly free of private ambition that they would not feel

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[60] III 38.2-3; 37.3-4

dishonored by a failure to persuade. Yet Diodutus is well aware that the Athenian democracy, like any actual city, is necessarily suspicious of its speakers' private motives, and that the city's interest sometimes even requires this vigilance. Since he understands these facts of political life, he disregards his utopian standard of "the moderate city" and tries to dishonor Cleon, whom he accuses of either being stupid or else speaking from some private motive of his own. Yet Athenian suspiciousness is such, especially in the wake of Cleon's accusations, that Diodotus must go still much further in order to gain a hearing for his argument. For the Athenians, he says boldly, are so envious that they would reject what is manifestly the best advice for the city if they suspected a speaker of giving this good advice for the sake of gain. A speaker, therefore, who wants to lead the city for its good must first overcome its suspicions of him, and this task is apparently impossible by straightforward means alone. For Diodotus concludes that even a speaker who wants to say what is better must lie to the multitude in order to be trusted, and that it is impossible to benefit the city -- and the city alone -- without deceiving it.[61] With remarkable frankness, Diodotus tells the Athenians that he will deceive them. And this admission leaves us with the following questions. Why is it impossible to earn the city's trust without lying to it? And how, precisely, does Diodotus lie?

Diodotus' lie would appear to be his claim that he will not even consider the question of justice, i.e. whether the

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[61] III 42-43

Mytileneans were unjust, but only that of whether it is in Athens' interest to kill them all. It is true that the bulk of his argument against these killings is a hard-headed analysis in terms of Athenian self-interest, but yet one feels that he is not so simply heartless as he pretends. Moreover, he does not, as we shall see, wholly disregard considerations of justice. Diodotus begins by claiming that even the most severe punishments cannot deter all rebellions, and that Athens should therefore be prepared to try to end any rebellion that does occur with as little cost as possible. Athens can do this, he says, by exploiting the division of classes among the rebels and by giving the multitude the prospect of leniency for themselves if they should willingly hand over the city, as the multitude within Mytilene had done, more or less, once they had received heavy arms. But then, surprisingly, Diodotus adds that it would now be unjust to kill the multitude, as distinct from the oligarchs, at Mytilene, since they had been the Athenians' benefactors.[62] So in spite of his original claim, Diodotus does argue explicitly in terms of justice. Moreover, there is much in his speech that has subtly been leading up to this argument from justice. For in order to show that it is impossible to deter rebellions, Diodotus says that all men by nature, both privately and publicly, commit transgressions, and that no law or threat of punishment will restrain them from this. In other words, we are all compelled, by our natural passions together with our hopes, to try to acquire the objects of our strongest desires.[63] And since we are compelled

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[62]Compare III 47.3 (and 46.5-6) with III 44
[63]III 45

to do this, however foolish our hopes for success may be, our mistakes or transgressions are involuntary; and even Cleon had admitted that involuntary crimes deserve pardon. Now Diodotus, for good reasons, does not explicitly draw the conclusion that all criminals deserve pardon: among other things, he does not oppose putting the alleged ringleaders of the rebellion on trial. But by speaking of the compulsoriness of transgression, he puts the Athenians in a forgiving mood, and he reawakens and even deepens the mild temper with which they had begun the day's assembly. In this way he makes them receptive to his contention that to kill the multitude of the Mytileneans would be unjust.

If Diodotus' deception, however, is his pretence to disregard justice, the question arises of why he didn't say, more straightforwardly, that justice (or humanity) and the Athenians' self-interest alike require that they not kill the multitude of the Mytileneans. But the fact is that it would have been ill-advised of him to say this. Especially because Cleon's speech had put the Athenians in an angry mood, an open argument against the justice of these killings would have pained them, and it would have made them suspect some weakness in his argument from interest. And more importantly, they would have suspected him of knowingly betraying the city's interests, under the pretext of justice or humanity, but in fact, as Cleon had charged, because of some private interest of his own. Since the city is so excessively distrustful of those citizens who address it, Diodotus must try to win its trust, and he does this by appearing to be wholly unconcerned with justice, at least to the extent that it is a distinct notion from the city's interest. In accordance with

this, he also says several times that the city's concerns, and in particular its freedom and its rule over others, are "the greatest things".64 By appearing to regard the city's interests, or its freedom and its empire, as immeasurably more important than justice, and indeed as the most important of all concerns, Diodotus succeeds in making himself trusted. And this success is dependent, of course, upon lying and deception.

