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The Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas

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In his account of the 27-year Peloponnesian War, Thucydides makes virtue the theme of his presentation of the most outstanding Spartan, Brasidas. That presentation can guide us to an understanding of moral virtue in all its richness and complexity. We learn from a careful analysis of Brasidas' deeds and speeches, and of Thucydides' assessment of him, that Brasidas' virtue, remarkable as it is, is problematic. Thucydides' account of it may move us, in fact, to abandon our own attachment to this kind of virtue, as we find ourselves in need of a more consistent kind of virtue, one that becomes visible above all in the first speech of the Syracusan Hermocrates. The conversion to this kind of virtue constitutes Thucydides' grounding of the life guided by reason.

Prior to the emergence of modern political philosophy and the liberal regimes that it brought into being, moral virtue was more widely held—in both “heroic” and advanced political societies—to be a primary requirement of a life worth living. It was thought by its adherents and its detractors alike to manifest not so much a concern for one’s happiness as a noble readiness for the kind of selfless sacrifice that moves us to admire and honor its possessors. And what is arguably the first¹ moral virtue, courage, shows itself most obviously on the battlefield—a place that offers the prospect of a noble death (Aristotle, *N. Ethics* 1115a25-32). Other virtues, too, show themselves clearly in the trying situations created by warfare, so it is hardly surprising to find a

full presentation of them in Thucydides’ account of what was the biggest and most revealing of all wars, the 27-year war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians. And he no less than Aristotle or Plato explores the life of moral virtue as part of his effort to provide a rational account of political life.² An important part of that exploration is his presentation of the outstanding Spartan leader Brasidas.

Of the many impressive human beings that Thucydides presents in difficult, dangerous, and sometimes desperate situations, Brasidas, a figure largely neglected in contemporary scholarship,³ stands out among the most virtuous. Not only is he one of the few characters in Thucydides to whom virtue is attributed,⁴ but Thucydides devotes such attention to

¹Courageous (pirating) deeds on behalf of the weak are the first deeds said to have been considered “noble” in Thucydides’ account of archaic Greece (see 1.5). As MacIntyre aptly puts it, “[c]ourage is important, not simply as a quality of individuals, but as the quality necessary to sustain a household and a city . . . To be courageous is to be someone upon whom reliance can be placed” (1981, 115–16). MacIntyre says this initially of heroic societies, but as he points out, “even heroic society is still inescapably a part of us all” (122), and in Greek cities of the fifth century BC, “courage is always praised” (127).

²As recent scholarship in classical political philosophy has shown, it was by means of a careful, dialectical investigation of moral virtue that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle addressed the serious threat that they perceived to the rational life made by alleged experiences of divine intervention in human affairs (Ahrens Dorf 1995; Bartlett 2001, 2008; Bolotin 1987b; Bruell 1999, 2004; Collins 1999; Pangle 1993, chap. 7; Stauffer 2000; Strauss 1936, 142–48; 1953, 145–50).

³Treatments of Brasidas are rare; none examines him at length with a view to moral virtue and its limits. Cogan (1981, 8085) explains the “ideologizing” of the war that Brasidas heightened by his threat to compel liberation of Acanthus from the Athenian empire, reading Brasidas’ threat to burn their crops as a potential threat to build reeducation camps. Crane (1998) says little of Brasidas, though he has a very helpful discussion of Spartan virtue and cowardice (221–36). Connor (1984) provides a perceptive account of the rashness of those who were induced by Brasidas to revolt, and notices the dilemma or “doubts and questions about Brasidas,” raised by Thucydides’ narrative (127–40). Hornblower (2005) investigates the “exaggeration” of the “heroic individuality of Brasidas” as part of a consideration of Thucydides’ alleged debt to epic poetry (38–61). Orwin (1994) touches deftly on the dishonesty of Brasidas but only as an instance of Spartan injustice or bad faith (79–81). Kagan (1974) treats the presentation of Brasidas largely from the perspective of Thucydides’ allegedly unfair depiction of Cleon. Similarly, Pouncey (1980) speculates that Thucydides’ admiring account of Brasidas was written as a way for Thucydides to elevate himself, having succumbed at Amphipolis to “a worthy victor” (3–5).

⁴The others are the Marathon fighters (2.34.5), those who visited their friends during the plague and fell victim (2.51.5), the Peisistratids (6.54.5), Nicias (7.86.5), and Antiphon (8.68.1). On the difficulty of discerning Thucydides’ own unambiguous opinion of the virtue in question in all of these cases, see Palmer (1989).

his deeds and speeches that it was sufficient, in subsequent ages—when men had read Thucydides' work—if one wished to invoke virtue, to mention the name "Brasidas." The statements that Plutarch makes about Brasidas, for example, are all addressed to the topic of virtue, including the famous statement of Brasidas' mother who, upon learning of his death, asked if he had died nobly, and told that he had shown himself the best man in Sparta, declared, unbelievably, that there were many better men than he in Sparta.⁵ In Rome, Caesar Augustus released a citizen he had imprisoned after learning that the prisoner was the sole living descendent of Brasidas.⁶ When Rousseau needed an exemplar of ancient Spartan virtue and independence, he quoted Brasidas.⁷ More contemporaneously, Plato's Alcibiades even bids us compare Brasidas to the great Achilles,⁸ and understandably so. For Brasidas is in a way Thucydides' equivalent of Homer's Achilles. The latter's sense of his own greater worthiness to rule, earned by dint of his generous, painful, and brave labors on behalf of the Greeks,⁹ had put him at odds with Agamemnon, but he eventually came to believe that noble, virtuous service on behalf of his Greek friends—even if it meant his own death on the battlefield—was preferable to the long, peaceful, but inglorious life he had momentarily preferred.¹⁰ We can be guided by reflection on Thucydides' non-mythical account of Brasidas to understand true virtue, the virtue that is as indispensable to a contented life in peace as it is in war. For as even the early deeds and speech of Brasidas force us to see, the virtue

that Brasidas has learned at Sparta is problematic, in a way that allows or permits us to ascend from it to a grasp of genuine virtue.

But a difficulty confronts any effort to approach Thucydides' text today. There would seem to be a promising indication at the start of the work that it will speak directly to the concerns of an enlightened time like our own: it is written at the peak of political life, when progress had been made away from devotion to the kind of virtue that depends on acceptance of mythical accounts of a golden, remote past (1.1–23). It presents itself, in other words, as the work of an enlightened human being living in an enlightened time. Even so, Thucydides did not anticipate the philosophically guided transformation of political thinking that has issued in our "enlightened" political order—an order guided not by public obligations imposed by allegedly divine laws but instead by a doctrine of individual rights, i.e., necessitated and hence justified claims of self-interested individuals. The permissiveness of this doctrine, its protection of us from the strictures that might otherwise be imposed on the private pursuit of our interests, inclines us to nod easily in agreement with claims that characters in Thucydides make concerning self-interest that Thucydides knew to be disturbing, if not shocking, to many of his contemporaries. A key component of our doctrine of individual rights—the alleged compulsion to pursue our own interest—likewise undergirds an approach to political life taken by international relations realists, obstructing Thucydides' teaching from us.

The difficulty I have in mind is well illustrated in the best treatment of Brasidas to date, that of Thomas Heilke, who uses Thucydides' narrative of Brasidas' deeds and speeches to make a case for the more widespread use of narrative by international relations realists. Heilke argues that Thucydides wishes to instruct us in "excellence in warcraft and statecraft" (2004, 126), in "human excellence" (128, 130), and even in how to become "wise" (129). He takes for granted that Thucydides accepts the Athenian claim that human beings are compelled by fear, honor, and profit to do what they do (127, 135). At the same time, he includes among Brasidas' virtues his "courage" (125), "valor," and his "apparent justice," as well as his "goodness in all things" (127). He notes that these virtues are made questionable by Brasidas' lack of truthfulness (131–32), including Brasidas' claims about Sparta's support for his liberation of Greek cities from Athens. But he does not dwell on this lack of truthfulness or apparent injustice. Instead, he gives us an argument that implies that such

⁵Plutarch (1931: 219c–e. See also 190b–c).

⁶See Plutarch (1931: 207f 14).

⁷See for example *The Second Discourse*, Masters, ed. Part II, 164.

