A Naturally Disastrous War: Nature, Politics, and Historiography in Thucydides' History

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Thucydides’ History has long been recognized as a repository of political wisdom. Over the last six decades, scholars have increasingly drawn Thucydides’ political insights into the orbit of classical philosophy, leading some to suggest that his History points to a life of theoretical contemplation, and not political action, as the genuine embodiment of natural right (Strauss, 1963; Bruell, 1974; Connor, 1984; Orwin, 1994). And yet, despite an increased scholarly emphasis on natural right within Thucydides’ text, sustained, focused treatments of nature within the History -- which would include its treatment of natural phenomena -- are noticeably missing from the scholarly landscape (though see Proietti, 1992 and Foster, 2009). At first glance, this absence shouldn’t trouble the reader. After all, the History is about a surpassingly great war waged by the two greatest cities of ancient Greece; it is not a work of natural science.

But Thucydides explicitly links natural disasters to the suffering endured during the war and thus to his claim for the war’s surpassing greatness (1.23). And because the war’s greatness is crucial to his choice of theme, his handling of those natural disasters that some of the actors in his work consider divine punishments should prove crucial to his theme; that is, to his decision to dedicate his single work to the political and military affairs of classical Greece. And yet, at the same time, Thucydides appears to distinguish his particular handling of his political subject from the conventions that characterize political life. Near the center of his History, he insists that he linked his account of the war to what would appear to be natural phenomena - a material order governed by the regular progression
of the seasons, and not by oracles and prophets or customs and conventions, informed his historiography (V.20, 26; II.1). Taken together, these statements suggest a complex triangulation between his treatment of politics, nature, and historiography at work in the History.

The present essay aims to clarify the nature of this triangulation in an effort to understand how a single work about a single war could reveal the “clear truth” (to saphes) about human affairs (I.20). That understanding may be stated, somewhat broadly, as follows: Thucydides’ historiography operates mimaetically because it embodies the very character of the political wisdom that the History seeks to cultivate in its audience. And that wisdom suggests, among other things, that the sharp distinction between a material world governed by fixed, immutable, and objectively knowable laws, on the one hand, and a cosmos governed by gods interested in upholding justice among men, on the other hand, represents a false dichotomy. Thucydides understands events like earthquakes, plagues, volcanoes, famines, and droughts to be the product neither of vengeful gods nor of a nature independent of human making, but of the interplay between what some, following Thucydides’ initial characterization of the war as a “megiste kinesis” (I.1), have called the “forces of motion” and the “forces of rest” (Strauss, 1963, 159).

Of course, such claims merely prompt one to inquire into the metaphysical status of such “forces.” Who or what is behind them? The present effort cannot answer these questions, partly because they are beyond its reach and partly because Thucydides himself frustrates any effort to do so. While his work certainly prompts the reader to raise questions about causes or “first things,” the distinctive focus of the History requires the reader to address those questions only on a human and political plane. Redirecting the metaphysical tendency of his reader back towards politics is part of Thucydides’ instruction here. This chapter will therefore limit itself to charting a path of inquiry that one must undertake if one is to understand both the so-called “natural world” in Thucydides’ History and its ability to illuminate, and thereby help the reader understand, the virtues of his presentation of Periclean Athens.

Natural Disasters and Seasons in the History

Thucydides’ most well-known statement on natural disasters occurs in his re-statement on the greatness of the war he relates (I.23; cf. I.1-2). According to our author, this war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians was the greatest because it:
both lasted long and the harm it did to Greece was such as the like in the like space had never been seen before....And those things which concerning former time there went fame of, but in fact rarely confirmed, were now made credible: as earthquakes, general to the greatest part of the world and most violent withal; eclipses of the sun more often than is reported of any former time; great droughts in some places and thereby famine; and that which did none of the least hurt but destroyed also its part, the plague. All these evils entered together with this year...

Thucydides’ insistence here on the greatness of the war he relates stands or falls with the suffering inflicted and endured during it, suffering caused in no small part by the “evils” of the disasters that occurred.

While it is clear how earthquakes, famine, and the plague can inflict great suffering, it is less clear, as one commentator observed, how eclipses produce any injury. Unlike the other phenomena listed, eclipses don’t impact our physical environment in a way capable of causing us harm. Put differently, eclipses can only be related to human suffering if they are understood as portents of evils to come, only that is, if they are understood to be signs, manifested within natural phenomena, of gods who convey to those “who can see” that they intend to intervene in human affairs, to punish humans for injustices they have committed. The causal link between eclipses and human suffering thus depends upon human interpretation. Thucydides shows us just such a link in his treatment of Athens’ defeat in Sicily, or what he calls the greatest action of the entire war (VII.87). The decision by the Athenian general Nicias to delay by 27 days the retreat of his massive force from Sicily on account of an interpretation of a lunar eclipse (VII.50), allowed the Syracusans time to position their ships so as to blockade -- and ultimately defeat -- the Athenian navy. This naval defeat subsequently doomed the Athenians to a devastating retreat through hostile foreign territory, resulting in the surrender and captivity of the entire force and the deaths of almost all Athenians involved.

