

# Robust Citizenship and Democracy: A Study of Pericles' Athens

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**Robust Citizenship and Democracy: A Study of Pericles' Athens**

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# **Robust Citizenship and Democracy: A Study of Pericles' Athens**

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## **Abstract:**

Hannah Arendt contends that one can find in Thucydides' presentation of Pericles a "pure" form of politics, unadulterated by the advent of philosophy in general and of liberal political philosophy in particular. Periclean political practice, Arendt argues, is therefore a superior alternative to liberalism—superior because it is more authentic and hence more satisfying to permanent human political longings.

After clarifying Arendt's claims about the pre-Socratic understanding of politics embodied in Pericles' statesmanship, the dissertation proceeds to test that account against a close reading of Thucydides' presentation of Pericles. Arendt's claim that Pericles' political practice is driven by a desire to escape the futility of human existence by creating an "immortal" story of his fame or glory proves to be unsubstantiated by Thucydides' account. To be sure, Pericles does seek glory, both for himself and for Athenians in general. But Arendt overlooks Pericles' preoccupation with *deserving* glory. Pericles' concern with cultivating Athenian citizens who can claim responsibility for their actions, and hence deserve praise for those actions, forces him to confront the complexities of human moral freedom and practical judgment in ways that Arendt ignores or overlooks.

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## Introduction

Pericles' praise of Athens in his Funeral Oration is widely recognized as one of the most moving tributes to political life at its peak. Garry Wills describes it as "the most famous oration of its kind, a model endlessly copied, praised, and cited" (1992, 41). The Athens that Pericles praises is, according to Voltaire, among the four historical epochs in which "the greatness of the human mind" fully flourished (1901, 5). Pericles himself is praised as a "visionary," who "saw the opportunity to create the greatest political community the world had ever known" (Kagan 1991, 136). Indeed, Western nations still appeal to Pericles' words to inspire courage and pride in our political aspirations. During World War II, rousing excerpts from Pericles' oration graced the sides of buses in London (Roberts 1994, 259); after 9/11, a U.S. Congressman appealed to Pericles' speech to conjure the image of strength in adversity (Harloe and Morley 2012, 11); and in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Paris in 2015, a sign in the Place de la Republique displayed a famous line from the oration: "Il n'est point de bonheur sans liberté ni de liberté sans courage" ("There is no happiness without freedom and no freedom without courage" [II.43.4])—and the quotation was attributed, rightly, to "Périclès."<sup>1</sup> Above all, perhaps, Hannah Arendt argues that Pericles' words are so moving because he presents *the* great alternative to the liberal politics that we practice in the West today, but to which

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<sup>1</sup> A picture of the sign appears in a 2015 article in Al Jazeera by Anealla Safdar, "France likely to close more than 100 mosques."

Westerners are still deeply attracted: a politics that satisfies the human longing to be part of something potentially more immortal than oneself, rather than a politics tailored to the satisfaction of individual wants and needs. This dissertation takes seriously Arendt's claim that Pericles presents an understanding of politics that speaks to "democracy's discontents"<sup>2</sup> in the age of liberalism. Simply put, if Arendt is correct, a close study of Thucydides, and his presentation of Pericles in particular, will be useful for those who feel such dissatisfactions.

In Arendt's reading, Pericles' speech is a celebration of his city's collective longing for "everlasting fame" and, ultimately, for immortal remembrance won through selfless dedication to a cause beyond oneself, which is the "highest and most divine way of life for mortals" (1978, 133-134). She argues that this speaks to a human longing to overcome our individual mortality that liberal politics either ignores or attempts to suppress. Insofar as this is the case, reflecting on Pericles' vision for Athens forces us to consider what we really long for from a strong community, and what assumptions we must make about the world and our place in it for that longing to be satisfied. It helps us consider the nature of the desire for a robust community in which one can aspire to "immortal fame" or "ageless praise."<sup>3</sup> And, indeed, that desire (in a tamer form, perhaps)

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Michael Sandel's book of that name.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "ageless praise" comes from Pericles (τὸν ἀγήρων ἔπαινον: II.43.2). It echoes his own words elsewhere, such as the phrases "everlasting memorials" (μνημεῖα [...] αἰδία: II.41.4) and "ever-remembered fame" (δόξα αἰεὶ μνηστος: II.64.5), and evokes the Homeric tradition, which Pericles is both implicitly and explicitly challenging (cf.



is alive today and is at the heart of many criticisms of liberal society, particularly those leveled by the “communitarian” movement.

### **Communitarianism and the Search for “Meaning” in Politics**

The various intellectual and political movements that may be grouped under the banner of “communitarian”<sup>4</sup> are united by their dissatisfaction with liberal citizenship and by their consequent concern with reviving a more robust form of political life, one that makes real demands on citizens, requiring civic virtue and devotion to the community.<sup>5</sup>

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II.41.4). Recall that Achilles’ famous choice was between a long life with no glory and a short life with “imperishable glory” (κλέος ἄφθιτον: *Iliad* 9.413). The similarity of the above phrases with one another as well as with a passage in Heraclitus’ Fragment B29 (κλέος ἀέναν) and Diotima’s commentary on Achilles in the *Symposium* (208d) allows Arendt to claim generally that the longing for “immortal fame” characterized pre-Socratic Greek thought and was epitomized in Pericles’ Funeral Oration (see *The Human Condition* 19, 193, 197; and *The Life of the Mind* 133-134).

<sup>4</sup> Communitarian authors are also sometimes grouped as “antiliberals,” since they all share in the effort to recover the primacy of the community over and against the liberal affirmation of the primacy of the individual and most reject the title “communitarian” (Holmes 1993). As will become clear, however, it is also important that many “antiliberal” communitarian thinkers are largely sympathetic to liberalism.

<sup>5</sup> The classic authors in this genre include Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, and Charles Taylor. More recent notable contributors to this tradition include

These authors claim that modern liberalism is based on a false understanding of the self as fundamentally “unencumbered” or “atomistic” (see Sandel 1996, 6, 12; Taylor’s essay “Atomism” in Taylor 1985; Walzer 1980, 68-69; Arendt 1998, 9, 13). Communitarians claim, instead, that we are in very important ways political beings who are at home and flourish only in particular communities.

They argue, for example, that our sense of “meaningful” existence arises from knowing that we are situated within “narratives” that inform us of our origins and ends, and that anticipate our existence and remember us when we are gone. We are “storytelling” beings who “rebel against the drift of storylessness” (Sandel 1996, 351). The demands of our unchosen, inherited traditions situate us; those demands give us direction and comfort in the world. Moreover, in spite of the attractive image of total liberation that unencumbered liberal citizenship may sometimes present, we are *in fact* encumbered beings, and it is these very unchosen ends that we may value above all. To deny the worth of unchosen ends is to deny that “we can ever be claimed by [...] ends

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Amitai Etzioni and Robert Bellah. I include Hannah Arendt in the broad category because she is also prompted to embrace the primacy of the community by a fundamental dissatisfaction with liberal citizenship. One should keep in mind, however, that even if she has been a source of influence for the communitarian movement, there are also important differences in her thought (see Beiner 2000). It is also worth noting that these authors tend to avoid describing themselves as communitarians and many explicitly reject the term (cf. MacIntyre 2007, xiv).

given by nature or God, for example, or by our identities as members of families, peoples, cultures, or traditions” (Sandel 1996, 322).

To take seriously the value of our unchosen ends, however, would require that we tailor our politics accordingly. Our existence as situated beings requires a public “space of appearance,” in the words of Hannah Arendt, in which communal remembrance and “storytelling” can take place (Arendt 1998, 50, 199-212). “For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves—constitutes reality” (Arendt 1998, 50, see also 204). It is on account of “meaningfulness,” understood as the human aspiration to “connec[t] one’s life up with some greater reality or story” (Taylor 1989, 43), that the community must take precedence over the individual, if only because that individual’s deepest longings can be satisfied solely through devotion to a robust community.

The interpretation of our desire for robust citizenship as a longing for “meaning” through participation in a shared public “narrative” is the most politically respectable account of the phenomenon today. For the virtue of a “narrative”—as opposed to, for instance, a “true account”—is that multiple narratives can coexist peacefully. The alternative is to insist on the truth of one account and the falsity of all others. Hence, though the concrete meaning of the narrative account of the self—that I am, for instance, an American or an Englishman, a Christian or a Muslim, because I exist within particular “narratives”—is far from frivolous, the language seems tailored to gloss over the most fundamental point: we also believe or hope that our narrative is a true account (or rather *the* true account), and that we can come to know that it is true. It is for this reason that most communitarians are not so hostile after all to liberalism’s emphasis on the

individual's right to choose to live by those beliefs that appear to him or her to be true. For the communitarian, too, sees that our narratives are not important only because they are *ours*, but also because we choose to accept those narratives in the belief that they are true accounts of the world and our place in it.

Indeed, as Ronald Beiner has persuasively argued, most communitarians accede to some version of the primacy of individual choice insisted on by liberals (Beiner 1992, 17-20). Steven Kautz summarizes the predicament that the contemporary communitarian faces as follows:

Whatever else might trouble us about liberal politics, most of us will not now repudiate this aspect of liberal rationalism: we insist that we must be permitted to see for ourselves—and not only to be told by authorities—what is good for us. So any communitarian (or new liberal) alternative to the prevailing liberal interpretations of contemporary liberal politics must somehow accommodate the continuing vigor of this liberal rationalism.  
(1995, 39-40)

However much the communitarian wishes to value community over the individual, that value could never be asserted over and above the individual's right to "see for himself" and hence choose among communities. The contemporary communitarian, then, is apt to advocate that we respect the sanctity of the community *within* liberal society, or that we aspire to augment our sense of citizenship only insofar as this is consistent with liberal society.

Consider Michael Walzer's position. He recognizes and admires the fact that citizens of the Greek polis had "a public life more vital than that of ordinary Americans," yet he argues that "[i]n the United States today, community will have characteristically modern forms, or it won't exist at all" (Walzer 1980, 15). The "characteristically modern" feature that Walzer has in mind is precisely the contemporary concern with the individual. The recovery of community must acknowledge that people "have learned to think of themselves as individuals" and therefore that project must be framed to "accommodate liberated men and women" (13; see also Kautz 1995, 21). The problem, Walzer goes on, is that the cold, impersonal nature of liberal citizenship today has left us dissatisfied; it lacks "emotional rewards"—"And so contemporary dissatisfaction takes the form of a yearning for political community, passionate affirmation, explicit patriotism" (1980, 68). But, he is quick to point out, "[t]hese are dangerous desires, for they cannot readily be met within the world of liberalism" (*ibid.*). Hence, Walzer recognizes and in some ways welcomes the fact that our entrenched liberalism precludes a return to the vital public life of the polis. His alternative is a pluralistic liberal society, which invites diverse individuals into the common political discourse in the belief that a "spontaneous and free" solidarity can emerge from the experience of robust participation among heterogeneous citizens. Democratic participation, Walzer hopes, can revive a stronger sense of citizenship, but "without a full-scale attack on private life and liberal values, without a religious revival or a cultural revolution" (68-69).

Walzer's position might sound like a watered-down version of communitarianism, but we should not for that reason reject it as unserious. The convergence of communitarianism and liberalism in Walzer's account does not reveal a failure to

embrace fully the potentially antiliberal sentiment at the heart of the longing for robust citizenship. Rather, it reveals that there is a deep *tension* between the longing to transcend our individuality by giving ourselves up to the demands of a community and the need to “see for ourselves,” which often forces us to question those demands—and that tension is as alive for communitarians as it is for many liberals.

### **The *Vita Activa***

We also should not reject the contemporary search for meaning as backward, parochial, or romantic. As Charles Taylor observes, many of our longings for “fullness” in modern life are, like “premodern” longings, “forms of a craving that is ineradicable from human life” (1989, 44). Hence, Taylor finds continuity between the contemporary desire for communal remembrance and “premodern” longings, such as the eternal life for which Francis of Assisi longed and the immortality through fame that the Athenians strove for under the Pericles’ leadership (43). “The modern aspiration for meaning and substance in one’s life has obvious affinities with longer-standing aspirations to higher being” (*ibid.*). In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt finds that “striving for immortality” is the “spring and center” of active citizenship at its highest peak, the *vita activa* (1998, 21).

For Arendt, “reality” is found only in public life. It is, to repeat, “something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves” (1998, 50). Only public life can transcend our otherwise ephemeral lives and provide us some respite from the futility of existence. Unlike the private world of the individual, the “world” properly speaking—that is, the reality constituted and confirmed by the plurality of people in the public “space of appearance” (204-5)—can aspire to immortality and guarantee that great words

and great deeds are not in vain. Yet, according to Arendt, the modern focus on the individual subverts the public space and reduces great human longings to vices.

It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time. [... And t]here is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality [...] testified to by the current classification of striving for immortality with the private vice of vanity.  
(1998, 55-6)

Hence, Arendt reverses the modern focus, in which the state exists to provide for the individual, arguing that individual concerns are low and slavish insofar as they are biologically determined and directed toward *mere* life, which will pass regardless. The household is where we are meant to satisfy these biological necessities so that we can emerge into the public realm of freedom, an emergence that constitutes a “transfiguration” from need-bound, biological, subjective animals into potentially immortal, free, spontaneous, human participants in an inter-subjective public world (50). Striving to preserve the body is an ultimately futile (if necessary) task; the striving for free, memorable, public action is the only thing that prevents human life from being as futile as biological existence. Hence, the modern indulgence in the subjective pleasures of the private realm comes at the expense of this grander public possibility:

The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves, and while the intimacy of a fully developed private life, such as had never been known before the rise of the modern age and the concomitant decline of the public realm, will always greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men. (*Ibid.*)

For Arendt, the assurance that we obtain from “reality” so understood is more than just a sense of “belonging” or the feeling that we have “meaning” or “identity.” Rather, it is what makes possible a fully *human*—in contrast to *animal*—existence; it is necessary for the full development of specifically human capacities.

In the absence of the political community, for example, not only do speech and action cease to fulfill the desire to transcend mortality, but those very capacities also cease to flourish (49). Hence, the robust citizenship of Periclean Athens represents for Arendt the peak of human flourishing and our highest individual satisfaction.

The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words—which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality



notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a “divine” nature. (19)

The realization of this “divine” nature and the highest satisfaction of our transcendent longings, then, are made possible through the robust citizenship lived in the ancient city.

Because the full realization of human greatness is available only in and through political life, Arendt seeks to articulate and thereby recover what has been lost by the modern ranking of the individual above the community. She claims that the polis as realized in Periclean Athens is *the* historical example of public life at its peak. The imperial city ensured that otherwise ephemeral words and deeds would gain everlasting remembrance and offer inspiration to those yet unborn (197-8). “[T]he *polis* was for the Greeks [...] their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals” (56).

### **Thucydides’ Pericles**

I will argue, however, that Arendt’s interpretation, for all its undeniable power, overlooks a crucial aspect of Pericles’ funeral speech: Pericles praises the Athenian citizens for their dedication to the polis, to be sure, but he also explains to them why they are truly deserving of the praise they seek. And they deserve such praise not only because they undertake great personal risks for the sake of Athens’ grandeur, but also because they do so with eyes wide open. What is most remarkable about the Athenians, according to Pericles, is their capacity to act deliberately and knowingly, without false hopes or

illusions. In Pericles' words, the Athenians alone are at the same time "both most courageous and [most] calculative," while in citizens of other cities, "confidence comes from ignorance"—literally, lack of learning (ἀμαθία)—"and calculation brings hesitation" (II.40.3).<sup>6</sup> Hence, what is striking about the Athenians is not so much their devotion to Athens as the fact that they pair that devotion with an equally robust capacity or desire to act rationally.

This more nuanced reading of Pericles' praise reveals an important theoretical feature of the longing to live a "noble and good" life, a truly praiseworthy life. For the Athenian desire to act rationally and deliberately is connected to their desire to win glory through selfless acts on behalf of Athens. The longing to *deserve* "ageless praise," unlike the longing simply to *attain* it, requires the capacity to claim responsibility for one's actions, and one can claim responsibility for one's actions only to the extent that those actions are deliberate and freely chosen, and the consequences intended. Hence, the cultivation of what one may call practical judgment and an insistence on moral freedom are necessary concomitants to the pursuit of truly praiseworthy nobility. This is why the tension between the liberal insistence on individual choice and the communitarian insistence on the primacy of community that we saw in Walzer's account is important: at the heart of that tension is the intuition that any serious desire to be part of a robust community cannot be fully separated from the desire to "see for oneself" and deliberately

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<sup>6</sup> Translations are my own, using the Oxford Classical Texts edition (Thucydides 1942, 1958, 1987) and Rusten 2001.

*choose* to fulfill the demands of that community, if only to be truly worthy of the honor one seeks.

Arendt and those thinkers who fall in the “antiliberal” tradition praise the Athenian concern for noble or robust citizenship, but when they turn to Thucydides they fail to see Pericles’ constant effort to balance the Athenians’ longing for a noble or praiseworthy life with their implicit concern with *deserving* the praise they seek and therefore for acting with deliberation and choice. By recovering Pericles’ more problematic or nuanced understanding of Athenian politics, we begin to see that robust communities are not all equal. For if indeed we wish to be part of a community in which our virtues can be praised *and* in which that praise redounds to the truly deserving, then to be serious about robust citizenship one must also be serious about cultivating the individual capacity to be deserving of praise: the capacity to act deliberately and freely.

### **The Dissertation in Brief**

In Chapter I, I analyze in more detail Arendt’s understanding of the alternative to liberalism as articulated by Thucydides’ Pericles. However, this dissertation is not about Hannah Arendt, and I focus primarily on interpreting Thucydides rather than on analyzing contemporary democratic theory. Hannah Arendt argues passionately that the long intellectual history that informs contemporary scholarship has crippled modern efforts to understand what is most important about human political longings, and that one should therefore return to pre-philosophic authors if one wishes to find adequate answers to the serious dissatisfactions that many have found in modern political life. This dissertation takes seriously the possibility that Arendt might be right, and therefore I turn

to Thucydides rather than to Arendt's contemporaries and successors to see if, indeed, the pre-philosophic tradition as embodied in Thucydides' great text contains insights that subsequent philosophic developments have obscured for us today.

In Chapter II, then, I turn to my own analysis of Thucydides' depiction of Pericles and his Athens. I argue that there are two prominent, and contradictory, themes in Pericles' speeches. On one hand, Pericles indulges the Athenian love of nobility, exhorting them to take risks on behalf of the city even contrary to what is prudent or rational. On the other hand, he also encourages them to act prudently—even with the coolest of cold calculation—and not to let their volatile passions corrupt their capacity for calm deliberation. Seeing how these two themes fit together in a coherent whole—if indeed they do fit together—is one of the main puzzles to solve in understanding the character of Pericles' leadership.

In Chapters III and IV, I follow these two threads of Periclean rhetoric—his appeals to reason, on one hand, and to the Athenian concern for nobility, on the other—in his first speech (in which he details his war strategy) and in the Funeral Oration. I argue throughout that beneath Pericles' exhortations to nobility there is an equally clear and consistent prudential purpose to his speeches. I point out, for instance, the obvious (if frequently overlooked) fact that Pericles praises Athenians' noble indifference to danger while simultaneously urging them *not* to fight but rather to hide behind the walls of Athens, precisely because facing the Spartans in the field would be too dangerous.

In Chapters V and VI, I turn to the philosophical foundations that ground Pericles' confidence in reason. Pericles envisions an Athenian citizen who sees clearly the world around him and his place in it, and who can therefore judge and act well. But this degree

of awareness requires (among other things) answering correctly a most fundamental question that proves to be central to Thucydides' book: are there divine beings who intervene in human affairs in order to reward the just and punish the wicked? Is the world such that the just or noble succeed and the unjust fail, in accordance with the wish or will of the gods? As we will see, Pericles denies that the world is of this character, and his confidence in human foresight (and the confidence that he attempts to inspire in the Athenians) even rests on that denial. According to Pericles, the world operates according to natural necessity and "ignorant" chance (I.140.1). But this view of the world is both theoretically and psychologically difficult to accept fully, to say the least. For, in what proves to be the opinion of many of the Athenian elite, the view that natural necessity governs the world is incompatible with the human moral freedom that Pericles elsewhere insists on. And the Athenian *demos*, despite Pericles' guidance, are not always willing to give up their hopes or beliefs that there are superintending gods who reward the just and punish the wicked. Moreover, how does Pericles know that his understanding of the world is true?

The Pericles that emerges from this analysis is not the single-minded glory seeker whom Arendt praises. Though she admires those who strive to "deserve" immortality (1998, 19), she focuses her analysis too much on the desire for immortality and not enough on the concern with desert. A closer look at Thucydides and his Pericles shows that it is the desire to *deserve* immortality—or an immortal remembrance, at least—not the desire for immortality simply that animates Athenians, at least as Pericles envisions them.

## Chapter 1

### **Arendt and the Love of Distinction**

Arendt claims that the modern, liberal turn that instigated the demise of robust politics is depriving human beings of their most meaningful form of activity. In her account, the essence of politics is the aspiration to immortality, an aspiration that has been mutilated and subverted to the extent that politics has turned its attention to the task of administering to bodily needs and away from inspiring, and honoring, great deeds. According to Arendt, the desire for immortality points naturally to the desire for distinction, to set ourselves apart from the crowd and gain fame so that the memory of our virtue might outlive our bodily existence. Yet Arendt's account of virtue is ambiguous, and our examination of her work will lead us to question her claims about the connection between virtue and the longing for immortality. What ultimately distinguishes Arendt's understanding of Pericles from mine is that Arendt's analysis leads her to praise virtue as the capacity to say and do things that are novel, while Thucydides' Pericles praises virtue as the capacity to say and do things that are needful based on a clear understanding of nature or necessity.

### **Background**

The broad purpose of *The Human Condition* is to inspire a reexamination (or recovery) of the original articulations of what Arendt calls the *vita activa*. Arendt is concerned that the fundamental distinctions among basic types of human activities—labor, work, and action—are being forgotten. This results from two related historical

events. First, by Plato's pen (and the Christian theologians and philosophers who followed), the life of contemplation was decisively established as the highest human life. And from the perspective of the *vita contemplativa*, the distinctions among types of activities cease to be important. All activities are distractions from one's highest purpose, and in that sense they are equal and equally unremarkable. The only important distinction becomes that between action and leisure. Hence, since the time of Plato, the *vita activa* has come to represent the undifferentiated mass of both necessary and idle activities from which the life of contemplation is distinguished (Arendt 2000, 167-168).

Second, Plato—or Plato's Socrates—not only established the dignity of philosophy but also brought philosophy to bear on politics. This began a tradition of political philosophy that culminated in Karl Marx's radical reversal of the traditional hierarchy of activities, which reduced the status of both thought and action. In Marx, labor achieved a dignity that would have been unimaginable in the age of Pericles but that is unchallenged today. We have become, in Arendt's estimation, a nation of laborers that can no longer think beyond the categories of labor (2000, 168-170). Hence, Arendt's project is to recover the original articulations of the *vita activa* from the triumph of labor as well as from the leveling gaze of philosophy, and by doing so to revive the waning richness of human life. It is for this reason that she must cast back to the self-understanding of pre-philosophic Athens, to a time before the meaning of the *vita activa* was obscured by Plato (or Socrates) and his successors.

## Meaningfulness

The most important purpose of Arendt's work, and the reason that we are concerned with it here, is to reestablish the dignity of action, which prior to Plato was the highest human activity. Periclean Athens was, in Arendt's view, the archetypal locus of action in the fullest sense of the word. However, it is important to emphasize that Arendt's intention in *The Human Condition* is to uncover the *meaning* of action. Action deserves dignity because action is *meaningful*. But what does that in turn mean?

As Arendt argues in *The Life of the Mind*, the "quest for meaning" is distinct from the quest for truth (1978, 15). Questions of truth are "in principle all answerable by common sense experience," for the quest for truth is the quest "to see and to know the world as it is given to the senses" (58). Questions of meaning, on the other hand, cannot be answered by common sense experience. They go beyond what is presented to the senses. "[O]ur mind is not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about," such as "what we now often call the 'ultimate questions' of God, freedom, and immortality" (14). The quest for meaning concerns these "ultimate questions."

In *The Human Condition*, of course, Arendt's purpose is not to recover the distinction between thinking, which properly concerns the "ultimate questions," and knowing, which concerns truth—that is the purpose of the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*. Rather, *The Human Condition* is an exercise in thinking about the meaning of activities—meanings that may not be apparent to the actors themselves. Arendt's proposition in *The Human Condition* is "to think what we are doing" (1998, 5). That is, she wants to make apparent the answers to the "ultimate questions" that our activities



implicitly provide, and which therefore guide how we actually live. But thinking about the assumptions of our activities is, as the proposition suggests, only possible *after* acting: we are already “doing,” and the task at hand is now to think about what we are doing—to discover the large, implicit “why” behind our activities that is usually not apparent to us as doers.

For example, consider what Arendt calls “biological” activities. We are driven to eat, sleep, and procreate by urges or instincts. There is no conscious intention; rather, we become conscious of the intentions of those activities only after we reflect on them. They are the facts that lead us to speculate on the purposes of nature that we unconsciously carry out. Similarly, Arendt would argue that our urge to participate in politics is just that: an urge. We are driven, and we have yet to think clearly enough about that driving force.

To clarify the distinction between truth and meaning, Arendt illustrates it with an example. According to the assumptions of science, the birth of any particular individual is a random occurrence. Yet a poet may assert, to the contrary, that that particular individual “was meant to be” (1978, 60-61). At the heart of the disagreement is a question not about the truth of the individual’s birth—that is, whether he was in fact born—but about its meaning—whether there was any cosmological significance to his birth. The scientist assumes or implies that the world is governed by mechanistic necessity; the poet implies that there are cosmic purposes. Both are attempting to derive from the visible world of events an account of the whole in which those events make sense.

Similarly, Anselm's ontological proof "is not valid and in this sense not true, but it is full of meaning" (1978, 61). A proof of God's existence need not be true for it to reveal what is of concern to Arendt. The very *attempt* to prove God's existence reveals a human longing for cosmological significance that guides Anselm's activities. Hence, when Arendt speaks of the "meaning" of activities, she is attempting to capture how our activities are significant, i.e., how they signify an account (*logos*) of the cosmos and man's place in it, which may or may not be a true account (1978, 58).

Arendt does not suggest, however, that metaphysical assumptions are arbitrary or that one is free to construct one's own conception of human meaning. On the contrary, this would imply what Arendt denies—that the meaning of an activity is found in the conscious choice that precedes it. She claims the opposite—that we become aware of the meaning of our activities only after acting. Moreover, one of the main tasks of *The Human Condition* is to show how the human concern for meaning is shaped by the (more or less permanent) human condition. Hence, though she refuses to speak of "human nature" (cf. Pangle 1990, 50), her account of the human condition amounts to an account of what is "natural" to human beings, insofar as our condition is more or less permanent. For example, one of the conditions that shapes human life is mortality, and the task of *The Human Condition* is to show how our activities reveal that the aspiration to individual, worldly immortality is an inevitable response to that condition. Perhaps by speaking of the human "condition" rather than of human "nature" Arendt is leaving room for the possibility of escaping mortality through technology, say, which would alter human life as we know it by altering the fundamental conditions that shape our lives. But for the purposes of *The Human Condition*, our mortal condition is a natural fact to which

humans have a natural response. The deepest underlying hope of all human activities, Arendt claims, is that we might yet overcome death.

This hope means that activities can be more or less “meaningful” depending on how well they accord with our fundamental longing. The activity of prayer is “meaningful” because it affirms the eternal cosmological significance of individual human beings. Yet, Arendt’s return to the ancients is in part motivated by her claim that our hope is for *worldly*—i.e., mortal—immortality, which casts doubt on the adequacy of otherworldly responses to that longing. The activity of labor, by contrast, is not “*humanly* meaningful” at all (1998, 106, my emphasis). Because labor has an ultimate purpose shared by all animals—the preservation of the species—and because it is dedicated not to reproduction, strictly speaking, but to the production of *new* individuals, the activity implies no striving after *individual* immortality; biological individuals are significant only as undifferentiated members of the species that fulfill that species’ need to propagate itself (1998, 8, 97-98, 106).

### **The Urgency of Life**

This longing for immortality is the primary point of contact between Hannah Arendt and Thucydides. For Arendt finds this longing expressed most fully in Pericles’ Funeral Oration. Modern politics, by contrast, is characterized by “the complete loss of authentic concern with immortality” (1998, 55). Yet, without “potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible” (1998, 50).

To understand this last assertion, it is helpful to review her criticism of the claim that life—mere life—is “the highest good,” which has become “the ultimate point of reference in the modern age” (1998, 313). The pagans had no such reverence for mere life, and therefore the alternative that they present embodies what is missing from modern politics. In Athens, one entered the polis not for the sake of safety but to demonstrate and make use of one’s mastery over—and hence freedom from—the necessities of bodily preservation.<sup>7</sup> From this point of view, “too great a love for life [...] was a sure sign of slavishness” (1998, 30-31, 36). Thus, in Arendt’s view, the triumph of the view that life is the highest good was “disastrous for the esteem and dignity of politics” (1998, 314).

For Arendt, the modern emphasis on the priority of life threatens to collapse the ancient distinctions between the public and the private and between the human and the animal. The division between the activities of “the common world” and those pertaining to “the maintenance of life,” Arendt insists, was one “upon which all ancient political thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic” (1998, 28). The private realm and the public realm both had their forms of community. But the “togetherness” of the private realm was based on necessity—the needs of the body—that of the public realm on freedom—freedom from those same needs. Her critique of both modern political theory and contemporary political practice is that the kind of togetherness that was once only

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<sup>7</sup> Hence, in her interpretation of Aristotle’s famous assertion that human beings come together for the sake of living but stay together for the sake of living well, Arendt understands “living well” to mean engaging in activities that require freedom from the necessities of mere living (Arendt 1998, 36-37; cf. Aristotle *Politics* 1252b25-30).

appropriate in the private realm of the household has now become a matter of public concern. She calls this deviant form of politics “society.” “Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public” (1998, 46). The public realm strictly speaking—the political realm, in contrast to the social—is where one goes to participate in activities that require freedom from the strictly private interest in the necessities of self-preservation.

