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Thucydides at Melos: An Archaeology of Democracy and Oligarchy

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The war Thucydides wrote between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians is a confrontation between an oligarchy and a democracy—an oligarchy and a democracy that are, moreover, at the peak of their powers (I 1.1).[1] Insofar as the peak development of a thing manifests its nature, this confrontation is one between oligarchy as such versus democracy as such. As Clifford Orwin writes, Thucydides's account holds true to a "characteristic [phenomenon] of political life"—namely, that "without being able to articulate a comprehensive understanding of justice, each party to a dispute claims to grasp and honor the demands of justice in the given case."[2] As such, the war as Thucydides wrote it must manifest a confrontation between the oligarchic and democratic understandings of justice. Furthermore, it is at Melos that the core of this clash is exposed most directly to the light. Supposing that David Polansky is correct to write that Thucydides's "mode of presenting speeches from men of different classes in different cities throughout the Hellenic world—each speaker intent on justifying his own cause—allows for a just rendering of each account,"[3] then we can expect to find in the dialogic speeches at Melos a just rendering of these antithetic principles and their corresponding justices.

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Straussian treatments have generally recognized that for Thucydides, something more is going on between Athens and Sparta than a case study in international relations and that something more is going on at Melos than a programmatic statement of *Realpolitik*.[4] But such treatments tend to understand Sparta (and, *a fortiori*, Melos) as being to Athens as traditionalism or traditional piety is to rationalism or enlightenment.[5] Orwin in fact "stresse[s]" that "the question of the regime appears in Thucydides not primarily as that of democracy versus oligarchy, but as that of Athens versus Sparta," with Athens and Sparta understood along just these lines.[6] One need not accuse this interpretation of being *wrong* to suggest that it stops short. Indeed, Orwin himself justly writes that to grasp, with Thucydides, "that human nature expresses itself *politically* is to grasp the fact that its manifestations are shaped *above all* by the *regime*."[7] Bernard Dobski also seems to be channeling Thucydides's thought when he writes that "to know the character of justice as expressed in a given regime one must know the truth about its *source*, which means one must possess knowledge of 'the first things.'"[8] The logic of these positions points to the necessity of paying attention to the problem of grounding the possibility of the Spartan and Melian and Athenian attitudes in their respective regimes. But "traditionalist" and "enlightened" are not regimes. Rather, under the aspect of the regime, Sparta is an oligarchy and Athens is a democracy. Comprehending the so-called traditionalism or rationalism of these regimes requires these phenomena be grounded in the principles, the origins, the forms, the surfaces, and the deep structures—in varying ways or from varying perspectives the "first things"—of oligarchy and democracy respectively.

I acknowledge that Thucydides declines to thematize oligarchy and democracy explicitly—neither term, for example, so much as appears in the Archaeology. But much remains implicit in Thucydides; there is correspondingly much room, even necessity, for interpretation. Such being the case, this essay attempts to render plausible the notion that there is more than enough to justify reading the conflict he portrays under this aspect. Of course,

I regard this reading as intrinsically plausible and attempt to show as much. But even if the reader finds my proposal strange, I nonetheless offer it as an exercise, for if nothing else, I claim it has this merit: it avoids begging the decisive question of whether Thucydides understood Athenian enlightenment (or reason) as enlightenment (or reason) as such or, rather, as merely a regime-expression, somehow democratically inflected. However brilliant many of the results of Straussian studies of Thucydides have been, I nevertheless suggest there is a danger—indeed, a danger even by Straussian premises—in shortcutting too hastily to the "theologico-political" categories that Leo Strauss argued were transhistorical without first attempting to understand whether and how those categories emerge to human beings within particular historical situations. The particular is the necessary ladder to the general. But there are multiple steps on this ladder, and each is important if we would reach understanding. If this ladder eternally demands to be climbed, then all the more can it never be thrown away.

Therefore, without purporting to offer a definitive or exclusive interpretation, this study returns to the clash between oligarchy and democracy, and between oligarchic and democratic justice. The clash between these principles can be clarified only by considering the diverse natures of democracy and oligarchy. In the height of the war, there appear before us Sparta, the peak oligarchy, and Athens, the peak democracy. However, neither this war nor the natures of its actors can be understood simply by peak appearances. In the origins of these twin peaks we find an essential clue to their natures and, insofar as they are the peak-examples of their two regimes, to the natures of these two regimes. For this, we turn our eyes to the Archaeology.

The Archaeological Foundations of Oligarchy and Democracy

In the early times of what is now Greece, disorganized peoples migrated from here to there, with more numerous groups evicting weaker groups by violence (*biazomenoi*) (I 2.1). The finest land was subject to the most contention, and the Peloponnese, Thucydides tells us, holds some of the finest land in Greece (I 2.3). The quality

of the land gave rise to differences, *stasis*, and external attacks (I 2.4).[9] The present-day Spartans would be then the descendants of a group earlier more numerous than other groups, a group tried by tribulations of every kind that subjected its members to a uniformity that precluded *stasis* and fended off every external attack; the Spartans hold Sparta because, and precisely because, they are the descendants of the strong. Meanwhile, Attica's soil is poor; nobody has fought over it; the same people have lived there since the earliest times (I 2.5)—or rather, not quite the same people, because those defeated everywhere else in Greece have flocked to Athens, safe land because unwanted land (I 2.6).[10] The Athenians are the descendants of and precisely of the scattered, the various, the outcast, the weak. No surprise, then, that "[t]he Athenians were the first of the Greeks to put aside their arms and adopt a more relaxed and comfortable lifestyle" (I 6.3). This weak people, Thucydides suggests, finds its niche in industry and commerce; and it does this only after seafaring is made easier by the warlike Minos's clearing of the pirates from the seas (cf. I 7.1 with I 4).

Thinking a little bit more about this preliminary disposition of things leads us further into Thucydides's understanding of the nature of things. The Spartans, from the outset, are sitting on a dragon's hoard, a hoard that their ancestors acquired in an unnamed, unknowable, prehistoric war. Spartans know that war is supremely subject to chance; they know that military victory cannot be attributed to military virtue alone (cf. I 82.6, I 84.3, IV 18.4). From their perspective, or from the perspective they have inherited, their original possession of this bounty must appear to a considerable degree unaccountable, the gift of nature or the gods—in any case certainly not as the product of their own industry. They do not take themselves to deserve it because they produced it, nor because they make the best use of it. Rather, they deserve it, in the first instance, because they or their ancestors conquered it, or because the gods permitted them to conquer it; and in the second, because it is the condition of their continued existence. Of all the peoples in Greece, they have the highest stakes in it. Therefore, they must maintain constant military

readiness, which both compels them to inculcate toughness and caution and necessitates that their farming be done by others—that is, by the helots. Their continued existence is particularly threatened by *stasis* or internal conflict, and thus they must be moderate vis-à-vis one another (cf. I 5.4).[11] Moreover, this need is sharpened by the presence of the helots—that is, by an *army* of enemies within their own city, a many up against them as a few.[12] Consequently, the Spartans must trust and maintain trust with one another: garrulity, sophistry, pettifogging, all represent threats to political security. They *must* maintain a rough virtue, a military virtue—for all its limitations, a steady and real virtue (cf. II 87.3–4).[13] They cannot stay away from home for too long or the helots will take it from them or collude with others to take it from them; they frequently must coordinate foreign affairs in light of the threat of the helots (cf. I 101.2, IV 41.3, 80.3, V 14.3, 23.3, 80.2–3). As Timothy Burns puts it, this "large slave population [is] the soft underbelly of Sparta."[14] Moreover, Sparta's wealth is not derived from commerce but from the land itself. Although Spartans are not inactive in foreign affairs, it would not be misleading to say that they are, and that Thucydides portrays them as being, always inclined to return home: They have what they need where they are.[15] Fundamentally, they wish to manage their own affairs and be left alone (cf., e.g., I 68.1, 71.1), and Athens is a threat most of all insofar as it threatens their ability to do this.[16] For the moment, it is safe to say that we can see how Spartan life may favor certain conceptions. The rich land inspires thoughts of the divine gifts of nature or, rather, the gods who have favored them particularly. The military needs of their situation demand sturdy and trustworthy behavior toward their own, that is, toward their friends. "They are a 'band of brothers,' a noble few who therefore deserve to rule."[17] They are the few virtuous men, eternally facing down a menacing horde of envious or hateful slaves (cf. IV 126.2).[18] They stand together in bonds of firm friendship, underwritten by their shared and supreme stake in their continued and self-sufficient possession of the divine gift that is their home. This is the Archaeological foundation of Spartan oligarchy.

