

Simplicity and *Stasis* in Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plato

"Simplicity, which shares a large part of nobility," writes Thucydides (3.83., "was laughed down and vanished." Thucydides' sole mention of "simplicity" (*to euethes*) has long captured readers attention. Martha Nussbaum seized on the passage for the conclusion of her genre-shaping *Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge 1986). Crawley's elegant (if elaborate) rendering of *to euethes* as the "ancient simplicity" in his Victorian-period translation of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, inspired the title of Gregory Crane's study of moral realism in the Athenian historian, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley 1998). Yet, as is often the case with much of Thucydides' description and analysis of civil strife (*stasis*), this sentence has tended to receive more admiration than attention in modern scholarship.

In this paper, I argue that Xenophon and Plato paid attention. Or, more precisely, Xenophon's Critias (*Hellenica* 2) and Plato's Thrasymachus (*Republic* 1). In putting "simplicity" in the mouths of Critias and Thrasymachus, Xenophon and Plato respectively show how they share Thucydides' understanding of a tight connection between (i) "simplicity," (ii) "nobility" (*to gennaion*), and civil strife. In their authors' hands, Critias and Thrasymachus are potential fomenters of civil strife, who both mock "simplicity" as an impediment to rule.

Speaking in the civil strife that had come about in Athens as a result of the Thirty's rule, Critias, the principal member of the Thirty, tells his fellow oligarch, Theramenes, the cold truth about how the Thirty must rule: "If, because we are thirty and not one, you suppose that we ought to be any less attentive about this rule, you are simple (*euethes*)" (*Hell.* 2.3.16). Critias' use of "simple" is the word's only occurrence in the *Hellenica*, making it an all-the-more ominous harbinger of what is to come: the power struggle between the two leaders that results in

Theramenes' death. Xenophon transfers elements of Thucydides' portrait of the social and psychological effects of *stasis* to his historical narrative: in presenting this interchange, he creates a slow-motion *stasis*.

In the *Republic*, Thrasymachus argues that Socrates has gotten it all wrong about justice: justice, Thrasymachus points out, just does not pay. "You need to look at it in this way, most simple (*eutheastate*) Socrates, that a just man has it all-around worse than an unjust man" (*Rep.* 1.343d). While everything about Thrasymachus' interchange with Socrates is extraordinary, his address of Socrates as "most simple," also stands out. Throughout the *Republic*, Thrasymachus is the one character who consistently addresses Socrates by name and with an epithet. It reflects Thrasymachus' overall challenge to Socrates in the *Republic*. In affixing Socrates with the address of "most simple" (*eutheastate*), Thrasymachus makes a move parallel to that of Critias in the *Hellenica* as demeaning not only his opponent but also downplaying the importance of simplicity. In demeaning "simplicity," Thrasymachus makes a move parallel to fomenters of *stasis*, laughing it down and causing it to disappear. Thrasymachus' extraordinary labelling of Socrates shows how Plato embraces Thucydides' understanding of the relation between simplicity, nobility, and civil strife. It is all the more intriguing that we find out in Plato's *Clitophon* that Clitophon left the conversation of the *Republic* persuaded by Thrasymachus; as scholars now know from the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia*, Clitophon would go on to serve as a participant of the oligarchic coup of 411 BC. Plato's Thrasymachus might reflect the historical Thrasymachus' role in fomenting civil strife in Athens.

Yet, Xenophon's Critias and Plato's Thrasymachus also shed light on Xenophon and Plato's literary and philosophical contest with Thucydides. Critias and Thrasymachus have long been recognized as sharing certain affinities with Thucydides, often reduced to the German

expression *Realpolitik*: a denial that justice has any place in political life. Interpreters like Nussbaum 1986 have found Thucydides' statement that "simplicity shares a large part of nobility" (3.83.1) to be at the core of Thucydidean ethical thought. In employing the language of "simplicity" in passages that depict philosophical fomenters of civil strife, Xenophon and Plato suggest that Thucydides' ability to "call it like it is" comes dangerously close to the coldness with which Critias and Thrasymachus view the world. Although Thucydides may have been correct at the end of the day, Xenophon and Plato seem to wonder about the shortcomings of simplicity.

Sources

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