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Language, truth and power in ancient Greek thought : prolegomena to Nietzsche.

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LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND POWER IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT:
PROLEGOMENA TO NIETZSCHE

A Dissertation Presented

by

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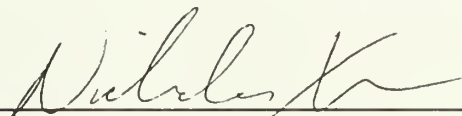LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND POWER IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT:
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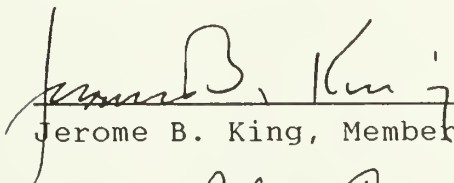

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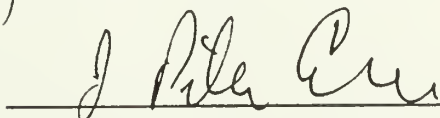
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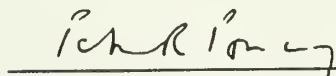
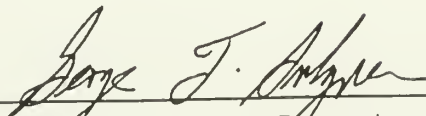_____
Nicholas Xenos, Chair

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For Dennis, *my* Patroclus.

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chart my own course through difficult waters without taking over the helm.

I want to single out Peter Pouncey for special, heartfelt thanks among my committee members. His own work, and his generous reception of mine, rekindled for me an intellectual fire that might otherwise have become extinguished through neglect.

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Lastly, but above all others, my heartfelt appreciation for Dennis goes beyond words. He has at all times been all things to me: father, mother, brother, son, and lover. He watched me set sail and waits for my return. Somehow he remains my friend.

ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND POWER IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT:
PROLEGOMENA TO NIETZSCHE

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The meaning of democracy was contested theoretical and
political terrain in classical Athens. In this dissertation
I examine three contending theoretical views of democracy
found in the works of three Greek thinkers--Thucydides,
Aeschylus and Plato--present at the height of Athenian
democracy. I show that each view draws upon competing
conceptions of nature, language, truth, and power in order
to claim the contested terrain.

I argue that the heroic view of democracy, portrayed in
Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, saw politics
as the means by which states achieve immortal glory through
feats of war which simultaneously destroy them. In this
view political power was delivered by the unified voice--the
single identity--of the Athenian assembly produced by the
power of persuasion.

I interpret the tragic view, represented by Aeschylus'
Oresteia, to criticize the heroic tradition of politics as
dangerously unbalanced. The *Oresteia* offers an alternative

view of democracy in which multiple voices divided against themselves produce not weakness but balance as a shield against the loss of limits implied in the heroic view. I argue that the ambiguity of language, and the ambiguous identity it produces, is affirmed by tragedy to be a source of political strength and not a sign of political disintegration.

The Platonic view articulated in the *Republic* opposes both the heroic view of politics and its tragic revision. I contend that the *Republic*, while appearing to oppose democracy, actually seeks to place it on a more secure foundation grounded in the logical concept of identity and rational thought applied to the soul. I argue that the Platonic attempt to found political order on the twin concepts of logical and psychological identity maintained by rational thought and language actually recapitulates on a grand scale the same dangers it identifies in its heroic opponents. And I suggest in conclusion that our Platonic legacy may effectively blind us to the dangerously heroic trajectory of the modern political state.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The collective nature of political power is expressed in various terms such as "assent," "consent," or "obedience." "Action in concert"[1] is the phrase chosen by Hannah Arendt to express the same concept and to distinguish between the nature of political power on one hand, and force or violence on the other. As Arendt well recognized, however, action in concert poses a problem of limits. If politics is by its very nature a marshalling or pooling of individual power, on what basis or by what means is the requisite assent, consent, or obedience obtained and what are its limits? How, in other words, are we to distinguish between cooperation and complicity?

The experience which shaped Arendt's political theorizing was of course the degree of cooperation, active or passive, which contributed to the power of Nazi Germany. Arendt's entire work is devoted to the need to distinguish between this kind of political power and more "legitimate" instances. In this respect Arendt's work is representative of much of Western political thought, and it follows a venerable tradition which seeks to found that distinction upon a notion of truth.

In her essay, "Truth and Politics," Arendt poses the rhetorical question of whether political power "could or

should be checked not only by a constitution, a bill of rights, and by a multiplicity of powers, as in the system of checks and balances, . . . [but also] by something that . . . has its source outside the political realm, and is as independent of the wishes and desires of the citizens as is the will of the worst tyrant."[2] To Arendt, the answer is clearly "yes," and in her essay she goes on to argue for a version of "factual truth" to fill that authoritative position. It is beside the present point if Arendt's effort ultimately fails to establish factual truth as the unimpeachable authority needed to ground or legitimize political action. For in that essay and in her larger work Arendt conveys the conceptual architecture behind a significant tradition of Western political thought. Arendt's lifelong search for a truth to occupy the position defined by the intersection of power, authority, and freedom represents a tradition which seeks to admit the necessity of power in political action while simultaneously seeking a basis to limit that power once admitted.

The figure which haunts the shadows of all such efforts is Friedrich Nietzsche. If Nietzsche's work can be said to culminate in an affirmation of will to power, the persistent target of this affirmation is the concept of truth in its various historical articulations beginning with Plato.

Traditional approaches to Nietzsche tend to read his work as endorsing, even celebrating, the priority of power over and against truth.[3] The implicit assumption within the

traditional critique is that truth and power stand in primary opposition to each other and, more specifically, that truth operates as a limit to power. On this traditional view, then, Nietzsche's attack on truth is an attack upon limits to power. But contrary to the traditional view, Nietzsche's work can also be read as a critique of a loss of limits to power which is definitive of modernity. Far from endorsing the abolition of limits, then, Nietzsche instead may actually sound a warning that the limits have already been abolished, and that the executioner was Plato.

From Nietzsche's perspective the highest ideals of modernity have always been some version of the Platonic ideal of subjecting power to a higher standard or even banishing it from the world altogether. In Nietzsche's lexicon, philosophic truth, religious truth, or scientific truth are all, despite the deep oppositions which divide them, merely different forms of the Platonist ideal of erecting a final authority over power, an authority in the form of an ideal standard which could both authorize and limit power but which would itself require neither authorization nor limit. From Nietzsche's perspective, however, the "highest ideals" in the Platonic sense actually operate as insidious forms of power, insidious in that they deny or conceal themselves as power, and so operate as to evade resistance, opposition, or limitation.

It is fundamental to Nietzsche's position, as I understand it, that unless power is openly acknowledged and accepted as a primary component of human life, human relations will be governed by a rancorous resentment which destroys the possibility of human friendship and mutual respect. Ironically then, from Nietzsche's perspective, the attempt to banish the element of power from human relations in favor of "higher" and finer sentiments can lead only to an unhealthy, subterranean pursuit of power whose insatiability consumes all other human possibilities including those "higher values" in whose name power is condemned. It is this self-denial of power which, in Nietzsche's view, renders the figure "man" such a sick and dangerous animal, sick because he does not recognize his servitude to invisible power, and dangerous because he seeks to extend it over all of life.

The Nietzschean position can be summed up briefly in the claim that Platonic truth institutes a modern regime of unlimited power. Adequate assessment of the charge requires a re-examination of Platonic truth with respect to the problem of power and its limits. But any such re-examination must avoid slipping surreptitiously into a mere Platonic rejoinder to Nietzsche. It is much too easy in attempting to assess Nietzschean claims to uncritically and unreflectively re-impose Platonic standards of truth and to discover, not surprisingly, that Nietzsche does not conform

to them.   This then opens an easy door to dismissing Nietzsche on various epistemological grounds.

To insist that Nietzsche be held accountable to Platonic standards of truth is not to refute Nietzsche, it is to refuse to take him seriously, and to take Nietzsche seriously is first of all to entertain the possibility of other configurations of truth opposed to the Platonic one. Only then can the more difficult task be undertaken, which is to assess the Nietzschean claim that Platonic truth poses a special danger with respect to power.

Nietzsche's assault on Platonic truth is launched from behind, so to speak, from the vantage point of earlier modes of Greek thought. I follow a similar strategy in examining the situation of Platonic truth with respect to the possible limits of power by rejoining Platonic truth to its original opponents in the form of tragic and heroic literature. The initial objective is merely to try to make plausible the claim that other configurations of truth form a part of the same tradition which produces Plato, and to suggest critical ways in which those earlier configurations differ from the Platonic one. The credibility of the Nietzschean accusation against Plato can then be better assessed.

Three traditional Greek cosmological orientations to the problem of power and its limits can be identified: the heroic, the tragic, and the Platonic. These configurations formed three separate strands of a single tradition which is largely definitive of ancient Greek political culture. But

as separate strands of a single tradition, each orientation nevertheless locates itself in opposition to one or both of the others.

The heroic tradition, usually associated with the Homeric poems, yields a relatively coherent conception of a natural cosmological order and man's place within it.[4] The two most prominent features of the heroic cosmos are power and death, that is, human mortality. In the heroic view, the cosmos is an arena of strife, an *agon* of forces and powers in conflict.[5] Within this conception the relation of truth and power can perhaps best be described as the truth of power. Cosmic power was not something which Homeric heroes took up and possessed; it was rather something which mortals passed through, something which took them up and touched them in some fashion or another. To an early Greek, for example, the regularity of the seasons and the alternation of night and day would not have signified neutral events obeying mechanical-type laws. They would be interpreted as signs of victory and defeat in the regular ebb and flow of struggles for power among gods and other active forces. Interpretation of the cosmos as a series of interminable struggles for power need not imply that the early Greeks did not notice the regularity of natural cycles. It means only that the regularity was interpreted and understood in terms of a contest or competition for dominance.

Next to power, the most palpable presence in the Homeric world is death. Significantly, death is the single most prominent difference between men and gods in the Homeric world.[6] Men die and the gods are immortal. The ancient Greek gods were more powerful than mortals but they were not omnipotent; they were fallible and could occasionally be outwitted, seduced, and even wounded by mortals. The gods were decidedly not more "moral" than mortals in a modern sense. For a Greek to rely on the morality of the gods could prove ruinous. What mortals could rely on from the gods was their competition and desire for honor, or deference, and in this they differed not at all from men.[7]

War was a normal occurrence in the Homeric world, and it was somewhat paradoxically through the medium of war that heroic man sought to overcome death through the achievement of honor and glory. Although death served as an absolute limit to individual power and presence in the immediate world, immortality of a sort could in principle be achieved in mortal memory, which is to say in the language of legend and song.[8] The epic language of the *Iliad*, for example, does not merely recount the exploits and the valor of heroes; it commemorates those heroes in a monumental language. The language of the *Iliad* is itself a monument to greatness which in its timeless retelling confers a semblance of immortality upon the greatest of heroes. The choice faced by Achilles in the *Iliad*, for example, was not

whether to live or die, but rather how to die: early, in combat for the greatest glory told forever in song; or later, unremembered and unsung.[9] Achilles chooses the heroic death, and his greatness is remembered in part because of the greatness of his opponent, Hector. In many respects the contest between Achilles and Hector exemplifies the heroic conception of power, which contains within itself the notion of opposition. Where today we might see two powers in conflict, the Homeric Greek would see conflict as the very substance and expression of the singularity of power. Conflict and the presence of opposition is a characteristic of power in the Greek conception.

Although the heroic cosmos is an *agon* of forces competing for dominance, the cosmos is not a chaos of power. Limits operate through the agency of *dike*. *Dike*, usually translated as "justice," is one of many Greek terms which revolve around a conception of natural order in the cosmos. *Moira*, fate, and *physis*, nature, are others. The term *kosmos* itself is opposed to chaos and implies order. For present purposes it suffices to think of *dike* as the regulatory principle of order in the cosmos, "the order of things," while remembering that the cosmos itself is an order of power. *Dike* is not yet a moral notion in the Homeric cosmos.[10]

Like any set of limits, *dike* both restrains and gives form to that which it limits. It is often useful, for example, to distinguish between the river and its banks, but

we need not lose sight of the fact that without banks there
is no river. Similarly, although it may be analytically
useful, even necessary, to distinguish between power and the
dike which limits it, it would nevertheless be thoroughly
misleading to think of *dike* as having a separate identity
from the power which it limits. Power and opposition are
one, not two, in the heroic cosmos. This is perhaps the
simplest, yet most difficult "truth" for moderns to
comprehend. Its simplicity lies in its restrained,
geometric balance. Its difficulty lies in its challenge to
our deepest convictions about the nature of identity. To a
modern mind, identity *means* non-contradiction, but the
marriage of opposites which seems to characterize early
Greek thought seems to deny what for us is an intuitively
logical and necessary truth. As I will argue later,
however, this "intuition" of ours is an inheritance from
Plato. It was neither intuitive nor necessary to much of
pre-Socratic thought.

The distinguishing feature of the heroic cosmos is the
characteristic relationship between power and *dike*. In the
heroic cosmos, power conforms to a cyclical nature, *physis*,
resembling an upright wheel. The movement of celestial
objects, rising from the horizon to an *akme*, or zenith, and
then declining below the horizon again, supplies a model for
the natural rotation, or *physis*, of power. The natural
cycle of life, from weakness at birth through strength at
maturity, followed by decline and death, is also seen to

follow this cyclical trajectory. To the mind of an early Greek, this paradigmatic movement represents a fundamental truth of the cosmos; and the *physis* of power--which grows from weakness to strength, possibly ascending to greatness before entering its inevitable decline--offers no exception. Given the agonistic conception of the cosmos which dominates early Greek thought, any account of this cyclical movement at the heart of the cosmos must be offered in terms of power. If day is followed by night and Spring follows Winter, for example, it is because Day becomes weak and is defeated by Night, and Spring achieves victory over Winter. Each achieves dominance in turn, only to face eventual defeat by its proper opponent. Power is seen to be self-limiting in this cosmology because it tends to naturally increase (*hubris*) until it destroys itself, and it destroys itself because it naturally generates its own opposition which then passes through a similar cycle. A natural tendency toward *hubris*[11] is followed by *dike*, not as two separate, oscillating powers, but as the *physis* of power itself.

Homeric man is compelled by the world he lives in to pursue honor and avoid dishonor. Either course necessitates an alignment with power. Neutrality, in the sense of a position outside alignments of power, is not an available option in the heroic world. Like most early Greek values, the Greek idea of freedom is intimately related to the centrality of power in the Greek experience. In the heroic

world "power" is almost synonymous with rule over others. Thus only two real possibilities present themselves to the early Greeks: rule or be ruled. In its heroic manifestation "freedom" means freedom from rule by others. Consequently dominance and freedom come to mean much the same thing.[12] Equality of power was not yet a principle to be maintained, but only a precarious condition resulting from an indecisive competition for power and honor.

The all-consuming pursuit of honor seeks to overcome the limit of mortality, but because power rises and falls with the turning of the cosmos, those to whom *dike* once grants the greatest honor and glory may also be those to whom she delivers the greatest suffering and undoing. The greater the rise, the greater the fall. Although the inexorable action of *dike* would seem to mitigate against the pursuit of greatness, it could also fuel the desire to die in a heroic blaze of glory. In such a way a mortal might cheat fate, live forever in memory, and earn a semblance of honor customarily reserved only for the immortal gods.

Although the heroic view is most often, and appropriately, associated with the epic poetry of Homer, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which bears many affinities to Homer's *Iliad*,[13] is particularly well-situated to illustrate the theoretical utility of the heroic orientation to power and its limits. By the time Thucydides writes his *History*, perhaps four centuries after the *Iliad* was written down, the view of nature which silently shaped

the earlier text is no longer uncontested. Time, events, and other texts have intervened to provide space for competing views to clash. The distance from Homer to Thucydides, however, far from dimming the heroic view, sharpens it in some respects and renders it more available to Thucydides as a theoretical account of the war he describes between Athens and Sparta.

The Peloponnesian war, which ended in Athenian defeat, lasted for twenty-seven years from 431 B.C. to 404 B.C. The end of the war marked the end of a remarkable trajectory of Athenian power following the combined Greek victory over Persian naval forces at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.[14] At Salamis the Persians were defeated by a confederation of Greek forces including among the strongest both Athens and Sparta. It was the Persian threat which initially served to unite, at least loosely and temporarily, what had been fiercely competitive and relatively autonomous Greek states. Although the Greek confederation was at least in principle an alliance between equals, Athenian daring and leadership was conceded by others and claimed by Athens to have contributed disproportionately to the victory. During the war with Persia, Athens had boldly overthrown its traditions to become a naval power. Following the audacious Greek victory at Salamis, Athens continued to develop its navy and emerged as the dominant power in greater Greece.[15]

Twenty-eight years before Salamis, Athens had become a democracy under the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 B.C., and

Athenians were fond of crediting their greatness to their form of government. If we accept this self-assessment, and designate 508 B.C. as the infancy of Athenian greatness, then the period which encompasses the institution of Athenian democracy to the death of Socrates just over a century later, in 399 B.C., represents a period of extraordinary accomplishment amid intense intellectual strife. This was the period of "Greek enlightenment" when traditional understandings of the fundamental bases of law, justice, and political rule, for example, came under intense scrutiny and debate. It was also during this period that the production and performance of Greek tragedy reached its height before passing into history shortly after the end of the Peloponnesian War.

The lifespan of Greek tragic drama closely paralleled the steep trajectory of Athenian power and greatness. It emerged along with Greek democracy and did not long outlive it. A signal characteristic of Greek tragedy is the dramatic presentation of contested meanings within the folds of action. But the "tensions and ambiguities in Greek tragedy"[16] do more than to dramatically reproduce and reflect the social strains of shifting meanings within a changing world.[17] Greek tragedy occupies a definite political position and embraces an affirmative political theory at odds with the heroic orientation shaping Thucydides' text.

Thucydides' *History* and Greek tragic drama can be juxtaposed to portray contending theoretical orientations to the nature of power and its limits. In part the debate revolves around the nature of language itself and its role in political life, and this contest may account in part for the prominent place of the famous speeches in Thucydides' text. The theoretical confrontation which emerges from a juxtaposition of Thucydides' *History* and Greek tragic drama serves to illuminate both the heroic and tragic orientations to the limits of power. The confrontation also helps to situate, both historically and intellectually, the Socratic/Platonic philosophic reaction to both the poetic tradition and the political dislocations engendered by the war. As it happens then, Thucydides' text presents a convenient aperture through which we might view, directly or indirectly, all three strands of the tradition I want to explore: the heroic, the tragic, and the Platonic.

Notes

[1] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969).

[2] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," chapt. 7 in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 240.

[3] In addition to Arendt, see also William T. Bluhm, *Theories of the Political System*, 2d ed., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), 521-545; Stanley Rosen, "Nietzsche's Revolution," chapt. 10 in *The Ancients and the Moderns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 189-208; Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 760-73; George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1959), 867-69; Joseph P. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 114-25; and Mark Warren, "Nietzsche and Political Philosophy," *Political Theory* 13 (May 1985): 183-212, for illumination of this point.

[4] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, 2d ed., trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 429, n.34. In addition to Jaeger, useful commentary on heroic culture can also be found in, among others, M. I. Finley, *World of Odysseus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977); Alvin Gouldner, *Enter Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1965); Jean-Paul Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1980), esp. chapt 2: "City-State Warfare;" and Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and The Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1958).

[5] Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, 103.

[6] Cedric H. Whitman, *The Heroic Paradox* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 22.

[7] A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 62-63; also E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 29.

[8] See Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 155, on the goal of reputation after death.

[9] See Homer, *Iliad*, 9.410-416.

[10] The facile translation of *dike* by "justice" tends to obscure the essentially unsettled and contestable meaning of the term throughout Greek history as well as today. Indeed the elusive and ambiguous meaning of *dike* is the subject of a substantial body of Greek literature, both philosophic and dramatic. In early Greece, the meaning of *dike* was closely related to *moira*, usually translated as "fate." Liddell, Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, supplies "the way," "normal course of nature," "order," "right," and "what is fit" as some early meanings of *dike*. Definitions of *moira* include "lot," "portion," "share," "one's portion in life," "destiny," "measure," "one's fate," "luck," and "that which is meet and right." Apparently *moira* is the hand one is dealt, and *dike* is the dealer, as in "death is the fate of all men." This does not of course yet illuminate the principle of order which governs *dike* or which *dike* expresses.

[11] Like *dike*, *hubris* is also not yet a moral term.

[12] Cf. Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Persian Empire and Greek Freedom" in *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 149, on the parallel imperatives of the Athenian position after the Persian War.

[13] In addition to the more obvious thematic similarities, see Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, and W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides*, on the subject of "ring composition," the organization of textual themes into concentric circles, which is common to the underlying structure of both texts.

[14] See J. Peter Euben, "The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 14 (August 1986): 359-90.

[15] Momigliano, "The Persian Empire and Greek Freedom" in *The Idea of Freedom*, 149. See also Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.93.

[16] The phrase is from Jean-Paul Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

[17] Cf. Charles Segal, "Greek Tragedy and Society: A Structuralist Perspective," in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. J. Peter Euben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

CHAPTER 2

THUCYDIDES AND THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

Thucydides and Homer

In Thucydides' *History* the heroic cycle of power is
traced by the dramatic rise and fall of Athenian power in
the context of the Peloponnesian War, where the war is
representative of the cosmic *agon*, and the combatants are
city-states rather than heroic individuals. The *History*
begins with an account of the antecedents of Athenian power
in "early times" and culminates in the political dis-
integration of Athens following the disastrous Sicilian
Expedition, in which the Athenians

> were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they
> suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying
> is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army--
> everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned
> home.[1]

Between its emergence and its demise, Athenian imperial
power surpassed all previous bounds among Greeks, and
appeared to deny any future limits. The magnitude of the
Athenian defeat in Sicily provides a dramatic counterpoint
to the Battle of Salamis in the Persian War in which the
invading Persian fleet was destroyed by smaller Greek forces
and Athenian ingenuity. Although Thucydides does not make
the comparison explicit, the ironic reversal could hardly
fail to be noted by any contemporary Greek reader, and the

contrast follows a basic structural principle of Thucydides' text.

In his introduction to the Crawley translation of Thucydides *History*, T. E. Wick describes Thucydides' style as "antithetical," that is, "characterized by sentences in which words, clauses, and ideas are coordinated to give balance, parallelism, and comparison and contrast."[2] As Wick also observes, the antithetical designation can readily be applied not only to Thucydides' own narrative sentence structure and that of the reconstructed speeches of various parties to the war, it can be applied as well to the organization and arrangement of the whole work. Initially, the text appears to be a running account of the events of the war as they occurred, and Thucydides' method of chronicling the war according to consecutive summers and winters contributes to the initial impression. The geometry of the text soon emerges, however. The speeches, often presented in balanced pairs, are frequently echoed and rejoined in complex juxtapositions later in the text. Beyond the speeches, the text abounds with contrasts and comparisons, oppositions and reversals. Sea-power is contrasted with land-power, Athenian character is contrasted with Spartan character, and oligarchy is contrasted to democracy. Justice is pitted against both force and expediency. A description of Athens afflicted by plague is paralleled by a description of Corcyra afflicted by civil war. These contrasting images are then reversed, turned

inside out, and paradoxically rejoined with yet other oppositions within the text moving in similar orbits. The structure is not merely antithetical; it is thoroughly agonistic. Even Thucydides' apparently natural method of recounting events chronologically by summers and winters can be seen to conform to the principle of paired oppositions which governs the structure of the text.

Hunter R. Rawlings III, in *The Structure of Thucydides' History*, further claims that "Thucydides wrote the history of a great war that was itself composed of two wars of almost identical length."[3] According to Rawlings, Thucydides' original insight that the Peloponnesian War was a single war of twenty-seven years' duration[4] is further complicated by Thucydides' belief, reflected in the structure of the text, that the war was "not only twenty-seven years long, but it consisted of two periods of intense, continuous fighting each lasting ten years. It was the equivalent of two epic wars."[5] Rawlings then argues meticulously that the speeches and events of the "two wars" present mirror opposites to each other.[6]

That Thucydides' text is carefully structured, and structured antithetically, has been extensively noted by other scholars.[7] Considerably less attention has been given to the significance of that structure. Rawlings contends that the structure is intended to demonstrate and verify the truth of Thucydides' assertion that the past will resemble the future,[8] not as repetition but as ironic contradiction.[9]

Francis Cornford, in his *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, is among those drawn to the tempting conclusion that Thucydides' text is not history at all in the modern sense but rather a form of tragic drama.[10]

Reacting to the "ambivalences" and oppositions within the text, James Boyd White claims in *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, that "irresolution on matters of greatest importance is a structural characteristic of the text as a whole."[11] White's intention is not to fault Thucydides' ability or style, even though he finds that "the events of the *History* are . . . constructed in incompatible ways as well as subjected to incompatible modes of explanation." Indeed he emphasizes that "the opposition is deliberate . . . [and] gives the text its central life and meaning."[12] White's interpretation is both sophisticated and generous. He argues that Thucydides has created a text which "mirrors the world" itself, one in which "the modes of presentation and understanding Thucydides employs are the ways in which we still try to make sense of our own world."[13] He maintains further that Thucydides goes "beyond the conditions of his own life as he represents them and raises a hope that things could somewhere, sometime be different" from a world which falls apart.[14]

White's invocation of a world shared at some level by both Thucydides and the modern reader fails to consider that Thucydides' world may be even more alien to us than White allows. White's insistent characterization of the

paradoxical oppositions which structure Thucydides' text as a "lack of resolution" prevents him from entertaining the possibility of a world in which the longing for resolution is not an operative or predominant standard. White's text is one of the more prominent attempts to interpret Thucydides' text as anti-war. But the alternative possibility, that the text is a glorification of war in the Homeric tradition, has at least an equal claim to viability. Rather than rejecting the world of war, the text may seek to defend and immortalize it just as Homer immortalized the Trojan War in the *Iliad*.

White would consider the criticism to be misguided since he interprets Homer's *Iliad* to be anti-war as well.[15] Commenting on the oppositions which permeate the heroic culture, and which are represented in the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, White finds it "remarkable that the culture provides the intellectual and rhetorical material by which an opposition such as this can be defined . . . but apparently no material by which it can be authoritatively addressed and *resolved*. . . . The central issue is always this: Who shall dominate, and who shall submit." [Emphasis added].[16] The agonistic order of the heroic cosmos is recaptured in part in the antagonism between Achilles and Agamemnon, and White confronts this world with wonderment. His governing standard of "resolution"--resolution of ambiguity and conflict--prevents him from seeing the culture he observes as whole and coherent in its own way. From the

perspective of "resolution," the culture must be viewed as deficient, incomplete, and inadequate.

White notes that, although Homer necessarily works within "a language that seems to have been made for the celebration of the heroic culture he criticizes,"[17] the structure of the poem manages to order materials into a "pattern of experience that teaches the reader something different from anything the material itself seems to say."[18] According to White, the critical space opened up by the structure of the poem "operates as an appeal to normalcy, to a world without war, where night is safe and beautiful."[19] The status of this "normalcy" is in question, however. White makes no claim that war itself was anything but normal in Greek culture from Homer to Thucydides.[20] It would appear, then, that the normalcy of a world without war alludes to the "impossible hope" repeatedly invoked by White and attributed to both Homer and Thucydides.[21] This longing for reconciliation and resolution, which finds no actual expression in the language of either Homer or Thucydides, and which exists, according to White, only in the unspoken community of author and reader,[22] apparently finds its reality in the universal longings of humanity.[23]

There is, then, something resembling a Hegelian dynamic shaping White's interpretations of both Homer and Thucydides. It seems uncharitable to be critical of this beautiful vision or to deny a moment of "truth" to the hope which inspires it. Nevertheless, it bears noting that

White's "impossible hope" may represent an innocence achieved through the privileged elevation of one set of longings over still yet others present in the human breast. Modern thought will puzzle at a suggestion that hope for an end to strife and conflict should not be privileged over contrary longings. But another Greek tradition, found in Greek tragedy, will treat the proposed hierarchy as itself dangerously unbalanced. And Nietzsche will, much later, remind us that such innocence may itself become the unwitting instrument of those "other" longings.

Thucydides' text exists in an ambiguous relationship to Homer. On the one hand Thucydides appears to disparage Homer and "the poets," associating them with exaggeration and romance.[24] On the other hand, Thucydides tends to echo Homer even as he discounts him. The key to this paradox is contained in the Greek tradition of the *agon*, or contest. Thucydides is engaged in a competition with Homer in which he seeks to best Homer at his own game. Like Homer, Thucydides relates the history of a war. More to the point, Thucydides informs us repeatedly that his war, the Peloponnesian War, is the greatest war in history.[25] This would certainly have been a bold claim by contemporary Greek standards. The Trojan war occupied the central position in Greek history, and all wars in Greece tended to be measured against the Trojan War.[26] Thucydides, however, provides numerous grounds for the claim that his war is greater than Homer's war. The Trojan War lasted for ten years by Homer's

account, but the Peloponnesian War lasted for twenty-seven
years. Furthermore, since the Peloponnesian War was a
single war composed of two ten-year wars separated by a
seven-year interval of nominal peace,[27] it was, he could
argue, the equivalent of two epic wars, and more than twice
as great as Homer's war.[28] Thucydides could also claim that
the scale of the fighting involved in the Peloponnesian War
was far greater than that of the Trojan War. For contrary
to the Peloponnesian War, he tells us, the Trojan War never
employed the whole concentrated force of the victors.

> On the contrary, they seem to have turned to cultivation
> . . . and to piracy from want of supplies. This is what
> really enabled the Trojans to keep the field for ten
> years against them. . . . If they had . . . persevered
> in the war without scattering for piracy and
> agriculture, they would easily have defeated the Trojans
> in the field . . .[and] the capture of Troy would have
> cost them less time and less trouble.[29]

Thucydides similarly dismisses the Persian War as an
engagement which "found a speedy decision in two actions by
sea and two by land," in contrast to the Peloponnesian War
which was "prolonged to an immense length," and caused an
unprecedented scale of desolation, suffering, and
bloodshed.[30] Lastly, Thucydides can, and does, claim
superiority to both Homer and Herodotus in terms of
accuracy, thereby elevating himself by implication to the
unrivaled status of the greatest historian of all time,
suitably fit to be the chronicler of the greatest war in

history.[31] As a parting blow to Homer, Thucydides notes as additional signs of greatness the unparalleled number and extent of earthquakes, eclipses, droughts, famines, and plague associated with the Peloponnesian War.[32]

Even as Thucydides discounts Homer on one level, he is simultaneously engaged on another level in demonstrating a Homeric truth exemplified in the Peloponnesian War on a greater scale than ever before: power follows its own laws, and power uses men, not the reverse. On one level, Thucydides might be read as the first modern historian, chronicling a war in an almost scientifically detached manner.[33] On a deeper level, the structural patterns of the *History* suggest that Thucydides may be defending an older, more conservative view of law, nature, and "the order of things" generally, against more modern contentions of his day.

The Truth of Power and Language

There can be little doubt that in his account of the war, Thucydides seeks to convey a great and timeless truth.[34] Thucydides himself informs us that

> The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which

is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.[35]

We may judge from this passage that Thucydides finds revealed in the war a pattern to human events which recurs over time, and it is this pattern which interests him even more than the particular events of the war. The course of the war is treated by Thucydides as metaphorical of a greater truth. The point is reinforced by Thucydides' assertion that his work eschews mere passing entertainment to aim at a possession for all time; that is, it presents, in Thucydides' view, a timeless truth.

Some scholars have focused on the apparent utilitarian value of knowledge claimed by Thucydides in the passage above. According to one view, Thucydides advances an early rationalist view of history incorporating a belief that rational understanding of the past will be useful in altering or controlling future events.[36] Thucydides, however, makes no such claim here or anywhere else in the text. He suggests that history recurs in cyclical patterns, and that a knowledge of those patterns will be useful in interpreting or recognizing the future. There is never any claim that human intelligence can do more than observe the larger patterns of power within which human events are implicated.[37]

The growth of power generally, not merely Athenian power, is the subject of the first twenty-four chapters of Thucydides' *History*, usually referred to as the

"Archaeology." The theme of "greatness" permeates this section of the text. In the opening sentences Thucydides tells us that he undertook to write the history of the Peloponnesian war because he believed it "would be a great war;" indeed it would be "the greatest movement yet known in history;" and further, that there was nothing on such a "great scale, either in war or in other matters" which preceded it.[38] Greatness is contrasted generally to weakness throughout the Archaeology, and it is treated synonymously with a range of activities including the building of large cities, collective action, naval power, and of course, war. The nominal subject of the *History*, then, is the course of a particular war, but the larger subject concerns a recurring pattern of history involving great and powerful deeds: deeds which command renown and are therefore worthy of retelling; and a pattern of power so inscribed in nature as to earn the epithet of "truth."

Addressing the question of the origins, roots, or causes of the war, Thucydides distinguishes between two categories of causes--those which were spoken and those which were unspoken--and he concludes that the true cause, which was "invisible to speech," was the growing power of Athens. This distinction between spoken and unspoken causes parallels Thucydides' division of the text into speeches and narrative. The passage which introduces the subject of the causes of the war deserves close examination since it has long been recognized as one of the most important in the

text. As translated by W. Robert Connor it reads as follows:

> The Athenians and Peloponnesians began the war when they repudiated the Thirty Years Truce which they had made after the capture of Euboea [in 446 B.C.]. I have set down first the causes of complaint and the grievances behind the repudiation so that no one ever has to investigate from what origin such a great war broke out among the Greeks. The truest reason, although the least evident in the discussion, was, in my opinion, that the Athenians by growing great caused fear in the [Spartans] and drove them into war.[39]

Hunter Rawlings III translates the same passage, retaining the Greek terms in critical places, as follows:

> As to why they broke the peace, I wrote first the *aitiai* and the *diaphorai*, so that no one will ever seek the background out of which so great a war arose among the Greeks. But as for the truest *prophasis*, though the least apparent in talk, I believe that the Athenians, becoming powerful and causing fear in the [Spartans], forced them into war.[40]

And lastly, the Crawley translation:

> To the question why they broke the treaty, I answer by placing first an account of their grounds of complaint and points of difference [*aitiai* and *diaphorai*] that no one may ever have to ask the immediate cause which plunged the Hellenes into a war of such magnitude. The real cause [*alethestate prophasis*] I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight [*aphanestate de logoi*]. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in [Sparta], made war inevitable.[41]

Both the Connor and the Rawlings translations make clear that the "true cause" of the war was unspoken, in contrast to the accusations articulated by the parties to the war. The Crawley translation, in rendering *aphanestate de logoi* as "out of sight" rather than "beyond language" or some such equivalent, deflects attention from the Thucydidean distinction between things which appear in language and things which do not. The Crawley translation does have the merit, however, of clearly highlighting the issue of background causes, or why the war broke out.

The controversy which surrounds this passage concerns the perplexing notion of "cause" employed by Thucydides. Frances Cornford argues persuasively that Thucydides had no concept available to him resembling our modern, deterministic sense of cause.[42] He concludes that the word is best avoided, advice which is largely respected by Connor and Rawlings. Sound as it may be, Cornford's analysis does not satisfactorily address the importance of Thucydides' distinction between things which did and did not appear in speech; and it is well for us to recall that precisely what did not appear in speech was the truth.

Cornford's analysis focuses on the fact that the Greek term *prophasis*, which Thucydides employs in some sense of "root cause," can also mean "pretext." Cornford then translates the critical phrase *alethestate prophasis, aphanestate de logoi*, as "the most genuine pretext, though it appeared least in what was said." He concludes that

"Thucydides draws no clear distinction between an *aitiai* and a *prophasis*. No respectable writer who had such a distinction in his thoughts could speak of a 'most genuine *pretext*, which appeared least in what was said'--which in fact was least of all a pretext."[43] Cornford identifies the paradoxical, oxymoronic aspect of the construction and concludes that Thucydides could not mean what he appears to say. But oxymoronic constructions, we know from Greek tragedy, were a hallmark of the Greek language. It is strange that Cornford, who argues forcefully that Thucydides' *History* is actually a tragic drama on the model of Aeschylus, should reject as meaningless a linguistic construction which is itself a characteristic feature of the language of Greek tragedy.