The activities of political life therefore also constitute the distinction between animals and humans. All activities of animals are determined by the need to preserve the species, including all social behaviors. Human beings, however, enter political life only after “mastering the necessities of life in the household,” which frees them for other, “*humanly* meaningful” activities (1998, 30-31, 106, my emphasis). Yet, as Arendt laments, in modern regimes, “the only thing people have in common is their private interests” (1998, 69).

This modern glorification of the life devoted only to the production and consumption of things that serve private needs and wants—the life of the laborer—came from Marx, most of all, but it began with Locke and Hobbes (1998, 93; 112, 105, 56-57). Their revolution capitalized on the urgency of the needs of the body.

The difference between what we have in common and what we own privately is first that our private possessions, which we use and consume daily, are much more urgently needed than any part of the common world [... They have] a driving force whose urgency is unmatched by the so-called higher desires and

aspirations of man [... And so they will] always be the first among man's needs and worries. (1998, 70, see also 87)

In taking their bearings by the most urgent and most private needs, the early liberal political philosophers brought a new seriousness to laboring for one's daily bread (1998, 127). The concerns of the laborer—not just for survival but also for making life easier and longer—became the standard against which all other activities were measured (1998, 208). The resulting demotion of the political life as it was formerly understood followed as a matter of course. For, “[f]rom the standpoint of ‘making a living,’ every activity unconnected with labor becomes a ‘hobby’” (1998, 128). And such ambitious “hobbies” as the striving for immortality were consequently reduced to mere vanity (1998, 21).

Arendt's critique of the liberal position is simple: what is most urgent for human beings is not what is most important to them.

[L]ife, which for all other animal species is the very essence of their being, becomes a burden to man because of his innate ‘repugnance to futility.’<sup>8</sup> This burden is all the heavier since none of the so-called ‘loftier desires’ has the same urgency, [none] is actually forced upon man by necessity, as the elementary needs of life. (1998, 119)

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<sup>8</sup> Quoting Thorstein Veblen, according to Arendt's note.

For Arendt, the most politically significant human “driving force” is not the fear of death or the desire to acquire, as Hobbes or Locke would insist, but the “repugnance to futility.” The problem with the life devoted to comfortable self-preservation is that nothing can remove “the essential worldly futility of the life process” (1998, 131). All humans die. Hence, the fundamental condition of human existence is each individual’s awareness that her worldly existence is linear: it has a beginning and an end (1998, 19). The urge not to meet one’s end is therefore an essential byproduct of human self-consciousness.

Yet, Arendt also worries that we are forgetful. She worries that our great success in the production of things for consumption has created a society of comfortable laborers on the brink of forgetting “the futility of a life that ‘does not fix or realize itself’”<sup>9</sup> in something more enduring than the human body (1998, 135, see also 121). Arendt wishes to warn us of our contemporary apathy toward futility because the stagnation of our highest capacities will come with the slumber of our deepest longings (1998, 49). She therefore wishes to be our gadfly and remind us of our inherent “repugnance to futility” in order to awaken us to her alternative view of the value of politics.

### **Worldly Immortality**

In contrast to the view that life is the highest good and therefore that the preservation of life is the proper object of politics, Arendt claims that the “striving for immortality” is the “spring and center” of all action, especially political action (1998, 21, see also 55). The Greek polis did not aim to make life long and comfortable, as do

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<sup>9</sup> Quoting Adam Smith, according to Arendt’s note.

modern regimes. The purpose of the polis was twofold. First, it was meant to “multiply the occasions to win ‘immortal fame,’ that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself” (1998, 197). Second, and related, it was meant to “offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech” (*ibid.*). The purpose of the polis was not to preserve people from an early or painful death but to preserve from futility those aspects of human life that otherwise leave no permanent trace. It did this by providing a venue in which the great deeds and words of excellent individuals might be remembered. To quote at length:

The *polis*—if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration—gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; without assistance from others, those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and future ages. In other words, men’s life together in the form of the *polis* seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made “products,” the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable [... It is] a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men [...]. (1998, 197-198)



This, according to Arendt, is what “the Greeks themselves thought of [the polis] and its *raison d’être*” (*ibid.*).

It is important to note, however, that Arendt’s claim is not just that the longing for immortality animates political life; it animates all activity. Our laboring satisfies the needs of our bodies, and by means of preservation and procreation we can achieve a kind of immortality in the perpetuation of the species. As we have seen, this is the lowest and most futile form that our immortal longings take, since it is an activity that we share with animals and it preserves only the species (1998, 84). Despite the hope that one’s offspring will be a second self, carrying on one’s image, that child is in fact a “‘foreign life’”<sup>10</sup> with its own individual identity (Arendt 2000, 170; 1998, 106). Procreation cannot satisfy the longing for *individual*, worldly immortality. Our “mortality is not compensated by [...] the species’ ever-recurring life cycle” (1998, 7). Moreover, there is nothing remarkable in labor because it results from natural necessity. “Labor, unlike all other human activities, stands under the sign of necessity, the ‘necessity of subsisting’ as Locke used to say, or the ‘eternal necessity imposed by nature’ in the words of Marx” (2000, 171; also 1998, 30, 83-84). Because our longings are not satisfied by what our biological nature has provided for our perpetuation, Arendt is even willing to claim that from a certain perspective humans are “not natural” (1998, 97-98).<sup>11</sup> Arendt’s higher alternative to

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<sup>10</sup> Quoting Karl Marx, according to Arendt’s note.

<sup>11</sup> This may be the deeper reason why she chooses not to speak of human nature. In her view, if humans have a nature it is their animal nature, which is unremarkable and therefore not fully human.

biological procreation is accomplished through action among other human beings. By "action," Arendt means the capacity "for beginning new and spontaneous processes which without men never would come into existence" (1998, 231). Human deeds are fundamentally unpredictable and unique, and therefore they have the capacity—unlike the activities determined by our common biological nature—to distinguish us as individuals, each with a peculiar story that might become worthy of remembrance.

Arendt's account of this more "human" capacity for immortality depends on her claim that the world is "phenomenal," or her rejection of the distinction between Being and Appearing. To be a human being means to be something that appears among other human beings. This is what Arendt calls the condition of plurality. A human without other humans would be a fundamentally different thing, nothing more than an animal. Hence, from the human perspective, to die is "to cease to be among men" (1998, 7-8). For Arendt, social death is the same as (or worse than) physical death. We are perceived and perceiving beings, "equipped to deal with a world in which Being and Appearing coincide," i.e., a world in which what we *are* is constituted by what we appear to be (1978, 20). Our "identity"—the sameness that unifies our daily life into one story with one agent rather than a biological process of coming to be and ceasing to be, in which change is the only constant—is constituted by the sameness of the objects that we encounter and the persistence of the "web of relationships" within which we act (1998, 181-188). For Arendt, our more fundamental "reality" is not the one confirmed by self-consciousness and clarity about the world around us but that confirmed by perceiving others and being perceived in turn, all within a political community (1998, 50). We should not forget, Arendt reminds us, that the *private* life is *privative*, meaning that it

involves “the consciousness of being deprived of something essential in life” (1998, 60). To live a private life means to be deprived of the public, which “guarantees [one’s] ‘objective’ reality” (1978, 19).

Moreover, just as the significance of death is that we cease to be among others, so there is a “birth” more significant than our biological birth, constituted by our emergence into the world of others (1998, 176). Arendt uses the metaphor of play-acting to sum up her point. On the most fundamental level, to live does not mean to eat and breathe and procreate but to make one’s appearance on stage, as it were (1978, 21). What follows from this, of course, is the crucial importance that there *be* a stage on which to appear and that there be an audience for whom to make a display. This is the public realm, in Arendt’s account, and it is for this reason that to be deprived of the “space of appearance”—the *polis*—is “to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance” (1998, 199). To repeat, this “second birth” into the political community is important to us not because we are vain; it is of fundamental importance because the words and deeds that are heard and seen by others constitute a public “story” potentially more permanent than our bodily existence. The meaning of action in the public realm is found in the aspiration to individual, worldly immortality available through “eternal remembrance”: fame.

Hence, Arendt argues that a “specifically human life” is not the same as life simply (*zōē*), which refers only to the natural processes of living in which all animals partake. The specifically human life is *a* life (*bios*), which as such can be told as a story

(1998, 97).<sup>12</sup> Because human beings are peculiarly aware that “[l]iving things *make their appearance* like actors on a stage,” they are “possessed by an urge toward self-display” (1978, 19, Arendt’s emphasis). That is, human beings have an urge to reproduce an appearance of themselves through action on public display that is more one’s own distinct image than is one’s offspring, and that achieves a “relative permanence” by making an impression on a public realm that is potentially more enduring than oneself (1998, 56).

To be the author of deeds is therefore the higher alternative to being a parent to offspring—higher in that it better satisfies our peculiarly human longing. In *The Life of the Mind*, Pericles again emerges as Arendt’s spokesman for “the highest and most divine way of life for mortals” in pre-philosophic Greece, a way of life based on the view “that all mortals should strive for immortality” (1978, 133-134). Here is her account in that book:

Compared to other living beings, man is a god; he is a kind of “mortal god”<sup>13</sup> [...] whose chief task therefore consists in an activity that could remedy his mortality and thus make him more like the gods, his closest relations. The alternative to that is to sink down to the level of animal life. “The best choose one thing in place of

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt here follows Aristotle in making the distinction by reference to the two Greek words for “life.”

<sup>13</sup> Quoting Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, II, 13, according to Arendt’s note.

all else—everlasting fame among mortals; but the many are glutted like cattle.”<sup>14</sup>

The point here is that it was axiomatic in pre-philosophical Greece that the only incentive worthy of man qua man is the striving for immortality: the great deed is beautiful and praiseworthy not because it serves one’s country or one’s people but exclusively because it will “win eternal mention in the deathless roll of fame.” As Diotima points out to Socrates, “Do you suppose that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles to avenge Patroclus . . . if they had not believed that their excellence [*aretē*],<sup>15</sup> would live for ever in men’s memory, as in fact it does in ours?”<sup>16</sup> (1978, 134)

In the public realm one can find a “guaranty against the futility of individual life” by giving birth, as it were, to the potentially immortal memory of the deeds that constitute one’s “life-story” and hence one’s unique self (1998, 19 and 180). Like the miracle of birth in nature, action is the “miracle-working faculty of man” in the public realm (1998, 294). Arendt sums up both of these procreative aspects of human life with her term “natality.”

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<sup>14</sup> Quoting Heraclitus, fragment B29, according to Arendt’s note.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek is Arendt’s addition, as is the preceding ellipsis.

<sup>16</sup> Quoting Plato’s *Symposium*, 208c, according to Arendt’s note.

## Nativity

Like Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, Arendt links the urge for biological procreation to the longing for immortality through fame (cf. *Symposium* 208c-d). And like Diotima, Arendt does this in order to show that the human need to act greatly, to do something new and remarkable, is a *productive* urge that stems from a natural “pregnancy of soul” (*Symposium* 208e). She coins the term nativity to distinguish such procreative human needs or urges from those needs associated with preservation. The needs of preservation stem from our poverty: we are hungry, naked, frail beings, who need to *consume* in order to live. The needs of procreation stem from our superabundance: we are beings with an urge to beget, to create, who need to *give* in order to be satisfied (cf. Bloom 2001, 139).

This distinction allows Arendt to shed more light on the importance of politics that the modern world fails to recognize. “[N]ativity, and not mortality,” is “the central category of political . . . thought” because the urge to overcome mortality through immortal deeds is at the heart of all action, *not* the urge simply to preserve oneself (Arendt 1998, 9). Biologically, mortality and nativity correspond to the desires of preservation and procreation, both of which are responses to the fact of death. But these responses point in opposite directions, for giving birth to and protecting one’s offspring often leads to self-sacrifice, while preserving oneself does not. Arendt insists on retaining this commonsense distinction. Similarly, in political life we strive not only to preserve what is past through tradition and remembrance, but also to procreate—to sow our seeds in the political soil, as it were—through remarkable deeds that are worthy of remembrance and that often require self-sacrifice. This is the life of politics. As Arendt

puts it, “[t]o be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display” (Arendt 1978, 21).

Arendt’s coinage of “natality” is meant to capture this positive aspect of the human condition in order to balance what she thinks is an undue emphasis on mortality, or the fear of death, that pervades modern political theory. As we have already discussed, the elevation of mere life to its status as the highest worldly good—an idea promoted first by Christianity’s focus on the sanctity of life and then by the liberal political philosophers’ emphasis on comfortable self-preservation—was “disastrous for the esteem and dignity of politics,” which originally “derived its greatest inspiration from the aspiration toward worldly immortality” (1998, 314). It was only by raising the status of the most urgent needs, such as the “need for food,” to new heights that Hobbes could demote the less urgent needs, such as “the need for public admiration,” to the status of “vainglory” (1998, 56-7). In doing so, Hobbes embraced the position that Diotima marked out in the *Symposium* for those who do not understand “erotics”: those for whom actions in the pursuit of honor are “irrational,” since such actions disregard the urgency of self-preservation (208c). Arendt would say, similarly, that Hobbes’ reduction of glory to vainglory stems from his blindness to the political importance of natality.

From Arendt’s perspective it is Hobbes who is irrational. Self-preservation is always ultimately futile. Everyone dies, if not violently. It is only by deadening our “repugnance to futility”—which modern technology threatens to accomplish by removing pain and effort from life, thereby making our futile existence easy, comfortable, and untroublesome—that human beings might go gently into a “lifeless life” (Arendt 1998, 119-120). To seek immortality through fame is at least to face up to and embrace the

necessity of bodily death. Hence, “whoever consciously aims at [...] leaving behind a story and an identity which will win ‘immortal fame,’ must not only risk his life but expressly choose, as Achilles did, a short life and premature death” (1998, 193).

Thus, in Arendt’s account, natality accounts for both our actual, bodily birth and our “second birth,” by which we “insert ourselves into the human world” with action (1998, 176). Bodily procreation is the form of our natality that contributes to the immortality of the species. Yet, what we really long for is an *individual* immortality in response to our awareness of *individual* mortality. The second urge is therefore specifically human and higher. Only human beings long to give birth to a second self, a public self. And this second self, unlike the first, is capable of individual immortality because it exists in the potentially immortal remembrance of the political community.

By emphasizing natality rather than mortality, Arendt means to counter the liberal tradition that emphasizes our decay and death, in light of which we seek preservation, above all else. That tradition overlooks that we are born and grow, that in life we have the experience of replacing the old with the new, and that the natural response to our mortality is not fearfully to seek preservation but boldly to produce things that will outlast our mortal nature and provide a “remedy for [...] futility” (1998, 197): children, worldly objects, and, most importantly, “immortal deed[s]” (19).

### **Immortality and Excellence**

In Diotima’s account of the pursuit of fame in Plato’s *Symposium*, those individuals who are particularly concerned with noble action seek “an immortal memory of their virtue” (208d, my emphasis). This proves also to be the case for Arendt. She



laments that the disappearance of the public realm marks the end of excellence.<sup>17</sup> For “society equalizes under all circumstances, and the victory of equality is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual” (1998, 41). The public realm, properly understood, “was reserved for individuality,” where “everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all” (*ibid.*). The equality among citizens in democratic Athens was not an end; it was the precondition for excellence, since excellence means to distinguish oneself from one’s peers (1998, 49; see also 95, 176). The public realm is a goad to action, and action is “highly individualistic” (194). It is the attempt to impress one’s superiority on the minds of one’s peers and thereby to win “immortal fame” (193-194).

But it is unclear in Arendt’s account whether virtue is instrumental—as a means by which to distinguish oneself and thereby to win immortal fame—or a good in itself that requires the possibility of worldly immortality as a goad. As we saw earlier, what is distinctive and “axiomatic” about the assumptions of pre-philosophic Greece is that “the only incentive worthy of man qua man is the striving for immortality” (1978, 134). As Arendt reads in Heraclitus, to be human means to ““prefer immortal fame to mortal things”” (1998, 19). Yet, what she seems to lament about the absence of that incentive in the modern world is the consequences it has on human excellence, rather than, say, the

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<sup>17</sup> Arendt uses the terms virtue and excellence (as well as *aretē* and *virtus*) synonymously (1998, 48-49; though cp. 208n40).

despair over our futility that should result from acknowledging our mortality. She concedes, after all, that the sheer comfort of modern life may cause us to cease being troubled by futility. But she specifically laments the deleterious effects that the contemporary absence of a public realm has on the human capacities for great words and deeds:

[O]ur capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and the private [...] No activity can become excellent if the world does not provide the proper space for its exercise. Neither education nor ingenuity nor talent can replace the constituent elements of the public realm, which make it the proper place for human excellence.” (1998, 49)

Nothing measures up to the “agonism” of the public realm for producing what is “great and radiant” in human beings: “the polis is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary” (1998, 206; cf. 194, 41).

Arendt’s critique of Christianity is particularly telling. She does not claim that Christianity failed to satisfy the human longing for individual immortality, but that it satisfied that longing in a way that no longer required—that even condemned—the desire to win immortality by distinguishing oneself in this world.

Aspiration toward immortality could now only be equated with vainglory; such fame as the world could bestow upon man was an illusion, since the world was

even more perishable than man, and a striving for worldly immortality was meaningless, since life itself was immortal. (1998, 314)

What she regrets is that Christianity prepared the way for the liberal concern with self-preservation—and the consequent diminution of the scope of our political ambitions—by relaxing the “repugnance of futility” that drove human flourishing. That is, by rejecting the supreme importance of *this* life and affirming that actual immortality in another is available to the humble who, among other things, avoid the sin of pride, Christianity teaches that there is no necessity to seek distinction in this life—indeed, one is even encouraged to *avoid* distinction and pursue self-abnegation.

Arendt’s rejection of Christianity as a solution to the problem of the human condition seems to indicate that virtue or distinction is the purpose of politics, rather than immortality. Yet, it is still unclear whether virtue is an end in itself, or whether it is just a means by which to win “immortal fame.” That ambiguity, however, is a necessary consequence of her understanding of politics. For, as she presents it, excellence is fundamentally yoked to “public performance” (1998, 49). To repeat, virtue *means* distinction for Arendt: one requires the presence of peers—a public—both *from which* to distinguish oneself and *for whom* to distinguish oneself. The Christian virtue of “goodness” or “good works,” which “hide[s] from being seen or heard,” is an “essentially non-human, superhuman quality” (1998, 73-78). The Christian virtues are not *excellences*; they are not virtues in the ancient sense, according to Arendt. Hence, for the Greeks, the pursuit of immortality required the same public space and the same distinguishing actions as the pursuit of excellence. Proving one’s excellence and winning

immortal fame in this account are coextensive and indistinguishable. For what wins eternal remembrance are precisely those actions that strike the public memory as distinct, extraordinary, new.

But this connection between public performance and excellence has the further consequence of denying the relevance of any measure of excellence beyond novelty. As is evident in her rejection of Christian goodness as a virtue, fame requires making a public impression, nothing more and nothing less. Hence, “to act well” cannot mean to act morally or to act effectively or to do what is necessary or needful; it must mean to act uniquely, creatively, innovatively. In Arendt’s reading, only the amoral criterion of “greatness” captures the end toward which human action aims: “acting is judged by greatness, by its distinction from the commonplace” (1998, 205n. 33).

What is outstandingly clear in Pericles’ formulations [...] is that the innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by the consequences for better or worse. Unlike human behavior—which the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to ‘moral standards,’ [...]—action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*. Thucydides, or Pericles, knew full well that he had broken with the normal standards for everyday behavior when he found the glory of Athens in having left behind “everywhere everlasting remembrance [...] of their

good and evil deeds.”<sup>18</sup> The art of politics teaches men how to bring forth what is great and radiant—*ta megala kai lampra*, in the words of Democritus; as long as the *polis* is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary, all things are safe; if it perishes, everything is lost. Motives and aims, no matter how pure or how grandiose, are never unique [...]. Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivations nor its achievement. (1998, 206)

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<sup>18</sup> One hears echoes of Nietzsche’s interpretation of Pericles’ Funeral Oration in *The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, Section 10: “It is the noble races that have left behind them the concept ‘barbarian’ wherever they have gone; even their highest culture betrays a consciousness of it and even a pride in it (for example, when Pericles says to his Athenians in his famous Funeral Oration ‘our boldness has gained access to every land and sea, everywhere raising imperishable monuments to its goodness *and wickedness*’). This ‘boldness’ of noble races, mad, absurd, and sudden in its expression, the incalculability, even incredibility of their undertakings—Pericles specially commends the *rhathymia* [ease of spirit] of the Athenians—their indifference to and contempt for security, body, life, comfort, their hair-raising cheerfulness and profound joy in all destruction, in all the voluptuousness of victory and cruelty—all this came together, in the minds of those who suffered from it, in the image of the ‘barbarian,’ the ‘evil enemy,’ perhaps as the ‘Goths,’ the ‘Vandals’” (Kaufmann 1967, 41-42).

In Arendt's view, the *polis* both inspires and preserves "the greatest achievements of which human beings are capable" by eliciting and remembering public performances that are ends in themselves (1998, 206). And by the "greatest achievements" she means, specifically, the most remarkable or novel achievements.

In Arendt's analysis, the public is by default the ultimate judge of what is worthy of remembrance, and consequently the only criterion of virtue is distinction in the city. Yet, in Thucydides' account, nearly every statesman worthy of distinction found himself in exile either by the will of the people or voluntarily, in fear of the judgment of the people. Pericles and perhaps Diodotus are the obvious exceptions, but they are exceptions that prove the rule: they are permitted to practice their virtue in the city only under the cover of public lies.<sup>19</sup> This leads us to ask whether, as Arendt insists, the public realm is indeed the "proper place for human excellence" (1998, 49). I will argue that Pericles' standard of excellence points beyond the city, to impressive Athenians such as Themistocles or Demosthenes, who were as independent as possible of public opinion—Themistocles because he thrived outside of the city, after being rejected by the people; Demosthenes because he is presented as an Athenian statesman who is truly worthy of

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<sup>19</sup> Diodotus tells the Athenian *demos* that their distrust of clever speakers makes it necessary for those who wish to do some good for the city—like himself—to lie to them in order to gain their trust (III.43.2). Thucydides praises Pericles' ability to manage the emotions of the *demos* through speech (II.65.9), which does not necessarily mean that he lies. However, he certainly stretches the truth in order to get the people to follow his advice, as I will argue below.

praise, though in fact his successes are mistaken for good fortune or overshadowed by Nicias' reputation. In both cases, the reader is conscious of Thucydides' attempt to distinguish what is praised from what is worthy of praise. That distinction is impossible in Arendt's account.

Moreover, Arendt's insistence on the centrality of public appearance and her consequent identification of Appearing with Being forces her to overlook what is most remarkable about Pericles' vision of Athens. Unlike Arendt, Pericles has an independent standard of human excellence. Human excellence is the capacity to perceive what is needful and to act accordingly. Pericles' vision of human excellence, at bottom, attempts to do full justice to the human regard for nobility, or what is truly praiseworthy. As we shall see, Pericles insists that truly praiseworthy actions must be noble in the traditional sense of being characterized by an unconcern with one's safety or immediate self-interest, but must also be characterized by a full consciousness of oneself and the world in which one acts. And this vision of excellence is not meant to be a Periclean fabrication: he is only clarifying what is implicit in all human praise. Only when we knowingly face dangers, for instance, can we be praised for the nobility of our courage, which means that the nobility of courage depends upon our clarity regarding that action. These two aspects of Pericles' standard of excellence—courage and judgment, in short—may be in some tension with each other, but this does not mean that he is wrong about the human regard for the noble. And an important consequence of Pericles' understanding of virtue, *contra* Arendt, is that it is inseparable from the capacity to see a reality that transcends the "reality" of the city, and consequently the purpose and value of that

standard cannot be dependent on public opinion or reducible to the desire for public praise.



## Chapter 2

### **Calculation and Nobility**

As we have just seen, Arendt's call for the resuscitation of the *vita activa* issues from her claim that "meaningfulness" lies beyond the human capacity to work or to create: it lies in the capacity to act, and in particular in the capacity to act politically (Arendt 1998, 176, 155). The meaningfulness of life for human beings resides in their specifically human power to perform and speak about rare, new, and perhaps even miraculous deeds (42, 178). To repeat, "[t]he task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words—which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness" (19). It is because such deeds require, "at least to a degree," an everlasting home that the action in question is *political* action. For the everlasting home that she has in mind is the city, the *polis*.

Hence, the possibility of meaningfulness in human life, according to Arendt, stands or falls with the possibility of the immortal city. And that most resplendent possibility is at the heart of her reading of Pericles' Funeral Oration. "The *polis*—if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration—gives a guaranty [...] that the most futile of human activities [...] would become imperishable" (198). Arendt reads in Pericles' Funeral Oration an emphatic call for the production of meaning through grand political action. To participate in grand politics is to create an enduring "reality" that both elicits greatness and preserves the memory of otherwise ephemeral human beings. The city guarantees that our speeches and deeds in this life will not be mere "dreams," which are "intimately and exclusively our own but without reality" (199). Our desire for

“meaning,” according to Arendt, finds its fullest satisfaction in participation—  
“extraordinary” participation—in a common “reality” that resides beyond ourselves and  
is for that reason free from our mortal fragility; the city provides our chance to participate  
in a kind of immortality (197-199).

But to take Pericles’ speeches only as calls to pursue immortal glory is to ignore  
Pericles’ equally remarkable calls to act with calculation or good judgment. It is to reduce  
Pericles to an uncomplicated imperialist. And even if we accept Arendt’s image of  
Pericles, it would be hard for us to walk away from reading Thucydides’ history with  
admiration for that image. As W. Robert Connor remarks, “the view that greatness is self-  
justifying, not dependent upon its social or human effects or its conformity to justice or  
any other moral standard,” though perhaps “deeply rooted in Greek culture,” cannot be  
taken seriously by the reader of Thucydides (Connor, 1984, 74). For in the rest of the  
book, “the sense of loss is so vivid, the emphasis on the suffering of the war is so intense,  
and the implications of the words [of Pericles] for Athens so ironic” that we are forced to  
conclude that that view is “explored, subverted, and finally repudiated” by the larger  
work (*ibid.*).

Of course, if Arendt’s view of Athenian greatness is on display in the speeches of  
Pericles only to be repudiated by the narrative of Thucydides, as Connor suggests, then  
we might conclude that Arendt’s understanding of Thucydides’ Pericles is accurate and  
that Thucydides disagreed with both Arendt and his heroic statesman. But that conclusion  
is hard to square with Thucydides’ final praise of Pericles in II.65. There, Thucydides  
presents Pericles as a model statesman. He ruled in a “measured way” (μετρίως), leading  
Athens both to greatness and to safety, and his unparalleled foresight, patriotism, and

esteem permitted him to defend caution and prudence even when it angered the people (II.65.5-8). Because this unexpected coda in defense of Pericles' moderation concludes Thucydides' depiction of the seemingly hawkish statesman, all readers of Thucydides struggle to pin down Pericles' character. Is he the "adventurous imperialist" revealed by his speeches or the "prudent strategist" whom Thucydides praises (Gomme, 1951, 75)? Is he a "radical imperialist" or a "careful conservative" (Bloedow 2000, 307)? "What is incontrovertible," Edmund Bloedow concludes, "is that the historian in fact presents us with two Pericles [*sic*], without resolving the contradictions between them" (308).

Yet it is impossible to resist the urge to resolve the Periclean contradiction. Some reconcile the two images of Pericles by arguing that Pericles does not call, after all, for the kind of self-sacrificial devotion on behalf of the city that Arendt finds so attractive. Sara Monoson, most notably, argues that the Funeral Oration

presents a view of democratic citizenship that prizes reciprocal mutual exchange between city and citizens and not, as an anachronistic and romantic reading of the [*erastes*] metaphor<sup>20</sup> in translation might suggest, the selfless devotion of the individual citizens to the good of the city. (Monoson 1994, 254)

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<sup>20</sup> Monoson is referring to Pericles' exhortation that Athenians become "lovers" of their city at II.43.1. Her essay is an extended analysis of the metaphor of citizens as lovers and the city as the beloved, in which she argues that the "lover"—the citizen—is not selflessly devoted but one partner in a mutually beneficial "exchange" (Monoson 1994).

On this reading, the citizen does not overcome his narrowly self-interested desires and, embracing his repugnance to futility, devote himself to Athens in pursuit of eternal fame; rather, he “conceive[s] of his interest in a relationship with the city to be rooted in his own felt desires and willful actions” (265-266). The citizen’s deeds on behalf of the city are not noble sacrifices but “ways in which they ingratiate themselves with the city and which enable them legitimately to expect to receive, in return, certain favors” (267). Individuals accept their duties as citizens in the best case, according to Monoson’s Pericles, in a perfectly rational pursuit of self-interest by means of mutually beneficial exchange. Similarly, Ryan Balot argues that Pericles’ rhetoric is meant to instill in the Athenian a “correct apprehension of his own [materialistic] self-interest as a citizen.” (Balot 2001, 520 with 510; cf. Sharples 1983). And most recently, Rachel Templar has supported this reading by appealing to Pericles’ much narrower statements on the duties of the citizen in his third speech, at II.60.2-4 (Templar 2015, 169; cf. 160-164).

