

The End of a Civilization: What Moderns Might Learn from Thucydides' Peloponnesian War

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ABSTRACT

Thucydides self-consciously presents the Peloponnesian War as the greatest war the world had ever seen to that point in history, insofar as it was a contest between the two greatest Greek powers—Athens and Sparta—at the peak of Greek Civilization. The war, however, would mark the beginning of the end of this great civilization. Although Thucydides does not unequivocally blame Athens for the war that ultimately leads to the destruction of Greece, it is clear that he thinks Athenian devotion to motion, or to the perpetual pursuit of progress, spurred it on. Thucydides appears to lament the great expansion of education, in particular the sophistic education that became prevalent in Greece and contributed heavily to the theoretical justification behind the Athenian Empire. Even or especially education at its highest—Socratic philosophy—seems to bear some culpability for, or is at least symptomatic of, Athens' decline, and ultimately Greece's decline as well, in Thucydides' view. This paper will examine Thucydides' teaching regarding the decline of civilization to see if it can offer any guidance to the current crisis of civilization in the West.

Keywords: Thucydides, Pericles, Diodotus, Alcibiades, Civilization, Athens, Empire, Sophistry, Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The modern project has long held that peace and progress in the arts and sciences go hand in hand, that there is a kind of natural harmony between progress in the sciences and arts, on the one hand, and politics, on the other. Peace and progress arise concomitantly, each mutually reinforcing the other in a sort of virtuous circle. Indeed, from its inception, modern political rationalism has promised peace to those who would follow the precepts of its science. As Hobbes says, if political scientists had discharged their duty as well as geometers have, “mankind should enjoy such an immortal peace” but for scarcity (Hobbes, *Epistle Dedicatory*). As the famous critic of modernity, Carl Schmitt, says of the modern project, “Technology appeared to be a domain of peace, understanding, and reconciliation” (Schmitt 91). Modernity was going to pave the way for peace, not just through progress in the sciences and arts, but also through republicanism (or liberalism) and increased secularism. Perhaps the most famous proponent for the possibility of peace is Immanuel Kant, who elaborated how it could be achieved in his tract *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*.

Moreover, progress in the arts and sciences was supposed to render man less afraid of powers invisible, less credulous regarding religion. As man's situation became safer and more prosperous, his need for religion would gradually fade away. Hear Montesquieu on the matter:

“Therefore, one does not succeed in detaching the soul from religion by filling it with this great object, by bringing it closer to the moment when it should find religion of greater importance; a more certain way to attack religion is by favor, by the comforts of life, by the hope of fortune, not by what reminds one of it, but by what makes one forget it; not by what makes one indignant, but by what leads one to indifference when other passions act on our souls and when those that religion inspires are silent. General rule: in the matter of changing religion, invitations are stronger than penalties” (Montesquieu, Bk. 25, Ch. 12).

As a result of his newfound secularism, modern man was thought to be rendered more pacific, especially since religion had been the cause of so many conflicts throughout Europe in the centuries prior to modernity. With the goal of minimizing conflict, modern thinkers sought to decrease the public role of piety. Republicanism, progress in the sciences and arts, and a depreciation of the role of religion were going to usher in a new golden age.

But such was not to be the case. Modernity did not culminate in a new age of perpetual peace. In fact, the 20th century was likely the bloodiest in history, and much of the crisis of modernity can be traced to a sudden and violent rejection of faith in the power of modern rationalism to bring about a peaceful and just world political order. Indeed, World War II has been taken as evidence that enlightenment rationalism, modern rationalism had self-destructed. Instead of achieving a new civilized era for humanity, modernity plunged us into a new kind of barbarism (Horkheimer and Adorno xi).

It appears as though modern rationalism has failed to understand adequately the relationship between progress in the arts and sciences and civilizational flourishing. Accordingly, one might be inclined to reject rationalism out of hand, as have many contemporary political theorists. Perhaps, however, there is an alternative to modern rationalism that can help us to understand more clearly the relationship between progress in politics, science, and the arts, on the one hand, and the prospects of civilizational decline, on the other. There are other, earlier forms of rationalism, forms that holds out more modest hopes for what reason can hope to achieve in the world, forms that recognize the fragile status of justice among nations.