The Athenians appear at first to have less for which to thank the gods: their land is barren, and they are weak. But this itself means, conversely, that they have two very important things for which to thank the gods all the more: their life and their liberty.[19] Forsaken, weak, and poor, they survive free. Their life and their freedom must be secured by the pursuits of which they are capable. Their agricultural poverty means they cannot solely farm, and therefore they must trade; they cannot rely on trade in agricultural products, and therefore, they must take to industry.[20] Trade presupposes safe passage, especially by water (consider I 93.3, I 143.5, II 62.2).[21] At first, they were too weak to secure safe passage themselves; their freedom is dependent on a prior Thalassocrat or Leviathan, Minos (I 4, 7, 8.2–3).[22] They were, indeed, too weak at first even to secure against tyrants; their political freedom is further dependent on a prior grant by, as it happens, Sparta (I 18.1). But freedom secured, they take to industry in their barren circumstances; multifarious and motley, they incline to inventiveness, competition, and the commerce that produces wealth (cf. I 70.8, II 40.1). However, with wealth comes danger: their freedom had previously been largely secured by their lack of anything to steal: "[T]he undesirability of Attica meant that [Athens] alone had no need for defense in its earliest incarnations (I.2)."[23] But industry makes things that are nice to take. Therefore, so long as they remain weak, they are vulnerable to the stronger peoples that surround them, peoples who are indeed responsible for their original location. While they were yet poor and consequently had little to fear, "each of them" could manage and conduct their own affairs (II 15.1). But with success came the need for military readiness, especially naval readiness, given their reliance on commerce. The rights of Athenian citizenship become inseparably bound not merely with the fact of equal cohabitation as such but with military service.[24] The rights of a citizen become informally if not formally attached to his power to protect the city, his "merit" (cf. II 37.1, 65.9). The omni-sided threat of the stronger threatens to capture the hard-won gains of the huddled weak. The weak remember their subjugation, hate the memory of their subjugation, tell

themselves stories that exaggerate the evil of their subjugation (cf. the historiographical intervention implied by V 54–56), stories that forget even the debt they owe to the stronger for freeing them from their original subjugation (cf. II 36.1 with VI 53.3).[25] They have tasted that, and they are not going back (consider VIII 71.1; cf. too Machiavelli, *Prince*, IV).[26] And so the Athenians declare: "These were the circumstances that first [necessitated the Athenians] to develop the empire[:] Fear was the strongest motive, followed later by honor and then by self-interest as well" (I 75.3; cf. VI 83 2–4).[27] For the moment, it is safe to say that we can see how Athenian life may favor certain conceptions. The poor land inspires resilience and industry.[28] These secure the Athenians in the first instance against niggardly nature and in the second against the ever-threatening re-encroachment of the strong (cf. I 70.8). The commercial needs of their situation demand flexibility, open-mindedness, cosmopolitanism, the ability to wear many masks, and a salesperson's fleet tongue (cf., e.g., I 90.3–91.3).[29] Where individually they were weak, they have become strong together; they have erected laws to maintain that freedom, laws they have made themselves, subjugated to no one: never again will they be subjugated to anyone.[30] They are descended from the diverse victims of the cruel few. Together, they outnumber these few, secure themselves against these few. Among themselves they are only masters, never slaves. This means that they are never masters vis-à-vis one another, for this would be to render one another slaves. They are masters only toward foes and toward themselves. They are equal and they are free (cf. II 35.2, 37.2, 40.1).[31] Their origins in poverty meant the threat of *stasis* was never as pressing as it was for the Spartans; they have had the freedom to develop in contentiousness, a contentiousness they rightly see as part of their freedom, a contentiousness they have institutionalized in the assembly, in voting on the proposals of orators. This contentiousness was not mere play, for once again we cannot forget for a moment the constant presupposition of Athenian democracy—all citizens served as soldiers in the Athenian army; the speeches (*logoi*) in the assembly were sublimated deeds (*erga*), and each vote was the prospective voice of a

spear.[32] The vote transmutes the masterful merit of free men, the industrious weaklings having become fierce warriors, into the substance of right. The empire shows these once-contemptible weaklings as masters, rich and moreover honored by all for their very freedom. They are the many industrious men, weak of body and therefore dependent on their minds and on their tongues, faced with the eternal necessity of staying one step ahead of the strong. For the strong believe that the gods, by granting them the strength, have thereby granted them the right to all the good things of this world, or they have granted them the right to the handiwork of the weak, the slaves. Thus, it is most of all against them or against their specter that the Athenians stand together, equal men and free. But the guarantor of this bond is an anxious knowledge of their individual weakness and, contrariwise, the surety of their combined strength. This is the Archaeological foundation of Athenian democracy.[33]

Let us note before moving on that if correct, this analysis implies that the Spartans and the Athenians were constituted *ab ovo* with totally distinct conceptions of the nature of political power. Spartan dominion originates in conquest over a naturally bountiful land. It is to their eyes a holy conquest—that is to say, a conquest sanctified or indeed proved blessed by the overflowing abundance with which it rewards them. From the outset, the Spartans must be impressed with both the abundance and precarity of divine favor. We must imagine their very lives to be permeated with gratitude for, as it were, the particular providence that once crowned the original military conquest of Sparta—indeed, that had rewarded the Spartans with a land of milk and honey. Contrariwise, the Athenians have what they have by merit of their work, their industry—their city is, in the first place, the "bequest" not of the gods but of human "courage" (II 36.1). Their land is a barren stone; their wealth results from human industry both in craft and in squeezing some few drops of water from that stone. The justice of Sparta is intimately connected with Sparta's being *originally* and *particularly* their own; the Athenians justify themselves by the relentless activity by which they *made* their own an object that itself is of indifferent quality. Correspondingly, the

Athenian vision is, in principle, more universalizable than the Spartan—for no amount of work could make a non-Sparta into Sparta or a non-Spartan into a Spartan, whereas the "whole earth" is the concern of Athens (cf. I 43.3) and is, as it were, a blank canvas before Athenian ingenuity and adventure.[34] An Athenian does not need to be in Athens to be an Athenian (cf. I 18.2; cf. also Plato, *Republic* 329e–330a, *Laws* 642c–d), whereas a Spartan removed from Sparta risks becoming no Spartan at all (cf. I 95.7 and the contrast implied at IV 81.3). The city of Athens is the self-made man of Greece; in more ways than one, one could fairly say that the Greek term for self-made man was "*tyrannos*" (cf. I 122.3, II 63.2, II 37.2, VI 85.1).[35]

This constellation bears particular consideration regarding the different ways the Spartans and the Athenians understand the rule of the strong. The Spartans are taught by their history that their own rule is the fruit of ceaseless strife borne by virtuous friends, blessed by the particular providence of the gods; the Athenians, meanwhile, have been taught by that same or at least a parallel history that the strong rule as a result of violent or unholy compulsion, expulsion and enslavement of the weaker, appropriation of the fruits of the industrious.[36] If it would be inappropriate to say that the Athenians have a more correct view than the Spartans, it seems nevertheless permissible to suggest that Thucydides himself seems more inclined to their view in analytical terms. But we cannot forget that Thucydides is, and tells us that he is, "an Athenian" (I 1.1).[37]

This essay proceeds under the hypothesis that these few sentences from the Archaeology (I 2.1–6) give the key to understanding the core of the confrontation at Melos.[38]

The Confrontation at Melos

The Athenians go to the Spartan island colony of Melos and demand submission. The Melians refuse on grounds of justice, trusting in the gods and in the Spartans whom they suppose are their friends. The Athenians scorn their foolishness—their faith in fortune and in the arms of others—and annihilate them.

