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Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity

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Thucydides' Pericles concludes his first speech to the Athenian assembly with a rousing call to arms: "You must know that it is a necessity to be at war — and we will have opponents who are less eager if we accept it more willingly — and that, for both a private individual and a city, the greatest honors result from the greatest risks" (1.144.3).¹ As rhetorically powerful as this exhortation is, Pericles might seem fundamentally confused about the nature of necessity. As the sovereign judge of Athenian policy, the assembled citizen body may presently decide against this war by offering the concessions that the Spartans demand, and even to follow Pericles' counsel will be a choice the Athenians have made. In claiming that "it is a necessity to be at war (*anankê polemein*)," does Pericles deny this choice? It seems not, for Pericles is exhorting them to make one choice and not another. In what sense, then, is the war necessary?

These tensions are not just a mismatch between a speech and its practical context. Having insisted that war is a necessity, Pericles himself immediately turns to the vocabulary of freely chosen action. "We will have opponents who are less eager," he says, "if we accept it more willingly (*hekousioi mallon*)." This seems to imply that the Athenians might choose to resist

¹ All translations are our own unless otherwise noted. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ryan Balot, Seth Jaffe, Derin McLeod, Nikolaos Papazarkadas, and Darien Shanske.

what he has just identified as necessary, though it would be imprudent for them to do so. But necessity seems to render such prudential judgment moot. Pericles then insists that the Athenians will make themselves eligible for “the greatest honors (*megistai timai*)” by confronting “the greatest risks (*megistôn kindunôn*),” which in this case means to “accept more willingly” a war that is necessary. If the Athenians are confronting the greatest dangers willingly, we might understand how their valor could win them honor. But if they confront these dangers because they have to? We usually think that people deserve neither praise nor blame for what they do necessarily.

How are we to make sense of Pericles’ call to win honor by freely choosing a necessary war? Given Thucydides’ reverence for Pericles’ intellectual abilities (1.139.4, 2.65.8), it is unlikely that he is presenting him as incoherent. Perhaps Thucydides is instead depicting Pericles’ gift for political rhetoric, the art of persuading an audience of one’s counsel. How better to convince the Athenian people to go to war than by persuading them that it is at the same time necessary, prudent, and honorable? Thucydides’ own claim that the war was necessary (1.23.6; cf. 1.88.1), however, primes us to see that there is more to Pericles’ rhetoric than mere manipulation.

Pericles’ exhortation to war presents the modern reader with puzzles concerning the nature of necessitated action, a central category throughout Thucydides’ work. The upshot may not be that he misunderstands what we mean by necessity, but that we misunderstand what he means by it. Attending both to Thucydides’ text and to his intellectual context can resolve these puzzles and illuminate the meanings of political necessity therein. It can also help us to recognize claims of necessity that are in harmony with choice, responsibility, and honor.

Necessity and Choice

As in English, claims of necessity in ancient Greek could be made using a number of different words and indicating a number of different senses. In speaking of necessity, ancient Greeks frequently used the noun *anankê* and its related verb, adverb, and adjective. These words are usually translated unproblematically as “necessity,” “to necessitate,” etc., though sometimes “constraint” or “compulsion” is more appropriate. There are also other ways to refer to necessity in Greek. There are the impersonal verbs *chrê* and *dei*, both of which assert a need for some thing or some action. There are verbal adjectives and verbs in the imperative mood. There is the word *akôn*, which means that one’s action is against one’s wishes, and marks that one is acting according to some constraining necessity.

In Greek literature before Thucydides, the forces said to necessitate are diverse: physical constraint, the gods, military or political command, natural phenomena such as storms, imminent threat to one’s life or one’s family, poverty, persuasive speech, hunger, lust. In surveying such claims, we can see that many writers were comfortable speaking of actions as necessitated both when they were voluntary (*hekôn*) and when they were involuntary or undertaken unwillingly (*ouch hekôn*, *akôn*). These cases seem to be importantly different, however. In certain circumstances, there is literally nothing one can do to escape the force of an overpowering wind, an attacking enemy, or a swelling wave. In these cases of “hard necessity,” one can resist with all of one’s might and still get swept away. For the Greeks as for us, however, most claims that it is necessary for someone to do something are not claims of this type. Instead, they describe intentional action constrained in some significant way by powers over which one has little or no control. Most claims to necessity, that is, involve an action that is both *hekôn*, voluntary, and *akôn*, against one’s wishes. We can call such a claim one of *practical necessity*, being a claim

about what must be done in the circumstances one is in, given one's commitments and character. For example, it is in this way that the Trojan men are necessitated to stay and fight the approaching Achaeans outside the city wall (*Iliad* 8.57). With their wives and children inside, the Trojans do not fight involuntarily, say by being physically forced to fight; they choose to fight because they see no real alternative. Indeed, Homer's Greek suggests they *yearn* to fight (8.56, *memasan*). Surrendering their families to rape and slavery does not present itself as an option for them: it is not just that they prefer on balance to fight and quite possibly die, but that in some sense they must do so. They ardently choose what they must choose.

This talk of necessitated choice will look confused to those modern readers who assume that when there is necessity, there is no choice, and vice versa. Even in those cases that appear most like hard necessity, however, we see that Thucydides is describing necessitated choice, not necessity precluding choice. Thus, for instance, in the final use of an *anankê* word in the text, Thucydides relates that Mindarus was forced (*anankastheis*) to put into port at Icarus after he was caught in a storm (8.99.1). Thucydides is not saying that the storm drove Mindarus into port as a matter of hard necessity. He is instead saying that, because of the storm, Mindarus was compelled to make for port and seek safety rather than carrying on to his destination.

