

READING THUCYDIDES WITH ARISTOTLE'S *RHETORIC*:
ARGUING FROM JUSTICE AND EXPEDIENCY
IN THE MELIAN DIALOGUE AND THE SPEECHES*

by

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ABSTRACT: In this paper certain prescriptions laid in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* are used to elucidate Thucydides' application of arguments from justice and expediency in the Melian Dialogue and in the speeches. Their mutual relation is tested in the perspective of rhetorical theory, and the meaning of τὸ συμφέρον in the Melian Dialogue and in the *Peloponnesian War* as a whole is discussed.

Nearly all studies on the Melian Dialogue have focused on the idea of the "law of the stronger" as propounded by the Athenian speakers in this arresting passage¹. Most critics closely relate this idea to one of the most vexing aspects of the Dialogue, namely that the Athenian speakers refuse to argue from justice (τὸ δίκαιον) and prefer to speak about expediency (τὸ συμφέρον)². For this reason, they are understood to oppose traditional morality, to despise values of any kind

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¹ Of the immense number of works treating this part of the *History* the most comprehensive are: FINLEY 1942: 202–212; WASSERMANN 1947: 18–36; DE ROMILLY 1951: 230–259; HERTER 1954: 316–343; STAHL 1966: 158–171; NESTLE 1968: 350–355; LIEBESCHUETZ 1968: 73–77; AMIT 1968: 216–235; VOLK 1970; MACLEOD 1974: 385–400; RENGAKOS 1984: 93–102; PRICE 2001: 195–204; SCARDINO 2007: 467–483.

² Thuc. V 89: δίκαια μὲν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ πρὸνχοντες πρᾶσσουσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ἐυγχωροῦσι [...what is just is arrived at in human arguments only when the necessity on both sides is equal, and that the powerful exact what they can, while the weak yield what they must']. In further argument this translation will be questioned. This and all translations of Thucydides are those of SMITH, Loeb edition, with minor alterations on my part where noted. Scholars are not in agreement as to the rendering of the word; most often it is translated as "expediency", "advantage", "benefit", "interest". In what follows I will rarely render the word into English, in order to avoid misconception involved in connotations of the "modern" terms, but if it is translated, I prefer "expediency".