

DESTRUCTIVE STATE INTEREST
AND PANHELLENISM
IN THUCYDIDES

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DESTRUCTIVE STATE INTEREST AND PANHELLENISM
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	iv
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. DESTRUCTIVE SELF INTEREST IN OTHER GREEK AUTHORS OF THE LATE FIFTH/EARLY FOURTH CENTURY	7
3. DESTRUCTIVE SELF INTEREST AND THE IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY	21
4. DESTRUCTIVE SELF INTEREST AND <i>PLEONEXIA</i> ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE.....	34
5. THE PANHELLENISM OF THUCYDIDES.....	56
6. CONCLUSION	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	75

ABBREVIATIONS

Names of journals are abbreviated as in *L'Année Philologique*. Frequently cited ancient authors and works listed below.

<i>Ach.</i>	<i>Acharnians</i>
<i>Alc.</i>	Alcibiades, life of, in Plutarch's lives
<i>Ana.</i>	<i>Anabasis</i>
<i>AP.</i>	<i>Athēnaiōn Politeia</i> (attributed to Aristotle)
Diod.	Diodorus Siculus
Her.	Herodotus
<i>Hell.</i>	<i>Hellenica</i>
<i>Kn.</i>	<i>Knights</i>
<i>Lys.</i>	<i>Lysistrata</i>
<i>Peace</i>	<i>Peace</i>
Plut.	Plutarch
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Republic</i>
Thuc.	Thucydides

Chapter One: Introduction

Thucydides through his critique of destructive self-interest on the international level provides a message of Panhellenism in his work. Thucydides' narrative, first and foremost, is a history of the Peloponnesian War. The history, however, includes an analysis of human nature (1.76.2) and demonstrates that human nature drove the events of the war, especially evident in the Corcyraean *stasis* (1.22.4, 3.84.2). Thucydides at 1.76.2 defines human nature as being driven by three factors: fear, honor and interest. This thesis investigates the third factor, interest, to see how the author portrays it throughout the history. I differentiate between two forms of interest: destructive self-interest and enlightened self-interest. While Thucydides makes no explicit distinction between the two, the difference is drawn from certain speeches and discussion of them by modern authors. Destructive self-interest occurs when an entity (an individual within a community, or a state on the international level) acts to enrich itself at the expense of the community, an act sometimes characterized by *pleonexia*, or a want for more. Enlightened self-interest occurs when the same entity chooses instead to support the community as a whole, putting aside immediate private gain so that the majority might profit.

The criticism of destructive self-interest and the preference for enlightened self-interest was a common theme in late fifth/early fourth century thought as writers like Herodotus, Aristophanes, the tragedians, Lysias, Xenophon and Plato included it in their works. Thucydides in his work demonstrates the danger of acting according to destructive self-interest on both the community and international level. On the community level, Thucydides in Pericles' *Funeral Oration* portrays the ideal society as

one where individuals moderate their own desires for the group, and in the Corcyraean *stasis* shows the ruined society as one where people pervert societal norms by pursuing their own interests to the detriment of the community as a whole. He furthers this critique by describing how the politicians that followed Pericles ruined Athens by pursuing their own desires (though he remains quiet on how Pericles pursued his own interests). On the international stage he shows how the war began, was prolonged and how its effects were magnified by states following policies of destructive self-interest. Though the majority of the history shows the danger of destructive self-interest, there are moments when Thucydides points to a way of enlightened self-interest: Diodotus' speech in the Mytilene debate (3.42-8) and Hermocrates' speech at Gela (4.59-64). Like other Panhellenic calls, Hermocrates calls for the subordination of individual cities' interest for the good of the whole Greek world in order to ensure the stability of the international community, thus making Thucydides a Panhellenist (as will be argued in chapter five).

In order to avoid my own intellectual overreach, I do not attempt to argue that Thucydides had this purpose in mind when he wrote. Again, his focus was on the Peloponnesian War, which included an analysis of the dangers of human nature. Part of these dangers involved acting according to irrational destructive self-interest (3.82.8). If the war happened due to human nature and part of human nature is to act on destructive self-interest, then the best way for states to avoid war is to avoid policies of destructive self-interest and to enact policies of enlightened self-interest. For states this means abandoning policies based only on the interest of the state and embracing policies of working together with other states - in other words, Panhellenism. This is the logical

conclusion, if one wants to learn from Thucydides' writing, not merely take it as an accurate measure of humanity without believing that anything can change.