⁸*Symposium*, 221c8. Connor (1984, 140) refers to Brasidas as "the Achilles among men," but without explanation. Hornblower attempts to explain the remark by showing alleged imitations and echoes of Homeric incidents and characters (2005, 38–61).

⁹See *Iliad* 1.158–172 (where Achilles claims to have been moved initially not by any self-concern but by *charis*; cf. Thucydides 1.9.3), 1.224–44, 292–303; 338–44; 9.314–45, esp. 323–27 (where he compares his deeds to those of a selfless mother bird).

¹⁰See *Iliad* 9.620–55. The desire to avenge Patroclus' death adds considerably to Achilles' wrath, but as this passage shows, and contrary to popular belief, not vengeance but friendship for his fellow Greeks is what decides Achilles to return to battle against the Trojans. Moved by Ajax's appeal to friendship, Achilles vows, however, to wait until the Trojans attack his own ships before entering the battle. Later (16.60–90), he reminds Patroclus of this vow, and giving him his armor, orders Patroclus not to rout the Trojans but to leave the glory of that task to him—which he would not have said had he not already planned to return to the battle.

injustice is in itself unproblematic, since the pursuit of interest that prompts it is unproblematic. Brasidas, he argues, would have been the “best” Spartan and even “wise” (127) had his virtues been a means to “his success” (128); Brasidas failed on both counts simply because he lacked a sufficient amount of the Spartan virtue of moderation in pursuit of self-interest (130). That is, Brasidas didn’t realize that his “personal satisfaction. . . may ultimately have contradicted the interests of his city” (131) because he “did not know ultimate Spartan intentions” or “misjudged or ignored the Spartan rulers” (132, 133). Owing to this ignorance of Spartan intentions, Brasidas’ “pursuit of honor and interest defined in terms of power” or “material advantage” was “unbridled” and hence “self-destructive” (135). In short, Brasidas ignorantly or stupidly overreached, in pursuit of his self-interest. If one happens to wish for “success, fame, or glory,” Heilke concludes, one needs in addition to good fortune the “knowledge of the observer” and “the excellence of character to use that knowledge to one’s own purposes” (136).

Having begun with a realist assumption about self-interest, Heilke arrives in this way at a conclusion that is of dubious value to contemporary realists, who, while perhaps in need of reminders about the perduring role of chance in human life, are unlikely to need narratives to learn that human beings sometimes ignorantly overreach in pursuit of their perceived advantage, or make mistaken judgments about how others will act. It is not Thucydides’ narrative, however, but Heilke’s realist assumption, that has this unfortunate result. For the narrative itself does not present us with a Brasidas who understands excellence of character to entail using knowledge, using virtue, or using anything else, to pursue “power” or “one’s own purposes.” The virtues that Heilke ascribes to Brasidas, courage and justice, are instead understood by Brasidas and by every other statesman in Thucydides—including those who attack them—as devotional virtues, i.e., as entailing a readiness to risk and even to *sacrifice* one’s own interests. (Consider, e.g., 5.107.) That they are so viewed is what makes these virtues appear impossible to their critics, who claim that all human beings are *compelled* to pursue their own advantage. It is, on the other hand, the virtues’ self-sacrificial character that makes them admirable and moving to those who practice and behold them, or make such virtues worthy of the high honors accorded to Brasidas first by the Spartans, then by the people of Scione (4.121), and finally by the Amphipolitans, who worship him after his death as the immortal, demi-god founder of their city (5.11). The honors are intended as a confirmation of his great

moral worth and accorded not only by those who on the basis of hearsay believed that he possessed virtue and intelligence but also by those who perceived this through experience.¹¹ Finally, and most importantly, Brasidas, whose daring deeds on behalf of his friends put his life at risk and, in the end, led to his death, believed that a goddess—Athena—was intervening in the war on his behalf, and he consecrated as sacred ground the place where her intervention first manifested itself to him (4.116.2). But divine beings are, of course, held by the war’s participants to intervene not on behalf of the self-interested but rather on behalf of the just. (See 4.20.2 and especially 7.18.2–7.37.18.2–3; cf. 2.5.4–5; 2.7 and 5.104 and 112). By presenting us with an account of Brasidas as highly admired for his virtue both during his lifetime and—because of his narrative—for millennia afterwards, Thucydides leads thoughtful readers to face the question of *whether* one should pursue one’s own good or be prepared to sacrifice it, as this outstanding Spartan appeared both to himself and to the war’s participants to have been ready to do. We cannot begin to face and resolve this important question if we set out with the easy assumption that Brasidas, and everyone else, is simply self-interested. We must, instead, approach the narrative of his deeds and speeches with our sense of justice or fairness at work, with the moral dispositions we still manifest in our everyday lives—in our praise and blame, our admiration, our sense of shame or pride—unchecked. We need to set aside not our souls but rather our artificial sophistication, and permit the narrative to guide our reflections and see where it leads us.

Brasidas’ Early Displays of Virtue and Its Problematic Character

The first time we see him, Brasidas makes a rapid and dramatic dash through Athenian troops with a hundred Spartan hoplites to save the city of Methone

¹¹4.81.2: *tōn men peira aisthomenōn, tōn de akoē nomisantōn*. This is not to say that their direct experience provided genuine knowledge. Rood, who omits this phrase from his quotation of the passage (70), endeavors to show how Brasidas “moulds his behaviour in awareness of the public gaze,” (1998, 70) and speculates that the moulding might have entailed deliberate deception. But showing one’s virtues by deeds need not entail conscious deception; it requires only a shared understanding between the doer and the spectator. Virtues are manifested in deeds. (Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1323b22, 30–34) And Rood recognizes that while self-conscious manipulation and deception are clear in the case of Sparta, they are not clear in the case of Brasidas (74, top). Besides, as Rood omits to say, Brasidas’ gaze is directed also at *Athena*, and there is no suggestion that he believes he is or can be deceiving her.

from the Athenians. This act, which required great daring, earned Brasidas an official vote of praise at Sparta—the only time, so far as I have observed, that Thucydides reports such a vote (2.25.2).¹² The vote is an early taste for Brasidas of the honor he seeks for himself from his city, and the Spartans' honoring of him confirms that his virtue is what the city expects of its citizens and aims for in its education of them (cf. 1.84.3 and 5.16.1). But as this official Spartan expression of praise (as opposed to congratulation) suggests, the courage that Sparta honors is viewed not simply as an end, or something good in itself, but (at least in part) as a means for Sparta to achieve another end—victory in war, and through it, the preservation of freedom and empire. In other words, as even the Spartan King Archidamos had been forced to argue, in response to the Corinthians' blame of Sparta's ways (see 1.84), virtue is a *means* for Sparta to remain free. Now if the virtue of courage, which requires one to risk one's own good, is not an end in itself, but understood as a means to another end, its claim upon us could become problematic (cf. Aristotle, *N. Ethics* 1095b30–31, 1099b29–32). Should Sparta's enemies, for example, prove that victory in war is attainable through other, more efficacious means—means that prove superior to the risk-taking courage practiced by Brasidas—then might Sparta not find herself sensibly adopting those other means in order to achieve those ends? And if she did, what difference would remain between her and her enemies? And what would a Brasidas have to think of his virtuous deeds?

To make clear what is at stake in this question, for us no less than for Brasidas, we note that if virtue is merely a means to good things, one could speak of the virtue of a gang of pirates, or of honesty among thieves, as true virtue.¹³ For moral virtue to be what we admire it for being, i.e., something that limits the pursuit of one's own good, rendering its possessor trustworthy, it cannot be adopted for a moment and thrown away when inconvenient. If it were, it would quickly earn its adopter the name of vice: fair-weather friend, charlatan, underhanded, cheat. The self-limiting, self-sacrificing side of moral virtue solicits our admiration and even moves us to tears when we see it dramatized. It lies behind the solemn and stirring formal dignity of state and military funerals, and in our quotidian lives is what we intend

when we call someone a *mensch*. Its absence, by contrast, as Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* brings out, would make an Achilles and his Danaans into repulsive thugs and confidence men.¹⁴ Self-consciously devotional virtue is what Glaucon demands when asking Socrates to praise justice not for "its wages and its consequences" but "all by itself," even and precisely when its possessor would be tortured, killed, and forgotten; it is what even as apparently cynical a person as Alcibiades is shown to pride himself on when pressed by Socrates: courage, he agrees, is noble, and while noble things are sometimes disadvantageous or harmful to oneself, "I wouldn't choose to live if I were a coward."¹⁵ Whatever salutary effects it may have for the acquisition of other goods, and even if in its practical origin it may have been deemed merely a necessary means to such goods,¹⁶ such virtue is demeaned if it is understood as a means; it cannot be what its possessors and admirers deem it to be if it is not an end in itself, trumping other ends and demanding their subordination or even sacrifice. In its purest form, the devotional, sacrificial aspect of virtue found ancient adherents in Stoicism and modern adherents in Kantianism,¹⁷ each of which, for all their differences, rests the worth or dignity of human beings on the free sacrifice of self-serving actions in the name of a higher (be it "natural" or rationally "categorical") law. Such virtue is for the same reason the target of the barbs of cynics, ancient and modern, who (confusedly) seek admiration for declaring most men suckers.¹⁸ As we will see in one of his later speeches, Brasidas is not among the cynics, but rather

¹⁴*Troilus and Cressida*, Act V, scenes vi–viii.

