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Thucydides 1.23.5-6

MALCOLM HEATH

‘As to why they broke the treaty, I have placed first an account of the αἰτίαι ...’: causes or charges? Thucydides resolves the ambiguity by the addition of ‘... and διαφοραί’; the recriminatory sense is confirmed a few lines later (αἰτίαι ... ἐκατέρων) and by the echo in 1.146 (αἰτίαι ... καὶ διαφοραὶ ... ἀμφοτέροις): note also 1.66 (αἰτίαι... ἐς ἀλλήλους). But ‘charges and disagreements’ may also be causes, since they may influence a decision to go to war; and that is clearly Thucydides’ meaning here: he presents the αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ as explaining διότι the treaty was abrogated, ἐξ ὅτου the war arose.

Of course, it would be absurd to say ‘I have given an account of the αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ so that no one need ever enquire ἐξ ὅτου the war arose; but in fact the real explanation (πρόφασις) is quite different’.¹ So the statement about the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις must qualify, not cancel, the implied explanatory role of the αἰτίαι; they are genuine προφάσεις, but not the most genuine. This accords well with 1.88, where οὐ τοσοῦτον ... ὅσον adds a more cogent explanation without denying the qualified validity of the first.² This means that we are not dealing with a contrast between real and professed (but false) προφάσεις.³ On the contrary, even if it is true that Sparta would not have gone to war over the αἰτίαι ἐς τὸ φάνερρον λεγόμενα if they had not felt threatened, they would nevertheless hardly have gone to war had they not been able to persuade themselves that it was the Athenians who were in breach of the treaty; so the αἰτίαι must have genuine explanatory force.

If ἀληθεστάτη implies that this is the most genuine among many genuine προφάσεις, the antithetical ἀφανεστάτη presumably implies that it was also the least apparent among many—but still, therefore, itself in some measure apparent. This is borne out by Thucydides’ account of the discussion at Sparta, in which (as has often been observed) the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις is articulated, notably by the Corinthians (1.68-71). Indeed, many interpreters have felt that, by comparison with the αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις is too much in evidence in Thucydides’ account to be called ἀφανεστάτη λόγῳ.⁴ This is a mistake, as a re-examination of the text will show.

The Corinthians do attempt to aggravate Spartan fear of Athens’ growing power; but do they neglect the αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραὶ? On the contrary, they begin by speaking of the harm they have suffered at Athenian hands (68.2 βλέπεσθαι, ὕβριζόμενοι) and their resentment at Sparta’s failure to defend them; Athenian

¹ πρόφασις as ‘real explanation’: L. Pearson, *TAPA* 103 (1972) 381-94. Against the ‘medical’ interpretation favoured by Rawlings and others see C. Schäublin, *Gnomon* 51 (1979) 10-12; A. Heubeck, *Glotta* 58 (1980) 232.

² H.D. Westlake, *CQ* 8 (1958) 102-5.

³ Pace G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London 1972) 53-5.

⁴ E.g. A. Andrewes, *CQ* 9 (1959) 225-6; de Ste Croix (n.3) 56-7; *HCT* V 419-20.

behaviour is denounced (68.3 ἡδίκουν; note the implications of 69.6 ἐχθρῶν ἀδικησάντων, 71.1 ἦν ἀδικῶνται), and the only question is: how are they to defend themselves against Athenian ἀδικία (69.2)? Thus they conclude with an appeal to Sparta to come to the aid of her allies (71.4-7).

Even if one chooses to emphasise the allusions to the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις in the Corinthian speech, however, it would be rash to assume that the speech is meant to be typical.⁵ Thucydides might have given it prominence precisely because of an untypical emphasis on the point he thought most significant. We must look at what he tells us about the other speeches in the narrative portion of his account before we draw any conclusions. The assembly is prompted by Corinthian complaints about Athenian violations of the treaty and about their ἀδικία (67.1), seconded by Aeginetan claims that the treaty had been broken (67.1). Sparta responds by inviting the allies to cite further instances of Athenian ἀδικία (67.3 εἴ τις τι ἄλλο ἔφη ἀδικεῖσθαι). Various states bring charges (ἐγκλήματα); Megara, in particular, cites numerous disputes (67.4 διάφορα), and especially the Megarian decrees, which they see as a violation of the treaty (παρὰ τὰς σπονδάς; already a cause of suspicion and an ἔγκλημα for the Corinthians, 42.2-3).