This reading emerged from several strains of classical scholarship.¹ The first vein deals primarily with Thucydides and the construction of his work. Jacqueline De Romilly in *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* recognizes that the history shows a dangerous shift in Athenian imperial policy, from the moderate policies of Pericles to the expansionist, dangerous and eventually destructive plans of Alcibiades.² She also notes the similarities between Thucydides and other authors of his time, but did not go so far as to see that these parallels meant that Thucydides could be conceived of as being Panhellenic.³ Virginia Hunter in *Thucydides the Artful Reporter* presents the historian as a writer who constructed the events of the history in order to demonstrate how history unfolds and how people can affect it.⁴ Peter Pouncey in *The Necessities of War* examines how Thucydides used the definition of human nature in 1.76.2 to explain the motivations of both states and individuals throughout the course of the history.⁵ Robert Connor in his *Thucydides* pushes the idea that Thucydides wanted to engage his readers in issues of the war, but that no overarching message could be taken from it.⁶ James Morrison continues these thoughts in *Reading Thucydides* in which he examines Thucydides' presentation and how the author creates certain parallels, like the comparison of cities to individuals, to get the reader to think along new lines of thought.

¹ The following is by no means a comprehensive review of all Thucydidean scholarship.

² Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Tody (Alden 1963), 350-1.

³ de Romilly, *Athenian Imperialism*, 358-9.

⁴ Virginia Hunter, *Thucydides the Artful reporter* (Hakkert 1973), 183.

⁵ Peter Pouncey, *The Necessities of War* (Columbia 1980), 143-50.

⁶ Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton 1984), 248-50.

Another strain of scholarship deals with classical Greek thought on International Relations. While focusing on the work as a history, these authors deal with Thucydides' presentation of states in an international system. G.E.M. de St. Croix in *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* outlined the realist view of Thucydides, portraying the writer as one who viewed the international world as anarchic, where states could and would only operate according to self-interest and that questions of justice were irrelevant.⁷ This view has been challenged, and modified since, with articles like David Cohen's "Justice, interest, and Political deliberation," showing that the author promoted courses of action arrived at by rational deliberation, rather than brash action.⁸ Laurie Johnson's *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism* or Gregory Crane's *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* attempt to modify or explain the ways in which Thucydides was a realist.⁹ John Dillery in *Xenophon and the history of his times* outlines how Xenophon in the *Hellenica* warned against states acting on *pleonexia*,¹⁰ an idea that this thesis applies to Thucydides.

Another implicit argument in this thesis is that Thucydides saw the Hellenic world as a community of states held together by some form of international law/accepted modes of state behavior, which is a controversial claim in scholarship. Some scholarship minimizes Greek interstate relations, seeing them as limited to only a few shared customs and practices, like common religious festivals, battlefield monuments and treaties.¹¹

George Sheetz and Polly Lowe demonstrate in their works "Conceptualizing International

⁷ G.E.M de St. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Cornell 1972), 16.

⁸ David Cohen, "Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation," *QUCC* (1984), 59.

⁹ Laurie Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism* (Northern Illinois 1993), 201-229; Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley 1998), 1-19.

¹⁰ John Dillery, *Xenophon and the history of his time* (Routledge 1996), 251.

¹¹ George Sheetz, "Conceptualizing International Law in Thucydides," *AJP* (1994), 51; Josiah Ober, "Law and Political Theory" in Michael Gagarin and David Cohen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Law* (Cambridge 2005), 403.