The conclusion to which Thucydides draws us is that the Athenian catastrophe in Sicily was the product of Nicias’ excessive piety (VII.50 end) and not the eclipse itself. Whereas plagues and earthquakes (and the flooding that sometimes result, III.89) strike without warning, eclipses are taken by some to be themselves a warning, one of a divine wrath that has yet to befall us and may yet be avoided if we propitiate the gods. If Thucydides’ work is in fact as great as our author declares, then its greatness must at least partly consist in its ability to reveal the enduring truth about the nature and origins of human suffering (I.1): Those which men inflict on each other and those that men understand to come from
nature, chance, and the divine. His treatment of these catastrophes must thus be of a piece with his analysis of politics and human nature.

The impression that Thucydides understands these disasters to be the effect of a nature that governs us and whose movements are independent of the gods receives further support from his sustained and detailed treatment of the plague that devastated Athens. Long viewed by scholars as evidence of his scientific rationalism (Cochrane, 1929), Thucydides’ presentation of a disease that claimed nearly eighty thousand lives (Hanson, 2005, 65-88) seems to identify principles of a material nature rather than divine wrath at work in the origins, symptoms, and suffering of the plague (II.48-51). More to the point, Thucydides’ analysis of the plague’s effects on human anatomy implies a nature whose laws and principles are fixed and intelligible to human reason. And in his concluding remarks on this episode he emphasizes, and thus distinguishes from his own practice, the tendency of men to resort to selective and self-serving interpretations of prophetic verses both to explain their suffering and to imbue it with divine significance (II.54; cf. I.20). Thucydides, it would seem, does not reinterpret (or rephrase) oracles and prophecies to make them fit the present circumstances and thereby validate their divine authority; he relies instead on his understanding of the present to judge the validity of -- and thus the divine authority behind -- oracles and prophecies.

As such, it appears that an understanding of natural principles of causation informs Thucydides’ decision to present the events of the war in chronological order by summers and winters; that is by natural, not political, markers. At the end of his treatment of the first ten-years of the war, Thucydides urges his reader to:

consider the times themselves and not trust to the account of the names of such as in the several places bare chief offices or for some honor to themselves had their names ascribed for marks to the actions foregoing. For it is not exactly known who was in the beginning of his office, or who in the midst, or how he was, when anything fell out. But if one reckon the same by summers and winters, according as they are written, he shall find by the two half years which make the whole, that this first war was of ten summers and as many winters continuance (V.20).

Six chapters later Thucydides drives this point home:

This also hath the same Thucydides of Athens written from point to point, by summers and winters, as everything came to pass, until such time as the Lacedaemonians and their confederates had made an end of the Athenian dominion and had taken their long walls and Piraeus. To which time,
from the beginning of the war, it is in all twenty-seven years (V.26.1; see also II.1 and II.65).

By following what is common to all men -- the unfolding of summers and winters -- and not what pertains merely to local customs or circumstances, Thucydides’ History appears to take its historiographical cues from a material nature that governs us and is in principle observable by all. But this view, which seems to receive so much support from Thucydides’ handling of natural disasters, is immediately complicated by the following observations, observations which his comments here cause us to note.

**The Questionableness of Nature as a Guide**

As he draws to a close his account of the tenth year of the war, Thucydides stresses the superiority of natural or seasonal chronology to the practice of recording events according to who held high office (i.e., archons) or who had won high honors at the time of a particular event (i.e., Olympic victors). After all, people may disagree about when a particular term of office began or ended and the celebration of religious festivals or athletic contests can be altered and even suspended entirely by human agreement (III.104 end; V.49-50). The change of seasons, however, occurs entirely independent of human agency. But Thucydides insists on his adherence to this practice in a passage where he marks the end of winter by the festival of Dionysus (V.20.1). And in his brief account of the six year Peace of Nicias, placed squarely between the end of the tenth year of the war and his restatement on his “natural” historiographical principles (V.26), Thucydides marks the beginning of this period by the ephorate of Pleistolas at Sparta and the archonship of Alcaeus at Athens (V.25). Though he insists in the following chapter on the unity of the 27 year war, his comments here point to an important difference between his handling of the two “10-year wars” and the six year, ten month peace that separated them. Thucydides seems to employ different methods for different years. One might begin to understand this difference by noting that Thucydides ends his account of all six years of the Peace (years ten through fifteen of the war) with the rather succinct “thus ended the *nth* year of the war” a conclusion reserved for only two other years of his account (the first, II.47; and the eighth, IV.116). All other years he concludes with “...so ended the *nth* year of this war as written by Thucydides.” The twenty-first year of the war, the last year which Thucydides records, represents an exception to both practices since his account of that year offers no formal conclusion (whether intended or not; VIII.109).
If the tenth through fifteenth years of the war reflect the ascendancy in Athenian politics of the man for whom that period is named as well as his piety (VII.50) and law-bred virtue (VII.86), then we might understand Thucydides’ historiographical practice to convey his judgment about both Nicias and the traits for which he is best known. The consequence of this observation is to invite readers to distance Thucydides from years to which he does not affix his name as author, years associated with conventional practices of marking time (though cf. II.1), the occasion of his own exile from Athens, Nician politics and virtues, and a nominal peace (years one, eight and ten through fifteen; the peculiar “ending” of the twenty first year of the war keeps this year an open-question). Subsequently, we are also invited to draw him closer to those years associated with seasonal chronology, the politics and virtues of a Periclean-Alcibidean axis, and the full violence of the war (years two through seven, nine, and sixteen through twenty). In other words, the years of the war can be divided along the following lines: convention, piety, moderation, and peace, on the one hand and nature, erotic daring, empire, war, and Thucydides on the other.