[105] That the ἐγκλήματα constitute the main theme of the allied speeches is indicated also by the Athenian reply. They choose not to address themselves at length to the points raised in the debate; instead they defend their conduct towards their own allies (73.2-77) and warn the Spartans of the dangers of war (78). But when they do refer to the allied arguments they say nothing of the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις; they speak of the ἐγκλήματα (71.3, cf. 72.1) and διάφορα (78.4), and take it for granted that these are the considerations that might move the Spartans to a declaration of war (78.1 ἐγκλήμασι πεισθέντες). In the Spartan closed session most of the speakers argue in just those terms (79.2 τῶν μὲν πλεόνων ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ αἰ γνῶμαι ἔφερον, ἀδικεῖν τε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἤδη καὶ πολεμητέα εἶναι ἐν τάχει). Archidamus accepts that the issue is the harm done to the allies (82.1), the allied ἐγκλήματα (82.5) and Athenian ἀδικία (85.2, mentioning Potidea), and he does not dispute that these constitute a *casus belli*; he only takes issue with the urgent ἐν τάχει, arguing that delay would give the Athenians an opportunity to back down, while allowing Sparta time to make the necessary preparations for war.

Of the debate's concluding—and conclusive—speech de Ste Croix comments that ‘Sthenelaidas says nothing directly about the *aitiai*, and in his last sentence, with the words, “And do not allow the Athenians to become greater”, returns to the “truest explanation”’.⁶ In fact Sthenelaidas bases his argument for war entirely on Athenian ἀδικία, on the harm that Sparta's allies have suffered at Athenian hands and on the need to defend and avenge them: οὐδαμοῦ ἀντεῖπον ὡς οὐκ ἀδικοῦσι τοὺς ἡμετέρους ξυμμάχους... ἀντ' ἀγαθῶν κακοὶ γεγέννηνται (86.1); τοὺς ξυμμάχους, ἦν σωφρονῶμεν, οὐ περιοψόμεθα ἀδικουμένοις οὐδὲ μελλήσομεν τιμωρεῖν· οἱ δ' οὐκέτι μέλλουσι κακῶς πάσχειν (86.2);

⁵ So de Ste Croix (n.3) 59.

⁶ de Ste Croix (n.3) 56.

ξύμμαχοι ἀγαθοί, οὐς οὐ παραδοτέα τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἐστίν... βλαπτομένους, ἀλλὰ τιμωρητέα (86.3); ἡμᾶς ἀδικουμένους... τοὺς μέλλοντας ἀδικεῖν (86.4); μήτε τοὺς ξυμμάχους καταπροδιδῶμεν, ἀλλὰ ξὺν τοῖς θεοῖς ἐπίωμεν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀδικοῦντας (86.5). To what do these expressions refer, if not to the αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραί? When Sthenelaidas speaks of the growth of Athenian power (86.5 μήτε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἐᾶτε μείζους γίγνεσθαι) he is surely not urging this as a reason for opening hostilities (it is common ground, as we have seen, that Athenian ἀδικία is a sufficient *casus belli*) but as a reason for opening hostilities *at once* (86.3 τιμωρητέα ἐν τάχει, cf. 86.4). Archidamus has urged delay and claimed that this would make the Spartan war effort more effective; Sthenelaidas counters with the claim that further delay would be to Athens' benefit (allowing her to consolidate her power) rather than to Sparta's.

Thucydides regards Spartan fears about the growth of Athenian power as the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις of the war. His own view, therefore, is rather different from the one he attributes to Sthenelaidas, for whom the αἰτίαι καὶ διαφοραί are sufficient grounds for war and the growth of Athenian power is a reason for going to war sooner rather than later. If any contradiction is at risk here, it is not that the ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις is too much in evidence; it is that Thucydides' account of the debate, and in particular the perception of Spartan opinion implied by the speech assigned to Sthenelaidas (cf. 1.22.1 περὶ τῶν ἀεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα), give no support to the claim that the Spartans made their decision οὐ τοσοῦτον τῶν ξυμμάχων πεισθέντες τοῖς λόγοις (1.88). This discrepancy exists, however, only if Thucydides is understood as claiming that the growth of Athenian power was a consideration which influenced the Spartan decision *directly*; and that is not his meaning. His view seems to be rather that the Spartans' perception of Athens as a threat created a climate of opinion in which they were predisposed to see Athenian actions as ἀδικία, and to react angrily to them as such. Once a disposition to draw certain conclusions has arisen, those conclusions may be drawn without any further reference to the factor which gave rise to that disposition in the first place. The implication of 1.88, therefore, is: 'the Spartans were persuaded by their allies' arguments; but—and this is the more important point (since it explains why they were so readily open to persuasion)—they were also afraid of the Athenians becoming more powerful.' It is the same reasoning that underlies Thucydides' claim that the πρόφασις of 1.23.6, though ἀφανεστάτη λόγῳ, is in fact ἀληθεστάτη.