Thucydides’ *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* offers such an alternative understanding of politics, one that still seeks to understand politics rationally. Given the crisis of modernity, or the crisis of modern political thought, one is justified in turning to alternative forms of rationalism in an attempt to understand politics. After all, if modern rationalism rested on a rejection of earlier forms of thought, and now modern rationalism is itself called into question, earlier forms of thought reemerge as serious candidates for understanding the world around us. Thucydides considered his book, moreover, to be a possession for all time (Thucydides, I.22.4; hereafter, all unmodified numbers refer to Thucydides’ work). Thucydides thought that his book contained knowledge, or even wisdom, and that he had much to teach future generations, including ours, about politics, the nature of war, the role of chance or fortune in human affairs, and, of course, human nature. Perhaps there is much we could stand to learn from Thucydides. Thucydides self-consciously presents the Peloponnesian War as the greatest war the world had ever seen to that point in history, insofar as it was a contest between the two greatest Greek powers—Athens and Sparta—at the peak of Greek Civilization, the greatest civilization the world had seen to that point. The war, however, would mark the beginning of the end of this great civilization. If Greece was at the peak of its power, a descent must of necessity follow. Precisely because he recounts the greatest war that ever occurred among the Greeks, Thucydides shows us the downfall of a civilization.

Thucydides challenges, moreover, the modern view regarding civilizational progress and war. Rather than showing civilizational decline as a radical departure from the virtues and habits that led to civilization in the first place, Thucydides prods his reader to consider whether progress in the arts and sciences coupled with the increased political power that results from such progress—in a word, civilization—fashion the very tools that will destroy civilization. The end of civilization is not decadence or decline or a departure from the principles that allowed for the growth of civilization in the first place; rather, the decline is the culmination or inevitable conclusion of the self-same sources that allowed for civilizational progress in the first place.

THE GREATEST “MOTION”

The Peloponnesian War was the “greatest motion” ever known—among the Greeks and among the barbarians, and my well be the greatest motion ever in the history of mankind to that point (1.1). This is because the Greeks were at the height of their power and prosperity. Such was not always the case. Originally, the Greeks were a primitive

people who wandered around, and there were no real cities to speak of. Athens, in particular, occupied relatively infertile land and was accordingly more or less left alone. Indeed, Thucydides says that primitive Greeks were not even Greeks—the term Hellenes was not yet applied to them until well after the Trojan War (1.3.3). Because the Greeks were so weak and primitive, their wars were also not very great. This is particularly the case, Thucydides argues, with respect to the Trojan War (1.11). After the Trojan War there was a series of upheavals in Greece, but finally Greece returned to peace, quiet and tranquility (1.12). During this time of peace and tranquility, Greece grew in power and wealth. Corinth especially grew in wealth and power as it developed commerce and trade; most importantly was the growth of the Corinthian navy. The navy served the purpose largely of promoting trade, which included protecting merchants and cities from pirates. The Greeks increasingly engaged in commerce and navigation; the result was growth and the acquisition of wealth throughout Greece (1.13.1). One cannot underestimate the role that such power and wealth eventually played in making the war greater; progress in the sciences and arts rendered the Greeks more capable of waging war on a grander scale—it made large-scale killing and destruction easier.

At this point of relative prosperity, Thucydides recounts the events of the Persian Wars. Twice the Greeks were able to repel the Persian invasion, and the result was even greater power among the Greeks, although after the second failed invasion power was concentrated, above all, in two principal cities: Athens and Sparta. The war served the purpose of showing the Greeks their relative strength and establishing two poles of power within Greece. But it also showed the cities in Greece the need to prepare militarily in case the Persians ever tried to invade again. Indeed, one could say with a measure of justice that the impetus for the growth of Greek military power arose out of fear of the threat posed by Persia. This is perhaps also the origin of the Athenian desire for empire (1.73).

All of these factors that led to the growth of Greek civilization contributed also to its downfall. In what follows, I will focus above all on Athens and the role it played in bringing about the downfall of Greece. While the wealth and power no doubt fashioned formidable tools of destruction, I will focus instead on the intellectual changes that made such a great war possible, and I will focus above all on such changes in Athens. In the first place, the limits of the paper compel me to narrow its scope, but there is also an argument for why one should focus on Athens. Athens, much more than Sparta, seems to have been the cause of the war (1.23.5). Athens' rise, Thucydides reports, was particularly problematic; it was the city most devoted to “motion” and its motion inspired fear in other Greek cities, principal among which was Sparta. Sparta, however, was devoted to rest and, to some degree, to moderation; it seems to have been pulled reluctantly into war and would have preferred rest. Not many cities are capable of faring well through prosperity. Indeed, Thucydides admits that the Spartans and the Chians are the only people he knew of who knew how to be moderate while flourishing—the general rule for those who are flourishing is immoderation—perpetual movement (8.24.4). Since immoderation is the general rule, and since the immoderation of Athens is a cause of the war, we are permitted to focus on Athens. Athens is the more typical case. We are not focusing on Athens because it was the more splendid or glorious city; we are focusing on Athens because of its immoderation, but the two are connected: “Thucydides cannot have been blind to the glory which was Athens, a glory which is inseparable from the spirit of daring innovation and from that madness, that mania, which rises far above moderation” (Strauss, 1989).