The fact that Thucydides' *History* consists in large part of reconstructed speeches of parties to the war strongly suggests that we should take Thucydides at his word, and treat the puzzling distinction between truths which appeared in speech and those which did not, as deliberate and significant. What does it mean to say that the truth did not appear in language? Does it mean that it was mere happenstance that no one mentioned it? Was there deception involved? Was the truth deliberately omitted from language, suggesting that it could have been spoken but was not? Or was the truth of such a nature that it could not appear in words, and was therefore invisible to language?

James Boyd White adopts the first view when he says that "*prophasis*" simply refers to "what the Spartans would have said had they spoken to the question. In this sense it is distinguished from the causes that *were* spoken. . . ."[44] According to White, Thucydides "spends little time on what he calls its [the war's] 'truest explanation' or deepest cause, for that is easily stated: it is Sparta's fear of Athens' growth. His primary concern is with its 'causes' in a different sense: the grounds or claims that the two sides had against each other," that is, the spoken charges and accusations.[45] But White's treatment of the problem begs the question of why Thucydides would bother to make such a distinction in the first place, and go so far as to structure the text around it. White overlooks the possibility that, far from spending little time on the war's truest explanation, which was hidden from speech, Thucydides actually devotes his entire text to exploring the unspoken cause--power--and its relation to language.

Thucydides' text has been interpreted by others as attempting to convey a universal truth or law of nature.[46] Often, however, these interpretations seize upon Thucydides' allusions to "human nature," and place that notion at the center of analysis. The approach is not without foundation in the text, but, in my opinion, it does not go far enough. Limiting the interpretive focus to the concept of "human nature" rather than "nature" writ large, tends to prejudge the question and overlook the strong possibility that

Thucydides' text resists to some degree the notion of a human nature autonomous from the forces of necessity [*ananke*] operating in the whole of nature itself.[47]

Focusing on the element of compulsion cited by Thucydides in the Athenian growth of power and the Spartan response, Werner Jaeger suggests that Thucydides points in the direction of an overarching law of nature. According to Jaeger, Thucydides considered that "Athenian progress to power was necessary and inevitable," and he saw that "Sparta was *compelled* by fear of Athens to declare war."[48] Jaeger concludes that Thucydides' recurrent references to compulsion, or necessity, indicate that the effort to delineate the causes of the war does not seek to fix responsibility or blame, but looks more toward the immanent laws of power itself. In this context it is significant that Thucydides emphasizes in the Archaeology that both Athens and Sparta were at the height of their power when the war broke out,[49] suggesting that power is bipolar in nature and conforms to a pattern of development ascending from early weakness to a great clash at its peak. The pattern of the Peloponnesian War, exemplifying the cycle of power, then suggests that the peak is followed by decline and disintegration before the pattern repeats itself anew. It has often been remarked that Thucydides, like Homer in his treatment of the Trojans, does not detract from the greatness of the Spartans, even though Thucydides himself is an Athenian. The explanation is found in the

Homeric/Thucydidean view of power as agonistic in its very structure. Power includes the element of opposition which it generates within itself as it grows.

Thucydides' treatment of the true cause of the war suggests a relationship between power, truth, and language such that power and truth belong together in some fashion on one side of an antithetical relation to speech. Three related possibilities present themselves. 1) The truth of power does not appear in language. But then what does appear in language? 2) The truth of power and the truth of language are not the same. This alternative suggests that there is a truth of language which is at odds with the truth of power. 3) The truth of power appears in language but does not appear in words or speech. This third formulation distinguishes between the content of language and its use, and it is this formulation which is most consistent with Thucydides' portrayal of language in the text. Thucydides regularly portrays language used instrumentally, and the reader must carefully distinguish between what is said *in* speech and what is sought *by* speech. This line of reasoning raises perplexing questions, to be sure, but it also provides a useful key to interpreting Thucydides' text. The speeches are included in the text as much for what is unsaid as for what is said, and the reader must therefore be alert to ironic juxtapositions of speeches, actions, and events. Another clue to the function of the speeches in the text lies in Thucydides' methodological statement that while he

has adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of
what was said, it was also his habit to "make the speakers
say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various
occasions."[50] Like other ambiguities and obscurities in
Thucydides, this methodological statement has been the
subject of some debate. Certainly, however, it seems to
admit the possibility that Thucydides' *History* portrays an
active power of Necessity at work in the speeches as well as
the events.

The Speeches and the War

Immediately following his statement of the true but
unspoken cause of the war--the growth of the power of
Athens--Thucydides allows that nevertheless, "it is well to
give the grounds alleged by either side which led to . . .
the breaking out of war."[51] An account of the affair of
Epidamnus follows. By prefacing his account in such a
manner, Thucydides makes clear that the events of the affair
to be described belong to the *aitiai* and *diaphorai*, and not
to the truest *prophasis* of the war. Later, following his
account of the affair of Epidamnus and the numerous debates
and allegations which it inspired, Thucydides provides a
lengthy retrospective account, known as the "penta-
contaetia," of the circumstances under which Athenian power
grew following the Persian War.[52] Although the penta-
contaetia has often been treated as a digression, W. Robert

Connor recognizes it as an elaboration of the truest cause
of the war: the growth of Athenian power.[53]

Epidamnus, a city on what is now the Adriatic coast,
was a colony of Corcyra, one of the wealthiest cities in
Greece and a notable sea-power. Corcyra in turn had been
founded as a colony of the city of Corinth. As a matter of
custom, the original founders of Epidamnus were leading
citizens of Corinth, thus preserving formal affiliation to
the original parent city. Following a period of
debilitating internal strife in which an exiled faction of
nobles allied themselves with non-Greek foreigners to attack
the city, Epidamnus sought the assistance of Corcyra to end
the war. Corcyra, however, refused any aid to its colony.
The Epidamnians then turned for assistance to Corinth after
receiving favorable guidance from the God at Delphi. On
behalf of their appeal to Corinth, the Epidamnians could
cite the customary bonds of affiliation as well as the
divine blessings of Delphi. The Corinthians consented to
protect the Epidamnians, according to Thucydides, because
"they felt it to be a kind of duty. . . . Besides," he adds
succinctly, "they hated the Corcyraeans" for their failure
to properly honor Corinth as their own parent city.[54]
Thucydides inserts a brief description of the relative power
and wealth of Corcyra before concluding that "All these
grievances made Corinth eager to send the promised aid to
Epidamnus."

In the space of a few short sentences Thucydides has managed to quietly introduce the elements of a major confrontation which will be amplified throughout the text. On one hand, there are claims of justice; on the other hand there are subterranean interests of power and advantage. In this instance calculations of justice (duty and friendship) and interest could be made to coincide by Corinth. But Thucydides deftly complicates things by noting a short time later without further comment that "the Epidamnian exiles had come to Corcyra, and pointing to the sepulchres of their ancestors, had appealed to their kindred to restore them."[55] In other words, Thucydides shows us two warring factions of Epidamnians appealing in similar terms of kinship obligations to enemies who are themselves related. Clearly, beneath the surface of this matter-of-factly chronicled event of the war, there are inaudible conflicts already taking place.

Upon learning of Corinthian assistance to Epidamnus, Corcyra besieged her colony, and Corinth then declared war on Corcyra. In the end, both Epidamnus and the Corinthian fleet fell to Corcyra. Following its defeat, Corinth, a Spartan ally, concentrated all of its efforts on building up a powerful naval force against Corcyra. Alarmed by the prospect of Corinthian power, Corcyra, previously unaligned with either the Athenians or the Spartans, sought to enter into alliance with Athens. An assembly was convened at

Athens to decide the question, with both Corcyraean and Corinthian advocates present.

The ensuing debate, generally referred to as the "Corcyraean Debate," contains the first set of formal speeches presented by Thucydides. The Corcyraeans spoke first to the question of why Athens should accept them into alliance. The Corinthians, in a point-by-point rebuttal, sought to convince the Athenians to reject the Corcyraean suit.

The Corcyraean speech is notable for its heavy reliance upon considerations of power and expedience to convince the Athenians to accept them. The Corcyraeans begin by renouncing their past policy of non-alliance as both weak and inexpedient. Next, following a perfunctory claim to being a victim of injustice, Corcyra enumerates the many advantages which will accrue to Athens upon acquiring the most powerful navy in Hellas, second only to Athens' own. Thirdly, Corcyra prompts Athens how to reply to anticipated Corinthian claims to have law and justice on its side. And lastly, Corcyra returns again to rehearse at length the strategic considerations flowing from the size of the Corcyraean navy, and the folly of an Athenian rejection of alliance.

> For your first endeavor should be to prevent, if
> possible, the existence of any naval power except your
> own; failing this, to secure the friendship of the
> strongest that does exist. And if any of you believe
> that what we urge is expedient, but fear to act upon

this belief, lest it should lead to a breach of the treaty, you must remember that on the one hand, whatever your fears, your strength will be formidable to your antagonists; on the other, whatever the confidence you derive from refusing to receive us, your weakness will have no terrors for a strong enemy.[56]

Aside from two rather peremptory and defensive earlier references to injustice, the entire Corcyraean speech is couched in terms of calculations of power and advantage. The brief mention of "justice" merely serves to highlight the emphasis upon power. In contrast, the Corinthian speech is devoid of strategic calculations, and is framed entirely as an appeal to considerations of justice. The Corinthian speech is sprinkled with references to justice and injustice, honor and shame, honesty and moderation, law and morality, doing right and being wronged, the commission of crimes, and mutual gratitude among friends. Against calculations of power and advantage, the Corinthians argue that "Abstinence from all injustice . . . is a greater tower of strength than anything that can be gained by the sacrifice of permanent tranquility for an apparent temporary advantage."[57]

At the conclusion of this lengthy debate, Thucydides reports that two assemblies were held by the Athenians. "In the first, there was a manifest disposition to listen to the representations of Corinth; in the second, public feeling had changed, and an alliance with Corcyra was decided on, with certain reservations."[58] It was to be a defensive, not

an offensive alliance, and could not therefore be invoked by
Corcyra to involve Athens in an attack upon Corinth, a
Spartan ally, in violation of the Treaty of Euboea between
Athens and Sparta. As for the reasons behind the Athenian
decision, Thucydides says only that war with the
Peloponnesians (Sparta and its allies) was felt to be
inevitable, and no one was willing to see the naval power of
Corcyra sacrificed to Corinth.

Thucydides says nothing more about the process of
Athenian decisionmaking except that "two assemblies were
held." James Boyd White acknowledges that the Athenian
decision, as reported, seems to bear little relation to the
actual arguments presented by either side, even though the
decision favored Corcyra over Corinth.[59] Why then has
Thucydides bothered to provide nearly eight pages of
speeches when they seem to have so little relation to the
way in which the decision to form an alliance was made?
According to White, the speeches introduce the reader to a
"culture of argument, of which it is Thucydides' object to
tell the history."[60] White maintains that it is language
which defines or constitutes the community of speakers, and
consequently it is language which furnishes limits upon the
actions performed by members of the community which it
constitutes. White contends that the culture of argument
depicted in the Corcyraean Debate is successful on its own
terms even though the outcome of the speeches is the
beginning of a war, for it is not the purpose of this

culture to eliminate war but rather to make it manageable within limits.[61]

White's identification of language as an authoritative source of limits would not have been an entirely alien thought to the Greek culture of Thucydides' time. Indeed there are both tragic and Socratic/Platonic dimensions to his argument. But Thucydides' text can also be interpreted as specifically contesting those views rather than sharing or endorsing them. The text directly challenges the presumption that language is a privileged repository of limits by portraying language as little more than one weapon among others to be wielded in the pursuit of domination or advantage. There are early indications of this view in the Corcyraean offer to Corinth to arbitrate their differences over Epidamnus. The offer was rejected by Corinth as long as Corcyra refused to lift its siege of the colony. In this exchange, which is reported without commentary by Thucydides, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that neither side is willing to resort to the language of arbitration unless it is likely to yield a superior advantage to its own position. Thus Corcyra is willing to talk so long as it is permitted to simultaneously continue its military options. The delay of arbitration would then disadvantage only Corinth. But significantly, Corinth, too, was unwilling to press for arbitration without securing a greater advantage for itself in the process.[62] Later, in the Corcyraean Debate at Athens, Corcyra recalled the

Corinthian rejection of arbitration as evidence of unjust
Corinthian intentions. The Corinthians countered that,
under the circumstances, the Corcyraean offer amounted to no
more than a resort to arms in words as well as deeds.[63]
Lest the Corinthians appear to occupy the moral high ground
in this debate, Thucydides mentions in passing that the only
reason for the Corinthian presence in Athens in the first
place was to prevent her own war aims from being impeded.[64]

It has long been tempting to read Thucydides' *History*
as a compelling drama of Athenian *hubris* (overreaching)
followed by the moral retribution of Nemesis.[65] From this
perspective, the Athenian alliance with Corcyra would
represent the first in a series of increasingly arrogant
Athenian actions which eventually led to her downfall. Part
of the appeal of this interpretation is undoubtedly its
comfortable fit with modern moral views. The text, however,
permits a contrary interpretation. Soon after the
Corcyraean Debate, Athens will suggest to the Spartan
Assembly that the issue of justice is only raised by those
who seek their own advantage but lack other forms of
strength to secure it.[66] It is a claim which recurs
throughout the text, and it suggests that an adequate
assessment of claims of justice must take into account the
relative position of who is speaking. In the Corcyraean
Debate it is the Corinthians who are at a strategic
disadvantage in confronting an alliance between Athens and
Corcyra. And it is Corinth who raises the "cry of justice."

Much later, in the hour of defeat, the Athenian commander Nicias, too, will speak of justice and reverence for the gods. But it remains to be decided whether, in Thucydides' view, this is a portrayal of poetic justice and Nemesis in action, or whether it is confirmation of the law of nature soon to be cited by Athens that the strong take what they can while the weak cry out for justice.

Although the Athenian Alliance with Corcyra was to be defensive in nature, it soon drew Athens inadvertently into direct naval conflict with Corinth, a Spartan ally and member of the Peloponnesian Confederacy. As a result of this and other grievances against Athens, Corinth and other allies came to address the Spartan Assembly, and sought to elicit a declaration of war from that body against the Athenians. Of all the allies to address the Spartans, Thucydides records only the speech of the Corinthians, the last to speak. The Corinthian speech presents two major thrusts. It holds Spartan lack of resistance responsible for the expansion of Athenian power, and it contrasts the bold adventurousness of Athenian character with the timid procrastination of the Spartans. The Corinthians accuse the Spartans of being overly concerned with acting justly, and too little concerned with resisting injustice.[67] For, according to the Corinthians, the true subjugator of a people is not so much the immediate aggressor as it is the one who could prevent it but does not.[68] There then follows

a long and striking comparison of Athenian and Spartan national character.

> The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution; you [Spartans] have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention, and when forced to act you never go far enough. Again, they are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine; your wont is to attempt less than is justified by your power, to mistrust even what is sanctioned by your judgment, and to fancy that from danger there is no release. Further there is promptitude on their side against procrastination on yours; they are never at home, you are never far from it; for they hope by their absence to extend their acquisitions, you fear by your advance to endanger what you have left behind. . . . To describe their character in a word, one might truly say that they were born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others.[69]

At the metaphorical level, the Corinthian speech introduces two new elements into the Thucydidean view of power. The Peloponnesian War is to be seen not merely as a contingent war over prerogatives between adjacent city-states, but rather as a violent and necessary clash between fundamentally opposite principles.[70] Secondly, Thucydides' characterization of power is not limited to domination, but includes within it the necessity of resistance to domination. The remainder of the text elaborates and

explores the inner dynamic of this bipolar conception of power.

The Corinthian speech is set off against a speech by Athenian envoys who, Thucydides tells us, just happened to be present in Sparta on other business. The intention of the Athenian speech, according to Thucydides, was not to defend Athens against the charges being brought against her, but to show that war was not a matter to be hastily decided upon but rather one which called for further consideration. "There was also a wish to call attention to the great power of Athens . . .," Thucydides informs us, "from a notion that their words might have the effect of inducing them [the Peloponnesians] to prefer tranquility to war."[71] The Athenian speech reminds the Spartans of Athens' superior contributions to the defeat of the invaders during the Persian War, a victory which benefitted Peloponnesians as much as Athenians. Then, in an interesting parallel to the Corinthian speech, Athens charges that it was Spartan reticence against the Persians that made the Athenian empire both possible and necessary.[72] And furthermore, they charge, had Sparta persevered contrary to her character, then Sparta, too, would have been forced to follow the same path to empire as Athens and incur the same hatreds.[73] Contrary to the Corinthian speech, however, which seeks to goad Sparta into compensating for its earlier hesitations by going to war against Athens now, the Athenian speech claims that as a result of Spartan reticence the Athenians fairly

earned and now deserve their empire. Inherent in this claim is a view of a natural order of things in which superior power properly rises due to the weakness of others. Moreover, the Athenian position implicitly denies a moral dimension to the imbalance of power, attributing it to the natural order. There is no room for equality in this conception; either Athens must dominate, or Sparta must dominate according to the order of things. At this point the Athenians articulate for the first time the natural law which commands their allegiance: ". . . for it has always been the law that the weaker should should be subject to the stronger." It is only Spartan calculations of their own interests, continue the Athenians, which now prompt them to take up the cry of justice, "a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might."[74] Nevertheless, Athens continues, in actual practice Athenian justice is far more equitable than its superior strength would require, and more moderate than the practice of others would be in the same position.

Athens, in the very act of describing its own position as just, seems to be conceding some legitimate force to the language and the principle of justice. But the "justice" which Athens acknowledges is upon closer inspection very different from the "justice" apparently invoked by its accusers. Athenian justice, or the principle upon which it is based, resembles a gift of mercy or restraint which a

conqueror might at its discretion grant to the conquered. This principle is not at all at odds with the law of nature, just cited by Athens in the same speech, that the weaker should be subject to the stronger.

The Athenian speech closes with a reminder to its audience of the unpredictabilities of war once it starts, and proposes that Spartan and Athenian differences should be settled by arbitration as called for by their treaty. The apparent reasonableness of this final appeal is somewhat tempered by two considerations. Firstly, the Athenian character described by the Corinthian speech is far better suited than the conservative Spartan character to take advantage of the imponderables of war. And secondly, the Athenian offer of arbitration is not only consonant with the treaty, it also coincides with the Athenian strategy of delay indicated earlier by Thucydides.[75]

Following the Athenian speech, the Spartan assembly dismissed both the Athenians and their own allies in order to debate the question of war among themselves. Thucydides presents the speeches of two Spartan leaders, King Archidamus and the ephor Stenelaides.[76] The speech of Archidamus is a model of prudence and moderation consistent with the king's reputation and the cautious Spartan character. As reasonable as the king's speech may sound, however, it is worth noting that the issue of justice is never touched upon, but instead the king's counsel of patience and preparation is based entirely upon strategic

considerations detailed in the speech. In context, the king's advice to continue talking to the Athenians while preparing for war shows that the Spartans, too, resort to language for strategic and tactical gains. "I do bid you not to take up arms at once," the king advises the assembly,

but to send and remonstrate with them in a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission, and to employ the interval in perfecting our own preparations. . . . If they listen to our embassy, so much the better; but if not, after the lapse of two or three years our position will have become materially strengthened, and we can then attack them if we think proper. Perhaps by that time the sight of our preparations, *backed by language* equally significant, will have disposed them to submission . . . . [Emphasis added].[77]

The long (three pages) speech by Archidamus is offset by a very short (one paragraph) speech of Sthenelaides.[78] Sthenelaides mistrusts words and uses very few of them himself. He announces tersely that he does not understand the long speech of the Athenians. "They said a good deal in praise of themselves, but nowhere denied that they are injuring our allies . . . ." Against proposals to let "lawsuits and words" settle the matter, Sthenelaides calls for immediate war against the Athenians. It is not by words we are harmed, he says, but by Athenian actions, and furthermore "long deliberation is rather fitting for those who have injustice in comtemplation." Despite its emphasis on action, however, the speech of Sthenelaides disdains all

strategic considerations in favor of the justice of prompt
retaliation against Athens. He urges immediate war based on
considerations of honor, duty to friends, and what Athenian
behavior deserves. "With the gods," he says in conclusion,
"let us advance against the aggressors," regardless of con-
siderations of money, ships, and horses.

Sthenelaides' speech is interesting because even though
it identifies words as dishonorable instruments of
injustice, it does not conclude that justice is nowhere to
be found. Sthenelaides clearly believes that there is a
moral order to the cosmos, and that that order is upheld by
the gods. He finds justice in certain actions--acts of
resistance against aggression, and acts of assistance to
injured friends, for example. It is an uncomplicated,
perhaps admirable, moral view which Thucydides does not
initially condemn. Instead he treats it as irrelevant.
Having just presented the reader with twelve additional
pages of carefully staged speeches, Thucydides declares
succinctly that

> the [Spartans] voted that the treaty had been broken,
> and that war must be declared, not so much because they
> were persuaded by the arguments of the allies, as
> because they feared the growth of the power of the
> Athenians, seeing most of Hellas already subject to
> them.[79]

Once again, the text provokes the question, Why has
Thucydides presented these speeches in such detail, only to
inform us at their conclusion that the succession of events

has little to do with what was said? To answer the question
we must refer back to the fundamental distinction made by
Thucydides between that which appears in speech and that
which does not. Beginning with the affair of Epidamnus,
Thucydides announced his intention to first "give the
grounds alleged by either side, which led to . . . the
breaking out of war."[80] But this was to be clearly
distinguished from the truer cause, invisible to speech,
which was the growing power of Athens. Twenty pages of
speeches reveal to us what the various parties told each
other, and told themselves, about the necessity of war.
They also serve to introduce several opposing views of
justice, or its absence, as justifications for war. We need
not treat what was said in the speeches as meaningless or
deceptive rhetoric. The speeches do show us a level of
truth. These are the things which people say, or said, when
preparing for war. On one level, the speeches reveal the
reasons for war. But Thucydides informs us that this is not
the deepest level from which to view the causes of war.
For, in his view, these were the sorts of things the
speakers *had to say*.[81] Thucydides here suggests that there
is an order to power which has the character of
inevitability, or necessity. From this point of view, the
speakers and the parties to the war are caught up in a
larger, inexorable movement of power which they may not
understand, but which nevertheless governs the direction of

events. At a deeper level, then, Thucydides' text portrays not people using power, but power using people.

Having presented, as promised, the spoken reasons for the war, the text then turns to the unspoken cause: the growth of Athenian power. The Pentacontaetia, or "Account of the Fifty Years," follows immediately after Thucydides' statement of the real reasons behind the Spartan vote for war.[82] This section recounts the growth of Athenian power from the end of the Persian War up to the events already described by Thucydides. The Pentacontaetia portrays a restless Athens ceaselessly engaged in battle, building up its fleet, subjugating formerly independent allies, and extending its power in all directions. Thucydides almost seems to apologize for the relentless quality of this section, saying that "My excuse for relating these events, and for venturing on this digression, is that this passage of history has been omitted by all my predecessors." But "besides," he adds almost coyly, "the history of these events contains an explanation of the growth of the Athenian empire."[83]

In a particularly allegorical description reminiscent of the growth of the empire itself, Thucydides relates the manner in which the Athenians hurriedly rebuilt and expanded the walls of their city at the end of the Persian War. "For the bounds of the city were extended at every point of the circumference; and so they laid hands on everything without exception in their haste," he states portentously.[84]

According to Thucydides, the allies begged Athens not to
fortify itself on the pretext that if the Persians should
return, such fortifications would only serve to aid an
occupying enemy force. "The real meaning of their advice,
the suspicion that it contained against the Athenians, was
not proclaimed," Thucydides informs us, signalling the
reader that we are in the subterranean realm of true but
unspoken causes.[85] The Athenian stratagem for extending its
defensive fortifications is representative of the Athenian
use of language to achieve its ends. Upon hearing of
Spartan objections to the Athenian project, the Athenians
proposed that negotiations should be held at Sparta to
decide the issue. The Athenians then delayed the talks long
enough to secretly complete their fortifications before
announcing that negotiations were no longer necessary.
Similarly, throughout the Pentacontaetia Athens regards a
truce of any kind as an opportunity to further expand in
another direction.

Following the Spartan vote for war, and after some
delay during which the favor of the god at Delphi was
ascertained, a second Peloponnesian congress was convened at
Sparta. This time the question was put before the Spartan
allies as a whole and, after some debate, the majority voted
for war. Once again it is the Corinthians who are portrayed
as the most aggressive and persuasive speakers, and on this
occasion it is only the Corinthian speech which is
reproduced by Thucydides.[86] The Corinthians portray Sparta

as the pre-eminent power in Hellas, having a duty to lead a united resistance against "enslavement" by Athens. The Corinthian speech assesses the relative strengths of each side and predicts a Peloponnesian victory based largely on the superior courage and discipline of the Spartan side.

After a period of preparation and some trading of charges between both sides, the Spartans issued a terse ultimatum to Athens: "[Sparta] wishes the peace to continue, and there is no reason why it should not, if you would leave the Hellenes independent."[87] As modest as this proposition may sound, compliance would certainly have entailed the dismantling of the Athenian empire, increased exposure to danger, and the loss of Athens' heroic status.[88] It may well have been deliberately formulated as a demand to which Athens could not possibly submit.[89] Upon receiving the ultimatum, the Athenians held an assembly to debate the Athenian response. Thucydides informs us that there were many speakers to address the assembly, some urging peace and others urging war. Of all the speeches, however, Thucydides chooses to reproduce only one: that of Pericles, "the first man of his time at Athens, ablest alike in counsel and in action. . . ."[90]

Pericles: The Heroic Ideal

The speeches of Pericles are widely considered to be a major focal point of Thucydides' *History*. This judgment is due in part to the high tribute paid to Pericles in

Thucydides' own remarks.[91] Since Thucydides rarely speaks
in his own voice, his favorable opinion of Pericles is taken
to be highly significant. But there is another structural
factor supporting the treatment of Pericles' words as having
key significance. The usual pattern of Thucydides is to
present speeches in antithetical pairs, but this pattern is
abandoned in the case of Pericles. Three speeches of
Pericles are reproduced in the text, all in fairly rapid
succession, and all are unanswered by any opponent. On the
other hand, elements and themes of Pericles' speeches
continue to resonate throughout the text, and are often
reflected ironically in the speeches of other major figures
such as Cleon, Alcibiades, and Nicias.

The privileged position of Pericles' speeches in the
text suggests that, on one level, Pericles occupies the role
of the traditional, Homeric hero in Thucydides' *History*. In
the Homeric world, the normal course of events is cyclical
in a more or less vertical plane, following a trajectory
from low to high and back to low again. In the *Iliad*, the
greatest heroes tend to die at the acme of their glory, as
measured by the greatness of their opponent. Paradoxically,
a heroic death achieves a measure of immortality through the
legendary fame of the hero untarnished by the inevitable
decline which would have otherwise occurred. This kind of
heroism is akin to the brilliance of an exploding star.
There are certain standard ingredients to the heroic
formula. First of, all the requisite heroic height is

usually achieved in battle or contest. Secondly, the ascent to heroic heights is itself a factor in bringing about death at the proper moment. Ideally, death would be neither accidental nor unrelated to the heroic pursuit. Pericles' brilliant career closely approximates this heroic trajectory, but the fit is imperfect due to his apparently untimely death from plague. Nevertheless, he died near the peak of his greatness and his reputation was spared its predictable decline.[92] The career of Themistocles, which Thucydides draws upon to represent the normal course of events, stands in contrast to the career of Pericles. Themistocles, described by Thucydides as among the greatest men of his time, was the architect of the brilliant Athenian naval victory over the Persians during the Persian War, and he was the founder of Athenian imperialism. Despite his near-heroic status, he ended his life as an outlaw and traitor to his country.

On yet another level, however, the true hero of Thucydides' *History* is Athens itself, and Pericles merely stands for, and speaks for, Athens at its height. On this level as well, Thucydides' *History* conforms to the traditional heroic paradigm of the *Iliad* except that large movements of collective power and greatness replace feats of the heroic individual, and personal interventions of the gods are replaced by the less personal operation of natural forces. In turning to the speeches of Pericles, then, as spokesman for the Thucydidean version of the heroic ideal,

we can expect to gain a clearer view of the geometry of power which Thucydides finds portrayed in the Peloponnesian War.

Initially, Pericles' first speech has the structural function of answering, and thus balancing, the Corinthian speech assessing the relative Spartan and Athenian strengths and predicting Spartan victory. But in introducing important new themes, Pericles' speech goes beyond that antithetical role to occupy new and uncontested heights. In one respect the first speech of Pericles can be read as a rejoinder to the Spartan ultimatum. The speech, however, is not directed to the Spartans but to the Athenian Assembly for the purpose of persuading that body to vote for war. In a brief earlier reference to Pericles, Thucydides had described him as ". . . the most powerful man of his time, and the leading Athenian statesman; he opposed the [Spartans] in everything, and would have no concessions, but ever urged the Athenians on to war."[93] Pericles confirms this unyielding characterization in his opening remarks, saying that his one guiding principle through everything is "no concessions to the Peloponnesians."[94] He portrays himself as disciplined, resolute, and uncompromising in contrast to the irresolution of ordinary men in the face of chance and changing events. Pericles goes on to cast Athens as the victim of Spartan aggression, and the approaching war as a necessary stand against Spartan enslavement. He also faults the Spartans for failing to offer negotiation of

their differences, as provided in the treaty, before issuing bellicose demands.

Two points about this speech initially stand out. First of all, up to this point the text has consistently portrayed Sparta to be a conservative, hesitant land-power in contrast to the audacious and acquisitive sea-power of Athens. Secondly, the Spartans would appear to have sound, historical reasons for distrusting any Athenian call for negotiations. In context, then, the specter of enslavement invoked by Pericles appears to be designed more to arouse the zeal of the assembly in support of war than to point to any real, immediate danger.

In the same speech, Pericles provides his own assessment of the military factors affecting each side, and his inventory is remarkably similar to that presented in the Corinthian speech to the Spartan allies. The chief divergence between the two speeches in that respect lies not in their perception of the "facts," but in their evaluation of the relative advantage the facts will give to either side. Unlike Corinth, Pericles argues that the military and political situation favors Athens over Sparta, and that the advantage lies chiefly in the concentration of Athenian resolve (*gnome*) compared to the characteristically irresolute tardiness and division among the Spartans.[95] The fact that the text portrays no significant disagreement over the "objective" military assets of the two sides supports the view that Thucydides considers this war to be less a

confrontation of military factors measurable in terms of men, money, and ships, than a clash between less tangible factors such as "character" and "resolve."

We have already heard the Corinthians describe the character of the Athenians as active, innovative, and daring compared to the slow, ponderous caution of the Spartan character, and the text consistently confirms that description. But Pericles' first speech introduces a major new chord upon the same theme. He attributes Athenian swiftness and decisiveness to their superior *gnome*, and he finds the roots of this *gnome* attached to Athenian political arrangements.[96] In the same vein, Pericles faults the Spartans for their lack of unity and consequent lack of strength, and he associates this fault with Spartan political institutions. Pericles clearly equates superior power with steadfast unity (*gnome*), and he associates this superior cohesion and resolution with political structure.

The claim that superior Athenian power and unified resolve are due to superior political institutions is made more explicit in Pericles' second speech, the "Funeral Oration," where he bestows lengthy praise upon the many advantages accruing to Athenians from their democratic institutions.[97] The chief advantage of democracy, in Pericles' view, is the power it delivers to the state. Pericles' speech does cite the many freedoms and comforts derived from democracy in ordinary life, but the final standard by which to evaluate the greatness of Athens, in

every case, turns out be measured in terms of Athenian power. Pericles pronounces Athens to be the "school of Hellas," by which he means that Athenian *arete*, competitive success, is the envy of the Hellenic world.[98] Athens' superiority is "a plain matter of fact," Pericles proclaims, which

> the power of the state acquired by these habits
> proves. . . . [T]he admiration of the present and
> succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our
> power without witness, but have shown it by mighty
> proofs; and far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist,
> or others of his craft . . ., we have forced every sea
> and land to be the highway of our daring, and
> everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left
> imperishable monuments behind us.[99]

There is probably no better statement of the heroic ideal than Pericles' funeral oration. It is appropriately the most famous, and the most frequently cited of all the speeches in Thucydides' *History*. Most recitations, however, emphasize its praise of democracy and the sacrifice of private ambition to the common interest. Rare attention is paid to the Periclean standard by which democracy is judged to be commendable: it confers the power to rule over others, and the means to achieve eternal glory through memorable feats of war.[100]

The Homeric theme is pursued and extended in the third and final speech of Pericles. This speech is aimed at an angry and demoralized Athens two years into the war.

Periclean war strategy had called for full development and
projection of Athenian naval power, coupled with a refusal
to be drawn into land battles against the Peloponnesians.
As a result, Athenian territory beyond the walls had been
laid waste at will by invading Peloponnesian forces, while,
at Pericles' insistence, Athenian citizens looked on.
Moreover, the city had been devastated by plague with its
attendant widespread suffering and death, further eroding
Athenian will and resolve. Demoralization reigned and
Pericles addressed them in an attempt to restore their
gnome. In the course of his speech Pericles reminded them
that

> your country has the greatest name in all the world
> . . . because she never bent before disaster, and
> because she has expended more life and effort in war
> than any other city, and has won for herself a power
> greater than any hitherto known, the memory of which
> will descend to the latest posterity; even if now, in
> obedience to the general law of decay, we should ever be
> forced to yield, still it will be remembered that we
> held rule over more Hellenes than any other Hellenic
> state, that we sustained the greatest wars against their
> united or separate powers, and inhabited a city
> unrivalled by any other. . . . Hatred also is short-
> lived; but that which makes the splendor of the present
> and the glory of the future remains forever unforgotten.
> Make your decision, therefore, for glory then and honor
> now.[101]

With the addition of the "general law of decay"
articulated in this speech, the portrait of the heroic ideal

is complete. All things human have a tendency to decay and pass away. But this general law can be thwarted through great and memorable feats of battle. Great deeds need not be "good" deeds. What counts is scale. Great deeds "whether for evil or for good," create immortal monuments in the living memory of posterity. It is worth recalling that in Thucydides' view, the Peloponnesian War was the greatest war of all time not because it was a "just" war, or even a victorious war. It was the greatest war in history because the scope and the depth of the suffering and dislocation it caused was unprecedented.[102]

But what is the status of this general law of decay evoked by Pericles? It is, to be sure, the tendency of all things toward disintegration. But what is its relation to that other general law cited earlier, and soon to be cited again by Athens, that the weaker should be subject to the stronger? These two laws appear to represent counter-tendencies in nature. Power is expressed as a tendency toward combination; weakness is expressed as a tendency toward fragmentation. Thucydides has made it abundantly clear that in his view, power, at least the greatest power, transcends individuals and is collective in nature. This premise is the basis of his interest in war rather than *muthodes*, or the quarrels of individuals. The collective character of power is associated in the speeches of Pericles with *gnome*, steadfast resolution, and *gnome* is associated in turn with the political practice of democracy. Power, to

put it simply, is a coming together, a uniting of something--call it "will" for lack of a better word--which makes concerted action possible. The historical movement toward association, expressed in the founding of cities and the formation of alliances, has a natural force of its own, judging from the history of power portrayed by Thucydides in the "Archaeology." But the historical movement toward amassed power is not unopposed in nature. The tendency toward integration and resolution is countered (but not necessarily balanced) by an opposite tendency toward disintegration and dissolution. This tendency is poignantly portrayed by Thucydides in the parallel events of the plague at Athens, and *stasis*, civil strife, at Corcyraea. Pericles, in his heroic role, understands these countertendencies as conflicting natural forces which he must dominate. But Thucydides, in a more complicated vision, portrays them as opposite poles of power, each opposing, yet each generating the other.