Other scholars are not so willing to infer from Thucydides’ praise of Pericles as “measured” that the statesman was “actually” concerned only with the citizens’ self-interest or material wellbeing. They conclude, instead, that Pericles’ moderation is tactical, and that therefore his apparent restraint does not contradict his underlying ambition to make Athens great even at the expense of Athenian lives and prosperity. Edmund Bloedow, for example, concludes that Pericles’ caution was only strategic, even though he insists that there are “contradictions” in Thucydides’ presentation of the statesman. And Martha Taylor agrees, arguing that Thucydides’ seemingly contradictory presentations serve as a rhetorical device, rather than as a conclusive judgment, and that the contradiction is meant to lead readers to reach for themselves the very conclusion that

Bloedow draws (Taylor 2009, 90). W. Robert Connor also argues that Thucydides' praise of Pericles should not be accepted as the author's final judgment. Like Taylor, he argues that the seeming contradiction between Thucydides' "apparent defense" of Pericles and his preceding presentation of Pericles serves a rhetorical purpose: it is meant to prevent the reader from dismissing Pericles too quickly (Connor 1984, 74). But what in his presentation of Pericles does Thucydides wish for us not to miss—especially if Pericles is, after all, just a calculative but ultimately reckless imperialist that brings Athens to ruin?

We certainly should not dismiss Pericles too quickly. But I suggest that we shift the focus of the debate over the Periclean contradiction. When Thucydides claims that Pericles ruled in a "measured" or "moderate way" (μετρίως), he does not mean that Pericles himself was moderate as opposed to being radical; he means that Pericles was capable of moderating opposing forces, or of bringing disparate parts into balance or harmony. This is the sense of the word that is expressed in Pericles' complaint that it is difficult to speak in a measured way to those who disagree with one another—it is difficult to "strike a balance," as it were, that satisfies both parties (II.35.2); or when Thucydides or his characters describe policies as "moderate" because those policies recognize the claims of the weak as well as the strong (III.46.4; IV.81.2, 105.2, 108.2); or when Thucydides praises the "moderation" of the Rule of the 5000 in Athens because it was a regime based on a balance of the few and the many (VIII.97.2). This last example anticipates Aristotle's endorsement of "measured" regimes, which contain a large middle class that helps keep in balance the extreme tendencies of the few and the many and so prevents the injustices of each (*Politics* 1295b1). This understanding of "moderation" as

a characteristic of the city that Pericles is responsible for, rather than a description of his own character, shifts the focus away from Pericles himself as a moderate ruler and toward the object of his moderation. We should be asking, “How did Pericles balance or moderate the discrete forces in the city?”

There is no question that Pericles had to balance a variety of factions, despite his tendency to speak of Athenians monolithically. There were city-dwellers and country-dwellers, the old and the young, and the oligarchs and the democrats, among others. But Pericles’ larger moderating purpose is more theoretical. His goal is to unify these groups by giving an account of the Athenian citizen that harmonizes selfless devotion with clear-sighted calculation. He wants to balance the pursuit of nobility, or virtue more generally, with the pursuit of reason. And his attempt to balance these two visions of human flourishing is most evident in his accounts of courage. Indeed, as we will see, Pericles presents two conceptions of Athenian courage: one based on their trust in their own virtue, which goes together with the qualities that Arendt praises, such as their sense of nobility and longing for immortal praise; and one based on a rational calculation of their superior resources, which is prudent but unheroic. One kind of courage prizes boldness of action; the other, safety.

### **The Nobility of Athenian Courage**

Pericles’ praise of Athenian virtue in the Funeral Oration reaches a climax in a striking statement on true strength of soul. “He would justly be judged strongest of soul who knew most clearly the terrible and the pleasant things and did not turn away from danger on account of these [διὰ ταῦτα]” (II.40.3). The statement contains an ambiguity

that captures well the two strains of Pericles' understanding of courage. The syntax of the phrase marks it as an unreal and perhaps even impossible standard, but nevertheless as the standard in light of which Athenians ought to live their lives.<sup>21</sup> But the precise meaning of the statement is not clear. How, in short, are we to understand the prepositional phrase “on account of these”?

There is a long tradition of scholarship suggesting that this prepositional phrase ought to be interpreted causally. For example, Gomme asserts that we should understand Pericles to mean that the courageous face danger ““on account of this knowledge”” (1956, 123). He denies that such an interpretation would require the singular of the demonstrative pronoun—i.e. διὰ τοῦτο rather than διὰ ταῦτα. On this reading, we would say that the strong of soul do not “turn away from danger on account of [their clear knowledge of] these [terrible and pleasant things].” Their claim to be “strongest of soul,” in this case, becomes a claim to knowledge. It is for this reason that commentators since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century have argued for a “Platonic”—or Socratic—reading of this

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<sup>21</sup> It is a “less vivid” future conditional. The judgment clause is the apodosis; the circumstantial participles form the protasis (Smyth 2322, 2329-32, 2344). Thus, the syntax implies an “if” in the protasis to complement the optative mood in the apodosis: *if* he knew the terrible and the pleasant *and* did not turn away from dangers, only then *would he be* justly judged strongest of soul. The “less vivid” construction is used to represent anything that is “supposable,” even if it is “physically impossible” or “contrary to fact” (Smyth 2329a).

passage: true courage is knowledge of what is truly terrible (Marchant 1961, 176; Gomme 1956, 123; Sharples 1983, 139-140; Hornblower 2003, 306-7).<sup>22</sup>

Despite the scholarly suggestions, nearly all translators have concluded that the prepositional phrase should be rendered with a concessive meaning: *despite* knowing clearly what is terrible and pleasant, the strong of soul do not “turn away from danger on account of these [terrible and pleasant things].” Thomas Hobbes translates the phrase:

And they are most rightly reputed valiant who, *though* they perfectly apprehend both what is dangerous and what is easy, are never the more thereby diverted from adventuring. (Greene 1989, 111, my emphasis)

Richard Crawley renders it:

But the prize for courage will surely be awarded most justly to those who best know the difference between hardship and pleasure and *yet* are never tempted to shrink from danger. (Strassler 1996, 114, my emphasis)

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<sup>22</sup> Hornblower describes these readings as “Platonic” and identifies the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors who give this interpretation (2003, 306-7). For Socrates’s definitions of political and individual courage, see *Republic* 429c-430c and 442c. See also *Protagoras* 360d4-5. Nicias makes a similar statement at *Laches* 194e-195a, which Socrates takes up in that text (cp. 199a10-b1).



And, most recently, Jeremy Mynott writes:

The bravest spirits are rightly judged to be those who see clearly just what perils and pleasures await them *but* do not on that account flinch from the danger.

(Thucydides 2013, 113, my emphasis)<sup>23</sup>

If the causal reading of the phrase is “Platonic,” the concessive reading, too, is not absent from the pages of Plato. For it hinges on a commonsense objection to the “Platonic” position that also features in the dialogues, namely, that courage must be distinct from knowledge, because he who enters battle only when he foresees certain victory cannot be considered courageous (cf. *Laches* 193a.). He faces an *apparently* dangerous task only because he knows that it is *not actually* dangerous. Insofar as knowledge diminishes danger, to that extent it obviates the need for courage to face that danger. Knowledge seems to make “courage” unheroic. To take it one step further, the courageous also cannot be without knowledge simply, since ignorance, too, diminishes danger (at least one’s awareness of danger) and therefore ignorance also obviates the need for courage. The truly courageous person must therefore be one who faces great dangers while knowing that he is indeed facing them—one whose courage is diminished neither by knowledge that he faces no real danger nor by ignorance of the risks that he runs. The

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<sup>23</sup> See also Smith 1991, 329. I have found no translation that fully embraces the causal interpretation of this phrase. Susan Collins and Devin Stauffer (1999, 27) and Benjamin Jowett (Thucydides 1998, 130) at least preserve the ambiguity.

underlying thought is that courage is something noble, meaning that it has the character of self-conscious risk or self-sacrifice.<sup>24</sup> This is the idea captured by the concessive reading of the phrase.

Translators perhaps prefer this rendering because of the context. Pericles has just asserted that, unlike “others,” the Athenian is able to unite within himself both daring and calculation in whatever task he undertakes. “For others,” Pericles goes on, “it is ignorance [ἄμαθία] that brings over-boldness while calculation brings hesitation” (II.40.3). What is new or remarkable is that Athenians remain firm in danger *despite* their clarity of thought, despite their full awareness of the dangers they face. Moreover, Pericles will state in the immediate sequel that Athenians benefit others “fearlessly,” which he specifies means *not* from a calculation of the advantages to be gained from beneficence but from their “trust in liberality” (II.40.5). Their fearlessness comes from an abiding *trust* in their own virtue—a trust that may lead them to confer benefits, it is implied, even in spite of what a rational assessment of their interest might recommend. Similarly, Pericles states that Athens opens her city to citizens and strangers alike, even

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<sup>24</sup> In Arendt’s terms, courage is “the political virtue par excellence” because devotion to the affairs of the city means living beyond the household where “one is primarily concerned with one’s own life and survival” (Arendt 1998, 36). Hence, to enter the political realm, the potential citizen must be “ready to risk his life” (*ibid.*). This courage, according to Arendt, constitutes the freedom of the Athenian citizen, for true freedom is inherently risky; “too great a love for life obstruct[s] freedom” (*ibid.*). The noble freedom of the citizen consists in his capacity to act even against his own private interest or desire.

though her enemies benefit from the city's lack of concealment (II.39.1). Again, Pericles explains that Athenians place their "trust" in their own "goodness of soul in action" rather than in the anticipatory "preparations" and "deceptions" that any calculation from security would surely recommend (II.39.1). In each of these cases, Pericles presents the Athenians as confident in their virtues *despite* knowing that their actions very well might cause them harm. Indeed, their knowledge of the risk enhances the nobility of their trust in virtue even as it exposes them to accusations of imprudence or recklessness.

Recently a third interpretation of this passage has been suggested, meant to reconcile the causal (rational) interpretation and the concessive (noble) interpretation of Pericles' praise. This new reading argues that the knowledge in question is "knowledge of values," which may require courage to pursue only because they are distant goals, which, as such, are not always clear or compelling in the moment to the common citizen (Sharples 1983, 140). As Ryan Balot has put it, "Pericles holds a composite view of courage that requires both the knowledge of value and a daring character that has been properly trained to act in accordance with one's judgments" (2001, 509). This argument offers an "Aristotelian" reading, which rests on the claim that Athenian courage is composed of a habituated character in addition to the intellectual capacity to grasp both "ultimate values" and prudential calculations. Through shame, the argument goes, Pericles has habituated Athenians to act on their "long-term values" from character rather than from intellect, and through deliberation they do this prudently (513). "[C]ourage is in Pericles' view the virtue that permits courageous people to put into practice their underlying values in the appropriate way" (518).

Yet, though the strongest proponent of this view, Ryan Balot, acknowledges that Aristotelian courage is practiced for the sake of τὸ καλόν—the noble, beautiful, or fine (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b12-14)—his thesis depends on reducing the true end of courage first to the vague idea of “values,” and then to “individual flourishing” understood as the “rational and prudent” devotion to Athens for the sake of one’s own gain (Balot 2001, 510-512). The preservation of Athens “in turn preserves the long-term materialistic, and even hedonistic, values of the mass audience [that Pericles] is addressing—in particular, continued enjoyment of the fruits of empire” (510). Hence, though the argument seems to preserve something of the sacrificial element of courage by its appeal to ultimate ends that require perseverance and stability of character to attain, the interpretation is ultimately in agreement with the causal reading of Pericles’ statement. For in this interpretation “the knowledge of the fearful and pleasant” is synonymous with knowledge of the city’s individualistic “core values” (515-516, 521; cf. Sharples 1983, 140; Monoson 1994, 254). The implication is that avoiding what is truly fearful and attaining what is truly pleasant is the highest goal of the Athenian citizen. Shame, accordingly, is only a means by which Pericles encourages the citizens to pursue their individual good (Balot 2001, 513). What is noble, it follows, is only the reflection of future prosperity that the citizen can rationally expect to enjoy: it is the “correct apprehension of his own self-interest as a citizen,” i.e., his “long-term materialistic, and even hedonistic, values” (520, 510).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the relevant question here is not whether Pericles himself affirms a view of self-interest rightly understood but whether the Athenian

But the equation of what is pleasant—even what is truly pleasant—with what is noble is, as the Athenians themselves assert, not the Athenian view but the Spartan view. Even the most thoroughgoing Athenian “realists” ridicule this conflation, stating that the Spartans, “most conspicuously of those whom we know, believe the pleasant things to be noble” (V.105.4). The Athenian speakers seem to accept, instead, what they suggest is the more common view, namely, that “the noble is accomplished with danger” (V.107.1; cf. II.42.4). Athenians, in short, balk at reducing a daring pursuit of the noble to a prudential pursuit of one’s own interest or pleasure. And this Athenian refusal to reduce the noble to what is advantageous or pleasant needs to be taken seriously.

The simplest solution to interpreting Pericles’ statement, then, is to maintain—as the Athenians do—the distinction between what is good or pleasant and what is noble (which is not to deny that the noble person can take pleasure in being noble). Knowledge of what is terrible and pleasant is not inconsistent with a noble understanding of courage for the Athenians because, at least in Pericles’ Funeral Oration, what is good *for oneself* is not the only measure of what is choiceworthy. Courage is choiceworthy because it is noble, and it is the courageous man’s knowledge of what is terrible and pleasant that

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citizens would accept that what is noble is equivalent to their long-term interest. For we are attempting to understand how the Funeral Oration was meant to be understood by the citizens. If Pericles appeals to nobility in order to make long-term self-interest more attractive to the citizenry, the thing that we want to understand is not his sobriety so much as the revelation inherent in this rhetorical necessity that prudential calculations from self-interest must *not* be sufficiently compelling on their own.

brings both the noble and its priority for him into relief. For doing what is noble or beautiful is most conspicuous when it requires one to endure harm or pain. Consider Aristotle's gloss on the noble in the *Rhetoric*:

... And all those things for which the prize is honor are noble; and all those for which it is honor rather than money. And all those things someone accomplishes by choice but not for his own sake; and the things that are good simply, both all the things someone does on behalf of the fatherland while overlooking himself and the things that are good by nature; and the good things that are not for him himself—since such things are for the sake of himself. And all those things more capable of existing after one has died than while one is living—for the things one has in life are more for the sake of oneself. And all deeds done for the sake of others—for these are less for oneself. And all good deeds done for others but not for oneself, and [good deeds] done for those who have acted well—for that is just. And things done out of kindness—for these are not for oneself. (1366b35-1367a8)

We should not assume that Thucydides' account of the noble is identical to Aristotle's. But Aristotle's intention in this passage is not to give a precise definition of the noble. Rather, his intention is to state the *endoxa* about it in order to identify its power in speech, the effect an appeal to nobility would have had on an audience of more or less Thucydides' time (*Art of Rhetoric* 1369b31-33). The frequent refrain of "not for one's own sake" in Aristotle's statement makes clear that noble deeds are most resplendent

when they appear most selfless. Indeed, our own experience of admiration for such deeds makes this immediately intelligible to us today. Hence, the noble is most evident when it is set off against those human goods that we would otherwise pursue because they are obviously good *for us*: beneficial things rather than terrible ones and pleasant things rather than painful ones. Sacrifice and risk reveal or bestow nobility. For Arendt, it is these self-transcendent deeds that are at home in the “reality” beyond the individual—and hence beyond individual mortality—that can be and deserve to be “imperishable” through “everlasting remembrance” (Arendt 1998, 197-198).

Thucydides’ remarks confirm that the human concern for the noble entails a willingness to risk or sacrifice oneself for something greater than oneself.<sup>26</sup> It is tied to both piety and lawfulness as well as to great deeds that benefit or impress others, and which entail risk—sometimes simply because they are beyond what human beings have yet accomplished. Moreover, the concern for the noble as Thucydides presents it seems to be natural and ineradicable. For instance, during the extreme suffering of the plague, concern for the noble seems to disappear, only to return in another form. During that episode, “no one had the heart to persevere in what was held to be noble, considering it unclear whether they would be destroyed before attaining it,” with the result that “no one was restrained by fear of the gods or by the laws of men” (II.53.3). The self-restraint necessary to forego one’s immediate desires in the name of justice or piety appears to rest

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<sup>26</sup> For a useful, brief discussion of the noble in Thucydides see Bartlett 2001, 95-96. I follow his lead in taking my bearings from Thucydides’ remarks on the noble in the contexts of the plague in Athens and Syracuse’s victory over Athens.

on one's opinion that that noble sacrifice of self-interest will be rewarded (or will permit one to escape punishment). Witnessing the plague destroyed that hope, since both noble and ignoble people perished alike. The result, however, was that "whatever was immediately pleasurable or beneficial to that end, this came to be both noble and useful" (II.53.3). In their most extreme despair, the Athenians did not just pursue pleasure *instead of* the noble; they allowed themselves to pursue their pleasure by calling it noble. Not even in the most trying times do human beings fully abandon their concern for nobility.

Thucydides gives an equally revealing example of the persistence of the noble in his remarks on Syracuse's victory over Athens in Sicily. The Syracusans, inhabitants of the largest city in Sicily, originally mustered their forces to repel the Athenians in desperation and fear for their very survival (VI.69.3). Nevertheless, with their decisive and somewhat unexpected triumph over the Athenians—at sea, no less—the Syracusans experience significant mission creep.

They no longer took care only over their own salvation, but also over how to prevent the others [from escaping], [... for] if they were able to conquer the Athenians and their allies both by land and by sea, their achievement would come to light in the eyes of the Greeks as noble: for the rest of the Greeks would immediately be freed or released from fear [...] and they themselves, being held



to be the cause of these things, would be admired both by the rest of mankind and still more by those yet to come. (VII.56.2; cf. VII.59.2)<sup>27</sup>

The Syracusans, it seems, cannot help but turn immediately from considerations of self-preservation to those of nobility. Having been compelled to fight out of fear for their preservation, they conclude their fight by desiring praise for their stunning service to mankind. And they believe themselves worthy of admiration not least because they volunteered their own city to “brave the first dangers” (προκινδυνεῖσαι: VII.56.3) in the common fight against the Athenians.

But, as this last remark implies, the noble is not only accomplished with danger: it also requires choice. As Aristotle draws to our attention, we praise people for the choices they make and therefore “one must attempt” in a speech of praise, such as a funeral oration, “to show that one was acting by choice” (*Art of Rhetoric* 1367b23-24). That is, only actions that are done deliberately are truly noble and hence worthy of praise. It is for this reason that Pericles is especially concerned with establishing the self-awareness of the noble Athenians. And it is for this reason that the roots of Athenian rationalism can be traced to their seriousness about nobility. If they are “realists,” it is not because they are

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<sup>27</sup> The repetition of the phrase καλὸν ἀγώνισμα σφίσιν is the other half of an embedded ring composition framed around the catalogue of allies that have come to participate in the war in Sicily on either side (Connor 1984, Appendix 9). Marchant suggests, “the Greeks are here spectators of the contest” and that it is meant to evoke an Olympic competition (cf. VII.66.1, 68.3, 70.7; Marchant 1893, 175; Hornblower 2010, 652).

dismissive of justice or piety or nobility, but precisely because they take these seriously. Pericles insists that the praiseworthiness of what is noble both requires the cultivation of judgment, or “calculation,” while at the same time refusing to reduce what is noble to mere calculations from self-interest. This is the tension at the heart of Pericles’ standard for true excellence.

From all this I conclude that the heroic (concessive) reading of Pericles’ statement is apt: this captures Pericles’ intention of praising those who self-consciously distinguish between what is good for themselves and what is noble—i.e., what is good simply, or good for others, or, in this case, what is needful (τὰ δέοντα)<sup>28</sup> for Athens—and who deliberately choose the latter “even when” it exposes them to harm or pain. The rational (causal) reading collapses what is noble into what is pleasant and fails to distinguish between things that are choiceworthy because they are good simply and things that are choiceworthy because they are good *for us*. Proponents of the causal reading therefore fail to do justice to the fact that some things appear most choiceworthy especially when they appear *bad* for us in certain respects. Indeed, some noble things—perhaps even the most dazzling noble things—come to sight as choiceworthy and hence good especially insofar as they come to sight as bad *for us*, like a noble death. Courage would cease to be attractive if it ceased being risky. Only by keeping the distinction between the noble and the good in mind can we appreciate the particular power of speech to “balance one thing against another,” as we do, for instance, in saying, “if it was harmful at least it was noble” (Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric* 1416a13-14).

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<sup>28</sup> See the appendix for a discussion of Thucydides’ use of this important term.

It is because we seem to have forgotten this distinction between what is noble and what is good (that is, good for the preservation or material wellbeing of the individual) that Arendt insists on our modern blindness to the “gulf between the sheltered life in the household and the merciless exposure of the *polis*” (1998, 35). In the eyes of the Athenians, Arendt claims, the division between the common world of noble deeds and the private world of self-interest was “self-evident and axiomatic” (28).

### **The Courage of the Fallen**

The brief statement in the Funeral Oration in which Pericles praises the fallen—those for whom the funeral is being held—illustrates the noble character of Athenian courage articulated above. Pericles takes every opportunity in that short passage to emphasize the deliberate and sacrificial nature of those soldiers’ deeds. By repeatedly emphasizing their deliberations as they first grasped the need for action and then chose to heed that call rather than pursue their own good, Pericles heightens the grandeur of their sacrifice. Moreover, the abundance of terms connoting their thoughtfulness (italicized in the passage below) reveals the role that self-conscious choice plays in the virtue of these men, at least in Pericles’ telling. Pericles shows us that they were deeds freely chosen in full awareness of the risks involved and hence worthy of praise. And while knowledge of what was needful for Athens was necessary for these soldiers in order to act on her behalf, that knowledge is not reducible to a calculation of the soldiers’ long-term self-interests. Knowledge of what is needful only provides the occasion for noble action.

Of these [men] here, none were softened through *preferring* the continued enjoyment of wealth, nor, with the hopes of the impoverished, did any put off the danger, on the grounds that he could yet become rich by fleeing it. But *holding* revenge on our opponents to be more desirable than these [considerations of prosperity], and at the same time *considering* this the noblest risk, they *wished* with this [risk] to be avenged on these [opponents] and to long for those [riches], leaving to hope the uncertainty of future prosperity [or success: κατορθώσειν], but *thinking it worthy* for them to trust<sup>29</sup> in themselves with action concerning what was already being perceived by them.<sup>30</sup> *Deeming it fit*<sup>31</sup> to defend and suffer rather than to be saved through giving in, they fled the shame of speech, and

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<sup>29</sup> Intransitive active forms of πείθω have a passive sense (LSJ, s.v. πείθω). See Homer, *Iliad* 4.325 for a close parallel, where Nestor regrets that he is no longer among the young and brave who “trust in bodily strength.” Because of his age, he says, he must resign himself to the task of guiding the young with counsel and speeches.

<sup>30</sup> In the Greek, the parallel emphasizes *acting* on that which is visible (the present) and merely *hoping* for that which is invisible (the future). While the passage as a whole emphasizes the deliberateness of the action, there are indications that the choice was in the heat of the moment and therefore not only free of desperate hopes but perhaps also lacking in foresight.

<sup>31</sup> LSJ cites this passage as the example of a use of ἡγέομαι that has the sense of “ἡγοῦμαι δεῖν” without the δεῖν: “*think fit, deem necessary*” to do something (LSJ, s.v. ἡγέομαι III.4).

submitted to the deed with their bodies, and through the smallest moment of chance and at the same time in the acme of renown rather than fear, they were delivered. (II.42.4, emphasis mine)

As knowers of what is pleasant and what is terrible *for them* as well as of what is needful *for Athens*, these soldiers chose to do the latter, and simply “to long for” their own future prosperity.<sup>32</sup>

### **Pride and Disdain**

To claim that Pericles’ statement on strength of soul is meant to depict the Athenians as more noble than calculative is appropriate to the nature of the speech. After all, the Funeral Oration is an *epideictic* speech (a speech of praise or blame), and the purpose of *epideictic* rhetoric is to put on display “what is noble or shameful” (Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric* 1358b29; cf. II.34.6). So far, Hannah Arendt’s reading of Pericles is faultless. The deeper problem comes when we note that this turns the Funeral Oration into a speech that seems to stand in insoluble tension with the mundane, prudential concerns of Pericles’ other speeches, and even with the role of calculation and self-awareness emphasized in the Funeral Oration itself.

How do we reconcile, for instance, Pericles’ disparate statements on citizenship? In the Funeral Oration, Pericles encourages the citizen to think of himself as an *erastes*, a

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the conscious choice emphasized in Pericles’ praise here, see Lowell Edmunds (1975, 60; also 44-46, 66-67) and Jeffrey Rusten (1986, 66, *passim*).

lover of the city, who is explicitly urged to reject “considering the benefit [of defending the city] by reason alone,” presumably because this would only reveal those more mundane, tangible goods that come from the city which are obvious to any sensible person, such as security and prosperity (II.43.1). To become a lover of the city means to transcend the concern with these basic goods. As Gregory Crane notes, Thucydides has Pericles exhort his fellow citizens in this passage to “gaze upon” (θεάομαι) the city and fall in love with it. It is one of only three passages in which Thucydides uses the word θεάομαι to speak about vision. Elsewhere Thucydides prefers words for vision with rationalistic connotations, like “examine” or “investigate.” Θεάομαι, by contrast, captures “the fascinated gaze” that, to Greek ears, evokes “self-deluding foolishness”: “Its effect is emotional, and thus subverts rational analysis” (Crane, 245). Yet, despite this vision of the Athenian citizen presented in the Funeral Oration, in Pericles’ third speech the citizen becomes precisely that mundanely sensible individual with a clear understanding of the dependence of his own interest on the preservation of the common good. The defense of the city is in everyone’s interest, Pericles argues there, because, should the city be destroyed, even the prosperous individual will suffer, and, should it be preserved, even the one suffering may yet fare well (II.60.2-4).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> As noted above, Sara Monoson tries to reconcile these statements by arguing that the *erastes* metaphor evokes an idea of citizenship that holds the citizen and city to be in a reciprocal relationship based on mutual advantage rather than the romantic idea that citizens ought to be selflessly devoted to the city (1994, 254, *passim*). Rachel Templar, following Monoson, appeals to Pericles’ third speech to support that view (2015, 169; cf.

We will best appreciate this tension among Pericles' statements by considering more fully his insistence in the Funeral Oration that Athenians place their trust in virtue rather than calculation, for this is the opposite of his express position elsewhere. In his first speech, Pericles encourages the Athenians to embrace the impending war by reckoning up for them their vast superiority in resources—their preparedness, which he so disdains in the Funeral Oration (II.39.1; I.141.2-6, 142.1; see also II.13.2-9). As he argues in his first speech, wars—especially wars of attrition—are won with money, not men, and he ridicules the Spartans for their naiveté (I.141.5).<sup>34</sup> They are farmers who know nothing of the accumulation of capital, since they live off the land, and who consequently are “more willing to make war with their bodies than with money, since

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160-164). Ryan Balot also attempts to reconcile the striking rhetoric of the Funeral Oration with the mundane remarks in Pericles' third speech (2001, 512). None of these arguments stand up to Gregory Crane's incisive textual analysis of the statement in the Funeral Oration. The “romantic” reading that Monoson and others reject is, in fact, the correct one.

<sup>34</sup> Archidamus, in a characteristic Thucydidean reversal, sounds more like an Athenian than a Spartan in his first speech, which is in many ways complementary to Pericles' first speech. After making nearly the same calculation of resources as Pericles and coming to the same conclusion—namely, that Athens has vastly superior resources—he asks the rather un-Spartan question: “and trusting in what do we rush to embrace war thus unprepared?” (I.80.3).

they trust that these [bodies] might yet survive the dangers, while they are not certain that they will not use up [their money]” (I.141.5).

In his final speech, Pericles returns to this assertion and develops more fully why trust in money is more stable than trust in “bodies.” He again instills confidence in the citizenry by stressing—even exaggerating—Athens’ superior resources: her material losses are negligible when one considers that the Athenians are the unrivalled masters of the sea (II.62.2-3). This consideration, he asserts, should urge them to confront their enemies not with “pride alone” but with “disdain” (II.62.3). Pride, he contends, is perfectly consistent with ignorance (ἀμαθία), since one can boast of superiority even when success comes through mere chance. The distinguishing feature of “disdain” is that it belongs to one who “trusts his judgment” that he is superior to his opponent (II.62.4). “Intelligence,” Pericles explains, “produces boldness with a strength augmented by its sense of superiority, since it trusts less in hope, the strength from which resides in want [or perplexity: ἀπόρρη], than in a judgment based on existing resources, the foresight from which is steadier” (II.62.5; cf. II.22.1). Pericles seems here fully to embrace the “unheroic” view of courage identified above—confidence based on the knowledge of one’s nearly certain success, i.e., knowledge that the seemingly terrible things are not truly terrible. It is simply naïve, Pericles here insists, to face dangers trusting only in one’s “body,” with no resources to speak of and hence with no reliable expectation of success. This is only the empty hopefulness of the desperate or confused, or of the ignorant buoyed by fortune.

To bring the example full circle and confirm Pericles’ willingness to alter his speech radically depending on the occasion, we can return to the Funeral Oration and



observe there the man of pride cast in the opposite light. For the pride, hopefulness, and trust in bodily action rather than rational preparation that came together in the deficient form of boldness scorned in Pericles' first and third speeches are precisely the qualities that Pericles exhorts the citizens to emulate in the Funeral Oration.

Judging happiness to rest in freedom and freedom to rest in goodness of soul,<sup>35</sup> do not consider anxiously the risk of war. [...] For the evil in being made soft is more painful for the man having pride than the coming, with strength and shared hope at the same time, of unperceived death. (II.43.6)

Here, hopefulness and pride in the exercise of strength—even or especially when death results, i.e., when success is far from certain—come to sight as the characteristics of those who are truly happy and truly free. The distant and uncertain hope of success through action far outweighs the immediate fear of loss that might otherwise recommend hesitation before the risks of war. Just before this passage, Pericles praised these same men for embracing the “noblest of risks”: “turning over to hope the uncertainty of future success,” these men decided to “trust in themselves with action ... and submitted to the deed with their bodies” (II.42.4). This, Pericles asserts, is the virtue that was revealed in these men by their deaths (II.42.2). They did not reckon up their superior resources in order to render their future success certain before confronting the enemy with contempt,

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. II.39.1: Pericles asserts that Athenians choose to eschew defensive preparations and deceptions, trusting instead in their own “goodness of soul” in action, as noted above.

safe in the knowledge that they were not really facing anything terrible. Rather, these were men of pride, who, precisely because the future for them was uncertain, hoped for future goods but placed their trust in noble deeds.

