

**BETWEEN GOD AND BEAST:**

**An Examination of the Ethical and Political Ideas of the Poet, Pindar;  
the Historian, Thucydides; and the Philosopher, Aristotle**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

"Between God and Beast: An Examination of the Ethical and Political Ideas of the Poet, Pindar; the Historian, Thucydides; and the Philosopher, Aristotle"

Through an analysis of the work of the poet, Pindar, the historian, Thucydides, and the philosopher, Aristotle, this thesis builds on the conception of man as a creature between god and beast in an attempt to develop a sense of the kinds of thought and language that are appropriate for political theorising. It discusses an understanding of political theory that is based on the human capacity for reasonable, creative action. In this, it opposes another model of political theorising, one that has been collapsed under a scientific model that judges itself successful only when it yields precise and definitive answers to dilemmas that grow out of a contingent and indeterminate world.

I have argued that man's good, his potential to become a responsible and flourishing actor, is realised through attentive and reflective political experience. This experience is not 'raw', acquired alone by passively 'absorbing' whatever man perceives to be the case in pursuit of his individual whims. It is instead guided, shared, interpreted, evaluated, and demanding. The texts I have chosen serve to supplement direct political experience.

Pindar's odes - their elliptical language and use of metaphor, their juxtaposition of seemingly mutually exclusive characteristics in men - demand effort on the part of an audience/reader to cultivate the capacity to derive meaning from culturally-situated complex ideas and images. Thucydides' description of the war through a 'fragmented' perspective, his examples of the kinds of reasoning that precede decisions, point to a perspective that seems to argue that agents should develop the kind of character that can creatively balance a general conception of what man is as a species with the relevant concrete details of a situation and proceed to act accordingly.

That man is a species with a fixed good is one of Aristotle's fundamental assumptions, and leads to his conviction that ethics and politics are inherently imprecise. I discuss how he defends this position and its consequences as elaborated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. I then attempt to show how what he has to say in the *Poetics* realises and supplements his ethical and political goals. The *Poetics* indicates that men must learn to 'extract sound generalisations by drawing inferences from disparate actions, to transform mistakes into valuable aspects of life, and be able to carve out the proper, dynamic, realm of responsibility. This generates a conception of man whose good goes beyond mere preference satisfaction but instead grows out of a reasonable (general) sense of what he is which can be used creatively in the specific (concrete) circumstances he confronts.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

The conception of man as a creature whose nature lies between god and beast was common in ancient Greece. This dissertation seeks to examine this idea and its political repercussions through three Greek authors: the poet, Pindar, the historian, Thucydides, and the philosopher, Aristotle. What can these thinkers tell us about this ancient conception of human nature? And further, what might such a conception mean for abstract political theorising, not only in ancient Greece, but in Western societies that have placed a premium on abstract thought? These related questions divide this project into two parts; the first deals with generating a more detailed understanding of this rudimentary conception of man, the second, given this richer interpretation, attempts to trace its effects on political theory.

Perhaps one of the most significant consequences of this belief is that it locates man in a contingent and indeterminate world. The assumption that man is caught between divine and animal natures makes his life one which is distinguished by probabilities, where there is regularity and consistency, but precious few necessities or universal truths. A human life thus embodies a series of choices in light of potential and possibility. While this description of the 'human condition' provides a broad, abstract framework, ultimately, it is too general to be of much use in political theory—understood here as a discipline that should help us both to understand and actually live good, fulfilling lives. Clearly then, the image of man as suspended precariously between god and beast demands some fine tuning.

Aristotle, for instance, claims that the nature of a theory depends on the nature of its subject matter.<sup>1</sup> If this were the case, it would seem that theory must begin by pinning down its subject matter, at which point one can analyse with appropriate expectations for a study's results. But, what happens when the subject matter is, in some sense, a moving target, when its

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<sup>1</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a27-30.

very nature precludes the possibility of its being pinned down? This appears to be the case with human beings. Unlike plants and (many) animals, human beings are not at the mercy of their physical needs, nor of external forces utterly outside their control. At the same time, they are not free, perfect, and immortal like the gods—yet they alone have been taken to be responsible for the quality of the lives they lead.<sup>2</sup>

Classical scholars have argued persuasively that clear distinctions between animal, man, and god are difficult to maintain in an analysis of ancient Greek thought—“the boundaries of humanity itself are too porous,” and the three ‘realms’ blur into each other.<sup>3</sup> In *Polarity & Analogy* for example, Lloyd expands on this issue; many Greek gods, he stresses, possessed decidedly ‘manlike’ attributes (e.g., ‘irrational’ and conflicting emotions, base desires, even at times the inability to direct their lives according to their wishes).<sup>4</sup> Such anthropomorphic characteristics make it difficult to draw a sharp line between the human and divine realms. Furthermore, at the ‘other end’ of the cosmos, Lloyd draws attention to the common Greek practice of personifying animals and inanimate objects, giving them too what we might classify as human qualities. This has some interesting consequences for political theory: if one assumes (as I do) that putting theory to use, actually connecting it to/realising it in practice, demands identification on the part of the theoriser with the theory, how might gods (and for that matter, animals) with human characteristics generate such identification and thus be a more effective access to a usable abstract theory than one which relies on purportedly ‘neutral’

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<sup>2</sup> In his discussion of Aristotle, Salkever suggests that unlike many other animals, man’s ‘natural’ (instinctive/inborn) inclinations do not lead him automatically and directly to his proper (and thus, *praiseworthy*) end. Rather man is unique in that he is responsible for *choosing* to realise his ‘right’ end amongst other possible ends that may be more intuitively appealing (e.g., a life of physical pleasure). This capacity, Aristotle will claim, depends on a political life (“Aristotle’s Social Science” *Political Theory* vol. 9 (1981, pp.479-508).

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion on the relationship between the natures of god, man, and animal, see Heath, J. “Disentangling the Beast: Humans and other Animals in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 119 (1999, pp.17-48); Vernant, J.-P. *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (Boston: 1983, pp. 323ff.), and his *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1980, pp. 143ff.).

<sup>4</sup>Lloyd, G.E.R. *Polarity and Analogy* (Bristol (repr.): 1987, pp.196-201).



concepts? That is, could abstractions that are more recognisably 'human' cultivate self-identification,<sup>5</sup> (for example, through the crystallisation of different kinds of recognisable motivations) and through this, affect an internalisation of principles which might cultivate an ability to use the theory?

The relationship between animal, man, and god in ancient Greece places man in the indeterminate position between two extremes, capable of moving closer to one or the other, but never identifying completely with either one. Given this inherent flexibility and mobility, we must seek to grasp just how man makes sense of *his* space, the stretch of middle ground he inhabits. What is it that makes him godlike and what, more animal? Should he aim to shed his animal attributes, and drive single-mindedly towards a pure godlike excellence? Or should he, on the other hand, recognise his ties to the physical world, and resign himself to a "lower" status in the cosmos? Or, does the answer lie somewhere in the middle? That is, should man seek to cultivate an excellence which is distinctly human, harmonising both extremes of his nature? It is this third tack which interests me here, and is the approach each author in this study seems to adopt.

How then can we bring about this harmony, thereby achieving a distinctively human excellence? To do this, we must understand and structure the indeterminate world we live in, at all times taking into account our 'composite' nature. If we assume that 'man's space' needs organisation, how do we understand the principles on which such organisation is based (more specifically for my purposes here, what is the nature of our abstract political

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<sup>5</sup> This sense of self-identification is not derived solely from a better developed conception of oneself as an individual with one's own personal and spontaneous preferences, but additionally (and perhaps, more importantly), one's sense of self is secured by the understanding that as human beings, one is a member of a larger kind/type—the human species—defined by needs and goods which point beyond the individual's private (and often erratic) wishes. It is my belief that a recognisably 'human' abstraction will serve to cultivate both a sense of individuality (as one sees oneself from 'outside', as reflected in others who are similar) as well as a sense of belonging to a group with certain constant/fixed characteristics (which imply for that group certain stable goods and the 'members' with a sense of security).

concepts?) and how are they to be accessed—through reason, through perception and experience, through inspiration?

Answering these questions lies in recognition of what is perhaps the most fundamental consequences of such a conception of human nature—and one of which Pindar, Thucydides, and Aristotle seem to be aware. Once again, this is the acknowledgement that the human world is indeterminate, rooted in probabilities, where there are (thankfully) detectable recurring patterns, but (almost) no certainty or truth. The way we lead our lives; the choices we make and the actions we perform, demand theories which are suited to and therefore, in some sense, based in our actual *experience* of such a world. The abstract principles in political theory therefore have a unique nature, decidedly different from the demonstrable, objective ones of ancient cosmology and mathematics—the stars and geometric shapes do not face difficult decisions.<sup>6</sup>

Is then abstract theory compatible with the uncertainty and opacity inherent in human life? My hope is that a careful analysis of the use of abstract language and general style in these three different disciplines will answer this question in the affirmative. This demands a clarification of political theory's aim—which, these authors suggest, is *not* to sacrifice everything in a blind reverence for certainty, but rather, through a critical examination of how we actually live, to illuminate a realistic sense of the kind of creature man is, the kinds of choices he faces, to cultivate the capacity for attentive and reasonable deliberation, and finally, to facilitate creative action. Though presented through different media and with distinct styles, Pindar, Thucydides, and Aristotle all suggest that the human world is essentially a political one. Each

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<sup>6</sup>Recognition of this comes, for example, in Aristotle who claims that the point of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not simply to “know virtue,” presumably through an intellectual awareness of some set of codified laws or principles, but rather to “become good” through a combination of other, more diverse and varied means (1103b28). Similarly, Thucydides claims that his *History* will be “a possession for all times” (I.22)—yet nowhere does he provide his readers with a systematic theory of objective principles.

one grounds his understanding of the political world in a conception of man which serves to shift the focus of political theory from an end (which it presumes is universally accepted<sup>7</sup>), to process, from goals to the activities which identify and work towards them, from definitive answers, to an understanding of the reasons behind one's beliefs and convictions.<sup>8</sup>

I begin here by exploring this conception of human nature as it is manifested in the odes of Pindar (Thucydides and Aristotle will follow this discussion). As I go, I will keep in mind a number of possible questions involving comparisons/contrasts between the three: both Thucydides and Aristotle are largely 'absent' from their texts, Pindar on the other hand is undeniably 'present'—what effect does this have on the theoretical nature of each work as well as on the reader's relationship to the work? While both Thucydides and Aristotle are 'absent', the character of each work is utterly different. Yet, at some level, they seem to express similar ideas—how is this possible? Pindar's work died out in the years following his death. Many claim that this was due in large part to the fact that his work was too firmly embedded in the immediate circumstances of its occasion, and lacked the coherent narrative which would make it accessible in the future. Narrative in Aristotle's work does not take the form of a single overarching history of a people, nor does it describe through imagery and metaphor the life of one man, yet his writings seemed to have had a (relatively) steady following—why is this? What is the

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<sup>7</sup> In Aristotle for example, the human end is *eudaimonia*. This "truth" is not subject to debate—as a member of the human species, man has no choice in the matter of his end. It arises out of what he biologically and psychologically is. This however is not to deny that the means to this end and how exactly it is realised in any individual life can come under scrutiny and critique.

<sup>8</sup> This, I expect, will support something more akin to Connolly's "agonistic" pluralism, rather than the "reasonable pluralism" of Rawls (which seems to be getting closer and closer to "reasonable homogeneity"). While such a stance admittedly is open to (traditionally conceived) stability problems, it is my belief that a solid understanding of why and how we come to the decisions we do will generate its own stability. That is to say, close attention to actual experience of decision making and action within an inherently indeterminate and contingent context will yield a stability appropriate to the constant fluctuations and conflicting particulars of human life. This is a stability which does not grow out of or depend on fixed, immutable 'truths', but nonetheless is framed by certain fixed principles of moral action to necessary ends.

content and form of Aristotle's narrative, or more generally, what is the role of narrative in 'philosophical' discourse, specifically, political theorising?

I will proceed here chronologically, beginning with Pindar who will allow me to examine how a poet, active in a decidedly un-theoretical mode of discourse, and writing before the emergence of concepts like 'political theory', might enrich the above conception of man so as to be a contribution to political thought. In this study, Pindar presents an interesting case—precisely because the poems he wrote are not presented as political or theoretical.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, the surviving Pindaric odes do reveal a certain understanding of human nature, and implicit in this, a discernible political ideology.

A better understanding of Pindar's conception of what man is will support the later discussion of what his poems might contribute to political theory, specifically, what they can tell us about the relationship between abstract language and concrete human choice and action. How might theory work within what has come to be seen as outside theoretical discourse? How might the form and language, the style of poetry serve to create a different, more effective and fruitful relationship between abstract political concepts and concrete human choice and action? As much contemporary political theory is manifested in abstract concepts which strive to be neutral and universal, it

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<sup>9</sup>The attempt to extract concrete political references from Pindar was seriously challenged by Bundy (*Studia Pindorica* Berkeley: 1962), which it has been said, effectively revolutionised Pindaric scholarship. This was perhaps a response to what Bundy viewed as failed/futile attempts by scholars to historicise/politicise Pindar's work (one of the most prominent examples of this kind of interpretation is Wilamowitz. *Pindaros* Berlin: 1922). Bundy's analysis suggests that (initially, at least) the reader must understand and judge each poem at a more formal level, on its success in fulfilling its most basic function, i.e., praise of the victor within the rules of the epinician form. Bundy's ideas have had a large and influential following, notably developed by D.C. Young (*Three Odes of Pindar: A Literary Study of Pythian 11, Pythian 3, and Olympian 2* Leiden: 1968). At the same time, the attempt to analyse Pindar's work in relation to the (hypothesised) historical events of his time did not altogether fall from favour, but rather has been developed and refined: see for example: Pfeijffer, I. *Three Aeginetan Odes of Pindar* (Mnemosyne Supplements, no. 197, 1999); Kurke, L. *The Traffics in Praise* (Ithaca: 1991); and Cole, T. *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: 1991). However, as my research is not so concerned with Pindar's own political views, nor with his possible commentary on "current events," but rather, with the ability to communicate political theory through poetry, this discussion will not be raised.

requires and cultivates a narrow kind of means-to-end reasoning. Human choice and action are reduced so as to correspond to an almost mechanical, methodological capacity, which is well equipped to deal with the manipulation of necessary universal concepts, but little else. Thus, it provides little guidance for much of human experience. Given this, poetry, and the experience its form and content offer, might inform and augment this excessively limited conception of political theory. What then is Pindar's 'theory' of human nature? Through what kind of language is it expressed? And finally, what might his conception mean for political thought today?

## Part I: Pindar

### Chapter 1: Pindar<sup>10</sup>

As stated above, like much of the ancient Greek world, Pindar seems to divide the world into two separate yet related, even 'touching' spheres—the elevated world of the gods and the heavens, and the lower world of humans, animals, plants, and inanimate 'things'. As human beings, we, more than other animals, have the capacity actively to strive towards, and at times even become godlike. The "great games" which took place in Greece (in this case, specifically the Pythian, Nemean, Isthmian, and Olympian) are a concrete manifestation of such striving. Success represented man at his best, pushed to the limits of the species and closer to the gods.<sup>11</sup>

Still, in victory, man is only *close* to the gods—he is still essentially man, and we are not yet significantly nearer to a substantive understanding of just what this means. What details about human nature can we uncover in Pindar's

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<sup>10</sup> All quotes from Pindar's odes will be Bowra's translation, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>11</sup>What can we make of the purely physical nature of the games? This godliness is not the elevated intellectual type praised by later philosophers, but rather bodily success and visible beauty. See for instance, Pythian X, where man's happiness is won not by his intelligence, but by "steadfastness and strength" (24). Man's excellence--always tied at some level to the physical world--demands *effort*: "Any bliss that man that man may win/And without labour, none! God shall perfect/ Today, perhaps! P XII (27-28). This quote supports Norwood who notes that toil and hard work are insufficient to guarantee success: human success also requires a *natural* (i.e., inborn) goodness (*phua*), and favour from the gods (*Pindar Berkeley*: 1945, pp.49ff.).

dense and often cryptic poems that might serve to flesh out this mere skeletal description? Below, I will examine a selection of his odes, with an eye to what I see as five major characteristics he seems to attribute to man, each of which, in its own way, places the human being between god and animal. Perhaps the most fundamental fact of human life is that it ends in death—we are *essentially* and thus inescapably mortal creatures. This brute certainty underlies, and to a large extent, defines the species. However, given a close reading of the odes the reader can 'extract' other significant characteristics of man which help to develop a richer conception of what he is. For instance, man seems to have an essential and *beneficial* connection to a community larger than himself (which I will argue simultaneously constrains him and provides the conditions necessary for his freedom); he is at once beautiful and frail; he is susceptible to the forces of chance and luck, rendering his future unknown and unpredictable;<sup>12</sup> he must be mindful, even at his most successful moments, that he has limitations; and finally, the fact that human life demands toil and hard work, but that through it, man can realise a good 'higher' than mere physical survival. With these examples briefly sketched, I will turn briefly to some historical background before moving on to the poems themselves.

### *Background*

The bulk of Pindar's extant and complete poems are epinician odes—that is, poems written for victors in the Panhellenic games. At the time when Pindar was writing (an exceptionally long career—from the age of 20, 498BC, to a ripe, old 72, 446BC), such poems were regularly commissioned and performed at post-game celebrations (*komoi*).<sup>13</sup> The poems were recited orally

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<sup>12</sup>I hope to show, however, that this indeterminacy, far from being wholly negative in its capacity to destabilise, is also the source of human individuality which, when connected to a culture's sense of reasonableness, is the precondition of change and progress, creation and innovation.

<sup>13</sup>Simonides is said to have been the first poet to perform for money (*Greek Lyric* vol.III Loeb ed. pp. 347-350). Additionally, he is said to have been the first to compose especially for a victory (Trypanis, C. *Greek Poetry: From Homer to Seferis* (London: 1981, p. 106). The precise relationship between Simonides and Pindar is difficult to discern. Simonides was almost a

and accompanied by music—they were in fact (performed) *songs* of praise. The *komos*, the celebratory event or, more literally, “reveling progression,” was geared towards a particular yet diverse audience, including the victor, his family, members of the larger society to which they belonged, and even at times, members of rival cities and states.<sup>14</sup>

The poet, often (though not always) the performer of the ode, was obviously central to such an event, and therefore had a complex range of duties. Some of these duties were laid out explicitly, as in for example, the rules which structured and defined the genre of the epinician itself. At the same time, the poet had to keep his audience at the forefront of his mind, and in this was saddled with the exceedingly difficult task of satisfying its often differing and at times, contradictory needs and expectations.<sup>15</sup> Thus the poet was constrained by two different classes of rules—both the rules of the genre itself, as well as the far less easily defined social ones. Both kinds, we will see, Pindar bent, and even at times, unabashedly broke.

## Chapter 2: The Epinician Genre

Lyric poetry has roots extending back to (at least) the 7th century BC, grounding it firmly in Greek culture. Poetry at this time was *performance*—often enacted in elaborate festivals accompanied by music (originally the lyre, or another melodic instrument) and often dance, a chorus (hence, choral

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generation older than Pindar, yet the times during which each composed did overlap (e.g., both were commissioned by Thrasyboulos in 490BC, Pindar’s P.VI). That they enjoyed friendship, or even a sense of mutual respect is unlikely (e.g., some assume that Pindar’s reference to “crows” in Olympian 2 was meant to indicate the work of both Simonides and Bacchylides).

<sup>14</sup>Cole, T. *Pindar’s Feasts or the Music of Power* (Rome: 1992, p.14); Nisetich, F. *Pindar’s Victory Songs* (Baltimore: 1980, p.10). Nisetich suggests that the wide variation within one single audience, often including recent enemies of war, might be related to the fact that Pindar wrote during the “sacred truce,” a time when, instead of warfare, the Greeks engaged in contests of skill and strength for the prize of glory, rather than territory.

<sup>15</sup> For an innovative and influential analysis of the relationship between the poet and his audience, see Gentili, B. *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece* trans. Cole (Baltimore: 1988, esp. ch. 8).

poetry).<sup>16</sup> The epinician ode flourished in the late Archaic period and is itself a 'subclass' of performed poetry. Therefore it was included in this long and well established cultural tradition. Despite its Dorian roots, (and therefore not 'native' to Athens) choral and lyric odes held a distinct and unshakeable place in her cultural life. The epinician form specifically flourished in Athens (e.g., with Simonides and his nephew Bacchylides), and it is believed that Pindar left his home in Thebes to train there in the art of the ode.<sup>17</sup> The rules of the genre were demanding, and clearly set out. The epinician ode was divided into roughly four parts;<sup>18</sup> praise of the gods, praise for the achievement of the victor, a reference to myth,<sup>19</sup> and an assertion of, however indirect, some truth or maxim (though not necessarily in that order).

Closer examination of this structure indicates one of the epinician ode's most significant features—and a way in which it is different from, for example, the Homeric epics.<sup>20</sup> Epinician odes were firmly historically situated: "expressive of stability and locality...bound by time and place."<sup>21</sup> The poems illuminated and reflected current events rather than to recreate an image of an illustrious

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<sup>16</sup> The performances were intended to represent the "collective voice...of the community" (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1996, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)

<sup>17</sup> That Pindar was Theban and not a native of Athens, and as such, was a permanent 'outsider' to the city in which he was trained as a poet, is another parallel between himself, Thucydides, and Aristotle. The fact that Thebes had a somewhat dubious relationship with Athens (it was thought to have cowardly surrendered when under attack by the Persians, and even sided with them at the battle of Plataea) no doubt made Pindar's relationship to the emerging superpower complex at times, strained.

<sup>18</sup> While these four elements are commonly found in the odes, there was some variation. For example, in I.7, Pindar does not include a myth, but where the reader expects it, instead tells the story of Strepsiades' uncle.

<sup>19</sup>For elaboration on the social/political function of myth in ancient Greece, see Vernant's *Mortals and Immortals* where he reinforces the inherently public and political status of myth in ancient Greek life, stressing the fact that it was used as a means of strengthening the interconnectedness of a particular society (Princeton: 1991, pp. 145ff.. See also his *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* Boston: 1988 pp. 203ff.). In *Myth and the Polis*, (ed. Pozzi & Wickersham Cornell: 1991) this issue is raised again, with a focus on the idea that the flexibility inherent in myths allows for, and even encourages, fruitful debate between rival cities or political factions (see especially the Introduction-Ch. 1.).

<sup>20</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the linguistic/etymological genealogy between the two genres, see Gentili *Poetry & Its Public in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: 1988 pp. 57-60).

<sup>21</sup>Parry, A. ("Bacchylides: An Introduction" in *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers*, Oxford: 1989, pp. 64-65).



and glorious past.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in Isthmian 7, Pindar claims that the great deeds of the past are easily forgotten by men, and implies that it is the recent deeds of men, *captured in song*, that will grab and hold the attention of the public:

But the grace of old  
drops to sleeps, and mortal men forget  
whatever has not intermingled  
in the glorious streams verses,  
and come to flower  
through a poet's skill.  
for Strepsiades too--  
victorious in pancratium at Isthmus,  
he is awesome in strength  
and handsome to see. (11-18)

The odes, however, did not refer solely to the current success of the exalted athlete, nor merely to the immediate political context in which the victory was situated.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the requisite tribute to existing cities and their recent successes, recall the other common ingredients of the ode—specifically, reference to myth.<sup>24</sup> This element enabled Pindar to use a traditional and familiar cultural medium to express new ideas. Gentili suggests that the more “realistic subject matter—human existence as experienced in the altered sociopolitical conditions of the archaic city-state” entailed that the choral odes/lyric poetry occupied the “middle ground between tradition and innovation.”<sup>25</sup> Through the epinician odes, as a part of the larger lyric tradition, Pindar seemed to succeed in grounding his audience in the familiar, and within this comfort of the known, he more ‘gently’ introduced new ideas.

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<sup>22</sup> See Kurke for insight into the cultural and economic context during which the odes were written (*The Traffic in Praise* Ithaca: 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Parry, for instance, claims that with the emergence of choral poetry comes the origins of abstract language (“Bacchylides: An Introduction” in *The Language of Achilles* Oxford: 1989, p. 62).

<sup>24</sup> Though indeed inclusive of familiar myths, Pindar’s odes presented them neither straightforwardly nor in complete form. This raises the question as to just how accessible his odes were, even at the time he was writing. Was Pindar deliberately elusive? What might lie behind his often enigmatic verses? An easy, and admittedly perhaps an accurate suggestion, is that his poems served to create an impenetrable circle around an educated elite. However, maybe the ‘work’ required to understand his words fully served a different, less malicious purpose. For example, perhaps the style and effort demanded of the audience (now reader) have increased individual experience in the event, promoting identification, which in turn allowed the message of the poem to become more firmly ‘fixed’ in the listener.

<sup>25</sup> Gentili, B. *Poetry & Its Public in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: 1988, p. 61).

This blend of old with new in Pindar's words, mirrors the actual 'journey' of the successful athlete about whom the poem is written. The victor, from the known world of his family and society, effectively catapults himself into a new arena. He pushes himself to the very limits of what he can do, often in a city foreign to him, and then returns to share his triumph with his family (*oikos*) and city (*polis*). Observers of his success are thus compelled to expand their own views of what had hitherto been known and accepted as possible. Pindar facilitates this reintegration through embedding the exceptional event in the well known form of the epinician ode. Thus, we see how the athlete's journey (and the inevitable introduction of 'the new' which follows from it) is more easily absorbed through the fact that it is brought home and distilled in the melody of Pindar's enchanting poems.<sup>26</sup>

However, this reintroduction might be said to be jeopardised by the celebration itself – Cole suggests that the *komoi* which centred around the odes were potentially "explosive." They did not serve so much as a re-grounding in the personal and familiar, but acted so as to penetrate a wider, public and political sphere. This leads us directly to the 'social rules' of the epinician.

### *Social Constraints*

The 'social rules' confining Pindar were no doubt subtler than those of the genre, yet in many ways, they were more powerful, and 'breaking' them had far more serious consequences. Again, the audience at such a performance was a complex one, and Pindar had to find a very delicate balance, whereby he aimed to satisfy everyone, or at the very least, offend no one.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kurke explores the theme of *nostos* (return home) in the odes, highlighting "the heroic or agonistic need for the individual to leave home and to return bringing the glory he has won" (*The Traffic in Praise Ithaca*: 1991, p.32). The individual's success takes on meaning and significance when it is shared with that community which made it possible. For more on *nostos*, see Burton *Pindar's Pythian Odes* (Oxford: 1962); Ruck and Matheson *Pindar: Selected Odes* (Ann Arbor: 1968).

<sup>27</sup>For a discussion of the make-up of the audience and complications involved in performing before one, see Cole, T. *Pindar's Feasts: or the Music of Power* (Baltimore: 1991, pp.14ff.). Race

In looking to understand the social constraints put on Pindar, we must keep in mind when reading his odes that the surviving printed words we read (often to ourselves) do not capture the entire experience of the *komos*. Recall that originally the odes were accompanied by music, and (often) dance, food and drink. Perhaps even more important, they were firmly embedded in a particular political climate.<sup>28</sup> Because of the 'local' nature of the events to which Pindar refers, and the fact that he does not provide much context to explain his allusions and metaphors, one might assume that his original audience had a substantial common knowledge base, which is now remote and obscure. In this, we see how much the endurance of later thinkers like Thucydides and Plato might be due to the more unified and single narratives into which they situate their ideas, as well as the known (to us) social constraints which are implicit in their work. For the latter, we have a surviving context linked inextricably to their ideas, ensuring (a level of) comprehension in future times. For Pindar on the other hand, we can only attempt as best we can to fill in the content of the social conditions which shaped his poetry in order to appreciate not only the subtler nuances of his language and style, but the basic ideas his work conveys.