Pericles understands the collective, and therefore political, nature of power. He claims in his speeches that Athenian superiority over the Peloponnesians is rooted in the Athenian form of government--democracy--which is said to yield superior *gnome*, or common will and determination, compared to the oligarchic governments of the Spartan confederacy. We might ask, however, what, in Pericles' view, is responsible for this coincidence of *gnome* and democracy? What is it about democracy which provides for

and sustains the singlemindedness from whence it derives its power? In the Funeral Oration, Pericles praises the Athenian constitution for the many benefits it confers upon its members. It favors the many instead of the few. Its laws provide equal justice for all in private disputes. Advancement in public life is the reward of ability, not class or wealth. But beyond these few explicitly political considerations, Pericles' list extends praise to many comforts of ordinary Athenian life whose connection to democracy is less clear. He cites, for example, the absence of interference from one's neighbors in one's private affairs. And he further commends the general respect for law which flourishes despite the freedom of private relations. And for our recreation, he says,

> we celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round,
> and the elegance of our private establishments forms a
> daily source of pleasure and helps to banish our cares;
> and the magnitude of our city draws the produce of the
> world into our harbor. . . .[103]

Undoubtedly these and other pleasures of Athenian life which Pericles goes on to mention, can be attributed in some fashion to political institutions and practices at Athens. Surely they are intended to compare favorably to the more regimented, austere lifestyle practiced at Sparta. And, just as surely, a high level of equality is prerequisite to the success of Athenian political arrangements. Yet the answer remains obscure. What, in Pericles' opinion, is the

source of the singlemindedness which constitutes Athenian
power, and which, he claims, is uniquely associated with
Athenian democracy? It is by no means obvious that
political equality and private comfort necessarily lead to a
common will of uncommon strength.

For the answer we must turn back to Pericles' first
speech responding to the Spartan ultimatum to Athens. In
that speech Pericles analyzed the strategic differences
between Sparta and Athens and concluded that "they are
incapacitated from carrying on a war against a power
different in character from their own, by the want of a
single council-chamber requisite to prompt and vigorous
action."[104] The "single council-chamber" identified by
Pericles refers to the Athenian assembly, and it appears
that in Pericles' view, that body is the source of Athenian
gnome and power. It differs from the Peloponnesian
organization "in which every state possesses an equal vote,
and each presses for its own ends, a condition of things
which generally results in no action at all."[105]

Although Pericles has in this speech located the
decisive *gnome* of Athens in its democratic assembly, while
locating the opposite principle in its Spartan counterpart,
it is increasingly clear from the text that both tendencies
are simultaneously present in the assembly. Its strength is
also its weakness. While the assembly may be superior at
achieving consensus and uniting public opinion behind a
common course of action, it is equally liable to greater

fickleness, divisiveness, and lack of focus. Worse, it may be resolutely carried away in a direction which is ultimately self-defeating, as in the disastrous Sicilian expedition.

Thucydides himself is more ambivalent than the words of Pericles would suggest about the strengths of Athenian democracy as embodied in the assembly. Looking back to the Corcyraean Debate, in which the Athenians had to decide whether or not to accept the Corcyraeans into alliance, we recall Thucydides mentioning almost in passing that "two assemblies were held" before reaching a decision to side with Corcyraea.[106] This unobtrusive comment signals early on in the text that the assembly may be somewhat less than decisive. Later, following Pericles' third speech, in which he assailed the Athenians for wavering in their resolve in the wake of the plague and repeated Peloponnesian invasions of the Athenian countryside, Thucydides again points to the ambivalence of the assembly. According to Thucydides, Pericles succeeded in convincing the Athenians "as a community" to prosecute the war with renewed vigor. "Still," he reports,

> as private individuals they could not help smarting
> under their sufferings. . . . In fact, the pubic feeling
> against him [Pericles] did not subside until he had been
> fined. Not long afterwards, however, according to the
> way of the multitude, they again elected him general,
> and committed all their affairs to his hands. . . .[107]

Thucydides' disdainful reference to the "way of the multitude" suggests less than whole-hearted confidence in the ways of democracy. Later in the war, in the debate over the fate of the rebellious colony of Mytilene, Thucydides would still more dramatically portray the indecisiveness of the Athenian assembly. Mytilene was an independent colony of Athens, in possession of its own naval forces, which revolted and joined the Peloponnesians. The revolt ultimately failed and the Athenians voted to put to death the whole adult male population of Mytilene, and to make slaves of the women and children.[108] The next day, after a lengthy debate reported by Thucydides, The Athenians elected by a slim majority to rescind the original decree and to impose a slightly less harsh punishment upon the population. The language in which Thucydides reports the reversal emphasizes the "division" and "change of feeling" among the Athenians.[109] Thucydides' own verdict upon the democratic assembly is found in his endorsement of the abilities and policies of Pericles.

> Pericles, . . . by his rank, ability, and known integrity, was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude--in short to lead them instead of being led by them. . . . In short, what was nominally a democracy became in his hands, government by the first citizen. With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude.

This, as might have been expected . . ., produced a host of blunders, and amongst them the Sicilian expedition.[110]

Despite Pericles' earlier assertion that Athens was free of the defect of disunity which he found in the Peloponnesians,[111] the text is clear that the Athenian assembly, and, by implication Athenian democracy, harbored within itself the two contrary tendencies of nature. In one direction lay the possibility of superior unity and therefore great power. In the other lay the possibility of great fragmentation and weakness. Pericles' greatness, in Thucydides' view, lay in his unparalleled ability to consistently tip the balance in favor of preserving and enhancing the great power of Athens. Unlike his successors, Pericles is said to have sought no power for himself, but only for the city. His successors, each grasping at supremacy for themselves, and each currying favor with the multitude, managed to prevent Athens from reaching its greatest potential height in war, and introduced civil strife at home.

The Fall

On one level, the text might be read as the story of Periclean leadership and the slow decline of Athens following his death from the plague in 429 B.C. On this reading, the greatness of Athens is to be attributed to the almost superhuman statesmanship and incorruptibility of Pericles. Only Pericles could retain and act upon the unifying vision of the common interest. Others, with their

limited, selfish visions could appear only as hollow imitations of the Periclean ideal. Their leadership, which substituted private aggrandizement for the public good, tainted the greatness of Athens and led it into moral and civic disintegration. This is the moral skeleton beneath many conventional readings of Thucydides' *History*, and it admits of many excellent variations upon a theme. It permits political lessons to be drawn emphasizing the importance of placing the common interest above private concerns, for example. Furthermore, Thucydides' characterization of Pericles' policies as moderate and conservative[112] can be used to support an interpretation of the text utilizing the moral axis of *hubris* and *nemesis*. From this perspective, Pericles represents the moderate center. His successors pursue extreme policies which, in a moral universe, bring about the *nemesis* of defeat as a form of retribution of the divine or natural order.

Thucydides' text is not unamenable to such pedagogical uses. On the other hand, in order to fit the text, such moral approaches tend to overlook and leave untouched much of its rich and profound complexity.[113] A similar, but far more interesting and sophisticated approach to the text examines the phenomenon of language as portrayed by Thucydides. A particularly lucid and influential version of this approach is advanced by James Boyd White.[114] White focuses on the speeches of the text and identifies a progressive loss of limits traceable to the Athenian use of

language. White's premise is relatively uncontroversial: a
community is largely constituted by the language it speaks.
Conversely, language is subject to misuse of a sort which
can erode and destroy the basis of community. According to
White, Thucydides' text portrays just such misuse by Athens
resulting in the steady disintegration of the Greek
community.

White argues that Athens' use of language to justify
aspirations to unlimited supremacy undermines a traditional
language of justice which imposed limits upon those who
shared the language. White's argument is sophisticated in
part because it seeks to avoid attributing transcendental
status to language even while identifying it as a source of
limits to behavior. The outline of his argument runs as
follows. The language shared by Athens and the other Greek
city-states defined a culture of argument in which a shared
language of justice could be used to justify a wide range,
but not all, of behavior. Thucydides' text portrays members
of the culture pursuing self-interest by using the language
of justice in imaginative ways. Under normal conditions,
the language of justice would tend to become strained to its
limits, but would not break those limits. The portrait,
according to White, serves to highlight the functional
limits residing in accepted linguistic practices. The
language could be used creatively to justify the pursuit of
advantage, but it could not be forced to justify simply
anything at all. There were limits, and those limits lay in

respecting, at least to the extent of paying lip service to, the premise of a rough equality of power between members of the culture. But Athens was, and sought to be, more powerful than any other city. The Athenian attempt to reshape the language of justice to accommodate and justify unlimited empire could not possibly be accepted by other speakers of the language, according to White, because it refuted the premise of equality, and demanded acquiescence to a state of permanent inferiority. In White's interpretation, Athens sought to impose a perverted language of justice which could not be shared by others. The Athenian use of language violated the unspoken limits which defined the community, thereby contributing to the demise of that community. White points out that "as language deteriorates, so does everything else,"[115] and he argues that Athenian ambitions were self-negating because they undermined the cultural framework of meanings which might have sustained those ambitions.

White repeatedly characterizes the Athenian position portrayed in the text as "incoherent' and "irrational" because it is self-destructive. This is an important characterization of "rationality," but it fails to take into account the heroic premises of Thucydides' text. In the heroic conception of time and the universe, everything passes away in due course. In that world, the accusation of self-destructiveness loses its force: everything is self-destructive, everything decays. Speaking from within that

world, Thucydides can claim that Athenian behavior is perfectly rational and eminently realistic. Athens pursues the only kind of permanence available in the heroic world: immortality in memory. White might respond that, even so, Athenian self-interest lay in preserving the culture which gave meaning to Athenian ambitions, if only to preserve an institutional memory which would exalt Athenian deeds. Thucydides' text constitutes his rejoinder to the hypothetical argument. It is partly through his text that the greatness of Athens, "for evil or for good," is still remembered and debated.

White concedes that there is a certain compelling logic to the "realistic" position of Athens in the text. "In a world of unequal power, talk about justice has no place," he admits.[116] But, White asks rhetorically, "could equality be seen not as the factual precondition of the discourse of justice but as its product, as something that it creates and makes real in the world?" Thus, despite its rational and pragmatic aspirations, White's argument is forced to fall back on a moral plea.[117] Thucydides recognizes and gives voice to similar pleas throughout the text.[118] Indeed, the text may even, as White claims, intentionally incite such pleas. But part of the "message" of Thucydides' text is that in the heroic world, such pleas cannot be heard or understood. They have no ontological footing. Thucydides depicts and defends a world in which equality has only a precarious place between great powers. In that world, the

plea for equality can only be heard as an attempt by the weak to become strong at the expense of the powerful. In a world where power is all, talk of justice and equality can only be heard as a clever strategy of power, no different in status from any other strategy. The heroic world of Thucydides' text is coherent and self-contained. It cannot be adjusted to accommodate and appreciate claims to equality from unequals. It can only be replaced by a different conception of reality. White's pragmatic effort to avoid attributing privileged ontological status or location to language is laudable, perhaps even dictated, by modern standards of academic argumentation. But it deprives him of any foundation for the moral plea which he is forced to advance. Without that foundation, his plea cannot penetrate the world of the text, but must remain external to it.[119]

White acknowledges that Thucydides' text is deeply ambiguous.[120] On one hand it might be read as a profoundly moral drama portraying the destructive effects of the Athenian abuse of language. On the other hand, if Athens was forced by historical necessity to talk as it did, then the text portrays Athens enmeshed in a web of forces beyond its control. White's own interpretation places the text in the category of moral drama. In doing so, however, it has the distinct merit of emphasizing the important position of language in Thucydides' text while simultaneously pointing to an alternative interpretation of its significance. The alternative interpretation would look to the portrait of

language presented in the text as it follows the trajectory of necessity.

The conventional moral framework focuses on what appears to be a progressively distorted use of language portrayed in the text, a distortion which closely parallels the decline in Athenian fortunes. Three events tend to occupy the foreground of the moral "decline-and-fall" genre of interpretation:[121] the Corcyraean Revolution, the Melian Dialogue, and the Sicilian Expedition. The Corcyraean Revolution, in which the cohesive force of language breaks down, is conventionally interpreted to represent the social disorder and corruption of language which flows from the pressures of war and the pursuit of self-interest. "Political anarchy readily symbolizes a moral anarchy," according to the interpretation of W. Robert Connor.[122] From the same perspective, the Melian Dialogue, in which Athens refuses to honor any talk of "justice," represents the supreme violation of moral limits. Following the conclusion of that debate, Athens imposed the same cruel punishment upon Melos which it had earlier refrained from imposing upon Mytilene. Lastly, the disastrous Sicilian Expedition represents, in Christian terms, the sin of pride or, in Greek terms, excess. The crushing defeat suffered by Athens in its ill-advised attempt to conquer Sicily then comes to symbolize Athens' final fall and the retribution of justice or Nemesis.

The conventional reading of the text is very useful and yields some very sophisticated interpretations, much as a simple theme can be expanded and embellished to yield a Beethoven symphony. Moreover, Thucydides' text does not unambiguously demonstrate the conventional approach to be mistaken. Indeed, the celebrated ambiguity of the text lends itself to a variety of interpretations. But allegiance to the theme of moral decline-and-fall tends to overlook many interesting elements of the text which do not seem to neatly fit the theme.[123] Furthermore, the decline-and-fall paradigm assumes a constant view of natural order which has shifted very little from Thucydides to today. Consequently, the notion of retributive justice at work in the conventional interpretation, for example, along with the structure of natural order which supports it, is left unexamined along with the various alternative versions of justice articulated in the text. Those versions which do not fit the standard are easily consigned to the category of "distortion," "abuse," or "pathology,"[124]--all respectable substitutes for "sin." Left out of this approach is the possibility that Thucydides does not share the presumptive paradigm but actively resists it in defense of an earlier conception of natural order. The remainder of this chapter looks more closely at the three episodes--the Corcyraean Revolution, the Melian Dialogue, and the Sicilian Expedition--from this latter perspective as an alternative to the decline-and-fall framework.

The "Corcyraean Revolution" refers to the condition of
stasis, or civil strife,[125] which infected Corcyra early in
the war, but which later spread throughout the Hellenic
world to finally envelop Athens itself. Thucydides
furnishes a brief history of the *stasis* at Corcyra, but
makes it clear in the process that that event is part of a
larger pattern of truth revealed in the war. The Corcyraean
stasis had its origins in the circumstances of the affair at
Epidamnus, which Thucydides had earlier recounted as part of
the *aitiai* and *diaphorai*, allegations and complaints,
leading up to the Peloponnesian War.[126] That account was to
be carefully distinguished from the truest *prophasis*, or
root cause, of the larger war. Turning later to the
Corcyraean *stasis*, Thucydides brings us up to date on the
"progress" of that original dispute, and simultaneously
lifts the curtain somewhat on the truth of war and the truth
of history.

Epidamnus, it will be recalled, was itself rent by
factions between the many and the few, the *demos* and the
oligoi.[127] The *oligoi* had been exiled by the *demos*, and the
former retaliated by joining with barbarian, non-Greek
enemies to attack the city. To assault one's mother city
would itself have been a crime of considerable magnitude
against Greek views of what was proper even in war, but to
ally with barbarians to accomplish the deed would have been
a transgression of the greatest proportions. Yet it was
this exiled faction with whom Corcyra sided against the

demos of Epidamnus.[128] Epidamnus, with the endorsement of
the god at Delphi, the religious center of Greece, then
appealed for support to Corinth, the mother city of Corcyra.
Corcyra then attacked and defeated both its own mother and
child, so to speak. Thucydides concludes his account of the
Epidamnian affair with the decision of democratic Athens to
accept oligarchic Corcyra into alliance because of the
potential value of the Corcyraean navy, leaving democratic
Epidamnus to appeal to oligarchic Corinth for assistance.[129]

When Thucydides returns his attention to Corcyra in the
fifth year of the Peloponnesian War, the city is rent by
internal strife.

> . . . the Corcyraeans were engaged in butchering those
> of their fellow-citizens whom they regarded as their
> enemies. . . . Death thus raged in every shape; and as
> usually happens at such times, there was no length to
> which violence did not go; sons were killed by their
> fathers, and suppliants dragged from the altar or slain
> upon it, while some were even walled up in the temple of
> Dionysus and died there.[130]

Thucydides' account vividly describes the savagery, the
treachery and the terror of *stasis*, and goes on to link its
contagion to a loss of stable meanings for words.

> Revolution thus ran its course from city to city, and
> the places at which it arrived at last, from having
> heard what had been done before, carried to a still
> greater excess the refinement of their inventions, as
> manifested in the cunning of their enterprises and the
> atrocity of their reprisals. Words had to change their
> ordinary meanings and to take those which were now given

them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the
courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious
cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for
unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question,
inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the
attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable
means of self-defense. The advocate of extreme measures
was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be
suspected. To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd
head, and to divine a plot, a still shrewder; but to try
to provide against having to do either was to break your
party and to be afraid of your adversaries.[131]

The disorder which is *stasis* is thus attributable to,
or paralleled by, a disintegration of language. The deepest
horror of *stasis*, in Thucydides' view, lies not only, if at
all, in its violence, but in its loss of coherence, its loss
of unity. Even here, Thucydides can be seen to be concerned
with the nature and the sustenance of power. Power, it will
be recalled, is collective, and is associated in Thucydides'
text with the concentrated resolve of *gnome*. *Gnome* in turn
is associated with Periclean leadership of the Athenian
assembly. At the time of its revolution, Corcyra was
democratic,[132] and certainly one facet of Thucydides'
description of the Corcyraean *stasis* is a reminder of the
fragility of democratic cohesion. More broadly, however,
stasis reflects the general law of decay cited in Pericles'
third speech.

The general law of decay is one of two counter-
tendencies of nature at work in Thucydides' text. The other

is a tendency toward combination. The tendency toward
combination, or unity, is associated with power, while the
tendency toward decay and decomposition is associated with
weakness. In linking disunity with the breakdown of
language, Thucydides' account of the Corcyraean *stasis*
begins to make more explicit one of the most persistent, but
unspoken themes of the text: political power and stability
are linked to the use of language as a form of persuasion.
W. Robert Connor notes that the episode of the Corcyraean
stasis is narrated by Thucydides as a series of attempts at
persuasion.[133] James Boyd White further points out that the
meaning of the Greek term for persuasion, *peitho*, is deeply
imbued with political connotations of power and authority.
"To persuade is to compel obedience; to obey is to be
persuaded," he explains, thus emphasizing the link between
language and power.[134]

Pericles' greatness in Thucydides' estimation lay in
his unparalleled ability to unify and lead the assembly by
means of his great powers of persuasion.

> Whenever he saw them unseasonably and insolently elated,
> he would with a word reduce them to alarm; on the other
> hand, if they fell victims to a panic, he could at once
> restore them to confidence. In short, what was
> nominally a democracy became on his hands, government by
> the first citizen.[135]

By means of persuasion Pericles was able to sustain and
dominate the common meanings attached to a public discourse.
As long as Pericles was alive this common discourse

sustained the unity of the Athenian assembly with the singlemindedness which constituted the decisive *gnome* of Athenian power. Following his death the common discourse sustained by Pericles was appropriated for the more limited, private ends of individuals seeking supremacy over the assembly. This, and not the narrow escape of Mytilene, is the foremost significance of the debate between Cleon and Diodotus over the fate of that city. At Mytilene, for the first time in Thucydides' text, Athenian speakers are heard to oppose one another, signifying the divisions which followed Pericles' death.[136]

Behind Pericles' rhetorical command lay the apparently selfless, unifying vision of Athenian imperial greatness. "With his successors it was different", Thucydides tells us. "More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude."[137] In a parallel passage referring to the causes of the Corcyraean *stasis*, Thucydides tells us that "The cause of all these evils was the lust for power arising from greed and ambition."[138] It is important to observe that Thucydides does not here condemn the imperial quest for domination. He condemns the lust for power of a more limited, selfish type. It is the pursuit of personal supremacy which corrodes the common interest and the common language, reducing society to an arena in which "no man trusted his fellow."[139] But the "common interest" defined by Pericles and endorsed by

Thucydides consists in the pursuit of Athenian domination to its furthest limits. Thucydides condemns the individual pursuit of supremacy not because he condemns Athenian domination, but because the contest for personal supremacy produces division which forestalls the collective action and collective greatness achievable in war. There is not a hint that Thucydides deplores the violence of war. Instead he deplores the squandering of greatness lost to personal contests for power.

It is tempting to conclude at this point that Pericles is the conventional hero of Thucydides' *History*. In his time Athenian greatness was at its height, Thucydides tells us, but his successors, following private ambitions and private interests, led Athenians into military "projects whose success would only conduce to the honour and advantage of private persons, and whose failure entailed certain disaster on the country in war."[140] But the conclusion is too facile. Thucydides gives us ample reason to believe that Athens would have become great even without Pericles,[141] and that Athens would have eventually declined even with Pericles. Thucydides praises Pericles because under him it became greater than it otherwise might have, and, had he lived, it might have become greater still before its inevitable decline.

Thucydides is quite clear that it was *stasis* which finally undid the heroic strength of Athens, and not the superior force of its opponents.[142] There is a fall here but

it is not a moral fall in the conventional sense. Athens fell because it lost its common voice, its common will. As the narration of the Corcyraean *stasis* foretells, the contest for personal supremacy in post-Periclean Athens imposed private meanings upon words, and the public language so skillfully orchestrated by Pericles disintegrated into a tool for personal rather than national advancement. W. Robert Connor argues that under the pressures of war language became an instrument of violence.[143] But Connor's interpretation is implicitly based on the assumption that an uncorrupted language had once been something other than instrumental. From the beginning, however, Thucydides' text consistently portrays language used instrumentally by each side to secure advantage for itself even prior to the war. Apparently aware of the problem, and unwilling to defend the purity of Pericles' language because of its support for war, Connor later points to a solitary, uncritical quotation of Homer by Thucydides.[144] According to Connor, the quotation refers the reader "back to an age of fabled tranquility and beauty, of poetry and order. We enter a festival of families bound together in common observances, contests of simple, physical joy. How complete a contrast to the perverted festival we have just witnessed in Corcyra!"[145] Connor goes on to claim that the "episode provides the contrast that lets us assess the events of Thucydides' day." If Connor is correct, he has apparently identified the single, brief passage in an otherwise forgotten portion of

the text in which Thucydides has encoded the lost ideal
which animates his entire *History*. It seems more likely
that the logic of Connor's decline-and-fall paradigm demands
an Eden-like reference point or standard by which to judge
the steepness of the fall.

Like James Boyd White, Connor ascribes to language the
task of setting limits, and he views the Corcyraean
Revolution as a loss of limits previously to be found in
language. The Corcyraean story is told as a series of
attempts at persuasion, Connor observes, but the theme is
ironic, he contends, because "discussion, argument,
persuasion produce no conciliation only growing horror and
violence."[146] What, we are entitled to ask, is the basis of
this expectation that talk should produce conciliation?
Connor apparently, and without reflection, presumes the
existence of a Platonic universe in which language refers to
and reflects a harmonious natural order. The structure of
Thucydides' text disputes that presumption, however.
Thucydides' text shows us a vision of reality and a
conception of natural order which is anything but
harmonious. In Thucydides' world nature is deeply agonistic
and, without being chaotic, permanently at war with itself.
Language has no special status in this world, and it is in-
distinguishable from any other instrument to be employed to
advantage.

In describing the Corcyraean Revolution, Connor
repeatedly refers to the "distortion," "abuse," or

"pathology" of language, thus referring by his own language to a standard of purity missing from the Corcyraean portrait. If something like Platonic harmony or "conciliation" is thought to supply the missing standard of purity, it would also give meaning to Connor's reference to limits which are violated in *stasis* and war. If harmony is the standard, then violence constitutes a natural violation of that standard. Armed with the Platonic ideal, Connor can then read Thucydides' text as a condemnation of war. "War becomes a teacher of violence," he claims, attributing the thought to Thucydides.[147] The "moral implication" of the Corcyraean episode, Connor concludes, is that the "drive for dominance, self-aggrandizement, and ambition are all manifestations of something in the very nature of man."[148] Connor's interpretation skirts the terminology of original sin, but the similarity between Thucydides' account of the Corcyraean *stasis* and his account of the plague at Athens demonstrates to Connor that the "something" in human nature is akin to a disease.

Much of the persuasivenes of Connor's position hinges on a controversial translation of a critical phrase from Thucydides.[149] Where Connor reads that war is a "teacher of violence," Peter Pouncey reads that war is a "harsh (or violent) teacher."[150] The former interpretation points to the immorality of war; the latter leaves it open to ask what is the lesson or truth imparted by war? We need not decide at this point which translation is most correct. It is

sufficient to observe that Connor's Platonic presuppositions woven into the moral decline-and-fall framework draw the interpretation in one direction to the exclusion of others.

Thucydides' account of the Corcyraean *stasis* suggests another view of the relationship between language, truth and power. Recall that in Thucydides' view, great political power is collective in nature. It is the expression of a united will or consensus behind a particular course of action. In the case of the Athenian assembly this singlemindednes, or *gnome*, is produced by Pericles' skillfull use of language. No Athenian leader after Pericles is able to produce and sustain that single-mindedness, even though Pericles' words echo through their efforts.[151] The reason for their failure, Thucydides indicates, is a deficiency of scale in their vision. The vision of greatness which informed the language of post-Periclean leaders was limited by standards of personal gain. On the other hand, the vision of greatness which informed Pericles' language was a vision of unlimited Athenian power and domination.

In the Platonic view implicitly imported by Connor, language approaches a transcendental status reflecting the truth of a harmonious cosmos violated by violence and war. In the heroic view of Thucydides, however, the cosmos is an *agon*, an arena of strife and competition for ascendence and advantage. In the heroic order, language is an instrument capable of producing an artificial harmony through artful

persuasion, a form of subjugation through words, but
language itself does not reflect or refer back to an
original, harmonious truth. In the heroic configuration of
reality, the position of Platonic truth is occupied by war.
In place of Platonic truth, Pericles' language invokes a
vision of competitive greatness (*arete*) so vast that it
dwarfs the personal aspirations of ordinary mortals. The
heroic ideal which informs the public discourse of Pericles,
and which also sustains the celebrated Athenian single-
mindedness, is an ideal of greatness in war. Tragically,
however, Thucydides also shows us that in the world which he
portrays, war necessarily prepares the way for *stasis*. The
prescribed path to greatness contains within itself the
seeds of its own demise, and the way up is also found to be
the way down.

The Melian Dialogue

The opposition between war and *stasis* presents a
paradox to post-Platonic thought. To the Platonic way of
thinking, peace and war represent the opposites of unity and
disunity, harmony and dissonance. But in the heroic,
agonistic world of Thucydides' text, war represents the
unifying ideal, the force of integration, while *stasis*
represents the force of dissolution and disintegration.
Yet, remaining within the confines of the heroic conception
of nature reflected in the text, it would be misleading to
think of the counter-tendencies of war and *stasis* as

entirely separate forces. They are opposites united together as arcs on a vertical circle; they generate and succeed one another much as seasons of the year.

Thucydides' observation that war leads to *stasis* is not necessarily a condemnation of war, for war is also heralded as the epitome of greatness. Instead, the observation may be an acknowledgement that the general law of decay is a governing principle of the cosmos along with the principle of concentration. The heroic stance of Athens, which seeks immortality through deeds so great, "whether for evil or for good," that they will never perish from memory does not pretend to negate that law. Rather the heroic choice enlists that law to assure death or decay at the proper moment--the acme of greatness--thereby cheating not death but time. Once again, the model is Homer's Achilles, who chooses not death over life, as if that choice were among the destinies offered, but rather the moment and manner of death which secures immortality in memory.

The universal status of the general law of decay is attested to by Thucydides when he tells us that "the sufferings which revolution [*stasis*] entailed upon the cities were many and terrible, such have occurred and always will occur, as long as the nature of mankind remains the same."[152] It is in this context that Thucydides says a few lines later that "war . . . proves a rough master," making it plausible that Thucydides' meaning is not that war is a teacher of violence but that war is a teacher of truth.

Thucydides' reference to the eternal recurrence of
stasis projects us both forward and backward in his own
text. Only a few lines earlier we had been informed that
the Corcyraean *stasis* was a preface to a similar convulsion
which engulfed not only Athens but the whole Hellenic world,
a convulsion which is dramatically portrayed in the final
chapters of Thucydides' work. In the other direction we are
reminded of Thucydides' statement early in the text that the
future of mankind would resemble the past and that this
truth constitutes a "possession for all time."

It is fitting that the end refers back to the
beginning, for the timeless truth which Thucydides finds
embedded in the course of the Peloponnesian War is a
circular path which joins together in an endless cycle the
opposites of war and *stasis*, integration and disintegration,
power and weakness. The initial Archaeology of Thucydides'
text leads us step by step from a description of the nomadic
instability and impermanence of "early times" in which there
was no "greatness," through the formation of successively
greater cities and associations, greater concentrations of
power, until finally power coalesced into two great rival
alliances: "At the head of the one stood Athens, at the
head of the other, Lacedaemon [Sparta], one the first naval,
the other the first military power in Hellas."[153] The
history of the war itself then tracks the ascending power of
Athens to its unprecedented height of greatness, followed by
its inevitable decline into fragmentation and *stasis*. The

two great forces of nature--association and dissolution,
power and weakness--are linked by the law of Necessity:
each is inevitable, and each contains within itself the
seeds of its own opposite which will grow to overcome it.[154]
Viewed in this configuration, power contains within itself
its only limits, and those limits are not ethical or moral,
but tragic in a heroic sense.

Thucydides dramatically compresses the circular
movement of Homeric nature into his account of the notorious
dialogue preceding the Athenian massacre of the inhabitants
of Melos. The dialogue appears at the rhetorical and
structural center of the text, and it is here that
Thucydides distills and arranges all of the contending
elements of the text into their respective positions.

To recapitulate briefly from Thucydides' account,[155]
Melos was a rather small island, a colony of Sparta, but one
which sought a "friendly neutrality" between the warring
parties of Athens and Sparta, and alliance with neither.
The Melian position became unbearable to Athens who
considered it an affront to Athenian power. Consequently,
Athens besieged Melos with overwhelming force, and delivered
an ultimatum: submit or be destroyed. Melos declined to
submit, and resisted briefly before being conquered by
Athens who then put to death all of the grown men, sold all
of the women and children for slaves, and colonized the
island for themselves.

The negotiations which preceded this annihilation are presented by Thucydides in the form of a stark dialogue in which Athens restricts the subject of discussion to what it calls matters of interest and expediency, and explicitly excludes appeal to notions of justice and right, since "right, as the world goes, is in question only between equals in power, while the weak suffer what they must."[156] In its actions, Athens claims merely to be following what it calls the "law of nature" in which both gods and men rule whenever they can. "We found it [this law] existing before us," Athens says, "and we shall leave it to exist forever after us; all we do is make use of it" as would any others in our position.[157]

The Athenian position certainly appears to be a claim to unlimited power, and it is this apparent loss of limits which places it at the heart of moral decline-and-fall interpretations. At Melos, Athens imposed without hesitation the same harsh punishment it had rescinded for Mytilene twelve years earlier, making it plausible to infer that Thucydides intended to portray a progressive moral decline on the part of Athens. Furthermore, the final line of Thucydides' account of the Melian episode is followed abruptly by a line introducing the grandiose and disastrous Athenian plan to conquer another island: Sicily. The juxtaposition lends itself to a view that Thucydides sought to dramatically link the *hubris* of Athens at Melos with the *nemesis* of Athenian defeat in Sicily.[158] Viewed from within

the heroic perspective, however, the Melian Dialogue suggests an alternative view in which the dialogue portrays not the moral inconstancy of Athens but rather the constant trajectory of power according to the law of Necessity governing the Homeric conception of nature.

The Melian Dialogue stands out as the only formal dialogue within Thucydides' text. Most other speeches tend to be organized into balanced pairs, often widely separated, and not addressed directly to each other but rather toward an assembly or gathering of some sort. The dialogue format of the Melian episode emphasizes its importance even as it heightens the sense of confrontation.

Thucydides informs us at the outset that the Melians prevented the Athenians from directly addressing "the people," permitting them only to address "the few."[159] The Athenians respond to this tactic saying that they know full well it is intended to prevent the Athenians from "deceiving" the people with seductive arguments. The Athenians then propose a dialogue in which the Melians will state their objections to the Athenian position, and the Athenians will answer them. In this manner we learn at the outset that the language of the dialogue will have a different status and a different purpose from that of the other speeches of the text. The Athenian proposal to submit to a dialogue counters the accusation of untruthfulness, thereby associating the dialogue format with the revelation of truth.

This is not a surprising move for Thucydides to make, for it was an evolving view at the time that the order of language bore a special relationship to the true order of nature and the nature of justice (*physis* and *dike*). It was a position later to be systematically explored by Plato, of course, but at the time it was deeply lodged within the production and performance of Greek tragedy as a public event. Thucydides, however, casts the Melian dialogue in an ironic light. To the extent that Greek tragedy was founded upon and defended a view of justice and nature at odds with the Homeric perspective,[160] Thucydides employs the Melian Dialogue to contest rather than endorse the tragic view.

As the Athenians are quick to point out, the strongest arguments of the Melians against their own annihilation or capitulation depend upon hope of good fortune, faith in the gods, and trust in the Spartans. Against these and other considerations of expedience advanced by the Melians, the Athenians counter with their interpretation of the "law of nature" and the primacy of power in the relations of both gods and men. The Melian Dialogue thus advances a view of truth in which language is both an agent of and a reflection of the general truth of power.

Does Thucydides mean then simply to side with the Athenian view of power as domination, and the artificiality of all limits? Few have ever believed Thucydides' work to be so uncomplicated. The Athenian version of the truth of power must be seen in its proper position on the wheel of

the dialogue, which is a dialogue between positions of power
and weakness. It has often been observed that the Athenian
position articulated in the Melian Dialogue resembles that
of the Persians against Athens in the Persian War as
recorded by Herodotus. Furthermore, the Melian reply to the
Athenians is posed in almost identical terms as the Athenian
reply to the Persians when faced with a similar demand for
submission.[161] Athens did not submit to the Persians, nor do
the Melians submit to the Athenians. The Athenians were not
destroyed, of course, as were the Melians, but instead
successfully repelled a far superior force against all odds
at the decisive Battle of Salamis. But if the position of
Melos resembles Athens' past, it also resembles Athens'
future in its defeat in Sicily in a battle which would be in
many respects a mirror image of the Battle of Salamis.
There, in Sicily, in its hour of defeat and in one of the
most memorably moving portraits in all literature, Athens,
in the voice of Nicias, the Athenian commander, would echo
Melos in its invocation of hope, justice, and favor of the
gods.[162]

What are we to conclude from these resemblances, these
possible substitutions? Must we concur with the decline-and
-fall view that the Melian Dialogue, poised between Salamis
and Sicily, dramatically portrays the moral blindness and
hubris of Athens? Not necessarily. The Melian Dialogue can
also be viewed as a temporal diagram of the trajectory of
power. Along the circumference of the circle traced by the

dialogue are all of the stages of *physis*: infancy, strength, decline; morning, noon, and night. At the moment of the dialogue Athens occupies the acme of power, much as Persia had before it. The image of Melos with its intimations of Sicily joins Athens' past and future, thus closing the circle.

The circumference of the Melian Dialogue dramatically recapitulates the trajectory of the Peloponnesian War, which completes a circle from Athens' weak position against the Persians to Athens weak position against the Sicilians. In between is imperialistic Athens at its greatest and most active height at Melos, where Athens resembles former Persia and Melos resembles the Athenian army in Sicily. Each point along the circumference of power is associated in the text with a particular view of justice, *dike*. Midway in its ascent to power, at the first congress at Sparta, Athens would first articulate the law of nature that the weaker should be subject to the stronger. But Athens' view then was muted and qualified by an ambiguous deference to moderation and restraint. The Athenian view was complemented by a further claim that cries of "justice" are raised only by the weak to further their own interests against the stronger, only to be abandoned whenever force might do as well. Opposite Athens position on the circle, below the plane of equality, stood Sparta. Sparta's view of justice was laconically voiced by Stenelaides who distrusts words and urges a simple faith in the justice of the gods to

rectify the imbalance. Later, at Melos, against the implicit claim that language constitutes the mirror of a justly balanced order of nature and a limit upon power, language would be stripped of its persuasive strategies and unmasked as a pure instrument and expression of domination. Later still, however, in the evening hour of its defeat in Sicily, Athens too would appeal to hope, justice, and the favor of the gods, just as Melos and Sparta had done before it.