Martin Ostwald (Ostwald 1988: 7-19), in a notable word study of *anankê*, has convincingly argued that there is not a single case of hard necessity to be found associated with this term in Thucydides. He concludes that Thucydides adhered to an understanding of necessity that Ostwald (like von Fritz before him) calls "psychological" and that we might label "interpretive": for Thucydides, necessity was the result of beliefs and attitudes that led agents to think they had but one course of action open to them. Mindarus' commitment to the preservation of his fleet and his belief that the storm threatened this go unmentioned by Thucydides, but they

must be assumed if the claim to necessitation is to make sense. In other cases, Thucydides more clearly spells out the underlying conditions of practical necessitation. For instance, it was the combination of the Mytileneans' desire to revolt from Athens, Athenian awareness of their plan, and Mytilenean unpreparedness that forced (*anankasthentes*) them to revolt before they were ready (3.2.1-3.4.2). Both the force of circumstances and the agent's aims and beliefs (not least about these circumstances) were essential to account for the necessitated action.

Necessity, Nature, and the Supernatural

It is important not to misstate the implications of Ostwald's conclusion, which do not extend to a general claim that a conception of necessary causation is absent from Thucydides. Thucydides clearly endorses and employs the idea of what we would call a necessary cause. In explaining a series of tidal waves in 426 BCE, for instance, he identifies earthquakes as their cause (*aition*), concluding that "without an earthquake, it seems to me, such a thing would not have happened" (3.89.5). But Thucydides does not characterize this kind of causal relationship in the language of necessity, though we habitually do so. In this way, Thucydides implicitly but consistently differentiates between the causal forces at work in the natural world and the necessity that compels human action through human judgment.

If the meaning of necessity in Thucydides' text is not equivalent to the modern conception of causal determinism, we might think that there is instead a more ancient and pre-scientific idea at work: necessity as supernaturally determined fate. Thucydides would have known this conception of necessity well from its prominence in myth, epic, and tragedy. In this milieu, *Anankê* was sometimes represented as a divinity. In visual art, Necessity is winged but intently walking in the same direction as a strong wind (Sidorova 2001: 34 and plate 30, lekythos

dated to c. 470-460 BCE). In a self-consciously archaic myth, Plato (*Republic* 10 617b-e; cf. Aeschylus?, *Prometheus Bound* 515-16, 103-5, 936) identifies Necessity as the mother of the Fates, one of whom says that each person is responsible for and necessarily bound to his or her own choice of life. The tragic vision depended on conceptions of Fate darkly unspooling according to Necessity. Oedipus must live out his fate, as must Achilles, Odysseus, and Ajax. Humans must, by the nature of their condition, be ruled by the gods. Yet, in epic and tragedy, human life is depicted as over-determined, agents freely choosing their way to divinely determined ends. Given the richness of this association between necessity, choice, and divine determination, we might profitably wonder whether this sense is at work in Thucydides' text.

Ultimately, however, there is no reason to think that Thucydides believed in supernatural necessitation or used this understanding of necessity. The idea does appear at least once in the text. Responding to the plague, and repudiating accusations that his policies were to blame for it, Pericles exhorts: "One must endure the acts of gods as a matter of necessity (*anankaiôs*)" (2.64.2). The similarity of this statement to lines in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (147) and Aeschylus' *Persae* (293) suggests that this was a deeply traditional sentiment (see also Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1316-17; Euripides, *Phoenissae* 382, 1763). We can understand why Pericles would have drawn on this rhetoric in this situation, especially given the strong association between plague and divine resentment in the traditional Greek worldview. But there is no evidence to suggest that Thucydides himself adopted a supernatural explanation of the plague, or of any other aspect of the war. His references to necessity surveyed above are to choices constrained by human circumstances and beliefs, not the cryptic workings of the divine.

There is one important conception of necessity that sits awkwardly with the paradigm of practical necessitation, however, and resembles tragic over-determination in important respects.

In the Melian Dialogue, most famously, the Athenians contend that a natural imperative compels all people to rule whenever they have the power to do so (5.105.2; cf. 4.61.5). The universality of the claim for this “necessity of nature” (*phuseôs anankaias*) distinguishes it from context-dependent claims of chosen practical necessity.

There is something recognizably tragic about this framing of a psychological drive in terms of necessity. In the surviving works of Euripides we find with particular frequency the claim that *erôs*, or lust, acts on humans as a necessitating force. This claim is importantly different, of course: *erôs* is not only a compelling physical urge, but also the tool with which Aphrodite achieves her ends. The necessity of lust is supernatural, as a number of Euripidean characters claim (Jason, Phaedra’s nurse, Helen), not just psychological. In this way it looks to be “harder” than if it were only a psychological impulse, for one is acting under the compulsion of an external and implacable force, the god’s command. It would seem to be an unavoidable fate, overpowering even the most determined efforts to escape it.

Euripides nonetheless depicts characters who struggle against this simultaneously psychological and supernatural necessity. Phaedra, for instance, refers to her desire for her son-in-law Hippolytus, as well as the ruin that it is causing her, as occurring without either of them intending it (*Hippolytus* 319, *philos m’ apollus’ ouch hekousan ouch hekôn*). Phaedra’s lust looks to be a case of hard necessity, imposed as it is by an implacable goddess. Yet Hippolytus is entirely unyielding in the face of *erôs* and Phaedra valiantly resists acting on her urges, holing up in the palace and trying to starve herself to death. Although neither escape Aphrodite’s ultimate plan for them, both characters demonstrate that lust, however controlling it may feel, is a different kind of compulsion from external, physical necessitation.

In Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, performed in the spring of 415 BCE, a few months after the Athenian conquest of Melos (surely a significant context for that performance, despite the doubts of van Erp Taalman Kip 1987 and others), we see the supernatural necessity of *erôs* being directly contested. Here, Helen faces off against Hecuba in an *agôn* over the former's culpability for the war (906-1032). Helen pleads that she cannot be held responsible for running off with Paris: Aphrodite gave her as a prize, and when Paris came to Sparta, he had Aphrodite's powers at hand, acting as her appointed avenger (*alastôr*). How could she resist? How could she be blamed for failing to resist?

Why did I do it? What made me run away from home
with the stranger, and betray my country and my hearth?
Challenge the goddess then; show your strength greater than Zeus'
who has the other gods in his power, and still is slave
to Aphrodite alone! Shall I not be forgiven? (946-50, tr. Lattimore 2012)

In the same scene, Hecuba characterizes Zeus as a "natural necessity," or *anankê phuseos* (886), a phrase very similar to that of Thucydides' Athenians in Melos (5.105.2). Nonetheless, she dismisses the idea that Helen's lust is supernaturally determined and to be forgiven on account of its necessity. Helen and Hecuba dramatically present necessity's two faces: the powerful force that constrains us to act in a certain way, and yet, because of this, also the powerful excuse that can be used to try to justify our wrongful actions. Their *agôn* suggests that the exculpatory power of psychological urges was, at the very least, contested in Athens during the final decades of the fifth century.

Even before the Melian affair, to justify or deflect attention from wrongdoing by arguing from the necessity of nature could be derided as chicanery. In the famous debate in which a personified Unjust Argument confutes and converts his rival Just Argument, Aristophanes has Unjust Argument explain his techniques:

I will go on from there to the necessities of nature (*tas tês phuseôs anankas*). You've erred, you've fallen in love, you've had a bit of an affair, and then you've been caught. You're done for, because you're not able to argue. But if you become my pupil you can indulge your nature, leap and laugh, think nothing shameful. If by chance you are seized as an adulterer, this is what you will reply to the husband: that you have done nothing wrong (*hôs ouden êdikêkas*). Then make reference to Zeus, saying that even he is unable to resist lust and women, and how can you, a mortal, be stronger than a god? (*Clouds* 1075-82, tr. in Sommerstein 1982, modified; cf. Gorgias, *Helen* 6-21)

Necessities drive history as they drive tragedy, but the glib application of necessity as a universal solvent of all responsibility is recognized as pernicious farce. When Thucydides attributes to the Athenians at Melos an appeal to a comprehensive justification for acting on natural impulses, Athenian audiences had long been laughing at such self-serving rationalizations of injustice.

Necessity, Responsibility, and Character

Despite his conviction that people share a common human nature (2.50.1, 3.82.2, [3.84.2]; cf. 1.22.4, 5.68.2), Thucydides recognized that different communities possessed and cultivated different collective characters (8.96.5), which in turn influenced how their members interpreted and pursued their interests. Thus, despite the universal pull of self-interest, the diversity of political cultures precluded any universal model of human nature that could explain human action in all of its variability and specificity. To account for why individuals or groups acted as they did in a given situation, Thucydides suggests that it is crucial to know something about their particular character, not just that they are humans pursuing their interests.

Thucydides frames the Athenians and Spartans as peoples of disparate national characters already in the *Archaeology*, but the most vivid portrait of this contrast comes in the Corinthians' speech at the Spartan congress (1.68-71). The Athenians are portrayed as a recklessly active

people, wanting what they don't have and constantly trying to get it. For them, to pursue one's interests means to try to acquire more. The Spartans, on the other hand, are portrayed as inactive and conservative, a people preoccupied with keeping what they already have. Both groups feel the pull of nature's necessity, but they feel it pull in different directions. The Corinthians thus characterize the Athenians and Spartans as fundamentally different in how they respond to necessity when it is felt. The Spartans dither, refraining from doing what they must for as long as they can (1.70.2). The Athenians, on the other hand, pursue what is necessary (*ta deonta*) as keenly as if they were going to a festival (1.70.8). While the Corinthians have a practical motive to paint such contrasting pictures of these collective personalities, Thucydides himself endorsed the contrast and employed it to great explanatory effect (see esp. 8.96.5).

A number of political theorists have identified contrasting outlooks on necessitated action and the demands of justice as the most important difference between the Spartans and the Athenians. According to Clifford Orwin (Orwin 1994), the Spartans maintain that humans have the choice to act justly or not and therefore always bear the burden of moral responsibility for their actions. The Athenians, however, characteristically hold that necessity defines the human condition, as the strong are compelled by fear, honor, and expediency to rule over the weak. The compulsion of these psychological forces, Orwin's Athenians suggest, exculpates them from injustice committed on behalf of the empire, as it does anyone driven to action by such forces. Given that they claim that fear, honor, and expediency are ubiquitous motivations for political action, this "Athenian thesis" suggests to Orwin a radical loss of moral responsibility from the political world.