But Diodotus' deceptiveness extends still further than we have yet acknowledged, for he has deceived us into thinking that his hidden concern is primarily the concern for justice. To see that this is so, we must look again at his statement of what we have been calling the Athenian argument for empire. Diodotus had said that all men, both privately and publicly, are of such a nature as to transgress, and that no law will ever restrain them from this. But since Diodotus knows this fact about our nature, law or justice cannot be his chief concern, not even in those circumstances ~~where justice is possible~~ (keeping agreements regarding justice is useful). He points, however, to what is his chief concern by explicitly applying the Athenian argument to men in private, or to individuals, something that no other speaker in Thucydides ever does. In other words, he is the only speaker who clearly indicates that the primacy of the good is in fact the primacy of the individual's good, as distinct from that of the city. Just as there is nothing greater, i.e. more important, than the good, there is nothing more important to the individual than what is good, or bad, for himself. The Athenians' suspicions, then, that their speakers

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64III 42.1; 43.4; 45.6; cf. III 37.4 and 40.3

are moved chiefly by private self-interest turn out to be well grounded ones, at least in the case of Diodotus. Now it is true that Diodotus' private interest as an Athenian, and even his educated humanity, both prompt him to try to be useful to Athens by persuading it to rescind a harsh and ill-advised decree. But the Athenians would not have honored him with their approval if they had understood his motives. Whether from their fear of tyranny or else, as Diodotus himself has suggested, simply from envy of another's greater good, the Athenians would not have accepted his useful advice unless he had convinced them that their city's concerns were, for him, "the greatest things". And since he doesn't believe that they are the greatest things, he is compelled to lie.

Though Diodotus indicates clearly that the ultimate good is the good of the individual, as distinct from that of the city, he says little more about its character. Given his critique, however, of the city's claim that its concerns are "the greatest things", it does not seem possible that he could have been satisfied with the rewards from political life alone. Indeed, the very fact that we know so little about this politically gifted man might suggest ~~suggests~~ that he did not regard rule over others, or its fruits, as the ultimate good of the individual. But apart from his statement about the necessity for deliberation before action, he conceals his positive thoughts about that good. In this respect, as in others, Diodotus is akin to Thucydides himself, for Thucydides also, as we have noted, is silent about the question of the best way of life. Or is he? Doesn't Thucydides' whole work, rather, direct us toward his own way of life -- above

all, his "quest for the truth" and his writing "a possession for all time"[65] -- as the best life for man? The only mention of philosophy in Thucydides' work is in Pericles' Funeral Oration. Pericles praises the Athenians for philosophizing "without softnesss", by which he apparently means, without retreating from political life. And he also speaks emphatically of the superior dignity of the active or political life to the life of leisure.[66] But Pericles fails to understand that the Athenians' "philosophizing" goes together with a kind of softness of its own. For men, or at least the most capable men, are compelled by the very seriousness of their moral and political concerns to question the truth of their most cherished convictions, and ultimately to turn toward philosophy as their supreme good. It was Thucydides who had the strength of mind to accept this compulsion and to think it through until he understood it clearly. And from this understanding he gained still further strength. For only from the perspective that he thus attained could he continue to look at political life, including its great horrors as well as its beauties, with such calm clarity, while also acting upon it, through his writing, with such balance and humanity.

I am especially indebted to two papers by Christopher Bruell: "Thucydides' View of Athenian Imperialism," American Political Science Review 68,1 (March, 1974), 11-17; and "Thucydides and Perikles," St. John's Review 32,3 (Summer, 1981), 24-29.

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[65] I 20.3; 22.4
[66] II 40.1; 40.2; 63.2-3; 64.4-5; and cf. II 41.4