THE DARING INNOVATION OF ATHENS

Athens was characterized by boldness, daring, and innovation; the Athenians are quick to act and adventurous. Even or precisely its enemies recognized these traits in Athens (1.70.2). One could perhaps point to a singular event as the source of Athenian daring innovation. To return to the Persian Wars, in the face of the Persian threat, Athens undertook a bold, innovative measure, and its decision to do so ensured its very survival. At the direction of Themistocles, the Athenians came to hold that the best chance they had of survival, the best chance they had to repel the barbarian invasion, was to abandon their city and break up their homes and use the material to fashion a navy. This innovative measure proved to be the key to their success. “The Athenian character—in particular its daring side—was formed, or at any rate came into its own, only at the time of the Persian Wars” (Orwin, 1986). To repeat, this daring act was also impious, and revealed to other Greek cities that Athens would transgress ordinary boundaries of propriety. Accordingly, other Greek cities grew to fear Athens (1.90.1). While we moderns may marvel at the ingenuity of this design, and surely it is something at which to marvel, one cannot but help to think about the lessons Athens drew from it. In the first place, war, that violent teacher, taught Athens the value of innovation. But one must also recognize the other side of this daring undertaking. For in abandoning the city, the Athenians abandoned temples, shrines, sacred spaces, and the graves of their ancestors. To put it as plainly as possible, abandoning the city was an act of gross impiety, and “it would be a real question within the conventions of Greek piety whether

a city could have any being at all under such circumstances” (Forde, 1986). Importantly, this act of impiety did not meet with divine retribution. In fact, to the contrary, it seems that abandoning the city was instrumental if not decisive in securing the city’s well being. The lesson that the Athenians, or at least some Athenians, drew from this particular instance was that the gods do not punish the wicked and reward the just and pious, though the Athenians refrain, initially, from making this conclusion explicit. The gods are not providential, and believing this compels one to call into question the traditional teaching regarding the gods, the teachings of the poets. This initial act of impiety thus gave way to a period, the Athens of Pericles’ time, of even more widespread heterodoxy, agnosticism, and even outright atheism. “Thucydides belongs in a sense to Periclean Athens—to the Athens in which Anaxagoras and Protagoras taught and were persecuted on the ground of impiety” (Strauss, 1964). This is not to say that everyone throughout Athens was impious, quite the contrary. As the very idea of these thinkers being persecuted shows, there was still a strong pious sentiment among many Athenians. Nevertheless, “At the peak of the biggest rest, which partly extends into the biggest unrest, there is power, wealth, the arts, refinement, order, daring, and even the over-coming of poetic magnification by the sober quest for truth” (Strauss, 1989).

Thucydides seems to go to lengths to show that the spirit of sophistry and the spirit of philosophy that permeated Athens insinuated themselves into the foreign policy decisions of the Athenian elites. Moreover, he reveals that these precarious sources of thinking about world politics often had pernicious effects. The novel and innovative character of thinking led to novel and innovative policies that sometimes succeeded but were often immoderate and unrestrained from conventional limits. While such flexibility can in fact be useful from time to time, and while perhaps the *best* foreign policy decisions are informed by philosophy, there is a grave danger in sophisticated opinions that fall short of philosophy guiding foreign affairs. Using the examples of Pericles, Alcibiades, and Diodotus—three men in Thucydides’ work who clearly received something like a philosophic education—I will show that Thucydides harbors deep suspicions regarding the sophisticated education prevalent in the Athens of his time. The daring innovation of Athens is simultaneously the source of the glory of Athens and a cause of its ruin.

The Case of Pericles

Thucydides reports three speeches from Pericles, but by far the most revealing for our purposes is his funeral oration. Pericles’ famous funeral oration arguably captures better than any other speech the spirit of Athens, revealing the connection between Athens’ greatness and its own inevitable demise. While it might seem strange to turn to a eulogy to lay bare Pericles’ understanding of Athens, very little of Pericles’ funeral oration is in fact a eulogy proper: only one of the twelve chapters (2.42) is devoted to praising the dead. The central, and by far longest, part of the eulogy is in fact a praise of the Athenian regime (*politeia*, 2.37-41). Leading up to this praise of the Athenian regime, Pericles suggests that Athens is now at the height of its greatness. The previous generations, especially the Marathon generation, were impressive, but Pericles implies that the current ones who have added to the empire are no less impressive (2.36.3).