Does this trajectory convict Athens of *hubris*, and vindicate the truth of *dike* as a self-balancing moral force in the cosmos? Not exactly. Not in the sense that it accuses Athens of a moral flaw in its failure to sustain a straighter, flatter trajectory. The changes which Athens exhibits in character are not shifts of a moral nature. Athens follows a path which exists before it and one which will continue to exist long after it, according to the timeless truth portrayed by Thucydides. The demand that Athens should be morally consistent is a Platonic demand which can operate meaningfully only in a world which has been reconfigured to accommodate that demand. What does remain truly constant, in Thucydides' cyclical view of history, is not the current occupant of any particular position on the circle, but only the circle itself. In that view, the only limits to power are those which power necessarily generates itself; and the only justice is found in time.

Notes

[1] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Revised with an Introduction by T. E. Wick, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Modern Library, 1982), 7.87. All further citations will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

[2] T. E. Wick, introduction to *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, ibid., xxi.

[3] Hunter R. Rawlings III, *The Structure of Thucydides' History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 45.

[4] Thucydides, 5.25-26.

[5] Rawlings, p. 12.

[6] Rawlings, pp. 255-72.

[7] See, e.g., Jacqueline De Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), 3; Jaeger, vol. 1, 392; Peter R. Pouncey, *The Necessities of War: A Study of Thucydides' Pessimism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), chapt. 1.

[8] Thucydides, 1.22.4

[9] Rawlings, p. 269.

[10] Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (New York: Greenwood, 1969)

[11] James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 86.

[12] White, p. 87.

[13] White, p. 88.

[14] White, p. 90. For a more pessimistic view, see Pouncey, *Necessities of War*. Thucydides' disdain for "hope" (*elpis*) throughout the text seems to tell against White's interpretation.

[15] White, Chapter 2. White furnishes an excellent and concise description of heroic culture on p. 27. I do not claim that White's interpretation is erroneous, only that the text admits of opposing interpretations.

[16] White, p. 35.

[17] White, p. 24.

[18] White, p. 41.

[19] White, p. 41.   In context White attributes this appeal to a specific textual image of watchfires on the plain. White, however, is clear that the appeal to "normalcy" is not confined to this passage, and that it is in fact only made possible by the longing for resolution which White claims is invoked by the text.

[20] White, p. 306, note 13, quoting Arnaldo Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), p. 120, on Greek culture: "War was an ever present reality in Greek life; it was a focus for emotions, ethical values, social rules. . . . War was the center of Greek life."

[21] White, pp. 42, 90.

[22] White, pp. 54-55.

[23] White, p. 54:   "But by that standard, all cultures are impossible, for none is rooted in the sense of common humanity and fidelity to *what is real* that marks this moment" of reconciliation between Priam and Achilles.   See also p. 58:   "The Iliad instructs us in the *reality* of such a universal vision, while at the same time teaching us that it is imperfectly attainable by men." [Emphasis added].

[24] See, e.g., Thucydides, 1.10, 1.21-22.   See also Thucydides 2.41 in which Pericles refers to Homer and "others of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression which they give to melt at the touch of fact. . . ."

[25] Thucydides, 1.1; 1.21.

[26] Pouncey, p. 11.

[27] Thucydides, 5.25-26.

[28] Rawlings, p. 12.

[29] Thucydides, 1.11.

[30] Thucydides, 1.23.   In his truncated estimation of the Persian War, Thucydides also manages to curtly diminish its historian, Herodotus.

[31] Thucydides, 1.20-21.   Herodotus is the unnamed target of these passages, along with the "exaggerations" of the poetic craft of Homer.

[32] Thucydides, 1.23.

[33] See, e.g., Charles Norris Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965).

[34] There is of course little agreement on the precise nature of that truth, except that it is a truth concerning power. See, e.g., David Grene, *Man in His Pride: A Study in the Political Philosophy of Thucydides and Plato* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1950); W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984); Pouncey; Jaeger; De Romilly; among others.

[35] Thucydides, 1.22.

[36] Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975), 145, quoted by Connor, 242, n.12.

[37] For a discussion of the question of utility, see Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides*, pp. 149-55. For another view, see Connor, *Thucydides*, pp. 242-48.

[38] Thucydides, 1.1.

[39] Thucydides, 1.23, translated by Connor, p. 32.

[40] Rawlings, p. 68.

[41] Thucydides, 1.23.

[42] Cornford, p. 59.

[43] Cornford, p. 57-58.

[44] White, note 33, pp. 310-11 [emphasis in original].

[45] White, p. 60.

[46] See, e.g. Jaeger and Pouncey.

[47] See Pouncey, p. 173, note 6. Pouncey emphasizes "human nature" but is sensitive to the "layers of necessity" from which the title of his book is derived. But see also p. 184, note 2, where Pouncey claims that Thucydides' conception of Necessity refers not to a "cosmic" force, but instead embodies a principle governing human action. For another view, see Grene, *Man In His Pride*, pp. 56-92.

[48] Jaeger, pp. 397-98 [emphasis in original].

[49] Thucydides, 1.1.

[50] Thucydides, 1.22.

[51] Thucydides, 1.23.

[52] Thucydides, 1.89-117.

[53] Connor, p. 33.

[54] Thucydides, 1.25.

[55] Thucydides, 1.26.

[56] Thucydides, 1.35-36.

[57] Thucydides, 1.42.

[58] Thucydides, 1.44.

[59] White, p. 66.

[60] White, p. 67.

[61] White, p. 68.

[62] Thucydides, 1.28-29.

[63] Thucydides, 1.39.

[64] Thucydides, 1.31.

[65] See, e.g., Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*. For a contrary view, See Pouncey, *Necessities of War*.

[66] Thucydides, 1.76.

[67] Thucydides, 1.71.

[68] Thucydides, 1.69.

[69] Thucydides, 1.70.

[70] Cf. Jaeger, *Paideia, The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, p. 40: Thucydides "was accustomed to envisage the relation of one state to another as the natural and necessary conflict of opposing principles."

[71] Thucydides, 1.72.

[72] Thucydides, 1.75.

[73] Thucydides, 1.76.

[74] Thucydides, 1.76.

[75] Thucydides, 1.72.

[76] Thucydides, 1.80-86.

[77] Thucydides, 1.82.

[78] Thucydides, 1.86.

[79] Thucydides, 1.88.

[80] Thucydides, 1.23.

[81] Thucydides, 1.22.

[82] Thucydides, 1.89-117.

[83] Thucydides, 1.97.

[84] Thucydides, 1.93.

[85] Thucydides, 1.90.

[86] Thucydides, 1.120-124.

[87] Thucydides, 1.139.

[88] Connor, p. 72.

[89] Pouncey, p. 74.

[90] Thucydides, 1.139.

[91] Esp. Thucydides, 2.65.

[92] At least as far as Thucydides' text portrays it. See Plutarch's *Pericles* for a slightly less glowing assessment.

[93] Thucydides, 1.127.

[94] Thucydides, 1.140.

[95] Connor, 55, n.9, notes that the concept of *gnome* is extremely important in Thucydides' text. It can be translated as "reason and intelligence" in contrast to the passions, or it can mean "planning and rational control" in contrast to chance or luck. Connor translates it as "intelligence, planning, and resolve." The element of "resolution," in the sense of maintaining a constant focus which would otherwise dissolve, deserves emphasis as the best expression of Thucydides' meaning. For a comprehensive study of *gnome* in Thucydides' *History*, see Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides*

[96] Thucydides, 1.141.

[97] Thucydides, 2.35-46.

[98] Peter Pouncey, *Necessities of War*, p. 83, observes that "the claim that Athens is the school of Hellas is based strikingly on the evidence of her power."

[99] Thucydides, 2.41.

[100] James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, is an exception to the rule when he observes that the Funeral Oration contains no principle by which the Athenian empire might be limited. (p. 71; also note 17, p. 307.) White's observation is confirmed by Pericles' third speech, which expressly claims that Athenian power, and empire, is unlimited provided that the Athenians are willing to bide their time and not lose their focus.

[101] Thucydides, 2.64.

[102] Thucydides, 1.23.

[103] Thucydides, 2.38.

[104] Thucydides, 1.141.

[105] Thucydides, 1.141.

[106] Thucydides, 1.144; also above, p. 38.

[107] Thucydides, 2.65.

[108] Thucydides, 3.36.

[109] Thucydides, 3.49. Thucydides may well have favored the reversal, as most commentators believe, but the debate over the issue is almost certainly intended to demonstrate the uncertain, and shrinking, grounds available to support those sentiments.

[110] Thucydides, 2.65.

[111] Thucydides, 1.143.

[112] Thucydides, 2.65.

[113] They also tend to overlook the rather obvious fact that Pericles' celebrated "restraint" is a war strategy designed to extend Athenian dominion beyond all previously imagined limits. To some degree both Connor and Pouncey each examine standard approaches to the text and find them strained.

[114] James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, chapt. 3, pp. 59-92. W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides*, adopts a similar view. See esp. chapt. 3, pp. 79-107; and Conclusion, pp. 231-250.

[115] White, p. 81.

[116] White, p. 91.

[117] White's argument is nonetheless admirable for the intellectual honesty with which he acknowledges the difficulty of his own position.

[118] For example, the Athenian decision to rescind the decree condemning the entire Mytilenian population to death or slavery originated in repentance of "the horrid cruelty of a decree which condemned a whole city to the fate merited only by the guilty." Thucydides, 3.36.

[119] White concedes that the moral judgment apparently provoked by the text has no available standing within the world depicted by the text. However, he interprets this *lacuna* as a call from the text to the reader to make ontological space available for such moral appeals. The latter interpretation is made possible only by first raising one reader's response to the text to universal status, and then attributing that response to the authorial design of the text. It seems to me that weaving one's own moral responses into the intentions of a text, as White's argument explicitly does, may be more misleading than revelatory.

[120] White, p. 85-86.

[121] I am aware of few interpretations which remain immune from reading Thucydides' text, implicitly or explicitly, as moral drama. One which does largely resist the temptation is Peter Pouncey's *Necessities of War*.

[122] Connor, p. 99.

[123] Peter Pouncey argues in *Necessities of War*, for example, that *both* sides in the war behave in essentially the same manner. See p. 167, note 15.

[124] The terms are from W. Robert Connor's characterizations of the Athenian use of language. (Connor, *Thucydides*, 94-102 *passim*.)

[125] "Civil strife" is almost too mild to convey the convulsive violence of the disorder, but other terms such as "factionalism," "civil war," and even "revolution" are more misleading yet. See Connor, p. 96, note 39, for some of the difficulties of adequately conveying the meaning of this term.

[126] See above, p. 34.

[127] The *oligoi*, of course, were not only "few" but also tended to be the wealthy *aristoi*, or noble families. The *demos* referred to the larger and poorer commons.

[128] Thucydides, 1.24.

[129] See Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 34, note 33, for a succinct description of the Corcyraean moral position in this affair. See also Pouncey, *Necessities of War*, pp. 55-56, for a clarification of the political inversions involved in the Athenian alliance with Corcyra.

[130] Thucydides, 3.81.

[131] Thucydides, 3.82.

[132] See Pouncey, p. 178, note 2, on this point.

[133] Connor, *Thucydides*, pp. 96-97.

[134] White, 35.

[135] Thucydides, 2.65.

[136] For a comprehensive view of the Mytilenian Debate, see White, *When Words Lose their Meaning*, pp. 72-76; Connor, *Thucydides*, pp. 82-89; and Pouncey, *Necessities of War*, pp. 85-87.

[137] Thucydides, 2.65.

[138] Thucydides, 3.82.

[139] Thucydides, 3.83.

[140] Thucydides, 2.65.

[141] Due to Athenian naval power, for example. The Archaeology suggests that Athenian wealth and naval power contributed as much to Athenian *gnome* as did Periclean leadership.

[142] Thucydides, 2.65.

[143] Connor, *Thucydides*, pp. 94, 101.

[144] Thucydides, 3.104.

[145] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 107.

[146] Connor, *Thucydides*, pp. 97-98.

[147] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 101.

[148] Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 102.

[149] *Biaios didiskalos.* (Thucydides, 3.82.)

[150] Connor, 102, n.57; Pouncey, 93. Connor argues that the Greek phrasing is ambiguous and can be read either way. Pouncey (182, n.5) rejects the argument, saying that "in Greek, disciplines are not conveyed by adjectives modifying 'teacher.'"

[151] The parallels, for example, between the speeches of Pericles and the words of Cleon--"the most violent man at Athens,"--have been extensively noted in the literature.

[152] Thucydides, 3.82.

[153] Thucydides, 1.18.

[154] Peter Pouncey, *Necessities of War*, often astutely observes the circular order of the text. See, e.g., 37, 147, and especially 48-53. See also David Grene, *Man in His Pride* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 60, on the same topic.)

[155] Thucydides, 5.84-116.

[156] Thucydides, 5.89.

[157] Thucydides, 5.105.

[158] This view is defended by, among others, Jacqueline De Romilly in *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 311-43. De Romilly nicely captures the attribution of a moral dimension to the *hubris-nemesis* relation when she defines it as a "sin against reality which reality itself punishes," 328. For a contrary view, see Pouncey, *Necessities of War*, 90-96, and esp. 167, n.15.

[159] Thucydides, 5.84-85.

[160] This claim will be further explored in Chapter 2 below.

[161] Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.143, quoted by Connor, *Thucydides*, 157.

[162] Thucydides, 7.77.

CHAPTER 3

TRAGEDY AND DEMOCRACY

From *Oikos* To *Polis*

It is noteworthy that we learn from Thucydides next to
nothing of the internal political arrangements or structure
of Athenian democracy. Nor do we learn many details of the
actual decision-making processes which lay behind the
policies and conduct of the war Thucydides so brilliantly
chronicles. This seems odd since Pericles explicitly, and
Athenians generally, attributed their city's power and
greatness to its democratic rule. We have already
encountered of course Thucydides' own apparent disdain for
democracy and his claim that what passed for democracy in
Athens was in fact leadership by the "first citizen."[1] But
can the omission be attributed solely to Thucydides'
antipathy to democracy, or perhaps to the author's editorial
decision to confine his *History* to external events of the
war? The alternative possibility must be considered that
the Homeric conception of a cyclical natural order--with its
corollary views of language, truth, power and justice--which
serves Thucydides so well as a theoretical account of the
war, simply can not be extended to provide a comparable
account of the democratic *polis* as well.

Politically, the most significant development between
the Homeric age exemplified in the Iliad and the Periclean

age of fifth-century Athens was the emergence of the Greek
polis, or city-state. The *Iliad* portrays a world in which
political organization is minimal and might be described
without too much distortion as "tribal." Ties of loyalty
and obligation were defined by membership in extended
household or kinship groups, and by reciprocal bonds of
philia between members of different families. The term
philia is conventionally translated as "friendship" but
would probably be better rendered as "alliance."[2] To a
modern ear "friendship" connotes a relationship based more
on mutual affection than one based on favors earned and
owed. Yet the latter dimension takes considerable
precedence over the former in the early Greek relationship
of *philia*.

The notion of alliance is critical to an understanding
of social relations in the pre-political world of Homeric
society.[3] As described by A. W. H. Adkins, "Homeric man
lived in a society of virtually autonomous small social
units called *oikoi*, noble households each under the
leadership of a local chieftain. . . . The *oikos* was at once
the largest effective social, political and economic unit,"
and only a tenuous, shifting structure of relationships
existed between *oikoi*.[4] Warfare was a prominent part of the
normal relations between *oikoi*, where these households
either fought one another or joined together to fight others
in a permanent quest for *time*, or honor.[5] The customary
expectation of reciprocal service and protection surrounding

the relation of *philia*, or guest-friendship, supported a primary network of alliances in these conflicts. It must be emphasized that these relations were personal, not political in a modern sense. Bonds of mutual obligation and protection were formed between persons not communities, although these personal bonds might in certain circumstances be extended to other members of the family unit. While the bonds of *philia* and similar ties may well have been the forerunner of political and military alliances between more recognizably political units, such abstract units did not yet exist in a meaningful sense in the Homeric world.[6]

The personal and apolitical nature of these earlier alliances is well-illustrated by an episode in the *Iliad*.[7] In the heat of battle the Greek warrior Diomedes encounters the Trojan warrior Glaucus. In the course of one of those extended genealogical accounts which identify heroes in Homer, the two men discover that they are mutual *philoi* by virtue of a compact of guest-friendship made by their grandfathers. Consequently, even though they have never met before, and despite the fact that they are enemies in war, Glaucus the Trojan and Diomedes the Greek will not fight one another out of respect for the bond of *philia* between them. The same episode illustrates the apolitical, or pre-political, character of the Trojan War. This was not a conflict between nation-states but rather a personal vendetta between the Greek brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus on the one hand, and the Trojan Paris on the other, fought

in order to avenge a violation of the code of guest-
friendship committed by Paris against Menelaus. The Greek
"army" is a loose assembly of great households under
independent chieftains bound together by personal bonds and
the perennial pursuit of honor, glory and booty. Agamemnon
is the leader ("commander" would be too strong a word) in
part by virtue of his close relationship to Menelaus and in
part because he is able to secure the assistance of the
largest forces. Nevertheless, as the *Iliad* makes clear,
Achilles or any other chieftain is free to leave and
withdraw his forces at any time, restrained only by concern
for one's own personal reputation and honor.

The identity of the Greek *polis* as a political
structure evolved slowly as relations between the chieftains
of these great households solidified and stabilized.[8] Two
consequences seem to follow. First of all, the original
polis would tend toward aristocracy, oligarchy, or the rule
of the few. Secondly, the central problem facing the
emerging community would be the problem of power. The *polis*
would naturally tend toward aristocracy because it
originated as an association of chieftains of great
households, and not initially as a merger of those
households into an overarching community.[9] These chieftains
were, collectively, the *aristoi*, the best men, by Homeric
standards. Their primary loyalty was always to their own
oikos and its *philoi*, and their primary aim was always to
secure and advance their own powerful status through

competitive success, *arete*, and the acquisition of tribute and honor, *time*.[10] Early Greek culture was, and remained, fiercely competitive. Its heroic values were well-suited to its agonistic texture, and they were deeply embedded in an agonistic view of nature which justified those values and that culture.[11]

In its earliest stages then the Greek *polis* was a precarious "assembly" of the powerful leaders of distinctly autonomous groups.[12] In any such association the problem of power must be paramount. For there to be an association at all there must be some form of rule; and some form of rule implies some form of submission. Yet to the heroic Greek *aristoi*, submission could only be equated with defeat. Competitive success, *arete*, the highest virtue of heroic Greek culture, could only mean one thing: victory and domination. The Homeric conception of natural order contains no space for an affirmation of equal power. Everything is either on its way up or on its way down in an endless cycle of growth and decay, strength and weakness. Equality is but a transient moment not to be sustained in the eternal contest for ascendance. The early history of the *polis* therefore is necessarily marked by intrigue, civil strife, and intermittent tyranny against a background of uneasy cooperation between heads of great households.

Whatever mystery attaches to the origin of the Greek *polis*, it is grounded in deeply rooted and tenacious Greek values of freedom, independence, and self-sufficiency.

Within the Homeric universe, freedom, *eleutheria*, was a "competitive combative concept, closely linked to *arete*, the quality which enables one to have freedom oneself and control over others."[13] The early Greek idea of freedom is inseparably linked to the ideal of domination or rule over others. To be free is to rule others; to submit to others is to be unfree. No other options were thinkable. Equality would be viewed as a mere standoff, not a goal to be pursued.

Nevertheless, the freedom sought and defended in early Greece was never the freedom of the individual in the modern conception. Just as no element of the natural universe could escape its assigned place in a larger order of things (*dike*), to a Greek mind every individual also necessarily occupied a prescribed position within a larger social order. Moreover, the social order was always embedded and reflected in the natural order of the cosmos, as is evidenced by the consistent appeal to *dike* as the most fundamental principle of good order, both natural and social, which persisted throughout Greek history. The early Greek conception of order, either natural or social, did not yet imply equality, but it did imply a certain reciprocity and an acknowledged set of limits, however vague or contestable, upon both ruler and ruled. To aspire to the disconnected and unlimited freedom of the modern individual would have been considered a form of madness to an ancient Greek. Such a terrifying

and insecure freedom would also constitute the most severe form of punishment in the Greek world: exile.

The Greek concept of freedom in the sense of self-sufficiency always referred to a larger social unit than the individual. Initially it may have applied to the family unit of blood relations. Eventually it applied to the *oikos*, the extended household, and its *philoi*. Finally it applied to the *polis* itself and its constituents, but not before the Homeric conception of natural order, *dike*, was undermined and transformed by its own extension beyond its original sphere.

Homeric *dike* is compatible with the hierarchical relations of mutual dependence which define the Greek *oikos*. And the same conception of *dike* might be stretched to fit the more or less egalitarian alliances between small numbers of *aristoi* for specific strategic purposes. But the lack of ontological space for permanent equality severely tests the possibility of a larger, more stable political order premised upon equal power, even if that power-sharing is confined, as it initially was, to a few aristocratic heads of great households. It would be overly facile to imagine democracy evolving "naturally" from such strategic alliances among equally powerful *aristoi*. Before the idea of democracy could emerge and be sustained as a legitimate, justifiable political order, the very concept of "nature" from which it is thought to evolve would need to be radically transformed. It is this transformation, more than

the origins of the *polis* itself, which is mysterious. For democracy, as a sharing of power among the common people as equals, could not evolve from the principle of *dike*, with its limited space for equality, inscribed in the Homeric conception of nature.

Although the actual conditions for a transition from aristocratic rule to democratic rule were undoubtedly complex and slow to evolve, the formal institutionalization of democracy in Athens is conventionally dated to the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 B.C. following the Peisistratid tyranny.[14] Prior to Cleisthenes' reforms Athenian history had been dominated by conflict and a struggle for power between three or four great aristocratic families and their *philoi*.[15] Cleisthenes, who was himself a member of the great Alkmeonid family, as was Pericles after him, reorganized the *polis* on a new, purely geographic basis rather than the former clan basis. In place of the four Ionian tribes which traditionally made up Attic society, Cleisthenes set up a system of ten new tribes in such a way that each tribe was now composed of *demes*, or districts, from each of three regions of the city: those closest to the center, those on the coast, and those in between. As a consequence each tribe then embodied a cross-section of populations, regional characteristics, and activities which made up the city.

Cleisthenes is also credited with introducing the practice of attaching the *deme* name to one's own name

instead of the traditional attachment of the father's name. Although this practice was slow to catch on, it did eventually become standard, and its intent was apparently to emphasize membership in the new civic organization over traditional hereditary ties. The final innovation of Cleisthenes was the introduction of ostracism, a procedure where annually the assembly might send a single man into exile for ten years without depriving him of either his citizenship or his property. Apparently, however, this particular provision went unused for another twenty years until 487 B.C.

Admittedly, it is not immediately clear from this brief account why Cleisthenes' reforms should be credited with the institutionalization of democracy in Athens. But the opacity of the account is apparently not due to its brevity or incompleteness. Others have also puzzled over claims, both ancient[16] and modern, that Cleisthenes was the creator of democracy in Athens.[17] What is not disputed is that the reforms were intended to dilute or "mix up" traditional aristocratic concentration and influence. More controversial is the interpretation of Cleisthenes' own strategy. Was it a complicated and shrewd attempt to rearrange the city in such a way as to benefit the Alkmeonids over the other aristocratic families, as W. G. Forrest argues?[18] Or did Cleisthenes seek power for himself only in order to institute his reforms and transcend the old conflicts, as Ehrenberg argues?[19] On the first

interpretation Cleisthenes was a clever politician who
outsmarted himself. Unable to achieve sufficient support
from the other families, he was forced to enlist the backing
of the *demos*, the common people, thereby initiating
democracy accidently. On the second interpretation
Cleisthenes was a selfless politician who sought to overturn
the traditional dominance of the aristocratic families,
including his own, for the greater good of the city.

Efforts to resolve the question have often sought to
ascertain the exact geographic boundaries of the *demes*, as
well as more precise knowledge of the patterns of influence
of the great families. This approach has thus far proven
futile because the historical record is simply insufficient
to determine the answers. Moreover the attempt is
misdirected. Of far greater import is the question of why
Cleisthenes' reforms, whatever their strategic status,
should have been widely, even enthusiastically received
among both *demos* and *aristoi*. That they were well-received
is attested by the relative internal stability of Athenian
democracy for almost two hundred years.[20] As M. I. Finley
observes, "Neither the sovereign Assembly with its unlimited
right of participation, nor the popular jury-courts nor the
selection of officials by lot nor ostracism could have
prevented either chaos on the one hand or tyranny on the
other, had there not been the self-control among enough of
the citizen-body to contain its own behavior within
bounds."[21] But what accounts for those bounds and what is

the source of this "self-control" which Finley attributes to
the prior Greek sense of community? If, prior to
Cleisthenes' reforms, the Athenian *polis*, like all Greek
polei, was strained by tension between the *aristoi* and the
demos; and if, as all observers agree that it did, that
tension persisted as a prominent strain in Athenian
politics, reference to a primary sense of community appears
to beg the question. For it is precisely the source and
cohesion of that sense of community which needs explaining.
Finley is right: Cleisthenes' reforms could not create that
sense of community if it did not already exist in some
fashion.

Elsewhere Finley frames the issue differently. Why, he
wonders, did the reforms of Cleisthenes not provoke a
political debate over the theoretical question of
legitimacy? Instead, he says, the Greeks debated the nature
of justice. In the "absence of any need to grapple with the
problem of legitimacy,"[22] Finley concludes that external
"conquest alone made possible political stability."[23]
Finley's conclusion fits with the Homeric/Thucydidean view
of natural order that an equality of powers is sustainable
only so long as that equality is a contingent strategy of
domination over others. And it vindicates the heroic view
that democracy and imperialism go hand in hand, each
supporting and, eventually, each undermining the other in an
endless cycle.

But Finley's conclusion overlooks the possibility that the continuing Greek debate over the nature of justice (*dike*) may have functioned in fact as a debate over political legitimacy, a debate in which the heroic legacy and its political implications were contested. The social order was traditionally thought to be embedded in the natural order, and human law or custom (*nomos*) was thought to be justified by the order of nature. In the ancient Greek context we would then expect that a question as to the propriety of the political order would ultimately be posed as a question of *dike* itself.

Dike: From *Eunomia* to *Isonomia*

We should not be surprised to learn that the meaning of *dike* tends to be elusive, not least because it tends to shift over time. From its earliest beginnings as an exclusive circle of ruling *aristoi*, the emerging structure of the *polis* presented a paradoxical challenge to the older Homeric conception of *dike*. In the older view "nature" could be seen as an agonistic order of power in which the eternal struggle for dominance brought about a regular succession of victories and defeats for the various elements (i.e., powers) of nature. This was not a conception of lawless nature, however. The principle of *dike*, order, referred to the regularities and the limits of the contest. "Nature" embodied a series of concentric spheres, each a separate arena of contest. Every element of nature was

confined to its appropriate sphere and had its natural
opponent. To be unjust, to violate *dike*, was to leave one's
proper sphere and to challenge an inappropriate opponent.
The order of nature prescribed a relatively fixed hierarchy
of spheres within which competition would assure not only
that each sphere was ruled at any given moment by the best,
it would also assure an "orderly" transition whenever the
best inevitably weakened and became unfit to rule. Of
course "best" in this conception of order meant best at war
or competition. But under the harshly competitive
conditions of Homeric society, that was certainly an
important measure of "good" or "best." It was also
consistent with the hierarchical social structure of the
oikos in which one man ruled at the top.

In principle, the older conception of *dike* could be
extended to justify a hierarchical organization of *polis*
life. But with its limited space for equality, and with its
emphasis on continual strife rather than cooperation, the
same conception of *dike* was strained to provide a legitimate
basis for stable rule by a group of *aristoi* from different
oikoi, none of whom was prepared to concede superiority or
even equality to any other. The emerging *polis* thus
somewhat paradoxically demanded a conception of *dike* which
might justify both equality and inequality at the same time.
Equality at the top was needed in order to achieve stability
among the ruling *aristoi*, and to prevent disintegration into
tyranny or *stasis*. But, in order for the *aristoi* to

preserve their ruling status, inequality between the *aristoi* and the *demos* below needed to be justified as well.[24] What was required, in short, was a justification of equal rule over others who had little or no participation in that rule.

Under the pressure of these twin political imperatives the political principle of *isonomia*--literally "equal law"-- emerged to satisfy the first condition: equality among rulers, a condition premised upon a fundamental inequality between ruler and ruled. The second condition--hierarchical inequality--was justified by the traditional principle of *eunomia*, good order, anchored in the traditional conception of *dike* as a hierarchical arrangement of spheres. J. Peter Euben provides an admirably succinct characterization of *eunomia*:

> *Eunomia* rested on the acknowledgement of natural hierarchies and inequalities. . . . *Eunomia* was the recognition and observance of the boundaries that marked and defined those places and ways. To ignore them, to cross the boundaries and encroach on an area where one didn't belong, was to violate nature, confound the law, make for disorder and injustice, and commit an act of impiety. . . . In the world of men as in the world of the gods, hierarchy and differentiation were the norm.[25]

The problem which arose, however, was that *isonomia* and *eunomia* each claimed to be universal principles of justice, yet each was grounded in a vision of natural order incompatible with the other, making it difficult to sustain both *isonomia* and *eunomia* simultaneously. *Isonomia* could

justify equality among the *aristoi*, and in principle, it could justify equality among the *demos*, but it could not justify inequality between the *aristoi* and the *demos*. The traditional principle of *eunomia*, on the other hand, could justify inequality between ruler and ruled, *aristoi* and *demos*, but the same principle could not also serve to justify equality among rulers. This is the dilemma of legitimacy which furnished the theoretical breeding ground for the emergence of democracy at Athens.

Against the traditional principle of *eunomia* it was initially *isonomia*, equal law, not *demokratia*, rule by the people, which was used to justify the reforms of Cleisthenes. Indeed there is considerable reason to believe that at the time of Cleisthenes' reforms the term *demokratia* did not yet exist.[26] The term *isonomia* did designate a principle of political equality, an ideal, which eventually came to justify democracy, a form of government, but originally the principle of *isonomia* did not necessarily imply a democratic polity.[27]

"*Isonomia*" is a compound word of two parts: *iso* (equal) and *nomos* (law). The term thus lends itself most readily to translation as "equality under the law" or "equality through the law." The full meaning of the term is adequately conveyed, however, only through an appreciation of law as an expression or medium of power and rule. In that sense *isonomia* means an equalitarian distribution of power among participants, i.e., those who share power, in a

political community. Furthermore the sense of equality expressed in the term *isonomia* does not imply a harmonious equalizing, and therefore neutralizing, of power. The equality found in *isonomia* refers to the sustained tension involved when one power is pitted against another power in a perpetually balanced opposition.

Although *isonomia* was always a political principle, we know little of its actual use in the debates leading to Cleisthenes' reforms. We learn of its meaning partially from medical texts roughly contemporaneous with the reforms of Cleisthenes. Alcmaeon, a physician, attributed the state of health to the maintenance of a symmetrical balance (*isonomia*) of power between opposing forces such as the hot and the cold, the wet and the dry, or the bitter and the sweet, etc. Ill health or disease he ascribed to a "monarchy" in which one power achieved supremacy over its opposite.[28] The unhealthy state, the unnatural state, is thus one in which a single power is superior to all others. The healthy state is one in which power is equally divided among opposing forces. Health is therefore conceived as a state of dynamic equilibrium in which power is always limited by an equal and opposite power.

The use of political imagery to describe health and disease in medicine is consistent with the practice of pre-Socratic thinkers to explain natural phenomena in political terms. We should not too hastily conclude, however, that the use of political metaphor is "merely" rhetorical. The

use of political metaphor to explain events in the physical realm secures its effect precisely from the fact that both nature and the political realm are seen as arenas of power in conflict. Alcmaeon's conception of physical health as an *isonomia* of powers, and his corresponding conception of disease as a monarchy suggests that the problem of political power and its limits formed a major axis of thought during the period.

As noted earlier, *isonomia* furnished the principal justification for Cleisthenes' reforms, and it continued to justify further extensions of democratic practice over time. Once having ascertained the meaning of *isonomia* as an equilibrium of power between those elements participating in the rule of a political community, it might seem as though we have sufficiently accounted for the appeal of this principle to both the *aristoi* and the *demos* of Athens in 508 B.C. But we have not. To modern thought which already believes in the transcendence of democratic rule it might appear that in any fair contest pitting equality and inequality against one another, equality would "naturally" win. But this view implicitly attributes to equality an immanent, teleological or transcendent status it did not and could not possess prior to the sixth century B.C. The appeal of *isonomia* as a political ideal is grounded in a conception of nature in which order exists and is maintained because nature is an equilibrium of powers engaged in perpetual but balanced opposition to one another. This

conception of nature as an equilibrium of powers is most strongly associated with the thought of the Ionian physicist Anaximander of Miletus, ca. 575 B.C.

In a radical break with tradition Anaximander was apparently the first systematic thinker to conceive of the cosmos in geometrically spherical terms in contrast to the more layered Homeric view. In Anaximander's view the earth lay at rest at the center of the cosmos, equidistant from all points of the surrounding sphere.[29] In the older view the earth was located in a hierarchical structure midway between the world above and the world below. In that position the earth was thought to require a support or foundation, an *arche*, on which to rest in order to retain its stability. But in a bold view which eliminated hierarchical considerations and dispensed with the need for a foundational *arche*, Anaximander's cosmology attributed the earth's stability to its location at the geometric center, as though it were suspended by the equal radii governing the spherical structure of the cosmos.

The term "*arche*" has various meanings. It can mean "foundation," the firm ground upon which something rests. Or, it can mean "origin" or "first principle" in the sense of "that from which all else follows." Thirdly, it can mean "rule" in the political sense preserved in the terminology of "monarchy," rule of one, "oligarchy," rule of the few, and "anarchy," no rule at all. The common thread which ties these meanings together is the concept of power. That which

supports everything else, that which is the source of everything else, and that which rules or dominates everything else are all superior powers. The spherical geometry of Anaximander's cosmology eliminates the need for a power superior to all others. To Anaximander the earth is stabilized, held in place, simply by virtue of its position in the center of the cosmos, equidistant from all other points on the celestial circumference.

The order which governs Anaximander's cosmos is neither static nor entirely harmonious. The elements which constitute the members of the cosmos are conceived by Anaximander as mutual opponents, pairs of opposites, each of which encroaches upon and seeks to dominate the other. Order is preserved, however, by the fundamental "law," *dike*, of the cosmos which is *isonomia*, an equilibrium of powers. The elements of the cosmos are balanced against one another in such a way that if one of them is dominant for a time, it is in its own turn then dominated by its opposition.

The language of Anaximander's text (actually only a fragment) is permeated with political concepts and terminology. The elements of the cosmos are construed both as "powers" and "members" or "constituents" which "encroach" upon on another. The elements are said to "pay reparation" or "penalty" to one another for their "injustices" according to the lawful "judgment" of time. With reference to the earth's position, it remains in the center, it does not fall, because it is not "dominated" by anything. This

language strongly suggests that the school of thought for which Anaximander was the spokesman represented an attempt to deal theoretically with the political problem of power which in turn was recognized as a problem of limits.

