

The melian dialogue essay sample

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Do you agree with the analysis in the Melian Dialogue about the relationship between strong and weak states, and between power and morality David Greer Thucydides can be seen as the first great Historian, and his “ history of the Peloponnesian war” is said to be the catalyst of the realist tradition. A question often asked, is whether Thucydides is a realist or not? He is merely recording a realist opinion? To answer the question, lets look at what Thucydides himself says.

“ And as for the real action of the war, I did not think it was right to set down either What I heard from people I happened to meet, Or what I merely believed to be true.” Thucydides is trying to emphasise the point, that from the onset his facts were right, and unbiased. By being an objective observer, Thucydides can “ probe beneath the surface reasons for war to reveal those hidden forces(power, fear, and self interest) that are really responsible for events.” This is the basis for power politics. I will go through the text, and find example that illustrate and identify these concepts, and in doing so, I will uncover other concepts such as: “ balance of power, alliances, honour, neutrality and perception. Thucydides wants to draw our attention to the political and moral issues raised in such a situation.

Throughout the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians accentuate the need for “‘Empire’ and “‘Power.’ The first thing we notice the Melians doing is refusing the Athenians permission to speak to the masses. Morgenthau would agree with the melians on this points, when he speaks of the “ incompatibly between the rational requirements of a sound foreign policy, and the emotional preferences of a democratically controlled public opinion” The Athenians knew of these “‘emotional preferences.’ They knew that by <https://assignbuster.com/the-melian-dialogue-essay-sample/>

talking to the people that they could convince them to surrender. I believe that the Athenians were right to ask for the people. If they had of done, then the whole eventual bloodshed would of being avoided.

We won't lie to you, argue the Athenians. We have not come here because it's our right, to do so, because of all the wars fought and won. We have not come because you have offended or injured our empire in any way. We are here simply, because it's in our interest to be here. But what about justice, plea the Melians? The Athenians went on to assert that: " The standerd of justice depends on the equality of power to compel, and the fact, the strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they have to accept" What we have here, is a number of key realist concepts emerging; The balance of power, justice, and the idea of equality. Lets look at this idea of " Justice." In the Melian dialogue Justice is sought by the Melians and the Athenians, and various arguments of justice are prominent throughout. Justice, argue the Athenians, is only assessable to the stronger party. This echo's Thrasymachus' view of justice. Thrasymachus was a sophist and rhetorician was appears in Plato's republic defending the proposition that " ~might is right.'"

He looked to the natural world for his explanation of justice. By looking at nature, he observed that the larger and stronger animals devour the weaker, and that the astute and cleaver out do the slow and the stupid. For him, this was an absolute truth, in accordance with nature, that the strong rule the weak, and thus, his belief that " Justice is what is in the interest of the stronger party," materialised. Another sophist, echoing the theme of nature

was Antiphon, who once said: " Therefore, a man might best employ justice in a manner advantageous to himself, but while amid witnesses, he should treat the laws as great, but while away from witnesses he should follow the dictates of nature" The Athenians are basically telling the Melians that same: " Our opinion of the Gods, and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude , that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule what ever one can" Justice is what we say it is-because we are the stronger party- so accept our definition, or risk the consequences.

Justice can only be sought if both parties are of equal strength argue the Athenians. Lets look at this from a modern perspective, the American bombing of Kosovo. The citizens held that the United States where in the wrong, and tired to fight against it. But they knew that in the end they would have no choice but to submit to the rule of the strong. On the other hand, if the other country had of been China, then the Americans would not of had it so easy. China are of equal size to America, and the idea of Justice must come into the equation, because neither side wants a to start trouble with the other side. Both want to hold on to their superiority, and don't want to risk defeat. This is the concept of the " balance of power." For thucydides the one of the main reasons for war, was concurrent with a shift in the balance of power. The main antagonism in Thucydides History is between Athens and Sparta. " Thucydides account of Athens provides a striking historical illustration of the imperial aspirations of a bipolar superpower."

To use modern language, each state was involved in an arms race. Both Athens and Sparta wanted to out do each other. This in turn caused both

sides to broaden their resources and their land mass. The Melians also appeal to the balance of power, and argue that if Athens attacked them, it could tip the scales, whereby inciting more hostility towards them. The Melians are arguing that they are neutral, and if other neutral states see the treatment they are receiving at the hand of the Athenians, then, through fear, this could lead to a pre-emption strike. The Athenians reply that it doesn't matter, that they are strong enough, and quite able and willing to fight. Let's look at this idea of neutrality. The Melians ask the Athenians: "So would you not agree to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?"