But this sharp distinction cannot be sustained if only because Thucydides insists in this very same context on the unity of the war, a unity which would seem to apply to his work as well. All of the years of the war are written by Thucydides. How or in what way then might we begin to understand the historiographical unity of his epic? The possibility that he understands the natural and the divine to be consistent with each other may be discounted as simply too poetic. It is true that the duration of the 27-year war he composes was prophesied to last “thrice nine years” (V.26.4). And in his discussion of the sixth year of the war, Thucydides notes that the poet Hesiod was killed in Nemea, a fate consistent with a prophecy about the end his life (III.96). But Thucydides prevents his readers from endorsing the attractive, if misleading, parallel between this poet’s death and the length of this war because he ends his account six years early. Interestingly enough, the sixth year of the war is also the only year of the war whose account begins and ends with the report of natural disasters: earthquakes and the resultant flooding (III.89) and the eruption of Mt. Aetna (III.116), the “invasion” of water and fire into their opposite elements. The apparent synchronicity between the seasonal calendar and natural disasters suggested here is punctured by Thucydides’ report that Mt. Aetna’s volcano erupted in the spring of the following year (the seventh year of the war). Thucydides’ artful insertion of the volcano here at the end of the sixth year violates the principles he insists upon at V.24 and 26 (and II.1). By muddying the “historiographical waters,” as it were, Thucydides draws the attention of the reader to his treatment of this year.
Thucydides prepares his treatment of the sixth year of the war with a mention of the Athenians in Sicily and their inability to attack the islands of Aeolus in the summer due to the shallow water around the islands, preventing access to them by ship; the volcanic activity on Hiera, and the Hiereans’ religious explanation of that phenomenon (III.88, end of the fifth year); and the series of earthquakes at the beginning of the sixth year, one of which resulted in a massive wave whose flooding turned “what was once land” on Euboea into sea (III.89) killing those unable to occupy the higher ground in time. Thucydides closes this introduction by attributing the strength of “the wave” and its varied impact on the Greek islands to the earthquake and its epicenter: at Orobiae the tsunami flooded most of the town, leaving parts of it underwater; at Atalanta, the tsunami’s wave carried away part of the Athenian fort and wrecked one of its ships; at Perapethus, there was no flooding, but the earthquake caused considerable damage to the buildings. Thucydides is clear that the earthquake was the cause of these effects. But he doesn’t bother to say what caused the earthquake (see also his refusal to speak about the causes of the plague, II.48.3). Thucydides thus introduces his account of the sixth year of the war by inviting the reader to raise the question of first causes (“what caused the earthquake?”), only to leave that question about the material world unanswered. In its place, one gets an account of “the most memorable” (III.90; logon malista axia) aspects of Athenian activity during this year -- and the Spartan response to that activity -- an account which focuses largely on Demosthenes’ campaigns in Aetolia.

This “introduction” to the sixth year of the war not only leads us again to think about the relationship between politics and nature; it also recalls the opening of the History where Thucydides justifies his work’s thematic focus on the grounds that this war was “most worthy of note” (I.1; axiologotaton). And Thucydides’ comments about Hesiod (III.96) and his most extensive commentary on Homer (III.104), which digress from the broader Aetolian-Sicilian narrative, recall his contest with the poets (I.10; cf. III.96, 104), his account of his own treatment of speeches and deeds (I.20-22), and the oldest or first things (I.1) whose treatment was to decide in his favor the “war” between Thucydides and his poetic rivals. Thucydides’ treatment of the sixth year of the war should thus prove indispensable for understanding the triangulation between politics, nature, and the historiography of his work.
Nature and Politics: Demosthenes in Aetolia

In his account of the war’s sixth year, Thucydides introduces his reader to the Athenian general Demosthenes. Of the account’s 28 chapters, he dedicates 20 to Demosthenes’ campaign in Aetolia. Demosthenes represents one of the most fascinating, if perhaps least studied, political actors in Thucydides’ masterpiece. Without ascending to the heights seemingly reserved by Thucydides for his “Pericles” or “Brasidas,” Demosthenes remains the figure whose career most closely bears on our author’s preoccupation with both great suffering and noteworthy deeds. Whether it is the men he lost in Aetolia (III.98), the size of his slaughter of the Ambraciots (III.113), the Hellenic world’s surprise over the Spartan surrender at Pylos (which he engineered, IV.40.1), the fate he suffered in Sicily (VII.87.5), or even the atrocity at Mycalessus (made possible by his departure for Sicily, VII.29), Demosthenes is always somehow involved at the extremes of the war; he is on stage for many of the greatest moments of the greatest war, or the “greatest motion.” Is it merely coincidental that his career should also offer a case-study in how to create and amplify one’s power by mirroring the movements of the material world?

