MOTIVES BEYOND FEAR: THUCYDIDES ON HONOR, VENGEANCE, AND LIBERTY

a dissertation by

ALEK CHANCE

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August, 2012
Abstract: *Motives Beyond Fear: Thucydides on Honor, Vengeance, and Liberty*

Alek Chance

Whereas many modern political philosophies and social science theories emphasize security or fear as the prevailing motivator of states and human beings more generally, Thucydides’ political psychology seriously explores diverse motives. A careful reading of his work shows that honor, shame, vengeance, and the desire for liberty exert great influence in political affairs, including relations between political communities. I argue that this broad account of human motivation gives us a better account of many enduring features of international politics than theories which prioritize fear and interest.

Thucydides portrays the importance of “spirited” concerns as issuing from the nature of political life. People ground their sense of worth in the exercise of freedom, and participation in political society promises the most substantive liberties. This affirmation of freedom culminates in the association of great worthiness and honor with the exercise of unfettered moral agency. While the powerful city must still bow to natural necessity, its great accomplishment is that it need not regard the rest of humanity as part of an inexorable nature. Ultimately it finds it impossible to relate to others on prudential terms and thus tends to conceive of relations between states as battles of wills.

I conclude the dissertation by drawing out the moral implications of Thucydides’ study of motives. Because Thucydides does not find the causes of significant conflict to lie solely in hard conflicts of interest or mutual fear, he shows mankind to be more mutually invidious but also more free to resist conflict than it is, for example, in Hobbes’ thought. Thucydides’ emphasis on spirited motives also shows us that a doctrinaire realpolitik is frequently infected by desires for punitive justice or an irrational intolerance of uncertainty. Most significantly, Thucydides suggests that given the unpredictability of human affairs, an unyielding rejection of moral considerations is as unrealistic as an idealism that seeks reliably to effect justice. His deep realism reopens a space for ethical action in international affairs by reminding us that realpolitik’s emphasis on the riskiness of ethical action springs from an optimism that an a-moral doctrine of interest can reliably mitigate risk. Such optimism, Thucydides would urge, is unfounded. Thus in the end, Thucydides grounds a kind of liberality in a deep pessimism.
Contents
Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: The Meanings of Fear in Thucydides' Realism ........................................................................ 11

Chapter 2: Thucydides on the Moral Significance of Wealth and Power ................................................... 47

Chapter 3: Honor, Insolence, and Retribution in War ............................................................................. 77

Chapter 4: Thucydides on Honor, Reputation, and Freedom of Action ................................................... 111

Chapter 5: The Evolution of Politics and the Cultivation of Interests ....................................................... 145

Chapter 6: The Mitigation of Conflict in Thucydides' History .................................................................. 184

Summary and Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 231

Bibliography .............................................................................................................................................. 253
It is one of the fine things about history that we see nations more easily consoled for their material losses than for injuries to their honor.

—Heinrich von Treitschke

Introduction

In their speech to the Spartan assembly, Athenian representatives announce that their city’s behavior has been driven by the greatest compulsions: fear, honor, and profit\(^1\) (\(timē, deous, ōphelia\), 1.76.2). Despite contemporary realists who read him as placing a priority on fear as the mainspring of political action\(^2\) throughout his \textit{History}, Thucydides maintains a broad view of fundamental human motivations and political concerns.\(^3\) This expanded view stands in contrast to contemporary theories of international relations as well as much political philosophy since Hobbes, although Hobbes did give a certain pride

---

\(^1\) \(ōphelia\) has a range of meanings from succor to plunder. I steer away from the commonly used “interest” to avoid, in Arnold Wolfers’ words, using an “ambiguous symbol.” I avoid the word “advantage” because this may misleadingly focus us on relative rather than absolute gains.

\(^2\) One example among many is Kenneth Waltz, \textit{Man, the State, and War} (Waltz 1959 p.159).

\(^3\) Some commentators, for example Palmer, make a point of refusing to call Thucydides’ work a history, let alone \textit{The History}, citing the fact that the book seems originally to have been called \textit{The War between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians}. I unequivocally take Thucydides’ work to be a work of political science rather than a mere recounting of past deeds. Nonetheless, for simplicity’s sake I will use the shorthand \textit{History} to describe this book, which has for centuries been conventionally titled \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War} or \textit{History of the Grecian War} (the latter being the title to Hobbes’ 1648 translation).
of place to Thucydides’ categories. A significant class of modern theories of human action prioritizes fear as the most powerful passion, and security as the most fundamental of all human objectives. The most elegant of security-based theories is achieved with neorealism, which relies on nothing other than minimal assumptions about man’s desire to endure in order to explain the persistence of conflict across time and space, blaming the anarchic structure of the international milieu for this tragic outcome.

Each of the three motives mentioned by the Athenians appears as significant in the History, and each plays its individual role. But Thucydides doesn’t merely assert that the mainsprings of human action are manifold. He shows us that the basic motives of the weak and the strong, of the individual and the community, differ. Most significantly, he shows us the great importance of the strangest and most controversial of these motives—honor—as a foundation of developed political communities. Through its cultivated concern for honor, the motives of the political body are altered and expanded. What is striking about Thucydides’ treatment of fear and the desire for gain is that they are both inadequate explanations of war by themselves. Moreover, they are both influenced by considerations of status. Thus fear is expanded to include the fear of losing

---

4 Although one must acknowledge the alternative view given by the Marxist tradition which places class and economic interest at the forefront, including in theories of international politics, as in the cases of Lenin and Hobson.
5 Waltz’ Man the State and War presents a prototype of neorealism, but the main theoretical text is his Theory of International Politics.
6 Some commentators, for example Palmer, make a point of refusing to call Thucydides’ work a history, let alone The History, citing the fact that the book seems originally to have been called The War between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians. This kind of distinction, however, has no relevance to my inquiry, so I will use the convenient shorthand History, to describe this book, which has for centuries been conventionally titled History of the Peloponnesian War or History of the Grecian War (the latter being the title to Hobbes’ 1648 translation).
political mastery or preeminence. Sparta goes to war out of fear, yet the real dilemma presented to Sparta is whether to choose war or inferiority.\(^7\) The concern for material goods grows stronger the more one has, for not only is there shame in giving up what is one’s own [2.62], but men who have nothing, rather than “having nothing to lose,” instead have nothing to fight for [1.2; 2.43]. These two motives take on a political, and what I will call a “moral” character. This is to say that considerations of honor and shame, prerogative and right, influence those motivations that “compel” mankind, and especially political communities. This in turn leads us to a careful consideration of that motive whose enumeration might otherwise seem odd in Thucydides’ rather sober treatment of the human being—honor.

Is it helpful today to turn to Thucydides’ threefold account of human motivations? What are the real differences between Thucydides’ realism and contemporary realism, and do these differences amount to a more realistic realism? What does it mean that Athens is driven to war by honor? Does it give us a new or more honest perspective on international relations to separate “security” from “interest,” as Thucydides does by separating “fear” from “profit”? In examining these questions I will attempt to set down how Thucydides’ broad account of human motivation gives us a richer account of the enduring features of international politics according to realists: the persistence of “self-help” among political units; the intransigence of conflict; and the predominance of concern with relative gains. I will also explore how Thucydides’ more nuanced understanding of national interest implies an escape from a reason of state rationale that

\(^7\) Doyle (1997) p. 67.
thinkers since Hobbes have either embraced or reluctantly accepted. In short, Thucydides’ view presents a twofold revision of modern realist ideas: Thucydides presents man as more invidious to man, but at the same time potentially more capable of moderation or forbearance.

Both of these differences spring, I think, from Thucydides’ wider scope. The story of the Peloponnesian War is not a study in international relations as such, but an examination of the whole range of political life from the motions of empires to the characters of individuals. Indeed, one could claim the most fundamental political dynamic in the History is the very process of the unification of individuals and then cities around common interests, and the subsequent decay and disintegration of the general will into the pettiness of individual life once again. This contrasts with contemporary realism’s attempt to heuristically treat the state as a “unitary rational actor” or with Hobbes’ and other modern thinkers’ treatment of states as (largely) analogous to individuals in a “state of nature.” Thucydides portrays war as penetrating the deepest matrices of social life and tearing apart not just alliances and empires, but cities, classes, and families. In other words, no human association is taken for granted as “unitary” in the History, and because of this, we have our attention directed to those exigencies particular to collectives as opposed to naturally unitary actors: we are directed to the question of whether a community can sustainably act without justice abroad (or endure

---

8 In the outlines of his account of humanity in a state of nature, Kant, for example, is perhaps surprisingly similar to Hobbes. Thus the problem taken up by Kant is in many ways one presented to him by Hobbes. See especially Metaphysics of Morals, “Doctrine of Right” section 44; but also the rhetorically milder Perpetual Peace in the note at [349].
9 Such is the premise of Pouncey (1980).
10 Although some would say this is perhaps putting the cart before the horse, see Tuck (1999), Conclusion.
injustice at the hands of others) and maintain it at home, or whether the causes of security and gain are sufficient to bind men to their body politic. The motives embraced by men in public may well be different than those that individuals as individuals would prefer to follow; i.e. honor on the one hand, fear on the other.\textsuperscript{11} The common will of an advanced society may hope for qualitatively different goods than individuals beset by hardship. Such considerations reveal a set of influences on foreign policy that the incredible effective unity of modern states may have obscured, but hasn’t necessarily obliterated.

Political realism tends to focus on the weakness of affective bonds or moral restraints in the face of more tangible interests, no matter how fleeting. In addition to this it emphasizes the “zero-sum” nature of international politics, meaning that political bodies are primarily concerned with relative rather than absolute values \textit{vis a vis} their peers. On both of these counts, Thucydides for the most part falls within the realist camp. However, his explanations of politics differ in ways that are useful to contemporary debate. Most contemporary thought in international relations is quite influenced in one way or another by the structuralist account of neorealism. Neorealism argues that nothing more than a structure of anarchy is needed to produce a world of political bodies concerned primarily with relative gains and therefore potentially in conflict with one another. Criticism of neorealism typically focuses on its attention to structure. Neoliberalism argues that with the right incentives, political bodies can realize that absolute gains can be achieved through cooperation despite the obstacles presented by conditions of anarchy. Moreover, liberals in general assume that mankind can focus

more on material gains or satisfaction, objectives which don’t necessarily engender zero-sum competition. Constructivism also denies that structure determines conflict, but rejecting the idea of a given human nature,12 goes far beyond neoliberalism by denying that it is even necessary that any individual or political body should have a sense of self-interest that is exclusive of that of anyone else.13 Neoliberal ideas have been very influential in American foreign policy, and provide the groundwork for a general optimism regarding a new world order or globalization. Constructivism has been an influential part of a cosmopolitan critique of the national form. Both of these optimistic critiques of realism are grounded in a rejection of Waltz’ emphasis on structure as the most relevant cause of conflict.

However, skepticism about the relationship between anarchy and conflict doesn’t necessarily lead to optimism. In order to pinpoint the problem of anarchy, many political scientists and political theorists have pointed out the necessity of unit level, or first image—that is, human nature—attributes that are intrinsically invidious, or values that are intrinsically relative. While the dynamic of the security dilemma may be regarded with skepticism in its most abstract form, this isn’t to say that we are free to deny the significance of human competition or the vicious circles that follow it. Thus Michael Doyle points to the importance of glory in Hobbes’ account of what is now called the security dilemma,14 and Daniel Markey suggests the importance of what he calls the “prestige motive” to realist theory up to the 20th century, pointing out that what is now

12 Human nature is “ideas almost all of the way down” according to Alexander Wendt (2000).
considered to be a value instrumental to security has typically been treated as a fundamental value in its own right.\textsuperscript{15} Here the logic of the security dilemma still applies, but the dynamic requires motivations other than an appreciation of structural insecurity in order to be problematic. Other studies in political psychology have suggested that even granting all of the constructivists’ conditions (that is, no prior history or context between parties), collectives of people tend to be intrinsically competitive.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, even when the dimension of self-regard is appreciated in political thought, it is often assumed that the benefits of cultivating a self-respecting society will be conducive to peace,\textsuperscript{17} another premise upon which empirical study has cast some doubt.\textsuperscript{18}

Such considerations indicate that a study of Thucydides with an attention to what may be intrinsically competitive in man or the body politic can contribute some clarity to this “return to realism’s roots.” This is done not necessarily with a view to rendering realism more pessimistic, but to help identify underappreciated obstacles to peace. As Markey points out, the relative importance of the “prestige motive” could have a great deal of significance regarding the question of what forms of global socialization are to be desired, for in a world where status-seeking predominates, the intensification of transnational bonds may well increase the likelihood of conflict.\textsuperscript{19}

Thucydides’ broader account of human motivation is not simply a more pessimistic or negative view of humanity. While the \textit{History} makes it clear that honor

\textsuperscript{15} Markey (1999).
\textsuperscript{16} Mercer (1995).
\textsuperscript{17} This is a premise of John Rawls’ \textit{The Law of Peoples} (1999).
\textsuperscript{18} Spinner-Halev and Thiess-Morse (2003).
\textsuperscript{19} Markey (1999) p. 171. He shares this intuition with Rousseau.
can lead to war, and success can carry men into hubris, Thucydides shows us how wealth can also improve the character of people, and a desire for honor can yield forbearance or perhaps even an attention to justice. In this way Thucydides circumvents one of the great ironies of modern political philosophy: that the liberal conceptual framework that articulates the freedom of individuals within the convention of civil society directly implies the non-existence of constraints or duties on nations—which by definition coexist without any regulating convention.

According to Hobbes, for example, the absence of any values of objective meaning beyond security entails the justification of any foreign policy action on the basis of subjective fear. Where there is no sovereign to guarantee fidelity to agreements or conventionally fix the criteria that would differentiate a reasonable from an unreasonable fear, there are no natural duties or claims which might temper what does remain: an unlimited right to pursue security in a state of nature. This logic underlies the modern doctrine of reason of state and in one form or another characterizes much modern political philosophy regarding the rights of sovereign states. Thucydides, by contrast, grants that people, and perhaps especially political bodies, still maintain an interest in adhering to values that do presuppose some “constancy of signification,” to use Hobbes’ language. The History indicates that (perhaps only some) men or cities may indeed be capable of stepping outside of their immediate subjective interest to consider other values.

---

20 “To this warre of every man against every man this is also consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice.” Leviathan Chapter 13

21 All words for things that “affect us” are of “inconstant signification, for we are unlikely to agree on thus, what “one calleth wisdom, another calleth fear; and one cruelty what another calleth justice.” Leviathan Chapter 4.
such as the honorable or just, or at a minimum care how they appear to others. If we connect this to their desire for esteem or fame, they furthermore might be disposed to try to do so. The rhetoric of the Athenian leader Pericles suggests that it might also be particularly important for political communities to have a self-regard grounded in values higher than mere preservation. Thucydides will show that this feature of politics can encourage competition, but at the same time affords certain checks on conflict that are absent from the Hobbesian account.

Against a background picture of the growth of political power yielding the cultivation of civilized mores, Thucydides portrays Athens as ambitious to rule over others but also—in her finer moments—capable of being “more just than they have to be.” This presentation prompts us to ask what hope there is that the progress of civilization will be able to ameliorate competition between nations. From the outset we must be highly skeptical about any sort of programmatic, progressive solution coming from Thucydides—especially as the Athenians’ remark implies that true justice is out of the question—but this doesn’t mean that an inquiry into his various discussions of moderation cannot inform our understanding of foreign policy options. Indeed, Thucydides’ critique of “security” rationales reveals more freedom of choice than that claimed by many modern conceptions of realpolitik. His understanding of humanity’s ability to transcend the reflexive cycles of vengeance and the hyper-vigilant concern for status lead Thucydides’ realism to eschew talk of inevitability and the need for automatic responses. It is his focus on honor and other motives unrelated to fear that allow him to understand that action taken in the name of security is seldom just that. Preoccupied as
they are with their worth, men and political communities reveal their desire to be free
from the wills of others, to exercise a profound freedom of action, and ultimately to
refuse to submit to the necessities of living amongst others. In the end, Thucydides will
show that this understanding of human motivation, initially so much more invidious, is
also more pregnant with possibility than security driven models of conflict.
Chapter 1
The Meanings of Fear in Thucydides’ Realism

Contemporary realism is perhaps best known for its focus on the security motive as the most important driver of behavior in international relations. Using the heuristic of the security dilemma, many contemporary realists attempt to show that in principle, conflict can arise between states motivated by nothing more than the desire for security.\(^22\) Security, the argument goes, is best thought of in purely relative terms: an increment of increased security for me directly entails the loss of an increment of security for my neighbors.\(^23\) So imagined, the concern for security as such can be viewed as conducive to relative gains problems which in turn contribute (substantially in contemporary realism’s eyes) to the “zero-sum” or intrinsically competitive nature of the international system.

It is common for such theorists to cite Thucydides’ passage regarding the rise of Athenian power and the subsequent fear it inspired in Sparta [1.23] to support this view.\(^24\) However, a survey of the ways in which fear appears in the History will show that Thucydides is not an exponent of this structural view. Moreover, his treatment of the different meanings that fear takes on is illuminating in its own right, particularly insofar as Thucydides shines a light on alternative sources of international politics’ zero-sum

---

\(^{22}\) See for example, Waltz (1988).
\(^{23}\) This view has its support in political philosophy as well, see Rousseau’s commentary in “The State of War” §27 (Rousseau (1997) p. 169). Waltz (1988 p. 165 ff) explicitly acknowledges his debt to Rousseau for this insight.
nature. The passage at 1.23 is certainly not a crib sheet to Thucydides’ views on conflict, but is rather the beginning of a complex treatment of the relationship between fear and other political motives. Thucydides is famous for portraying behavioral drivers as threefold: fear, honor, interest [1.75]. It is strange how often these other two clearly enunciated motives are overlooked in attempts to show Thucydides’ emphasis on fear. Recently, however, there has been some effort in international relations theory to grant Thucydides’ honor motive more attention, both within the context of the History, as well as in the traditions of political philosophy and classical realism.25 A closer look at Thucydides’ treatment of fear confirms that not only is honor worthy of discussion in its own right, but honor or related concerns for status, prerogative, and liberty also intervene and alter the influence that fear has on the body politic.

Fear in Thucydides’ History cannot adequately explain the origins of war in part because fear in Thucydides’ account has multiple effects and is itself an expansible concept. Thucydides shows Athens justifying its excesses with proclamations of fear, while Sparta’s fearfulness explains its chronic inertia. Barbaric early men tended to avoid one another out of fear [1.2], yet at the same time barbarians are apparently most murderous when lacking fear [7.29]. We also see fear having a paralyzing effect during the oligarchic revolution in Athens [8.66] and the utmost desperation rendering individuals fearless, as is the case during the plague at Athens [2.53]. Fear of a certain kind also leads people towards prudence,26 but there is a tension between the exercise of

26 For example, in Archidamus’ speech beginning at 1.80.
prudence and the political body’s preferred self-conception as something not susceptible to fear. This tension is neatly expressed and partially resolved in Pericles’ dictum that Athens must fear its own blunders, but not the enemy [1.144]. Overall, the relationship between fear and action itself varies and is subject to intervention by other motivations, hence Thucydides’ presentation of not one, but three fundamental motives: fear, honor, interest.

In his *Archeology*, the portrayal of Greek political development in Book One, Thucydides does show that international politics is constituted by an anarchy of security-minded actors, but goes on to show that the advanced political bodies with which he is concerned have much more complex motives, to the point where talk of security is at times taboo and at times but specious justification. The old tribal politics of Greece appear to be aptly described by Chapter 13 of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, yet Thucydides makes it clear that he finds contemporary politics vastly more interesting and “significant” (*axiologon*)\(^{27}\) in part because of its great coalitions and accomplishments [1.1], both of which were spurred by things other than fear. This achievement stands in contrast to the state of affairs in ancient times, where tyrants never achieved anything “significant” because they were chiefly concerned with stability and preserving their own [1.17]. The concern for security itself doesn’t appear to be conducive to “significant” politics but rather seems to be a feature of a primitive state of affairs. To Thucydides, the sources of

---

\(^{27}\)The word of course means ‘worth talking about.’
the great, unprecedented motions\textsuperscript{28} of the Peloponnesian war were not simple, static phenomena of human nature.

\textit{Sparta’s fear of Athens}

Thucydides’ passage at 1.23 is very often taken to be a distillation of his views on the ultimate driver of the conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans, namely, hegemonic change and the insecurity felt by the declining power. I will argue that this frequently cited passage is often translated in such a way that it has become something of a red herring. Thucydides directly comments:

\textit{“the truest explanation (tēn alēthestatēn prophasin), although it has been the least often advanced, I believe to have been the growth of the Athenians to greatness, which brought fear to the Lacedaemonians and forced (anankasai) them to war.”}

Thucydides then continues, “But the reasons publicly alleged (aitiai)…were as follows…” [1.23.6].” From translation to translation, a considerable amount of ambiguity surrounds the precise meanings of \textit{prophasis, anankasai,} and \textit{aitiai} (respectively “explanation,” “forced,” and “allegations” to Smith).

While the above translation by Charles Forster Smith takes \textit{prophasis} to mean “explanation,” Thucydides’ word choice here has often been interpreted in a way that grants fear a very direct sense of causal force. The word \textit{prophasis} is often translated to suggest a sense of material causality as distinct from mere allegations (\textit{aitai}), to such a

\textsuperscript{28} Thucydides begins his History with the suggestion of a theme of motion and rest by calling the war the ‘greatest motion’ ever to have occurred [1.1].
This is in part attributable to Thucydides’ apparent intent to contrast the word *prophasis*, the explanation “least often advanced,” with the word *aitia*, the explicit allegations. Thucydides’ construct has prompted translators, including that of the most commonly found editions, Richard Crawley, to render *prophasis* as “cause”—implying that it stands in clear contrast to mere allegation. Similarly, Rex Warner has taken it to mean “real reason.” Depending on whether we choose “truest explanation” or “real cause” we might either examine or dismiss Thucydides’ ensuing discussion of factors within the realm of human deliberation and in turn come to very different conclusions about the political impact of insecurity or fear.

Thucydides does appear to be setting up a contrast between these two sentences, yet it doesn’t appear that the contrast he intends is one of true explanations versus specious ones. Indeed, Sparta’s fear is the truest explanation, not a uniquely true cause juxtaposed with false allegations. In fact, the word *prophasis* is best rendered as “explanation, grounds, or reason,” and can itself mean “specious reason,” “ostensible cause,” “legal allegation” or even “pretext” as Crawley himself later renders it [1.126.1; 1.141; 6.76.2]. Given the context of these latter instances, *prophasis* can only mean something like a pretext or charge, indicating that Thucydides is not using the word to connote “scientific” causal powers, as some have argued.

---

29 See the discussion in Orwin (1997) Chapter 2; Kirkwood (1952) p. 40.  
30 Kirkwood (1952) p. 38. See also Orwin (2001) and Lebow (2003) for more discussion on the topic.  
31 There is an older literature speculating that Thucydides is using *prophasis* in the Hippocratic sense of “exciting cause” see, e.g., Smith (1940).
What is at issue in all this? Depending on how one renders this passage, one can be led to take the subsequent speeches concerning “public allegations” of complaint and blame more or less seriously. This in turn colors how one understands the question of human choice versus inevitability in Thucydides and the nature of the hold that fear has over men. Is “threat” unambiguously perceived, exciting an automatic, Newtonian response according to the old behavioralist “billiard ball” analogy, or are degrees and types of threats framed and understood in deliberation that mediates between political action and reaction? Indeed it would be strange for a book so filled with artfully crafted speeches to denigrate their political importance before a single one has been given. Rather, it is obvious that Thucydides emphasizes political deliberation with his attention to speeches while granting that we must come to terms with the fact that some causal factors nonetheless go unspoken.  

This relationship is unduly distorted by two major translators, and thus confused for the many scholars who cite this passage as the essential Thucydidean analysis of the war. Both major translators and interpreters of Thucydides emphasize an element of inevitability even though it doesn’t quite exist in the text. Rather, in Thucydides’ words, Sparta is “forced,” (anankasai) into war, which does not necessarily carry all the connotations of “inevitable.” For example, “forced” can still refer to a situation where war is a hypothetical imperative for the Spartans, i.e., war is necessary so long as Spartans refuse to relinquish certain values. As it happens, the Corinthians illustrate this

32 For a discussion of the role of speeches placed against the context of contemporary theories of causation see Garst (1989) pp 5-7.
hypothetical nature of human necessities in their criticism of Sparta when they claim that Sparta doesn’t even do those things that are necessary (*ankaia*) [1.70.1]. Such a phrase clearly indicates that the word *anka* is not reserved in the *History* solely for categorical necessities. This kind of practical inevitability, unlike simple inevitability, does not imply the existence of inexorable causes operating outside the horizon of human agency and deliberation.33

Yet both Richard Crawley and Rex Warner import language into their translations that emphasizes inevitability while denigrating the role of explicit causes of war. Crawley presents such claims as a kind of afterthought or formality:

“The real cause, however, I consider to be the one most formally kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta made war inevitable. Still it is well to give the grounds alleged by either side…”

Warner takes the additional liberty of suggesting that not only are the manifest complaints specious, but they somehow *obscure* the “real reason:”

“I propose first to give an account of the causes of complaint…[b]ut the real reason for the war is, in my opinion, most likely to be disguised by such an argument. What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power…”

If one follows Warner in overemphasizing the contrast between the explanation “least often advanced” and the explicit allegations, then Thucydides’ contrast here takes on a new meaning, and entirely without justification.

---

33 In his discussion of the Melian dialogue, Michael Walzer notes that in both Greek and English, the concept of necessity presents a rhetorically useful ambiguity by simultaneously connoting ‘indispensable’ and ‘inevitable.’ In short, this ambiguity allows speakers to present desires as inexorable natural forces, thereby preempting moral discussion (Walzer 2000, p. 8).
It really appears that the intended contrast between the *prophasis* and *aitia* sentences points us to the difference between the kinds of explanations or rationales can be made publicly, and those which cannot (at least, as we shall see, from a Spartan perspective). Although Thucydides indisputably places more importance on Sparta’s general fear than he does on the ensuing accounts of more proximal causes, contrary to what is implied in the translations of Crawley and Warner, we are certainly not being asked to dismiss as irrelevant those complaints that were publicly alleged. They too contribute somehow to the story of how Sparta’s fear leads to war. Not only are the alleged causes true, but they may well be decisive parts of the “truest explanation.”

The acknowledged causes, the affairs at Corcyra and Potidaea, are in fact the latest manifestations of the truest cause. The growth of Athens’ power has no abstract reality, but rather is treated as constituted in particular cases of Athenian action. These actions are revealing to Sparta not necessarily for how they indicate capability, but how they indicate intent. These events, constitutive of the truest cause, amount to “last straws”—but why these events? We must look at the events themselves to discover this.

We must look beyond a simplistic reading of the “truest cause” and more at the given *casus belli*, in part because Thucydides indicates that fear by itself has a varying influence on men, and therefore attributing the war to fear is not in itself very illuminating. In fact Sparta typically displays a fearfulness that is more associated with

---

35 The first indication of Sparta’s uneasiness describes their concern for Athen’s navy and daring, 1.90. At 1.102 Sparta fears their daring and *newteropoia*, their revolutionary or revisionist spirit.
inaction and a very low tolerance of risky endeavors. The Spartans have avoided conflict with Athens up until the Corcyraean affair and the Potidaean revolt and have

“made no attempt to check it, except to a trifling extent, remaining indifferent the greater part of the time, since they had never been quick to go to war except under compulsion, and this case were in some degree precluded from interference by wars (at home) [1.118.2].”

Along with once more suggesting that war was indeed “forced” upon Sparta, Thucydides is touching upon a theme of Spartan inertia, as well as one of its domestic sources: their huge and sometimes unruly slave population—the Helots—a mass of people with whom the Spartans were always technically at war.36 Spartans throughout the History show themselves to be slow moving, overly cautious, only willing to engage in a fight they are sure to win, and only so with all of their friends [2.39; 5.109]. This caution goes against the flow of human inclinations for Thucydides, who rather finds that success tends to breed hubris and overconfidence.37 Insecurity at home, then, seems to contribute to Sparta’s moderation or reluctance to engage in activity abroad.38 When the Corinthian ambassadors, smarting from Athens’ fighting alongside Corcyra, come to Sparta to urge all-out war, they begin their exhortation with what is perhaps a vague and ironic allusion to this fact, commenting that it is the trust that Spartans have in one another that keeps them moderate yet unconcerned with foreign affairs [1.68.1]. The Corinthians quickly become more direct and proceed with a browbeating, blaming Spartan inertia and excessive caution for Athens’ abuses [1.70.].

36 Cornford (1907) p. 8. See also 4.80 where Thucydides claims that Sparta’s “policy [was] governed at all times by the necessity of taking precautions against [the Helots].”
37 See 1.84; 3.39; 4.17; 4.65; 6.11.
38 This would put Thucydides in a camp with those skeptical of diversionary wars.
Corinth regrets that Sparta has waited until Athenian power has doubled itself—alluding to their recent alliance with Corcyra—rather than stifling it from the beginning [1.69.5]. Sparta’s inertia, it seems, is incompatible with a policy of preemptive war, and the Corinthians correctly anticipate that such an aversion finds its expression in right or justice.\(^{39}\) The Corinthians claim that the question of justice in this matter is in fact already settled, claiming “we are no longer to be considering whether we are wronged, but how we are to avenge our wrongs [1.69.2].” Contrary to the Corinthian assertion, it is as yet unclear who stands in violation of the current treaty between the Peloponnesian League and the Athenians. Thucydides in fact implies [5.20], and the Spartans themselves later admit [7.18] that it is their invasion of Attica that violates the treaty for the first time. Corinth anticipates this objection and rhetorically reverses the nature of concern for justice: “a peaceful policy suffices long only for those who, while they employ their military strength only for just ends, yet by their spirit show plainly that they will not put up with it if they are treated with injustice [1.71.1].”

This language of justice expressed as righteous indignation rather than justice conceived as a constraint on action will win out in the ensuing Spartan debate as represented by the speeches of Archidamus and Sthenelaidas. Yet, as Thucydides tells us, it is not the speech of the Corinthians that has decisive impact [1.88]. For a more likely catalyst we must look to the speech of the Athenians which immediately follows.

The Spartan reaction to the Athenian speech reveals that not only senses of justice at

---

\(^{39}\) Although Thucydides hints at the deeper origins of Sparta’s lawfulness in their domestic organization, this is not to say that their concern for justice is not genuine. We shall see momentarily that their concern for divine justice (via the oaths associated with treaty law) is very real; later we will see its hypocrisy in action.
play, but that these correspond to different senses of fear. The Spartan King Archidamus emphasizes an attitude of deference towards fortune which entails both caution and a concern for treaty law. The fear of the ephor Sthenelaidas reveals itself to be an anxiety about acquired political goods more than an elemental fear. One form of fear is timidity like that of Rousseau’s solitary man; the other is apprehension—seen in the anxious plots of zealots in war-torn Corcyra [3.82] or the anticipations of men in Hobbes’ state of nature. Insofar as apprehension is focused on human relationships, it may appear as a fear of a diminished status or diminished ability to influence the human world. Such apprehension aptly expresses itself in terms of just indignation, and it is only Thucydides’ judgment about the truest cause [1.23.6] that indicates that the underlying essence of Sthenelaidas’ perspective is one of fear. The reaction to the Athenian speech will bring out that the Spartan fear is a political fear for the particularly political nature of the Athenian threat—a political fear that at least in Sparta can not even express itself as such.

After the Corinthians conclude their speech, some Athenians who happen to be in Sparta on other business⁴¹ think it appropriate to comment on the situation. They do not seek to convince anyone of Athens’ innocence, but simply to remind the Spartans of

---

⁴⁰ Hobbes, of course, conflates these senses of fear, as is famously pointed out by Rousseau. Rousseau attributes only timidity to fear—apprehensive violence is the result of cultivated passions. Thucydides, as I hope to show, would mount a similar objection insofar as he indicates that the justificatory character of genuine existential fear may be out of place in the world of apprehensions about our human environment.

⁴¹ This fact is important. Thucydides seems to suggest that we are getting an unvarnished view of Athenian attitudes and not a calculated act of diplomacy. In this way, the speech can be read as a revelation of Athens’ self-conception. Romilly (1963 pp 243-44) goes one step further and suggests that the implausibility of the circumstances indicate that the speech is an invention intended to communicate the Athenian spirit directly to the reader. Obviously under this theory the speech couldn’t have contributed to Sparta’s decision, but can still be regarded as exemplary of the particular character of the Athenian threat.
Athenian greatness [1.72]. The Athenian citizens basically seek to deter Sparta, a strategy which assumes a connection between fear and inaction, and which they must have some reason to believe will be effective. The Athenian citizens begin by reminding the assembly of their greatness and service to the rest of Greece during the Persian wars [1.73-74]. Yet they go on to what appears to be a justification of their own empire claiming that they were compelled to seek and then maintain an empire by the three greatest compulsions, fear, honor, and interest. The Athenians are in fact acting much better than anyone else who might end up in their situation. This is because they are particularly worthy (axios) of having achieved their present power [1.75-76]. What’s more, it is their very magnanimity that (ironically) earns them a reputation for injustice, for if they only exercised rule in the medium of brute force, nobody would expect any better of them [1.77]. The Athenian speakers conclude by reminding the Spartans that they are duty bound to seek arbitration for any conflict with Athens [1.78].

Clearly the Athenians, while not answering any of the specific charges brought by the allies of the Spartans, are interested in projecting some kind of unorthodox vindication for their empire, yet how does this provocative justification square with the deterrent purpose suggested by Thucydides? It is possible that some kind of justification for empire is in order because the Athenians must give the Spartans a publicly avowable pretext for their backing down from Athens.\footnote{Orwin (1986) p. 75.} One cannot help but think, however, that the character of this particular justification is ill-suited for such a purpose, and part of the speech seems as much Athenian self-congratulation as anything else. The Athenians
must imagine that the very boldness of their talk is incidentally capable of cowing the
Spartans, as they admit that they are motivated by something other than fear. By
showing its attachment to goods other than security, Athens indicates that it won’t be
susceptible to coercion or Sparta’s plans to extract concessions. Perhaps even their
willingness to admit that their empire has at best very controversial grounds for
legitimacy will reveal that they are to be taken with the utmost seriousness.⁴³

Needless to say, the Athenian speakers’ gambit does not work. It may be too
much to say that it backfires, yet the Athenian speech does immediately precede those of
the Spartan king Archidamus and the ephor Sthenelaidas who represent the anti- and pro-
war viewpoints, respectively. These in turn immediately precede the Spartans’ decision
to go to war—“out of fear” as Thucydides points out, here inserting his assessment into
his narrative of the war for the first time [1.88]. (The first commentary on fear appears in
something of a preface at 1.23; the second mention is by the Corcyraeans in their speech
at Athens.) The lengthy speech of Archidamus gives us some grounds for thinking that
the Athenian tactic of deterrence through boldness may have been more than a mere shot
in the dark. Archidamus is skeptical—and rightly so—that Athens is a city on which they
can inflict pain via laying waste to the land.⁴⁴ This turns him to serious reflection about
the character of a war with Athens, what the allies’ objectives are, and how such a war
can be ended [1.82]. Archidamus’ position seems perfectly reasonable: Athens is

⁴³ Orwin (1986) claims that part of the deterrent is that Athens is publicly stating “facts about justice...that
only a first-rate power dare admit.”p 80. However, we will see momentarily that Sparta is unlikely to
relate to this doctrine and must either miss the point or find it appalling.
⁴⁴ In his first speech, Pericles successfully rallies the Athenians to ignore the Spartan invasion, effectively
trumping their strategy. By Book Five, Thucydides finds the Spartan strategy to have been a failure, which
in conjunction with their debacle at Sphacteria, spurs them to seek peace [5.14].
wealthier and enjoys more political cohesion than most cities, and thanks to their naval empire is uniquely independent of their land. All of this means that bellicose Spartans seriously underestimate the resiliency and power of Athens.

Archidamus seizes an opening given to him by the Athenian speech, taking up the issue of arbitration as a reason not to rush to war [1.85]. Archidamus here shows what the Corinthians would call an excess of caution, and even defends the Spartan practice of slow deliberation. It is this dilatoriness which keeps the Spartans wise, moderate, and allows them to escape the typical fate of mankind: allowing success to lead them into hubris [1.84].

Keeping in mind Thucydides’ suggestion about the true source of Spartan moderation—domestic instability—a picture develops of fear-as-caution. Such a fear, at least for Archidamus leads to judgments that are vindicated by Thucydides’ commentary and the course of events. This fear-as-caution counsels against immediate engagement in war. Thucydides himself points to the appeal of war avoidance for Sparta at this juncture by noting that the vote for war in the Spartan assembly was too close to call by the customary mode of acclamation [1.87].

The winning side, however, is the war party as represented by the ephor Sthenelaidas who in his much briefer speech [1.86] adopts the Corinthians’ formula for redirecting the concern for justice from restraint to indignation: from Archidamus’ worries about treaty obligations to a concern for injury and punishment. Athens cannot deny hurting the Peloponnesus, and as such is deserving of punishment—in fact, “two-

---

45 This view of human nature is shared by many speakers in the History and apparently, Thucydides himself. Cleon at 3.39.4; Spartan envoys at 4.17.4; Athens fails to heed Spartan envoys’ advice and “want more” at 4.21.2. See discussion in Romilly (1963) pp. 322-329.
fold punishment, because they used to be good and have become bad.” According to some interpretations, this speech is the only occasion in Thucydides’ History where the argument from justice prevails, yet the situation is certainly more complex than that as Sthenelaidas’ strange invocation of double punishment suggests. As we just saw, Archidamus had in fact elicited a concept of justice, that of the treaty law which Athens hadn’t quite broken, but which Sparta would certainly violate if they pursued war without first seeking arbitration. Sthenelaidas on the other hand decides—unilaterally as we would say today—that Athens has indeed committed an injustice against their allies and eschews the idea of framing the situation in terms of treaty law: “nor must we seek redress by means of legal processes and words, when it is not in word only that we ourselves are being injured.” The reader of the History has already seen the language of punishment in the speech of the Corinthians at Athens, who are in a fit of indignation after being stung by the impudence of their supposed inferior, Corecyra, and we again will see the association of indignation with punitive justice in the speech of Cleon. Sthenelaidas too, seems to have gotten himself worked up, as his talk of double punishment indicates. The ability to punish—rather than merely to combat—to some degree implies an established political mastery or at least a shared normative world that purports to uphold certain rights or prerogatives. Throughout the History there is a clear association of the prerogative to punish and political status, whether it be in the

46 For example, Boucher (1998) p68.
47 1.38; 1.40 See Crane (1992a); section 3 of this chapter.
49 Compare with Kant on this point, Metaphysics of Morals section 144.
relationship between colony and parent-city or hegemon of an alliance. Sthenelaidas’ emphasis on this feature suggests what is truly at stake from his perspective, and the concern for status and prerogative reveals that it isn’t simply a matter of security.

Sthenelaidas emphasizes the necessity of response to transgression to the point where he seems to disdain Archidamus’ calculations of relative resources. He even seems to conflate arguments for the feasibility of war with a claim that war is imperative. We can see in Sthenelaidas’ mindset a need for urgent automaticity of response to transgression: of action responding to action unmediated by speech. Deliberation is suitable for “those contemplating injustice” he says, echoing the Corinthians’ emphasis on the importance of refusing to submit to injustice rather than scrupulously avoiding sins of commission [1.71.1].

His rash avoidance of calculation and his emphasis on the indignant aspect of justice is also combined with a confidence in a cosmological support for his position. Unlike Archidamus, who avoids talk of gods altogether, Sthenelaidas exhorts the Spartans “with the favor of the gods [to] go against the wrongdoer (adikountas).” If Sthenelaidas’ speech is the concrete manifestation of what Thucydides has called fear, then it is clearly something more like anxiety regarding self-

50 This is indicated in Athens’ “right” to punish its ally Samos [1.43.1] which the Corinthians portray as a general rule. There is some indication that Thucydides portrays such prerogatives as unreasonable as will be discussed later. However, he doesn’t seem to go so far as to indicate the effective meaninglessness of punishment in the absence of an established judge as Kant does.

51 This theme is echoed by Cleon, 3.37ff, who urges the Athenians not to let their discussion on the fate of the Mytilenians cloud their previous anger. Pericles defends deliberation at 2.40, claiming that at least in Athens, discussion is not enervating.

52 With adikountas, the concept of justice (dike) is again invoked with less ambiguity than “wrongdoer” might suggest.
worth and inviolability than fear for the security of the individual’s body, the anticipation of suffering, or existential diffidence.

In the debate at Sparta, we see a speech emphasizing caution and forbearance on the one hand, and one emphasizing punishment and reaction on the other. It is interesting that Archidamus’ speech against rushing to war, by dint of its theme of caution, is on the surface closer to Thucydides’ “truest explanation” than is the fiery speech of Sthenelaidas, whose only ostensible concern is with the injustice of Athens. Both speakers cast their positions as flowing from certain virtues and concerns with justice. If we accept Thucydides’ assessment about fear, we must suppose that it is fear that ultimately underlies Sthenelaidas’ indignation. Perhaps it is fear that Sthenelaidas appeals to with his talk of punishment. This in turn strengthens the suspicion that fear has two distinct effects upon the minds of men. The fear of Archidamus lends itself to caution and is prospective, taking the form of concern about fundamental security. The fear of Sthenelaidas appears as more apprehensive about other prospects, and as such doesn’t portray itself as fear at all.

We see other examples of the positive aspect of prospective fear in Hermocrates’ speech to the Syracusans, urging them to remember that “contempt of invaders is shown by valour in actual conflict, but that…preparations made with fear are safest [6.34.9];” and Archidamus himself speaking to his troops before battle, “oftentimes a smaller force, made cautious by fear, overmatches a larger number that is caught unprepared because it
despises the foe [2.11.4].” Sthenelaidas’ brand of anxiety devalues apprehensive calculation and excites what appears to be a rash decision. This bifurcation of fear has prompted some to attribute Hobbes’ treatment of fear to Thucydides, and indeed in the Epistle to the Reader in his own translation of the History, Hobbes comments that fear “for the most part adviseth well, though it execute not so.” To Gabriella Slomp, this suggests that for both Hobbes and Thucydides fear has “either a positive or negative effect on human deliberation, depending on its time-horizon.” For Hobbes this means that the existential fear, or diffidence of the state of nature is debilitating, whereas a generalized, prospective fear is what undergirds the Leviathan. Thus, among the passions that “inclineth man to peace,” the first is fear of death.

Yet Sthenelaidas doesn’t seem to demonstrate anything like Hobbes’ diffidence. Although he does urge what from Archidamus’ perspective is an anticipatory act, and is distinguished from Archidamus in his eschewal of treaty law, the time horizon in which Sthenelaidas acts is the same as Archidamus’ and most of the urgency of the situation is in fact created by his assertion that action and reaction ought not be mediated by deliberation. What separates the two approaches is Sthenelaidas’ prickly sensitivity to prerogative and status, as opposed to Archidamus’ caution and attention to obligation and the status quo.

---

53 See also Hermocrates’ use of the fear of uncertainty in Athenian meddling as an incentive for Sicily to unite and expel the Athenians, 4.63.
54 Slomp (1990) p 569.
55 Thucydides (1823) p ix.
57 Leviathan XIII p 188.
Sthenelaidas does not mention fear, yet Thucydides makes him the mouthpiece of a decision that he tells us is motivated primarily by fear. Thus we have something of a puzzle, and seeing this kind of disjuncture one can sympathize with the urge shown by so many commentators to treat the speeches at this assembly as mere window dressing disguising hard facts of power. Yet Thucydides elsewhere makes it clear when he believes an argument is given as sheer pretext,\(^{58}\) and he refrains from labeling Sthenelaidas’ speech as such. Thus the reader’s first impression—that Sthenelaidas’ speech is an important reflection of the “truest cause” of the war—is justified. We are directed to inquire into the nature of the relationship between what Thucydides has called ‘fear’ and justice as Sthenelaidas presents it. In particular, we must ask why fear, which is “least often advanced” appears instead in the form of a sense of indignant justice.

Thucydides’ division between spoken and unspoken explanations is reminiscent of the full context of Hobbes’ discussion of fear in his “Epistle to the Reader:”

"...for a man that reasoneth with himself, will not be ashamed to admit of timorous suggestions in his business, that he may the stronglier provide; but in public deliberations before a multitude, fear (which for the most part adviseth well though it execute not so) seldom or never sheweth itself, or is admitted.”\(^{59}\)

More interesting than the time horizon issue here is Hobbes’ suggestion that there is a difference between the motives avowable in public and by an individual to himself. Here he implies that groups of people are rendered imprudent by this phenomenon, and his

\(^{58}\) 1.126ff. This revolves around the curse on the family of Pericles and Athens’ rebuttal involving a curse on the family of Pausanias. Strauss (1964) p. 179 emphasizes that even these religious pretexts are given great weight at least in the amount of text Thucydides dedicates to the charges, but Thucydides does make the political intent of the religious charges evident [1.127].

\(^{59}\) Thucydides (1834) p ix.
critical turn towards emphasizing the individual has much to do with fostering this view of prudence.\textsuperscript{60} It appears that Thucydides agrees that the operation of fear at the level of the political body becomes transformed, and won’t likely be explicitly mentioned.

Nikias, well aware of this as he counsels against the invasion of Sicily, exhorts the responsible men of Athens “not to be shamed into fear lest he may seem to be a coward if he do[es] not vote for war…[6.13].” Once the political community has adopted an adversarial stance, it seems exceedingly difficult to appeal to fear-as-caution as a source of strategy. The individual is instead afraid of the shame that is expected to attend his advocacy of caution. In the end, Nikias loses out, as “on account of the exceeding eagerness (\textit{epithumia})\textsuperscript{61} of the majority, even if anyone was not satisfied, he held his peace in the fear that if he voted in opposition he might seem disloyal to the state [6.24].”

In the case of Sthenelaidas’ speech, the fear of the encroachment of Athens upon Sparta’s hegemonic turf is entirely expressible in terms of justice. The fear of Sparta as a city and hegemon is not the existential fear of Hobbes’ individual in the state of nature, but a fear of infringement upon the values of the political body as such: its status \textit{vis-a-vis} its numerous allies and its position as an autonomous great power within Greece that has ordered affairs as it has seen fit [1.76.1]. Sthenelaidas’ view effectively chooses “war over inferiority.”\textsuperscript{62} Archidamus looks beyond such fears to more elemental ones, conceiving the nature of war to be such that it might render Sthenelaidas’ fears trivial by

\textsuperscript{60} Strauss (1952) Ch. 4 argues that Hobbes’ turn towards the viewpoint of the individual is critical to supporting the modern conception of a calculating and materialistic “self-interest.” This suggests that communities as such are intrinsically oriented towards other, more problematic things.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Thumos}, or spirit is an important concept to Thucydides, who describes the ravages of the plague at Athens as resulting in \textit{athumia}, and the violence of civil conflict at Corcyra as being driven by \textit{prothumia}.

comparison to the unknown misfortunes ahead. Yet it appears that the political body
instinctively turns first to Sthenelaidas’ anxiety, his brand of fear.