Whether or not Thucydides blamed the Athenians would thus seem to hinge on whether he believed that they had to act as they did. The previous section suggested, however, that

Thucydides and his readers may have doubted the natural necessity of ruling whenever one has the power to do so, thus leaving rulers responsible for their rule. Moreover, there is reason to think that an assumption of the broad incompatibility of necessity and responsibility is either a modern projection onto Thucydides' text, or a generalization of a position that would have been seen as tendentious. Consider again the context of Athenian tragedy, which frequently presents characters who live out their lives according to the necessity of a divine plan and are nevertheless held responsible for their actions. Although Oedipus, for example, is compelled by the gods to murder his father and commit incest with his mother, he is deeply shamed by these actions, and the gods punish all of Thebes for his transgressions with a devastating plague. For Oedipus, necessity and responsibility form a tragic union, not an antithetical pair (Williams 1993, esp. ch. 6; for an application to Thucydides, see Balot 2015: 23-26). Sophocles' presentation of Oedipus suggests that Thucydides and his contemporaries could hold the Athenians responsible even for necessitated transgressions.

In thinking of Thucydides as a sort of tragic critic of Athenian democracy, it is important to remember that in fifth-century Greek culture, tragic necessity was not only a vehicle for blame. It was also a vehicle for honor and greatness. The capacity to endure supernaturally necessitated sufferings was a cardinal virtue of the Greek hero, both in Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy, as was the capacity to cause great suffering for others. One of the epithets of Odysseus, for instance, was *polutlas*, "much-enduring" or "much-suffering," and he can claim to have endured as much hardship as anyone (*Odyssey* 7.211-12). Achilles, likewise, endures god-sent sufferings over the course of the *Iliad*; his very name suggests grief or pain (*achos*) (Nagy 1979: 69-93), while his fame depends on his own destruction (*Iliad* 9.410-16). As a tragic hero,

Thucydides' Athenians, even if compelled, would be eligible not only for blame, but everlasting glory.

Can such a tragic perspective be found in Thucydides' text? It is tempting to move from the argument that Thucydides innovates by extending the scientific approach of the Hippocratic medical writers to social and political action (cf. Cochrane 1929, Ober 2006, Thomas 2012) to the idea that he sought to break radically from the methods and explanatory structures of the literary tradition. The latter position appears to gain support from Thucydides' early polemic against previous prose writers and poets (1.21-22). But Thucydides is very specific about his objection: they distorted their accounts in order to make them more attractive for their audiences (1.21.1). As a result, they were inaccurate and unreliable. Thucydides' major contribution is to be that he will privilege accuracy over the qualities that make a work immediately pleasing (1.22.4). We find here no censure of traditional modes of heroic explanation or evaluation.

Far from wholly rejecting a heroic or tragic perspective, Thucydides shows from his very first sentence that his work is motivated by and oriented to greatness. He asserts that he began the project of recording the war because he "expected it to be great (*megan*) and more worthy of account (*axiologôtaton*) than any before it" (1.1.1). This expectation, he explains, was based upon the build-up to the war being "the greatest mobilization (*kinêsis megistê*: see Rusten 2015) among the Greeks and some part of the barbarians; one might say, among the greater part of humankind" (1.1.2). Thucydides, like his predecessors, chose to write about a great war, thinking greatness most worthy of account. His war differed from theirs most importantly, he says, because it was even greater than any before it — an affirmation that only confirms that he shares with prior authors of great wars the heroic metric of value.

Following soon after this opening characterization of the war's greatness, Thucydides continues to work in a recognizably tragic mode, underlining the relationship between superlative greatness and unsurpassed suffering:

Of earlier events, the greatest to have happened was the Persian War, and yet that was swiftly decided by two naval battles and two land battles. The length of this war was far greater, and more suffering (*pathêmata*) was endured by the Greeks in this than in any comparable period of time. For never had so many cities been laid waste once captured, either by the barbarians or by the Greeks warring against each other...nor had there been so many men exiled and murdered, some due to war and others to civil strife. (1.23.1-2)

This passage has given commentators pause (e.g. Connor 1984: 30-32), suggesting to them that Thucydides must be subverting the traditional understanding of greatness by making it synonymous with suffering. Thucydides may indeed innovate in how he frames the suffering of this war, but the connection between greatness and suffering is neither new nor subversive. Epic and tragedy had always focused on the fearsome mental and physical traumas of greatness, and the greatest of heroes are marked out by exceptional suffering: Heracles, Oedipus, Achilles, Hector, Odysseus. Thucydides' primary theme of greatness and suffering is characteristic of the heroic worldview, though like other authors in early Greek literature he has a distinctive approach to it. Integral to Thucydides' innovation is his deep reflection on the *dêmos* itself as heroic, as the collective takes on the power, honor, and depravity of the heroic king (see Hoekstra 2016 on this theme).

Glory, greatness, and suffering again reinforce one another in Thucydides' analysis of Athenian defeat after the death of Pericles (2.65.5-13). Thucydides lauds Pericles for leading Athens to its greatest height during peacetime and for accurately understanding its capacities in times of war. For proof that Athens really was as great as Pericles had said it was, and that the

Athenians were capable of outlasting the Spartans as he said they could, Thucydides points to the extraordinary amount of suffering that they were able to endure before being overcome:

Having suffered ruin in Sicily, in the greater part of the navy, and in other war materials as well, and with the city already in a state of civil strife, [the Athenians] nevertheless endured against their original enemies for [eight] more years, and with them the Sicilians as well, and against the still greater number of tributary allies who rebelled, and later against Cyrus, the son of the Persian King, who joined as ally against them and provided money for the Peloponnesians to build a navy, and they did not give in until they were led by personal quarrels to attack themselves and were finally defeated. (2.65.12; cf. 2.64.3)