¹⁵*Republic* 358d1 and *Alcibiades I* 113d1–8, 115a8–9, 115b–d. See Bruell (1999), 23–32, and also Rabieh (2006), 61–63. MacIntyre argues that classical moral virtue is not understood as entailing sacrifice, but as a means to one's own good, as understood within and informed by a given social structure (1981, 178). The difficulty with his argument may be illustrated in his discussion of the virtue of courage. As noted above (note 1), he argues that "[c]ourage is important, not simply as a quality of individuals, but as the quality necessary to sustain a household and a city . . . To be courageous is to be someone upon whom reliance can be placed." But the reliability of the courageous cannot be explained, as MacIntyre attempts to do, on the basis of the courageous person's "power to aid me" (116), since that power is also the power to do me harm. Courage must itself include fidelity or steadfastness of intention to endure suffering and run risks of one's own good on behalf of others.

¹⁶Consider Thucydides' account of Minos' (brutal) suppression of piracy, his self-serving transformation of it from something "noble" to something "base," at 1.5 and 1.8.2–4. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a30–37 and 1280b5–9.

¹⁷See MacIntyre (1981, 131).

¹⁸Consider Xenophon's portrait of Meno at *Anabasis* 2.6.21–27.

¹²References to Thucydides' text will appear by book, chapter, and line. Translations are my own, and rely on the Greek text of Henry Stuart Jones, with corrected and augmented critical apparatus by John Powell (Oxford University Press, 1942).

¹³See in this regard Strauss (1964, 27m, 82t).

one who understands the virtue that Sparta has inculcated in its citizens to be true virtue, the virtue of those who would have good things only if they deserve them.¹⁹ Much is at stake for him, then, in whether the rulers of his city genuinely understand the practice of virtue as their city's end, or are content to see it as a mere means to other things.

Thucydides' narrative forces us to reflect on this very question of virtue as an end or a means when, a little later, the Spartans call upon Brasidas to overcome what they take to be cowardice among the Peloponnesians. For in the first sea battle of the actual war, and under the skillful direction of the Athenian admiral Phormio, (whose naval tactics include the artful use of a regularly occurring wind), a fleet of 20 Athenian ships had secured an initial, decisive victory over a fleet of Peloponnesian ships more than twice its size (2.75–78). The Spartans, Thucydides makes clear, are thoroughly outclassed in this battle by the experienced, artful Athenians. But the authorities at Sparta altogether discount the role that art, gained through experience, played in it, and hence are utterly astounded by the defeat. They attribute it in their anger not to inexperience or lack of skill but to cowardice (2.85.2). In this situation they send out Brasidas along with two other commanders to advise Cnemus, the admiral of the Peloponnesian fleet (2.85).

Before examining the deeds and speech of Brasidas on that mission, we must note that the Spartans' angry discounting of the possibility that human artfulness or inventiveness plays a decisive role in victory is not without reason. Reliance on such artfulness represents, after all, an alternative to reliance on the moral virtue inculcated at Sparta. As king Archidamos had argued at the start of the war, Spartan virtue is law-bred and awe-inspired, and rests on the assumption that holding one's ground, come what may, in a just, lawful cause will ultimately prove to be superior to experience, art, or numbers—that the virtuous will in the end get what they deserve. Through such virtue, the Spartans have become “wise and warlike,” and have thereby long preserved their just rule.²⁰ But in their famous characterizations of Athens and Sparta, the Corinthians had dubbed such virtue old-fashioned, and had pitted against it Athenian artfulness, intelligence, and their “way” of

seeking to gain mastery of motion through attention to necessities. While the Corinthians also cite the Athenians' remarkable public spiritedness, the tendency of their speech is toward the realization that inventiveness or intelligence gained through experience can and does neutralize or indeed trump moral virtue (1.70–71). And if true, this would mean that obtaining what is deemed good is something that can and indeed should be done without moral virtue. For if the good things that we desire can truly be acquired through cleverness rather than through virtue, then virtue, which requires sacrifice, would be an unnecessary and less desirable route to happiness. In this way, the superiority of art or inventiveness to virtue begins to open up a challenge to the deep-seated assumption that we, no less than the Spartans, are likely to have acted upon every day of our lives, namely, that we can obtain the objects of our desire by becoming worthy of them, and lose them on account of our lack of worthiness.

Now inventiveness born of experience, as the Corinthians had noted in their provocative speech at Sparta, shows itself most in a novel, daring kind of artful power, seamanship. Hence it is not surprising that the issue Thucydides' narrative has brought to our attention, and in which Brasidas is intimately enmeshed, is explicitly raised in the first set of speeches from the war proper which occur between the first two sea battles (2.83–92). Those battles, and the speech by which Brasidas and his fellow commanders attempt to instill courage in the Peloponnesian troops,²¹ brings the issue to a head.

The Spartan commanders' speech opens with the encouraging claim that the former sea battle was lost *not* from baseness (2.87.3) but rather because of inadequate preparations, chance, and perhaps also through inexperience (2.87.1–3). But it then stresses that a chance inexperience is no excuse for cowardice. For success at sea is not caused simply by experience or art: the “just” ground of confidence, according to the speech, is courage, a defiant determination without which, the commanders claim, skill is rendered useless in the face of dangers (2.87.3–9). The speech concludes with a warning that all base sailors will be punished and the good receive the reward befitting their virtue. The Athenian Phormio, on the other hand, restores *his* sailors' confidence in the face of the increased number of Peloponnesian ships by telling them that the *knowledge* that comes through experience is itself what engenders courage. The Spartans

¹⁹4.126.3–6, and see below.

²⁰See the Corinthians' words at 1.70–71, especially 71.2, and the reply of the Spartan king Archidamos at 1.84–85.1. The Spartan faith in the law-bred, shame-induced virtue that makes them “wise and warlike” proves to rest on the assumption that the dedication to justice that such virtue manifests is seen and eventually rewarded by the gods (1.84, 1.86, 1.121.4).

²¹Thucydides presents the speech that “Cnemus, Brasidas, and the other Peloponnesian commanders” then delivered to their troops in order to overcome their fear. Brasidas is, at least at this point, significantly indistinguishable from the other Spartans.

have been misled by their land success, he argues, into believing that they are invincible simply; they have in fact been strong on land only because of their superior experience on land; they lack such experience at sea. And the Athenian sailors to some extent share this Spartan misunderstanding, inasmuch as they, too, are cowed by the name "Sparta." Inviting his sailors to manifest in the battle their free dedication to their city, Phormio concludes by warning them to keep their wits about them even should they appear to be suffering a defeat. He artfully directs them to consider their art and experience as the means to making possible what they fear is impossible (2.89).

