

4-1-2019

## Thucydides on Strength and Justice in the Melian and Mytilenian Debates

Molly Wancewicz  
*Rice University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wancewicz, Molly (2019) "Thucydides on Strength and Justice in the Melian and Mytilenian Debates," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2019.090109

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol9/iss1/9>

This essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

## Thucydides on Strength and Justice in the Melian and Mytilenian Debates

Molly Wancewicz

Rice University (Houston, TX)

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* provides incisive historical analysis of the clash between the Athenian and Spartan alliances during the fifth century BCE. Through his depiction of the Mytilenian debate and the Melian dialogue, Thucydides analyzes prioritization of self-interest, and more specifically, the idea that might makes right. Thucydides's discussion of these topics indicates that he largely disagrees with the positions taken by the Athenians in these debates.

Thucydides develops his arguments by presenting structured dialogues in which he does not directly comment. Thucydides presents the Mytilenian debate as two speeches in front of the Athenian assembly about the appropriate response to the revolt at Mytilene (3.36). The first speech, in favor of massacring the Mytilenians, is made by Cleon, while the second speech, in favor of leniency, is made by Diodotus (3.36-41). On the other hand, Thucydides presents the Melian dialogue as a structured debate alternating between Athenian and Melian representatives (5.84-116). The purpose of the dialogue is to prepare the Melians for a decision about whether to side with the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War (5.112).

Despite the fact that Thucydides presents dialogues spoken by others, he is still able to develop his own arguments. For instance, he uses the tactic of inserting words into the mouths of certain actors in order to inject his own opinions. Though Thucydides strives to maintain the

integrity of speeches' meanings, he does not simply transcribe their text. Rather, he notes, he "make[s] the speakers say what, in [his] opinion, was called for by each situation" (1.22). Therefore, Thucydides is able to argue his own points by voicing criticisms and questions through the dialogue of speakers. For example, in his writing of the Melian dialogue, he is able to raise some of his own concerns by voicing them via the Melians. Thucydides also develops his own arguments by creating the structure of the Mytilenian debate and the Melian dialogue. Given the nature of political debate, it is unlikely that the Melian dialogue was as clean and back-and-forth a process as Thucydides describes. However, using this structure allows him to clearly delineate the Athenian points and the corresponding counterpoints. By presenting rebuttals immediately following Athenian assertions, Thucydides is able to subtly point out the flaws in Athens' arguments. Similarly, more than two men probably spoke to the assembly about Mytilene, considering the gravity and contentiousness of the issue. However, distilling the arguments into two speeches allows clarity of and comparison between two opposing viewpoints.

In his description of the debate about Mytilene, Thucydides's chief concerns include the correctness of the Athenians' prioritization of self-interest over absolute justice. The emphasis on self-interest throughout Cleon's and Diodotus's orations indicate the importance of this question to Thucydides' analysis. For instance, Diodotus distills the question of the Mytilenians's fate into one of political expediency, arguing "If we are sensible people, we shall see that the question is not so much whether they are guilty as whether we are making the right decision for ourselves" (3.44). Diodotus further constructs a dichotomy between the idea of justice and Athenian priorities, asserting, "This is not a law-court, where we have to consider what is fit and just; it is a political assembly, and the question is how Mytilene can be most useful to Athens" (3.44). Though he is Diodotus's opponent in the debate, Cleon reinforces the idea that empires such as Athens must not

be persuaded by empathy, argumentation or decency (3.40). Cleon also draws an explicit distinction between morality and self-interest, noting that Athenians must pursue self-interest first: “If, however, whatever the rights or wrongs of it may be, you propose to hold power all the same, then your interest demands that these too, rightly or wrongly, must be punished” (3.40). The way in which Thucydides has Cleon and Diodotus explicitly contrast justice and self-interest, as well as frame the issue as central to the debate, indicates that Thucydides views this clash as a major concern.

In terms of the Melian dialogue, the most salient concern for Thucydides is the validity of might makes right, the Athenian assertion that military strength decides what course of action is the most just. This concept serves as an extension of the previously articulated idea of self-interest, since it contradicts the concept of absolute justice and instead asserts that the interests of the most powerful actor determine what should be done. In the Melian dialogue, the Athenians argue that it is necessary for empires to conquer whatever they are able, and therefore the Melians must be compelled to pick a side (5.105). While the Melians respond that they “are standing for what is right against what is wrong,” the Athenians denounce the very existence of an absolute morality (5.97-104). The Athenians go on to articulate the basis behind the idea that might makes right, positing, “So far as right and wrong are concerned, . . . there is no difference between the two, that those who still preserve their independence do so because they are strong” (5.89). By presenting opposing viewpoints on what an empire should do and by articulating the consideration of absolute morality, Thucydides analyzes the issue of might makes right in significant depth and indicates that the topic is one of his chief concerns.