Thucydides' style here accentuates the almost endless amount of endurance that the Athenians demonstrated before they were vanquished at last. With each relentless clause of this protracted sentence, stretched to its syntactical limits with lists and additions, the Greek reader feels each successive blow that landed on Athens. It is thus all the more impressive that the Athenians endured for years against these mounting odds. Their unremitting opponents cannot break the Athenians, and the passage leaves open the possibility that they could have held out against their external enemies indefinitely if they had not turned on themselves. And Thucydides further suggests that the Athenians even endured civil war for some time, adding to the awesomeness of their resilience. Thucydides demonstrates that the Athenians, pitted against the greater part of the known world, and eventually against themselves, far exceeded any of the figures of epic and tragedy in the capacity for heroic endurance. It was fitting that, in the greatest of wars, the greatest of heroes should fall.

Necessity, Imperialism, and Injustice

Some have perceived an underlying principle that unites the Athenians' arguments concerning the relationship between empire, necessity, and justice. This principle is thought to be revealed in

the Athenians' first speech in the work, at the Spartan Congress. The Athenians there assert the maxim that "one is altogether blameless when looking after oneself (*to xumpheronta ... eutithesthai*) amid the greatest dangers" (1.75.5). This is a premise of the Athenians' argument that they are not to be blamed for their empire. The Athenians argue that they are in "the greatest dangers" precisely because of their empire, as the imperial subjects are hostile and rebellious. Should they lose imperial control, they would face the immediate revenge of their former subjects, and fear of this prospect compels them (like any other autocratic ruler) to maintain their rule (1.75.4; cf. 1.75.1-3). The Athenians contend that hatred of their rule itself compels them to continue it, and that they are absolved of any associated injustice because of the grave risk they face.

This argument echoes elsewhere in the text (e.g. 2.63.1-3, 3.37.2), but we should be wary of identifying it as the essential Athenian position. For the text suggests that there may not be an essential Athenian argument, as the Athenians' claims repeatedly change in both subtle and significant ways. This is especially notable when we look at the work as a whole, but is even true within the speech at Sparta itself.

Prior to arguing for the necessity of maintaining their empire, the Athenians argue that it was necessary to acquire it. The source of the necessity to acquire empire was not, as it could not then have been, the hatred of the imperial subjects. Rather, the Athenians argue, they found themselves confronted by the confluence of three different circumstances that gave them no choice but to take the empire: the Persian threat, Sparta's departure from the anti-Persian alliance, and the invitation to replace the Spartans as leader of this alliance (1.75.2). In this situation, they argue, they were forced (*katênankasthêmen*) to establish their empire, "first by fear, then by honor, and finally by advantage (*ôphelias*)" (1.75.3). Pointing to the perilous

situation that they were in, as well as the motivating force of fear, the Athenians look here to be making an argument from practical necessity. The inclusion of honor and advantage as necessitating forces, however, makes this argument an unusually encompassing one. Rather than using the argument from necessity for its reductive clarity, identifying a single value or aim such as self-preservation to trump all others, it suggests that the acquisition of empire was overdetermined for the Athenians by overlapping claims of practical necessity. This suggestion is simultaneously rendered doubtful by claiming that sources of action that appear to be optional (such as advantage) truly necessitate.

This emphasis on fear, honor, and advantage is picked up when the Athenians argue for the natural necessity of the rule of the strong over the weak:

We have done nothing amazing or deviant from normal human behavior if we accepted an empire that was being given and did not give it up, overcome (*nikêthentes*) by the greatest — honor, fear, and advantage; nor in turn are we the first to do such a thing, but rather it has always been the case that the weaker are coerced (*kateirgesthai*) by the stronger. (1.76.2)

The participle *nikêthentes*, here translated as “overcome,” suggests the hard necessity of coercion through physical domination. Thucydides accentuates this suggestion with the adjectival phrase “the greatest” (*tôn megistôn*), which identifies who has overcome the Athenians. In making the adjective modify a noun, as English demands, many translators look ahead to what sits in apposition: honor, fear, and advantage. They thus suggest that we read this as “greatest motivations.” Modern editors of Thucydides’ Greek text have also tried to define *tôn megistôn* by inserting a “three” (*triôn*) into the adjectival phrase. But both attempts at greater specificity undercut the rhetorical magnification suggested by the Greek: *tôn megistôn*, left by itself, puts the reader in mind of the greatest possible conquerors, the most potent forces of the natural, supernatural, and human world. These psychological forces are thus depicted as if they were the

hardest of necessities, suggesting that the Athenians would not be any less responsible for their actions if forced by the hand of god. The Athenians paint themselves as at once the stronger and the weaker party, coerced to coerce.

The Athenians build onto this argument from natural necessity a claim that they should be commended for the justice that they have demonstrated in the administration of their empire. “They are worthy of praise,” they assert, “who are more just than their present power requires of them when following human nature and ruling over others” (1.76.3). But this move would seem to contradict the ubiquitousness of necessity in imperial life and the consequent exculpation of imperial injustice. If the Athenians are capable of the ethical responsibility needed to be just, how can they claim to be excused of all injustice?

We do not find a clear and programmatic statement of the Athenians’ position in their speech at Sparta, but rather three different arguments that overlap even as they are at odds with one another. This pattern of parallelism, tension, and over-determination is characteristic of the ways in which the Athenians argue from necessity, both in individual speeches and across the text. Despite echoes in theme and form, their arguments are always changing.