These impressive men contributed to the development of a regime that has become a pattern for others. The beauty or nobility of Athens is “inseparable from the regime and the way of life” (Orwin, 1994). As Pericles makes clear, Athens’ daring character, so central to its way of life, made its empire possible (2.43.1). The Athenian regime, instilling a daring spirit in its citizens, paved the road by which the city reached its empire (2.36.4). Indeed, the Athenian empire seems to be the natural consequence of the Athenian regime. This regime is devoted to freedom, and equal justice for all. It subscribes to unwritten laws, and has plenty of leisure activities. Athens is engaged in commerce and enjoys products from all over the known world into its harbors as a result. Athenians alone are educated to live as they please, unlike especially their rivals the Spartans. Freedom here again seems to be central: the Athenians alone are free to live as they please. The regime is permissive and freedom to live as one pleases entails a kind of liberation from ordinary or conventional restraints. As individuals, Athenians could pursue whatever they pleased, and the variety of tastes and pursuits contributed to the myriad beautiful things to be enjoyed in Athens. This private freedom, however, manifests itself publicly as well: Pericles views the Athenian decision to hold an empire as an undertaking freely chosen (2.40.4-5, Cf. 3.45.6). Pursuing empire seems to be the only way for Athens to express its freedom on a world level. Athens alone is not bound by the yoke of necessity like other cities; it can transgress the ordinary boundaries of propriety in regards to foreign affairs.

But there is a problem: Athens needs its citizens to support the empire, in many ways but most decisively with their lives if need be. Freedom to live as one pleases, however, means traditional restraints no longer bind. Morality, at least as it is conventionally or traditionally understood, no longer holds, and appeals to moral grounds will fall on the deaf ears of those who are inclined, thanks to the blessings of liberty, to live as they please. This is why Pericles

does not appeal to a sense of duty when he urges his fellow citizens to admire and imitate the fallen and to defend the city and its empire. While Pericles exhorts his audience to put their lives in the service of Athens, he can no longer do so by reference to a conception of morality that is bound up with self-sacrifice, for the permissiveness of living as one pleases has taken its toll on appeals to duty and sacrifice. “Tradition,” Clifford Orwin says in this context, “had exhorted men to risk their loves for parents, wives, children, and ancestral gods” (Orwin, 1994). Since the Athenians are now free to live as they please, it is difficult if not impossible to make painful or even potentially life threatening demands of them. Their devotion to Athens must get them something; it must pay, so to speak. Accordingly, Pericles appeals to glory as the motivating factor for Athenians to support the empire, no longer being able to appeal to a sense of duty or justice that would weigh heavy on the conscience. The Athenians are now free to live as they please, thanks to their regime, and choosing to pursue glory would a noble pursuit that citizens could freely choose. But it is not clear, indeed it is highly doubtful, that love of glory can be safely relied upon for defense of the city; appeals to duty or morality would seem to resonate more with those whose education has focused on doing what one ought to do. But, to repeat, such appeals are no longer persuasive to an Athenian audience thanks to the liberal, daring character of the way of life that the Athenian regime instills in its citizens. The spirit which leads to the founding or origin of Athenian Empire thus devours itself—freedom from traditional pursuits encourages Athens to pursue the perilous task of running empire but cannot adequately motivate its citizens to take up arms on its behalf.

Sophistic and philosophic education were increasingly in the air, further undercutting, and in many cases providing a theoretical justification for, abandoning traditional conceptions of justice and piety. Philosophy, too, is a kind of liberal or free endeavor. Its existence relies on a kind of freedom or permissiveness and its goal is further liberation, insofar as it aims to liberate one from conventional opinions, especially conventional opinions about justice, the law, piety, and the gods. It is therefore unsurprising that a funeral oration that praises philosophy is almost completely silent about the gods. Pericles clearly links the pursuit of glory liberated from traditional constraints with the prevailing educational currents. He proclaims of the Athenians: “We love the beautiful (*philokaloumen*) without extravagance and we love wisdom (or, we philosophize “*philosophoumen*”) without softness.” As Clifford Orwin notes, Pericles means by philosophizing without softness deliberating combined with daring (2.40.3; Orwin 1994). Pericles thus traces the cause of Athenian imperialism to their love of beauty combined with their love of wisdom (or literally, philosophy). Let us not forget, after all, that the philosopher Anaxagoras was Pericles’ teacher, and, according to Plutarch, Anaxagoras more than anyone else was responsible for Pericles’ majesty and the worthiness of his moral character (See Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 4.4). So this chief architect or most enthusiastic proponent of the Athenian Empire was philosophically educated. The rise of sophistry and philosophy in Athens provided its outstanding youths with first-rate educations, educations that severed them from traditional thinking and allowed them to pursue novel, bold policies. The Athenian Empire itself was the boldest policy, and, in another speech, Pericles is willing to admit how bold it is: “Besides, to recede is no longer possible, if indeed any of in in the alarm of the moment has become enamored of the honesty of such an unambitious part. For what you hold is, to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny; to take perhaps was unjust, but to let it go is unsafe” (2.63.3 with minor changes to the translation).