It is here that the Athenians misjudged the effect of their deterrent speech: by
imagining that their brazen self-portrayal would elicit a more elemental fear in the
Spartans, they overlook the political body as Hobbes describes it above. Unless extreme
hardship turns it to more mundane concerns, the political body cannot admit to itself that
it is motivated primarily by fear, and cannot entertain such a self-conception.
Archidamus aside, the human mind has difficulty envisioning how things could be even
worse than the status quo, and thus Sthenelaidas’ and the Spartan majority’s reaction was
in all likelihood to be expected.63 The Athenian speech backfires because the discussion
of their broadly defined motives, including the desire to expand their rule, inspires a fear
in Sparta as a body politic by showing the Spartans that Athens has no respect for the
status quo. Thus the Spartans who, unlike their allies were not initially afraid of the
material fact of Athenian capabilities, are now afraid of a palpable Athenian threat to
Sparta’s political stature that has been brought out in their speech.64 At 1.90.1
Thucydides attributes Sparta’s actions to the instigation of their allies. That is to say,
Sparta’s “fear” is situated first and foremost in the fate of their hegemonic status.65

63 It is possible that the Athenians had no available argument to assuage Sparta’s fear rather than deter,
given that such a project would entail concessions that were incompatible with Athens’ own self-regard as
an agent motivated by something beyond fear (see, for example, Pericles’ comments at 1.141.1).
64 See Kauppi (1996).
65 The passage further makes clear that even among the fearful allies, it is the daring—the character—of
Athens that causes them fear.
It is the revelation of Athens’ character in both its own deterrent speech and its resonance with the description of the Corinthians that tips Sparta from one aspect of fear to another, from a cautious timidity to a vigilance regarding its status. This reflection goes some way towards explaining what appears from a historical perspective to be something of a mystery. According to the historical record the years preceding the Peloponnesian war did not see much expansion of the Athenian empire at all, calling into question Thucydides’ claim about the “truest explanation” being the “growth” of the empire, and the fear that it caused. In fact, as Thucydides’ own account shows, but does not explicitly point out, Athens embarks on no territorial conquest or seeks no allies between thirty years’ peace and Corcyra affair. What we do see is the consolidation of empire, and a more forcible subjugation of allies—Athens’ transition from head of an alliance to tyrant [1.96-99]. Athens had indeed been doubling or trebling the tribute levied from their allies and had established a range of oppressive practices within the Delian league that was so rapidly becoming an Athenian empire. Yet Thucydides is quite silent on these matters, as if to emphasize that any material fact of oppression is secondary to the underlying political fact of dominion.

If we read Sparta’s fear as a fear for its political prerogatives and stature, then the pieces fall into place. We see how both the recent activity of Athens as well as the modus operandi revealed by their speech cause sufficient fear in Sparta to act, activities

---

66 See the discussion in Romilly (1963) pp 70-97. Such perspectives attribute the cause of the war to the Megarian decree, i.e., an economic issue which Thucydides lists as only one among many pretexts at 1.139.
68 Romilly (1963) p. 20.
that reveal that their disposition is of more concern than their actual capacities. It is this
disposition, this daring (tolma), that had already caused Sparta’s allies to become
apprehensive [1.90].^69 It also becomes apparent how this fear appears in the language of
a particular sense of justice. In the assembly at Sparta, Thucydides reveals his great
emphasis on the political. The Athenian statement of broadly political goals—including
the pursuit of the city’s honor—inspires a political response.

What neither Sthenelaidas nor Archidamus do is argue that their subjective fear of
the growth of Athenian power is sufficient grounds for them to engage in war. To both
Spartans, fear as such is an inadequate casus belli. Even after the assembly of allies votes
for war, Sparta is still sufficiently insecure about the justice of the cause that they appeal
to the oracle at Delphi for approval. Although the oracle allegedly gives a blessing, the
Spartans are still troubled by the fact that they have likely been the first to breach the
treaty, a concern which affects their confidence throughout the first period of the war
[7.18]. From the Spartan perspective, fear does not justify transgression. In public,
honor precludes fear being given as grounds for policy. Moreover, their piety precludes
their conceiving of themselves—in principle at least, for things are quite different in
practice—as the final arbiter of the justice of their actions. On the former point, the
Athenians will show themselves to be somewhat confused. On the latter, they
unabashedly differ.

^69 On tolma see Forde (1986).
Fear as a Motivation for Athenian Actions

In their address to the Spartan Assembly, the Athenians claim that in acquiring their empire they were effectively compelled:

“we were driven at first to advance our empire to its present state, influenced chiefly by fear, then by honour also, and lastly by self-interest as well; and after we had incurred the hatred of most of our allies, and several of them had already revolted and been reduced to subjection, and when you were no longer friendly as before but suspicious and at variance with us, it no longer seemed safe to risk relaxing our hold [1.75].”

Athens wants to claim that the empire was consolidated initially out of fear of the Persians, yet given the resentment that rule necessarily elicits, they now have a wolf by the ears. The initial fear of Persia is inarguable, and Athens only took control of the allied Greek states when the initial leader, the Spartan Pausanias, turned out to be tyrannical and treasonous to an almost comical degree. The control of Greece simply fell into Athens’ lap, and given the precariousness of their security situation, Athens was doing “nothing remarkable or inconsistent with human nature [1.76.2]” in seizing upon the opportunity to try to guarantee their future security.

Yet the Athenians immediately proceed to seamlessly expand this idea of the mundane and presumably exculpatory characteristic of human nature. They return to the idea of the three greatest compulsions, this time referring to them as overpowering things70 and altering their order. Honor now comes first, followed by fear and then self interest or benefit. This sleight of hand is sufficiently well executed that Crawley does

---

70 Nikethentes, or “vanquishing things.” This is typically loosely translated as “motive” but such obviously misses the stress that the Athenians wish to place on powerlessness of the will in the face of these things.
not faithfully render it, instead repeating the ordering first given by the Athenian speakers. One might argue that this is an excessive parsing, yet Thucydides has the speakers very carefully use words indicating ordinal or temporal ranking in their first utterance of the three motives, and the Athenians quickly move on to proclaim their peculiar worthiness of having landed in this situation, suggesting that this second list of the motives involved in maintaining empire—as opposed to stumbling into it—is indeed somewhat different.

The Athenians announce that they are worthy of empire because while no one ever abstained from acquiring something available to them through force for the sake of justice, “they are to be commended who, by yielding to the instinct of human nature to rule over others, have been more observant than they might have been, considering their power [1.76.3].” Here the inexorable pull of human instinct is towards ruling others, something that may or may not be a derivative of fear. In the first line of argument taken, Athens wants first to argue that actions made out of fear are understandable, not contrary to the imperatives of human nature and thus presumably forgivable. The insecurity of Greece, combined with the necessary control—and thus necessary resentment—of their subordinate allies would lead any state in this situation to act as Athens has acted. According to this reasoning, the Spartans should perhaps be wary of overturning Athenian dominance lest they end up in the same situation. The argument continues

71 Deous, epeita kai times, husteron kai wphelia. Cornford (1907) p. 11 takes time to be “the first of the...motives which the Athenians allege as compelling them to retain the position they had won.”
72 To the credit of the Athenian speakers, we must remember Sparta’s leadership of the Greek alliance was relinquished not out of an aversion to rule but because Pausanias’ tyranny was so overweening and
beyond the topic of fear, however. The speakers want to claim that following the dictates of the other two motives is equally mundane and thus unsurprising, understandable, and forgivable, employing a philosophy of *tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner.*

To Spartans already reluctant to embrace fear as a casus belli, this must truly seem shocking, so why has this line of argument been taken? It is easy to imagine transgressions which can be forgiven on account of fear but in no way can in be forgiven when done out of a desire for honor—that is unless one removes a sense of free will altogether. The Athenian desire to exonerate the desires for honor and benefit indicates that they have indeed become serious motives in their own right.

Yet the idea of honor does not sit well with the idea of compulsion, and it is indeed strange that it would require such exculpation in the first place. Shouldn’t we expect that actions taken out of a sense of honor would have—to some degree at least—some kind of self-evident goodness about them? Honor in fact often implies an ability to escape the hypothetical imperatives of a narrow selfishness, which in turn implies the exercise of a will that is able to overcome narrow self-interest for the sake of other goods. The Athenian speaker Pericles, for example, praises Athens’ ability to rise above petty calculation [2.40], and claims that the greatest honors come from willing exposure to the greatest risks [1.144]. Elsewhere Athenians deride the Spartans’ inability to see beyond their narrow self interest. Spartans are allegedly incapable of separating the just from incompetently it was overturned [1.95]. The speakers are also prescient in that by the end of the war when Athens’ decline is at hand, the Spartans immediately formulate plans for dominance of all Greece. Forde (1995) p. 151.

For discussions of the various implications of this argument see Forde (1995), Bruell (1981; 1974).
immediate inclination [5.105.4]. Their attachment to the concept of honor, and their desire to proclaim themselves worthy to rule and not simply creatures of their environment lead the Athenian speakers to partially undermine their “tout comprendre” argument. It is somehow important to the Athenian spirit to claim room for a free will to operate and demonstrate that it can be “more just than it has to be.”

The speakers attempt to reconcile the tension between their two arguments by presenting the menu of free choices as limited and situated within a broader context of compulsion. This construction demonstrates again the strange nature of fear as a ground for political action. The dangerousness of the world and imperative nature of self-preservation point towards the use of fear as a justification, yet the political actor seems otherwise pained to have to admit such a banal weakness. By dint of this Athenian candor, we glimpse the nature of fear as justificatory on the one hand, and as being eventually overshadowed by other motivations with the growth of empire. Yet at the same time it still lurks ambiguously as a rationale for action. By virtue of their skeptical re-assessment of the applicability of justice in the world (and much like a Machiavellian or Hobbesian political thinker), Athens feels entitled to call upon the nature of fear to exonerate them in a way that Sparta does not. And yet it seems nonetheless important for Athenians to understate the compulsory nature of fear in the last analysis, much as Sthenelaidas has avoided the topic altogether.

---

75 This separation is a major theme in Thucydides’ political philosophy and will be treated extensively later.
We do see an unadulterated argument for the exculpatory nature of fear in the speech of Euphemus at Camarina. But here it is interesting that the most unvarnished statement of international politics being driven by a compelling fear is given in a rather disingenuous manner. This speech, in which fear explains all of Athens’ actions, is intended to deceive the Camarinians into believing that Athens has no design to subjugate Sicily. In a world rife with eternal ethnic enmity [6.82], Athens seeks to provide for nothing more than its own safety, and looks to “liberate” Sicily (presumably from Syracuse) only in order to escape subjugation itself and thereby avoid harm [6.87]. Yet later we learn that Athens plans to subjugate Sicily as part of a scheme to rule all of Greece and perhaps beyond [6.90]. Thus the clearest statement about an unmediated link between insecurity and offensive action is placed in a piece of rhetoric that is meant both to assuage the fears of the listeners and obscure true intentions.

Euphemus aside, for whatever reason, the Athenians cannot rest simply on the argument that actions taken out of fear are excusable. This is in part because of the deterrent intent behind their speech: Athens can present itself as less susceptible to coercion if it is not too attached to security narrowly construed. But on the other hand, this passage also shows the importance of the liberty to be ‘more just than they have to be’ and a sense of worthiness are to the Athenian self-understanding. It seems that the Athenians, like the Spartans, prefer not to conceive of their city as being motivated

---

76 According to many sources, including Strauss (1964), Euphemus is a likely invention of Thucydides. This would fit with the irony in his name.
77 In general Thucydides underplays the salience of ethnic bonds and tensions, see Romilly (1963) p 83-84.; also, the Melians illustrate the futility of putting stock in common blood with tragic poignancy at 5.108. Euphemus himself only emphasizes a negative aspect of particularism, for he joins the many in the *History* who claim that there is no natural bond between any men whatsoever [6.85.1].
wholly by fear, although from their more self-entitling perspective they may be more likely to exploit its justificatory nature. Their attempt to exonerate themselves by the argument from necessity clashes with their desire to regard the city as a free agent, capable of effecting good and bad in the world according to their own judgment.

In fact, for the most part the Athenian leader Pericles celebrates the Athenian empire as a freely chosen project throughout his first two speeches: one urging Athens not to submit to Spartan demands; a second celebrating Athens as something worthy of the sacrifices that come with war because of the great honor it allegedly affords each citizen. In the early stages of the war, fear appears only as the motive that ought not to be followed. In Pericles’ defiant first speech, fear appears as that motive that would cause the city to ignobly yield to unreasonable demands [1.140-41]. Fear appears twice in this passage, both times as the motive that must not be acted upon. Only in his third speech, pressed by the hardships of Spartan invasions of Attica and the ravages of a plague throughout the cooped-up population of Athens, does Pericles portray the city’s situation as one in which fear should dictate the course of action.  

“Nor must you think that you are fighting for the simple issue of slavery or freedom; on the contrary, loss of empire is also involved and danger from the hatred incurred in your sway. From this empire, however, it is too late for you even to withdraw, if any one at the present crisis, through fear and shrinking from action does indeed seek thus to play the philanthropist; for by this time the empire you hold is [like] a tyranny, which it may seem wrong to have assumed but which is certainly dangerous to let go [2.63].”

---

78 See the discussion in Orwin (1997).
79 Pericles introduces a neologism andragathizetai, I have inserted Pouncey’s (1980) p.101 “play the philanthropist” for Smith’s “play the honest man.”
80 Smith omits the hws, (as/like) which qualifies Pericles’ judgment.
Pericles counters the public anger with his passive war policies and the Athenians’ “unreasonable dejection [2.62]” regarding the plague with an image of imperialism as a dangerous dilemma. Athens will be legitimately threatened by the hatred of its subjects if it ever relinquishes its hold on them. It is only at this moment of extreme political necessity that Pericles lays bare this aspect of their situation. Yet he immediately muddies the water by suggesting that those conciliatory types who “play the philanthropist” might have good advice for a “vassal state,” but not for an imperial power. Doesn’t this imply that being a smaller player is a viable survival strategy, and that there isn’t necessarily such a mortal risk associated with relinquishing imperial control? Doesn’t this in turn imply that the value justifying the risks of empire is something other than safety? And indeed, Pericles wraps up the speech on a high note, reminding Athens that the hatred of its subjects will not last long, but rather, the lasting effect of their imperialistic exploits will be an eternal afterglow of fame [2.64].

By implying that imperial powers have more to fear than small or weak states, Pericles begs the question of what exactly is feared. Are we to think that resentful subjects will exact a cruel revenge wherever possible, or just that they will assert their independence wherever possible, and that imperial states thus place targets on their own backs? These two phenomena imply very different kinds of fear: existential insecurity, or the diffidence of Hobbes’ state of nature on the one hand; fear of losing things for which one has developed an attachment, on the other. If the latter situation applies, then the

---

81 Pericles has also scrupulously avoided speaking of empire at all in the first two speeches, except in a negative sense of “don’t expand it” at 1.144.1. See Pouncey (1980) pp. 100-101.
various Athenian arguments that seek to derive moral implications from the compulsory nature of fear seem to intentionally obscure this difference.

It is worthwhile then to look at a second instance of the Athenians’ “fear” of their subjects. In the famous Melian dialogue, Athenian representatives give their most unvarnished and unpitying statement of their theory about the compulsory nature of the appetites and the subsequent limits of justice and honorable action in the world—the so-called “Athenian thesis.” At its core, the argument given to the Melians is that it is Athens’ desire to subjugate the island and that it is simply the nature of things that “the strong do what they will; the weak suffer what they must.” The Athenians attempt to convince the Melians that acquiescing to this reality is in their true interest, for an adherence to any conception of justice will be to no avail. The reality of the situation is that the Melians are in no position to ask questions, and the parameters of the discussion have been constrained by the facts on the ground and quite literally set by Athens. The Athenians wish to portray their need to subjugate Melos as inexorable—a moral fait accompli so to speak—and then forbid the Melians to even discuss the issue of justice [5.89]. The real moral issue at hand, the justice of Athens’ gratuitous annexation, is taken off the table before the discussion even begins.

However, the Athenians in rejecting the Melians’ offer of friendly neutrality do venture an additional justification: that Melos’ very existence as an autonomous island within a maritime empire is a threat to Athens, for it implies the Athenians are incapable or reluctant to subdue it [5.97]. Fear is in some sense magnified or extended for an

---

82 5.89, Crawley’s translation.
imperial power and becomes fear of appearing afraid.\textsuperscript{83} Beyond this, their reasoning also seems to presuppose that all actors seek (or are expected to seek) to aggressively alter the status quo unless checked by fear—something of an inversion of Sparta’s willingness to act only upon overwhelming evidence of threat. That is, the Athenians presuppose that the default activity of mankind is acquisitiveness, and thus any limit to expansion must imply fear. Amazingly, though, the Athenians have already revealed that they do not fear the end of their empire and subjugation to the Spartans, whom they portray as more kind to the vanquished than former subjects would be [5.91]. This is a rather baffling statement. Does Athens really existentially fear their weak Aegean subjects more than the great power of the Peloponnesians? This is difficult to imagine, since the main threat of the islanders is elsewhere presented as their ability to side with the Spartans, rather than inflicting any serious harm in their own right.\textsuperscript{84} What Athens seems to be admitting is that it is willing to run the risk of subjugation to Sparta (by frightening the rest of Greece into rallying behind it) for a shot at glorious dominion. Yet the fear justification is still at play, even though by this point fear has been transformed into an anxiety for the future enjoyment of dominion or mastery.

\textsuperscript{83} Lebow (1984) calls this ‘the paranoia of the powerful’ and attributes it to the symbolic assertion of power as a remedy for a decline in real power. This is, perhaps, too rational an account insofar as the symbolic assertion is directly instrumental to assuaging another very real fear. It isn’t clear, however, that Athens’ power is so diminished at this point—it has, after all, just pulled off a major coup against Sparta at Sphacteria. A comparison with the Mitylenian affair does suggest, however, that some kind of moral decline has taken place in Athens since the early portion of the war which has perhaps eroded the barriers to this exorbitant “fear” which in truth looks more like an inability to accept human limitations.

\textsuperscript{84} For example, Cleon finds Mytilene’s desire to defect to be grounded in the desire to harm Athens by siding with Sparta. Likewise do the envoys at Sparta feel that the real threat of defection is the polar opposition with Sparta 1.76.4, something Thucydides himself alludes to in 1.1 when he points out that one of the “significant” elements of the war was the bipolarity of the Greek world.
The connection between existential fear and this cultivated fear has become tenuous, as has the moral reasoning that is derived from the character of existential fear. The revelation that the Athenians’ fear not to be feared shows their attachment to a mastery of their environment, to their ability to demonstrate that they are not constrained by anything, but rather carry on uninhibited with what they now conceive to be the default human activity of imperial acquisition. However much the desire for mastery may grow out of a more elemental fear, once mastery is approached, the concerns of the political community seem to expand to the point where they change qualitatively. With a change in condition comes a change in fundamental perspective, and in this manner, perhaps, success leads to hubris.

It appears to be characteristic of fear, as revealed in the speech of the Athenians at Sparta, that it lurks in the background as a justification because its salience wanes by imperceptible increments. The beginning of the Athenian argument regarding their fear of Persia is plausible enough, yet the Athenians smoothly segue into talk of other motivations, different modes of compulsion, and different senses of fear altogether. This is done in such a way that fear is left undisturbed in its role as a mainspring of action and a justification for it. As such, fear can be returned to, as in Pericles’ final speech, or by the envoys to Melos, whenever they see fit to abandon the attempt to present Athens in a more honorific light. We cannot doubt Pericles’ claim that there is some real risk posed to Athens by rebelling subjects; however, to envision a scenario in which Athens is inexorably thrust into the severe dangers of imperialism through their very attempts to escape the perils of subjection is a tale too tragic to be plausible. Not least among our
sources of doubt is Pericles’ acknowledgment that while it may have been unjust to acquire this empire, it is simply too late for such discussions. He thus implies that at some point their expansion was an injustice not attributable to necessity. All of this points to a motive or motives beyond fear operating alongside it, which take the reins at times, or more interestingly, which co-opt fear’s psychic urgency and imperious nature and apply it to new objects. With its acclimation to mastery of its environment, Athens focuses its fear on the loss of this mastery, something that may or may not—as the Athenians themselves admit—pose a direct bodily danger to the citizenry.

**Conclusion**

It has been said of realists like Hobbes and Thucydides that they are concerned that the troughs of politics are lower than the peaks are high.\(^5\) This is certainly the view of Archidamus, whose mundane caution seems to look down towards maintaining the basic material grounds of human well being. Not so with Sthenelaidas, whose preoccupation with concepts of transgression and punishment overshadow his calculative faculties to such a degree that he even seems to subordinate the feasibility of war to the moral imperative of striking at Athens. Sthenelaidas, then, is looking up to more cultivated and socially situated values like status or prerogative. Such values depend upon stability at the level of mundane and bodily things, but ironically threaten to subvert it through bellicosity. The Athenians, while professing to be grounded in the most stringent

---

\(^5\) Orwin (1996).
realism, reveal in their logical incoherence that they are in fact in the same plane as Sthenelaidas. They too, look upwards and are attracted to a cultivated notion of an absolute inviolability of the body politic and a subsequent desire to expand their control and dominion.

To be clear, Thucydides never seems to imply that the difficulties of politics would be entirely avoided if this cultivated sensitivity were held in check. As the Corinthians point out, Sparta’s policy wouldn’t likely grant them peace even if their neighbors were like them, i.e., adherents of the status quo. A kernel of legitimate concern for basic security does lies at the core of the concern for what we call “interest,” yet around it concerns of different kinds accumulate. Thus an elemental security dilemma is exacerbated by expanded motives. With the expansion of its power, the political community enjoys the liberty of controlling its environment. Liberty and mastery become conflated and the city in turn comes to conceive of itself as something that escapes subjugation to necessity. It conceives of itself as being motivated by higher things than fear. It is a common axiom of political realism that with the growth of power comes an accompanying growth in interests. Thucydides puts forth his own version of this observation in a way that lays bare the internal character of the phenomenon. As it becomes more competent in dealing with the externalities of a strategic environment, the political community internally develops the desire to cease being the creature of its environment and become its creator. What is significant and perhaps unique in Thucydides’ account is this depiction of a qualitative transformation of motives from
elemental concerns to political commitments that might otherwise be glossed over with the terminology of expanding “interests.”

Fear by itself only indirectly and inadequately explains Sparta’s decision to go to war. Athens makes it clear that it is motivated by the desire for honor and gain as well. Both cases illustrate that for Thucydides the stakes of war are highly political in the sense that they are concerned with hierarchical relationships just as much as they are with safety or security. Security issues are intertwined with desires for the liberty to act without restraint, mastery of the environment, and the honors which attend status and prerogative. For this reason, Thucydides’ account of the mainsprings of international politics does not stop at fear, but includes the famous additions of honor and gain. More importantly, Thucydides draws our attention to a difference between the prudential realism of Archidamus’ sobriety, and the doctrinal realism of the Athenians’ realpolitik that serves as a fig leaf for their constellation of problematic ambitions. Thus Thucydides simultaneously challenges the adequacy of reductive realist theories at a theoretical level; and at a moral level alerts us to the deceiving and self-deceiving characteristics of realism as a doctrine.
Acquisitiveness tends to be treated in contemporary thinking about international relations in two ways. The acquisition of wealth has largely been regarded as instrumental to the acquisition of power in the old realpolitik tradition, and so it remains in contemporary descriptive realism, which is focused primarily on security as a prime mover of politics. On the other hand, the liberal tradition ascribes a pacifying effect of the acquisition of wealth: whether it is through softening mores, “satisfying” people materially and psychically (as in the work of Montesquieu, Aron, or Rawls)\(^1\), or by building stabilizing systems of economic interdependency. A third approach, which derives aggression from acquisitiveness—such as that of Lenin or Machiavelli—has fallen out of favor.

Given Thucydides’ placement of “benefit” (*ophelia*) beside fear and honor as one of the greatest human motivations,\(^2\) we might initially place Thucydides at least partly in this last category emphasizing economic causes for aggression, yet much of the time his treatment of economic motivation places him much closer to the realpolitik camp. The desire for material wealth is not portrayed as a sufficient cause of Athenian imperialism, but rather a mere part of a more grandiose “desire for more.” While Thucydides certainly portrays the growth of wealth as concomitant with some degree of a pacification of

---

\(^1\) Rawls (1999) p. 19 captures most of these causal mechanisms of international liberalism.

\(^2\) “Motives” is a rather weak rendering of the language the Athenians use here—*nikethentes* literally means ‘conquerors’ and is idiomatically used in classical Greek to indicate overpowering passions. This of course aligns perfectly with the Athenians’ overall justification of their empire: that necessity has driven them to it and it should be accepted as an inevitability that is neither “remarkable nor inconsistent with human nature [1.76].”
mankind, this is largely because it has been a critical component of the power that subdued the ancient anarchy. Nowhere does Thucydides suggest that wealth itself has the power alter man’s inclinations in a peaceful direction. Rather, Thucydides’ nuanced treatment shows that a comfortable “surplus” (*periousia*) of wealth over the subsistence level frees men to focus their attention upon what one might call “post-material” concerns. The wealthy, by dint of their wealth, become free to disregard the pragmatic underpinnings of mundane life, for better or for worse.³

This somewhat paradoxical phenomenon points towards Thucydides’ complex understanding of the ways in which the burdens of political life are justified in the eyes of individuals. This chapter will spell out Thucydides’ partial kinship with the realpolitik tradition with regard to the subordination of acquisitiveness to power, and then move on to his portrayal of Periclean Athens as largely attempting to transcend materialistic calculation altogether. In Thucydides’ treatment of man’s connection to material things we will ultimately see a picture of political association justifying itself by something beyond the promise of wealth and safety. Instead, the strongest case the body politic can make for itself is its ability to grant the collectivity a freedom unavailable to individuals: an albeit partial and illusory freedom from the limitations of the body. In turn, we are led to see how such a conception of liberty leads to the desire to be free from the necessities imposed by the bodies and wills of others—a desire that perhaps finds its greatest satisfaction in empire.

³ There is a considerable body of work in comparative politics, especially in the work of Ronald Inglehart, correlating “self-expression values,” i.e., post-material concerns such as liberty and personal fulfillment, with economic development.
Thucydides’ Omission of Economics

The desire for gain is famously given a prominent position in Athens’ description of its aims, yet the pursuit of benefit or self-interest is mentioned as the third—and explicitly last⁴—of the compelling motives by the Athenian speakers at Sparta [1.75]. While the concept of ophelia that they elicit has a very broad range of meanings, from assistance to plunder, the fact that it is distinguished from fear and honor indicates that this is a reference to that domain of self–interest independent of personal security or self-worth. Its status as a mere part of a triad of largely self-serving motives seems to imply that ophelia in this context is “self-interest” in a rather narrow sense.⁵ Thucydides is inclined to disaggregate basic motives, which distinguishes him from many more reductive theorists who ultimately ground concepts of “self-interest” in security.⁶ Ophelia’s position as last of the motives (it remains in the third position in both of the Athenians’ statements, 1.75; 1.76) is borne out by the rest of the History.

This approach has led to generations of historians and classicists chastising Thucydides for his inattention to alleged economic motives behind Athenian imperialism.⁷ Some scholars—apparently assuming that costly and damaging wars must

---

⁴ The statement at 1.75 uses language indicating ordinal ranking.
⁵ This is also the assessment of Romilly (1963). The word itself is used in a more general sense in other contexts throughout the text.
⁶ See, for example, the work of Kenneth Waltz and neorealism more generally.
⁷ For much of this section I am indebted to the discussion in Romilly (1963) pp. 70-97. Her treatment here is especially helpful for lending one confidence to say what is not in Thucydides’ text. Because so many commentators seamlessly work in outside historiography (e.g. Doyle, Grene, Kagan) regarding shipping routes, exchange rates and the like, it takes a certain amount of careful reading to realize that Thucydides is not overly interested in such things. Even if, as Cornford suggests, Thucydides is woefully ignorant of economics, one must still try to discover whether there is a workable coherence to Thucydides’ treatment as it is, without supplying dynamics that are not there.
have been arrived at by irrational decision-making processes—have attributed the apparent irrationality of the war to parochial economic interests that managed to get the ear of Pericles.\footnote{Such is the view of Cornford (1907) ch. 3. See Doyle (1997) p. 66; Smith (1940) p. 294. Of course the fact that wars are costly does not necessarily mean that they won’t happen, as Norman Angell discovered in 1914.} Others have argued that grain shipping routes were the main stakes in conflicts between any powers in Greece at the time.\footnote{see discussion in Romilly (1963) p. 71.} Indeed, grain is a likely concern and what one might call an occasional cause for Athenian action, for there is clear overlap between theaters of military activity and places that are known to have been major sources of Athens’ or Sparta’s sustenance.\footnote{Romilly (1963) p. 71.} This includes Egypt, which Athens invades in the \textit{Fifty Years}\footnote{That is, the \textit{Pentecontaetia}, which is the classicists’ title for the digression [1.89-1.118] explaining Athens’ growth in the fifty years prior to 431BC, which is the year in which the primary narrative picks up.} upon the invitation of a local faction [1.109-10], and Sicily, which becomes a focus for Athenian expansion in Book Six. It is also likely that conflict points at the mouth of the Black Sea and in Chalcidice (Halkidiki) were of commercial significance. Thucydides has in fact already told us in the Archaeology that the Attic countryside around Athens was particularly useless for agriculture, spurring Athens to look to the sea and commerce for almost everything, which in turn implies a serious commitment to the maintenance of favorable commercial conditions.

Thucydides, however, says almost nothing about grain supplies, and certainly neglects to associate such factors with these geographic points of contention. In fact, the only time that the control of grain routes appears as an explicit concern for Athens, the
objective at hand is the strategic one of disrupting Spartan supply chains [3.86.4]. The same can be said of concerns for timber, which appears as valuable only for the construction of ships which were instrumental to further imperialistic exploits, as in Alcibiades’ revelation of the Athenians’ rationale for the invasion of Sicily [6.90].

Also striking is Thucydides’ near silence regarding what appear in other texts to be a significant cause of the Peloponnesian war: the Megarian decrees. Aristophanes, Plutarch, and Diodorus each state that the decrees which barred Megara’s access to the market at Piraeus and eventually the entire Athenian empire, were the main point of contention during the negotiations between Athens and Sparta in 431. Cornford sides with Plutarch and the others regarding the significance of the Megarian decrees, but instead of agreeing that the origin of the decrees lay in Pericles’ unexplained and irrational hatred of Megara, speculates that the class of wealthy merchants must have cajoled Pericles into pursuing the policy.

Thucydides, on the other hand, not only explicitly claims that parochial interests were marginalized in Periclean Athens [2.65], but he relegates the Megara issue to part of a bundle of pretexts (prophaseis) that the Spartans bring to superficially justify the war

12 This is by Romilly’s count, (1963) p. 71. In addition to this, I find a few general references to grain commerce, one of which might indirectly imply a casus belli. At 1.120.2 the Corinthian ambassadors argue that inland cities have as much a stake as coastal cities in holding fast with Sparta and avoid Athenian dominance, because if Athens controls the coasts, it will necessarily control the access the inland cities have to markets. It is unclear, however, whether from a pure economic perspective such Athenian control would be undesirable, and thus we cannot know precisely on what grounds Athenian control would be objectionable.
13 Cornford (1907) p. 25. Cornford agrees with these three over Thucydides, reiterating the baffling yet common practice of using the authority of Plutarch (46-120 AD) to contest contemporary observations of Thucydides. In general Cornford justifies this anachronism by making claims about Thucydides’ “blindness” or inadequate understanding of non-psychological, i.e. economic, causation (see Preface, Ch. 14).
Rather than imputing economic interests or the anger of Pericles, Thucydides merely attributes Athens’ wrath to improper territorial acquisitions by Megara and their harboring of runaway slaves [1.139]. While the Spartans claim that war can be avoided if the Megara issue is addressed [1.139], Pericles tells the Athenian assembly that if Athens backs down on this issue, she will only face more demands [1.140.5]. Given that Thucydides tells us that the Spartans are at this juncture busy concocting pretexts for war, it is plausible enough that Pericles is correct in assuming that accommodation would not yield peace. All the same, it is odd that Thucydides is so silent on what must have been commonly perceived to be a cause of the war. As Cornford argues, for Aristophanes to offhandedly refer to the Megarian decree as the cause of the war in his play the Acharnians, he must have assumed the public wouldn’t find the connection a radical one.14 Yet there are good reasons to doubt Aristophanes’ association of the decrees with the outbreak of the war. One study points out that Acharnians is the first piece of literature to intimately place the decrees at the outbreak of the war, yet the play was written a decade later, and Aristophanes’ text implies that the decrees were really in place for some time before the escalation towards war in 432.15 If the embargo against Megara had already been accepted by the Spartans, it could at best constitute a background complaint against Athens, and not a true cause of war. Other evidence within the History seems to support Thucydides’ claim that the decrees were mainly a pretext for the Spartans. For example, Thucydides comments that the real damage that Athens inflicts

14 See Cornford (1907) ch. 3 for an account of the Megarian decree and its legacy.
15 Brunt (1951).
on Megara was because of Athenian incursions and blockades, implying that by comparison the trade embargo had been ineffective [4.66].

At any rate, Thucydides does not portray the likely objectives of a merchant class as having any decisive influence upon foreign policy at Athens. What then, about the demos, the lower classes? Plutarch portrays Athenian imperialism as at least partially motivated by Pericles’ desire to demonstrate his populist bona fides through appropriating vast sums of money from the allies and lavishing it on the people. Moreover, Thucydides does show a desire for riches as contributing to the demos’ desire to carry out the (perhaps) foolhardy Sicilian expedition [6.24]. Yet the significance of this fact is qualified in two senses. In this passage Thucydides portrays the diverse desires of all the people of Athens, who have “fallen in love” with the idea of invading Sicily. Old men seek victory, younger men seek adventure, and the common soldiers seek both immediate riches and a rule that will ensure future riches. Athens chronically “grasps at more” [4.21.2; 4.41.4] and the acquisitiveness of Athens as described by Corinth [1.68 ff] is certainly borne out by the facts, repeatedly. But we see that this wanting more (pleonexia) in the longing for the Sicilian expedition is really a general desire for all forms of aggrandizement—a phenomenon of which the desire for material goods is only one part. Moreover, despite Athens’ democratic nature, we hear in an unusually authoritative—and rarely quoted—statement towards the end of the History that all along imperialism seems to have been driven mainly by the aristocratic classes [8.48.6].

See the general discussion of the likely ineffectiveness of the decrees in Brunt (1951) 276-77.

This observation contradicts a clear thread of historiography that associates the aristocratic factions in Athens with anti-imperialism. Such treatment appears in the work of Grene, for example, who clearly makes this connection on the basis of sources exterior to the History.\textsuperscript{18} Regarding the oligarchic coup in Athens in 411, Thucydides makes it quite clear that the oligarchs’ first desire is to maintain the empire, but that they are also willing to abandon it if they must do so in order to maintain control within the city. This of course only tells us that unlike the democrat, the oligarch may still content himself by exercising dominion at home and thus may not be totally dependent upon empire for such satisfactions.\textsuperscript{19} The democracy, perhaps, has no such option, and is thus more committed to empire, especially so long as liberty is associated with rule, for liberty-via-rule is the minimal goal of both the demos and the oligarchs [8.91.3]. Thus while we see various cleavages between the demos and the aristocratic classes, this does not coincide in Thucydides’ account with an imperialist/anti-imperialist divide.

Yet regarding this question of the Demos’ vested interests, Thucydides also seems to commit something tantamount to a sin of omission. Romilly points out that imperialism was in fact greatly beneficial to the demos at Athens, not only through the practice of ample compensation for soldiers—which Thucydides addresses only indirectly by discussing the per diem costs of naval expeditions [e.g. 6.8; 6.31]—but through a variety of tributes on allies and the imposition of cleruchies. The cleruchy, unlike the traditional Greek colony which maintained political autonomy, was a new kind

\textsuperscript{18} (1950) p. 46. Some classicists and historians consider Book 8 of the History to be apocryphal or at least unreliable, thus the passage in question is rarely quoted, or even discussed, despite the fact that it presents an unusually clear statement from Thucydides. This clarity is itself a cause of suspicion.\textsuperscript{19} A value which we may tentatively put forward as the \textit{summum bonum} in Periclean Athens.
of settlement over which Athens retained political control, expanding direct power into the territory of subordinate states. The Athenians even turned the payment of tribute into a grand spectacle of subservience wherein ambassadors publicly offered their payment to the demos in the theater of Dionysus in a ceremony that prompted Aristophanes to comment that the Athenians must have been trying to maximize hatred towards themselves.

It also appears from extant tribute lists that the imposition of tributes increased dramatically in the years preceding the war, including at Potidaea in the two years prior to its revolt from Athens. Despite the palpable economic benefits to the demos, and the resentment it garnered among the allies, Thucydides does not see fit to attribute Athenian imperialism or the conflict it engenders to the desire of elites to placate the masses through enrichment. Neither do we see allies frame their objection to Athenian heavy-handedness in economic terms, although such must have been the subject of the legal disputes that are mentioned as symptoms of discontent [1.77]. Nor do any Athenians base arguments for expansion on economic considerations, or even bring up the economic benefits of empire to the demos, aside from Pericles’ passing boast that the fruits of the world can be found in Athens’ markets [2.38]. Discussion of policy in Athens is always on a political plane that is distinct from the economic, and the “interest”

---

20 Romilly op cit p. 74-5. See for example, Athens’ dividing the Lesbian territory into cleruchies at 3.50 as punishment for the Mytilenian revolt.
21 Romilly op cit.
22 Smith (1940) p.288.
23 Here is a small example of the kind of fact that is tempting to the seeker of economic causes, but that Thucydides omits: Athenians at this time had apparently become accustomed to Sicilian delicacies. Smith (1940) p. 292.
of Athens is conceived of in terms of either safety or a generalized aggrandizement in which the desire for material wealth is intermixed with, but overshadowed by, the desire for power, a secure liberty, and honor.

Thucydides is not blind to the concept of parochial interest dictating policy. He portrays this as a feature of tyranny [1.17], and more significantly, a feature of post-Periclean Athens [2.65]. The salience of parochial interest appears, however, as a sort of pathology or degradation of politics, be it ever so common. In its ideal form, Thucydides’ political community has a genuine common interest. Whatever this is, it stands in contrast to both the pettiness of tyranny and the general chaos of unaligned individual interests that shows itself in the final book of the History. After the death of Pericles, Athens lost its sense of common cause and was led astray by individuals pursuing wealth and honor [2.65]. Interestingly, however, the most prominent cases of the conflict between individual ambitions and the common good revolve more around issues of honor, and not wealth, although the two are often connected. The most striking case is that of Alcibiades, whose ambitions facilitated the ill-advised invasion of Sicily [6.15]. Alcibiades is clearly among those whom Thucydides has in mind as he blames the private pursuit of honor and wealth for the downfall of Athens [2.65 with 6.15].

Elsewhere we see an interesting and problematic interplay between private honor and the

---

24 To Pouncey (1980) the confusing character of Book 8 illustrates the chaos of individual ambitions and the subsequent lack of anything worthy of mention, which contrasts with the formation of communities in Book 1 and the concerted action of cities and alliances at the outset of the war. Book 8 is then the final stage in a cyclical “progress of pessimism” that undoes the political accomplishments of the past.

25 This blame is shared by those who recalled Alcibiades from Syracuse, as well as those who engaged in faction. We know this because elsewhere Thucydides implies that the Sicilian expedition would have succeeded with Alcibiades’ leadership, and thus the downfall of the empire cannot be blamed simply on Alcibiades’ encouragement of this enterprise.
public good in the stories of Demosthenes and Nikias.\textsuperscript{26} The interests of individuals can even perhaps prolong war by Thucydides’ account, as is the case with the violent Cleon and honor-seeking Brasidas, whose deaths help facilitate the peace of Nikias that divides the two parts of the war [5.16]. Nonetheless, such factors play at best a contributing role in the overall state of conflict, they focus on individual ambition rather than class-conscious economic interests, and Thucydides is loath to attribute the actions of Athens or Sparta to the desires of individuals.

The emerging pattern is that not only does Thucydides fail to attribute imperialism and the conflict it engenders to economic motives, but he systematically underreports or flat-out omits even what might appear to be quite relevant economic issues, like the Megarian decrees or the steep increase of tributes imposed upon Potidaea. He makes no mention of the decree of Thudippus, which steeply raises tributes throughout the empire after Demosthenes and Cleon’s victory at Pylos.\textsuperscript{27} To some this implies a certain confusion in Thucydides’ appreciation of economic motives,\textsuperscript{28} but Thucydides has already opened the book with what he seems to present as an unorthodox thesis: that the true basis of power—or anything worth talking about (\textit{axiologon}) for that

\textsuperscript{26}That is, in the case of the general Demosthenes, who dishonorably ignored his recall in order to better serve Athens, and the general Nikias, whose commitment to traditional propriety rendered him incapable of making a pragmatic and essential retreat.

\textsuperscript{27}Kagan (2009) p. 138. Kagan notes that this is part of a broader disjuncture between Thucydides’ account of Cleon and reality. Cleon, described as ‘the most violent’ man in Athens was celebrated as a hero after Pylos and enjoyed more influence and respect than any Athenian leader since Pericles.

\textsuperscript{28}Such is the gist of Smith (1940), who lays out an excellent account of Thucydides’ consistent treatment of economic motives as instrumental to the acquisition of power, yet does not seem to derive this thesis from the facts, or Starr (1978) who finds Thucydides’ treatment partial and inferior to that of the Pseudo-Xenophon who does make more assertive claims about economic motives behind imperialism.
matter—is money. It seems, rather, that Thucydides is consciously underemphasizing certain economic issues in order to preempt what he anticipates will be a commonly-pursued red herring. Thus he clears the way for his own presentation of economic motives being bound up with the ambition to rule, or instrumental to the acquisition of power for the sake of that ambition.

Wealth and Power

What Thucydides does have to say about the relationship between the economic and the political is fairly clear, beginning with his passage in Book One on the origins of Greek power and civilization—what has come to be called the Archeology. In the oldest times, tribal groups of people were in a state of constant flux, seeking subsistence from the land and continually driving one another off of arable plots. Fertile land was in fact a source of great instability, attracting invaders but also cultivating faction and civil disorder (stasis) [1.2]. Because of this instability, wealth above the subsistence margin was not worth accumulating, and in turn this lack of “surplus” (periousia) meant that people were “easily” driven off of their land [1.2]. Despite the fact that these pre-civilized men sought only the bare necessities, their fundamental attachment to material goods in the

---

29 At least in the early stages of political development, for there is some question about the evolution of desires and motives. See Chapter 5.
30 This is a phenomenon that is still observed today in nations with one or two major, easily extractable resources. This combination presents too great a prize for factions to resist and thus invites political instability. Such is especially a feature of contemporary politics in many African countries, the so called “resource curse.”
31 Crane (1992) p. 18 comments that the word periousia appears in classical Greek literature only 20 times, and 13 of these 20 instances are in Thucydides’ History.
earliest stages is at least in this sense somewhat weak. The dependence of individuals upon the necessities of life is not directly parlayed into an attachment to an established political order, or even perhaps, political body. Despite the fact that access to arable land was a matter of life and death, Thucydides strangely represents this struggle almost as a low-stakes game. As Pouncey puts it, “the easy acceptance of aggression” in this portrayal “almost removes its menace, and certainly its moral taint.”32 This may be putting it a bit strongly, but the point remains that without a cultivated stake in a political order, man’s reaction to insecurity takes on a markedly different character than it otherwise might.33

This state of affairs was overcome in Greece by the naval power of King Minos, who liberated much of the Aegean from the threat of pirates or wrongdoers (kakourgoi) [1.8].34 From here to the end of the Archeology, Thucydides puts a clear emphasis on naval power, perhaps because it is in the character of the sea to facilitate commerce and hence intercourse and ultimately, common action. Thucydides claims that between land powers there is less opportunity for the aggregation of power, and that conflict amounts to nothing more than border disputes [1.15].35 The naval power of Minos allowed

33 This of course contrasts sharply with Hobbes’ presentation of the state of nature in De Cive, and especially Leviathan, where Hobbes focuses on portraying anarchy as generating an insidious anxiety in all parties. While it is well known that Hobbes lifts many of his ideas here from Thucydides, it is critically important to note that his source is Thucydides’ treatment of social decay [3.82ff], and not the archeopolitical conditions described in the Archeology. This is discussed in Chapter 5.
34 Whatever the precise moral meaning of kakourgoi, it is interesting that it is not a derivative of dike, justice. In the debate at Sparta, the Corinthians use adikoumenoi which is of course derived from dike to convey the sense of ‘wrongdoer.’ This would seem to support Pouncey’s point about ‘moral taint’ to some degree.
35 Again, there could conceivably be an economic explanation for this phenomenon (the demands of agriculture versus commerce, for example), but Thucydides says nothing on the matter.
sufficient stability for “surplus” to be developed. This meant that walls could be built to
protect wealth still further—and assert the permanence of a political order for the first
time. Once it became feasible, the desire to accumulate wealth began to preoccupy the
majority of people, to the point where they reconciled themselves to subjugation out of
their desire for gain. A few, however, recognized the potential for their aggrandizement
in this phenomenon and thus used surplus as a means to subjecting neighboring cities
[1.8.3].

“Rest” allows for the growth of resources [1.12], and such resources constitute the
basis for consolidating true power. Thucydides embarks on a condescending and
somewhat humorous deconstruction of the *Iliad* to illustrate these points. Contrary to
what Homer says, it was Agamemnon’s power, backed by wealth, that intimidated the
rest of Greece into following him to Troy—not the oath of Tyndareus [1.9]. If we are to
take Homer’s word (and Thucydides perhaps implies that we ought not) we see that the
entire combined force of Greece was approximately 102,000 men.\(^{36}\) Yet this power was
still weak by Thucydides’ standards, and the expedition was forced to remain in Ilium for
ten years not because of the great power of Troy, but because the Achaeans lacked the
funding to keep their army actively engaged in a siege for any length of time. Instead,
Thucydides infers that the majority of the expedition must have been occupied with
piracy and farming to support themselves [1.11]. (Interestingly, this is not the only army

\(^{36}\) This is if we follow Thucydides’ suggestion at 1.10. It must be mentioned that while Thucydides finds
this number insignificant, the largest force assembled by Athens in the Sicilian expedition is somewhat
smaller than this (estimated at 70,000 in some accounts, 40,000 by Thucydides’ count at 1.71).
Thucydides must mean that Homer’s era was inconsiderable because Homer envisioned a pan-Hellenic
force of 102,000 to be enormous.
of over 100,000 soldiers that Thucydides portrays as lacking the power to achieve
significant ends. In Book 2, we see the army of Sitalces, King of Odrysian Thrace, which
despite its massive power, succumbs to private intrigues and fails to accomplish its
objective.)\textsuperscript{37} The importance of money here seems to be that it allows for political
persistence in the face of the exigencies of biological life. Among poor men, political
affairs are interrupted by the more mundane demands of human existence. The political
will of the rich city can become relentless. Pericles touts this as a superiority of Athens
over the more agrarian Peloponnesians [1.141], a superiority that their liberty on the seas
affords them, and which their landlocked adversaries cannot match [1.141; 1.143].