In the ensuing battle, the combination of Athenian art or skill and daring on behalf of their city again proves decisive (2.90–92), so much so that Brasidas and Cnemus soon afterwards plan only a surprise attack on the Piræus, daring no longer to confront the Athenian fleet openly. And not surprisingly, given what superior Athenian experience has indicated about Spartan courage, the Spartans become terrified at the risk of even this surprise attack, and lose their nerve. Blaming the wind, they attack only Salamis. But as Thucydides remarks with uncharacteristic sharpness, they could easily have taken the undefended Piræus and thereby swiftly won the war, had they resolved not to shrink from the deed, "and no *wind* would have prevented them" (2.93–94, especially 93.3–4 and 94.1). Nor are the two battles of Phormio and his men the only cases in which inventiveness and experience neutralize Sparta's law-bred virtue and cause them to lose their nerve. As actions in the north of Greece suggest, the heavy infantry characteristic of Sparta, requiring the moral superiority characteristic of Sparta—a shame-induced orderliness (cf. 2.80–82)—loses out to inventive light infantry. In fact, owing to superior intelligence, art, or inventiveness, the Athenian victory in the so-called first war is a *rout*. As Thucydides eventually explains, the Spartans' lack of experience with a rapid, naval war eventually renders them not merely defensive but even timid. Unable to endure their adversity, and to stop the rapid deterioration of their rule, they must innovate (4.55) as their Corinthian allies had warned that they must, creating a light infantry of their own (4.55). They are compelled to admit, by deed if not by word, that their virtue is *not* an end in itself, but rather a means to other ends, and hence something that can be safely foregone when superior means to those ends can be found.

Before the Spartans begin to innovate, however, they again send out Brasidas, this time to be an

adviser to the Spartan admiral Alcidas (3.69). This service, too, distinguishes Brasidas while making more acute the problem of his virtuous service to Sparta. For the widely believed and widely hoped-for end of the Spartans' fighting this war was liberation of cities from Athenian imperial rule (2.8.4–5). But the actions of Alcidas prior to Brasidas' arrival betray a lack of good faith in that end. Alcidas' failure to come swiftly to the aid of the city of Mytilene, for example, had doomed to failure the first attempt of a revolt by an ally of Athens, a revolt that might have emboldened others (see 3.13.7). And in his subsequent fear of taking risks and his desire to return swiftly to the Peloponnese, Alcidas had been deaf to the pleadings of his allies to take advantage of a splendid opportunity to bring the cities of Ionia into revolt from Athens (3.27.1, 29.1–31.2; cf. 4.80.1). Moreover, on his way back to the Peloponnese Alcidas had slaughtered all the men from cities under Athenian rule who had been swimming out to his ships. He had stopped the slaughter only when told by a Samian envoy that he was supposed to be fighting a war of liberation (3.32.1–3). He had then hightailed it back to the Peloponnese (3.33), from which he had not stirred until joined by Brasidas, who had orders to bring the fleet to strife-torn Corcyra (3.69).

Brasidas' arrival may well have changed the whole character of the Spartan war effort. For unlike Alcidas, and despite the increasingly unnerving lesson of Athenian artfulness—or perhaps because he is an innovator of his own, a would-be liberator—Brasidas is not averse to the risks inherent in winning cities away from Athens, and perhaps even more willing to fight than before. He is said, at least, to have urged Alcidas after an initial sea victory at Corcyra to attack the city itself. But Brasidas is prevented from leading a Spartan war of liberation because the Spartans have not granted him equal authority with the far less daring Alcidas, who simply ignores Brasidas' advice and again beats a swift retreat to the Peloponnese (3.76–79, especially 79.2–3). The honors that the Spartan oligarchs are willing to bestow on Brasidas, we now begin to see, are quite limited. In spite or rather precisely because Brasidas has been so outstandingly virtuous, he is denied the authority he might deserve (see especially 4.81.1 with 4.108.7 and 132.3). As a result, the Spartans do not wage a war of liberation until Brasidas is allowed to do so on his own. And he is allowed to do so only after the Spartan war effort takes a surprising, dramatic turn for the worse—that is, he is allowed it as a desperate last resort.

Brasidas' initial deeds and speeches, then, while demonstrating his own serious devotion to virtue, begin to show us at the same time the problematic character of that virtue. Virtue is threatened, as the end-in-itself that it must claim to be, by the compulsion of the Spartans to abandon it for other means to victory. And their pursuit of victory itself appears to aim, not at the noble and proclaimed end of liberation, but simply at maintaining the Spartans' rule. Finally, even within that rule, which the Spartans could still claim to have as *its* aim the virtue that manifest itself in noble deeds (cf. 5.105.3), the share of the noble accorded to outstanding Spartans like Brasidas is limited by the desire of each Spartan to maintain his own share—a share that Brasidas, for his part, never denies is justly theirs (see, e.g., his approval of oligarchy at 4.126.2). That is, precisely because he is so outstandingly virtuous, Brasidas is prevented, by the just demand of the other Spartans to share in rule, from obtaining the office that he deserves. The Spartans' hopes of victory without Brasidas' leadership must be laid low before he can obtain an opportunity more fully to exercise his virtue.

Spartan Desperation

To better grasp their desperation and hence the opportunity that finally opened up for Brasidas, let us briefly review the events that brought Sparta to turn to him. In the seventh summer of the war the Athenian Demosthenes, recognizing the soft underbelly of Sparta, her large slave population, invents guerilla warfare to exploit it. He attempts to fortify Pylos (4.3–4) in order to provide fugitive Messenian Spartan slaves a safe haven, and a base from which Messenians could infiltrate the Spartan slave population and cause a full-scale revolt. The alarmed Spartans immediately attack his fortification at Delos by sea, and as Demosthenes tells his troops, everything depends upon whether the Spartans can successfully force a landing (4.10). Brasidas, still merely a captain of one of the Spartan galleys, likewise recognizes this necessity, and distinguishes himself in the Spartan attack. Not only is he undaunted by the fear of breaking his ship on the rocks—a fear that was holding back the other Peloponnesians—but, after encouraging others to sacrifice their ships, he beaches his, makes for the gangway, and receives many wounds from the Athenians before fainting away (4.11.4–4.12). Had more Spartans acted with such daring, Sparta might never have faced the grave

situation that she did after the defeat and consequent entrapment of her hoplites on the neighboring island of Sphacteria. That entrapment, however, is precisely what affords Brasidas the chance to display his courage and obtain glory.

For when the 420 hoplites on the island of Sphacteria find themselves blockaded by the Athenian fleet, the Spartans—to almost everyone's great surprise—immediately sue for peace. And that peace—unlike the subsequent peace of Nicas—would surely have meant the end of Spartan hegemony. For the Spartan peace proposal includes an offer of service to Athens as her junior imperial partner (4.19 with 17: “keep what you have”); the Spartans are ready at this point to forego their last chance to stop Athenian growth—ready, it seems, to rule a Lacedaemon dominated by Athens rather than risk losing their regime altogether.²² Such a peace would have thoroughly discredited the Spartans in the eyes of those who had looked to them as the leaders of an anti-imperialist alliance. Their offer of closed-door negotiations suggests that they are willing to suffer such discredit (for restoring Nisaea, Pegae, Troezen, and Achaea to Athens; 4.22) *if* they can be sure that the offer will secure a peace now.²³ The Spartans' situation grows still more desperate when their offer is successfully opposed by the immoderate Cleon, who demands full transparency in the negotiations, thereby dooming the proposed treaty, but who is subsequently able, by allowing Demosthenes to take Sphacteria, to return to Athens with 300 captured Spartans. “Nothing more surprised the Hellenes,” says Thucydides, than the surrender of these three hundred Spartan hoplites. As Thucydides' pointed reminder of the battle of the 300 at Thermopylae in this context suggests, the Spartans had hitherto claimed, and were believed, to be of such virtue that no alleged necessity would ever cause them to surrender; they were reputed, that is, to be ready to die rather than do anything ignoble. (Consider the famous, defiant, moving words of the Spartan Leonides who, told that the arrows of the 250,000 Persians at Thermopylae would blot out the sun, replied: “Then we will fight in the dark.”) In the judgment of the Hellenes, therefore, the Spartans are no longer of the same virtue as the men who died nobly at Thermopylae (4.36.3, 40.1).

In addition to the shame that it forces Sparta now to labor under, Demosthenes' victory at Sphacteria

²²Cf. the similar judgment of the Athenian oligarchs at 8.91.