What then are thought to have been the events that accompanied Pindar's epinician odes? Cole explores this subject, beginning with an etymological examination of the word, *enkonomia*. Taking "en" simply as in/within, "*komos*," he tells us entails first an occasion of revelry, but also, equally important, it assumes a *procession*. It is therefore not a static event, but a moving one. Its movement is "beyond the bounds of the private."<sup>29</sup> In this, praise becomes a kind of speculation, a projection from the inner, the personal, to the outer, the

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discusses the potential for Pindar to cause resentment in his audience (perhaps for cutting short a complimentary story), and suggests that this causes the poet to "assume an 'apologetic' stance" at times ("The End of *Olympia* 2: Pindar and the Vulgus" *CSCA* 1979, p.256).

<sup>28</sup>As Pindar's life spanned some of the greatest battles of the Persian Wars (Marathon, Salamis, Plataia, and the lesser known Himera) and the closing of (what has come to be seen as) the Archaic period, 'current events' were often dramatic and volatile.

<sup>29</sup>Cole, T. *Pindar's Feasts or the Music of Power* (Rome: 1992, p.18).

public. This, Cole notes, helps to explain why the odes are often written in the future or imperative.<sup>30</sup> They are forward looking, their aim is to extend beyond current psychological and social boundaries.

The question then remains, once having penetrated the public sphere, what 'contains' the *komos*? Do the strict rules guiding the epinician's construction reign it in? What then do we make of the fact that Pindar often disregarded these rules? How were the 'liberties' Pindar took in writing the epinician odes a means of inducing change not only in the genre itself, but in the social roles and tradition in which they were situated as well? How might this be seen as a means for changing established political rules?<sup>31</sup>

This general background stated, let us now turn to the odes themselves with an aim to 'extract' some features Pindar seemed to understand as essential to man. I will begin by restating some of the recurrent human characteristics I plan to trace through a selection of the odes: the effect of the brute fact of man's mortality; the essential and beneficial connection between man and a community larger than himself (which simultaneously constrains him and provides the necessary conditions for him to flourish); simultaneous human beauty and frailty, man's susceptibility to chance and luck (which prevents him from knowing his future with certainty), the need for man to put in effort and hard work towards his endeavours (through which he may come to realise a good 'higher' than mere survival)<sup>32</sup>, and finally, the importance of

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<sup>30</sup> For further discussion on the "encomiastic future" see Hayden, P. *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar* (Gottingen: 1995, ch.3); and on the use of the future more generally, Slater, W.J. "Futures in Pindar" *Classical Quarterly* vol. 19 (1969) pp. 86-94

<sup>31</sup> These questions will arise in slightly different contexts throughout this study as I explore the idea of reasonable creativity—two concepts which seem at face value to be at odds. To what extent must man follow rules thereby maintaining stability and security—the reason(s) that order(s) his environment? When and how can he challenge and even break existing rules? This issue arises with the choices generals make in Thucydides' *History*, as well as with the application of the law by the "equitable" man in Aristotle.

<sup>32</sup> The sense of something 'higher' comes through the personal—here, a particular deed—but can lead men to an understanding of a more general human good. I believe that this is one of the functions of Pindar's odes, i.e., to embed the individual event/action in a song in such a way that a general truth can be gleaned from it.

recognising his own limitations, that is, avoiding hubris and *pleonexia* (or over-reaching). I will begin with Pythian X, thought to be Pindar's earliest work, composed at the age of 20.

### Chapter 3: Pythean X<sup>33</sup>

"Happy Lacedaimon/Blessed Thessaly!:" Pindar begins Pythean X with a joyous exclamation. However, it is not directed, as one might expect, towards the victor he had been paid to praise, but towards the cities (and surrounding areas) from which the victor and the poem's commissioner sprang. The praise gradually becomes more finely pointed, and finally, at the penultimate line of the opening 'turn,' Pindar refers to the athlete himself, Hippocleas. The order here is significant. The victor comes into focus, only after the audience understands him to be a part of a political community, which has itself been located, if somewhat indirectly, in a larger, more 'cosmic' context (Sparta and Thessaly were believed to share Heracles, the great hero and son of Zeus, as a common ancestor). Therefore, while Hippocleas' glory is undoubtedly the result of *his particular* feat accomplished due to *his individual* prowess, through the words and music of the ode, the audience is compelled to consider the larger context of his victory, or, more precisely, the preconditions necessary to bring it about:<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For further analysis of P. X, see Rose, P. *Sons of Gods, Children of Earth* (Ithaca: 1992, pp.164-184); Glidersleeve, B. *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (New York: American Book Co., 1885 pp. 348-356); Nisetich, F. *Pindar's Victory Songs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1980, pp. 213-218); Burton, R.W.B., *Pindar's Pythian Odes* Oxford: 1962, pp. 1-15).

<sup>34</sup>Kurke emphasises the importance of explicitly acknowledging family in an ode: "victories of other family members are included as a matter of course" (*The Traffic in Praise* Ithaca: 1991, p. 19). The dependence of son on father, of both on city, and of all on the grace of the gods, is a theme common to almost every ode. Pindar's words enforce the need not only to recognise this inescapable dependence of the particular man on the broader group to which he owes his excellence, but demand further that such recognition bring with it respect. Individual victory is *always* coupled with a sense of obligation to give the highest honour/praise to those powers that are responsible for all particular successes. See for example, P. VI, where Pindar draws attention not only to Xenocrates, the victor, but also to his son. He embeds the story of Antilochus (a model son because he died for his father), in a tradition of son respecting father, and man—more generally—honouring the gods:

Zeus Kronidas,  
The deep voiced Lord of Lightning and Thunderbolts,  
Him thou shalt worship first of the gods:

The end and the beginning,  
O great Apollo, ripen into sweetness for men  
when a god urges them on.  
He has done what he has done  
in accordance, surely, with your plans.  
But he has also walked  
in the footsteps of his father. (7-11)

The importance of the community as opposed to the individual athlete himself arises again when Pindar refers to “the host of dwellers” who proclaim Hippocleas winner. In this, there is (perhaps) the insinuation that Hippocleas’ success depends, to some extent, on the collective recognition of those around him. It is the community’s conscious judgement and acknowledgement of Hippocleas that makes his victory significant—glory does not come from the brute fact that he, the young man Hippocleas, won a race (which is itself comprehensible only due to the broader, established tradition of the games). The concrete race and the victor alone cannot enter consciousness in a meaningful way—the sheer uniqueness of the event places it outside the known, it has yet no place. Hippocleas’ exceptional speed is insufficient to give meaning to the race; it needs to be affirmed in some more formal way by those around him.<sup>35</sup>

If Hippocleas’ speed, the beauty of his action, succeeds in ‘piercing’ public consciousness, yet cannot be automatically understood and integrated into the minds and lives of the spectators, what more is needed? Such integration involves something more active than the mere passive watching of an event—

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And a like honour  
Give to thy parents for the length of their days.  
Antilochos was a warrior long ago  
Who kept to this purpose,  
for he died for his father. (25-45)

This theme appears again in N. II when Pindar claims that “Truly Salamis has strength/ To breed a man for the fight” (12-14) and later: “In old tales of Archanai/ Had brave men, and in every event of the Games” (15-17). While it is Timodamos’ feat that occasions the ode, his physical ability is not its only, perhaps not even its primary focus-- rather those *poleis* that produce the individuals are the object of praise.

<sup>35</sup> Rose argues that Pindar’s words imply that “man’s achievement of true blessedness *depends* on his being celebrated in song by skilled poets” (*Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth* Ithaca: 1992, p. 176).

it requires a kind of guided and active *experience*. The gradual procession Pindar leads in his ode, connecting god, city, family, and finally individual, provides such an experience. The participants of the *komos* are actively involved in the celebration, for each must follow<sup>36</sup> Pindar's melody, through which he draws connections, at times using complex images and metaphors, between the victory, themselves, and the world.<sup>37</sup> The poem does more than just state these connections. Pindar himself notes that his praise works complexly, at many levels at once—in Nemean V, he contrasts the form of the ode, with that of a other, more static arts:

I am no maker of statues,  
who fashions figures to stand  
motionless on the self-same pedestal;  
rather, on every ship, every bark  
set sail, sweet song going from Aigina  
to say Pytheas, the mighty son of Lampon,  
won the victor's crown in the pancratium at Nemea. (1-5)

Not only can Pindar's odes be verbally communicated and so travel easily beyond the location of their performance, but the words that makes them up are inherently more flexible/fluid than say, marble, requiring interpretation from all who hear them. The intricate and complex approach to his subject serves to realise an important part of the ode's function, i.e., to ensure the active involvement of the audience. Only given this *shared, participatory experience* can the truths he brings be learnt.

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<sup>36</sup>Though I recognise the potential implausibility of the suggestion that the audience "must follow" Pindar's path, one might see the music as a benignly coercive force, luring the audience in to hear (and hopefully to absorb) its message. North notes that the lyre (which often accompanied the performance of an ode) was thought to have "calming, civilizing effects," encouraging and cultivating *sophrosune*—moderation/self-restraint (*From Myth to Icon* Ithaca: 1979 p. 65). Perhaps this state of mind allowed for a more unified experience, bringing diverse identities/peoples together harmoniously, and the collective involvement in the ode in turn, likely encouraged greater individual participation.

<sup>37</sup>Again, one might ask, to what extent was the audience able to follow what seem to us now, exceedingly obscure connections, juxtaposition of images, cryptic metaphors of Pindar's odes? Was this a way to exclude the lower, less educated masses? I would argue that this is not necessarily a sign of elitism, but might be the result of a belief that concerted effort brings greater, better entrenched understanding.

The experience is not an appeal to what has come to be known as the 'rational' side of man. Rather, the ode engages the audience through other means; through emotion, through man's response to beauty, through his curiosity and his desire to feel a part of something. While this kind of access might be seen as more personal/subjective than the so-called 'neutral' principles of much contemporary political theory, it is not therefore confined to a limited audience, but can succeed in illuminating ideas and stimulating thought in *all* those who actively take part. The odes, Miller suggests, are "transpersonal;" because of their references to both commonly known, overarching myths and the cultures and histories of particular, individual *poles*.<sup>38</sup> They offer an alternative means of identifying and addressing man – they echo his experience and simultaneously demand his participation in and reflection on this experience. In this, the odes represent universal human characteristics in a way in which 'neutral' principles cannot. And further, by their very nature and structure, they seem to encourage and 'activate' man to think *actively* (which is to say, creatively).

The experience Pindar crafts weaves together many diverse ideas. One 'thread' is the continual reference to actual, familiar cities which serve in part to lead members of the victor's community to feel a real share in Hippocleas' success. This, one might assume, cultivated confidence and pride, and ultimately, a firmer and more expanded sense of cultural (and individual) identity. However, if it is true that Pindar's audience was not homogeneous, what of the participants in the *komos* who were not of the same political community? Just as the success is not exactly Hippocleas' own, neither is it solely the property of his own political community.<sup>39</sup> Both the individual

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<sup>38</sup> *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness* (New York: 1994, p. 86)

<sup>39</sup> In fact, Pindar words often suggest that a fundamental virtue of a community is its capacity to make outsiders feel welcome. In N.V, for instance, he refers to the victory of Pytheas, claiming that "To the Aiakdai, he has brought honour / And to his mother city, land that loves strangers." (6-8). In P.V, Pindar praises the city of Cyrene, referring to it as "A tower of a city, / A most bright eye to strangers." (56-57). In N.III.3, he refers to Aigina's "welcoming Dorian island" (3), and again in N.I Pindar praises the virtue of generosity towards strangers:

I have taken my stand at the courtyard gate



victor and the society to which he belongs are humbled in light of the gods. It is "great Apollo" who "ripens into sweetness" the trials of men (10-11). Thus, all listeners, whether sharing a common citizenry, or from distant, and possibly even rival cities, are reminded of their place in a larger order, and their ultimate subordination to the (often erratic behaviour) of the gods.<sup>40</sup>

But, crucially important is the fact that while the ode reinforces and stresses the importance of the larger 'cosmic' order (producing both pride and humility), it was commissioned and performed for a specific reason—the recent success of the particular individual, Hippocleas. This success highlights the domain, however small, of man's freedom.<sup>41</sup> It represents

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Of a man who welcomes strangers,  
And sweet is my song,  
Here a fitting feast is set; not often  
Is the house without guests from overseas. (19-22)

On a smaller scale, in O.VII, Pindar opens the ode with the description of wedding rites, indicating the good of the resulting union of two different households:

As a man takes in his rich hand a bowl  
Bubbling inside with the wine's dew,  
And shall give it  
To his young bridegroom to pledge him  
From one home to another. (1-4)

That Zeus was (among other things) the god of hospitality also points to the importance of treating visitors with appropriate respect, generosity, and trust. Traditional literature and mythology have shown that betraying this fundamental duty can have disastrous repercussions.

Yet, the Greek attitude towards "outsiders" was in no sense straightforward. From today's standpoint, it seems at times paradoxical. The importance of being a good host was undeniable, but not *everyone* was welcome into a particular household or community. Just who was the appropriate recipient of a community's warmth is ambiguous – the line between welcome guest, and adversarial "other" is not always easy for us, from this distant vantage point, to discern (this includes both enemies of equal status, as well as inferior, irrational, almost *inhuman* 'barbarians'). Dougherty discusses the complex relationship of victory, friendship, and colonisation in Pindar (*The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece* Oxford: 1993, pp.132ff.).

<sup>40</sup> The motivating force of the gods on man, often by way of his *thymos*, is discussed by Hayden in *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar* (Gottingen: 1995).

<sup>41</sup> I use "freedom" here in a very narrow sense. Pindar's use of the Greek word *eleutheria* is in no sense the modern one. It is limited, referring to the freedom of a *polis* as not the subject of another *polis* (e.g., in O.XII, Pindar begs Zeus to watch over the freedom of Himera, a land recently having undergone a revolution: "Aigina, dear mother,/ Keep this city in her voyage of freedom" P. VIII (95-100). *Eleutheria* was not directly attributable to an individual (whose life was too ephemeral, too vulnerable the forces of chance to secure something like freedom, and who therefore could only access freedom through the structure of a flourishing *polis*). However, the individual was free to choose to undertake the necessary training/work needed to cultivate his talents if the *polis* in which he lived provided him with such options.

man's ability to stretch beyond what he has been until that point. The individual is not lost entirely in the face of greater powers—indeed, his particular actions are the motor behind progress and growth. The individual effort which climaxes in a glorious, new achievement is a kind of catalyst, causing the ode's existence, which, in part through oscillation between familiar and unknown, community and individual, serves to expand man's self-image which in turn affects his actions in the world.<sup>42</sup> The ode thus has two important and in some sense opposing messages: praise for the immediate occasion—the success of the individual (in this case, Hippocleas)—illustrating man's freedom to push and actively extend himself beyond past bounds. Yet, at the same time, through reference to family, city, hero, and gods, it also firmly established man's place in a larger context. Disregarding this place and pushing too far, we will see later, had grave repercussions.

Placing man in a larger context has another important effect—it gives him some security and stability—of utmost importance given the inescapable human susceptibility to chance and luck. In what might be seen as an attempt to qualify his praise of human greatness—whether in terms of the city, family, or individual victor—Pindar follows some largely 'political' praise with an indication of the frailty of man. Pindar speaks of possibilities and hopes: "May their luck hold, and keep in the days to come."<sup>43</sup> It is unclear, Pindar suggests, whether or not glory will continue, even given a noble family and multiple past successes. "There's no guessing," he echoes later in the poem, "What any twelvemonth brings" (62).<sup>44</sup> Unexpected twists are inherent in

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<sup>42</sup>Professor J. Lidov in a seminar at the Graduate Center at CUNY ("Pindar" Fall, 2003) highlighted the necessary (and often productive) tension between individual achievement, triggered by hope (*Elpis*), and the (general) force of *Tuche*, which often served to limit and impede the aspirations of particular men.

<sup>43</sup> Lines: 17-19 – *epoito*, optative mood, indicating wish/hope.

<sup>44</sup>Pindar's odes are full of references on the theme of human frailty and vulnerability to chance/luck, for instance, P. XII:

Any bliss man may win  
(And without labour, none!) God shall perfect  
Today perhaps! But fate may not be escaped.  
Then lo! Time's hand,

human life, and often come and steer man off his intended path. The gods act according to their own rules, which, though unknown to man, greatly affect him. Thus, human beings cannot know with certainty what the future holds, they cannot 'hand pick' the events that will influence their lives and guide their decisions. However, if man can more accurately identify and understand his nature more generally—his inextricable place in a larger web of fluctuating relationships with other men, the physical world, his past, and as well as his immediate circumstances—he might generate the strength and adaptability to endure "the change of winds" which blow him.<sup>45</sup>

The 'human condition', however uncertain, is not marked by utter chaos and despair. Pindar repeatedly invokes natural metaphors when speaking of human beings:

Even now Alcimidas gives valuable witness  
That his race is like the fruitful fields  
Which change about  
And now give men abounding life from the soil,  
Now rest again and pick up strength. (N. VI, 7-11)<sup>46</sup>

This highlights human beauty (as a kind of sovereign human excellence), which, though fragile and delicate, dependent for survival on the right environment and care, is nonetheless, like nature, a genuine good in its own

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Throwing at you the unforeseen  
Turns calculation upside down, and gives you  
One thing, but another not yet. (27-33)

Other examples may be found in P. X (17, 20); P. VII (16-18); I. VIII (14-17).

<sup>45</sup>For example, Lloyd remarks that however unable we are to control the lives of the gods, we can gain some understanding of them because their lives bear resemblance to those of humans: "Not only are the Olympians generally conceived in the form of men, but the whole Homeric description of the gods—of their life, their behaviour and motives which govern it, even of their rudimentary political organisation—faithfully reflects Homeric society itself" (*Polarity and Analogy*. Bristol (repr): 1987, p. 194). A similar idea is expressed by Pindar in N. VI (discussed more fully below): "Single is the race, single/ Of men and of gods;/ From a single mother we both draw breath./But a power in everything/keeps us apart" (1-4). Given the similarity, Lloyd argues that there is a potential for acquiring understanding by way of analysing and interpreting analogy, and *not* through learning fixed truths. Such an understanding, though imprecise, can be seen as itself a good, implying the further point that not all understanding leads to certainty and control.

<sup>46</sup>In N. II, Pindar draws an analogy between Timonoos' success and "the finest harvest" (8-10). We will see that for Thucydides also, attention to nature and her recurrent cycles helps to increase man's understanding of his world and his capacity to establish order in it (see especially the discussion on Demosthenes below).

right. Hippocleas is crowned with “splendid wreathes” which are beautiful, a sign of excellence, even despite the fact that over time they will in time wither and dry out. This is unlike the “bay leaves of gold” which crown the gods.<sup>47</sup> “Lordly wealth,” he *hopes* (but cannot know) “will stay aflower,” again indicating the ephemeral nature of man and his fortune. The comparisons to the natural beauty of flowers, the symbol of the victory wreath, suggests that man is indeed a valuable and worthy being amongst mortal creatures. His achievements, while fleeting, are objects of genuine recognition and celebration.

However, the success and celebration should not lead to hubris or excessive vanity. This might result in a false sense of power, the belief that even as mere mortals, men can become like gods on earth. This inflated—and false—sense of self Pindar indicates, often leads to *pleonexia*, grasping for more or “over-reaching.”<sup>48</sup> Instone indicates how the violent nature of many of the myths Pindar uses illustrates the admonitory nature of his odes.<sup>49</sup> Pindar repeatedly stresses the contrast between god and man as if to hinder the development of excessive arrogance:

They [the gods] feast and are glad.  
And sickness never, nor cursed old age  
Touches their holy bodies;  
Without toil, without war  
They dwell, and do not trouble. (41-44)

Man, on the other hand, is often troubled, his hopes and reality do not always coincide. Pindar repeatedly remarks on man's inherent limitations:

He shall never climb the brazen sky

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<sup>47</sup>Pindar regularly contrasts the eternal and enduring nature of the gods with the ephemeral lot of men. For example, gods' dwellings are sturdy and fixed, e.g., “Apollo's porch” P.VII.9, “Pillars of Heracles” O.III.42. In N. I, Pindar contrasts the men who live in the (seasonal) “Green branch of Syracuse”, who compete for the (passing beauty) of “Olympian olive's leaves”, with gods who wield “bronze weapons” and sit upon “golden thrones.” Man's memory cannot be dependent on physical constructs (the results of *techne*), but he *can* win ever-lasting remembrance through song (the result of divine inspiration).

<sup>48</sup>For a clear and concise analysis of myths involving the dangers of excessive *hubris*, see North, H.. *From Myth to Icon* (Ithaca: 1979, pp.27-33).

<sup>49</sup>Instone, S. *Pindar: Selected Odes* (Warminster: 1996, pp. 2-4)

But what glittering things we mortal men attain;  
He travels there. (25-28)<sup>50</sup>

We will not—and indeed cannot ever—elevate ourselves to the greatness of the gods, Pindar seems to caution again and again. Note too that human glory “glitters.” It is not a bright and constant source of light—objects that glitter catch light, they are not a source but a kind of a reflection, intermittent and elusive. As humans then, men cannot expect to ‘shine’ like the gods, and thus should not try to live a divine life; “drop the anchor quick from the bows./Let it bite the bottom, to keep us off the reef” (51-52). Divine happiness is eternal, while that of man ebbs and flows throughout a single life, and man should expect such fluctuations.<sup>51</sup>

The contrast here between god and man is made all the more forceful as it follows immediately after a comment on man’s limitations, and the absurdity of excessive pride or self-aggrandisement: “He [Apollo] laughs as he sees/Their beasts high cocked presumption!” (33-36). Through the story of Perseus, who could only *visit*, but could not remain in the land of the Hyperboreans, Pindar’s message is unequivocal: man is not, and should not presume to be divine, to live as immortals do.<sup>52</sup> However, this leaves the present reader (and perhaps the audience) with an ambiguity—Pindar seems to suggest that man should strive to be godlike, yet only to a certain point. What is this point? How does he know when he has ‘hit’ it? These questions are not easily answered.<sup>53</sup> We have seen already that excessive hubris is a

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<sup>50</sup>Notice that Pindar includes himself in this—“we mortal men”—he is present in the ode (and trying to display his own respectful modesty).

<sup>51</sup>In P. III, Pindar again reflects this theme: “We must ask from the Gods/Things suited to hearts that shall die/Knowing the path we are in, the nature of our doom” (57-60).

<sup>52</sup>Rose notes that the praise of the just, “upright minds” of the Hyperboreans can be seen as parallel for appropriate (*human*) achievement of the Thessalians (*Sons of the Gods, Children of the Earth* Ithaca: 1992, p. 172). See also Gildersleeve: “The land of the Hyperboreans is a glorified Thessaly” (*Pindar* New York: 1890, p. 350).

<sup>53</sup>Aristotle will explicitly highlight the difficulty of finding this balance in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “while there are many ways to miss the mark, there is only one correct way.” The lack of definitive theoretical answers to concrete ethical and political dilemmas in both poetry and Aristotelian philosophy indicates the inexact nature of any philosophy of man. This imprecision however is not necessarily negative for it leaves space for man to question, to be

common human fault, and a recurring theme of Greek myth, but ultimately, this abstract 'truth' does not give definitive answers as to just where striving for excellence ends and *pleonexia* begins. Is it then finally a matter of trial and error? And if so, is the athlete, sent out to 'stretch' the limits of the species' excellence an innocent guinea pig, a sacrifice in the hope of progress?<sup>54</sup> I wish to argue that the odes themselves--through the examples they demonstrate and the participation they demand--help the audience (and later, readers) to enrich *and make useful* their understanding of the necessarily imprecise concepts of human excellence, *pleonexia*, and hubris. The odes suggest that while these concepts can yield no definite and universal rules to guide action, *experiencing* them through their representation in myth, analogy, and story can inform man's understanding in a practical way, so that he is better able to act well.

There is one aspiration about which there is neither question nor lingering ambiguity, for it is simply and forever outside man's scope. This is the characteristic that most traps him in the 'lower' world—his mortality. However, Pythean X (and indeed almost all Pindar's odes) suggests the way in which man, so far as he is able, can achieve a certain, human immortality. This comes through being captured in the beauty of song—the intoxicating odes themselves are vehicles for a peculiarly human type of immortality. While men die, the poems celebrating them live on, and can be sung for generations, indeed, for thousands of years.<sup>55</sup> The odes recurring presence in a culture not only recalls the victor himself, but triggers broader memories,

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critical and reflective—which is to say, it provides the conditions for man to exercise his *reason*, after which he can make prudent, *creative* choices.

<sup>54</sup> While there is no denying the element of risk in actions which strive to extend beyond the known and accepted norms of a particular society. Nonetheless, this risk is decreased given a more general understanding of the kind of creature man is as a species (which reflection on the odes can provide). Such an understanding does not provide precise rules about how far one should reach, but it can offer some guidelines to shape and structure one's choices. Furthermore, societies (organisations of men living/cooperating together) provide men with exemplars, people (perhaps athletes, or aristocrats, or men of virtue) who have, through experience, acquired a broader understanding of (at least a piece of) the world which they can impart through their words and actions.

<sup>55</sup> Preserving memories for posterity, we will see, was a goal for Thucydides as well.

awakening a dormant sense of its history, pride, and identity. In composing an ode, Pindar is thus raising man to the closest he can get to “pure” divinity. However, his victory songs imply that immortality has a special meaning for human beings, it is not the extension of the concrete life of an individual. Rather man, preserved in words, becomes a vital force through the memories he stimulates, all the more powerful as they evolve into the collective memory of a community.

The ability to achieve this goal of a place in (a common cultural) memory depends to a large extent on the medium through which the memory flows. Often Pindar, when speaking of his odes, likens them to fluids, a metaphor which is not only appropriate to the songs themselves, but for man as well. A fluid indicates the simultaneous strength and variability of human beings. Fluid moves in a kind of constant, yet unpredictable motion—powerful, yet often erratic, as human life can be. In order to realise its power effectively, a fluid must take on a definitive form, that is to say, it must be *channelled*, always somehow constrained and directed in its flow. These characteristics of fluids find a parallel in human life which also must be lived within a structure, according to a definitive order. If human freedom is to be constructively actualised, so as not to become a chaotic (and violent) fight to secure one’s own desires and personal survival, it must be deliberately shaped and *guided*.<sup>56</sup> Fluids in Pindar’s imagery come in many forms which illustrate these qualities; e.g., the flowing of nectar and honey, attracting men and influencing through sweetness. Elsewhere, water images invoke the mighty flow of rivers and the tremendous power of the sea.

In Pythean X, fluid images recall both the past and future. Hippocleas’ present success would not be possible without the goods he received from his family:

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<sup>56</sup> This idea emerges again with Aristotle who claims in the *Politics* that man without the structure of a *polis* is potentially worse than the ‘lowest’ beast (1253a30-33).

the blood in him follows his father's tracks,  
Who won at Olympia twice. (12-13)

Pindar's words suggest that the blood is transferred simply and naturally from father to son (it "flows"), and not recklessly, but in "tracks." Towards the end of the ode, Pindar evokes the future playing on the fluidity of song itself:

I hope that the when the men of Ephyra  
Pour out sweet music beside [the river] Peneios  
They will make Hippocleas with their singing  
More splendid than ever. (55-58)

Here Pindar depicts men singing together--an activity that requires a shared goal and cooperation, the result of which is a beautiful way of imparting information. The song both exalts the individual and creates a shared, pleasurable experience for those involved. That the singing takes place near a river continues the fluid metaphor, and suggests that the words in song will travel, and like a river, nurture those with whom they come into contact.