Money had the power to unsettle old ways of life, and hereditary monarchies
based on “stated prerogatives” gave way to tyranny of a presumably more absolute kind
[1.13]. The characteristic mark of tyranny is its commitment to the preservation and
augmentation of wealth for the tyrant himself and his family. While tyrannies achieved
great power,\textsuperscript{38} this attention to personal aggrandizement meant that the tyranny aspired to
nothing more than stability or security (\textit{asphalos}). In other words, the political objectives
of the city served the personal aims of the tyrant and thus engaged in no common action
or anything “worthy of mention” (\textit{axiologon}) [1.17]. The age of tyranny came to an end
when a liberated and stable Sparta was able to acquire the power to “regulate the affairs”

\textsuperscript{37} 2.98 ff.
\textsuperscript{38} There is a textual issue here that is very intriguing. Thucydides seems to leave a tension between the
claim at 1.17 that tyrannies never achieved anything ‘worth mentioning’ (\textit{axiologon}) and the descriptions
in 1.13,14 that indicate the great power of certain tyrannies. This apparent tension seems to have been
‘corrected’ by an apocryphal sentence in 1.17 that claims that the insignificance of tyranny was not a
universal phenomenon. Most editors omit this sentence (see Smith n. 1 at p. 30). The issue is revealing
insofar as Thucydides seems to be distinguishing achievements ‘worth mentioning’ from mere power,
something the author of the apocryphal sentence did not see.

61
of other states and put down tyranny around Greece [1.18]. Sparta, being the first free state, and the first society to establish a sense of the commonality of all citizens [1.6] ushered in a new era of politics. Thucydides’ comments about the nature of tyranny seem to imply that with this new era comes a different orientation towards material goods and political aspiration in general. He gives no explicit analysis of this, however, and we must look to his portrayal of the “high” politics in Athens as his narrative of the war unfolds.

The Transcendence of Material Concerns in Pericles’ Oratory

The oratory of the Athenian leader Pericles provides the clearest example of what we might call “high” politics in the History. Thucydides has told us that part of what makes this war so significant is that both Athens and Sparta were at a sort of peak, or acme [1.1]. Moreover, democratic Athens appears as the most advanced form of the subordination of the individual to the common,39 and the near-totalitarian vision of Pericles, spelled out in three prominent speeches, offers a stark contrast to the smallness of the ancient tyrannies.

---

39 Athenians are unsparing of their lives for the sake of their city according to the Corinthians, [1.70.6]; See also Bruehl (1981); Strauss (1964) p. 170. This may be surprising when thinking about modern democracy and the expansion of the private sphere, but Barry Posen (1993) points out an interesting relationship between militarism, nationalism and mass democracy in 19th century Europe. Prussians were impressed by the high level of motivation shown by patriotic French revolutionaries because of the tactical advantages it allowed for and tried to duplicate this by creating public schools to foster a sense of nationalism.
Pericles’ first speech is an exhortation to the Athenian demos to not fall into the trap of offering Sparta concessions regarding the Megarian decree or any other pretext (*prophasis*). Adopting such a posture would only invite further demands [1.140]. Putting the matter quite starkly, he asks Athens to decide once and for all whether they will “take orders” or refuse to “yield to any pretext, great or small, and not hold our possessions with fear (*phobos*) [1.140].” Pericles clearly sets up the strategic picture to look like a sheer contest of wills between Athens and Sparta, a contest in which it cannot be the role of the city to appease out of concern for preservation of individual safety or property. “[I]t means enslavement just the same when either the greatest or the least claim is imposed by equals upon their neighbors [1.141].” Athens will concern itself with status abstracted from mundane needs, and eschew the idea of acting out of fear.

More significant to our present purpose, he goes on to reveal Athens’ defense against the Spartan plan of laying waste to Attica. In Pericles’ judgment, it is imperative to avoid direct confrontation with the Spartans on land, and laying low while their countryside is ravaged is a task he wagers the Athenians will be up to. Regardless of the painful damage the Spartans might inflict upon private property, Athens as a political body is relatively invulnerable to such a strategy because its power is in its people, its navy, and its allies,⁴⁰ and its wealth comes from the sea. This collective source of strength can trump Spartan aggression, particularly when Sparta and her allies lack both money and a truly common cause [1.141, 42]. Focusing on the common sources of

---

⁴⁰Pericles typically avoids words with imperial connotations. Here he uses *xummachoi*, allies, although in the same sentence he admits that they are aligned with Athens solely out of fear.
power, rather than the wealth of individuals, Pericles exhorts the Athenians to “relinquish [their] land and houses, but keep watch over the city and the sea [1.143].” To drive his point home, Pericles goes so far as to say that if he thought it feasible, he would encourage the Athenians to go lay waste to their own property themselves, in order to prove to Sparta their commitment not to be coerced into “obedience [1.143].” Pericles himself, in order to show the subordination of his personal interests to the common good, orders that if his country estate is spared from Spartan torches, he will make it public property.\footnote{Part of this is to preempt any Spartan strategy that might set the public against Pericles, who has personal connections to Archidamus.}

Athens will prop itself up with that which makes it less vulnerable. What makes Athens strong is what Athenians share in common, and as Pericles’ comments suggest, their common commitment to the city as a city. Yet one can easily see how this common commitment is found in an increasingly abstract sense of power that becomes ever more separated from what is most intuitively good or at least basic in human life. This is especially the case regarding that which appears good from the ultimately inescapable perspective of the individual. In this regard it is striking how much Pericles’ emphasis on collective identity cuts across the natural foundations of life. He finds no room for parental affection, and women are treated as an inconvenience and an afterthought [2.45]. This phenomenon of divergence from the patterns and necessities of man’s biological life is taken to its extreme in the story of the Athenians completely abandoning Athens during
the Persian wars. The very material context and grounding of the political community temporarily ceased to exist. The location and the substance of the everyday life of the individual were abandoned, yet Athens endured. This uprooted characteristic of the people has often been pointed to as a source of Athens’ energy and irreverent daring (tolma), whether it is through the desuetude of the ancestral religion that is tied to the land, or through being liberated from the mundane horizons of agricultural life. As Forde puts it, “what was amazing about Athenian behavior…was that they did not simply disperse, did not consider the city to have been ruined or dissolved […] however, the principle or foundation of their community could not help being altered in some way by the experience.”

Commentators are often tempted to conceive of this uprooted nature as a kind of deviancy, or a sign that Athens has lost touch with the traditions, pieties, and practical constraints that constitute a proper grounding of political life. Yet we must remember that on the issue of political forms or economic arrangements, Thucydides’ *Archeology* shows nothing but one transitory period lapsing into another. The tone of the Archeology does not indicate that the old ways that Athens has abandoned necessarily enjoy any privileged stature. Whether or not Thucydides is implicitly passing a negative judgment

---

42 This is first brought up by the Athenians as proof of their worthiness at 1.73.  
43 *Tolma* is also the word used to describe the dissoluteness of the plague victim, 2.53.  
45 Crane (1992), for example.  
on Athens regarding this transformation, it is at any rate a rather unique city, and perhaps one that is more purely political than any other. 47

In his final two speeches, Pericles continues to develop an image of the psychology of the civilized man, or at least the citizen of the powerful and wealthy state. Pericles’ funeral speech is the peak of his oratory, and presents the most ideal portrait of the reconciliation of the individual with his political community. The speech is a praise of Athens and a justification of the necessity of sacrifice for the city. By participating in the city’s exploits, the citizen can partake of the city’s honor and lasting fame. Merely being part of the glorious city is not only enough to justify personal sacrifice of the greatest kind, but is also sufficient to blot out personal defects [2.42]. Pericles clearly takes rhetorical liberties to downplay the tension between the private and the public good, for example referring to death as “unfelt” or “unperceived [2.43].” He likewise seems to exaggerate the meaningfulness of participation in the greatness of the city: it is difficult to see how being an imperceptible part of something, no matter how grand, can compensate for individual sacrifice from the horizon of the individual. Regardless of these possible shortcomings in the Periclean vision, it does express the amazing commitment of the Athenian people to their city. 48 Part of this commitment seems to be an outgrowth of the enjoyment of prosperity that the city’s power has afforded them.

47 I would suggest that Thucydides portrays the ethical consequences of this profound freedom of the Athenians as thoroughly ambiguous. This is discussed in Chapter 6. 48 As the Corinthians put it “they use their bodies in the service of their country as though they were the bodies of quite other men” [1.70].
Pericles suggests something of a counterintuitive dynamic whereby men are more inclined to accept risk the wealthier they are. In urging sacrifice for the city, he argues that

“it is not those that are in evil plight who have the best excuse for being unsparing of their lives, for they have no hope for better days, but rather those who run the risk, if they continue to live, of the opposite reversal of fortune, and those to whom it makes the greatest difference if they suffer a disaster. For to a manly spirit more bitter is humiliation associated with cowardice than death when it comes unperceived in close company with stalwart deeds and public (kôines)\textsuperscript{49} hopes [2.43].”

The man who has no hope of anything better won’t be willing to risk his life. Thus, rather than having a “nothing to lose” outlook, those in dire straits simply lack a certain source of motivation. This squares with Thucydides’ portrayal of how “easily” poor tribal groups were removed from their land [1.2]. Those who have much, on the other hand, have an increased tolerance of risk, and are more likely to jeopardize their lives for the sake of future prospects. (It must be noted that Pericles does not ask for straight sacrifice here, but rather a willingness to risk death.) The reason for this acceptance of risk is that the prospect of losing what one has is “humiliating,” especially if it is conjoined with the shame of having refrained from action out of cowardice. Thus the real dynamic at play is a sort of moralization\textsuperscript{50} of man’s attachment to property or other material comforts. Without this moralization, one might easily imagine the attachment to wealth would lead to conservatism, as is the case with the tyrants [1.17], or result in the softness that can accompany a commitment to this earthly life or commercial

\textsuperscript{49} That is, ‘common.’

\textsuperscript{50} Again, this is in my special sense of the word as having to do with the infusion of concerns with honor or shame, self-worth, and status.
pursuits.\textsuperscript{51} Hence, Pericles’ statement is faintly normative as he appears to be illustrating the proper orientation of the Athenian citizen to his good fortune. He is perhaps wary that without his emphasis on the shame of loss and the honor of acquisition the effect of wealth might have other effects.

Pericles reiterates this feature of human psychology in a few more places. Shortly after the passage quoted above, he takes up the issue of much more profound attachments, those to the loved ones that were killed in battle. Grief is most acute for things taken away, rather than things never had \[2.44\]. Again we see that attachment, not desire; loss, not lack, are the more moving things. In his final speech, Pericles explicitly comments that “it is a greater disgrace to let a possession you have be taken away than it is to attempt to gain one and fail \[2.62\].” Here we are reminded of the Athenian envoys at Sparta, who seem to say that while what drove them to acquire empire was fear, what compels them to maintain it is honor.\textsuperscript{52} All of this is reminiscent of the Corinthians’ portrayal of Athens in the assembly at Sparta. In this description, the Athenians relentlessly scheme and toil, always in a forward looking manner, never enjoying what they actually have. This combination of attitudes about loss and acquisition contributes to the idea that Athens’ best defense is to always be on the offense. Their city’s wealth somehow leads Athenians to transcend it, and wealth becomes power; the activity of wealth becomes acquisition rather than enjoyment. This indeed does result in the

\textsuperscript{51} As in Constant, Montesquieu, or Aron’s satisfied men.
\textsuperscript{52} 1.75 with 1.76.
Athenians’ willingness to “use their bodies in the service of their country as though they were the bodies of quite other men [1.70].”

These reflections of Pericles, like many sentiments in the History, up to a point align quite nicely with the fundamental propositions of prospect theory: essentially that people will risk more to prevent a loss than to make a gain, and that obtaining something increases its value beyond what would be expected according to rational choice models (the so-called endowment effect). Prospect theory also includes the observation that the “reference points” by which we gauge gains or losses change according to what our peers are doing, and hence a “keeping up with the Joneses” effect may lie at the root of states’ concerns with relative gains, and constitutes a psychological element to the security dilemma or other forms of zero-sum competition. To this the Athenians add the twist that acquisition as the best means to preservation, creating a doubly dangerous mindset. While the endowment effect suggests that people will run risks to retain what they have, prospect theory more generally assumes that they will not run risks in order to acquire more. Here the Athenian mindset transcends prospect theory in its willingness to accept risk across the board. To Richard Lebow, however, this is to be expected. Prospect theory has always evaluated dispositions towards material goods, and as such is only a theory of the appetites. Lebow, following Thucydides in his threefold treatment of motives, posits that a prospect theory for those concerned primarily with supra-material

---

53 See Jervis (2004); Levy (1996).
goods (e.g. honor) would predict risk acceptance across the board.\textsuperscript{55} Lebow’s revision of prospect theory presupposes the possibility of transitioning from an emphasis on “appetites” to a valuation of “spirit” (honor), a transition which Thucydides seems to be recounting here.

One root of this phenomenon may be the simple fact that wealth removes the precariousness of existence and allows cities to engage in more risk. As the Athenians tell the Melians,

“for those who have resources in abundance (\textit{periousia}), though [hope] may injure, she does not ruin them; but for those who stake their all on a single throw…it is only when disaster has befallen that her true nature is recognized, and when at last she is known, she leaves the victim no resource wherewith to take precautions against her in the future [5.103].”

Working with a theme common in the \textit{History}, that of the deluding power of hope,\textsuperscript{56} the Athenians condescendingly lecture the Melians in a way that is rather befitting an investment planner.\textsuperscript{57} Only the wealthy can accept risk, they argue, because their baseline wealth ensures that no risk will constitute the ultimate risk. But this logic implies that the Athenians are risk takers because their wealth \textit{allows} it, not because it so demands. To the Athenians, insecurity, economic or otherwise, is incompatible with aspiration or hope, and properly stands in the way of action, in this case, the defense of Melos’ independence.

\textsuperscript{56} According to Diodotus, hope in men is stronger than fear [3.45]. The most explicit claim in this regard comes in Thucydides’ own voice at 4.108.
\textsuperscript{57} Crane (1992) p. 243.
Thus the Athenians portray themselves as free by virtue of their wealth and power, and their comparison of Melos and Athens takes on the air of a moral judgment. This judgment seems to work towards the remarkable aim of allowing the Athenians to assert their superiority without provoking an indignant response from the Melians. In fact, the Melians shouldn’t be ashamed of subjugation at all, for shame and honor only apply between equals [5.101]. In other words, Melos quite literally cannot afford to conceive of itself as a moral agent, at least vis a vis the much superior Athens. To some degree this is clearly a rhetorical tactic, for Athens wishes to get Melos to submit without a fight and thus is interested in convincing them that there is no shame in this. The Melians clearly think otherwise, and are willing to risk everything to preserve their freedom. The oligarchs of Melos, however, fall short of Patrick Henry’s disdain for anything less than freedom, in part because their resistance is encouraged by a number of delusional hopes that they will actually succeed in resisting Athens. Athens by contrast, can afford to hope and does so with enthusiasm.

There is, of course, some tension brought about by the near-paradoxical claim that freedom from calculation is purchased by material prosperity. One might say that this is a manifestation of the generally uneasy relationship that the concept of nobility has with the reality of power: nobility and honor are almost always derived from wealth and power, yet at the same time they almost always purport to be something quite different from brute superiority or capability. Hobbes’ reduction of honor to power

---

58 The word “shame” appears 4 times during the Melian Dialogue out of a total 19 occurrences in the entire History. See Crane (1998) p. 141 ff.
notwithstanding, the powerful and rich are rarely satisfied to classify their virtues as mere capacities without emphasizing an element of desert.

According to the Corinthians, Athenians are “bold beyond their strength [1.70].” Even though at Melos they portray hope to be folly, the Athenians repeatedly show that they find no shame in the failure of risky, daring, and ambitious ploys. Pericles praises Athens for having defeated Persia “more by daring than strength.” Athens rose above what might have been expected of them, undeterred by the fact that a dispassionate calculation of her material capacities might have counseled otherwise. In short, these accomplishments are moralized. At Melos, either the Athenians have ceased to appreciate the virtue of spontaneity over calculation and thus see nothing respectable or noble in the Melians’ obstinacy, or they are revealing their awareness of the material prerequisites of free action, prerequisites that seem to partially undermine the association of spontaneity with moral superiority.

From this we might derive that for Thucydides, there is in human nature a yearning for liberty, liberality, or spontaneity that prosperity and power allow room to develop. This spontaneity seems to transform into something qualitatively different from

59 “To pray to another, for ayde of any kind, is to Honour; because a signe we have an opinion he has power to help; and the more difficult the ayde is, the more is the Honour. To obey, is to Honour; because no man obeyes them, whom they think have no power to help, or hurt them. And consequently to disobey, is to Dishonour. To give great gifts to a man, is to Honour him; because ‘tis buying of Protection, and acknowledging of Power.” Leviathan Ch. 10.
60 1.144 Crawley’s translation.
61 Pericles claims that calculating types who lack real zeal have no place in Athenian deliberations [2.60].
62 This association is made in the speech at Sparta, 1.76, and by Pericles at 1.144 with the claim that the greatest glory comes from the greatest risk. Pericles also notes Athens’ great liberality (eleutherws) which, among other things, prefers giving to receiving. This in turn is considered to be a source of power [2.40].
the prudent calculation that is in the domain of the weaker or less wealthy. This is most clear at the level of the individual, at least in Pericles’ Athens. Wealth has allowed for the cultivation of greater aspirations, but at a certain point the perspective of the calculative individual is left behind, and acquisition for its own sake or as an expression of a superior liberty becomes preeminent. Not only this, but Thucydides also seems to suggest that man in more modest circumstances is not highly motivated towards acquisition in the first place. This is in part because of the infeasibility of the endeavor, but that cannot explain everything, for likely infeasibility does not hamper the hopes of the wealthy, who become free to act beyond their abilities, so to speak, through risk.63

The Archeology shows acquisitiveness to be something cultivated; in Pericles’ oratory we see it eventually cease to be mankind’s most notable preoccupation. We are presented with an image of the progress of political organization exciting more and more desires, to the point where the citizen of Athens embodies a restless acquisitiveness and ambition that is no longer in the service of each individual’s benefit per se. For the individual, the very fact of risking death for the objectives of the city means that the perspective which calculates personal benefit has been partly transcended, and it is here that the concepts of honor and shame appear vital. Wealth and good fortune paradoxically facilitate a cultivated perspective wherein the very attachment to these things is disdained. The replacement of the individual perspective with the common, political perspective helps to square this circle: the preservation of the city is a task

---

63 Athens is said to be “bold beyond her strength;” Pericles touts that she has achieved success “more by daring than by strength” [1.70;1.144]. At its extreme, good fortune yields a sense of invincibility and a conflation of hopes and expectations [see for example 4.65.4].
carried out in the realm of necessity and calculation, but in carrying out this charge, individuals can exercise spontaneity and transcendence over the pursuit of petty self-interest.

This transcendence is only partial and contingent because Pericles still speaks in the language of the citizen *risking* his body for the city, not outright sacrificing it: the Athenian may still hope for the preservation of his body [2.43.1] and indulge it [2.42.4]. Such transcendence is at best paradoxical or at worst illusory because spontaneity and freedom from base calculation is only possible within the parameters of good fortune. Pericles does urge Athens to think of vengeance—that is, in a sense, of honor—*more than anything else* when the time comes [2.42.4], and denigrates the status of familial matters by comparison to the lofty affairs of the city. But Thucydides reminds us in two passages—those recounting Corcyraean *stasis* and Athens’ plague—of the human being’s ultimately inescapable relationship with his own very private body. The high politics of Athens, a politics in which liberality and freedom from mundane calculation are espoused as key virtues, are possible not because of a genuine freedom from bodily or mundane concerns, but because of an effective, relative freedom on this count which is afforded by the political power of the city. So long as the power of the city addresses man’s more basic and biological needs, they can fall out of sight and out of mind, and the citizen focuses on more distant pursuits. He then conceives of the political bond in a different way. When a plague confounds basic expectations about bodily security or the

---

64 Indeed, the two words are etymologically linked in Greek: *time, timwrew*.  
65 This contrast is illustrated in Orwin (1988).
predictability and justice of everyday affairs [2.53], or war interrupts the daily satisfaction of man’s basic needs [3.82], things can change drastically. In the former case all sense of the noble is collapsed into what is most immediately desired [2.53]; the latter case results in an outright inversion of the noble and base and results in the frenetic violence of faction and civil war [3.81-5].

Yet it is striking how much this unstable and contingent nature of the “high” body politic is understated. Earlier we saw that Pericles only openly discusses the dangers of empire as a major consideration under the duress of the plague. In this same final “plague” speech we also see a justification of obligation to one’s city made in practical terms that contrast sharply with the tone of the funeral oration: “…even though a man flourishes in his own private affairs, yet if his country goes to ruin, he perishes with her all the same; but if he is in evil fortune and his country in good fortune, he is far more likely to come through safely [2.60].” As Athens suffers the scourge of the plague and all the demoralizing insecurity that attends it, Pericles finds it necessary to lower the tone of his oratory and present the political body as a pragmatic social contract. At this level the political body justifies its demands in terms of satisfying the needs of the citizen. By the end of the speech, however, Pericles cannot resist ascending once again to the heights shown earlier in the funeral oration: Athenians ultimately seek fame and should cheer themselves up by contemplating further conquest as well as their superiority to others [2.61-2]. Pericles then recasts the original argument about political obligation in the language of honor or glory (time). Anyone who expects to share in the glories of Athens
must share in her burdens [2.63]. At the pinnacle, we have the final words of Pericles recounted in the *History*:

“To be hated and obnoxious for the moment has always been the lot of those who have aspired to rule over others; but he who, aiming at the highest ends, accepts the odium, is well advised. For hatred does not last long, but the splendor of the moment and the after-glory are left in everlasting remembrance. Do then, providently resolving that yours shall be honor in ages to come and no dishonor in the present, achieve both by prompt and zealous effort [2.64].”

In this way, Pericles works from the practical utility and necessity of political life (and by extension, foreign policies) all the way through to the final unabashed assertion that the greatest of all aims is to rule over others.

In the self-conception of the powerful city, the political body becomes the object of commitment based not so much on its ability to sustain and protect the wealth of private citizens, but more as the expression of the freedom from necessity that this more mundane capacity affords. Because its life is artificial, only the city can truly express this freedom, and only by sharing in the common life of the body politic can the individual enjoy it. In such a city then, wealth appears as merely instrumental to the activities that exercise this freedom. For Athens, this activity is ruling others. This is, perhaps, only fitting. Just as “surplus” leads in time towards the conceit that the necessities of mundane life can be ignored and eschewed, the accompanying surplus of power creates the expectation of a radical freedom from the impingement of the wills and interests of others. The realities of the political world necessarily mean that such a desire is unfulfilled, but is not empire the next best thing?
Chapter 3
Honor, Insolence, and Retribution in War

Throughout the History, actors, most notably but by no means exclusively Athenian ones, invoke the ideas of time, doxa, onoma, mneme—honor, reputation or fame, and being remembered by posterity. The most frequently used of these words, the noun time, often translated as “glory” typically refers to the honor due to a superior, including the gods or someone in a position of authority. It can also mean “dignity” and connotes value or worth.¹ This, in conjunction with the stress often placed on the opinions that others have about us (doxa, onoma), point us towards a recognition-seeking that is deeper than might be suggested by the use of the more ambiguous “glory,” a word which at times might connote nothing more than the self-serving thrill that accompanies great accomplishment.

Likewise it seems best to avoid the word “prestige” in discussing Thucydides’ time. Prestige, Hans Morgenthau’s word for reputation, has been applied in a recent resurrection of the topic of status-consciousness in international relations.² But prestige in fact connotes deception. The sense of the prestigious as dazzling or glamorous is grounded in its original meaning, to deceive or trick. Honor and prestige should at least be conceptually separated. Definitions may vary, but the concept of prestige implies perception constituting most, or even all, of the phenomenon. In failing to make this or a

¹ Liddell & Scott, time. See also the frequently used verb timaw. The double senses of worth in time seems to be expressed in the English pair ‘esteem’ and ‘estimate’, which are both cognates via the Latin aestimare.
similar distinction, one runs the risk of implicitly siding with a “modern” view of honor promoted by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bacon in which honor exists only in relations without referring to inherent qualities. Where this occurs, what Barry O’Neill calls prestige can overlap with what Hobbes calls honor. The essence of this kind of prestige lies in others’ perceptions of my ability to help or harm them:

“To pray to another, for ayde of any kind, is to Honour; because a signe we have an opinion he has power to help; and the more difficult the ayde is, the more is the Honour. To obey, is to Honour; because no man obeyes them, whom they think have no power to help, or hurt them. And consequently to disobey, is to Dishonour. To give great gifts to a man, is to Honour him; because ‘tis buying of Protection, and acknowledging of Power.”

Missing from Hobbes’ description is the dimension of worth that the Athenian ambassadors are careful to append to their characterization of Athenian power [1.76]. They address the difficulty of squaring our intuitions about honor with this reductive definition shown in Hobbes. After all, how can I not chafe at being a supplicant to a powerful man whom I find callous or otherwise undeserving of his position in this asymmetric relationship? Is such resentment compatible with honoring? The Athenian envoys at Sparta wish to avoid conflating honorableness with mere power, for they understand that what power primarily elicits is resentment, not honors. Perhaps resentment and envy can be construed as the truest form of honoring—and indeed Pericles at times tends in this direction at least rhetorically [2.64]—yet this cold-comfort

---

4 In his study of honor and war, O’Neill makes a distinction between honor and prestige by suggesting that prestige operates at the level not of evaluations of worth, but of perceptions of others’ perceptions. In other words, prestige is given an ontological status similar to that of a run on a bank. If one state propagates a reputation for power, this can be parlayed into real power over actors who perceive the opinion to be generally held. Oneill (2001) Ch. 12.
5 Leviathan p. 152, and Chapter 10 more generally.
association seems to ring hollow in the end. Partly like the American tradition of the “city on the hill,” Athens in all its power seems to desire recognition for a true superiority that is recognized as good by others even where it is not necessarily good for others.\(^6\) Just as Americans can be caught boasting about the world’s appetite for blue jeans or rock music,\(^7\) Corinth even expects love from its colonies [1.38].

At the very least it is clear that actors in the *History* are concerned with perceptions about their power, dignity and worth, and are driven to seek recognition for their superiority over others. But to examine the matter adequately, we must not preclude the possibility that both men and political communities in the *History* are concerned with realities as well as the perceptions of others. They are concerned with an honor that cannot be conflated with prestige as I have described it—and that they grapple, as we shall see in the case of Pericles, with the problems that lurk in the relationships between the two.

Relevant to international relations theory is a second, related question. In addition to the question of whether honor is only a “sign” of power or whether it purports to refer to some deeper worth is the related question of whether honor is sought for its own sake or only as an instrument for procuring other goods, such as security. Recent scholarship

\(^6\) Reinhold Niebuhr (2008) pp. 69-71 discusses the “vagueness” and ambiguity in the tradition of American exceptionalism in its unacknowledged quest for power while conceiving of itself as a model for all mankind. “Except in moments of aberration we do not think of ourselves as the potential masters, but as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection.” The Athenians are simultaneously more honest about the facts of their power and less interested in beneficence than Americans in this account, yet equally concerned with the idea of their superiority. The Spartan general Brasidas confirms a more substantive link between the honorable and the beneficent at 4.86.

\(^7\) See for example Nye (2004) who measures American ‘soft power’ according to many such indices.
has focused on how in the realist tradition in the 20th Century there has been a tendency to render concepts like prestige, reputation and status not only as merely subsidiary to power, but subsidiary to a power that seeks security.8 This is an analytical step beyond Hobbes, who would consider such a reduction well-advised, but who also acknowledges the impact upon the world of ambitious men who seek superiority for its own sake,9 even making an early portrayal of his state of nature in *De Cive* seem to depend on “evil” men to render it nasty.10

Daniel Markey situates this issue of “instrumental” versus “intrinsic prestige” in international relations theory in two ways. If what he calls prestige is in fact sought at least by some actors as an end in itself, it diverts us from today’s predominant version of state of nature theory that attempts to explain conflict solely between security-seeking actors. For example in Kenneth Waltz’ neorealist formulation, anarchy itself is sufficient to cause conflict between security-minded agents:

“Neorealist theory…shows that it is not necessary to assume an innate lust for power in order to account for the sometimes fierce competition that marks the international arena. In an anarchic domain, a state of war exists if all parties lust for power. But so too will a state of war exist if all states seek only to ensure their own safety.”11

---

8 Markey (1999).
9 *Leviathan* 13, p. 185 sums up Hobbes’ version of the Athenians’ three greatest things: competition, diffidence and glory; the latter initiates violence “for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, or any other signe of undervalue…”
10 In *De Cive’s* “Preface to the Readers” (p 11), the problem is that good and evil men cannot be readily distinguished, and thus diffidence towards all is cultivated and the state of nature rendered invidious. This view is supported by Schweller (1993), see especially pp. 119-121. Though *Leviathan* leans in a more structural direction, Chapter 13 still warns that the ambition of others will still endanger those who are “glad to be at ease within more modest bounds.”
On the one hand, there is certain evidence that Thucydides agrees with this structural view as a sort of baseline image of international politics. For example the Corinthians suggest the impossibility of maintaining peace even between status quo powers [1.71], and Thucydides’ depiction of early times portrays people driven to conflict largely out of the pursuit of basic necessities. On the other hand, Thucydides makes it perfectly clear that the more “significant” politics of his time are of a qualitatively different kind. While conflict may be facilitated by anarchic conditions per se, the great power conflicts of the Peloponnesian war are driven by the revisionist character of Athens colliding with Sparta’s attachment to its hegemonic status. Thus Thucydides would likely agree with the early Hobbes as well as Randall Schweller and Alexander Wendt in their claims that the real possibility of non-security aggression is necessary to make the security dilemma operable.\(^\text{12}\) The outbreak of the Peloponnesian war was certainly not a situation of “all cops, no robbers.”\(^\text{13}\)

While Thucydides’ view is no doubt based in an effectively nastier conception of the political body and human nature, a focus on the characters of states and individuals—the first and second images—would also reinstate a greater focus on institutional change and human agency.\(^\text{14}\) In addition to this problem of levels of analysis, Markey points out that depending on whether status is sought for the sake of security or in its own right, we

\(^{12}\) Wendt (1992); Schweller (1993).

\(^{13}\) This is Schweller’s description of neorealism’s pure security dilemma.

\(^{14}\) For example, a structural or “third image” approach is often used to invalidate such reforms as Kant’s, which, given its attention to state-level reforms, is thought to fail in addressing the real cause of conflict which is anarchy itself. Kant of course outlines the problem of anarchy in rather Hobbesian terms but introduces the possibility of a “negative surrogate” to a world state in the form of the pacific federation. _Perpetual Peace p 357._
might expect very different outcomes in a few areas. For example, in a world full of honor-maximizers, we would expect a different set of reactions to such processes as the densification of international society, or the development of sovereignty-curtailing international cooperative regimes.

Given the Athenians’ association of honor (time) with fear and benefit as a primary mover of political man’s soul, it seems natural to think that the History begs for some attention on this front. Yet two factors have combined to put something of a damper on the study of desire for honor or esteem (doxa) as universal and fundamental motives of political man. First, Thucydides takes something of a cynical and certainly a pessimistic view of political relations, typically downplaying the role that affective bonds of various kinds play in politics.15 This begins with his critique of Homer’s account of the Trojan War [1.11] which emphasizes the role of money and fear and which deemphasizes duty or goodwill in motivating action. The account in the History follows with countless examples of men pursuing immediate interest16 in violation of nobler considerations, the most poignant episode being the exchange between the Spartans, Thebans and Plataeans that culminates in Sparta’s decision to massacre all the surviving Plataeans in order to “please the Thebans, who were thought to be useful in the war at the moment raging [3.68].” Thucydides recounts a number of speeches relating the point that

---

15 This does not amount to a categorical dismissal of such things. See for example the Argive motivation to ally with Athens at 5.44.
16 Thucydides does not attempt to set up a systematic opposition between “interest” as such and other, ethical, considerations as does, for example Hans Morgenthau who places “ethics” and “interest” in separate “autonomous spheres” (1945; 1950). (However one should not understate the importance of the tension to Thucydides). Thucydides does repeatedly set up an opposition with momentary or immediate desires conflicting with the dictates of justice or nobility [1.41; 2.53; 3.36; 3.40; 3.56; 3.68; 3.82]. This will be discussed in later chapters.
the only reliable bonds between men are those of shared interests [1.124; 1.35; 6.85]. We see that the Dorian/Ionian ethnic division is irrelevant at best,\(^{17}\) and at worst the common culture among all the Greeks means that Athens gains more honor by ruling them all [2.64.3]. The bonds between colony and metropole are generally weak, and under extreme screws of necessity, even the family can be torn asunder [3.81]. This, in conjunction with the apparent determinism of power configurations discussed in the last chapter, combine to create the impression in some quarters that Thucydides is primarily interested in portraying only the calculations of egoistical agents and material capabilities.\(^{18}\)

The second factor that often precludes a general examination of the role of honor in Thucydidean politics has been an attention to the particularities and peculiarities of the honor-seeking Athens in his account. The role of honor or glory has certainly been given much attention in both the classics and political philosophy literature, but much of this inquiry has been framed by comparisons of the excesses of Athens with moderate Sparta,\(^{19}\) or comparing innovative and daring Athens with the traditional way of life or "ancient simplicity" from which it has departed.\(^{20}\) Consequently, treatments of the

---

\(^{17}\) See for example 6.61.2; Euphemus inadvertently admits this at 6.85. See also Romilly (1963) p. 83. Greece was divided between the Dorian and Ionian ethnies, which had their own dialects, differing customs and to a certain degree, political traditions (most democracies were established in Ionian cities, for example). Despite these differences, Greece in the History is usually implicitly treated as a kind of unity in contradistinction to the barbarian and Persian worlds. The ambitions of Pericles and Alcibiades look toward a single Greek world.

\(^{18}\) Crane (1998) p. 151 asserts that the symbolism of greatness is irrelevant to factors of power in the History. For accounts of the widespread interpretation of Thucydides along these lines see Lebow (2001) and Garst (1989).

\(^{19}\) The paradigmatic comparison of Athens and Sparta is Strauss (1964).

\(^{20}\) For example, Crane (1998).
honorific state or political glory-seeking in the _History_ tend to focus almost entirely on the speeches of Pericles. Yet Thucydides’ work is full of less obvious treatments of honor in politics, particularly if one looks for a broader category of concerns about status, insolence, and retribution. An over-emphasis on the peculiarities of Athenian ambition might construct a misleading appearance of the honor-seeking state as anomalous or unique.

The particular character of Athens is of course striking, and only the careless would miss the fact that Thucydides’ speeches bear the mark of his careful consideration of ethical issues, yet it also seems fair to regard Athens as a sort of archetype for at least one kind of politics, or at most, all politics among the powerful and fortunate. We are first invited to take up this inquiry when the Athenians at Sparta claim that in their compulsions—including their desire for honors and fame—they are no different than the rest of humanity. We are tempted to examine this assertion at face value after reflecting that Thucydides himself indicates on a few occasions that a relatively stable human nature can be analyzed from the particulars of human actions [3.82.2], and that in times of good fortune this nature tends not only towards hope, but towards _hubris_, which is strongly related to concern for honor. For example, Aristotle describes _hubris_ as one manifestation of anger, which seeks “conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight.” As it happens, “insolence (_hubris_) is also a form of slighting, since it consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim…the cause of the pleasure thus enjoyed by

---

21 Orwin’s book (1997) is the most elegant and convincing demonstration of the great deal of care Thucydides has put into his work to provide the material for a serious consideration of the relationship between justice and necessity.
the insolent man is that he thinks himself greatly superior to others when ill-treating them.”

Thus one of the most consistently asserted features of human nature in the *History*, one which has serious implications for the behavior of states, falls squarely within the domain of consciousness about worth or status.

In short, the *History* seems to ask us to treat Athens’ concern for honor as both compatible with Thucydides’ pessimism about affective bonds, and also as a potentially universal characteristic of the politics of the powerful, if not exactly “power politics.” The first proposition does not require such a conceptual leap: in one sense the desire for honor can be construed entirely as a self-serving enterprise, either as a pursuit of psychic satisfaction or as instrumental to the maintenance of power. However, we must examine whether the concern with honor can at times reflect a concern for a genuine sense of worth—worth as ascertained by both self-assessment and the recognition of others. Honor is often taken to have this dual sense, or perhaps ambiguity. According to Martin Wight, for example, honor has historically been construed in the modern British tradition as adherence to accepted standards, versus consciousness of status in the German tradition. It appears that this ambiguity or dual nature is also maintained within Thucydides’ treatment. A concern for worth or honor compels men to seek recognition of their superiority and to be prickly about their rights or prerogatives, but also conscious of how they comport themselves in front of others and adhere to common principles or laws. Pericles seeks to assert Athens’ superiority, but also wants its worthiness

---

24 1.84.2; 3.39.4; 4.18.2, indirectly at 4.65; 6.11 and by implication 8.24.4.
26 Also see Bruell (1981) p. 27.
recognized by its putative inferiors, as do the Athenian envoys at Sparta. We have already seen that men’s orientation to justice can similarly follow different paths in the Corinthians’ division between refusing to do wrong versus refusing to submit to it [1.71]. This unique nature of the concern for honor, fame, and worth potentially opens the door to something beyond realpolitik—both for good and for bad—insofar as it potentially bridges the gap between purely self-serving behavior and concern for one’s worth and relations with others.

The pursuit of honor or fame appears as the most noteworthy and explicitly avowed motive beyond fear in the History, most obviously in the oratory of Pericles. Yet Thucydides portrays a whole range of dynamics that seem to spring from parts of the human being that are more spirited than appetitive. An attachment to liberty, which includes the desire to maintain moral agency, appears to be a critical part of the identity of powerful states. More striking, and deeply problematic, is the frequent association of liberty with ruling others. Liberty and its attendant moral agency become ever more closely aligned with high political status. To such conceptions of liberty we can add two more spirited features of politics, both of which exacerbate competition and conflict. This chapter will examine two forms of a particular kind of status-consciousness: indignation. Corinth’s conflict with Corcyra shows how much its status as hegemon frames its understanding of its interests. In Cleon’s argument in the Mytilenian debate and in the words of the Athenian generals at Melos, we see another aspect of the relation between indignation and honor. It is striking how much the language of punishment and revenge colors discussion of policy in the History, and we are given ample context to
assess the relationships between honor, power, and the attachment to liberty and moral agency.

**Honor and the War’s Inaugural Conflict: Corinth and Corcyra**

Setting the stage for the Peloponnesian War, and providing the first strains in the thirty years’ treaty between the Athenians and the Peloponnesian league is the dispute between Corinth and her Adriatic colony Corecyra (now called Corfu in English). The dispute begins when Epidamnus, a mainland colony of Corecyra—hence falling indirectly under the aegis of Corinth—after being weakened by war with neighboring barbarians, falls prey to civil war [1.24]. The prevailing democratic faction soon finds itself at the mercy of a new alliance between the exiled oligarchs and the barbarian neighbors and turns to Corecyra for assistance but is refused. We are given no reason for this refusal. The Epidamnians then turn to Corinth, with whom they have both indirect and direct ties in tradition, and secure Corinthian assistance. We do hear what motivates Corinth here. Because in their eyes Epidamnus belongs to them as much as to Corecyra, they act out of a sense of right *(dike)*. In addition to this, the Corinthians have developed a hatred for Corecyra because their wayward colony has developed the habit of publicly dishonoring them and failing to provide the requisite tokens of subordination. This “disregard” *(paramelein)* springs from Corecyra’s pride in her wealth and power, which is comparable to the greatest Greek cities [1.25]. Thus, seemingly out of spite, Corinth becomes involved in the affair. Peter Pouncey has noted that the sequence of events at Epidamnus
constitutes a sort of microcosm for the greater war that they helped initiate. That is, external war begets hardship, this hardship presses the city into internal strife or stasis, and outside help is sought which broadens the conflict. Finally, as we later see in Thucydides’ account of vicious stasis in Corcyra herself, we see that stasis itself spreads with war. It should be noted that this tone-setting, inaugural conflict around Epidamnus has so much to do with matters of honor.

If the Corcyraeans were indifferent to the plight of her colony before Corinth became involved, they become violently angry once Corinth arrives in Epidamnus. Upon hearing word that a Corinthian contingent is nearing Epidamnus, the Corcyraeans avail themselves of an offer to ally with the oligarchic/barbarian faction that they have to this point ignored. The Corcyraeans lay siege to Epidamnus, demand the restoration of the exiled oligarchs and the withdrawal of Corinth. The failure to resolve this issue, including Corinth’s refusal to accede to Corcyra’s request for arbitration (which would perhaps have been a victory for the rebellious colonists given arbitration’s presumption of certain equalities), leads to Corcyra seeking assistance in Athens, and ultimately, as we saw earlier, general war.

In Thucydides’ brief account lurk a number of striking dynamics, to such an extent that many historians have rejected this passage and the ensuing speeches of the Corinthians and Corcyraeans at Athens as implausible representations of the facts. At the

---

27 Pouncey (1980) Ch. 2.
28 It seems that the barbarians are Illyrians here. Thucydides typically gives precise names for non-Greek tribes and usually omits to mention whether or not a particular group is ‘barbarian’ or not. In this case, it seems he is underscoring Corcyra’s lack of affection for Epidamnus by portraying their new allies simply as ‘barbarians’.
heart of the problem is the fact that Corinth is so driven by its hatred of Corcyraean insolence that it risks confrontation with Athens. For example, Gomme’s commentary on 1.25.3 finds it odd that “Thucydides, who in his Introduction is careful to stress political and economic motives, should here mention only sentimental ones. One naturally suspects an economic motive, such as rivalry in the Adriatic trade.” Gomme’s perspective associates serious motives with the material appetites alone—his description of honor as a “sentimental” concern appears meant to trivialize it. Thucydides’ portrayal of the issue solely in terms of the considerations which attend hierarchical relationships appears patently insufficient to the modern mind.

Some interpreters attempt to reconcile the “sentimental” with realpolitik by stressing the anomalous character of Athens. Thucydides’ presentation of such apparently quaint motivations leads Crane to comment upon “how poorly we still understand why primary actors in the late fifth century did what they did.” Crane takes these puzzling motivations as the status quo, and warns that Athens’ behavior is “deceptively familiar”—its realpolitik is not business as usual but an innovation. Thus we are instructed to remember that “Thucydides is a revisionist historian. He constructs an Athens that views the world very differently from other states.” Thus to Crane the considerations of status shown by the actors here are indeed quaint and outmoded forms of politics, and we must not draw the conclusion from Athens’ behavior that all politics at the time were “unsentimental.”

However, the gist of so many expressions of the Athenian position in the *History* implies that their innovation lies not in their actions but in their frank acknowledgment of their motivations [for example 1.76], and Thucydides seems tacitly to support this proposition for the most part. In addition to this, it will come out that the fundamental issue at hand in the Corcyraean affair—the desire for acknowledged superiority at most or at the very least equality—courses through much of Thucydides’ work, including among the “modern” Athenians. Even if Thucydides intends to cast Athens as drastically revising contemporary norms, this revision clearly includes a concern for status, a concern which goes some distance towards dissolving Gomme’s distinction between the “sentimental” and the properly “political/economic.” Whether we like it or not, Thucydides gives us an account of power politics that contains a concern for honor or prestige as an important ingredient.

Thucydides makes it clear that Corcyra has no real interest in Epidamnus other than trying to foil Corinthian ambitions there. Corcyra dismisses the Epidamnians’ request for assistance, but then becomes violently angry (*chalipainw*) once Corinth becomes involved. Here Thucydides seems again to be distilling out the key factors for his readers by indicating that Epidamnus itself is not of interest to Corcyra. What they are interested in is their stature with regard to Corinth. Corinth, we are told, is interested in Epidamnus as a matter of right (*dike*) [1.25.3], yet this is because they feel ownership over the city by dint of their hegemony over Corcyra. Inferring right in the sense of an

---

30 See especially 3.68.4
31 The question of worth, which in Athens’ case tends towards the question of superiority rather than equality appears most notably in the Athenian speech at Sparta, each of the Speeches of Pericles, and the Melian dialogue.
obligation to Epidamnus’ inhabitants would be a stretch, particularly when we learn that in order to fund the expedition Corinth gives much of Epidamnus away to whatever mercenaries enlist in their cause [1.26]. The Epidamnians, desperate in the exigencies of the moment, may ultimately regret having their wish granted. Thus Corinth too, is using Epidamnus as a vehicle for reasserting herself over Corcyra.

The character of this relationship is on further display in Athens, where Corcyra lobbies for assistance, and Corinth attempts to show that it is neither expedient nor just to become involved with such characters as the Corcyraeans. The Corcyraeans speak first, employing a primary tactic of trying to convince Athens that war with the Peloponnesians is inevitable and thus that Corcyra is an indispensable ally. This alliance would offer Athens a triple benefit: the great Corcyraean navy would be on Athens’ side, it would not be on the side of their adversaries, and such a great allied navy would provide Athens with “a good name before the world” to boot. Yet the envoys still feel the need to justify Corcyra’s recent behavior, no doubt in part because one element of their stated task is to convince the Athenians “that their gratitude can be depended on [1.32].” This is a daunting challenge given Corcyra’s history of strict isolationism, rendered still more daunting by the fact that they are currently in the process of breaking off their sole

---

32 The precise nature of these land grants are one of the technicalities about which Thucydides seems to assume the reader has other knowledge and upon which he does not elaborate. In a few cases in the History entire cities are packed up and moved or are required to accommodate whole new populations, with little commentary from Thucydides on the human cost of such activities. It seems safe to assume that Epidamnus’ prospective salvation by the hand of Corinth will come at no small cost, and likewise that it is safe to assume based on Thucydides’ lack of specificity, that such practices were common.

33 arête tous pollous. arête can refer to the rewards accompanying recognized excellence as much as excellence itself, both Crawley and Smith capture this sense in their translations.
previous relationship. Corcyra’s claim to justice is that she has been mistreated by Corinth, who has not respected her equality:

“But if they say that it is not right for you to receive their colonists, let them know that while every colony honors the mother-city so long as it is well-treated, yet that if wronged it becomes alienated; for colonists are not sent out to be slaves to those who are left behind, but to be their equals [1.34].”

It is unclear what particular grievances Corcyra holds against Corinth. They make no claim against Corinth beyond its refusal of arbitration, which is a charge that is freighted with some difficulties. Thus we must go on largely what Thucydides has already told us, that Corinth expects the traditional signs of deference at public sacrifices and the like [1.25]. Yet Thucydides has told us one more thing that lends an intuitive support to the Corcyraean claim: that Corcyra is in fact one of the richest and most powerful states in Greece at this time. One need not assume that all relationships are mediated purely by material capabilities in order to find Corinth’s expectations of Corcyraean subordination jarring, or at least unrealistic.

The Corinthians for their part match the Corcyraean speech with an appeal to interest properly understood, which incidentally coincides with justice [1.42.3]. Yet they feel obliged to defend themselves against their colony’s charges before moving on to addressing the strategic situation at issue before the Athenians. The end result is a speech made up of two distinct parts: a reasonable and somewhat prescient exhortation to follow

34 Neither side can agree on the preconditions for arbitration, and Corcyra wishes its control of Epidamnus to be regarded as a new status quo to begin arbitration. If possession is nine-tenths of the law, then Corcyra has effected a fait accompli and arbitration would likely be useless to Corinth [1.28].
long-term interest\textsuperscript{35} that follows upon a fairly unreasonable treatment of their relationship with Corcyra. These two areas of exposition combine in the minds of the Corinthians in such a way that it justifies a “with us or against us” ultimatum [1.40] which is the tactical core of the speech. They seem to imply that Athens’ siding with such untrustworthy characters as the Corcyraeans would only reaffirm those suspicions the Peloponnesians already have about Athenian ambition—that their disregard for everything but immediate interest reveals their true colors. Perhaps this is what they mean in their opening remarks when they say that understanding their complaint about Corcyra will help Athens find adequate grounds for a rejection of the proposed alliance [1.37.1]. Yet the subject matter of this first part of the speech makes one wonder whether the Corinthians are in a proper position themselves to draw such implications or issue such ultimatums.

