

## Metaphysical Language in Thucydides' Account of Periclean Athens

In a well-known essay, William Arrowsmith noticed a “metaphysical discontent” in fifth century Athens (1973: 129), for which he found evidence in Aristophanes' *Birds* and in Thucydides' account of the Sicilian Expedition. The term refers to an inclination to challenge material constraints that people usually consider as inherent boundaries imposed by physical reality on their enterprises. Thucydides is critical of the influence of said disposition at the time of the Sicilian Expedition. Yet, as this paper will try to show, he also acknowledges the advantages that the Athenians' metaphysical restlessness brings: Thucydides mobilizes language with a markedly metaphysical ring in order to capture how the Athenians at the time of Pericles surmount seemingly unalterable material limitations of human aspirations. Although Thucydides does not suggest that the Athenians consciously engage in actual metaphysics, he sees their determination to overcome material limitations as driven by a temperament that recalls the philosophers' striving after metaphysical insight.

In Thucydides, the Corinthian ambassadors at Sparta make the striking observation that the Athenians “consider themselves deprived of their own when they do not achieve something that they have mentally conceived” (1.70.1: ἃ μὲν ἂν ἐπινοήσαντες μὴ ἐπεξέλθωσιν, οἰκειῶν στέρεσθαι ἡγοῦνται). The language of “one's own” suggests that the Athenians experience mental conceptions as actual and real even if these do not coincide with material facts. Pericles' war strategy is a case in point: advising the Athenians to imagine their city as an island, he urges them to “think of themselves as closely as possible as this [namely, as islanders]” (1.143.5: ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τούτου διανοηθέντας). Through thorough identification with this mental construct, the Athenians nullify the seemingly ineluctable fact that their city is located on the mainland. The Corinthians also observe that the Athenians “use their bodies on behalf of their city as if they were utterly alien, but their mind as what is their own most of all” (1.70.3: τοῖς μὲν σώμασιν ἀλλοτριωτάτοις ὑπὲρ τῆς πόλεως χρῶνται, τῇ δὲ γνώμῃ οἰκειοτάτῃ). The Athenians experience their physical embodiment as secondary but their

mind as truly constitutive of themselves. Finally, Thucydides describes the Athenians' exceptional capacity to vividly anticipate the future as a foray into a mystifying realm, which he repeatedly characterizes as "invisible" (1.138.3: τὸ ... ἐν τῷ ἀφανεῖ ἔτι; 2.42.4: τὸ ἀφανὲς τοῦ κατορθώσῃν). In all these passages, the Athenians' awareness of mental projections becomes more real for them than their sensory perception of the seemingly paramount material realm.

The language applied by Thucydides to the Athenians bears resemblance with Plato's description of the Forms. First, as a metaphysical idealist, Plato holds that the world of matter is less real than the realm of thought (*R.* 508d4-9); this idea bears resemblance with the Thucydidean view that the Athenians experience the material realm as less determinative of real events than the conceptual sphere. Second, Plato also holds that the mind is more truly constitutive of the human person than the body (*Phdr.* 249e4-5, 250c5-6); this view can be compared with Thucydides' claim that the Athenians experience their bodies as not their own. Third, Plato uses the language of invisibility to conceptualize the transcendent realm of the forms (*Phd.* 79a2-10). This invisible realm is only accessible through an intellectual effort (*Phd.* 79a3); in a similar way, Thucydides describes Themistocles' penetration into the invisible sphere as a rational act (1.138. 3: οἰκεία ... ξυνέσει).

Testifying to the impact of philosophy on Pericles, Plato and Plutarch highlight his acquaintance with the philosopher Anaxagoras (Pl. *Phdr.* 270a3-8, *Alc.*1 118c3-5; Plu. *Per.* 4.4-5.1). Despite Socrates' criticism of Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo* (*Phd.* 98b7-e5), Anaxagoras' idea that νοῦς governs the material world closely resembles the Platonic view that mind is prior to matter (*Phd.* 97b8-c4; cf.: Guthrie 1965: 274-5, 320; Curd 2007: 234; Rechenauer 2013: 784). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles claims that the Athenians "love wisdom" (2.40.1: φιλοσοφοῦμεν). The claim hints at a general Athenian proclivity for philosophy. Noting this inclination, Thucydides ascribes a mentality to the Athenians that bears resemblance with the metaphysical ideas that circulate among the philosophers: just as

philosophers like Anaxagoras and Plato posit a rational entity, *Mind* or the Good, as an ontologically supreme principle that organizes the material realm (Pl. *R.* 508b-c, 517c2; DK 59 B 12), so the Athenians experience their conceptual capacities as more real and as more strongly determinative of a situation than material facts.

### Bibliography

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