Like fluid naturally seeps into and nurtures the earth, song permeates easily the minds of men, influencing and shaping their thoughts. Words embedded in melody can take root in the mind of an individual, and flower into a lasting, yet dynamic image, evoking, in this case, memory. Memory, Pindar suggests, serves to enhance and replenish a fading identity (which, I would argue, cultivates agency necessary for deliberate choice and action). Hippocleas is made "more splendid than ever" through his representation in the ode. There, his magnificence is distilled, bringing his family and community pride, a sense of who they have been, and who they are. The unique beauty of Hippocleas' action casts a light; at once illuminating a coherent, shared past, and simultaneously suggesting possibilities for the future.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Rose makes the further point that not only does the ode bridge past and future, but abstract and concrete: [Pindar's] suggestive shift from the concretely athletic to the generally human...[indicates] the broader relevance of the 400 meter dash" (*Songs of the Gods, Children of Earth* Ithaca: 1992, p. 169).



Pindar's songs of praise captivate an audience in part by stimulating potent memories. These can in turn generate a sense of identity, empowerment, and hope given the described past success. At the same time, the melody of the ode mirrors man's peculiar kind of excellence—like a song, it is not static or immutable, rather it “darts from one thought to another” (54). It flows and changes within a larger structure, and its inherent variability allows for, even at times invites improvisation. This fluidity reflects a certain freedom man has to consciously construct his own life, though, of course, only within the parameters of his nature (just as a song, to be pleasing, must retain its organised composition). The epinician, like the memory it triggers, and man himself, is at once in flux and lasting. The medium of song through which the ode is communicated creates a distinct and pleasing experience for the audience which makes its message more easily absorbed. Once internalised, this message continues to be thought-provoking and inspirational. At its best, the truths the ode embodies, though not fixed, immutable principles, nonetheless increase understanding and provide the stabilisation needed for reasonable, creative action.

#### Chapter 4: Nemean VI<sup>58</sup>

Nemean VI, like Pythean X, does not open with direct praise for Alcimidas, the triumphant wrestler, but with the larger issue of the relationship between god and man:

Single is the race  
 Of men and of gods;  
 From a single mother we both draw our breath.  
 But a difference of power in everything  
 Keeps us apart;  
 For the one race is nothing,  
 whereas the bronze heaven remains a secure abode forever.  
 (1-4)

There is here an explicit recognition of similarities between the two. They share a common ancestry, which one might presume gives rise to the

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<sup>58</sup> For further analysis of N. VI, see Nisetich (*Pindar's Victory Songs* Baltimore: 1980, pp. 255-258); Bury, J.B. *Pindar's Nemean Odes* (London: 1890, pp. 98-113); Farnell, L.R. *The Works of Pindar: Critical Commentary* London: 1932, pp. 281-288).

resemblance in body and mind which come in the following lines: "Yet we can in the greatness of mind/Or of body be like the Immortals" (5-6). However, neither likeness can override the essential differences, which Pindar does not hesitate to make known. Once again, these differences revolve primarily around power specifically that which is gained through foresight and immortality. Ironically, it is precisely his most *un-godlike* attribute, that is to say, his mortality, which provides man with his only substantive bit of sure foreknowledge. Therefore, human beings must not only face the inevitability of their own mortality, but also the fact that death is, in truth, *their only real certainty*. However, as man travels from birth to death, this 'certainty' has limited use, for it does not release him from his ignorance of what, on a smaller scale, will come next.<sup>59</sup> Each day in a human life involves constant fluctuation and change, and the incessant threat of interference by unknown, external forces: "we do not know/by day or in the night/what course destiny/has marked for us to run" (4-7).

The fact of this inherent indeterminacy in human life demands that man make choices:

There are broad approaches  
from every direction  
that bards may take. (44)

The allusion to choices here (presumably, to the choices Pindar himself faces in composing the ode)<sup>60</sup> invites the audience (and reader) to speculate on the many 'approaches' among which he must decide in his own life.<sup>61</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Indeed, one might argue that this brute fact simply cannot enter into our every day consciousness. The psychoanalyst, Thomas Ogden, argues that "We are incapable of both maintaining our sanity and experiencing our own mortality," *Reverie and Interpretation* (New Jersey: 1997, p.18).

<sup>60</sup> Pindar 'appears' in other odes (e.g.: Nemean IX, 40-45: "I shall tell..." *phasomai*; Isthmian IV, 1: "It is I" *esti moi*; Olympian XIII 93 "But I..." *eme d'...*). For a more detailed study on the nature of Pindar's presence in his odes, see Lefkowitz' discussion in *First Person Fictions: Pindar's Poetic 'I'* (Oxford: 1991).

<sup>61</sup> Not only must man decide between a variety of different external possibilities given his particular 'place' in life, but each man is, internally, a unique creature, capable of more or less than others due to his own natural make-up:

What nature gives is in every way best, but many  
have tried to win renown

concrete reality of Pindar's choice brings the abstract fact of human choice to a concrete, personal, and thus a very real level, but within constraints (of the lyric's frame and structure). In expressing this experience, Pindar, (who is, in his role as a poet, *external* to the audience) makes a confession, and in this, he extends a metaphorical hand out to the listeners—the two separate spheres are bridged. He sympathises with the audience (albeit indirectly), and in this, validates a common human plight—the necessity of choice amidst contingency and uncertainty.<sup>62</sup> In this again, an experience is created—one that recognises in a 'public' (i.e., shared) forum a human phenomenon which is common to all involved.

At the same time, one might assume that with the reference to "bards" (or tellers of tales, *logioisin*), Pindar helps to 'elevate' (the thoughts of) his onlookers beyond even himself as the poet/performer. This allusion could not help but conjure up memories of the work of great, indeed almost superhuman poets of the past—(most likely) Homer and Hesiod. In this, the participants in the *komos* would have been compelled again to draw connections from within their own particular worlds to ideas and images of the past. For the audience to remember the greatness of these men, now almost abstractions themselves (but abstractions with qualities with which they could undoubtedly identify) perhaps served to cast their very real and often murky, concrete choices in a somewhat brighter light. At the very least, the memory might provide models to use to enhance an understanding of the

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By taking lessons in prowess.  
If a God is not there, nothing,  
for some roads go farther than others.  
No single training will look after all of us. (O. IX, 100-106.)

This idea is echoed later in Aristotle who also speaks of the diversity of men, claiming that not all, for example, should eat the diet of the wrestler Milo (*NE* 1106b1-8)..

<sup>62</sup> This is not to imply that to have choices is entirely negative. It may be difficult, given that humans lack foresight, but Pindar also refers to choice as a sign of god's grace:

By grace of gods  
I have an endless path  
On every side; For you Melissos, in the Isthmian Games  
Have revealed to me abundant means  
To pursue in song the prowess of your race." (I. IV, 1-3)

human condition and through this, give some guidance. The personal divulgence of Pindar's condition so immediately juxtaposed to a familiar, relevant, and, in an important sense, *human* abstraction, encourages a connection between listener (reader) and some larger, more formidable abstract entity with which one can feel some kinship, and which one might be able to use as an exemplar.

The scope here, however, need not be so wide. The actual decision making process it seems, can be aided by looking much closer at hand. This becomes clear in the lines that follow. There, Pindar reflects on the ancestors of Alcimidas:

The Aikiadai,  
by the display of their great deeds  
have bequeathed to it a glorious heritage. (46-47)

This direct reference to the more recent past, to a more personal/local history, helps the audience see the many tiers of exemplars to which they might appeal for guidance. Reflection on and engagement with history, whether recent or remote, can bring the present to a level of intelligibility otherwise seemingly impossibly confused and overwhelming. Man left to himself in his own fleeting present cannot think, much less act reasonably—from such a narrow viewpoint, he is often incapable of even discerning the full range of options and choices in front of him. Past human experience, Pindar suggests, should be made to do the work it is capable of, that is to illuminate, inform, and suggest by revealing man's already realised potentials, which serve to reinforce his identity, and at the same time, shed light on future possibilities.<sup>63</sup>

How then do "future possibilities" manifest themselves in the odes? However important the past, Pindar does not dismiss, nor downplay the significance of the present moment, specifically the occasion of Alcimidas'

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<sup>63</sup>Kurke writes that the odes suggest that "the road of achievement and the road of the ancestors are one" (*The Traffic in Praise* Ithaca: 1991, p. 61).

success. However, he recognises the present, only after admitting his own debt to past poets:

This theme men of old found a road for traffic;  
I too follow it and make it my care.  
But the wave that rolls nearest the ship's keel  
Is always a man's first concern. (53-56)

The "wave" here, that which lifts and carries the audience forward, the source of the ode, is Alcimidas himself, or, more specifically, his magnificent wrestling ability displayed in the Nemean game. Pindar speaks to Alcimidas directly "you have added it [glory] to your illustrious race." This remark, so pointed and direct—actually calling out the young victor by name—in conjunction with the metaphor of a mighty wave, brings out the power of the concrete, of the present (most immediately experienced) particular individual (or action). Like a great wave, a beautiful action moves people, it can elevate and uplift. In doing so, those witnessing it gain a new perspective, they are catapulted into new 'territory' from which they can reassess where they have been and are now. This overt reference to the individual Alcimidas and the analogy of the wave gives each person a new perspective from which to reflect on his unique place in the broader world, and in this to recognise the power a single action can have. At the same time, as Kurke forcefully argues, the victor's 'transcendent' action is always 'brought down' and re-connected to his family. Only given this reunion does it become accessible and meaningful.<sup>64</sup>

Almost as though anticipating the potential for the growth of insolence and hubris given such recognition, Pindar ends the poem praising the skills of the victor's trainer, Melesias, who, Pindar claims, is like a "dolphin in the sea." Such a graceful and intelligent animal is able to ride the waves (echoing the preceding metaphor). He is a necessary part of maintaining the sea's natural equilibrium. Equally important is the role of Melesias, as Alcimidas' trainer. By providing a habitual and rigorous education, he is able to compose the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. pp. 58ff.

athlete's brute force into ordered and meaningful action. That is, Melesias 'channels' Alcimidas raw potentials and natural abilities into a beautiful and skilled display of bodily virtue.<sup>65</sup> All human 'transcendence', Pindar seems to suggest, though coming from an individual, and in its most final and complete form, the action of a particular man, depends on a recognised, organised, collective strength.<sup>66</sup> This strength takes the form of a tradition of training, of 'riding' (a wave), though not yet 'steering' oneself, in order to bring the individual to his excellence, and without which training, he would not have succeeded.

Pindar's reflection on man and his lack of foresight in Nemean VI suggests another, slightly different human truth. Human excellence cannot depend on a capacity to predict the future. Such an ability is simply not available to man. Even a great family like the one of the victor, Alcimidas, does not in itself ensure a bright future. As inherited excellence is perhaps man's most assured claim to an auspicious future, when Pindar doubts even its reliability, the human quest for foreknowledge and certainty is called into question. Alcimidas' lineage, though undeniably extraordinary,<sup>67</sup> is like:

crop-bearing fields  
which alternate  
and at one time give men abundant sustenance  
from the plains,  
but at another rest to gather strength (10-12).

The good life for man, his good fortune, is never assured nor is it in any sense eternal.<sup>68</sup> If any regularity is detectable, it is, like that of seasons and crops, a

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<sup>65</sup> Recall the metaphor of the *channelled* fluid above, and the function of the laws of the Aristotelian *polis* below.

<sup>66</sup> This 'collective strength' is derived from a culture of shared values and a general sense of reasonableness which serves as the grounding from which the individual feat can extend/fit into/depart from.

<sup>67</sup> Nisetich cites twenty-four previous victories for the Bassidai (*Pindar's Victory Songs* Baltimore: 1980, p. 255). However, success seems to skip generations, highlighting the variability of even the best "genes."

<sup>68</sup> In P. I, Pindar again underscores the inherent variability in man's fortune and the importance of song in providing him with some measure of lasting stability and certainty:

Only the glory of fame which they leave behind them  
Proclaims men's way of life, when they die,

cyclical one—human beings must work and rest, progress and retreat, always aware of their vulnerability to forces outside their control.<sup>69</sup>

In comparing human life to an agricultural cycle (ostensibly familiar to most Greeks), Pindar captures an important and subtle point. The planting, growing, and reaping of crops embodies and crystallises an experience which involves a *limited* amount of human control. Through this parallel, he highlights the more 'animal' side of composite human nature. Agriculture illustrates man's intermediate (and ambiguous) level of power, a concrete example of regularity which admits to 'bumps'. However crucially important is the fact that often the obstacles man meets can be managed, not by 20/20 foresight, "the streams of foreknowledge" Pindar sings, "lie far off", nor from a supreme power that prevents them from happening in the first place, but rather through different, more human means. Human excellence does not lie in the capacity to foretell the future with any kind of precision, but much more in the astonishing ability to adapt to and shape the present given unexpected twists of fate. This adaptability demands that man be responsive to and *alive* in the particular moments of his life. The odes demand this kind of attentiveness and sensitivity—full and fruitful experience of them, requires reflection and participation. Thus, they act as training for men to be active in how they live their own lives.

Underlying man's adaptability is the recognition that alone he can achieve neither success nor can he even derive meaning from his actions. In order to be a responsive, deliberate, flourishing agent, man needs to see his particular decisions and actions as meaningfully connected.<sup>70</sup> This requires that he be well habituated within a particular tradition—one which has enough organization to provide him with training, which can accommodate the

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In history and in song. (91-93)

<sup>69</sup> Pindar uses a similar agricultural metaphor in describing the success of Timodamos in N.II: "Timonoos's son shall often reap/The finest harvest of victories" (8-10).

<sup>70</sup> The notion of one's actions being connected in such a way as to form a coherent whole, will be discussed below in my chapter on Aristotle's *Poetics*.

games, which has a public which values coming together to listen to and reflect upon poetic performance. Only with this common, shared, and recognised structure can he hope to gain the capacity to reshape and 'transcend' the seemingly unintelligible/unmanageable fluctuations inherent in his own individual situation.

The realisation that men lack complete control is made less severe in light of the subtle reminders from Pindar that they do have some. Through the analogy to the commonly experienced and familiar cycles in man's relationship to nature, Pindar's audience (and later readers) get an understanding quite distinct from that imparted by an abstract law or principle. Through reference to this common experience, Pindar catches nuances that abstract theoretical language, often deliberately severed from concrete experience, cannot. Furthermore, the 'cognitive' work necessary to draw these connections/to understand the analogies between similar processes exercises man's reasoning capacity and helps to develop it more fully. In comparison to the godly ideal, man may seem impossibly unruly, contradictory, and unpredictable. Yet, when seen in light of the experiences of his own species, this unpredictability is not a call for despair. Rather it calls for closer attention to and engagement with the world man does inhabit, working within human bounds to find what is possible, and ultimately, generating an understanding of what is humanly best.<sup>71</sup> This understanding arises only through *praxis*, in the context of having been trained for excellent action (which seems to have formed the basis of Pindar's understanding of the aristocracy).

Once again though, we are left in somewhat of a quandary. Where exactly are these 'human bounds', what is the nature of the 'humanly best'? Can they be

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<sup>71</sup> Gentili writes that the hero in Pindar helps man to see this distinctly human balance: "The Pindaric hero functions as a paradigm in two ways--both through the positive qualities that make him like the gods, and negative ones that distance him from them. Man's destiny may be defined in terms of this relationship" (*Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece* Baltimore: 1988, p. 136).



expressed in abstract laws and principles? Pythian X made clear the fact that the consequences of pushing beyond our 'natural' limitations were severe and, frankly, dangerous—would not the Greeks then have been better off simply accepting who and where they were, leaving any hope of 'improvement' behind as an excessively risky endeavour? Was there no access to, much less motivation for progress? These questions, while puzzling, lead to an important aspect of human nature which underlies Pindar's work—man's constant striving.<sup>72</sup> Our 'motion' may not be perfect and regular like the heavenly bodies, but by our very nature, we do continue to move, both physically and intellectually. How then are we to understand this movement and what might constrain it?

Again, as seen in Pythian X and the partial analysis of Nemean VI above, we must remember that human 'motion' (i.e., the ability, the *freedom*, to change and progress) is continually and simultaneously pulled in opposite directions. On one hand, Alcimidas' victory and Pindar's ode commemorating it work to re-invoke the memory of past ancestral glory, thereby reinforcing the bond between individual, family and community—all of whom share some common history. While I agree with Kurke that such recognition and acknowledgement acts to empower and 'refuel' (individual) and cultural identity: "The victor's ultimate goal in winning *kleos* is to bring it home, to set it in the house as a renewal of past achievements and an inspiration to future glories,"<sup>73</sup> it is also inherently a limiting force. After all, a reminder of the

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<sup>72</sup> This striving, it seems to me, is ultimately a striving towards stability. Hornblower, writing about Thucydides, notes this tendency in language, where he finds that: "the goal of descriptive and analytic writing is certainty" (*Thucydides* Baltimore: 1987, p.155). But where is this stability *really* located? Of what can human beings be certain? Might we somehow harness the certainty of man's curiosity and the accompanying drive (or motion) it produces? Such striving might be more "productive" when allied with a discourse which admits to "narrative vagueness." Perhaps the ambiguities inherent in Pindar's odes are the perfect compliment to a nature which is compelled by and drawn to solving mysteries: "Who can doubt that vagueness of a certain enticing sort offers a pleasure all its own: the pleasure, not of grasping the inconceivable, but of thinking one's grasp is truly about to close upon it" (Harris, J.R. *Accidental Grandeur: A Defence of Narrative Vagueness in Ancient Epic Literature* New York:: 1989, p.3).

<sup>73</sup> Kurke, L. *The Traffic in Praise* (Ithaca: 1991, p.60).

value and importance of community, family and tradition, though perhaps optimistic and self-affirming, is inherently limited to what has happened in the past—it is a strength rooted in conservatism, and thus cannot help but constrain pure, free movement. Pindar's odes balance this constraint through his deliberate and unqualified praise for the particular action of the victor—here, Alcimidas. That is, the concrete manifestation of a physical beauty embodied in the observable, particular *actions* of a uniquely skilled wrestler. It is therefore through this concrete act of human beauty—skilled/excellent *action* arising from rigorous training within a particular tradition (which is to say, *not* merely a beautiful body)—that we can, perhaps even, are forced to break free from tradition. The awesome, and yet crucially, wholly individual *human* action is that which pierces into new territory.<sup>74</sup>

Therefore, we see again the split message of the ode. Alcimidas' victory serves a dual purpose for Pindar. On the one hand, he uses it to illuminate the past and the importance of belonging to a particular tradition with structured practices. The ode brings to light, or perhaps more accurately, reminds the audience of the similar victories of his grandfather, and again, his great-grandfather before that. Success extends beyond family, and praise is given to the community as well, uncovering a (perhaps neglected) sense of strength and common, cultural identity. This pattern in the lives of the Brassidai clan through analogy to experienced, repeated cycles, delineates a kind of logical rhythm in human life. The recurring echoes of success reveal a kind of meaningful and continuous narrative, developing a sense of identity which, though dynamic, generates stability.

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<sup>74</sup> The tension between the freedom of an individual to 'create' his own life, and the fact that this freedom is contingent on man being bound to a particular tradition finds a parallel in the poet's capacity to 'create'. Gentili writes of the debt poets have "to tradition and to the achievement of [their] predecessors", whether acknowledged or denied. Poetics, he states, should be understood as "heuristic imitation rather than aesthetic creation"—the poet does not create from nothing, but rather is free to manipulate creatively the material he has available to him in virtue of his experiences, his tradition and culture. This is true even of Pindar, who unlike Bacchylides, strains to distinguish himself from his predecessors and highlight his 'originality' (Gentili *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece* Baltimore: 1988, pp.53-55).

And yet, while this strength, derived from a renewed sense of belonging and enduring identity gives meaning and stability to the world, it is also that which enables young Alcimidas to go out and push beyond traditional bounds (thereby potentially upsetting the stability gained). His effort culminates in an action so awesome that it raises the sights of men. It lifts them up to 'peer' over old boundaries and thus illuminates new horizons of possibility. This perspective gives man space (a critical distance) from which he can assess things anew.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it is in a sense, the conscious valuing of tradition and belonging (within family, community, society, cosmos) which provides the force needed to transcend it, and *without which it would never have occurred*. The poem continues to 'work' long after the actual action occurred because the magnificence of the particular victory is reflected by and retained in the language, imagery, context, and style of the ode. Thus, as the words and the images they recall are themselves preserved, so too is the capacity to gain critical distance from them.

Each new victory the audience enjoys presses further than the previous ones. The current victor, Alcimidas, augments the successes of his forefathers: "Alcimidas," Pindar sings, "you have added it [glory] to your illustrious race"(59-60). Thus his victory has its own important particularity as it introduces something new into the family, something is "added." Importantly, however, it also serves to reach back and pull the old glory into the present. The beauty Alcimidas displays is inspirational in both its utter newness and its reinforcement of tradition. As in Pythean X, the newness of the present victory is made 'absorbable' by Pindar in part through simultaneous references to both the past of the individual family as well as a larger past embodied by myth.

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<sup>75</sup> Therefore, the particular, personal, concrete act of beauty is that which allows one to use the past creatively and prudently without being unduly burdened by it. Importantly, this is not in some utterly detached utopian fantasy which might serve to turn attention from the here and now, but because the action is both *real* and beautiful, it encourages a closer attention to what man actually experiences and the kinds of deeds of which he is capable.

All this progress does not come easily, however. Human 'extension' requires hard work:

three prize winners  
Reached the peak of prowess by tasting of toil.  
With good fortune from god  
Boxing has proved no other house  
To hold more crowns in the heart of all of Hellas. (23-26)<sup>76</sup>

Men, unlike gods, must work to reach the heights of excellence. Again, Pindar reinforces the idea that human excellence exists in man through the grace of the gods, and only *as a mere potential* which must be deliberately realised through concerted effort. In this, man has the freedom to push to his limits. However, as humans, fallibility is always a possibility. Even Pindar himself recognises his potential to make a mistake: "I hope,/in making this great claim, to hit the mark head on" (27-28). Pindar's admission of possible error is significant. It provides the audience, who are not victors, most likely not members of a prestigious family, and almost certainly not great poets, an opportunity to recognise and further accept their own fallibility.

Fallibility provides a convenient stopping place for this examination of Nemean VI, as it serves as a smooth transition to the next ode I will analyse.

### Chapter 5: Olympian VII<sup>77</sup>

While the theme of fallibility in Olympian VII is most significant for my purposes here, I want to look briefly at the opening turn of this ode, as its difference from those considered above is remarkable:

As a man takes in his rich hand a bowl  
Bubbling inside with the wine's dew,  
And shall give it  
To his daughter's young bridegroom to pledge him

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<sup>76</sup> "Without labour," Pindar sings elsewhere, "few find joy" O.X (20-24).

<sup>77</sup> For further analysis of O. VII, see Nisetich *Pindar's Victory Songs* Baltimore: 1980, pp. 110-116); Dougherty *The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece* (Oxford: 1993, pp.120-135.); Young, D. *Three Odes of Pindar: A Literary Study of Pythian 11, Pythian 3, and Olympian 7* (Leiden: 1968); and Gildersleeve *Pindar* London: 1890, pp. 183-191).

From one home to another,  
– All of gold, crown of possessions,  
Joy of the revel, – and honours his bridal,  
And makes him to be envied before his dear ones  
For his wedding in which two hearts are one. (1-8)

What is distinct about these lines, and what are their repercussions? First, note that Pindar does not begin this ode with praise for a particular family, or city. Instead, somewhat unexpectedly, he speaks directly of “a man.” Such a reference is undoubtedly less specific than the opening lines of the odes examined above—his words do not point to a single individual. Through the use of the indefinite pronoun (*tis*) Pindar broadens the scope of reference, yet not so much as to render it amorphous, unrecognisable, or unidentifiable. This “a man” feels honour and envy, joy and love, he makes pledges, and has “dear ones”—it is an abstraction that accurately evokes many of the facets of what it is to exist as a human being. The abstraction is somehow fluid, its imprecision demands effort/thought, and allows for some creativity and play, but is not entirely without form. Indeed, from these words some of Pindar’s most recognisable themes resonate, for instance, the importance of being a welcoming host, of sustaining and respecting a connection to family, and the joy of revelling. The words, and the often intangible, and complexly nuanced meanings behind them, create an opportunity for the audience to see themselves—they can project and connect their own experience to something outside them, something common, more formal, and public. And, crucially important, this experience and sense of identity is reflected back at them.

Ultimately, “a man” gives way to the concrete individual victor whom Pindar has been commissioned to praise in Olympian VII. It is Diagoras, one of the most famous boxers in antiquity. Diagoras’ talent, not surprisingly, is attributed to the gods.<sup>78</sup> However, his skill was not simply given to him fully formed—it was a *potential* that he chose to realise through persistent effort

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<sup>78</sup> Nisetich writes that Diagoras, as a Dorian, could trace his genealogy back to Zeus (*Pindar’s Victory Songs* Baltimore: 1980, p. 110).

and strenuous labour. Yet even such dedicated hard work, Pindar indicates, could not guarantee success. Success, or more generally, human excellence, he insists depends on continued *charis*, or fortune. Human dependence on *charis* highlights the contingency and unpredictability of man's experience: "*Charis*, who makes life blossom, looks with favour / now upon one man, now another"(11-12).<sup>79</sup>

A human life then, while not wholly determined by, is nevertheless greatly influenced by deliberate and focused hard work. Because such a life is defined by the relationship between fluctuating external circumstances, and equally variable internal potential and individual choice, it is inherently unpredictable and indeterminate. This results in an openness that makes human beings prone to, or at the very least, capable of making mistakes:

But about the minds of humans hang  
numberless errors, and it is impossible to discover  
what now and also in the end is best to happen to a man. (25-26)

As man's future is uncertain, he acts freely (to the extent his nature allows) and thus, he has a degree of choice in terms of the course his life will take. Inevitably, some of those choices lead him into unexpected hardship. The choices that result in difficulties, those that take him 'off track' illustrate his fallibility. However, in *Olympian VII*, fallibility is not seen solely in terms of man, but is viewed from both levels of the cosmos, divine and human.

As one might expect, Pindar embeds this issue in a blend of myth and history. The history he recounts flows backwards, beginning with the colonisation of Rhodes (the homeland of Diagorus), back to the birth of the goddess Athena, born there out of the head of Zeus, and culminating with the actual birth of the island. Each step in this reverse chronological sequence embodies mistakes and their repercussions at a divine level. However, the fact that

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<sup>79</sup> As discussed above, the metaphor of "blossoming" ties man to the natural world, and suggests his ephemeral and fragile nature. Additionally, the personification of *charis* reveals a style that makes abstract concepts more human.

gods can and, in fact, often do make mistakes does not necessarily lead to destructive consequences—at times they even yield unexpected yet undeniably good results.

Helios, for instance, having missed the ‘meeting’ during which Zeus divided up the earth’s land among the gods, is none the poorer for his absence (his ‘mistake’). Helios does not passively bemoan his fate, nor does he angrily demand a redistribution of land:

And Helios was absent--no one assigned him a portion,  
he was left without a place,  
even he, the sacred god.  
At his complaint  
Zeus would have cast the lots a second time  
but Helios forbade it (55-60, Nisetich)

Instead, Helios claims possession of a newly emerging island--Rhodes--seen by him as it “grew from the watery sea.” Thus, despite his failure to attend the important divine event (which might have been construed as an irrecoverable error), he perseveres and uses the error as an opportunity—given nature’s creation, Helios himself can create. He directs his mind not to regret about his error, but elsewhere—he is attentive to and engages with the present moment which reveals to him the possibility of creating a new, hitherto unforeseen good.

But what does this say to man? What does it tell him about his life and the errors he makes? If we now recall man’s dependence on *charis*, we are reminded of man’s indeterminacy, his vulnerability to chance, and the possibility of error that arises from it. Perhaps ‘experiencing’ divine error and its good repercussions through the ode works as a model demonstrating a way that man can view his mistakes, allowing him to see that he can adapt (at least sometimes) and turn them to his own benefit in the end. Error might be conceived not as something entirely or necessarily adverse, but rather as a deviation from a norm/pattern that has grown out of the past, perhaps one about which there has not been much reflection. Breaking free from such a norm/pattern might open up new possibilities, unknown before the ‘error’

demanded reflection. As mistakes are something inevitable to human nature, they should not be seen as irreversibly negative actions, but lapses or diversions which can both shape and be shaped by man. Given this view, man's aim should be not the futile task of eliminating error altogether, but instead working to develop ways of 'correcting' them and, as much as possible, adapting to them profitably as they emerge.

