

**Bosworth's take on the Melian Dialogue: A provocation too far?**

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## Melian Dialogue

The Melian Dialogue is a Thucydidean passage which inspires passion and provocation, if not actual moral horror. Bosworth's reading of it as sympathetic to the Athenians' stark international amorality has been influential, but it has inspired equally violent disagreement. It is perhaps interpretation of the Melian Dialogue which should indicate whether Thucydides was a precursor of Tacitus (whose moral bleakness results from measuring characters against high moral standards) or of Machiavelli (whose moral bleakness results from his realization that Christian morality is inapplicable to political life). If Bosworth is right, Thucydides is much more in the latter camp. However, is Bosworth right? In investigating this question, one must engage with Thucydides' attitude toward direct speech and his use of a unique format for the Melian-Athenian debate. To explore the intention behind the Dialogue, one must also consider the attitude of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the Greek cultural context. It emerges from this investigation that both "sides" of the debate have to be read together, because "right" is vested unequivocally in neither: philosophically, the Dialogue reveals the inevitable tragedy of human life; practically, the Dialogue endorses the incompatibility of the useful and the honourable. Bosworth's contribution is a valuable reminder of the convincingness of the Athenian case—nevertheless, a synchronic reading is superior.

It is necessary to briefly tackle the nature of Thucydidean speeches to determine the extent to which he was "limited" by history. According to Thucydides' preface, "my habit has been to make the speakers say what was, in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said." (I.I.xxii)<sup>1</sup> What does this mean in practice? Thucydides had a freer hand for the expression of his own ideas when, as Bosworth states,<sup>2</sup> a speech had few witnesses than when it was common knowledge. The Melian Dialogue was conducted in camera—moreover the Melians involved were soon executed, and many of the Athenians who were privy to the negotiation may have been killed in Sicily. This does not mean, however, that Thucydides had no sources of information—generals were hardly

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified all line numbers refer to Thucydides.

<sup>2</sup> Bosworth (2000), p.15; Hudson-Williams (1950), pp.168-169

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taciturn, and he had friends who moved in the same circles. The Melian Dialogue is constructed on some scaffolding of fact, but the privacy of the situation and the informality of the discussion allowed Thucydides an artistic opportunity to discuss his own core ideas, opportunely placed in his narrative just before Athens' tragic failure.<sup>3</sup>

One of the aspects which makes the Dialogue so memorable is its unique format. In all Thucydides' other set-piece discussions, the opponents present their views in paired speeches of reasonable length. In the Melian Dialogue, not only is the characters' oratory spliced together in uniquely short bursts, the Athenians draw attention to the unusual form (V.XVII.xxvii).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Melians agree that this would be fairer, though they object to the Athenians being "judges in your own cause" (V.XVII.xxviii). If set speeches are so misleading, one might ask, why has Thucydides found them an adequate way to deal with conflict to this point? Is there something especially truthful about the Melian Dialogue? The link made between the Melian oligarchy and the criticism placed in the mouths of the democratic Athenians regarding the deceptiveness of oratory before the popular assembly is key.<sup>5</sup> The Athenians speak of being able to "deceive the ears of the multitude by seductive arguments which would pass without refutation (for we know that this is the meaning of our being brought before the few)..." (V.XVII.xxvii). Thucydides' decision to keep out of the internal affairs of states which he considered to be irrelevant to his subject of the war,<sup>6</sup> means that he mostly shows us political speeches which are deliberately designed to include deceptive statements. The Melian Dialogue, stripped of all lies, is for the few, addressed directly to the reader who is to profit from the history.<sup>7</sup> Does this make it a sophistic elenchus? It is hard to define which of the two parties is intended to be the questioner and which the answerer—neither speaker occupies Socrates' role, and the Dialogue can be read either way. In fact, the most important feature of the Dialogue is that neither the Athenian nor the Melian

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<sup>3</sup> Macleod (1974), p.400

<sup>4</sup> cf. Plato *Gorg.* 449b,c

<sup>5</sup> Hudson-Williams (1950), pp.164-165

<sup>6</sup> de Romilly (1963), pp.64-65

<sup>7</sup> *pace* Morrison (2000), p.145

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arguments move the other party—and if it were a sophistic work in this technical sense, it would therefore be a failure.<sup>8</sup> I doubt it can be contended that the schoolroom is the intended echo of the passage. The form the Dialogue takes is in fact meant to avoid the usual deceptiveness of Thucydidean characters in public settings and thus allow a unique degree of honesty at a pivotal point in the narrative.