Pericles offers a fine example of this pattern. In his third speech, he too argues that it is practically necessary to maintain the empire, but he does so to different ends. Like the Athenians in Sparta, he insists that it is prohibitively dangerous to give up the empire, on account of the animosity their rule has engendered (2.63.1). But Pericles does not use this argument to excuse Athenian wrongdoing. Rather, he boldly says to the Athenians, “you already hold your empire like a tyranny, one that seems unjust to take but perilous to let go” (2.63.2). Pericles suggests that the Athenians must stay the course even if it was embarked upon unjustly.

Another of Pericles' arguments from practical necessity is based on honor rather than self-preservation. The logic of the argument is simple: the Athenians must stand up to the Spartans and fight because their freedom and honor are at stake (1.140.2, 1.141.1; cf. 2.63.1). To give in to the Spartans' demands is tantamount to becoming their slaves, Pericles argues, placing the honor that the Athenians had accrued since the Persian Wars on the line. The Athenians cannot give this up, Pericles asserts, and thus there is no choice but to fight.

With this argument, Pericles again departs from the simple idea that necessity exculpates, and he does so in a heroic register. He begins his first speech with the imperative "you must not yield (*mê eikein*) to the Peloponnesians," and this thought echoes throughout his two assembly speeches (1.140.1, 1.141.1, 2.64.3; cf. 2.60.1, 2.61.1). As Bernard Knox (Knox 1964: 15-17) noted, the refusal to yield (*eikein*) is characteristic of the Sophoclean hero. Pericles insists that in following the compelling force of honor and refusing to yield, the Athenians are acting admirably and deserve praise (2.61.1). "It seems right (*eikos*) for you to stand up for the honor (*tôi timômenôi*) the city receives from ruling an empire, honor that glorifies you all," he tells the Athenians, "and for you not to shrink from the labors, or not to pursue the honors (*tas timas*)" (2.63.1). Pericles makes clear that the Athenians effectively must follow the pull of honor, which requires stubbornly heroic action liable to praise and blame. He states that the Athenians will win everlasting glory for themselves by standing up to the Spartans, becoming the envy of every active man (2.64.3-5). At the same time, Pericles accepts that they will incur blame for this course of action. Men of an idle disposition will disparage the project, he suggests, and contemporaries will find the Athenians odious. Pericles suggests that this blame is not simply nullified by Athenian necessity. It will be greatly overshadowed by Athenian glory in the future, however, and is therefore worth incurring (2.64.4-5).

In the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians do reject blame for their empire. They dismiss justice and injustice altogether, as irrelevant to a party so superior in power (5.89.1). To the Melians' characterization of them as unjust, the Athenians reply only in terms of necessity, not deigning to specify whether such necessity means that what they are doing is just, merely excusable, or beyond categories of culpability. In addition to their argument from "necessity of nature" discussed above, the Athenians depend on the idea that the hatred of their subjects practically necessitates aggressive actions to maintain their empire (5.91.1, 5.97.1). They assert that their subjects interpret the persistence of Melian neutrality as a symbol of Athenian weakness, making their rule over these subjects less secure. The Athenians thus claim to be compelled by their fear of their subjects to subdue the Melians even though they pose no immediate physical threat. Unlike both Pericles and the Athenians at Sparta, therefore, the Athenians at Melos insist (5.95.1, 5.97.1) that the argument for the necessity of maintaining empire implies a further imperative of imperial expansion.

In the Sicilian Debate, Alcibiades articulates another argument for the practical necessity of imperial expansion based on self-preservation. As others do, Alcibiades argues that the empire is in a constant state of existential threat. He does not, however, identify the imperial subjects as the source of this threat. He instead asserts that the Athenian empire's future existence is critically threatened by other imperial powers like themselves, as each seeks to absorb the others (6.18.2-3; cf. 2.63.1, 5.91.1). All aspiring or established imperial powers, Alcibiades suggests, are on a collision course with one another in a contest for survival and supremacy. In such a world, preemptive action against potentially threatening powers such as Syracuse is necessary (*anankê*), "for we are in danger of being ruled by others if we do not rule" (6.18.3). Alcibiades is silent on the question of whether this necessity exculpates the Athenians. Like Pericles before

him, Alcibiades is not concerned with the justice of Athenian action, but with convincing the Athenians that they must go to war.

In contrast, Athenians elsewhere agree with their representatives at Sparta that necessity exculpates. Yet these are not straightforward reiterations of the Athenian position in Sparta. For example, Cleon argues that the Mytileneans could be forgiven for their rebellion if they had been forced to revolt by the necessity of their situation, but in fact they revolted out of hubris and therefore deserve punishment (3.39.2-6). Rather than appealing to necessity to excuse the Athenians, Cleon uses it as a foil to accuse the Mytileneans, thus harnessing necessity in a different way to justify the use of Athenian imperial power.

Perhaps the strongest claim of the exculpatory force of necessity comes in the affair of the Athenian occupation of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delium. The Athenians assert that “it is reasonable (*eikos*) that anything done because of a formidable military threat is forgivable, even before the god; for altars are a place of refuge for those who commit involuntary errors (*akousiôn hamartêmatôn*), and we reserve the name ‘crime’ for those bad deeds that were uncompelled (*tois mê anankêi kakois*)” (4.98.6; cf. 3.40.1). This is another articulation of the idea that whatever is done in the face of imminent physical threat is coerced and therefore excusable. The Athenians extend the exculpatory scope of the claim even further with their claim that the god would pardon action thus compelled. Unlike the Athenians in Sparta, the Athenians at Delium are not concerned with justifying their empire at large, and this argument makes no reference to the structural sources of practical necessity inherent in empire. Rather, the Athenians are defending themselves against very specific charges relating to their occupation of Delium, and the threat they face is a superior Boeotian army waiting to engage them in battle. In speaking about the necessity that they act under, then, they are not speaking about the necessities felt by

stronger powers at all. Rather, they take up the position of the weaker power, of men who are staring death in the face.