²³When the Spartans' true aims with Brasidas become clear, their allies think of deserting them: 5.7–8.

and Pylos and the desertion of slaves that it prompts at Sparta rapidly exposes a shamefully prosaic truth about Sparta. Her virtues are caused, Thucydides can or must now reveal, especially by the need to maintain a disciplined subjection of her large slave population. Most of what the Lacedaemonians institute, he states (4.80; cf. 3.54.5), has always aimed at providing against the Helots. And this revelation is still more devastating to the virtue to which Sparta lays claim than was the Spartans' surrender at Sphacteria. For it shows that, in the first place, Sparta's moderation abroad, her lack of unjust expansion, has been caused not by any free choice, or dedication to a high principle of liberation or freedom, but merely by a prosaic and grim necessity (cf. 7.25 with 7.41 and 4.41, 4.56.2; cf. 1.101.2 and 1.128.1). Second, and more than this, the common good at which the Spartans' much vaunted virtue aims *domestically* is for the most part the harsh suppression of their helots. In the past, Thucydides here chooses to tell us, the Spartans even practiced a dark betrayal of her most loyal helots. After calling forth the bravest, proudest, and most patriotic of them, the Spartans secretly murdered every one of them (4.80.3). The Spartans, alleged liberators of Greece, sit uneasily at the top of a social pyramid in Lacedaemon, and at the huge base of that pyramid stand the Messenian helots; to keep them there is one of the chief aims of the regime. Now that Demosthenes has succeeded in taking away a significant portion of the top and the bottom of that pyramid, Sparta is threatened with collapse. Unable to endure this adversity, and in fact interpreting it as a divine punishment for having started the war (4.20; cf. 5.16.3, 7.18.2), the Spartans are now brought to the depths of despair (4.55). Even a vigorous defensive action by Brasidas within their empire (at Nisaea, 4.70–73) cannot save them from their growing slave revolt at home. By the summer of the eighth year of war, Sparta is coming apart at the seams (4.79–80).

It is in this grave situation that the Spartan oligarchs are compelled, against their usual dispositions, to grant authority to leaders who would not otherwise have been able to come forward. Chief among them is Brasidas. He is permitted to lead a company of Spartan slaves out on a campaign of liberation of Athenian subject cities Thrace-ward, in Northern Greece (4.79–80). Lacking full support from the cautious Spartans, who are now more cautious than ever, Brasidas nonetheless takes full advantage of the opportunity of Sparta's perplexity to rise above Spartan mediocrity and mendacity, and display the noble virtue for which Spartans had

hitherto been renowned. But it is precisely here that we learn of a certain softness inherent in the virtue of Brasidas.

Sparta Restored: Brasidas

As Thucydides tells us, Brasidas' early successes on the Thracian campaign were such as to give strong (and even unreasonable) hope to citizens of all other cities who subsequently revolted from Athens, who believed that other Spartans would be like him (4.108). In particular, during their dialogue with the Athenians, the Melians could drop his name in response to the Athenians' claim that the Spartans do not run the risks that go with nobility (5.107–110). For Brasidas' virtues—his courage, which we have already seen, along with his apparent justice and measuredness, his intelligence, and his perceived gentleness (4.81 and 4.108; cf. 6.55–56)—made possible a liberation policy that did indeed bring him the most magnificent honors. He was eventually crowned at Scione as liberator of Hellas (4.121) and honored at his death by the Amphipolitans with the honors of a hero-founder or demi-god (5.11).²⁴ His virtues also allowed him to benefit his city in its darkest hour by giving her the means to a far more favorable peace (4.81). But these two results of Brasidas' virtue are in manifest tension; the noble policy of liberation, for which he was honored, is one that in fact enslaved a number of Greek cities to Sparta and Athens. Moreover, his reputation as liberator, as a man whose city does not wish an empire but wishes only to bring down that of Athens, is what most helped Sparta's efforts, Thucydides tells us, "after the events in Sicily," i.e., when Sparta sought to rule all of Greece by herself (4.81, 86.1, 87.5 with 8.2.4). Smaller cities must rely on the larger for protection, and the power to protect is the power to oppress. Once Brasidas' manifest virtue had convinced Athens' subjects to trust the Spartans to protect them, Sparta was able to oppress them. We are therefore led to see that his virtues are highly problematic and to wonder what would lead a man like Brasidas to do what he did. His speeches prove to reveal a disturbing answer.

The first of a series of masterful speeches that he delivers in his campaign of liberation is to the Acanthians (4.85–87). The latter are somewhat open to revolting from Athens, but they fear suffering a severe Athenian retaliation for revolt, should they be

²⁴For the unusual character of Thucydides' report of the burial and funereal rites, see Hornblower (2005, 43).

unsuccessful, and they fear (especially the *demos*) an imposition of an oligarchy by Sparta, should the revolt succeed. Brasidas' speech defeats those fears. He promises that Spartan strength, evinced in the Athenian refusal to fight his own troops at Nisaea,²⁵ will protect the Acanthians. He argues that it would hurt Sparta's reputation to impose oligarchy on liberated cities, and he assures the Acanthians that the greatest oaths possible have been sworn by Spartan authorities to keep the liberated cities free of harm and to preserve their freedom to retain their own regime. Should the Acanthians nonetheless decide against revolting, he warns, he will be compelled to *force* the Acanthians to assist him in the Spartans' liberation of Greece. Sparta does not seek empire, but, in the name of the common good that she does serve, Brasidas would have to burn their (ripe) crops. (See also 4.106.1.)

In addition to this threat—to which we will return below—it is the gentleness that seems manifest in the terms that Brasidas offers, and his other qualities, that win the day, and the Acanthians become the first of many cities in northern Greece to revolt from the Athenian empire. Part of the gentleness that he shows, moreover, stems from a rather remarkable willingness to accept or employ a version of the argument about the compelling power of interest that is most often found in the mouths of the Athenians, and has hitherto been conspicuously avoided by the Spartans.²⁶ He wished, for example, to have the Toronaian believe that he held no grudge against them for their loyalty to Athens, for he *excuses* that loyalty as the result of compulsion (4.114.5), i.e., an unavoidable attention to their own good. And in a similar if more complex statement, he tells the Scionians that they are to be *praised* for having chosen to do what was *manifestly good* for them (4.120). His gentleness, in other words, appears to stem from the same sources as the gentleness of the Athenian Diodotos, who had similarly absolved the rebellious Mytileneans from blame on the ground that they were *compelled* by erotic hopes to rebel (3.45). This, and Brasidas' love of the glory that comes from noble actions on behalf of a common

good, may help to explain why the goddess to whom we see him sacrificing, and whom he himself believes has intervened on behalf of his efforts, is Athena (4.116, 5.10.2). His devotion to the noble goal of liberation is such, moreover, that even after Athens and Sparta agree to a one-year truce, Brasidas refuses to give over Scione, a city he had won over after the truce was signed (4.120–22). This steadfastness in turn encourages Mende to revolt (4.123) and appears again when Brasidas makes an attempt at Potidea, in clear violation of the truce (4.135).

The expiration of that truce and the Spartans' need for a final blow against Athens to bring them to the peace table frees Brasidas to launch a campaign for the liberation of Amphipolis. Here as elsewhere, Brasidas' opponent—in this case the cowardly Cleon—does precisely what Brasidas expects him to do on the battlefield (5.7). And before the battle, which proves to be his last, Brasidas encourages his troops and details for them his battle plan. In the midst of disclosing it, he declares that he and his men “should be out and at the enemy, with no fear for the result.” And he proves, as he promises, true in deed to his own words (5.9.5, 10 with 4.120.3). While six hundred Athenians die in the subsequent battle, only seven die on the Peloponnesian side. He is one of them, dying nobly, it seems, on behalf of his friends, proving thereby his virtue and loyal and abiding friendship to the cities he has liberated. It is then that he obtains the honors of an immortal demi-god at Amphipolis, attaining, it seems, the glory that he had sought (5.11.1, 5.16–17).

But while Brasidas appears to achieve the glory for which he longs by achieving great things in a noble cause, his speeches do not in truth represent Spartan views or policy. His expedition is, as we have seen, caused by the Spartans' desperate need to obtain peace, which, since the defeat at Pylos, the helot problem had imposed upon them.²⁷ The Spartans, in other words, have been using Brasidas, permitting him to practice his policy of “liberation” in order to have the liberated cities as bargaining chips when suing for peace (cf. esp. 4.81.2). And Brasidas was certainly aware of this. He more than anyone knew where he stood in oligarchic Sparta, and knew that it was only Spartan desperation that had provided him with his opportunity at all. Brasidas, then, follows a policy that allows these cities to be used by Sparta, and used to the ruin of these cities.