If Thucydides intended his reader to grasp the truth communicated in the Dialogue, surely ancient scholars, steeped as they were in a similar cultural background, would have done so. We do possess an important ancient evaluation of the passage, by the universal historian and rhetorician of the first century BC, Dionysius of Halicarnassus. He seems every bit as shocked as later thinkers by the apparent disdain shown by the Athenians in the Dialogue for morality and the justice of the gods. He makes no distinction between a Thrasymachean argument and the Athenians’—in his mind, they “declared that the pleasure of the stronger constituted the justice of the weak” (*De Thuc.* 41.396). For him, not only is the Melian viewpoint unequivocally correct, but the Athenian rejection of it is so immoral as to be incredible—“I do not know how one could commend words like these as fit to be spoken by Athenian generals, namely that hope proceeding from the gods brings ruin upon men, and that there is no use of either oracles or divination to those who have chosen a life of piety and righteousness.” (*ibid.* 40.393). It is important to remember the standpoint from which Dionysius criticizes. For him, the speeches in Thucydides are wholly fictional (*ibid.* 41.395) and they ought to be criticized in terms of ‘*to prepon*’, which can be loosely translated as ‘fitness’. It is ‘unfit’ for such arguments to be used by such people in such a place. Dionysius represents Bosworth’s deepest challenge, because, working from a Greek cultural lexicon, he clearly had a widely divergent response to the Melian Dialogue to that Bosworth argues was intended.

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Macleod (1974), pp.389-391; Wassermann (1947), p.23: “In practical life, the main purpose of a discussion is to lead to a compromise. The Melian Dialogue...rather stresses the irreconcilability of opposing characters and philosophies...the tragic issue is that neither can the Athenians sacrifice their prestige nor the Melians their freedom without ceasing to be what they are.”

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To understand why an ancient reader formed these opinions of the passage we have to engage with Bosworth on the territory where he is undoubtedly strong—testimonials from ancient authors about Greek attitudes to the Dialogue’s themes. Firstly, Bosworth is certainly right that Greek opinion about the quixotic nature of hope is fairly unanimous and that the Athenians are meant to be scoring a palpable hit when they point out the Melian reliance upon hope (V.XVII.102).<sup>9</sup> Apart from anything else, seen in the structure of Thucydides’ overall work, the problems with relying upon hope are just about to be reinforced (to the Athenians’ great detriment) via the Sicilian expedition (see Nicias’ first speech; VI.XVIII.11-12).<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, there *is* also a certain tension in Greek culture,<sup>11</sup> underlined in the fine Athenian argument (V.XVII.111), between virtue as wisdom, which precludes heroic folly, and virtue as the avoidance of disgrace.<sup>12</sup> The *Gorgias*, which in Wassermann’s opinion, Plato wrote to oppose the ideas expressed in the Melian Dialogue,<sup>13</sup> shows that Athenian culture during Thucydides’ lifetime embraced both the almost Nietzschean views of Callicles—excellence as the intelligent pursuit of one’s desires—and the moral idealism of Socrates—excellence as right action, heedless of circumstance. For Callicles, ordinary morality (“law”) is a delusion foisted upon humanity by weaklings, and “nature” indicates that the strong ought to dominate others (*Gor.* 483b-d); whereas for Socrates, the health of the soul, only injured by one’s own unjust actions, is all that matters (*Gor.*

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<sup>9</sup> Bosworth (1993), pp.41-42

<sup>10</sup> Morrison (2000), p.139

<sup>11</sup> The two parties are meant to be emblematic of their national characters. They recall the attitudes of the Athenians before Salamis and of the Spartans before Thermopylae. Herodotus’ Themistocles says, “so long as Athens had two hundred warships in commission, she had both a city and country much stronger than theirs...” (VIII.61). Herodotus says of Leonidas that he “thought it unbecoming for the Spartans under his command to desert the post they had originally come to guard...honour forbade that he himself should go.” (VII.220). This course of action is condemned as “folly” by the Persians (VII.210).

<sup>12</sup> But see for a hostile perspective Orwin (1994), p.115

<sup>13</sup> Wassermann (1947), p.24

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525a). In Athens in Thucydides' day, the idea of morality's validity in opposition to brute natural laws was being challenged.

In Thucydides' Athens, radical ideas were thus circulating and one would therefore assume the Athenians of Thucydides' era could be relied upon to be less shocked than later readers (especially as Bosworth also has a good point about the fact that the Athenians' argument is not to be identified with Thrasymachus' in the *Republic* and therefore that responses to Thrasymachus' extreme philosophy are not to be lumped in with Thucydides'<sup>14</sup>). The Dialogue's Athenians offer up no warped definitions of justice,<sup>15</sup> they simply claim it is not relevant to the Melians' situation (V.XVII.90&97), whereas Socrates' opponent claims "that *justice* is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger." (my italics; *Rep.* I.338c).<sup>16</sup> The idea of justice's non-relevance to politics is more Machiavellian than Thrasymachean. It is Machiavelli who states: "he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation...Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do *wrong*, and to make use of it or not according to necessity." (my italics; *Princ.* XV.1,2). Any connection between the Melian Dialogue and Plato's *bété noires* must spring from Calicles' statement that: "nature and law, are for the most part opposed to each other...if a person makes a statement in terms of law, you slyly question him in terms of nature; if he makes it in terms of nature, you question him in terms of law...For by nature all that is worse is also more shameful, like suffering what's unjust, whereas by law doing it is more shameful." (*Gor.* 483a). Clearly in contemporary Athens there was a school of thought which conceived of natural law as amoral and applied it in this form to human affairs—and thus with one significant audience at least the author could be assured of a sympathetic reception.