Why Thucydides Presents the Melian Confrontation as a Dialogue

The Melians themselves are described as Spartan colonists, but neutral in the war and unwilling to acknowledge Athenian authority as do the communities on the other small islands (V 84.2). The Athenians come to change their minds with considerable allied forces in tow (V 84.1). The Melians do not bring the Athenian envoys before the people in assembly but tell them to explain their business behind closed doors, to the rulers (*archai*) and the few (*oligoi*) (V 84.3). From the outset, Thucydides demands clear recognition that the Athenian democracy here confronts an oligarchic constitution of some kind or another.[39]

There is evidence to suggest that Thucydides, as Aristotle suggests most people are accustomed to do, regards democracy and oligarchy as being the two fundamental regimes—not acknowledging, that is, whatever distinct character "aristocracy" may be said to have (cf. VIII 64.1 with 64.3; see Aristotle, *Politics* 4.3.6, 8).[40] Pericles defines the democracy with regard to its being a regime that favors not the few but the majority (*pleōn*) (II 37.1). Curiously, in this definition Pericles does not say the *dēmos*; one is tempted to say the regime is oriented less toward any particular social group than the *more* as such—perhaps one is meant to relate this to the theme of the Athenians' graspingness (*pleon echein*) in Thucydides's narration (cf., e.g., I 70.8, IV 17.4, VI 9.3). If this is correct, the kinship such an attitude has with imperialism is relatively easy to see, even if not easy to articulate precisely (cf. VI 18.1–3). Thucydides does not explicitly say how we are to understand the relationship between democracy and empire—that is, whether he understands democracy as necessarily leading into or finding its realization in empire. He does make it comparatively more clear that empire as such is tyranny, even in its self-understanding (cf. II 63.2, III 37.2, VI 85.1). He does not, however, seem to think that tyranny is necessarily wicked (cf. VI 54–56).[41] Nevertheless, if democracy necessarily leads toward empire, then it would be the case that democracy is the seed of tyranny (cf. Plato, *Republic* 562a). However, even if one supposes that the

relationship between democracy and empire is, for Thucydides, that of seed to flower, Thucydides nevertheless suggests that imperial democracy has a bad conscience—the sense of fairness that animates the democracy is forbidden by the nature of imperial power (cf. III 40.2).[42] Moreover, although Thucydides makes clear, at least with regard to the Sicilian expedition, that he regards Athenian war aims to amount to enslavement of others (VII 75.7), he nowhere shows us an Athenian, other than himself, admitting this latter fact. Although they occasionally use the term "tyranny" in self-reference, no Athenian speaker ever uses the word "slavery" or "enslave" in any form to refer to their aims in any situation (cf. V. 86 with 87, 92 with 93, and 100 with 101; cf. also VI 83.4).[43]

Placing Pericles's formulation to one side, democracy is or understands itself to be the rule of the *dēmos*. The other cities of Greece seem to understand Athens this way too (cf. II 65.8–9, III 82.1).[44] To understand the democracy, one must have some understanding of what the *dēmos* is. The Archaeology gives many significant hints, as we have seen above. But more schematically, the *dēmos*, in the first place, is a crowd, mutatis mutandis, an army. Some first indications might be gathered that Thucydides thinks crowds or armies have a certain nature: they hate boasting (IV 28.3); they are jealous and fickle but love the very ones they envy (II 35.2, 65.4, cf. VI 16.3); they are susceptible to panic, especially in the dark (IV 125.1, VII 80.3); and when they are afraid, they seek out the authority of a single man (II 15.1, VIII 1.4, and cf. II 65.2–9, VIII 54.1). They share strong passions almost as a single body (cf. II 64.1, 65.8, VII 80.3), but not always in the same way. Sometimes the relation of individual to crowd is that of part to whole (VII 74.6); other times, each member of the crowd feels himself to be the entire crowd at once or psychologically identifies with the totality (IV 14.2). Both of these relationships suggest that the individual members of the crowd view themselves as *equal* members of the crowd considered as a whole. Therefore, democratic right is, as it were, premised upon a real or imagined quantitative division of this whole. Greater numbers therefore imply greater claims, regardless of the qualities of the claimants—significantly,

the only claim the more intelligent have on the more numerous is that the more intelligent might somehow be of greater use to the more numerous (VIII 76.3). Therefore, members of the *dēmos* regard with suspicion anyone possessed of qualities that all members cannot be thought to share, particularly cleverness or wisdom (cf. VIII 68.1).[45] Hence, the *dēmos* hates boasting—its members are aware of the threat posed them by the clever and thus are fearful of being tricked (cf. V 46.5).[46] They regard their eyes as their best guarantee against this, and thus they hate the hidden (cf. III 82.7, VI 27–28, 60.4; and consider V 84.3).[47] Relatedly, the *dēmos*, sharing passions as a body, is comparatively enveloped in the unreflected *conscience collective* and thus is relatively pious with regard to traditional beliefs or myths or the gods of common speech (II 14–16, IV 97.3–98.2, V 1.1), even if, *in extremis*, this breaks down (II 17.1, III 82.6–7).[48] But the members of the *dēmos* seem to be aware that their piety renders them somehow vulnerable to the predations of the few (cf. IV 74.3). If they are fiercely, even ferociously protective of the holy things (VI 27–29, 53–61, 60.4), they are no less sensitive to having their piety manipulated—they employ rough empirical checks of oracles and the like, one assumes, above all, with their eyes (VIII 1.2).[49] In summary, the character of the *dēmos* can be expressed in a few pairs: its members hate outstanding men and love them; they are a multitude and they are one; they think themselves wise and know themselves foolish (cf. VIII 76.6); they are suspicious and credulous.[50] These contradictory pairs are resolved when one recognizes that the second term in each applies above all when they are afraid—and he who knows them well knows how to make them afraid (II 65.8). Provisionally, this much can be said regarding the nature of the *dēmos*.

The antithesis of the *dēmos* is the *oligoi*—"the few." Like the *dēmos*, which, even though it does not rule in the oligarchy is nevertheless present in the oligarchy, the few correspondingly exists in the democracy as well. If oligarchy is the regime of the few, then we can correspondingly suppose that to understand the oligarchy one must have some understanding of what the few is.

First of all, the few is rich. Correspondingly, its members, generally speaking, have a greater interest in peace than does the *dēmos*, the members of which have less or nothing to lose (II 65.2). When the few cook up strife, and they do, it seems primarily to be with an interest toward bringing about a situation sufficiently threatening to cause the *dēmos* to coalesce in fear and fall behind their betters—the logic of this is not fundamentally different when a demagogue seeks to cultivate the *dēmos* in favor of one group within the few as opposed to another (VI 38.2–3, VIII 66.5; cf. Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, VI.203).[51] Insofar as the few are simply the rich, in their personal characters they are not necessarily elevated above the members of the *dēmos*. In the democracy, however, they are more likely to be distinguished by merit (II 37.1). In a democratic city, this means that the few come to resent their equality with the members of the *dēmos* and so come to despise demotic opinions. Thus, in democracy the few are inclined toward worldliness or atheism (cf., most strikingly, Pericles's proposal at II 13.5[52]). This gives the few an advantage insofar as its members can abuse such things as oaths with comparatively little scruple (IV 74.3). It would be wrong to regard this tendency of the few toward atheism as necessary (cf. Nicias, e.g., at VII 50.4, 77.1–4), but it would be no less wrong to regard it as resulting from some higher philosophical consciousness on the part of the few as such.[53] Simply put, the impiety or worldliness of the few stems in the first place from a desire of its members to distinguish themselves from the ruling *dēmos* with whom they are legally equal.[54] This dynamic is lacking in the oligarchy, which accounts for the apparent fact that members of the few within oligarchies are less impious than are their counterparts in democracies (cf. I 126.2 ["first demand"], V 50.1–2, 54.2, 55.3, 116.1, VI 95.1, VII 18.2–3).[55] It is interesting to consider that the pious *dēmos* coming to power is precisely that which produces the rule of the impious (cf. II 13.4–5 with 65.9). The secularizing dynamics are reinforced in the case of Athens particularly, given its Archaeological origins, which make an instructive contrast with the comparatively pious disposition of the Spartan few.

In any case, the oligarchy's preference for peace is of a piece with the few's relatively higher stakes in the continuance of the regime. This argument from stakes is one of the distinctive claims to rule that the few makes (III 63.3; cf. Mynott's note 2 to page 202 in his translation). The second claim they make is that they are more virtuous, "the so-called 'good men and true'" (*kaloi k'agathoi*) (IV 40.2, VII 46.2; cf. Mynott, 259n2).[56] Their third distinctive claim to rule is that they wish primarily to mind their own business and therefore should be allowed to do so, as opposed to being subject to the meddlesomeness (*polupragmosunē*) of the *dēmos*, which not only would demand their money but further and more fundamentally detests the hidden and demands everything be brought out into the open—that is, before their eyes (cf. I 70.8; consider also Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* §§ 204, 213, 263).[57] In summary, the few claim to rule on the basis that (1) they have higher stakes in the thing to be ruled; (2) because they are more virtuous, their cause is just; and (3) they wish only to mind their own business and be left alone.[58]

Meanwhile, although the democratic claim appears at first to be merely one of power or that of being *more* as such (cf. esp. VIII 76.3; cf. also VI 82.3), its deeper basis, like that of the oligarchs, can be traced to the Archaeology—fear, anticipatory self-defense, and the right of those who have wrested power from the barren hands of nature to keep what they have fought so hard for and won. The Athenian claim is ultimately based in the double-nature of the *dēmos*, as a whole strongest of all, as individuals infinitely weak (and particularly inferior to the members of the few to whom they are, considered collectively, superior). Each individual of the *dēmos* wants the more or the increase of the strength of the whole ultimately for the sake of protection (cf. V 71.1); the engine of collective democratic greed is individual fear (I 75.3, VI 83.2; cf. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, I 1.3; J. S. Mill, *On Liberty,* chap. 3, fourth paragraph from the end).[59]