Demosthenes’ campaign in Aetolia begins with an ambush of Leucadians and the investment of their city Leucas, itself located on an isthmus. Demosthenes’ allies here, the Acarnanians, urge the Athenian general to build a wall across the isthmus thereby cutting off the city from the continent (for the appropriateness of such Acarnanian advice, see II.102). At the same time, however, Demosthenes was also urged by the nearby Messenians to attack the inland Aetolians, which attack they promised would give Demosthenes a surpassingly easy conquest (III.94), one that Demosthenes himself hoped would add to his other “continental allies” and allow him to bring the war to Boeotia without additional aid from Athens. Demosthenes accepted the Messenians’ counsel and after initial successes against Potidania, Krokyle and Tichium, he was urged yet again to push ahead with his attack (III.97). Because he now began to trust “in his fortune,” Demosthenes did not wait for necessary Locrian reinforcements. This decision proved catastrophic. The result was an Athenian defeat at the hands of the lighter-armed barbarian forces; the Aetolian darters, by virtue of their superior position on higher ground, were able to gain the upper hand in a battle characterized by alternating advance and retreat (III.97). The defeat turned into a rout as many of the retreating Athenians, whose Messenian guide had been killed in the battle, got lost in a wood that the Aetolians then burned down. Of the 120 Athenians killed here, all of whom “were in the prime of life,” Thucydides
says what he says of no one else in the History: these men were “by far the best men in the city of Athens that fell during this war” (III.98). The defeat was of such a magnitude that Demosthenes refused to sail back to Athens with his forces, choosing instead to remain by himself near Naupactus rather than risk suffering exile – or worse – at the hands of the enraged Athenians.

Despite these failures, Demosthenes did not give up. Rather, he proved an adept student of both his own missteps and the ability of his enemy to exploit them. As such, he was able to apply the lessons learned from a bitter defeat in his effort to save both the cities of Naupactus and Olpae from the Spartan-led Aetolians. Indeed, his “education” allowed him not only to defeat the Spartans twice, but to deliver a blow so great that Thucydides called it “the greatest disaster that befell any one Greek city in an equal number of days in this war” (III.113). Demosthenes’ ability to secure the higher ground surrounding Idomene, his subsequent attack on Ambraciots in the dark hours of early morning, and his use of Messenian troops speaking the Doric dialect common to their enemies, enabled him to inflict a defeat of such magnitude that Thucydides refused to “set down the number of the dead, because the amount stated seems so out of proportion to the size of the city as to be incredible” (III.113; the number of Ambraciots killed that Thucydides makes available starts around 1,200 or ten times the number of men that Athens lost in Aetolia). And such lessons, it seems, were not parochial; what Demosthenes learned in Aetolia could be applied under similar conditions elsewhere. Thus as we learn from Thucydides’ account of the Pylos affair in Book IV, Demosthenes, aided by another Messenian “guide” (IV.36), was able to use to his advantage on the island of Sphacteria (IV.30) against his fellow Greeks what he learned earlier from the “continental” and barbarian Aetolians (III.98).

Thucydides’ account of Demosthenes’ failure recalls his account of that retreating and advancing flood which killed all those incapable of making it to higher ground (III.89). Demosthenes’ successes at Naupactus, Olpae and Idomene, on the other hand, not only mirror the destructive power of nature, they amplify it. By framing Demosthenes’ campaign in Aetolia in terms of natural disasters, Thucydides invites his reader to consider the possibility that military failure and success hinges on one’s capacity to account for and imitate the powerful motions of nature. To be sure, Thucydides never suggests that Demosthenes studied earthquakes or tsunamis in order to devise some new tactical approach; his own painful military experience provided more than enough material on which he could reflect. But the parallel that Thucydides draws between
Demosthenes’ defeat and success in Aetolia and earthquakes and tsunamis (or even volcanic activity, III.89) suggests that nature provides a useful guide or template for the creation and expansion of military power insofar as the destructive motions at work in one can also be used to great effect in the other. In Aetolia Demosthenes initially fails to guarantee himself possession of the high ground; he doesn’t adjust to the “ebb and flow” of battle against lighter-armed adversaries; he doesn’t possess direct knowledge of both the enemy’s numerical strength and the foreign landscape in which he fights; he doesn’t sufficiently appreciate the need for local allies who might offset some of the advantages enjoyed by the indigenous opposition; and his defeat is turned into a rout by the dangers of dark woods for men of the city. Demosthenes’ later victories, by contrast, suggest his grasp of the significance of all of these elements. As such, Demosthenes refuses to give battle when he doesn’t enjoy these advantages.

One might expand on the parallel between Thucydides’ handling of natural phenomena and Demosthenes’ exploits by observing that his military successes were made possible by the judicious application of an appropriate mixture of forces related to “land” and “sea,” to “Greeks” and “barbarians,” and to “Athens” and “Sparta.” That this mixture must be appropriate, that it is conditional and therefore must observe certain limits, can be gleaned from Demosthenes’ success over the Eurylochus-led Spartans. In that engagement, Demosthenes’ distinct (or unmixed), if outmanned, forces routed the mixed together Peloponnesian and Aetolian armies (the Mantineans, who kept themselves distinct, prove an exception to this grim fate, III.107, 108). A complete or indiscriminate mixture of the elements, however, is not conducive to military success as indicated by his military defeats (III.95, cf. II.102; III.98).