The first charge against Corcyra is that its unilateralism is founded not in a desire to avoid entanglement in the sins of others, but so that Corcyra’s sins can be kept to herself. This lack of political intercourse allows Corcyra to act in such a way that “wherever they have power they may use violence, and wherever they can escape detection they may overreach someone [1.37].” All this is done “shamelessly.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus Corinth implies the existence of a community in whose eyes such crimes would be

\textsuperscript{35} Much of what the Corinthians say in 1.41 about the consequences of pursuing ever-changing interests seems vindicated in various episodes throughout the history. For example they claim that those who pursue momentary and changing interests “mismanage their interests in the eager rivalry of the moment.” Thucydides implicitly notes the relationship between the aggressive pursuit of self-interest and the loss of long-term perspective in Pericles as well as perpetrators of stasis [2.42.4 with 3.82.8].

\textsuperscript{36} The verb is \textit{anaischuntew}.  

93
shameful and implies a connection between realpolitik, isolationism and vice.\textsuperscript{37} At least to the envoys’ minds, alliances and other forms of interaction create a common world in which shame can discourage the unchecked pursuit of advantage. This is the case no matter the content of that community, as the Corinthians make clear with their later remarks regarding the value of the thirty years’ treaty. They imply that this treaty between Corinth and Athens (among others), even if it is an agreement hammered out by war, makes the two parties more mutually trustworthy than those who have never had any interaction at all, as is the case between Athens and Corcyra [1.40]. In principle this tack has its merits, for people tend to prefer dealing with known quantities, yet Corinth offers no particulars about Corcyraean crimes. Corinth can only make vague insinuations about piracy, although the facts of the case seem to support them in one respect: Corcyra’s about-face from indifference to outrage regarding Epidamnus shows a certain petulance on their part: they desire the perquisites of hegemony while eschewing its responsibilities.

The real crime, it seems, is the lack of respect offered by the colony to the metropole. The colonists, full of the hubris that attends wealth, refuse to honor\textsuperscript{38} their parent city [1.38]. According to the Corinthians, to be the honored leader of a colony is the reason a city establishes colonies in the first place, a satisfaction Corinth’s other colonies adequately supply. The Corinthian argument proceeds apace: given their

\textsuperscript{37} This idea is reiterated in a way by the Athenian Cleon, who asserts that those who senselessly exert violence are more dangerous than those who clash as rivals on equal terms [3.40], hence a distinction between war and mere violence; rivalry and enmity.

\textsuperscript{38} The Corinthians draw a word from Pericles’ lexicon, \textit{thaumazesthai}. This is a strong verb for ‘honor’ which connotes wondering or marveling at something.
relationship of hegemony and subordination, if in fact Corinth is in the wrong, then the honorable course for Corcyra would be to submit, in which case it would be shameful for Corinth to press their advantage. One need not get to the astonishing second hypothetical (would Corinth in fact defer to Corcyra’s deference?) in order to find something amiss. Corinth clearly conceives of Corcyra as an independent agent, one in a relationship not of identity with Corinth, but of subordination to Corinth. In fact it seems critical that the Corcyraeans not consider themselves Corinthian, or they would be incapable of proffering any meaningful honors, for honors in this instance are clearly marks of subordination. Yet at the same time the colony is not considered to be an agent that acts in accordance with its own judgment. Like a child, the colony’s honor lies in its capacity for deference even where the parent city errs. But this child has grown up, and the swagger of Corcyra from any perspective other than the Corinthian appears as a manifestation of the simple fact that no one offers up tokens of subordination where they don’t have to.39

Here is the first substantive conflict between convention and human nature in the main storyline of the History. It seems that given Corcyra’s great wealth and navy, Corinth’s expectations of deference are grounded entirely in convention, and no longer have any basis in what are sometimes called the facts on the ground. It is true that Corinth is at the moment prevailing in the conflict, but this is because of its superior ability to attract allies. This is in turn because it is in the interest of no power to set the

39 In fact, the power of Corcyra is well established: the first naval battle in history, according to Thucydides, was won by Corcyra approximately 200 years prior to this episode.
precedent of allowing defection. They urge the Athenians to participate in maintaining this convention too [1.40]. Thus Corinth appeals to a second kind of community bound by convention, that of the beneficiaries of the status quo.

It is interesting that Thucydides has framed this opposition between Corcyra’s power and its relationship with Corinth as dictated by convention in this way. Thucydides will show us the weakness of convention, forbearance, and goodwill in the face of power and self-interest many times again. At Melos the pull of the dramatic situation will have most of us lamenting the lack of Athenian respect for Melos’ independent neutrality (as well as the weakness of the Melians’ argument in their own defense), yet in the Corcyraean affair, things seem quite the other way around. The Corinthians’ expectation of deference according to custom amounts to an expectation that Corcyra will not act according to what it thinks well and good, submitting to Corinth even when Corinth is not acting in Coreyra’s interest. As they have tacitly admitted, this happens to be the case here. Here the implicit parent/child analogy breaks down, as Corinth makes no claims regarding a greater capacity to act for the good of both cities. Accordingly, they show their own petulant stripe.40

It now appears that Thucydides is underhandedly making us sympathetic to an aspect of what is called realism: the version consisting in skepticism about the ability of conventional prerogatives to overcome material interests. But he does so not by

40 Later the Corinthians tell the Spartans that “identity of interests is the surest of bonds, whether between individuals or cities [1.124].” Perhaps this means that they’ve been cynical with their expectations of Corcyraean deference, or perhaps their statement to the Spartans shows a new perspective after having been burned by their colony.
encouraging a distant cynicism about motives, nor by postulating, as Hans Morgenthau does, that motives as such are radically inscrutable and therefore incapable of offering guidance or explanation. He does so by presenting the demands of the conventional relationship in this case as unreasonable—perhaps even unfair. Consequently, this is not simply a story of the inexorable preponderance of material capacities or the “epiphenomenal” nature of convention. The specific problem of the disjuncture between material capacities and convention appears in the form of the tendency of the powerful to secure hierarchical relationships as such and to stake a great deal, certainly their pride, on their maintenance; and the impossibility of the subordinate to accept such terms if there is any glimmer of possibility that they can overcome them. These two dynamics are played out throughout the History: the powerful tend to seek to convert rule into honor—that is, they moralize political relationships—which in turn leads them to regard defection with indignation. The ruled can only offer tokens of esteem with difficulty and ambiguously, for rule elicits hatred above all else, and when wealth lends them the hubris and capacity required to cast off their bonds, they do.

Thucydides’ presentation of the affair between Corcyra and Corinth contains no reference to either economic or security considerations, which is not to say that they play no part in the affair. Rather, just as we saw Pericles subsume issues regarding the necessities of life under broader and putatively more lofty concerns for honor and other moral relationships, so too do Corinth and Corcyra conceive of their relationship in these terms. The language of honor and respect, prerogative and deference is not code for

---

41 Morgenthau (1985) Ch. 1.
underlying material interests, but rather show the degree to which the higher self-conceptions of the political body take on a life of their own. This is reflected in Thucydides’ failing to bother with the kernel of material interests that lay at the core of either city’s concern for superiority.

In some modern conceptions the diverse and various desires of mankind come to be expressed in the desire for the all-fungible currency of power. For example, this might be said of Hobbes, in whose eyes the vicissitudes of fortune *effectively* yield the “perpetual and restlesse desire for power after power which ceaseth only in death [Leviathan Ch. 11].” Elsewhere, Hans Morgenthau finds power is the only unambiguous or legitimate object of desire for a state, citing both the inscrutability of psychological desires and the inappropriateness of the state pursuing more substantive goods, given its role in representing diverse domestic interests. This approach has prompted Michael Doyle to comment that Morgenthau’s approach effectively amounts to the pursuit of power as such. Thucydides portrays Corinth and Corcyra as pursuing a subsuming and ultimately super-ordinating good of status. Perhaps this difference is only nominal, yet the pursuit of high status lends itself to the possibility of honorable behavior, that is something other than the self-serving modus operandi that accompanies the pursuit of power as such. Whether the concept will bear such fruit, and whether the desire for honors and high status will prove to be anything more than an additional spur to conflict remains to be seen.

---

42 *Leviathan* Chapter 11, p 161.
43 Morgenthau (1985) Ch. 1.
The Indignation of the Powerful and the Disposition to Punish

One of the features of Corinth’s anger with Corcyra, something quickly extended to Athens as well, is its willingness to cast the issue at hand as a transgression worthy of punishment. Refusing to regard the prospect of Athens’ defensive support of Corcyra as a neutral act, they warn “you will not merely become allies to them, but also enemies to us instead of being at truce with us. For it will be necessary for us…to include you when we proceed to take vengeance (amunw) on them [1.40.3].” They take the further step of proclaiming the (somewhat dubious and ambiguous) right of metropoles or hegemons to punish (kolazw) their allies or subordinates, just as they “allowed” Athens to punish the Samians some years prior. Later—and perhaps “mugged by reality”—Corinthian envoys show a different view of interstate relations in their speeches at Sparta.

The first speech, encouraging Sparta to accept war, constitutes something of an about-face from their speech at Athens. The claim that Corinth is no threat as such to Athens [1.41] is replaced by a vehement regret that Athens was not destroyed before she even became powerful [1.69]. This is translated into a more general dictum about the prudence of strangling the baby in the cradle, so to speak. The second speech, lauding the Spartans for accepting war, and encouraging them to meet Athens with full force, contains another reversal. Instead of eliciting an idea of a common world in which treaty

\footnote{According to Cogan (1981), it is impossible that this principle could have had any juridical status. At any rate, the Corinthians here are exploiting an ambiguity: Samos was defecting from a juridical alliance with Athens; Corinth only asserts traditional prerogatives over their colony Corcyra.}
and goodwill bind cities through shame and honor, they curtly announce that identity of interests is the only true bond [1.124]. What remains the same, however, is the indignation, and the fundamental strategic situation is cast in terms of the righting of a wrong: “it is because we are suffering wrongs (adikoumenoi) and have ample grounds for complaint that we are stirring up this war, and as soon as we have avenged (amunw) our wrongs upon the Athenians we will bring the war to an end.” The rest of Greece will fall into line with the Peloponnesians, “partly through fear, and partly through self interest, [1.123]” yet the Peloponnesians themselves will be spurred by the reflection that

“nothing indeed could be more monstrous than the suggestion that while [Athens’] allies never tire of contributing for their own servitude, we should refuse to spend for vengeance (timwrew) and self-preservation the treasure which by such refusal we shall forfeit [1.121].”

With their discussion of the reliability of bonds founded in interest and their assertion that the mere apprehension of threat justifies preemptive action, the Corinthians here sound more like the Athenians than, say, Sthenelaidas, who looks simply at the question of the justice of Athenian action. Sthenelaidas in turn evaluates this question simply from the perspective of what has helped or harmed the Peloponnesians, and renders a verdict calling for double punishment, one for harming Spartan interests and one for ceasing to be good [1.86]. Yet one may wonder whether there is a disjuncture between the language of interests and the language of culpability and punishment. For example, as we saw earlier, the Athenian statement at the congress at Sparta implied a philosophy of tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner. In that formulation the Athenians—on the other side

46 Crawley’s translation.
of the issue than the Corinthians—suggest that if they inexorably follow their own interests, they are not doing anything particularly remarkable.

In a dangerous world, they find it reasonable to deemphasize the idea of transgression: “no man is to be blamed for making the most of his advantages when it is a question of the gravest dangers [1.75].” Their presentation could even be construed in such a way that it calls into question the very nature of transgression and culpability. Like a predator taking its prey, they are simply partaking of the nature of things. This argument presumably invites the Peloponnesians to evaluate their actions with different criteria than they otherwise might: if Athenian action is not free or gratuitous, it can be rendered more intelligible and perhaps appear less invidious to the affected parties.47 Indeed, part of the appeal of the language of interest as articulated by 20th Century realism is precisely that it lends itself to conceiving of relationships in reciprocal terms, either at a practical level in Morgenthau’s case,48 or at a more moral level in Niebuhr’s.49 This is accomplished in either case by de-moralizing politics: the former stressing the amoral criterion of “interest” in decision-making; the latter discouraging moral self-certainty among political actors.50 All the same, the Corinthians’ sudden adoption of this

47 This is of course bearing in mind the fact that the Athenians too want to have their cake and eat it insofar as while drifting in the currents of inexorable human drives, the Athenians are both more forbearing than they might be and particularly worthy of the goods that their appetites drive them towards. See Chapter 1.
48 See also Habermas’ (2006 Ch. 8) interpretation.
49 Niebuhr frequently warns against the presumption that right is on one’s side in international affairs, but without becoming resigned as a result. One must add the caveat that Niebuhr didn’t consider himself a realist: see for example Niebuhr (1952) p. 40.
50 It is always interesting to reflect on the Christian Just War tradition in which not only is punitive war permitted, but the deservingness of the attacked is a main criterion for any action. This is true even to the point where Aquinas seems to subordinate the right of self-defense to the status of a corollary of the right to punish malfeasants (Finnis, 1996). The punitive principle is included by the very Westphalian Michael
language is in the greater context of their rather less coldly calculating entanglement with Corcyra, and their continued assertion of a right to punish is accordingly confused.

Given their statement at Sparta, we might expect that the issue of punishment takes a different form among the Athenians, but this is only qualifiedly true. The debate at Athens over the fate of the Lesbian city of Mytilene reveals the intriguing difficulties that attend the viewpoint of the Athenian envoys at Sparta. The free Athenian ally Mytilene, having grown apprehensive about Athenian expansionism had defected but was quickly retaken, due in part to the ultimate refusal of the demos to participate in the revolt [3.27]. At first the Athenian assembly, caught up in the passionate wrath (orge) of the moment, condemns all the men of Mytilene to death and the women and children to slavery [3.36.2]. The passage of time diminishes their anger, and the following day Athenians decide to reconvene and reconsider their decision to punish all, and not merely the culpable (aitious) [3.36.4].

Cleon, Pericles’ successor as the leader of the lower classes and the “most violent” and powerful man in Athens [3.36] speaks in favor of upholding the previous day’s grim decision. Towards this end, he takes the position that the anger felt at that moment was the most suitable standpoint from which to view the situation, for otherwise,

---

Walzer as a part of Just War Theory, yet it is telling that he cannot develop a modern version of the principle—after listing it as a feature of Just War thinking he never discusses it again. For Walzer, reprisal is primarily justified for its deterrent effects.

And perhaps growing full of hubris as well: see the discussion of their rationale for defection in Orwin (1997) Chapter 3. At any rate, the Mytilenian fear of Athens expressed at Olympia is as attenuated a fear as that felt by the Spartans.

The momentary nature of the wrath is made doubly explicit by Thucydides, for not only does orge convey a passion in the fleeting sense, the construction he uses, hup’orghs, emphasizes that it is the feeling of a moment.

Pericles succumbed to the plague in the early years of the war.
“the edge of the victim’s wrath is duller when he proceeds against the offender, whereas
the vengeance that follows upon the very heels of the outrage exacts a punishment that
most nearly matches the offence [3.38.1].” Mimicking Pericles,54 Cleon chides the
assembly for inconstancy, and reminds them that their rule constitutes an empire (arche)
that is maintained by force and not goodwill, thus they must discourage defection in the
harshest manner possible [3.39]. The manner in which they can achieve this is by
attempting to recapture the lost moment of wrath, the touchstone of justice, and by
avoiding the real transient passion: the momentary (brachus) pleasure of leniency [3.40].
Cleon thus promotes a remarkable inversion of the conventional wisdom on the
relationship between passions prudence, and the passage of time.

Cleon’s speech is riddled with strange inconsistencies as well as an outright
misrepresentation. He is disingenuous in presenting all of the Mytilenians as equally
culpable. The next speaker, Diodotus, reminds us of what Thucydides himself has
already told us: the demos in fact facilitated the Athenian recapture of the city as soon as
the oligarchs were foolish enough to arm them [3.27]. Cleon’s position, then, rests in
part on a lie. More interesting is the fact that Cleon does pay a certain amount of lip
service to the Athenian language of compelling interests, yet the second pillar of Cleon’s
argument is that the Mytilenians were acting from completely different motives. While in
the Athenian manner he affirms that mercy is appropriately granted to unwilling
transgressors [3.40], according to Cleon not only were the demos willing participants, but

54 Many commentators have noted Cleon’s emulation of Pericles, which even includes his parroting
Pericles’ ironic neologism andragathizesthai, “to play the philanthropist” 2.63; 3.40.
in a rich and astonishing passage he argues that the Mytilenian oligarchs did not act according to excusable compelling interests. It is worth quoting at length:

“I can make allowance for men who resorted to revolt because they were unable to bear your rule or because they were compelled by your enemies to do so; but men who inhabited a fortified island and had no fear of our enemies…who moreover were independent and were treated by us with the highest [honor] when these men have acted thus, what else is it but conspiracy and rebellion rather than revolt—for revolt is the work of those who suffer from oppression—and a deliberate attempt by taking their stand on the side of our bitterest enemies to bring about our destruction? And yet this is assuredly a more heinous thing than if they had gone to war against us for the acquisition of power [3.39 emphasis added].”

Thus Cleon does accept at face value the major corollary of the “Athenian thesis” that compulsion, even the compulsion to acquire power, is exculpatory. He claims that had Mytilene been acting out of a desire for power, their transgression would be more or less forgivable. On the other hand, in this case he finds that the Mytilenians acted out of voluntary and gratuitous malice. Along the way, he applies a distinction between “revolt” (apostasis) and “conspiracy” (epanastasis) to emphasize the intimacy of the transgression. This complements his opening hyperbole that nobody has ever harmed Athens more than the Mytilenians have just now done [3.39.1]. What troubles Cleon most is the fact that given the Mytilenians’ freedom from immediate threat from Athens, their decision to defect seems to have been spurred only by the hubris that

55 Smith uses ‘consideration’ here but the word is time.
57 This is something the Mytilenians are self-conscious about as well, see their justification for a preemptive divorce from Athens at 3.9-14. From the Mytilenian perspective, they would have ultimately been oppressed, therefore Cleon’s distinction between ‘revolt’ and ‘conspiracy’ was really only a matter of time.
follows from unexpected or sudden good fortune, in this case, good fortune given by the grace of Athens’ decision to allow the city political autonomy and its own defenses. These goods constituted a certain consideration or honor (iime) that Athens accorded to Mytilene, but in return Athens received only spite. This seems to be the true ground of Cleon’s anger: the idea that Athens’ indulgence—their honor bestowed—has been leveraged by the Mytilenians into an opportunity to conspicuously dishonor their hegemon. Whatever the real motives of the Mytilenians were, it is difficult not to interpret Cleon’s anger as arising from a sense of Mytilene biting the hand that feeds it. Cleon’s anger seems to arise from a perception that Athens has discovered the hard way that honoring cannot be a reciprocal activity, and he now casts it exclusively in zero-sum terms. The inability of subjects to appreciate generous terms of subjection in no way prevents the powerful from feeling indignation at this fact, and from interpreting it as hubris and intentional disrespect.

The policy that Cleon formulates in response to this situation is clear, but its implications are not. Cleon first regrets past indulgences: “the Mytilenians from the first ought never to have been treated by us with any more [honor] than our other allies, and then they would not have broken out into such insolence (hubris); for it is human nature

---

58 Cleon is but one among many in the History that promulgate this as a law of human nature. See the discussion in Romilly (1963) pp. 322-29.
59 It must be noted that Cleon may be right about Mytilenian hubris in a more limited respect. Mytilene’s ‘fear’ of Athens, like that of Sparta, is highly prospective, and thus violating their alliance was not easily justified. Like Sparta, however, their very power, permitted at the leisure of Athens, was what allowed the Mytilenians to entertain such a consideration in the first place.
60 Andrews (2000) p 49 argues that Cleon is eliciting a common sense of hubris as “aggressive behavior involving the desire to bring dishonor to the victim.” See also Fisher (1976; 1979).
61 Again Smith uses ‘consideration’ for the verb timaw.
in any case to be contemptuous of those who pay court but to admire (*huperprophein*) those who will not yield. Let them be punished, therefore…in a manner befitting their crime [3.39.5, 6].” Here Cleon reminds us of the Athenian envoys at Sparta, who complain that a sense of injustice is more easily aroused among those who are treated on equal terms, whereas those who are violently oppressed are more compliant [1.77].

Thus if respect is offered but not reciprocated, the best course for imperialism is to refuse to offer it in the first place. Likewise is it expedient to punish those who have transgressed in such a manner, for to do otherwise would send a counterproductive message to other subjects, especially ones who actually do suffer from outright oppression. Thus Cleon can claim a happy coincidence between expediency and justice.

Cleon is dabbling in muddy waters, however, for he has already echoed Pericles’ admission that Athenian rule is tyrannical. Yet to underscore his point about the justice of punishment he argues that failing to punish would be to imply that the Mytilenians were right to revolt, which in turn would mean that it is wrong for Athens to rule [3.40.4]. Cleon here comes face to face with his earlier realism about the nature of Athenian rule: Athens, he has already implied (though not so strongly as Pericles) is indeed wrong to rule. This suggests that he will have to jettison the argument about the justice of punishment. Cleon quickly and somewhat evasively segues into the suggestion that

---

62 This is because those who are treated on equal terms (*apo tou isou*) forget to be “grateful that they have not been deprived of what is of greater moment.” In other words, the oppressed are more likely to have a ‘glass half full’ perspective.

63 This conflation is also associated with the Spartans at 5.105 (see also 3.68) and the victims of the plague in Athens at 2.53.
whether or not their rule is just, Athens must punish as “interest” (xumphoros) requires, or relinquish rule in order to “play the philanthropist.”

This transition from the confluence of expediency and justice on the one hand to the prioritization of expediency without regard to the question of justice on the other, occurs within but a breath. Cleon’s rhetorical haste at this juncture seems to indicate his awareness of a difficulty. This difficulty of course includes the fact that his earlier argument about “revolt” versus “conspiracy” directly implies that all the other allies would be justified if they revolted. Yet Cleon does not seem to be using the issue of justice as a mere cover for the expedient, but genuinely conceives of his viewpoint as just. In fact, as Diodotus shortly hereafter points out, the argument from expediency could just as easily recommend lenience, because future rebels facing Cleon’s policy would be encouraged to fight to the death under any circumstance, making surrender negotiations impossible [3.46]. Cleon’s vision is very much colored by what he fancies is his just indignation about Mytilenian hubris. This sense of justice can only be applied to the situation with a procrustean effort, and with certain overt misrepresentations of the facts. Diodotus’ speech explores the difficulties of Cleon’s punitive perspective, but itself tends towards the sense that politically expedient punishment must be willfully blind to certain truths.

---

64 Pericles’ word andragathizesthai from 2.63.2. In general Cleon seems to be expressing a sort of unrestrained version of Periclean doctrine: an emphasis on vengeance, and a no-nonsense chiding about the necessities that attend imperial rule, all in a more violent form.

65 Diodotus initially fails to see how punishment is an effective deterrent, for mankind is doomed to err either way, but then progresses to admit that it is expedient to punish some, but a fewer number than those actually culpable. See Orwin (1997) pp 146-162.
The destruction of Melos provides a subtler example of an even more problematic combination of the language of interests and the punitive instinct. The Athenian envoys to Melos try to dissuade the Melians from viewing their situation through the lens of honor and shame by suggesting that honor and shame apply only between equals [5.105], and moreover the shame of committing folly is greater than the shame of having to acquiesce to a superior power, something they describe as a “misfortune” [5.111]. In essence, as Clifford Orwin points out, unlike Cleon’s attribution of hubris, the Athenian envoys charge the Melians with foolishness, which ought not invoke anger. Yet at the end of the day the Melians are massacred to a man in what can only be conceived of as a very punitive act, as well as a possibly unprecedented one. This punishment stands in juxtaposition to a set of facts similar to the Mytilenian affair. Beyond the obvious matter that unallied Melos could not be guilty of defection, is the fact that like at Mytilene, the city had been handed over by a faction—perhaps the demos—so at any rate the city cannot have been entirely culpable. Yet this time around, we see no debate at Athens or any discussion about the attribution of culpability or the nature of guilt and punishment. We simply must infer that an argument like Cleon’s must have won the day.

Of course the decision to massacre the Melians may have been entirely separate from the rhetoric of the envoys in the dialogue, but the combination of the two episodes is still jarring, and the dialogue itself may be interpreted as being laced with a certain peculiar brand of the retributiveness of the realist. The envoys seem frustrated by the end

---

67 Cogan (1981) p. 66. Athens’ behavior in 416/415 is perhaps unprecedented, but Melos is not. We cannot forget the two similar atrocities committed by Athens just prior to the Melian episode at Scione and Torone [5.3].
of a dialogue in which they charged the Melians with being “willfully perverse” (hekontas) [5.111.3].\(^{68}\) This leads Orwin to interpret the tone as one of anger.\(^{69}\) One must interpret the tone of such a passage as the Melian dialogue with caution, yet Orwin’s reading seems supportable for reasons discussed in the previous chapter—namely, in their discussion about the relationship between power and matters of honor and shame, the Athenians argue that because Melos is weak, such questions do not apply, for they are simply victims of misfortune. There is no shame for Melos in acquiescing to the necessities of their situation. And yet, Athens claims worthiness in its ability to transcend the calculative perspective that they attempt to foster in the Melians. Thus the Athenians would deny the Melians access to the kind of excellence that they purport to embody, and on the paradoxical and problematic grounds of the discrepancy in physical capacities. But Melos will not relinquish its claim to the worthiness that attends asserting one’s freedom (even in vain) over exigent circumstances,\(^{70}\) and it is on these grounds the Athenians envoys interpret this indomitability as an act of hubris. The central element of this perceived hubris is the Melian refusal—or perhaps inability—to take Athens as the impersonal force of nature it wishes to present itself as. Despite the great disparity in power between the two, Melos regards Athens in human terms, as something to be reasoned with, appealed to, and to whom it would be shameful to willingly become

---

\(^{68}\) This is Orwin’s translation; Smith renders it ‘unreasonable’.

\(^{69}\) “The envoys have claimed to banish all concern for justice from the conversation, but they have not banished it from their hearts. In their anger they display a peculiar kind of retributiveness, that of the debunker of justice (and thus of retribution) angry because his debunking has been rejected.” Orwin (1997) p. 117.

\(^{70}\) Again it is important to note that the Melians do not ask for either liberty or death, but foolishly believe that either the Gods or the Spartans will support their just cause. All the same, they conceive of their liberty, and not their safety as the primary issue at hand.
subject. In so doing, it implicitly asserts a sort of equality that galls the Athenians. As foolish as the Melians are, they nonetheless represent a key feature of Thucydides’ world: a desire for liberty and a hatred of rule that transcend the calculative mindset.

If we interpret the Melian dialogue as being charged with a certain punitive tone, we find that even in this most extreme formulation of a-moralized political relationships, the incongruent element of culpability and punishment still enters. If this kind of relationship still creeps into the viewpoint of the Athenians, who are otherwise so careful to excuse human action by way of describing the sway of necessity, then it certainly must be the case among those who are less reflective of the relationship between culpability and necessity. Indeed, this proves to be so, not only among the Corinthians, but even more notably so among the Thebans, who repeatedly invoke concepts of punishment in their show-trial of the Plataeans [3.61-67]. This is not to mention the Spartan commander Gylippus, whose speech to the Sicilian troops at Syracuse encourages anger in the name of vengeance [7.68]. In a world that Thucydides consistently portrays as being driven by self-serving motivations, there is also the consistent portrayal of interstate relations as being colored, seemingly inescapably, by conceptions of transgression and retribution. Relations between cities are persistently moralized and personalized to the point where it seems impossible to accept another actor, no matter how powerful, as a simple inexorable given. The animating force behind these concerns is in turn the concern for superiority and worth—in short, of honor.
Chapter 4
Thucydides on Honor, Reputation, and Freedom of Action

Thucydides is often interested in portraying the relationship between appearance and reality, and introduces reputation as a serious concern for many actors in the History. An attention to relations between appearance and reality takes on a number of interesting forms, as we see actors wanting to live up to their reputation on the one hand, or on the other hand seeking to surpass their reputation. At times we see even a striving to exceed the possible. This dichotomy of seeking to match a reputation or exceed it is applied to Thucydides’ occasional theme of comparing the characters of Sparta and Athens. As part of his initial description of the main cities in his history, Thucydides imagines future archeologists poking about the ruins of Athens and Sparta and the conclusions they would draw from the vestiges of the civic architecture. They would no doubt erroneously think Sparta to have been much weaker than it really was, and the converse for ostentatious Athens [1.10]. Thucydides’ speculation about what future people might think of Athens and Sparta is of course in many senses true. While history certainly has not failed to appreciate the Spartans, it is Athens that today symbolizes Ancient Greek achievement—and it is Pericles’ building projects on the Acropolis that accomplish this—surely the symbols that Thucydides has in mind in this passage.
Many commentators take this passage primarily to indicate Thucydides’ thoughts on the irrelevance of political symbolism to underlying facts of power, yet it seems more revealing of the different characters of Spartan and Athenian power. This is reflected in the Corinthians’ observation that Spartans attempt less than is justified by their power, whereas Athenians endeavor more [1.70]. This theme of excess and defect, of struggling to live up to expectations and trying to surpass them is continued elsewhere. Archidamus, a king of Sparta and exponent of thoughtful conservatism, expresses the desire not to underachieve: “It is but right [...] that we neither should show ourselves worse men than our fathers nor wanting to our own fame (doxa) [2.11].” In Athens, meanwhile, Pericles seeks more, celebrating the fact that “Athens alone...when put to the test is superior to the report (akoh) of her [2.41].” He displays a concern for the judgment of others for both overconfidence and underachievement. “For as all men claim the right to detest him who through presumption tries to grasp a reputation to which he has no title, so they equally claim a right to censure him who through faintheartedness fails to live up to the reputation he already enjoys [2.61].” While Archidamus fears not being able to live up to the reputation of Spartans past, Pericles encourages Athens to surpass her own reputation, and indeed implicitly denigrates past accomplishments and suggests that the nature of Athens is incessant improvement and aggrandizement. Whereas Archidamus is worried that honor will force Sparta to commit its credibility to

---

1 For example, Crane (1998) p 151.
2 Pericles begins his funeral oration with a denigration of tradition [2.35] and the claim that the preceding generation was the greatest to date, given its contributions to the size of Athens’ empire [2.36]. This seems to suggest that to live up to the name of their forefathers, Athenians had to surpass them, so to speak, making the Periclean vision a sort of progressivism that yields expansion. See Palmer (1982) p 829, Orwin (1986) p 16.
an endless war [1.81], to Pericles, war is but the occasion to demonstrate the excellence of the Athenian people—their power is the proof of their worth [2.41].

These different attitudes about the relationship between reputation and reality speak to a debate within international relations theory about the meaning of reputation: is it pursued as an instrument of power and security, or for its own sake? A further line of inquiry asks, if it is pursued on an instrumental basis, is this an effective policy? In modern realist literature, reputations are commonly thought in to be cultivated and manipulated as symbols or substitutes for power. In Hobbes’ neat formulation: “reputation for power is power.” To Morgenthau, reputation is others’ subjective assessment of one’s power, and as such it can be used to project power without engaging in conflict: “a politics of prestige attains its very triumph when it gives the nation pursuing it such a reputation for power as to enable it to forgo the actual employment of the instrument of power.” Reputation for power, or “prestige” as Morgenthau calls it, allows for the collection of those benefits that accrue to the powerful at a cost lower than the actual physical assertion of superior force. This of course means that states can manipulate their prestige by demonstrating power or “credibility”—the apparent willingness to use force—in symbolic instances in order to avoid the costs of a more direct assertion of power. This in turn implies that disparities can develop between

---

3 See Markey (1997; 1999).
5 Leviathan Ch 10.
6 Politics among Nations p. 95.
7 It must be noted that this dynamic of Morgenthau’s rests on the assumption that power is a “psychological relationship” and not (solely) a material fact as it for, say, Waltz. As this chapter unfolds, it
power-as-prestige and power-as-capacity, creating tensions that can only be resolved through the re-evaluation of actual capabilities through war. Such a dynamic is thought to be a significant cause of war according to some theories.  

Maintaining a reputation for resolve is often cast as a stark defensive necessity, in the sense that credibility must be firmly established in order to ward off what could turn out to be endless challenges. In this view, the maintenance of such a reputation is part of an unavoidable high-stakes game. Thus in Thomas Schelling’s eyes, “reputation for resolve is one of the few things worth fighting for.” A classic application of this perspective makes the connection between appeasement at Munich and the excitement of Hitler’s ambitions. According to this view, rather than mitigating tension, any refusal to meet initial, lower-level challenges will simply invite further aggression. The demagogue Cleon, described by Thucydides as the most violent man in Athens, frames this dynamic in the language of honor, contempt, and hubris: “…it is human nature in any case to be contemptuous of those who pay court, but to admire those who will not yield” [3.39]. Along these lines, Lyndon Johnson conceived of the strategic environment surrounding the Vietnam War in grave terms: “surrender anywhere threatens defeat everywhere.” This logic is also carried to a perhaps absurd extreme by the Athenian

---

8 For example, Robert Gilpin’s theory of hegemonic change, see *War and Change in International Politics*.


10 Robert Jervis (1976) reminds us that we must be aware that this “deterrence model” is accompanied by a converse “spiral model” and either can potentially apply. In the spiral model, an eagerness to demonstrate credibility may be threatening to other actors, and instead of preventing further aggression, an overly zealous deterrent posture can invite aggression.

envoys at Melos. As we have seen, to them inability to hold sway anywhere threatens their dominion everywhere [5.97]. This way of thinking overlaps considerably with what James Bowman calls “reflexive honor:” the urge to project one’s self as something not to be trifled with through the uncompromising commitment to retribution no matter the costs.12 The exhortations of the Corinthians at Sparta also spring to mind: “peace stays longest with those who are not more careful to use their power justly than to show their determination not to submit to injustice [1.71].”13

There has been some effort to explain these phenomena on rational choice premises as a version of the contest-of-wills game “chicken” wherein winning a confrontation essentially means executing a successful bluff. If an actor fails in one confrontation, then from rational choice premises, reestablishing sufficient credibility to prevail in the next confrontation is nearly an impossible task. This is of course because against an actor with an established reputation for backing down, all opponents will play to win with conviction, and cannot be beaten without a headlong confrontation (that is, a collision if we are to remain with the metaphor of the game). In terms of international politics, this means that for those who have a reputation for capitulation, it is thought that bluffs can never be effectively used in lieu of the clash of arms and the benefits of Morgenthau’s prestige are entirely lost. Such a line of thinking suggests that in a world of rational actors, there are serious risks to ever backing down from a confrontation.

13 This is Crawley’s translation. Given the context in which the Spartans are concerned with finding a legitimate casus belli on the one hand, and feeling the indignation of Sthenelaidas on the other hand, it seems appropriate to render the sentence as contrasting the implications of two concepts of justice as Crawley does. Smith’s translation is largely consistent with this, but does not adequately stress this contrast.
Yet the work of Jonathan Mercer suggests that this kind of logic cannot be so easily determinative. He introduces another empirically supportable consideration: the phenomenon of “never again.”14 Under Mercer’s revised model, an actor who has submitted once can be filled with resolve to redeem or reassert himself, and as such potential adversaries might consider a policy of brinksmanship unwise. This fundamental indeterminacy in the rational choice interpretation of bluffing games is introduced by an element whose nature Mercer doesn’t describe, yet might be described as a kind of shame or at least redoubled determination. This heuristic game leads him to an empirical study of the concern for reputation in international affairs demonstrating that while reputation is often desired, it seldom has the utility envisioned by the rational choice theorists.

Looking at reputation through a different lens, Mercer finds that between potential adversaries, conciliatory gestures are usually interpreted as coerced by external necessities, whereas challenges are typically attributed to the disposition of the adversary. This means that one way or another, potential adversaries “cannot win,” because de facto worst case assumptions are made about the bases of their behavior no matter what they do.15 If I engage in behavior that challenges another actor, he will likely believe that my behavior originates in my aggressive disposition; if I show weakness, I will probably still be viewed with circumspection because my weakness will likely be chalked up to

---

15 Mercer (1996) p. 45. Mercer grounds these observations on in-group/out-group studies in social psychology. Within the ‘in-group,’ the tendencies to attribute behavior to dispositional versus situational causes are inverted. People we like get the benefit of the doubt: we attribute their bad behavior to situational constraints; good behavior to their internal disposition. Mercer does not find an international ‘in group’ within security communities or alliances. He extends his analysis to show how within alliances it is very difficult to gain a reputation for loyalty, because all manifestations thereof are attributed to situational constraints, etc.
extenuating circumstances. This means that while a reputation for toughness can be justifiably earned, taking a soft line in one case will not necessarily leave one with a reputation for weakness that will be applied in other cases. Mercer interprets this to mean that efforts to maintain a reputation for resolve are not worth the considerable costs, thus behavior which exacerbates tension—that is, the overzealous projection of credibility—can be reduced.

Mercer’s primary objective is to point out that the maintenance of a reputation for resolve is not worth the associated costs, so his work does not directly address the great question that immediately springs from it: why do states care so much about reputation if it is of such dubious utility?\footnote{Both his own work as well as the work of Markey and O'Neill argue that this is the case.} If Mercer is correct in his claim that the pursuit of reputation is an activity that is at best ambiguously rational, then we must look more carefully at reputation or recognition of worth as something pursued as an end in itself or perhaps as something useful or meaningful within the confines of domestic politics. Within Thucydides’ portrayals of the concern for reputation we do see some expectations of a reputation for resolve having a direct practical effect, but this is only part of the story. Beyond instrumental concerns, we see that at least to the Athenians, reputation is a measure of power, which in turn is a measure of worth, something that they clearly care much about. After all, the Athenian speakers in the assembly at Sparta cannot help but undermine their argument about the sway of necessity by asserting that Athens is also particularly worthy of having been coerced into the status of imperial power [1.76]. The importance of worth is confirmed as Athens comes to grip with the problematic fact that
power is more resented than respected: even where Athens’ greatness is not recognized, it maintains its appeal.

Pericles initially sounds a bit like Lyndon Johnson with his claim that Sparta’s demand for a revocation of the “trifling” Megara decrees “involves nothing less than the vindication and proof of [Athens’] political conviction.” He chides the assembly, “if you yield this point to them you will immediately be ordered to yield another and greater one, as having conceded this first point through fear [1.140].”17 Here is an apparently straightforward application of the idea that once one has backed down, it is difficult to reestablish a credible reputation for resolve. The anxieties of Archidamus too, could be interpreted as being rooted in the acknowledgment that the maintenance of Spartan reputation was critical to her ability to maintain a leadership position, particularly when her reputation for valor seems to have outstripped her true abilities. Indeed, the Athenian victory over the Spartans at Pylos and Sphacteria [4.31-39] constitutes a real turning point insofar as the Athenians entered battle in great fear of Spartan military prowess, but having secured an unexpectedly decisive victory there, they succeeded in shattering the Spartan mystique in the eyes of all of Greece [5.28]. Three hundred Spartiates—a significant portion of their ruling class—surrender at Sphacteria, which in turn prompts the Spartans to sue (in vain) for peace with Athens [4.17]. Thus at least from Archidamus’ perspective, the maintenance of reputation may well be considered instrumental to the maintenance of status, yet for Sparta this would entail conflict

17 Pericles touches on the incompatibility of fear and credibility or reputation, which is suggestive of the somewhat counterintuitive dynamic of developing an aggressive reputation for the sake of the security.
avoidance and a reliance on upholding interstate law. Given the tendencies of legalism towards a status-quo bias, a focus on treaty law and other conventions must favor the entrenched position of the Spartans.\(^\text{18}\)

Reputation has its greatest practical utility in sparing the bearer from having to exercise real power, as Morgenthau suggests. Even better, it might spare the bearer from even being as powerful or otherwise grand as their reputation suggests, although such a façade cannot be maintained indefinitely. Thus Archidamus’ concerns, including the possibility that Sparta cannot live up to its reputation, are potentially reconcilable with the phenomenon of instrumental reputation, or prestige. But in the pages of Thucydides, it is the Athenians who are most concerned with garnering honor, for developing and expanding a reputation (\textit{akoe, doxa}) for energy, daring (\textit{tolma}), and excellence. It is Athens in the vision of Pericles that seeks to surpass its reputation, and it is the Athenian envoys at Sparta that are concerned with the worthiness of their city. And yet Athens is in fact a threat to the status quo, and as such has no use for developing a reputation for strength as a means towards resting on their laurels. They also already enjoy a reputation for daring to the point that it creates anxiety among the members of the Peloponnesian league \([1.90]\) and given the Corinthian depiction of Athens’ relentless energy and self-assertion \([1.70]\), Pericles’ claim that one concession will leave Athens with a reputation for weakness is improbable. (It would appear even less probable in the light of Mercer’s observations regarding the attribution of behavior to disposition versus circumstance.)

\(^{\text{18}}\) This is in part because of the wearing off of the taint of aggression over time. As the Athenian speakers clearly imply at Sparta, what distinguishes Athenian dominion from that of the Spartans is only the fact that Athens’ imperialism is being exercised in the here and now, whereas previously it was Sparta that had “organized the affairs of [others] as they saw fit \([1.76]\).” See also Strauss (1964) on this point.
More generally speaking, Pericles’ talk of surpassing reputation does not square with the concept of instrumental prestige: a state that successfully cultivates prestige as a surrogate for the exercise of the instruments of physical power might in theory have no concern for the cultivation of actual characteristics. Yet to desire to surpass a reputation means that one is concerned with being as well as seeming worthy, and Pericles’ desire to show Athens as ever greater than its reputation necessitates those actions that instrumental prestige seeks to avoid. If the instrumental value of seeking honor (\textit{time}) and fame (\textit{doxa}) is questionable in the case of Athens, we must then inquire into the real nature of these preoccupations.

\textit{The Two-Fold Nature of Honor}

Honor (\textit{time}) and reputation/fame (\textit{doxa, onoma}) feature prominently in the rhetoric of the Athenian leader Pericles, whose speeches comprise the greater part of Thucydides’ illustration of Athenian motivation. While \textit{time} is often translated as “glory”—that is, considered something which might be entirely self-regarding—the more complex connotations that accompany the word “honor” are not entirely out of place in the \emph{History}. Honor connotes both a concern for superiority as well as an adherence to standards of conduct, particularly when this adherence comes at the cost of more material self-interest. These two, related aspects of the concept are described by Martin Wight

\footnote{There are of course serious limitations on the extent of such an illusion in real life.}

\footnote{One aspect of the interconnectedness of the two forms of honor certainly lies in the fact, observed by Lebow (2008), that although in most cultures high status almost always derives from a superiority of}
as the “British” and “German” facets of honor, respectively. The word time which is frequently used in the History, most literally means to honor a superior such as an authority or god and as such most immediately shows itself to be more concerned with the former, immediate sense of hierarchical superiority. However, the frequent association of honor with a sense of worth (axios) or nobility (kalon) suggests that the sense of honor as a sort of reflection of moral superiority is operable as well. The former honor, to whatever extent its pursuit can be a fundamental motive, is quite clearly a source of zero-sum competition between actors. The latter sense, by contrast, at least potentially has the capacity to constrain action.

This dual nature of honor is related to a similar doubling of the connotations of justice that we see in the assembly at Sparta. Archidamus conceives of justice in terms of adherence to treaty law and attributes Sparta’s lawful disposition in this regard to their having a sense of shame (aidos) [1.84]. The Corinthians on the other hand emphasize a sense of justice that is an unwillingness to submit to wrongs. This view is taken up by capacity (money, physical power) it also almost always seeks to portray itself as being grounded in something less controvertible and tangible. That is, the question of desert or worth must enter the calculus to legitimate disparities in status (and, many realists might add, extend high status beyond the life-span of true physical capacity).

22 This may be the case to an extreme extent. Suing in vain for peace at Athens, Spartan envoys offer to share top honors in Greece with Athens [4.20] prompting one to wonder whether this is the sticking point for Athens, which receives from Sparta every concession it may want except for an acknowledgement of its worthiness. The Spartans instead insist on casting Athens’ successes as good fortune [4.21].
23 One very suggestive observation is that in the Archeology, Thucydides’ treatment of more primitive political arrangements, the terms honor, shame and justice are all absent. (Shame and honor appear in the negative one time, but in the negative sense that pirates at that time did not know enough to realize that their profession was shameful.)
24 They cannot help but remind us here of Francis Bacon’s advice for those who would increase their power: “always be prepared to be sensible (that is, sensitive) to wrongs.” Essays, “On the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates.”
Sthenelaidas, who takes up this view of justice and assimilates it to the concept of worth or dignity (*axios*). He argues that both justice and dignity demand the contravention of treaty law and an attack on Athens [1.89].

Honor is not exclusively tied to aspects of competition: the Syracusan leader Hermocrates notes that after all, peace brings with it its own forms of honor (*time*) and splendor (*lamprotes*) [4.62]. The association of high status or nobility with restraint is not completely alien to the inhabitants of Thucydides’ world. The Boeotian commander Pagondas equates nobility (*gennaion*) with neither tolerating aggression nor committing it, providing us with a rare image of a possibly constructive (or positive-sum) reciprocal principle [4.92]. The innovative and very “Athenian” Spartan general Brasidas exhorts the Boeotians not to fear Spartan meddling in their internal politics, for such policies would not redound to Sparta’s honor or reputation (*time, doxa*) [4.86]. Brasidas, equating honors with gratitude (*charis*), touches upon the fact that at some level honor-seeking actors must in some way be good for those from whom they seek honors. (It must be noted that it is always possible that those who think themselves to be truly great will imagine their inferiors to be uncomprehending and therefore merely envious—I will treat this theme momentarily.) All the same, at some level, fame must be held distinct from

---

25 These are also Pericles’ words, suggesting Hermocrates occupies the role of a counter-Pericles. This will be treated in Chapter 6.

26 The word *gennaion* is related to the concept of ‘well born’ and is sometimes taken to connote a sort of old-fashioned scrupulousness.
infamy, and this implies a connection between being *worthy* of honor and being *capable* of being honored.²⁷

Elsewhere we have seen the Athenian speakers at Sparta claim that their particular worthiness allows them to achieve a qualified transcendence of necessity and thus make the claim to have been “more observant of justice than [they] might have been, considering [their] power [1.76].” Indeed, their very moderation is a positive liability considering that their willingness to settle disputes by legal means rather than overt force is more noxious to their subjects:

“…because those who may use might have no need to appeal to right. But if ever our allies, accustomed as they are to associate with us on the basis of equality, come off second best in any matter, however trivial, contrary to their own notion that it ought to be otherwise…they are more deeply offended because of their trifling inequality than if we had from the first put aside all legal restraints and had openly sought our advantage [1.77].”

The Athenians suggest that administering their alliance (or indeed empire) according to a principle of nominal equality is deeply problematic insofar as a sense of equality leads to expanded expectations on the part of the subjects. At the same time, they seek credit for a willingness to condescend to a legal medium of interaction, which derives from a sense of liberality that rises above the expedient.