But all this seems only moderately plausible, or at least is only half the message. Surely man cannot hope to have the good luck Helios does. Nor does it seem likely that Pindar's message is simply: "Look around, whatever you've done, it's not so bad!" Men make mistakes—grave ones which have terrible consequences—and it seems ludicrous that Pindar would be attempting here to deny or somehow gloss over that fact. Perhaps a closer look at the way Pindar tells these myths will illuminate other possible meanings.

In recounting the history and praising the city of Rhodes, Pindar does something interesting—he 'revises' the more traditional stories about it.<sup>80</sup> He works to 'adjust' accounts which have been mis-told by others in the past. Thus, Pindar himself corrects human mistakes in this ode—he aims to "set straight from the start" (21) various misconceptions people have.<sup>81</sup>

Following this bold declaration, he proceeds with two major 'revisions'. The first has to do with the murder of Lykymnios, killed by Tlapolemos, founder of Rhodes. In the *Iliad*, Tlapolemos is described as "huge and mighty," a "spear-tamed leader" who "sacked many cities of god-supported fighters." This description does not awaken a sense of pity or compassion. Homer's words suggest that the murder of Lykymnios was a deplorable act: "he

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<sup>80</sup> For other examples of Pindar's 'revisions', see his treatment of Ajax in N.8, as well as that of Neoptolemos in N.7. For a useful discussion of this practice, see Gentili *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece* Baltimore: 1988, pp. 139ff.).

<sup>81</sup> This 'correcting', we will see, is a project for Thucydides as well (e.g., his 'more accurate' account of the story of Hippias and Hipparchus).



[Tlapolemos] struck to death his own father's beloved uncle [Lykumnios]...a man already ageing." After committing this shameful deed, Tlapolemos is portrayed as a "fugitive," a man of "great misfortune."<sup>82</sup> The picture Pindar paints in Olympian VII is strikingly different:

In Tiryns once, this city's founder,  
furious, with a club  
of gnarled olive wood battered to death  
Alkmena's bastard brother  
Likymnios, as he came from Medea's room.  
Disturbance of mind has turned  
even a wise man astray. (28-31, Nisetich)

The murder, though explicitly referenced, is presented as an act committed in (justified?) retribution—at its very worst, it is the result of a "disturbance of mind," which, Pindar asserts immediately: "turn even the wise man astray." Tlapolemos is not the malevolent fugitive described by Homer, but "the founder of this land." Pindar takes great care to let Tlapolemos off the hook, effectively saying that one mad act does not define or determine a man's character.<sup>83</sup>

Pindar's second 'revision' has to do with the source of the great artistic skill attributed to the Rhodians. Popular belief attributed this skill to the Telchines, cunning magicians—or, less euphemistically, a group lacking in moral standing. In Olympian VII, Pindar suggests a different source of the Rhodian skill—it is due, he sings to his audience, to Athena, great goddess of the arts and native to the island:

The bright-eyed goddess [Athena] gave them  
all art, to outshine mankind in the yield  
of their hands' skill. (50-53, Nisetich)

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<sup>82</sup>*The Iliad* (Book II, 653-670), trans. Lattimore, R.

<sup>83</sup> Dougherty remarks on Tlepolemos' posthumous "purification," his visit to Apollo's oracle, and notable transformation from murderer to "colonial founder to civic hero." Diagorus, he writes, by association has "similar powers to confer on his city" (*The Poetics of Colonization* Oxford: 1993, pp. 125-126). All this indicates, among other things, the complex identities of individuals, their power to change, to be shaped not by one action, but by a life time of actions. Aristotle, we will see, makes a similar point regarding the judgement of man's character.

What then to make of these revisions? While one could claim that Pindar was a shameless sycophant, (a “toady,” according to one scholar), and that his revisions served merely to charm and please his wealthy hosts, such an explanation seems thin and superficial. After all, it is likely that the audience was not solely made up of Rhodians, and furthermore, as himself the composer of the ode, Pindar could have avoided these rather ‘uncomfortable’ topics altogether. That he deliberately brought these issues up, and explicitly changed them seems significant.

Pindar suggests through his corrections that man, over time, has distorted, or somehow misinterpreted events. In Olympian VII, Nisetich indicates that Pindar’s accounts are alternatives to *well-known* stories.<sup>84</sup> The audience is then placed in an interesting position. Each must think about the source of this information. That is to say, experiencing the ode, listening to its words and conjuring up the images it recalls, demands that participants weigh and value differing, perhaps conflicting messages. Do they accept the words of the poet in front of them, or do they, on the other hand, maintain the validity of a different, previously held account? What does one do upon encountering the brute fact of this kind of seemingly irreconcilable conflict?

Again then, the ode itself distills an experience common in human life—the uncomfortable, unsettling, and highly de-stabilising effect of conflicting ‘facts’, or interpretations of facts which directly oppose one another.<sup>85</sup> What can we make of the fact that Pindar actively creates such a condition? To what extent might he have been encouraging the Rhodians to redefine themselves as they pleased? Can man freely pick and choose his history? (Or, for that matter, his present reality?) This extreme interpretation, I believe, is not one the words in the ode endorse. However, through his revisions,

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<sup>84</sup> Nisetich emphasizes that the story was told by Homer, implying its renown (*Pindar’s Victory Songs* Baltimore: 1980, p. 110).

<sup>85</sup> For more on this issue – specifically how the inherent flexibility in myths allows for, and even encourages fruitful discourse, and hopefully resolution, see *Myth and the Polis*, ed. Pozzi and Wickersham (Ithaca: 1991, esp. Ch. 1).

Pindar again indicates man's *limited* freedom. Without doubt, Pindar presents alternatives that do not correspond to more traditional accounts, however they are not pulled blindly out of thin air. They are *reasonable* alternatives, where reasonable implies an acute awareness of his circumstances, a common body of knowledge based on attentive experience which provides some grounds for justification of his proposed changes. Such experience reveals that man can choose, within limits, how he defines and understands himself. Pindar's stories in Olympian VII are not those of Homer, but belong to another legitimate, if perhaps lesser known tradition. Remembering this tradition with its more positive description of their past could have reinforced a sense of identity that cultivated a sense of empowerment. We cannot, Pindar suggests, be *anything*, but, within what we are, we have some choice, and it is attentive, guided experience which allows us to discern choices and reasonably act on them.

## Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks

In attempting to capture something of the experience of being alive, the words themselves must be alive. Words, when living and breathing are like musical chords. The full resonance of the chord or phrase must be allowed to be heard in all of its suggestive imprecision. We must attempt in our use of language in...our theory making...to be the makers of music, not the players of notes.<sup>86</sup>

Thomas Ogden, though speaking here of psychoanalytic theory, makes a relevant point about political thought as well. All language that seeks to express an understanding of human experience, as political theory must, should be somehow *alive*. "Alive" here implies a theory which recognises and integrates the details of the concrete and particular moment at hand. This requires that theorists develop an ability to be attentive to the complexity and richness of this moment, rather than to attempt to reduce it to a lifeless, 'neutral' abstraction. A 'living' theory must have 'space' to incorporate the

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<sup>86</sup> *Reverie and Interpretation* (New Jersey: 1997, pp.4-5).

unique and relevant aspects of an individual life, and the theoriser must be prepared (i.e., trained or habituated) to use this 'space' reasonably and creatively.<sup>87</sup> Simultaneously, political theory must reveal the continuity which exists between discrete moments in a life so as to disclose the way this particular, inimitable life is not only a whole in itself, but also more generally, a *human* one. These two aspects of life, the individual moments, and the meaning which arises out of their coherent unification, echo the relationship between man and the larger community and tradition in which he is raised and lives—alone, the decisions and actions of one man are incomprehensible. It is only in the context of common, recognised practices that an individual life becomes intelligible. Theory thus must be capable of reconciling both these aspects of human life, which at times appear to be mutually exclusive. The words which describe and explain the 'human condition' have to retain a certain elasticity, and inherent in this flexibility is imprecision. This imprecision however, does not mean ethics and politics rely on careless argumentation and confused logic. The imprecision necessary to political theory becomes precise in its application—it leads to deliberate choice and concrete action. Given this, when reading Pindar (or poetry as theory in general), we cannot be passive users of language. This is too often the case with some 'modern' political theory, which has come to rest (to a large extent) on the mechanical manipulation of fixed, immutable terms. Language that makes no claim to this kind of definitive certainty, on the other hand, demands a different kind of interaction and participation.

As I hope to have made clear in the discussion above, Pindar's odes often contain language which is elliptical, enigmatic, perhaps even deliberately obscure. The images and metaphors he invokes do not always sit harmoniously side by side, guaranteeing immediate comprehension or easy reading (listening). The elusiveness of the odes themselves at once mirrors

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<sup>87</sup> The capacity to theorise given a theory which is imprecise is not an innate ability. Man develops it given broad guided experience and reflection. This is why Aristotle thought that youth should not study ethics and politics. (This issue is discussed in more detail below.)

the fleeting quality of human life, and through this *reflection of experience*, it simultaneously *creates* an experience. The ambiguity of Pindar's words, the flexibility of language he employs is alluring. The simultaneous obscurity and familiarity of the odes incites curiosity and invites active participation on the part of the reader (listener),<sup>88</sup> the reward of which is a renewed, and expanded sense of identity. Through a continued oscillation between poles of certainty and uncertainty—death and life, traditional myth and the present moment, common practice/inherited customs and the individual—Pindar accesses something universally human, though not in the form of a certain and fixed abstraction.

But what is this 'human thing' that he accesses, and through what capacity? Is it more than individual passion directed at particular (arbitrary) desire? Are his odes based on the untenable concept of 'intuition'? How does he ground 'theory' so as to avoid floating subjectivity and relativism? The escape comes through the experience of the ode itself which I have argued demands that the audience (reader) weigh diverse ideas, connect and integrate new and old beliefs, test and reflect on the web of beliefs that guide a particular community. This *work* grounds this mode of discourse and makes it not mechanical means-to-end reasoning, but more than flighty emotive nonsense. The experience generated by the odes with their integration of the individual and the common, does not give us external objectivity, an Archimedean point of pure Reason, but rather a sense of *reasonableness*, where the objectivity needed to make reasonable judgements and evaluations arises out of the actually doing it within a tradition of practices.

The odes Pindar composed, through both their style and language as well as their substantive content, worked to re-enforce traditions, to stress the

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<sup>88</sup> John Heath explores the effect of ambiguity on an audience, specifically, when the distinction between man and animal becomes obscured: "the blurring of distinctions between human and animal...produces the desire for critical analysis and systematizing of the resulting order," "Disentangling the Beast" *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 119 (1999: p.20).

importance of family and community, and to renew the norms and values they endorsed. Man saw his place, *as a kind of creature*, in the larger cosmic order. By invoking and re-examining past traditions, and triggering memories which became part of a larger cultural consciousness, the odes succeeded in cultivating and sustaining a meaningful moral 'infrastructure' in the present based on a sense of how societies were presently structured and what had been understood as reasonable in the past. The vivid cultural and historical images manifested in the odes were a familiar framework, illustrating what humans had been capable of and through this, developing a reasonable sense of the kinds of possibilities men might have open to them now and in the future. Through (guided) exposure to actually realised human potential, active critical reflection could generate a general sense of the 'human-ness' which continued to evolve through further reflection and ongoing discourse. This 'human' identity revealed, among other things, the limited nature of man's freedom, which can be actualised by creative action firmly grounded in the sense of reasonableness derived from experience gained through living in a *polis*, and participating in its culture (literature, art, history) and practices (laws, education).

Ultimately however, the odes did more than just reinforce old customs—their structure, language and imagery (ideally) enabled the active audience member to gain distance from the traditions into which he was raised, allowing him to reflect on, and extend his 'horizons' of his thought. By securing man with a sense of structure and belonging—a sense of reasonableness—the odes enabled him to act creatively. Descriptions of some of the things man had been helped to illuminate a range of things he could be. This broad framework based on a balance of past and future, reason and creativity, infused the human world with meaning, a precondition for deliberate choice and action. Thus, through poetry, Pindar created an experience which served to both illuminate man's world and to train him to be reasonable and creative given the kind of being he is.

Thus, the conception of man that emerges through Pindar's odes was an embodiment (and even a celebration) of the coexistence of opposites—man was both the vessel for tradition, continuity, and the sense of reasonableness they provided, as well as the instrument for innovation and creativity (themselves dependent on the existence of the former). Understanding how these two elements come together to guide an active human life is the foundation of political theory, and will emerge again below in Parts II and III, on Thucydides and Aristotle, respectively.

## Part II: Thucydides

### Chapter 1: Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored how the conception of man, understood as a being suspended between god and beast, was manifested in a selection of Pindar's epinician odes. The discussion began with the premise that given such a position (or, from a slightly different angle, given this 'compound' nature), man finds himself in a contingent and indeterminate world. Pindar depicts the human world as essentially dynamic, where any order or regularity was under constant threat of interference by gods or chance (*tuche*). As both chance and divine actions were often indecipherable in terms of human logic and reason, man's world could offer him no guarantees—events could be likely or probable, but never certain. However, even in the midst of this 'flux', there did exist a certain stability; for instance, recurring cycles in nature and the inherited values from those traditions into which man was acculturated. Thus, for Pindar, the world of man, like man himself, had a complex, and at times seemingly illogical and contradictory, nature.

The world that emerges from Pindar's odes, though perhaps unpredictable, is not without structure. The odes illuminate a natural hierarchy (an ordered *kosmos*), and disclose man's distinct, yet variable place within it. This variability makes man's nature intrinsically indeterminate, and requires that he actively work to sustain the structure of his world, and in doing so, both acknowledge and respect the 'larger' order of the *kosmos*. This meant, for instance, observing and using the natural cycles to his advantage, e.g., developing agricultural practices to correspond effectively with the seasons. However the structure did not end with the natural world, that is, the 'natural hierarchy' itself indicated a moral/political structure, so that the two spheres were in some sense, fused. This conflation of the natural and political demanded that man participate in the customs and practices of family and community. In short, man had to habituate himself to his culture's traditions, to live by the laws of his city. He had to



actively engage in the 'training' his society provided (i.e., both its moral and physical *praxeis: paideia* and *gymnasia*). For Pindar, part of what this comprehensive education entailed was honouring one's 'noble ancestors', and, more broadly speaking, acknowledging a debt to the immortal gods who bestowed certain bloodlines with excellence.

Given this, the individual (exemplified by the athlete in Pindar) takes on a complex role. Praise of a particular victor became a vehicle for a broader object of glorification—that is, of the athlete's family and the culture which nurtured him. Of course, such praise finally made its way back to the gods, who were ultimately responsible for the potential excellence dormant in all noble lineages. In this, the victor himself was never praised, and in fact *could not be understood*, in isolation. Rather Pindar always placed him (and his success) in a larger context, or again, a 'cosmic order'. The odes reinforced this "order" and in doing so, facilitated man's education, or perhaps more accurately, they were an essential part of it.<sup>1</sup> The performance of an epinician ode created an experience which stimulated and secured a conscious and shared cultural memory, one which strengthened and further cultivated tradition and reinforced a god-given order (which, not surprisingly, was often the order accepted by and benefiting the elite). This memory secured for man a sense of pride and identity, giving both him and his world continuity and stability, while at the same time, deflecting his persistent hubristic tendencies by reminding him of his (relatively small) place in the cosmos.

However, the odes did not work solely to discredit man as an individual—it was, after all, the individual athlete who prompted the composition in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup>In his book, *Thucydides*, J.H.Finley points out that the notion of the poet as teacher permeated other genres of Greek culture, see for example, Aristophanes' *Frogs*, line 1054 (Cambridge: 1963, p.39). Even in Sparta, a culture not traditionally associated with a thriving "art culture" we see the importance of poetry, see, Plutarch's "Life of Lycurgus" (IV.3). Richard Martin expands on the role of the poet in "The Seven Sages as Performers of Wisdom" in *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece* (eds. Kurke and Dougherty, Oxford: 1998 pp. 108-131).

Nor did the odes, in calling upon tradition, simply reinforce the status quo. The victors, whose actions Pindar elaborately praised, revealed a world of new and genuine possibility, of hitherto unrealised human potential. The individual feats glorified in the odes invoked a sense of awe in those watching, they illuminated and extended man's previously accepted limitations. By embedding the athlete's concrete display of beauty in the familiar form of the ode, the once exceptional action became accessible to the audience. In connecting the 'new' (i.e., the extraordinary, unprecedented deed) with the 'old' (i.e., the familiar structure of the ode and its content of praise for a mighty tradition and culture), man was simultaneously inspired and empowered. The strength imparted by a renewed sense of (abstract) identity, a sense of belonging, strengthened man, making it possible for him to access and use the (concrete) action. While newly illuminated 'choices' might, on their own, 'destabilise' man's sense of who he is, in the context of an ode, change and growth became an unthreatening (or at least *less* threatening) possibility—even more, an essential part of what it is to be human. Because this expanded range of human potential was made in a *public* setting, and appealed to a *common* tradition, man was better able to see and experiment with the choices before him in his own life, to take advantage of his own *limited* flexibility and freedom. This is not, of course, to say that the actual accomplishment of each victor was suddenly possible for the physically (or, for that matter, economically) average audience member. Rather, when captured in an ode, each magnificent athletic achievement was transformed into a kind of practical tool, allowing and encouraging the members of the audience to 'stretch' themselves to greater lengths.

In this, the deed of the victorious athlete became a model or exemplar, which helped to bridge the gap between individual and human standards (where 'standard' is not understood as simply the feat itself, but more broadly, the capacity for change without loss of identity). The odes both praised and inspired virtuous, beautiful actions. But, crucially important, it was only because the

actions were put in a recognisable context that they became 'useable'. They cultivated not an unrealistic, anything-is-possible attitude, but a reasonable sense of progress that was *appropriate to man's own species*.<sup>2</sup> In summary then, Pindar's odes sought to secure in man a reasonable and humbling sense of identity, yet one which was in no way stagnant. The odes did not engender complacency. In fact, quite the contrary—the very act of 'fixing' man's identity in a tradition and larger order of which he felt both proud and an important part, gave him the security and stability which enabled him to see, consider, and (ideally) to stretch himself beyond his own prior limitations and those of his predecessors. The newly illuminated range of possibilities the athlete displayed at once revealed the inherent human indeterminateness together with a sense of the kinds of opportunities such 'imprecision' made possible. The odes gave man a sense of his ability to grow, they encouraged (guided) experimentation and action. They allowed him to see and better understand (through a kind of indirect experience) his own kind of excellence. The abstract sense of his species' identity (which grew out of belonging to a tradition) served in some sense as the conditions for man's *agency* in the present. Ultimately, Pindar's odes suggested that man had the stability and strength necessary to excel further beyond what he knew, but that he should always strive and extend himself only so far as his species allowed and defined.

These (outwardly) divergent commitments further highlight man's peculiar condition, specifically, the tension between his potential for growth and change, and his need for stability and continuity (this is related to the desire to be an discrete individual, and the need to be part of a group in order to realise oneself as an individual). Pindar's poetry acknowledged the fragile relationship

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note here that 'progress' for Pindar (most likely) meant a strengthening of or movement towards the embodiment of recognised aristocratic values and practices (which is, I suspect, the reason he is often deemed elitist—though I believe that this is a potentially misleading term. If one takes "aristocratic" literally, Pindar might be understood as encouraging man to be his *best*). This is quite unlike today, when the (Western) notion of political progress has become inextricably linked to the development of 'democratic' forms of government (in name, at least).

between these two, and recognised the importance of each as an essential part of what it is to be human. Rather than trying to suppress either man's capacity for change, growth, progress, and individuality, or his need for identity, stability, consistency, and sense of belonging, Pindar attempted to harmonise the two.

In Part II of this dissertation, I want to explore some of the same issues, but this time through the work of Thucydides. Therefore, as above, I will pursue several different lines of inquiry. The most immediately pressing task will be to untangle from his complex narrative a more fully developed view of Thucydides' understanding of man (presented until now through the lens of Pindar and the epinician ode). How does the *History of the Peloponnesian War* invoke a similar conception of man—i.e., as a being between god and animal? Just as Pindar's odes revealed an image of natural order or hierarchy—a *kosmos*—I will argue that Thucydides' text too presupposes such a hierarchy, and given it, suggests a distinct understanding of human freedom. He presents a conception of human freedom which is 'larger' than that implied by Pindar, yet of an entirely different nature than many modern accounts. With a better understanding of man and his peculiar kind of freedom, the next endeavour will be to clarify the way in which Thucydides' conception of man informs and shapes how we might best theorise effectively about politics.<sup>3</sup>

The issue of genre is of some importance in allowing the reader access to Thucydides' understanding of man. With Pindar, we saw that the form of poetry, specifically publicly performed poetry, played a large role in his message and its accessibility. His odes reflected certain aspects of the human experience and in doing so, *created* an experience to be shared by his audience. The odes depicted man as simultaneously noble and beautiful, and vulnerable and weak—

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<sup>3</sup> Part of what this will entail is thinking about the kind of community needed for this particular model of the human being to flourish (where flourishing implies the realisation of the capacity to see choices, to deliberate reasonably about them, to choose makes choices, and finally, to act creatively given the specific details of one's situation).

that is, at his most godlike and his most animal. Experiencing, *actively participating* in the ode meant reconciling this juxtaposition of opposites (an exercise which undermined traditional or scientific logic—man is *simultaneously* good *and* bad, free *and* constrained because of his nature). Ideally, this was an activity in which a group of people with different (and at times, competing) needs, interests, and concerns was obliged to take part. In examining Thucydides, we need to ask how might a written, and most likely, privately read history of a war generate and make accessible a similar understanding of man, and how might such an understanding be used to shape/effect, and possibly cultivate an more active role for political theory for citizens in a *polis*?<sup>4</sup>

The structure of the present chapter, therefore will be divided into roughly three sections. To begin, I will give some background on the *History* itself in order to place Thucydides, to the extent it is possible, in a socio-historical context.<sup>5</sup> With this in place, I will examine a selection of episodes in Thucydides' *History* with an aim to fleshing out some of the basic characteristics of man as conceived by Thucydides, keeping in mind what this conception implies about political theory specifically, how it might benefit from a history such as this. That is to say, I will examine how Thucydides' *History* might be not merely descriptive, but normative as well. How does it aid political theory in its capacity to enlighten and empower 'man,' conceived specifically in terms of his ability to see the

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<sup>4</sup> Moles argues that Thucydides' concept of truth "was becoming something much more complex than factual truth." As he was not simply recording the particular and specific facts of the war, but presenting it in such a way as to capture both "specific truth and general truth," the language and structure of his text became more subtly nuanced and, more complicated ("Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides" from *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* eds. Gill and Wiseman Exeter: 1993, pp. 106ff). To untangle and derive meaning from Thucydides' narrative then, demands active participation on the part of the reader, who likely would be able to identify with/recognise some of the character types and events he represents. For other discussions of Thucydides' style, and the purpose such a dense and complex written history might serve, see Crane, G. *Thucydides and The Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: 1998, pp. 294ff.); Kitto *Poiesis* (Berkeley: 1966, pp. 349ff).

<sup>5</sup> In doing this, I do not mean to imply that his ideas are relevant only to his particular 'moment' in history. However, especially in light of Thucydides' attempt to be an "objective" observer and reporter, a sense of his time will help to tease out some of his unstated biases, influences, and values.

possibilities before him, to deliberate reasonably about them, and finally, to facilitate acting on the choices he makes.

## Chapter 2: Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*<sup>6</sup>

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* extends back to the earliest stages of Greek civilization, though all but 21 years of this rich past are summarised succinctly in the first of eight books. While he highlights in some detail the 50 years following the Persian invasions and preceding the Peloponnesian War—the “Pentecontaetia” (I.89-I.118)—the majority of this awesome work focuses on the years spanning from 431-411BC, documenting “the greatest war there has ever been.”<sup>7</sup> Though the more distant events in Greek history are only briefly sketched out, it is worth noting that the momentous and often brutal conflict between Athens and Sparta is scrutinised by Thucydides only after he embeds it, as best he can,<sup>8</sup> in its broader historical context.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from Thucydides' *History* are from Blanco's translation (New York: 1998), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> Although the war between Athens and Sparta lasted from 431BC-404BC, Thucydides' narrative ends abruptly at the close of his eighth book, mid-winter in 411BC, with the sacrifice at Ephesus. There has been much debate among scholars as to why his *History* is incomplete and if it nonetheless forms a unified whole. But as these issues are not relevant to my present analysis, I will not explore them here.

<sup>8</sup> Thucydides makes it clear in his opening chapter that a precise and accurate history of the distant past is an impossibility: “Because of the amount of time that has gone by, I have been unable to obtain accurate information about the period that preceded the war or about epochs in the still more distant past.” (I.1) This highlights his conviction that man can only really know what he has himself actually experienced at the time in which he lived (an understanding that prevailed in both the middle ages, and later with Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* trans. Nisbet, Cambridge: 1975).

<sup>9</sup> One might note here a resemblance to Pindar, who, though working in a different medium, also took care to place his subject (i.e., the victor) in a larger context, which often extended back generations. Thucydides' relationship to 'ancient' history is more complicated. Despite voicing disdain for the way it had traditionally been reported (i.e., with no concerted attempt for factual accuracy), and an acute suspicion about its reliance on “fabulous” stories and myths, Thucydides does nonetheless take care to retell some 'ancient' Greek history (and such references are not only in the initial (possibly “earlier”) chapters (e.g., further mention of the more distant and personally unexperienced past occurs again at: VI.2-6). Clearly, such events were important in some way at some point for Thucydides. Parry argues that Thucydides' concern for distant events, though perhaps central to his more youthful thought, dwindles after his experience of the war, so absolute and massive was the path of its destruction (“Thucydides' Historical Perspective” in *Yale Classical Studies* 22, 1973). His experience of the upheaval in his own time, Parry suggests, was so personally overwhelming and disillusioning, that it dwarfed the events of earlier history, and made them important only insofar as they culminated in those which he personally

In the first book, however, Thucydides gives more than a concise review of the events which culminated in the war he goes on to describe (and in fact himself took part in). In a series of remarkably revealing chapters (1.20-1.23), he lays out both a critique of his predecessors, and an outline of his ambitious intentions.<sup>10</sup> These chapters reveal a man with a passionate concern for reporting “the facts,” and a heightened sense of responsibility to his “serious” readers. He emphasises the validity of his project through reference to his rigorous method—the *History* did not flow effortlessly onto the page, Thucydides’ process demanded from him considerable toil and effort. The account he leaves, Thucydides claims, is presented only after meticulously examining and extracting material “from the

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experienced. Thucydides’ dismissive treatment of the distant past, and his confidence in the importance of his own time serves to amplify not only the magnitude of the Peloponnesian War, but also his own limited viewpoint. As an active participant in the events he describes, Thucydides was unable to achieve substantial reflective distance on those events. However, far from devaluing his work, this is a privileged position, one which gives his readers a distinct, inimitable insight into the distant past. Thucydides is Hegel’s quintessential “original historian.” His distinguished position as a general in a politically and socially structured polis like Athens gives him a voice which *necessarily* expresses the “spirit” of his time: “the substance of his narrative and of his own culture and consciousness are in equal measure the substance and consciousness of those words he renders” (Hegel. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. Nisbet Cambridge: 1975, p.14). Thucydides’ words, the events he selected and *chose* to describe all reflect a particular time and, if indirectly, its peculiar way of assigning value and significance.