But this also suggests that such a mixture, if it is to be produced, must be produced intentionally; it must be the product of human intelligence and foresight. Demosthenes’ strategic defeats and triumphs in Aetolia are thus properly contrasted with the undirected or unguided movements of nature, whose earthquakes and tsunamis, for example, impact various locations differently, indiscriminately sparing some human beings while indifferently (or unintentionally) destroying others. The success or failure of the Athenian general depends, at least in part, on his direct knowledge of the enemy’s strengths and the layout of their territory. His reasoned grasp of the principles of military success, principles that seem to be reflected in the “unreasoned” movements of nature, allows him to inflict intentionally a staggering defeat on his enemies, one that dwarfed the suffering produced by his men’s chance retreat into the Aetolian woods.
Because his understanding allows him to harness and direct forces that in nature seem undirected, Demosthenes may appear even more destructive than nature, and thus more capable of inflicting human suffering, a point supported by Thucydides’ silence about the number of victims of the earthquake and tsunami.

Demosthenes’ remarkable military turn-around is based on his ability to take account of and replicate the interplay of forces that, as Thucydides’ artistry shows, can also be found in nature. He was able to create and magnify his own military power because he understood how his own forces were destroyed. Thus through an understanding of a particular manner of decay or degeneration, Demosthenes appeared to discover a particular form of growth or (re)generation; he discovered how he could generate more power for himself and for Athens. Unlike the silence about what caused the earthquake that produced the devastating tidal wave at the beginning of 426 BCE (or caused the plague), Thucydides’ narrative on Demosthenes suggests that the source of his creative destruction can be found within this supremely talented human being. Might the mind and soul of a man like Demosthenes prove the sources or “first causes” of the more powerful motions in political life?

Demosthenes’ experience in Aetolia reminds one of those Athenian engagements in Sicily with which Thucydides opens and concludes the sixth year of the war (III.88 and 116; see also 99, 103, 115). And Thucydides’ last reference to the Greeks on Sicily (III.116), raised in the context of his discussion of the eruption of Mt. Aetna, points ahead to his “Sicilian archaeology” (VI. 2-6), an account that appears far more deferential to the poetic stories of the Cyclopes and Laestrigonians than does his first archaeology (I.1-19). Indeed, the night assault on Idomene (III.112; cf. VII.43, 44), his comments about the destruction of the Ambraciots (III.112 end; cf. VII.87 end), and his references to Athenian action in Sicily call to mind pivotal moments in the doomed Sicilian expedition. Thucydides thus seems to intimate by the end of Book III that success or failure in Sicily will depend on Athens achieving the proper balance of antithetical elements. That we know the Athenians failed in Sicily suggests that they didn’t achieve this balance. Did they fail because they were insufficiently attentive to the true character of their physical environs? Or might they have been too poetic in their outlook and aspirations? Given what we have already learned about Demosthenes in Aetolia, one wonders how this could be possible. But a closer look at the campaign at Pylos will show how Demosthenes’ approach to nature may itself be a form of piety.
Nature and Piety: A “Nician” Demosthenes?

Demosthenes’ greatest victory was his triumph over the Spartan forces on the island of Sphacteria in 425 BCE. Thucydides’ artfully structured narrative of this campaign (IV.2-40) suggests that, despite the apparent role played by chance in this account, the Athenian victory here was the product of a carefully designed plan by Demosthenes, one designed before he left Athens and that he set in motion before the storm “forced” the fleet led by him, Sophocles, and Eurymedon to land at Pylos (IV.3). A study of the details of this narrative suggests that Demosthenes’ plan from the beginning was to draw the Spartans into an engagement that would tempt them to make the colossal strategic blunder of landing troops on the island of Sphacteria, a plan ultimately aimed at the capture and humiliation of the Spartan hoplites, and the destruction of their formidable warrior mystique. To see the kind of foresight such a plan would entail, let us consider some of the following examples.