Thucydides disagrees with the position taken by the Athenians in both the Melian dialogue and the Mytilenian debate: that self-interest trumps justice. The words Thucydides puts in the

mouths of the Melians indicate scorn; the Melians condemn the Athenians by saying that Athens “force[s] us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest” (5.90). Thucydides’s depiction, through the Melians, of the Athenians’ position as completely devoid of justice and entirely self-concerned casts a negative light on the Athenian perspective and suggests that Thucydides disagrees with it. Thucydides also clearly opposes the Athenian trajectory towards controlling as many lands as possible; he indicates such by asserting “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta,” war clearly being an unfavorable outcome (1.23). Finally, the fact that Thucydides even raises the question of the suitability of Athenian policy suggests that he opposes Athens’s prioritization of self-interest in these debates. Thucydides is an Athenian himself, but prominently presents arguments against the Athenians’, including creating clear counterpoints to Athenian assertions via the structure of the Melian dialogue. Thucydides reveals his disagreement with the Athenians while depicting Athens as bulldozing justice.

The contrast between the ideals voiced in Pericles’s funeral oration and the idea of self-interest in international relations also indicates that Thucydides disagrees with the stance taken by the Athenians. Textual clues suggest that Thucydides agrees with Pericles: he praises Pericles’s “intellectual gifts” and “general reputation” (2.34). Further, the fact that Thucydides gives Pericles a voice at all, especially since a funeral oration is nonessential to analysis of the Peloponnesian war, suggests that Thucydides backs the sentiments of Pericles’s speech. Therefore, Pericles can be considered as giving voice to Thucydides’s own opinions in the work. Pericles hails Athens’s status as a democracy because of the fact that democracies treat all people as equal and do not privilege a stured minority (2.37). Democracy prioritizes justice and fairness, directly contradicting the debates’ claims about the primacy of self-interest. Thucydides’s analysis

suggests that his concerns about Athenian preference for self-interest lies with the value he places on Athenian democracy.

Thucydides also disagrees with the Athenians' idea that might makes right, which is a manifestation of the Athenian prioritization of self-interest. On the contrary, Thucydides clearly respects Athenian institutions, and he insists through Pericles that democratic institutions make Athens great. These assertions promote the reverse idea: that "right makes might." Thucydides argues that the just political systems of the Athenian empire are the very structures that imbue Athens with its glory and strength. Therefore, he disagrees with Athens's assertion that fairness can be warped in favor of political ends. Further, the points presented by Diodotus and Cleon in the Mytilenian debate, as well as the logic exercised by the Athenian representatives in the Melian dialogue, lack reference to the institutions that Thucydides believes makes Athens exceptional. The politicians' lack of reliance on these structures suggests that Thucydides's values are absent from the Athenians' perspective, furthering Thucydides's divergence from the Athenian positions. Additionally, by implying the presence of an absolute morality, Thucydides rebukes the Athenian argument that military power allows states to dictate right and wrong. For instance, Pericles's statement that "When we do kindnesses to others, we do not do them out of any calculations of profit or loss" implies that Thucydides believes in an absolute concept of kindness regardless of the material effects of the kindness on its giver (2.41). Thucydides's subsequent lauding of these qualities and Pericles's assertion that these virtues make Athenians particularly worthy indicate Thucydides's opposition to the Athenian statement that might makes right. The nature of Thucydides's analysis suggests that his primary concern with Athenians' prioritization of strength lies with his value of morality.

Overall, Thucydides's presentation of the Melian dialogue and the debate over Mytilene reveals his concern with the privileging of Athenian interests over morality and fairness. Using implicit commentary as well as dialogues elsewhere in the work, Thucydides diverges from the positions taken by the Athenians at both of these debates.

#### About the author

Molly Wancewicz is a sophomore at Rice University majoring in History and Political Science. On campus, she is an editor for the *Rice Journal of Public Policy* and serves on her residential college's student government.

#### Reference

Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex Warner. 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books, 1972.