Now it is true that Brasidas' campaign allows his city to attain peace. And unlike the peace that had

²⁵The action to which Brasidas appeals was in fact an inaction, but the “spin” he gives it enhanced the standing of the Peloponnesians; Brasidas also magnified the strength of the troops that stayed with him afterwards.

²⁶See 1.23.6, 1.75.3–76.2, 3.39.6–40.1 (Cleon) 3.45 (Diodotos); 4.59.2, 4.61.3–5, 4.62.3–4 (Hermocrates); 5.89, 5.105 (Athenians at Melos); 6.82.2–4, 85.1–3 (Euphemus). For excellent treatments of the argument, see Bolotin (1987a); Bruell (1974); Orwin (1994).

²⁷See 4.17, 79–81, 108.7, 117, 120.2 [as *he* intended], 5.13, 5.15.2.

been offered and rejected earlier, this peace—the peace of Nicias—was a restorative peace for Sparta, one that permitted her to attend to all her urgent, pressing needs before returning to the task of halting Athens' growing greatness. The campaign allowed Brasidas, in other words, to present his city with a great gift—its very preservation and the ultimate restoration of her reputation—and thus appears to have served a noble end. But this solution to the problem of Brasidas' virtue, at which Thucydides permits readers to arrive, is not satisfactory, even to Brasidas, as one of his final remarkable speeches on the subject of virtue—the speech at Lyncus—makes clear (4.126).

Deserted by Perdiccas' army of Macedonians, and hence facing alone a huge number of barbarians, Brasidas' small contingent of 300 picked Peloponnesians is afraid (4.124–125.2). He restores their confidence by reminding them that they are, after all, oligarchs, the few ruling the many, and have gained their power by their virtue, the virtue of superior *strength* in battle (4.126.2; cf. 4.86.6). Now this would seem to suggest a rather crude or primitive understanding of virtue; it would appear to consist of the ability of the strong to act with brute force in their own interest. But as Brasidas goes on to explain (4.126.3–6) the Spartans will prove to be daring against their barbarian opponents because they have, or will soon gain, a solid knowledge of an unexpected superiority, a superiority of an altogether different kind than selfish, brute force. That superiority consists in a shame-induced willingness to maintain one's position against force, for the sake of a common good. The barbarians, he reminds the Spartans, will indeed shout and move their arms menacingly, but “since flight and attack are held equally noble with them, their courage cannot be put to the test. Besides, autocracy in fighting gives to each an excuse (*prophasis*) for saving himself becomingly” (4.126.5). Unlike the barbarians, the Spartans fight courageously because they fight *not* each for himself and by himself, in a mob, but instead to obtain the noble good that comes from orderly, obedient service on behalf of the whole. The famed orderliness of Sparta's hoplite army, through which her citizens manifest their virtue, is not, then, for Brasidas, a mindlessly rigid or hide-bound ranking.²⁸ Still less is it an individual pursuit of one's own good. Rather, it is informed by and in the service of a perceived noble, common end to which the Spartans are devoted in

common with their allies. They are a “band of brothers,” a noble few who therefore deserve to rule. But precisely if this is the case, Brasidas could not but be troubled by his own activities, which serve not the common good of Greek cities, as he repeatedly claims, but the good of Sparta alone, at the expense of the good of cities he induces to revolt.

Now in Brasidas' defense, it could still be argued that his intention was—as indeed seems most likely—to make Sparta so powerful that no exchange of cities with the Athenians would have been necessary,²⁹ or to make his campaign of liberation so successful that the Spartans could not turn back from it. He could, in other words, had he gone far enough, have presented the Spartans with a *fait accompli*, a road toward the liberation of Greece too far traveled to permit a return. But is this attempt not a very great gamble? Does it not put at very high risk the lives, the freedom, and the well being of all those whose allegiance he asks for? And does that risk not become especially great and manifest when the Spartans conspicuously fail, out of jealousy and a desire to bring the current war to an end, to send reinforcements when Brasidas needed them (4.108.7)? The one year truce, in any event, made Sparta's intention to use Brasidas' conquests for their own selfish purposes clear to all (4.117)—so much so that some cities in the Peloponnese, seeing how the political winds were blowing, were thinking of deserting Sparta and going over to Argos (cf. 5.14.4). And in the event, while the cities that had gone over to Brasidas appear to be protected from Athenian retaliation by provisions in the treaty that was eventually signed, these were provisions that Sparta was clearly not inclined to enforce and in no position to enforce. (See 5.17, 21, 28–29, 35, 69.) Most disgracefully to Sparta, Scione, one of the liberated cities, whose inhabitants stood under a decree of death moved by the angry Cleon (4.122) was to be given to the Athenians with full freedom to do what they wished with her. The Scionans were to suffer the same fate as the people butchered by Alcidas. Finally, despite or perhaps because of Brasidas' promise to leave each city its own regime, the Spartans took the novel step of sending out young Spartans to rule over cities that Brasidas had brought over to Sparta, and Brasidas himself became subject to overseers (4.132.3).³⁰ So

²⁸Brasidas in fact subsequently dispenses with strict order when circumstances require it. (See 4.128.1; contrast 5.71–72.)

²⁹Consider especially his attention to Amphipolitan timber, for shipbuilding (4.108.1,6), and the attempt to secure Potidea in order to keep Scione free of Athenian sea attacks (4.121.2).

³⁰As Westlake, following the commentators, notes, the overseers later became the Spartan harmost system (1968, 138).

while Brasidas had grand plans and may have wished to present Sparta with a *fait accompli* after he had liberated enough cities, bringing honor to himself by elevating Sparta to the noble task of liberation, it was clear throughout the final year of his campaign that his own city, which he still needed for his success, and whose very nobility he wished to redeem, was using him, and hence that he was putting at high risk of betrayal and perdition those to whom he was promising liberation.

Brasidas' Softness

But Thucydides does not leave us without guidance in our effort to discover what would move so noble and virtuous a man as Brasidas to act in a manner that risks disaster for those whom he would liberate. When describing the hopes that the rebelling cities put in Brasidas, Thucydides takes the unprecedented step of telling us that Brasidas was dishonest. Now the specific lie that he mentions in this context is a small one: Brasidas' claim that his (present) troops alone intimidated the Athenians at Nisaea (4.108.5; cf. 85.7). Yet Thucydides suggests that there were other lies, too, and leaves us to draw the conclusion concerning those other (and bigger) lies. If we reconsider Brasidas' first speech, in which the obvious lie is told, we can find some guidance from Thucydides on the cause of the subject cities' willingness to accept the lies of Brasidas. As we do so, we come to see that Brasidas himself was not consciously deceiving the cities that he liberated. Rather, we realize that Brasidas was becoming aware of Sparta's plan, and, in the end, of his inability to stop it, but turned *away* from this knowledge, lacking the strength of soul to accept it. For he no more than his listeners was able to accept a certain hard truth, not merely about the authorities at Sparta, but about human nature. Owing to a softness that Brasidas shared with his listeners, in other words, Brasidas was compelled to lie to himself.

Turning back to Brasidas' speech to the Acanthians, then, we notice that the arguments by which Brasidas quells their reasonable fears of Athenian retaliation and of imposition of Spartan oligarchy upon them are weak, individually and collectively. For Brasidas cannot really protect the Acanthians from Athenian naval power with his small army of slaves and mercenaries; the powerful Athenians are likely to counterattack. And should the Spartans break the oaths that they are alleged to have sworn,

and impose oligarchy on cities that have been taken away from the Athenian empire, they would have no need to worry, as Brasidas claims they would, about the reputation this would give them. In fact, many of their stronger oligarchic allies, like the fairly cynical Corinthians, would welcome such a breach.