As Daniel Boyarin writes, it "cannot be emphasized enough" that "the Melian Dialogue is an absolute *unicum* in Thucydides—there is no other dialogue anywhere in the work—prompting many

critics, from antiquity (Dionysius of Halicarnassus) until now, to wonder what might be its explanation."[60] I suggest the following: The war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians is itself a confrontation between Spartan oligarchy and Athenian democracy, and inasmuch between what Thucydides seems to take to be the two basic regimes. But this confrontation is imperfect precisely because the Spartans and the Athenians are so evenly matched. For the few *as such* are not equally as strong as but rather infinitely *less* strong than the *dēmos.* For this reason, the purest confrontation between oligarchy and democracy can take place only between an oligarchy that is actually a few compared to a democratic adversary that actually is a many. This is what takes place when the Athenians come to Melos and demand submission. This is why Thucydides chooses this occasion to write a dialogue, as opposed to merely showing the Athenians crushing the Melians with minimal effort.[61] The confrontation here, physically unimpressive or even trivial, must be shown, if it is to come to sight at all, at the level of thought.[62] The Melian dialogue, like the Archaeology, presents this confrontation *to* thought. But if the Archaeology isolated the chronologically "first things" of oligarchy and democracy to show us their growth, the Melian dialogue isolates these same "first things" in their highest efflorescence and under, as it were, scientifically purified conditions. The seeds have matured into regimes, ways of life, principles; and these principles, through conscious or unconscious articulation, achieve expression in the form of comprehensive worldviews. In the dialogue, these speak forth.

The Dialogue at Melos

The Melians invite the Athenians to a private discussion, declining to bring their delegation before the *dēmos* (V 84.3). The Athenians find this offensive and accuse the Melians of seeking to prevent them from "deceiving" the *dēmos* with "persuasive arguments that would go unchallenged" (V 85). The assumption that their arguments would go unchallenged, even before a raucous assembly, indicates this charge's irony: the implication is that the Melians in fact wish to deceive the *dēmos* precisely by hiding the real situation

from them, a situation they would presumably judge in accordance with the Athenians' wishes, for the situation is obvious to anyone who can see (cf. IV 22.2). Orwin puts it well when he writes that the Athenians "need not dissemble because they have nothing to hide," for "they can conceive of no argument more persuasive than their overwhelming power."[63] One might further emphasize, their *visibly* overwhelming power.

To the Athenians' proposal of a point-by-point debate or discussion, the Melians respond that whatever appearance of fairness it may have is belied by the facts, most importantly because the Athenians come as self-appointed judges; therefore, "if we win [the debate] by the justice of our case and therefore refuse to submit, that means war; but if we concede, enslavement" (V 86)—in other words, given the Athenians' obvious superiority of strength, enslavement either way. The Athenians implicitly deny they seek to "enslave" the Melians. Instead, they demand that the Melians disregard considerations about the future and "consult about the safety of their city in terms of things present and visible"[64] (*ek tōn parontōn kai hōn horate*) (V 87). The Melians agree to limit their considerations to the question at hand—namely, survival (V 88).

The Athenians apparently proceed to disclaim justice as a warrant for their demands—but at bottom, their disclaimer is more specific: they renounce any claim that their demands are justified by reference either to their past valor or service or to some past injury they may have received. Moreover, they preemptively discount any Melian claim to neutrality hitherto in the present war or to innocence as regards the Athenians in past times (V 89). That is to say, if they first forbade consideration of the future, they now do the same of the past: the topic of discussion is the present. In the present, or "in human discussion," or according to "human reason" (*antropōpeiō logō*), claims of justice can be raised only between those under "equal necessity" (*isēs anankēs*) (V 89).[65] A greater necessity itself compels. Therefore, although the Melians characterize the Athenians' position as "expediency as opposed to justice is the basis for discussion" (V 90), this is somewhat tendentious.[66] What the Athenians emphasize, rather, is that justifications

based in past things become relevant only between people standing under equal necessity in the present, an equality visibly absent from the present discussion. The divergence already visible between the Melians' and the Athenians' preferences or understandings regarding the appropriate standards for discussion is not unrelated to the Archaeological considerations presented earlier in this essay. We do not know the precise origin of Melos, but insofar as the Melians are Spartan colonists, we can assume their understanding is similar to that of the Spartans.[67] The Athenians speak in terms of present and nonpresent, but the Melians hear expediency and justice. The oligarchs understand justice in terms of the nonpresent; they live always in an armed camp, "[d]welling as a garrison in their own city," keeping down an army of hungry slaves.[68] The justification for this *must* be sought elsewhere than in what sits before their eyes; it is found in the deep past. Athenian justice is the vote—all agents declare their wills at this present moment, and the disposition of strength is immediately sanctified as right.[69] Perhaps it would not be too much to say that the Athenians' implicit understanding is that the weak Melians have been, as it were, *outvoted* by the strong Athenians; therefore, it is, in fact, *just* and not merely expedient for them to submit (consider II 39.3).

Although the Melians and Athenians have already left the realm of mutual understanding, the Melians proceed.[70] The Melians, appealing to the expediency they believe the Athenians now demand, argue that there *would* be expediency were the Athenians to consider "the common good," because—and here, they already break their agreement not to consider the future—were the Athenians to suffer downfall, the retribution they suffer would vary in its severity with the severity with which they now treat others (V 90). Despite the Melians' breach of their word, the Athenians take the bait or are tricked into considering the future—just what they initially both forbade and renounced doing. They do this, however, only to reject the Melians' appeal—any such eventuality is for us to worry about (V 91.2; cf. 103.1–2, 111.1–2). But, en route to rejecting the appeal, they do something peculiar, mentioning that in the event of their fall they would have to fear primarily not the Spartans (whom the Melians did not mention) but their

former subjects (V 91.1). This counterargument to nothing (which indeed, if anything, seems to support the Melians' case) seems to speak to their bad imperial conscience, or the conflict between the democratic project and the imperial project.[71] For the same fear that serves as the engine of democratic imperialism inclines democratic peoples to honor, even if only inwardly, "the universal *nomos* that sanctions resisting the aggressor" (cf. III 56.2; cf. also III 45.4, IV 61.5, VI 33.5–6); we recall the attack of conscience the Athenians seemed to suffer after annihilating the Scionians (V 32.1; cf. also VII 77.4). In any case, the Athenians then claim that they come for their own self-interest and also for the safety of the Melians and that they "want [the Melians'] safety to benefit both of us," implicitly ceding to the Melians' appeal to consider the common good (V 91.2).

The Melians ask how there could be any common benefit between slave and master. The Athenians answer: You would benefit by not being killed, and we would benefit by not having to kill you (V 92–93)—not a particularly sophisticated response. In any case, they do not repeat the accusation of enslavement, as if afraid of the very word. The Melians then request to be left alone, allowed to mind their own business. Here we note that the third of the three distinctively oligarchic claims of oligarchic right surfaces in the Melians' mouths (V 94; cf., again, II 72.1; Plato, *Republic* 433a–b).[72] The Athenians reject this request because were they to leave them be and part as friends, the Athenians would look weak, thus exposing themselves to danger (V 55). One can go further: to leave the Melians be would subject the democratic principle of right to that of the oligarchy. It would mean for the more numerous in their overwhelming strength to recognize the right to rule of the few who wish to be left alone—that is, it would be for the *dēmos* to recognize the claims of the few as a just limitation on its own power. To be deterred from aggression on these grounds would be, for the Athenians, to capitulate to a "fear" that the *dēmos* is in fact absolutely inferior to the few in some aspect that is not commensurable with the superior "power" that would manifestly enable the *dēmos* to prevail should it merely will to do so (cf. V 96–97). This

theme is reinforced by the Melians' suggestion that control over a small island such as theirs is of no great consequence to the Athenian empire (V 96). This implicitly reminds us that the control of this island is of *very great* consequence to the Melians themselves (cf. V 100). In other words, the Melians would base their claim to rule over the island on the higher stakes they hold in the island—and this, in turn, is the first of the three distinctive claims of oligarchic right (cf., again, III 65.3; Mynott, 202n).