<sup>10</sup> It is in these introductory chapters that Thucydides first makes his own presence explicit. Though obviously ‘present’ throughout as the author of the text, his primary aim is to provide an account of “the facts,” keeping his personality (and often, his own generalisations and conclusions) out of it. This makes Thucydides’ detailed representation of men and their actions an immediate, almost “living” account of the war. His appearance at I.1 is, of course, easily explained—this is the introduction to his unprecedented project. However, this direct self-reference is noteworthy in that it is juxtaposed to what is perhaps the most general, detached analysis in his work (i.e., Thucydides’ account of the events of ancient Greek history). In Book V, at the “second preface,” Thucydides again emerges, reintroduces himself, and proceeds to give another general sketch of events. Thucydides’ appearance during these ‘summarising’ moments is significant because through them, the reader sees the individual in stark contrast to the general. It sets up an experience in which the reader ‘views’ simultaneously a distinct man opposed to a more detached, abstract account of events. Thus, if unintentionally, Thucydides prevents his readers from any illusion of a ‘neutral’ standpoint in the face of abstract generalisations. Rather we step into *his* shoes—we experience the war as Thucydides, the particular reporter, did. He is our access into the facts, his initial appearance creates (and halfway through, again re-establishes) an inherently personal framework—in this case, a framework from the perspective of ‘a someone’ who is acculturated in a way to see events as a member of a particular ‘class’ (and, according to Hegel, Thucydides’ class is the historically significant/representative class). It is then from this ‘partial’ viewpoint that the reader must place and understand the string of ‘facts’ that follow.

best available evidence" (I.21) and often "with difficulty...going over each event in as much detail as possible" (I.22).<sup>11</sup>

And Thucydides does not disappoint. Any arrogance one might detect in these introductory statements is almost surely forgiven after reading his staggering account of the war. Thucydides works systematically and painstakingly—"passionately"—leaving his readers an historical account like no other. Yet, Thucydides gives nothing away. A solid understanding of how he fleshes out his conception of man demands more than a mere passive reading of the *History*; it requires rigorous analysis. Like Pindar's odes, Thucydides' *History* requires his audience's (in this case, the reader's) active participation.

In what then do we, as reader's, participate? What is the nature of Thucydides' work? As he insists (provocatively) that his text will be "useful" (*ophelima*), even of "permanent value" (*ktema te es aei*), this question is relevant to my present investigation. After all, knowing what is useful, or what will be of enduring value to man surely presupposes an understanding of what kind of being he is. Before looking at the nature of the text itself, let us look first at the background against which Thucydides wrote. In order to fruitfully explore the questions raised above, a general sense of the 'climate' during which Thucydides wrote will be useful, if only to get a sense of the 'raw materials' available to him.<sup>12</sup> Was he, for example, influenced by the sophists' lively debates on moral issues? Is his *History* akin to the tragedies which flourished during his lifetime? That is, does it

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<sup>11</sup> Thucydides again references his method in the "second preface" at V.26—again, using it to stress the reliability of his account. However, even given these confident guarantees of accuracy, Thucydides is not at all clear about just what his rigorous method entails. What criteria does he use to separate fact from fiction given the enormous and varied body of data from which he worked? Given this crucial omission as to his actual method of distinguishing and selecting only the 'valid' evidence, the reader is again reminded that Thucydides' narratives is very much his own. Therefore, however 'factual' it may seem, it is ultimately the product of a particular viewpoint embedded in a particular place, at a particular time in history. This is not to call it 'subjective', rather the *History* represents a 'particular' viewpoint as a cultural/status perspective of what is believable/plausible and what is not.

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful and insightful discussion on Thucydides' language, see: Parry, A. "Thucydides' Use of Abstract Language" in *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers* (Oxford: 1989, pp.177-194).



weave together individual lives, developing 'characters' with personal motives, particular needs and desires? Or, is it on the other hand, more like a scientific or medical treatise, reporting facts to be used to generate the fundamental abstract laws and principles that govern human behaviour?

### Chapter 3: The *History's* Historical and Intellectual Context

"...it can be said of Greek thought that it derived on the one hand from observation, not from dogma, but on the other hand from observation of experience, not scientific observation."<sup>13</sup>

The Athens of Thucydides' day was marked by upheaval and change. There was, of course, the *kinesis* that was the war itself, yet Athens was also experiencing a distinct shift in intellectual atmosphere. Very broadly speaking, prose writing and oratory were emerging as important and effective media for public discourse. Writing on Thucydides' use of language, Parry claims that it is towards the end of the fifth century that "prose begins to replace poetry as the most serious vehicle of thought."<sup>14</sup> That which had previously been almost exclusively the domain of poetry—cosmological doctrines, state constitutions, works dealing with moral issues—came to be a matter of public debate, and displayed a new 'rational' structure.<sup>15</sup> This new prose made extensive use of abstract concepts, and was conspicuously lacking in allusions to "the divine element." The repercussions of this shift were enormous in terms of the Greeks' conception of man. Poetry, though delivered *by* man, did not originate *in* him—man was its vehicle, its origin, the muses. Furthermore, (as we have seen) poetry

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<sup>13</sup> Finley, J.H. *Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: 1963, p.61).

<sup>14</sup> Parry, A. "Thucydides' Use of Abstract Language" in *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers* (Oxford: 1989, p.179).

<sup>15</sup> This structure regularly employed the use of antitheses, 'proving' a point/establishing a conclusion by setting up linguistic oppositions, which, though often immediately persuasive, frequently rested on faulty logic (see Lloyd, G.E.R. *Polarity and Analogy*, Cambridge: 1966 pp.111ff). Thucydides makes frequent use of antitheses. However, his use of them is subtle and complex, suggesting an essential ambiguity underneath their apparent precision and certainty. For further discussion, see Boyd-White *When Words Lose Their Meaning* (Chicago: 1984, pp.62ff); and Parry, "Thucydides' Use of Abstract Language" in *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers* (Oxford: 1989, pp.177-194).

used myth and divine prerogative to explain both cosmological and political order. The abstract concepts used in the “new prose,” on the other hand, if not themselves man-made, were ‘man-discovered’. They grew out of observation of the natural world, and pointed to the idea of a logically structured, almost mechanical cosmos, which was not at the mercy of the grace or ill-will of the gods, but could be fully understood, and to some extent at least, even controlled by man himself.

In seeking to explain the world in terms of ‘natural’ rather than divine causes, the emerging prose style carved out a fresh, and significantly bigger role for man. As the most intelligent species in the ‘natural’ world, man was empowered by this shift in thought and language. If power was taken away from the gods, surely he was next in line. His mind (*nous*) and its distinctive rationality (*logos*), were certainly equal in potency to the new abstract concepts which they were responsible for discerning and articulating.<sup>16</sup> Thus, man’s perceived sphere of control expanded.

### *The Sophists*

This shift was undoubtedly bolstered by the presence of sophists in Athens during this same period.<sup>17</sup> While it is impossible to define a single ‘sophist doctrine’, one cannot deny that the instruction offered by these roaming teachers put traditional Athenian beliefs and convictions under rigorous scrutiny, “dispel[ling] clouds of tradition and dethron[ing] values.”<sup>18</sup> The so-called “new learning” was greatly aided by the extensive travel of the sophists. Movement from city to city meant exposure to diverse ways of life and political

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<sup>16</sup> Vernant, expands on this idea, focusing the emergence of *to on* as a new concept of being, not accessible through experience, but through *logos* itself. This promoted a kind of mechanical reasoning, aimed at logical certainty and relying primarily on the principle of non-contradiction (*Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* Boston: 1983, pp. 127ff.).

<sup>17</sup> For more extensive discussions on the influence of the sophists during this period, see (among many others) Havelock, E. *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (London:1957, pp.155ff; Jaeger, W. *Paideia* vol. 1 (Oxford: 1954, pp.286ff.); Kerferd, G.B. *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: 1981).

<sup>18</sup>Adcock, F.E. *Thucydides and his History* (Cambridge: 1973, p.3).

organisation. The sophists thus brought to the attention of the Athenians alternative approaches to intellectual inquiry, suggesting new answers to the old question of the source of human excellence.<sup>19</sup> As the sophists' 'lessons' frequently took the form of public debate,<sup>20</sup> and were often on issues of morality, they generated a more conscious awareness of values, where they come from, and how they are acquired. This subject matter perhaps encouraged those watching to reflect on and question some of their culture's long-standing beliefs. The sophists stimulated a critique of Athenian traditions and values—previously held to be both natural and universally necessary—and in doing so, made man a more critically active force in his world.

The extent of man's power in the world was an important theme for Thucydides, and the "art of persuasion," polished and refined by the sophists, was arguably a large impetus behind (and influence on) his work. Again, their stylised moral arguments made extensive use of abstract terms, which made for some rather 'elastic' rhetoric. This revealed not only the dangerous possibility of moral relativism, but the equally threatening potential for an expanding discrepancy between language and reality.<sup>21</sup> Thucydides' profound concern for this appears again and again in the *History* through his juxtaposition of word and deed (*logos* and *ergon*)—raising the question concerning the extent to which words, and implicitly, human intelligence can shape and effect brute fact.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> As Pindar showed, the primary, if not the sole source of human excellence had been thought to be god-given 'good' blood.

<sup>20</sup> Some argue that the sophists' debates played an analogous role in Greek society to the recited poetry of earlier eras.

<sup>21</sup> The issue of relativism was a central concern for Aristotle, who was uneasy about the sophists' steadfast attempt to form persuasive argument, often with little regard for truth (*NE1181a10-20*). This will be discussed further below in Part III, on Aristotle.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Parry expands on this theme in the early books of the *History* in "Logos and Ergon in Thucydides", doctoral thesis (Harvard: 1957). It is interesting to note that Cleon, a general who most certainly did not earn Thucydides' respect in most areas, directly echoes his worry on this point (IV.37-38).

Finley writes that the sophists “applied to humanity those principles of mechanistic causation which the Ionian physicists applied to the cosmos.”<sup>23</sup> Natural science and ethical principles seemed to have been travelling on parallel roads. The linguistic ‘battles’ waged by the sophists required a strong command of language, and suggested a dubious relationship between abstract words and the concrete world. Ober highlights the danger inherent in the extreme elasticity of some of the abstractions used in some of the speeches in Thucydides’—likening their words to “empty vessels,” filled simply by whatever the immediate context required.<sup>24</sup> Surely this echoes a capacity seen in the sophists, who seemed to manipulate language with ostensible success. Thus, during the 5<sup>th</sup> century, an intriguing, and previously unarticulated flexibility in language arose, one which threw into question man’s once secure place in the cosmic order. Through this develops a theme which runs through Thucydides’ *History*: How much freedom and control *did* man have?

Because one generally assumes that words have referents in some form of external reality, the flexibility in language revealed by the sophists perhaps indicated a similar flexibility in the world. As man seemed perfectly capable of controlling the terms in an argument, he might have assumed that a similar capacity to manipulate actual things in the world would follow. That is, the evolving ability to control words might be understood to imply a parallel capacity to control their concrete referents. When the words in question are abstract, their range of referents is ambiguous and easily inflated, and thus, so too becomes the extent of man’s perceived control over the external world. Thus, the deterioration of an accurate and fixed understanding of the relationship between word and external reality might have serious—even disastrous—practical consequences. Parry notes an extreme of this case in Gorgias, who

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<sup>23</sup> Finley, J. *Thucydides* (p.39).

<sup>24</sup> Ober, J. *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: 1998, pp. 52ff.). Hansen argues that Thucydides’ speeches represent a new and unprecedented style of writing (*Historia* 1993 pp161-180). Pritchett refutes this claim in *Essays in Greek History* Berkeley: 1994, pp 27-109).

implies that his abstract words are “superior to what we call reality...because they can *create* this reality.”<sup>25</sup>

### *The Athenian Democracy*

And, as a budding democracy, Athens was indeed creating a new reality for herself, and one in which words played a central role.<sup>26</sup> In rejecting the more traditional forms of government in ancient Greece (primarily, tyrannical and oligarchic regimes), Athens also gave up a fixed and (largely) unquestioned moral code. Democracy thrust values and political practices under the public microscope to be scrutinised and critiqued by a much larger audience. In doing so, it was particularly susceptible to the far reaching intellectual and practical implications of the sophists’ finely honed rhetoric. Democracy was an arena for reflection and critique, and in this, as a political structure, it forfeited its stability—Athens’ political world, Forde writes, “points beyond itself.”<sup>27</sup> The use of language and argument as political leverage (as opposed to noble birth, or wealth)—accessible to all Athenian citizens—became a potent source of influence and control, often empowering those who previously had been excluded from public decision making. Ober expands on this linguistic equaliser, this political “might” which was open and available to all citizens: “Athens,” he writes, “was a democracy because the ordinary citizen was a participant in maintaining a value system that constituted him as the political equal of his elite neighbor.”<sup>28</sup> It was no longer solely wealth, property, or noble blood that determined a man’s political status and endowed him with political muscle. Rather it was also a

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<sup>25</sup> Parry, A. *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers* (Oxford: 1989, p.192).

<sup>26</sup> For interpretations arguing that Thucydides was opposed to democracy, see Grote, G (*A History of Greece* New York: 1857), Popper (*The Open Society and Its Enemies* Princeton: 1952), and McGregor “The Politics of the Historian Thucydides” *Phoenix* 10, 1956). For less definitive conclusions about Thucydides’ political beliefs, see Finley, J. (*Three Essays on Thucydides* Cambridge: 1967), Connor, R. (*Thucydides* Princeton: 1984), de Ste Croix (*The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* London: 1972), and Pope, M. (“Thucydides and Democracy” *Historia* vol. 37, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Forde, S. “Political Ambition in Thucydides and Plato” in *Politikos II: Educating the Ambitious* ed. Rubin, L. (Pittsburgh: 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Ober, J. “Civil Ideology and Counterhegemonic Discourse: Thucydides on the Sicilian Debate” in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* ed. Boegehold and Scafuro (Baltimore:1994, p.104).

well-trained mind, manifested in the ability to speak effectively, the capacity to persuade an audience,<sup>29</sup> that became a channel to power which had previously been blocked to most of the *demos*.<sup>30</sup>

In this respect, Gorgias was right to attribute to words a hitherto dormant and remarkable potency. A democracy *did* make available a 'universally' accessible weapon—language—and through its seemingly boundless power, man himself seemed invincible to interpret the world as he thought best. Words were capable of shaping and effecting both man's character and the broader public sphere. Bit by bit, confidence in the ability to control the world seemed more and more plausible: "Speech," Gorgias boldly asserts, "is a powerful master and achieves the most divine feats with the smallest and least evident body."<sup>31</sup> If this power was not routinely checked against concrete experience, the repercussions could be (and were) disastrous.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, it seems irrelevant (and futile) to try to judge definitively whether the effects of this new kind of (public) thought and discourse were on the whole positive or negative. What is of no doubt is that the kind of questioning and

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, critical of the sophistic movement, thought that the 'learning' taught by sophists—i.e., the training needed to win a plausible argument over opponents—was misguided for it was not concerned with *truth*. Thus, such 'clever' rhetoric was insufficient to train men to judge correctly, a virtue essential to the good statesman (*NE* 1181a12ff).

<sup>30</sup> While the democracy in Athens was indeed more inclusive of the 'common man' when contrasted with past oligarchic or tyrannical regimes, it was in no sense open to *all* people as (many like to think) modern democracies are. Citizenship in ancient Athens was a narrowly defined category—only males above the age of thirty were granted full political rights. Thus, citizenship, the prerequisite for political participation remained in many ways an elite status, closed to women, foreigners, and slaves.

<sup>31</sup> Gorgias "Encomium of Helen" in *Early Greek Political Thought* ed. Gagarin & Woodruff (Cambridge: 1995, p. 192). Contrast this attitude with Plato's distinction between word and deed in the *Crito*, where the laws of Athens "speak" to Socrates and imply that his actions indicate something stronger than his words (53b33-34).

<sup>32</sup> Thus we see that hubris, perhaps the most dangerous human vice in Pindar, persists in Thucydides, and remains a threat to man's well being. Euben articulates the potential problems accompanying such an inflated sense of power: "The sense of possibility that attends the recognition of the world as open to the shaping hand of human power can too easily initiate a dialectic capable of destroying the culture that made such power possible in the first place." *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton: 1997, p.134).

explanation they encouraged developed an important and new understanding of abstract language and through that, man's relationship to the world.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Other probable influences on Thucydides were the medical writers and the dramatists. The largely abstract work of the sophists might be said to have been countered by the more empirically based work of the medical writers (specifically that of the Hippocratics), which flourished during the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the sophists, Hippocratic language was closely linked—in some sense even inextricably tied to the concrete—its primary aim being the correct diagnoses of particular observed diseases. (Lloyd however, notes a parallel between the medical writers and the politicians in that each required speaking skills: *Magic, Experience, and Reason* Cambridge:1979, p.254.) The ability to diagnose would ideally lead to the right prediction for the proper remedy. According to Cochrane, prediction was then (and perhaps, is now), "the essence of science." He writes further that the Hippocratics were well aware that: "the possibility of prediction depends on close attention to the facts [i.e., observable symptoms]" (Cochrane, C. *Thucydides and the Science of History*, London: 1929, p.8). The resonance here with Thucydides' stated method is unmistakable, as he too insists on the same kind of rigorous analysis and attention to the particular details of actual events and implies that the "facts" that make up such collected data will be repeated—more or less—throughout the history of man. Cochrane expands on what he understands to be a direct parallel between Thucydides and the medicine of his time: "The *logoi* [History]...represent the attempt of Thucydides to do for history what Hippocrates was at the same time trying to do for medicine...which thus becomes for him the semeiology and prognosis of human life" (ibid. p.26). For a more tempered interpretation of Thucydides as an objectivity seeker / realist, see de Romilly *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (Oxford: 1963, p. 272).

Thucydides' *History* has also been linked to the Greek drama, especially tragedy. In fact, parallels to the dramatists of his time are unmistakable; the narrative style of the *History*, the events he recounts tied in with the characters evoked; the 'dialogues' formed by contesting speeches, the plights of both the individuals and *poleis* during the war all echo themes of the ancient Greek playwrights. One could easily take Athens to be the excessively hubristic 'protagonist' of a traditional Greek tragedy. Cornford, for instance, draws extensive parallels between Thucydides' and Aeschylus' psychological "theories" (*Thucydides Mythistoricus* repr. Philadelphia: 1971, pp.154ff.). In his *Three Essays on Thucydides*, Finley draws on the parallels—stylistic, linguistic and thematic—between Thucydides and Euripides (Cambridge: 1967, pp.1-54). Kitto highlights the similarities between Thucydides' and Sophocles' understanding of the limits of human power (*Greek Tragedy* London: 1961, pp.182ff.). Hornblower, however, notes that some of the connections drawn between Thucydides and Euripides are "forced" (*Thucydides* Baltimore: 1987 p. 170). Not only does the story of the war as a whole reflect a tragic narrative—the fall of the seemingly invincible 'actor', Athens—but the reader can detect paradigmatic tragic elements in the lives of the particular individuals within the *History* (e.g., ill-fated outcomes despite well thought out intentions (the Spartan soldiers hurrying home to defend Pylos), the confrontation of dilemmas for which there is no single "right" answer or course of action (Pericles' policy advising the Athenians to abandon their farms and relocate to the city), the ethical impasse posed when loyalties are split between man's personal and 'civic' duties (Nicias and the Sicilian expedition), the danger of hubris (Alcibiades and the Sicilian expedition). In keeping with a theme central to many tragedies of his day, the *History* portrays the constant tension between external necessity and man's (limited) freedom. From a slightly different angle, Thucydides' work also bares some resemblance to the comedians writing during the 5<sup>th</sup> century—notably Aristophanes. There is a sense in which the *History* offers a commentary on the politics of the day, bringing to mind Aristophanes' critical and comedic work which 'starred' many of the same 'characters'. Like Aristophanes, Thucydides was both critical and fiercely proud of Athens, and showed overt contempt for those, like Cleon, who did not realise those qualities which made her excel.

#### Chapter 4: The Nature of the *History*

"No writer ever worked harder to achieve the Archimedean standpoint. No writer ever understood more deeply the impossibility of that quest."<sup>34</sup>

Though it is impossible to be precise in dating the kind of gradual intellectual/linguistic transformation Athens was undergoing during Thucydides' lifetime, and harder still to determine whether her developing democracy was its cause or its by-product, it is sure that during the 5<sup>th</sup> century, new kinds of thought and discourse were slowly making their way into the public consciousness.<sup>35</sup> However powerful this shift was, it is crucial to remember that for Thucydides, this was still a relatively new mode of public expression, and had yet to develop into the truly dominant force it later became. In his time, for example, disciplines had yet to be categorised, and were not yet sharply distinguished from one another. As he predated the existence of 'history' and 'political theory' as explicitly defined 'subjects', Thucydides stood "between two worlds, dazzled by ideas but never quite willing to break the bonds of sense."<sup>36</sup> Writing on the cusp of these linguistic and intellectual developments, Thucydides was able to experiment with new methods of interpretation and expression, resulting in an innovative style and novel approach to historical documentation.<sup>37</sup> Thus, it was his rather precarious and transitional position in Western intellectual history that in retrospect appears to have enabled Thucydides to undertake a unique venture in prose writing and effectively forge what proved to be a new path for historical research.

At the same time it was precisely the instability of the intellectual and historical/political conditions during which Thucydides wrote which

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<sup>34</sup> Crane, G. *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: 1998, p. 14).

<sup>35</sup> Vernant, J-P. *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (Boston: 1983, pp.348ff.).

<sup>36</sup> Finley, J.H. *Three Essays on Greek Thought* (Cambridge, MA: 1967, p.56).

<sup>37</sup> J.W. Allison discusses the opportunity this opened up for Thucydides, he was, she says: "free to narrate the war...obeying no rules of past prose" (*Word and Concept in Thucydides* Atlanta: 1997, p. X).



complicates our ability to classify his account of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides does not carefully cite sources, he does not pay much attention to the undoubtedly powerful economic forces at play in the war—there are many lacunae scattered throughout the text which make his work decidedly un-historic to the modern sensibility. Therefore, the term ‘history’ does not neatly correspond to the kind of work a modern historian might expect, and the question of the precise character of his work remains open. Not surprisingly, it has generated much scholarly debate. One might trace a major source of the disputes to the interpretation of a mere two sentences:

Those [however] who want to see things clearly as they were and, given human nature, as they will one day be again, *more or less*, may find this book a useful basis for judgment. My work was composed not as a prizewinning exercise in elocution, to be heard and then forgotten, but as a work of *permanent* value.<sup>38</sup>

There have been, broadly speaking, two ‘camps’ on this issue in the course of Thucydidean scholarship. The first are those who see his work as fundamentally ‘modern’, ‘scientific’, a search for ‘objectivity’. Scholars of this persuasion understand Thucydides to have undertaken a work heavily influenced by, and structurally similar to, the science of his day.<sup>39</sup> Gomperz, for example assumes that Thucydides’ primary aim was to uncover “the natural foundation of historical phenomena,” embodied in the “universal forces” which control human life.<sup>40</sup> He characterises Thucydides’ narrative as a “pursuit of strict

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<sup>38</sup> I.22, trans. Blanco, my italics.

<sup>39</sup> However ‘fact based’ we would like to think science to be, it is important to note that the medical writers of ancient Greece, like researchers today, had to begin with a theoretical proposition. For ‘moderns’ this is then ideally confirmed or disproved by concrete data. However, a purely ‘impartial’/‘objective’ account of empirical data is impossible—all human perception of the world comes through the filter imposed by our physical and psychological make-up. Scientific hypotheses are often theory driven, that is, facts are selected to support a particular theoretical standpoint. In ancient Greece, it important to note that among some ‘intellectuals’ there existed a powerful distrust of physical objects, the world of becoming was for many, much less real, even much less scientific than that the world of ideas, of thought, of ‘pure being.’ (For further discussion, see Lloyd, G.E.R., both *Magic, Reason, and Experience* (Cambridge: 1979), and *Science, Folklore and Ideology* (Cambridge: 1983). For examples of a similar phenomenon in Thucydides’ own reporting, see Hunter, V. both her *Thucydides the Artful Reporter* (Toronto: 1973); and *Past and Process in Herodotus and Thucydides* (Princeton:1982).

<sup>40</sup> Gomperz, T. *Greek Thinkers* (excerpt in HPW trans. Blanco New York: 1998, p.407).

objectivity." In a similar vein, Cochrane claims that Thucydides wrote "with the assured faith of the modern scientist," and Collingwood suggests that Thucydides sought above all to reveal the "laws" which guide human conduct. De Romilly provides a contemporary, and more refined version of the view of Thucydides as an "objective" recorder of the war.<sup>41</sup> This line of interpretation seems to presuppose a post-Enlightenment understanding of human knowledge—i.e., that human objectivity comes through neutral, empirical, *detached* discernment of events. While I believe there are similarities between this 'modern' project and Thucydides' (both, for example, look to find recurring patterns in order to help prepare and predict effectively for future circumstances), Thucydides' *History* must be distinguished in this crucial way: nowhere does he seem to have aimed to 'remove' himself from the world of men so as to view human life from an disengaged standpoint. His objectivity lies in reporting *both sides of the war* from man's point of view—i.e., with values and purposes recognised (and *not* from the imagined 'neutral' or 'purely empirical' standpoint of post-Enlightenment pretensions). Thucydides strove to discern those continuities that give meaning to actions and events which are observable from *within* the fluctuations and uncertainty of human life.

Let us now leave the nuances of this kind of approach to one side, and examine, for the sake of drawing out a contrast, the extreme end of this line of interpretation. This 'optimistic' view of the *History* assumes (at least implicitly) that "usefulness" and "permanent value" must be in some fundamental sense "scientific" or "clinically objective"—presumably exemplifying the kind of precise and exact knowledge associated with modern science. Scientific knowledge, then and now, is often thought to be reducible to clear abstract laws and principles which operate everywhere and throughout time. These abstractions are generalisations, free from the inherent mutability of concrete, particular events and people. Their purity, simplicity, and detachment from the

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<sup>41</sup> *La Construction de la Verite chez Thucydides* (Paris: 1990). For a similar interpretation, see also Wallace, W.P. "Thucydides" *Phoenix* vol.18 1964 (pp.251-261).

merely 'superficial' or 'inessential' ensures their constancy and longevity, allowing them to be used to predict accurately at any time or place. Abstract scientific laws therefore allow man to maintain a high level of control over the present and future world. The conviction that a "work of permanent value" must be some form of this understanding of 'science' will be a comfortable, indeed almost instinctive conclusion for the modern, Western, post-Enlightenment mind. Again, it is precisely these 'modern' and 'scientific' characteristics that will ensure that a work will endure.

And indeed, at a certain level, it requires no stretch of the imagination to understand why Thucydides has earned the title of a "scientific historian."<sup>42</sup> His unbiased stance, his insistence on his own reliability, his unwavering confidence in his unstated, yet trustworthy method of discerning the good evidence from the bad, makes such a title seem all too fitting.<sup>43</sup> Further, Thucydides is adamant that his narrative will not contain the "fabulous"/"romantic"/"entertaining" (*muthodos*)<sup>44</sup>—characteristics which had been essential ingredients in earlier poetry and history. He promises to be accurate, assuring the reader that he, unlike his predecessors, will not simply accept the familiar and too often unquestioned accounts of the past, so often blurred and merged with mythical narratives and stories.<sup>45</sup> No doubt, his hyper-critical approach towards collecting nothing but the most sound and reliable data has the distinct flavour of scientific method. However, it is interesting to note that while Thucydides insists on his rigorous critical method, nowhere does he inform the reader as to just what this method entails. Furthermore, as insistent as these commentators are about the nature of Thucydides' *History*, it is similarly unclear where his final 'scientific'

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<sup>42</sup> Cochrane, C. *Thucydides and the Science of History* (Oxford: 1929).

<sup>43</sup> Gomme. *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides Bk 1* vol. 1 (Oxford: 1945-1972, p.136).