Demosthenes understood that the Spartans would not be able to take by land the garrison at Pylos once it was fortified (especially with their army in Attica and their city in the midst of a festival), that the Athenians would thus need to fortify their positions before the Spartan army could return and their city regroup, and that the Spartans would subsequently need to depend on their navy to remove the Athenians from occupied territory. Moreover, because he could count on Spartan insecurity about its navy, Demosthenes could reasonably predict that the Spartans would be inclined to rush their naval efforts to retake Pylos before the Athenian fleet, which left behind a “vulnerable” force under Demosthenes’ command, could backtrack from its presumed westward voyage and relieve Sparta’s siege (a return Demosthenes made sure the Spartans knew was imminent). And this meant knowing that the Spartans would use the same tactic they employed in the Crisaean Gulf against Phormio’s numerically inferior navy, one which deployed hoplites on the shores to support their triremes (II.86.1, 87.6). Of course, all of this would have been for naught had Demosthenes not also known the physical character of both Pylos and Sphacteria, knowledge of which was crucial for his particular fortifications at Pylos and his detailed assault plan for Sphacteria. Demosthenes’ plan, in both design and execution, thus presupposes a grasp of the physical nature of the locations involved (and the waters around them) and the political psychology and habits of the respective belligerents. It is no accident that the Athenian demagogue Kleon arrives at Pylos when he does or that he does so with the kinds of troops perfectly suited for fighting on the rocky terrain of Sphacteria (IV.28-30).
What the narrative, at an initial glance here, suggests is due to luck or the accidental motions of nature or human impulse (IV.4.1; Hornblower, 1996, 156), Thucydides, through his own deliberately designed account, shows the reader to be instead the work of intelligence; what otherwise appears happenstance is in reality the product of human forethought (Connor, 1984, 110; Hornblower; 1996, 152; see also I.138). Such artistry, employed in the service of this particular insight, naturally invites the reader to wonder if Thucydides’ handling of the Pylos affair doesn’t also serve as a metaphor for the intelligence at work in his own historiography. Moreover, the blow Demosthenes sought to strike to the reverence the Greeks reserved for the Spartans -- showing the god-fearing and ancestral worshipping Spartans to be “paper tigers” -- would surely have far-reaching implications for the war (as it promised to, see IV.15-22; 40.1). Might it not also bear on Thucydides’ interest in exposing the true character of Sparta’s piety and her famed power?

Demosthenes’ success here is not attributable to intelligence alone. Just before the Spartan navy attempts a difficult landing on Pylos -- at the one place in the fortifications that Demosthenes has curiously left vulnerable -- he addresses those few men chosen to defend the rocky beach (IV.10). Demosthenes begins by stating that he doesn’t want those who share in the present danger to try to show themselves wise by calculating all of the odds against them. He then follows this admonition by calculating the many reasons why the Athenians at the beach landing should be confident in the coming engagement. These reasons make up the rest of his brief speech. That Demosthenes has carefully weighed all of the “perils” should come as no surprise to anyone. And his soldiers should indeed take comfort from the detailed planning of their general.

But given his original admonition, one can’t help but wonder if Demosthenes isn’t committing the very “sin” against which he has cautioned his men. Isn’t he indulging the desire to display his wisdom for others to see? Moreover, what is it that Thucydides hopes to convey to his readers about Demosthenes by presenting such an obvious inconsistency in this speech -- the only speech of Demosthenes recorded in direct discourse in the entire History -- in the midst of a narrative that both points to and replicates the general’s remarkable intelligence and subtlety? If this speech represents Demosthenes’ rhetoric, then that rhetoric trains those capable of following it to see for themselves both the value of calculation and that Demosthenes possesses that virtue in spades. We thus might begin to understand why the generals, sailors, and soldiers who initially rejected his advice to fortify Pylos, embraced this plan with such enthusiasm once they could see its wisdom for themselves (Hadhung,
2006). One might even wonder if his “inconsistency” here doesn’t shed light on the motive behind his careful orchestration of all of the forces at Pylos. Does Demosthenes seek to produce the kind of triumph that would reveal his intelligence to those carefully trained to see and appreciate it?

If this is true, then Demosthenes’ subtle revelation of his own brilliance should not be confused with the vulgar and selfish display of one’s cleverness that he advises against (because it would imperil the Athenian cause at Pylos) and that Kleon so violently denounces as politically harmful (III.37). After all, Demosthenes secures for Athens a tremendous victory for which Kleon tries to take the credit. Nor should such a refined self-disclosure be confused with the gaudier “Olympic” aspirations of the tyrannical Cylon (I.126) or the slippery Alcibiades (VI.16.2; cf. V.80). There is something more Diodotcean, and thus Thucydidean, in Demosthenes’ self-display. But Thucydides, no less subtly than his Demosthenes, also points to an important difference between himself and this general. Thucydides tells us that in his effort to persuade his fellow generals to fortify Pylos, Demosthenes appeals to the nature of the place; it was “strong by nature” (phusei karteron on, IV.3.2). Later, Thucydides, when speaking of the virtues of Pylos in his own voice, refers only to the “place itself” (tou koriou auto karteron, IV.4.2; Strauss, 159, 1963). He refuses to attribute to nature the particular virtues that recommend the fortification of Pylos.

The difference between the two men might be stated broadly, if imperfectly, as follows. Demosthenes can only operate militarily as he does if he thinks the political and material worlds operate according to fixed laws and principles that can be known and mastered, or at least predicted, by human beings. For Demosthenes, the material world is something that can be manipulated or “negotiated” to serve his own political and military goals. While this view would exclude the belief in divine beings who could intervene in human affairs by moving natural elements according to their own wishes or impulses, it nevertheless views the material world, as something that can be known and manipulated by man, as an ordered “home” that is not completely indifferent to human hopes and aspirations. In this respect, Demosthenes’ naturalistic view of the world is similar to the kind of piety practiced by Nicias, who seeks to divine the will of the gods through a “reading” of nature’s motions and to propitiate those gods by long-standing rituals and practices. The trust in “fortune” of which his defeats in Aetolia cured him appears to have been replaced by a trust in an ordered and intelligible nature.