Law in Thucydides” and *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece* that various relationships existed in the Classical Greek world, including ties of metropolities to colonies, ideas of reciprocity, shared religious sanctions, arbitration as an alternative for conflict resolution and that the existence of these practices present a more complex picture of Greek interstate relations than earlier conceived.¹² The existence of such laws would mean that Greek states existed as a community and that the war was in effect a *stasis* on an international scale, the thesis of Jonathon Price’s *Thucydides and Internal War*.¹³ These strands combine to form this thesis: Thucydides engages his reader in an attempt to teach, his history presents the dangers of human nature, especially the danger of acting on destructive self-interest, that despite showing a realist system, the historian actually critiques such a system and that the Greek cities existed in an interconnected community bound by unwritten laws, much like a polis.

Why does my view differ? I live in a time when the United States succeeded to lone hegemony where Athens failed, only to see the disastrous outcome of that victory. The root of Thucydidean scholarship to which I am responding was written in the Cold War when two powers stood against each other with the rest of the world divided between them.¹⁴ Thucydides’ work is applicable to the situation as it demonstrated what would happen if the two powers did engage each other (sans nuclear weapons). Therefore it made sense given the climate at the time to think that states only acted in self-interest to protect themselves. I write this analysis with little recollection of a time when the United States and the Soviet Union stood toe to toe with the world divided

¹² Sheetz, “Conceptualizing International Law in Thucydides,” 70-1; Polly Low, *Interstate Relations in classical Greece* (Cambridge 2007), 252-3.

¹³ Jonathan Price, *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge 2001), 77.

¹⁴ Connor, *Thucydides*, 3.

between them. I saw the US enjoy, briefly, an unparalleled point of influence in world affairs, witnessed the result of that power misused and watched the US enter into a war and an occupation not for the interest of the state, but the interest of a few individuals and corporations, an action which was then sold to the people as being in the interest of the state (Thuc. 2.65.8). Just as Sparta's hegemony ended when it tried to stabilize Greek affairs in its favor (as demonstrated by Xenophon) so too the United States ruined its dominance by nation building in a very unstable region of the world. Looking at Thucydides, I saw this process occurring with Athens during the Peloponnesian war.¹⁵ Does this negate either view? No. Thucydides portrays a world of competing hegemonies, while at the same time showing what happens when states act in their own interest. Instead of focusing on the nature of the conflict, I looked at its impact on individual cities and took as the more important lesson that when states act according to destructive self-interest they harm the international community and eventually destroy themselves. To avoid this fate, states should subordinate national interest in favor of working through the international community.

¹⁵ The long history of world powers, like the US, the former Soviet Union, China, France and the United Kingdom, meddling in the affairs of lesser states to their detriment, as Athens and Sparta did before and after the war, reinforces this message for me.

Chapter Two:

Destructive self-interest in other Greek authors of the late fifth/early fourth century

Thucydides is not alone in demonstrating the dangers of self-interest and *pleonexia*; other authors of the late fifth and early fourth century, like Herodotus, Aristophanes, Lysias, Xenophon and Plato, included similar themes in their works. Herodotus presents individuals acting in self-interest as the immediate cause of the Persian wars (5.35-6.32), and notes the role of overreach in Xerxes' campaign (7.8-18). The tragedians and Aristophanes incorporate such ideas into their plays: the tragedians through the tragic fall of a character, like Oedipus, Creon or Xerxes and Aristophanes in his war plays, *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Peace* and *Lysistrata*. Lysias relies on the *topos* of the danger of individuals putting their desires above the city in several of his speeches, including *On the murder of Eratosthenes*, and *Against Alcibiades*. Plato in the *Republic* debates in whose interest the state is run and the disastrous impact uncontrolled self-interest can have on an individual and his community. Finally, Xenophon in the *Hellenica* illustrates how *pleonexia* led to the fall of both the Thirty in Athens (2.3.11-4.21) and to the end of Spartan hegemony over Greece.