As this should make clear, there is a conspicuous diversity in the Athenians' arguments from necessity. These arguments do not consistently feature exculpation, empire, or the same source of necessity. What is less clear is what Thucydides is doing amid all of this variety. Is there supposed to be a right version of this argument that many Athenians get wrong? Are we seeing the Athenians change their understanding as they become increasingly drunk on power? Or are we simply seeing the Athenians make whatever arguments they can, given the different situations that they are in?

Rhetorical Necessity

The variability of Athenian appeals to necessity leads to the suspicion that their underlying commitment is not to a particular view of necessity, but to saying what they think will best bring about their aims in speaking. Interpretations of Thucydides offered in the last fifty years would have us wonder further whether the appeal to necessity (and to reality more generally) is just a powerful rhetorical move in an ineluctably discursive universe. For most of the twentieth century, Thucydides was presented as focused on *erga* rather than *logos*, scientifically seeking to report the truth of events and excavate the underlying realities of power. On this view, the speeches in the text were seen as either epiphenomenal or – in some cases – as revealing authorial belief. More recently, Thucydidean scholarship took a linguistic turn. The speeches came to be read less as statements of the speakers' or author's belief and more as rhetorical constructions by Thucydidean characters. Even Thucydides' presentation of the *erga* of the war is a *logos*, it was emphasized, and he uses his own speech to manipulate the reader's expectations

and emotional states (Stahl 1966; Parry 1969 and Parry 1972; Connor 1977). It may be tempting to conclude that Thucydides gives us *logos* all the way down, that even his own apparent objectivity is but the adoption of “an authorial stance, a device, a mode by which the author presented himself to the reader” (Connor 1984: 6, 8).

Early in his work, Thucydides states that the speeches he relates are some mixture of the actual policy (*gnômê*) of the historical speaker and his own judgment of “what was most necessary for each speaker to say” (1.22.1, *ta deonta malist’ eipein*). This reveals little about the logic driving Thucydides’ own contribution. He says that the speeches were written according to “what was most necessary” but apparently leaves open the meaning or kind of necessity. Colin Macleod (Macleod 1983: 52) has suggested that Thucydides’ Greek is not as vague as it seems. Referring to Gorgias’ *Helen* (2) and Plato’s *Phaedrus* (234e6), Macleod maintains that *ta deonta eipein* specifically refers to the sophistic art of saying what was necessary to persuade an audience. On this reading, Thucydides programmatically reveals to his reader that the speeches are constructed according to a logic of rhetorical necessity.

Some claims of necessity within the speeches are themselves readily describable as rhetorical necessities. Speakers frequently make reference to the necessity that they say certain things, or that they say them in a particular way. The Corinthians begin with an emphatic assertion that it is necessary to respond to the Corcyraeans’ accusations against them and to prove that they are in the right (1.37.1). Diodotus states that one must lie in order to be believed in the Athenian assembly (3.43.2). The Melians say that it is necessary to argue in terms of interest as the Athenians demand (5.90.1). In beginning his speech in Sparta, Alcibiades insists that it is first necessary to address the slanders made against him (6.89.1). Rhetorical necessity of this kind is similar to the practical necessity of which examples were given earlier, though the

necessitating end is not self-preservation or honor in the first instance, but the need to persuade or otherwise motivate one's audience.

Such persuasion is always in the service of further aims, however, and the need to persuade an audience can even be a straightforward case of the practical necessity of self-preservation. In the case of the Melians, for instance (and in some way too for the Plataeans), persuasion could have meant survival. Those who failed to persuade were instead sentenced to death by their audience. Death is not confined to discourse, and whatever the nature of Thucydides' project, it must depend on a conviction that such actions and events occurred not merely in speech but in deed. The consequences are not only discursive, but discourse has real consequences. Indeed, that is *why* Thucydides gives us the *logoi* of historical actors, and why he gave us his own *logos*, which he hoped above all else would be useful for future readers (1.22.4).

Were we to take Thucydides' speakers at their word, we might be astonished at their view of the pervasiveness of constraints on action. It is clear, however, that necessity is frequently invoked because it is thought to be rhetorically effective. We have suggested that a tragic conception of necessity that is compatible with responsibility is at work in Thucydides' text. Nonetheless, the Athenians and others sometimes draw on a judicial conception of responsibility precluded by necessity: defending against accusations of injustice, they claim necessity to disavow responsibility and avert the consequences of blame. In addition, speakers sometimes claim necessity when exhorting their audience to do something. To convince people that they face a situation of practical necessity is to make them believe that they have only one choice open to them; and this is not merely to describe but to create a situation of practical necessity. Believing that they must, they must.