If we embrace the heroic reading of Pericles' statement on strength of soul, as I am arguing we should, and face up to the seemingly insoluble contradictions between the claims in the Funeral Oration and those in Pericles' other speeches, then we are left with a puzzle. Why does Pericles—the man who boasts of an unmatched stability and consistency of judgment (I.140.1; II.13.2; II.61.2)—alter his speech so radically depending on the situation? While I have argued that the Funeral Oration is meant to appeal to the listener's sense of nobility, which accords with Hannah Arendt's attraction to the passage, the fact that his appeal there is in tension with his other speeches—and even with other statements within that speech—makes it far from clear whether we can “trust” his “famous words” (Arendt 1998, 198).

### **Periclean Rhetoric**

Of course, it is not difficult to see at least one reason why Pericles is so willing to alter his speech. Pericles' modulations in speech need not reflect any confusion or variability on his part; rather, they result from the changing circumstances in which his speeches take place. Not least, they reflect the variability of the Athenian people, to whom his speeches are addressed. This is Pericles' own explicit judgment of the situation (I.140), and Thucydides confirms that judgment by praising Pericles both for the accuracy of his foresight and for his ability to tailor his speeches to the mood of his audience. “For whenever he perceived them being made confident by hubris in some

inopportune way, by speaking he would strike them back into a state of fear; and again, [whenever he perceived them] being irrationally fearful, [by speaking] he would return them once again to confidence” (II.65.9; cf. II.59.3, II.65.1). This facility at speaking allowed Pericles “to control [or hold back: κατεῖχε] the multitude freely, and he was not led by them but rather he led them” (II.65.8; also I.139.4). He could afford to eschew flattery and even to court the anger of the people by contradicting them because of his peculiar ability to regulate, with speech, the passions that animated them (II.65.8). Specifically, Pericles was able to balance the Athenian regard for the noble against their good judgment; that is, he moderated them by balancing their trust in virtue against their trust in calculation (II.40.3). This is the balance Pericles captures when he says that Athenians philosophize without softness and love the noble with frugality (II.40.1).

This seemingly simple suggestion—that Pericles’ modulations in speech are meant to regulate Athenian passions—has the virtue of taking Thucydides’ praise seriously. But it is complicated by the fact that it forces us to question the prudence of Pericles’ rhetoric in the Funeral Oration. For is it not clearly *imprudent* to glorify the sacrifices of those who died nobly fighting the Spartans while, at the same time, holding fast to a policy of non-confrontation with that same enemy? It is tempting to conclude, with Gomme, that Pericles was “playing with fire,” for “it was taxing the people’s patience to the utmost to tell them of their power and daring and at the same time warn them not to use these assets to the utmost in war” (1951, 77).

Let us, then, turn to Pericles’ speeches with this question in mind: how are we to understand Pericles’ exhortation in the Funeral Oration in light of his more prudential remarks elsewhere? For we want to know, above all, whether Thucydides means for us to

take seriously the suggestion that noble action on behalf of, and immortalized by, the city will alone satisfy our deepest longings. It is entirely possible that, despite his praise of Pericles, Thucydides would not agree with Arendt that human fulfillment is to be found through grand politics. For it is not clear “which Perikles” Thucydides admires: “the prudent strategist,” who details Athens’ advantages in war in his first speech, “or the adventurous imperialist,” who exhorts his citizens to pursue immortal glory in the Funeral Oration (Gomme 1951, 75).

My suggestion is that the beautiful rhetoric in the Funeral Oration has the same practical political purpose that all his other speeches have, namely, to shore up the flagging resolve of the citizenry in carrying out Pericles’ cautious war strategy. But, as the foregoing has shown, Pericles employs two methods to instill confidence: he appeals to the Athenians’ noble trust in virtue, and he engages in “unheroic” calculations of their superior resources. We see this same rhetorical strategy effectively deployed later by the Athenian Demosthenes. In Demosthenes’ speech at Pylos, the general begins by exhorting his troops not to engage in “calculating” or “reckoning up” (μηδεὶς . . . ἐκλογιζόμενος) the urgent threat they are facing, but instead to embrace the danger with “good hope” (εὐελπίς: IV.10.1). And yet, after this opening exhortation, Demosthenes immediately turns to a careful calculation of those Athenian resources that will compensate for their deficiency in numbers, a calculation that constitutes the bulk of the speech (IV.10.2-5). In C.W. Macleod’s words,

The orator [Demosthenes] exploits the urgency of the situation to exclude consideration of its difficulties and to awaken an unthinking courage in his

audience; at the same time those factors which favour the Athenians allow him to create a rational confidence. The speech is effective because it appeals both to instinct and reflection. (Macleod 1983, 61)

In the same way, the singularity of Pericles' purpose unifies his separate appeals to both "unthinking courage" and "rational confidence." What is remarkable, however, and what Arendt overlooks, is the extent to which Pericles attempts to teach or instill "rational confidence," even though he simultaneously depends on awakening an "instinct[ual]" or "unthinking courage" in the citizenry. No account of Pericles is complete that does not account for both his rationalism and his regard for the noble, as well as the connection between these.

In the next chapter, I will show how Pericles' first speech, defending his war strategy, broadly follows the same format as Demosthenes' speech: it combines prudent arguments to instill "rational confidence" with appeals to the Athenian regard for the noble to instill "unthinking courage." I will then take up the Funeral Oration, which celebrates the Athenian capacity simultaneously to hold or balance these two contradictory understandings of courage. Throughout, my intention will be to show that Pericles' war strategy is prudent and therefore provides a solid ground for "rational confidence." Yet, each of his speeches betrays Pericles' perceived need to encourage the adoption of his practical plan by extraordinary rhetoric. There are three related reasons in particular why "rational confidence" alone is not sufficient: the instability of human judgment in the face of strong passions; the difficulty of enduring private pain on behalf of the common good; and the problem of chance. Each of these hurdles encourages

Pericles to engage in ennobling rhetoric that inspires an “unthinking courage” in support of Athens’ wavering confidence. What each of these cases reveals more generally is the enduring tension between rational foresight and love of the noble. Arendt’s emphasis on the love of the noble ignores this tension insofar as it ignores Pericles’ concern with prudent or rational action.

The purpose of this analysis is not, however, to undermine Pericles’ appeals to the noble as “mere” rhetoric. Pericles consciously and effectively permitted the growth of an Athenian self-understanding that combined these two conceptions of courage, a self-understanding we see play out in the remainder of the narration. That self-understanding is, I will argue, fundamentally incoherent as Thucydides’ presents it. But it is not for that reason a Periclean fabrication or an anomalous imposition on the Athenian people. Indeed, as Thucydides will remark in a later episode, “it is the habit of human beings to give over to uncritical hope whatever they long for, and to reject with autocratic reason whatever they do not accept” (IV.108.4). Part of the purpose of the subsequent analysis will be to show how Pericles’ self-contradictory rhetorical strategy does not produce so much as reflect the inconsistent “habit” of human beings as such. Pericles is attempting to appeal to the aspiring Athenian “realist” who, despite his realism, always harbors a deep regard for the noble, however confused that might be.

### Chapter 3

#### **Pericles' War Strategy**

Pericles' first recorded speech begins with the claim that he is repeating himself (I.140.1; cf. I.127.3), which draws attention not only to Pericles' consistency but also to Thucydides' selectivity. It was apparently unnecessary to report Pericles' earlier speeches on the subject. Moreover, Thucydides summarizes the strategy detailed in this speech twice, once explicitly declining to report Pericles' actual words (II.13.1-9; II.65.7). Because the same strategic advice is reproduced elsewhere, shorn of the rhetorical trappings present in this iteration, it is likely that this account of Pericles' strategy offers something more robust than those summaries. On this occasion, Pericles' oratory is as important as the substance of his recommendations.

Pericles' strategy for the war, in brief, is to gather all of the residents of Attica behind the walls of Athens every spring in order to avoid a direct confrontation with the Spartans in the field. The Athenians will rely on their superabundance of wealth, their access to the sea, and their empire abroad to satisfy their daily needs, while hunkering down in the city and waiting for the Spartans to realize that their invasions by land cannot harm Athenian power in any substantial way. To the extent that Pericles is recommending this plan, the speech is a clear and sensible example of Pericles' calculating approach to war. He provides an impartial and comprehensive account of the strengths and weaknesses of Sparta and Athens, and advises war only on the reasonable foundation that Athens' strategic resources outweigh Sparta's.

But the peculiarity of the speech is that the recommended war strategy is clearly in tension with the rhetorical accoutrements that Pericles deploys in his speech, a peculiarity that has not been lost on commentators. As Simon Hornblower points out, Pericles begins and ends his oration by encouraging the Athenians to exhibit resolution and boldness even beyond what their power (i.e., their resources) warrants (Hornblower 1987, 54). In Pericles' words, "our fathers stood up to the Medes even when they had abandoned their possessions, though they began without so much [as we have now]; and, by resolution [γνώμη] rather than by fortune, and more by boldness than by power, they beat back the barbarian" (I.144.4). Yet, Hornblower notes, "the argument of the central part of the speech"—the specific strategic recommendations—rests on the "prudent calculation of, precisely, material resources" (1987, 54). The disparity in tone if not outright contradiction between these parts of the speech has led some to claim that the central part is a late "Thucydidean" insertion, while the exhortations that frame it are most likely remnants of an early, faithfully reported "Periclean" speech (*ibid.*).

Recourse to speculation about the composition of the work, however, is unnecessary. The speech itself and the surrounding context explain the apparent contradiction. The speech is a response to the present disposition of the Athenians as much as it is a repetition of Pericles' strategic recommendations. Remember, as we know from the very first line of the speech, Pericles is giving the same advice that he gave earlier (I.140.1)—advice that was at one time persuasive and adopted as the common policy. That advice is now being questioned by the *demos*. If Pericles intends to retain his leadership and see his policy enacted, his only option is to "repackage" that advice. The



recommendations remain the same; Pericles alters only the means by which he encourages their adoption.

But this alteration points to the fundamental problem that Pericles faces as a democratic leader: being intelligent and being persuasive are distinct capacities.<sup>36</sup> The intelligent statesman can be rendered impotent by the inability to speak well, and the persuasive speaker can galvanize support even for unintelligent or unjust policies. Pericles himself stresses the importance of this fact. As he claims in a striking moment of self-praise in his third speech, “I suppose myself no less suitable than another to know what is needful and to explain these things,” which sets him apart because “knowing but not teaching clearly is the same as if [the knowledge] had not even been conceived” (II.60.5-6).<sup>37</sup> Communicating persuasively is as crucial in democratic politics as knowing what is needful. That Pericles happens to have both of these capacities is one reason why

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<sup>36</sup> Clifford Orwin’s useful discussion of this theme in the Mytilenian debate has influenced my analysis here (1984, 321, *passim*). See also Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* 1395b26-32.

<sup>37</sup> Rusten suggests that Pericles here uses litotes to soften his self-praise (1986, 199). “I am no less suitable...” means, effectively, “no one is more capable than I am...” This passage also in some ways supports Arendt’s bold claim that one’s thoughts lack reality if they are unspoken. However, one could easily, and perhaps with more justification, understand Pericles to be simply remarking on the *uselessness* of ideas that are not clearly articulated, rather than their unreality, especially since he is here discussing the role of a statesman whose ideas are meant to have a practical application.

he is an effective leader. Pericles' war strategy speech, to return to our present concern, is therefore as much a statement about the obstacles that Pericles faces in persuading his fellow citizens to accept his intelligent advice as it is a recapitulation of that advice.

The specific obstacle that Pericles faces is the variability of the judgments (γνώμαι) of the people, which are influenced by their passions—passions that in turn vary according to circumstances or fortune. “I know,” Pericles states, “that human beings are not in the same temper when they are persuaded to go to war and when they undertake it in fact, but that they change their judgments [γνώμας] according to their circumstances [or misfortunes: ξυμφορὰς]” (I.140.1).<sup>38</sup> Present, felt sufferings, for instance, are often more persuasive than distant, hoped-for or expected goods. Consider, for example, Pericles' comment in his third speech, after the plague has brought such great suffering to the city:

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<sup>38</sup> Pericles' statement concerns ἄνθρωποι (“human beings”), which can mean “people” generally but can also have a pejorative connotation, meaning *mere* “human beings” as opposed to “men” (ἄνδρες). “Men” are characterized by a courage or manliness (ἀνδρεία). The primary meaning of ὀργή, (“temper” here) is “natural impulse,” “disposition,” or “temper” generally, though it frequently has the more specific meaning “anger.” Here, since Thucydides is contrasting two passions—how people feel when they choose to go to war and how they feel when they are actually engaged in war—it makes sense to use the more general meaning. Elsewhere I have translated the same word as “anger.”

[T]he apparent incorrectness of my argument [or reason: λόγον] lies in the weakness of your resolution [γνώμης], since the pain is now felt by each of you [ἐκάστω] but the manifestation of the benefit for all of you [ᾗπασι]<sup>39</sup> is still far off; and since this great and sudden reversal has fallen upon you, your mind [διάνοια] is too downcast to hold fast to what you know [ἔγνωτε]. (II.61.2)

It is important to recognize that Pericles is not simply placing the good of the whole over the good of the individual. When he says “the benefit for all of you” he means not only the good of Athens but also what is good for each and every citizen.<sup>40</sup> This is an exaggeration, but it is exactly in line with the highest goal of his strategy. The best-case scenario of Pericles’ refusal to engage the Spartans on land is a war in which there are *no* Athenian casualties. Pericles is claiming here that the long-term common good is identical to what is good for all individually and without exception (ᾗπασι), but that the prospect of that great common good is being eclipsed by the short-term fears or pains suffered by each individually (ἐκάστω). The primary opposition, then, is not between the individual good and the common good but between a short-term individual good (freedom from suffering) and a long-term individual good (the survival of the city *and* of oneself). Though Pericles does not hesitate to ennoble the empire by drawing attention to

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<sup>39</sup> Pericles uses the emphatic form of “all” here: ᾗπασι, “quite all.”

<sup>40</sup> Forms of πᾶς without the article mean “everyone,” i.e. the whole *and* each part. See Smyth 1174c, where he translates such forms of the adjective as “*all* (conceivable)” and “*every conceivable*.”

the lives lost in its pursuit (II.41.5, II.64.3), it does not follow that he himself is unsparing of Athenian lives. His over-scrupulous attention to the preservation of Athenian lives is precisely why his strategy smacks of cowardice, as I discuss below (see II.21.3).

To return to the argument, Pericles suggests that the immediacy of the passions engenders short-sightedness, or the inability to hold fast even to what one “knows.” He therefore cannot simply state the necessary or expedient policy, even when it is in everyone’s interest. He must also establish among the citizenry the disposition to act in accordance with that judgment. Doing what is needful or necessary requires courage (cf. Burns 2016), but the courage to face up to rational necessity need not be simply rational itself; one can be persuaded by means other than reason. Thucydides decides to report *this* war strategy speech, rather than an earlier one because only now is Pericles’ leadership seriously being called into question, and therefore it is here that his capacity to say what is needful is most on display (cf. I.139.4).

Pericles’ rhetorical strategy here rests on the ambiguity of the word γνώμη—“that untranslatable combination of intelligence, planning, and resolve,” as W. Robert Connor puts it (1984, 55). Pericles’ opening remarks are a defense of resolve—of sticking to the policy through thick and thin. It is both a defense of his own resolve and a call upon the resolve that he expects from his fellow citizens. That Pericles himself is determined to maintain the policy of refusing concessions to Sparta is no great surprise. He acts in accordance with the terms of the treaty still in force, which stipulates that the two cities

settle their differences through arbitration rather than arms (I.140.2, I.144.2).<sup>41</sup>

Concession on even a small point (such as the Megarian decree) under the threat of force would therefore render moot the treaty establishing peaceful legal equality between the cities, which would call into question Athens' sovereignty and so weaken her empire. It also cannot be overlooked that the treaty was especially beneficial to the Athenians, since it shielded them from Spartan opposition while expanding and solidifying their empire.

More importantly, Pericles understands that the Spartan demands are symptoms of a deeper motive and that minor concessions would therefore do little to forestall Sparta's aggression (I.140.2-5). Pericles presents the war as inevitable, and Thucydides has prepared the reader to accept this judgment by emphasizing the compulsion of fear that Sparta felt in light of Athens' growing power (I.144.3 with I.23.6 and I.88.1; see also Romilly 1963, 113; and Kagan 1991, 224f.). The fact that Sparta sent several embassies with several demands does not change the underlying circumstances that led Pericles to refuse concessions in the first instance. Pericles is resolute, then, because no decisive consideration has changed. As Lowell Edmunds observes, "gnome, as Pericles uses the word of himself, comes to mean not simply 'policy' but to have the normative sense, too, of 'policy based on reason'" (1975, 9).<sup>42</sup> Pericles' far-sighted plan recognized the inevitability of war and anticipated that it would be long and arduous. He overlooked no event that could be planned for. With respect to Pericles, then, γνώμη means "intelligent

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<sup>41</sup> See also I.78.4, I.85.2, I.145.1 and VII.18.2 for the Athenian offer of arbitration. I.66 implies that the treaty still held at this point (cf. II.7.1).

<sup>42</sup> The influence of Edmunds will be evident throughout this section (esp. 1975, 7-23).

judgment,” which is the source of his rational confidence. Resolution is only a byproduct of his superior foresight, his clear knowledge of what the situation demands.

Yet, the understanding of γνώμη that Pericles offers to his fellow citizens is quite different. He asserts that “human beings” are more passionate than rational. The present shift in opinion among the people indicates only that the Athenians are becoming apprehensive as the war approaches, not that they have a reasonable objection to the policy they earlier decided on in common. It is noteworthy that Pericles here implies that the Athenians are mere “human beings” (ἄνθρωποι) as opposed to “men” (ἄνδρες). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles praises the fallen soldiers for exhibiting the “virtue of a man” (ἀνδρὸς ἀρετὴν) and for their “manly goodness” (ἀνδραγαθίαν: II.42.2-3). As we have seen, that virtue consists in their capacity to know what is needful and to do it even in the face of great danger. Hence, Pericles’ praise of the Athenians for their manliness there is in direct contrast to his censure of Athenians for their “humanness” here. It is characteristic of a human being to be irresolute. Unlike the steady judgment of men, the γνώμας—or “ignorant ... thoughts”<sup>43</sup>—of human beings change with their fortunes (I.140.1).

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<sup>43</sup> Pericles remarks that “it is possible for the happening of things to proceed no less ignorantly [or irrationally: ἀμαθῶς] even than the thoughts [διανοίας] of human beings” (I.140.1). It is a remarkable line, not least for the application of ἀμαθῶς to occurrences of chance, though it is not entirely clear what he means by this. I will have more to say about this passage in what follows. For the present, it suffices to note Pericles’

Pericles is exhorting his fellow citizens, then, to emulate him—to act like men and once again support the decision earlier resolved on.<sup>44</sup> Like him, they should “hold fast to the same judgment” (I.140.1).<sup>45</sup> He offers them the following alternative: they can either stick to their resolutions even in the event of some failures or forfeit their claim to intelligence in the event of success (I.140.1). By suggesting that resolution is an indication of intelligence—an intelligence that makes one superior to one’s fallible passions—and that irresolution is therefore an indication of weakness in the face of those passions, Pericles frames resolution as an attractive quality to exhibit—*whether or not one has the intelligence to back it up*. Resolution itself is a mark of superiority or strength. Intelligence in this case is not the grounds of resolution. Rather, the *claim* to intelligence appears to be a *reward* for resolution in the event of success—resolution especially in the face of wavering judgment, i.e., in the face of the *lack* of a clear understanding or intelligence. In other words, while Pericles’ resolution is the unheroic conviction of his calculations, compelling only insofar as they are rational, the Athenians’ resolution is based on a noble resistance to doubt, compelling because it evokes pride,

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implication that the thoughts of human beings proceed haphazardly like chance, since they are unlearned or irrational.

<sup>44</sup> This exhortation appears in a speech that precedes the Funeral Oration, so his remarks here anticipate rather than state the distinction that I have made explicit. However, in this speech he does go on to exhort these “human beings” to act like “men” at I.143.5.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. LSJ s.v. ἔχω C.

hopefulness, strength, and trust in resolution as a virtue in the face of the dangerous unknown.

Thus Pericles reasserts his leadership over Athens by turning the mounting reservations of the Athenians into self-doubt concerning their own ability to assess the situation correctly. He turns their fear of having been too easily persuaded in the first place (the germ of mistrust in Pericles' leadership) into a fear of their own susceptibility to persuasion and therefore a greater awareness of their need for leadership.<sup>46</sup> In return for unwavering support of *his* leadership, Pericles offers them a claim on the very intelligence they have come to feel they lack. While Pericles' resolution rests on his rational confidence in his own knowledge or foresight, the resolution of the Athenians rests ultimately on doubt or ignorance—it is boldness in the face of the lack of knowledge or foresight. The ambiguity of γνώμη captures both possibilities.

Still, we should not overlook what is at stake in Pericles' rhetorical acrobatics here. He shores up Athenian resolve by appealing not to their pride simply, but specifically to their pride in *deserving* praise. What the Athenians are concerned about most of all, it follows, is not success simply, but success that is attributable to their foresight and intelligent policy—they wish to be able to claim responsibility for their prudent actions.

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<sup>46</sup> Orwin notes a similar rhetorical strategy in Cleon's speech at Mytilene: "If Cleon establishes his kinship with [the people] by articulating their distrust of others, he must establish their need of him by appealing to their distrust of themselves" (1984, 317-318).



## Pericles' Self-promotion

But why should the Athenians trust Pericles, rather than someone else? Leading his fellow citizens to mistrust their own judgment might make them aware of their need for advice, but it would not single out Pericles as the people's advisor. Moreover, the suspicion that they are themselves incapable of judging the merits of a proposed policy would seem to inculcate a general distrust in leadership as such, at least insofar as they would be more aware of their susceptibility to clever speech. This is the situation that arises at the time of the Mytilenean debate, during which both Cleon and Diodotus comment on the problems of clever speech and public suspicion in Athens (cf. Orwin 1984). Indeed, it is the situation that arises more generally in Athens after the death of Pericles (II.65.8-12), and we might even hold Pericles responsible for this, to some extent.

However that may be, Pericles is well aware that sowing mistrust among the Athenians regarding their own judgment must be accompanied by efforts to make himself trusted in ways that do not depend on their clear comprehension of the advice he gives. Moreover, since he is here seeking to recommit them to a policy that they have already adopted, it is useful that he can speak of *his* advice as *their* prior resolution. And his emphatic statement that his mind has not changed, paired with his articulation of the causes of such a change in the *demos*, is itself calculated to *show* the people the strength of his intelligence. His resolution makes him appear free from the passions that make one's judgment fail, even if the people do not see clearly the grounds of his confidence.

Moreover, when Pericles later praises his own capacity for leadership he includes, in addition to his capacities to know and explain what is needful, his patriotism and

incorruptibility (II.60.4-7; see also II.65.8). Again, it is important that these virtues are *manifest*. Pericles goes out of his way to *show* the people that he is incorruptible and that he is concerned with the good of the city more than with his own immediate or obvious interest. For instance, before the first Spartan invasion, Pericles anticipates that Archidamus might provoke suspicion of him by preserving his property while laying waste the rest of Attica beyond the city walls, which would suggest to the people that Pericles had secretly secured his own exemption from the common suffering. To ward off this suspicion, Pericles proclaims in the assembly that his property will become public should it survive intact (II.13.1). Thus, Pericles is not just incorruptible; he anticipates suspicion and makes public demonstrations calculated to preserve his *image* of incorruptibility.

Not only do Pericles' active attempts to preserve his image testify to the dependence of his influence on the public perception of his character, but Sparta's tactics reveal that the Spartans, too, knew this about Pericles. Before the outbreak of the war, Sparta demanded that the Athenians exile Pericles on account of his hereditary connection to an ancient curse (I.127.1). Their demand, Thucydides affirms, was not made out of piety or from any expectation that Pericles would actually be exiled. Rather, the Spartans hoped that the accusation would expose Pericles to slander from within the city (I.127.2). The tactic—unsuccessful in the event—was intended to undermine the purity of his reputation and thereby discredit him as an advisor to the Athenians.

Pericles' dependence on reputation reveals that his intellectual capacity alone is insufficient for effective leadership. Again, it requires more than rational speech to be persuasive. Good leadership also requires manifest deeds that testify to the character of

the speaker and the truth of his words (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1172b15f.; Cicero, *De Officiis*, II.31-38 and II.75-77). “Deeds,” of course, must include “speech acts,” such as those just mentioned. It is the *act* of advocating the same policy (in speech), and the *act* of declaring his land public (in speech) that bear witness to his confidence and his devotion to Athens. Likewise, in the dramatic “action” that opens the Funeral Oration, we “see” Pericles submit to the funeral law before our very eyes, even though his judgment seems to oppose it. He advertises his scruples that it is a bad law, only then to submit to it on the grounds that obedience to law is “noble” (II.35.3). These are deeds calculated to persuade Pericles’ listeners that Pericles himself is trustworthy. They are not arguments establishing that his plan is in fact sound. Hence, when Thucydides gives his own account of the “cause” (αἴτιον) of Pericles’ success in directing the affairs of the city (in contrast to the decline in leadership that followed that statesman’s death), he explains that Pericles was superior to his successors not only because of his power of judgment (δυνατὸς ... γνώμη) but also because he had the power of reputation (δυνατὸς ... ἄξιωματι) and because his “most incorruptible” character was “manifest” (or “conspicuous”: διαφανῶς, II.65.8).

Indeed, intelligence in the absence of such visible “proofs” of these other admirable qualities is a cause for suspicion rather than confidence, as the necessity of such proofs suggests.<sup>47</sup> Diodotus chastises the Athenian democracy in the years just after

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<sup>47</sup> Cicero writes in *De Officiis*, II.34: “wisdom without justice is of no avail to inspire confidence; for take from a man his reputation for probity, and the more shrewd and clever he is, the more hated and mistrusted he becomes. Therefore, justice combined with

Pericles' death for depriving the city of "obvious benefits" on account of their envy and their suspicion that even speakers saying "the best things" might ultimately be seeking personal gain (III.43.1). "Because of our over-shrewdness, in this city alone is it impossible to do good plainly, without deceit. For the one offering some good openly is met with the suspicion that somehow in a concealed way he will acquire more [for himself]" (III.43.3). Regarding this difficulty, Clifford Orwin remarks:

For so long, then, as audiences fall short of wisdom—for so long, in other words, as they are in need of advice—wisdom will be neither sufficient nor necessary to a given speaker's success at persuading them ... plain good advice, in the absence of whatever it takes to foster trust, remains at the mercy of the calumnies of opposing speakers. (1984, 321)

Pericles is superior as a leader at least as much because his conspicuous nobility places him above suspicion as because he is intelligent.

Accordingly, in his introductory remarks to the Funeral Oration, Thucydides draws to our attention the insufficiency of intelligence as a claim to rule in democratic regimes. To be chosen orator at the Funeral Oration is an elective honor decided annually by the people. "A man [is] elected by the city, who in judgment [γνώμη] is *held to be* not

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practical wisdom will command all the confidence we can desire ... wisdom without justice will be of no avail at all" (Miller, trans., 1913, 203).

unintelligent and [who] in merit [ἀξιώσει] is preeminent” (II.34.6).<sup>48</sup> In that speech, Pericles claims that “inconspicuous merit” (ἀξιώματος ἀφανεία) is no hindrance to advancement in the city because Athens honors only “virtue” and the capacity “to do something good for the city”: they elect officials according to true merit rather than according to lot or rank (II.37.1).<sup>49</sup> All Athenians, we are told, are capable, if not of constructing policy, at least of passing judgment on it (II.40.2). Yet, as his rhetorical

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<sup>48</sup> First, ἡρημένος—αἰρέω in the middle voice—has the political sense of “*choose by vote*” or “*elect to an office*” (LSJ, s.v. αἰρέω B.II.3). Second, Pericles uses litotes. “Not unintelligent” means “especially wise” (Rusten 1986, 138). Finally, I do not follow Edmunds in making a distinction between ἀξίωσις and ἀξίωμα. Edmunds concludes from the fact that ἀξιώματος ἀφανεία seems to be used synonymously with πένιαν (II.37.1) that ἀξίωμα has the more precise definition of “rank in society based on wealth,” while ἀξίωσις has a more general meaning (1975, 53-54). But this distinction does not hold up. In II.65.8, for instance, Thucydides uses the two words interchangeably. He remarks that Pericles had the power of merit (δυνατὸς ... ἀξιώματι) and then immediately clarifies: his “power according to merit [δύναμιν ... ἐπ’ ἀξιώσει] allowed him to contradict the people...” See also Gomme 1956, 110; and Rusten 1989, 138.

<sup>49</sup> The interpretation of ἀπὸ μέρους is controversial. Some argue that it refers to rotation in office (Rusten 1989, 145-146; Hornblower 2003, 300-301). Others argue that it refers to election according to rank (Mynott 2014, 111 n5; LSJ, s.v. μέρος I.2). Regardless of how we translate it, Pericles is arguing against both alternatives: Athenians elect officials according to true ability rather than according to lot *or* rank, according to Pericles.

strategy in his first speech makes clear, Pericles must doctor his image because most Athenians *cannot* judge the merits of his policy, or at least cannot hold firm to their judgments about its merits. It is precisely because he demonstrates his good character “conspicuously” (διαφανῶς: II.65.8) to reveal his “merit” (ἀξιώσσει: II.34.6; II.65.8)—i.e., because he does *not* suffer from “inconspicuous merit” (ἀξιώματος ἀφανεία: II.37.1)—that Pericles is able to use his great capacities in the service of the city (cf. Edmunds 1975, 54-55).