Unlike his predecessors, however, Anaximander saw no need to account for order and stability in the cosmos in terms of the rule of a superior power. From Anaximander's perspective, the older, hierarchical view posed an insurmountable problem of limits. For if one element of the cosmos should possess sufficient power to dominate all the rest, then that power would necessarily be unlimited and would, of necessity, envelop and destroy all the rest.[30] Anaximander's solution to the problem lay in his geometric conception of an equilibrium of powers. For Anaximander it was equality, not supremacy, which furnished theoretical limits to power and implied a guarantee of order in the cosmos.

Anaximander's cosmology retained many features of traditional Greek thought. The universe was still infused and animated by power. It was still an *agon*, a universal contest of forces in conflict. And, most importantly, it still conceived of power as self-limiting. In the older, Homeric view the path of power followed a vertically circular course in the manner of an upright wheel. In the course of its trajectory from low to high and back to low again, power naturally sought its greatest possible height. But in so doing, power also necessarily generated within

itself the seeds of its own opposition and destruction. It generated an opponent which would inevitably grow to overcome it, one which would itself then turn and repeat the same eternal trajectory of *hubris* and self-destruction all over again. It is a familiar pattern repeated throughout Greek literature. Aeschylus recalls it in the *Prometheus Bound* where Zeus is said to have overcome his father, *Kronos*, only to fear his own overthrow by a future son in turn. Thucydides invokes a variation in the rise and fall of Athenian power. And distant echoes of the theme still resonate in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* where each form of polity is paired with its characteristically degenerate form.

Although Anaximander's conception of the cosmos retains the most prominent features of traditional cosmological thought, those features are reconfigured to yield a radically new conception of limits embedded in a new conception of *dike*. In Anaximander's cosmology the upright wheel of Homeric order is turned to rotate nearly horizontally on its axis. In this configuration each point on the circumference of the circle rises briefly, but not too steeply or too far, above the others, only to decline and occupy the diametrically opposite position soon after. In this configuration all the points of the circle, representing all the members of the cosmos, are seen in a symmetrically reciprocal relationship one to another: each one rules and is ruled in turn. Ascendance and decline are

no longer equated with victory and defeat, dominance and submission. Instead, ruling and obeying are compressed into a new temporal order in which each position is seen to be the reciprocal of its opposite in a single, simultaneous relationship of *isonomia*.

Anaximander's reconfiguration of the cosmos into an equilibrium of powers in rotation yields for the first time an ontological footing for political equality. *Dike* no longer refers to a succession of victories and defeats which balance out only in a complete cycle of historical time. In Anaximander's conception *dike* comes to refer to a regular rotation of power in which all elements of the cosmos participate on an equal basis, one in which ruling and being ruled come to be seen as complementary positions within the framework of a single, mutually shared relationship.

Without foundation in the cosmology of Anaximander it is unlikely that the political slogan of *isonomia* could have had more than limited appeal in a traditional, hierarchically ordered polity. To be sure, the ruling circles of the aristocracy would have found in *isonomia* an attractive solution to a problem of power-sharing among themselves. But even so, *isonomia* would have lacked legitimacy in the sense that it could not be rendered compatible with traditional notions of *dike* and *arete* in the same way that *eunomia* might be. And absent any grounding in a new conception of *dike* such as Anaximander's, any link between *isonomia* and *demokratia*, rule by the ordinary people, was

certain to be encountered and resisted by the *aristoi* as a threat to traditional, aristocratic conceptions of justice and good order. Before it could lend legitimacy to equal participation in power among traditional rulers, the political principle of *isonomia* required a foundation upon a new conception of *dike* such as Anaximander's universal equilibrium of power. Even with the requisite legitimacy, however, *isonomia* posed a new problem. It could justify equality among participants in power, but it could not then turn and restrict participation in ruling power to a select few. Once the legitimacy of *isonomia* was established by the need for stability among the traditional ruling circles, the path to democracy was relatively assured.

Dike is by its very nature a universal conception. Without a prior conception of justice to support unlimited equality in power-sharing, the movement toward rule by the *demos*, the people as a whole, would almost certainly have led to *stasis*, civil strife, instead of stable democracy at Athens.[31] The fact that *isonomia* as a political principle apparently did find sufficient appeal in 508 B.C. to overcome residual resistance by the Athenian *aristoi* suggests that the new equalitarian conception of *dike* had already partially displaced the older Homeric conception.[32] In this context Cleisthenes' reforms do not themselves institute democracy so much as they signal a shift in the conception of justice, *dike*, away from one configuration toward another. The reforms of Cleisthenes then do not so

much institute a new political order as much as they remove elements of an old one already in the process of passing away, thereby making room for an extension of democratic reforms and practices. Among those practices were unrestricted participation for citizens in the ruling assembly, election to office by lot, and rotation in office to assure maximum political equality and nearly universal participation, all of which practices existed to a limited degree prior to Cleisthenes' reforms.[33]

Tragedy and Theory: The *Oresteia*

Despite the enormous intellectual, literary and political legacy of ancient Greece, the inventors of democracy never left us with, and apparently never formulated a systematic theory of democracy.[34] They did, however bequeath us Greek tragic drama from which we might extract something like a theoretical point of view, if by "theoretical" we mean a cosmological view of nature which serves to ground and justify democratic institutions and practices.[35] Although it may seem curious to look for political theory in the dramatic action of the theater, the link is not so farfetched as it initially may appear. Tragedy and democracy were both Athenian inventions which developed, flourished, and eventually declined together.[36] The association is more than coincidental. Tragedy was both a political and theoretical institution which played a vital role in the democratic education of the *demos*.[37] In its own

way tragedy was as much a political institution as the Council or the Assembly. It was sponsored and financed by the state in the same manner as the all-important Athenian fleet. Admission was either free or subsidized and was open to all citizens. Attendance was, if anything, even more democratic than the Assembly since women apparently were permitted to attend the theater while being barred from participation in the Assembly.[38] Tragedy, moreover, was commissioned for and performed on the annual holiday on which the city of Athens celebrated its own democratic structure: the City Dionysia.[39]

More than mere entertainment, tragic theater was in its physical setting, its performance and its vision, a theoretical act. The geometry of the Greek theater recreated the circular structure of the cosmos. Within that design, including the seating arrangements of the audience, all of the structural tensions of the city were re-capitulated. It is useful to know that etymologically "theater" and "theory" share a common root meaning to "see, sight, gaze, look upon, behold, admire, and contemplate."[40] What is seen in the Greek theater is the nested, concentric spheres of the cosmos in general, and the political sphere of the *polis* in particular. In tragedy the city "puts itself on the stage and plays itself."[41] What is finally played out on the stage is a conflict between two visions of *dike*, two conceptions of universal order.[42] One, the *dike* of the Homeric world, portrays the heroic politics of an

oikos-centered social order transposed to the context of the
emerging *polis*. The second version of *dike* derives from the
cosmology of Anaximander and is reflected in the political
principle of *isonomia* underlying the democratically ordered
polis. On one hand, heroic *dike* represents for the *polis*
the constellation of values and behavior which must be
opposed if the *polis* is to be sustained. Against heroic
dike tragedy portrays and affirms the *dike* associated with
isonomia. On the other hand, heroic *dike* cannot be entirely
rejected and obliterated. It too has its necessary moment
if the *polis* is to be defended and preserved. Sophocles'
Oedipus, for example, is a heroic figure. He is both
essential to, and destructive of the city's preservation.
The heroic principle for which Oedipus stands must be
permitted its time to rule, but it cannot be permitted to
rule uncontested. The perpetual contest between mutually
incompatible but mutually necessary opposites provides the
tragic principle of limitation essential to moderate and
stable political power, and it is this principle which is
portrayed and affirmed in Greek tragedy.

The tragedy which best illustrates the contest between
one *dike* and another is in many respects Aeschylus' trilogy,
the *Oresteia*. Produced in 458 B.C., shortly after the final
consolidation of democracy in Athens, the *Oresteia* is the
only trilogy of Aeschylus to survive completely intact.
With the exception of the *Persians*, an early play, the other
extant plays of Aeschylus each represent only a single part

of a trilogy, an incompleteness which renders their
interpretation relatively more speculative.

The *Oresteia* consists of three separate but related
plays: the *Agamemnon*, the *Libation Bearers*, and the
Eumenides. By modern standards of dramatic action very
little actually happens in the *Oresteia*. The dramatic
tension occurs largely in the dialogue where contested
interpretations of the major events of the trilogy are given
voice by the chorus and other characters. In the play which
bears his name, Agamemnon, king of Argos and head of the
House of Atreus, returns home from the Trojan War only to be
murdered by his wife, Clytaemnestra. In the second play,
the *Libation Bearers*, Orestes, son of Agamemnon and
Clytaemnestra, returns home to avenge the murder of his
father by killing his mother. In the third play, the
Eumenides, the scene shifts to the city of Athens where
Orestes has been driven by his mother's Furies, or demons.
There the protector of the city, the goddess Athena,
empanels a jury of Athenian citizens to conduct a trial of
Orestes' guilt. That is the bare bones of the action which
occurs on stage.[43]

Indirectly throughout the dialogue we learn of other
events and actions which frame those viewed by the audience.
We learn of Helen, sister of Clytaemnestra and wife of
Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother. The seduction of Helen by
Paris of Troy is recalled as the cause of the Trojan War in
which Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus, organized the

great Greek expedition to conquer Troy, retrieve Helen, and right the wrong done to Menelaus and to Argos by Paris and Helen. We learn too that in the course of sailing to Troy, Agamemnon's fleet was becalmed, apparently through the anger of a goddess. In order to appease the goddess and free the fleet to sail, Agamemnon ritually sacrificed his daughter, Iphigeneia. Later, on the return home following the complete destruction of Troy, a violent storm struck the Greek fleet, scattering and destroying it, leaving only Agamemnon's ship to return safely to Argos.

Eventually we learn of the existence of a curse upon the entire House of Atreus. Some time in the past, Atreus, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, had quarrelled with his own brother, Thyestes. Thyestes had seduced Atreus' wife and sought to supplant him as the ruler of Argos. Defeated and exiled for his attempts, Thyestes later returned with his children to Argos as a suppliant to Atreus. Feigning reconciliation, Atreus invited Thyestes to a feast at which Atreus served to Thyestes his own roasted, slaughtered children which Thyestes innocently ate. Upon learning the nature of the meal he had just eaten, Thyestes cursed the House of Atreus and fled with his only surviving child, Aegisthus, who was later to become consort and co-conspirator with Clytaemnestra in her murder of Agamemnon and usurpation of the throne of Argos.

From even this brief synopsis it should be clear that the separate threads which weave this story together are

deeply knotted and entangled. What does it all mean? Although there are many themes and symbols which recur throughout this dense tragedy, it is widely agreed that the meaning of "justice" (*dike*) is a preeminent concern of the trilogy.[44]

According to what has now become a standard interpretation of the text, the trilogy unfolds as a progression from a "primitive" sense of justice, the *lex taliones* in which the crime of murder is repaid in kind by the by the family of the victim, to a higher, "truer" sense of justice in which the family vendetta is replaced by the impartial rule of law in the political state.[45] There is clearly some merit to this interpretation. But in its most superficial form it risks turning Aeschylus' tragedy into mere political propaganda celebrating the central authority of the state over more traditional forms of social organization. At best it presents us with a vision of the narrow confines and conflicts of the traditional family-centered social structure transcended and reconciled within the broader bonds of the political community.

There are at least two difficulties with the standard progressivist interpretation. One is raised by Lazlo Versenyi who notes that Aeschylus' introduction of trial by jury as a "solution" to the problem of blood feud poses dramatic problems of its own because the trilogy then presents two sets of law diametrically opposed to each other without addressing the legitimacy of one replacing the

other.[46] Versenyi appropriately raises the issue of

legitimacy without which Aeschylus' trilogy, and especially

the *Eumenides*, approaches political propaganda. His

criticism goes awry, however, because he can conceive of

"legitimacy" only in terms of philosophical rationality

which is absent from the *Oresteia*. To his credit, Versenyi

recognizes that the *Eumenides* fails to resolve the conflict

between competing conceptions of justice. But the Platonic

or Hegelian standard of rationality by which he measures the

text and finds it wanting forces him to conclude that

Aeschylean tragedy is primitive and "incoherent."[47]

Conflict fails to yield to unity; therefore nothing has been

resolved and, apparently, nothing has truly been said.[48]

The second difficulty, closely related to the first, is

that the progressivist interpretation sees the establishment

of "true" justice as a matter of conflict resolution,

harmony, and reconciliation of opposites.[49] But, as Simon

Goldhill has painstakingly argued, to the extent that the

progressivist interpretation locates a reconciliation of

opposites and a final resolution to conflict in the

Eumenides, it must overlook or oversimplify significant

elements of the text.[50] According to Goldhill and similar

critics, "the problem of *dike* . . . in this trilogy is not

solved but endlessly restated."[51] Conflict, not harmony,

continues to reign in the end.

The desire to find a politically ordered resolution to

the conflicts of the *Oresteia* in the establishment of

"rational" legal institutions finds support in the text of
the *Eumenides* where the goddess Athena establishes the first
court to try cases of murder, a court which is ordained to
last for all time. But the longing for harmony which this
interpretation represents is forced to ignore other parts of
the text which do not readily fit the interpretation. For
example, what are we to make of the fact that the jury of
citizens is evenly split on the guilt of Orestes,[52] and that
it takes the act of a goddess to determine the outcome of
the trial? In what sense is this "resolution," and why
should opposing forces feel reconciled by Athena's
apparently arbitrary vote[53] which finds Orestes formally not
guilty but not wholly innocent either? What are we to make,
furthermore, of the Furies, those female demons who
represent the stubborn forces of darkness and the past in
this tragedy? Contrary to the progressivist interpretation
they are never truly harmonized into the higher order of the
state. They never fully emerge into the light. They remain
submerged underground from where they continue to exert
their terror. To be sure, they are not excluded, indeed
they cannot be banished from the political order, as Athena
assures them and us. They have power and cannot be
defeated. Nor is it entirely clear that their force can
always be fully "channeled" to work only on behalf of the
state, as the progressivist interpretation would have it.
All that can be said with confidence is that the political
order represented by Athena and Athens in this trilogy

depends for its own success upon forces which are opposed to it. Nor is it even certain that the political domain represents the realm of light against the realm of darkness in this most murky tragedy. All the text permits us to say is that the political realm is constituted by and depends upon continuous tension between pairs of mutually exclusive yet mutually dependent opposites such as light and darkness.

What kind of justice is this? It is the justice (*dike*) of *isonomia*, the justice of Anaximander, not the justice of Plato or Hegel. Aeschylus does not present us with a choice between hierarchical order or conflict, as does Plato. Nor does he present us with the evaporation of conflict in the actualized political order as does Hegel. Instead Aeschylus presents us with an image of universal tragic justice in which sustained conflict between equal opponents is affirmed as the guarantee against an oscillation between absolute chaos (*stasis*) and absolute power (monarchy) represented by the heroic configuration of justice.

The tragic justice of Aeschylus affirms equality but does not therefore disavow conflict. Aeschylus, and Greek tragedy in general, remains strongly within the ancient Greek tradition in which the *agon*, the contest, represents the supreme reality and the ultimate metaphor. Tragic justice does not reject the contest but rather affirms the equality of the opponents, thus assuring that the contest will continue but that no victory and no defeat will ever be complete. Equality of power not supremacy; perpetual

conflict not harmony provides the tragic guarantee of political order. "No anarchy, no rule of a single master" decrees Athena, echoing the Furies[54] and identifying a mean established not through the elimination of conflict but through its continuation.

Against the progressivist interpretation of the *Oresteia* stands a more conservative reading in which ancient Homeric justice is affirmed rather than rejected or transcended. The most prominent articulation of this view comes from H. Lloyd-Jones,[55] who explicitly rejects the progressivist reading of the trilogy. "The cliche which we have heard all our lives that the *Eumenides* depicts the transition from the vendetta to the rule of law is utterly misleading," he writes.[56] According to Lloyd-jones, the essence of Homeric justice is the inexorable punishment of wrongdoers. Those who violate the law of the universe are punished by the gods. Those who violate the laws of the state are punished by the state. The principle remains the same. In the Homeric order the justice of the cosmos was enforced by those mortals to whom Zeus made known his will such as Agamemnon. In the Athenian state justice comes through the law court established by Zeus' daughter, Athena. For Lloyd-Jones, the court of Athena does not replace the demonic Furies as agents of Zeus. Instead, he says, the court is established to assist those venerable agents in their fearful task.[57]

As with the progressivist interpretation which it opposes, the conservative reading must find harmonies where the text is dissonant or ambiguous. For example, the conservative reading finds agreement between Athena and the Furies while explaining away or ignoring the fact that Athena casts her vote against them at Orestes' trial.[58] Moreover, the conservative reading presupposes a timeless, unchanging conception of justice. What shifts over time is merely the mechanisms or agents of enforcement, from religious to political, and not the order of justice itself. Continuity, however, is purchased only through oversimplification. Lloyd-Jones concurs that "justice" (*dike*) refers not only to the established order of the state but also to the whole order of the universe.[59] But, contrary to Lloyd-Jones, throughout the *Oresteia* and throughout the history of Greek thought, "*dike*" always means much more than merely the punishment of lawbreakers. Indeed it is the profoundly dense ambiguity of the term "*dike*" which furnishes the dramatic subject-matter of the *Oresteia*, an ambiguity which is suppressed by the conservative interpretation. Lost in the search for continuity is the possibility that the *Oresteia* portrays two complex versions of *dike*, two incompatible versions of universal order, one against the other. The first, located most prominently in the *Agamemnon*, is associated with *eunomia* and the traditional *oikos*-centered social organization of the *Iliad*.

The second, most prominently portrayed in the *Eumenides*, is associated with *isonomia* and political democracy.[60]

The progressivist and conservative readings of the *Oresteia* each tend to focus on one part of the trilogy at the expense of others. The progressivist reading, for example, tends to concentrate on the *Eumenides* at the expense of the more heroic *Agamemnon*. From the progressivist perspective, the mere establishment of a trial court in the *Eumenides* suffices to overturn the more "primitive" justice of the *Agamemnon*. From the conservative point of view, the heroic justice of the *Agamemnon* seems to be affirmed while the more "naive dramaturgy of the *Eumenides*" is dismissed.[61] Each view oversimplifies the notion, and the problem, of justice in the *Oresteia* while largely overlooking the unique association of tragedy with the origins of democracy. Along the way it has somehow been forgotten that in sponsoring the production of tragic drama the Athenian *polis* performed the political function of educating, not propagandizing, the demos in a "theoretical" view of the natural order which legitimized democracy. And it did so, furthermore, by interrogating and reinterpreting its own past in a remarkably sophisticated way. It is time for another look at the *Oresteia*.

Heroic Agamemnon

It is no accident that the Trojan War provides the frame of reference for the *Agamemnon*, first play of the

Oresteia. The Trojan War was a heroic war and the *Agamemnon* is heroic drama.[62] The Trojan War, it will be recalled, was fought as a matter of justice against the Trojans for Paris' abduction of Helen in violation of the Greek code of guest-friendship. But it must also be recalled that Greek justice (*dike*) was more than a legal or military affair. It was also a matter of natural order. The traditional account of the Trojan War with which every Greek was familiar through the poetry of Homer's *Iliad* conveyed the cyclical pattern of natural order and justice which constituted the *dike* upholding heroic culture and its *oikos*-centered political structure. The *Agamemnon*, with its treatment of the House of Atreus, recapitulates that traditional order even as it calls it into question.

Heroic *dike* follows a trajectory of rising and falling, victory and defeat, success and failure reminiscent of the arched path of celestial objects. In its circular course, however, heroic *dike* conveys more than a mere repetitious succession of victories and defeats. The principle of *dike* operating in the heroic universe inscribes a pattern of necessity in which the only path to victory also leads to defeat, a pattern in which the necessary means to success also set the stage for eventual failure. It is a recurrent theme in Greek literature traced by Homer's Achilles in the Trojan War, Thucydides' Athens in the Peloponnesian War, and Aeschylus' Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*, among others.

Agamemnon was a hero of the Trojan War and it is primarily through his character in the *Oresteia* that Aeschylus traces the essential elements of heroic *dike*.[63] In the opening lines of the play a watchman speaks of the "grand processionals of all the stars of night" resembling dynasties of men waning as others arise. What we see in the *Agamemnon* is the moment of Agamemnon's star falling just as Clytaemnestra's rises, and the play explores the connection between these two events. Indeed, they are finally seen to be as intimately connected as spokes on a wheel so that they constitute not two events but a single movement of rotation.

Agamemnon's actual presence upon the stage is brief. He has fewer than ninety lines of dialogue in a play more than 1670 lines long. His action is equally brief. Agamemnon returns home from the war in his chariot. He is persuaded by Clytaemnestra to alight without touching the earth but to pass directly into the house upon precious tapestries, where she kills him. Agamemnon's arrival in his chariot, his failure to descend to earth, and his immediate death all combine to remind us that Agamemnon's fate is directly tied to his heroic status and the war.

Although Agamemnon's appearance upon the stage is brief, his dramatic presence spans a much greater time, ten years, in fact, the length of the Trojan War. If Agamemnon's murder at the hands of Clytaemnestra marks the end of the Trojan War, his own sacrificial slaughter of their innocent daughter, Iphigeneia, marks its inauguration.

That past event is recounted by the chorus early in the play[64] so that it constitutes an introduction to the later events presented upon the stage.

Ten years previously, the chorus recalls, Zeus had dispatched the army of the Atreidae to sail against Troy in order to avenge the abduction of Helen. But at Aulis, before the fleet could reach Troy, the goddess Artemis held back the winds, leaving the fleet powerless to sail upon its ordained mission of justice. In order to appease the goddess and free the fleet to sail, Agamemnon was required to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigeneia. His only alternative was to abandon the expedition, with all the shame attendant upon that course.

It is perhaps too easy from a modern perspective to condemn as immoral Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter in order to save the fleet and prosecute the war. Viewed from within the framework of heroic culture, however, the choice confronting Agamemnon constituted a genuine dilemma. As king of Argos and head of the dominant house of Atreus, it was Agamemnon's duty and responsibility to protect his "house" (*oikos*) and its followers along with the other houses of Argos from attack or violation. The abduction of Helen constituted an attack upon one of the most sacred customs of the Greek world, the custom of "guest-friendship" by which strangers were protected from harm outside their land, and who in turn refrained from doing harm to their protectors. This was no mere courtesy,

but rather a fundamental principle by which an insecure and vulnerable world achieved a modicum of peace and stability.[65] Violation of this customary law by Helen and Paris tore at the very roots of whatever social order existed in heroic culture. For Agamemnon to fail to defend his "house" would not only be viewed as cowardice on his part, a serious enough charge, but it would also threaten to unravel the only system of justice known to his world.

It would be a mistake to view Agamemnon simply as a character with a fatal flaw who could have and should have chosen other than he did in order for good to win out in the end. Agamemnon's dilemma was legitimate and resided in the fact that in order to fulfill his role as protector of the house (*oikos*) he had to sacrifice an intimate and cherished member of that house. In order to avenge a crime he had to commit another one. In order to protect justice he had to commit an injustice.

In Aeschylus' drama Agamemnon chooses to resolve his dilemma by sacrificing his daughter and going to war. We misread the play, however, by concluding that Agamemnon simply chooses war over family, implying perhaps that men will always choose war and that women and children will always pay the price. There is much to be said for that angry view but it nevertheless oversimplifies the play. Agamemnon had no guilt-free course open to him. Under the circumstances, and apart from the larger conflicts of justice of which the play treats, it is clear that if

Agamemnon did not fulfill Artemis' condition and sacrifice Iphigeneia, everyone, including Iphigeneia, would die.[66] That is not to say that, contrary to modern intuitions, Agamemnon chose rightly. It depends upon what we mean by "rightly." Within the play, choosing rightly means "choosing according to justice (*dike*)." But in Agamemnon's situation, each choice open to him is both just and unjust at the same time. And we are led to infer that this paradox, too, is according to *dike*.

But what kind of justice is this? It is ambiguous. It may be heroic or it may be tragic. It is heroic if an act of justice necessarily breeds an act of injustice which ultimately brings the heroic actor to his death.[67] It is tragic if the necessary conflict, the paradox in which an act is simultaneously just and unjust, prevents the tragic actor from moving too far in one direction and flying too near the sun, so to speak.

Each conception of justice is associated with a conception of limits. In heroic *dike*, the overreaching, the high arch, is a necessary part of of the trajectory. The correction, the inevitable fall, comes later in time as the wheel of justice turns and the opponent bred by the original action overtakes and fills the space previously occupied by the the heroic actor. In tragic *dike* the limits occur not over a period of time but more nearly simultaneously, as the inherent injustice contained within a just act restrains the

tragic actor, holding him to a flatter trajectory, and preventing him from overreaching his bounds.

Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter was heroic, and the life of Agamemnon portrayed by Aeschylus follows the heroic path. He arose to heroic heights in the Trojan War and died at the pinnacle of his glory in Argos. Symbolically, he never set foot upon the earth following the war, but returned home in his chariot only to enter his house upon fine tapestries and meet his death.

Clytaemnestra, too, is no less a heroic figure than Agamemnon. She is his opposite on the wheel of heroic justice. She rises as he falls. She justifies her act of murder in part because it rights; that is, it balances over time the injustice of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia. He has slain a family member, and so does she. He has slain a woman, she kills a man. He has acted to protect the "house" in the extended sense; she acts to defend it in the more immediate sense of family.

Clytaemnestra's act has justice on its side, to be sure, but it is unjust as well. She has killed her husband, a crime. She has killed the king, a greater crime. And she has usurped the throne of Argos, perhaps the greatest crime of all in the eyes of democratic Athens. Predictably, Clytaemnestra's act does not end the heroic cycle; it merely continues it. Her own unjust act of justice inevitably leads to her own death at the hands of exiled Orestes, her son. The figure of Clytaemnestra represents no alternative

to Agamemnon's rule but rather its inversion. Her rule represents the other side, the underside, of Agamemnon's heroic trajectory. It is Clytaemnestra's rule (*arche*) which, together with Agamemnon's, completes one cycle of heroic *dike*. The cycle then appears to begin anew as Orestes returns to kill his mother in retribution for the murder of his father.

Like Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra before him, Orestes is bound to commit an act which is both just and unjust at the same time: the killing of his mother. It is a just act because, as the only surviving son of Agamemnon, Orestes is bound by the codes of the social order to avenge the death of his father.[68] It is an unjust act because the same code of social justice forbids the crime of matricide. Unlike Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, however, we shall see that Orestes' character is tragicly balanced and not heroic, thus lending his name to Aeschylus' trilogy. Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra are each heroic figures because each represents only one side of a complete circle. Each is the other's opposite, and it is this one-sidedness which Aeschylus identifies as an essential quality of the heroic figure.[69]

When we first encounter Agamemnon at Aulis, he is torn by the choice presented by Artemis: save his daughter and lose the fleet, or save the fleet and lose his daughter. "Which of these things goes now without disaster?" he complains as he agonizes over his fate.[70] But then he

"endured" or "dared"[71] to become the sacrificer of his
daughter, and as he did so, the chorus tells us, his
character changed.

> When necessity's yoke was put upon him
> he changed, and from the heart the breath came bitter
> and sacrilegious, utterly infidel
> to warp a will now to be stopped at nothing.
> The sickening in men's minds, tough,
> reckless in fresh cruelty brings daring. He endured
>   then
> to sacrifice his daughter . . . .[72]

Under the yoke of necessity, Agamemnon passed from agonizing
indecision to singleminded resolution as he decided that
"such sacrifice of innocent blood . . . is right."[73]

The chorus associates the shift in Agamemnon's
character with a loss of limits--"a will now to be stopped
at nothing"--and a "sickening in men's minds" which "brings
daring." The "sickening" harks back to Alcmaeon, the
physician, for whom ill health represented a loss of balance
between equal and opposite forces. Good health he
attributed to a sustained but tense equilibrium (*isonomia*)
of opposing forces.[74] In his anguish, then, torn by
indecision over his fateful dilemma, Agamemnon was painfully
but healthily balanced. The sickening of Agamemnon's mind
referred to in the text represents a departure from that
balance, that *isonomia*, followed by a loss of restraint
which led to reckless daring. It is Agamemnon's resolution,
his singleminded shedding of his agony, and not his decision

to sacrifice Iphigeneia which is referred to by the chorus as a sickness. To be sure, Agamemnon had to make a decision. But he did not have to passionately agree that the sacrifice of innocent blood was unambiguously "right." He did not have to cease to suffer over the injustice intertwined with the justness of his decision.

The one-sidedness, the imbalance which constitutes Agamemnon's newfound resolution, is partially represented in the text by the silencing of Iphigeneia. For Agamemnon not only sacrifices his daughter, he ceases to hear her voice-- "her supplications and her cries of father were nothing"[75]-- and he gags her mouth in a move which the chorus characterizes as drowning speech in strength.[76] At the moment of sacrifice the chorus, too, is drowned by silence. "What happened next I saw not, nor speak it," the chorus announces.[77] What is this curtain of silence which drops over the scene? It is the silence of the other voice, the other side of Agamemnon's identity, which ceases to be heard and therefore ceases to exercise its restraints. At the moment when Agamemnon decided that the shedding of innocent blood was unambiguously right, Agamemnon became unbalanced, relieved of his agony. He ceased to be warrior-king and father both, to become warrior only, unrestrained by the claims of close family.

Later, when Agamemnon arrives upon the stage, still in his chariot signifying his heroic heights, the same one- sidedness rules his speech. He praises the gods whose agent

he was in the destruction of Troy. He speaks in terms of a unanimous vote in which the gods one-sidedly favored the death of Troy and all her people. "Above the opposite vase [i.e., the vase to hold opposing ballots] the hand hovered and there was hope," he recounts, "but no vote fell."[78] In this speech which implicitly equates justice with success, a venerable Greek view,[79] Agamemnon speaks only of the lopsided victory which the Argives achieved over the Trojans. He gives no hint, he says not a word of the enormous cost in lives and sacrifice paid for his and the gods' heroic conquest. He speaks only of the pride and glory of total victory.

A more balanced view is provided by the herald who precedes Agamemnon's arrival upon the stage. The herald's initial speech, filled with references to daylight and sunshine, relays the immense scale of the Trojan defeat. "All their plain has been laid waste. Gone are their altars, the sacred places of the gods are gone . . . ," he announces as he praises Agamemnon, ominously, as a "man fortunate to be honored far above all men alive."[80] Soon, however, under pressure from the chorus, the herald begins to reveal a darker, more painful side to the Argive victory. The heroic glory of battle was accompanied by immense hardship, suffering, and loss of life for ordinary people. "But why live such grief over again?" asks the herald in true heroic fashion. "That time is gone for us, and gone for those who died." The one-sidedness of the heroic path

is captured in the herald's timeless query. "Why must a
live man count the numbers of the slain . . . " he asks.
"For us survivors," he continues, "the pleasure wins, pain
casts no weight in the opposite scale."[81] The herald
extolls the glory which will accrue to Argos as a result of
the great victory over Troy. Immortal fame and honor will
live on in memory; the dead do not count in this tale.
Eventually, however, after further entreaty from the chorus,
the herald reluctantly reveals the true cost of victory in
human terms. Only one ship, Agamemnon's, has returned
safely from the war. All the others have been lost at sea.
This is the underside, the silent side, of the heroic quest
for justice.

Juxtaposition of the herald's speeches with that of
Agamemnon allows the audience to question the value, indeed
the very meaning of "success" and "victory" in a way not
possible for Agamemnon. There is no doubt that in
traditional terms the expedition against Troy was a
resounding success. But what kind of success, Aeschylus
seems to ask, is purchased at such enormous cost to both
victor and vanquished alike? In some of the most bitter,
biting lines of the play, the chorus recalls that not only
the houses of heroes suffered from the war and the
transgressions of "some strange woman."[82] Every house in
Hellas suffered the loss of loved ones as the funeral urns,
packed smooth with "ashes that once were men,"[83] returned
home from the war. A disproportion is introduced here in

which the undying fame of heroes is purchased with the blood of nameless, unheroic citizens.

Sickness, Suffering and Wisdom

It is tempting from a modern point of view to try to understand Agamemnon's "sickness," his one-sidedness, as a sign of mental or moral deficiency in his character. And to support such efforts we would have available to us the familiar Greek notion of "*hubris*," or excess. To take that path, however, would do little more than to affirm modern categories of thought and to obscure, if not falsify, Greek history. A whole range of behavior which eventually became condemned as excessive was once commended as appropriate and even necessary to the pursuit of justice. The shift involved precisely those aristocratic characteristics once associated with Homeric heroes, such as the competitive pursuit of honor and glory in personal combat and the accumulation of booty or wealth to signify and confirm their greater status.

The eventual rejection of the extremes of traditional aristocratic behavior in the democratic *polis*--behavior which sought to exalt particular individuals and families over the city itself--was historically associated with a shift in the techniques and strategies of warfare.[84] Homeric heroes were *hippeis*, owners of horses and chariots who fought individually in combat to secure and protect the honor due themselves and their families. Later, in the

seventh century, the *hippeus* came to be replaced by the hoplite phalanx, heavily armed men fighting in an unbreakable line, the shield of each man protecting the man next to him.

With the shift in battle technology came a shift in values. The warlike frenzy, *lyssa*, which once propelled the individual hero into battle, permitting him to perform extraordinary feats of courage, was now discouraged as excessive and dangerous to the success of the coordinated hoplite phalanx. Success would now depend upon each hoplite soldier resisting the temptation of individual combat and personal glory to hold his position in the line and not break ranks. The virtues of self-restraint and respect for equality began to take precedence over the competitive self-glorification of heroic *arete*.

Agamemnon's "sickness," his singleminded resolution so reminiscent of Periclean *gnome*,[85] must be seen in historical context and not through modern moral or psychological categories. To accuse Agamemnon of *hubris*, excessive behavior, and let it go at that is to lose the ambiguity of his character. To be sure, Agamemnon does go too far. We learn from the herald that he has destroyed the Trojan altars and the sacred places of their gods, actions which Clytaemnestra had previously warned might anger the Greek gods, endanger the expedition, and inaugurate a new round of fresh wrongs demanding to be repaid.[86] Clearly, Agamemnon's actions at Troy represent a loss of limits, an illicit

crossing of boundaries. But those actions cannot be
isolated from his actions at Aulis, for it was at Aulis that
Agamemnon first affirmed that the sacrifice of innocent
blood is right (*dike*), thereby acquiring a will "now to be
stopped at nothing." Left unresolved by the charge of
hubris, which seems to imply a flaw in moral judgment, is
the question of why Agamemnon lost a sense of limits in the
first place. The answer is found in the chorus' reference
to the "yoke of necessity" which first introduced the change
in Agamemnon's character. "When necessity's yoke was put
upon him, he changed," the chorus tells us in a view which
complicates our vision of *hubris*.[87] The chorus seems to be
saying that the shift in Agamemnon's character, the resolute
closing of his mind to restraining voices, had a fateful
quality of necessity, of inevitability, about it.