Herodotus uses the theme of acting on destructive self-interest leading to greater trouble in his explanation of the Ionian revolt (5.35-6.32) and the idea of *pleonexia* leading to disaster in the Persian debate on Xerxes' invasion of Greece (7.8-18). The Ionian revolt, which Herodotus labels as the beginning of trouble between the Greeks and the Persians (5.97.3), was caused by two men following their own interests.¹ Histaeus and Aristagoras, the instigators of the Ionian revolt according to Herodotus, started the revolt not out of desire to free Ionia, but rather in order to advance their personal

¹K.H. Waters, *Herodotus the Historian* (Croom Helm 1985), 126.

ambitions. Before the revolt, Aristagoras feared he would lose his status as tyrant of Miletus because he had failed to capture Naxos for the Persians, could not pay the troops from that campaign and had earned the ire of the Persian commander Megabates due to his failure in the campaign (5.35.1). Histaeus, Aristagoras' cousin, at the time was a counselor to Darius in Susa, wanted to return to Miletus and conspired with Aristagoras to coerce the Ionian cities to revolt so that Darius would send him back to help subdue them (5.35.4). Aristagoras, desiring to protect himself and at the prompting of his cousin, persuaded the Ionians to revolt (5.36.1-2). Through this story, - with the amusing anecdote of the message being tattooed on the head of a slave (5.35.2-3) - Herodotus blames revolt on the machinations of two Persian puppets, and afterword notes that the war between the Greeks and the Persians arose from the Ionian revolt (5.97.3). Thus, Herodotus shows how destructive individuals acting for their own profit could be.

Herodotus also discusses *pleonexia* and the problems of overreach. Croesus of Lydia attacked the Persians in the hopes of creating a great empire, and in the process lost his kingdom (1.71-83). Various Persian campaigns also demonstrate the dangers of *pleonexia*: Cyrus desired to subjugate the Massagatae and died in the attempt (1.201-14.3), Darius led a failed invasion of Scythia (4.1-142), ordered the unsuccessful invasions of Greece in 492 (6.43-5) and 490 (6.94-116) and Xerxes invaded Greece to his misfortune (7.4-9.122). In depicting the debate over the invasion, Herodotus highlights Persian concern regarding *pleonexia* and overreach. When Xerxes announced his plan to invade Greece, only his uncle, Artabanus, cautioned the king about the risks involved in the venture (7.10.c). He noted that the gods strike down the greatest of living creatures, while leaving the small ones alone, and in this manner brought the great low (7.10.e).

Xerxes listened to these strong warnings against the invasion (7.12.1). Though Xerxes initially decided not to invade Greece, a divine force commanded him in a dream to attack (7.14). He made Artabanus experience the same dream and while Artabanus bowed to the will of the vision, he reaffirmed his advice that the desire for more leads to ruin (ὡς κακὸν εἶη τὸ πολλῶν ἐπιθυμέειν), recalling Cyrus' fate against the Massagetae, Cambyses' invasion of Ethiopia, and Darius in Scythia (7.18.2). Thus Herodotus not only included the themes of destructive self-interest and *pleonexia*, but also demonstrated their negative consequences.

Characters acting out of self-interest are well known in Greek tragedies, as are the connections between Thucydides and the tragedians.² Sophocles' Oedipus in his blind search for the truth destroyed his house; his Creon, determined to ensure that Polyneices remained unburied, lost his wife and son. The plight of these men mirrors Athens' fall in Thucydides' text, as a determination to follow single courses of action, either finding the source of a plague, punishing rebels, or the domination of the Greek world, end in disaster.³ The tragedians also include a warning against *pleonexia*, as seen in Aeschylus' *Persae*.⁴ Xerxes' queen relates how his advisors pushed him to attack Greece in order to increase the wealth left him by Darius (755). Later in the play, the ghost of Darius laments that the desire for the wealth could result in losing prosperity (824-6). The

² J.R. Finley, "Thucydides and Euripides," *Three essays on Thucydides* (Harvard 1967); Colin Macleod, "Thucydides and Tragedy," *Collected Essays* (Oxford 1983). Simon Hornblower in his *Thucydides* devotes an entire chapter to the parallels between Thucydides and other writers (Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides* (Johns Hopkins 1987), chapter 5 intellectual affinities) and in *Thucydides and Pindar* examines the parallels in political thought and style between the two authors but hesitates to claim any direct link between them (Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides and Pindar* (Oxford 2004), 371-375).

³ Macleod, *Collected Essays*, 142; Peter Burian, "Myth into *muthos*: shaping of tragic plot," in P.E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1997), 182.

⁴ Michael Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley 1976), 45.