That Thucydides’ criticism of Nician piety as too trusting in divination (VII.50.4) might also apply to Demosthenes’ view of nature receives
additional support by the ways his text invites the reader to think of these two men together. Demosthenes’ first failed campaign is introduced alongside Thucydides’ reference to Nicia’s ineffective Melian expedition (III.91). And that campaign began in Nemea, the precinct famous for the prophesied death of Hesiod (III.96), an image whose richness prompts one to wonder if Demosthenes’ own military hopefulness originates in a form of poetry or prophecy. Later, in Sicily, Demosthenes twice objects strenuously (VII.47.3, 49.2-3) to Nicia’s proposal to remain encamped before Syracuse only to drop his opposition on the mere suspicion (uponioia) that Nicia’s continued resistance must be due to his greater knowledge (which knowledge, inexplicably, he never insists Nicia share). For a man who was willing to argue against the views of two generals at Pylos and who persisted in his designs there after initially failing to persuade the sailors, soldiers, and captains, this willingness to trust Nicia here, when so much more is at stake, is baffling. Finally, Demosthenes’ last reported speech is said to “very nearly resemble” (paraplesia legon, VII.78.1) Nicia’s final recorded speech (in direct discourse, VII.77). That brief speech, after quickly noting Nicia’s own good fortune and devotion to the gods, grounds the confidence of the Athenians equally in the justice of the gods and the numbers and efficiency of their hoplites. It strains credulity to think Demosthenes’ speech could “very nearly resemble” Nicia’s speech if it omitted half of the original.

Thucydides’ reluctance to attribute the virtues of Pylos to nature does not allow us to conclude that he thinks the material world bereft of all order; after all, summers and winters will continue to alternate. In light of his handling of natural phenomena, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Thucydides views the material world as having what might be called “ways” or “manners” which can be discerned or grasped, but not fixed natures whose material causes can be known objectively by the human mind. It is perhaps for this reason that Thucydides, when referring to the wisdom his work makes possible, refers not to human nature but the “human thing” (kata ton anthropinon, I.23.4).

**Thucydides’ “Manner” and Periclean Athens**

Thucydides’ criticism of Nician piety is perhaps most apparent in books VI and VII of the History. But the reader discovers the grounds for that criticism (and with it the grounds for his rejection of Demosthenes’ view of nature) in his account of Periclean Athens. Thucydides’ account of Pericles’ career occupies the latter part of Book I and most of Book II, a career which is more moderate than it is aggressively imperialist.
Thucydides situates four crucial passages on Pericles in the context of failed Athenian interventions in matters of succession in Thessaly and Thrace: 1.) his early career (I.111); 2.) his assembly of the largest army of Athenians ever (II.31) and his famous Funeral Oration (II.35-46); 3.) his third and final speech (II.60-64); and 4.) the truth about his political moderation (II.102). These are in turn coupled with references to the motions of the material world (Egyptians turning water into land, I.109-110; a solar eclipse, II.28; the plague, II.47-54; the emergence of land where there was water, II.102). These passages also “touch on” Acarnania, a region in Greece named after Acarnus, the son of Alcmeon (I. 111; II.29-30, 33; 67-8, which deals with Amphilocthus, Alcmeon’s brother, and 95-101), and almost all of them deal with the virtues of possessing cavalry of sufficient quality and numbers.

Thucydides introduces Pericles with an otherwise unremarkable discussion of a failed Athenian engagement in Thessaly: Athens tried to restore Orestes to the throne of Thessaly but had been thwarted in this attempt by Thessalian cavalry (I.111). And in their first appearance in the History (I.107), the Thessalian cavalry, just moments before the massive and evenly matched forces of the Athenians and Spartans were about to do-battle, betrayed the Athenians and switched sides. This betrayal tipped the odds of the battle which ended up as a closely fought victory for Sparta. The decision by Athens not to bring sufficient cavalry against Thessaly thus suggests a weakness within her imperial strategy, one, as we will see, not born from ignorance, but from domestic objections to her foreign policy (see also VI.24.6).

Given this introduction, it seems that Pericles’ remarkable, if somewhat modest, imperial success is due in no small part to his awareness that not all elements of Athenian society supported the goals and costs of her democratic imperialism. This may explain why, when the Athenians were enduring the devastation wrought by both the second Spartan invasion of Attica and the plague, Pericles decided to send a massive force of hoplites (almost four thousand) with nearly 300 cavalry in specially designed naval transports to harass the Peloponnese (II.56). By ensuring that those citizens whose lands and homes were currently being ravaged were no longer in Athens, but in the Peloponnese venting their frustration on their enemies, Pericles could relieve some of the domestic pressures brought on by his strategic decisions without also risking his city’s military strength. Thucydides’ treatment of the plague suggests that Pericles had to tailor his imperial policy to account for the limitations facing him domestically (see also II.65.8-9). Thucydides’ final “frame” of Pericles’ career – his
treatment of Alcmeon — is perhaps most helpful in understanding the genius behind Pericles’ successful rule in Athens.