On one level the yoke of necessity applies to
Agamemnon's identity as a hero. His decision at Aulis to
sacrifice his daughter represented a decision to go to war
and enter battle. But for a hero to enter battle and fight
in a truly heroic manner it was necessary for him to become
unbalanced; that is, it was necessary for him to enter into
a state of relatively unrestrained frenzy (*lyssa*) which
would produce and sustain the stamina and courage necessary
to heroic combat.[88]

On another level, the "necessity" which applies to the
shift in Agamemnon's character at Aulis also posesses a more
universal quality associated with *dike*. Zeus has mandated

the Trojan War as an affair of justice. But war requires
the presence of *lyssa*, the fierce determination which
overcomes fear and produces resolute courage. *Lyssa* is a
necessary ingredient of both victory and justice, but, on
the other hand, it is an imbalance which almost guarantees a
transgression of limits which will then demand fresh
retribution in the future. And so the cycle eternally
recurs. It appears, at least to Aeschylus, that Zeus'
justice in its heroic configuration necessarily generates
injustice which must eventually be repaid by a further act
of ambiguous justice, and so on, forever.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* faithfully recapitulates this
heroic cycle of justice even while it also calls it into
question. Recurring to Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia
as representative of the heroic configuration of *dike*, it is
notable that the episode is neatly framed in Aeschylus' text
by two references to "suffering" and "wisdom." "Zeus has
. . . laid it down that wisdom comes alone through
suffering,"[89] says the chorus, introducing the tale of
Agamemnon's dilemma. Later, immediately following the death
of Iphigeneia, the chorus repeats that "Justice so moves
that those only learn who suffer."[90] These lines have often
been thought to contain the central "moral" of this tragedy
but their meaning is elusive.[91] "Suffering" is commonly
taken as a reference to the pain of punishment while
"wisdom" is often interpreted aa learning obedience to
political or religious authority.[92] But this interpretation

is less than adequate for a number of reasons. Firstly, everyone in the text to whom the lesson might apply already quite justly believes that he or she is already obeying the law in the proper sense.[93] Secondly, no one ever learns anything in the *Oresteia*. They are for the most part simply killed, as one scholar has observed.[94]

The complexities of the *Oresteia* suggest that a more complicated interpretation is in order. If the *Oresteia* reflects a contest between two complex versions of *dike*, one associated with heroic traditions and the other associated with the new democracy and *isonomia*; and if Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia dramatically portrays the *dike* upholding heroic traditions, then we are not unlikely to find that the lines which frame that portrait point in the opposite direction.

The Greek word for wisdom, *sophrosyne*, is historically associated with the terms *dike* and *kosmos*, both of which refer to universal order.[95] The constellation of these terms suggests that wisdom consists in comprehending the order of the cosmos and acting according to its law, its *dike*, and we may well ask whether the text portrays Agamemnon as wise. The text is unambiguous that Agamemnon follows a path laid down by Zeus in the pursuit of justice. Indeed, Agamemnon's character dramatically embodies Zeus's justice in its heroic configuration and we should therefore expect him to be portrayed as wise, but that is not the case. In his brief sojourn on stage Agamemnon is portrayed

as a returning, conquering hero, but not a particularly
brilliant or insightful one. Indeed, in his exchange with
Clytaemnestra, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that
Agamemnon is quite dull and even stupid. Most telling of
all, perhaps, it would seem that if Aeschylus had intended
Agamemnon's character to stand as a portrait of wisdom, the
text would have commended his decision to sacrifice
Iphigeneia as honorable. By heroic standards Agamemnon's
decision was appropriate and just. It should have been
regarded as difficult, perhaps, but wise. Instead, in a
reversal of expectations, the text describes it as shameful
and mad.[96] Aeschylus' reversal effectively calls into
question traditional notions of wisdom and justice.
Agamemnon follows the *dike* of the heroic cosmos, yet he is
not wise. Therefore, either wisdom consists of something
other than justice, or the *dike* which Agamemnon follows is
not truly the justice of Zeus. Aeschylus suggests the
latter. He does not reject the equation of wisdom and
justice. Nor does he suggest that Zeus is not just.[97] He
does suggest that Zeus' justice has been incorrectly
understood.

Wisdom comes to those who suffer. Suffering leads to
wisdom. So states the chorus reflecting upon Agamemnon's
dilemma at Aulis. The usual interpretation suggests that
this is a sequential relationship: pain is followed by
wisdom, with the implication being that wisdom reduces or
avoids further pain. It may be, however, that Aeschylus

holds that the actual relation is one of identity: suffering and wisdom are in some sense united as one.[98] Wisdom consists not in the elimination of suffering but in its retention. What can this mean? Aeschylean "suffering," I propose, refers to the constant tension of being pulled in opposite directions simultaneously which is characteristic of *isonomia*, the *dike* of Anaximander's universe and the ontological justification of equality in the democratic *polis*. Aeschylean "wisdom" consists in sustaining that balanced tension, living with it, bearing up under it, rather than diffusing or expelling it in some heroic act.

The identification of suffering and wisdom found in the *Oresteia* challenges the traditional view of *dike* which undermines democratic order in favor of a newer *dike* which preserves it. Once again, Agamemnon's character serves to illustrate the contrast. When Agamemnon first contemplates the terrible choice confronting him at Aulis, he is torn in agony. And "agony" is precisely the appropriate term here. Agamemnon's identity embodies and reflects the universal *agon*, or contest, which identifies the character of the pre-Socratic Greek cosmos. Agamemnon's identity is at war with itself. It is self-contradictory as it pulls in opposite directions simultaneously. Agamemnon is, in modern terms, both head of state and head of family.[99] To be king he must sacrifice his daughter in order to protect the state. To be father he must sacrifice the fleet upon which the safety of the state and, consequently, all families depend. Each

course open to Agamemnon is mandated by who he is and each is forbidden by who he is.

When Agamemnon chose to sacrifice his daughter he acted courageously, resolutely, heroically. But he also acted one-sidedly. He told himself that such sacrifice of innocent blood was unambiguously right. Shedding his agony, Agamemnon heard only the voices of fighters calling for the execution of justice. The voice of his daughter softly pleading against her own execution fell on deaf ears. Agamemnon excised half of his identity and thereby shed his suffering, but as he did so he lost his balance and his self-restraint, signified by his failure to honor the sacred sanctuaries of the gods in his pursuit of war.

If wisdom consists in acting justly, Agamemnon was wise by heroic standards, according to which the necessary part of one's multiple identity dominates at the necessary time.[100] But Agamemnon was unwise by tragic standards according to which opposing parts of the self act in unison (but not in harmony) to restrain each other, a restraint which ceases to operate when one side dominates and silences the other. Agamemnon was unwise because he ceased to suffer the agony of his identity. He ceased to be warrior-king and father both to become warrior only, unrestrained by the contradictions of his character. To be sure, Agamemnon had to choose and he had to act. And perhaps it was even necessary to choose as he did. Still he did not have to gag his daughter's mouth and cease to hear or remember her

cries. But Agamemnon shed his agony and forgot it. He
ceased to suffer and he was unwise.

Tragic Orestes, Tragic Wisdom

In contrast to Agamemnon, whose character represents
the heroic *dike* of the past, the character of Orestes
represents the tragic *dike* of the present in the *Oresteia*.
Numerous parallels can be drawn between the figures of
Agamemnon and Orestes, the most obvious of which is that
each kills an intimate family member. Agamemnon kills his
daughter and, in a mirror image of that action, Orestes
kills his mother (who of course has killed Agamemnon). The
immediate effect of these reverse parallels is to suggest
that the wheel of heroic *dike* continues to turn and "right"
itself, so to speak. Until its last few lines, that initial
impression seems to be dramatically confirmed by the events
of the *Libation Bearers*, the second play of Aeschylus'
trilogy.

In the *Libation Bearers*, Orestes returns home to Argos
to avenge his father's murder and assume his rightful place
at the head of the ruling house of Atreus. The language of
the play is saturated with references to "right" (*dike*) and
things returning from darkness to light, all of which
suggest the eternal cycle of heroic justice based on the
temporal image of the movement of the sun. Orestes himself,
who is invoked as a hero and bringer of justice in the final
lines of the *Agamemnon* and in the early lines of the

Libation Bearers, appears to his sister Electra from a place of concealment into the light.[101] Soon afterwards the chorus explicitly associates the "turning of justice" and acts of retribution with the "age-old wisdom," a wisdom which will be challenged in the final lines of this play and in the events of the *Eumenides*.

The action of the play is simple. Under the guidance of Apollo, Orestes has returned home to avenge his father's murder by killing his mother, Clytaemnestra. With Electra and the chorus of serving-women, Orestes hatches a plot to the enter the house and carry out the "innocent murder."[102] After the slaying, Orestes is aflicted by the horrible Furies who drive him from the stage in fear and anguish.

Like Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra before him, Orestes is required to perform an act which is both just and unjust at the same time. And, like Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, Orestes initially approaches his task in the traditional, heroic manner; that is, he approaches it one-sidedly, resolutely. Indeed, Orestes is perhaps even more resolute in his task initially than was Agamemnon. Prior to his decision Agamemnon was portrayed as agonized by his dilemma. Orestes, on the other hand, is confident from the outset in the pure justice of his cause. He sees no dilemma. Apollo has sent him on his mission of justice, Orestes claims, armed with a litany of horrible punishments which Orestes would incur at the hands of his father's Furies if he should fail in his assignment. It is notable, however, that

Apollo, the rational god, is also one-sided. He has tellingly neglected to inform Orestes that he would also incur similar punishments from his mother's Furies if he should succeed in his assignment.

Within the play, then, Agamemnon travels from agony to resolution while Orestes' path takes him from resolution to agony. Once again the suggestion is present that Orestes will complete the circle and finally right the imbalance afflicting the accursed house of Atreus. Repeatedly throughout the play the approaching action of Orestes is invoked by the chorus and others as the event which will once and for all "wipe out the stain of blood shed long ago."[103] Only after the murder, in the final lines of the play, do the chorus and Orestes recognize that locked within the hope of eternal justice there is found only the promise of eternal injustice. "Where is the end," cries the chorus,[104] echoing Orestes' discovery that he has both succeeded and failed at the same time.[105]

Like the hero that he must be, Orestes prepares for the approaching contest with his mother by inducing a state of *lyssa* to carry him through. For more than two hundred lines Orestes, Electra, and the chorus alternately invoke the traditional justice of Zeus with accelerating frenzy and violence, at the end of which the chorus announces that "The rest is action. . . . Your heart is set . . ., now you must strike and prove your destiny."[106] Orestes' carefully constructed resolve falters momentarily before he acts, as

Clytaemnestra reminds him that they are mother and son. He
hesitates briefly but sheds his doubts, recovers his
imbalance and resolutely slays his mother. Immediately,
however, his doubts return to haunt him. He turns to the
audience as to a jury and defends himself. "It was in all
right [*dike*] that I achieved this death, my mother's," he
pleads.[107] He tries to frame his act as purely just. He has
been assured that it has the approval of Zeus, Apollo, and
the citizens of Argos. He even tries to characterize his
mother as some worthless "water snake, some viper" unworthy
of sympathy.[108] But he is unsuccessful and he slips into
agony. "I grieve for the thing done, the death," he cries.
"I have won but my victory is soiled [polluted], and has no
pride [honor]."[109] At the fever pitch of Orestes' inner
doubt he is assailed and haunted by the Furies who
eventually drive him to Athens to escape his torment. Now
an outcast driven from his homeland and his household by the
Furies, he makes one last public appeal. "I killed my
mother not without some right," he submits.[110]

The distance travelled from Orestes' first submission
to the audience-jury that his act was entirely right, to his
final plea that it was not without *some* right that he killed
his mother represents the difference between tragic error
and tragic wisdom. Tragic error coincides with heroic
wisdom and consists in acting and thinking one-sidedly, in
failing to hear and honor competing claims upon oneself
simultaneously. Tragic wisdom consists in recognizing that

every act of justice contains within itself the seed of injustice, and in somehow balancing these opposing claims simultaneously. Tragic wisdom recognizes *isonomia* as the law, the esssential *dike* of the universe.

Orestes' initial claim that the murder of his mother was entirely just and right echoes Agamemnon's earlier claim that the sacrifice of innocent blood was entirely right. At that moment Agamemnon lost his balance and his wisdom because he ceased to suffer, and honor, the contradictions of his identity. In a reverse trajectory Orestes arrives at wisdom when he recognizes that the justice of his act of retribution is limited and partial because it is simultaneously an act of injustice deriving from his relationship to his mother, a previously submerged side of his identity.

From the outset Orestes had approached his task soley as his father's son. As Agamemnon's son, Orestes was required by the customary code of justice to avenge his father's murder and occupy his father's rightful place at the head of the house. From this perspective, which Apollo adopts, Orestes' murder of his mother is entirely justified.[111] But Orestes is not only his father's son. He is his mother's child as well, and from this perspective, which is that of the Furies, the killing of his mother is entirely unjust; it is purely criminal. Prior to the murder, listening to Apollo, Orestes had discounted his relation to his mother. Only moments before he strikes does

Agamemnon's son begin to recognize himself as the son of
Clytaemnestra as well. Then, at the moment he acts, Orestes
recovers, and suffers, the contradictions of his identity,
and he begins to be wise. He comes to recognize that his
act is necessarily polluted, ambiguous. It is neither
purely just nor purely unjust. It is both simultaneously.

Shall we say then that tragic wisdom consists in
enduring the torment suffered by Orestes at the end of the
Libation Beearers? If action necessarily generates both
justice and injustice, must we conclude that the highest
wisdom consists in the paralysis of inaction? The answer is
provided by Athena in the *Eumenides*, the final play of the
trilogy. As has already been noted above,[112] the trial of
Orestes which takes place at Athens represents an
irreconcilable deadlock between opposing forces in which
nothing is finally resolved. According to the human jurors
the claims on both sides, represented by Apollo and the
Furies, are equal. This deadlock represents the tragic
balance, the *isonomia* of the universe. It is only the vote
of Athena which decides that Orestes shall be acquitted of
the charge of matricide, and she votes on quite arbitrary
grounds.

Athena votes to acquit Orestes of his crime on the
grounds that she is "always for the male."[113] Before we
dismiss this vote as hopelessly sexist,[114] however, perhaps
we can view it in a wider light. The action of the
Eumenides lifts the themes of "wisdom" and "justice" from

their locus within human characters and situates them in a broader political order represented by Athena, goddess of wisdom. The location is Athens and the political order is democracy. Like Agamemnon and Orestes before her, Athena confronts an impossible dilemma. She must decide for or against Orestes' guilt on the charge of matricide.

Dramatically, the question turns upon whether Orestes is his father's or his mother's son. The question sounds an odd note to modern ears, and we are tempted to interject that "he is both, of course," as though that would solve the problem. But the ancient Greeks were not primitive thinkers and before we leap to the conclusion that we are so much wiser than they, we might consider that our response is precisely the same as would be proffered by any Greek audience. And therein lies Aeschylus' trap. For if Orestes is both Agamemnon's and Clytaemnestra's son, then his action was inextricably just and unjust at the same time. The consequences for society are grave. For if Orestes had failed to act against his mother, then, by a crime of omission he would have condoned tyranny and undermined the only principle of orderly political succession known to his world. In carrying out his duty and murdering his mother, however, Orestes' action violated the foundations of the very order he sought to defend. Simply put, if Orestes was indeed the bearer of a dual identity, then, as a matter of justice, he was both bound and forbidden to to carry out the same act of vengeance. Moreover, either course--action or

inaction--leads fatally to the erosion of law and order and the corrosion of political and social foundations. That is Athena's dilemma: Should Orestes have acted or not acted? Is he guilty or not guilty? Either verdict upholds a legitimate version of justice while hoplessly shredding the fabric of the social order.

Certainly it would be better for Athena if Orestes' "actions" were separable, but as the failures of Apollo for the defense and the Furies for the prosecution make clear, they are not. Orestes has committed a single act which is by different standards both just and unjust alike. And just as Orestes has committed a single act, so Orestes is one man (although he has a dual identity) and must be judged as such: guilty or not guilty. Athena votes to absolve him of his guilt but she does so on grounds which seem to have little to do with the issues posed by the contest. She is "always for the male," and it is just this apparently arbitrary element which appalls many modern readers of the play, not only for its apparent sexism but for its apparent dramatic ineptitude. But the modern reader should perhaps consider that, just as the ancient Greeks were not primitive thinkers, Aeschylus was not a primitive dramatist. Surely the arbitrary quality of Athena's decision was apparent to Aeschylus and his audience and was not without its dramatic intentions.

The vote of Athena constitutes a political act in a political context, and we can view it as representative of

the often unavoidably arbitrary, and therefore unjust,
character of political decisions and political action.
Political decisions, by their very nature, determine which
set of fundamental arrangements will prevail over other
equally possible arrangements at any given time. No matter
how just, such decisions must inevitably disallow and
dishonor some legitimate claims.[115]

Faced with her dilemma Athena acts, she makes her
choice. But, unilke Agamemnon, she does not act one-
sidedly. She continues to hear and honor both sides at the
same time even though she must choose between them. Her
vote favors Orestes and the male, but to fully appreciate
the ambiguous meaning of her vote we must attend more
closely to the contested arena which Orestes' character
represents and embodies.

Orestes is not a modern identity, and there is more at
stake in the *Oresteia* than his personal "guilt" or
"innocence." Like Agamemnon's character, Orestes' character
represents a field of battle, an *agon*, where opposing forces
meet. There are numerous pairs of opponents at war upon the
terrain named "Orestes." On one side there is Apollo, on
the other, the Furies; male versus female; youth versus age;
change versus tradition; reason versus passion; and finally,
the political family versus the family of blood ties. In
voting for "the male," Athena has voted in favor of a whole
army against its related opponents. But at the same time

she has not in heroic fashion elevated one side to victory while crushing the other side in defeat.

Athena upholds the side upon which Apollo fought but she rejects his argument against Clytaemnestra's maternity of Orestes. Instead she couches her own decision in the same words used by the female Furies, sustaining to some degree the positions of both sides. On balance, Athena sides with Apollo that on the issue before her Orestes is more his father's son than his mother's. In doing so she casts her vote for the political family over the family of blood ties. In this she once again echoes Agamemnon at Aulis. Unlike Agamemnon, however, she does not cease to hear and honor the legitimate claims of the other side. Her elevation of the Furies to a position of power and authority within the political order recognizes that the unlimited victory of either side over the other leads only to unlimited bloodshed and disintegration.

It is well to remember that while Athena casts the deciding vote, it is still only one of many. Her vote is decisive only because the human jury was evenly split, signifying the justice of *isonomia*.[116] Athena's vote merely tips the balance slightly, and perhaps only temporarily, in favor of one side over the other while ensuring that the contest will continue. One might even construe her decision in favor of the male, while conceding no power of her own, to be a statement that both the female and male "forces," or governing principles, are necessary to good order.

Although Athena recognizes that justice speaks on both sides through Apollo and the Furies, she also recognizes that neither side can articulate a principle of limits for itself. Each side claims that the victory of the other guarantees a loss of limits and a disintegration of order, but neither side can hear the truth in the other's words. Only Athena recognizes that they are both right. She recognizes, for example, that to the extent that Apollo stands for rational order and the Furies stand for a passionate commitment to traditional loyalties, each has a legitimate time and a legitimate title to rule. But she recognizes also that the rule of either alone without the other leads to unending bloodshed. As incompatible as they are, each needs the other as a limit to his or her own excesses. Without fear or passion, the most violent acts can be rationalized. But without the restraint of reason, passion authorizes continuous violence.[117] It is Athena's wisdom to recognize that although a decision must be made, a verdict rendered, an action taken, neither side can afford complete victory over the other. All sides must continue to be heard and sustained in equal opposition. In the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus educates and celebrates the democracy of Athens as the political embodiment of this wisdom.

Notes

[1] Thucydides, 2.65.

[2] A. W. H. Adkins, "'Friendship' and 'Self-Sufficiency' in Homer and Aristotle," *Classical Quarterly* n.s. 13 (1968), 29-45.

[3] See M. I. Finley, "Household, Kin and Community," chapt. 2 in *World of Odysseus*, esp. 98-102.

[4] A. W. H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 11.

[5] Jean-Paul Vernant, "City-State Warfare," chapt. 2 in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1980).

[6] The point is well-made in Finley, *World of Odysseus*, 74-107. See also Adkins, *Moral Values*, 10-21.

[7] *Iliad*, 6.119-231. See the gloss on this episode by Adkins, *Moral Values*, 18.

[8] W. G. Forrest, *The Emergence of Greek Democracy* (New York: World University Library, 1966); and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).

[9] Victor Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates* (London: Methuen, 1967), 50 and 99-100, notes that early Athens was an aristocracy of the clans, and that by far the majority of Greek states were aristocracies. Adkins, *Moral Values*, 68, observes that even in democratic Athens the basic unit of society remained the individual household with its *philoi*.

[10] Finley, *World of Odysseus*, 118, reminds us that honor is necessarily hierarchic and that Homeric culture was fiercely competitive as each hero strove to outdo the others.

[11] See Adkins, *Moral Values*, 21, on this point.

[12] To say that they were autonomous is not to say that they shared no common cultural bonds such as language and religion.

[13] Adkins, *Moral Values*, 112. See also Arnaldo Momigliano, "Persian Empire and Greek Freedom," 149.

[14] See Victor Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," *Historia* 1 (1950),515-48; also W. G. Forrest, *Emergence of Greek Democracy*, 191-203.

[15] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Origins of Greek Thought*, 98. My summary of Cleisthenes' reforms relies on Vernant's admirably succinct account (*Origins*, 98-101), as well as the more extensive discussions in Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates*, 87-99; and Forrest, *Emergence of Greek Democracy*, 191-203.

[16] See, e.g., Herodotus, 5.66.

[17] See, e.g., Martin Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 149ff.

[18] Forrest, *Emergence of Democracy*, 202-203.

[19] Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," 543; and *From Solon to Socrates*, 87-88.

[20] With two notable exceptions, in 411 B.C. and 404 B.C. On this point see M. I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, rev. ed., (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University press, 1985), 23; 70-71.

[21] Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, 29-30.

[22] M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 131.

[23] Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, 134. The conclusion is stated even more forcefully in *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, 87: "The full democratic system would not have been introduced had there been no Athenian empire."

[24] This is not to say that there were no complementary pressures for greater equality from below, only that those pressures retained a different status. One might say that they were politically revolutionary without being "theoretically" revolutionary.

[25] J. Peter Euben, "Political Equality and the Greek *Polis*," in *Liberalism and the Modern Polity*, ed. Michael J. Gargas McGrath (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1978), 210.

[26] Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," 534.

[27] Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," 531, for example, argues that the term originated in an aristocratic context to designate an "equality of 'peers,' not of the people." This position is vehemently contested by Gregory Vlastos, "*Isonomia*," *American Journal of Philology* 74 (1953), 337-66. Vlastos, however, concedes that *isonomia* might apply to an equalitarian oligarchy within the limits of its restricted franchise. In principle then there is nothing which says that *isonomia* must be universally extended. It could apply to any group of two or more where power is divided and shared exclusively. How and why the principle became associated almost exclusively with democracy is therefore worth some exploration. Further discussion of *isonomia* can be found in J. Peter Euben, "Political Equality and the

Greek *Polis*," in *Liberalism and the Modern Polity*, ed. Michael J. Gargas McGrath (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1978), 207-28; Gregory Vlastos, "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies," in *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. David J. Furley and R. E. Allen (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 56-91; Jean Pierre Vernant, *Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); and Martin Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), esp. 96-160.

[28] For a thorough discussion of this facet of *isonomia* see Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy*, 99-106, and Vlastos, "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies," 57-60.

[29] My discussion of Anaximander relies principally on Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Jean Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), esp. chapts. 6 and 7; Jean Pierre Vernant, *Origins of Greek Thought*; and Gregory Vlastos, "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies."

[30] For a discussion of this point see Jean Pierre Vernant, "Geometrical Structure and Political Ideas in the Cosmology of Anaximander," chapt. 7 in *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*.

[31] It is unnecessary to conclude that "theory," in the form of Anaximander's reconfiguration of cosmic justice, was the driving force behind the evolution of Athenian democracy. Surely there were economic and military factors as well. (On this point see, e.g., Forrest, *Emergence of Athenian Democracy*, 77-97; and Vernant, *Origins of Greek Thought*, 62-64.) The point I wish to make is that political transformations unleashed by historical forces require an overarching sense of legitimacy if they are to integrate rather than disintegrate political associations.

[32] It is only when that displacement is complete, or at least hegemonic, that the straightforward translation of *dike* as "justice" ceases to obscure political history.

[33] Athenian democracy can of course be criticized for its exclusion of women, slaves, and resident aliens from the ruling privileges of citizenship. That is an important truth. But it is equally important to note that justification for those exclusions became increasingly difficult as equalitarian justice gradually displaced hierachical justice. Prior to that displacement it was the principle of inclusion, not exclusion, which required justification, and this represented a significant reversal.

[34] On this point see M. I. Finley, *Democracy, Ancient and Modern*, 28; A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 41-42; and Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 176ff.

[35] "Theory" could have hardly any other meaning prior to Plato.

[36] Karen Hermassi, *Polity and Theater in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 25; Werner Jaeger, Paideia, vol. I, 2d ed., trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 246.

[37] See J. Peter Euben's discussion of this point in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 21-31; and in *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 50-59. See also Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Aeschylus, the Past and the Present," in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 257; and Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. I, 246-248. While these authors may disagree among themselves and with me on the content of tragedy's educational mission, they do agree that tragedy was both a political and democratic institution.

[38] John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes Song: *Tragoidia* and *Polis*" in *Nothing to Do With Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, eds. J. J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39, note 58.

[39] J. J. Winkler, "The Ephebes Song," 37-42.

[40] J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 50, note 41. See also Karen Hermassi, *Polity and Theater in Historical Perspective*, 18.

[41] Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation" in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 279.

[42] Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Ancient Greece," 26.

[43] Strictly speaking, even Agamemnon's murder is not viewed but merely heard and recounted by the chorus.

[44] Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33; Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 190; Hugh Lloyd-Jones, The "Guilt of Agamemnon," *Classical Quarterly* n.s. 12 (1962): 187; C. W. MacLeod, "Politics and the Oresteia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 131; Anthony J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 63.

[45] Versions of the progressivist interpretation can be found in H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1964), 54-86; George Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens* (New York: Haskell House, 1967), 279-89; Anthony J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy*, 78; Lazlo Versenyi, *Man's Measure* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1974), 193-96; R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 167-74. The progressivist interpretation is challenged by H. Lloyd-Jones in "Zeus in Aeschylus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 76 (1956): 64, and in *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 94. Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 37-56, challenges both the progressivist interpretation and Lloyd-Jones' criticisms.

[46] Lazlo Versenyi, *Man's Measure*, 199-202.

[47] Lazlo Versenyi, *Man's Measure*, 201-202.

[48] A similar position is adopted by Eric A. Havelock, *The Greek Concept of Justice*: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 295, when he complains that "nowhere in the drama of Aeschylus can we find out 'what justice is'. . . . We . . . have to wait for a philosopher to tell us what we want to know."

[49] See, for example, Werner Jaeger, *Paideia* vol. I, 267: ". . . the final scene of the Oresteia [closes] with the picture of *cosmos*, harmonious order throughout the state, reconciling all oppositions . . .;" and also R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus*, 172: "The *Eumenides* sorts things out which have been fused in the earlier plays, only that they may be harmonized at a higher level."

[50] Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 33-56.

[51] Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 56. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy" in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 108, n. 2, argues that at the end of the *Oresteia* "an equilibrium is established, but it is based on tensions. In the background there continues to be conflict between opposing forces. In this sense tragic ambiguity is not resolved. Ambivalence remains."

[52] A long and lively disagreement continues over whether Athena's vote to acquit Orestes breaks a tie or creates a tie in the ballots. In favor of the former, see, e.g., R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 124 and 125, n. 110; and H. Lloyd Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 76 (1956): 64. In favor of the latter, see, e.g., Michael Gagarin, "The Vote of Athena," *American Journal of Philology* 96 (1975): 121-27; C. W. MacLeod, "Politics and the *Oresteia*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 134, n. 49; and Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy," 108, n. 2. Nothing in the present argument hinges on the ultimate outcome of this debate.

[53] She is "always in favor of the male," a statement which understandably infuriates many readers of the play. [See, e.g., Froma Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myths and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," *Arethusa* 11 no.'s 1 & 2 (1978), 149-84. However, Athena's position may be less absolute and less misogynist than it initially appears. First of all, Athena herself is a female born of no mother but only a single male god, Zeus. She therefore embodies equally both female and male herself. Secondly, as with every other figure in the play, Athena's position exists only in opposition to some other position in the text. In Athena's case, she stands in opposition to the Furies who are wholly female themselves and devoted soley to avenging matricides. Athena's position in support of the male thus neatly balances the position of the Furies who, incidentally, are never neutralized in this tragedy. They continue to represent the "female principle" against the "male principle" throughout.

[54] *Eumenides*, 526-28, 696. Unless otherwise noted, all line references are to the Richard Lattimore translation of Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953).

[55] H. Lloyd-Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 76 (1956): 55-67; and *The Justice of Zeus*, 90-95.

[56] H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 94.

[57] H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 95.

[58] For a critique of Lloyd-Jones' position see Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 49-50.

[59] H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 87.

[60] Also lost is any distinction between types of political order. To the conservative reading, one state is the same as another, and the unique association of tragedy and democracy is overlooked.

[61] H. Lloyd-Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," 64.

[62] William Arrowsmith, "The Criticism of Greek Tragedy," *Tulane Drama Review* 3. no. 3 (1959), 46.

[63] That is not to say that we understand heroic *dike* through the *mind* of Agamemnon. Without addressing, but merely noting, the long debate over the place of psychology in the interpretation of Greek drama, I take the dramatic, as opposed to the psychological, character of Agamemnon to be the bearer, that is, the carrier and agent, of heroic *dike*.

[64] *Agamemnon* 183-255.

[65] On the subject of Homeric values and Homeric culture, see A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 30-36; and his *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece* (New York: Norton, 1972), 11-21.

[66] Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 36.

[67] See R. B. Rutherford, "Tragic Form and Feeling in the *Iliad*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982), 145-160, for an interesting version of this point.

[68] John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 115.

[69] On this point and many others, I am indebted to Peter Euben's provacative "Justice and the *Oresteia*," chapt. 3 in *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[70] *Agamemnon* 211.

[71] See the excellent commentary on Agamemnon's condition in Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 36.

[72] *Agamemnon* 217-26.

[73] *Agamemnon* 214-15.

[74] See above, p.117.

[75] *Agamemnon* 227.

[76] *Agamemnon* 237.

[77] *Agamemnon* 248.

[78] *Agamemnon* 818.

[79] A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 35-36.

[80] *Agamemnon* 526-30. The praise is ominous because the Greeks traditionally believed that for a man to stand out too far above others was to invite the jealous retribution of the gods. It is ominous, too, because it follows upon earlier reminders by the chorus that the gods punish those who attain envied heights of wealth, power, and glory (*Agamemnon* 460-75.)

[81] *Agamemnon* 566-73.

[82] *Agamemnon* 448. The phrase abruptly shifts the issue of Helen's alienation from a lofty principle of justice to a mere family quarrel. Helen's "strangenes," i.e., her unrelatedness, is contrasted to the closeness of the young men lost to ordinary families during the war. "Those they sent forth they knew," (*Agamemnon* 433) the chorus says, prefacing Helen's strangeness.

[83] *Agamemnon* 443.

[84] See J. P. Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, 62-65, for a concise summary of this shift. See also Forrest, *Emergence of Greek Democracy*, 77ff.

[85] See Chapter One, p.56ff.

[86] *Agamemnon* 338-47.

[87] *Agamemnon* 217-18.

[88] The pattern is set by Achilles in the *Iliad* whose own heroic frenzy is induced by the death of his beloved Patroclus at the hands of Hector, all according to the plan of Zeus.

[89] *Agamemnon* 176-78.

[90] *Agamemnon* 250-51.

[91] Michael Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 139-50. Gagarin reviews the efforts to attach profound significance to these lines and concludes that they are misguided. Gagarin favors a rather narrow, more figurative interpretation to the effect that certain people will be "taught a lesson" if they don't watch out.

[92] Karen Hermassi, *Polity and Theater in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977), 16; W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1945), 266; Michael Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama*, 148-49.

[93] Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama*, 68-70.

[94] Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 76 (1956), 62.

[95] See Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 274; Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 1, 110; and Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1966), 15.

[96] Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus*, 83.

[97] In the lines which frame the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the chorus first asserts that it is according to Zeus that suffering is united with wisdom. Later they assert that the same relation holds according to *dike*. Therefore Zeus and *dike* are not in conflict.

[98] This interpretation would be consistent with the tragic conception of "balance" which replaces the heroic conception. Heroic balance occurs over a complete cycle of time where "time" is a vertically cyclical notion. Tragic balance occurs at any given moment in time and yields the horizontal relation of *isonomia*, the simultaneous attraction and aversion of opposites in a precarious equilibrium.

[99] Along with other political ambiguities, the text probes the tensions within the meaning of "family," or *oikos*. What happens when the larger political community is conceived in terms of an extended family and those mutually constituted meanings then come into conflict, the text inquires.

[100] See A. W. H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (London: Constable, 1970) on the structure of the self in Homeric and later literature.

[101] *Libation Bearers* 210.

[102] *L.B.* 830.

[103] *L.B.* 650. See also *Ag.* 1667; *L.B.* 138-163, 805, 933.

[104] *L.B.* 1074.

[105] *L.B.* 1020-21.

[106] *L.B.* 306-514.

[107] *L.B.* 988-89.

[108] *L.B.* 994-95.

[109] *L.B.* 1015-17.

[110] *L.B.* 1027.

[111] This is the import of Apollo's sophistic argument in the *Eumenides* in defense of Orestes that the mother is not a true parent of the child but merely a vessel which carries the father's seed. (*Eu.* 657-66).

[112] See p.132

[113] *Eumenides* 737.

[114] As does Froma Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myths and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978), 149-84, and, to a lesser degree, does R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Clytaemnestra and the Vote of Athena," chapt. 6 in *Studies in Aeschylus*, 125-131.

[115] This is consistent with Anaximander's view that any given comological order is to some degree unjust simply because it displaces some other possible order with equal claim to exist.

[116] Winnington-Ingram observes in this context that "the key word *dike* is associated with the equal votes of the human jurors." *Studies in Aeschylus*, 145.

[117] Implicit within the framework of *isonomia* and the cosmology of Anaximander is the additional premise, perhaps embodied in Clytaemnestra's character, that a combination of opposing forces on one side would be the most dangerous configuration of all. Opposition is the source of limits.

PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*:   THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF TRAGEDY

Agony v. Identity

The dual vision and ambiguous language of Greek tragedy
reflects and represents on stage the principle of *isonomia*
(law of equals) which justified Athenian democracy. The
principle of *isonomia* is drawn from an image of nature which
yields conceptions of wisdom, justice, law, truth and
goodness which are at odds with the traditional meanings of
those terms within the Homeric conception of nature
portrayed by Thucydides in his *History*. A democratic
politics is therefore at its very origins a contest over the
meanings of words.

The natural order of the *kosmos* represented by *isonomia*
is one of a balance of opposing forces engaged in a
perpetual contest where no force is strong enough to defeat
any other. Nature is seen to be composed of pairs of forces
which are mutually incompatible yet mutually dependent and
inseparable at the same time. Opposites not only attract
and repel each other simultaneously, they mutually
constitute each other as units of power, or bipolar
identities.

Isonomia is not a theory of power, strictly speaking.
It is a vision which implies a theory of <u>limits</u> to power.
That nature is an order of powers is taken for granted. The

principle of *isonomia* is based on the premise that no power or force contains within itself the principle of its own limitation. Every force naturally seeks to dominate. Limits are to be found only in the opposition of a different but related force.

Isonomia characterizes itself as the law of nature articulating the nature of justice. But this is a very different sense of justice and a very different law of nature from that articulated by Athens in Thucydides' *History*. In the heroic conception of justice found there the forces of nature also seek to dominate, and they succeed, but in so doing they generate their own opposition which overcomes them in time. Time contains the limits which balance out the forces of nature in their eternal cycle of domination and submission, victory and defeat.

Tragedy constitutes a radical challenge to the heroic tradition of Greek culture. The heroic tradition is not overthrown or repudiated, however. It is reinterpreted and seen to be only a partial view of nature, representing incomplete wisdom. From the tragic perspective of time the balance of the heroic cycle is seen to be an imbalance. History appears as a cycle of domination and submission, power and weakness, war and peace, victory and defeat only because an imbalance has been introduced at some point. Original nature is portrayed as *isonomia*, a balance of equal forces each restraining the other, preventing the heroic imbalance. Tragedy portrays the heroic cycle as a special

case of order. What was once seen to be natural is now seen to be a distortion of nature. The heroic balance in which power and weakness naturally revolve over time is treated tragically as a loss of a more original balance.[1]

Tragedy introduces the notion of politics as a set of dilemmas to be straddled rather than a war to be won. Every political act threatens to set in motion the vertical imbalance of the heroic cycle. The political art, exemplified by Athena in the *Eumenides*, consists of maintaining the balance even though it can never be "perfect." Political decision-making always privileges one side or the other, but that privilege can never be permanent. It must be reciprocated if the perpetual imbalance of the heroic cycle is not to rule.