Pericles is often cited as an excellent example of a statesman who put his philosophic education to good use in service of Athens; he recognized, however, the tyrannical character of empire and nevertheless supported it. He clearly possessed excellent rhetorical skills, and the funeral oration is a prime example of rhetorical acuity. And Athens’ empire flourished with Pericles at the helm. Once he was gone, however, his successors misguided foreign affairs and too often conducted affairs according to the whims of the multitude, producing a host of blunders. While Pericles put his philosophic education to use successfully guiding the empire, he was an extraordinary man. Thucydides, by emphasizing Pericles’ unique and impressive character (2.65), leads one to question the desirability of the widespread diffusion of a liberal, philosophic education. The daring or innovative character, however, allowed these types of education to flourish, and sophists from all over Greece came to Athens.

Pericles was liberated him from concern with the ancestral gods as well as with the traditional concern with justice; this liberty allowed or enabled Pericles to put support for the empire on a new, non-traditional ground. Citizens are now to be devoted to the common good because they stand to gain something. But perhaps, “[Pericles] did not realize that the unjust understanding of the common good is bound to undermine dedication to the common good however understood. He had not given sufficient thought to the precarious character of the harmony between private interest and public interest; he had taken that harmony too much for granted” (Strauss, 1964). Strauss continues, “It is in the long run impossible to encourage the city’s desire for ‘having more’ at the expense of other cities without encouraging the desire of the individual for ‘having more’ at the expense of his fellow citizens” (Strauss, 1964). Post-

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Periclean Athens lacked proper devotion to the common good—Athens became increasingly unjust, if we can call devotion to the common good justice—and we can see Pericles’ contribution to that problem.

The Melian Dialogue

Although many Athenian speeches reflect a position that is liberated from ordinary constraints of morality, none is more famous or infamous than the so-called Melian Dialogue. This dialogue arguably contains the clearest expression of Athenian foreign policy as it came to be divorced from questions of morality—or to speak more clearly, justice. The Melian dialogue, above all, exemplifies the novel, daring character of Athenian foreign policy. And it also, above all, reveals itself to be the product of a kind of philosophic education. This dialogue contains the bold, sophistic assertion that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (5.89), so reminiscent of the rhetoricians and sophists from the Platonic dialogues like Thrasymachus, Protagoras, and Callicles.

Directly before recounting the Melian dialogue, Thucydides mentions that the Athenian general Alcibiades happens to have been sailing around the islands of the Athenian empire (5.84). Alcibiades is thus fresh in the reader’s mind as Thucydides turns to recount the conversation between the Athenian envoys and Melian representatives. Although one could by no means with certainty show it to be the case, the implication seems to be that Alcibiades, or at the very least someone very much like him, speaks for Athens in Melos. At the very least, one could say that Alcibiades “might have said what the Athenians on Melos say... while Pericles might never have said what the Athenians said on Melos” (Strauss, 1964).

The Melian dialogue stands apart from the other speeches in Thucydides’ work; all of the other speeches are rhetorical speeches: there are exhortatory speeches, warning speeches, display speeches, and apologies or defense speeches. The Melian dialogue stands alone as a dialogue, i.e., not a rhetorical speech at all in the precise sense, but rather a conversation. The unique character of this speech draws attention to its special character. It is, as it is commonly referred to, a dialogue, the form of speech preferred by Socrates. Thucydides has just mentioned that Alcibiades, widely known to be a student of Socrates, was in the area, so to speak. And while Plato presents Alcibiades as a rather poor student of Socrates, Xenophon shows that Alcibiades in fact picked up a great deal of Socrates’ manner (See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.20-46).

The dialogue in Melos takes place under the following circumstances. Athens sailed to Melos, a small Spartan colony that had striven to remain neutral in the war, and asked the Melians to submit to their rule. The Athenians sent ambassadors to Melos to conduct negotiations, and the Melian few have urged that they meet privately, i.e., not in front of the people (5.84.3). Upon immediately meeting, the Athenians propose that the negotiations be conducted dialectically, criticizing long rhetorical speeches as seductive and deceitful (5.85). “The Athenian ambassadors talk as if they had been listening to Socrates’ censure of Protagoras or Gorgias” (Strauss, 1964). Conversation is safer and more conducive to teaching (5.86, 5.98) than rhetoric, and the Athenians set out to educate the Melians regarding their true interest. Regarding safety, the Athenians seem to presume that the Melian few are elites like themselves, free of the wrongheaded religious and moral concerns of the many. They think that they can focus solely on self-interest, relieved of the compulsion of making beautiful speeches about justice: they can get down to brass tacks, so to speak. The Athenians set out to show the Melians that it is in their interest to surrender; the only alternative is annihilation. One should note from the outset how coolly the Athenians begin: they urge surrender strictly from the vantage point of cold calculating interest.