The blind forces the Athenians invoke as the universal determinants of human conduct are enumerated in a purely descriptive rather than normative vein.

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<sup>14</sup> Bosworth (1993), p.40

<sup>15</sup> *contra* Orwin (1994), p.113: "the primacy of advantage over justice" without caveat.

<sup>16</sup> Bosworth (1993), p.40

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What the parties are arguing about is whether the way the world *is* can be identified with the way it *ought* to be—or at least the Athenians are trying to describe the way the world is and the Melians are trying to argue about how it ought to be.<sup>17</sup> It is the gravest of errors to confuse sophistic amoralism with political amoralism—the latter means that morality, while valid, is not relevant to politics (Machiavelli’s position). This is the argument of the Athenians—not that justice is the rule of the stronger or that there is no such thing as justice but simply that justice is irrelevant to the transaction. The argument is about morality’s jurisdiction. Nevertheless, despite all of the factors we have examined (the Greek disdain for hope, the debate within their culture about the nature of virtue and the fact that the Athenian argument is not so crude as it is often assumed to be and could be assured of a sympathetic reception in some quarters), Thucydides’ picture was distasteful to Dionysius, something that Perry explains in terms of the time gap between the two authors.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the conclusions of the Melian Dialogue’s Athenians are found morally and psychologically repugnant by Dionysius is, in my opinion, to be explained by the very fact that the Athenian arguments could be convincing.<sup>19</sup>

Simply because the Athenian arguments are undoubtedly much more compelling than they are often acknowledged to be, it does not necessary follow, as Bosworth falsely considers, that the Melian perspective must be sophistical. The two sides of the debate must be read together to understand Thucydides’ ideas. On the one hand the Melians speak for a purified version of the Spartan mentality<sup>20</sup> (much admired at the time)—they trust in the gods and in the justice of their cause, they appeal to “shame” as a motivation for correct action, they believe the useful to be identical with the honourable and they block off the possibility of taking any course of action which is not identical with their perception of honour (V.XVII.104 ,107, 110, 87). The Athenians, by contrast, believe the gods to be subject to brute universal laws and justice to be irrelevant in the face of these laws, they find disgrace to be an un compelling motive in the

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<sup>17</sup> *contra* Alker (1988)

<sup>18</sup> Perry (1937), p.419

<sup>19</sup> Callicles remains unconvinced by Socrates (*Gor.* 513c)

<sup>20</sup> Orwin (1994), p.97

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face of overwhelming force, they believe the useful and the honourable can be inimical to one another and the force they acknowledge as regulating their freedom of action is the compulsion to use power to its ultimate extent (V.XVII.104, 101, 97, 104). One wants the Melians to be right for one's own intellectual peace of mind, but as the sequel (and countless other sequels across history) shows, they are not.<sup>21</sup> The reason Athenian imperialism has received so much disproportionate opprobrium is the honesty with which thinkers such as Thucydides present their motives—historians of ancient Rome in similar situations argue that Rome rules through its moral superiority (its citizens are brave and patriotic) and that extreme actions are morally justified. Shocking in antiquity because of its convincing presentation of political amorality, the Melian Dialogue outlines Thucydides' tragic vision of human life by showing the thorough incompatibility of "is" and "ought".

Thucydides has poured his all into writing both the Athenian and the Melian positions, and he intends them both to be "right". The fact that this is not a Socratic-format Dialogue is important—neither party is assigned the privileged role of questioner. Moreover, as both parties assert that within their moral universe they have no freedom of action, it is not even a real negotiation, more a simple clash of ideologies. Bosworth's point about the Melian attitude toward hope is important. In Hesiod, hope is all that Pandora is left with at the bottom of her jar (*Works and Days* 92)—the quality which makes human life possible to endure, hope is to an extent delusory, because with all the evils let loose, hope is foolish! In the same way, the Melian position is the only way people can live, but it rests upon false premises about the universe and results in tragic consequences. By contrast the Athenian position is not a doctrine to which people can remain faithful without extraordinary courage, and it is thus no surprise to see religious enthusiasms and trusting to hope taking over when the Athenians themselves suffer misfortune. It is also true that the brute forces the Athenians speak of are as inevitably tragic in their ultimate outcome as the Melian propositions—the Sicilian expedition, caused by a willingness to gamble

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<sup>21</sup> Wassermann (1947), p.21: "One of the main purposes of the Melian Dialogue is to make clear that both sides have a point."