None of this implies that the speakers in Thucydides who make necessity claims are all or only deploying them to manipulate their audience in such ways. Nor does it mean that necessity is merely rhetorical for Thucydides. During his own narration of the war's events, Thucydides often writes of people who are practically necessitated. We have no good reason to doubt the sincerity of Thucydides when he describes the practical necessitation of Mindarus, or invokes necessity in his own voice on other occasions. He so describes a range of hard realities that drive human decisions, as when the long-besieged Potidaeans are driven to cannibalism (2.70.1), Theseus compelled the residents of rural Attica to accept the rule of the city of Athens (2.15.2), and the Athenian subjects before the war find themselves in pressing circumstances (1.99.1). And in his analysis of *stasis*, Thucydides more generally identifies necessity as a characteristic feature of war, providing an explanation immediately grounded in the realities of conflict for why claims of necessity are so pervasive in his work (3.82.2).

Thucydides recognized that necessities were frequent in political life, especially in the contexts of empire and war. Necessity remains the product of straitened circumstances, however, as found above all in war (3.82.2). Such circumstances mean that there is greater motivation to make claims of necessity regardless of their truth, but also that more claims of necessity may truthfully be made.

Necessity, War, and History

We can finally return to Pericles. We wondered at the outset about the consistency of Pericles' counsel to the Athenians to choose what was necessary. This should now appear as an unproblematic claim of practical necessity. We also asked about the coherence of his assertion that the Athenians stood to gain honor by willingly pursuing a war that was necessary. We are

now in a position to read Pericles' claim as an exhortation to act heroically in the face of necessity. But we may still wonder about the truth status of Pericles' claim that the war was in fact a necessity.

It is apparent why it would have been rhetorically advantageous for Pericles to frame the war in terms of necessity. Whether or not it was necessary, if he could bring the Athenians to believe that it was, they would have no choice but to follow him to war. It may be tempting to assume that Pericles did not believe the claim, but exhorted the Athenians to war for his own ends or his perception of theirs. But Thucydides gives us good reason to think otherwise. He directly characterizes Pericles as a leader of superlative integrity (2.65.8), for instance; and most importantly, he offers a claim about the cause of the war that reinforces Pericles' own.

Emphasizing that it is a statement of personal belief (*hêgoumai*), Thucydides identifies "the truest cause" of the war in terms of necessity: "The Athenians were becoming great and causing fear in the Lacedaemonians, which necessitated (*anankasai*) war" (1.23.6). Commentators have long debated whether Thucydides here attributes responsibility for the war to Athens or Sparta. Ostwald (Ostwald 1988: 1-5), however, has convincingly argued that Thucydides had neither city in mind individually, but both together. It was the combination of Athenian greatness and Spartan fear that made war unavoidable, as it made it practically necessary for each city to confront the other.

Thucydides' identification of the truest cause is abbreviated, and later in the text he elaborates these basic elements. For example, it emerges that Pericles himself is critical to Athenian greatness (2.65.5), as well as serving a more direct role in necessitating the war. Athenian character and circumstance also contributed significantly to Athenian greatness, and to the necessity of war. The Athenians were active, competitive, and — as they brilliantly displayed

in the Persian Wars — heroically stubborn. Their acquisition, defense, and expansion of the empire bred conflict with the Spartan alliance, to which they also refused to submit. Character and circumstance thus combined to compel the Athenians to confront the Spartans. Thucydides' Pericles sees this clearly and articulates this realization in such a way that the Athenians can see it clearly, too. Pericles plays a vital role in compelling the Athenians to war by teaching them to see the necessities already inherent in their situation.

We might profitably wonder whether this characterization of what Pericles is doing for the Athenians can help us understand what Thucydides is doing for his reader. Thucydides states that his goal was to write a work that would be judged “useful” (1.22.4, *ôphelima*). Interpreters have long disagreed over what this means. For much of the twentieth century, and also by some recent scholars, it was thought that Thucydides wrote with the intention of providing a manual for political leaders (Finley 1942: 50; cf. Ober 2006, Raaflaub 2013). In Thucydides, according to this interpretation, one was to find the fundamental patterns or necessary laws shaping political life, the recognition of which was to allow agents to control the political process of their own day. On the other hand, there have been more pessimistic interpretations. Parry (Parry 1981 [1957]: 103-13) and Stahl (Stahl 2003 [1966]: ch. 2) argued, for instance, that Thucydides' usefulness was not practical but strictly intellectual, helping his reader see the past “clearly” (1.22.4). Others (cf. Connor 1984, Hawthorn 2014) go further, suggesting that Thucydides denied there were enduring patterns to be seen in human affairs, and that he taught his reader to recognize instead the subtle hand of chance and contingency, as well as the folly of those who tried to control the flow of events with reductive theory.

Like Pericles, Thucydides sought to teach his audience to see the necessities inherent in their situations. This recognition is intellectual, but has immediate practical consequences. Such

readers will judge differently, causing them to act differently, causing politics to unfold differently. Most forcefully, if they believe themselves to be compelled, they will be compelled. Yet, necessity is not presented as a problem that can be solved. Rather, it is something to be endured, and which it is praiseworthy to endure. But necessity is best and most laudably endured when it is accurately identified as such. In this, Thucydides' text promises to be of great use to its reader.

In helping his readers to recognize necessity at work, Thucydides can compel them to action. In this sense, the text itself can necessitate. Yet it must then be true that the text possesses liberatory power as well. Just as Pericles is able to compel his audience by persuading them that they are compelled, so Thucydides can release his audience from compulsion when showing them that they are not necessitated in the way that they thought they were. Recognizing again and again that the Athenians and others did not have to do all that they did, Thucydides' readers can be freed from making similar mistakes. They can also be freed from the manipulations of political leaders who falsely invoke necessity for their own ends. Practical necessity follows from believing that there is only one choice; practical liberty follows from realizing that there are other ways to go.

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