The Melians, however, appeal immediately to equity or common decency (*epeikeia*), an oblique reference to justice; this is an early indication that the Athenian ambassadors’ assumption that the Melian few share their view of the world may have been wrong. But the Athenians will have none of this discussion of decency. They recognize in the Melian appeal to decency a latent appeal to justice. If the Melians are here to talk about anything other than their own safety, they assert, they can simply stop talking. They go on to say that they will not trouble the Melians by speaking beautifully about how they rule their empire with justice, for they know that justice is only in question among equals, as far as the world goes, “while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (5.89). The Athenians in Melos boldly and coolly dismiss any pretense of justice; they have been loosed from these conventional demands and limits on proper behavior.

The Melians, compelled to dismiss claims of justice, now make an appeal to self-interest—though their argument is that it would be in Athens’ self-interest to pay attention to justice! They argue that one day the Athenian Empire will fall, and when it does, as it inevitably will, the Athenians would be well served if they could point to the fact that they observed justice when they ruled (5.90). In response, the Athenians say that they are not worried about be-

ing conquered by another rival empire, for any other empire would recognize the law, so to speak, that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. Any future conqueror, therefore, would be free of the indignation that arises as a result of the belief in justice and would lack the motivation, then, to treat Athens in an overly harsh manner. The Athenians return to the task at hand, advising the Melians that it is in their interest to submit; they point out that the Melians will suffer the worst possible fate if they do not submit, revealing at the very least the Athenians' suspicion that there is no afterlife in which mortals would be rewarded or punished. This is our first indication, as it were, of the connection between the Athenians' immorality and their disbelief in the traditional ancestral gods.

It is these very gods to whom the Melians appeal. The Melians refuse to submit, and they give two reasons to hope that they will not suffer the fate that Athens has said in no uncertain terms they will suffer: the Spartans and the gods will come to their aid. These two factors, with a little luck, give the Melians reason to hope for a favorable outcome (5.102).

In response to these suggestions, the Athenian ambassadors make very bold speeches about the gods, speeches that betray beliefs that may have always been present, for example in Pericles' characterization of the Athenian regime and in his general silence regarding the divine in his funeral oration, but have never been articulated clearly and openly to one's enemies as it is now. The Athenians assert here, boldly, that the gods do not come to the aid of human beings; there are not providential gods. Not only do the gods not come to the aid of the just and not punish the unjust, it would be nonsensical for them to do so.

Human beings are compelled to behave as they do, hence there is no room for praise and blame regarding human action. We have seen the Athenians consistently make this argument or something like it among human beings, but we now see how it informs their theology.

In chapter 105, the Athenians offer a new theology, one that is based on the so-called Athenian Thesis. The Athenians flatly deny the notion that gods will punish them for their empire. Human beings rule when they can; this is a law of human nature (5.105.2). The strong will do what they will, the weak suffer what they must, and that is human nature. An account of the gods that says they punish human beings is false and bad—it makes no sense to punish human beings for being human beings—just as it would make no sense to punish a lion for eating a gazelle. Athens and Melos are the same in the eyes of gods—each does what it must. Human “injustice” if you will, is natural—it is innate. And a god that punished human beings for being what human beings are by nature would be unreasonable. Worse, it would show that the god does not understand human nature. The Athenian Thesis regarding the nonsensical character of praise and blame extends to the gods. It is very clear that the new Athenian morality, the new Athenian view of justice, is inseparable from abandoning the opinions and worship of the ancestral gods. The Athenians are now freed from any traditional understanding of justice and piety, and this enables them to guide their empire ruthlessly.

Ultimately, the Athenians are incapable of persuading the Melians to surrender. And, as Athens had predicted, the Melians fall at the hands of the Athenians. Neither the gods nor the Spartans came to the aid of the Melians. Of course, the actions that follow are absolutely horrific, and it seems clear that Thucydides intends to leave the reader with a very foul taste in his mouth. The Athenians kill all of the adult male inhabitants of Melos and enslave all of the women and children (5.116.3-4). While it is unknowable whether the ambassadors would have agreed with this course of action, it is undeniable that Thucydides leaves the impression that the speeches in Melos are clearly connected to the deed. Increasingly we see that the spirit of daring innovation conduces to transgressing ordinary boundaries of decency.

The Case of Theodotus

This is not to say that Thucydides thinks that all philosophical thought is pernicious, or that all innovative thought is harmful. Perhaps the clearest case of a philosophically inclined speaker putting his philosophic and rhetorical skills in the service of justice, advocating moderate measures, occurs earlier in the war in response to the revolt in Mytilene. Here, like in the case of Melos, the Athenians have decided to kill the entire adult male population of a city and to enslave the women and children. This time, however, there is a different outcome, and the favorable outcome seems to come about as a result of the philosophic speech of one Diodotus. The Mytilenians, a colony of the Athenian Empire, have revolted, unsuccessfully. The Athenians have successfully squashed the rebellion thanks in large part to the capitulation of the Mytilenian people. The Athenians are pretty upset because unlike their treatment of other colonies, they had actually treated Mytilene pretty well. They were not, strictly speaking, under the Empire <https://openaccess.cms-conferences.org/#/publications/book/978-1-4951-2095-4>

