

The Failure of Justice in Thucydides' Plataean Debate

In Thucydides' account of the Plataean debate (3.52-68), the Peloponnesian approach to justice is manifestly deficient. Thucydides believed in the importance of justice, and likewise in the customary processes among Greek states that upheld its universality (3.56.2; cf. eg. 3.58.5). His language, however, makes clear that Thebes and its Peloponnesian allies largely disregard normal judicial processes concerning Plataea in the Peloponnesian War, and even justice itself as a virtue.

Thucydides allows both the Plataeans and Thebans equal time in his account of their speeches. Yet, the final portrayal of the two sides is one of contrast in which he sets the themes of "usefulness" and "revenge," represented by the Peloponnesians, against that of justice, represented by the Plataeans. The Peloponnesians, as a result, appear to be driven only by self-interest and opportunism; the Plataeans, while themselves driven by self-interest - indeed, the interest of self-preservation - more importantly appeal to virtue, a universal understanding of justice, and therefore represent the author's own belief in the importance of upholding that virtue.

This paper will examine specific sections in the debate that illuminate the author's contrasting portrayal of the two sides. I highlight in particular choices of politically or religiously-charged words (e.g., 3.56.2 *ἄσπιον...ἀμύνεσθαι*; 3.58.5 *θεοῦς τοὺς ὁμοβωμίους*), and the language of justice in the Plataeans' defense speech (e.g., 3.56.2 *ὀρθῶς τε ἐπιμωρησάμεθα*). As a consequence, I propose an authorial indictment emerges from the literary indictment of the Peloponnesians in two parts. First, that the Peloponnesian cause neglected customary processes meant to ensure equality and justice, as when they held a false trial (3.53.1); and second, that a cold desire for immediate profit replaced any intention of carefully serving justice, as when the

judges asked a rhetorically unanswerable question instead of bringing an actual charge (3.52.4). In this context, truth itself becomes dangerous (3.53.2). The full implication of this is felt when the Plataean men, after inevitably answering that they had not done anything for the Peloponnesians, are finally executed, and their city razed to the ground. In the end, usefulness wins out over justice, and the Plataean debate stands as an example for Thucydides of the larger failure of justice during the Peloponnesian War.