The Melians next outline other future outcomes the Athenians may fear, which seem pretty much of a piece with those earlier, though focusing more explicitly on the Athenians' demonstrated fear of their subject peoples (cf. V 98–99 with 90–91). This provokes the Athenians only into admitting the strong desire for freedom they correctly assume is felt by the subject peoples who are smarting under the necessities of imperial rule (cf. II 8.4–5). This desire, they presume, is strong enough even to provoke the subjects into doing something "irrational" (*alogistō*); already, they allude to the delicate connection between despair and the turn away from what is rational or what can be reasonably expected—namely, the delicate relation between real hopelessness for attaining one's heart's dearest wish and the hope for miraculous intervention by those things that exceed or else fall below reason (V 99; cf. III 45.7, IV 108.4, VII 67.1, 67.4, 75.7, 77.3).[73] The Melians respond that if being enslaved to the Athenians is as hateful as the Athenians have now admitted, then they themselves would surely be cowards were they not to fight with all they can while they still can (V 100). The Athenians again decline to repeat the word "slavery" and counter simply that this is not a contest of honor but a question of self-preservation for the Melians. The Athenians are so much stronger that for the Melians to talk of honor is nonsensical (V 101). Indeed, the Athenians portray themselves as so much stronger that their relationship to the Melians is better regarded as an overwhelming natural if not supernatural calamity than that of men threatening other men with combat. This fundamental imbalance means the Melians' foolishness in speaking of honor and their foolishness in speaking of injustice are of one

piece (cf. I 77.4). The Melians scarcely knew how right they were when describing the Athenians as "self-appointed judges" (V 86). Here the Athenians say, in effect: *Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him?* The Melians would put the Athenians in the wrong that they may be in the right; and so, the Athenians respond: Have you an arm like this? For our arm is such that it can do everything; no purpose of ours can be thwarted; you Melians utter what you do not understand (cf. Job 40:2, 8–9, 42:2–3).

The Athenians, of course, are not almighty, nor are they gods. Even if they seem to resist admitting it under the circumstances (cf. V 91.1, "if"), they are but mortals, and they know it (cf. II 64.3, VI 23.3).[74] The Melians know this too. But in the present confrontation, the Athenians do not misrepresent their relative strength vis-à-vis the Melians. The Athenians' strength so vastly outmatches the Melians that there is no intelligible place for strategy on the part of the Melians. Therefore, the Melians appeal to the chaos and unpredictability of war as a rational foundation for hope (*elpis*) (V 102). From a certain perspective, this *is* relatively rational, for if Thucydides is to be believed, war is *in fact* extremely unpredictable—it has "many forms" (I 109.1) and it is an engine of chaos.[75] The Spartans know this (I 82.6, IV 18.4); the Athenians know this (I 78.1–2, 140.1, VII 61.3); the Corinthians know this (I 120.5, 122.1); the Syracusans know this (IV 62.4, VI 78.2). In short, oligarchies and democracies alike know this. The pressure or necessity of war causes men to innovate constantly and to seize opportunities quickly (I 142.2, II 75–78, III 82.3, IV 10.1, VII 25.8, VII 36.2). This causes the situation to rapidly change and makes foresight difficult if not impossible. The Athenians know this well enough that even if their relatively dynamic polity puts them at a certain advantage regarding these rapidly shifting things (cf. I 70.4, 70.8, 71.5, IV 55.2, VIII 96.5; Machiavelli, *Prince*, XV), they themselves alternate between being exhilarated and then deeply unsettled by their own runs of good luck. Even at their most successful, they know that *Fortuna* is not to be relied on (cf. IV 65.4 with IV 73.4). Freak victories and defeats do occur (cf., e.g., II 94.3, IV 30.2, V 11.2; cf. also VIII 6.5, 31.4, 99.1).

It is nevertheless obvious that precisely because purely chance or random saving occurrences cannot be predicted, one cannot reasonably expect them to happen in any given case (V 103.1), and the Melians here are speaking of a single battle, not a war. Therefore, despite the Melians' seemingly worldly or rationalistic presentation of their grounds for hope, the Athenians sense what they are really driving at: they place their "hope" not in the normal things of man but with "manifest grounds of hope . . . lacking to them, [they] turn to immanifest ones, divination and oracles and that sort of thing, which crush [the unwary] with hopes" (V 103.2).[76] The Athenians guess right, for the Melians place their trust in the gods, or more precisely in the divine (*theion*), "since we stand here as pious men confronting unjust men" (V 104). In short, they stake their claim on the divine interest in their character as pious or just men or, in other words, they base the higher sanction for their claim to rule in their being virtuous or "so-called 'good men and true'"—the second of the three distinctive claims of oligarchic right (cf., again, IV 40.2, VII 46.2; cf. Mynott, 259n2). At this moment in the dialogue, we note, the Melians have now appealed to all three claims to oligarchic right; they have thus shown themselves as perfect oligarchs. But to this last argument, which they persist in claiming is based in "chance" (*tuchē*), they add one based in power: the Spartans, who are not their allies, are nevertheless their kinsfolk and as such will "of necessity" come to rescue them. Therefore, they claim, their hope—no, now it has become their "confidence" (*phrasunometha*)—is "not altogether irrational" (*alogōs*) (V 104). The Archaeologically based belief in particular providence is reunited with its counterpart: the original oligarchic society of steadfast friends (cf. V 108).

Whether from bad conscience or residual democratic ingenuousness, the Athenian elites once again take the bait or are tricked by the Melians into moving away from arguments about the present situation. They declare that they act in accord with what humans believe about the divine (V 105.1). But here they present a picture of the divine radically at odds with that of divination, oracles, and whatever else of the kind. The divine makes itself

known in nature, and the necessity of nature is laid down in the form of a *nomos*—namely, that whenever anyone has the upper hand, they rule. This law is not of the Athenians' own making, but having discovered this law already established and expecting it to last forever, the Athenians—or more specifically these Athenian few—make use of it and follow it in good conscience (V 105.2–3). Therefore, it may appear here that the specifically democratic few confronts the specifically oligarchic few with the impious speech that is the highest flower of democracy, despite having already made clear that this speech is a lie insofar as these few have a bad conscience precisely *for* carrying out their understanding of, so to speak, the divine command—or at least the natural law. But while this may be correct in one aspect, it is insufficient in another. It is important to note that per the evidence in the Archaeology, the Athenians have been taught this divine law by the same history that the Melians have been taught their own gentler divinity, just experienced from the opposite perspective. The Melians' Spartan ancestors saw the alliance of steadfast and virtuous friends rewarded by the gods with the best land in Greece; the Athenians' ancestors saw themselves punished and starved for their weakness, pushed to rocky Attica by the merest will of those men who could rule (contrast, e.g., the Spartans' understanding of human nature at IV 19.4 with Kleon's at III 39.5 and, for that matter, Hermokrates's at IV 61.4). The justice that all men attribute to their grandfathers went sorely unrewarded in the Athenians' case. Thus, the present Athenians look at history and see only the merciless *nomos* of the necessity of nature, industry, striving, and grabbing what one can and never letting go. The gods, they have learned, and debatably no less piously in their own way than the Melians, reward adherence to this *nomos* most of all or exclusively.[77] For their god is the god of weak men who have become strong—indeed, who have become strong precisely by banding together—that is, their god is the god of democrats.[78] Their notion of justice is correspondingly articulated: Callicles's justice (the conspiracy of the weak) and Thrasymachus's justice (the advantage of the stronger) dovetail and intermerge in the democratic Leviathan.[79] Nevertheless, although

as democrats the Athenians do in fact believe in the right of the majority and inasmuch the right of the stronger within their own city, when the democracy becomes empire, they are left straddling an uneasy tension between the right of the stronger that they recognize domestically and the fearful sympathy they feel with "the universal *nomos* that sanctions resisting the aggressor" in the realm of foreign affairs (III 56.2).[80]

The Athenians' apparently brutal statement scares the Melians from talk of the divine, and they spend much of the remainder of the dialogue appealing to the possibility that the Spartans will save them (V 106–10).[81] Although this hope is, like their understanding of the divinity, based in an intelligible inference from their Archaeological experience—namely, in the memory of the original oligarchic society of steadfast friends—the Athenians correctly point out that this is a foolish hope (V 105.4). However intelligible their faith in their friends may be, it seems nevertheless fair to say that Thucydides deliberately portrays the Melians grasping at straws (V 110.1–2). Perhaps the increasing shakiness of their argumentation reflects an awareness that they themselves are guilty of disregard for the principle to which they appeal: though Spartan colonists, they themselves have disregarded the duty to ally with Sparta in the ongoing war—in other words, *they* have betrayed the original oligarchic society of steadfast friends.[82] Whatever the case, it is at this point that the Athenians completely lose patience and finally remember that the Melians supposedly agreed at the outset to refrain from talking about the future anyway (V 111.2).