This sense of honor as an adherence to standards that stands above expediency or immediate self-interest is weak, perhaps by necessity. Barry O’Neill, who also adopts a

²⁷ Treatments of “honor societies” (e.g. Lebow, 2008 p. 61) often note that “esteem” and “self-esteem” are distinct concepts only in the modern West (thanks in a great part to Kant and Rousseau), and that societal appraisal and self appraisal are often identical. While it is important to remember the distinctness of the two concepts, we also have to note that Thucydides treats this question with more nuance than a potted understanding of honor societies would admit.
two-fold conception of honor, suggests that when push comes to shove, this weaker vision of honor tends to be jettisoned in favor of the principal demand of the prickly or “reflexive”\(^{28}\) sense of honor: do not allow yourself to be seen as submitting to the wills of others.\(^{29}\) If one adds the requirement—a step taken by Pericles as we shall see—that freedom of action entails the ability to impose one’s will on others, then this indomitable honor leads to a zero-sum competition for superiority. Part of the weakness of the constraining and scrupulous sense of honor surely lies in its dependency on either a milieu of appreciative and reciprocating counterparts, or strong internal incentives or restraints. Without some internal predisposition, or wherever reciprocity is unlikely, this view of honor receives a devastating blow from the question posed by *The Prince*:\(^{30}\) what is the point of being good among so many who are not? Thucydides shows the power of Machiavelli’s position in the extreme case of the civil war in Corcyra. In an environment of intense antagonism and mutual distrust, nobility (*gennaion*) is “laughed out of existence [3.83].”\(^{31}\) Without certain supports, restraint is but naïveté. This problem also appears in Hobbes, for whom the problem of “inconstant signification” robs mankind of the means to understand human motives in any terms other than narrow self interest. Lacking grounds for more substantive agreement about the meaning of their actions, Hobbes’ men can only regard egoistic competition to be the only reliable mode of framing interaction with their fellows. Given the weakness of an honor of principles,

\(^{28}\) In Bowman’s (2007) terminology.
\(^{31}\) Crane’s translation. It must be noted that the preconditions for this antagonism consist in what Thucydides portrays as a pathology or deviation from the norm of politics, and not any kind of touchstone. This will be discussed in the next chapter.
one might find that to cast honor purely in terms of status is a kind of default position, and indeed the views of the Corinthians, Sthenelaidas, and such actors as Alcibiades confirm its strength and appeal.

**Pericles’ Problematic Vision of Honor-Seeking Politics**

The rhetoric of the Athenian leader Pericles somewhat uncomfortably straddles these two senses of honor. As the chief exponent of a glorious Athens, Pericles employs a vision of honor in the service of political cohesion in each of three key speeches.  

A first speech encourages the Athenians not to back down to Spartan demands, and emphasizes that during a conflict with an ostensible equal, to accede to demands rather than engage in arbitration is tantamount to slavery [1.141]. In the speech, Pericles takes great pains to minimize the significance of particular issues, and instead casts the tension between Sparta and Athens in terms of a battle of wills abstracted from the actual complaints directed at Athens. The second speech, the famous funeral oration, grapples with the most difficult political question: how to justify the sacrifice of individual lives for the greater good of a political body. The notion of honor must carry great weight in this justification. Finally, Pericles must rally Athens to persevere in the face of the hardships brought by war, especially the plague. Pericles begins by softening his tone and discussing the political body as something that is in the service of individuals, but

---

32 A fourth speech of Pericles is reported by Thucydides in indirect speech and treats mostly practical matters such as the allocation of resources and funding for purposes of the war.

33 The Corcyraeans make an identical connection regarding Corinthian demands at 1.34.
progresses to the most extreme vision of an honor-based political order yet. The core of the latter two speeches is the justification of politics to the individual. In the end, at the deepest level all three of the speeches are about freedom.

At first one gets the impression, particularly from the funeral oration, that it is Athens’ goal to be admired by the rest of Greece: in short, to be both worthy of honor and capable of being honored. Recounting the various reasons why individuals should feel fortunate to be able to fight for such a city as Athens, Pericles announces that Athenians should be proud that Athens is a “model” to the rest of Greece [2.37] and indeed the “school of Hellas [2.41].” This is not only because it is particularly worthy of emulation, but because the spirit of liberality at Athens, a spirit which transcends petty calculation of interest, creates an open society that is visible to the rest of the world [2.40]. This free and easy society, according to Pericles, creates men who are capable, virtuous, and brave by nature rather than by enforced convention—in clear opposition to Sparta’s closed, rigid, and demanding military society. Such a city is certainly deserving of its citizens’ at least risking—if not outright sacrificing— their lives for it in battle [2.41with 2.42]. Citizens of such a state are right to savor, even contemplate its power [2.43]. After all, among all human goods only honor (time) has a lasting, permanent value [2.44].

In short, Pericles seeks to resolve the tension between private and public interest by showing that not only is Athens superior to other political bodies, but it is regarded as such by others. It would be problematic to have this sense of greatness carry so much water if this excellence received no external acknowledgment—particularly when this
excellence is described in contradistinction to other regimes like that of the Spartans. Thus not only is it a model and a school for others, but Athens is guaranteed to enjoy the admiration of her contemporaries and future generations [2.41]. This greatness also means that there is allegedly no shame in being defeated by Athens, and more astonishingly, that her subjects accept the legitimacy of her rule on the basis of this superiority [2.41].

Pericles only vaguely indicates in his funeral speech that this picture of Athenian greatness and concomitant admiration is too good to be true. A grain of salt appears in the discussion of the “proof” of Athens’ greatness: military power. Pericles does not suggest that military power is a final end of Athens’ superior regime, but rather, such power is evidence of the superior people (liberal, inventive, brave) that the regime cultivates. Yet the manifestation, the proof of greatness lies in Athens’ ability to “everywhere plant everlasting memorials” of daring (tolma), whether for good or bad [2.41]. The undercurrent of conflict is brought to the surface, if only momentarily. Given that military greatness and daring are made manifest through both good and bad things, it then becomes questionable whether Athens can really attain the kind of honors and reputation it expects from those it subordinates to its will.

Indeed, the final speech—the “plague” speech—of Pericles shows the troubling ambiguities that lurk in the connection between honor and dominion. Here we see that after an initial foray into social contract theory in which Pericles grounds the material

---

34 The Athenian envoys to Melos make just this argument at 5.111.
35 The word for “to plant” here, xunkatoikisantes, connotes colonization.
good fortune of individuals in the overall fortunes of the city [2.60], there is a final return
to an even grander vision of glorious politics. This treatment is more clear-eyed about
both the relationship between Athens’ greatness and her dominion, and the possibility of
being admired by those under her sway. Facing incredible hardships, including the
Spartan control of Athenian lands outside the city walls and the scourges of a devastating
cholera-like plague, Pericles must ground his rhetoric in two regards. First, he presents
the project maintaining empire as being grounded in security imperatives rather than as a
freely chosen project [2.63]. Next, he must qualify the character of the reputation and
honors that Athens might hope to attain.

“[It] will be left to posterity forever, how that we of all Hellenes held sway over
the greatest number of Hellenes…These things the man who shrinks from action
may indeed disparage, but he who, like ourselves, wish to accomplish something
will make them the goal of his endeavor, while every man who does not possess
them will be envious [2.64].”

Rule over Greeks now appears as the greatest achievement, reversing the funeral speech’s
claim that military efficacy was evidence of domestic achievement. Not only this, but we
are told that instead inspiring general emulation and respect, it is the nature of rule to
elicit envy from the weak, and emulation only from the strong and active.36 Whether or
not the weak truly envy the powerful (rather than simply resenting external rule), Pericles
is acknowledging that perhaps the only honors that Athens can earn will come in the form
of enforced tribute payments. Pericles continues;

“To be hated and obnoxious for the moment has always been the lot of those who
have aspired to rule over others, but he who, aiming at the highest ends, accepts

36 This takes on a perhaps ironic significance as we see the energetic Syracuse suddenly take up the
mantle of the glorious state with a decisive annihilation of the Athenian siege forces at 7.56.
the odium, is well advised. For hatred does not last long, but the splendor of the moment and the after-glory are left in everlasting remembrance. Do you then, providently resolving that yours shall be the honor in ages to come and no dishonor in the present, achieve both by prompt and zealous effort [2.64].”

Pericles has finalized a transformation of the political body’s conception of power. No longer “proof” of worthiness, a more naked form of power-as-dominion *per se* now is presented as the ultimate end of foreign policy. Indeed, it is among the “greatest things” (*megistois*). This more stark formulation also entails a further qualification of the honors attending rule. Rather than expecting honor in the present and future, the Athenian public must now accept hatred for the time-being and the possibility of going down in history in a glorious fashion.37

Pericles’ concessions to reality cast considerable doubt on whether honor can be derived from action in the realm of interstate politics. On the one hand, it is clear that the commonality of Greek culture across multiple political bodies elicits a desire on the part of some parties to rule it all.38 That rule over Greece, rather than some more practicable collection of Greeks and barbarians is considered to be an ultimate political objective suggests that the goal is socially constructed. That is to say, the particular nature of the desire is premised upon such a stature having meaning within a wider Greek society and is not likely derived from the internal interests of Athens.39 Pericles’ attribution of resentment to envy is consistent with viewing empire as a good that is regarded by a wider Greek society, for it implies that the goal is shared by all, even the resentful. At

---

37 Again it is only fair to note the great success Athens achieved in this regard.
38 Alcibiades also admits this to be an ultimate objective of empire.
39 That is, that the desire is exogenous, not endogenous in the parlance of social science. This observation would also rule out the applicability of any theory of conflict which grounds aggression in an inability to countenance “the other.”
the same time, if resentment is the only likely outcome of rule, then the desire to rule, to whatever degree it is a commonly held aspiration, is intrinsically prone to zero-sum conflict.\(^{40}\) These two phenomena, the desire for and resentment of rule, can readily be seen as two sides of the same coin: for in a hierarchy based on power alone, nothing other than superiority will suffice.

Yet it must be a drastic oversimplification to describe the Greek system as dominated by a zero-sum struggle for hierarchy. Many states like Melos are committed to the status-quo and prize neutrality. Thucydides also suggests that much of the resentment directed at the Athenians is rooted in the subordinate cities’ aversion to being forced to participate in external politics,\(^{41}\) implying that to a great degree the desire simply to be left alone is a strong one [1.99]. The general Pagondas’ view of nobility provides a strong support for this more inert view of politics [4.92]. Having at least sown a seed of doubt regarding the degree to which empire can really be associated with external honors of any kind, Pericles then invites an inquiry into the possibility that honor-as-rule is a more inward-looking good, one that has value primarily to the body politic as such.

---

\(^{40}\) It is certainly the case that conflict between honor seeking actors is a critical feature of “honor societies.” See Lebow (2008), O’Neill (2001).

\(^{41}\) This inertia of course has its downside: much of Athens’ burdensome requirements had much to do with balancing the power of the Persian empire, which most of Greece had failed to resist. A very sympathetic reading of Athenian imperialism along these lines would regard Athens’ coercions as overcoming a free rider problem in the name of a common defense.
The Hatred of Rule

The problem of the inability of subordinate cities to honor Athens should be no surprise when placed against the greater background of the History. In his discussion of the political development of Greece in the Archeology, Thucydides mentions that weak men were initially reconciled to the rule of the stronger out of their ability to thereby pursue wealth [1.8]. We must also note Nikias’ reminder to allied soldiers regarding the honors that they are accorded via their association with Athens [7.63]. These however, are two among very few passages in the History that explicitly outline any unambiguous benefits to what Pericles calls an “unmolested servitude” or show us what kind of external honors Athens might be earning via its imperial grandeur. Beyond the rugged state of affairs portrayed in the Archeology, a much different picture emerges of an irreconcilable clash between the necessity of political organization and the resentment of rule and the desire for freedom of action. The History is full of implicit examples of the benefits of the consolidation of political power, perhaps even consolidation at the point of a spear. At best Thucydides seems profoundly ambiguous about imperialism, and at first glance starkly pessimistic about the reconcilability of human aims.

Part of this pessimism lies in the fact that Athens is repeatedly denounced for her imperialism, yet, the details of her transgressions are seldom given by Thucydides. Thus there is little material to work with for those who seek lessons about more stable modes

---

42 This is perhaps ironic foreshadowing, as the soldiers in question will in short order all be massacred or imprisoned in a quarry to await futures of slavery.
43 In fact, they are the only two, to my mind.
of organization, whether in the form of cooperation or “benign hegemony.”

As we have already seen in the case of the increases in tribute, Thucydides seems deliberately to understate the character of Athens’ imperialism and generally fails to account for particular points of contention. (Interestingly, this approach is much in line with Pericles’ move from conceiving of conflict in terms of particular issues to a more abstracted view of a contest of wills [2.35 ff.].) Nor do subordinate cities lodge particular complaints about Athens, but rather denounce the injustice of empire as such. Romilly takes this phenomenon to mean that Thucydides “seems to be uninterested in [imperialism’s] methods and indifferent towards its faults.”

She goes on to distinguish Thucydides from the many other writers who “judge the nature of Athenian rule” and suggests that he eschews “moral considerations” and avoids “judging” this issue.

This is certainly overstating the point—Thucydides does give us sufficient although complex grounds to “judge” imperialism, for example we have seen Pericles’ tacit admission that empire is itself unjust. Yet Romilly’s impression that the political relationships rather than particular complaints are what matter to Thucydides certainly rings true. Thucydides does indeed tell us that the mere fact that Athens has evolved from hegemon to imperial center is the crux of the problem for her subordinate states [1.97-99]. He describes the atmosphere of Greece at the outbreak of the war, telling us

---

44 While Thucydides notes that Athens is an exacting master at 1.99, it is possible that this is rendered necessary by the Persian threat at the time.
45 The Melian episode is covered in detail, yet Thucydides glosses over two prior atrocities at Scione and Torone, 5.3.
47 Romilly (1963) p. 94.
48 Romilly (1963) p. 98.
49 This is also the observation of Strauss (1964).
that most public sentiment was at the time with the Spartans, “to such an extent were the majority of the Hellenes enraged\textsuperscript{50} against the Athenians, some wishing to be delivered from their sway, others fearful of falling under it [2.8].”

This anger is acutely perceived in Athens. The Athenian envoys at Sparta claim that the natural consequence of their pursuit of the “three greatest things” is the hatred of all those who are affected by their power [1.75]. They even extrapolate on this principle to claim that Spartan power would likewise have been resented had they persevered in their leadership of the Greeks [1.76]—an allusion to the fact that Sparta only relinquished leadership over the unified Greek world by dint of their foolishly treasonous general Pausanias, who squandered Sparta’s political capital. Pericles too, as we have seen, when he takes a more grave and pragmatic turn in his rhetoric, reminds the Athenians that they face “danger from the hatred incurred in [their] sway [2.63].” This is also one of the many points where Cleon emulates Pericles [3.37]. To this we might add Thucydides’ more direct (and perhaps more generalizable) observation that the Pisistratid tyranny became a focal point for hatred of tyranny \textit{per se}, regardless of its moderate nature [6.54].\textsuperscript{51} In short, if rule elicits “envy” as Pericles claims, it is an envy that most often takes the simple form of hatred for rulers.

\textsuperscript{50} Again the word is \textit{orge}.
\textsuperscript{51} Thucydides’ purpose is clearly to show the importance of democracy in the Athenian psyche, but also to reveal how their foundational myth was grounded in several fallacies. Orwin (1997) remarks that the story points out that the overcoming of the tyranny was accomplished \textit{for private purposes}—i.e., democratic myths must overemphasize both the egregiousness of other regime types and the relationship between freedom and public spiritedness. Many commentators are puzzled by the placement of the Pisistratid anecdote (the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton) in the narrative about the desecration of the herms, but to me it is clear that Thucydides seeks to explain the ensuing disarray at Athens in terms of
Honor as a Political Bond

The rhetoric of Pericles contains two central ambiguities. Is Athenian imperialism a freely chosen project, or a response to a dangerous environment? Are the honors attending rule simply reluctant acknowledgments of power (as for Hobbes) or can lesser cities truly admire Athens and affirm its worthiness as the funeral speech or the envoys at Sparta would have it? The first ambiguity is resolved by reflecting on the contingent necessity of empire: so long as Athens pursues an expansive conception of liberty—that is, it desires not to be a “vassal state” in “unmolested servitude”—then empire is indeed necessary. The second ambiguity is complex. One might wish to side with Pericles in his refusal to associate worthiness with popularity, yet given that the pursuit of honor at the level of interstate politics is so deeply problematic and unlikely to be consummated, the true source of the concern must be located elsewhere. An alternative locus is obvious given the function of Pericles’ oratory: Pericles’ main objective in the final two speeches is to maintain political cohesion and all three speeches encourage perseverance.\(^{52}\)

Thucydides comments that Pericles is uniquely suited for this task given his extraordinary ability to reconcile the public interest with the private [2.65]. At its core, as seen in the beginning of the plague speech, this task of statesmanship may be grounded in the utmost

its paranoia regarding oligarchic plots. See also Grene (1950 p. 69). Other interpretations that seek to explain the herm scandal in terms of a sudden religious revival at Athens (Strauss 1964; Ahrensdorf 2000) can make no sense of the placement of the interlude.

\(^{52}\) One might question whether Pericles’ speeches portray only the mobilization of the Athenian populace and doubt that they represent real rationales for policies. Thucydides, however, gives us little else in the way of rationalizing Athenian behavior at the outset of the war, and indeed attributes vast powers of decision-making to Pericles.
necessity, but Pericles’ emphasis on perseverance nonetheless focuses attention on higher things.

Thucydides often portrays politics as a kind of chaos, and political man as fundamentally unruly. This view appears not only in the persistent portrayal of hatred for rulers, but also in the various iterations of the “Athenian thesis” which essentially asserts that right never constrained anyone [1.76; 5.89]. Human nature is “accustomed even in spite of the laws to do wrong,” and where it has occasion to “triumph over the laws,” it takes “delight in showing that its passions [are] ungovernable, that it [is] stronger than justice, and an enemy to all superiority [3.84].” With such anarchic, indeed anti-archic raw materials, the statesman’s task of reconciling private desires with public goods and constraints is indeed difficult, and this difficulty is met in part by an emphasis on the political body as being a conduit for the people’s desire for honor.

Pericles does initially put forward a vision of political cohesion that is based more in self-interest. He argues that no matter how well-off a man is, he cannot survive without his city, whereas if his city falls, he will follow suit [2.60]. Yet neither of these things is entirely true. Though we do see instances of the destruction of cities in the pages of the History, such is not a likely outcome of losing a war, something the Athenians (with tragic irony) acknowledge to the Melians [5.91]. Cities engage in conflict over their right to rule themselves, something that may or may not matter to the private individual. There are many noticeable depictions of the treachery of individuals

---

53 This must be qualified in some sense: it appears that humanity becomes more unruly as it becomes more “civilized” as Diodotus points out. This relationship will be examined in the next chapter.
against their cities, and there is nothing to suggest that such behavior is absurd or self-defeating from a practical standpoint. Nor is Pericles correct in claiming that even a great man cannot survive without his city. The History presents a few examples to the contrary, of men who succeed in this transcendence in one way or another. Themistocles, Pausanias, and Alcibiades are all men whose impulse to garner private honor or wealth render them individuals-at-large in the world, and thus at least to some degree, independent of their cities. The political body, it seems, does not monopolize the space in which people can act. Like Hobbes, though in a different way, Thucydides is concerned about the degree to which men will by nature be bound to their political communities. Quite contrary to Hobbes, for Pericles the solution to this problem lies in the community’s attachment to honor.

Pericles recognizes the weakness of the argument for community based on enlightened self-interest and consequently leans much more heavily on the moral component of political society, stressing the idea that the actions of the city constitute a source of pride. Pericles re-writes the social contract on terms more favorable to the sustenance of the community as such:

“…you may reasonably expect…to support the dignity (time) which the state has attained through empire—a dignity in which you all take pride—and not to avoid its burdens unless you resign its honours (time) also [2.61].”

Thus he calls on the citizens not to be the dispassionate advocates of Athens’ interests that the Athenians elsewhere seem to think they are (e.g. at Melos). Such calculating men would never be above treachery because without love of a country whose power is worthy of “contemplation” they can always be bought [2.60]. The reflection of this
glorious power allows for perseverance to overcome fear and even seems to serve the purpose of cheering up the people in the course of their miseries during the plague. It is the promise of the honor which attends dominion that brings Athens back to Pericles and the common good, and away from submission to Sparta.

The union arising from enlightened self-interest is notoriously weak; sharing in honor presents a firmer bond. Unlike providing for his own needs, the glories of empire are unambiguously something that can be attained only via the individual’s political community as a part of that community. Moreover, because honor is something intrinsically separate from the more material concerns of fear and interest, only it can compete with and take precedence over them insofar as it stands above the calculus of such interests. As Hobbes knows, among men who do not embrace any goods beyond those of security or gain, the only way to get citizens to make necessary sacrifices for their political community is for it to become more fearsome than the enemy.⁵⁴ Pericles accomplishes a more substantive transcendence of self-interest with what is ostensibly a transcendent good. Insofar as men are seekers of honor rather than simply concerned with security and gain, the city provides the opportunity for them to immerse their individuality into a potentially greater whole.

⁵⁴ Hence Hobbes’ comment that battles are “on both sides, a running away.” Leviathan, Chapter XI.
The Body Politic and the Scope of Fortune

What then, is the character of this honor, this good that is attained only via political association and enjoyed only by participants in that community? Pericles has already ruled out the concept of honor as positive appreciation wherein subordinates marvel at their superior. Likewise have we seen this as impossible in practice in the case of Corinth’s unrequited desire for the “love” of the Corecyraeans, who instead desire only equal status [1.34]. Is honor instead the mark of excelling in a zero-sum competition for preeminence that brings the victors only danger and resentment (or envy)? This may still be a possibility, but the intrinsic appeal of the pursuit of honor to citizens of such states is highly questionable. Instead, honor is a focal point for the political body insofar as it dwells on what the political body is best at providing: freedom.

In each of Pericles’ speeches, honor is closely associated with freedom, and freedom is arguably at the heart of each speech. The first speech, which seeks to remove the question of particular issues from the table, stresses the single principle of refusing concessions and equates backing down from an equal with slavery. The funeral oration focuses on the internal liberal (eleutherws) character of Athens as a source of pride sufficient to demand the sacrifice of its citizens, and the third speech exhorts persistence in the face of difficulty, the highest expression of liberty. Returning to the theme of opposition to concessions Pericles here notes that

“if the necessary choice was either to yield and forthwith submit to their neighbor’s dictation or by accepting the hazard of war to preserve their independence, then those who shrink from the hazard are more blameworthy than those who face it [2.61].”
As in the relationship between honor and risk, liberty and danger go together more often than they are at odds.

This emphasis on the issue of freedom, particularly *vis a vis* others, is repeated by many other speakers throughout the *History*. Corinthian envoys to Sparta claim that taking dictation from Athens is essentially slavery [1.122]. Brasidas follows Pericles [2.63] in admitting that losing to Athens does not necessarily imply death or (literal) slavery at all [5.9], but something just as bad: subordination [5.9]. Hermocrates also admits of the possibility of what Pericles calls “unmolested servitude,” noting that while the Camarineans’ subordination to Athens may be the safe policy, it is also the shameful one [6.80]. Alcibiades presents the starkest vision of a zero-sum vision of liberty, suggesting that one must choose to either to rule an empire or be subsumed by somebody else’s [6.18].

Likewise is Pericles’ connection of honor and shame to liberty and “slavery” repeated throughout the *History*. The most noteworthy appearance of shame must be the Melian dialogue, in which the concept appears four times in the context of the issue of freedom and subordination. Confronted with the loss of liberty, the Melians grapple with the decision whether to run the substantial risks of resisting Athens or accept a safe albeit expensive subordination to Athens. The shame associated with surrender here appears as a critical obstacle for the Melian leaders. Rejoining the Athenian commanders’ claim that Athens runs great risks to preserve its liberty, the Melians in turn remark that “surely it would be the height of baseness (*kakotes*) and cowardice not to resort to every
expedient before submitting to servitude [5.100].” In turn, the Athenians stress that only the powerful can afford to conceive of political relationships in terms of honor and shame [5.101]. Melos’ weakness means that they have no place considering the honorable, and thus no business being too preoccupied with their liberty. The full scope of this liberty is made apparent by the Athenians’ further remark that both honor and justice can only be pursued at the cost of exposure to considerable risks [5.107]. Only the powerful, in this view, exercise proper moral agency.

Thus while both Melos and Athens consider liberty the properly honorable status for a political community, as the Athenians would have it, the two cities are nonetheless on entirely different planes of political life. On the one hand, the Melians in their weakness must learn to submit to the more powerful, and recognize that their claims of justice against the stronger will go unheeded. The Athenians seek to de-personalize their subjugation of Melos and present it as an act of fortune, an inevitability, and a fact of the political environment. As a result of these considerations, they suggest, Melos should feel no shame in submission. On the other hand, Athens’ power allows it to pursue such things as honor and justice, and personalize its conflicts with other cities. The powerful city presents itself as having transcended fortune, at least in one key respect: other men do not have to be regarded as elements of fortune, and are separated from the environment of necessity.
Power and wealth, rather than being objects of intrinsic value, are instead in the view of “high” politics, the instruments of moral agency.\textsuperscript{55} Thus both Pericles and Hermocrates stress agency when exhorting their respective publics to persist in the maintenance of their free and powerful statuses. For Pericles, Athens garners honor from the fame of her actions “both good and bad [2.41].” To Hermocrates, a policy of resistance to Athens will preserve the freedom of the Syracusans, allowing them to remain “arbiters of [their] own destiny, able to [punish/reward]\textsuperscript{56} good or bad deeds with equal effect [4.63].” The ability to administer punishment and reward are then intrinsic elements of liberty. In contrast to the Melians, who must view the actions of others as a part of a given, unalterable, or perhaps natural strategic environment, great states such as Syracuse or Athens afford their citizens something that is likely otherwise to be impossible: the ability to pursue justice and exercise moral agency. As the Athenian generals at Melos indicate, honor and justice become joined through what liberty power affords. The sense of honor that dominates here is that which shows itself not to be subject to the wills of others—the spirited rejection of being subject to the wills of others and the impingements of their interests.

This concern is certainly behind Pericles’ advice to Athens regarding their having to endure a plague and a war at the same time: “the hand of heaven [that is, the plague] must be borne with resignation, that of the enemy with fortitude [2.64].” Pericles outlines a particular scope of fortune, and places the plague within it and the Spartans

\textsuperscript{55} See Chapter 2 for a more detailed account of this transformation of values. 
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{amunw}, which is probably best rendered as “return” or “requite” in the sense of like for like.
without. Regardless of the fact that the two misfortunes were related, and that the coincidence of the two was certainly outside the realm of human control, the political challenge presented by the Spartans is different in kind and requires a different response entirely. This limitation of the scope of fortune removes political challengers from the realm of environmental factors and places them in an inter-personalized world in which honor and justice can be pursued. To Pericles, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships like punishment and reward take priority—at least in his rhetoric—over everything else [2.42].

Conclusion

In Chapter Two, I outlined how the growth of wealth and power allows the political body to begin to ignore its foundations in satisfying the mundane needs of its citizens, and start to focus on goods such as spontaneity and liberality that transcend the calculative mindset. Here, at its extreme the political body oriented around honor entirely loses touch with its grounding. The advanced political community, having acquired relative freedom from fortune through its ability to amass “surplus” (periousia) now expands its taste for the mastery of fortune and is increasingly loath to accept misfortune as a natural given. In this gradual conquest of the uncontrolled, certainly the realm of human affairs

[^57]: A distinction should be made between Pericles’ oratory, which is focused upon domestic cohesion, and his foreign policy, which despite his talk of the glories of Athenian military superiority, urges the continuation of Athens’ policy of maintaining the status quo and making no new acquisitions. Thucydides comments that Pericles is uniquely capable of balancing fear and confidence [2.65], suggesting that the tension between prudence and hope is intrinsically unstable, and cannot last without a “leader of genius” (Romilly 1963).
presents the most tempting acquisition. Pericles’ Athens, having acquired the power to stabilize expectations regarding the exigencies of daily, biological life, stretches its conception of liberty to its ultimate form: the ability to adjudicate and act upon one’s judgment. In short, along the continuum Thucydides presents beginning with unsettled, chaotic life and the power of Athens, moral agency and the ability to limit the scope of fortune appears to be the greatest form of liberty. It is the body politic as such that allows for and creates the aspiration for this liberty—finally providing it with a perhaps illusory opportunity to achieve it.

Thucydides thus portrays foreign policy as susceptible to becoming an expression of an unrealistic and overreaching expression of liberty. The oratory of Pericles suggests that at its core, the preoccupation with national honor is a focal point for domestic politics insofar as it is the most concrete good the political community offers its citizens by dint of their political association. The advanced politics of Periclean Athens shows that its central principle transforms into something altogether post-material, or what Richard Lebow would call “spiritual.” This analysis prompts us to reassess international politics’ central problem of zero-sum competition, which in Thucydides’ presentation

58 There is a clear parallel to this idea in Morgenthau’s work: “By transferring his egotism and power impulses to the nation, the individual gives his inhibited aspirations not only a vicarious satisfaction. The process of transference transforms also the ethical significance of the satisfaction. What was egotism and hence ignoble and immoral there becomes patriotism and therefore noble and altruistic here. While society puts liabilities upon aspirations for individual power, it places contributions to the collective power of the state at the top of the hierarchy of values.” (Morgenthau 1945 p 15.) In short, he speaks of a transference of animus dominandi. Morgenthau only parallels Pericles because the latter shows the greater significance of freedom of moral action rather than domination per se. Thus regarding the issue of “transference” or sublimation of urges, Thucydides’ version comes much closer to explaining why there is a moral improvement from the individual to the collective: the focus on freedom of action rather than force at least strives to reconcile the liberties of citizens.

arises at the very least between advanced and powerful states. The History recommends we take into account a quasi-rational and uncompromising aspiration for a liberty which is aloof to taking the interests of counterparts into account. This disposition ultimately moralizes or personalizes conflict, casting interstate competition as a pure contest of wills above everything else. It is not amenable to compromise or frameworks of reciprocity, either in the form of legal norms or the a-moralized vision of egoistic action stressed by the modern realpolitik tradition.

We see in the History an honorific politics of expansive liberty which, while it in some sense is ennobling, Thucydides also portrays to be deeply problematic. Thus rather than being the slavish follower of Pericles that he is often presented to be, Thucydides is in fact preparing the ground for a critique of Pericles’ choice of emphases. With the problems attending the close association with honor and radical freedom, we look forward to the competing views of Diodotus and Hermocrates. These men, quite contrary to Pericles, stress the importance of fear, the limitations of human control, and the de-personalization and a-moralization—to a point—of relations between states.

---

60 Donald Kagan (2009), for example, claims that Thucydides’ devotion to Pericles is so thoroughgoing that it blinds him to important political realities and taints his views of men like Cleon, who according to Kagan, was a more impressive leader than he is given credit for.
Chapter 5
The Evolution of Politics and the Cultivation of Interests

As perhaps the first analyst of realpolitik—and arguably its first critic—Thucydides is frequently associated with the concept of continuity. Thucydides in many ways seems to ground his understanding of politics in the character of the human being or the group rather than institutions and his great antiquity is frequently summoned in order to lend credibility to realpolitik’s claims to permanent relevance. Indeed, Thucydides’ own discussion regarding the value of his work rests at least in part on a continuous pattern of human events, given that his inquiry is written for those who “wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or a similar way [1.22].” In uncovering the continuity that underlies this modestly predictive and hence indirectly prescriptive task, Thucydides and the characters he chronicles frequently lean upon the concept of nature (*physis*). This underlying human nature urges men towards “the three greatest things” and in so doing it frequently overpowers the constraints of law or convention (*nomos*). Hence human nature (*physis*) prevails over law and the assertion of the right of the strongest is claimed to be wholly consistent with human character (*tropos*) and nature (*physis*) [3.84; 1.76].

At the same time, Thucydides intrigues us with a number of accounts of political growth or development that constitute real qualitative change. While Thucydides’ central
insight about the weakness of the law in the face of human tendencies stands in any case, his
discussion of change suggests that we ought not to put too much emphasis on human
class as unvarying or having a fixed determinacy. The word is, after all, sometimes
used by speakers to indicate what we might call “character;” we hear for example the
Corinthians claim that there is a unique Peloponnesian nature [1.121]. Thucydides
himself confounds his readers by suggesting that the civil war at Corcyra is the model for
civil war everywhere, at least so long as human nature stays the same [3.82, emphasis
added]. It is also clear that Thucydides does not conceive of human nature as a set of
rock-bottom, inalienable characteristics of the human animal—for if he had such a view
he could not say that “human nature” succumbed to the ravages of the plague. He
suggests here that human nature can indeed be defeated, and a person can be
dehumanized while still present in body. Likewise is nature something a person can fail
to actualize—at least to Pericles, who exhorts women properly to live up to their natures
[2.45].

Such equivocation about the nature of nature gives some glimmer of hope to those
who would read Thucydides as a relativist or constructivist of some kind. This approach
has in fact become popular in the last few decades, following the great emphasis that J.B.
White puts on his interpretation of Thucydides’ observation about the changeability of

1 The account is at 2.50. One might think that this is an expression indicating that the illness was terminal,
but we know that it was not (our author himself had it) and Thucydides’ subsequent discussion of the
effects culminate in a discussion of the social effects of the malady.
2 This concept of nature is clearly closer to that of Aristotle than the modern concept of nature. The word
for “nature,” physis, in its etymology suggests growth or development.
words during civil war.³ Constructivists in the field of international relations have in turn felt justified in appropriating Thucydides. Following White’s “linguistic turn,” they claim that Thucydides’ true intent is not to portray the weakness of law superimposed upon a fixed human nature, but rather to show the dangers of undermining the normative language that holds communities together and constitutes the identities of their members.⁴

It is perilous, however, to overstate this issue of the cultural relativity of drivers for behavior. On balance, the concept of nature is certainly most widely used to counterbalance the notion of convention.⁵ One unvarying characteristic of human nature, for example, seems to be the reliable weakness of normative constraints, especially when times are difficult. But unlike Thomas Hobbes, Thucydides will not necessarily attribute a full range of egoistic impulses to a “natural” man, much less ascribe them to the inexorable dictates of reason. Rather, at the very least, critical features of human behavior vary according to external circumstance⁶ and as Diodotus points out to the Athenian assembly, human history seems to be marked by an ever increasing predilection toward daring, insubordination, and hope [3.45]. The issues of transformation, development, and perhaps even progress, must then be carefully examined.

---

³ White (1984). White’s book is entitled When Words Lose Their Meaning, but Thucydides’ language is in truth a bit different. This will be discussed shortly.
⁴ See, for example, Lebow (2001; 2003); Monoson and Loriaux (2001).
⁵ And as I will argue shortly, the arguments of White and Lebow over-interpret Thucydides’ meaning at 3.82. While I will argue that motives and interests are expansible contexts, one unvarying characteristic of what Thucydides calls human nature is egoism, separating him clearly from constructivist thought, which tends to regard egoism as “ideas” nearly “all the way down” in Wendt’s (1999) language. In other words, to Wendt, that “ego” is exclusive of “alter,” is potentially nothing more than a construct.
⁶ 3.82, 2.53.
Thucydides in fact gives us three instances of what might be superficially called “states of nature,” that is, they constitute revealing episodes of political evolution or devolution. These episodes consist of the rudimentary politics described in the *Archeology*, and the accounts of the plague and civil war, or *stasis*. To at least some degree, these comprise the kernel about which modern state of nature theorizing has grown, by dint of Hobbes’ attraction to and appropriation of significant pieces of the *History*. Yet to Thucydides, none of these episodes provides the baseline and core of human action that Hobbes sought in his state of nature. None can fully be a touchstone, for they are either devoid of critical drivers of behavior or are cases of pathological excess. This means that Thucydides’ accounts of degraded politics cannot serve as a lowest common denominator whose evils it will be the purpose of our politics to avoid. Many of the worst political developments are closely related to its greatest achievements, and Thucydides does not seem to recommend we throw out the baby with the bathwater. His presentation of high politics, which finds its apotheosis in Pericles’ Athens, brings its own set of constraints, compulsions, and opportunities. Interestingly, we will see that with regard to at least one key issue, Thucydides has less in common with his student Hobbes and more in common with one of Hobbes’ most significant detractors on this point, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Like Rousseau, Thucydides understands the role of political or social interaction in cultivating a desire for more intrinsically zero-sum goods and expanding interests. As Rousseau, and after him Kant, acknowledge,⁷ Thucydides

---

⁷ Kant certainly recognizes the problem as such, finding ultimately that Perpetual Peace will require more than just a “technical task;” genuine moral improvement is necessary. *Perpetual Peace* p. 377. It is difficult to pin down any prescriptions from Rousseau regarding international affairs, but one line of
suggests that because the “logic of anarchy” is not a fully sufficient account of transgression and conflict, meliorating the clash of interests requires moral changes, not merely structural ones. The coalescence of groups and establishment of hierarchy appear quite natural to Thucydides, and it is the passions and interests that grow therein that provide the greatest challenges.

The Archeology

Thucydides’ account of Greek political development, the so-called Archeology, springs directly from Thucydides’ explicit desire to differentiate the events of his lifetime from previous events. The History begins with the claim that the gravity and scale of the Peloponnesian War were truly unprecedented. In fact, it was the greatest “movement” (kinesis) to date [1.1]. The singularity of the movement suggests that Thucydides is interested in the consolidation of power and the human capacity for concerted action, for certainly the sum of movements in the turmoil of early Greece was considerable. Thucydides clearly states that what makes this conflict uniquely significant are the calamities that ensue, both between cities and within them [1.23]. The two are connected: it is this “acme” achieved by Sparta and Athens, their great state of

---

argument synthesized by Stanley Hoffman puts the proper direction of amour-propre front and center. See Hoffman (1965) and Rousseau’s essay “The State of War.”

8 This is not to say that the contrast is Thucydides’ only intention in relating the story. Certain themes of continuity begin in the Archeology, for example the issue of the importance of money, naval power, etc.

9 hathrooi, Pouncey (1980 p. 51) argues that concerted action is Thucydides’ primary interest. Concerted action is that which is axiologon or worthy of mention.
preparedness, that intensifies war to the point of ravaging the very communities whose coalesced wills afforded this power in the first place.

Thucydides portrays power and “rest” as being mutually reinforcing except during those periods when power must be exercised to alter the status quo. The *Archeology* portrays several instances of the unifying and pacifying function of power as powerful kings overcome the chronic instability of tribal conquests and usurpation. The power of Hellen’s descendents gives rise to the concept of the Hellenes [1.3];\(^{10}\) Minos frees the Aegean of pirates, allowing greater commerce (albeit taxed by Minos) [1.4]; Agamemnon unifies the Achaeans through his ability to build ships [1.9]. Both instances of state-building are presented as though they were simply more sophisticated forms of piracy, which both empowers leaders and sustains their followers.\(^{11}\) Later we see Theseus contribute to the stability of Attica by abolishing the village councils and consolidating governmental power in Athens [2.15]. The culmination of this power accumulation is the Athenian empire, whose consolidation is described in the account of the “fifty years” following the *Archeology*.

The consolidation and growth of political power—largely presented as driven by self-serving motives—establishes stability by rendering naturally wealthy areas less conflict-prone. Among agrarian people with weak political associations, fertile farmland invites usurpation and internal conflict (*stasis*), providing an early example of the

\(^{10}\) Here and at 1.6 Thucydides clearly implies that it is an identity developed through political intercourse and a set of conventions which distinguishes Greek from Barbarian.

\(^{11}\) Thucydides here is reminiscent of the historian Charles Tilly’s (1985) comparison of state-formation to organized crime.
“resource curse” [1.2]. This dynamic (from which Athens was felicitously exempted on account of its lack of arable land) is gradually snuffed out through the power of the kings of old, yet they cannot achieve the true rest that conduces to growth [1.12]. A relative peace that allows for the growth of more wealth and power (and hence, to a point, more stability) eventually settles over Greece, and the implication is clear that this is because of the ever-increasing reach of political agency and military power. This rest allows for the development of self-serving and materialistic tyrannies which overturn constitutional monarchies [1.17]. These in turn yield to the more sophisticated and inclusive regimes of either the oligarchic or democratic type, which gather the common (koinon) aspirations of large groups of people.

This account is certainly the most obvious narrative running through the Archeology, but Thucydides not only brings out several other elements to his story of the development of advanced political forms, but he makes some intriguing omissions too. One overt focus of Thucydides is to associate the accumulation of money and the aggregation of individual wills with what he considers to be “significant.” Commentators typically notice his attention to the importance of money in achieving great objectives. For example, the Archeology perhaps satirically points out how a lack of funds rendered Agamemnon’s assault on Troy less than spectacular, and Pericles grounds much of his confidence in ultimate success in the relative balance sheets of Sparta and Athens [1.141]. Thucydides, however, also points out that a critical element of significant power is the establishment of a sense of the common. Thus the tyrants of old—pursuing only individual gain and safety—fail to achieve anything “significant.”
committed as they are to the private \textit{idion}, they never coalesce to pursue common \textit{koine} goals [1.17]. The most striking example of how power is grounded in a sense of common cause lies in the story of Sitalces the Odryssian, whose army of one hundred thousand men is rendered useless by private intrigue [2.98 ff].

This sense of a “common” life as evidenced by “collective” \textit{hathrooi} action, both between individuals and cities,\footnote{For example, 1.5.3.} is presented as the product of a gradual development. Early groups, described essentially as pirates, aggregated around strong, greedy men who also sustained their followers [1.5].\footnote{Trophes connotes caring or raising.} Later, after establishing a more settled life, out of a desire for wealth, weak individuals and cities submit themselves to the rule of the strong. The common interests that bind the weak and the strong ultimately work to diminish their differences, creating more coherent and inclusive societies. The Athenians lead the way in forbidding the carrying of weapons, then, interestingly, it is Sparta which first develops an outward egalitarianism by outgrowing class-based ostentation, a practice which Athens eventually follows [1.6]. The peak of this transformation of the common is Periclean Athens, a city which allegedly shuns ostentation and regards private wealth as a public resource [2.40]. It is a city whose citizens treat their bodies as though they were not their own [1.70].

It is clear that common purpose (facilitated by a sense of commonality between citizens) combines with money to create a city that can afford to aspire to great things and more importantly, to persevere in its ambitions with collected willpower and material wealth.
security. This leads to vast power with unprecedented will to use it, along with the ability to focus on values above and beyond material benefit and security.\textsuperscript{14} In this, Thucydides’ assertions about the discontinuity between his world and the older Greece are supported by contemporary scholars.\textsuperscript{15} Many have argued that it is Thucydides’ intent to underscore how this new world lacks practical restraints or cultural inhibitions such as the “ancient simplicity,”\textsuperscript{16} marking a collapse into a sort of nihilism, particularly on the part of Athens.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, while those finding continuity between the \textit{Archeology} and the rest of the \textit{History} focus on the persistence of egoism and weakness of bonds between men, those who focus on discontinuity tend to find Thucydides still more pessimistic.

But is there more to be gleaned from this account of political development? In many ways it is notable to assess what is lacking in Thucydides’ portrayal of early politics, namely, honor and a sense of justice. While both honor and justice are of great concern to actors in Thucydides’ day, they are portrayed as playing no part in rudimentary politics. The Athenians at Sparta in fact look longingly upon those days when superiority of power, rather than claims to justice and expectations of equality, sufficiently settled matters [1.77]. One might argue that Thucydides only portrays justice as a futile complaint of inconvenienced parties, and thus has no need to include it in his

\textsuperscript{14} This is the thesis of Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{15} For example, Donald Kagan (2003), points out that the old style of warfare was largely a seasonal affair consisting of daytime skirmishes to establish a winner, followed by an early bedtime. It is Periclean Athens which attains the capability to wage what we might call ‘total war’ for the very first time, and Sparta is clearly caught off guard for the first few years of the conflict.
\textsuperscript{16} This is a famous casualty of stasis, 3.83.
\textsuperscript{17} See for example, Crane (1998). White (1984) argues on similar lines about the destruction of common culture resulting from Athens’ power, echoed by Lebow (2001).
factual reporting of early times. Yet the Athenian envoys encounter the expectation of just and equal treatment as an influential fact of their environment, as do the generals at Melos. It cannot be taken for granted in ancient thought that justice and equality are linked. Nonetheless, the two notions are certainly linked in a number of places in Thucydides. This includes the relationship between Corinth and Corcyra, the Athenian empire’s legal system, and the Melian dialogue [1.34; 1.77; 5.99ff]. When power can effectively underwrite stability and wealth, we find that the powerful develop a taste for moral agency and freedom from necessity to the point of valuing spontaneity. Beyond this, Thucydides suggests that within stable orders created by power, expectations of justice and honorable behavior are also cultivated.

Many have noted that the word “justice” makes no appearance in the Archeology, but more interesting is Thucydides’ omission of the concept of honor or shame, because of a single interesting exception. For the most part, political motives in the Archeology are chalked up to the more basic elements of self-interest, and most of the time this means material gain. In sharp contrast to the rhetoric of Pericles or Sthenelaidas, the overt preoccupation of powerful men in the Archeology is wealth.

---

18 They are certainly not, for example, in the thought of Aristotle.
19 The Melian dialogue shows a complex relationship between justice, honor, and equality. Athens takes Melos’ claims for justice to be a concern for honor, which is inappropriate considering her unequal power. Honor and shame apply only between equals. Thus the Athenians would have us believe that justice is a relationship mediating only those claims which power cannot. From the Athenian perspective this would mean that justice applies only in the context of the arbitration clause of their treaty with Sparta, for bilateral discussion outside of arbitration is also judged to be an unacceptable submission to Spartan power. Strauss (1964) effectively implies that pacta sunt servanda is the only sense of common justice that survives Thucydides’ presentation.
20 See Chapters 2, 5.
21 Strauss (1964); Crane (1998 p. 46).
22 Crane (1998 p. 146) and Grene (1950 p. 57) have also noted these omissions.
Thucydides’ exception is the appearance of “disgrace” (aischune), “nobility” (kalon), and “worthiness” (axion) in a revealing negative sense. In the universal state of predation presented in the Archeology, piracy was a common means to survival, and

“this occupation did not as yet involve disgrace, but rather conferred something even of glory. This is shown by the practice even at the present day, of some of the peoples on the mainland, who still hold it an honour to be successful in this business…who invariably ask all who put in to shore whether they are pirates, the inference being that neither those whom they ask ever disavow that occupation, nor those ever censure it who are concerned to have the information. On the mainland also men plundered one another; and even to-day in many parts of Hellas life goes on under the old conditions…And these mainlanders’ habit of carrying arms is a survival of their old freebooting life [1.5].”

Thucydides’ implication is clear enough: in his present-day Aegean world, people know better than to regard piracy as honorable and regard it, rather, as shameful. Among the more barbaric people of old, or those rustic Greeks and barbarians (the northern “mainlanders”) who still carry personal arms, there is no distinction between “success” in the field of marauding—i.e., force and fraud—and honor. This account then associates a pacific way of life, a civilized life perhaps, with a disentanglement of the concept of honor from promotion of self-interest at the direct expense of others.

This world of piracy and arms is quite clearly a near-zero-sum economic system, where a significant component of the living of each is simply taken from others. In this harsh world, where cities wall themselves in far from the coast and individuals must arm themselves as a matter of course, it seems to be accepted as necessity that violence and

---

23 Barbaric peoples would recognize Hobbes' definition of honor: “honourable is whatever possession, action, or quality is an argument or signe of Power.” Leviathan Ch. 10.
24 Of course some generation of wealth must take place somewhere, but it is the irony of instability that the actual production of goods is the least secure activity to engage in.
usurpation are “the natural round of things” and are “easily accepted.” People certainly “easily” give up their belongings [1.2]. Pirates themselves are motivated by gain but also necessity, as Thucydides describes the activity as a “living” which sustains the pirate rank and file. Thus necessity appears here as providing the justificatory cover that Athenian speakers so frequently seek, and while the economic realities may be zero-sum, this rudimentary concept of honor is not. Honor can be accorded to those who intend to harm and to steal, who seem to be deemed part of an inexorable, natural order of things. This nascent honor is both sought and given, but the moral leap towards separating it from the simple pursuit of self-interest has yet to be taken. For the time being, it is collapsed and entangled with the basic and the necessary.