like others. Mytilene was an oligarchy, and it was the oligarchs who decided to revolt against Athens. But their attempt to revolt did not fare very well. The troops were not winning and they were running out of food. The Spartan commander, then, tried to arm the population in Mytilene against Athens. This sort of backfired—the many decided that it would be better to threaten to turn the city over to Athens unless the many gets the food. The Oligarchs decide to turn things over to the Athenians themselves. The Athenians are nonetheless upset with the Mytilenians, and have decided to execute all the adult males of the city and enslave all of the women and children. The subsequent debate we see in Athens is over punishing the People, the *Demos*. But it should be remembered that it was the oligarchs who started the revolt, and we never get an indication where the Many stood. The debate, then, is a reconsideration of the previous assembly's decision, as the Athenians have already decided to kill them and enslave the women and children, and they have already sent a ship to Mytilene to do the deed.

The Mytilenian Debate, it seems to me, may in fact be the most important debate in the entire work—more important than even the much more famous Melian Dialogue which we have already discussed. The reason is that this debate explores more deeply, I think, than any other series of speeches, the so-called Athenian Thesis that the Athenians first offer in Sparta. Let me briefly state that, as I understand it. In Sparta, when Corinth was trying to convince Sparta to go to war against Athens they charge that Athens behaves unjustly in conducting its empire. Against these charges, Athens says, more or less, “we do not apologize; we will not defend ourselves.” Why do these Athenians refrain from apologizing for their empire? Because there is no room for praise and blame in international politics, because there is no room for justice. Justice does not matter in international relations. All cities are compelled to pursue what they believe to be best in the light of three considerations: fear, honor, and self-interest (1.76.2). The compelled part clinches the argument for them: because they are compelled, praise and blame do not make sense. We only blame or praise actions that we think are the product of volitional action. The Athenians deny that cities are free from compulsion, hence, no praise or blame.

Now, Cleon comes forward to advise destroying the Mytilenians and standing by the decision they have already made. His speech appears cold, calculated, and ruthless. It would seem to represent the Athenian Thesis. It is possible, however, that Cleon's speech represents either a confused Athenian thesis, or it makes clear that the Athenian thesis is itself confused for the following reason. The Athenians in Sparta excuse their own actions by recourse to compulsion, as I just explained. But if that is correct, the same compulsion led the Mytelianians to do what they did. In other words, compulsion explains the actions of not only the strong but also the weak; it explains the actions of those who are seeking empire and those who are seeking to get out from under empire. The anger with which Cleon speaks about the Mytilenians, assuming it is not feigned, is misplaced. Cleon's speech is tinged with justice: How dare those Mytilenians revolt after we treated them so well? Whether we see it or not on first glance, his angry speech betrays a sense of justice.

Then we hear from Diodotus, who begins his speech with the words, “I do not blame.” In other words, he begins by recognizing a key part of the Athenian Thesis, that praise and blame have no place in the conduct of cities. Diodotus jettisons concerns for justice in the deliberation at hand, remarking that justice is appropriate in a court of law, but has no business in deciding matters between cities (3.44.4). Diodotus says the only consideration for Athens with respect to what to do about the Mytilenians is advantage: if it is advantageous to kill all the Mytilenians, fine, and if not, also fine. Who cares about justice? Diodotus thus presents himself as even less concerned with morality and justice than his rival Cleon. Interestingly, though, Athens' self-interest is served, he argues, by sparing the Mytilenians. He insists that in advocating for sparing the Mytilenians, he is only considering self-interest. Ultimately, Diodotus' speech carries the day—barely. By the slimmest of margins the Athenians vote to undo the previous decision and spare the Mytilenians. Diodotus, the hard-nosed advocate for profit and self-interest, has worked to spare the lives and freedom of an entire city.

There is a problem with this interpretation of the speech: Diodotus, who makes every effort to sound hard-nosed, admits that he is compelled to use a disguise in addressing the democratic assembly, that he will in fact lie (3.43.2). This raises an interesting question about prudence, truth-telling, demagoguery, and democracy. But I think there is a question of greater importance: What is Diodotus lying about? Toward the very end of his speech, he quickly mentions that butchering the people of Mytilene would be unjust (3.47.3). I contend that Diodotus' lie is in his denial that he is concerned with justice. He is in fact concerned with justice, but he recognizes the fragility of justice in the world (3.45, see also Orwin, 1997 and Strauss, 1964). Justice can only be achieved with great effort, and its achievement is always insecure.