The unity of the citizens in their devotion to the common good of Athens, then, is due in large part to Pericles’ ability to foster trust in him as the only person capable of conceiving the right policy for Athens. He is the only one who knows what is needful for Athens. Hence, even when they were most angry with him, the Athenians were still “persuaded by his speeches [λόγοις] regarding public affairs” and, after punishing him, “they again elected him general and entrusted to him all matters, ... [in particular] those of the city that were most pressing, believing him to be most worthy” (II.65.4). And it is worth noting that even when they are persuaded “by his speeches [or reason],” they still find it necessary to punish him, as if Pericles’ singular capacity to see the rational necessity of enduring the hardships of war is somehow morally blameworthy. If they were persuaded that Pericles’ strategy and everything it entailed were necessary, they would see that *he* is not to blame for *their* decision to implement his plan. And though we might be tempted, with Pericles, to encourage the citizens to take responsibility for the common decisions, it is not entirely unreasonable for them to feel as though Pericles misled them. For however prudent his plan is, his attempts to ennoble the adoption of that

plan have surely obscured the real pain of implementation with the irrational hopefulness that attend the people's unthinking courage.

### **The Problem of Chance**

The refusal of the Athenians to listen to reason—their inability to hold fast to their determinations in the face of great suffering—is linked to a greater obstacle to the persuasiveness of intelligent policy that we have so far ignored. Pericles attempts to foster resolution not only because he doubts that his fellow citizens will judge correctly in the throes of their individual passions, but also because they will have good reason to doubt the certainty of Pericles' foresight. They will see and feel the failures or limitations of his planning. As Pericles himself says, he seeks the support of the people “even if in some way we fail” (I.140.1). He admits, then, that failure does not imply error and therefore that intelligence does not guarantee success. For, as Pericles says, “it is possible for the happening of things to proceed no less irrationally [or ignorantly: ἀμαθῶς] even than do the thoughts of human beings” (*ibid.*). The irrationality of events places a necessary limit on human foresight and human responsibility, and this makes judging the wisdom of policy much more difficult than Pericles' exhortations at times suggest.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Gomme 1950, 453; Hornblower 2003, 227, for the irony of the use of ἀμαθῶς. The question is whether events are unforeseeable or whether they are unteachable, meaning that they do not conform to the plans of men but adhere to their own logic. In the latter case they may be in principle foreseeable though they tend always to elude us and therefore appear stupid or “ignorant.” In either case, the ambiguity of the phrase is well

If Pericles here admits the existence of chance—of events that *in principle* cannot be accounted for or anticipated by human reason—then his own confidence becomes all the more remarkable. For if there are no rational grounds for absolute confidence, cautious skepticism regarding the reach of human foresight would seem to follow (consider Hermocrates’ advice to the cities of Sicily at IV.62.4-63.1; Connor 1984, 124; IV.17-20). The point here is not only that chance poses a necessary limit to human planning but also that the awareness of or belief in chance limits the confidence one can have in even the most intelligent plan. Chance justifies doubts in the efficacy of planning and gives rise to hopes of success even contrary to rational expectations (e.g. V.102-104 and VII.61.3). Skepticism of rational human foresight can therefore tip the balance in favor of hopeful but imprudent actions rather than burdensome but well-grounded strategies. Hence, Pericles follows up his admission of the power of chance with a statement deployed *against* skepticism, in tone if not in meaning. “On account of this”—the awareness that events may proceed irrationally—“we are accustomed to blame whatever happens contrary to reason [παρὰ λόγον] on chance” (I.140.1). Pericles thus

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wrought. Pericles is attempting to gesture toward the problem of chance in such a way that places the bulk of the blame on the stupidity of human beings and therefore encourages confidence in prudential foresight rather than in wishful thinking, as will become apparent in what follows. Edmunds writes: “Pericles is not making an ironic comment on the fickleness of fortune, but, as the last clause of the prooemium shows, on the general tendency of mankind to blame tyche for their bad luck when they should, Pericles implies, blame themselves” (1975, 16 n17).



quietly notes that there are limits to human foresight while at the same time emphasizing—even ridiculing—the appeal to chance as an excuse for poor planning. As Edmunds writes, “Pericles describes adversity *in terms of* human planning, which thus becomes the criterion. Adverse luck is then understood as that which was unplanned, badly planned, or contrary to plan . . . In this way Pericles trivializes chance, while yet admitting its existence” (1975, 17). The listener is left with the impression that chance is no excuse for failure, even though the clear meaning of the statement is that sometimes, in fact, chance *is* an excuse for—because it is the cause of—failure.

Thus, Pericles implies or encourages contempt for chance, giving the impression that *he*, at least, does not require the excuses that fortune affords because his plans are not made ἀμαθῶς, ignorantly. But, once again, his intention is not to make the Athenian people understand the grounds for his confidence but only to render them more resolute in the execution of his plan. His acceptance of responsibility *despite* chance is meant to *show* that chance does not frighten him; it suggests that his planning is stronger even than fortune. He does, of course, follow this opening exhortation with a detailed account of the superiority of Athenian materiel and preparation, which suggests that he wishes the citizens to understand the basis of his confidence in Athenian strength. Or, to use Macleod’s language once again, he wants to augment the effectiveness of his speech by combining appeals to “unthinking courage” with arguments in support of a “rational confidence,” as Demosthenes does (1983, 61). Pericles’ enumeration of Athens’ superior resources is a powerful rhetorical support for the resolution he wishes to inspire, and the fact that he does not leave it at the calculation of material resources alone suggests that the unadorned account is insufficient in the present circumstances.

I earlier noted Pericles' definition of "disdain," in his third speech, which he distinguished from "pride" by the former's grounding in intelligent calculation (II.62.3). Now I must note the qualification to Pericles' statement there. Pericles asserts that disdain is more certain than pride, since disdain implies steady foresight based on the calculation of resources while pride rests only on one's trust in (empty) hope (II.62.5). But Pericles prefaces his remark there by noting that this is true only if one supposes "equal fortune" (*ibid.*)—i.e. if the effects of fortune are equal on both sides and hence moot (Rusten 1989, 203; Gomme 1956, 172-173). He concedes that "self-confidence will also arise even in a coward from fortunate ignorance [ἀμαθίας]" (II.62.4). Presumably, then, despair can arise even among the disdainful whose foresight is unsuccessful due to misfortune, even if there is no error in planning. Barring the intervention of chance, there is no folly in confidence grounded on a calculation of the superiority of resources. But insofar as chance *is* a factor—or is perceived to be a factor—confidence based on such calculations may well appear foolish. Indeed, the Corinthians seem to evoke this line of thought when they argue that disdain belongs to the unintelligent, by which they mean those who have an irrational overconfidence in human planning. And Gomme remarks that Pericles' phrasing is "purposely borrowed for this unique context, because folly and arrogance are the usual accompaniments of contempt" (1956, 172).

Whether or not Pericles himself harbors an irrational overconfidence in reason, he at least recognizes that the effects of chance limit the confidence he can expect his prudence to inspire in others. Because chance prevents success and failure from tracking exactly to good and bad planning, Pericles' rhetoric must compensate for fortune's tendency to dispense confidence unjustly. That is, by means of speech, Pericles corrects

fortune's tendency to encourage those who plan poorly and discourage those who plan well. It is for this reason that Pericles must overstate the capacity of virtue—resolution and boldness—with which he ends his speech. He does so not because he thinks that virtue can conquer chance, but because he knows that chance will cause irresolution even in the execution of the most intelligent plan—in this case a plan that requires above all steadfast resolve. If the people believe that fortune rules in human affairs then they will not share Pericles' confidence in foresight, and they will therefore be more likely to indulge their irrational fears and desperate hopes. Thus Pericles frames his otherwise prudent, relatively cautious, and carefully calculated plan in rhetoric that pushes beyond prudent calculation and beyond caution. He intends only to encourage the confidence in his foresight that he believes his plan merits and requires.

We can now appreciate the rhetoric of Pericles' closing exhortation. He there urges his fellow citizens to live up to the example of the Athenians who fought off the Persians. They succeeded “by γνώμη rather than by fortune, and more by boldness than by power” (I.144.4). Translators invariably understand this occurrence of γνώμη to mean “wisdom” (or an equivalent), though these same translators use “resolution” (or an equivalent) earlier in the speech.<sup>51</sup> Their emphasis on intelligence is no doubt an attempt to capture something of Pericles' evident prudence and his encouragement of Athenian

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<sup>51</sup> Compare I.140.5 and I.144.3 in the translations by Crawley, Hobbes, Mynott, and Jowett, for instance. Hornblower agrees that there is a dual meaning here—“there is probably a suggestion of ‘resolution’, i.e. moral strength, as well as intellectual power”—though he opts for the translation, “not by good fortune but by wisdom” (2003, 231).

deliberation. Indeed, Pericles clearly believes that one ought to depend on intelligence rather than chance. But this destroys the parallelism of the exhortation. The exhortation—as commentators have not failed to note in the case of the line “more by boldness than by power”—pushes beyond the prudent strategy Pericles has just finished outlining. This second pair of terms is clearly meant to inspire trust in virtue rather than in the “prudent calculation of . . . material resources,” as Hornblower put it (1987, 54). The first pair ought to be translated similarly. Even if γνώμη is supposed to evoke the intelligence of his plan, Pericles’ exhortation to his fellow citizens is not first and foremost to be wise but to be resolute, precisely because they are not wise. While Pericles might believe that in most cases intelligence can *outwit* fortune, here he needs his fellow citizens to believe that it is resolution, as a moral virtue, that can *conquer* fortune.

## Chapter 4

### **Athenian Virtue in Pericles' Funeral Oration**

As I have presented it so far, Pericles' rhetoric combines calculations meant to inspire rational confidence with appeals to the Athenian sense of nobility meant to encourage them to act on those calculations. This argues against Arendt's claim that the primary task of the city is to inspire Athenians to overcome their narrow self-interest and lose themselves in the pursuit of glory on behalf of Athens. Rather, the devotion that Pericles wishes to inspire by his appeals to nobility is in the name of prudence, not glory.

This interpretation begins to sound like the "Aristotelian" account of the Funeral Oration mentioned earlier, according to which Pericles' rhetoric is intended to habituate Athenians to act reasonably in pursuit of their "ultimate or long-term values"—which are "materialistic, and even hedonistic"—through "habits of courage" rather than through clarity of thought (Balot 2001, 510-515). But we must note that the equivalent to Aristotelian habituation in Thucydides is "laborious training" or "toil," and this is the method by which "other" cities instill virtues in the citizenry (II.39.4; cf. I.84.3 and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a14-b25). According to Pericles, Athens is the exception. He claims: "we are willing to face danger with ease of spirit rather than with laborious training, and with manliness not so much by laws as by ways of life"; and again, "we are manifestly not more lacking in courage than those who are always toiling, and in both these things and in yet still others our city is worthy of wonder" (II.39.4; see also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a30-35). The wonder of the Athenians is precisely that they are *not* habituated in the Spartan sense.

Athenian virtue, in the best case, appears to have its foundation in nature (cf. *Laws* 642d). Indeed, this seems to be the implication of stating that the Athenians do not require habituation. Athens aspires to be a city in which the flourishing of natural virtues is encouraged and rewarded, insofar as individual growth is not subject to constraint and honors and offices are granted according to true capacity rather than good birth or other conventional distinctions. This, at any rate, appears to be the goal toward which Pericles' praise of Athens points. Thus, Pericles envisions the city as a place peculiarly suited to draw out what is most resplendent in human beings, as Arendt would argue. But, for him, what is most resplendent is not self-sacrifice in the name of immortal glory, but the capacity to face up boldly to what is needful (τὰ δέοντα): to have the courage to act prudently, without succumbing to illusion or false hope.

### **The City in Speech**

Pericles' Funeral Oration presents a perfected account of Athenian citizenship. There is, consequently, no need to apologize for the Athenian way of life. Unlike the Athenian envoys at Sparta, who excuse Athenian imperialism on the grounds that the Athenians were "compelled" to acquire their empire by universal and inescapable human motivations (I.75.3, I.76.2), Pericles here in effect denies that Athenians ever require the excuse of necessity. The only compulsion that Pericles recognizes in the Funeral Oration is that which subjects feel under the weight of Athenian superiority (II.41.4). The central idea of Pericles' Funeral Oration is that the Athenians are "worthy of wonder" (or admiration: θαυμάζεσθαι, II.39.4; also II.41.4) because they face the most difficult actions by choice rather than by necessity. They are compelled neither by law nor by

habituation nor even by the inexorable forces of human nature. Their actions are free and self-consciously chosen and hence worthy of praise. Pericles therefore speaks of virtuous Athenian citizens as “knowers of what is needful” (γινώσκοντες τὰ δέοντα: II.43.1) who willingly act on that knowledge. Hence, Pericles’ praise of the fallen is primarily an encomium of the Athenian way of life, their practices, and their regime (II.36.4 with II.42.2), because it is through these things that Athenians became praiseworthy individuals.

Pericles asserts that Athens’ tempered democracy fosters this excellence. The Athenians manage the city for the majority rather than the few, and though all are equal before the law, honors or offices are awarded according to merit. No one is barred on account of poverty or low birth from distinguishing himself. There is, as we might say, equality of opportunity. It is therefore a democracy, but modified so that excellence is duly honored (and used) and consequently dignity is *unequally* distributed (II.37.1). It is a democracy with an aristocratic element; it recognizes that virtue has a just claim to distinction (Gomme 1956, 109; Rusten 2001, 143; Edmunds 1975, 47-55).

Most importantly, though they are tolerant in private life (II.37.2), the one thing Athenians do not tolerate is indifference to politics. There is universal participation—in the best case, at any rate. Those who do not formulate policy are at least eager and able to pass judgment both on proposed policies and on elected officials (II.40.2). Hence, excellence rules in the city not through aristocratic institutions so much as by democratic choice (Edmunds 1975, 53). The private freedom to pursue one’s interests is paired with the political freedom of autonomy. Each and all are responsible for the public matters of the city, and by taking that responsibility seriously each is afforded the opportunity to

develop his capacity for reflection and judgment. Through deliberation prior to action, Athenians become capable of deliberate action. It is by this practice that Athenians learn to act in accordance with choice rather than necessity. The hope of Pericles' perfected democracy is that unity will arise spontaneously or naturally since, through public deliberation, all can become "knowers of what is needful" (II.43.1) or, at the very least, capable electors and overseers of those who rule.

If this seems overly ambitious, it is worth reflecting that it does not differ significantly from the hope of enlightened democratic politics at the heart of our own political experience, what Walter Lippmann once called "[t]he ideal of the omniscient, sovereign citizen" (1925, 39). It is this vision of a politically enlightened public that leads some to argue for mandatory voting. And we often justify universal education with such a goal in mind. We believe that democratic citizenship requires education because citizens must deliberate and decide responsibly, and many even share the faith that more prudent policy will emerge from deliberation among informed citizens than from experts.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps more importantly, many of us also share the view that the full flourishing of the individual's capacity to act deliberately is the foundation of true moral excellence, if not the peak of virtue itself.

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<sup>52</sup> The prominence of this view is indicated by James Surowiecki's bestseller, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2005). For an ancient treatment of this, consider Aristotle's assessment of the claim that the many should be authoritative in the city or at least share in deliberation and judgment (*Politics* 3.11).



To return to Pericles: his foil, it becomes clear as the speech progresses, is Sparta. The most memorable exhibition of Spartan virtue, the event that established that city's renown, was the resistance mounted by the Spartan force at Thermopylae. Herodotus reproduces the laconic epitaph dedicated to those fallen soldiers: "Stranger, report to the Lacedaimonians that here we lie, obedient to their commands" (Herodotus 7.228.2). In his *epitaphios*, Pericles calls on his listeners to doubt whether this Spartan obedience is truly worthy of praise, for obedience is required only when there is a separation between those who judge and those who act. Pericles perhaps fails to do justice to the Spartans—Sparta is also a republic, after all. But his claim about Athenian virtue is clear: only those whose excellence in action is paired with understanding can justly be said to act with the moral freedom that warrants praise. As Rusten observes, "The admonition 'stand your ground and do not yield' is the oldest commandment of the Greek hoplite. But for Thucydides' Athenians it is the product not of blind obedience, but reasoned reflection" (1986, 66-67; see also Edmunds 1975, 67). Athenian institutions, unlike those at Sparta, foster the understanding that would make their boldness truly praiseworthy. Of course, this also means that the freedom of Pericles and his perfected Athenians is in some tension with the lawful obedience that Sparta celebrates and that all regimes to some extent require.

### **Athenians and Spartans Abroad**

Pericles suggests that all Athenian citizens learn to judge what is needful through political participation (II.40.2). And he suggests that this participation will produce a body of men who are capable of wholly independent thought and action, and who are

therefore individually “self-sufficient”<sup>53</sup> and “most versatile” (II.41.1). It is because of this prudent versatility that, in the best case, they can be cautious when caution is required and bold when boldness is required. However, the individual self-sufficiency that Pericles praises also points *beyond* the city. It is an aspiration that transcends citizenship. If one were truly self-sufficient he would be independent of the city.<sup>54</sup> But the education in deliberation that produces these self-sufficient citizens, as Pericles presents it, is clearly political. The citizen learns through political participation how to judge what

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<sup>53</sup> The phrase τὸ σῶμα αὐτάρκες can literally mean “a body that is self-sufficient” (Collins and Stauffer 1999, 27), and in that sense it echoes the praise of acting with one’s body rather than calculating with one’s mind that we have already noted. But here the phrase is also used to describe “a self-sufficient individual” in contrast to the “most self-sufficient” city of II.36.3. See Rusten: “in this passage it [σῶμα] designates the individual as opposed to a larger group . . . just as Pericles has declared his *city* to be αὐτάρκεστάτη (36.3), so also are her *citizens* the most self-sufficient individuals” (Rusten 2001, 159). The reason for the perhaps labored construction here is to echo the challenge to self-sufficiency that the plague will pose shortly (II.51.3). The rapid breakdown of bodily integrity makes abundantly clear our dependence on the body, and hence the limits that the body poses to complete self-sufficiency. See also Solon’s discussion of happiness and self-sufficiency (Herodotus 1.32), as well as Aristotle’s (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b6-21).

<sup>54</sup> This independence need not mean total alienation from the city. One might not depend on the city and yet wish to be with other human beings.

is needful—that is, what is needful *for Athens*. Hence τὰ δέοντα is frequently and justifiably translated as “duties,” as in one’s duties as a citizen of Athens.<sup>55</sup>

Still, Thucydides means for us to consider the supra-political standard toward which Athenian citizenship points. He shows this most clearly with his eulogy of Themistocles. After recounting the final years of the Athenian statesman’s life, Thucydides presents this portrait of him:

For Themistocles exhibited the most enduring natural strength, and he was worthy of wonder [or admiration: ἄξιος θαυμάσαι] especially in excelling others in this: with his individual intelligence—this [alone], without learning anything prior or after—regarding immediate things, he was the most able judge [γνώμων] with the least counsel, and regarding future things, he was the best diviner of the most distant event. And whatever he was engaged in he was able to explain, and those things of which he was without experience were not beyond his ability to judge [κρῖναι] sufficiently; he foresaw<sup>56</sup> most of all what was better and what worse in

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<sup>55</sup> Edmunds 1975, 60; Mynott 2014, 115; Strassler 1996, 115.

<sup>56</sup> Προεώρα. Thucydides uses two terms for “foresight”: προοράω/πρόοψις and προνοέω/πρόνοια. Both can be used to capture the English meaning of “foresight,” i.e., conceiving of future events. But they also differ in the same way that ὁράω and νοέω differ, the former referring more to physical sight, the latter to mental perception. Hence, προοράω and πρόοψις can also have the more literal meaning of perceiving something with the eyes, with the prefix having either a temporal meaning (perceiving Y before X,

whatever was obscure. In sum, with his natural capacity to speak, he became with little preparation most able to extemporize whatever was needful [τὰ δέοντα].

(I.138.3)

Themistocles appears fully to manifest the peak of Athenian virtue. Yet this encomium does not celebrate Themistocles *the Athenian*. In the immediate context it is an explanation of his ability to thrive among barbarians, beyond the walls of Athens, after his native city ostracized him and then attempted to arrest and punish him in exile (I.135.2-3).

The whole episode, in fact, is largely meant to distinguish the “most illustrious” man of Athens from that of Sparta precisely by comparing how each fared when divorced from his native city (I.138.6). The ablest Athenian thrives abroad. On account of his extraordinary individual capacities, Themistocles learns the Persian tongue, becomes the most important Greek advisor ever to attend the barbarian king (I.138.1-2), and is granted his own governorship in that foreign land (I.138.5). It is a story of the general utility of the virtues, including the natural capacities, that Athens cherishes most of all.

Thucydides’ praise of Themistocles in exile forces us to wonder whether the public realm is indeed the “proper place for human excellence,” as Arendt claims (1998, 49), or whether human excellence transcends those bounds.

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for example at V.8.3) or a physical meaning (perceiving X right in front of me, for example at 4.34.3).

The Spartan Pausanias, on the other hand, quickly discovers his inability to exhibit Spartan virtue outside of Sparta. He, too, gains the audience of the Persian king. But while the king's desire to rule Greece is an asset that Themistocles successfully exploits (I.138.2), for Pausanias it is the catalyst that liberates his own debilitating "longing for rule over the Greeks" (I.128.3; cf. I.95.3). That desire, augmented by the hope of Persian assistance, overpowers him until he is "no longer able to live in the established way" (I.130.1), and he thereafter refuses to be the equal (ἴσος) of those around him (I.132.2). He casts off the "measured dress" of the Spartans and takes on the ostentatious garb of the Persians, signifying his abandonment of the more general practice at Sparta of living as equals (ἰσοδίατοι: I.6.4). Moreover, try as he might, he is "not able to hold back his plans" (I.130.2). He reveals his grand designs through his flamboyance, his aloof manner, and his increasing tendency to become angry and harsh in his presumed superiority. "On account of this not least," Thucydides informs us, "the allies turned to the Athenians" (I.130.2; cf. I.95.1, 96.1). Pausanias' longing leads him to betray both the Greeks in general and his own Spartan citizens in particular, and the latter both to the enemy abroad—the Persians (I.128.7)—and to the enemies at home—the Helots (I.132.4). He manages to arouse the anger and suspicion of the entire Greek world before forcing his own city—the city most reluctant to condemn one of their own—to take his life (I.132.2 and 95-96; I.132.4 and 95.5; I.134.3). It is a story of the utter failure of Spartan virtue beyond the walls of Sparta.

Pausanias is therefore the model of lawlessness for the Spartans (I.132.2 and 4). He is *the* example of Spartan degeneracy and, consequently, he is the embodiment of what Spartan law attempts to protect against and the justification for their insularity

(I.95.7). Themistocles, on the other hand, exhibits a kind of human excellence that requires no particular home. For that reason, Themistocles, too, is lawless in a sense—and not only because he is literally a fugitive from the law.<sup>57</sup> He embodies a lawlessness belonging to the highest manifestation of Athenian virtue.<sup>58</sup> As Pericles presents it, Athenian virtue rests on the capacity to judge and do what is needful rather than the readiness to defer to what is lawful. The tension between judgment and law is for this reason a prominent sub-theme in the Funeral Oration, and Pericles himself embodies that tension.

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<sup>57</sup> There are two terms in Greek that can be translated as “lawlessness”: ἀνομία, which literally means to be “without law,” and παρανομία, which literally means to be “beyond law” or “contrary to law.” Παρανομία describes Pausanias’ condition, capturing both the fact that his physical existence beyond the reach of Spartan law led to his corruption, as well as his own sense of being beyond or above the lawful equality practiced in Sparta. It is worth pointing out that Alcibiades’ superiority also led him to lead a life of παρανομία vis-à-vis Athens (cf. VI.15.4). Ἀνομία describes freedom from law or the absence of law, such as was the state in Athens during the plague (II.53.1).

<sup>58</sup> One could argue that Themistocles is not “lawless” but a “law unto himself.” But this would still have to be understood as constituting an independence from the laws of Athens rather than an internalization of those laws. It is precisely because of the example of Themistocles that Edmunds’ stress on the Athenians’ “inner sense of shame,” “proper fear,” and “knowledge of their duty” (1975, 59-60) does not quite capture the heights of Athenian virtue.

### Pericles' Qualified Lawfulness

Pericles delivers the Funeral Oration in observance of an ancestral law (II.35.1; II.34.1; II.46.1). But it should be emphasized that his observance of the law stands in dramatic tension with his own assessment of what is needful or appropriate. Pericles demonstrates this by explicitly refusing to praise the law and then proceeding to articulate precisely why the law in question is not praiseworthy.

He begins his oration by questioning the adequacy of speech to do justice to deeds. He is astonished that deeds should be honored with words rather than with more deeds, and he notes the risk of entrusting the reputation of these men to his ability to speak (II.35.1). He then wonders whether he will be able to satisfy the expectations of his listeners, and he expresses his fear that his words will arouse envy and, with it, incredulity (II.35.2). Finally, despite these worries, he submits to his obligation (χρῆ) to offer his praises, “since these things were thus sanctioned as noble by the ancients” (II.35.3).

This is in many ways a standard opening for a public speech of praise. As Nicole Loraux has documented, Gorgias, Lysias, and Pindar offer similar preambles to their orations (1986, 236-9), as does Socrates' Aspasia in Plato's *Menexenus*. These tropes serve to gain the goodwill of the listener. The speaker's final submission to the law, emphasized by the preceding difficulties, is “only to prove all the more his fidelity to the city” (*ibid.*). Raising the problem of envy and expressing his wish to fulfill the expectations of his listeners is the speaker's acknowledgement that the city is final arbiter. And denigrations of speech gain the goodwill of the listener by expressing the

humility of the speaker and directing attention to the actions being praised. Consider Lincoln's famous phrase in the Gettysburg Address: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here."<sup>59</sup>

But despite Pericles' adherence to these standard tropes, his use of them is peculiar. His denigration of speech is neither spoken as praise of the fallen nor as an expression of humility. The inadequacy of speech for Pericles stems not only from the incommensurability of words and deeds but also from the nature of democratic political assemblies. As Pericles explains, because the assembled crowd comprises at least two types of people, each with distinct expectations and desires—those who know the fallen and their deeds and wish to have them praised adequately, and those who do not know them and are more prone to envy—no single speech can satisfy both parties (II.35.2). Pericles' denigration of speech, then, actually lays the groundwork for his denigration of the funerary law in particular and even of law as such. Because democratic political assemblies are heterogeneous, it is impossible to make a speech that is appropriate for all parties. The funerary law is fundamentally flawed because it is impossible to fulfill. Law as such, since it is general and therefore not tailored to particulars, is open to the same criticism. Law must at the very least be supplemented by judgment to suit present, particular circumstances.

With this consideration, the distinctions that Pericles tacitly sets out at the beginning of his speech take on deeper significance. Pericles opens the Funeral Oration

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<sup>59</sup> Though for Lincoln, as for Pericles, what was best remembered in fact was of course the speech.



by opposing what “the many” praise as noble (οἱ μὲν πολλοὶ...ἐπαινοῦσι...ὥς καλὸν) to what seems “to me” to be the case (ἐμοὶ δὲ...ἔδόκει: II.35.1). His own opinion is likewise set off, in his final pledge of subordination, from the established opinion of what is noble (ἔδοκιμάσθη ταῦτα καλῶς ἔχειν: II.35.3). He thus asserts that his judgment concerning what is needful in the circumstances is superior to what is held to be noble by both law and prevailing opinion. More importantly, his assertion is persuasive because it is justified by his reasonable criticism of the law in question: a single speech is necessarily ill suited to a heterogeneous audience. Accordingly, though he proves himself dutiful in practice, he remarks that he will do his duty only “to the greatest possible extent [ὥς ἐπὶ πλεῖστον],” i.e., not completely (II.35.3).

It is notable, however, that his attempt to fulfill the law indicates his seriousness about lawfulness or nobility even as he critiques it. Indeed, the tension between prudent judgment and noble lawfulness is the same tension at the heart of Athens’ “realism,” which is based on and never wholly free from their seriousness about the noble. This movement toward clarity of judgment through critiquing, without fully abandoning, the human regard for the noble is perfectly in keeping with the main theme of the oration, and therefore it is an aptly chosen introduction to this speech. With his opening deprecation of the noble practice of offering praise, Pericles is announcing a new criterion for what is praiseworthy: it is praiseworthy to act prudently, according to one’s knowledge of what is needful, rather than in obedience to law or established practice—and prudence includes the need to defer to established practice in certain circumstances. He is, again, offering an alternative to the Spartan idea of the virtuous citizen. As the Spartan king Archidamus remarks of his own city, “we are of good counsel because we

are educated with less learning than to disdain the laws and, through discipline, with more moderation than to disobey them” (I.84.3). Let the Spartans be praised for obeying the law, Pericles responds; Athenians will be praised for obeying their judgment.

As Pericles’ speech progresses, he drops the distinction between his own judgment and common opinion and speaks instead in the first person plural: “we.” Being true to the genre, he adopts his role as the voice of public opinion (Loraux 1986, 236-9). But even in the opening gambit his antagonism was not toward the many simply, but toward the many speakers before him who had observed the law “already [ἤδη],” i.e., in the past. And he also distinguished his opinion specifically from the opinion established “by the ancients” (τοις πάλαι: II.35.1). His antagonism, it becomes clear, is toward what is old or traditional. The superiority of present judgment over deference to tradition or law that is implicit in his early statements requires in turn that he elevate the present generation in general—it implies the triumph of “us, now” over those who came before.

