Slaves to Expediency: A Fresh Look at Justice and Freedom in Thucydides’ Speeches

This paper investigates one aspect of the relation between justice and expediency in the speeches of Thucydides. The interaction of these ethical-rhetorical categories has received inadequate attention in the scholarship. George Kennedy’s conclusion that Thucydides’ speeches contain one idea and tend to focus on expediency summarizes the traditional view.[[1]](#footnote-1) The parts of speeches which advance arguments from justice or honor at best are seen as rhetorical ornament, at worst, as cloaks for expediency. These judgments, in my opinion, oversimplify the evidence. Numerous passages from Plato and the Sophists indicate that defining justice in relation to political profit was a burning philosophical issue in 5th century Greece. Thucydides’ speakers themselves, far from deploying mere set-piece arguments on these topics, deliver an array of competing conceptions of justice and expediency which are derived as often from experience and moral reflection as from rhetorical exigency.

The habit of separating “the just” from the “expedient” in political deliberation looms large in the Athenian speeches of the post-Periclean period (e.g., 3.44, 6.83). Athenian speakers often employ the distinction to limit the terms of debate to questions of political advantage. In their view, law and morality have no place in the deliberative process if one or another party’s claims can be carried by force. The will of the stronger, in accord with human nature, will ever exert itself to gain more and to rule over the powerless. Behind this “realist” foreign policy there resides an obvious assumption about the content of “what is advantageous.” Political advantage consists in the acquisition of ever greater power and material wealth (5.89). Advantage, once conceived in abstract terms, operates as an impersonal force. As its true nature is discerned, the Athenian imperialists, as all others endowed with like power, can only act in accordance with it (1.76). This mechanistic impulse toward expediency seeks to eliminate free decision-making and ethical reflection, for these can serve only to thwart the pursuit of a state’s real political ends.

This paper points to two seldom discussed passages in Thucydides on the relation of state power to expediency. The first comes from Pericles’ funeral oration, in which the Athenian general praises the city for its confidence in freedom (τῆς ἐλευθερίας τῷ πιστῷ) and rejection of expediency (τοῦ ξυμφέροντος λογισμῷ) as a measure of foreign policy (2.40). The second appears in the Plataeans’ speech to the Spartans in defense of their beleaguered city. The speaker uses a verb denoting slavery to describe the Spartans’ preference for expediency over justice (τὸ δὲ ξυμφέρον μᾶλλον θεραπεύοντες) (3.56). In both instances, a fundamental link is created between expediency and constraint and, what’s more, justice and freedom. That Thucydides reports (or creates) this antithetical pairing, I will argue, indicates a deeper philosophical commitment to justice as the expression of a free state than has heretofore been recognized in the *Histories*.

1. Kennedy, George. 1963. *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*. Princeton. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)