<sup>44</sup> Flory suggests that Thucydides' disdain for the *muthodos* referred, not to a rejection of all pleasurable stories, but more specifically to his refusal to report: "patriotic stories in particular and sentimental chauvinism in general" ("The Meaning of *to me muthodos* (1.22.4) and the Usefulness of Thucydides' *History*" in *Classical Journal*, vol. 85 (p.194).

<sup>45</sup> Thucydides works hard to disentangle history from myth, e.g., at 2.29, he distinguishes Tereus, a figure of myth, from Teres, an actual king of Thrace whose son made an alliance with the Athenians.

conclusions lie. The 'data' is collected, but the explicit conclusions drawn from it are absent—there are no formal laws or principles stated anywhere in the *History*.<sup>46</sup> The absence of such theoretical guidelines led Gomperz to wonder: "not what he [Thucydides] denied, but what he affirmed."<sup>47</sup>

Given such an omission, it is not surprising that Thucydides' *History* has been cast in a strikingly different light by a second group of scholars who are less easily categorised. One might suggest that they ally Thucydides' *History* more closely with literary narrative (specifically, Attic tragedy) than with the science of his day (and certainly not with the science of *ours*). Cornford was perhaps first to argue along the lines that the *History*, far from being a 'rational' scientific treatise, showed that Thucydides knew "the limits of certain knowledge" (i.e., universally necessary and certain knowledge, which later becomes Plato's *episteme*).<sup>48</sup> Wade-Gery refers to the *History* as a work written, not with the exacting accuracy of the scientist, but with "a poet's precision."<sup>49</sup> Parry insists that far from being a "calculative machine" allowing one to accurately predict human behaviour, Thucydides' *History* reveals just the opposite, precisely that there are, for human beings, no "scientific" laws of behaviour.<sup>50</sup> In discussing this issue of certainty based on fixed laws or principles more specifically, Fliess suggests that Thucydides' attitude towards the *principle* of imperialism indicated that he was

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<sup>46</sup>G.E.M. de Ste. Croix remarks that Thucydides, far from seeking to make explicit the laws of human nature, simply "takes them for granted" (*The Origins of The Peloponnesian War* London: 1972, pp.5-7)

<sup>47</sup> *History of the Peloponnesian War* trans. Blanco (p.412). I argue that Thucydides' method serves to reveal data which then allows and encourages the reader to draw his own general conclusions from the text. This capacity to discern general ideas from within/immanent in particulars is a fundamental part of Thucydides' lesson.

<sup>48</sup> Cornford, F. *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (repr., Philadelphia: 1971, p.73). This view was also developed by Finley, *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge: 1967). For more recent interpretations of a similar view, see, Lloyd-Jones *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley: 1971); and Edmunds "Thucydides' Ethics as Reflected in his Description of Stasis" from *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* vol. 79 (1975).

<sup>49</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) For further discussion on Thucydides and the poets, see MacCleod "Thucydides and Tragedy" in *Collected Essays* (ed. Taplin Oxford: 1983, pp. 140-158); and Hornblower's *Greek Historiography* (Oxford: 1994, pp. 64-69), and his *Thucydides* (Baltimore: 1987, p. 110ff.).

<sup>50</sup> Parry, A. "Logos and Ergon in Thucydides" (Doctoral Thesis, Harvard: 1957, p.108).

neither “for nor against it...[but] seems to have been quite willing to accept any policy that made sense *in a given situation*.”<sup>51</sup> Orwin emphasises the fact Thucydides was “little known as a theorist,” underscoring that his *History* does not articulate ideals about utopian conceptions of what a good city or just international order might be. Instead of describing an unattainable goal, Thucydides works to reveal the difficulties that men face as they try to make decisions given the many political demands with which any *polis* or international community must contend.<sup>52</sup> Thucydides tells a story, where (certain kinds of) characters make choices and take actions within a web of other agents.

Like the “scientific” reading, this line of interpretation is also supported by the text. For instance, it has been argued that the *History* is reminiscent of a tragedy, portraying vivid descriptions of *particular* individuals, their *concrete* needs and *specific* desires (often in stark contrast with their inevitable fates known only retrospectively). While the interpretations which follow this kind of argument often recognise the ‘scientific’ nature of Thucydides’ stated method, ultimately they must understand the “permanent value” of the text to lie in a different kind of knowledge—a knowledge which is not so exact as that of much modern science, or ancient ‘science’ as *episteme* (that which is universally and necessarily true). The knowledge imparted by the *History* admits to probabilities, to more or less. However, arguments on this ‘side’ do not clearly answer the question of how such a narrative (i.e., one which recounts the immediate details of a particular time) succeeds in being lasting, much less useful as Thucydides himself claimed it to be. One might legitimately ask what temporally embedded events, however accurately reported, might mean for a future in utterly different circumstances.<sup>53</sup> Is it possible to reconcile Thucydides’ passionate concern for

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<sup>51</sup> Fliess, Peter. *Thucydides and the Politics of Bipolarity* (Louisiana: 1966, p.114).

<sup>52</sup> Orwin, C. *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994, pp.172-173).

<sup>53</sup> One interesting account of the relevance of history (even the most remote ancient history) to contemporary life is that provided by Quentin Skinner, who states that the study of history is not best understood as the “crude lessons” which can be extracted and imperfectly applied to our own lives, but rather its effective ability to “provide a lesson in self-knowledge.” (“Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” *History & Theory* 8: 1969 p.53).

the immediate and concrete facts at hand, with his broader claim of permanent value and use?<sup>54</sup>

Having stretched to extremes two polar interpretations of Thucydides, my aim was not to represent a comprehensive survey of the sophisticated and complex arguments which make up much of Thucydidean scholarship, but rather to mark out a basic framework for further analysis and thereby develop the 'middle ground'. Either argument in its most radical form runs into trouble; the 'scientists' are left with no explicitly stated methodological theory, and the 'dramatists' are left unsure of just what kind of truths are both particular and enduring. How then to find the middle ground, and in doing so, come to some understanding of how lasting knowledge, knowledge which will be of continued use to man, might be culled from such a complexly detailed and massive text? Clearly, it must be a form of knowledge that is less precise and less demonstrable than that of 'science' in either the ancient Greek or the modern sense. Is there then a different kind of enduring knowledge? I will argue that there is, and that Thucydides' *History* is a tool for obtaining it. I will begin by exploring Thucydides' distinct understanding of man, which is presupposed by his insistence on his work's enduring practicality.

## Chapter 5: Thucydides' Conception of Man

I will argue that Thucydides' understanding of man is a variation on the one we saw in Pindar—that is to say, he is portrayed as a species between god and beast.<sup>55</sup> Man, for both Thucydides and for Pindar, seems to occupy a 'space' in a

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<sup>54</sup> For further discussion on Thucydides' personal involvement with and emotional commitment to the events he describes, see Connor "A Postmodernist Thucydides?" (*Classical Journal* 1977 pp. 289-298); Badian "Thucydides and the Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War: A Historian's Brief" in *Conflict, Antithesis, and the Ancient Historian* (ed. Allison Ohio: 1990 pp.46-49); Hornblower *Thucydides* (Baltimore: 1987 p. 34ff.).

<sup>55</sup> According to Hunter, Thucydides wrote his *History* with a strong set of theoretical conceptions about the nature of man: "Thucydides used unchanging generalisations about human nature and human behavior in order to link events together in a meaningful process" (*Past and Process in Thucydides* Princeton: 1982, p. 159). I suggest further that the capacity to "link events together in a meaningful process" underlies man's freedom, for this ability implies a fundamental

larger order or natural hierarchy. While the odes often sought to illuminate and reinforce this order, the *History* draws attention to the nature of man's freedom *given* his (somewhat elastic) place in the *kosmos*. In the *History*, the reader sees man caught in a world over which he has a limited amount of control. This is apparent almost immediately, in the words he uses to describe the power of the war. At I.23, he claims that it "brought upon Greece *sufferings*" (*pathemata*—in Greek, literally "imprints" from without, the effects of external conditions).<sup>56</sup> This vulnerability to external environment however, does not capture the whole picture of man as he appears in the *History*. Thucydides reveals man to be a complex creature; he is not powerful enough to direct to his advantage all events external to him, yet he is not wholly determined, simply at the mercy of natural causation. Man both shapes, and is shaped by his world. Given this, the *History* attempts to illuminate this obscure truth about man's nature, and at the same time, helps him to be better able to contend with and make sense of it. What more can we say about the image of man that emerges out of Thucydides' *History*, and in what way might his *History* be useful to such a creature?

Taking into account both the content and structure of the *History*, together with Thucydides' claim that it will be a "possession for all time," makes a definitive conception of man and the kind of knowledge he can have about himself and his place in the world elusive. Nowhere does Thucydides interrupt the flow of his narrative to define explicitly the nature of its 'actors', nor does he present a consistent relationship between them and their external environment. This is not to deny the fact that there are direct statements about human nature in Thucydides' text. However, these claims in themselves do not seem to be what

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understanding of his environment which is necessary to determine and carry out reasonable actions in his world.

<sup>56</sup>Connor argues that suffering is the primary theme of the *History* (*Thucydides* Princeton: 1984, p.31). Kitto too, after examining Thucydides' detailed references (his "burning passages") about the brutalities and horrors of war, suggests that it was Thucydides' intention to bring out this extreme *suffering* in the *History* above all else (*Poiesis* Berkeley: 1966, pp.273-274). Therefore, the conspicuous absence of economic/political details can be explained if one sets aside our modern expectations for what should be included in an historical text, and tries to understand the nature of the history that Thucydides himself was trying to write.

vest the *History* with lasting use and value, in part because they frequently come out of the mouths of men who are less than trustworthy.<sup>57</sup> To further blur this issue, Thucydides does not state explicitly why or how the *History* he leaves might embody a kind of knowledge that will be valuable to his later readers. In omitting these precious details, Thucydides deprives the (modern) reader of the information he/she most expects given his bold introductory claim.<sup>58</sup>

With Connor and Orwin, I contend that the obscurity many (modern) readers find in Thucydides is intentional.<sup>59</sup> Or, perhaps more accurately, the tension between what he claims he will deliver, and what he actually does deliver serves an important purpose: the oblique and indirect style in which Thucydides imparts his message in part embodies the message itself. As with Pindar, Thucydides' style helps to 'train' the reader to think critically and reflectively about a world in which there seem to be no permanent, immutable rules, where no abstract theory can capture every relevant particular nuance. The *History* teaches the reader to be active, to find a sense of stability and security that does not depend on fixed, external abstractions, but one which nonetheless enables him to make good choices.<sup>60</sup> Because man occupies a similar 'stretch' of middle ground we saw in Pindar (as opposed to a fixed point), his place in the *kosmos* is 'flexible'. Thus, there can be no grand, overarching theory to guide him successfully through the particularities involved in those difficult decision he faces. Instead, he must develop a consistent, stable and enduring *character*, embodied by the *capacity* to act with honesty<sup>61</sup> and a sense of reasonableness

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<sup>57</sup> Some examples of generalisations made about human beings throughout the *History* are: the Athenian ambassadors at the start of the war (I.76), Thucydides himself (II.50, III.82, IV.108, V.68), Cleon at (III.39), Diodotus' response to Cleon (III.45), from Spartan ambassadors (IV.19), from Hermocrates (IV.61), from the Athenians in the Melian dialogue (V.105), from Nicias (VII.69).

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps this boast is a rhetorical tool, designed (at least in part) to motivate the passive reader to actively look for the information Thucydides insists is there.

<sup>59</sup> Connor *Thucydides* (Princeton: 1984); Orwin, C. *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994).

<sup>60</sup> For further discussion on Thucydides and the demand for reader participation his *History* makes, see, Connor *Thucydides* (Princeton: 1984, pp. 12-19)

<sup>61</sup> The importance of honesty to Thucydides is a theme that is articulated in Thucydides' introduction, and woven throughout the entire *History* (e.g., the specific case of correcting the mistaken, yet prevailing account of what really happened between Hippias and Hipparchus). On



even given the uncertainty which arises out of a contingent and variable life. In demanding that the reader engage in this intellectual “work out” (as opposed to simply supplying him with an explicit, universal abstract theory) Thucydides’ text suggests a distinct understanding of man and the kind of knowledge available and appropriate to him.<sup>62</sup>

### *Abstract and Concrete*

“No matter how abstract our theories may sound, or how consistent our theories may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell, the full meaning of whatever we say.”<sup>63</sup>

Thucydides’ *History* reveals man to be a creature who has the capacity both to ‘extract’ generalisations from specific past circumstances/experiences, and to use those abstractions to understand and judge future situations in order to make reasonable decisions as to how to act well.<sup>64</sup> Both the structure and content of his text work together to teach his reader how to engage effectively in the process of negotiating between the abstract and the concrete, difficult though it may be. Euben, for instance, reads the *History* as “point[ing] to, but not establishing...a separation between theoretical and practical life.”<sup>65</sup> I wish to argue that the

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a larger scale, Palmer suggests that a lack of honesty--self-deception--is that which leads to the downfall of Athens (*Love of Glory and the Common Good* Maryland: 1992, p.43ff.).

<sup>62</sup> One aspect of this intellectual training might be seen as the active participation Thucydides requires of his readers. This line of Thucydidean interpretation is not unique—indeed, Hobbes, in the preface to his translation makes a like point: “Thucydides makes his auditor a spectator...so that he may, from the narrations, draw out lessons to himself” (Hobbes’ *Thucydides*, “To the Readers”). For an expanded review of more contemporary interpretations similar to this one, see Connor *Thucydides* (Princeton: 1984, p.6ff; p.231ff.); Euben *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: 1990); Farrar. *Origins of Democratic Thinking* (Cambridge: 1988, p.126ff.); and Orwin. *The Humanity of Thucydides*. (Princeton: 1994, p.203ff.); and Adcock *Thucydides and his History*(Cambridge: 1973). Kitto states this point explicitly when examining Pericles’ comments about the Peloponnesians at I.141, and the seeming lack of information Thucydides provides about their behaviour at III.15: “What he [Thucydides]does not furnish, he expects the reader to work for.” And with this work, Kitto argues, many of the lacunae in the *History* disappear (*Poiesis* (Berkeley: 1966) pp.301-302).

<sup>63</sup> Arendt, quoted in Disch, J. *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cornell: 1994, p.110).

<sup>64</sup> This understanding of man shares much with that conception of man described by Gill as the “objective-participant” model, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: 1996, p.11).

<sup>65</sup> Euben, P. *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: 1990, p. 201).

*History* works to help the reader bridge this separation by developing a better understanding of this relationship through seeing where abstract generalisations come from and how they relate to, and be effectively used in negotiating concrete particulars. Thucydides does this by telling a *story* which serves to reveal the fragile connection between general concepts and the actual experiences which make up human lives.<sup>66</sup> Thucydides implies that the nature of man's abstract concepts is complex, and their relationship to the concrete world is intimate, though not at all straight-forward. The *History* suggests that a sound, *general* understanding of what human beings are begins with *experience*. For the reader, this includes the experience of 'entering' this past and foreign world, and through attention to its particular details, learning to draw general conclusions from his "visit."<sup>67</sup> The concrete 'life experiences' which come through a critical, attentive reading of Thucydides' words allow them to transcend the particular details of the war, and render them useful for making choices in one's own life (e.g., What *kinds* of reasons did Nicias appeal to in opposing the Sicilian expedition? How did Pericles use *basic* human characteristics such as honesty and inspiration to unite and galvanise the Athenians? What *fundamental* aspects of Spartan culture nurtured the attributes of Brasidas?). At the same time, the reader sees the necessity of good *instruction/leadership* as he is led through these particular experiences (e.g., the indirect guidance he gets from Thucydides'

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<sup>66</sup> For an expanded discussion on Arendt's use of story-telling, see Disch, J. *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: 1994, p.111ff).

<sup>67</sup> I borrow this idea from Arendt's notion of the imagination "going visiting." (*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago: 1982 p.43). "Visiting," she claims, provides a *broad* (and thus implicitly, stable) base of experience outside one's own immediate life from which to draw when making decisions. It provides one with "enlarged thought," or the capacity to think "generally" (where "general" is derived from moving from particular "standpoint to [particular] standpoint"). Extensive exposure to human life in its many manifestations allows man to reflect on his own inherently partial position, and gives him a bigger picture of what *kinds* of things human beings do—that is, he develops a sense of "reasonableness," or reasonable *for man*. The idea of "enlarged thought," or a sense of "the general" which is fundamentally bound to particulars is important when one gives up the idea that reasonable action originates from accessing abstract concepts which are detached from/impartial to actual human life—that is, when one forgoes finding an external Archimedean standpoint from which to judge.

deliberate selection of material,<sup>68</sup> as well as the more direct 'counsel' he receives from the actual leaders in the war). The *History's* portrayal of both 'raw' experience and 'leadership' helps man to develop an appropriate understanding of the relationship between abstract and concrete—a necessary, though insufficient 'condition' for making reasonable choices for creative action in an undetermined future.

### *Man's Use of Abstract Principle and Past Experience*

What more does Thucydides' *History* say about the nature of the general principles that man is capable of drawing out of particular situations, and how does it prepare him to use them well? Clearly the abstractions embedded in Thucydides' text are not akin to Kant's categorical imperative—immutable and universal. Can they still provide man with an impartial and neutral standpoint on which to base his decisions? Do they allow him to predict accurately given the indeterminateness of himself and the world he inhabits? If they do not, and we have given up hope for finding an Archimedean standpoint, should man rely on precedent in order to predict and plan effectively for his future?

Allying useful and enduring knowledge with certainty in the form of fixed abstract principles, which serve both as neutral standards for judgment, and as the basis for consistent and accurate predictions for the future, is a line of thinking that is fueled by natural science, and proves misguided when analysing Thucydides' narrative (and, I would argue, political theory in general). The events described in the *History* indicate that actions performed as the result of rigidly applying even the soundest abstract principles do not necessarily achieve, much less guarantee, man's intended results.<sup>69</sup> Time and again, the reader

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<sup>68</sup> The fact that Thucydides does not state his method precisely should not prevent the reader from recognising that the history he leaves comes through the filter of an Athenian man who lived through the war. Thucydides' periodic self-assertions (e.g., I.1, II.48, III.25, IV.104, V.26, VI.7, VI.51) though perhaps not intended to underlie the text's 'bias', do serve this purpose.

<sup>69</sup> Often this approach to decision making depends on reducing one's experience to its 'essential core' ("just the facts") efficiently cutting away the merely 'superficial' aspects. Too often, this method does not articulate explicitly what criteria establish 'essential' and 'superficial'. In

confronts meticulously calculated strategies, based on seemingly reasonable principles only to see them utterly distorted when realised in practice.<sup>70</sup> Even Pericles, the most highly esteemed and overtly praised man in the *History* does not provide a single, overarching theory which can be isolated and used as an objective or otherwise omniscient standpoint after his death.<sup>71</sup> Surely no one could reasonably contend that a close study of his early strategy for the Athenians—even understood as the design of the paradigmatic statesman and general—could be crystallised into a universal theory which could generate a sound foreign policy for a modern nation, or even for Athens ten years later in the war.

Thucydides seems to warn against relying solely on concrete precedent or current accepted opinion as the basis for sound prediction as well.<sup>72</sup> Connor observes that as early as the *Archaeology* (I.2-19), Thucydides puts forth a number of generalisations based on facts of ‘ancient’ history that are plainly not substantiated in the detailed narrative that follows.<sup>73</sup> While the reader is told of the increasing power of both Athens and Sparta, Thucydides makes a point to highlight the extreme importance of sea power: “the states that turned their

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bypassing this important analysis, one can avoid confronting the fact that any reduction necessarily involves *evaluation*, and thus is never neutral.

<sup>70</sup>Arendt argues that the failure to achieve consistently one’s desired results when relying on the dictates of abstract concepts is (at least in part) the effect of the inherent inefficacy of such concepts in confronting unprecedented events which can “ruin our categories of thought and standards of judgment” (Arendt as quoted in Disch. *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* Cornell: 1994, p.112). This will be addressed further in the discussion of Pylos below.

<sup>71</sup>In fact, some of the generals who follow Pericles retain his basic principles yet derive from them atrocious policies.

<sup>72</sup>Edmunds draws a nice contrast between Pericles’ concept of the city and its values and the more traditional ones of Greece. Given his ‘untraditional’ conception of the *polis*, and Thucydides’ clear respect for Pericles, the notion that Thucydides himself was simply maintaining conservative values in his *History* seems unlikely (*Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* Cambridge, MA: 1975, p. 76ff.). Finley highlights that action based solely on precedent yields “disaster,” and undermines the policy of one of the most ignoble characters in the narrative—Cleon (*Thucydides* Cambridge, MA: 1962, p.58ff.).

<sup>73</sup>More specifically, Connor remarks that the *Pentecontaetia* suggests that the power of Athens, and naval power more generally, should secure her a victory in the war. That this is not borne out reiterates the idea that one cannot predict the future, even given close attention to past successes (e.g., Athenian naval success at Salamis) or to present circumstances. This suggests that good decisions utilise both abstract and concrete must be used together (*Thucydides* Princeton: 1984, pp. 34ff.).

energies to the sea were assured of power in the form of revenues and hegemony over others...as to land wars, there were none that resulted in the acquisition of power”(I.15). Because the reader is likely to be aware of Athens’ renowned navy, these ‘historical’ observations do not lead to their ‘logical’ outcome—an Athenian victory. The human capacity to predict accurately is presented as imperfect in the *History*—both abstract principle and precedent can be of only limited use. Given this, the ability to predict with certainty, and in this gain control over one’s future can not be the goal of Thucydides’ *History*—and if this is the case, it shares even less with the aims of modern science than has sometimes been argued.

## Chapter 6: Developing a Sense of Reasonableness and Using It Creatively

As Thucydides portrays human life as indeterminate, no principle or set of past experiences will be of guaranteed value in the future. Given this, we must try to identify what kind of useful knowledge the *History* provides. I argue that this knowledge is manifested in the ability to harmonise precedent, present circumstance, and general principle in order to make reasonable decisions and perform creative action. For instance, that which makes Pericles a figure useful to men living hundreds, indeed thousands of years after his death, is not the specific advice he gives in his circumstances, nor is it solely the general principles which underlie his particular policies. Rather, it is his ability to act both *reasonably* and *creatively*<sup>74</sup> where a sense of what is ‘reasonable’ arises out of

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<sup>74</sup> My concept of “creative action” is inspired by Arendt’s idea of “natality” as presented in *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p. 8). Arendt characterises natality as the condition required to “begin something anew...a sense of initiative” (ibid. p.8). Through the condition of natality, human beings have the ability “to perform what is infinitely improbable...and unexpected” (ibid. p.178). This is an essential piece of every human life, for each person is like no one else—unique, individual and singular—and one’s distinguishing characteristics arise in the performance of an action (not in the motive behind or the achievement of that action ibid., p.206). This manifestation of each man’s fundamental uniqueness, i.e., the human capacity to act deliberately, underlies man’s freedom, and shifts its meaning. Freedom is not derived from “mastery” or “sovereignty” from without, but an evolving understanding from within (Arendt argues further that choosing to manifest this action in *forgiving* is the true realisation of human freedom, p.236ff. Further discussion on this idea will appear below in the discussion of Pylos). Thus, human freedom for Arendt does *not* come from the power that seems to inhere in applying

habituation within a particular community and reflection on that experience, together with a broad exposure to 'outside' experiences (i.e., lifestyles and 'stories' foreign to one's own particular tradition). This reflection yields generalisations which are never simply accepted, but are continuously tested in practice, as one makes decisions to act in the world. By 'creativity' I mean the capacity to integrate and act on these critical reflections—that is, a sense of 'reasonableness'—given the new situations one encounters throughout life (creativity is essential to a good leader).<sup>75</sup> This basic framework reveals Pericles to have been great in his ability to judge which particulars within his present situation were relevant and important, and to act on them innovatively in conjunction with his prior reflections and generalisations. However, this is not to discount the fact that Pericles did in fact *get it right*. Nor was his success irrelevant to Thucydides.<sup>76</sup> The outstanding general possessed a unique, well-cultivated insight that was manifested in the choices he made, the 'risks' he took. His judgements and actions often proved his decisions right in the circumstances in which he was involved. Of course, just as not all members of Pindar's audience could hope to achieve deeds equal to the victors he praised, neither could each citizen expect to become a Pericles. Yet still, Pericles' enduring merit—his 'lesson' to posterity—arises not *only* out of the fact that many of his particular actions resulted in good outcomes, but of what lay behind those

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universal abstract principles to dynamic human life. It is *not* the capacity to control and accurately predict things about ourselves and the external world. For this inadvertently destroys human freedom. Such an understanding locks man into an infinite causal regress of merely *re-*acting mechanically to what has come before in hopes of ensuring a particular, determined, chosen future. Instead, Arendt argues, we must see that freedom comes in deliberate action itself, not in the consistent realisation of a desired consequence, but from the mere act of creating, from doing something new. Man's ability to integrate *reasonable* generalisations (i.e., those derived from reflected experience within a community) with his own distinct perspective can potentially release him from being forever trapped in *re-*acting. That which defines and unites the human species therefore is this capacity to interpret experience and "begin" from a distinct, inimitable perspective. We will see that realising this capacity fully, that is, vesting "natality" with meaning, for both Arendt and Thucydides, can occur only from within a political setting—a *polis*.

<sup>75</sup> Any action undertaken by an individual is necessarily creative because one's circumstances, though usually falling into a recognisable kind/type of interaction, are, in their details, unique.

<sup>76</sup> Aristotle too praises Pericles' political acumen, specifically his capacity to see the good for men "*agatha...dunatai theorein*" (NE 1140b8-11).

actions. That is to say, Pericles demonstrates that good results are *likely* to follow from honest and concerted attention to both general principle and specific circumstance, on a willingness to risk under the guidance of reason--to act on one's principles creatively rather than dogmatically.<sup>77</sup>

Thucydides' text embodies a complex web of men, their motives, actions, and the dynamic and uncertain conditions that make up their world. Through the narrative, the reader sees that man's actions should not be mechanical *re*-actions to the dictates of abstract principles, for human abstractions (which is to say, those of ethics and politics) are not absolute and, more important, *cannot be*. Human beings are indeterminate (and thus, 'free') creatures. Our abstractions are no more (and indeed no less!) than generalisations formed from habituation and reflection on past experience.<sup>78</sup> Treating them as anything more than this endows man with an inflated sense of power, and sustains the illusion that only given fixed certainty accessed from 'above' (i.e., abstract concepts which are somehow 'impartial' to the value-laden lives we live) can he secure the power and stability needed for reasonable thought and action.<sup>79</sup> A sense of what is reasonable for man comes from honest attention paid to the experiences 'within' his world. In Thucydides' *History*, it is equally the men who act on isolated principle alone as those without principle at all who are most misguided.

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<sup>77</sup>A revealing parallel can be drawn between Pericles and the victors whom Pindar praised. Pericles, like the great athletes, was *exceptional*, and not all members of even the most optimum *polis* would be able to achieve the greatness he did (just as the audience of an ode were not all capable, even given the most excellent training, of performing at the level of the athletes Pindar exalted). For Greeks, all human beings, though considered by some to be members of the same human species, were not endowed with identical potentials. However, this does not make training/education irrelevant for those who are, by nature, 'average'. Indeed, I would argue that the function of the ideal Greek *polis* was to allow people to become fully realised, to whatever lengths they could be given their individual nature and in light of the *polis'* good. A Pericles, or a great athlete helps to illuminate the boundaries of human excellence, and in this provides guidance/a framework for all people, not matter how far they, individually, can reach.

<sup>78</sup> Here we might draw some parallels between Wittgenstein's "language games," and Cavell's "shared forms of life" (*Philosophical Investigations*; *Must We Mean What We Say*, respectively).