Hence Pericles’ “praise” of the older generations, again a familiar trope of much encomiastic literature, is also unusual. Rather than presenting the past as a golden age that the present generation ought to emulate, Pericles interprets the past in light of the present acme of Athenian excellence. The oldest generation was worthy of praise for freely bestowing the land of Attica on succeeding generations, Pericles states (II.36.1). And “those, our fathers, are yet worthy of still more praise” for acquiring more (II.36.2). But the present generation has accomplished the most: “and we ourselves—these ones here now, having established ourselves and still being most of all in our prime—we have augmented these things beyond [what we inherited], and we have prepared the city in all ways to be most self-sufficient, both in war and in peace” (II.36.3). It is the remarkable

capacity of the present generation that deserves the highest praise. With this introduction, Pericles turns to the way of life that has made the present city great, which constitutes the majority of his praise of the fallen (II.36.4; II.42.4).

In refashioning these common features of encomiastic oratory, then, Pericles is illustrating the very tension between deference to what is held to be noble (law or tradition), on the one hand, and free judgment, on the other, that is at the heart of Athenian political life. He is attempting both to defer to the established practices of funerary oration while at the same time using those practices to convey a new understanding of the true greatness of the Athenian as precisely one whose judgment renders him to the greatest extent free from tradition or law.

### **Glory as the Greatest Good**

Though Pericles praises the deliberateness of the Athenians, he does not go so far as to suggest that they are simply calculative or that their moral freedom leads them to fail to satisfy the needs of the city. They choose to serve the city because it is noble to do so. But they do not choose to do what is noble because it appears to be their own good in any straightforward or simple way. To say simply that they prefer glory above all else would be to deny that they see the pursuit of glory as risky or self-sacrificial—that is, as noble. But “Pericles is emphatic in portraying [Athens’ imperial] splendor and the willingness [of individual Athenians] to devote themselves to it as noble, by which he means first and foremost that it transcends mere ‘calculations of advantage’” (Stauffer and Collins 1999, 6). Our admiration for the soldier’s choice is elicited by its paradoxical appearance: the choice is remarkable precisely because it entails real risk of real sacrifice

of other important goods. “The longing for the other things [the things of prosperity] does not cease [...] indeed, the soldiers’ choice to seek vengeance in the face of this longing is more impressive than if they should have ceased to have had any concern at all for these other objects” (29; cf. Rusten 1986 and 2001, 166). We fail to appreciate the beauty of Pericles’ praise if we conclude that he is attempting to make death choiceworthy by making the attainment of glory appear *simply* advantageous. While it is undeniable that Pericles equates noble courage with individual happiness (II.43.4), it is also important to acknowledge the tension between the nobility of self-sacrifice and the advantage of self-interest that pervades the speech. Thus, though Michael Palmer’s interpretation of Pericles’ speeches is excellent in most respects, he goes too far in his assertions regarding the role of glory in the Funeral Oration. Palmer writes:

What Pericles is trying to maintain is that to die in defense of the city is not really a private loss but a gain, because one thereby wins the greatest glory, and glory is a greater good than wealth or safety. Pericles attempts to solve the problem of how the city can ask its citizens to die for it by denying the sacrificial character of the death, by denying that the tension between the public good and the private good is indissoluble. (1982, 830)

As I have already argued, Pericles does not diminish the sacrificial character of these soldiers’ actions. Arendt, too, rightly notes that dying for glory is remarkable because the urgency of life is, in fact, urgent. Achilles’ choice is difficult, and his plight is moving, because both he and the reader know that by choosing glory he is sacrificing a long life.

Pericles' emphasis on the clarity of thought and awareness of risk evident among the soldiers—at least in his telling—is similarly meant to make their sacrifice more remarkable. Hence, if it is the case that Pericles makes glory appear to be a greater good than wealth or safety, this is complicated by the fact that glory also appears to be something noble, which means that it must risk or sacrifice other true goods. Indeed, in the Funeral Oration, the “apex of glory” comes to sight only with the sacrifice of life (II.42.4). And as Pericles says in the exhortative peroration of his first speech, “for both cities and individuals, the greatest honors come from the greatest risks” (I.144.3).

According to Pericles' Funeral Oration, then, this strength of soul—which unites understanding and boldness in the capacity willingly to face up to what is needful, even or especially when it requires the risk of harm to oneself—constitutes the peak of human excellence. And this is what he claims to be unique to Athenians in the best case if not (always) in fact.

### **The Practical Intention of Pericles' Funeral Oration**

Michael Palmer is only one of many who have concluded that the intention of the Funeral Oration is to convince Athenians that their own greatest good consists in sacrificing themselves on behalf of the city. Arendt, of course, is another great advocate of this reading. And Pericles' speech offers much support for this interpretation. He claims that in some cases otherwise unexceptional men “became good” by dying in defense of Athens (II.35.1; II.42.2); that they died at the “peak of fame” (II.42.4); that in return for their sacrifice they received—individually—“ageless praise” (II.43.2); that being honored brings more delight than does wealth (II.44.4); that “softness” is more

painful than “unfelt death” (II.43.6); and that the courage they exhibited constitutes true human happiness (II.43.4). And in the midst of this he explicitly exhorts his listeners to emulate these men who lost their lives because they faced the dangers of war without hesitation (II.43.4). It is no wonder that Arendt takes Pericles’ speech as the archetype of the human aspiration to immortality through grand acts of political devotion.

I cannot and do not wish to deny that Pericles’ intention must be in part to prepare his fellow citizens for the possibility that they, too, may be asked to make the “ultimate sacrifice.” Indeed, Pericles’ own defensive strategy did not eschew offensive military action altogether; he recommended avoiding only hoplite battles in Attica and efforts to expand the empire. Athens continued to pester the Peloponnesians with her navy in order to prevent or truncate Sparta’s depredations in Attica (I.142.4; II.23.2-24.1, 58.1-3); the siege of Potidaea was at that time still unresolved, requiring men to serve there (II.58.1); and the maintenance of the empire would require Athenian forces to suppress rebellions among the island cities (e.g., Mytilene: III.2-3).

Still, the primary purpose of Pericles’ appeals to noble sacrifice is not to encourage more men to fight and die for Athens. Pericles’ praise of Athenian virtue suggests that, in the best case, the Athenian citizen is not expected to die nobly for Athens; rather, he is expected to do whatever is necessary on her behalf, motivated by his own knowledge of what is needful. Here discretion really is the better part of valor. This, of course, may require boldly risking one’s life. But it is important that this does not always require such boldness. It requires more general virtues: prudence, which may at times recommend boldness but at other times caution; and resolution, or the ability to stick to one’s judgment even in the face of the most terrible things. This may seem like an

over-subtle or insignificant distinction. But it is significant in this case. It means that Thucydides' Pericles differs from Arendt's. For Thucydides' Pericles praises, above all, the mental clarity and rational confidence of the fallen Athenians, rather than their desperate longing for immortal praise. Moreover, by praising these soldiers for choosing to do what was needful even at the risk of sacrificing their lives, Pericles is in fact preparing the Athenian people for a very different sacrifice. His intended effect is to ennoble the sacrifice of property for the sake of life precisely because Athenians are too willing to sacrifice life for the sake of property. To see this, we must consider the broader context in which this speech takes place.

### **The Speech in Context**

As we have noted, Pericles offers his Funeral Oration at the end of the first year of war in accordance with the laws of the city in order to commemorate those who lost their lives in battle (II.35.1, 35.3; II.46.1; II.34). The men whom he is commemorating are few: Athens suffered losses in only one skirmish during the first year of the war, in which "not many" cavalry were killed (II.22.2). Yet the circumstances of these losses are important.

The war officially commenced with a Spartan invasion of Attica, led by the Spartan king Archidamus. His plan was to engage the Athenians on land, knowing that a single pitched land battle would favor the Spartans and hoping that one decisive blow would end the war. Pericles foresaw this Spartan strategy and advised the Athenians to abandon their homes and farms in the country and move into the fortified city, where they could defend themselves without facing the Spartans on the field. With their store of

resources and access to goods through her naval empire, Athens would be able to weather the Spartan invasions indefinitely. The strategy was to avoid the decisive battle that the Spartans were seeking, which the Athenians would likely lose because of their inferior skills in hoplite warfare, and turn the war into one of attrition, which the Athenians would likely win because of their superior resources (I.141.6; II.13.2-8). Archidamus' invasion in 431 B.C.E. was the first of many attempts to draw the Athenians out of the city and force them to fight on land.

Archidamus' strategy relied on two observations about human nature. First, he knew that young men tend to be eager to fight (II.20.1). Thucydides confirms that this was indeed the case in both Sparta and Athens. Enthusiasm for the war was high at the outset, since "there were many youths in the Peloponnese and many in Athens, who welcomed the prospect of war on account of their inexperience" (II.8.1).<sup>60</sup> Second, Archidamus knew that painful perceptions are more poignant than theoretical considerations. As he informs his troops, "anger [or passion: ὀργή] seizes all those suffering the sight of something they are unaccustomed to at the moment [when they see it] and when it is right before their eyes; and it is those consulting their reason least of all and their spiritedness most of all who enter into action" (II.11.7).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Literally, "who accepted the war not unwillingly," though this is awkward in English.

<sup>61</sup> The construction of the sentence is awkward and possibly corrupt, though the sense is clear. See Rusten 2001, 112-113. The phrase I have translated "right before their eyes" is, literally, "in the eyes" (ἐν τοῖς ὄμμασι). Note the echoes of Pericles here: action goes together with a kind of blindness or ignorance that is incompatible with reason.



Counting on these natural human tendencies, Archidamus planned to disrupt the Athenians' reasonable caution and prompt them to act in a fit of rage at the sight of the destruction of their homes outside the city walls. Accordingly, he chose to occupy the largest *deme* close enough to the city to be visible—Acharnae—and “making camp and remaining there a long while, he ravaged it” (II.19.2). He expected that this visible destruction would encourage the Acharnians, who were pent up in the city, to clamor for war, which would in turn, he hoped, rile up the significant number of young men in Athens and draw the whole city into a land battle. Failing that, the attack would at least create division among those trapped within the city, since the Acharnians would likely lose their motivation to assist in any future action after watching the rest of the Athenians stand idly by as the Acharnian lands were destroyed (II. 20.2-5).

Archidamus could not have predicted more accurately the effect his actions would have on the Athenians. On seeing the Spartans occupy Acharnae, the Athenians “no longer considered it endurable.”

[It] appeared terrible to them, the land being ravaged in plain sight, something which the youths had never before seen—nor had the elderly except during the Persian Wars—and it seemed [better] to them and to the others and most of all to the youths to go out against them rather than witness [this]. (II.21.2)

The Athenians “had been stirred up in all ways” (II.21.3), and in their anger at Pericles, they forgot his earlier advice entirely. Quite the contrary, “they reproached him as a

coward<sup>62</sup> for not leading them out although he was a general, and they held him to blame for [or as the cause of: αἰτιόν] all that they were suffering” (*ibid.*).

Just prior to this episode, Thucydides prepares us to understand the shrewdness of Archidamus’ offensive strategy (and the difficulty of Pericles’ defensive strategy) by detailing the hardship of the Athenians in abandoning their homes and moving within the walls of Athens. The majority of Athenians, Thucydides tells us, had always been accustomed to living in the country (II.14.2). Though Theseus had long ago unified the region politically, the Athenians nevertheless continued to live in more or less autonomous settlements outside the walls (II.16.1). Pericles’ defensive strategy required “leaving behind both their homes and their hereditary temples—which had always belonged to them in accordance with the former constitution [πολιτείας]” (II.16.2). To the Athenian citizen, moving into the city required him to change his very “way of life”: “it was nothing other than forsaking his own city” (*ibid.*).

The only thing that prevented Archidamus’ strategy from being entirely successful was Pericles’ refusal to allow the assembly to meet. He stopped the Athenians from convening because he feared that they would act in anger [ὀργῇ] rather than with judgment [or resolve: γνώμῃ] and on that account make the great mistake of abandoning his strategy and confronting the Spartans in the field, as Archidamus wished (II.22.1). Having temporarily delayed that imprudent action, Pericles sent out the cavalry, not so

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<sup>62</sup> ἐκάκιζον means to abuse or reproach. But the reproach is implicitly that one is “bad” (κακός), meaning *morally* bad generally and cowardly in particular (cp. I.105.6 and V.75.3.)

much to prevent the Spartans from ravaging Attica as to prevent them from falling upon lands “close to the city,” i.e., *within sight* of those who could not stand to see it (II.22.2; cf. III.1.2). It was during this operation that those few soldiers over whom Pericles delivers his Funeral Oration died.

### **The Boldness of Inaction**

This context of the Funeral Oration makes implausible the suggestion that Pericles is attempting to encourage others to emulate these soldiers by dying nobly for their city. Indeed, these soldiers died precisely because the Athenians were *too* eager to risk their lives on the battlefield. The only deaths in the first year of the war resulted from Pericles’ desperate attempt to shore up the flagging Athenian resolve to stay within the city by removing the painful vision of destruction that caused those passionate clamors for engaging the Spartans. That is, these men died because the Athenians—whom Pericles is praising for their resolution in the face of the most terrible things—failed, on account of the terrible sight of their burning homes, to stick to their resolution *not* to fight the Spartans.

The political purpose of the Funeral Oration, then, is not to encourage more men to seek a noble death. It is rather to encourage the noble resolve that Athenians admire but apparently lack. The Athenians should emulate the fallen soldiers’ fortitude, not their fate. The beautification of citizen virtue, the glimpse of eternity, and the celebration of resplendent glory in Pericles’ speech are not primarily in the service of mustering the martial spirit. As in the case of the contests and sacrifices that the Athenians hold throughout the year, his oration is meant to “drive away pain” and provide “rest for the

mind” (II.38). He wishes to draw the attention of Athenians to the longest possible view of things, a vision that he hopes will inoculate them against the immediate force of the passions.

The political purpose of the Funeral Oration, then, which is identical to the purpose of all Pericles’ speeches, is to reinvigorate Athenian commitment to his cautious and defensive—but prudent—war strategy. In his final speech, Pericles again urges the Athenians to pursue “everlasting remembrance” through actions that bring “momentary brilliance and future fame” (II.64.5). But Thucydides informs us that Pericles’ intention there was “to turn their minds toward what was more soothing and less fearful” (II.59.3; cf. II.65.1) so that they might be more willing to stick to his advice (II.65.2; also II.65.8-9). They required this boost of spirit not to inspire them to go out and fight but to stay in and endure, because “they were pained by their sufferings, the people because although having little to begin with they lost even this, and the affluent because their beautiful country possessions—both buildings and expensive furnishings—were being destroyed” (II.65.2). The Funeral Oration’s beautification of Athenian moral strength is meant primarily to ennoble *that* sacrifice, the pain of which would otherwise drive them to risk a much more permanent sacrifice. For, as he exhorts his fellow citizens in his first speech, “you ought not (χρῆ) to make your lamentation over houses and land, but over bodies; for these do not supply men, but men these” (I.143.5; cf. II.62.3).

### **Pericles’ Refounding**

It has recently been suggested that Pericles’ strategy amounts to a refounding of Athens on a new political order, and that the Funeral Oration facilitates this refounding

by offering the Athenians a new self-understanding. The image of the perfected Athenian in the Funeral Oration, according to this reading, is meant to ease the outrage of those who might otherwise “rebuke the Periclean strategy as a surrender of Athenian manhood” (Templar 2015, 159). There is something to this. The Athenian movement into the city entailed a radical political change for the majority of Athenians. To repeat, “for each it was nothing other than forsaking his own city,” meaning his *deme* outside Athens’ city walls (II.16.2). Pericles’ strategy required that the Athenian people give up not just their homes and temples and way of life but even the hope that they might yet preserve these through bold action. They were asked to act instead on Pericles’ “cowardly” call to hide behind the walls of Athens indefinitely (II.21.3),<sup>63</sup> and even, perhaps, to give up their lands and become entirely dependent on the navy. It would not have been surprising if these Athenians responded to the prospective abandonment of their homes as the Melians did in their fateful hour: “to submit straightaway leaves no hope for us; but with action we may still hope to stand upright” (V.102.1). Even if Pericles’ strategy is merely “tactical” (Palmer 1982, 826), it is a tactic that demands an apparently permanent transformation of the city based on the premise that preserving the old order is hopeless.

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<sup>63</sup> Rusten notes that “at least two comedies appear to have branded Pericles openly as a coward, and probably belong to this year” (1989, 128). He refers to Hermippus’ *Moirai* and Cratinus’ *Dionysalexandros*. The year in question is 431 B.C.E, the year of the first Spartan occupation of Attica, when, according to Thucydides, the Athenians “reproached [Pericles] as a coward for not leading them out although he was a general” (II.21.3). See my discussion of this line above.

Thucydides calls attention to just how radical this transformation is by stressing the people's inability to submit fully to Pericles' plan, evidenced by the long delay between their resolution to adopt his recommendation and their enactment of it, which they finally carry out only on the eve of the invasion. Unlike Pericles, the Athenians outside the walls are never so confident that their hopes must be abandoned and that such a transformation of the city is necessary.

As we have seen, the Athenian refusal to give up the hope that they might yet preserve their *demes* is both the strategic weakness that Archidamus seeks to exploit and the strategic weakness that Pericles fears will undermine his plan. Indeed, Pericles testifies to the power of this hope—a power that seems to outstrip even his own power of speech—when he states that he would order the people to raze their own homes, “if I believed I could persuade you” (I.143.5).<sup>64</sup> His subsequent remark is telling. He fears Athens' “mistakes” more than Sparta's plans (I.144.1). He means specifically that he fears that the Athenians will take unnecessary risks, such as attempt to extend the empire during war or, as the immediate context of the remark suggests, confront the Spartans in defense of their ancestral homes (I.143.5). On the other side, Archidamus encourages the Spartans not to destroy Attica indiscriminately or completely. He wants to preserve the Athenian lands in order to preserve Athenians' hopes. Such hopes make unspoiled lands a “hostage” that he can exploit (I.82.3-5; but cp. I.81.6). He, like Pericles, recognizes that

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<sup>64</sup> Recall also that at the peak of the Athenian clamor to go out and defend their homes, Pericles managed the situation by refusing to call an assembly (II.22.1). There, too, we see that he is aware of the limits of his capacity for speech.

the Athenians would be more difficult opponents if their lands were destroyed, since they would then be *forced* to think of themselves as “islanders”: they would be liberated from attachments beyond the “shores” of the walled-city (Taylor 2006). Archidamus does not want the necessity of pursuing Pericles’ plan to become plainly evident to the Athenian *demos*. Pericles, conversely, wishes they would burn their homes themselves because the Athenian resistance to becoming “islanders” is a resistance to reason, insofar as his plan represents what is rational. Their attachments beyond the walls of the city encourage the Athenians to entertain irrational hopes that those lands can yet be preserved. This resistance to reason, as we saw, is the theme of Pericles’ first speech and is connected to the people’s awareness that fortune always prevents absolute confidence that adherence to a given plan will lead to success.

What is perhaps more remarkable than the Athenian refusal to heed Pericles’ advice is Pericles’ own confidence in that advice. Indeed, as I noted in discussing his first speech, Pericles appears open to the possibility that chance might remain a problem: even the best-laid plans can fail, and even poor plans succeed. Moreover, how does he *know* what is needful? What constitutes his own clarity of thought as distinguished from the muddled, irrationally hopeful thinking of the Athenian people? The key to Pericles’ clarity of thought proves to be his rejection of the divine, as the next chapter will show.

## Chapter 5

### **Rational Confidence and Pericles' Theology**

Scholars often pair Pericles' evident rationalism with his doubtful piety. He has been hailed as a leader of the Greek Enlightenment, as a founder of secular politics, and as a rational humanist; he has been described as agnostic, atheistic, impious, and free from vulgar superstition (Nichols 2015, 48; Orwin 1994, 20; Kagan 1991, 10, 23, 165-171; Edmunds 1975, 39; Ehrenberg 1954, 91-98; Plutarch 6.1-3). Yet Pericles' final position on the gods is still contested. According to some, Pericles denies the influence of the divine in human affairs because he envisions an Athens that satisfies the highest human longings and therefore needs no gods (Orwin 1991, 20). Along these same lines, J.J. Pollitt states that in Periclean Athens the "gap between men and gods vanishes" (1972, 87. Cf. Kagan 1991, 165-166). Whether through the apotheosis of Athens or the sufficiency of human politics at its peak, the suggestion is that Pericles' political project attempts to make gods superfluous.

Others have suggested that Pericles gives voice to a new and even unique piety. For instance, C.J. Herington writes, "to the Pericleans . . . *Athena is Athens*" and therefore devotion to Athens *is* devotion to Athena. Consequently, "every thinking Athenian who had been fired by the Periclean ideal 'believed' in Athena" (Herington 1955, 56; cf. Kagan 1991, 170). More recently, Mary Nichols has suggested that Pericles embodies "genuine piety," which consists in recognizing "the limits of the human in



relation to the divine” (Nichols 2015, 111).<sup>65</sup> Plutarch was perhaps the first to defend a version of Nichols’ claim. After noting some of the benefits that Pericles derived from Anaxagoras, Plutarch adds that, as a result of spending time with that philosopher,

[Pericles] seems also to have become superior to fear of daimonic things [δεισιδαιμονίας]—that [fear] which is produced by astonishment at things above<sup>66</sup> among those who, being ignorant of the causes of these things and excited about daimonic things, are agitated on account of their inexperience [...]—for natural reason frees one from timidity and inflamed fear of daimonic things by producing stable reverence [εὐσέβειαν] with good hopes. (“Life of Pericles” 6.1)

Plutarch suggests that vulgar piety is mere superstition while Pericles’ rationalism belongs with “reverence.” Moreover, Pericles is hopeful and steady because he knows the

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<sup>65</sup> It is not entirely clear what Nichols means by “genuine piety.” I suspect that she means that Pericles is not an atheist; rather, he believes that there may very well be gods but not ones that intervene in human affairs, at least not in any rational or predictable way.

<sup>66</sup> The word μετέωρος is used to describe things that are raised or up high (such as an acropolis) or that are taken up (such as arms). It can also mean, as in this case, “things in the heaven above,” but in the naturalistic sense of “astronomical phenomena” (LSJ s.v. “μετέωρος” A.II). Meteors, for instance, are μετέωρα. For this reason it is also used to describe a person who is absent-minded—one whose “head is in the clouds,” as we would say (*ibid.*, A.III.5).

causes of things, which frees him from the vicissitudes of those whose fearful superstition makes them so excitable. Plutarch explains that this rational freedom from superstition does not entail a rejection of divine ends or limits. The “naturalist” (ὁ φυσικός) complements the “diviner” (ὁ μάντις) because natural reason understands the causes that explain how phenomena occur, while divination understands the divine ends that natural phenomena signify (*ibid.*, 6.2-3). Nichols, too, defends the combination of reason and piety: “piety does not lie in ceding the human capacity to deliberate, judge, and act to divine forces”; it only circumscribes the realm of human knowledge and action within its bounds (2015, 111). For Nichols, the limits of human action are divine because they are “beyond reason,” a definition of the daimonic that she borrows from Pericles (*ibid.*; see II.61.3 with II.64.1-2).

But Pericles’ political speeches and actions betray his thorough rejection of the divine. He rejects the claim that divine signs should be sought in natural—or even daimonic—phenomena, despite Plutarch’s suggestion that such a view of the divine does not preclude rational politics. Whether what we are left with can be called “genuine piety” will have to be considered later. But it is already difficult to see how that “piety” could amount to anything more than a genuine appreciation of the fact that chance—*mere* chance, which is daimonic only insofar as it is “beyond reason” (παράλογος; II.61.3 with II.64.1-2)—can disrupt even the best-laid plans. To put it another way, Pericles’ acknowledgment of “daimonic” limits to human action is at the same time a rejection of the idea that there are purposive or *divine* limits to human action. This rejection of the divine appears to be in the service of his desire to see the world as it truly is, which for

him means to accept that natural necessity and chance—rather than divine wish or will—govern the world.

### **The Absence of Gods**

Pericles' rejection of the divine first comes to sight negatively: it is conspicuous that he almost never refers to the gods. The exceptions only make the case stronger. Pericles explicitly refers to divine things three times. He mentions Athena once, but his remark is hardly pious. He suggests to the Athenians that, should they run out of war funds, there is plenty of available wealth among their sacred items and in their sanctuaries (II.13.4). Should they become truly desperate, there are some forty talents of gold on the statue of Athena that could be removed and used (II.13.5). He does say that they would be required to replace whatever gold they use, but, unlike Nichols, I read this as a concession to his audience's piety more than a disclosure of his own (cp. Nichols 2015, 111). As Lowell Edmunds notes, the Athenians never resort to this expedient in the course of a 27-year war that destroys and impoverishes the city, which reveals "the difference between Pericles' and the people's views" (1975, 38).

In the Funeral Oration, Pericles makes what appears to be a pious remark on Athenian lawfulness. He says: "in public affairs we most of all do not transgress the law on account of our fear (or awe: *δέος*), being always obedient . . . both to those [laws] set down in order to benefit people being treated unjustly and to those [laws] that, although they are unwritten, bring undisputed shame" (II.37.3). According to Hornblower, the appellation "unwritten" may have been understood to mean "divine" (2003, 302-303). This is not an unreasonable reading. As Hornblower points out, Xenophon has his

Socrates draw out of Hippias this same commonsense understanding of the phrase “unwritten laws” in the *Memorabilia* (4.4.19). And Sophocles’ *Antigone* states explicitly that unwritten laws come from the gods (*Antigone* 450-470). But if this is the significance of Pericles’ statement, then we are tempted to conclude that the allusion is ironic. For immediately after speaking of unwritten laws, Pericles makes a second explicit reference to the divine that is as casually irreverent as his comment about the statue of Athena. Pericles states that among the great goods available to Athenians are public competitions and sacrifices, which provide “much rest to the mind” (II.38.1). The gods do not inspire fear but ease. In Pericles’ understanding, religious devotion is one of many ways in which Athenians relax from their habitual frenzy of activity. It is the public equivalent of the “fine estates” that they delight in privately, which “every day drive away pain” (*ibid.*).

In his third speech, Pericles explicitly refers to the divine for the third and final time. He says there that the plague was a “daimonic thing,” and that daimonic things must be borne “of necessity,” since they cannot be anticipated (II.64.2). This is a clear denial of the pious claim that daimonic events—events that are unanticipated because they appear to be exceptions to the natural course of things and are for that reason “beyond reason” (II.61.3 with II.64.1-2)—ought to be interpreted as indications of divine favor or disfavor. For the pious view holds that suffering such misfortunes is neither necessary nor unpredictable: suffering can be avoided by heeding the will of the gods, as revealed in prophecies and daimonic omens, and therefore people can expect their fortunes to correspond to their piety or justice *rather than* their calculations. This is the implicit view of those who saw the plague as a divine punishment of the Athenians (II.54.1-5) and the explicit view of the pious Melians (V.104.1). As Clifford Orwin

remarks, to insist that the plague must simply be borne of necessity is to “reject the divine admonition it allegedly conveys” (Orwin 1994, 20). Indeed, it is against this background that we have to consider the Athenians’ perpetually wavering judgment. If fortune makes them doubt the dependability of human foresight, is this not in part because they believe, implicitly or explicitly, that one’s fortunes do not always correspond to one’s calculations *because* they correspond to one’s justice or nobility?

### **The Rejection of Prophecy**

This brings us to Pericles’ implicit dismissal of prophetic interpretation more generally. Just before Pericles’ third speech, in which he asserts that the proper response to the daimonic plague is to endure, Thucydides notes that the affliction fulfilled two prophecies. First, there was an ancient prophecy that a plague would come with a Dorian war (II.54.2-3). Second, at the outbreak of the war, the oracle of Delphi said that the god would support the Spartans if they fought with all their might (I.118.3, II.54.4-5).

Thucydides dismisses the first prophecy with the explanation that the people recalled the words of that prophecy only on account of the evil they were suffering (II.54.2). Moreover, there was a disagreement over whether the prophecy said “plague” (λοιμός) or “famine” (λιμός). The present agreement that a plague was prophesied only reveals the inclination of human beings to “fashion their memories according to what they suffer [or experience: ἔπασχον]” (II.54.3). While scholars agree that this reveals Thucydides’ rationalistic approach to prophecies, few note the significance of placing this remark just before Pericles’ implicit rejection of the prophetic interpretation of the plague on the same grounds. Thucydides primes the reader here by suggesting two possible

interpretations of that daimonic event: either prophecy can explain great misfortunes, or great misfortunes explain our openness to prophecy. The one accords with the pious understanding of the plague, shared by the Spartans and much of the Athenian *demos*; the other interpretation Pericles will go on to embrace in his subsequent speech. And Thucydides' stated reason for dismissing the prophecy—the tendency of human beings to fashion their thoughts according to their present sufferings—is a clear echo of Pericles' understanding of human beings. In his first speech, Pericles states that the central problem he faces as a democratic statesman is that the people “change their minds according to their misfortunes” (I.140.1), a claim that he repeats in his speech about the plague (II.61.2). We should therefore not overlook Thucydides' use of “Periclean” reasoning here.

Perhaps the author is signaling his ultimate agreement with Pericles on this question. But he is also elaborating on Pericles' criticism of the Athenian *demos*. For Thucydides here draws a connection that Pericles had not drawn, namely, that the people's openness to prophecy is connected to their variability of judgment. When we read Pericles' third speech after Thucydides' “Periclean” commentary on the first prophecy, we are prepared to see that Pericles' repeated rebukes of Athenian inconstancy are also rebukes of Athenian piety (or superstition). The inability of the citizens to hold fast to their judgments in times of misfortune is connected to their tendency to understand those misfortunes as signs of divine disfavor. The constancy of Pericles' own judgment, conversely, rests on the conviction that misfortunes are *merely* chance setbacks that must be weathered “of necessity” (II.64.2), and hence never divine warnings that must be heeded. Fortune or chance discloses nothing significant to human calculations.