The Plague

Thucydides’ account of the plague which afflicted Athens beginning in 430 BC (the second year of the war) is an account of a different “low” to which political life might be subjected. It is the one and only part of the History which atomizes society to a collection of individuals, for while the pirates and tyrants of old may have had self-serving motives, the coherence of the communities which they lead or rule is taken for granted. The ancient world was still comprised of groups. It takes a plague to

---

26 As will be discussed shortly, Thucydides’ portrayal of stasis reflects the disintegration of common constraints, but the end result is faction, not individual interests incidentally in conflict.
radically individualize people, albeit temporarily. It contrasts sharply in a number of ways with the highs of Pericles’ funeral speech which immediately precedes it. Where Pericles touts the citizens’ ability to eschew their bodies and contribute their individual efforts to the greater glory of the city, the plague passage immediately grounds the loftiness of his rhetoric. In fact, the plague is greatly exacerbated by Pericles’ attempts to transcend the old constraints of agrarian-based conflict by packing the city with all of Attica [2.52]. As people die “like sheep [2.51],” the attention of all is focused on the frailty of the body, and in turn, hedonism and license rule the day for a great majority of people.

When anyone, regardless of their character or past deeds, can at a stroke be condemned to a miserable death, both hope and expectations of justice are likewise condemned:

“No fear of gods or law of men restrained; for, on the one hand, seeing that all men were perishing alike, they judged that piety and impiety came to the same thing, and, on the other, no one expected that he would live to be called to account and pay the penalty of his misdeeds. On the contrary, they believed that the penalty had already been decreed against them, and now, hanging over their heads, was a far heavier one, and that before this fell out it was only [fair] to get some enjoyment out of life [2.53].”

---

27 In Thucydides' narrative (which is not strictly chronological) Pericles rouses Athens to overcome the enervating effects of the plague, and thus the city recombines around the prospect of future glories. See discussion in Chapter 2. In reality the plague persisted for some time, and Pericles himself succumbed to it shortly after the time in which Thucydides places his “plague speech.”

28 The word here is eikos, which Orwin takes to mean “fair” but Smith has translated as “reasonable.” Liddell & Scott defines eikos as “reasonable/fair/equitable,” thus while Smith is right to render the word in this way, he leaves an ambiguity with regard to whether the reasonableness comes from a sense of fairness or a rational calculation.
Thus two distinct judgments—pessimism and a sense of injustice—shake out from this crumbling of expectations of bodily security. Both result in license and daring (*tolma*), but the former has certainly received more commentary than the latter.

Thucydides’ insight about the first of these dynamics is the kernel around which Hobbes builds his political theory: my concern for the future security of my body is where I am most susceptible to the control of the laws. Where lawfulness is effectively supported by external constraints, they are most effective, thus when hopelessness breeds a lack of fear, a critical part of the calculus of restraint is lost.\(^{29}\) The result here is a complete eschewal of self-restraint in either the sense of long-term planning or principled, lawful, or honorable behavior. The honorable does not disappear altogether, but as in the dangerous world of the *Archeology*, it is conflated with the useful:

“…no one was eager to practice self-denial in prospect of what was esteemed honor,\(^{30}\) because everyone thought that it was doubtful that he would live to attain it, but the pleasure of the moment and whatever was in any way conducive to it came to be regarded as at once honorable and expedient [2.53].”

As a consequence, the city slides into a hedonistic lawlessness in which men no longer hide their pursuit of pleasure, and out of desperation rob one another with impunity.\(^{31}\)

Pursuit of the honorable or noble beyond the selfish seems to be something akin to the

\(^{29}\) It is interesting to note that while Hobbes certainly takes note of how hope for the continued enjoyment of security has a positive effect on the social order, this extreme test case of hopeless fearlessness is not considered. Rather, Hobbes seems to assume that fear will always be there to provide a foundation for his constructs.

\(^{30}\) This puzzling qualification—“*what was esteemed* honor”—is one of a few instances where Thucydides indicates either the sheer conventionalism of virtues or an unstated distinction between conventional versus genuine virtues. See for example his comment that Nikias had lived in accordance with “*what was considered*” to be virtue at 7.86.

\(^{31}\) It is notable here that the main objects of theft have to do with funeral preparations.
pursuit of wealth: an extrinsic good whose value can only be redeemed in the contingency of a stable social order.

As in the case of the armed barbarians which populate the *Archeology*, honor is constricted and entangled with basic desires or needs. Considerations of justice follow a similar course. Since self-abnegation and a stepping outside of the immediacy of the moment are otherwise critical aspects of a higher honor, how can reckless hedonism accommodate itself to it?\(^{32}\) It seems that the very sense of violated fairness contributes to the conflation of the honorable and the pleasant and the expedient, and it is this indignation that reintroduces a moral aspect to the daring hedonism of plague-ridden Athens. One might say that it is the kind of honor shown in Sthenelaidas’ speech, the honor that seeks above all not to be trifled with. By casting off their commitments to anything other than their immediate desires, the people of Athens refuse to get the short end of the stick in a transaction of lawfulness, reward, and punishment. In this, they show something of a spark of self-assertion.

This self-assertion is not spirited. First and foremost, the plague instills dejection, or more precisely, a lack of spiritedness (*athumia*). It is critical to note what the collapse of lawfulness is *not* to Thucydides. Most notably, it is neither frantic nor violent. While disregard for laws of every kind—conventional, formal, and divine—prevails, we do not see the chaotic free-for-all that issues from civil war. Thucydides is vague about the particulars of the crimes, but the pathetic examples he does give mostly involve desperate

\(^{32}\) Thucydides clearly sets up this comparison at 2.53. Elsewhere Pericles associates honor with a transcendence of immediate interest. See Ch. 5.
and shameless ploys to dispose of the corpses of family members at the expense of others. Otherwise we see that men shamelessly cease to hide what they’ve been doing all along—engaging in various forbidden or discouraged pleasures. Pleasure, in fact, is the ruling principle of the day, and Thucydides uses the word *hedone* several times, omitting any talk of passion. Thucydides does not relate stories of violence, envy, or score settling, which sets the lawlessness of the plague apart from the lawlessness of civil conflict. This distinction often goes unnoticed, no doubt due to Thucydides’ lack of detail regarding the shameless transgressions.\(^{33}\) Anticipating the treatment of lawlessness in his portrayal of civil conflict, we might say that Thucydides does not ascribe any particular effects to lack of constraint as such, but rather, lawlessness takes on different forms depending on which expectations are confounded and which needs go unsatisfied. Hope, then, becomes critical, and men’s orientation to hope greatly influences their behavior. Pericles knows this well, before attempting to revive Athens with more transcendent hopes of imperial splendor [2.62], he comments in the funeral speech that those who have little to hope for have little to fight for [2.43]. True desperation comes from having everything to lose, not from having nothing to lose.

The plague account shows how much of politics is grounded in satisfying the bodily needs of individuals, and the great importance for the political order to be able to create a reliable environment of safety, punishment for transgression, and rewards of honor for virtuous actions. The ordeal also reveals something beyond the importance of a stable political order: the importance of justice. The plague “succeed[s] in wringing

\(^{33}\) An exception is Orwin (1988; 1994 Ch 8).
from men neither their susceptibility to honor nor their sense of fairness.” In fact, it is the failure of the cosmos to satisfy basic expectations of justice, and the political order’s sheer impotence in the face of the arbitrariness of the calamity which ultimately degrade the character of Athens’ citizens. Powerlessness in the face of a randomly assigned fortune causes them to assimilate the noble, the fair, and the expedient. Debating the fate of Mytilene, the Athenian demagogue and general Cleon claims that “a state which has inferior laws that are inviolable is stronger than one whose laws are good but without authority [3.37].” Thucydides implicitly challenges this proto-positivism with his account of the plague. Expectations of justice go hand in hand with the desire to meliorate uncertainty and insecurity, and dashed hopes for a fair world are transformed into the justice of unmitigated self-indulgence. The critical element of security provided by a political order is not guaranteed safety per se, but freedom from the arbitrary vicissitudes of fortune or the whims of other men. Given the claims levied against Athens by its subordinates and states like Melos, it appears that stability breeds expectations of justice even beyond the confines of the city. Considering the destructive role that the spurned sense of fairness plays, one wonders whether it is truly in Athens’ interest to disregard and debunk such claims.

---

Civil War

Thucydides’ narrative of civil conflict in Corcyra, the *stasis* passage, shows humanity acting in every which way but dispirited. Rather than the *athumia* of the plague, the reigning passion of civil conflict is *prothumia*, or zeal.\(^{35}\) The political and social order in Corcyra breaks down in the face of the pressures of the war, while the emerging bipolar structure in Greece divides the oligarchs from the democrats with the temptation of outside support.\(^{36}\) As with the plague, this results in a general lawlessness, yet the community is not reduced to atomistic individuals, but factions. What begins with opportunistic and private score-settling ends in the “frantic impulsiveness [3.82]” and horrific violence of factional war. Every form of lawlessness prevails over restraint, with violations of mores, statutory law, family ties, and piety abounding. Even the conventional understanding of everyday virtues changes. As Thucydides comments, “*[t]he ordinary acceptation of words in their relation to things changed as men thought fit [3.82].*”

While the stasis passage does show in some respects the consequences of a security breakdown, the dissolution of society portrayed here has more to do with overweening hopes than fears.\(^{37}\) The collapse of society features something more like

\(^{35}\) *Thumos*, or spirit, also connotes a desire for recognition of dignity or worth. See Mansfield (2007).

\(^{36}\) The idea of using oligarchy or democracy in the ‘ideological’ sense as ways of solidifying support to Athens or Sparta seems to be something hit upon since the beginning of the war. See Diodotus, [3.47]. Prior to this there was a more spontaneous alignment with most of the Athenian subjects—with notable exceptions—being democracies and the Spartans pursuing a policy of interfering in the politics of their allies to suit their purposes.

\(^{37}\) In fact, on my reading, fear only appears twice: in the passage at 3.83, in the negative sense that there was no oath terrible enough (*phoberos*) to inspire compliance; also at 3.83 people fearing their own weakness anticipate the strengths of others.
antagonism for its own sake—rather than the pursuit of security—driven by the
degradation of character. The basic formula Thucydides offers is that war provides the
opportunity for the oligarchs and the demos to obtain outside support (from Sparta or
Athens, respectively). This opportunity combines with the degrading nature of hardship
and want; these, in conjunction with man’s natural resentment of hierarchy and rule, yield
the unchecked desire for superiority, victory, and gain (*philotimia*, *philonikia,*
pleonexia) [3.82.8].

“[I]n time of peace they would have had no pretext for asking [Sparta or Athens’]
intervention, nor any inclination to do so, yet now that these two states were at
war, either faction in the various cities, if it desired a revolution, found it easy to
bring in allies also, for the discomfiture at one stroke of its opponents and the
strengthening of its own cause. And so there fell upon the cities on account of
revolutions many grievous calamities…[f]or in peace and prosperity, both states
(poleis) and individuals have gentler feelings, because men are not then forced to
face conditions of dire necessity; but war, which robs men of the easy supply of
their daily wants, is a rough schoolmaster and creates in most people a temper
(orge) that matches their condition [3.82.2].”

Thucydides once again touches on the ability of prosperity to cultivate finer sentiments.
But compared to other instances of deprivation in the *History*, sustained war brings about
a different reaction. Unlike the dejection we see during the plague or the acceptance of
predation we see in the *Archeology*, the fall from prosperity yields an ugly passion. All
the same, the hardships of war seem to undo the work of civilization, creating a “savage”
environment [3.82]. This combination of opportunity and the erosion of the material
props for self-restraint unleashes the natural daring in men, both rich and poor, oppressed

---

38 Note the root of *time* in the word for ambition/love of honor, *philotimia*.
39 Rahe (1996) points out that this word *hwmos* literally means “raw” and connotes barbarism. It is used
three times in the *History*, once to describe the uncivilized Aeolians who eat raw things [3.94], here in the
stasis passage, and also to describe how the Athenians felt after condemning the Mytilenians to death
[3.36].

163
and oppressor. Unlike genuine need, which emboldens those who have nothing to grasp at something, the degradation of politics in Corcyra emboldens all to take more. The poor seek to escape debt, personal vendettas are satisfied, and all seek more power, more wealth, and above all, to rule. All of this is facilitated by a zeal (prothumia) which springs from the love of victory (philonikia) [3.82.8]. Throughout we see an emphasis on purely relative goods and zero-sum competition, nicely captured by the concept of “love of victory” which is the capstone of Thucydides’ explanation of the “cause of all the evils” of civil conflict.

If Thucydides does not explain civil conflict arising out of insecurity but rather from opportunity, perhaps there is still room for thinking about the continuation and escalation of conflict in terms of fear as an overwhelming passion or the logic of the security dilemma. Indeed, the two factions in Corcyra do reveal their fearfulness in Thucydides’ account of the particulars of this case (3.70-3.81), but fear is interestingly omitted for the most part in the final assessment of civil conflict as such (3.82-84). We do see the problem of anticipation that is so important to Hobbes and the modern realist tradition, but it is recast in terms of trust. “For there was no assurance binding enough, no oath terrible enough, to reconcile men; but always if they were stronger, since they accounted all security hopeless, they were rather disposed to take precautions…than able to trust others [3.83].” This lack of trust—leading as it does to the impulse to
unilaterally pursue one’s own interests—naturally leads to the logic of anticipation, or in

40 Diodotus seems to be vindicated here in his claim that all men hope for more, thus both the poor and the rich, the weak and the poor all have their own mainsprings for transgression 3.45.
41 This approach is very effectively taken by Mueller (2000) with regard to ethnic conflicts in the 20th Century.
today’s language, preemption or prevention. This is particularly the case for those who perceive a weakness on their part, and feel the urge to dispose of those with more capacity in advance. Hence, “it was generally the meaner intellects who won the day [3.83].”

Hobbes parallels many of these observations—often stating them in stronger terms—including even this comment about the advantages that accrue to those with blunter wits. Most significant to my purposes is the question of anticipation as a function of the erosion of trust. To Hobbes, given the lack of trust in the state of nature, “there is nothing so reasonable as anticipation.” Lack of trust—and thus mutual fear—flows from the lack of coercive enforcement. Where effective enforcement is lacking, “covenants without the sword are but words.”

Trust in a sense is a construct, whereas distrust is natural, thus in a state of nature there is not only a tendency but a positive entitlement to preempt or prevent subjectively assessed future threats. In a system where several actors ascribe to this view and feel mutually threatened, conflict is almost guaranteed.

But Thucydides does not share Hobbes’ assessment here. We hear nothing about an erosion of enforcement powers causing this lack of trust. In fact, such highly contentious men appear to fear little and don’t seem especially interested in pursuing safe policies, for “to get revenge on some one was more valued than never to have suffered injury [in the first place 3.82].” The collapse of the common community results from individual and factional ambitions becoming relatively stronger than the commitment to common goods. The city’s diminished capacity to provide for the material welfare of its inhabitants...
citizens leads them to chafe at a subjugation that they could otherwise endure. This in turn leads to a daring that assaul ts the common commitment to the laws, those institutions which previously maintained the now intolerable status quo. Private and class competition then leads to a competition in lawlessness, a competition in which deceit and treachery become virtues. Trust then becomes impossible, even imprudent. The preventive destruction of a potential enemy becomes a possibility, first in the form of a positive pleasure, and ultimately, perhaps, a perceived necessity.

Contrary to Hobbes, it does not seem that Thucydides finds there to be anything reasonable about this. The comment about those of “meaner intellect” gaining advantage over otherwise inert men of superior intellect in fact raises the question of how directly menacing their superior capabilities are. Such men haughtily assume that they can get by with their wits, but only as the need arises. In fact, what the small-minded fear is that they will be “worsted in words” and somehow be duped. This preventive action, then, is the result of the collapsing of the space between deliberation and action. Anticipation appears to be a kind of thoughtlessness which imagines itself to be making a preemptive strike but in reality is substituting action as such for an actual appraisal of risk.

The elimination of words or thoughtful deliberation as mediating action is a common theme in the History, and is given its best expression in Thucydides’ famous account of the alteration of language. Earlier, we heard speakers such as Sthenelaidas and Cleon denigrate the influence that words, debate, and hesitation have on action—indeed impulsive reaction—to the behavior of others. Set in the middle of the stasis
account Thucydides lists several examples of a similar phenomenon, the denigration of hesitation or reflection:

“the ordinary acceptation of words in their relation to things was changed as men thought fit. Reckless audacity came to be regarded as courageous loyalty to party, prudent hesitation as specious cowardice, moderation as a cloak for unmanly weakness, and to be clever in everything was to do naught in anything. Frantic impulsiveness was accounted a true man’s part, but caution in deliberation a specious pretext for shirking. The hot-headed man was always trusted, his opponent suspected. He who succeeded in a plot was clever, and he who had detected one still shrewder; on the other hand, he who made it his aim to have no need of such things was a disrupter of party and scared of his opponents [3.82].”

The interpretation of this passage has a long history in political science, sociology, and philology. It is frequently associated with Hobbes’ emotivist philosophy centered upon the alleged “inconstant signification” of words.\textsuperscript{43} Self-interest presents a nearly insurmountable obstacle to linguistic agreement, because allegedly objective observations are really only utterances reflecting subjective desires, hence “one man calleth wisdome what another calleth feare; and one cruelty, what another justice…”\textsuperscript{44} Whenever interests are not in harmony, language can only represent the dissonance, not facilitate compromise or agreement. Given language’s inability to help individuals step outside their own shoes, the solution to disagreement is to fix meanings artificially by sovereign fiat—something clearly unavailable between political bodies.

Readers like Lowell Edmunds have assessed the passage according to a conservative ethic, arguing that Thucydides is offering an implicit criticism of the Athenian democracy by associating the “stasis virtues” with democracy and portraying in

\textsuperscript{43} For example by Rahe (1996).
\textsuperscript{44} Leviathan Ch. 4.
the passage a conservative set of oligarchic or Spartan virtues succumbing to them.\textsuperscript{45}

Along these lines Gregory Crane sees Thucydides as lamenting the loss of the “ancient simplicity” in the face of a new era.\textsuperscript{46} Thus \textit{stasis} is often seen to be inverting virtues. Orwin also adopts the term “inversion,” but gives a more elaborate account of \textit{stasis} breeding extremism for its own sake, thus it is moderation itself which suffers.\textsuperscript{47}

Other interpreters focus less on the content of the virtues or vices enumerated and more on the idea of the changeability of words. In an influential essay, J.B. White argues that citizens as well as the cities of Greece were bound by a common “narrative” which gave boundaries of meaning to actions, both cooperative and competitive. The egoistical destruction of this socially constituted context of meaning leaves “self-interest alone, the desire for power without culture to give it bounds and meaning…it is incoherent and irrational; for without a comprehensible world, there can be no way of reasoning about it or acting within it. One cannot be self-interested without a language of the self; one cannot have power without community.”\textsuperscript{48} Richard Ned Lebow follows this path, asserting that “when words lose their meaning, or their meaning is subverted, the conventions that depend on them lose their force, communication becomes difficult, and

\textsuperscript{45} For example, Edmunds (1975). The “Athenianness” of \textit{stasis} is also pointed out by Strauss (1964) and will be discussed in due course.

\textsuperscript{46} Crane (1998). This “noble simplicity” (\textit{gennaion euthe\textsc{s}}) is “laughed out of existence” during civil conflict, as guile and deception become the primary modes of interaction 3.83. Orwin (1988) points out, however, that in Thucydides’ time, the word already connoted simplicity in the sense of “simpleton.”

\textsuperscript{47} Orwin (1988) and (1994) Ch. 8. Again we see Thucydides as a proto-Aristotelian.

\textsuperscript{48} White (1984) p. 79.
civilization declines…thus it is impossible to formulate interests at all when conventions break down…” The result is that objectives can become “limitless.”

Thucydides does not say, however, that words had lost their meaning. What changed were the kinds of activities which could properly be described by such words as courage or intelligence. Thucydides’ account does not show us the breakdown of convention which takes the lid off of an innate *animus dominandi* or a limitless and hence senseless pursuit of power, but rather an alteration of the general tone of interaction towards competition and hyper-vigilance. This alteration has a clear pattern and a very social basis: each example of change is a denigration of deliberation and a promotion of reflexive action; each example associates thoughtless reaction and anticipation with commitment to a group. In this spirit we see that action is key even to the point where it is better to bait an opponent into committing a transgression which requires vengeance than it is to lie low. Fear is not overtly a prevailing motive, but fearfulness is an accusation to be leveled at those who wish to dampen, rather than aggravate conflict. As we saw in the speech of the Ephor Sthenelaidas and its effect on Sparta, here too is fear disavowed as a legitimate motive within the group.

People caught up in the collapse of society cease to value attempts at distanced analysis, and thus hesitation and deliberateness—and surely deliberation as well—are regarded as cowardly retreats from factional competition. More significantly, they threaten to undermine it. We are reminded of Sthenelaidas’ exhortation to meet action

---

50 See Ch. 1.
with prompt reaction: “…nor must we seek redress by means of legal processes and words when it is not in word only that we are being injured…And let no man tell us that it befits us to deliberate when a wrong is being done us; nay, it befits rather those who intend to do us a wrong to deliberate a long time [1.87].” Sthenelaidas effectively denies that anything ever needs to be discussed, for there is a difference in kind between speech and action. If a course of reaction is understood without deliberation, then all deliberation can only be regarded with suspicion—as a ruse to distract the indignant from their true interest. Cleon also espouses this rationale, warning Athens about the power of words and the distancing it creates between action and reaction: “I…wonder at those who have proposed to reopen this case against the Mytilenians, and who are causing a delay which is all in favor of the guilty, by making the sufferer proceed against the offender with the edge of his anger blunted; although where vengeance follows most closely upon the wrong, it best equals it and most amply requites it [3.38].” Whatever its benefits, this stance trumps any ethical standpoint which puts any stock in extenuating circumstance and negates a calculative mindset which promotes a broader interest than avenging perceived wrongs. One might be tempted to say that it simultaneously negates humanism and realism.

The *stasis* passage can help us get a better understanding of this emphasis on reflexive action because here Thucydides wraps it into such a detailed account of other behavior. It becomes clear that the problem is not so much that detached assessment, moderation, or the desire to reconstruct a common world become impossible, but that they stand in the way of the action required of party ambitions. For this reason, it is in
the interest of faction to undermine these mediating characteristics. When trust is undermined to the point where promises provide no assurance, then loyalty can only be demonstrated through action. “[T]he tie of blood was weaker than the tie of party, because the partisan was more ready to dare without demur…Their pledges to one another were confirmed not so much by divine law as by common transgression of the law [3.82.7].” The revisionist aspirations of the partisans engender a desire to destroy the common world of the old status quo. They desire to defeat and overturn, not to assert themselves within an established framework of customs and rules. Hence trust in words ceases to become possible and complicity becomes a firmer bond than anything else. In this world of action and reaction it seems best to align with one of the camps, and it is in the nature of the struggle to draw everyone in. Some men nonetheless attempt to remain moderate and are distrusted for it, as the passage at 3.82.4 suggests, and elsewhere we see that those who strive towards neutrality are killed “either because they would not make common cause with [either party] or else through mere jealousy that they should survive [3.82.8].” Stasis tends towards an all encompassing two-sided and zero-sum competition.

Those responsible for kindling civil conflict seem to engage in a deliberate evisceration of trust:

“The fair proposals of an adversary were met with jealous precautions by the stronger of the two, and not with a generous confidence.” Revenge also was held

---

51 Opinion is cleanly divided on how to interpret this sentence. Due to Thucydides’ very complex grammar, some translators render this sentence to mean exactly the opposite, i.e., that it is the weak who do not generously accept the overtures of the strong. I have taken Crawley’s translation for this passage, because Smith—I think incorrectly—renders the sentence in the latter sense. It does not seem that the question can be settled on grammatical grounds. Instead, I fit this discussion into the context of a theme that appears elsewhere which ideally associates generosity with power. Pericles (2.40), and the Spartans
of more account than self preservation. Oaths of reconciliation, being only offered on either side to meet an immediate difficulty, only held good so long as no other weapon was at hand; but when the opportunity arose, he who first ventured to seize it and to take his enemy off his guard, thought this perfidious vengeance sweeter than an open one, since, considerations of safety apart, success by treachery won him the prize for superior intelligence. Indeed [men are more willing to be called clever rogues than good simpletons]\(^{52}\) and are as ashamed of being the second as they are proud of being the first [3.82.7].”

Thucydides does acknowledge the problem that agreements only reflect transient interests, but part of the problem of promises is the advantage that can be gained through deception. Such an advantage is necessarily premised in there being some albeit provisional or limited power behind promises—fraud is of no value where nobody expects to hear the truth. What is most astonishing and revealing in this passage is the claim about what drives men to undermine a common system of trust to the point where conflict is preferred to peace. In a word, it is honor which drives the desire for conflict, for without conflict there is no victory.

Both senses of honor appear at the heart of the stasis passage, and one version achieves a decisive victory over the other. That men prefer to be clever rogues than honest simpletons shows the appeal of that which Bowman calls “reflexive honor” over the version which espouses commitment to scruple or the refusal to act out of lowly self-interest.\(^{53}\) The participant in civil conflict cannot endure being thought of as a thing to be trifled with. The degradations of war combine with the temptations of alliance to rupture factionalists’ adherence to the common good of the city. As trust breaks down within the

\(^{52}\) This is Smith’s alternate translation at note 1, which is the best fit given the context.

\(^{53}\) This victory of one version over the other is also predicted by Oniell (2001) p.99.
city, something like a security dilemma emerges, but it is driven as much by the desire not to be fooled as it is by fear. To have been deceived or to have had one’s trust violated is a source of shame, whereas there is a certain pride in achieving victory at whatever cost. When cleverness can consist in merely getting the jump on an unsuspecting and perhaps innocent person, the incentives to violence become very high, and the frantic activity of the zealot appears prudent. The zealot at least, will not fall prey to deception and suffer the attendant humiliation.

Thucydides completes the *stasis* passage with his most clear presentation of conflict as driven by purely relative conceptions of self-worth in the allegedly “redundant” summary in 3.84.\(^{54}\) The dissolution of society in Corcyra first shows us the consequences of an unruly human nature when it acts without constraints, that is,

> “all the acts of retaliation which men who are governed with high-handed insolence rather than moderation are likely to commit upon their rulers when these at last afforded them opportunity for revenge; or such as men resolve…when they seek release from their accustomed poverty [3.84.1].”

The tensions of the old social order fuel conflict as scores are settled and inequalities are rectified. But the language grows stronger, and moves beyond these more tangible conflicts. We also see

---

\(^{54}\) 3.84 has historically been considered spurious on account of its having been “obelized” (marked by an obol for an unknown reason) in a manuscript and for failing to appear in the commentary of Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Many find the chapter too direct to be the work of Thucydides. Some find textual reasons for dismissing it, for example Fuks (1971), who argues that it is uncharacteristically econocentric. Christ (1989) argues convincingly otherwise, showing that most of the elements of 3.84 are also contained within 3.82-3 and are not overly economic in nature. I lean towards accepting the Chapter’s authenticity, especially considering the fact that the comment about the benefits of self-restraint in 3.84.3 is echoed by the Melians’ comment at 5.90.
“assaults of pitiless cruelty, such as men make, not with a view to gain, but when, [even] on terms of complete equality with their foe, they are utterly carried away by uncontrollable passion. In this crisis…human nature, now triumphant over the laws… took delight in showing that its passions were ungovernable, that it was stronger than justice, and an enemy to all superiority [3.84.2].”

At its core, humanity rejects hierarchy, law, and superior power, but it has taken the creation then fracturing of a common political world to bring out this potentiality. The proximal causes of conflict may take the form of social inequalities, poverty, or greed, but once the competition has begun it is fueled by sheer love of victory. Thus even among those of equal fortune—or especially among them—competition is fiercest and most abstracted from material concerns. What drives this, according to Thucydides, is the disposition to envy (phthonew). This is Thucydides’ last word in his explanation of stasis.

Thucydides portrays civil conflict to be highly irrational, and not merely in its outcomes. Certainly according to most understandings of rationality, self-preservation is held in high esteem, yet Thucydides comments in a number of ways that during times of heightened conflict vengeance is preferred to safety, and that victory is superior to there never having been a fight in the first place. We cannot help but be reminded of Pericles’ exhortation to the Athenian public to think more of vengeance than of anything else [2.42]. Just as Pericles encourages Athenians to think of their position relative to other cities—most notably in the form of its superior ability to punish and reward without regard to the constraints of necessity—the participants in civil war are driven by highly relative concerns: love of victory, love of honor or ambition, and the desire for more.

55 This is appears to be a very deliberate but subtle critique of Pericles’ policy. The suspicion is confirmed when two other speakers, Hermocrates and Diodotus, take up the issue again.
Behind this is passion, or orge, a word which Thucydides uses several times to describe the character of civil war. Besides being focused upon the conception of victory and vengeance, this passion is also short-sighted by nature. Among those driven by passion, agreements can only be momentary (autika), and caprice and immediate (autika) animosity become driving forces [3.82.7; 3.82.8]. Love of victory and the purely comparative sense of honor are thus short-sighted. An excessive focus on relative power yields a blindness to long-term interests, the circumstances of one’s adversary and the interests of the common [3.82.8].

**Contention and the Control of Human Events**

Pericles responds to the social effects of the plague with the observation that “the spirit (phronema)\(^{56}\) is cowed by that which is sudden and unexpected and happens contrary to all calculation [2.61].” The plague indeed shows the degree to which the human spirit depends on an order in which it can establish stable expectations about the future, and beyond this, expectations for the realization of justice in this world. Much of the oratory of Pericles centers around the political community as providing this order—first by maximizing its power over the natural world through the accumulation of wealth, then maximizing its moral agency in the human world. As much as it is tasked with feeding and housing people, the role of the body politic is to support the spirit through the

---

\(^{56}\) Phronema also connotes will.
containment of the unexpected. Insufficient power to control the natural world is to be expected, a deficiency of power in human affairs is intolerable. Hence to Pericles, “the right course is to bear with resignation the afflictions sent by heaven and with fortitude the hardships that come from the enemy [2.64].” The natural world can present unpredictable challenges, but the overall theme of Pericles’ response to the plague is to focus on the power of calculation—and thus control—over human events.

While Pericles may be able to walk the fine line between framing political matters as a pure contest of wills that is nonetheless susceptible to intelligent calculation, the tensions between calculation and spiritedness seem elsewhere to escape the influence of intelligence. Pericles is well aware of these tensions, and asserts that Athens is unique in its not being enervated by debate [2.40]. The Corcyraeans, Cleon, Sthenelaidas and the Corinthians at Sparta all show the greater likelihood that contention between men collapses the space in which intelligence—at least in the form of distanced analysis of genuine interests and the motives of others—can operate. The episode of the Corcyraean civil war portrays how it is the very nature of competition to preclude attempts to step outside of the most narrowly construed interests of the belligerent parties. This is because action, not discussion, is the only true mark of loyalty.

The most interesting appearance of this dynamic is found in the speech of Diodotus as he attempts to persuade the Athenian public to revoke their “raw” decree to kill or enslave all of Mytilene. Responding to Cleon’s insinuation that those who would

\[57\] Lowell Edmunds (1975) offers a detailed account of Periclean Athens as attempting to use intelligence to counter mere fortune, a concomitant of which is an expanding empire.
counsel a careful (and therefore inappropriately dispassionate) reexamination must be traitors or fools, Diodotus promises the assembly that he will not speak of justice, but only of a narrow interest\textsuperscript{58} indifferent to justice or clemency [3.44]. He then proceeds to show how the punitive stance which Athens has taken is not indeed in its best interest narrowly understood. Most striking are Diodotus’ opening remarks. Men like Cleon, he claims, create such an atmosphere in democratic deliberation that it becomes necessary for speakers to lie to the public in order to carry through even the best legislation [3.43]. Needless to say, this comment has prompted much speculation about what, precisely, Diodotus’ rhetorical lie might be. It seems clear that Diodotus’ lie is in fact his assertion that he will constrain his discussion to an evaluation of interest with no regard to the question of justice. As his speech progresses, it becomes apparent that his discussion of compulsion and the efficacy of deterrent threats is in fact a complex presentation of a notion of justice grounded in realism. His doubts about the collective guilt of the city would be appropriate in any discussion about the justice of the situation. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to obscure these issues with a professed indifference to the plight of the Mytilenians. The problem of the assembly’s difficulty with the truth—ruthlessly addressed by Plato in such dialogues as the \textit{Gorgias}—is well taken. More interesting is the fact that Diodotus’ lie seeks above all to avert the loyalty/deliberation problem

\textsuperscript{58} “Interest” here is \textit{xumphoron}, literally ‘the advantageous’ or ‘the expedient’. Diodotus explicitly separates it from justice, suggesting that among his audience the two words are not necessarily contradistinguished as they tend to be today. It is also not the “interest” which appears in the Athenians’ famous “three greatest things.” That idea, \textit{wpheilia}, is less abstract and tends to be associated with more material goods or good things. It is important not to burden the concept with a technical meaning which separates it from allegedly less genuine needs or imprudent desires. Such an idea is arguably the outgrowth of 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} Century philosophy. See, for example, Hirschman (1977); Mansfield (1995).
presented in 3.82. Wishing to avoid having his loyalty questioned on account of his hesitation, Diodotus must assert a separation of interest and justice and overtly work from the premise that the lives of the Mytilenians should not factor into foreign policy decisions.

In all of the *History*, this is where we see the concepts of interest and ethics being separated into what Hans Morgenthau would call “autonomous spheres.” Yet the complete cleansing of justice from interest in Diodotus’ speech is part of a deception which results from a complex problem. As much as anything else, Diodotus’ lie is about the Athenian assembly’s difficulties with assessing their conflict while removed from the narrow scope of tit-for-tat notions of justice. In order to maintain the ear of the assembly, Diodotus is forced to maintain the conceit of complete disregard for anything other than Athens’ most purely self-serving interests. Engaged as it is in intense competition, Athens only listens to partisans. Like those engaged in civil war, Athens will be counseled neither by fear, nor consideration for the motives of their adversary, nor of repercussions for the future. We are reminded of Hobbes’ reading of the *History* which finds that while “a man that reasoneth with himself, will not be ashamed to admit of timorous suggestions in his business, that he may the stronger provide; but in public

\[59\] Morgenthau (1985). “Ethics” is Morgenthau’s term for motives beyond the acquisition of power, economic gain or spiritual salvation. These spheres are allegedly autonomous because each speaks to separate areas of life. Thus, while “ethics” “judges” political decisions, it does not influence them. Such a distinction certainly constitutes a redefinition of the word ethics, and according to many interpreters effectively makes “ethics” irrelevant. See, for example, the discussion in Pangle and Ahrendsdorf (1999).

\[60\] In Athens’ defense, it does come around and adopt Diodotus’ measure to rescind the penalty.
deliberations before a multitude, fear...seldom or never sheweth itself, or is admitted.”

This combination of “in-group” dynamics combined with “group-think” clearly frustrates some actors, including Nikias who encourages Athenians to vote against the Sicilian campaign, and not to feel ashamed of appearing afraid [6.13]. He argues in vain: those who oppose the invasion held their tongues “in the fear that if [they] voted in opposition [they] might seem disloyal to the state [6.24].”

If interstate war is analogous to civil war on this point, then this narrowness of vision and emphasis on action results from the aspiration to dominate rather than work within the confines of human institutions. As all other measures are overthrown, complicity in continuing the transgression is the only true gauge of solidarity; any hesitation threatens the whole operation. If, for a moment, we can regard Diodotus’ chimerical concept of interest to be a prototype of the modern “autonomous” version of Morgenthau, it is revealing to consider its roots in competition. Interest of this kind is primarily defined not by what is needed by the political community, but by whose good will be excluded from consideration.

The *stasis* and plague passages show at their most superficial level that mankind does indeed tend to follow Pericles’ advice and treat the challenges of life quite differently depending on whether they originate in human or non-human sources. While the inconveniences of nature can at some times be planned around and other times endured, the world of human affairs offers both the hope of control and the most

---

61 From “Epistle to the Reader.”
intransigent obstacles to it. In an ironic twist, other human beings, despite being the only element of this earth that is susceptible to reason, appear at best as things to be reasoned about, and never to be reasoned with. At worst, the desire to bristle or display an indomitable will persistently precludes moderation and hardens positions and interests. In times of conflict, honor tends away from principle and towards the impulse to demonstrate that one is not to be trifled with—hence it becomes better to be a clever villain than an honest fool. Justice ceases to be a medium of adjudicating competing claims and becomes instead language of unmediated self-assertion.\textsuperscript{62} Among such contentious actors, the critical element of humanity is not its intelligence but its spirit or its will. When the greatest aspiration of the political body is to escape grip of fortune, the wills of other humans present the greatest obstacle. One might say that conflict in this sense is deeply personalized or moralized. When taken to the level of the spirit or the will\textsuperscript{63} it becomes intensely and intrinsically conflictual. The warlike and indignant sides of both honor and justice point towards vengeance, which to the partisan in civil conflict and the ideal citizen of Pericles’ Athens alike is the most dominant passion. Whether the development of civilization as Thucydides presents it has the tools to overcome this intensified competition will be the subject of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{62} As seen in the Speech of Sthenelaidas, and the Corinthian preference to unjustly prevent injustice rather than risk harm as a result of just inaction.  
\textsuperscript{63} Phronema and thumos each capture both ideas.
The Paradox of Power.

Reading the Archeology, plague, and stasis passages together gives the reader a picture of evolution more than of continuity. It has often been appreciated that Thucydides portrays a kind of growth of civilization in terms of the consolidation of power, but his account of growth along other dimensions often escapes notice. In the old days, politics were structured around a clear and pragmatic modus vivendi: both within and among cities, the powerful and rich protect the weak and the poor in exchange for their subordination. The politics of the old days had but a confused appreciation of honor, and justice seemed irrelevant. As power grows, life improves, and humanity develops greater capacities to develop a sense of commonality. It also develops greater expectations, resulting in twin currents which ultimately clash. Power, by creating stable expectations of safety and alleviating the vicissitudes of fortune, allows space for justice to grow. Once relative plenty is attained, people develop a reluctance to regard power-as-predation as intrinsically honorable—perhaps we can say that the underlying potential of the concept to transcend the necessary and base can be actualized. On the other hand, civilized life breeds acquisitiveness and unrequited desires for equality which lead to unruly passions that seek more than simple satiety or equality. Hope is a critical factor in Thucydides’ man, and it undergirds the indefinite expansiveness of his ambitions, recalibration of his perceived interests, and willingness to violate normative constraints. He notes that it is hope that determines action, while employing reason only to push away inconvenient doubts [4.108]. Diodotus notes that in this way, hope has led man to become

---

64 It is worth noting here that Aristotle thought confounded expectations of equality were a significant source of domestic conflict. Politics 1301b. (Aristotle 1941) pp. 1233-4.
progressively more fearless and therefore more difficult to control through negative inducements [3.45].

Speakers in Thucydides frequently note that the growth of power elicits both envy and hatred, both perhaps accompanied by an unspoken fear. At the same time, it is difficult to argue against the observation that power creates civilization in Thucydides’ eyes. We are presented with something of a paradox of power then: power creates stability in a political world that allows for the development of interests which ultimately conspire to overthrow that power. It is tempting to read in the History the maxim that while there are creative aspects to power, even war, power still carries with it the seeds of its own destruction. The phenomenon of hubris and overstretch alone are not the only sources of this paradox, but also hope and expectations of equal, legal, or just treatment. Common interpretations of hubris and nemesis aside, Thucydides does not seem to give us such a deterministic reading of history, and we are tempted to look for more positive outgrowths of power or even empire. To David Grene there is certainly more, though it is ethically ambiguous:

“The object of interest for the nation in its historical development is...power, and this means dominion over others. Fear and greed are the driving motives on the road to imperialism[.] Yet in the course of the development there is a moment when these two factors are not the only ones. There is, as the Athenian envoys state it, honor. In the greatness of the thing created, the empire, there is a quality different from the qualities which created it...The historical moment cannot, perhaps, last long; yet its greatness and dignity is the magnet of the historian’s attention, and its decline the most penetrating exhibition of political motives and failures.”

---

65 Grene (1950) p. 84. To Grene the ‘transcendence’ shown here ‘has no object’ but is rather a good unto itself—p. 85.
Is there “more” to Athenian imperialism, or perhaps more generally the developed, powerful state of Thucydides’ time? Is the *koinon*, as Steven Forde suggests, an “ethical accomplishment” as much as an organizational one? Finally, we must ask whether the true “significance” of Thucydides’ account lies in the moral possibilities and self-awareness of the actors—and the subsequently more painful ethical declines—as much as it does in the great scale of the miseries he chronicles. The answers to these questions lie in whether the less destructive fruits of political development can moderate the competitive ones, or at the very least offer goods which balance favorably against the negative consequences of a hyper-politicized world.

---

66 The great ethical value of the state is an aspect of Kant’s philosophy (one overlooked by those who see him as unrealistically cosmopolitan) although its precise accomplishment differs somewhat from Thucydides’ account of what I tentatively call “civilization.”
Chapter 6
The Mitigation of Conflict in Thucydides’ History

Thucydides’ History reveals many ways in which mankind is moved by spirited compulsions that rise above basic desires for safety or comfort. The ability to transcend a simple and immediate view of necessity is given form in the desire for liberty, the affirmation of liberality, and the pursuit of honor. One might hope that among these traits of developed political societies, there are the tools to create a less invidious political world, especially at the international level. For example, in eschewing fear, clamoring for the admiration of posterity, or emphasizing freedom of action, states might be able to escape the traps of conflict set by more material interests. This chapter will assess the potential of Thucydides’ spirited characteristics to mitigate conflict. In the end, we will see that many of these elements of human nature are but weak checks on aggression and egoism, and the concern for honor and desire for justice are susceptible to the corruption of immediate desires. Yet Thucydides does show a distinct form of liberality that can induce moderation and promote mutual understanding. It is perhaps ironic that this liberality ultimately takes on the form of a kind of ethical realism, but it is a realism that, like honor, is grounded in the promise of seeing beyond low and immediate interests. The realism of Diodotus and Hermocrates—which I will argue is Thucydides’ realism—distinguishes itself from that of Machiavelli and his heirs by eschewing a doctrinaire pessimism. This difference springs from a very different teaching about the limits of control over the human sphere and fortune.
Thucydides shows that the worst aspects of conflict arise out of the passions and interests of what we might tentatively call civilization. Conflict over the more basic concerns of material well-being and bodily security is an underlying fact of human affairs at any level of political development. But the creation of a common and peaceful politics within societies creates expectations of a freedom from necessity which in turn yields a moralization, personalization, and intensification of conflict between political bodies. Interstate relations in the era of politics worth mentioning are susceptible of being cast in terms of a pure contest of wills, and the collective wills of societies such as Athens can indeed be considerable. Pericles binds the common of Athens through the principle of the state’s promise of freedom and the possibility to achieve justice and freedom of action, and attain honor. As Clifford Orwin suggests, the (putative) banishment of necessity from the realm of domestic politics is not only the political body’s claim to nobility, but is necessary for harmony, lest the domineering implications of the “Athenian Thesis” infect the domestic order.¹ The result of this great achievement is the gravity of the ensuing war, which is Thucydides’ starting point [1.1]

This irony results in a still greater tragedy. As cities engage in the high politics of spirited competition over intangible goods, they degrade themselves, returning to the realm of basic necessities. Thus war becomes a violent teacher, destroying the character of civilized man, and reintroducing him—only after the harshest lessons in the precariousness of human goods—to a grounded and pragmatic prudence. As a general

¹ Orwin (1994) Ch. 9. Alcibiades reveals the threat to the domestic order that the Athenian thesis presents, suggesting that if Athens ceases to rule others, it will begin to turn on itself [6.18]. The “Thesis” is the statement made both by the representatives at Sparta and the Generals at Melos that the strong naturally and properly rule the weak.
tendency, Thucydides seems to suggest an endless cycle from necessity to freedom and
back again, for those experiencing good fortune and freely exercising their wills can only
with great difficulty envision turns of events that might induce caution. He makes this
point over and over again, most articulately in the speech of Diodotus, who notes that the
desire for more weighs as heavily upon the fortunate as poverty oppresses the poor.
Thucydides reserves the most forceful of such statements for his own voice: “men are
wont, when they desire a thing, to trust to unreflecting hope, but to reject by arbitrary
judgment whatever they do not care for [4.108].”² Thucydides’ deep pessimism cannot
be passed over without comment. In an inversion of many modern views, fear yields
prudence and possibly relative peace; hope is a spur to transgression and conflict.

At the same time, it is tempting to look to the human capacity for hope and its
capacity for transcending apparent necessities as tools for moderating politics. Qualified
and fraught with complications though it may be, this Thucydidean vision of honor
through liberty tempts us to assess avenues for mitigating conflict in part because it is
less deterministic than the Hobbesian anarchy model. The worst manifestations of
mutual antagonism are caused not by an intransigent feeling of intrinsic insecurity, but by
cultivated desires for dominance and “more.” Consequently, Thucydides portrays the
range of choice to be larger than in anarchic theories. While there is the temptation to
excuse aggression through the language of necessity, it is rather attenuated at the level of

² Here he cannot but help to remind us of David Hume’s skeptical pronouncement that reason is the slave
to the passions.
the acquisition of “surplus.” Talk of necessity undermines the desire of the powerful and fortunate political body to speak of freedom.

After all, it is Athens’ pride in its uncalculating daring which causes its envoys to qualify their argument about necessity to the Spartans. It is their freedom of action which affords them an air of moral condescension in their dealings with Melos. Athens is worthy because of its daring transcendence of self-interest during the Persian Wars and is “more observant of justice than they might have been, considering their power [1.74; 76].” The oratory of Pericles urges politics from the realm of the body into the realm of the spirited will, but we see that the ensuing freedom can be cast in terms of liberality as much as liberty. ³ The openness of Athenian society is a mark of her confident sense of security, and the greatest mark of her power is her generosity [2.37; 2.40]. In the negative sense, we see in the plague that the collapse of hope and faith in justice yields the collapse of the space between the just and the expedient. Athens, which claims the freedom to effect both good and bad, can thus in theory cultivate the separation between the just and the expedient, and escape the blinding self-interest of “the moment.” Indeed, Athenian speakers show a genuine ability to at least comprehend the difference between their own interest and the claims of justice. Diodotus, though explicitly speaking in terms of interest, nonetheless makes the most subtle demonstration of understanding the limits of momentary inclination, but even Cleon reveals his awareness of the difference between justice and the urge to punish, though he does not act on it. The Athenian public at large shows measure in their willingness to reassess the Mytilene decree, though they

³ As in English, the two concepts are connected and can both be captured by the word *eleutheros*. 
elsewhere do not show such clemency. Spartans, on the other hand, with their oppressive domestic environment, appear to be incapable of making this separation.