Diodotus, like so many Athenian speakers before and after him, evinces a certain liberation from justice traditionally understood—he is willing to use duplicity, after all, in a democratic assembly—but he nonetheless shows himself to care deeply about justice. He opposes the butchering of the Mytilenian people, and despite his claims to oppose this

only on the grounds of self-interest, his open admission of the need to use disguises and deceit compels the reader to discern the character of his deceit and disguise. And his disguise is a brilliant one. Diodotus thus reveals himself to be a philosophically educated man who resorts to lies and trickery precisely because of the prevalence of demagoguery or rhetorical sophistication of less than competent, less than decent men. The only way for justice to succeed in circumstances such as these is by foul means.

Diodotus seems to believe more consistently in the Athenian Thesis than the other Athenians. He recognizes that cities and humans are compelled to behave the way they do, but does not use this insight to justify the satisfaction of the basest longings. He appears to put his knowledge in the service of justice. So while the vast majority of Athenian speakers' liberation from conventional morality leads them to the heights of immorality, Diodotus shows that this liberation from conventional morality can in fact be the best defense of morality in immoral times. One should recognize immediately that appeals to conventional morality would have fallen on deaf ears in the assembly. Moreover, the Diodotuses of the world are rare; in fact, there is doubt that this man even existed. In other words, it is difficult to find men still devoted to the common good who have been exposed to and even adopted a sophisticated education. More often than not, such an exposure will often be taken as an excuse to pursue one's own advantage. We have not answered the question of why men like Diodotus would be concerned with the common good once liberated from traditional reasons to be so devoted. Indeed, this is puzzling, so let us leave it at suggesting that there may be a rational account of why one should support the common good, one that relies on reason, not tradition.

CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to show that Athens' boldness or daring links the tyrannical empire to the peak of progress in the sciences and the arts, namely philosophy. In other words, the heights of injustice and philosophy coincide in Athens, but really it is no coincidence. Both are the products of a liberated bold, daring innovative spirit. Both within the city and without, Athens and Athenians were no longer devoted to the common good. "Post-Periclean Athens lacked the singular public-spiritedness which was the honor of Athens from the time of the Persian war until the age of Pericles" (Strauss, 1964). Athens was more public spirited in previous generations, and that public-spiritedness was linked to the divine. Athens' first successful repulsion of the Persians was at the Battle of Marathon, when "belief in the ancestral gods was in its greatest vigor" (Strauss, 1964). Even during the time of Pericles, the Athenians recognized that the virtue of these men was extraordinary (2.34.5). As civilization progresses in the arts and sciences, with concomitant growth or expansion in politics, this entails a rejection of the traditional or the ancestral. And one wonders whether devotion to the common good, to justice, can exist without the support offered by belief in the ancestral gods. "It is precisely for this reason that human beings seek support for right in the gods or that the question of right cannot be considered entirely apart from the question concerning the gods" (Strauss, 1964). Athens' daring character meant that Athens dared to reject the ancestral gods and the ancestral conception of justice. A city no longer devoted to piety and justice cannot expect to survive long, as it transgresses boundaries of ordinary decency that foreign cities still observe, and it will increasingly have a difficult time persuading its citizens to sacrifice on the city's behalf. The intellectual currents undermined meaningful devotion to the city and its empire—one supported it provided it made no serious demands.

It should be recalled that we have no external evidence that Diodotus exists, unlike the other persons represented in Thucydides' work. It is possible, then, that Diodotus, whose name means "Gift of God," stands in for Thucydides, representing the kind of speech Thucydides would have offered himself in the situation in which Diodotus found himself. That is, Thucydides, the author of the work, was surely familiar with what I have been calling the Athenian Thesis. Familiarity with or understanding even of this doctrine takes a mind that has been exposed to a kind of philosophic education. No doubt Thucydides himself was familiar with the intellectual currents of his day. Thucydides, after all, considers himself a wise man, and he believe that his book is a possession for all time. No doubt a philosophic education can provide us with a work comparable to Thucydides' great book, and it can also guide politics in a corrupt time in the manner of a Diodotus. That is, philosophy can be a good guide for theory and practice, but in limited cases. Through the deeds and speeches he presents, however, as well as his own concealed way of writing, Thucydides leaves us with the impression that the diffusion of a somehow philosophic education is pernicious, eroding the source of morality and the common good without which a city, or a civilization, inevitably declines. Perhaps sophistry is nothing other than diffused or vulgarized philosophy. I have not sufficiently distinguished the two in this paper.

Thucydides is much less certain than we are that there is a harmony between progress and peace. In fact, his work seems to evince doubt that what we call progress is possible at all. Quite to the contrary, history seems to be some-
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what cyclical, not in the sense that there is a clear pattern, but in the sense that civilizations rise and fall. Reading Thucydides, we can have a greater appreciation for the fragility of civilization, and take a more cautious view of unlimited progress. We can come to see that science liberated from prudence can have potentially catastrophic consequences, and we can have a more realistic view regarding the prospects for enlightenment and peace.

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