Thucydides tells us that the Acanthians were moved to accept Brasidas' weak arguments on account of his threat to destroy their crops (4.88.1). That threat, made in the name of the common good of Greece, and accompanied, as we have seen, by Brasidas' unexpectedly mild offers of peace to those who had hitherto acted against Sparta, clearly ensured that Brasidas' arguments would not be examined with the calmest of minds. Should the Acanthians decide that what Brasidas had to tell them was false, and reject his offer, they would have to give up the ripe crops for which they had worked hard all summer. Their desire to avoid an immediate pain, then, or an immediately painful choice, moved them to grasp at the slender hope offered to them by Brasidas. They weighed Brasidas' threat against Brasidas' hope, in other words, rather than against the threat of future Athenian retaliation and/or Spartan oppression. And this explains why Thucydides later suggests that the Acanthians and many others believed that they could do what they did without cost (cf. 4.87.2 and 4.106.1 with 4.108.4–6)—hope, as Thucydides succinctly and ironically puts it, overthrowing sovereign reason. They and others came to hope that the noble and gentle Brasidas, who recognized their wretched plight, would take care of everything (see 4.120.3). What they and the inhabitants of other rebel cities lack is not intelligence; rather, it is the capacity to accept a difficult or trouble-filled world. They give in to the hopeful promise of someone who can set all aright, nobly acting for them against all odds, rather than for himself.

To spell this out a bit, the allies of Athens were seduced by Brasidas' speeches to believe it possible for Sparta to act in the way that others in the work, especially Athenians, claimed was impossible³¹—to believe, that is, that a city could be dedicated to its friends as well as, and even at the expense of, its own perceived interest. They believed that human beings by nature are not compelled to pursue the good for themselves insofar as they can. They hoped that

³¹According to the subsequent peace treaty, the Acanthians and Amphipolitans had become allies of Sparta by their own free choice. Thucydides shows them having been moved to act on the basis of Brasidas' threat and the hopes that what he said was true.

Athens was uniquely wicked in her pursuit of empire, that her self-aggrandizement was not necessary, and that by bringing her down, Greece's problems would be solved: all would be free, protected by the likes of the noble Brasidas at Sparta. And the oaths by which Brasidas claims to have bound the Spartans played no small part in the hopes of the defecting cities to overcome their sober fears—fears prompted by what they could clearly see before them. The appeal to these oaths helped to occlude from all of them the compulsion of interest, by calling as witnesses not merely the likes of the Corinthians but powerful beings whose just and powerful providence would provide answers to their prayers. In the end, the temptation to believe Brasidas' sworn promises was resisted by no one, and his name came to be on everyone's lips. He was their savior, the one for whom they had longed. But after the Greek cities had listened to and believed "the tempting but untrue words of Brasidas" (4.108), the Spartans simply used these cities as they had planned. The dream became a nightmare, the joyful dancing turned into bitter tears of betrayal (see especially 4.120–21 with 5.32.1).

It is not simply the citizens of the rebel cities who are deceived, however. Brasidas, Thucydides shows us, deceived himself. His powerful, moving speech at Scione (4.120, end) reflects a growing awareness of the failure of his city to live up to his expectations of her—an awareness, that is, of the limits of his noble actions. (This awareness, and the defiance of it, may help to account for the speech's power.) He appears to have perceived at this point that his cause might well fail, but to have attempted it in order to achieve the undying glory that comes from the attempt (cf. 4.81.1, 87.6, 120) and believing that the divine Athena was working alongside him, sending manifest signs of her approval of his daring efforts (see again 4.95–96.2 and 5.10.2). Yet as we have seen, the hoped-for route to obtaining his wish is incoherent: his cause cannot be glorious if it is bound to end—as he should be able to see—in such awful failure. We are forced to conclude that Brasidas, like the Acanthians whose crops he threatened to burn, did not view his activity with the calmest of eyes. Just as he had moved the Acanthians to think in a less than clear manner about themselves and their true situation, so Brasidas himself, longing for the immortal glory that a divine being could make possible, had been moved to do what he did by an extravagant hope. The nature of that hope, which lies behind the exemplary virtue of Brasidas, becomes clear if we reflect on what it is that he, like his listeners, was unable to accept.

The Insight of Hermocrates

Our efforts to find clarity on this question are aided by the order in which Thucydides has chosen to present the drama of the war. That order points us first towards Brasidas as the savior of Sparta and the bane of Athens, but then away from Brasidas to Hermocrates, the person who truly begins to turn the tide against imperial Athens. For the deepest change in Sparta's fortunes begins not with Brasidas, but with a rebuff of the Athenians' initial attempt to take Sicily, which had been taking place simultaneously with Brasidas' campaigns (Cogan 1981, 80). And that rebuff is set in motion by the first speech of Hermocrates the Syracusan (4.58 ff.), which comes at the low point for Sparta, the high point for Athens, and thus marks the true turning point for the war as a whole. The same Hermocrates will later lead his city to victory over the more famous full scale Sicilian expedition. The only man whose speeches straddle the two wars, Hermocrates has a breadth of judgment that stems from a sustained, serious reflection about human affairs. Weak and strong cities alike, he has concluded, and not cities only but individual human beings, pursue their own advantage by nature; the Athenians' attempt to gain for themselves the good things of Sicily cannot be blameworthy (4.59.2–3, 4.61.3–5). Hermocrates accordingly warns his fellow Sicilians that Athenian "aid" will merely result in Athenian conquest of Sicily (4.59–64), and that considerations of justice and injustice are out of place in determining the correct course of action (4.61).³² For neither strength nor the rightness of one's cause, he argues, is a guarantee of its success. "Vengeance will not have good fortune because an injustice has been done, nor is strength sure because of good hopes" (4.62.4; cf. 6.78.2). Now if we *must* bear what we take to be injustices—as Hermocrates' listeners apparently conclude that they must—then we must admit that those who deserve good things do not get them for deserving them. And this admission contains a crucial implication: our inability to accept "injustices," or our felt lack of due reward, points to the fact that we do indeed expect a world in which our just desires *will be satisfied*, our wishes *fulfilled*,

³²Hermocrates does seem later in the speech to employ an argument from justice (4.61.8), and he certainly does not hesitate to do so later in the war, at Camarina (6.77.1, 79.1 and 3), when it suits his purpose. He also alters the connotation of "nature" as he does so (from what is universally human to what is based on kinship: 6.79.2). Even in this speech at Gela, he is careful to say that the action he recommends to the Sicilians is not base or shameful (4.64.3).

because they are just, because we are deserving of their fulfillment. When we thus acknowledge that we long for our own success even in our pursuit of justice, when we recognize that we are acting justly in order to obtain the objects of our longing, then we are in a position to see that what we had hoped for from our sacrifices cannot be ours on that basis at all, since the sacrifices are not sacrifices. Accepting alleged injustice as necessary or inevitable or insurmountable, then, entails accepting that the world is not such that we can make ourselves worthy of the fulfillment of our wishes by just deeds or sacrifice, that we must instead work to secure what we can of our desires, and be resigned to the world's inability to grant us our deepest desires. It means, that is, accepting the absence of justice from the nature of things. Having made this difficult recognition for himself, Hermocrates is able to say (4.58) that the Athenians should not be blamed or envied for wanting the good things of Sicily. They do what they do "by nature," and their alleged justice is but a means to their own perceived good.

Such reflection on the problematic nature of justice could have brought home to Brasidas the impossibility of sacrificing his own good in noble, virtuous actions. As we have seen, his initial speech, on the superiority of virtue to any artfulness gained through experience, had been followed by an Athenian victory that was unnerving precisely because, being caused by the Athenians' superior artfulness, it showed how virtue is threatened, as the end-in-itself that it must claim to be, by the compulsion to abandon it for other means to victory. But that very compulsion, which moved the Spartans, was never fully acknowledged by Brasidas. Nor did he consider how his honor, obtained over and against that of his fellow Spartans, was necessarily pursued in his own perceived interest, as, in the end, Thucydides points out to us.³³ That is, even if—as seems most likely—he understood his actions to be in the service of genuine liberation of cities from Athenian rule, his obtaining his just share of honor would have been at the expense of others obtaining what he admits to be their just share of honor.³⁴

³³5.16.1. We might add that the Amphipolitans deify him partly out of a desire to obtain Spartan friendship (5.11.1 with 4.108.7) i.e., out of calculation of *their* present interest.

³⁴That a just distribution of deserts can, paradoxically, be at odds with justice understood as the common good or the good of the city, is shown later in Thucydides' text as well, in the Athenians' capital punishment of those named in the affair of the Hermae (6.60.5).