The Athenians then advise the Melians not to fear the mere "name" of dishonor (V 111.3), but even so, they do not resist appealing to that very name. In fact, they remind the Melians that in submitting they would not even incur this name anyway because the Athenians are so much stronger that, again, there is no talk of honor to be had. Moreover, they here explicitly counter the Melians' repeated charges that they wish to enslave them by calling the arrangement they intend an alliance, a less dishonorable name than that of slavery (V 111.4).[83] Once again, as subtly throughout, the Athenians' toughness seems to be something they are playing

up for show. Thucydides's portrayal seems to be of curiously conflicted imperialists, susceptible to accusations on grounds of the common good, and perhaps more pious than they let on.[84]

With a final, impressive warning (V 111.5), the Athenians take their leave to allow the Melians to deliberate. The Melians maintain their original decision to resist; appealing to things long past, they place their trust in fortune, the divine, and other men (V 112.1–3). The Athenians ridicule their trust in things they cannot see with their eyes (V 113) and proceed to show the Melians the truth of their situation. The Athenians accuse them of relying on the desperate form of hope that denies reality, a thing they know something about and of which they will, in time, gain even more intimate knowledge (cf. III 3.1; IV 108.4; VII 67.4).[85] This last part of the dialogue seems to be more or less a reversion. With reference to the Archaeology, we can see why the Melians' faith in their supposed friends, the Spartans, has an intelligible basis. Moreover, we have seen the Melians repeatedly bait the Athenians into discussing higher concerns than the Athenians originally intended. Nevertheless, it seems that the manifestly unrealistic character of the Melians' reasoning in V 110 serves to snap the Athenians out of whatever ascent they had till then been led on by the Melians; there is less a descent than a crash. Perhaps one is forced to say that the Melians are, in the end, unreasonable even by their own standards: they remember all too well the Spartan legacy of firm friendship, and all too little the concomitant and co-originating legacy of keeping close to home.

The relatively absolute power of the Athenians here means that for Thucydides, they have an opportunity for moral agency that the Melians lack. As such, their decision carries correspondingly undiluted moral weight (cf. I 76.3, 77.2, II 87.3, III 40.1, 56.3, 63.2, 63.5, IV 63.2, 98.5–6, VIII 24.4).[86] But because this scene is not merely the strong facing the weak or the unjust facing the just, a full consideration of its significance must also consider the character of the Athenian's decision in light of the specific origin and nature of Athenian democracy. The Archaeology reveals something more complicated going on here than merely the strong facing the

weak. Rather, the Athenians and the Melians meet one another with the tables turned. The democrats, originally weak, have become strong; the oligarchs, originally strong, have become weak. The weak Melians therefore bring their faith in the goodness of their friends and especially in the divine that is characteristic of the originally blessed; and the strong Athenians bring knowledge of the merciless necessities of nature characteristic of the originally forsaken. On this occasion, the Athenians seem to come with the attitude more suited to the malignity of the times, and perhaps to the harsh necessity that characterizes war in general. But neither this nor the physical result of the confrontation at Melos should blind us to the fact that the Melians think and act on the basis of inferences from their Archeological past that are just as—or nearly just as—reasonable as the Athenians' inferences from their own.

Concluding Remarks

This study has endeavored to render plausible the proposition that understanding the Melian dialogue requires interpretating it in light of the conflict between oligarchy and democracy, and that this understanding in turn opens the road toward more fundamental considerations, toward a fuller understanding of Thucydides, and toward deeper access to fundamental questions of our own. The crux of the matter is whether Thucydides understands so-called Athenian enlightenment simply as "rationalism" or, rather, as a thoroughgoing expression of, as it were, "democratic culture." This study has explored the latter possibility. The Athenian democratic culture is one shaped by the concrete institutionalization of abstractions such as equality and number under the aspect of right or, alternatively, it is one whose concrete institutional practices bring these corresponding abstractions into being. But when we consider these issues in Thucydides, even the term "democracy" can be a stumbling block to our understanding. For the regimes Thucydides knew as "oligarchy" and "democracy" are in many ways strange to us. Despite this, articulating the forms of justice that Thucydides understood as emerging from these regimes cannot avoid touching on persisting, perhaps sempiternal, issues. It is an

implicit suggestion of the foregoing argument that whatever may be of eternal value in Thucydides's account is accessible only through first recognizing the strangeness of the forms of polity and self-understanding he presents to us. Thereby, we can enter into the particularity of these forms of understanding, especially in their conflicts with each other. It is through ascent from these particulars that approach toward the general may become possible. But the condition of this ascent is to first know these particulars in their particularity, with imported, higher-order categories expunged. In the present context, this means we must expunge categories of analysis that would, illicitly and perhaps unknowingly, lead us to favor the *argument* of one or the other party at Melos for reasons beyond those that Thucydides regards as operative and relevant.

Thucydides is fair. His excellence as a teacher is inseparable from his fairness. To learn from Thucydides requires us to achieve, if only temporarily, this terrifying fairness in ourselves. This study has been a small effort toward this essential, perhaps impossible, task.

Notes

1. For Thucydides, I generally quote from *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, trans. Jeremy Mynott. London: Cambridge University Press, 2013. For the Greek texts of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle I have referenced the Loeb editions. Book and section numbers in the text unless otherwise noted refer to Thucydides. Throughout, I have assimilated the format of references to Thucydides's text in other authors quoted to my own without further notice.
2. Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10, punctuation modified.
3. David Polansky, "Nietzsche on Thucydidean Realism," *Review of Politics* 77, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 436.
4. Aside from Orwin, *Humanity*, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964); David Bolotin, "Thucydides," in *History of Political Philosophy*, *Third Edition*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 7–32; Michael Palmer, "Love of Glory and the Common Good," *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (December 1982): 825–36; Michael Palmer, "Alcibiades and the Question of Tyranny in Thucydides," *Canadian*

Journal of Political Science 15, no. 1 (March 1982): 103–24; Michael Palmer, "Thucydides' 'History' as Political Theory," *Teaching Political Science: Politics in Perspective* 15, no. 3 (1988): 108–14; Michael Palmer, "Machiavellian *virtù* and Thucydidean *aretē*: Traditional Virtue and Political Wisdom in Thucydides," *Review of Politics* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 365–85; Michael Palmer, "Stasis in the War Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Sara Forsdyke, Edith Foster, and Ryan Balot (Oxford, 2018), printed from Oxford Handbooks Online, November 18, 2020; Bernard J. Dobski, "Thucydides' Philosophic Turn to Causes," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 123–55; Bernard J. Dobski, "The Enduring Necessity of Periclean Politics," *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek Political Thought* 34 (2017): 62–93; Timothy Burns, "The Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," *Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (May 2011): 508–23; Ryan Balot, "Was Thucydides a Political Philosopher?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Sara Forsdyke, Edith Foster, and Ryan Balot (Oxford, 2018), printed from Oxford Handbooks Online, November 18, 2020; Paul Ludwig, "Xenophon as a Socratic Reader of Thucydides," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Sara Forsdyke, Edith Foster, and Ryan Balot (Oxford, 2018), printed from Oxford Handbooks Online, November 18, 2020.

5. Cf., e.g., Orwin, *Humanity*, 61, 62 ("the traditional or Spartan understanding"), 110, 116, 117, 168, 193, 204; Balot, "Was Thucydides," 13; Burns, "The Virtue," 512; Dobski, "The Enduring Necessity," 63 ("the traditionalist critique of empire embodied by the Spartans"). At *Humanity*, 97, Orwin calls the Melian manner "a purified or pristine version of the 'Spartan' [manner]."
6. Orwin, *Humanity*, 192.
7. Orwin, *Humanity*, 10, emphasis added.
8. Dobski, "Causes," 140, emphasis added.
9. Palmer treats the question of how to translate the word "*stasis*" at considerable length in his "Stasis in the War Narrative"; it is usually translated, not unproblematically but not catastrophically, by terms such as "civil war," "civil conflict," and "revolution."
10. Of course, in a brilliant feat of political rhetoric, Pericles presents the fact that Attica, barren and unwanted, was inasmuch historically free from subjection by invaders as a matter of civic pride, evidence of primordial Athenian bravery (II 36.1).
11. See Dobski, commenting on I 5.4: "[I]t was first in Sparta where the great among the citizens *chose* to observe an equality of appearance

among the rest of the citizen body. . . . A sense of legitimate restraint on one's outward conduct and appearance—and thus a concern for the common good—while the defining character of all of Greek life, emerged in Spartan politics first" ("Causes," 142). Cf. too Numa Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton Kent & Co., 1916), 459.