The Athenians refuse outright. They held the belief that if they let the Melians go free, then that will be seen as a weakness on their side.

Machiavelli would probably have agreed with the Athenians when he said: "It is much safer to be feared than loved." The Melians are a colony of Sparta, and the Athenians are taking no risks. They acknowledge the fact, that although neutral at the moment, there's nothing stopping the Melians becoming allies with Sparta in the future. To use a modern example let's look at the British invasion of Ireland, in 1600. At the time England was at war with France and Italy. It was the time of the reformation, and King William of Orange's reign. This saw the overthrow of the Catholic Church. Throughout this war, Ireland remained neutral. Knowing this, the English still invaded. The Irish people replied in much the same way that the Melians did. It's not our war, we've been neutral all this time. The English used the same logic as the Athenians. Although neutral now, replied the English, there's nothing stopping you allying with France or Italy in the future. We view you as the backdoor into

England, and you must be taken out. This had pretty much the same consequences as the Melians; rape, murder and slavery.

Kenneth Waltz stresses that states “ At a minimum, seek their preservation, and at maximum, drive for universal domination” This is true, of both the Athenians, and the Melians. For the Athenians Power is the goal, while for the Melians it’s the self preservation of their island and it’s people that’s in question. The Melians continue to talk in terms of justice, hope and honour. The Athenians reply: “ You seem to forget that if one follows one’s self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path of honour involves one in danger” Would you rather live or die? Why believe in some false sense of hope, and get you people killed. Surrender, and with the loss of freedom, live. That what it boils down to, argue the Athenians. What we are seeing here, is a genuine attempt by the Athenians, to resolve the issue without bloodshed. They are trying to nail home the fact, that they can, and will win. But at the same time, they’re emphasising the consequences of a defeat. It is wrong what the Melians are doing. They are applying to honour and a lost cause of hope.

As Donnelly puts it “ they are willing to die rather than live with the shame of submission” I believe that that is wholly wrong, and would agree Thomas Hobbes, when he stressed the need to “ give up one’s freedom for security.” The last point I want to talk about is the concept of morality. Should morality have a part to play in international affairs. If we look at the Melian dialogue we can see that Power plainly prevails over morality. Towards the end of the argument, the Melians start to appeal to Morality and the gods. We know

that the Gods will be on our side, stress the Melians, because we are standing for what's right, with Justice our number one imperative. The Athenians dismiss this, and argue that the Gods are also on their side: " So far as the gods are concerned, we see no good reason why we should fear to be at a disadvantage."

There counteracting the Melians plea for morality. Is your gods any more powerful than ours? Why should the gods help you, when we're fighting for a belief that has it's roots in nature. It's been there before we came, argue the Athenians, and it will be there after we go, were merely acting in accordance with it. The Athenians are working on the assumption of the " survival of the fittest" Morality does not come into the head of the lion, when it's chasing the stag, nor does it appeal to the fox, with a rabbit in it's sight. The Athenians dismiss the Melians appeal for morality. The Melians however stick to their principles, till the very end. Holding on to their faith, and to their belief in justice, and morality, they stand firm and defiant. They were warned however of the consequences, and the Athenians stuck to their word, and eventually killed all the men, and enslaved the woman. Many modern critics would agree with the idea of morality being exempt from international state actions. " What the Melians have tried to do is impossible in Thucydides world. They have injected values and ideas into a sphere of interaction, where they don't belong"

Looking at the dialogue I have to agree with the analysis, insofar as the relationship between strong states and between power and morality. I believe that Thucydides' account of power politics is still relevant today.

Donnelly states in his book "The arguments advanced by the Athenian envoys at Melos are so rigorously realist, that they provide on of a few examples of a sustained, consistently radical realism" Throughout the Melian dialogue, the Athenians told the Melians exactly how it is. They did not use any fancy saying, or beat around the bush. Give up and live, or fight and die.

I believe that the Melians were wrong, and stupid to not of believed the Athenians. They had a reputation for being ruthless, and victorious. Yet they gave the Melians a chance to live(although as slaves), and as I have stressed earlier, honestly wanted to avoid bloodshed. Power politics runs the system today, and the strong still oppress the weak; Nazi Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1936, Russia and Hungary in 1959 and Indonesia and east Timor in 1975. In each of these cases it is evident that the Strong attacked the weak, and that morality was no where to be seen. I think it's frightful and distressing that we live in a world dominated by power politics, where morality comes second to power. But we must accept this, and learn to live with it. If the Melians had of done, then they would of avoided the loss that they did.

Bibliography

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