<sup>79</sup> If man construes his abstractions as Truth, he gives himself the capacity to create Truth, a power that is inappropriate to him in that it disregards his nature/his species' place in the *kosmos*. Furthermore, this deluded sense of power is one which can be--and often has been--used cruelly (see Arendt's idea of "truth as construct of power" explored by Disch *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* Ithaca: 1994, p.113).

Ultimately, either extreme is a form of enslavement, as blinding and oppressive as a despot's arbitrary rule.

## Chapter 7: Arendt and Human Freedom

I will interpret the *History* as reformulating a common (modern) understanding of human freedom, one which is reflected by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. A man's freedom, according to Arendt (and, I wish to argue, according to Thucydides as well), does not arise out of becoming 'master' of his world. That is, freedom does not come about through sheer power and control (as stated above, this is often associated with the possession of an objective Truth thought to render man capable of infallible prediction and guaranteed achievement of ends). This conception of freedom is a distortion when associated with human beings, for it is not derived from observation of men as they actually live. In fact, it patently misrepresents the nature of man and the world he inhabits. Closer scrutiny on the experience of human life (through for instance, its representation in poetry and history) reveals human freedom to be more elusive than this, and certainly not confirmed by the ability to act and to achieve without fail one's desired ends. As Arendt argues, freedom comes through the human capacity to "risk self-disclosure" in action and speech within a community. Freedom is man acting *creatively* given a *reasonable* sense of (an educated or well-informed guess as to) what is both possible and good for him. This creativity, dependent on and stimulated by a sense of reasonableness, is available to man only when from acting *within* a web of human relationships in the world (*not* from a neutral point outside it). For Arendt, human freedom is not realised solely in discreet, isolated achievements, but on well-reasoned, creative action amongst others:

It is because of this already existing web of human relationships with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose, but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone



is real, that it “produces” stories, with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things.<sup>80</sup>

Men, Arendt claims, through action and speech, *make stories* yet, importantly, stories over which they have only limited control.<sup>81</sup> By paying attention to and being honest about one’s own story, as well as the ‘real’ stories others live, men can arrive at a “general standpoint” which is necessarily “closely connected with particulars” (because it grows out of them).<sup>82</sup> This standpoint—due to the breadth of its origin, *not* its detached, neutrality/objectivity—offers men a place from which to reflect, and ultimately allows them to shape more freely their own lives (the actions of which Arendt believes are tested and judged in the public sphere). Through “visiting” the world that Thucydides portrays in the *History*, the reader’s world expands, opening new possibilities and ways of thinking.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, its stories reinforce the fact that human beings are forever embedded within a socio-historical context for which there is no ultimate transcendent perspective.

I wish to argue that Arendt’s distinct understanding of human freedom has some striking parallels with what we find in Thucydides—the *History* displays a world of speech and action, where actions, though perhaps often derailed from actors’ intentions, do not cease to be worthwhile and meaningful. Meaning is not derived solely from the realisation of an intended ‘end’ (which, Arendt notes is a difficult concept to reduce to a particular action, for though perhaps performed for a specific reason, every action has an infinite number of consequences that in some sense “outdo” it), but out of conscious deliberation and honest reflection (reasonableness), and the actual *doing* itself (creativity). Again, this is not to deny the importance of outcomes, it is only to stress a crucial point about political

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<sup>80</sup> *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p.184).

<sup>81</sup> Arendt claims that each man is the “hero” (as originally conceived in Homer), not the author of his story (ibid., p.184).

<sup>82</sup> *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: 1982, p.44).

<sup>83</sup> This happens at first on the scale of the war itself. Cogan remarks that the speeches, which give the reader a “view” from a multitude of perspectives, expands and deepens his understanding of the events Thucydides describes (*The Human Thing* Chicago: 1981).

theorising: No political theory can guarantee the sure attainment of particular intended outcomes, nor can a single theory guide men through the specific details and nuances that make each individual life meaningful (if difficult). To expect this would be to misunderstand what man is, for it would ignore the inherent indeterminacy of being human. However, a good political theory can give the theorist (and hopefully others) a broader understanding of the *kinds* of things that are reasonable for human beings, and in this can increase the *likelihood*, the *probability* of achieving good outcomes more consistently.<sup>84</sup>

Thucydides' story reveals the impossibility of isolating fixed and universal rules or principles for men to use rigidly in guiding their own particular lives, and at the same time, it trains the reader and broadens his perspective in such a way as to help him better understand the general principles he relies on so that he can better and more deliberately shape his own particular life. The men we encounter in Thucydides' *History*, and his present readers alike, have only a *limited* view of the *kosmos* and thus only a *limited* amount of control over it. They can never step fully outside their world, but they can find stability by extending its 'boundaries', by engaging honestly and attentively with the many varieties of human life.

## Chapter 8: The Power to Discern

But then what enables us to act reasonably (as opposed to merely acting)? Acting reasonably given this understanding of human freedom demands cultivating the power to *discern* what is important in a given situation. This power to discern is what reading (i.e., actively participating in) the *History* helps

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<sup>84</sup> A 'good' general was considered good because he increased the *probability* of achieving certain outcomes over others. His insight and reason made him a certain kind of person. This distinct character manifested itself in the external world through discreet actions which brought about specific 'outcomes'. But, the capacity for good action (and subsequent outcome) was the product of a long cultivated, stable character which, as we have seen, was not invulnerable to external forces. Given this, the reader must shift from valuing a mechanical and certain attainment of goals, to valuing increased understanding, the basis of a 'noble' character. Such a character increases the *likelihood* of doing good consistently. This understanding will highlight the importance of forgiving and human freedom, discussed more fully below.

to develop in its readers—at any time in history. Man must not (and indeed cannot) hope to generate a set of immutable, universally applicable principles, but instead must nurture an acute discerning capacity. In doing so, he learns to be attentive to and present in the situations in which he finds himself, in all their complexity.<sup>85</sup> There is no escape into the purity and clarity of a wholly abstract world. The power to discern comes from immersion in, not separation from the world *as it is*. Thucydides presents the human world as anything but clear and consistent. Its inherent ambiguity requires that man view his abstract generalisations in a new light. They do not authoritatively direct action from ‘above’, instead they are both stable and *tentative*, capable of simultaneously structuring a particular moment yet flexible enough to ‘fit’ its distinctive elements. Therefore, the rigid dichotomy that much of western culture has come to associate between abstract and particular dissolves, and leaves instead the evolving ability to discern how they work best together.

The “power to discern” I describe is manifested in a particular and stable character or disposition. Cultivating such a disposition demands understanding the dynamic relationship between abstract generalisations and concrete particulars in the human world. Thucydides presents this relationship to his readers. The *History* reveals both man and his world to be indeterminate, each one effecting and being affected by the other.<sup>86</sup> Reading the *History* requires engaging in the continuous process of broadening one’s understanding through

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<sup>85</sup> This capacity to discern, I hope to show in Part III, has many parallels with Aristotle’s concept of the mean as determined by the prudent man, or *phronimos* (e.g., *NE* 1104a5-10, b25-28; 1106b16ff; and 1109a13). In Thucydides, this capacity means being attuned to *ta deonta* – the relevant factors of a concrete situation. For a discussion of *ta deonta* in Thucydides, see, de Ste. Croix *Origins of Peloponnesian War* (London: 1972, pp.6ff); Edmunds, L. *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge: 1975, pp.167ff); Finley *Thucydides* (Cambridge: 1942, pp.95ff.).

<sup>86</sup> A similar understanding of the relationship between human beings and the external world in which they act is expressed by Hannah Arendt: “In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things” (*The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p.9). And later, “man is always a doer and sufferer” (*ibid.*, p.190). A similar view is found in Marx’s *The German Ideology*: “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” (*The Marx Engels Reader*. ed. Tucker, New York: 1978, p.165).

experiencing the world from an ever-increasing number of standpoints. This inherent openness results in an ongoing and open dialectic—the very crux of man’s freedom. The reader *experiences* this dialectic, this freedom, by reading the *History*. There, he engages with the interplay between man’s words and actions, and the consequences that they have on the world external to him, both intended and unforeseen.

Thucydides recognises that the unforeseen is a source of uncertainty, and that uncertainty is a source of terror for man. In hopes of regaining control and escaping the uncertainty inherent in his freedom, man is prone to cling desperately to abstract principles (as religious omens, or perhaps, ‘fancy words’ from the mouths of dishonest ideologues). Whatever their form, these fixed abstractions share the characteristic of being detached from and elevated above the vicissitudes of man’s actual life—his political life. This lofty position endows them—and the men who claim to ‘know’ them—with a false sense of power.<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, these immutable abstractions divert man’s attention, or worse, they excuse man from having to perform the infinitely harder task of paying attention to, and drawing lessons from the important particular details of life. Thus, it is precisely man’s freedom, that precious quality that many argue elevates him from the beasts, which generates the unstable and insecure condition that causes him to seek, hold on to, and often become imprisoned by a false sense of certainty. Relinquishing this deceptive sense of certainty forces man to cultivate stability elsewhere. Thucydides helps to develop this alternative.

### **Chapter 9: Custom and History—The Structure and Stability Provided by the *Polis***

This shift from trying to locate security in fixed abstract principles to cultivating a life-long “power to discern” leaves the image of man as he emerges from Thucydides critically incomplete. Above, I discussed the relationship between

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<sup>87</sup> Abstractions come later to embody not only power, but *reality*, e.g., Plato’s “cave” in the *Republic*.

abstract and concrete, and the need for man to be acutely sensitive to and honest about both the generalisations he has made, and the ways they relate to the particular situations in which he finds himself. I have discussed the importance of broadening one's experiences, of engaging in what Arendt terms "visiting" in order to reach a "general standpoint" from which one can reflect. While reflection on a wide range of experiences is crucial to man's sense of reasonableness (necessary when abstract principles lose their authority), there is another important factor which Thucydides (and Arendt) suggests is equally vital. We must turn to the role played by the *polis* in order to help further illuminate what is reasonable for man and understand how he accesses it. The idea that reasonableness is based on varied experience alone is too vague, it leaves man adrift, and in the end, supports a position that is vulnerable to a charge of relativism. While the *polis* cannot supply the certainty of universal, abstract standards, it further cultivates the 'middle ground' (the *human* ground) by illustrating how a sense of reasonableness for man arises through being acculturated to particular customs and belonging to a larger sense of history.

In the *History*, men receive instruction/leadership in two interconnected ways--I will call them 'custom' and 'history'. Thucydides suggests that these are accessible to men by living in and habituating themselves to a particular culture, developed and sustained in a *polis* (the space for Arendt's "web of relationships and enacted stories"). The *polis* provides the external conditions that men need to develop, both physically and intellectually. The *polis* provides the initial 'substance' for his thought. Custom and history as experienced through active political life give man a sense of who he is. In a *polis*, he can reflect on and critically think about not only what values guide his own actions, but about what others like him do and have *historically* done. He can see the effects of both his own decisions and actions and those of others' (Arendt's *publicity* and *plurality*). Furthermore, the *polis*, with its laws and mores, gives him stability. Again, this is not the stability provided by True and fixed abstractions, but a more 'local', and

thus importantly, a more accessible (though no less reasonable) form. Custom and history, though in ways constricting, give man a base, something to ground himself in (if eventually only to react against!). Through direct engagement with an ongoing political experience man can begin to flesh out a *reasonable* sense of what kind of creature he is.

Arendt argues that the *polis* serves as that which can combat the inherent “chaos” of the human world (as well as the brute fact of human mortality) by creating an arena of “organised remembrance.”<sup>88</sup> Only by living within the structure and security of a *polis* can men be recognised and remembered by others. Living in a *polis* makes man feel *a part of something*, and only as a part of something can man become an *agent* capable of meaningful action. Meaningful actions do not happen randomly or in a vacuum, but through a medium—again, this is the “web” of human relationships, or the political realm. The structure and order of the *polis* generates a broader sense of belonging to an articulatable *something* (which Arendt claims is (in part) derived from the promises we make with one another). In such a community, man sees his actions reflected back to him, he experiences their effects. Over time, this process develops in him a stable identity. This enduring identity allows him to act and assign value to the world around him. Actions take on meaning through being both embedded in and *guided by* the structure of man’s political sphere, which is itself structured by custom and history. Both instruct and guide man as he interacts with the world, and shape the way he first relates to it. As such, each one, somewhat paradoxically, serves both to constrain man and to free him.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: 1998, p.198).

<sup>89</sup> See Hunter, V. (*Past and Process in Thucydides* Princeton: 1992); de Ste. Croix (*The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* London:1972); Hornblower (*Thucydides* Baltimore: 1987) for discussions of Thucydides’ own constraints. However, the existence of man’s inescapable constraints or partiality need not be seen as inimical to good/fair judgement and choice. This point is made clearly in Disch’s interpretation of Arendt, in which Disch highlights an alternative to judgement from an illusory Archimedean standpoint, replacing it instead with “impartial partiality,” the ability to be critical from *within* a particular situation (*Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* Ithaca: 1994, pp. 27ff.). This view has parallels with Aristotle’s conception of the *polis* as that which cultivates this capacity. This idea will be discussed further below in Part III.

The *History's* portrayal of different *poleis* highlights the fact that for Thucydides, man can never be simply a passive recipient of an endless stream of sense data, but rather is always, *necessarily*, situated in a concrete context (i.e., living in a particular community with its values and at a specific time in history). Thus all 'extraction' from and reflection on concrete experience has implicit in it an ideological framework derived from habitual interpretation from a distinct perspective—that is, from living life in one community or another.<sup>90</sup> Every man will not interpret brute 'fact' identically, in part because his customs and history will inhibit or hone his ability to interpret the 'data' he perceives.<sup>91</sup> As these interpretations differ, so too do his abstract principles and ideals. This means that those concrete experiences to which man is exposed as he lives in the world directly impact the abstract principles he develops and employs in his thought and action later in life.<sup>92</sup> Because of the influence of diverse external conditions, all men cannot access equally a set of universal ideals above and beyond their particular experiences had in their own cultural milieux. Given this, man must

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<sup>90</sup> The importance of community, and the *polis* in particular, is evident in Thucydides at the outset of the *History*—in the *Archaeology*—where Thucydides implies that it is only after a "common sense of Greek nationality" is established that human accomplishment is made possible (Finley. *Thucydides* Cambridge, MA : 1963, p.85). In a similar vein, Crane argues that the principle which grounds much of Thucydides' *History* is the idea that success can only come to *poleis* given political stability (*Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* Berkeley: 1998, p.16). The world Thucydides describes in the *Archaeology* is one where small, undeveloped states quarrel amongst each other—this lack of centralised power recurs as the war progresses, Athenian leadership fragments, and Athens is finally defeated. The importance of the *polis* is all the more palpable in Thucydides' impassioned discussion of the horrors of *stasis* at III.82-86. Civil strife, in destroying the structure/order of a city, makes it impossible for man to flourish. With it comes the dissolution of meaningful language, the decay of custom and law, and the rise of selfishness, greed and depravity. For an extensive discussion on this theme, see Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994, pp.172-192). It is also in this that we see a potentially misleading connection to Hobbes. While both understand the *polis* as essential to human flourishing, unlike Hobbes, Thucydides cannot conceive of 'man' with capacities and habits that are pre-socio/political/civil existing outside of it, there in 'natural' form to be constrained by the rationality of the contract.

<sup>91</sup> For further discussion on the nature and limits of ideology on man's capacity to judge and act reasonably, see Crane *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: 1998, pp.8-9).

<sup>92</sup> This presumably is what leads Aristotle to claim that it makes "all the difference" into what kind of community one is raised. This is not to deny the possibility that there is some form of Truth out there, it is only to say that the human capacity to access such truth, if it does in fact exist, is not realised in us at birth. This will be addressed further below.

seek to actively enlarge his experiences, and in doing so, enlarge the 'content' of his abstract thought and his potential for reasonable, creative action.

This conclusion leads to a modification of my preliminary account of man as he appears in Thucydides--that is, as simply an indeterminate being, capable of developing from varied experience a power to "discern," and then able to engage in prudent action within his particular environment. While man and his world are in large measure 'malleable', the possibilities available to him are not infinite and unlimited, nor can they be understood objectively from an external standpoint. The customs into which man is raised, and the history he is a continuation of, form the constraints he faces as he manifests himself in the world through speech and action. However, it is equally the case that custom and history serve as the support and security man needs (providing a sense of belonging and identity) in order to confront and engage effectively with 'foreign' ways of life, alternative 'stories', which are necessary to the development of the kind of enduring discerning character that allows him to act reasonably and creatively in an otherwise uncertain world.

In summary the *History* suggests that a general understanding of man cannot be accessed, much less adequately understood without scrutinising the environment into which particular men have been acculturated. Discourse on abstractions in isolation of the people and events which substantiate them is a mere linguistic game, not good political theory. However, this assumption does not bar Thucydides (or present readers) from having an abstract sense of what man is--it just qualifies this general sense, renders it open, indeterminate, somewhat tentative. The conception of man that appears in Thucydides builds on the conception of man found in Pindar in that he appears to be a creature who has a peculiar kind of freedom derived from his variable place in a fixed natural hierarchy. Ultimately, the *History* suggests that those qualities and capacities which make man uniquely man--for instance, his ability to act humanely--must be *developed*. Man's 'humanity' exists in him only as a potential, and it is the task



of political theory to identify through what *sort* of speech and action, and in what *kinds* conditions, this potential is realised.

In exploring and analysing the experience of life in a *polis*--specifically through its customs and history--we see that each in a different way contextualises man's place in his world, shapes his evolving understanding of it, and cultivates his discerning capacity. It is only through a sense of where man has come from, what he has done, and for what kinds of reasons, that an understanding of what is reasonable (and good) for him in the circumstances can emerge. This is not to say that man is inextricably bound to the ideological framework of his past or present community, unable to progress or change. In fact, Thucydides' *History* implies that precisely the converse is true. However, as we saw with Pindar, whose odes embedded even the most awe-inspiring and ground-breaking victors in a past tradition, any deliberate and reasonable change demands a sense of who or where man currently is. This self-knowledge comes through immersion in custom and history, both one's own and those of others. The first allows man to see better the range of choices available to him, and to discern more prudently the appropriate ones given his own predicament. Broad exposure to a range of different customs and histories (i.e., other *poleis*) helps man to contextualise and make sense of his own character because he has a broader base from which to critically reflect on his desires and beliefs. This puts him in a better position to *choose* to change, or at least move beyond blind acceptance of the tradition in which he was acculturated to. He can develop an understanding of *why* his particular *polis* endorses the doctrines and practices it does.<sup>93</sup> The 'constraints' of history, custom, and character provide the base man needs to realise his

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<sup>93</sup> In saying this, I by no means want to imply that Thucydides thought to escape one's 'nurture' or habituation was easy given sufficient exposure to different cultures. The idea of a self-made man, or the American dream of self-reinvention was no part of the ancient mind. It was the *polis* that made the man, and for both Thucydides, and we will see even more explicitly for Aristotle, change, though not impossible, is *extremely* difficult.

humanity effectively so that he can prudently use his freedom in reasonable, creative action.<sup>94</sup>

But isn't this merely pushing the initial issue back a step--or worse, deferring to a disguised form of just the line of thinking I hoped to refute? Am I not simply replacing "certainty" in the form of fixed abstract generalisations with the more ambiguous and muddled "conceptual web of varied experience, custom, and history"? I want to use Thucydides' *History*, with its complex structure and rich content to avoid this trap. I wish to argue that the *History* actively trains readers to replace certainty (derived from a detached, neutral--'objective'--standpoint) with the capacity to discern, that is, to think reasonably, to reflect on and be critical of what has been done, to understand why certain characters did what they did. The alternative I propose demands reading the *History* as a tool--as the embodiment of particular experiences, customs and histories--to be used to help build a discerning character prepared to engage with the inescapable uncertainty of human life, where one must rely not solely on principles, but on principles as they relate to (and perhaps are changed by) experience. In this, Thucydides provides man with a much more effective and sufficiently (if not definitively) well-grounded body of knowledge with which he can think reasonably and act creatively, or be *humanly free*.<sup>95</sup>

Human freedom however, is not only limited by the qualities/potentials man has because he is a man (and not a god or an animal), particular men are limited by the disparate capacities they have by nature as individuals, and by the environment in which they are raised. Not everyone can be a Pericles, no matter where they are raised, or what calibre of education they receive. Likewise, an extremely gifted man who has the misfortune of being raised in a seriously impoverished community has little hope of realising fully his potential. Both

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<sup>94</sup> Again, "freedom" and "creativity" should be understood in the narrow way I have tried to define them, not as they are often understood in the modern, anything-is-possible sense.

<sup>95</sup> In doing so, I hope to show that this sets up a relationship between individual and history/tradition/character which is not so unlike Pindar's in that the individual is the vehicle for change, but that change is possible only through understanding where one has come from.

natural ability and environment profoundly, and often permanently, shape the characters men become. Yet a deeper understanding of one's beliefs and the reasons behind them, even if unable to bring about a pronounced character change or political revolution, can nonetheless better prepare man to do well in the complicated circumstances he encounters.

Reading Thucydides and taking seriously his aim in writing the *History* suggests the belief that this understanding comes through broadening one's perspective through wide exposure to and experience with different cultures, and contact with the kinds of characters those particular cultures generate given their particular set of values and beliefs. In extending his perspective in this way, man improves his chances (increases the likelihood/probability) of assessing and understanding situations in such a way that he can make good decisions. But success for man is rare, and a truly admirable man, perhaps rarer (the generals who follow Pericles indicate this tragic truth). Still, even lacking a concrete, recognisable success--for getting it right is no small achievement for man--human lives can have *meaning*. To understand this, one must understand the kinds of external forces that limit man's freedom, that render him incapable of realising his good intentions. Thucydides' narrative illuminates just this--his narrative shows (though does not tell) his readers why certain characters advise and do what they do. The *History* encourages the reader to think about what values certain men were acculturated to, what kinds of "words and deeds" they were exposed to, and given this, what kind of characters they became. To what extent did they push themselves to understand, or perhaps see beyond their own cultures and beliefs? And importantly, to what extent was pushing beyond effectively impossible for some men? There are no definitive answers to these questions, but *learning to ask* them, and *actively thinking* about how to find and judge amongst different answers to them is, I believe, an essential element of what Thucydides aimed to 'teach'.

Thucydides' narrative explains why certain characters are to be admired and others denounced through representing their experiences. As the *History* progresses, the (active) reader develops a capacity to judge the men in the *History* given the specific situations each particular man confronts together with a more general understanding of man (which emerges gradually, through 'extracting' from the different experiences Thucydides portrays). The reader, like those portrayed in the text itself, cannot 'learn' how to be successful all the time--this would be divine, not human. Developing a deeper, richer sense of the kinds of thoughts and reasons that shape man's actions is the aim, and this is within man's control. Both discreet achievement and success, and personal and political change depend on this preliminary understanding (yet even with it they are not guaranteed).

The *History* helps to cultivate this understanding of man by describing a series of events in a variety of styles, reflecting different modes of human interaction together with analysis on that interaction. The narrative represents the deliberations, the choices and the actions of men, as well as their results: it is punctuated by a stylised debate between cities, frank observations from Thucydides himself, and, of course by the legendary speeches delivered by significant individuals during the course of the war.<sup>96</sup>

The speeches in the *History* aid significantly in illuminating the characters' abstract values and beliefs, and in the section to follow, I will examine a particular debate to flesh out this point. However, while Finley argues that Thucydides' speeches are the "primary vehicle for general truths,"<sup>97</sup> I maintain that this is not the quite the case, but accept an interpretation closer to that of Cogan--that the "general truths" in Thucydides' *History* lie in the juxtaposition of

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<sup>96</sup> For detailed analyses of the speeches in Thucydides, see Stadter *The Speeches in Thucydides* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1973). There has been extensive debate as to the accuracy of the reported speech in the *History*, but as that discussion is beyond the scope of this study, I will not address it here.

<sup>97</sup> Finley, J.H. *Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: 1963, p. 76)

and relationship between speech and recorded events.<sup>98</sup> That is to say, Thucydides sets out a path for the reader which moves continually from concrete to abstract and back, thus 'training' him to negotiate more effectively the relationship between general concepts and the specific people and events which substantiate them. Furthermore, due to Thucydides' style, the reader is aware that both the speeches and narrative itself are delivered by individuals, each from a distinct perspective.<sup>99</sup> To reinforce this diffused perspective, the men in the *History* are always understood to be the product of a particular city (understood to have its distinct ideals and values). Thus, the structure of the narrative constantly forces the reader to shift from one viewpoint to another. This casts light on the nature of the abstract generalisations in the text – it precludes the possibility of their being understood as the embodiment of “neutral” principles obtained from a single, objective standpoint. The flourishing man is he who can make these shifts gracefully and does not grasp desperately at only the limiting principles to which he was first habituated. Let us now look at a specific moment in the *History* to observe more concretely some of these ideas.

## Chapter 10: Cleon's Speech at Mytilene

The debate between Cleon and Diodotus about Mytilene has received much attention among scholars and has drawn a great deal of attention to these two remarkable speakers.<sup>100</sup> Mytilene, a “privileged” yet disgruntled ally of

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<sup>98</sup> Cogan *The Human Thing* (Chicago: 1981, pp. 173ff.). For an extended discussion of the relationship between speech and narrative in Thucydides, see *The Speeches in Thucydides*, ed. Statder, P.A. (Chapel Hill, NC: 1973), especially “Particular and Universal in Thucydides” Hammond, N.G.L.; Hunter, V. *Thucydides: the Artful Reporter* (Toronto: 1973); and Palmer, M. *Love of Glory and the Common Good* (Lanham, MD: 1992).

<sup>99</sup> Even Thucydides himself makes his presence known periodically throughout the text (e.g., I.1, II.48, IV.104, V.26, VI.7, VI.51). While his introductory words make himself out to be the definitive/authoritative voice on the history he narrates, this confidence reveals a strong, *personal* voice to the reader, suggesting a distinct person, growing out of (even if differentiating himself from) a particular tradition.

<sup>100</sup> Connor remarks on the deceit used by both Cleon and Diodotus, and the contrast between the reader's relief at the outcome of the debate and the events which immediately follow it, which, in some sense, negate it (*Thucydides* Princeton: 1984, pp.111-112); Raubitschek comments on the

Athens,<sup>101</sup> with an offer of Spartan and Boeotian support, attempted to unify and galvanise all of Lesbos to revolt against Athenian rule (III.2). The rebellion, though unsuccessful, caused the Athenians great anxiety--no doubt heightened by the strain of an escalating war, the devastation inflicted on them by the plague, and recent loss of their great general, Pericles.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, the failed revolt brought the potential upset of a successful rebellion into high relief. Thus, in a fit of (worry turned to) rage, the Athenians resolved on a savage punishment – they would kill all the Mytilenean men above the age of puberty, and sell the women and children into slavery. However, after literally sleeping on their decision (and effectively reflecting on it), the Athenians reconsidered – perhaps their proposed punishment was excessive, disproportionate to the deed, or, at the very least, directed at those who might not have been responsible (i.e., at the *demos* rather than the oligarchs).

The debate between Cleon and Diodotus occurred as a result of these second thoughts – specifically on the issue of whether or not to punish the *demos*.<sup>103</sup> However, scholars have also characterised it as a dramatised analysis of a

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shifting meaning of empire, contrasting both Cleon and Diodotus with Pericles (“Pathology of Power in the Speeches in Thucydides” *The Speeches in Thucydides*, ed. Stadter, pp.28-29); Westlake draws a comparison between Cleon and Pericles *Individuals in Thucydides* (Cambridge:1968 pp. 60-65); Euben contrasts Cleon's rhetoric with that of Pericles' (*The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: 1990, pp. 177ff.); Crane writes on Cleon's relentless and unabashed promotion of Athenian hegemony (*Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: 1998, pp. 167-187); and Gomme refers to Cleon's “cynical and ruthless logic” but admits to the practical difficulty in realising the strategy of Diodotus (*Historical Commentary on Thucydides* III.40.3, III.46.4).