12. On the helots, see too Balot, "Was Thucydides," 17–18, who helpfully articulates the hypocrisy of the would-be liberators of Hellas. The helots were not the only domestic opposition of the Spartiates, who after all were very few—see Fustel de Coulanges's classic presentation of Spartan oligarchy, *Ancient City*, 460–465.
13. See too Orwin, *Humanity*, 75–76, 195.
14. Burns, "The Virtue," 514. See too Orwin, *Humanity*, 83–84.
15. See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 148; see too Orwin, *Humanity*, 78–79: "Far from expanding to the limits of her considerable power, [Sparta] devotes herself . . . to preserving what she already enjoys." Correspondingly, Bolotin's remark ("Thucydides," 17) that "[i]n other words, the Spartans' moderation, such as it was, in foreign affairs was rooted in their fear of a slave revolt" seems somewhat one-sided.
16. Cf. Orwin, *Humanity*, 57.
17. Burns, "The Virtue," 517; cf. also Orwin on Sparta's extreme aversion to sacrificing Spartans (*Humanity*, 76–82), versus Athens, "which prides herself on a willingness to expend rivers of Athenian blood (II 64.3)" (76).
18. Even if Brasidas is, in many ways, an exceptional and unrepresentative Spartan, I am tempted to characterize his remark here (IV 126.2) as *the* statement of Sparta *qua* oligarchy in the book. See Orwin's perceptive commentary on this remark, *Humanity*, 84.
19. Consider, relatedly, Orwin, *Humanity*, 63.
20. Cf. Goro Dati (1362–1435) regarding Florence, as summarized in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1975] 2003), 91.
21. But of course, these Athenian leaders' directives to focus on the sea is more directly, though I believe not unrelatedly, pertinent to Athens's naval power, regarding which I have learned much from John Nash's "Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 119–39. On the relationship of Themistocles and Pericles with regard to "Athenian grand strategy," see Karl Walling,

"Thucydides on Policy, Strategy, and War Termination," *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2013): 52.

22. See too Palmer, "Machiavellian *virtù*," 374.
23. Balot, "Was Thucydides," 5; see too Palmer, "Machiavellian *virtù*," 374.
24. This is a logical transition, not necessarily a historical one.
25. Cf. Orwin, *Humanity*, 31–32. Orwin's analysis of a related point also bears consideration in this connection: Pericles's funeral oration portrays the Athenian imperialism as a choice freely undertaken, whereas in more sober moments the Athenians portray and seem to understand their empire as a burden they maintain out of fear (see Orwin, *Humanity*, 17, 27, 29, 53).
26. Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
27. The rhetorical context of this speech complicates its reading, but I do not regard it as being presented as though it is fundamentally inaccurate. Orwin's analysis of this list in *Humanity* (46–47, and see too 53) is interesting, but I doubt if the meaning of the Athenians' later reversal of the order of "fear" and "honor" (I 76.2) is as self-evident as he implies.
28. See Balot's excellent treatment of Thucydides's Athenians' "resilience," "Was Thucydides," 11–12.
29. See too Orwin, *Humanity*, 181; cf. Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 433.
30. The latter half of Thucydides's statement that Periclean Athens was "in speech" a democracy but "in deed" the rule of the foremost man (II 65.10) should not cause us to overlook the practical importance of the former half, which renders the latter half possible; Pericles could not have ruled Athens as a "king," and as a democratic leader, he knows his rhetoric must avert envy and suspicion toward his own person (cf. Orwin, *Humanity*, 25; Palmer, "Love of Glory," 829; cf. also Plato, *Republic* 463a; I believe Palmer is too cavalier with the latter half at "Machiavellian *virtù*," 378).
31. Cf. also Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 126.
32. It was self-evident for the Athenians and even for Aristotle the Stagirite that democracy must be based on universal armament (cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 3.17.4; consider too Carnes Lord, "Aristotle," in *History of Political Philosophy, Third Edition*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 140; Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 432&n.2, n.b. too 447). This presupposition, i.e., this physical warrant to the claim for political right, may help us to understand both why citizenship for women was never seriously

considered and why if it was considered at all, it was in conjunction with the proposition that the citizen-women must serve as soldiers, as in Plato's Kallipolis (though the latter was, of course, not a democracy).

33. Dobski gives a somewhat different but not necessarily incompatible account of the relation of the Archaeology to Athenian democracy at "The Enduring Necessity," 89, and "Causes," 142–47.
34. See Dobski's insightful "The Enduring Necessity," esp. 74–80.
35. Consider also Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 362.
36. Cf. also Palmer, "Love of Glory," 834.
37. See too Palmer, "Political Theory," 111.
38. Admittedly, I may express myself with too little qualification here, inasmuch as these sentences do not directly mention the helots; but I think it is at least plausible that Thucydides assumed the reader would have the bare knowledge that the helots *existed* in Sparta. Under this supposition, the general *role* of the helots in the Spartan constellation is, I think, inferable in broad terms from the information given.
39. Daniel Boyarin also recognizes the Melians' "oligarchical stance" and "oligarchic form of government" in his "Deadly Dialogue: Thucydides with Plato," *Representations* 117, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 67–70.
40. Rather than the Bekker numbers, I employ the traditional subsection numbers, as used, e.g., in the second edition of Carnes Lord's translation (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
41. See too Dobski, "Causes," 139; Palmer, "Machiavellian *virtù*," 369, 372; Palmer, "Alcibiades," 107, 109, 121.
42. See too Orwin, *Humanity*, 56: "the [Athenian] envoys [to Sparta in book I] are far from denying that true justice is a virtue—and of all the virtues justice is the one most obviously in tension with empire"; cf. too 144.
43. But cf. Orwin, *Humanity*, 48, on the Athenians' use of the word "subjects" (*hypēkooi*); n.b. also 67 on the Athenian manner of treating their subjects and the understanding the Athenians hold regarding that treatment.
44. See Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 492–93.
45. On these themes, consider too Palmer, "Machiavellian *virtù*," 370; also Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1963), 41–42; *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1952] 1988), 179–80; and "Plato," in *History of Political Philosophy, Third Edition*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 75.
46. As Orwin paraphrases Diodotus, the Athenians "would rather ignore good advice than risk having something put over on them" (*Humanity*, 160).

47. Cf. also Orwin, *Humanity*, 31.
48. On the "moral qualms about [killing] enemy civilians" displayed by the "ordinary Athenians" as Thucydides depicts them, see Adrian Lanni, "The Laws of War in Ancient Greece," *Law and History Review* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 482. Orwin writes that Thucydides "agrees with the [Athenian] envoys on Melos that 'the many' are always 'Melian' (V 103). . . . Most Athenians have never been as 'Athenian' as their envoys to Melos, never as self-reliant or as conscious of the folly of relying on the divine" (*Humanity*, 122–23, where also find many useful citations of passages that evidence common Athenian piety and/or superstition). On demotic moral breakdown in extreme circumstances, see Williamson Murray, "Thucydides: Theorist of War," *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2013): 39–41; Orwin, *Humanity*, 174.
49. Palmer interprets the Athenian "hysterical witch-hunt that ensued" after the mutilation of the Herms in terms of the Athenian fear of tyranny ("Alcibiades," 106–7); this interpretation receives support from Orwin's remark that "[t]here is no Spartan parallel to the orgy of distrust and persecution that erupt at Athens after the affair of the Herms and that culminates in the execution of many of the *best* citizens" (*Humanity*, 76, my emphasis); see too Bolotin, "Thucydides," 24.
50. Orwin makes a similar statement at *Humanity*, 162, though without the "harmonizing verse" I offer in the following sentence.
51. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, trans. Christopher Lynch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
52. Instructively, the members of the Athenian *dēmos* never act on Pericles's proposal to melt down the statue of Athena for gold to fund the war effort, "not even in their most desperate moments" (Orwin, *Humanity*, 20n12). On the "two sides to Athens," see Palmer, "Love of Glory," 827; and cf. too Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 20.
53. See also Orwin, *Humanity*, 93&n11, 137–38; Orwin elsewhere outright calls Nikias "quasi-Spartan" (126); see too Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 290–2. To anticipate, as Gerald Mara remarks, "Particularly striking are the parallels between the appeals of the confounded Melians as they resist Athenian threats, and the hopes of the desperate Athenian general Nicias as he confronts the Sicilian defeat." "Possessions Forever: Thucydides and Kant on Peace, War, and Politics," *Polity* 45, no. 3 (July 2013): 331.
54. Consider Orwin, *Humanity*, 168–69.
55. The second two examples here may reflect prudential or worldly calculation on the part of Agis, a complicated and perhaps more worldly

than average Spartan. On these themes, see Orwin's treatment of Archidamos and Sparta, *Humanity*, 58–62; see too 84–85.