**Democracy, the Common, and Liberality**

To what degree can we attribute this liberality of the Athenian people to their institutions, and does it in the end have any effect on their behavior? While many commentators find Thucydides to be a critic of Athenian democracy—Romilly, for example, alleges that he “despises the mob”4—it seems in reality that he is ultimately ambivalent about its merits. It must first be acknowledged that Thucydides in no way portrays a “democratic peace” in classical Greece, nor is there one to be found elsewhere in the historical record.5 The democratic regimes of Argos and Athens, for example, both attack democratic Syracuse in the greatest clash of the war. Democracies do, however, show some degree of solidarity with one another, and there is a corollary mistrust between oligarchies and democracies recounted in Thucydides’ discussion of the tensions arising from Argos’ late alliance with Athens in Book Five. These considerations, however, do

---

4 Romilly (1963) p. 330. Opinion is very divided on this issue. Many assert that Thucydides shows conservative Oligarchic tendencies, while others, like Donald Kagan, claim a fawning devotion to Pericles’ popular party. In reality, Thucydides suggests a superior fitness of Athens to organize the defenses of Greece if not to rule it, and as will be demonstrated shortly, also provides a subtle critique of Pericles’ honorific politics.

5 See for example, Russett (2006).
nothing to ensure a categorical mutual respect between democracies or a lack of political engagement between democracies and oligarchies.\textsuperscript{6}

Aside from the question of mutual respect between democratic societies, does the regime at Athens promote a softening of mores? Pericles argues that despite the great liberty provided by their political order, Athenians are law abiding through shame, and Athens is marked by high levels of compliance and order with regard to both written and unwritten rules [2.37]. His focus on the intense public-spiritedness of the citizenry goes hand in hand with an assertion of an easy, un-coerced political order—certainly a comparison to rigid Sparta is at play.\textsuperscript{7} Athens, then, is a relatively genuine “common” space,\textsuperscript{8} in which the tension between individuals and factions is minimized, and the banishment of hardship and conflict facilitates a generous spirit. This spirit does in fact work to some effect, to the dismay of Cleon, who scolds the assembly for it:

“on many other occasions in the past, I have realized that a democracy is incompetent to rule others…The fact is that, because your daily life is unaffected by fear and intrigue in your relations to each other, you have the same attitude towards your allies also and you forget that whenever you are led into error by their representations or yield out of pity, your weakness involves you in danger

\textsuperscript{6} This idea of mutual respect is critical for theorizing the modern democratic peace because any theory suggesting democracies are peaceful \textit{per se} is immediately disconfirmed by the fact that modern democracies fight wars as frequently as any other regime type. The discussion about the ‘softening’ of Athenian mores thus cannot be directly useful to any discussion about the contemporary democratic peace.

\textsuperscript{7} The public-mindedness of Athenians is confirmed in Corinth’s description at 1.70, though it also emphasizes the restless nature of Athens and not anything easy about Athenian society. Pericles seeks to reconcile energy with leisure, thus also acknowledging the restless character of his democracy.

\textsuperscript{8} It is frequently asserted that one difference between ancient and modern democracies has to do with the definition of “the people.” According to this view, the ancient form did not envision the ruling \textit{demos} as the whole populace, but only the lower classes. Thus, ancient democracy was the in truth the rule of the poor over the rich rather than vice versa. Thucydides’ Pericles seems not to portray democracy in this partisan sense, and the Syracusan demagogue Athenagoras explicitly claims that “the people” is in fact the whole state [6.39].
and does not win the gratitude of your allies. For you do not reflect that the empire you hold is a despotism imposed upon subjects who, for their part, do intrigue against you and submit to your rule…by reason of your strength rather than of their goodwill [3.17].”

The first thing to note here is the clear implication of Athenian obliviousness to the nature of their rule. Beyond this, however, Cleon is worried that the liberality of Athens renders it unfit to engage in foreign affairs for two related reasons: it is insufficiently harsh towards its subjects; and it presumes that those whom it treats with moderation will reciprocate with goodwill. These expectations arise from the security and easy relations between citizens within Athens. Cleon essentially asserts a spillover effect of domestic liberality, which according to his view of international politics, is entirely dangerous. If Cleon is wrong, however, to assert that only the most stringent oppression is required for the maintenance of hegemony, then the Athenian disposition may well work in the interests in mitigating aggression. The ensuing argument of Diodotus, combined with Athens’ eventual relenting, suggests that in fact this is a positive attribute. This understanding cuts across much commentary on the Athenian character—for example it is often said that the concept of moderation is never used in conjunction with Athens.  

This claim is not strictly true. The kind of moderating empathy we see in the Mytilenian episode does seem to be a genuine feature of Athenian democracy, and it is in fact described as such in Phrynicus’ calculations of the merits of oligarchy and democracy in the eyes of Athens’ allies. Phrynicus expects, correctly it seems, that the people of the various subject states would prefer to be ruled by a democratic Athens than an oligarchic

---

9 For example, Strauss (1962).
10 His prediction that the allies would not be impressed with an oligarchic regime at Athens is borne out at over the course of Book Eight.
one, because the people have the ability to “moderate” (swphronistw)\textsuperscript{11} the tendencies of the oligarchs.

“As for the ‘good and true’ men, [Phrynicus] said that the allies believed that they would bring them no less trouble than the popular party, being as they were providers and proposers to the people of evil projects from which they themselves got most benefit. Indeed, so far as it rested with these men, they, the allies, would be put to death not only without trial but by methods even more violent, whereas the people were a refuge to themselves and a check upon the oligarchs [8.48].”

Thucydides never suggests that Athenian aristocrats are especially invidious in any way, and it is important to note the Phrynicus here deals with perceptions, not hard realities. Yet the description of the people as being capable of softness if not moderation, does resonate elsewhere, especially in the reassessment of the Mytilene decree on account of the people’s “raw/barbaric” (hwmos) feeling the next day.

In his discussion of political development in Book One, Thucydides does portray a sort of progression of civilization centered upon the banishment of violence from domestic society, establishing the possibility of justice, and a sense of common humanity among citizens. These achievements are reached through effective centralized power that facilitates the hope of people to resist being the playthings of fortune, and ultimately allows them to savor the goods of freedom and the high-minded liberality that is manifest in generosity. By contrast, we see more “barbaric” peoples drawing different kinds of confidence from their good fortune. The Odryssian Thracians parlay their (numerical) power into an enjoyment of receiving gifts [2.97]—an odd comment until juxtaposed with Spartan and Athenian comments that associate genuine power with generosity and

\textsuperscript{11} This of course is the verb, “to moderate” but as in English, it is largely the same word as the adjective “moderate” (swphron).
More gravely, Thucydides’ poignant interlude about the tragic massacre of schoolchildren—and indeed everything that lived—at Mycalessus at the hands of Thracian mercenaries shows an extreme relationship between confidence and violence. Such men as the Thracians are “most bloodthirsty when they have nothing to fear [7.29].” It is perhaps no coincidence that such “barbaric” societies are also least accomplished in transcending the dominance of private ambition. In a limited sense, we might then suggest that democracy—in the ideal form celebrated by Pericles and lamented by Cleon—can plausibly claim to most fully embody the ethical achievements of civilized politics.

Athenian democracy in this regard affords a clear contrast with the Spartan regime. Despite the Corinthians’ claim that it is Sparta’s great confidence in their regime that makes them moderate [1.68], Sparta’s domestic tranquility is a sham. The ruling group at Sparta is indeed defined by close adherence to civic virtue, yet this appears to be largely in response to the fact that Lacedaemon as a whole is characterized by constant low-grade war within Lacedaemon. Sparta effectively enslaves the peasant populations of the Helots and Messenians, and maintains its rule via the strange mechanism of an

---

12 There is some irony here considering Athens’ proclivity to take large sums of money from its allies, yet Thucydides does comment that among the Thracians and Persians there is more shame in not giving when asked than in asking but being refused. The difference seems to be one of acquiring tokens of esteem on the one hand; more overtly acquiring wealth via power on the other [2.97].

13 See the futility of Odryssian power at 2.101 and the Persian infighting throughout Book Eight, combined with Thucydides’ comments on the strength of Athens in transcending parochial interests at 2.67.

14 The comments at 2.65 certainly complicate the picture of Pericles as an exponent of extreme democracy. Thucydides claims that under his guidance Athens was genuinely ruled by one man through great influence over public opinion. However, Pericles is ‘democratic’ in the sense that he emphasizes a great commonality and public spiritedness amongst all Athenians, hence, a republican citizenship.
annually renewed declaration of war. This widely accepted fact of Sparta’s constitution suggests a certain irony in the Corinthians’ comment about stability and moderation.

In fact, Spartan insecurity at home plausibly guides their conservative foreign policy, which suffers from a chronic inertia the Corinthians find galling and impractical. Thucydides himself is widely interpreted as making the underhanded suggestion that only those cities which bear the burden of huge slave populations are capable of acting with moderation—Chios, and by implication, Sparta.\(^{15}\) The effects of Sparta’s insecurity are not simply a beneficial caution, however. Besides the strange social organization of the city, which Thucydides only indirectly addresses,\(^{16}\) Sparta’s insecurity about their slave population renders them paranoid and ungenerous. In an episode that contributes greatly to the tension between Sparta and Athens, Sparta rudely dismisses an Athenian force that had arrived to help its ally put down a Helot uprising in 462.

“And it was in consequence of this expedition that a lack of harmony in the relations of the Lacedaemonians and the Athenians first became manifest. For the Lacedaemonians…fearing the audacity and [revolutionary spirit]\(^{17}\) of the Athenians…thought that if they remained they might be persuaded by the rebels…to change sides; they were therefore dismissed then, alone of the allies, without giving any indication of their suspicion, but merely saying that they had no further need of them. The Athenians, however, recognized that they were not being sent away on the more creditable ground, but because some suspicion had arisen; so because they felt indignant…the instant they returned home they gave up the alliance which they had made with the Lacedaemonians against the Persians […1.102].”

\(^{15}\) 8.24. See discussion in Orwin (1996) Ch. 9. Orwin’s reading is that moderation can only come from the burdens of necessity, and those societies are moderate which otherwise have no choice.

\(^{16}\) For example, at 1.77 where the Athenians comment on how its customs are “incompatible” with the rest of Greece.

\(^{17}\) \textit{newteropolitan}, which literally means “making things anew,” an opposite to conservatism. Smith takes a liberty to translate it as “fickleness,” but the word can mean ‘revolutionary spirit’ or perhaps ‘revisionism.’
This episode, some years after Sparta’s foiled attempt to prevent the reconstruction of Athens’ walls following the expulsion of the Persians, appears as a critical milestone in the degradation of Spartan-Athenian relations. The issue takes on the form of a security dilemma, in which Spartan fears of Athens drive it to inadvertently signal hostility which in turn can only make matters worse. What is significant about the content of this relationship is that it is driven by Spartan paranoia about a fifth column finding support in the revolutionary spirit of Athens, and the Athenian reaction is in turn one of indignation. Athens seems indignant because their efforts to assist Sparta were genuine, which in turn surely causes them to reassess Spartan intentions, already suspect on account of the wall episode.\(^\text{18}\) While the Corinthians stress the impracticable slowness of Spartan policy, Thucydides simultaneously shows how its ungrounded fears contribute irrationally to a self-fulfilling prophecy of conflict.

Thucydides’ understanding of Athens’ strengths is gravely counterbalanced by an account of its defects. Athenians seem more at home in the world of practical interstate affairs, are more capable of discerning the difference between what is fair and what is merely in their unilateral interest, and even seem to be more naturally measured than their Spartan counterparts, who act in accordance with strange laws while at home and none at all when abroad [1.77 with 1.130]. At the same time, democracy in the pages of Thucydides seems to be a regime that establishes domestic harmony by exporting

\(^{18}\)Thucydides’ filling out of the psychological content of the security dilemma is similar to a striking exchange cited by Robert Jervis. While anticipating Soviet resistance to NATO, Secretary of State Acheson described it as a case in which “the guilty flee when no man pursueth.” Envisioning NATO to be purely defensive, he assumed the Soviets would share his assessment—unless they were up to no good. Jervis (1978) p. 182.
conflict. Pericles begins his funeral speech with a discussion about envy—since all men envy one another, he will speak about each man’s value as a part of the state, rather than on his own merits. He sets up the image of an honorific, imperial state as an abstraction that assists with transcending the quarrels and redirecting the ambitions of private citizens. The clear consequence of envisioning the political body in this way is an intolerance of submission to necessity that takes the form of aspiring to rule others.

Alcibiades presents this problem in more direct terms [6.18]. Rather than deriving liberty from the rule of law as in most visions of modern republican “democracy,” Athenian democracy is a genuine rule of the people. They both rule over one another by turn, and continually rule over their subordinate allies.19 As accustomed to ruling others as they are, the Athenians find it very difficult to accept even an allegedly moderate representative oligarchy towards the end of the war [8.68]. Thus democracy maintains a tyrannical principle of liberty through rule with the proviso that domestic equality pushes the ruler/ruled relationship outside of the city.20 The Athenian people find that their cultivated distaste for discussing danger and their turn abroad to satisfy their association of liberty with rule ultimately lead them to disaster in the invasion of Sicily.

“Everyone fell in love with the enterprise. The older men thought that they would either subdue the places against which they were to sail, or at all events, with so large a force, meet with no disaster; those in the prime of life felt a longing for foreign sights and spectacles, and had no doubt that they should come safe home again; while the idea of the common people and the soldiery was to earn wages at

---

19 This is the most critical distinction between the ancient democracy and the “democracy,” or rather, republicanism envisioned by Kant to be capable of maintaining law-bound peaceful relations with other states.

20 See discussion in Grene (1950) p. 32; Romilly (1963) p. 82.
the moment, and make conquests that would supply a never-ending fund of pay for the future [6.24].”

As they depart for Sicily, the Athenians reveal how their enthusiasm for lofty endeavors and a desire for gain after gain fuel an imperialist fervor. Thucydides here takes up another gravely problematic aspect of Athenian democracy: the economic independence of the lower classes is predicated upon military service and tribute payments.

In the end, democracy is not structurally beneficial to foreign affairs in any necessary way. It has no inherent institutional virtues, but simply a greater tendency to allow for the cultivation of ever greater conceptions of freedom and its attendant liberality. (As the episode at Pylos shows, the spontaneity and self-motivation of the average Athenian is also a great military asset: having nothing better to do, some idle Athenian sailors fortify their camp of their own accord. The advantage that results from this action leads to a decisive victory some days later.) At the same time, the apparent moderation of Sparta is in many ways coerced, their great piety notwithstanding. It is an effective rather than genuine moderation, yet Spartan fearfulness does inspire an eschewal of grand schemes and greater adherence to treaty law. Both cities commit atrocities, each has its own particular ineptitudes in the realm of foreign affairs, and both show their own grounds for restraint or principled action. The question of Thucydides’ own approbation of the Spartan or Athenian regime is frequently treated as a central theme, yet there are difficulties even in posing this question, given Thucydides’

21 Crawley’s translation.
22 Orwin (1997 Ch. 9) suggests that even the pious form of Spartan moderation springs from the necessities of their domestic political order.
23 For example in Strauss (1964) and Orwin (1997).
lopsided attention to Athenian affairs over Spartan ones. In the end, perhaps, the bulk of Thucydides’ ethical and pragmatic concerns work in favor of Athens, which shows more foresight and more awareness of the problems inherent in justifying action. Certainly Athens shows a greater capacity to engage in the elevated politics that he frequently suggests—despite all the ensuing pitfalls—are constitutive of civilization.

_Honor as a Restraint_

It is difficult to precisely identify a Thucydidean ethical view, yet throughout his work there is a persistent theme of overcoming necessity or elevating conduct above the pursuit short-term interests. One might tentatively suggest that he presents a number of potentialities for free action that can be more or less entangled with the demands of the necessary or momentarily desirable depending on the material conditions of humanity. Nobility, honor, liberality, and justice are all things that risk being conflated with immediate wants or needs on the one hand, or given their independent influence over affairs on the other. Of these, honor is perhaps most prominent, and also most problematic. Despite its frequent association with confident power on the one hand and risk-acceptance on the other, honor all too often does not live up to its potential to be a check on competition and conflict.

In Thucydides’ world that the inwardly derived honor emphasized in modern thought is weak. While in theory, honor never loses its sense of pertaining to genuine value rather than mere appearance, in practice, the desire for honor frequently fits
Montaigne’s definition of the ancient *gloria*—it is public approbation for public acts.\(^{24}\)

This extrinsic honor leads to no end of difficulties, not least because of its dependence on a coherent social order—something that cannot be taken for granted in the pages of the *History*. Pericles cannot rest his account of the transcendent value of the city on any firmer foundation than its reputation among other men. Finding difficulties reconciling oppression with honor, he simply punts the issue into the realm of posterity [2.64].\(^{25}\)

Their natural tendency to despise their rulers renders men incapable of honoring Athens, yet the Athenians cannot come up with any more apt principle to ennoble their ambitions.

At the individual level, the concern for extrinsic honor creates more practical difficulties. The general Demosthenes understands that he must temporarily bring dishonor upon himself by staying away from Athens if he wants to achieve military success [3.98 with 3.114].\(^{26}\) Nikias, who deals with the tension between pragmatism and honor very differently than Demosthenes, shows how a concern for honor can bring about results that are ironically disastrous to the public interest. Before allowing his superstitious piety to fatefully delay the eventual Athenian retreat from Syracuse, Nikias first acts against Demosthenes’ practical advice to raise the siege upon Syracuse while they still can. Aware of the dependence of his personal honor upon the approbation of the Athenian public, Nikias prefers to die honorably in battle—no matter how pointlessly—than to be dishonorably chastised at home for giving up on the expedition.

\(^{24}\) *Montaigne “On Glory” Essays.*

\(^{25}\) Pericles must acknowledge that in the present, the real response to Athenian power is hatred, but that posterity will be able to honor Athens without having its judgment clouded by envy.

\(^{26}\) Having lost a battle at Aetolia, Demosthenes lingers away from Athens while his army returns. Fearing fines, censure, or worse, he chooses to remain in the field until he regains favor with the people.
The irony of the episode lies not only in the tragedy of Nikias being punished for his conventional uprightness—something that evinces some sympathy from Thucydides—but also in the fact that the pursuit of external honors is in the end profoundly selfish.

Thucydides does in fact often seem to admire those like Demosthenes who can suspend conventional codes of conduct in order to get things done, in part because it seems that the fickle public is so frequently a poor judge of policy. Most surprising, is Thucydides’ affirmation that the facilitator of purges and terror campaigns, Antiphon, was the most “virtuous” man of his day. Some confusion may be avoided here by understanding that the concept of virtue elicited here, *arête*, can describe manly capability as much as anything else. Regardless of Thucydides’ evaluation of Antiphon, there seem to be clear limits to any programs of political machinations unguided by principle. The Athenian general Phrynicus, for example, in a clear contrast to Nikias, claims “he would never…[by] yielding to the consideration of disgrace, hazard a decisive battle unreasonably.” Yet Phrynicus’ Machiavellism leads him into ever more complex and counterproductive intrigues, which include betraying the Athenian army so as to save Athens, and vigorously supporting the very oligarchy that he had set out to forestall, so as to save his own skin. All of the twists and turns recounted in Book Eight, facilitated by double-crossing (and sometimes triple-crossing) agents guided only by their own ambitions and survival, remind us by contrast of the great achievements of Pericles. For all its flaws, the honorific state of Pericles (virtually) transcends factionalism and private ambition, at least within Athens. This is no small feat in a political world in
which profound domestic instability plays a large part in damaging cycle of interstate and civil conflict.27

Honoring agreements is one of the very few clear principles of justice in the pages of Thucydides, and the breaking of such agreements is considered to be dishonorable. Yet the record of the History shows that this, too, is a tragically weak restraint, and is portrayed only in the breach, or in the case of the Plataean trial, both honored and dishonored for maximum negative effect. The Plataeans are punished for honoring their agreements with Athens by Spartans who refuse to honor their own commitments to the city.28 Gratitude for past services meets the same fate. Corinth fails to secure any good will from Athens on account of its past diplomatic support, and their warnings about the difficulties that will ensue from forming an alliance with unknown Corcyra fall on deaf ears. Athens, looking only to future opportunity, disregards any obligations arising from past benefits as well as the idea of working within an environment of cultivated relations.29 The relevance of gratitude in interstate politics is at most a question of whether services have been rendered recently, and in a more extreme and unstable formulation, what services will be rendered in the future. Indeed, the Spartan question

27 The deep divisions within societies is a striking feature of Thucydides’ world that he seems to take as a given. For example, we repeatedly see that in conflict between states, some faction within one city or another will curry favor with the enemy in order to seize power. The consolidation of interests or identities within groups is clearly a source of power, as shown in the leadership of Pericles and Hermocrates, but it is the exception to the rule.
28 My use of “honor” here as a motive for upholding agreements is elicited by the Plataeans in both cases, see the discussion below.
29 The Corinthians warn that Corcyra’s isolationism makes them dangerous because they have not had the interaction—even conflictual—and legal intercourse that establishes baselines for political relationships. [1.40].
leveled at the defeated Plataeans [3.52] amounts to nothing more than “what have you done for us lately?”

Athens’ turn to the prospect of future assistance is of course ultimately a self-defeating principle once it looks past momentary interest. Benefactors cannot be repaid in a world where gratitude is only anticipatory, and thus if Corcyra takes the same view as Athens, it won’t likely repay it for its help. Honor, expected to be a prop to mutual assistance and a hedge against breaking contracts, frequently proves too weak to stand up to the temptations of momentary desire, something against which the Corinthians repeatedly warn the Athenians [1.41, 2]. What one might call rational reciprocal principles appear to be exceedingly weak in the History, even though Thucydides himself seems to put forward a version of the golden rule. This principle appears twice, once in his description of stasis, and once during the Melian dialogue. Attempting to reconcile the interests of Athens with the just cause of their continued liberty, the Melians urge that the Athenians

“not rule out the principle of the common good, but that for him who is in time of peril what is equitable should also be just, and though one has not entirely proved his point, he should still derive some benefit therefrom. And this is not less for your interest than for our own, inasmuch as you, if you shall ever meet with a reverse, would not only incur the greatest punishment, but would also become a warning example to others [5.90].”

It seems a fatal mistake of the Melians to associate this principle of the “common good” with the concept of punishment, the possibility of which the Athenians can easily dismiss. They take a general principle of reasonable reciprocity and burden it with too much talk of the force of justice—trying to make the principle stronger, they undermine
it. Yet Thucydides seems still sympathetic to this argument. While the guilty frequently go unpunished in international politics, the principle still stands in the weaker form of what is sometimes called “generalized reciprocity.” In his own voice, Thucydides laments that

“indeed, men do not hesitate, when they seek to avenge themselves upon others, to abrogate in advance the common principles observed in such cases—those principles upon which depends every man’s own hope of salvation should he himself be overtaken by misfortune—thus failing to leave them in force against the time when perchance a man in peril shall have need of some one of them [3.84].”

In the case of the Athenians at Melos, the principle of reciprocity is rejected in part because of Athens’ (somewhat incoherent) claim to not be motivated by fear. Fear about future misfortunes cannot have any hold on the Athenian mind. This claim is only strengthened by their professed acceptance of their inevitable downfall [5.91]. In the case of the Corcyraean civil war, it is instrumental to the ambitions of those engaged in conflict to destroy as many obstacles to their ambitions as they can. Such actors care more about victory and vengeance than the eventual reestablishment of a peaceful political order that can ensure their safety no less than that of their opponents. In both cases, the hope of acquisition and the passion for vengeance heavily outweighs long-term calculation. Despite these problems, it is significant that Thucydides does not dogmatically reject the maintenance of such principles, nor does he stress great risks in attempting to do so. Indeed, despite the weakness of Thucydides’ “golden rule,” at the very least it encourages reflection on the possibility of reversals of fortune. Athens for a
variety of reasons is driven to shun such considerations, yet their downfall at Syracuse constitutes precisely the kind of reversal that the Melians talk about.

“For further more...their misery...did not even so seem easy at the moment, especially when one considered from what splendor and boastfulness at first to what humiliating end they had now come. For this was indeed the very greatest reversal that had ever happened to an Hellenic armament; for it so fell out that in place of having to come to enslave others, they were now going away in fear lest they might rather themselves suffer this [7.75].”

In general, not only is the restraining and principled tradition of honor a weak prop to pragmatic moderation, but the more domineering strand of honor actively works against mutual agreement and the operation of reciprocal principles. Only once do we see a marriage of nobility and non-intervention. The Boeotian general Pagondas swims against the current by proclaiming that “freedom means simply a determination to hold one’s own.” The Boeotians, he claims, are men whose “glory is to be always ready to give battle for the liberty of their own country and never unjustly to enslave that of others...” [4.92]. Elsewhere we find that where rigid principles are promulgated, they either promote hostility or are decidedly one-sided, especially when they relate to external reputation. Cleon, acting as a more contentious version of Pericles, asserts as a guiding principle that “it is human nature in any case to be contemptuous of those who pay court, but to admire those who will not yield [3.39].” Here Cleon is arguing that Athenian softness inspired Mytilene’s contempt, but obviously the principle does not go so far as to acknowledge the corollary that Athens might admire, or at least understand, Mytilene’s own refusal to yield to Athens. Instead the Mytilenian revolt elicits Cleon’s punitive instincts. So too goes the argument at Melos: Athens is worthy because it does
not submit to necessity; the Melians are but insolent fools if they fail to submit to inexorable forces.\textsuperscript{30} We can add to this the Corinthian assertion that acting unjustly to signal one’s refusal to submit is preferable to refraining from self-assertion out of a sense of justice. Where injustice is less tolerable than justice is obligatory, conflict will surely ensue.

The failure of honor to bring about any kind of equitable settlement to war is nowhere more clear than in the exchange in which Sparta first sues Athens for peace. Having three hundred of their ruling class held hostage on Pylos, Spartan envoys present a compromise deal to the Athenians, essentially offering to share the honors of hegemony over all of Greece [2.20]. They enumerate the reasons for Athenian moderation, including an appeal to the idea of fickle fortune, and a more compelling argument about the power of generosity to break cycles of vengeance and preempt hatred. The argument regarding fortune, despite its sagacity in more general terms, suffers from an acute rhetorical failing. On the one hand it seems to be a version of Thucydides’ thoroughly reasonable “golden rule.” On the other hand, the Spartans’ repeated assertion that Athens’ success was only a feature of “unwonted fortune [4.17],” cannot help but gall the honor-seeking Athenians, who in many ways defeated the Spartans fair and square. Should the Athenians pursue their current course, they risk incurring Sparta’s “undying personal hatred [4.20].”\textsuperscript{31} Thus, just as in the case with the Melians’ similar argument, the more generalized warning about creating a world in which each actor presses his advantage to

\textsuperscript{30} See my discussion in Chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{31} idian, as opposed to the “public” (koine) adversarial relationship already in place. Emphasis added.
the maximum is overshadowed by the more combative assertion of a real possibility of punishment.

The second prong of the Spartan argument rests on no other foundation than the relationship between power and generosity elicited by Pericles in his funeral speech.

“We believe that a permanent reconciliation of bitter enmities is more likely to be secured, not when one party seeks revenge and, because he has gained a decided mastery in the war, tries to bind his opponent by compulsory oaths and thus makes peace with him on unequal terms, but when, having it in his power to secure the same result by clemency, he vanquishes his foe by generosity also….For the adversary finding himself now under obligation to repay the generosity in kind, instead of striving for vengeance for having had terms forced upon him, is moved by a sense of honor and is more ready to abide by his agreements…. [4.19].”

While Athenian honor compels them to assert mastery and control, Sparta reminds them that honor can work against this impulse as well. Appealing to the honor of a supplicant will both legitimate a settlement and more readily procure their continuing adherence.

By contrast, the imposition of control by force—even where possible—will never give Athens what it really craves, but a balance of political satisfactions can, if perhaps in more limited form. Sparta calls upon the problematic flip-side of the Athenian quest for honor through domination, namely, that dominance brings about more resentment than honors. Here, rather than adopting a doctrine which seeks to a-moralize relationships, they stress the psychic impulses on the other side of the coin, which includes the most

---

32 Many elements of Thucydides’ world parallel Paul Schroeder’s (1989) vision of 19th Century Europe as embodying a “political balance” or “balance of satisfactions” rather than a balance of power-as-capability. The features in common are a collective emphasis on satisfying national honor, the prestige that attends having a stake in the fate of the system, and satisfying prerogatives of free action. What is missing in Thucydides’ Greece is an alignment of conservative interests that actively promulgates principles of conduct. There is no Greek “Congress System,” and this of course has much to do with the fact that Athens to some degree plays the part of Napoleonic France. Still, the informal norms and ideas of accommodation frequently put forth by various diplomats in the History are striking.
personalized hatred. Sparta, now itself filling the shoes of the victim of fortune, understands that the unrestrained aspirations of Athens elicit an explicitly irrational response among its adversaries, for, as they acknowledge,

“… it is natural for men cheerfully to accept defeat at the hands of those who first make willing concessions, but to fight to the bitter end, even contrary to their better judgment, against an overbearing foe [4.19].”

Unfortunately, the Athenians are “greedy for more [4.21].” No doubt the Spartan attribution of Athens’ victories to luck plays a part in their rejection of the Spartan entreaties, and it is likely that the offer of sharing greatness with a power currently at their mercy appears to be too compromising a compromise. Again, Thucydides does not stress any particular danger in accepting Spartan accommodation, and indeed their argument resonates with pragmatic judgments that Thucydides makes throughout. The decision to ignore the Spartans is taken on the basis of a confidence that since they have the Spartans on Pylos as hostages, they can acquire a still more beneficial settlement, and at a time of their choosing. The hope of acquiring more combines with the delusion of total control and overcomes honor’s claims to moderation and accommodating behavior.

_The Just and the Expedient; Momentary and Lasting Interest_

There is a notable paucity of what one could call reciprocal principles in the History. Still fewer are those rooted in honor. Nonetheless, Thucydides does show the possibility of separating immediate self interest from at least a broader conception of self-interest.
In so doing, he points to the possibility of a conception of justice which can reconcile multiple interests.

One area of promise is the idea of transcending immediate or momentary \((brachus; autika)\)^33 desires or interests. This constitutes a clear ethical theme running throughout the History but one to which the connection of honor is tenuous. Corinth warns Athens not to succumb to the momentary passions of competition, in which the love of victory overcomes all other interests [1.41]. The plague traps humanity in an ephemeral world and thus a hedonistic one [2.53]. Athens condemns Mytilene in a momentary rage [3.36], while the doomed Plataeans urge their Spartan captors not to yield to the same shortsightedness of the moment [3.56]. Cleon inverts the ethical implications of immediate passion, asserting that it is the punitive urge that serves Athens’ long-term interests, whereas the public’s clemency is but a transient passion [3.40]. The nature of a more calm reflection works against Cleon, for in describing his task as resurrecting the wrath of the previous day, he must tacitly admit that it is truly more fleeting. The normative content of the transcendence of the momentary is given its clearest expression in the Athenian generals’ contemptuous remark that “of all men with whom we are acquainted [the Spartans] most conspicuously consider what is agreeable to be honorable and what is expedient just [5.105].” The statement assumes the capacity of

---

^33 Each of the following examples uses either \textit{brachus} or \textit{autika}.
Athens to make such a distinction on the one hand and an inability of the Spartans on the other.\textsuperscript{34}

Sparta does indeed live up to this characterization of the generals to the point where it shows a general inability to make distinctions between its interests and those of others, or of the question of justice. While piously concerned with the question of \textit{jus ad bellum} at the outset of the war, the Spartans reveal little capacity for objective reflection once the war is underway. Early in the war, as the Spartans attack Athenian allies, they make no distinction between adversaries and neutrals, making it their common practice to kill anyone but their own allies [2.67]. This brutality ceases when the Spartan commander Alcidas is confronted by some pragmatic diplomats regarding his killing and imprisonment of both Athenian allies and neutrals.

“…he anchored at Ephesus where he was visited by envoys of the Samians…who said that it was an ill way he had of freeing Hellas, to destroy men who were not lifting their hands against him and were not enemies, but were merely allies of the Athenians under compulsion; and unless he abandoned this course he would win few enemies over into friendship and would turn far more friends into enemies. Alcidas was persuaded, and set free all the Chians and some of the others [3.32].”

Thucydides’ matter of fact language here would be amusing were its subject not so grave—it is as though the rationale given by the Samians had not even crossed Alcidas’ mind. The episode reveals a Spartan conception of interest that is narrow to the point where it can neither understand the extenuating circumstances of Athens’ subordinate allies nor the prospect that current enemies can become future allies. It should not

\textsuperscript{34} A more cynical reading would find THAT at least Athens wasn’t so conspicuous about conflating the two.
surprise us, then, that the Athenian speech about the extenuating circumstances of their imperial growth fell on deaf ears.

Sparta’s most egregious conflation of their interest with justice comes in their outrageous trial of the Plataeans. Having been under siege for some time, with all of its inhabitants and most of its defenders having fled, Athens’ somewhat unwilling ally Plataea negotiates its surrender to Sparta. Sparta sends five judges to try their case, which the Plataeans are told will be in accordance with justice (*para diken*). They must assume the issue at hand will be their violent dispute with Sparta’s ally and Plataea’s longtime rival Thebes. Instead, the Spartan judges simply ask the Plataeans what good they have done Sparta in the current war [3.52]. The Plataeans—having first been denied an alliance with Sparta, then afterwards turning one down, having turned instead to Athens—are understandably distraught, and question both the intentions of the Spartans and the nature of the proceedings. They had no idea that the Spartans would presume to judge them in such a manner, but would still expect that the legal nature of the affair would involve the assessment of a particular charge.

Being presented only with a question to which there is no good answer, the Plataeans sense that the trial is but a show [3.52]. The Plataeans offer many justifications of their policy, grounded in the justice of preserving their independence from Thebes, their past services to Greece, and Sparta’s long-standing, sanctified, pledge to protect Plataean independence. They claim it would be dishonorable to violate their agreement with Athens and are bound to it on account of Athens’ past support. They remind Sparta
that it was the Spartans themselves who urged them to ally with Athens. Moreover, in
the war with Persia Plataea distinguished itself in the cause of Greek freedom whereas the
Thebans allied with the invader. Beyond this, they are burdened by the most pressing
necessity: they must remain close with a city that holds their women and children as de
facto hostages. Making the most thoroughgoing self-justification in all of the History, the
Plataeans urge the Spartans,

“For if you shall decide the question of justice by such considerations as your
immediate (autika) advantage and [Theban] hostility, you will show yourselves to be, not true judges of what is right, but rather to be mere slaves of expediency
[3.56].”

The Plataeans pull out all the stops and invoke a litany of reasons for moderation rooted
in pragmatic politics and common tradition. This is followed by a subtle reminder about
the relationship between liberality and liberty. Yet all of this is to no avail. The Spartans
simply restate their absurd question to the Plataean soldiers one by one—whether they
had rendered Sparta any good service in the current war—and execute each when they
answer with the truth. Two hundred men are killed, and soon thereafter the entire city is
razed and ceases to exist.

Neither appeals to gratitude for past deeds, or the reputation of Sparta [3.59] enter
into Sparta’s calculations sufficiently to outweigh their conception of immediate interest.
Plataea’s appeal to their promised independence is rejected on the grounds that they
failed to remain neutral in exchange for their independence [3.68]. Here the Spartans
overlook both the fact that they made no attempt to render this neutrality reasonable by
protecting Plataea and that they themselves attempted to draw the city out of its
neutrality. Nonetheless, Thucydides portrays the Spartans as being genuinely satisfied that they had just cause to no longer honor their promises on the basis of the neutrality issue. The true heart of the matter, Thucydides tells us, is that

“it was almost entirely for the Thebans that the Lacedaemonians in all their dealings with the Plataeans showed themselves so thoroughly hostile to them, thinking that the Thebans would be serviceable in the war just beginning [3.68].”

Singularly attentive to their short-term aspirations, it is notable that the Spartans nonetheless convince themselves that they are legitimately released from their treaty obligations towards Plataea. Conceiving of themselves as acting within the parameters of justice rather than necessity, the Spartans assess their actions almost as if resolving a cognitive dissonance. This justification, however, takes no account of extenuating circumstances, that is to say, of the considerable degree to which necessity weighs upon the decisions of the Plataeans.

In urging the Spartans to put the Plataeans to death, the Thebans show a similar ineptitude for impartial judgment. They argue that the Plataeans will be justly punished because they had “illegally” (paranomos) killed some perpetrators of a Theban plot to capture the city some years earlier [3.66]. The particular crime was that the Plataeans executed some Thebans who had surrendered, violating the very customary law that the Plataeans were now using in their defense [3.56]. The Thebans are aware that the argument cuts both ways, yet escape this problem by claiming that the impending massacre of the Plataeans is the just punishment of criminals rather than an action taken against surrendering soldiers [3.67]. The Thebans entertain similarly conflicting ideas while arguing that alliance with an unpopular power was involuntary in their own case
(they had allied with the Persians during the invasion) and completely voluntary in the case of Plataea’s alliance with Athens [3.64]. In making this argument they exonerate the Thebans at large by pointing out that it was Thebes’ tyrants that had made this alliance. Rejecting the idea of collective guilt in the case of their own defense, they turn around and enforce it upon a random sample of Plataean soldiers now at their mercy.

The realpolitik “Athenian thesis” in embracing the role of necessity in political affairs seems—somewhat ironically—to open the door to the prospect of escaping the mindset of the Spartans. In asking that the Spartans view the Athenian empire as the product of necessity—or more precisely, a creature of the compulsory nature of the avoidance of fear and the desire for honor and advantage—the Athenians suggest the corollary that the compelling circumstances of others can similarly be understood. The language of necessity used in the assembly at Sparta is justificatory, and implies a more nuanced sense of justice than the Spartan identification of interest with justice. The overt acceptance of interests is more susceptible of being cast in reciprocal terms yielding mutual understanding of motives than is the one-sided justice of the Spartans.\(^{35}\) Athens asks for understanding based upon this conception of human necessities, but does it reciprocate?

In contrast to the Spartan view, the violent Athenian Cleon does in fact assert the exculpatory nature of necessity although he constrains its scope. Self-conscious about

\(^{35}\) One could argue that this objectivity of interest is a cornerstone of the stability envisioned by the Westphalian system, see Habermas (2006 Ch. 8). The modern doctrine of the superiority of interest over passion is similarly envisioned to facilitate stability through transparent predictability rather than harmony, Hirschman (1977).
the potential tension between the just and the expedient, Cleon finds it necessary to claim
that his recommended policy of killing the Mytilenians reconciles both goods [3.40].
Were the circumstances of Mytilene’s revolt different, an examination of the city’s
freedom of choice would in fact be relevant. Cleon claims, for example, that he “can
make allowance for men who resorted to revolt because they were unable to bear your
rule or were compelled by [Athens’] enemies to do so [3.39].” Here he distinguishes
himself in theory from the five Spartan judges who will condemn the Plataeans in the
episode immediately following. However, Cleon cannot find that Mytilene is burdened
by such necessities, but were in fact treated by Athens “with the highest [honor]36
[3.39].” This fact of the relative ease of Mytilenian subordination not only takes the
question of necessity out of the question, but turns their revolt into a “rebellion,”37 and
one of particularly heinous proportions. Invoking the logic of the Athenian thesis, Cleon
even suggests that the pursuit of power is excusable. Yet he pushes his charge against
Mytilene to the point where he presents it as a gratuitous act of spite towards their
hegemon.38 As a result, it would behoove the Athenians to punish in proportion to the
sheer gratuitousness of Mytilene’s transgression, not only to satisfy justice, but to deter
future revolts. Cleon accepts the principle of extenuating circumstance and the tensions

36 Smith uses “consideration” but the word is, of course, time.
37 That is to say, a more intimate and moral transgression. There is a clear note of indignation related to
this “consideration.” See Chapter 3.
38 The psychological theory of attribution invoked by Mercer (1996) suggests that negative behavior
issuing from actors who are already viewed negatively will be attributed to their nature rather than
circumstance. Cleon seems to work backwards through this logic to prove the viciousness of the
Mytilenians through inference. He stresses the inherent nature of the transgression to prove the
intransigent nature of Mytilene: “compassion may rightly be bestowed upon those who are likewise
compassionate and not upon those who will show no pity in return but…are always enemies [3.40].” See
also Crawford (2000 p. 147) who notes that circumstantial reasoning is unlikely to be applied to those
who are emotionally feared.
between expediency and justice. To some degree he applies this understanding to power politics. He claims, for example, that the pursuit of power would be better than the hubris shown by Mytilene. Yet all of this is just talk. In order to punish the Mytilenians, Cleon must move away from language that depersonalizes and a-moralizes political relationships and re-inject an element of punitive justice and collective guilt. This is done by taking the personalization of political relationships to the extreme, resulting in a patently absurd claim: Mytilene did not act out of its own interests but was instead bent solely on harming Athens. The language of interest and necessity is affirmed in theory only to be discarded in his analysis, as Cleon attributes a personal slight to Mytilene that demands an equally personal act of retribution from Athens. In the midst of this argument for punitive justice is the claim that both justice and expediency are combined through the efficacy of harsh punishments as a deterrent to future revolts [3.39].

The triumph of the moderating power contained in the doctrine of extenuating circumstances is seen in Diodotus’ success in convincing Athens not to massacre the people of Mytilene. Directly confronting Cleon, he extends the necessity argument from the Athenian thesis to the point of empathizing with the mistakes of the Mytilenians. Having promised only to talk of expediency rather than justice, Diodotus does not overtly take up the cause of justifying the behavior of Mytilene. Instead, he evaluates the benefit of punitive justice as a deterrent. In his eyes, the deluding power of hope is the true root

---

39 His success must perhaps be qualified in the sense that it seizes upon a “raw” feeling of regret that had already beset the city, lending justification to a passion as much as it directs the calculations of the city. Thucydides does not mention any comparable sentiment on the part of the Spartans, who direct their sensibilities about justice solely to the more legal question of *jus ad bellum*, for example at 7.18.
of transgression. Hope both feeds the daring that springs from hardship and facilitates
the greed which arises from good fortune [3.45].

“Hope and desire are everywhere; Desire leads, Hope suggests the facility of fortune; the two passions are most baneful, and being unseen, phantoms prevail over seen dangers. Besides these, fortune contributes in no less degree to urge men on; for she sometimes presents herself unexpectedly and thus tempts men to take risks even when their resources are inadequate…In a word, it is impossible to imagine that when human nature is wholeheartedly bent on any undertaking it can be diverted from it by rigorous laws or by any other terror [3.45].”

Diodotus overtly a-moralizes and depersonalizes the situation between Athens and
Mytilene by widening the scope of human understanding. He includes the tendencies of
hope and desire in addition to the grip of necessity, which Cleon had shown to be so
easily disposed of. He includes no discussion of exoneration, but shows an
understanding that certain tendencies of human nature are in fact practical inevitabilities.

Free people forced into submission will “naturally” revolt—this is to be expected [3.46].

The actions of Mytilene may not have been coerced, and thus are not explicitly excused.

They are, rather, understood, and it is from the grounds of this understanding that
Diodotus assesses the meaning of punitive justice. His entirely forward-looking
discussion of punishment is on the surface based in the principle of utility rather than
desert, and he a-moralizes the discussion by announcing that the Athenian assembly is
not a court of law: “we are….not engaged in a law-suit with [Mytilene], so as to be
concerned about the question of right and wrong…[3.44].”

40 This idea of dissociating unilateral political decisions from legal judgments is taken for granted in the
Hobbesian and state sovereignty traditions (which includes Kant). Yet this modern dispensation stands in
contrast to the Plataean claim which accepts that enemies can justly be adjudicated and punished [3.58].
Even in their terrible predicament, rather than rejecting the meaning of arbitrary unilateral judgment
Diodotus’ appeal to long-term expediency runs deeper than the pragmatic amorality of the modern notion of state sovereignty, however. He directly raises the problem of collective guilt, indicating that the vast majority of Mytilenians are “innocent,” and that in killing them Athens would be “guilty” of killing their benefactors [3.47]. Maintaining his theme of expediency, he stresses both the detrimental effect of punishing the innocent as well as the practical value of clemency while eschewing it as a motive. Given the uselessness of punitive justice to future enterprises, it is in fact expedient to punish as few people as possible. Such a policy will both reduce the intensity of revolts by offering the rebels the opportunity to surrender, and maintain Athens’ popularity with common people everywhere [3.46]. In his distanced evaluation, one in which he looks to the future and not the present [3.44], Diodotus takes error and transgression to be part of the natural round of things, but so too is an appreciation for justice and clemency. By the end of his speech, the notion of justice creeps into his speech in a number of instances, as he uses words rooted in *dike* to connote both the innocence of the Mytilenian commoners and the injustice of killing them. Diodotus’ sense of justice—or perhaps more simply, humanity—takes a final transformation in turning Cleon’s deterrent logic on its head: “it is far more conducive to the maintenance of our dominion, that we should willingly submit to be wronged, than that we should destroy, however justly, those whom we ought not to destroy [3.47].”

---

41 One element already discussed in Ch. 3 is the divergence between Cleon and Diodotus on the value of speech as contributing to decision-making. Cleon implies that speech corrupts the automaticity of action and punitive reaction, whereas Diodotus claims its indispensability to policy.

42 This is Orwin’s interpretation (1997) Ch. 9.
Cleon’s claims to achieving a marriage of justice and expediency fail, primarily because of the lack of expediency in punishment at all costs. Diodotus also firmly disputes the assertion of the Corinthians at Sparta, who claim that peace will attend those who show themselves unwilling to submit to justice (rather than those who seek not to commit it) [1.71]. His ability to turn the other cheek allows Diodotus to escape the trap of contention described in the stasis passage: he urges Athens to swallow its pride and prefer to suffer the indignity of a setback than to act the “clever villain.” One is tempted to say that Diodotus can claim a failure of justice in Cleon’s speech. It is certainly the case that Diodotus combines a long view of the future with an escape from a narrow, punitive justice as well as the shortsighted expediency of the moment that Cleon shares with both Spartans and plague victims. Diodotus thus opens up hope that his more synoptic view of human nature, while eschewing punitive justice, can still offer a kind of reconciliation between a moderate humanity and interest if the latter is properly understood.

If Diodotus is understood as embodying a deeper sense of justice or perhaps a more elevated liberality than Cleon or the Spartans, then we can envision a continuum of viewpoints, from the Spartans, to Cleon, to Diodotus. Thucydides clearly invites this comparison by placing the Plataean trial immediately after the moderate resolution to the Mytilenian episode. The Spartans seem wholly to disregard the question of the necessities imposed on their adversaries or the idea of conflicting interests. Diodotus

---

43 The speech can easily be read as though Diodotus were assaulting only “Cleon’s justice” or punitive justice, leaving other possibilities for justice unspoken. There are practical reasons why Diodotus must not cast his emphasis in terms of a competing sense of justice: he acknowledges the political difficulties of making such an argument on behalf of an adversary. See my discussion in Ch. 5.
shows such a degree of understanding of motivation that his understanding of justice becomes considerably nuanced. The middle is occupied by Cleon, who shows the Athenian understanding of necessity, yet also seeks to dismiss the question of Mytilenian compulsion—or more interestingly, he uses the language of compulsion to intensify his charge by comparison. Thus Cleon’s view overlaps considerably with that of his fellow Athenian, but he shows how the language of interests can become appropriated by aggressive impulse. He also shows how his different demeanor influences his interpretation of facts. Both Cleon and Diodotus agree, for example, that the revolt was not strictly necessary for Mytilene, as they were not immediately threatened by any act of Athenian oppression. Thus they both agree that there was something superfluous about the uprising, but Diodotus regards the temptations and errors of the Mytilenians to be practically inevitable whereas Cleon does not.