Different conceptions of justice are reflected in different forms of literature. The heroic conception of justice lends itself to the historical form, particularly the history of war, as Thucydides recognized. History reveals the temporal "truth" of justice in its eternal cycle of ascent and decline. The justice of *isonomia*, tragic justice, lends itself more to the dramatic form. Tragic drama compresses time to portray justice as a simultaneous tension of opposites locked in a perpetual contest of equals without final or full resolution.

Tragic drama affirms a democratic political order in which opposites are honored as equals and no single force is permitted to rule unopposed. The wisdom of *isonomia*, and

the wisdom of democracy, consists in the recognition that
not only must opposition be tolerated out of fear of
reprisal, but one's own opposition must actually be honored
as good. For without opposition there are no limits, and
tragic wisdom tells us that we need limits even upon (or
within) ourselves. Without the limits found in opposition
every force ascends to crime and injustice. That is the
wisdom of tragic *isonomia*.

The Greek idea of wisdom had long been associated with
a knowledge of limits and self-restraint.[2] "Know thyself,"
the traditional formulation of wisdom inscribed over the
temple of Apollo at Delphi, originally meant to know one's
place in the social structure and not cross one's bounds.
To know thyself meant to restrain oneself and maintain one's
proper place in the social and natural order.

Tragedy continues that tradition but identifies that
order as contradictory in nature, placing oneself in an
arena of conflicting demands and loyalties. Wisdom consists
not in eliminating the dilemmas and resolving the
contradictions, for that would introduce an imbalance, but
in somehow honoring all contestants and dishonoring none,
thus retaining one's precarious balance.

Greek wisdom had always been associated with words
while "goodness" (*arete*) was more traditionally associated
with successful action, particularly in battle, although
"goodness" was always also the quality of a successful
person.[3] Thus the poets were wise because they articulated

in inspired language the "truth" of the natural order. Leaders and warriors were "good," on the other hand, if they were successful. To be good was not necessarily to be wise.

In heroic hand-to-hand battle the quality of successful *arete* could almost be said to be associated with a loss of restraint, a loss of balance, in the form of *lyssa*, the frenzied possession which overcame fear and inspired courage. In time, however, as successful battle tactics shifted from hand-to-hand combat to the hoplite phalanx where success depended on maintaining one's place in line, noble "goodness" became more associated with inaction and self-restraint, almost the opposite of what it had once meant, and closer to the notion of "wisdom."

As the location of "goodness" shifted from outward action to the inward "action" of self-restraint, the *arete* of action and the wisdom of words were drawn closer together. Finally in democracy where warring words became the medium of power and success, the domain of wisdom, language, action, thought, and power overlapped the political space of the assembly and the inner space of the soul. It was this historical conjunction which permitted Socrates and Plato to politically address language to the arena of the soul rather than the arena of the assembly.

Plato's[4] relation to democracy is paradoxical. If we are to take him at his word in the *Republic*, he considered it the most nearly perfect form of political insanity imaginable.[5] Nevertheless, Plato's *Republic* sets out to

show us on what foundations a democracy would have to be
established if it were to succeed. It would require a new
basis of self-restraint, a new form of wisdom. First,
however, its tragic foundations would have to be destroyed.

Plato's target in the Republic is not democracy as
such. It is *isonomia*, the original foundation of democracy.
Isonomia is an illogical principle. Indeed it is the very
antithesis of logic. *Isonomia* portrays and affirms conflict
and self-contradiction as the true soul of nature.
Opposites such as justice and injustice, friends and
enemies, are portrayed as inseparably bound together as one.
Consistent with this illogical view, the language which
articulates the law of *isonomia* is deeply and irremediably
ambiguous.

From a Platonic view, *isonomia* would seem to be a
dangerous foundation for politics because it seems to embody
the very principle of disorder itself: contradiction. To
Plato, contradiction is the metaphor of political
disintegration, *stasis*. *Stasis* means more than mere civil
strife. It represents the complete breakdown of order and
restraint such as would be found in a riot. It was a
frightening specter to all Greeks and a terrifying memory to
Athenians at the end of the Peloponnesian war.

In the Republic, Plato seeks to replace the law of
isonomia upholding Greek democracy with the law of identity
upholding logic and mathematics. The principle of identity
is the principle of non-contradiction. There are many ways

of formulating the principle of identity. It essentially states that opposites cannot be attributed to the same thing in the same place at the same time. Aristotle defined it as "the most secure *arche* [foundation] of all."[6] It remains "the most secure arche" of modern rational life.[7]

Plato was the first political philosopher to attempt to place political order on rational, logical foundations, but in order to do it he had to undermine and defeat the principle of *isonomia*. That is why the *Republic* bans tragic poetry from the ideal state. Tragic theater was the institution which articulated the nature of *isonomia* and dramatically represented it to the Athenian democracy. The exclusion of the tragic poets from the ideal city of the *Republic* is not a peripheral aesthetic concern to Plato. It is the immediate target of his political project.[8]

Language and law are closely related. The affinity is expressed in the Greek term *logos*, which refers to the universal law reflected in orderly thought and language. The law is articulated in words, of course. But the universal *logos* is expressed in the form of language itself. Language must be properly formed and arranged if it is to adequately reflect and express the highest *logos* of all. That is the foundation of poetic wisdom. From Homer to the tragic poets to Plato, the source of poetic wisdom has always been found not only in the spoken or written words, but in the form of speech, the inspired arrangement of the words into an order which reflects the true order of nature.

The law of *isonomia* is found in the paradoxical
ambiguity which haunts the language of the tragic poets.
The endless double meanings, double visions and oxymora
which give life to the tragic form are not warnings of the
chaos and perversion which threaten to envelop the political
order.[9] They affirm the vitality of the healthy political
order itself as a contest which preserves contradiction and
the coexistence of opposites in an uneasy balance. It is
the balance of "self-contradiction" which restrains the
political order from oscillating between the dangerous
imbalance of tyranny, where one element would rule all
others, and *stasis*, the absence of any rule at all. Tragedy
warns against logical coherence as a dangerous dream.

The language of Thucydides's *History* challenges the
tragic view of language as a mirror of a paradoxically
ambiguous nature implying the law of equals. Thucydides
portrays nature as a heroic contest in which language is no
more than another weapon in the struggle for domination and
inequality. Thucydides and the tragic poets agree that
nature is an *agon*, a contest of power between opposite
forces. They disagree on the geometry of that *agon*. Is it
a vertical cycle of ascent and decline, or is it a
precarious horizontal balance between rotating opposites?
The answer yields conflicting views of politics, justice,
law, wisdom, and goodness.

If tragedy contests the traditional heroic view
portrayed in Thucydides' *History*, Plato contests them both.

Although tragedy contests the heroic view of equality, both Thucydides and the tragic poets retain the central image of the *agon* as the true metaphor of nature. Plato is much more radical in his repudiation of this defining metaphor of the entire Greek tradition. For Plato, the *agon* is also the metaphor of *stasis*. Any politics founded on the image of the *agon* at its core must ultimately produce *stasis* and disorder.

At the same time, however, Plato is much more conservative than the tragedians on the notion of equality. Plato rejects the balanced equality of *isonomia* in favor of the idea of sovereignty. Sovereignty retains the vertical stance of the heroic cycle but freezes the rotation at the point in time where reason is at its zenith. But tragedy warns that even the sovereignty of reason represents a dangerous imbalance inviting crime and retribution. Even reason needs its opposition at times if it is not to ascend to injustice. The sophistic reason of Apollo in the *Oresteia* could justify any crime, and Athena recognized that the fear and horror of the female Furies did not represent a loss of reason or control but rather the enforcement of a necessary restraint upon reason.

Sovereignty is the guardian against *stasis* in Plato's thought. But what, the tragedians would ask, is to restrain the sovereign? Plato's answer is that the true sovereign will be self-limiting. Indeed this is to be the criterion by which the true sovereign is known. Moreover Plato seems

to believe that the principle of identity (the good), and
only the principle of identity, can fill that position.

The principle of identity, the Platonic good, is the
principle of "oneness," wholeness, and self-sufficiency.
Plato seems to believe that anything which is naturally
good, i.e., internally self-consistent, cannot change or
grow beyond a certain point before it divides into two.
Large, rich cities, for example, are in reality not one but
many cities at war with one another, and no match for a
smaller, more united city. As long as the principle of
identity rules, then, there can be a self-limiting
sovereign.[10]

Plato's paradoxical position with respect to the
tragedians and Thucydides is perhaps most evident on the
question of the status of language. Tragedy portrays the
natural ambiguity of language as a mirror of nature with
democratic implications for the nature of political life.
The view of language endorsed by tragedy and *isonomia* would
tend to affirm a rather robust and raucous assembly in which
all views were aired and honored. Political decisions would
tend to be understood as having elements of sacrifice to be
atoned for rather than acts of pure justice.

Thucydides portrays language as a weapon to be used in
the struggle for domination, and the political implications
are at odds with those of Greek tragedy and the democracy it
supported. Thucydides shows Pericles dominating the
Athenian assembly during his life with his considerable

persuasive powers. Pericles' strength rested on his ability to impose consistent public meanings on words and to overcome the naturally indecisive and selfish language of the assembly. Pericles was able to exercise this power by consistently invoking the image of the greatness of Athens over the greatness of any individual including himself. The greatness of Athens and the prospect of immortality in history was able to unite the Athenian assembly against the image of death and dissolution.

If we can characterize Pericles' decisive *gnome* as the elimination of ambiguity from the language of the assembly, then Plato is closer to Thucydides in his view of language than he is to Aeschylus or Sophocles. Plato would agree in principle with the tragedians that language is a mirror of nature, but he would disagree that the ambiguous language of tragedy adequately reflected the truth of nature. For Plato the ambiguous language of the poets represents a dangerous distortion of language leading inevitably toward the collapse of meanings into political *stasis*. The elimination of ambiguity, and the poets who employ it, would avert *stasis* and place politics on a more stable footing. Unambiguous philosophical language would have to replace poetic language, and philosophers would have to replace the poets as the wise men of a stable political order.

Where Plato sees *stasis*, tragedy sees limits. Where Plato sees stability, tragedy sees a dangerous imbalance and a loss of limits. If ambiguity is lost and philosophy

rules, tragedy asks, what is to restrain the philosophers? Where is the principle of limits? From a Platonic perspective it is an almost incoherent question of course. The notion that philosophy might need limits seems quite logically absurd. Philosophy would appear to be the very embodiment of limits in its affirmation of the principle of identity as the truth of nature and the fundamental principle of political language. An unambiguous language would reflect the highest good as the true form of nature. Philosophical wisdom and restraint would be reflected in a pure, unambiguous language just as traditional poetic wisdom was reflected an incurably ambiguous language.

From the perspective of traditional *arete* and action Thucydides would ask Plato what "good" is language in a practical sense? Plato sees language as both wise and good reflecting his position at the intersection of these two separate strands of traditional thought and meaning. Where Thucydides saw language as a weapon to be used in public battle, Plato sees a surgical instrument to doctor the soul. If a wise language reflects the principle of identity at the heart of nature, then a good language will be a useful device to bring the soul into a healthy state, a condition of identity, at one with itself.

Plato seeks to replace the law of the *agon* in both its heroic and tragic formulations with the law of identity which yields yet a third view of politics and language which will be traced out in the *Republic*. The principle of

identity is based on the axiom that contradiction and conflict are unnatural, unreal and untrue. A politics founded on the basis of identity then will be free of conflict and the pursuit of power, both of which are contrary to nature. Ambiguity will be purged from political language and philosophers will replace the poets as the guardians of language and the figures of political wisdom.

It is well to remember, however, that when Plato repudiated the *agon* as the central metaphor of politics, he also eliminated the traditional source of limits to power. As long as power was thought to be the natural and defining characteristic of politics, political theory addressed itself to the issue of limits. Even Pericles who seemed to hold out to the Athenians the vision of an empire without bounds never doubted that the natural forces of decay and disintegration would overtake the Athenians in time. The goal was not boundless power but eternal fame and glory. To be talked about forever was a form of immortality in language beyond death. Without the *agon*, a new source of limits would have to be envisioned and articulated. Plato apparently believed that the sovereignty of identity in the form of "the good" would fill that role as well.

The Government of Desire

In democracy language is the medium of power. In the Athenian assembly, the mysterious power of persuasion was transformed into political power. It is appropriate then

that Book One of the *Republic* initiates not only a discussion of the contested meaning of "justice" derived from a proper understanding of nature but also a discussion of the status of language itself which will be carried on throughout the text.

The opening lines of the text find Socrates detained by a group of friends who wish him to stay and join their festivities. Polemarchus presents the options to Socrates: he will be overpowered by the physical force of numbers unless he can convince them to let him go.[11] Socrates suggests persuasion as an alternative to force but he yields when his friends respond that the power of persuasion will be powerless if they refuse to listen.

The brief encounter raises important but unanswered questions. What is the difference between the force of physical strength, represented by superior numbers, and the force of persuasion? Which is the superior power in terms of both *arete* and justice? Which is more legitimate, we would ask, under what conditions and why? How are we to evaluate the consent required by persuasion to secure its effect.[12]

The conversation moves to the home of Cephalus, father of Polemarchus. Cephalus is a "good" man in the traditional sense. He is pious in the sense that he observes the proper religious rituals. He is wise in the sense that he is self-restrained and moderate. He is well-off but not greedy. He has less money than his grandfather but more than his

father, and he has no desire to increase his wealth. He is
honorable. He has sufficient money to pay his debts and
keep his word, a "noble," if simple, conception of justice.
He is not troubled by need or desire.

Socrates attempts to question Cephalus on his notion of
justice to see if it does not lead to contradiction, but
Cephalus declines the bait. He leaves the conversation to
attend to a religious duty but he bequeaths his part to his
son, Polemarchus.

Cephalus leads a good, but unexamined, life. He is
comfortable and secure and feels no need to question
traditional practices and beliefs. But Cephalus is elderly
and approaching death. He represents an age which is
already passing away. And the new age is not so self-
contained. It is no accident that the scene takes place in
the port district of Athens during the festival of a new
god. Athens has become a cosmopolitan city and the port is
the symbol of exotic pleasure and sensual desire.[13]

Polemarchus takes over his father's position and
introduces the second, traditional formulation of justice:
helping friends and harming enemies. Socrates thoroughly
confuses Polemarchus demonstrating that he does not know
what he is saying. First he seems to discredit the
traditional view of justice as not useful. In a culture
which places a high value on success this is a powerful
argument. Socrates secondly shows that Polemarchus does not
know what it is that is <u>due</u> to friends and enemies, nor can

he adequately distinguish real friends and enemies from apparent ones, and finally he does not know what is helpful or harmful.

The conversation with Polemarchus serves to show that the traditional formulation of justice has become an incoherent and meaningless cliche. But in the process Socrates seems to have established that justice is a matter of knowledge and desire. He has, moreover, injected the tacit premise that justice and injustice, friends and enemies, and even "helping" and "harming" are mutually contradictory opposites which are never the same. The ground for the eventual rejection of tragedy is thus laid early in the opening lines of the *Republic*.

Thrasymachus enters to provide the third formulation of justice. "Justice is the advantage of the stronger." Thrasymachus also represents a powerful tradition. He stands for the timeless belief that power is the good and absolute power for oneself is the highest good. He also stands for the Athenian view portrayed by Thucydides that equality is merely a convention among the weak to restrain the strong from harming the weak.

Socrates catches Thrasymachus in a web of apparent contradictions. But Socrates concedes that his victory over Thrasymachus is unsatisfactory. It was too easy, unsystematic and incomplete. Furthermore Thrasymachus does not consider himself defeated. He has been silenced but not persuaded. It is an insecure victory and Socrates knows it.

But Thrasymachus is incapable of carrying on the argument. He is little more than an incoherent beast. Does Plato suggest that those who occupy the position of Thrasymachus will never be persuaded but only tamed and domesticated at best?

In any case Plato has gained much from the reader. He has seduced us into implicitly agreeing that the contested terms of the argument are "knowledge" and "the good." And he has secured our tacit agreement that the antithesis of knowledge is contradiction. Those who contradict themselves in argument are ignorant. And arguments which lead to contradiction are false. By securing early and uncontested submission to the principle of non-contradiction as the standard of knowledge Plato has already secured the foundation for his conclusion that tragedy must be banned almost before the "real" dialogue begins.[14]

Glaucon and Adeimantus take up the argument on behalf of the silenced Thrasymachus. They claim that most people secretly, but silently, agree with Thrasymachus. If they could have their way, most people would want everything for themselves. The convention of equality, they say, has been adopted by the weak, who would end up with nothing, only to curb the appetites of the naturally strong, who would end up with everything. The convention is thought to be unnatural, however, and anyone able to violate it without being caught or punished would naturally do so.

It is not necessarily a perverse argument. It is an argument that could be made against democratic equality on behalf of traditional *arete* and traditional forms of honor. Honor was the form of praise which men either offered or earned based on their standing or "goodness." Goods, in the form of possessions and property, were merely outward signs of the honor and status one had actually earned. Goods could not confer status; they could only confirm it. From this perspective, it is certainly possible to claim that democratic equality upsets the natural order of things by giving equal shares of honor to unequals. It might certainly appear that democracy was an arrangement which gave to the undeserving more than they deserved while giving less to the more deserving.

The key to the argument as it is framed in the text is the link between justice and "happiness." In traditional aristocratic terms justice consisted of having the amount of honor one deserved, and happiness consisted in being satisfied with that amount. Goodness, *arete*, supplied a natural limit to goods. To desire more than one's share was unjust. Under commercial conditions, however, it became possible to acquire an unlimited amount of goods with money. Money represented a loss of limits. If democracy was associated with the commercial classes, and the possession of goods came to be associated with the acquisition of money rather than traditional forms of success, then the democratic pursuit of happiness could come to be associated

with the unlimited acquisition of goods along with the power
such a pursuit would require. From this perspective
equality would seem to be a necessary social convention to
compensate for the loss of limits associated with the
severed link between "goodness" and goods.

Justice and happiness are linked and so it is not
farfetched that the quest for the meaning of "justice" in
the text is pursued in terms of the meaning of "happiness."
It can be agreed that everyone desires happiness and that
happiness in an interior condition. It is assumed that
justice is also an interior state (the text is concerned
with the "just man") but is it the same as happiness? The
participants in the conversation contrive an experiment to
find the answer. Socrates proposes that they look for
justice in the political state in order to better see it in
the soul. He further proposes that they construct their
experimental state in words rather than examine an actual
state, presumably to encounter justice in its purest form.[15]
There is no immediate discussion of this proposal which
establishes that truth is to be found analytically in words
and not empirically in deeds.[16]

The origin of the *polis* is said by Socrates to be
determined by need. An association is necessary to fulfill
basic human needs because individuals are not self-
sufficient and cannot supply all of their own needs. The
first premise of the association, division of labor, is
logical and follows from the stipulated lack of self-

sufficiency. Socrates' second premise, that each person is "naturally fitted for a different job" and should perform only one job,[17] can also be said to be logical but not logically required. It is logical in the sense that it is the axiom of identity in disguise which Plato is inserting as the foundation of the *polis*. It is not surprising that it will later turn up as the mark of a just soul.

The first city constructed in this manner is simple, self-sufficient, and self-contained. Socrates describes it as "true and healthy."[18] We would probably describe it as "primitive." Glaucon calls it a "city for pigs" because of its lack of more sophisticated pleasures and luxurious comforts.[19] The designation is ironic because we would be more inclined to describe the fat, bloated city which follows as more pig-like in its indiscriminate feasting on pleasure than the more primitive city.

Glaucon's objections are accommodated and the consequences are several. The city will need to greatly expand in order to accommodate expanded desires. It will need to encroach upon its neighbors' territory and it will be the object of their envious desire. The city will need a military to make war and defend itself. But more importantly the city will need a government as a restraining force. We would call it a police force. Plato calls them "guardians."

The first city, the "true and healthy," city needs no formal government and no police. It is self-governing and

self-restrained, possessing the characteristics of wisdom and freedom. Its primary characteristic is its transparent visibility. It is small enough for everyone to see everyone else. Everyone knows what they are supposed to do, they know what everyone else is supposed to do, and they see that they do it. It is a society in which everyone watches over everyone else, everyone looks after everyone else, everyone observes everyone else. Depending on your vantage point this kind of society is either stifling or caring. But in traditional Greek terms it would be free and wise; that is, it would be self-governing, self-restrained and self-sufficient.

It is the portrait of a classic shame culture. Its freedom derives from its transparent visibility, its simplicity, its limited size, and its well-defined and well-differentiated roles. All this collapses with the expansion of desire and the expansion of the city. The engorged city is no longer visible to itself. People cannot see each other. They become anonymous and do not know each other. Instead of looking after one another they must guard against one another. With a loss of visibility comes a loss of shame. And with a loss of shame comes a loss of limits, a loss of restraint. A loss of restraint signals a loss of wisdom. It is no accident that the guardians of Glaucon's enlarged, cosmopolitan city must be philosophers, lovers of lost wisdom. The first "true and healthy" city of the

Republic resembles Cephalus in that it too is a symbol of an older age which is near death.

Invisibility and anonymity generate the need for a police force, a government to watch over the city and guard it from enemies inside and out. But who will watch over the government; who will guard the protected against their guardians? It is a classic paradox of government and freedom. Plato answers that all must be governed by the one law which governs nature, which he believes to be the law of identity.

Plato has framed the problem of government as one of desire. The need for government only arose in the context of unrestrained desire for physical pleasures and comforts. If the guardians were to be governed by those same desires then they would surely turn against those they were instituted to protect just as a shepherd fattens his sheep only to harvest and fleece them, as Thrasymachus earlier pointed out.[20] The solution offered in the *Republic* is that governors and governed must all be ruled by one desire, one love, but the object of that love must be something of which there is no conceivable shortage, "the good," which will turn out to be logical identity. The true good which everyone really loves, Plato will argue, is not a physical thing at all but a *meta*physical thing, something which is unlimited yet is itself a limit. That "thing" is the good. What we really seek above all, he will try to persuade us, is a state of inner peace and harmony, without conflict or

contradiction. This would be a state which conforms with the true form of nature.

In order to maintain freedom while being ruled by government, each person must rule one's self according to the same law. When we are wise we seek to conform ourselves, our souls and our state, with the law of identity. Each person must seek to be only one person, not many, and perform the one task which they are naturally suited to do to contribute their part to the city. When that happens the city will be one, at peace within itself.

Freedom and government are both maintained when each obeys the same law. Language, law and justice are related in Greek thought. The law which conforms to nature will be a just law expressed in a form of language which reflects that nature. This thought does not originate with Plato. It is the traditional source of poetic wisdom. The poets, however, in Plato's view speak a false language and portray a false justice. Plato's complaint against poetic language is that it is ambiguous and contradicts itself. It is therefore dangerous on two levels. It corrupts the city, leading it toward *stasis*. And it corrupts the soul, leading it to confusion at best, lunacy and criminality at worst.

"Identity" is both a logical and psychological principle. That is part of our Platonic legacy. If logical identity represents the form of the highest good, the true form of nature, then if the soul is to become good, it must seek to replicate logical identity. The *logos* of nature and

the *logos* of the soul must reflect each other as one. Then
and only then will the political sphere also be good in the
same image. The tool which accomplishes this political task
is philosophical language. If the city is to be orderly and
well-governed then the speech of its guardians must also be
orderly and well-governed.

Most importantly, however, if the city is to be free
and self-governing, then its citizens must learn to speak to
themselves in a language which maintains the true identity
of each. Language is a powerful political tool. Used
correctly it can bring health to the city and health to the
soul. As it turns out the primary function of the Platonic
guardians will be to guard language. And the primary
function of Plato's *Republic* is to teach the young, the
future rulers and citizens, how to talk to themselves
philosophically instead of poetically or incoherently as in
ordinary language.

The need for government generated by unleashed desire
initially seems to pose an insurmountable problem to
Socrates in the text. It seems that the rulers of such a
city would require contradictory natures. They must be both
ferocious and gentle at the same time. They must be harmful
to enemies and gentle to friends.[21] It seems contrary to
nature. "How can we keep men with natures like that from
being savage to each other and to the rest of the citizens?"
Socrates asks. "It seems impossible to reconcile
contraries, so it seems impossible to have a good

guardian."[22]   The difficulty expresses the unnatural character of government in Plato's view. But then Socrates remembers the existence of watchdogs who seem to naturally unite the contrary qualities in one being and he concludes that the possibility of government is not hopelessly unnatural after all.

It is a curious exchange of dialogue made even more strange by Socrates' sudden realization that watchdogs must be natural philosophers because they instinctively know how to distinguish between opposites.[23] In any case Socrates has made several points here. Firstly, not all apparent contradictions are real contradictions. At first it seemed that the guardian's nature would have to be self-contradictory and therefore contrary to nature. That turned out not to be the case as proved by the existence of watchdogs. Nevertheless, the premise has been reiterated that real self-contradiction is contrary to nature. True nature conforms to the law of identity.

Secondly, Socrates has suggested that friends and enemies are true opposites. Friends are not enemies and enemies are not friends. We should note again that this is a rejection of the tragic view. We see in the *Oresteia* that friends (family) can be enemies and enemies can be friends at the same time. The law of identity does not hold. The wisdom of the tragic identity is that it must honor contradictory voices within itself, even when forced to choose between them. Agamemnon could not identify himself

solely as the head of his political family and sacrifice his connection to his biological family without a loss of limits. Orestes could not identify himself solely as his father's son while sacrificing his mother without committing crime. The wisdom of Athena consisted of balancing and honoring those inseparable but contradictory claims simultaneously.

The same point is made perhaps more explicitly in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Creon insists upon the rigid distinction between friends and enemies which destroys his family and brings a plague upon the state. Creon resembles Plato in his rigid separation of apparent opposites and his philosophical resolution of conflict by the imposition of hierarchy. Plato challenged the political wisdom of the poets, but clearly the poets were also busy contesting the political wisdom of the Socratics.

Finally, Socrates has made a statement about the nature of knowledge and the nature of philosophers. The process of knowledge is the process of distinguishing between opposites. It is an expert skill demanded of rulers which philosophers perform best. Natural philosophers are rare in nature, however, suggesting that orderly government is likely to be no less rare.

Having established the need for guardians the discussion in the *Republic* turns to the form of their education. Not surprisingly, given the power of words to imprint themselves on the soul, stories play a significant

role in the early education of the guardians. Socrates first distinguishes between true and false stories because guardians must be told only the truth or stories useful for attaining the truth.

True stories do not contradict themselves or show the gods or citizens at war with each other.[24] Socrates is evidently not saying that such things never happen.[25] He is saying that even if they do happen they are still untrue because what is true is natural, and what is natural is an absence of conflict and contradiction. Truth is not a property of historical fact but of language correctly composed to reflect the truth of nature.

Furthermore the gods must always be presented as good, not evil, Socrates says. "We must . . . prevent our citizens from saying or hearing, in prose or in verse, that a god, being good, causes evil. That's pernicious, impious, and a self-contradiction."[26] Self-contradiction is taken to be sufficient proof of falsity. "We must find some other cause for evil," he says portentously.[27]

Once again the anti-tragic implication is that the opposites of good and evil are mutually exclusive and cannot be present in a single identity. The danger in this position from the tragic point of view is that the quest for a pure identity will continually cast out on to others the impurities produced and found in the soul, just as Plato will eventually locate the cause of evil in female nature,[28] and ban tragedy from the ideal city.

Most dangerous of all from the tragic perspective is the denial involved in the process which is symbolized by Agamemnon's loss of memory and restraint after sacrificing Iphigeneia in the *Oresteia*. The denial that opposites can belong to a single identity disables us from recognizing that our hates are produced by our loves. To love the good is to love the one and hate the other which threatens to pollute it. If identity is to be the highest standard, then it appears that one cannot love without hating. This is the tragic form of truth denied in Plato's *Republic*. The denial is dangerous, tragedy teaches, because it cannot confront the sacrifices it makes and the furies it creates as its own productions and engage them as its own children.

Platonic truth is a property of language not fact which opens up a possible disjunction between truth and history. A true language will reflect nature and not necessarily history. Language properly composed is a useful instrument for doctoring and healing disordered souls. But disordered souls also speak and make ignorant speeches reflecting the state of their souls. In such cases their speeches are lies but liars often make history. It is not always easy then to distinguish lies from truth. Only the philosophers, the guardians and doctors of language, can be trusted to make the expert distinction, and only they can be permitted to lie for good reason.[29]

The most notable lie in the Republic is of course the "noble lie" which says that the citizens are all one family

born of the earth.[30] The effect of this lie if it were to be believed would be to eliminate divided loyalties between families, and to prevent competition for rule. The noble lie unites the city into a single political unit by eliminating distinct family units altogether. In this situation there can be no conflict of loyalties between the political family and the blood family such as agonized Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*. There would be only one family and it would be identical with the state.

The signal characteristic of a "dilemma" is that it cannot be resolved by privileging one side over the other because, in either case, the sacrifice would be too great. The characteristic of a "contradiction" is that it can be resolved by eliminating or elevating one of the conflicting elements over the other. We would call it "prioritizing" in the parlance of efficient organization.

The noble lie of the *Republic* transforms the tragic dilemma of the *Oresteia* into a simple contradiction to be resolved by eliminating one side. This was precisely the form of one-sidedness which, in the case of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the *Oresteia* portrayed as sickness not wisdom. We may also recall that Socrates' "medicine" in treating the family as unimportant or disruptive is the same cure prescribed by Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Creon tried to remedy the ills of Thebes by subsuming the family beneath the state. There too the disease was *stasis*, but

Creon's cure succeeded only in bringing about a worse plague which threatened to destroy the state he had hoped to save.

Having identified the true content of the stories to be told in the ideal city, Socrates turns to their form. He distinguishes between three basic styles of storytelling. The first form is pure narration in which there is only one voice to be heard, the voice of the author. There is no deception or concealment here. The author's voice is easily identified. It is authentic because it maintains a single, uniform identity.

The second style is the opposite of the first and consists of pure "imitation" with no narration. This is the form of dialogue found in drama written for the theater. In the imitative style the author impersonates many voices and many characters without ever revealing his own.[31] We might say, along with Plato, that this style is unauthentic because the author has no identifiable identity. He appears always as many, never as one.

Socrates identifies use of the narrative style with good men and use of the opposite style with the "opposite nature."[32] The standard of judgment is the standard of identity. Bad persons maintain no identity. Good persons maintain one identity. On this basis the tragic poets are judged to be worthless and are quietly but explicitly outlawed from the city for the first time in the *Republic*.[33] The law which is violated by the tragic poets is the basic law of identity which has governed the regime from the

beginning: "...our men are not variable," says Socrates, "each does only one thing."[34] This principle is crucial to the idea of justice and the idea of the good at the core of the *Republic*. It says that a good person is one person (not many) whose soul naturally corresponds to one activity. Justice prevails when these natures match.

In Book Four of the *Republic* Socrates declares the just city founded, and by a rather deft (and logically suspicious) process of elimination he discovers that the principle of justice holding it together is none other than the founding principle that "each one must pursue the one pursuit to which his nature is most naturally suited."[35] Following this declaration, the discussion seeks to determine whether the same configuration of justice found in the city coincides with the configuration of justice found in the soul of a just man, as was the original intention of the dialogue.

At this point in the text the discussion suddenly turns much more meticulously logical. The search begins with the first formal articulation of the axiom of identity to appear in the text. "The same thing will never suffer or do opposite things in the same part at the same time toward the same thing...."[36] The principle is then elucidated and repeated two more times in rapid succession for emphasis.[37]

The formal statement of the principle inaugurates a demonstration of rigorous logical analysis evidently designed to reveal the method of Socratic knowledge. The

method proceeds by identifying, analyzing and resolving contradictions into their non-contradictory component parts. If anything seems to contain its own opposite, if it appears self-contradictory, then either the contradiction can be shown to be merely apparent, not real, or the analysis has not proceeded far enough to separate out the true, fundamental identities. The argument "proves" that the soul, like the city, does indeed have the same three corresponding parts and that justice does indeed consist in fitting them together in the only way possible to preserve them as a single, harmonious unit. Reason must always dominate, with the forceful part immediately below and the emotional, acquisitive part always on the bottom under control. Force is not required, however, since all sections will naturally agree on the order because of their love of harmony.[38] Justice, Socrates concludes, "is really concerned with internal activity--with the true self and its business."[39]

Plato is fond of medical metaphors and he now has Socrates compare justice and injustice to health and disease. "Producing health," he says, "means establishing the parts of the body so that they dominate and are dominated by each other according to nature, disease so that they rule and are ruled contrary to nature." Justice and injustice in the soul are then defined in identical terms.[40]

Once again Plato has inserted a veiled but explicit rejection of the tragic principle of *isonomia* in favor of

the principle of sovereignty. In a medical context *isonomia* portrays health as neither a harmony nor a hierarchy but rather a contest in which the opponents are equally balanced.[41] The *Oresteia*, which enacts this image of health upon the political stage in the *Eumenides*, reiterates that a loss of balance implies either anarchy, no rule, or monarchy, the rule of one. What appears to Plato as an unlimited good--the rule of reason--can only appear to tragedy as a dangerous loss of balance. The sovereignty of the good identity in which Plato finds the only possible limits represents to tragedy the exact opposite: a dangerous loss of any possible limits. It is not the rule of reason which tragedy finds so dangerous, however, as though the rule of passion might offer a superior alternative. The danger lies in the principle of sovereignty itself which represents a loss of balance and restraint.

Judgment and Conviction

The first four books of the *Republic* follow a trajectory from low to high, body to mind, from the sensual pleasures of the Pireaus to the intellectual pleasures of a logical demonstration of justice. Retracing that trajectory reveals that Socrates has also been more seductive than strictly rational.[42] He has waited until the end of Book Four to formally articulate the principle of logical

identity which had been surreptitiously and repeatedly inserted into the discussion at every possible opening.

Books Five through Seven repeat the same trajectory at a higher level. The first four books represent the realm of the body and its desires. Books Five through Seven represent the intellectual realm of reason and its love as the dialogue soars to the overarching height of truth, dialectic and the idea of the good. The text ascends to what would have been the realm of the gods and reveals the thread of language which connects it to the world of politics and the human soul below. Later, in Books Eight through Ten, the text will descend once more to the realm of worldly politics and the afterworld of death and immortality. By that time, however, "knowing oneself," knowing one's place in the traditional sense of wisdom, will have been overturned.

Book Five opens with Polemarchus interrupting the discussion to raise the issue of sexual relations among the guardians. The voices of all of the earlier participants except Cephalus, but including Thrasymachus, are briefly heard again signifying the new beginning. Socrates himself warns that the subject of sexual relations forces the discussion back to the beginning. It is not immediately clear why this should be so, but the answer seems to be that the historical conjunction of "sex" and "happiness" forces the discussion to tackle the equation of "pleasure" and "the good" and the love which joins them.

Book Four had opened on the question of happiness and ended on the same question, still unanswered.[43] The conventional answer that happiness consists of the physical pleasures obtainable through money, sex and power had not yet been refuted, as Socrates reminded us.[44]

Socrates now proceeds to gain assent to a program of rationally controlled breeding and sexual activity in the ideal city in which even the meaning of "parent" and "child" become mathematically determined. The arrangement is designed to minimize the disruptive influence of jealous and possessive sexual *eros* upon the city.