After relating the failed efforts of Sitalces to fulfill an oath he had made with the Athenians, Thucydides recounts the story of the mythical Alcmeon (II.102). The reader will initially resist the temptation to link this Alcmeon with Pericles because he is not the one for whom Pericles’ family line (the Alcmeonids) is named. But Thucydides might pardon any hermeneutic indulgence on this score on the grounds that he himself highlights how both this Alcmeon and Pericles “silence” women (II.102.5; II.45.2). And using the mythical Alcmeon instead of one of the many historical Alcmeonids related to Pericles has the advantage of revealing the truth about the moderate or measured basis of Periclean power without allowing the reader to treat one as the cause or origin of the other. In other words, the metaphorical use of this myth offers one more curb to thinking in terms of a linear causality (and thus first causes) outside of human agency that can be known by reason.

The Alcmeon of lore was a matricide compelled by Apollo to walk the earth until he should find a land that the sun had not touched at the time he killed his mother. According to Apollo’s oracle, Alcmeon would have no release from his terrors until he found such unpolluted territory. Thucydides reports that Alcmeon eventually found this land at the mouth of the river Achelous, whose alluvial deposits continually created new land connecting Oenia on the continent to the nearby islands. According to Marcellinus in his Life of Thucydides, Thucydides points in this passage to the “moderation” of Alcmeon. Though Thucydides makes no mention of the term “moderation” here, Alcmeon may nevertheless achieve a kind of moderation through his release from the terror caused by a belief in wrathful gods, a release caused by his recognition that principles of causation, exclusive of gods who interfere in the affairs of men, are at work in the world (Burns, 2010, 10).

If Pericles’ ability to hold Athens together during the war results from an awareness of the limitations that constrained his imperial policy, then perhaps we see in Alcmeon’s story the roots or ground of such an awareness. Alcmeon seems to learn not to impose on the world his own views of the gods and their roles in the affairs of men; his is an education in the principles of human behavior, the power of necessity, and the proper balancing of the principles of “land” and “sea” (and of “motion” and “rest” and “Greek” and “barbarian”), that proves so crucial to Demosthenes’ military successes. And it seems the grasp of this mixture allows Pericles to navigate the contending forces of Athenian politics, those, like the more conservative oligarchs, who represent land and thus rest, and the more
radical, immoderate and pro-imperial democrats, who represent water and thus motion.

To say that the moderate rule reflected in Pericles’ careful blending of rival forces resembles the blending that proved so crucial to Alcmeon’s “liberation” is not to say that his understanding is the same as that conveyed by the myth. After all, like Demosthenes, Pericles evinces more than once a desire for the kind of fixity or rest in Athenian political affairs (I.140.1, 143.5; II.41.4, 42, 45.2) that is implicit in Demosthenes’ view of an ordered and intelligible material world. Pericles may thus share the piety of Demosthenes from which reflection on Alcmeon’s experience should cure one. For this reason, Thucydides can no more endorse Periclean moderation than he can endorse Demosthenes’ view of nature. The virtue of the Alcmeon myth is not that his particular moderation informs or powers Athenian imperial policy. Its virtue consists in showing how a kind of psychic moderation can be caused by reflecting on the interplay of land and water and thus categories like “motion” and “rest,” “human” and “divine.” What the reader must wonder is whether or not there is an alternative to the pious religiosity of Nicias and the equally pious, if less religious, views of Demosthenes and Pericles. Is there an alternative that can lead the reader to a self-knowledge free from the pious hopes plaguing the work’s actors? As we saw in Thucydides’ treatment of Demosthenes, two possible sources of the most powerful motions in the human and political worlds were the minds and souls of certain talented individuals. But what kind of treatment of first causes reserves a place for the mind and the soul, whose desire for self-disclosure, and thus self-understanding, seem to be the real source of motions in political life, such as we saw in the campaign at Pylos?

Thucydides’ work constitutes such an alternative through its very historiography. Thucydides’ manner, that is his particular treatment of the war, is Periclean insofar as it reflects the statesman’s ability to blend successfully antithetical forces at work in his community through a narrative that weaves together politics and nature, that counterbalances issues of motion and rest, and that braids stories of the Spartans and Athenians, and Greeks and barbarians into a unified account of Periclean Athens at war. But it does so without endorsing the belief in a cosmic order that corresponds to human hopes and desires. And because his work places politics at its thematic center, Thucydides’ focus reinforces what he indicated earlier about Demosthenes’ motives in Pylos: on the question of causes, Thucydides, instead of dilating on the metaphysical status of nature and the divine, substitutes the motions of the mind and the soul -- perhaps even the motions of his own soul (see I.1.1 and I.1.2; Dobski,
2010, 131-132) -- as they come to light through his particular presentation of Periclean Athens.

Works Cited


Notes

1 Thucydides' work has no official title. I follow convention in referring to it as the History. All references to Thucydides' History are in standard book, chapter, and, where relevant, sentence, form. Translations of Thucydides' Greek are from Hobbes's rendering (1989).

2 While the present essay owes a great deal to the chapter on Thucydides in The City and Man by Leo Strauss, my treatment of Thucydides' handling of the sixth year of the war is especially indebted to his comments in footnotes 10, 70, and 83.

3 My understanding of the details surrounding the Pylos affair, especially as those details bear on Demosthenes' ultimate strategy in this campaign, owes a considerable debt both to the treatment of the secondary literature and to the sensitive exegesis of this narrative by Thang Teddy Haduong (2006).