What, then, is the root of the difference between the two? A key way to characterize the difference is by means of their outlooks regarding the question of control over human affairs. There need not be any philosophical difference between the two as far as their understanding of free will and culpability goes, although Diodotus’ understanding of compulsion, or rather, tendency, is broader. While Cleon clearly affirms that the Mytilene revolt was an act of free will and therefore worthy of punishment as such, Diodotus does not take this matter up. In any case, to Diodotus, the application of punishment is not practical, although his argument is suggestive of deep

---

44 That is, Cleon accepts the exonerating nature of necessity only to emphasize the outrageousness of the Mytilenians’ allegedly un-necessary transgression.
45 This theme is elaborated in Chapter 1.
46 The speech of the Mytilenians at Sparta admits this, [3.9 ff.].
problems in the relationship between punishment and free will taken up by Plato. Cleon hopes that violent punishment is an effective deterrent to future transgressors, but he must also assert that there is justice in it, and that those who might plot against Athens can ultimately correct their behavior through some sort of rational anticipation. In other words, Cleon presumes that punitive justice works in the service of a firm control over human affairs. Those justly punished must willfully have erred, those who might be punished can be convinced to avoid that fate, and those who execute this justice can reinforce their influence over events. Thus the central aspect of Diodotus’ insight appears by contrast to be an essential pessimism about the possibility of control, especially via the means of punitive justice. Diodotus presents the widest range of human motivation to be both natural and practically inevitable, without suggesting an attending banishment of culpability. The reflexive honor of Sthenelaidas or the Corinthians is not an option, for punishment is not guaranteed to work in the service of control and in fact can undermine it: “we must not be such rigorous judges of the delinquents as to suffer harm ourselves [3.46].” Responsibility remains in the hands of the Athenians not to punish the innocent or to reject the benefits of clemency, but Athenians must refrain from attributing injustice to others while still submitting to it themselves. Thus there is a kind of forbearance in Diodotus’ argument that is rooted in pragmatism, but it is also an acknowledgement of the strength and relative invulnerability of Athens. Like the association between risk-acceptance and worthiness that the envoys to Sparta claim [1.77], this aspect of Diodotus’ thought shares in the self-abnegation that

47 The theme appears many times in Plato, for example, in his absurd portrayal of retributive justice in the Laws which recommends punishment for injurious roofing tiles and horses [873e].
finds its honor in resisting the pull of the immediate. Perhaps it is its ability to forego visceral and immediate reaction that allows Athens to show its freedom to be more just than it has to be.

**Hermocrates and Grounded Politics**

Diodotus’ subtle foray into politics finds a compelling support in the leadership of the Syracusan general Hermocrates. Much more a man of action, Hermocrates still embodies many of Diodotus’ insights into the scope of fortune and the necessity of demoting punitive justice as a foreign policy ambition. This combination of features allows us to view Hermocrates as Thucydides’ antidote to Pericles—a man who can effectively lead and unite people without “ungrounding” politics from the realities of human vulnerability and the needs of everyday life. Herodotus’ speech at Gela exhorts the feuding Sicilians to unite in the face of the impending Athenian threat. A masterful counterpart to Pericles’ funeral oration, it presents a few striking contrasts.

Unlikely Pericles, who vacillates between portraying war as a glorious act of freedom and a harsh necessity, Hermocrates begins his speech with an unambiguous pronouncement that war occurs by choice. Wars happen simply because the instigators hope to gain something by them—either temptation outweighs fear or a state prefers danger to a “momentary disadvantage [4.59].” Hermocrates comes close to implying

---

48 My critique of Pericles’ tendencies in this direction can be found in Chapter 2.
49 The word again is *autika*. 

220
here that war in general cannot be in one’s long-term interest, but it surely isn’t in Sicily’s case. Hermocrates goes on to show a savvy understanding of Athenian motives, for example recognizing their divide-and-conquer strategy and dismissing the red-herring of ethnic conflict between Dorians and Ionians. “[I]t is not on account of hatred of one of the two races into which we are divided that they will attack us, but because they covet the good things of Sicily which we possess in common [4.61].”

Taking up the problem of intra-Sicilian conflict, Hermocrates discusses the role that faction plays in weakening both cities and regions, preparing the way for foreign intervention and exploitation. Athens is a tempting ally for those who would settle old scores with neighbors, and this is indeed the back door through which Athens intends to enter Sicily. Rather than reemphasize the concept of the commonality of Sicilian goods, Hermocrates deals with this problem in language similar to that of Diodotus—he emphasizes the futility of pursuing punitive justice.

“[M]any men ere now, whether pursuing with vengeance those who have wronged them, or in other cases, hoping to gain something by the exercise of power, have on the one hand, not only not avenged themselves, but have not even come out whole, and, on the other hand, instead of gaining more, have sacrificed what was their own. For revenge has no right to expect success just because it is in the right, nor is strength sure just because it is confident [4.62].”

Hermocrates pairs the pursuit of punitive justice with the attempt to control one’s environment through force, just as was the case in Diodotus’ discussion of deterrence.

Pursuing justice, attempting to acquire more, or exercising dominion all suggest the

\[50\] Hermocrates certainly refers to internecine conflict and perhaps aggressive ambition here—he elsewhere stresses the importance of a vigorous show of defensive force [6.34].

\[51\] A theme which of course is played out time and again in the History.
possibility of mastering the sequence of events, and like Diodotus, Hermocrates accepts
great limits on the human capability to do so. The Athenian mindset, shown by Pericles
and the generals at Melos, suggests that the weak are well aware that only the strong can
actualize justice. Hermocrates, by granting unforeseen events greater influence, warns
that even the powerful should not take it for granted that they can exercise their freedom
to pursue justice.

Where Pericles dismisses the influence of fear and seeks to limit the scope of fortune to the universe of non-human factors, Hermocrates welcomes an appreciation of uncertainty and its attending fears: “it is uncertainty that for the most part prevails, and this uncertainty, treacherous as it is, proves nevertheless to be also most salutary; for since both sides alike fear it, we proceed with greater caution in attacking one another [4.62].” Hermocrates in fact embraces fear and uses fear of Athens as a unifying principle for Sicily. Affirming the value of fear in this way, Sicily can bring about the state of affairs sought by Pericles, yet in a modestly constrained manner. “Let us feel assured that if my advice is followed we shall each keep our city free, and from it, since we shall be arbiters of our own destiny, we shall with equal valour [requisite]52 him who comes to benefit and him who comes to harm [4.63].” By avoiding the temptations of mastery that an extended position of control might entail, Hermocrates suggests that in its own limited space, a city can retain some of that freedom of choice which Periclean Athens seeks to the extreme. To accomplish this, the cities of Sicily in reality must forgo the opportunity to settle scores or perhaps even press their legal advantage against one

52 ἀμοῦνω means punish or reward, as in the sense of “return.” I have substituted Jowett’s “requisite” for Smith’s more confusing “punish.”
another. Fear counsels that the greater practicality of warding off Athens outweighs these satisfactions.

Hermocrates’ wisdom lies in a sentiment that has only a weak connection to the mainsprings of human action. Uncertainty about the future—which to Hermocrates is a “vague fear [4.63]”—supports a policy of unity and moderate claims. But to many actors in Thucydides’ work, uncertainty presents opportunity and is a spur to ambition, as is recognized by Diodotus. Uncertainty of this kind appears as fear to Hobbes but it is precisely the kind of fear that unsettles the state of nature, and which must be replaced by the certain fear of negative consequences for transgression. Thus Hermocrates’ amoralizing of the world of international politics must be propped up by a grounded view of politics that contrasts with that of Pericles. He takes the Periclean emphases on honor (time) and splendor (lamprotes) and applies them to peace instead [4.62]. Rather than “anesthetizing” death, Hermocrates describes war as “awful” (deinon) [4.59]. The city to Hermocrates is vulnerable and can be injured by an aggressive score settling or the pursuit of other spirited satisfactions. Where Pericles urges the Athenians not to condescend to making concessions, to exile fortune from the realm of politics and think of nothing but vengeance in warfare, Hermocrates announces “I deem it my duty…to make concessions, and not to harm my enemies in such a way as to receive more injury myself; or in foolish obstinacy to think that I am as absolutely master of Fortune, which

---

53 Strauss (1952) and Slomp (1990) assert the centrality of fear-as-uncertainty in Hobbes’ state of nature. Thus to Strauss, Hobbes’ politics are ultimately about a foolproof system more than anything else. If so, his enterprise would find little support from Thucydides.

54 Pericles’ greatest euphemism is his reference to the “unfelt death” of the soldier in glorious battle [2.42].

55 Hermocrates here distances himself from Pericles as well as the perpetrator of civil conflict [3.82].
I do not control, as of my own judgment; nay so far as is reasonable, I will give way [4.64].” Hermocrates twice emphasizes that this is his policy even though Syracuse has the power to act otherwise [4.59, 64]. In other words, through his fear he takes the Spartan route of taking less action than his power allows, rather than the converse Athenian practice, described by the Corinthians and embraced by Athens, of seeking to surpass their own capacities.

Hermocrates’ policies thus aim at many of the same values as those of Pericles, but in a more constrained manner, aware of the circumscribed nature of freedom of action. By urging an eschewal of punitive justice in international affairs he casts doubt on humanity’s ability to control its environment, but this acknowledgement in turn leads to a greater sense of control over a smaller scope of events. The power to effect both good and bad, which Pericles boasts is exercised by Athens on “every sea and every land [2.41],” to Hermocrates entails simply the ability to forestall foreign interference in the affairs of Sicily [4.63]. Hermocrates looks eagerly at the opportunity for his city to rise to prominence in the same way that Athens has, but he attributes both the prospect of a great Syracuse and the current greatness of Athens to good luck [6.33]. Like the Athenian envoys at Sparta, he understands the propensity of the powerful to rule, yet like Diodotus he also acknowledges the other side of the coin: the powerful cannot but expect resistance [4.61]. Hermocrates finds that there is something “natural” in both impulses. Yet he also seems to understand in a way that few Athenians do, that there is a certain nobility in both the freedom to rule and freedom from rule. In short, Hermocrates does not relinquish the aspirations of elevated politics, but more honestly situates these
aspirations in a realistic world of necessity and compulsion. Hermocrates will not fight a futile battle to master fortune, and he allows that human factors are part of the natural environment in which he must operate.

The partial depersonalizing and a-moralizing of politics and the embrace of fear presented by Hermocrates can be read as a corrective to the litany of problematic mindsets seen throughout the *History*. It is important to note the fragility of good policy and its reliance on statesmanship. As is the case with Pericles’ unifying efforts [2.67], Hermocrates’ policy rests on a careful balancing of impulses and values, and not on any failsafe principle or institutional mechanism. The one sure principle which stands out in contrast to Pericles—not to pursue vengeance to one’s own detriment—is intrinsically limited by the fact that he nonetheless espouses moral agency as a critical value for the political community. This precarious balance is certainly the most significant aspect of Thucydides’ pessimism, and it is most marked in his account of the ultimate fate of Syracuse. For all of Hermocrates’ talk of confining their ambitions to preserving the balance of power on Sicily, once their stunning victory over Athens is achieved, the Syracusans immediately set their sights higher.

“For the Syracusans were no longer concerned with merely saving themselves, but also with preventing the Athenians from being saved, thinking, as was the case, that in the present circumstances their own position was much superior, and that if they could defeat the Athenians and their allies both by land and by sea the achievement would appear a glorious one for them in the eyes of the Hellenes…and they themselves, being the authors of all this, would be greatly admired not only by the world at large but also by posterity [7.56].”
Thus democratic Syracuse finds itself in just the situation Athens had been after driving away the Persians, and the ground is prepared for a potential new cycle of liberation, hegemony, and empire.

**Conclusion**

Thucydides portrays no certain ways to mitigate conflict between political communities. While honor does have a constraining and self-abnegating aspect, it is also a spur to competition and fiercely works against the pessimism about control that is promoted by Hermocrates and Diodotus. The prickly version of honor, that which promotes the man or the city as a thing not to be trifled with, militates against constraints on action. Embracing uncertainty and reining in the instinct to master one’s environment are perhaps the only sure prudential principles consistently offered by Thucydides. Honor nonetheless renders them precarious ones. They cut across the deepest aspirations of the political community to shelter its citizens from necessity and afford them the possibility to think about justice, safety, and control.

While there are no sure grounds for optimism to Thucydides, neither is there an automaticity to his pessimism. The characteristics of elevated politics—nobility, justice, and an escape from shortsighted inclination—can be brought out in speech and deliberation to check the impulses of reflexive honor and punitive justice. Though constraints are weak, Thucydides never claims that more moderate behavior is out of place or dangerous in politics between states. Here Thucydides stands apart from more
modern strains of realism, many of which emphasize a positive danger in not pressing
one’s advantage to the maximum,\textsuperscript{56} or at least placing a premium on the demonstration of
resolve.\textsuperscript{57} This brand of realism appears in the *History*, but we are given sufficient
context to question its rationality. Cleon and the Corinthian speakers both emphasize the
dangers of appearing soft, essentially invoking the “Munich analogy” with regard to both
great power politics and the administration of empire. Spartan softness invites Athenian
aggression, argue the Corinthians. Cleon asserts that Athenian softness invites rebellion
at Mytilene. Both speakers, significantly, are angry and indignant about having their
superiority challenged, and especially in the case of Cleon, the question of punishment is
thoroughly intertwined with his deterrence theory. Diodotus’ critique of Cleon’s
deterrence-through-justice argument implies that the cause/effect relationship between
harshness and deterrence is no more reliable than the “democratic” expectation of a link
between softness and compliance. Hermocrates continues this line of critique and further
spells out the close relationship between the desire to effect punitive justice and the
expectation of mastering causal relationships in the human realm. Like Pericles,
Hermocrates shows that freedom of action is an ennobling goal for a political community,
but also that it must be constrained lest those like Cleon saturate political relations with a
personalized animus that works against the dictates of prudence.

Prudence, to Hermocrates, entails an embrace of uncertainty and fear, which to
him intrinsically limits ambitions. The idea of uncertainty as inspiring theoretically

\textsuperscript{56} The classic statement of this idea is found in Machiavelli: “for a man who wishes to profess goodness at
all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good.” *The Prince*, Chapter 15.

\textsuperscript{57} For example, Schelling’s dictum that nothing is so worth fighting for as a reputation for toughness
(Schelling 1966 p. 124.).
unlimited aspirations to power is clearly enunciated in Hobbes, and is given a contemporary voice in the work of John Mearshimer. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was greatly concerned by the fact that uncertainty about Soviet intentions elicited planning based around worst-case scenarios, which in turn meant greatly expanded conceptions of interest. In Hermocrates’ mind, uncertainty ought to have an entirely different impact, one that undermines the logic of the Hobbesian drive for “power after power.” Thucydides’ work as a whole suggests that expanding interests as a result of uncertainty would be better characterized as a kind of unwarranted optimism regarding the ability to master the causal mechanisms of human behavior. Thus the “realism” of Cleon, which focuses on the surety of deterrent effect and the coincidence between expediency and exercising punishment, appears not to be too realistic in either sense of the word: it grounds a disguised optimism in an unwarranted confidence in prognostication.

The genuine realism of Hermocrates and Diodotus is cautious rather than ambitious. It is wary of the temptation to pursue a radical freedom of action. In Diodotus’ case, this pessimism is transformed into a sort of ethical realism or humanism—all predictions being uncertain, Diodotus opens up a space in which to exercise the human potential to see beyond momentary impulse. The surprising consequence of his embrace of human compulsion is his rejection of the idea that action

---

58 1967 speech to the editors of United Press International. Cited in Kegley and Raymond (2011) p. 236. 59 One is reminded here of Reinhold Niebuhr’s critique of realism during the cold war: Niebuhr finds in realism a latent desire to destroy evil through force (Niebuhr (1952) p. 40.). He clearly means some irony here, for one of 20th Century realism’s greatest laments was the liberal aspiration to rid the world of evil by idealistic means.
must be met with reaction, unmediated by speech. He discards the doctrinaire automaticity encouraged by other proponents of realpolitik. By distancing himself from the expectation of controlling events, he gains perspective on the relative values of punishment and clemency. Harsh treatment of subordinates will yield no certain benefits, but Diodotus need not claim that moderation will either. His acceptance of the limits of control allow him to acknowledge the positive side to softness and moderation, and the recognition that such a policy is not foolproof does not prove fatal to it. This is not to say that the world is a safe place for the inert, but rather, that Diodotus seems to discourage the idea of a doctrine of realpolitik. More significantly, where Hobbes’ claim about the unavoidability of expanding interests loses traction, so too does its normative corollary of a right to all things.

In the case of the Mytilenian debate, the difference between the politics of control and the politics of forbearance seems to turn not so much on a rational foresight as it does on a kind of bias towards action. In Thucydides’ portrayal, preferences for action and control—however illusory—clearly preponderate, despite the security dilemmas and self-fulfilling prophecies that ensue. Without ignoring the role that reasonable fears play in this dynamic, we can nonetheless augment our understanding of this dynamic with Thucydides’ account of the influence of more spirited human desires. Cleon and the Corinthians at Sparta are more afraid of having moderation insolently thrown back in their faces than they fear the actual power of their rebellious subordinates. We are finally reminded of Thucydides’ description of the contentious men of Corcyra, driven not by fear, but by honor as they demonstrate that
“…it is generally the case that…men are more willing to be called clever rogues than good simpletons…and are as ashamed of being the second as they are proud of being the first [3.82.7].”

It is tempting to think that the true accomplishment of Cleon’s realpolitik lies not in a superior grasp of human affairs, but in its ability to save his city from ever feeling the shame of playing the fool and having its liberality turned against it.
Summary and Conclusion

Thucydides on Complex Motivation

Thucydides’ study of political motives in war reveals the great significance of what one might call spirited or moral considerations. We see a great, and in some senses “irrational” (in the sense of unsafe or shortsighted) preoccupation with liberty, honor, moral agency, and reputation as a reflection of true worth. Much of this springs from Thucydides’ great emphasis on the dynamics of collectives of people rather than reducing political phenomena to the impulses and interests of the abstract individual. In short, he is a student of the shared and common life of cities and concerned with the psychology of the body politic as much as the individual. As such he takes in those motives which are particular to the group or which arise out of the intercourse of advanced political societies.

This attention allows Thucydides to note that while political societies draw upon the moral implications of fear and insecurity to justify their behavior and explain the grounds of their expanding interests, such talk all too easily becomes a fig leaf for ambition. This comes about in part because of a tension in the way communities envision themselves. The political community desires to think of itself as having outgrown a susceptibility to necessity, while simultaneously being a precarious good which requires a special safeguarding. As such, it eschews fear and talk of insecurity at one moment and at another co-opts their explanatory and exculpatory powers. Thucydides does not argue
that those in mortal peril have limited rights to protect themselves. He does, however, show that in reality fear and insecurity cause as much inertia as action. Genuine fear is unlikely in any simple way to be the motive of the great and concerted actions that constitute wars. The more serious fear, it seems, is not so much an existential fear or Hobbes’ “diffidence,” but anxiety about the continued enjoyment of acquired goods. Such a fear combines with the attachment to other values—status, liberty, honor, wealth—in a way that is in fact likely to goad the body politic to serious action.

Understood this way, “fear” still motivates in a compulsory manner, but surely some of its justificatory powers have rubbed off. Thucydides’ treatment of security motives reveals what many modern thinkers often suspect: that the modern concept of security contains multiple elements. In addition to safeguarding the cohesion of the state and the bodily integrity of its citizens, security-minded actors seek to maintain prerogatives, preserve accustomed liberties, and sustain material standards of welfare.¹

Thucydides’ analysis of the diversity of motivations shows that while the preservation of wealth is a critically important goal of the body politic, this is in no small part because of the moral stake the community has invested in not ceding ground to others or necessity. Otherwise wealth is instrumental to power, a power whose greatest aspiration seems to be to shield the political community from necessity. This includes separating the sphere of human interaction from the natural and inexorable. The city

¹ Indeed, it is sometimes observed that the Westphalian system of modern security states is most appropriately thought to be ordered around the principle of national liberty rather than either peace or safety.
strives never to have to regard the demands and interests of other humans as being part of
the world of necessity. The political community associates a genuine worth with this
kind of spontaneity or qualified transcendence of necessity. The purest statement of this
project is given in the speeches of Pericles, Thucydides’ political unifier *par excellence*.
In part, this spontaneity takes on the form of a noble departure from a petty and
calculating mindset. The more significant aspect of this freedom is the expectation that
affairs in the human world will be dealt with in terms of justice rather than necessity.
The mindset that Pericles cultivates acknowledges that humanity must bow to the
necessities of nature, but adamantly rejects thinking of the human world as part of this
nature. Thus while practicality and prudence may be appropriate signposts in some
domains of life, interaction with other human beings is essentially imagined as a battle of
wills. Freedom becomes cast as the ability to shape the world according to one’s wishes,
and indomitability becomes a key component of the self-appraisal of each city. Interstate
affairs so conceived yield a world of intense zero-sum competition.

The ability to make the distinction between human and non-human forces may be
universally desired, but Athens conceives of it as a prerogative of power, conflating
material power with a free nobility in a problematic manner. While the Athenian
generals at Melos encourage the weaker city to think of their relationship in terms of
weaker and stronger material forces, the Melians find this galling and impossible. The
Athenians clearly pride themselves on their ability never to have to swallow so much
pride, but confuse the question of whether it is their strength alone or a moral superiority
that affords them this luxury. In any case, power is shown to be instrumental to the
ability to interact with other men as equals—at the very least—in the pursuit of respect and justice. Much realism and the modern tradition of interest tend to agree with the advice given by the Athenian generals at Melos, as do the Thucydidean speakers Diodotus and Hermocrates. These traditions—particularly that of the doctrine of interest—while dismissing the limitations of justice as restraints on war, also often banish just indignation from the menu of valid causes of action. Thucydides shows that this amoral principle exists only at the level of prescriptive ideal, not descriptive truth. In reality, actors in the *History* are very much motivated by the desire to project worthiness, and they act out of just indignation, sensitivity to perceived hubris or insolence, vengeance and even fury. The promises of the political community to offer true moral agency and protection from the vicissitudes of fortune and the whims of other men helps explain this category of spirited motives.

This dimension of motivation has an ambiguous effect on the behavior of states. On the one hand, indignation and punitive instincts exacerbate conflict, providing both expanded bases for complaint and greater occasion for skewed and self-serving judgments—the problem described by Locke as “partiality.” On the other hand, however, where states associate their worth with spontaneity and risk-acceptance, they

---

2 Some realpolitik formulations would recommend maintaining a posture of indignation for purposes of establishing a credible reputation for standing up for one’s interests or as a way of expanding opportunities for aggrandizement. For example, see Francis Bacon’s advice to always “be sensible of wrongs.” *Essays*, “On the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates.” (Bacon 1985 p. 153).

3 This problem of self-adjudication is prominent in all state of nature theories, but Locke is certainly less perturbed by it than others (e.g. Hobbes or Kant, both of whom find justice impossible or meaningless without prior conventions and judges). Locke seems to be closest to Thucydides here, noting the problems of justice in “anarchy” (with the proviso that this is not a concept employed by Thucydides) without proclaiming a natural sense of justice impossible.
can perhaps transcend the niggling calculations of interest-maximization and, like the Athenians, at least try to be “more just than they have to be.” Significantly, the ability to establish a reputation for such self-abnegating greatness seems genuinely important, at least to states like Athens. While it seems all too easy to violate customary norms, as the Corinthians in Book One suggest there is nonetheless something of a society of states in which behavior can be judged either to be shameful or honorable. This sense of society, they further allege, creates more positive and predictable relationships than the behavior of atomistic and overtly self-serving communities.

More often than not, however, this moralized political world tends towards conflict. Where worth and honor are associated with freedom, freedom is still associated with ruling others. In part, this is because freedom in the History seems to be a badge of honor and a mark of hard-earned worth rather than an intrinsic human right. As the Athenian and Spartans clash over the right to order Greece as they see fit, and where the exercise of hegemony conflicts with the desire of all cities to be free, we find Thucydides portraying an almost impossible world of irreconcilable aims. Any ameliorative policy must deal with this moral dimension and transform or suppress unbounded expectations of liberty and the pursuit of justice—all too often of the punitive variety.

The so-called “Athenian thesis,” that proclamation that puts political affairs in the world of inexorable natural necessity, is a partial step in the right direction. Announcing that it is but natural that the powerful should rule the weak, the Athenian thesis moves

---

4 This comes some way towards reconciling Athenian democracy with Athenian imperialism. See the discussion in Galpin (1983).
towards understanding humankind as part of a given world. The interests and needs of others are inexorable givens, and navigating the associated conflicts cannot be cast simply as of battles of will. But the Athenian thesis is partial in both senses of the word, emphasizing only those elements which benefit Athens. While proclaiming the inevitability of their urge to rule others, Athenians of various stripes are confounded by the equally inevitable resistance they encounter. They seek to have their imperialism understood and exculpated via a doctrine of necessity, yet they refuse to shine a similar light upon the activities of those they would dominate. The Corinthians in their conflict with Corcyra invoke a similarly confused combination of moralized concerns for honor and punishment and realpolitik slogans.

The doctrine of necessity is completed by Diodotus and Hermocrates, each of whom outlines the difficulties of effecting justice through control of human events. This brand of realism is neatly captured by Hermocrates’ observation that “…revenge has no right to expect success just because it is in the right, nor is strength sure just because it is confident [4.62].” Rather than announcing the natural inevitability of his actions (and thus removing the occasion for deliberation and moral choice), Diodotus instead takes the language of natural compulsion and applies it to the actions of others. Understanding natural behavior in terms of tendency rather than destiny, Diodotus reopens the space for deliberation while casting doubt on the connection between punitive justice and a control over human events. Thus despite its allegedly a-moral disposition, Diodotus’ speech encourages a deeper sense of justice which combines an ethical realism about the behavior of others with an acknowledgment that moral choice still operates. Here he
reminds us of Reinhold Niebuhr’s exhortation to remember mankind is neither entirely a
creature of his environment nor entirely its creator, but something of both.\(^5\) By focusing
on tendencies in the behavior of others, Diodotus counsels Athens to moderate its
expectations about how much it can alter the behavior of others through a commitment to
punitive justice. By speaking of tendency rather than compulsion, Diodotus also avoids
the syllogism set down by other Athenians—that the necessary is also the excusable, and
therefore transgression cast as necessity ceases to be transgression. This slight alteration
in the conception of human necessity helps Diodotus to avoid the self-serving and
selective application of the simpler conception of necessity and to preserve a sphere of
moral action.

It is on this point of a preservation of a freedom of action that Diodotus’ realism
departs most significantly from the version of realpolitik he counsels against. Statesmen
like Sthenelaidas and Diodotus’ interlocutor Cleon peddle the idea that actions taken by
adversaries must be met by swift, automatic reaction untrammeled by debate or
deliberation. They suggest that the political community’s interest is clear and simple: no
act of effrontery or violence can go unpunished, and their cities’ power and influence can
be augmented by pursuing justice at least for purposes of deterring future transgression.
As the Corinthian envoys warn the Spartans, the prudent choice is to refuse to submit to
injustice, not to worry about sins of commission. Here we see the language of inexorable
necessity bleed together with the concepts of punitive justice and control in the human
sphere. The emphasis on reflexive action shown by Cleon and Sthenelaidas constitutes

its own kind of rejection of moral choice. The language of interest invoked at such times is the language of immediate (*autika*) interest. It is rash and susceptible to shortsightedness. It is interesting that nonetheless such animus is driven by moralized concerns such as indignation or honor and overtly describes its actions in terms of justice. As both Hermocrates and Diodotus point out, this policy of swift reaction, of automatic justice and reflexive honor is also more optimistic than realistic. To pursue a rigid doctrine of intolerance to slights is to show great confidence that right will prevail, a policy which on its face is no more realistic than the idealism of avoiding sins of commission.

Thucydides shows that a moralized, hyper-vigilant, status-sensitive orientation to justice overlaps considerably with the concern for reputation, credibility and relative power. On the issue of deterrence, the coincidence of the moralized view and the modern rational view is most complete. Each approach strives to achieve control over the causal chain of human events, regarding other men as things reliably and primarily susceptible to coercion rather than debate and deliberation. Diodotus and Hermocrates’ critiques of the aspiration to control apply equally to each dispensation. This prompts us to wonder whether the foundation of each is the same. Are, perhaps, their critiques of the attempt to master fortune as applicable to “domino theory” as they are to Cleon’s confidence in effecting justice? Thucydides’ analysis of the foundations of political life, especially in a dynamic state like Pericles’ Athens, reminds us that promises of freedom of action and freedom from necessity are the greatest goods political association has to offer. Thus Thucydides points out to us an important but underappreciated source of foreign policy
expectations. Excessive expectations of transcending fortune will surely constitute a significant feature of international politics, particularly among powerful states with free populates.

Thus despite the modern derogation of honor in Western culture in the writings of Montaigne and Cervantes,\textsuperscript{6} its reduction to interest in Hobbes, and its philosophical transformation to self-respect at the hands of Rousseau and Kant, Thucydides tempts us to wonder whether there is nonetheless some part of honor contained in modern notions of interest. Thucydides’ treatment of honor is so suggestive because it is so deep. Rather than portraying honor as an oddity of bygone days or a frivolous motivator of deeply irrational beings,\textsuperscript{7} Thucydides shows it to be an integral part of a human spiritedness which desires to be free, especially from the control of others. The self, which must remain part of any concept of self-interest, can indeed remain substantial, deep, and complex.

\textsuperscript{6} See, for example, Montaigne’s essay “On Glory.” For accounts of the turn away from honor in early modern European thought see Hirschman (1977) and Bowman (2007).

\textsuperscript{7} Which, it must be admitted, it can be, as in the case of the Arthurian legends. For a striking account of how irrational honor related norms can be, see the discussion in O’Neill (2001) of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.
Honor and Liberty

It is interesting to note that Jean-Jacques Rousseau also took his more spirited analysis of motives in a direction similar to Thucydides. In fact, especially in the *stasis* passage, a reader of Rousseau might recognize more *amour-propre* than *amour de soi* in Thucydides’ accounts of conflict. To both thinkers, men are animated by competition, frequently know their worth only by reference to others, and primarily cherish a liberty which is difficult to reconcile with the liberties of others. While the similarities cannot be pushed too far, the comparison to Rousseau can be helpful. Recognizing, as he does, the intrinsically competitive nature of political man, Rousseau also acknowledges the shortcomings of any view which assimilates too much of “interest” to genuine needs. Rousseau, for example, follows Thucydides in noting how interaction and competition breed expanding senses of self-interest. Rousseau uses this observation to critique Hobbes’ assertion of natural man’s right to all things. If Rousseau is correct in asserting that in a state of nature the aspiration for indeterminate quantities of power does not arise out of natural necessity, Hobbes’ problematic right is thrown into question.

Rousseau is not the only theorist to overlap with Thucydides on this question of an inordinate and zero-sum conception of self-worth and liberty. Indeed, this excessive conception of liberty is often named as a critical problem by other liberal critics of realpolitik. Within the state of nature tradition, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls both identify what the former calls a “savage liberty” in the unrestrained behavior of the sovereign state. Kant, while adopting a surprisingly Hobbesian understanding of man’s
rights in a state of nature, still emphasizes the role freedom and willfulness play in engendering conflict. To Kant, the sovereign revels in the “majesty” of this freedom, causing one to recall, perhaps, the glory Pericles evinces with regard to Athens’ freedom of action. To Rawls the convention of modern sovereignty which confers this great liberty is the most notable cause of interstate war. Both theorists on this score fault the concept of sovereignty in their own ways. Rawls makes the distinction between peoples and states a central part of his argument, while Kant more moderately suggests that it would be “absurd” for a people to aspire to the “majesty” of an unrestrained liberty.

Thucydides’ treatment of the question of honor, worth, and liberty suggests that this problem outlined by Kant and Rawls lies still deeper than the institutions of modern world order. The world in which Athens and Sparta come to blows is not organized by any such principle of sovereignty. Indeed, aspirations for unchecked freedom in Thucydides’ accounts militate against norms and expectations that are far more restrictive than those which characterize the modern world. Thucydides suggests that the association of worth with the liberty to order one’s world is intrinsic to developed political societies. More pessimistically, they seem to be cognates of what might be called civilized life.

Yet the comparison between Thucydides and these later thinkers still gives some hope, or at least raises some important questions. In the case of each, acknowledging the

---

8 All references here are to Rawls (1999).
9 Kant’s aside about the “absurdity” (Perpetual Peace p. 354) seems to be one of Rawls’ points of departure, but the latter makes much more of the issue than the former. Kant gives us no explanation for his comment and cannot find a way to do away with the notion of sovereignty in any case.
problem of a prejudicial liberty and associating it with the spirited problem of self-worth takes us from the realm of the material and necessary, possibly into a realm of choice. Rousseau’s reflections on the artificiality of man’s expansive needs in fact anticipate either a return to nature or a revision of the artificial man such that his needs, liberty, and sense of worth are not gained at the expense of others. Kant, too, pursues this attempt at revising the foundations of the human sense of worth, following Rousseau in emphasizing grounds for self-respect that are independent of the opinions of others. Interestingly, Kant finds this foundation in a feature familiar to Thucydides’ man—that longing for a true dignity or worth as opposed to Hobbes’ more instrumental desire for reputation for power. Thucydides sees something in humankind that Kant would recognize as a genuine moral capacity—people are aware of the disparity between worth and reputation and they have the ability to step outside their own shoes.

Kant begins with what he considers to be the only sentiment not susceptible to the corruptions of self-interest—respect. Respect in Kant’s hands is turned towards respect for moral law as recognized by the individual, which in turn entails self-respect. This moral autonomy to Kant is the most genuine freedom, and one which is most easily reconciled with that of others. The idea that lawfulness is grounded in self-respect is nothing new in the pages of Thucydides. It is invoked, for example, by the Spartan king Archidamus [1.84]. Kant’s innovation here is the association of dignity with a law based in principle rather than fiat. It is on this point that we find the critical difference between

\[10\] I draw this line of argument from the *Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals*, to *Metaphysics of Morals*, to *Perpetual Peace*. I am also indebted with regard to the discussion of self-respect and the moral law to Knippenberg (1989).
Athenian democracy and the republican government Kant envisions as fit for a “democratic” peace. Where the Athenian democracy is a genuine rule by the people, Kant envisions the rule of law. What Kant saw as an original natural right to do as one thinks right and good—a right susceptible to abuse by sovereigns intoxicated with the lack of restraint associated with this liberty—aligns closely with the liberty cherished by Athens in the pages of Thucydides. But this liberty, however natural, is deeply problematic and moral duty demands it be outgrown. Kant envisions liberal democracy as the means towards this growth, and a peaceful federation between liberal democracies is the capstone of man’s moral progress. Only liberal democracy based in the principle of the rule of law rather than force and fiat can hope to reconcile the liberties of men or nations.

Such an order lies far beyond the reach of Thucydides’ Greece, however. Thucydides’ world seems far less stable than the system of strong states that capture Kant’s attention. One grave difference between the two thinkers is the gulf between their outlooks on domestic politics. Kant to some degree takes it for granted that the reconciliation of force with at least positive law is easily accomplished at the domestic level. He proclaims in *Perpetual Peace* that the reasonableness of establishing a republic is so apparent that even a nation of devils could do it. The gravest difficulties of order for Kant arise from international politics; the challenge of domestic politics is incremental reform towards greater autonomy for citizens in a given context of stability. Thucydides, however, takes no amount of social order for granted. Thucydides’ Greece is characterized by intense strife between the people and the oligarchs, strife which actively...
undermines the stability and safety of virtually every city. Under such conditions, it is impossible to imagine how the people as a whole could either share sovereignty (as Rousseau envisions) or mutually subject themselves to rational law (as Kant envisions). Divided as they are, the few and the many seek first of all to gain the upper hand over their adversaries at home. Pericles’ Athens seems only to export this problem, temporarily suppressing domestic strife by satisfying all Athenians’ desire to rule by providing them with an empire.

Why this difference? Why does Thucydides refrain from building on the nobler aspects of human dignity whereas Kant derives some limited optimism? One might speculate that Kant’s relative confidence in attaining cohesion via more Hobbesian means is in fact more realistic than the deeper pessimism of Diodotus in which there is no effective way to goad men into compliance. Perhaps the cultural re-valuation of honor, safety, and financial gain that began in the early modern West was requisite to creating the more security-focused beings with whom Kant and Hobbes deal. On another level, one might wonder whether the radical domestic strife that tainted Thucydides’ world had to be overcome by a principle such as nationalism before popular sovereignty could arise. If the idea of a de-personalized, rational, rule of law is dependent on the notion of popular sovereignty, then it is also historically contingent upon a doctrine establishing the unity of peoples.11

11 These connections are drawn out by Bernard Yack (2001). Rousseau puts great emphasis on the connection between a people, popular sovereignty, and genuine individual liberty in The Social Contract.
A final line of inquiry might begin with an understanding of the differences between the understanding of Rousseau and Kant regarding the possibilities for reconciling the liberties of nations. Rousseau is famously much more pessimistic than Kant regarding peace between nations, and to a great degree this is grounded in his rather different understanding of the foundations of morality. To Rousseau, the moral sense is derived from a sense of pity—it is a passion. To some degree this passion might be rationally universalized (as it is for Emile), but for the most part Rousseau understands that impassioned concerns for others are most effective when limited in scope. As a result, Rousseau grounds popular sovereignty and genuine liberty in the sentiments of what we might call nationalism.\(^{12}\) As such it is particularistic and ultimately difficult to reconcile with any cosmopolitan project. At his most pessimistic, Rousseau in fact attributes the problem of war to the fact that the state’s reliance on patriotic sentiment renders it weak and indeterminate. It knows its strength only through comparison and competition with others.\(^{13}\)

Parts of Thucydides’ thought seem to overlap with both Kant and Rousseau. On the one hand, Thucydides sides with Kant in identifying a genuine capacity to transcend the expedient, at least in principle. On the other, Thucydides and Rousseau alike see the proclivity of political groups to understand themselves mostly by comparison to other, competing groups. He moreover sees man’s moral development—for better or for worse—as being tied to his dependency on the material goods his city provides and his

\(^{12}\) See *The Social Contract*.  
\(^{13}\) This is the argument given in *The State of War*. The state is weaker and more indeterminate than, say, a natural being with fixed needs.
interaction with his compatriots. The ensuing implications for the question of cosmopolitan versus particularistic moralities are not immediately clear. Ultimately, Thucydides’ relative pessimism on this point raises important questions which are too difficult to properly address here. Understanding the potential that honor and moral self-regard have in reconciling the liberties of men is clearly a critical issue in understanding the relations between individuals and political groups, and Thucydides must be part of any inquiry into the subject.

**Thucydides on an Ethical Realism**

At both a descriptive and a normative level, Thucydides places some distance between himself and many realist thinkers he is commonly associated with. His understanding of human motivation separates him from modern “interest” based realism and contemporary realism which focuses on the security motive. He neither reduces the diversity of human goods to ‘interest’ or “security,” nor uses them as a means to bundle multiple concepts. Instead, Thucydides’ characters talk of fear and material benefit, honor and reputation, justice and vengeance. Most significantly, they speak of a liberty that is a reflection of human worth rather than a mere instrument to survival. By allowing motivations to remain manifold, Thucydides avoids the “ambiguity”\(^\text{14}\) that besets modern talk of interest

\(^{14}\) To use the language of Wolfers (1952).
or security. These two concepts, despite often claiming great explanatory and justificatory power, remain difficult to define and constrain.\(^{15}\)

Thucydides’ understanding of the human ability to rise above immediate desire and purely self-serving goals separates him from Hobbes’ conventionalism, Machiavelli’s skepticism, and the realpolitik that each of them in his own way recommends. The weaknesses of cultural, religious, legal, and even psychological\(^{16}\) restraints do not lead Thucydides to a doctrinaire focus on power. Thucydides’ realism instead consists in a kind of moderation that urges caution about those human inclinations that seek to punish and vindicate, and reminds us that control over human events is limited. This confinement of moral considerations, unlike the entitling versions presented by the Athenian envoys or modern realpolitik,\(^{17}\) restrains acts of power rather than justifies them.

In general the History leaves us skeptical about the possibility of an a-moral doctrine of interest. Most of Thucydides’ characters speak of justice and vengeance. Those who speak of the forces of necessity tend to do so only to justify their own behavior and ultimately show themselves unwilling to accept all the implications of their doctrine. As Diodotus tacitly shows us in his speech, the exclusion of moral consideration from foreign affairs is as much about distinguishing us from them as it is

\(^{15}\) On security see Wolfers (1952); Walzer (2000). On “interest” see Hirschman (1977); Brodie (1973) Ch. 8; Mansfield (1995).

\(^{16}\) That is, to Thucydides, even fear and self-interestedness cannot operate as the reliable and predictable forces in human affairs as so much of the modern tradition hopes.

\(^{17}\) For example, the language of Morgenthau (1985) clearly implies through its separation of ethical and political “spheres” that the ethical sphere shall have no influence on making decisions about action. See Pangle and Ahrensford (1999) on this point.
about tensions between necessity and choice. Lest he look traitorous, he will speak only of Athens’ interests, defined by contradistinction to the question of justice for others. Pericles’ talk of power is hopelessly bound up with conceptions of Athens’ glory and her worth. Athens’ aspirations to power are so impassioned that Thucydides essentially describes them as “erotic.”

The *History* portrays a great aspiration to control as arising from spirited concerns as much as rational calculation. Thucydides shows us a noble aspiration to escape the demands of natural necessities and exercise spontaneity and free will. But beyond this, we see humanity’s more complicated desires to avoid becoming subject to the arbitrary wills of others, or worse still, to be duped or cheated by others. Given the considerable pride at stake among competing political groups, policies which attempt to shield the community from suffering the humiliations of defection or transgression become increasingly appealing. Hence, the sensitivity regarding honor and indignation shown by men like Cleon is transformed into worst-case analyses and aggressive, unreflective action. In the eyes of Diodotus and Hermocrates, while this posture claims to embody a certain realism in the sense that it is not disinterestedly occupied with questions of justice, it is nonetheless apart from the dictates of prudent calculation. A genuinely realistic embrace of uncertainty both in terms of the intentions of others or “fortune” more generally does not necessarily entail an aggressive posture, much less a vindictive one.
Thucydides’ attention to the issue of mastering fortune is an important complement to the more obvious treatment of the same topic given by Machiavelli and the subtler one in the thought of Hobbes. Machiavelli devotes one of his most shocking images to the notion of man overpowering fortune, but Hobbes, too, shows a great discomfort with uncertainty. To some degree, the orientation towards power in each view is grounded in a genuine skepticism about knowing any other human goods. Hobbes’ derivation of prudent politics from the lowest common denominator of human psychology overtly recognizes this connection: where there is no knowable sumnum bonum, political society must be organized around the one incontrovertible sumnum malum. Thucydides gives us reason to question the ambitions of Machiavelli to dominate Fortuna or Hobbes to create a foolproof political system. As a whole, the work of Thucydides especially casts doubt on the rationality of a quest for power after power.

Thucydides’ observations in this regard are deeply suggestive with regard to international relations theory. If one takes Robert Jervis’ suggestion that the dynamics of international relations can follow a few very different models or analogies—for example

---

18 See Strauss (1950; 1952 Ch. 5).
19 Forde (1995). Forde emphasizes that the link between power politics and philosophical skepticism has become obscured in the newer social-scientific versions of realism. In effect, he argues, realism has forgotten the original anti-moral or at least skeptical underpinnings of its a-moralism (1995 p. 153).
20 Hirschman (1977) traces the evolution of the modern concept of interest and finds that it originates in the idea of countervailing passions. Some passions became more reliable for the establishment of predictable and controllable interactions between men and attained the status of “interests.” Mansfield (1995) notes that while it is unclear in the tradition of modern moral philosophy what precisely distinguishes a passion from an interest, he suggests that the prevailing focus on interest reveals an underlying focus on mastery and control. Indeed, to Mansfield, the doctrine of interest is a “passion” for mastery.
the “Munich analogy” versus the “security dilemma”\textsuperscript{21}—Thucydides shows how impassioned or spirited characteristics can greatly determine the appeal of one over the other. From a prudent or a disinterested perspective the decision to stand one’s ground or back down in a confrontation may well be a toss-up, or at least must be made after a great deal of deliberation. On the other hand, wherever statesmen like Cleon regard having their moderation met with contempt as a grievous breach of a critical sense of inviolability, the odds will be in favor of confrontation.\textsuperscript{22} Thucydides’ contribution to the ethical assessment of international affairs is to shed a bright light on the genuine motives underlying the disposition of states to cherish such inviolability, and to question the final prudence—and indeed, realism—involved in the pursuit of such a goal.

Thucydides’ general understanding of politics differs in another regard from the Hobbesian or Machiavellian traditions of realpolitik. Not being doctrinally skeptical about various human goods, and recognizing the hubris and possible folly in aspirations to failsafe policies, Thucydides reopens the door to evaluating security and non-security goods on a more even footing. Rather than being the fallback, \textit{de facto} greatest good, to Thucydides security has always been one among many competing goods; one which is influenced by and mixed with them. In fact, the \textit{History} urges us to take each invocation of a security rationale with a grain of salt. Thucydidean realism being skeptical about formulating any certain policies for universal application, and affirming as it does the value of risky goods such as spontaneity, liberty, and valor, there can be no clear

\textsuperscript{21} Jervis (1976). Jervis uses the language “deterrence” and “spiral” models, but “Munich” and the security dilemma (or perhaps still better, the “July (of 1914) crisis” analogy) fit the basic outlines of his models.

\textsuperscript{22} The work of Mercer (1996) reveals a bias in favor of ‘deterrence’ models in the sense that reputation for resolve is greatly overvalued by statesmen.
prioritization of safety. Thus the notion we find in the reason of state tradition that safety ought peremptorily to trump the claims of justice is alien to Thucydides’ ethical and political landscape.

More significantly, because Thucydides cannot be optimistic about the prospect of reliably manipulating the political world through force and fear, the unreliability of good will, gratitude, and affective bonds is no more troubling than life’s other uncertainties. Explicit in Machiavelli’s rejection of goodness, by contrast, is the claim that there is a sure danger in failing to know how to act badly. Implicit in this claim is a kind of optimism regarding the superior reliability of badness. Thucydides’ rather deeper pessimism, by contrast, warns against depending too much on the nobler veins of human motivation, yet it doesn’t emphasize a danger in attempting to bring them out where possible. Those who do stress the dangers of trust, expectations of gratitude and moderation towards the weak, tend to do so from an impassioned perspective. Such warnings come from speakers who are as concerned with injuries to their pride as much as genuine dangers to life and limb.

If, as Diodotus suggests, the true science of human behavior is one of tendency and not necessity, Hobbes’ description of life as an unlimited competition for power after power becomes less certain. In turn, his judgment that there must be an attending right to all things loses much of its justification. Thucydides reminds us that insecurity and uncertainty involve risks, not certain dangers. As such, they elicit no certain responses, nor do they recommend any particular level of risk-aversion. In a world where risk-
acceptance is actually considered praiseworthy, Thucydides shows the possibility of a freedom for ethical action that is entirely absent in that realpolitik which, by conflating risk with certain danger, subordinates all other goods to the ensuing notion of security.
Bibliography


Brodie, Bernard (1973) War and Politics Macmillan.


Cornford, Francis Macdonald (1907), Thucydides Mythistoricus London, Edward Arnold.


----- (1998) Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity UCLA.


Greene, David (1950) Man in His Pride University of Chicago Press.


Romilly, Jacqueline de (1963) *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* Barnes and Noble.


----- (1952) *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* University of Chicago Press.

----- (1950) *Natural Right and History* Chicago University Press.


----- (1928) *History of the Peloponnesian War* Charles Forster Smith, tr., Harvard University Press.


Waltz, Kenneth (1959) *Man, the State, and War: a Theoretical Analysis* Columbia University Press.