Thucydides is more generous with the second prophecy—that the god would support the Spartans in the present war if they fought with all their might. He remarks that Athens was the city most affected by the plague, while the Peloponnese was virtually free from it; and that it struck right after the Peloponnesians had invaded Attica, as if it were fighting on their behalf (II.54.5). Indeed, by tradition plagues were held to be “evil arrows” of divine vengeance used by Apollo, the Delphic god (cf. *Iliad* 1.8-12, 380-385). And although Thucydides notes that at the time there was speculation that the Spartans were eager to break off their campaign because of the plague—suggesting a lack of confidence in their divine immunity—he confirms that this was in fact “the greatest” Spartan foray into Attica, both in terms of the duration of their occupation and the extent of its devastation (II.57.1). Thus, Thucydides defends the view that the plague squarely opposed Athens’ defensive efforts and supported Sparta’s vigorous attack. Thucydides himself, then, may be more willing to entertain the prophetic interpretation of the plague than his treatment of the first prophecy suggests. Even if he ultimately agrees with Pericles, his remarks on the second prophecy are an often-overlooked qualification to his confident dismissal of the first.

But Thucydides also dismisses an oracle earlier in his account of Pericles. Pericles’ war strategy required that the Athenians move behind the walls of the city in order to weather the annual Spartan invasions, as we have noted. Since the majority of Athenians lived outside the city walls, this meant that the city quickly became overcrowded. The Athenians took up residence wherever they could find space, occupying uninhabited lands, sanctuaries, shrines, public towers, and even the Pelargicum, a sacred area beneath the acropolis (II.17.1, 3). Occupation of the

Pelargicum was forbidden by an ancient curse and discouraged by a Delphic oracle: “the Pelargicum is better unworked” (II.17.2). Thucydides playfully remarks that the oracle was correct, but not as one would expect: “For misfortune did not come to the city on account of the unlawful occupation”; rather, the misfortune of war brought about “the necessity of the occupation” (*ibid.*). Inhabiting the Pelargicum did not cause the war as a divine punishment but was caused by the war as its necessary consequence. And yet, as the prophecy states, it would indeed be better if the land were unoccupied, since this would mean that the cause necessitating occupation—the misfortune of war—did not exist.

Thucydides’ doubts about the oracular prohibition are evident. He appears confident that the relevant causes are natural necessities rather than divine beings that enforce divine laws. But focusing on what this reveals about Thucydides again distracts from the significance of the episode in its context. Thucydides’ interpretation of the unlawful occupation of the Pelargicum is his final comment on why the relocation that Pericles’ war strategy required was hard on the Athenians (II.14.2). Thucydides’ commentary on the difficulty of relocation begins with a digression into ancient Athenian history: the unification of Athens under Theseus. The point is apparently to draw attention to Theseus’ decision to leave largely independent the various villages that participated in the unification, only requiring that they recognize Athens as the common political center and that they all contribute to a common fund (II.15.2). Thucydides then adds that Theseus also instituted the Synoikia, a religious festival celebrating Athenian unification, and he remarks that “the Athenians still even now put on the festival for the goddess at the public expense” (*ibid.*). The statement appears to be a digression from the



digression. Thucydides was recounting the long independence of Athenian villages, despite political unification, presumably to make us feel the full weight of abandoning that independence. What is the relevance of the festival? Scholars suggest that the line is an interpolation. Indeed, the entire digression is thought to be rich with interpolation, since it is rich with “antiquarian material” about ancient traditions that are apparently superfluous to Thucydides’ narrative (Hornblower 2003, 265-267). Why, for instance, does Thucydides go on to tell us about yet another ancient festival that certain Athenians “still even now” observe (II.15.4)? And why do we need to know about the spring from which the ancients drew water for “the most worthy things,” and which Athenians use “still even now [...] for weddings and other sacred things” (II.15.5)?

The relevance of these comments, however, is not hard to see. Thucydides is drawing attention to the endurance of sacred institutions because, even though Theseus’ unification of Athens was politically expedient (it allowed him to hand down to posterity a city that “had become great”: II.15.2), expediency was not the only critical support to his political reform. The endurance of the attending religious devotion speaks to Theseus’ political wisdom in instituting a festival to sanctify his reforms. More generally, Thucydides may be suggesting that political expediency is insufficient on its own to institute lasting change (cf. Coulanges 1956, 130-132).

This prepares the reader to doubt the prudence of Pericles’ dismissive view of religious festivals. Like Pericles, Theseus sought to make Athens a “great city,” and, like

Pericles, he combined capacity with intelligence (II.15.2).<sup>67</sup> But Theseus recognized that what constitutes a city or a people is its common devotions. Pericles appears at best indifferent to the sacred practices of the Athenians, and at worst destructive of them.<sup>68</sup> Thucydides' emphasis on the centrality of religious devotion to the life of the city is meant to illuminate the political dangers of Pericles' irreverent war strategy. As Thucydides presents it here, the sacred is literally the central and defining feature of the city: he "proves" where old Athens was situated on the implicit premise that cities are build around places of common worship, hence one can discern the location by the concentration of temples in that area of the city (II.15.4-6). This argument again implies the persistence of the sacred—the temples remain despite changing political circumstances, such as the growth of the city. But more importantly his statements establish sacred places as *the* defining feature of "a city."

It should be no surprise to the reader, then, when Thucydides says in the immediate sequel that for a country dweller to abandon his village and move into the city was "nothing other than forsaking *his own city*," for it required him and his fellow citizens to leave behind "both their homes and their hereditary temples—which had

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<sup>67</sup> Pericles speaks of himself, at least, as σύνεσις (I.140.1; cf. II.62.5), while Thucydides says that he is δυνατός (I.127.3; I.139.4). Thucydides attributes both of these qualities to Theseus (II.15.2).

<sup>68</sup> Pericles is not wholly unaware of the political necessity of common devotion. His exhortation to gaze upon the power of Athens and become "lovers" of her appears to be his alternative (II.43.1).

always belonged to them in accordance with the former constitution” (II.16.2, my emphasis). Pericles acknowledges the great difficulty of the sacrifice that he is asking them to make, but he apparently does not realize that this is due to anything more than their attachment to property. For Pericles’ statements about the Athenian sacrifice focus only on the abandonment of their homes and fail to note the abandonment of their sacred places (I.143.5; II.62.3). Thucydides’ emphasis on the enduring attachment of people to their sacred places and practices is therefor meant to stand in contrast to Pericles’ silence on that score. And Thucydides offers that contrast not because of a casual interest in the provenance of such things but because it is this attachment that makes Pericles’ plan so difficult in practice: moving within the walls necessitated abandoning what was most sacred to Athenians in the country. It is therefore also no surprise to the reader that the people were so angry with Pericles for refusing to let them fight: not to fight was indeed to abandon their homes, but it was also to forsake their temples and gods.

To return to the point: Thucydides’ own dismissive interpretation of the prophecy about the Pelargicum is not just a playfully irreverent aside. It is the culmination of a general statement about the difficulty that the Athenian concern for the divine posed to following Pericles’ plan. This prophecy is noteworthy because it reveals that Pericles’ plan forced the Athenians not only to offend their own gods, by abandoning their local temples, but also Athens’ gods, by squatting on sacred land. It required deserting the places that piety would have them occupy and defend, and occupying and defending a place that piety would have them leave deserted. In Pericles’ view, both the war and his strategy were necessary (II.61.1). But his prudential calculations only established the necessity of those actions by denying that pious considerations have any place in

prudence. For no pious person would believe that offending or placating the gods is irrelevant to prudential considerations.

Indeed, Pericles' whole career as an Athenian political leader rests on a rejection of the political significance of the gods. For, as the Spartans are quick to point out, Pericles is the descendent of an accursed family (I.127.1). To redress an ancient offense and lift the curse, Athens ought to cast Pericles and his family out of the city (*ibid.*). In fact, Pericles' ancestors were already cast out twice, though in both cases they returned (I.126.12).<sup>69</sup> The Spartans were not so naïve as to hope for Pericles' exile (I.127.2). They knew, apparently, that considerations of political prudence had as much traction with the Athenians as piety, and so they knew that the Athenians would not drive out their best general at such a crucial moment. However, the Spartans did hope to sow suspicion that the war was partly due to Pericles' unfortunate ancestry (*ibid.*). Hence, although the Spartans doubted that the piety of the Athenians would be sufficient to exile Pericles, they believed that the Athenians took the curse seriously. The Spartan plan assumed that the Athenians would "in part" interpret the war as a divine punishment rather than as a political necessity (*ibid.*). Pericles—the accursed one himself—implicitly rejects this view by staying in the city and leading Athens into the war.

This episode encourages the reader again to wonder whether Athenian seriousness about the divine undermines Athenian confidence in the necessity of war. For the war

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<sup>69</sup> It is worth noting as well that the Spartans were behind one of the past purifications of Athens (I.126.12). Thucydides is surely suggesting that they had political motivations in the earlier case, just as he explicitly says they do on this occasion (I.127.1).

might be avoided by lifting the curse, i.e., by exiling Pericles. And after suffering two invasions and the plague, the Athenians do indeed blame Pericles as the cause of their misfortunes (II.59.1). They blame him in large part, surely, because he was the chief proponent of the war. But might they also blame him because his contempt for the gods makes Athens deserve such punishments?

### **Prudence and Fortune**

The foregoing evidence suggests not only that Pericles is less pious than the Athenians at large but also that his impiety is central to his prudence. As Thucydides remarks in passing, the prospect of the war led to extensive planning on both sides (II.8.1). But it also led to an abundance of oracles and prophecies, and to a heightened scrutiny of such incidents as might prove prophetic, such as an earthquake on Delos at that time (II.8.2-3; cf. I.22.3). This suggests that openness to prophecy comes with uncertainty about the future—the *paralogos* of war, as more than one Thucydidean character will call it (I.78; VII.61). Pericles' judgment, however, appears to be unperturbed by the uncertainty that comes with war and indifferent to the attending abundance of prophecies. The stability of his judgment is in part due to his rejection of the idea that considerations of the divine have any relevance to the certainty or uncertainty of the future. Specifically he rejects the view that occurrences of fortune—events that appear “beyond reason”—reveal divine sanctions or admonitions.

It is for this reason that Pericles ridicules both human judgment and chance when the Athenians begin to doubt their decision to go to war. The deepest meaning of Pericles' statement that fortune is “ignorant” (ἀμαθής) is that there is no will or intention

behind it (I.140.1): it does not signify divine approbation or prohibition. The statement is a rejection of the view voiced by the Melians, who claim that fortune is “from the gods” and that they have every reason to hope for their share of it, “since we are pious men making a stand against those who are not just” (V.104.1). In Pericles’ view, fortune is indifferent to moral desert, which is why daimonic things must—and can—be borne “of necessity” (II.64.2).

Pericles’ view of fortune is therefore at once hopeful and somber. The hope that Pericles encourages in the Athenians comes from the recognition that chance setbacks need be nothing more than temporary obstacles. A setback does not signify divine opposition, and hence the proper response to it is not to acquiesce or repent but to persevere. That Athens often refuses to yield to misfortune suggests that Pericles’ attempt to encourage the adoption of this view of fortune was to some extent successful: Athenians refuse to allow misfortune greater significance than it deserves (II.64.3; VIII.1). Moreover, this understanding of fortune perhaps allows Athenians to face up to their own apparent injustices without fear of cosmic retribution (at least when they are not suffering), which is why Pericles does not hesitate to boast about Athens’ good and evil deeds, her offensive attacks on other Greek cities, and even her seeming “tyranny” over the empire (II.41.4; II.39.2; II.63.2). But that hopefulness is bought at a steep price. For to assert that exceptions to the natural course of things are *not* indications of a divinity that rewards the pious and punishes the impious is also to assert that there are no purposeful exceptions to the natural course of things. It is to assert that there is no way to secure for oneself an exception to natural limits. It is to embrace the thought that the only forces beyond human action governing the world are natural necessity and “ignorant”

chance. Hence, the same reasoning that might encourage Athenians to endure misfortune forces them also to accept the ultimate misfortune: that “all things by nature decline” (II.62.3). Pericles’ view of fortune or chance thus entails this “theology”: there are no gods that limit our ambitions to less than we are able to attain, but there are also no gods that can satisfy our longings for more than the limits of necessity or chance allow.

## Chapter 6

### **Unthinking Courage and the Athenian Thesis**

As I illustrated in chapters two, three, and four, Pericles' speeches are unified by his persistent attempt to encourage the Athenians to see or at least act on "what is needful." His own steady foresight is constantly contrasted with their variable judgment, and we have just seen that his steadiness depends on his claim that the world operates (almost) entirely in predictable, necessary ways. But this last assumption does not *require* rejecting the idea that there are gods who intervene in human affairs. Gods might act in predictable ways, and therefore foresight is not impossible even in a world governed by the divine. For instance, the Melians hope or expect that the gods can be counted on to reward piety and to protect against injustice.<sup>70</sup> Insofar as Pericles denies that there are gods that intervene on behalf of justice, as we have just seen, he aligns himself with the Athenian envoys at Melos, who believe that the hopes and expectations of the Melians

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<sup>70</sup> This view would suggest that the gods are themselves bound by nature and therefore not omnipotent. Moreover, the suggestion is not just that the gods are bound by natural laws in the physical world, but by their own natures. For instance, we might say that it is in Zeus's nature to reward the just, which would imply that the idea of justice is prior to Zeus's recognition of the just and that his nature compels him to reward those that he recognizes as just. Only then could one be completely confident in one's foresight that the just will be preserved and the unjust will suffer. A god capable of acting arbitrarily would solve the problem of subordinating the divine to nature, but at the expense of the possibility of reliable human foresight.



are foolish. Although Pericles' position will prove to differ from that of the envoys, the envoys' explicit denial of the role that gods play in human affairs is the clearest account available in Thucydides' text that can justify Pericles' remarkable confidence in human reason. It is likely, then, that Pericles accepts some version of the Athenian argument so boldly expressed by those envoys to Melos.

### **The Melian Dialogue**

The dialogue between Athens and Melos happens in the sixteenth year of the war, when the Athenians arrive at the island-city of Melos in full force with the simple goal of compelling the islanders to submit to Athenian hegemony of the "watery part of the world" (Taylor 2009, 78). There is no explicit mention of any Melian offence other than that of being an island free from Athenian subjugation. As such, however, Melos belies the Athenian claim to be "masters of the sea" (V.97; see also Taylor 2009, 115f.). The dialogue between the Athenian envoys and the leaders of Melos that precedes Athens' attack on the island-city is therefore revealing, since it is in part meant to explain or justify what looks to be an unprovoked and hence unjust attack on a neutral island. Indeed, the Athenian argument has come to be one of the most important contributions to political theory, as the oldest extant articulation of what is now called "political realism." That is, it is an extended debate about whether concerns of justice have or ought to have any bearing on relations between foreign powers.

The fundamental Athenian claim is that everyone is compelled to pursue what appears to him to be advantageous, including rule over others, and therefore that "by a necessity of nature those rule wherever they are able" (V.105.2). That is, it is impossible

*not* to pursue one's advantage, and so it is impossible for those who are truly capable of gaining what they desire to curb the exercise of their power in its pursuit. The claim expressed so baldly on Melos is first made by some other Athenian envoys at Sparta, before the outbreak of the war (I.75.3, 76.2). Those envoys begin with the uncontroversial moral claim that what is done by compulsion is not morally considerable: we neither praise nor blame what is done by necessity. For example, what is done out of fear is morally excusable because everyone recognizes that mortal fear sometimes necessitates and hence justifies actions that are otherwise morally blameworthy, such as committing acts of violence against others. What is innovative about the Athenian argument at Sparta is that the speakers extend this ordinary moral reasoning beyond fear to other psychological "compulsions": the desires for honor and advantage (*ibid.*). They conclude that all actions taken to attain what appears good derive from compulsive passions that have the same force as fear and that are therefore morally excusable by the same argument. In support of their claim they observe: "no one yet, when he happened to be able to acquire something by strength, has turned away from having more because he preferred [justice]" (I.76.2). The Athenian understanding extends the realm of necessity so broadly as to make considerations of justice irrelevant, and they thereby "explode the ordinary moral horizon" (Bartlett 2001, 85). But the argument is not for that reason unpersuasive. Simply put, the claim is that even when we seem to be acting most selflessly, we are still ultimately motivated by considerations of self-interest insofar as we only pursue these things because we consider them good.

Following this reasoning, the Athenians on Melos insist that their dialogue with the Melians proceed by considerations of advantage alone, "setting aside justice" (V.90)

as well as all other “noble expressions” (V.89). The Athenians claim to be speaking “as knowers” to knowers, who know “that considerations of justice adjudicate in human speech when there is equal necessity [i.e., among those of equal strength]; but that the preeminent do what they can and the weak yield” (V.89). Only when equality of strength renders force moot do considerations of justice have any sway. In the present circumstances, the preponderance of strength on the Athenian side makes the question of justice superfluous. The Melians should consider only the most expedient means to preserve themselves.

The Melians in effect confirm that they are “knowers” in the Athenian sense when they agree to this demand, noting that the Athenians have “compelled” them to argue on Athenian terms (V.90). But they also accept the Athenian position more fundamentally when they choose *not* to claim that standing fast against Athenian superior strength is simply just or noble or pious, even (or especially) if it is dangerous. They could simply admit that they choose to do what is noble and accept the consequences *rather than* doing what is advantageous. Instead, they argue that their justice, piety, and nobility constitute rational grounds to hope that their resistance will in fact be advantageous in the end (V.104). That is, they believe that noble resistance to unjust aggression is the best means of self-preservation. Hence, the question at the heart of the debate between the Athenian and Melian representatives is *not* whether one should do what is right even when it is disadvantageous. The question is whether justice (and piety) or the naked pursuit of self-interest is a better means to securing one’s advantage. In other words, is Periclean foresight, based on a clear understanding of practical necessities and material resources, a better or worse predictor of success than Melian foresight, which is based on an

understanding of who is in the right and who in the wrong? The Melians concede from the very beginning that their “irrational” refusal to bow to Athenian military superiority does not rest on the belief that it is better to die in the right than to live in the wrong; rather, they claim that doing what is right is the surer path to their preservation. Hence, they claim that their decision is in fact rational, even or especially on the Athenian premise that what is rational is what actually conduces to one’s own advantage. One might wish, at this point, to note the destruction of Melos as decisive evidence in favor of the Athenian position: the Melians did not, in fact, preserve themselves even though they acted nobly. But it is worth noting, as many scholars have, that neither did the Athenians preserve themselves (e.g. Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999, 17). For Thucydides arranges his text such that immediately after the slaughter of the Melians, the Athenians suffer their own defeat in Sicily, “the greatest reversal [of fortune] to befall a Greek army” (VII.75.5). Perhaps, then, the Athenians were punished for the injustice of their attack on the pious Melians after all.

However that may be, by admitting that they, too, believe themselves to be pursuing their self-interest by the best means available, the Melians bear witness to the fundamental Athenian insight that all human beings always seek their own advantage: even the greatest risks are entered into only with the hope or conviction that those risks are in fact safe. In other words, the Melians in effect concede that justice, piety, and nobility are only instrumental. Their final statement confirms that this is their true position.

Our opinion is no different than it was at first, Athenians, nor in one short moment will we be robbed of the city that we have inhabited in freedom for 700 years now, but trusting in fortune from the gods, which has preserved us up to now, and in vengeance from human beings—the Lacedaimonians—we will attempt to preserve ourselves. (V.112.2)

The Melians are just as confident in the rational foundation of their foresight as are the Athenians. Because they are “pious men making a stand against those who are not just” (V.104), they have reason to expect that they will receive assistance from the gods, in the form of good fortune, and from human beings, the Spartans, whose regard for justice will lead them to avenge those who are wronged. The Melians concede, then, that they are seeking self-preservation, and they claim that their endeavor is “not altogether irrational” because their justice permits them to hope that human and divine assistance will correct the imbalance in power that would seem to put them at a disadvantage (V.104). They are unmoved by the Athenian arguments, and they are willing to stake their lives on the expectation that their justice will preserve them. Such high stakes make it unlikely that the Melians are stating their position in terms of advantage only because the Athenians ordered them to do so. This appears to be their genuine belief.

The Melians’ de facto acceptance of the premise that all human beings seek their own advantage, however, is fatal to their pious hopes. For their own rational pursuit of preservation rests on the premise that there are beings in the world, gods and men, who can be counted on to protect and reward the noble against the ignoble. It is easy enough, then, for the Athenians to point out that, because the Melians agreed on the priority of

self-interest in human affairs, it is unreasonable for them to expect the Spartans to put themselves at any great risk to become the saviors of Melos. The Spartans' own abiding concern with self-preservation will make it unlikely that they will court unnecessary dangers to defend the cause of justice (V.105.3-111). However, if the Melians are correct in believing that acting nobly is in fact instrumental to self-preservation, because it is the best way to assure divine assistance, then perhaps they could count on Spartan piety to bring the Spartans to their aid. For the Spartans, too, might defend justice in the hope or expectation that they would thereby make themselves worthy to receive divine good fortune.

Dispensing with the Melians' expectations of divine assistance is somewhat more difficult, and it is this argument that is of particular interest to us. Recall that we are attempting to understand why Pericles is so confident that fortune does not come from the gods and that considerations of divine intervention should be disregarded in prudential calculations; and we turned to this dialogue because we here get the clearest Athenian argument against the rationality of such pious hopes. That argument also rests on the Athenian insight that by nature all human beings are compelled to seek their own advantage, broadly understood. The Athenian envoys make this argument:

For we hold, both as it seems regarding the divine and as has always been clear regarding humanity, that by a necessity of nature those rule wherever they have the power; and we neither laid down the law nor were we the first to be subject to it once it had been laid down; but we are subject to it—we found it in existence and when we leave it behind it will be in existence forever—and we know that

both you and others, having come into the same power as ours would act in the same way. (V.105.2)

If indeed it is the case that human beings “by a necessity of nature” always seek their own advantage, then no human being can be blamed for securing his advantage in whatever way he can—by ruling when he has power, for instance, or by arguments from justice when he does not. There is no moral high ground in the Athenian view. No one seeks justice, nobility, or piety as an end in itself; all seek these as instrumental goods in the natural human pursuit of advantage. Thus, the Athenian premise, which the Melians accept, denies that there is any morally significant difference between the greedy imperialism of the Athenians and the noble resistance of the Melians. Both are seeking their advantage, albeit by different means. And neither can be blamed or praised for this, since both are simply driven by the same natural necessity. It is this claim that destroys the grounds on which Melian confidence rests. For precisely if there are gods who care about justice—as the Melians insist and the Athenians do not explicitly deny—then for this very reason they will refuse to intervene on behalf of the Melians, who just like the Athenians are acting in accordance with the law of self-interest to which all human beings are subject (Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999, 18).

### **Pericles and the Athenian Thesis**

The Athenian dismissal of the possibility of divine intervention, then, rests on the insight that human beings are subject to the natural, exculpatory compulsion to pursue what they perceive to be their self-interest. One cannot be blamed for his subjection to the

laws of nature. And more importantly, one cannot expect to be praised and rewarded for noble sacrifices that are not, in fact, sacrifices. As Robert Bartlett remarks, “the greatest sacrifice undertaken with the expectation of receiving the greatest reward ceases for that very reason to be a sacrifice. If this is correct, such ‘sacrifice’ cannot reasonably claim to merit the extraordinary intervention needed to fulfill in every case that expectation” (2001, 101). Insofar as “noble” sacrifices are undertaken for the sake of reward, to that extent they are not noble and do not deserve to be rewarded. Pericles’ confident indifference to prophecy and prophetic fortune reveals that he, too, grasps this insight, and that he understands human actions in terms of the natural compulsion to seek one’s advantage rather than in terms of free, noble choices that are rewarded by “fortune from the gods” (V.112.2)—and that he believes this despite his encomium praising the noble choices of the Athenian dead in the Funeral Oration.

If this is the case, then we must conclude that Pericles’ rejection of fortune as a divine sign entails the rejection of the noble as an end that is simply choiceworthy in itself. This means also a rejection of Arendt’s understanding of the highest peak of political life. For in Pericles’ speeches, noble action went together with hopes for future prosperity—hopes that are under this understanding irrational. But if this is the case, why does Pericles at times encourage rather than censure the Athenians for their “trust in virtue,” as the Athenians do the Melians (for example at V.111.3)?

The Athenians on Melos, in fact, differ from Pericles in some important respects. The Athenian envoys believe that fear is the strongest deterrent, that being hated is a sign and source of strength, and that being lenient is a sign of weakness, which invites revolt (V.95, 97). In these respects, the Athenian envoys on Melos have more in common with



Pericles' successor Cleon than with Pericles himself. The Athenians are angry with the Melians for a perceived injustice (as was Cleon with the Mytilenians: compare V.89<sup>71</sup> and III.37-40), and they, too, wish to make an example of their enemies simply because those enemies refuse to acknowledge Athenian superiority (compare V.95, 97, 99 and III.37.2, 40.1-2, 4, 7; also read V.116.4 in light of III.36.2). While the Athenians on Melos claim to be acting simply on cold calculations of their own interest, those calculations are based on the assumption that fear will teach their enemies to act rationally. And the Athenians seem frankly indignant—even morally indignant—that the Melians would dare to prove that assumption wrong. The Melians refuse ever to act “rationally,” insofar as it is not rational not to seek safety or preservation by trusting in otherworldly means. They will not turn their hopes to what is “manifest”—the necessity of submission in the face of overwhelming Athenian strength—but insist on placing their hopes in the “immanifest”—“divination and oracles and other such things that cause ruin by means of hopes,” as the Athenians put it (V.103.2). The Athenians punish the obstinacy of the Melians accordingly.

Of course, that the Athenians are compelled to carry out their punishment of the Melians suggests that the Athenian envoys (and Cleon) are simply wrong about the compulsive force of their threats.<sup>72</sup> The Athenians threatened the Melians on the premise

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<sup>71</sup> See Hornblower 2010, 232, for the suggestion that this comment implies that the Melians did something to provoke the Athenians.

<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Cleon himself notes that Mytilene did not heed the example of its neighbors, which Athens subdued by force (III.39.3). Why, then, is he so confident that making an

that fear would by necessity compel obedience; the fact that they are forced to follow through on this threat betrays their foolish hopefulness about the effects of their show of force. Hence, the crucial difference between the Athenian envoys and Pericles is that the former have an unfounded confidence in the priority of human fear, which Pericles does not share. To put it another way, even if all are compelled to pursue what they perceive to be their interest, there is a great difference between those who do so through cold calculation based on the “manifest” and those who do so by means of hopes in the “immanifest.” The envoys on Melos do not acknowledge, presumably because they do not feel, the strength of the human longing to pursue self-interest by means of the latter.

The speaker that most clearly presents the variation on the Athenian thesis that takes seriously human hopes in the immanifest is Diodotus, an otherwise unknown Athenian citizen whose timely speech preserves the rebellious Mytilenians from suffering a fate that would have rivaled the slaughter of the Melians. And it is telling that, while the Athenians on Melos fail to persuade the Melians to act “rationally” by threatening them with “the most terrible things” (τὰ δεινότατα παθεῖν: V.93), Diodotus argues that it would be irrational for the Athenians to expect such “rational” fear from the Mytileneans on the grounds that no one adequately considers the risks when their decisions concern “the

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example of Mytilene will serve to prevent other rebellions—especially if, as he also argues, their revolt was the result of “human nature” coupled with an Athenian error of judgment (III.39.3-5)?

greatest things” (περὶ τῶν μεγίστων<sup>73</sup>), such as the political freedom that both Mytilene and Melos seek (III.45.3). Our desire for the greatest things outweighs our fear of the most terrible things. Hence, Diodotus’ expectations are grounded on his observation that human irrational or noble longings are stronger than prudent human fears, which is precisely opposite to the expectations of the Athenian envoys at Melos. This is the primary difference between these otherwise very similar situations.

Indeed, the similarities between these two episodes are striking, and they invite us to compare the two accounts. Like the interlocutors at Melos, Diodotus and Cleon agree on the primacy of expediency over justice when considering affairs between cities (III.40.4, 44.1-2). And Cleon, “the most violent citizen” of Athens, argues that exacting vengeance on the rebellious island-city of Mytilene will serve Athenian interests because it will make Athens look strong and induce fear in other, would-be defectors, a thought the Athenians at Melos will later echo (III.36.6, III.40.7; compare V.95). But in anticipation of the Melians’ persistent “irrationality,” Diodotus counters Cleon’s position by arguing against his policy of deterrence on the grounds that the fear of death is not sufficient to curb human beings in the pursuit of the most resplendent goods, such as freedom and empire (III.45). What is important about Diodotus’ understanding for our purposes is that this is also the implicit view of Pericles, who encourages the Athenians to overcome their fears by extolling the Athenian empire and its devotion to freedom, both individual freedom and the freedom of city as a whole. He is confident that the grand

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<sup>73</sup> Compare I.76.2, where the Athenian envoys at Sparta call fear, honor, and interest, the “greatest things” (τῶν μεγίστων).

hopes of freedom and empire will outweigh the immediate pains of war. Indeed, he is more than willing to fuel those desires and hopes that encourage the Athenians to “take risks” from “inadequate means,” as Diodotus puts it, despite encouraging them in his next breath to base their decisions on a careful accounting of their resources.

### **Diodotus and Pericles**

Diodotus’ argument is worth looking at more carefully. Unlike the Athenian envoys at Melos, Diodotus accepts that human hopes are stronger than human fears—that the anticipation of “the greatest things” carries more weight than the anticipation of “the most terrible things”—and yet he agrees with the envoys that indulging those hopes leads to ruin.