56. See Orwin's perceptive and deflationary account of the claims to "moderation" (perhaps *the* distinctively "aristocratic" virtue) by the *kaloi k'agathoi* (187–88).
57. Cf. also the first item given at I 74.1; cf. too II 41.1–2, 64.3, VI 87.3; consider also the notion implicit in Archidamos's offer at II 72.1; cf. too Plato, *Republic* 433a–b. See the useful discussion in Victor Ehrenberg, "Polypragmosyne: A Study in Greek Politics," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 67 (1947): 46–67, esp. 47–53. Orwin, *Humanity*, 60, notes only that "to mind one's own business is a common definition of justice"; I suggest its oligarchic coloring must not be overlooked. (I use Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1989.)
58. Contrast Alcibiades's view at VI 18.3.
59. Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. R. B. McCallum (Oxford: Basil Blackford, 1948).
60. Boyarin. "Deadly Dialogue," 59. Some traditional explanations are listed in H. Ll. Hudson-Williams, "Forms of Debate and the Melian Dialogue," *American Journal of Philology* 71, no. 2 (1950): 164. The problem with interpretating the Melian dialogue as a "classic statement of realist thinking"—cf., e.g., Lanni, "Laws of War," 469–70; Michael A. Allen and Benjamin O. Fordham, "From Melos to Baghdad: Explaining Resistance to Militarized Challenges from More Powerful States," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2011): 1025–26; Benjamin O. Fordham, "Who Wants to Be a Major Power? Explaining the Expansion of Foreign Policy Ambition," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 5 (September 2011): 588—is that it seems to reduce the significance of the dialogical action to a direct efflux or reflection of the physical situation and therefore cannot justify why there is a dialogue presented at all, let alone at such length. The upshot of such interpretations tend to be summarizable in a single paragraph. Douglas B. Klusmeyer writes beautifully against thus oversimplifying the "lesson" of the Melian dialogue and Thucydides's work generally in "Contesting Thucydides's Legacy: Comparing Hannah Arendt and Hans Morgenthau on Imperialism, History and Theory," *International History Review* 33, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–22; see also Ludwig's perceptive remarks, "Xenophon," 1.

61. One might object that the Athenian *dēmos* as such does not confront the Melian oligarchs: The Athenian speakers at Melos are Athenian elites. I do not think this vitiates my interpretation, according to which, broadly speaking, the respective elites represent their respective regimes. Thucydides accomplishes two things by staging the confrontation between elites: First, a dialogue becomes physically possible; second, Thucydides brings a specifically democratic few to interface with a specifically oligarchic few, underscoring the different manifestations of elite consciousness in the two regimes. (Perhaps one could say that the corresponding confrontation between the democratic *dēmos* and the oligarchic *dēmos* comes afterward, on the battlefield.)
62. A similar intention can be ascribed (though obviously not to the exclusion of other, weightier considerations) to Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, the only dialogue wherein Socrates converses with a many, and which ends with them proffering a legal judgment, or an argument based in their justice, to kill him.
63. See Orwin, *Humanity*, 100.
64. Orwin's rendering, *Humanity*, 98.
65. Orwin's philological dissection of this famous passage is helpful, *Humanity*, 99.
66. *Pace* Bolotin, "Thucydides," 14; Orwin, *Humanity*, 117.
67. See, again, Orwin, *Humanity*, 97.
68. Orwin's expression, *Humanity*, 85.
69. As Fustel de Coulanges writes (*Ancient City*, 441), in Athens, "suffrage was reputed one of the most sacred sources of authority." Regarding the competing principle of selection by lot, cf. ibid., 243n.1, 427.
70. As James V. Morrison bluntly observes, throughout the dialogue "[t]he Melians ignore Athenian limits on discussion," and "the Athenians themselves fail to observe their own restriction[s]." "Historical Lessons in the Melian Episode," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000): 135–36.
71. On this theme, see Sungwoo Park's excellent article, "Thucydides on the Fate of Democratic Empire," *Journal of Area and International Studies* 15, no. 1 (June 2008): 93–109. Consider also Charles M. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 25–26.
72. My ordering (first claim, second claim, third claim), both here and in the previous section, is entirely arbitrary and has no significance.
73. As Scott Jenkins puts it, "Faced with two horrible alternatives, the Melians imagine a third that is much more agreeable—salvation through the assistance of other nations—and let that imagined scenario guide

their deliberation. Despair thus brings about beliefs concerning the future that, as the Athenians point out, cannot be justified through appeal to the facts. These beliefs do alleviate psychological distress, but because they also guide deliberation and action they ensure that the Melians get slaughtered. This is the principal hazard of wishful thinking." "What Does Nietzsche Owe Thucydides?," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 41.

74. Moreover, whereas the Athenians assert that all alike are subject to the *nomos* of V 105.2–3, the God of Job is omnipotent. Consider, in this connection, Orwin, *Humanity*, 95–96.
75. See also Murray, "Thucydides: Theorist of War," 33–35.
76. Orwin's rendering, *Humanity*, 104.
77. I say "debatably" because, as Orwin shrewdly reminds us, in Greek religion, "[i]mitation of the gods is *hybris*, the ultimate outrage against the divine" (*Humanity*, 105; see too the very penetrating discussion on 106). Are the Athenians here *imitating* their divinity or, rather, following the law they believe their natural divinity has made manifest? I think the latter is more plausible based on V 105.2, but there is room for interpretation. (If they take themselves to be simply acting according to natural necessity, then to say they believe themselves to be (willfully) following anything at all would be strange, but V 105.2 seems to speak against this last, "deterministic" interpretation.)
78. Cf. Palmer, "Alcibiades," 111; consider too Fustel de Coulanges, *Ancient City*, 397, 411, 418.
79. Callicles's account is in Plato's *Gorgias* (and Glaucon has a similar idea in *Republic* II); Thrasymachus's is in *Republic* I.
80. This is, as it were, the other side of the coin of Orwin's remark at *Humanity*, 55, and cf. too 125, 152–53, and 155, which advances a different but related and compatible thesis, if at a higher (and per the premises of my study, too high) level of generality. Cf. also Bolotin, "Thucydides," 27: "Since [the Athenians] thought of themselves as being noble, they could not help feeling the weight of the accusations against them for presuming to rule over others against their will."
81. Cf. Orwin, "Only after V 105 do the Melians dig in their heels: it is only their least reasonable hopes that they absolutely refuse to abandon" (*Humanity*, 110).
82. Historians argue on basis of a recovered inscription that the Melians indeed contributed to the "Spartan War Fund" during the relevant time period—see Michael G. Seaman, "The Athenian Expedition to Melos in 416 BC," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* bd. 46, h. 4

(4th quarter, 1997): 391–92. Howsoever this may be, Thucydides does not mention it; inasmuch, it is arguable whether these contributions can be attributed to Thucydides's Melians. This being said, the "particularistic" character of oligarchic justice and piety enables remarkable flexibility, not to say hypocrisy (cf. II 72 with V 105; consider too Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 275). Thus, even if Thucydides *had* known of these contributions, it would not necessarily mean that, for him, the Melian expectations were any more realistic.

83. I read this as the Athenians being led along by the Melians, but Orwin (*Humanity*, 108) views it instead as a deliberate rhetorical strategy employed by the Athenians to "teach" the Melians.
84. Cf. Mara, "Possessions Forever," 332: "Each position [at Melos is] informed by a kind of political imaginary, a projection on experience that establishes both what is the case and what is to be done. Melos' imaginary is that of a pious regime unjustly threatened; Athens' is that of a powerful but anxious hegemon. Both imaginaries involve a positioning with respect to the gods. While Melos's piety is more obvious[,] . . . the Athenian response is hardly godless"; Orwin also discusses, though in a different context, "the residual piety of the Athenians" (*Humanity*, 96, cf. too 202).
85. As Joel Schlosser points out in "'Hope, Danger's Comforter': Thucydides, Hope, Politics," *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 1 (December 2012): 169–82, hope has both negative and positive nuances or forms in Thucydides; it is not necessarily delusory: "To follow hope in light of Thucydides means harnessing the necessary motivation for political success while tempering this motivation with contextual judgment and self-critical honesty" (181). A similar distinction can be made with regard to "fear" in Thucydides—see Orwin, *Humanity*, 170&n43.
86. See Orwin, *Humanity*, 140: "Voluntary, according to Thucydides' schema, is the [action of those] who, whatever their motive, are under no direct external constraint to act as they do."