As noted earlier, moreover, part of Brasidas' gentleness arises from his (limited) use of the argument that his enemies were forced by Athenians' superior strength to do what they did and hence were not to be blamed for it (4.114.5); what they did, as Brasidas' very sense of justice tells him, was done under duress from the strong, and therefore not unjust. Now the conclusion to which this argument points is the conclusion of Hermocrates: it is not really reasonable to blame anyone for injustice. For justice assumes that we are free to abide by or to reject its strictures. Yet if Brasidas' very sense of justice bids him honor the exculpation made on the basis of a compelling fear, then that sense of justice must be informed by an awareness that justice is binding on each of us to the extent that it is or can claim to be good for each of us; what does not appear good to us cannot be binding on us. This awareness obviously runs contrary to Brasidas' deep sense that the good belongs by right only to those who deserve it, on account of their manifest willingness to *sacrifice* what appears to be for their own good. But if in truth what appears to be good for human beings is compelling, as Brasidas himself sometimes acknowledges, what appears to be—what we wish very much to believe to be—self-sacrifice, cannot be so. The human perception of what is good, and the compulsion to pursue it, dissipates the obligatory demands of justice to act against what appears good for us. Moreover, we cannot then make ourselves justly deserving, through sacrifice, of the aid of beings whose care would remove the evils that beset us by nature. Brasidas, who takes the first step in this argument, is unable to take the argument to its conclusion. More than this, he is able, as we saw in his speech to the Scionians, both to acknowledge the need to pursue what is manifestly one's own good and to deny that need in one and the same breath (4.120.3). He appears moved by the brief glimmer of truth, which he allows himself in speech, to be all the more dedicated to its denial by deeds. In this above all, he shows himself to be Thucydides' equivalent of Achilles, whose reflections in the ninth book of the *Iliad* are never refuted or proven to be mistaken, but instead turned away from, in pursuit of the very deeds that those reflections had called into question.

We are led to conclude that Brasidas, painfully aware of his inevitable mortality, longed over and against it for the immortality of a hero; he hoped to overcome death by means of a courageous, self-sacrificial life culminating in a noble death on the battlefield—a hope that helps us more fully to appreciate his sacrifices to the goddess Athena.

Brasidas no more than his listeners could allow himself to face the fundamental self-concern that would render impossible the kind of divine care for the devotionally virtuous upon which his hope to be worthy of immortality rested. And so his understanding of what he was doing, which his noble words disclosed, was at odds with what he was in fact doing. In the light of this failure, we can see why he could not be resigned to the need of his own city to attend to her own good, nor face the prospect of being an accomplice to her treacherous ways. He was able to solve his dilemma only by a noble death that appears to be not altogether unlooked-for, or an effort not so much to die a noble death because it is noble as to flee or overcome a life that must be mixed with evils—evils that include the growing impossibility of recognizably noble actions as a Spartan.³⁵ In death too, then, Brasidas proves to be the Thucydidean equivalent of Homer's Achilles, whose similar inability to sustain an impressive reflection on the relation of worth or desert to death ultimately leads him to believe in the superiority of a short and glorious life.³⁶

Given what we have seen to be at issue, neither Brasidas' failure to sustain consistently the argument against justice and hence divine justice, nor his turning away from it, should be surprising. It is true, of course, that the argument is frankly and famously stated by others in the work: by Athenians speaking at Sparta and at Melos, and their espousal of it has helped to encourage "realists" to assume Thucydides' espousal of it. But as scholars have come to notice, the Athenian proponents of the argument concerning necessity over and against sacrificial virtue do not consistently hold to their argument, nor act in accord with it. At Sparta, the Athenians claim to be deserving of praise for being more just than they have to be, and are rankled by the ingratitude of their subjects (76.2–77.3), while the Athenians at Melos not only suggest their envy of the Melians' simplicity, but evince an abiding attachment or devotion to what is

³⁵Consider the self-sacrificial role Brasidas will play in the tactics he describes to Clearchus at 5.9.7–8, a role which, because they most completely deceive their unjust enemies into thinking themselves victorious, he considers "most noble" (5.9.5). He all but turns his command over to Clearchus in the same speech (5.9.9). Owing to Cleon's impatience and cowardice, these tactics prove to be unnecessary, yet Brasidas is still fatally wounded. As noted above, only seven Peloponnesians are killed, while 600 Athenians die in the rout (5.11.2). Consider again also the sayings attributed to Brasidas (and his mother) by Plutarch (1931), 190B, and Diodorus Sicilius XII, 7.

³⁶On this failure of Achilles, see Burns (1994) and Bruell (1999, 101–102).

noble, over and against what they claim about the selfish Spartans (5.105.3, 107–109).³⁷ In fact, the one speaker in Thucydides' account who adheres consistently to the Hermocratean conclusion about justice is the mysterious Diodotus (3.42–48). Like Brasidas, he is an opponent of Cleon; unlike Brasidas, he spells out clearly what he understands to be the misleading character of the ubiquitous hopes generated by human longing and indicates the perduring of such hopes in the anger and opprobrium that result, in weaker men like Cleon, when such hopes are thwarted (3.45.1, 5–6). The deception that Diodotus frankly tells his audience he must practice (3.43.3) rests on that understanding: to save as many Mytileneans as possible against the angry and violent Cleon, Diodotus makes, over and against what he sees as the truth of the matter, an underhanded appeal to his listeners' sense of justice, and likewise pretends to hold "freedom and empire" to be "the greatest things" and hence worthy of the erotic devotion to which Pericles had called the Athenians.³⁸ Diodotus' recognition of the need for such deception bespeaks, we may say, his own freedom from the self-deception manifest in Brasidas, just as the latter's gentleness finds its fullest expression in Diodotus' call to spare the majority of Mytileneans from capital punishment. And his prosaic advice concerning the prevention of future revolts is free of the mistaken hopes that had led the Athenians to their failed policy (3.47).

Through the narration of Brasidas' deeds and speeches, interwoven with a narrative about the Sicilian campaign that brings Hermocrates to the fore, Thucydides provides his readers with the means to reflect on Brasidas' virtue in a way that can lead to the clear-sighted virtue of Hermocrates and Diodotus, a virtue that is indispensable, in war or peace, to the (necessarily incomplete) happiness that is available to us mortals. But the highest practitioner of that virtue would seem to be Thucydides himself. Certainly Brasidas' fate stands in striking contrast to that of Thucydides, whose only recorded "deed" in the work is his saving of Eion, Amphipolis' port, at the eleventh hour from Brasidas' daring campaign against it, a success for which he received not glory but a 20-year banishment from Athens for not having done enough to save Amphipolis (4.104–108 and 5.26). The result of his banishment was a long,

³⁷See Bolotin (1987a); Bruell (1974, 1981); Orwin (1986); Pangle and Ahrens Dorf (1999, 13–20).

³⁸On Diodotus' deceptive appeal to his listeners' justice, see Orwin 1984; on the pretense concerning freedom and empire, see Bolotin (1987a).

peaceful life spent composing his “eternal possession,” one made so in part by the difficult, thoroughgoing reflections on divine justice that arise from the speeches and deeds of Brasidas. Instead of speculating on how Brasidas’ taking of Amphipolis may have engendered in Thucydides unsavory motives to distort his history³⁹—for which motives and distortions there is in any case no evidence—we might instead note that by giving a brief account of his own military activity, Thucydides ensures us that he was not himself inexperienced in the profound longings and hopes that moved Brasidas to attempt noble deeds, and hence was in a position to feel the full force of the reflections to which such longings can give rise. Unlike Brasidas, and like his successor Xenophon, Thucydides came however through these reflections to be inclined toward a life of peaceful, rational understanding rather than toward the noble deeds of war and politics.⁴⁰ As the account of Brasidas that he composed during his private peace makes clear, Thucydides’ change of orientation relies upon a hard-won awareness that transcends the virtue characteristic of political life, a resignation to the annihilation of our being of which reason would have us be and remain fully aware. It relies then upon a specific enlightenment that is necessarily rare and that stands in some need of and hence gratitude toward the initial life of noble action that makes it possible.

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- ³⁹Hornblower (2005), Kagan (1974), and Pouncey (1980, 3–5).
- ⁴⁰See 5.16.1 with 2.8.1, and compare Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.6.1–7 with 4.7–13, 7.1.4, 7.1.38, and 7.8. See also Marcellinus, “Life of Thucydides,” 23–27 and 46–50.
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