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and a need to use power to its ultimate extent, is after all right around the narrative corner. Socrates' refutation of Calicles springs to mind—pursuing one's appetites to their ultimate extent leads rather to pain than to benefit (*Gor.* 493-497). Philosophically, what Thucydides is trying to communicate is the inevitably tragic nature of the human condition—no matter which way we turn, whether we do or do not face the truth, we and all our works will eventually be destroyed.

However, Thucydides claims to be providing practical guidance rather than merely theoretical instruction and it is thus of crucial importance to consider whether the Melian comments about the need to respect neutrality survive scrutiny and whether, as some scholars argue, they thus have a superior insight into the future to the Athenians.<sup>22</sup> The Melians' comments about neutrality seem to foreshadow Athenian strategic errors in Sicily. It has been argued that while the Athenians see the present clearly, their view of the future is clouded.<sup>23</sup> The fact remains, however, that the fatal Sicilians were still islanders and thus that the Athenian comments about the irrelevancy of continental neutrals are correct. Moreover the Athenians are not blind in the sense that, like their author, they have no sense of their mortality. Unlike many an empire, they can imagine their demise with relative equanimity—"The end of our empire, if end it should, does not frighten us: a rival empire like Lacedaemon...is not so terrible to the vanquished as subjects who by themselves attack and overpower their rulers." (V.XVII.92). The Melians argue for the political validity of the concept of neutrality ("Is that your subjects' idea of equity, to put those who have nothing to do with you in the same category with peoples that are most of them your own colonists, and some conquered rebels?": V.XVII.96) and the Athenians counter with the facts of the military situation, which they believe are all that matters to the subjects they need to intimidate—"As far as right goes they think one has as much of it as another, and that if any maintain their independence it is because they are strong, and that if we do not molest them it is because we are afraid..."

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. Morrison (2000), p.136: "the Melians have failed to "teach" Athens the value of recollecting the past and contemplating future contingencies."

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g. Liebeschuetz (1968), p.75

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(V.XVII.97). The Athenians are well aware that they are a tyrant city and that their power has made them hated—but they have always known that, at least according to Thucydides who puts such statements into the mouth of his admired Pericles (“For what you hold is...a tyranny; to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe.”; II.VII.64).<sup>24</sup> The Athenians are prepared to take that risk (V.XVII.92). Risk-taking defines the Athenians, and it destroys them, but the Melian gamble upon a just universe is equally great. Moreover Bosworth<sup>25</sup> is correct that Thucydides is as interested in the Melians’ dilemma as he is in Athenian imperialism.<sup>26</sup> In Xenophon’s account of the debate about whether to destroy a defeated Athens, mention is made of the services to Greece in the war against the Mede (*Hell.* III.II.7) which the spokesmen on Melos deemed irrelevant (V.XVII.90). However, the Athenians were right that Lacadaemon would be more lenient to them than revolted subjects and that Lacadaemon would obey the laws of Empire the Athenians had outlined. Thus the Melian Dialogue, placed at the apex of Athenian power, right before their tragic fall, outlines real, rather than the idealized, ground rules of the bleak universe in which Thucydides’ narrative takes place.

Coming just before the Sicilian disaster and taking place in a private oligarchic setting, the Melian Dialogue allowed Thucydides a unique opportunity for honesty, one too great for the historian to ignore. In antiquity, the premise of the Dialogue was consistently viewed as morally shocking, which, given the validity of the Athenian line in a Greek cultural context (*pace* Bosworth) requires explanation. However, Bosworth’s conclusion that, because the Athenians’ arguments are compelling, the Melian position must be sophistical, *is* taking a provocative argument too far. It is the two-sidedness of the Dialogue, in which

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<sup>24</sup> Wassermann (1947), p.24

<sup>25</sup> Bosworth (1993), p.31: “But the dilemma of the Melians is equally compelling, the dilemma of a small state facing insuperable odds and deciding between capitulation and resistance. Thucydides may have agonised over the morality of empire, but he also sympathised deeply with the problems of...the small run-of-the-mill poleis which had to chart a perilous course between the great powers of the day.”

<sup>26</sup> Perry (1937), p.427: “the folly of the Melians rather than the cruelty of the Athenians is the chief subject of contemplation.”

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neither party is granted a privileged position, which has granted it a unique kind of discursive vitality, opening out tragic visions which can be seen alternately from the viewpoint of Dionysius or Bosworth, and the strength of which lies in the continuing conversation, in which the past is necessarily an “aid to the interpretation of the future” and the *Histories* are thus “a possession for all time” (I.1.23).

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