In every instance, hope and eros—the one [eros] leading, the other [hope] attending; the one [eros] thinking out the plan, the other [hope] supplying the resource of fortune—are most harmful, and these immanifest beings are stronger than visible terrors. In addition to these, fortune contributes no less to the inducement: for there are times when, coming unexpectedly, she leads one to take risks—even [someone] from among those with inadequate means—and cities no less, especially concerning the greatest things, freedom or rule over others, and, when all are together, each irrationally esteems himself something greater [than he is]. (3.45.6)

Diodotus' language is striking in light of the dialogue on Melos. Diodotus, too, speaks of the strength of immanifest forces, and he suggests that these lead human beings to trust in the gifts of fortune. According to Diodotus, however, these forces are not gods but desires and the hopes that may attend those desires. In addition, he identifies fortune as the factor that allows us to discount future obstacles or failures, which explains why we permit ourselves to anticipate good things rather than bad ones. In light of the uncertainty of the future, we gravitate toward what is more attractive. And despite the absence of gods in this account, one wonders whether Diodotus is implying that even without explicit reference to the divine, human beings tend to understand the gifts of fortune in terms of rewards and punishments for the deserving—that is, as rewards for those willing to make the greatest sacrifices or take the greatest risks on behalf of something great or noble or beneficent (cf. IV.65.4).

Diodotus also squarely opposes the criticisms of the Athenians on Melos. He does not blame people or cities for acting on their longings “irrationally,” for “in every instance” these “immanifest beings,” when present, are “stronger than visible terrors.” If this is the case, then, the Athenian envoys at Melos are themselves too hopeful in thinking that their enemies—even those with obviously “inadequate means”—would buckle at the sight of manifest Athenian superiority. Despite all their attention to human psychological compulsions, the Athenian envoys on Melos are compelled to recognize that the Melians choose not to submit to the compulsion of fear. Because they choose to resist, the Melians are not only foolish, they are also an affront to Athenian superiority. And their offence is not only that they refuse to acknowledge Athens' manifest superiority of strength, but also that they belie the Athenians' superior understanding of

human nature. Such hubris deserves to be punished. It is perhaps for this reason that the Athenian destruction of Melos appears more vengeful than strategic (Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999, 24). Athenian pride more than Athenian interest is on the line. For their own sense of nobility may rest, ironically, in the sense of danger they feel in rejecting what is traditionally held to be noble, and they are aggravated by the Melians' dramatic refusal to acknowledge the Athenians' noble resistance to that siren song.

However that may be, the Athenian reaction is revealing. Their decision to punish the Melians reveals the error in their judgment: they overestimate the compulsive force of their manifest superiority of strength and they underestimate the compulsive force of the Melians' hopes in the immanifest. Diodotus' variation on the Athenian thesis is not subject to this error. He denies that the strong should ever expect the ready submission of the weak, for even the weak are prone to overestimate their chances of success, especially when they are in a crowd—i.e. when they constitute a city—or when they believe that fortune might intervene on their behalf (III.45.6). Human beings err “by nature,” Diodotus claims (III.45.3). They are always driven to take risks because all circumstances (ξυμτυχίαι) give rise to passions (ὀργαί) that “lead them into danger” (III.45.4). Poverty, “by necessity,” leads to desperate boldness, while prosperity leads to arrogant hubris (*ibid.*). Neither circumstance produces passions conducive to moderation; both cause human beings to take risks against their better judgment. Indeed, the passions that drive the Mytileneans in their resistance to Athenian imperialism are on this reading no more blameworthy or exceptional than the passions that lead Athens in her imperialistic suppression of such revolts.

Moreover, Diodotus argues, because human longings always outpace prudent human fears, the Athenians should not attempt to rule by becoming an object of fear, even if their superior strength is overwhelming and manifest. This will only drive other cities to act in envy and desperation. Rather, Athens ought to rule by preserving in other cities the hope and expectation that their superiors will be merciful or just (III.46). Hence, Athenians should not present themselves as “realists,” indifferent to considerations of justice, even and precisely if they are. They could better suppress rebellion and acquire allies by demonstrating their abiding concern for justice, as the Spartans do when Brasidas appears to make good on their claim to be the “liberators of Hellas” (for example at IV.108.2). Indeed, most of the Greeks supported Sparta rather than Athens at the outset of the war because they believed that Sparta was fighting for their liberty (II.8.4).<sup>74</sup>

What Diodotus recommends as Athens’ strategy for leadership in the Greek world, Pericles enacts in his leadership of Athens. He recognizes that arguments from self-preservation are not sufficient to motivate the Athenians to adopt his war strategy. Rather, he appeals to their grandest hopes—for freedom, for empire, for immortal fame—

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<sup>74</sup> There is much debate about Thucydides’ assertion that the truest cause of war was the growth of the Athenian empire and the fear this caused in Sparta (I.23.6). However, setting aside the nuances of the debate over who was to blame for the war and why, there is one obvious implication of the remark: Thucydides is declaring from the outset that Sparta went to war from a self-interested concern for self-preservation, not, as they presented it, from a noble desire to defend Greek liberty.

rather than to their fear of death. Indeed, the very grandeur of these hopes is attractive precisely because they show the Athenians' noble disdain for such fears. As others have noted, the Athenians' "grand imperial ambition is itself a sign of their noble superiority to calculations of safety and risk" (Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999, 25). Pericles himself moderates the Athenians' envy and fear of his own ambition by presenting himself as an obdurate patriot—as one whose concern for the common good is unsullied by timidity or self-interest or inconstancy—and therefore as someone who would never sacrifice Athens' collective ambitions to his own. His own noble disregard for self-interest makes him trustworthy. This is what most distinguishes him from Alcibiades, and that difference is what most prevented Alcibiades from being able to lead the Athenians as Pericles had (consider VI.15.4).

Finally, Pericles understands the forces against which he contends to be natural human passions—rather than gods—that are implacably hopeful and always subject to changing circumstances. In all of these ways, Pericles betrays the fact that his view of the world (and the role of humans in it) is distinctly Athenian and more precisely Diodotean. The key difference, then, between Pericles and Diodotus, on the one hand, and the Athenian envoys on Melos, on the other, is that the former account for and accept the human attraction to noble deeds and the consequent eagerness to forego immediate interests in the name of goods that appear to exist beyond oneself. Both Pericles and Diodotus understand this phenomenon as an "erotic" compulsion that transcends "calculation" (compare II.43.1 and III.45.5). Hence, Pericles urges the Athenians to take risks "trusting in virtue" *rather than* calculation, as lovers of their city. And Pericles encourages rather than censures the Athenians for their "trust in virtue" because he



recognizes that the longing to deserve rewards for nobility from the “immanent” is a stronger force in the human soul than prudent fears or the concern for safety. For just like the Melians, the Athenians—despite insisting that everyone is compelled to pursue his self-interest—also claim to deserve praise and rewards for their noble superiority to calculations of self-interest.

### **The Athenian Envoys at Sparta**

Consider again, for instance, the Athenian envoys to Sparta, who voiced the Athenian argument just before the war broke out, long before the exchange on Melos took place. At that early conference among the Peloponnesian allies, the Athenians (who happened to be in Sparta on other business) asked to speak to the assembly with the intention of preventing war. Despite explicitly claiming that they were not there to defend their imperialistic activities, they do offer what amounts to a defense or explanation. In acquiring their empire, they were “thoroughly compelled” by the three strongest motives: fear, the desire for honor, and the desire for advantage (I.75.3). Moreover, that they were “conquered” by these forces is nothing out of the ordinary: it is human nature, and anyone else in the same position would and will suffer the same. “It has always been established that the weak are held down by the strong,” the Athenians assert, anticipating the later statement by the Athenians on Melos (I.76.2; cp. V.105.2).

The envoys’ account of Athenian imperialism at first appears to stand in stark contrast to Pericles’ understanding of the Athenians, at least as presented in the Funeral Oration. Pericles, recall, recognizes that to praise the fallen soldiers he has to show that the actions in question issued from choice, that they were intentional (Aristotle, *Art of*

*Rhetoric* 1367b22-28). His claim, then, that the Athenians and their city are “worthy of wonder” (or admiration: ἀξίαν εἶναι θαυμάζεσθαι)<sup>75</sup> for their way of life is accordingly a bold assertion of human freedom (II.39.4). This understanding is flatly denied by the defenses of Athenian imperialism propounded by the Athenians abroad—at both Sparta and Melos, as well as at Camarina<sup>76</sup>—according to which the Athenian empire resulted from laws of nature, which compel humans as humans to act as they do. According to this account, the Athenians have accomplished “nothing to be wondered at” (θαυμαστὸν

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<sup>75</sup> The primary meaning of θαυμάζω is “to wonder at,” and it covers the same range as the English word “wonder,” from things that are simply curious or unexplained to those that are amazing or beyond belief. For instance, it is used to describe perceptions that lack immediately apparent explanations, as in “The Corcyraeans ... *were wondering* why the Corinthians were backing water” (I.51.2; see also I.95.5, IV.111.2). But it is also used to describe the admiration one feels in the presence of something truly remarkable, as in “the king, it is said, *was amazed* at [Themistocles’] intelligence” (I.138.1; see also III.38.1). Unlike the English “wonder,” the Greek term also describes the honors that superiors expect from their inferiors, as in “*to be honored* in the appropriate manner” (I.38.2; see also VII.63.3). It is also noteworthy that θαυμάζω is the word used by Plato and Aristotle to describe the wonder that is the beginning of philosophy (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b12f.; Plato, *Theaetetus* 155D).

<sup>76</sup> Euphemos defends Athenian imperialism to the Sicilians at Camarina, eschewing “noble phrases” and appealing principally to the compulsion of fear and considerations of safety (see, for example, VI.82.2).

οὐδὲν), since they have in no way deviated from “the way of human beings” (τοῦ ἀνθρωπείου τρόπου: I.76.2). Hence, while Pericles praises the Athenians for “utterly compelling” (καταναγκάσαντες) every land and sea to become accessible to them through their boldness, the Athenian envoys claim that the Athenians *themselves* were “utterly compelled” (κατηναγκάσθημεν) by human nature to pursue such bold undertakings (II.41.4, I.75.3). The latter claim questions the assumption of human freedom on which deliberate choice and praise are predicated.

But as the Athenian envoys at Sparta proceed, it is not at all clear that they are able to accept the consequences of their stated understanding of human nature. They claim twice that they were overcome by the three greatest things—fear, honor, and advantage—but their second statement includes a small but telling retrenchment. On the first occasion, they claim that they were “utterly compelled,” κατηναγκάσθημεν, the root meaning of which is “necessity,” ἀνάγκη. In the second iteration they claim that they were “conquered,” νικηθέντες, by the three greatest things, a term that suggests these human “compulsions” should be understood in terms of relative strength, as something against which we fight and to which we often—though perhaps not always—succumb. This shift away from an absolute claim about necessity toward a claim of relative strength paves the way for the Athenians’ surprising next claim, namely, that the “necessities” at work in the human soul are, paradoxically, not quite absolute—at least not for Athenians. For the Athenians’ argument is not only that they are blameless for their imperialism but in fact that they are also worthy of praise and of their rule over others. They have a just claim to rule not according to human law, perhaps, but according to their superiority as rulers. And their superiority consists in the strength to overcome or resist those very

selfish forces that “conquer” the human soul and excuse what would otherwise be called injustice. Their unique strength, they go on to claim, allows them “to be more just in ruling over others than would accord with their present power” (I.76.3).

The point, it is worth stressing, is not that they *could* be more unjust than they in fact are, but that they *should* be more unjust than they are, according to their own understanding of human nature. That is, they should not even be capable of the justice they practice because their strength over other cities (and hence their capacity to pursue their interest regardless of what justice dictates) ought to preclude it. Consider the same construction at II.50.1: The plague was “too difficult for human nature [to bear]” (χαλεπωτέρως ἢ κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπείαν φύσιν), i.e., it was beyond human endurance. The Athenian claim about their justice, strictly translated, should read similarly: they rule in a way that is “too just for their present power [to permit]” (δικαιότεροι ἢ κατὰ τὴν ὑπάρχουσαν δύναμιν).<sup>77</sup> The formulation is designed to be paradoxical. We are meant to understand the Athenian position on human compulsion as setting an absolute limit on the extent to which the strong are able to practice justice: the powerful *cannot* act in accordance with what is said to be just because human beings are by nature too psychologically weak to pursue justice when they are fully capable of pursuing interest at

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<sup>77</sup> See Smyth 1079: “After a comparative, ἢ κατὰ with the accusative . . . denote[s] too high or too low a degree” (1984, 281). Jeremy Mynott’s translation captures the meaning well: “people deserve special credit if in following human nature and ruling over others they still behave with more sense of justice than their power would allow them to do” (2013, 47).

the expense of justice. The claim must be this strong for it to be exculpatory, as the Athenians insist it is. In light of this, the Athenian regard for justice that they go on to claim appears truly wonderful, even incredible.

The position, then, is that one would only be worthy of praise for justice, and hence worthy of rule, if he were more just than one could reasonably expect a powerful human being to be. The Athenians claim that they are “worthy” of rule because Athenians are in the crucial respects stronger than human nature. And if they fail to live up to justice in every respect, it is excusable on account of “universal” human weakness. The envoys thus propose the thesis regarding human nature that by natural necessity all pursue their apparent advantage but that the Athenians are worthy of praise because they have carved out a narrow swath of moral freedom with such extraordinary strength of soul as to resist those very natural compulsions.

In light of these considerations, the envoys go on to reveal the injustice of the blame they have received from those subject cities that complain of their treatment in Athenian courts. While those cities criticize the Athenians’ claim to be more just than they have to be as a failure to be completely just, the Athenians contend that being more just than they have to be is a remarkable triumph of human moral freedom in the name of justice (I.77.1-5). The Athenians alone continue to observe considerations of justice even when they know that this practice causes them harm, that is, even when it contradicts the principle that everyone pursues his own self-interest (I.76.4-77.5; cf. II.39.1, 40.5). Thus, the Athenian allies’ false assumption that humans are simply free moral agents leads both to unjust blame and to the failure to give just praise to those who exhibit the strength of soul necessary to exercise true moral freedom—those who “are worthy of praise”

(I.76.3). The Athenian envoys' account of human nature is meant to correct these false assumptions. They thus intend to reveal themselves to be both blameless of injustice and, in fact, worthy of praise and rule.

Despite my attempt to interpret the passage generously, it is hard not to conclude that the Athenians at this early stage in the war simply want it both ways: they excuse themselves from blame by appeals to natural human necessity while at the same time claiming that they deserve honor for their noble and just use of human freedom. That is, it appears to be impossible for them fully to face up to their espoused "realism" and accept what follows, namely, that just as no one can be blamed for pursuing his interest so can no one reasonably claim to be morally superior and hence more deserving than others.

Like the Melians, then, the Athenians at Sparta seem unable simply to cast off "noble expressions" in light of their clear apprehension of the full meaning of the insight that everyone is compelled to pursue his self-interest. Like the Melians, the Athenian envoys consider themselves to be peculiarly worthy on account of their noble indifference to calculations of mere self-interest. The Melians, however, easily admit that their readiness to suffer harm—even to suffer "the greatest things"—is connected to their belief that their noble devotion to justice and piety is *something good* insofar as it secures them their future good fortune; the Athenians, on the other hand, insist that their regard for justice is praiseworthy precisely because it does not serve their own interests. Indeed, in the example above, the Athenian envoys imply that it would be much easier for them to rule by force than by law, but that they endure the hardship nonetheless, in the name of justice (I.77.1-6; cf. Bruell 1974, 28). This, for them, is a noble triumph over self-interest.

This leaves us with the impression that the Athenians are confused. They are unapologetic “realists,” who contend that all humans by nature are compelled to pursue their self-interest, while at the same time understanding themselves to be noble precisely because they sometimes forego their self-interest in the name of higher goods, such as justice or liberality or empire or glory. We are even encouraged to wonder whether there is really much difference between the Athenian “trust in virtue” and Melian piety. Can the Athenians really be so devoted to noble action without harboring some hope that the world will compensate their risks and sacrifices with good fortune? Is this not the true reason for their variability of judgment, and Pericles’ consequent need to appeal to their regard for nobility rather than to their self-interest? As Pangle and Ahrens Dorf have concluded,

by claiming that they deserve the rewards of empire and glory, [the Athenians] imply that they believe and hope [...] that the world is such that ultimately human beings get what they deserve and hence that the world is fundamentally just. Consequently they must believe as well, albeit implicitly and half-consciously, that there are gods or divine powers who ensure that human beings are rewarded in accordance with their deserts. (Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999, 23)

If indeed we “somehow sense” that living up to noble demands “in turn demands recognition or compensation” (Bartlett 2001, 99), is it possible not to hope and even expect the world to compensate us accordingly? And is this not, at heart, a form of piety that requires supernatural beings to intervene in the natural course of things on our

behalf, even if we are not fully conscious of these pious hopes? If this is the case, then the Melians appear to see more clearly where their regard for the noble points than do their Athenian challengers. They see and accept that their noble disregard for immediate self-interest goes together with a trust in piety and justice that requires supernatural beings to reward their risks and sacrifices. The Athenians at Melos and Sparta appear, by comparison, “half-conscious” or confused.

But however confused these Athenians may be, and however much Pericles’ rhetoric encourages (or did not discourage) that confusion, to say that they are “half-consciously” pious distracts from their intellectual seriousness about the human concern for nobility. For what is most striking about the Athenian regard for nobility is their thoughtful and self-conscious refusal to allow true nobility to be merely instrumental to self-interest, as the Melians are so quick to admit is the case for them. Hence, the Melians’ solution is problematic from the Athenian point of view not only because it is incoherent—insofar as it rests on the expectation of rewards for “sacrifices” that are not, in fact, sacrifices, precisely because they are made in the expectation rewards—but also because it conflates nobility with advantage, which is what the Spartans do and what the Athenians intentionally refuse to do (V.105.4). The Athenians are not “realists” because they are simply blind to or unaware of their concern for justice and nobility; rather, as Robert Bartlett concludes, “the Athenians were forced to abandon justice altogether precisely on account of their respect for justice understood as something different from and higher than mere self-interest” (Bartlett 2001, 84).

Pericles, more than anyone, attempts to satisfy *without conflating* both Athens’ self-interest and the Athenians’ abiding concern for the noble, which is why his speeches



vacillate between these two poles and why he presents the image of the perfected Athenian that he does. Pericles' perfect citizen combines the noble disregard for danger with clear-sightedness or knowledge. To repeat: "He would justly be judged strongest of soul who knew most clearly the terrible and the pleasant things and did not turn away from danger on account of these" (II.40.3). To strive toward that vision of human perfection means never to lose sight of what is truly good and bad, but also never to suppress one's aspiration to nobility. Precisely because the Athenians take seriously the insight that the noble is at once one's highest self-interest while at the same time, paradoxically, being characterized by the sacrifice of self-interest, they are inclined to prize their clear-sightedness about the priority of self-interest over traditional understandings of nobility: they insist that insofar as courage is sacrifice for the sake of reward it is unheroic and unworthy of reward. Pericles encourages them, for that reason, neither to count on the "rewards" of good fortune nor to be agitated by the "punishments" of bad fortune—these will not come from superintending and just gods. But according to the same insight, the Athenians are also attracted to a purified form of nobility—one unsullied by blindness to their own self-interest. However, Pericles does not go so far as to expect the Athenians fully to give up their regard for the noble, if only because it may well be psychologically impossible to do so. Instead he promises them immortal fame, not so much because this is an end in itself or because it is a useful ruse but because it satisfies the ineradicable human longing for the noble without *precluding* the capacity to see the world as it truly is. That is, it is only when one faces up to the fact that noble risks and sacrifices are *real* risks and sacrifices—because there are no supernatural beings to compensate for them—that one can begin to face up to what the manifest situation

requires rather than placing one's trust in immanifest forces that keep the justice ledger in balance. Even if one is ultimately seeking fame, there is a vast difference between those who do so trusting in their own lights and those who do so trusting in divine assistance.

## Conclusion

The goal of this dissertation was to clarify Thucydides' presentation of Pericles and his Athens. The hope animating it was that such an investigation will help us understand the modern attraction to robust citizenship, which we find in antiliberal thinkers such as Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explicitly attempts to recover the Periclean understanding of the ends of politics, the starting point of the present analysis. The most important distinction that emerged between Arendt's Pericles and the Pericles that we encounter in the pages of Thucydides concerns their different understandings of what action is truly praiseworthy. For Arendt, true action issues from the peculiar human capacity to create new beginnings. She therefore celebrates what is new, novel, unconstrained by morality or even prudence, and which for these reasons can only be measured on the scale of "greatness." The modern world, Arendt argues, does not participate in "action," so understood; we lack, or have buried, the longing for immortal fame that leads to those remarkable human deeds that deserve to be remembered and which can therefore constitute a "reality" or narrative that transcends our limited existences.

Pericles would reject this understanding. For however much Pericles contributed to the greatness of Athens, at the heart of his understanding of praiseworthy action is not a simple admiration for fame or glory, but a problem. Pericles sees that the noble actions that win fame are praiseworthy only when they are deliberate or freely chosen, and so he concludes that deliberation or clarity of purpose is essential to nobility. And though this leads Pericles to remark that clear-sighted courage would be truly praiseworthy, it is not

at all clear whether martial courage and clear thinking can ever be fully compatible. However that may be, Arendt ignores this aspect of Pericles' thought, presumably because her explicit purpose is to leave "the activity of thinking" behind so that she can recover the *vita activa* from the obscurity it has fallen into as a result of the rise of philosophy (1998, 5, 17). Her project presupposes that the concern characteristic of the *vita activa* "is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*" (1998, 17), and she imposes that assumption on Pericles.

The Pericles whom Thucydides presents, however, does not maintain that strict division between action and thought. Indeed, he is the only character in Thucydides to use the term "philosophy" (II.40.1). And my intention throughout has been to show that one cannot understand Pericles' statesmanship without seeing that his concern with political virtue is bound up with a concern for contemplative virtue. That is, if what is most praiseworthy is noble action undertaken in full consciousness of one's actions, as Pericles suggests, then precisely those who are most serious about deserving praise must begin to consider what full consciousness or self-knowledge requires.

Part of that full consciousness, for instance, would have to include the knowledge of one's own motivations. And as the dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians reveals, the Athenians take this concern seriously. For, as the Melians show, people tend to risk their manifest self-interest with the pious hopes that they will thereby secure their self-interest by other means—that they will be rewarded by superintending gods who are concerned with justice. The Athenians reject this view of the gods for the very reason that gods who care about justice would find no morally significant distinction between the frank self-interest of the Athenians and the "pious" or convoluted self-interest of the

Melians. According to the Athenian understanding, the human priority of self-interest (broadly understood) precludes the possibility of divine intervention in the sense of either reward or punishment. For Pericles, the clarity of thought he encourages includes facing up to this insight and seeing the world in terms of natural necessity and ignorant chance. Only then can one aspire to his stability of judgment, since that stability is based on the reasoned conviction that there are no intelligible exceptions to the natural course of things. But, to repeat, this insight comes from an abiding seriousness about what truly deserves to be rewarded or praised.

If it is the case that Pericles' exhortation to the Athenians to aspire to *deserve* praise is of a piece with his statement that to be truly praiseworthy is to face risks with eyes wide open (I.140.1 with II.40.3), then the thrust of Pericles' statesmanship would point in a different direction than the one Arendt's understanding suggests. Arendt's singular focus on glory leads her to praise what is novel indiscriminately. Her understanding of action, in the words of one commentator, "can no longer find measure in fixed and determinate goals; politics, dominated by the thirst for recognition or glory, becomes an end in itself, unguided and unrestrained by any fixed purpose" (Pangle 1990, 50). Pericles' statesmanship, on the other hand, is animated by a problem that points in the direction of cultivating one's capacity to see the world as it truly is, which includes considering what actions are really choiceworthy and praiseworthy, if only because one can take full responsibility for one's actions and deserve praise only after confronting such questions. That thoughtfulness about action leads Pericles to be less reckless than a statesman of the Arendtian stamp would be, and it leads him to praise a form of citizenship that should be characterized more by prudence than by boldness. Whatever

excesses and difficulties the Athenians' confused or inconsistent "realism" led them to, it is the genuine concern with seeing the world as it truly is that is lost in Arendt's reading of Pericles' vision for Athens. Indeed, if we wish, with Arendt, to "think what we are doing," we would be best served by returning directly to Thucydides in order to recover the problem that animated Pericles' thought.

**Appendix:**  
**On “The Needful” (τὰ δέοντα)**

Because it was difficult to recall or recover precisely what was said during the war, Thucydides famously states in his remarks on method that his practice was to put into each speaker’s mouth the words that were τὰ δέοντα—needful or appropriate—in the given circumstances, according to his own judgment and sticking as closely as possible to the overall intention of what was said (I.22.1). It is mainly in light of this claim that Thucydides’ ambiguous use of τὰ δέοντα has attracted scholarly attention. And it is indeed not immediately clear what Thucydides means by the phrase. As Colin MacLeod remarks, “τὰ δέοντα is a notion as complex as rhetoric itself is complex” (1983, 52).

Of course, MacLeod’s point is not that τὰ δέοντα is a difficult phrase to parse but that determining what the *rhetorical* situation demands—what words are needful or appropriate—is a complex and difficult task. That is, MacLeod is suggesting that τὰ δέοντα is a semi-technical term referring to rhetorical necessity, and as such “it corresponds to what Aristotle in talking of drama calls τὰ ἐνόντα καὶ τὰ ἀρμόττοντα [what is possible and suitable]” (*ibid.*). According to Aristotle, it belongs to the political person and the rhetorician to be able to say things that are plausible and appropriate in a given situation (*Poetics* 1450b4-6). Following this line of thought, many scholars conclude that τὰ δέοντα refers to forms of speech or methods of argumentation that would have been expected under the circumstances, “the right strategy in each case according to current rhetorical theory” (Woodruff 1993, xxii). Pericles, for example, employs many standard tropes in his Funeral Oration, and by employing the tropes of that

genre, Thucydides constructs a speech that appears appropriate to that context (Loraux 1986, 236-9). Indeed, as is frequently noted, all of the debates and speeches in the history reflect Thucydides' deep knowledge of formal rhetoric. Thucydides, then, is claiming in I.22 to have employed "the best arguments that could be found to support the ξύμπασα γνώμη [overall intention] of the speaker" (Marchant 1912, 169). And while this approach can be taken too far,<sup>78</sup> most scholars agree that Thucydides' substitution of τὰ δέοντα for the actual words of speakers refers to his practice of saying what was "as apt and effective in its situation as possible" (Macleod 1983, 52; cf. Winnington-Ingram 1965, 70).

But as Darien Shanske points out, Macleod is "too dogmatic in limiting the sense of *ta deonta*" to rhetorical necessity (Shanske 2006, 158). Though Macleod himself notes that τὰ δέοντα "partly ... refers to the content of a speech which gives the 'necessary' advice in any given circumstance," he all but ignores the specific content of the speeches and focuses only on their generic forms. Surely that is because in I.22 Thucydides is speaking about his historiological method with respect to the *speeches*, in explicit

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<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Shanske's critique of Ostwald, who attempts to argue that we can have confidence that Thucydides' speeches accurately recreate what was *actually* said because he knew what was "demanded" by "factors objectively inherent" in the situation (Shanske 2006, 157). Gomme criticizes those who argue that Thucydides employs the "'ideal argument,'" since this would often conflict with Thucydides' self-professed commitment to sticking as closely as possible to what was actually said (Gomme 1950, 140).



contrast to his method with respect to the *deeds* of the war. He does not, that is, admit to recounting deeds in his history that were not known to have happened based on what actors *should* have done in a given situation, as he does with speeches, and so we must conclude that what was *actually* done curtails Thucydides' freedom to tailor the advice of a recreated speech to what he judged was needful in the given situation. Perhaps Macleod judged, with Gomme, that the content of the speeches was more or less set, and that Thucydides provided only "the *words*, the style, that is the *literary* quality (as opposed to the historical content)" (Gomme 1950, 141).

But if we adhere too rigorously to this interpretation then we overlook two important facts. First, the limitation of actual deeds on Thucydides' freedom to reconstruct speeches is less restrictive than first appears. Actions are ambiguous and admit of alternative, sometimes contradictory, explanations. Consequently, it matters a great deal what debates preceded Athens' last minute decision to spare many of the Mytilenians, for instance, or what arguments justified their decision to destroy Melos. By reconstructing the relevant speeches, Thucydides is in effect interpreting the deeds. And that interpretation dramatically changes our understanding of the facts themselves, insofar as we distinguish between, say, intentional and accidental conquests.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, what Thucydides' speeches reveal about the speakers is not so much that they were fluent in the latest rhetorical trends as that they grasped both what to *do* and how to persuade their audience to *do it*.

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<sup>79</sup> For the most dramatic example of this in Thucydides' text, consider the debate over Demosthenes' success at Pylos—was his success due to planning or fortune?

Second, by claiming to know τὰ δέοντα, Thucydides is not just explaining his method. He is placing himself in the ranks of Pericles and Themistocles. For among the words that Thucydides writes into the speeches of his characters are these, spoken by Pericles: “I believe that I know no less than anyone<sup>80</sup> both what is needful [τὰ δέοντα] and how to explain these things” (II.60.5). And in his praise of Themistocles, Thucydides writes that Themistocles was by nature “most able to extemporize whatever was needful [τὰ δέοντα]” (I.138.3). In both cases τὰ δέοντα refers the rhetorical capabilities of these statesmen *and* to their extraordinary practical judgment and foresight. Knowing τὰ δέοντα, then, refers not only to knowledge of rhetorical necessity, but also to knowledge of practical necessity, or prudence. Consequently, MacLeod’s remark that τὰ δέοντα is “as complex as rhetoric itself is complex” should be emended to read, “τὰ δέοντα is a notion as complex as effective speech *and action* are complex.” Indeed, Thucydides surely admires the Athenian capacity to say what is needful (τὰ δέοντα...εἰπεῖν: I.22.1). But the Athenians were also known, Thucydides points out, for their capacity to *do* what is needful (τὰ δέοντα πράττειν: I.70.8). Hence, when Thucydides praises Pericles for being most capable in both speech and action, he means that Pericles is most able to “say as well as do τὰ δέοντα” (Winnington-Ingram 1965, 70).

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<sup>80</sup> Litotes: “no less than anyone” is the equivalent of “more than anyone” (Rusten 1989, 199).

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