The extreme offensiveness to us, the modern readers of Plato's highly rationalized program of sex and breeding, forces us to confront the author's intentions. Is it a Swiftian-style "modest proposal" intended to shock the reader (or listener) to the potential horror and absurdity of the Platonic project? Surely it is here, if anywhere, that such irony can be found. Might Plato be warning us sub-textually that rationality is an extreme medicine required to restore an extremely sick *polis* to health?[45] If so, the *Republic* would appear to recapitulate the heroic trajectory of Thucydides' Athens and Aeschylus' Agamemnon, suggesting that the medicine is potentially as poisonous as the disease, and portending further that any future antidote to the excesses of rationality would necessarily be as one-sidedly dangerous as what had gone before, recalling the endless cycle of revenge and retribution dramatized by

Aeschylus in the first two plays of the *Oresteia*. Where will it end, the tragic chorus would ask? If Plato joins Aeschylus in calling such oscillation into question, the *Republic* nevertheless has no political or theoretical correspondence to the *Eumenides* within itself. The *Oresteia* is tragic. The *Agamemnon* alone is not.

It is more likely that if Plato's eugenics is intended ironically, it is intended not to call the project of the *Republic* into question but rather the equation of happiness with sexual pleasure. Immediately following the discussion of sexual relations and the evils of civil strife within the city, the question of happiness reappears once more. Socrates contends that on the basis of the previous discussion they have determined that the guardians will be happier than any Olympic victor.[46] Indeed they will be the happiest class in the city because they have the pleasure of preserving the whole city, maintaining its identity. The highest natures do not love the pleasures of sexual objects, they love the pleasures derived from their relation to the metaphysical object of the whole, the idea of the one.

Having decided that the ideal city as described is best and most happy, the discussion turns to whether or not it is possible for such a city to ever occur.[47] Socrates insists that it can never occur until philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers. Political power and philosophy must be made to coincide. Socrates explains his conclusion by explaining the nature of images and ideals.

He reminds his listeners that they were seeking a model on which they might model themselves.[48] But models, images, are by their very nature ideal and not exactly reproducible in physical form. He further reminds his listeners that the conversation thus far has constructed an image, an idea, in words. The ideal city is a construction of and in language, not the physical world. But, Socrates insists, language always contains more truth than action.[49]

Language is the instrument which shapes the soul and Socrates is teaching his students to talk to themselves properly if they are to realize and maintain the ideal state in their souls, which is where it must be realized first, if ever.[50] Socrates can only seduce them with his language. If they are to be free and self-governing they must be truly persuaded and learn to speak the same language to themselves in his absence.

Socrates has subtly turned the conversation to the status of language and the unspoken power of persuasion. He has been demonstrating the method of true knowledge and the structure of reason itself. He showed that it was possible to know something securely by following a methodical, rational inquiry. He showed that the method of logical reasoning is founded upon the axiom of identity, the principle of non-contradiction. Now he self-consciously points out that the knowledge of justice which had been secured so far was produced by a logical argument which flowed from an image, an idea, composed of words.

By calling attention to the structure of the conversation itself, Socrates has suddenly managed to cast the entire conversation of the first four books into an image, a mere shadow of the position where the conversation now stands. In so doing he is able to cast the idea of happiness and *eros* which governed the earlier conversation into a mere shadow of the true happiness and the highest love which will soon be illuminated. In the process the role of imagery in the power of persuasion will also be illuminated.

The ideal city is a city composed of speech. If it is to be well-ordered and well-governed it must be ruled by those who are most expert at the composition of language. It must be ruled by philosophers and not poets or sophists like Thrasymachus. Language shapes the soul. The soul shapes the state. Therefore he who best controls language will best control the state. But whose language is best? To ask this question is to ask to whom we should submit, by whose language should we be persuaded in the contest among the poets, sophists and philosophers? How is it possible to decide among the language of the theater, the language of the assembly, and the language of the soul-doctors?

The text suggests that the speech which shapes our souls is also shaped by love. We are likely to be persuaded by language shaped by the same love which directs our soul. Persuasive speech therefore must contain an element of seduction to entice the listener into desiring what is

offered. The love which guides philosophy is different from (and superior to)[51] the love which guides the poetic speech of the theater and the ordinary speech of the assembly and the market. The rules of philosophical speech flow from an image which inspires its devotion, the image of the good. Philosophy loves the image of the good which is always harmoniously one, identical to itself and forever unchanging.[52] Its truth is reflected in an unambiguous, logical language. Its wisdom consists of its steady desire for the good. Its knowledge consists in its expertise in using language to promote the good of the soul.

Poetic speech and ordinary speech, Plato believes, are ruled by the image of war and the contest (*agon*).[53] Their truth is reflected in the ambiguous language of the theater or the disputatious speeches of the assembly and the market place. Poetic speech loves to stir up the dangerous and subversive emotions, while political speech seeks victory either for its own sake or the honors it brings. The character of ordinary speech is revealed in the selfish babble of the market place as it pursues the power to acquire endlessly more goods. They all lead to the same end in Plato's view: war and *stasis*.

In the *Republic* Socrates must persuade his audience that what they really love is not what they think they love. They think they love the physical pleasures obtainable through money, sex and power. But, he argues,[54] such pleasures are unstable and their pursuit leads only to

misery and the opposite of happiness. What they really want, he must argue, is an internal state of harmony and peace, being at one with oneself. This desire can never be fulfilled by the endless pursuit of physical pleasures and objects. That route leads only to war and *stasis*, internally and externally, because it knows no end, no final limit.

Most people do not know what is truly good for them, Socrates must argue, because they do not know the idea of the good which everyone admittedly desires. That is why the ideal state must be ruled by philosophers. Only philosophers have knowledge of the good, the wisdom to pursue it, and the skill to teach it.

While Socrates is extolling the virtues of the rule of philosophy he is suddenly and forcefully interrupted by Adeimantus who objects that Socrates really tricks his listeners into seeming to contradict themselves because of their lack of skill in the "game" of "question and answer."[55] The participants, he complains, are left feeling trapped with nowhere to move and nothing to say in this "game where the pieces are words." But the game has "nothing to do with the truth," he declares, because the world of action, the visible world, the real world all contradict Socrates' world of words. Socrates' argument has shown conclusively, it seems, that only philosophers are fit to rule. Yet, Adeimantus observes, if we actually look at

the people who are called philosophers we find that they are either "scoundrels" or useless.

Adeimantus confronts Socrates with a powerful contradiction between the compelling conclusion of his argument that philosophers should rule and the contrary evidence of the senses. The objection raises fundamental questions as to the power of persuasion and the meaning of "truth." Adeimantus is essentially conceding the intellectual validity of the argument on Socrates' own terms. But why, he asks, should anyone be persuaded by logical argument, especially when the evidence of one's own eyes shows that the logical truth is falsified by the facts of the visible world? Adeimantus is defending the knowledge of the senses and the visible world (which after all seem to produce real pleasures) against the seemingly insubstantial truths of the intellectual world.

Socrates answers that he can only respond to Adeimantus' objections with a metaphor, a poetic image, a portrait in words. He supplies the image of a ship with a mob of ignorant sailors who refuse to believe that sailing and navigating require any special skills. The image, which is reminiscent of Thucydides' portrait of the Corcyraean Revolution, portrays democracy as the equivalent of *stasis*. It portrays the mob of sailors as believing that only coercion and "sharp persuasion" are the skills necessary to ruling.[56] The image is an allegory of language ungoverned by the compass of truth.

There is nothing deceptive or devious about Socrates' resort to imagery in defense of logical truth. Indeed he claims that it is required. And Plato clearly wishes to call attention to this shift in the rhetorical strategy from strict argumentation to metaphorical imagery. Otherwise he would not have Adeimantus pointedly taunt Socrates with the apparent inconsistency in his method. "I thought you never used similes," Adeimantus teases him.[57] Plato is conceding, even insisting, that the force of all persuasion including the persuasion of logic proceeds from imagery and vision. It is finally the correctness of the image, its truth, which determines the truth of the argument and the power of persuasion. In a contest between two forms of truth, the logical and the empirical, for example, the correctness of the vision informing the truth will determine the victor.

Socrates uses his image of the shipboard mob to undermine his listeners' allegiance to the embodied world and the limited vision of the goods associated with it. He intends to show that appeals to the "real" world as a final verification of truth are forced to presume a certain necessity to the way things are. Theory must submit to reality, the empiricists claim. But Socrates takes the radical step of proposing that theory might be a test of reality. Theory, and thus language, may be more true than reality.

Plato seeks to found political theory on logical necessity, implying that things need not necessarily be the

way they seem. If the world does not conform to the theory, then the world may be false. In this upside-down world it can be simultaneously true that a) philosophers are the most fit to rule by nature, and b) most philosophers are either useless or evil. But the apparent contradiction convicts the world not the theory.

Several other images swiftly follow the image of the shipboard mob in the text,[58] all designed to loosen ties to the visible world and the loyalties, pleasures and loves it commands. The images are intended to open up the intellectual eye of the soul to its love for the highest idea of the good, while dimming the eyes of the body directed toward the physical world and its erotic pleasures.

The idea of the good is the idea which informs knowledge and truth. The good makes knowledge and truth possible.[59] Socrates says he is unable to state the outlines of the good without recourse to imagery. But he can say what kinds of knowledge make use of the good. They are the kinds of knowledge which the guardians must be good at such as mathematics and geometry which are based on the skill of judging the difference between one thing and another.

If the good is not the principle of identity itself, then it is the source of the power to make distinctions and judgments which rely on the law of identity to make them possible. It is worth recalling that the image of the good

supplied by Socrates in the text is the image of the sun which is the source of power as well as light.[60]

The power of judgment is called upon to resolve contradictions.

> ...if one is never seen without its contrary, so that it always appears to be its contrary as well as itself, then it demands judgment because it baffles the soul and forces it to investigate. The soul stirs up its mind and asks what one itself is. Thus the study of unity would be one of the studies that lead the soul and turn it to the contemplation of what *is*.[61]

It is precisely this power of judgment which is subverted by tragedy, Socrates claims, and it is the justification for its expulsion. Tragedy appeals to a confused, irrational part of the soul by failing to distinguish between opposites such as justice and injustice or good and evil. Instead it portrays opposites as inseparable in violation of the law of identity.

As he levels his charges against the imitative poetry of tragedy, Socrates cites the law of identity once more. "Didn't we declare it impossible for the same thing to hold contrary opinions about the same things at the same time?" he asks.[62] The formal accusation follows: tragedy portrays persons "plunged into strife" within themselves "holding contrary opinions about the same things at the same time," and contending and fighting within themselves in their actions.[63] Finally the verdict,

> The imitative poet instills an evil regime in each
> individual soul, gratifying an irrational thing in it
> that distinguishes neither larger nor smaller but thinks
> the same thing now large and now small; he is a phantom-
> maker ... who stands far from the truth.[64]

and the sentence:

> Thus in justice we may now bar him from the city, if it
> is to have good laws, because by arousing, feeding and
> strengthening that part he destroys the soul's rational
> part ... and puts the rabble in charge.[65]

The charge is not merely that tragedy appeals to the
emotions. It is more serious than that. Tragedy encourages
division and loss of identity in the soul in violation of
the foundational law of the city and the foundational law of
logic. Tragedy confounds the logic and the psychology of
identity. Significantly, Plato's most descriptively
passionate charge against tragedy is leveled at the shameful
portrait of good men in grief.[66] It is significant because
it is in grief at the loss of a loved one that we feel most
deeply torn in agony inside, as Socrates so profoundly
reminds us. But a truly good man, he says, will resist
inner sorrow, pain, grief and suffering, and certainly never
display anything but a calm, deliberate persona in public.

Reason dictates the expulsion of poetry, Socrates
insists. But in a rather disingenuous touch on Plato's part
he also has Socrates concede that "should imitative poetry
directed to pleasure be able to give reasons for her
existence in a well-regulated city, we would gladly take her

back from exile...."[67] But of course tragedy cannot justify
itself rationally. To do so would negate its own identity
and destroy its balance. Tragedy is the very antithesis of
rationality. The ancient feud cited by Socrates between
philosophy and tragedy is real and irreconcilable.[68] They
are contradictory and, true to the form of rationality, the
philosopher-judge must resolve the contradiction by
eliminating one side with conviction.

Plato also permits Socrates to generously allow others,
not poets, to plead on tragedy's behalf but only in prose
form. Until they persuade us, however, "we'll chant this
argument [of the *Republic*] to ourselves whenever we hear her
as a charm to ward off her spell...."[69] Plato's emphasis
upon the form of language to be permitted at trials and
appeals is telling. First of all, the trial is a mirror
image of the trial and conviction of Socrates (in the
Apology) for refusing to speak in a manner pleasing to the
Athenians. Secondly, the suggestion that we should drown
out the voice of the opposition with our own speech to
ourselves recalls two injunctions. The first is the
Platonic injunction that the voice in which we talk to
ourselves is the way in which we govern ourselves to
maintain our freedom and our identity, which are one. The
second, opposing injunction comes from the image of
Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia, where Agamemnon
silenced the voice of his daughter, drowning her speech in
strength, in order to maintain his identity as a warrior.

Lastly, the insistent control of language is reminiscent of the "Melian Dialogue" in which the Athenians restricted the Melians' plea for justice to a form which guaranteed their extinction.

Three images remain long after the trial and condemnation of tragedy in the *Republic*: Melos, Agamemnon, and Socrates. The same three images and the truths they represent about power and wisdom continue to haunt, and contest, the language of politics today.

Notes

[1] One can speculate here on the peculiar intensity of the
nomos-physis (law v. nature) debate at this time. If
isonomia represents the original law of nature then
democracy is more natural than empire, for example. On the
other hand, if *isonomia* represents an imposition of
restraint upon the natural pursuit of domination, then
democracy represents an artificial balance contrary to
nature.

[2] See Michael C. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations*
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 15; and more generally
Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint
in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1966).

[3] Guthrie. *History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3
(Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969), 30. Michael C.
Stokes, Plato's Socratic Conversations, 199.

[4] For my purposes there is little reason to distinguish
between Socrates the speaker and Plato the writer, although
for other purposes that can be an important task. Unless it
is necessary to avoid confusion I will refer simply to Plato
throughout since it is really the influence of the *Republic*
that I am concerned with here.

[5] Plato, *Republic*, ed., trans., Raymond Larson (Arlington
Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979), Book 10, 558e-562b.
All further references to the *Republic* will be to this
edition unless noted.

[6] Quoted in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), 252.

[7] The broad attack on this "secure" *arche* defines post-
modernity, although not always self-consciously.

[8] Alexander Nehemas, "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in
Republic 10," Chapt. 3 in Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the
Arts, eds. Julius Moravscik and Philip Temko (Totowa, NJ:
Rowman & Littlefield, 1982).

[9] See Charles Segal, "Greek Tragedy and Society: A
Structuralist Perspective" Chapt. 2 in Greek Tragedy and
Political Theory, ed. Peter Euben (Berkeley: University of
California, 1986), 72-75. Segal's privileged standard of
"coherence" is already a Platonic standard which concedes
victory in the contest between tragedy and philosophy before
it even starts.

[10] *Republic*, 423a-b.

[11] *Republic*, 327c.

[12] See J. Peter Euben's discussion of these issues in *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990), 245-6.

[13] I am grateful to Peter Euben for this observation. Here as elsewhere in this chapter Euben's influence will be unmistakable although we come to different conclusions.

[14] Michael C. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations*, 28, suggests that "the process of either reducing to contradiction or bringing to a Socratic conclusion on pain of self-contradiction [is] the whole point of at least the early dialogues."

[15] *Republic*, 368e-369c.

[16] The premise is dramatically confronted later, however, in an impressive demonstration of Plato's logical rigor. *Republic*, 487b-c.

[17] *Republic*, 370b.

[18] *Republic*, 372e.

[19] *Republic*, 372d.

[20] *Republic*, 343b.

[21] The traditional formulation of "justice."

[22] *Republic*, 375b.

[23] Whether the dialogue is serious or ironic at this point would seem to depend upon the Greek attitude toward dogs at the time.

[24] *Republic*, 378c.

[25] *Republic*, 378a.

[26] *Republic*, 380c.

[27] *Republic*, 379c.

[28] *Republic*, 549c-d.

[29] See the discussion of lying in *Republic*, 382b-389d.

[30] *Republic*, 414b-e.

[31] See Nehemas, 57, on the meaning of "mimesis" being "acting like" rather than "counterfeiting" or falsely copying.

[32] *Republic*, 396c.

[33] *Republic*, 398a.

[34] *Republic*, 397e.

[35] *Republic*, 433a.

[36] *Republic*, 436b.

[37] *Republic*, 437a, 439b.

[38] *Republic*, 442c.

[39] *Republic*, 443c.

[40] *Republic*, 444d.

[41] See Chapt. 2, p.117, above.

[42] Many of the early arguments of Socrates are suspicious if not spurious, as even he seems to acknowledge near the end of Book Four (438d).

[43] Book Four opens with Adeimantus objecting that the guardians will not be happy because they have no possessions (419a). It ends on the question of whether or not justice "pays" (445a), as though to remind the reader that from the beginning, even prior to the question of justice, was the question, What is happiness?

[44] *Republic*, 445a-b.

[45] This appears to be Gadamer's position in Hans-George Gadamer, "Plato and the Poets" chapt. 3 in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale U. Press, 1980), 39 – 72). To some extent it may also be Peter Euben's position in *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, chapt. 8, 235-77. Gadamer appears to read his own responses to the text into the author's intentions and weave them into a seamless whole. However, the limits of Gadamer's hermeneutical principle of interpretation are questionable. It is notable that throughout his essay Gadamer continually refers to Plato's "purification" of poetry and not its expulsion, while warning that the text is not to be read too literally.

[46] *Republic*, 465d-466b.

[47] *Republic*, 466d-471e.

[48] *Republic*, 472c.

[49] *Republic*, 473a.

[50] Socrates has already established in Book Four, 435e, that the city receives its form from the souls of its citizens

[51] *Republic*, Book Nine, 581c-583a.

[52] *Republic*, 485b.

[53] Plato can conflate the poetry of Homer and the tragedians because, in spite of their differences, they do both retain the image of the *agon* as the central metaphor governing their language.

[54] In Books Eight and Nine.

[55] *Republic*, 487b-d.

[56] *Republic*, 488b-e.

[57] *Republic*, 487e.

[58] The image of democracy as a huge, moody beast (493a–494a) is followed by the divided line (509d–511e) and the image of the cave (514a–517b).

[59] *Republic*, 508e.

[60] *Republic*, 509b.

[61] *Republic*, 524e.

[62] *Republic*, 602e.

[63] *Republic*, 603d.

[64] *Republic*, 605b–c.

[65] *Republic*, 605b.

[66] *Republic*, 603e–604e; 605d–606b.

[67] *Republic*, 607c.

[68] *Republic*, 607b.

[69] *Republic*, 608a.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Democratic Possibilities

This dissertation originated with a concern for the
nature of modern political power and its relation to truth
and language. As with Arendt, this concern was rooted in
the memory and the horror of the Nazi period in Germany. In
Hitler's Germany the power of the state was concentrated in
a drive to unify and dominate the western political world
under the Third Reich. The power of the state was further
mobilized to exterminate an entire people identified as a
people and not a state. What is the connection between
these drives of power and what are the implications for the
politics of the modern state in general and the modern
democratic state in particular? These questions have never
been exhausted. Furthermore, I fear that we have not yet
learned to frame them rightly.

It is too easy to launch an interrogation of history
from a medical or moral perspective which would identify
Nazi Germany as a diseased, perverted, or otherwise
pathological state. We might, for example, look to the
peculiar conditions of German history in order to fix the
onset of the disease and thereby prevent it or cure it in
ourselves. But this line of questioning presumes that a
diseased politics is a state of contamination or infestation

by a foreign invader. The cure consists of prophylactically preventing the infection or excising it once it has entered the body. The operative assumption is that we can identify a pure state of health free of disease and then seek to attain or maintain it. Excluded from this approach is the thought that the very condition which we cherish as good also generates the disease which we fight.

We might seek a more juridical account of the genesis of Nazi Germany by characterizing it as a criminal state ruled by thugs and murderers. Such an account would at least have the merit of conceding that bad children often come from good families, but then only through perversion or subversion never as fruition.

It must not be forgotten that the Nazi era sprouted from democratic soil. What if democracy and fascist authoritarianism are produced from the same vine, and that nurturing the one necessarily involves nourishing the other? The question may seem absurd but it should not therefore be forbidden. Its apparent absurdity stems from the Platonic premise that good and evil are opposites and that like produces like: good produces good; evil produces evil. It remained for Machiavelli to suggest that evil might produce good. Not until Nietzsche did the older, tragic thought recur that good is also the father of evil.

The characterization of Nazi Germany as a transgressor state quickly leads to the problem of limits. There would seem to be no form of politics immune from perversion or

subversion. "Politics" necessarily implies the formation
and use of power, and so the concept of limits applied to
politics seems to imply, as Arendt's work nicely
illustrates, the necessity of non-political limits upon
political power. Those limits have been sought in morality
and philosophy which, in the West, find roots in Plato.
Following this path leads eventually but certainly to an
inquiry upon the nature of "truth" (philosophy) and the
"good" (morality) and their relation to political power.
The dimension of language is deeply implicated in this
inquiry because of its intimate relations with philosophic
truth and morality ("in the beginning was the word") but
also because language is the very medium of political life
and political power in democracy, more so, perhaps, than in
any other political arrangement.

This dissertation has tried to take seriously the
Nietzschean thought that cherished ideals may contain within
them the seeds of evil. This endeavor entails a willingness
to consider the possibility that in some crude way the Nazi
regime in Germany represented neither a contamination nor a
perversion of the modern democratic state but rather a
harbinger of its future. The point is not to condemn
democracy nor to celebrate Nietzsche. The point is to open
an examination of democracy's foundations which is precluded
by the intellectual quarantine of an entire period of German
history as perversely or cancerously different. It may not
be sufficient to intone "democracy" as a talisman against

fascism. It may be that something like German fascism, albeit more refined, can and will happen here unless we are prepared to confront *all* of the promises, the dangers as well as the hopes, of our democratic ideals. Surely it is neither perverse nor diabolical to confront the possibility that tyranny may flow from democracy. Plato seemed to consider it a certainty.

"Democracy" has many meanings. This dissertation has looked at three contending theoretical views of democracy represented in works of three Greek thinkers--Thucydides, Aeschylus, and Plato--present at the height of Athenian democracy. These three views of democracy yield three interwoven but contentious views of language, truth, and power embedded in competing interpretations of nature. Juxtaposition of these theoretical strands of thought reveals many knotted but common political threads among them. Themes of justice, law, wisdom, freedom, war, peace, death and immortality, for example, are but a few among the many which might be singled out for further scrutiny. Complete clarity is not to be expected, however. Pulling on one thread may loosen some but tighten others connected to it. I see this as a gain and not a loss, however.

The project embarked upon here has not sought to "analyze" the tapestry of our politics by unthreading its past into its separate and distinct colors. That sort of autopsy offers its own rewards but it would, I fear, destroy exactly what I have been seeking in the process of

interpretation pursued here. Politics is best understood in the texture and the weave of its whole fabric. We do not better understand politics by unravelling the tapestry into its separate yarns and threads, sorting them, perhaps, according to their different weights, thicknesses and colors. What I have sought to do instead is to unfold the tapestry in which we ourselves are folded, and to pull on a few tantalizing strings to see how they might be tied to others.[1]

In conclusion, I want to tug briefly but more firmly upon the thread of "identity" left dangling from the tapestry. In the three texts examined here, there can be found three versions of identity associated with three theoretical visions of democracy. In Thucydides' *History* the identity of Athens in the "person" of the assembly is the focus of concern. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia* the torn identity of Orestes occupies the stage. And in Plato's *Republic* the identity of the good soul is the subject of the dialogue. The material in these texts permits a retrospective look at the nexus of language, truth and power from the perspective of these identities. From there we can we can speculate briefly on the same themes with respect to modern democracy and its identity.

Thucydides' *History* concerns itself with the growth and decline of Athenian power which is equated with greatness. Within the heroic view of nature represented in that text, power is composed of unity while weakness is attributed to

division. Political power is shown to be a composition (*poiesis*)[2] of forces acting in concert, not disparately. There is nothing strange about this view. We have often heard it said that "strength lies in unity" or "united we stand, divided we fall." It is also a view shared by Plato in the *Republic*. However, in contrast to the *Republic*, at least on the surface, the *History* suggests that political power requires an enemy, an opponent, in order to sustain and perhaps to construct its own identity. To Thucydides political power was inseparable from war.

In principle, unity equals strength. In actuality, Athenian power derived from the decisions made by the often fractious assembly. But as long as the assembly could remain united behind a single policy, it was unequalled in power. To the extent that the Athenian assembly was united, to the extent that it spoke with one voice, we can say that it acquired a single identity. Thucydides' task, and our own, is to comprehend the accomplishment of that identity, an accomplishment best understood through the speeches of Pericles.

Thucydides was no democrat. He considered the assembly too whimsical to govern effectively. But as long as the voice of the assembly was identical to the voice of Pericles, democracy was the most powerful form of government exciting the greatest possible loyalty and sacrifice. The unity of the assembly and its identification with the voice of Pericles was not naturally harmonious, however. It was a

construction of power, specifically the power of persuasion exercised by Pericles.

The persuasive power of Pericles had one notable feature from which it drew its superior force. Pericles was uniquely able to mute and render impotent any opposition to his policies. He accomplished this feat primarily through the "imagination of desire." As we saw in Chapter One, Pericles continually enlisted support for his policies by appealing to the one desire which could unite the men of Athens: the desire for eternal glory. An immortal death has always been the dream of heroes. And Pericles held out to men the hope of participation in the undying fame of Athens due to its greatness in war.

Sparta, the enemy, did not seriously threaten the identity of Athens. Indeed it was partly through Sparta, the enemy, that Athens consolidated its identity. There was another force, however, which did threaten to decompose the identity of Athens: the force of disintegration and decay which eventually overtakes all things.

Identity and therefore power are coterminous in Thucydides' *History*. But identity appears always to be a precarious and dying achievement. It exists only so long as it holds its opposite force at bay. This opposing force is portrayed symbolically in the *History* in the form of the plague (which ironically may have been caused by Pericles' victorious policy of concentrating the Athenian population within the walls of Athens), and also by the Corcyraean

revolution which represents the decay of language and foretells the breakdown of persuasion which had sustained the identity of the Athenian assembly.

The figure of Pericles represents the force of identity in the text. He does not change. He remains constant. "I am the same man and do not alter," he tells the assembly at one point, "it is you who change."[3] Can we find another figure within the text to personify the opposite force which undermines identity thereby threatening heroic fame and glory? This figure has no voice but it is a silent presence representing the other side of identity in the funeral oration of Pericles. Addressing the women in his audience at the very end of his speech, Pericles admonishes them that the "greatest [glory] will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad."[4] The female force, and women's voices, represent the silenced "other" in Thucydides' *History*.

In heroic Greek literature the female force often embodied unsteadiness and unfaithfulness. Women were considered dangerously unreliable not because they were weak but because they tended to change sides, they tended to wander. The classic representative of this dangerously ambiguous force in the heroic tradition is Helen, as Aeschylus reminds us in the *Agamemnon*. Within the funeral oration of Pericles, Thucydides has insinuated the contest between truth and falsity that is at the heart of his *History*, a contest between male and female forces.

Pericles, the hero and the male, embodies truth. He is
singleminded and addresses the true desire of the assembly.
Women embody untruth, they bear a false identity, and they
must be barred from the field of language lest they corrupt
it.

Thucydides bears an ambiguous relation to Homer. He
positions himself against Homer and the poets, but at the
same time he strives to be a better "Homer" than Homer was.
Rather than condemning Homer, it seems that Thucydides seeks
to rival him.

Plato is to Thucydides as Thucydides is to Homer. The
Republic seems to condemn Homer along with the tragic poets,
but the similarities between Thucydides' and Plato's texts
suggest that Plato also seeks to rival Homer for the poetic
heights of truth. If so, then the *Republic* is heroic
literature and philosophy is heroic at its origins.

The similarities between Plato and Thucydides are
perhaps best revealed in a comparison of their own heroes,
Socrates and Pericles. Each seeks to shape the identity and
therefore the government of Athens through the force of
persuasion. Pericles of course addresses his persuasive
powers toward the assembly while Socrates, in the *Republic*,
directs his persuasion toward the structure of the
individual soul which he identifies as the source of the
Athenian form of government.[5]

From Pericles to Socrates, "identity" has moved inward
but the ideal remains the same. To speak with, and accede

to, a single authoritative voice yields superior strength and goodness (*arete*). Plural, opposing voices signal a decline into weakness and political *stasis*.

Socrates also recognizes, along with Pericles, that persuasive force relies on an appeal to desire. Even the persuasive power of reason and logic, Socrates demonstrates, must ultimately rest upon powerfully seductive images for its force. Socrates' task in the *Republic* is to shift the image of desire away from the eternal glory earned in war toward the inner peace found in the eternally elusive quest for truth in the soul. The traditional Greek desire for immortality in the face of death is consoled in the *Republic* by the final Myth of Er which closes the text while extending the prospect of reincarnation into another life spent in the eternally rewarding quest for the truth of identity.

The Periclean path to identity requires an enemy to fight. It also requires the exclusion of another dangerous opponent, one who is also a friend, from the field of language which is also the field of power. The double, and therefore false, identity of women represents a threat to the unwavering heroic male identity, and so they are silenced by Pericles, neither to be heard from nor talked about in public.

Are there parallels to be found in the *Republic*? On the surface there are no enemies in The *Republic*, only errant friends. This apparent harmony is consistent with

the Platonic pursuit of identity as a universal ideal reflecting the universal truth of nature. It can be argued, however, that there is an enemy in the *Republic* occupying the space of Melos in the *History*. In the *Republic* that position is filled by tragic poetry. In the *History* Melos was destroyed in part for its refusal to submit to the language of justice and the law of nature articulated by the Athenians. In the *Republic* tragedy, too, is invited to save itself by pleading its case in the rational language established by Socrates. Tragedy could not of course speak in a different voice without annihilating its own identity, and so the voice of tragedy was banished from the ideal city, silenced by philosophy.

Is it significant that poetry is consistently identified as a feminine voice ("she") in the *Republic*? The crime for which tragic poetry is convicted and banished from the city is the crime of ambiguity, a traditionally feminine characteristic. Surely it is significant that it is a woman, a harping wife, who corrupts the ideal regime of the philosopher king, initiating its decline and fall into tyranny.[6] If so, then there is strong evidence for believing that the ascendence of philosophy and the conviction of reason is inseparable from the condemnation of the "other." The charge is not merely that the ancient Greeks were sexist, but that philosophy and the rule of reason may in its very structure be one-sided and blind to

the crimes and sacrifices it commits on the altar of identity.

The *Republic* seeks to replace the ideal of a heroic death in a great war with the idea of a permanent peace beginning within and extending outward. But because it does not successfully escape the heroic model it opposes, the *Republic*, and by implication the unopposed rule of reason, may actually set the stage for even more gloriously devastating wars than either Homer or Thucydides ever dreamed of.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* systematically undermines the destructive assumptions and pretensions of the heroic, imperialistic democracy portrayed by Thucydides. It does so by affirming the fundamental ambiguity of language and identity. It reveals in the *Agamemnon* the crimes and the sacrifices which flow from the heroic ideal of singleminded resolution. It substitutes in the *Eumenides* a vision of democracy in which all voices are heard and none are silenced. It is no accident that in Greek tragedy women's voices are powerful and the female characters are often the most richly complex. The result is not a harmonious chorus but a noisy and fearsome clamor. The *Oresteia* affirms the necessity of political judgments and convictions which are not simultaneously condemnations of the other. It identifies politics as a contest of claims to be precariously balanced, and a set of dilemmas to be dangerously straddled, rather than a set of conflicts to be

"resolved." We learn from Greek tragedy that rationally resolving conflict often means little more than unequal sacrifice and crimes committed by the strong against the weak in the name of "justice".

If Greek tragedy remains the best critic of the heroic ideal, it can also stand as a warning that Plato did not succeed in replacing the heroic foundations and aspirations of ancient democracy but merely succeeded in concealing them.[7] The warning is relevant today only if it can be shown that the modern democratic state rests upon Platonic foundations. The full challenge of that task cannot be undertaken here but the most promising approach to its exploration begins with Nietzsche.

The authoritarian implications of the *Republic* have not been overlooked by other scholars.[8] Possession of the final truth is antithetical to democracy. Still others, however, point out that even Socrates never claimed to have seen the light of the "good" or to be in possession of the truth. Its positive identification appears to be eternally elusive. Truth claims appear always open to further interpretation and disputation. Therefore "there can be no permanent elite who have the right to rule because they know [the truth]."[9] On this conventional, liberal reading democracy consists of a collective pursuit of truth in which no single vantage point can claim a monopoly. The eternally elusive character of truth is thought to be a political safeguard against tyranny while pulling us toward community.

This position tends to overlook the fact that "truth" and "good" are finally coterminous in the *Republic*, and that the quest for truth is first of all a quest for internal purity and goodness. While the elusiveness of truth is seen on one hand to be a safeguard, few beside Nietzsche have explored the consequences of never being able to be "good" enough or pure enough. The pursuit of goodness translates into the pursuit of a pure, internally harmonious identity. The question then becomes, What are the consequences of never being able to achieve that identity? The short answer is that the impossibility of meeting that standard generates feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and self-hatred (Nietzschean "*ressentiment*") which translate into a public pool of damned up docility and rage. This reservoir of docility and rage then generates the supply of political power available for deployment by Nietzsche's "sick priests" and politicians.[10]

Turning this Nietzschean lens toward the past and the rise of German fascism reveals heroic strains. One might conclude that targeting the Jews for elimination performed the strategic function of concentrating the fear and hatred of the other, which already diffusely existed, in order to generate the political will and power for war. Turning the Nietzschean lens toward the present, we might inquire about our own foundations and our own trajectory. What sort of democracy do we have and what will emerge from it? It is a contest of course, but one in which we had better be able to

identify the contestants, for we are, heart and soul, listed among them.

Notes

[1] Of course I have not merely "found" the tapestry displayed here. I am in part its weaver and interpreter as well as a figure in its tale. But it seems to me that political theory is always in this position and that the dream of detachment is itself one of the threads in the Platonic yarn. What I have tried to do is to make such threads more visible *as threads* which pull against others. We cannot extricate ourselves from the tapestry in which we occupy such a prominent position.

[2] *Poiesis* implies composition in the sense of something made or fashioned, and is not restricted to writing or singing. The craftsman is as much a poet as the dramatist. There is, therefore, an inescapable dimension of power to poetry, and the texts examined here are, at a most profound level, poems of power.

[3] Thucydides, 2.61.

[4] Thucydides, 2.45.

[5] These addresses are not mutually exclusive, however, and their comparison has the potential to illuminate the mutually constitutive relationship between national and individual identity which obtains today.

[6] Plato, *Republic*, 549c-d.

[7] This is *not* a claim about Plato's intentions.

[8] See, e.g., I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988).

[9] J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 263.

[10] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE, TRUTH, AND POWER: NIETZSCHE AND GREEK THOUGHT

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Efforts to ground legitimate limits of political power upon a foundation of truth belong to a tradition dating back to Plato. In conjunction with the doctrine of "will to power," Nietzsche's attack on truth has conventionally been interpreted as an affirmation of unlimited power. I argue to the contrary that Nietzsche's work may be an attempt to identify a loss of limits traceable to the logical concept of identity at the heart of Platonic truth.

I identify two pre-Socratic theoretical orientations to the problem of power and its limits expressed in Greek heroic and tragic literature. These orientations have opposing political implications--one supporting Athenian imperialism, the other supporting Athenian democracy--but they share an agonistic conception of power as naturally self-limiting. I argue that the Platonic distinction between appearance and reality, and the concomitant effort to found political stability upon the harmonious order of the individual soul, both derive from the principle of non-contradiction which entails the rejection of the agonistic tradition of prior Greek thought.

Notwithstanding its achievements, I contend that the Platonic restructuring of political thought bequeaths a problem of limits without a satisfactory solution, one which evolves into a political, philosophical, and psychological pursuit of ultimate authority. I argue that Nietzsche's work identifies the unraveling of the problem and seeks to remedy it by a (possibly rhetorical) return to a more agonistic orientation to power. I conclude that while Nietzsche's remedy may itself be unsatisfactory, the position which he occupies may supply needed balance to the tradition.