<sup>101</sup>Kagan remarks that the Mytileneans, though seen as “autonomous” prior to the outbreak of war, had wanted to secede from the Athenian alliance well before the fighting began, but were unable to secure support from the Peloponnesian League (*The Archidamian War*, Ithaca:1974, p.134).

<sup>102</sup>See III.13 for Mytilene's description of Athens' weakness at the time of the revolt. For a more comprehensive account of Athens' state at 429, see Kagan *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca: 1974, p.154).

<sup>103</sup> Orwin points out that Thucydides keeps the guilt or innocence of the Mytilenean *demos* unclear, thus forcing the reader to focus on “more fundamental issues,” e.g., those of justice and expediency, the value/efficacy of democratic deliberation (*The Humanity of Thucydides* Princeton: 1994, p.143). Kagan highlights the fact that Thucydides gives the reader only the “extreme” positions of the debate, omitting the more moderate perspectives, which, he argues, were most certainly voiced at the time (*The Archidamian War* Ithaca: 1974, p.159). I believe that these omissions and ambiguities support the idea that Thucydides encouraged and expected his reader to participate in the text, to be *active*.

common theme in Thucydides; the (often contentious) relationship between justice (abstract, theoretical, legal) and expediency (concrete, practical, political).<sup>104</sup> Thucydides reports the arguments of the two generals in direct discourse (Cleon from III.37-40 and Diodotus from III.42-48). Below, I will examine Cleon's speech with an aim to assess how Athenian citizenship (i.e., being raised within, and acculturated to the traditions of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens) plays itself out in different characters. I will examine Cleon's inability to negotiate between abstract principle, precedent, and present context, revealing how his misunderstanding of this relationship ultimately inhibits him from acting reasonably and creatively within the political sphere.

This will begin to bring into focus the nature of a good leader as being successful not only insofar as he is capable of achieving his intended particular ends (that is, as effectively using practical reason), but as he who can clarify the situation, tease out and order its puzzling elements, and orient the *demos* towards what he has discerned as the reasonable and creative action.

### *Cleon*

Before concentrating on some of these issues, I will first sketch a brief image of Cleon as he emerges from Thucydides' narrative. Cleon is a particularly striking individual in the *History* for a number of reasons. Perhaps most obvious is Thucydides' unqualified negative judgement of him, one which gets progressively more pointed and resolute as the *History* continues. Westlake highlights not only Thucydides' initial characterisation, identifying Cleon as the

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<sup>104</sup> Crane discusses the deteriorated relationship of just reciprocity between Mytilene and Athens, and the fact that the increasing power (and *pleonexia*) of Athens made them subject to the lure of any expedient action likely to increase her power (*Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* Berkeley: 1998, pp. 176-180). Kagan analyses Diodotus' speech pointing to his belief that injustice--which characterised Cleon's proposed punishment--would in fact *not* be expedient (*The Archidamian War* Ithaca: 1974, pp. 160-163). Orwin remarks on Diodotus' ingenuity by playing on the structure of Cleon's argument which claimed that the harsh punishment was necessary, if unjust. Diodotus then argued that even if just, the punishment would be inimical to the Athenians best interests. In this, Orwin argues that Diodotus provides an argument that relies both on justice *and* expediency (*The Humanity of Thucydides* Princeton: 1994, pp.146ff).

“most violent/forceful of citizens” (*biaiotatos ton politon*),<sup>105</sup> but also his striking speculation about Cleon’s ignoble motives in his actions following his appearance at Mytilene.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, of particular note is Thucydides’ portrayal of Cleon’s death—he dies a coward in battle: “having never contemplated taking a stand...and running immediately [upon confrontation with the enemy]” (V.10).<sup>107</sup> Such an end, especially given Cleon’s own projected self image—realistic, tough, and above all, a man of action rather than mere words—is undeniably critical, even hateful.<sup>108</sup> His death appears all the more disgraceful in light of its striking contrast with Brasidas, the Spartan general opposing him at the time. While Cleon runs, Brasidas speaks of the fearful Athenian soldiers under Cleon’s command with their “shaking spears and heads.” However, ultimately even the nameless Athenian hoplites showed more courage than Cleon, “not giving up until the Myrcinian and Chalcidian cavalry and peltasts had surrounded them” (V.10).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>It is significant, however, that Thucydides does refer to Cleon as a *citizen* – not merely as a man – thus locating him firmly in the Athenian community and tradition (deteriorated though it may be).

<sup>106</sup> This is especially true of the second debate at Pylos, for which Kagan provides a useful and detailed analysis (*The Archidamian War* (Ithaca: 1974, p. 218ff.). See also, Westlake (*Individuals in Thucydides* Cambridge: 1968, p.71).

<sup>107</sup>A disgraceful death was particularly shameful for the Greeks, perhaps this is why Thucydides does not give details about that of Pericles, who is thought to have suffered the terrible, dehumanising effects of the plague. In portraying Cleon in this shameful light, Thucydides, effectively, and we can assume, intentionally, marks him for posterity (especially given Thucydides’ intentions for the permanence of his work).

<sup>108</sup> Thucydides’ passionate aversion to Cleon leads Hornblower to place the excessively hostile comments in the context of the more personal grounds that might have motivated Thucydides in describing him (*Thucydides* Baltimore: 1987, pp.165ff.). However, whether or not Thucydides did or did not hold a personal bias against Cleon, his actions in this battle illustrate an important point—abstract principle is impotent, if not destructive, if lacking a stable, discerning character/disposition to apply them, to make them ‘fit’ the situation. For more on the relationship between word and action, see Boyd-White *When Words Lose Their Meaning* (Chicago: 1984, p. 62ff.), and of the influence of the [words of] histories on one’s present actions, see Cogan *The Human Thing* (Chicago: 1981, pp. 182ff.).

<sup>109</sup> It is important to note at this point that the Athenian hoplites, while perhaps “nameless” were not low level, riff-raff in the Athenian *polis*. The hoplites were often of the wealthier classes, as the equipment needed to be a land soldier was expensive (see de Ste. Croix, G.E.M. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquest* (London: 1981, p.115); and Murray and Price (eds.) *The Greek City* (Oxford: 1990, pp.59-82)



Still, even given Thucydides' plain contempt for Cleon, his tie to Athens is strong. He is an active participant in the war, and plays a central role in three of eight books in the *History*. Furthermore, he was a leader *chosen* by the Athenians (a fact which casts light on Thucydides' opinion of the Athenian *demos*--albeit under strain in a brutal war). Cleon's connection to Athens becomes even more palpable in that his language recalls that of its most distinguished statesman and general, Pericles.<sup>110</sup> Equally significant is the parallel between Cleon and Thucydides himself. Cleon's speech about Mytilene imparts a message which echoes Thucydides' own concerns about man and democracy, specifically the ability (or inability) of the *demos* to be discriminating, or "discerning" in the face of skilled, persuasive, yet untrustworthy orators.<sup>111</sup>

What then to make of Cleon? Why is his counsel, despite relying on principles so similar to those of the esteemed Pericles and Thucydides' own, so utterly abhorrent? And how is it, given such inhumane advice, that he is in an eerie way, a persuasive speaker? As a way of structuring my analysis of Cleon and his argument, I will try to answer these questions in light of some of the themes I discussed above.

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<sup>110</sup> See Connor *Thucydides* (Ithaca: 1974, p.79); Gomme *Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: 1945-72, pp.107ff); Macleod (*Collected Essays* Oxford: 1983, p.68); and Andrewes "The Mytilene Debate: 3:36-49" (*Phoenix* 16, p.75) for discussions of verbal echoes. This sharing of basic, abstract principles [in word] and resulting divergent actions illustrates a fundamental piece of my argument – that is to say, sound principles do not necessarily generate good action, the bridge is experience and reflection.

<sup>111</sup> At I.21, Thucydides warns against people's tendency to believe what is told them unquestioningly, and similarly at III.38, Cleon condemns people who naively accept the rhetoric of skilled orators simply because their message is pleasing. This distrust of the *demos* persists into the philosophy of ancient Greece – Plato is certainly no lover of the *demos*, and Aristotle also criticises its inability to be discriminating (*NE* 1105b16). Even modern democracies seem to hold the source of their own power suspect – e.g., the early structure of American government effectively barred the "people" from direct access to government, giving the citizens direct vote only for representatives to the House. Today, the United States' electoral college itself might be seen as a way of 'distancing' the people from decision-making.

*Cleon's Power to Discern (or lack thereof)*

Both Cleon's speech and subsequent actions indicate his inadequate grasp of abstract principles.<sup>112</sup> This deficiency emerges specifically in terms of his approach to applying the law, and more broadly speaking, in his understanding of Athenian political customs and tradition. Ober, for instance, describes Athenian democracy as "not ossified" but capable of being responsive to variable external circumstances.<sup>113</sup> The debate on Mytilene reveals that Cleon views abstract law as a force external to human life, imposing or compelling action from the outside. This is made explicit in two statements, strategically (and revealingly) placed at the open and close of his speech: "it is better for a state to enforce bad laws that are always obeyed than to have good ones that go unenforced" (III.37); and: "they [the Mytilenens] need to be punished whether it's fair or not" (III.40).<sup>114</sup> Cleon seems committed to upholding 'the rules' irregardless of the specific factors that might alter their application in the current situation (the fact that these 'rules' seemed appropriate to a group of men in a state of impassioned rage, makes the general's obstinate stance even more reckless and irresponsible).

This incompetent use of abstract principles arises because Cleon lacks the capacity to discern what is important in his particular circumstance and thus cannot creatively integrate his principles with the present situation in an effective way. This crucial deficiency results in Cleon advocating simple, thoughtless *re-*action, disregarding completely the deliberative customs of democratic Athens:

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<sup>112</sup> The reader is reminded of Sthenelaidas, who plays on the passions of the people, urging against deliberation, and instead, encouraging prompt action alone (I.86-87). Just as there is an inevitable contrast between Pericles and Cleon, so too in Sparta, between King Archidamus and Sthenelaidas.

<sup>113</sup> Ober, J. "Thucydides' Criticism of Democratic Knowledge" in *Nomodeiktes* ed. Rosen and Farrell (Michigan: 1993, p. 82).

<sup>114</sup> This runs counter to what is said later in both Plato and Aristotle. Each implies that rule of law alone is insufficient and inappropriate to govern human affairs. See for example in the *Statesman* where it is said that law alone is insufficient because it is unable to "determine what is noblest and best for one and all for...nothing in human life is ever at rest" (1294b). Aristotle suggests that law's universality makes it unable to deal effectively with certain unprecedented "eventualities," which require not dogma, but "experience." (*Politics* 1287a23ff.).

“Get closer to your state of mind when you were aggrieved. Pay them back now. Don’t weaken in the passing moment.” (III.40).<sup>115</sup> He condemns rhetoric, yet depends on the *demos*’ quickness in responding to emotion generated in them by his inflammatory oratory, on arguments which destabilise a thoughtful response that draws on experience. Cleon’s reactive-ness reduces his actions from meaningful (deliberate, reasonable) ‘creations’ to mere ‘mechanical feedback’, like inevitable links in a causal chain. Orwin points to the fact that his speech taps into “the two harshest passions: fear and anger...and incites to unrestrained bloodlust.”<sup>116</sup> As such, Cleon’s words do nothing to distinguish him as a force who is capable of illuminating possibilities and clarifying the present situation--as a good leader should. Cleon becomes oddly passive, even cowardly in his steadfast adherence to carry out the punishment, for he fails to recognise and bring to light (much less realise) the other, more honourable possibilities open to him.

The notions of honour and bravery get distorted when the Athenians are under Cleon’s sway. He states that the “practice of man’s virtue (*andragathizesthai*)” is only possible when it is safe (*akindunou*). As the Athenians are all too aware, empire is by definition susceptible to revolts, and thus Cleon’s words make the practice of virtue and empire mutually exclusive.<sup>117</sup> Given this, he gives the Athenians *no choice* but to advocate brute, unreflective enforcement of punitive/retributive law (in this case, preceded by rash decision). Cleon’s

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<sup>115</sup> This is directly counter to Arendt who condemns precisely this kind of reactive, mechanical response in favour of “natality.” This is the human capacity “of beginning something anew” and for Arendt is “the central category of political thought” (*The Human Condition* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p.9).

<sup>116</sup> Orwin *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994, p. 144). See also Andrewes: Cleon uses “the plain man’s prejudice against fancy thinking to prevent any thinking at all” (“The Mytilene Debate” *Phoenix* 16 (1962) p. 75).

<sup>117</sup> In criticising Cleon, I do not wish to imply that empire and virtue are plainly compatible. The exercise of political power is never clear-cut. However, power struggles and the possibility of virtue are inherent in any political situation, and their harmonisation demands ongoing negotiation, constant discourse, and thoughtful reflection. For a discussion on the frailty of a magnanimous empire, see Rahe “Thucydides and Ancient Constitutionalism” in *Polis and Polemos* (Claremont: 1997, p. 159ff.). Because Cleon lacks precisely those attributes necessary to understand, much less articulate publicly what it would mean to cultivate a “virtuous empire” the possibility of one is lost to him, and for a moment, to the Athenian citizens.

speech seeks to mask reality--that is, *the fact that there is a choice to be made*. Andrews notes that the single option presented by Cleon comes in part from his appeal to the need for self-preservation, a requirement that he insists demands setting a "*paradeigma saphes*" (unmistakable precedent).<sup>118</sup> In case he was not completely successful in his pressure and deceit, he claimed further that to reconsider would be to act childishly, to make a 'game' out of a serious situation--in short, to be weak (III.38). His audience is trapped--either they must accept that Cleon's way is the only way, or they are soft, men of mere words. Through this we see that Cleon's inability to access a sense of reasonableness at this critical moment, to "discern" the situation's relevant, concrete details and harmonise them with principle rendered him unable to act creatively and humanely.

In criticising Cleon, however, we must remember that the Athens Cleon confronts is not the stable *polis* it had been at the height of Pericles' rule. The war brought about a mild schizophrenia in Athenian citizenship for it forced them to acknowledge the conflict inherent in their domestic and 'international' policies: they were an imperial force in the larger Greek world, yet their democratic ideology, so long a source of pride, still shaped their domestic identity.<sup>119</sup> Time and again, Cleon proves himself ill-equipped to grapple with and reconcile this split identity, which only intensified during the continuous fighting.<sup>120</sup> To hope for a complete 'reconciliation' between these two sides was perhaps too ambitious an aim given the situation. However, in times when consensus seems impossible, a good leader should work to articulate and identify the conflicting perspectives and important facts that characterise the present dilemma. In doing so, he can better foster the sense of calm and order which comes with broader understanding, in this case much needed amidst the manic and confused

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<sup>118</sup> Andrews "Cleon's Hidden Appeal" *Classical Quarterly* 50 (2000) pp.45-62.

<sup>119</sup> The fact that their land had been ravaged as a result of Periclean policy must have added to their 'identity crisis', for they were forced to define themselves more and more abstractly, through what they believed, or perhaps wanted to believe, they were.

<sup>120</sup> This capacity to embody two seemingly exclusive characteristics is a feature of both individual and *polis*, and part of what makes 'scientific theorising' (or theory that is grounded by the law of non-contradiction) in politics problematic.

troops.<sup>121</sup> Instead, Cleon simply seizes upon the Athenian fear and anger. Such surface emotions are raw and easy to ignite, yet ultimately, because they are without depth--because they do not grow out of reflective experience--they are fleeting. His dependence on thoughtless, unreflective emotion discloses Cleon's incompetence as a leader. Laws, undoubtedly important to Cleon require brute, unreflective enforcement, not thoughtful application and appropriate critique.<sup>122</sup> This attitude blocks the capacity to integrate the particular details of actual human life into one's choices and actions. Simply put, this kind of non-discerning attitude prevents Cleon from performing reasonable, creative action.<sup>123</sup>

Cleon tries (and to large extent, is able) to mask his deficiencies, to make his rigid incompetence appear tough, the result of thought which is independent of the whims of the naive populace.<sup>124</sup> The attempt to raise himself 'above' the *demos* promotes a political sphere sharply divided between 'rulers' and 'actors', where the rulers stand in isolation from the life and activity of the *polis* yet cause its citizens to act.<sup>125</sup> Upon closer scrutiny, however, Cleon's position is neither courageous nor independent; rather, it is cowardly, indicative of an underdeveloped mind. The charge of cowardice may seem more apt when

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<sup>121</sup> Disch presents an interesting discussion on the importance of publicly acknowledging and recording divergent viewpoints when arguments seem irreconcilable (*Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* Ithaca: 1994, pp. 204ff.). One could argue that this is precisely what Thucydides has done in writing the *History*.

<sup>122</sup> For further analysis of Cleon and his use of the law, see Andrews "Cleon's Hidden Appeals" (*Classical Quarterly* 50, 2000); Orwin *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994, p. 142ff.); Hornblower *Thucydides* (Baltimore: 1987, pp. 421ff.), and Macleod (*Collected Essays* Oxford: 1983, p.69) remark on Cleon's deliberate attempt to blur the distinction in the case of Mytilene between the concept of *psephima* (decree) and *nomos* (law)--decrees were traditionally understood to be more flexible, while laws firmer and more difficult to change.

<sup>123</sup> Cleon represents one side of the distinction made by Aristotle between the self-restrained and the obstinate man: the self-restrained man can, with effort, stand firm against passion and desire, the obstinate man is opinionated, stupid and boorish (*NE*1151b7ff.).

<sup>124</sup> Orwin remarks that Cleon ingeniously argues that the Athenians have been too trustful of their allies, yet insufficiently trustful of him--the leader capable of seeing "what's really going on" (*The Humanity of Thucydides* Princeton: 1994, p. 144). Gomme notes his conspicuous use of *egoge*, signaling his "independence" in the opening lines of the speech. An *ego* reappears at III.39, further intensifying Cleon's egoism (*Historical Commentary on Thucydides* Oxford: 1945-72).

<sup>125</sup> This phenomenon is described by Arendt in *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p.222ff).

directed at the circumstances surrounding his death and his clear inability to apply his stated principles to his own actions, but the debate on Mytilene shows how it can be applied more broadly. Cleon is a coward because afraid to “risk [self] disclosure”<sup>126</sup>--a risk inherent in every free action. He is thus 'enslaved' for he is unable to think critically or act creatively, much less encourage and guide the *demos* to do so. Instead he is preoccupied with achieving a particular, fixed goal--carrying out the punishment--and cannot act in a way that is more reasonable, yet perhaps less conspicuously 'law-like'. He is unable to reconsider, to take into account the full complexity of the situation because he wants the glory that inheres in the discreet achievement of a single end.<sup>127</sup> Thus, Cleon was doomed to fail for his conception of achievement was too narrow, excluding the fact that meaning and value lie in reasoned, deliberate action itself--whether it be the distinct act of punishing, or the more subtle, yet perhaps braver *act* of reconsideration. Macleod notes that the word/deed relationship for Cleon was grossly distorted so that “words are not merely set against deeds, but linked with falsehood.”<sup>128</sup> Cleon's claim to be strong and steadfast in his views--“I, for one, have not changed my mind”<sup>129</sup>--is only a thin veil for his imprisonment by abstract standards to which he himself ultimately cannot stand up in practice. Cleon uses words that invoke traditional Athenian ideology, but by isolating them from context, he distorts their meaning and in doing so, reveals himself to be trapped in a pattern of *re*-action as opposed to liberated action.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Arendt. *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p.180).

<sup>127</sup> Arendt analyses the difference between “achievement” and action (ibid.).

<sup>128</sup> Macleod *Collected Essays* (Oxford: 1983, p. 70)

<sup>129</sup> This is one of the Periclean echoes – Pericles too suggests that he holds the same beliefs as before while the *demos* falters (II.61). However, Pericles’ consistency is preferred to the *demos*’ vacillation because the shift in their attitude finds its source in an acute grief which “enslaves the will” and precludes the possibility of deliberate thought and choice. Cleon, on the other hand, seeks to preserve the decision which arose out of anger, using the war, Pouncey argues, to “serve his own interests” (*The Necessities of War* New York: 1980, p.148). Deliberation, reasoned choice, are shunned by this “most trusted” general.

<sup>130</sup> Gomme, in remarking on Thucydides’ choice of Cleon’s language i.e., its similarity to that of more “respected” men, notes that the Athenians of Thucydides’ generation were characterised by a willingness to experiment with “the meaning of words,” to deliberately play with context, speaker, and situation so as to reveal the flexibility of words--often to exploit their ability to mask the ideas behind them (*Historical Commentary on Thucydides* Oxford:1945-1972).

Thus, Cleon's detestable character in the *History* is generated, in part, by his dogmatic use of abstract principles. His grip on them is so tight, and so inflexible that they are ruthlessly forced in from 'outside', cruelly and brutally imposed onto any situation in which he finds himself.<sup>131</sup> He falls into just the trap Arendt warns against--(mistakenly) identifying strength as being 'above' political activity. Rather than engaging in the far more difficult task of paying attention to what is actually around him, and integrating abstract principles into the current circumstances, Cleon applies them cruelly, without finesse or reflection--without *discerning* the particular demands of the event he confronts.<sup>132</sup> Cleon uses his rigidity to his advantage in the Mytilenean debate, transforming an obdurate, narrow-minded approach to a complicated problem into what seems to be, at face value, a forceful, strong disposition. However, upon closer scrutiny, Cleon's appeal to 'principles' of power and realism merely hide his own deficiencies, specifically, the capacity to creatively integrate abstract and concrete. He is unable to understand himself as a part of an ongoing story, rather than as a mighty solo actor. This deficiency leads him to promote action which is both inhumane, and inimical to Athens'--and indeed to his own--freedom.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Cleon uses the verb "*prosthesete*" at III.39 when talking about the punishment. The verb *prostithemi* connotes action from without, literally to put onto, to augment or add – i.e., not organic to or a natural part of something.

<sup>132</sup> In this, he stands in direct opposition to Aristotle's *phronimos* – described, in part, as he who can perceive what is necessary *in the moment* – not just the general principles, but the particular facts of a situation (see esp.: NE 1141b14ff, 1142a13ff). In practical philosophy, "universals" have a wider application (*hoi men kathelou koinoteroi*), but they sacrifice greater truth (*alethinoteroi*) for this broad applicability (NE1107a30). "Universals" alone are therefore insufficient to tackle the demands of practical philosophy for they can blind one to relevant, concrete details. There is here an echo of Arendt who discusses the cowardice of escaping to the Archimedean vantage point rather than face up to the "chaos" inherent in the genuine plurality of the *polis* (*The Human Condition* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p. 220; also in Disch *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* Ithaca: 1994, p.173).

<sup>133</sup> Cleon's role is complicated by the fact that some of the ideals that drive his actions may be described as "traditionally Athenian," and some of his concerns reflect genuine problems in Athens at the time. For example, his worry that the Athenians, gathered to hear his speech, are too easily persuaded by fancy rhetoric is supported by Lloyd who claims that Athens was undergoing at that time "a natural progression from political debate to sophistic performance" (*Magic, Reason, and Experience* Cambridge: 1979, p.254). I believe that this ambiguity supports the idea that principle alone is insufficient to guide action.

Cleon's speech begins with a remark that permeates all that follows--"democracy cannot rule over others." While such a statement harkens back to Pericles' own observation about the growing Athenian empire at II.63 where he indicates the difficulties in maintaining an identical policy for both national and international affairs, Cleon uses this conclusion to condemn Athens' own democracy itself (never under threat with Pericles in power<sup>134</sup>). Cleon's speech highlights a tension Thucydides himself finds in democracy--it gives power to the *demos* to make choices about public policy,<sup>135</sup> but in doing so, makes an implicit, often overlooked demand. Democracy requires that the *demos* be both capable of and *willing to engage* in critical thought.<sup>136</sup> In comfortably making this pronouncement, Cleon reveals that he has been defeated by this tension and thus by the challenge of democracy.<sup>137</sup>

With this sweeping, anti-democratic premise in place, Cleon can apply it crudely to the Mytilenean revolt as a means of justifying the cruel punishment. The Mytilenean revolt, he roars, occurred because the Athenians had long been too generous with them, allowed them too much freedom, blindly trusted their

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<sup>134</sup> It is of some significance that Pericles, after concluding that the Athenians 'international' policy had to be *like* that of a tyranny (*hos tyrannida*), he goes on to speak of the natural tendency of all things to decay (*panta gar pephuke kai elassousthai*), and the possibility of having, at some point to relinquish some power, even, of Athens' inevitable downfall. All this sharply distinguishes Cleon's superficially similar statements. Gomme notes that the *hos* is lacking in Cleon's similar statement (*Historical Commentary on Thucydides* Oxford: 1945-72).

<sup>135</sup> M. Hansen discusses this power as freedom (*eleutheria*), in part embodied by the entitlement to "participate in the running of political institutions" ("Liberty: Athenian vs. Modern Views" in *Demokratia* ed. Ober and Hedrick, Princeton: 1996, pp.289-313).

<sup>136</sup> Arendt might argue that democracy does provide the preconditions for reflection and critique, which are in turn preconditions for realised power and freedom. Indeed, her idea of acting "in concert" depends on the "space" created in democracy where "in-terests" can be expressed and discussed. The end is not consensus (which is neither desirable nor possible), but the revealing of difference and the attempt to hear/see from other perspectives. This is the reality of the human condition (*The Human Condition* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: 1998, pp.50ff.).

<sup>137</sup> While Thucydides himself does not reveal a decisive preference for democracy over all other forms of government (apparent, for instance in his favourable portrayal of the Pisistratid rule (VI.54) as well as his clear respect for certain Spartan leaders), he does not yield because of its inherent difficulties. Rather, he suggests that any form of government requires good leadership -- that is a discerning, honest character. Cleon does not fit the bill.



goodwill. The Mytileneans should be executed because they made fools of the Athenians,<sup>138</sup> and the qualities that allowed this to occur, Cleon insists, are endemic to Athenian democracy itself, which is characterised by both trust: “You go fearlessly along from day to day without suspecting each other, and you have the same attitude towards your allies” (III.37) and public debate: “You [the *demos*] are to blame...You like to *watch* debates and *hear* about actions” (III.38, my italics).<sup>139</sup> With this, Cleon creates a false, yet oddly intuitive dichotomy, where generosity, trust and open discussion are seen as naive, and set in direct opposition to strength, security, and realism. And with this rigid dichotomy in place, man’s capacity for innovation (and collective power) is stifled. Furthermore, his comments imply a narrow definition of action. While the *demos* may indeed have been passively entertained by “watching” and “hearing” the debates held in Athens, there is the broader implication that thought and reflection themselves (which, under good circumstances, might be prompted by watching and hearing a debate) do not constitute activity.<sup>140</sup>

Cleon’s condemnation of public debate (and by implication, critical/reflective, or *active* thought more generally) misleadingly played on the *demos*’ distrust of sophists. Rather than try to illuminate an honest correspondence between word and deed—a relationship the sophists were indeed capable of masking—Cleon became ‘sophistic’ himself and spoke so as to pit the Athenians against one another in an attempt to preserve his own authority and destroy the possibility of a critical political body that might ‘depose’ him. While both Pericles and

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<sup>138</sup> Arendt recognises this fear of “being made a fool of” (akin to Rorty’s fear of humiliation as described in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Cambridge: 1989) as one of the risks of human action, of self-disclosure. There is always the chance that our actions will backfire, or be misread by others. However, this fear is softened, if not totally dissolved, if we realise equally with our capacity to act, the power to forgive, and in this, release others (and ourselves) from actions gone awry.

<sup>139</sup> Cleon’s statement implying that the *demos* is passive is ironic given the fact that his mechanical and uncritical application of ‘rules’ seems to me to be a much more dangerous and insidious form of passivity (like that of a robot who is unresponsive to a changing environment), whereas as watching and hearing can at the very least, help one to be active *in the future* by expanding one’s perspective.

<sup>140</sup> For more on Cleon’s distortion of the relationship between word and deed, see Macleod (*Collected Essays* Oxford: 1983, p. 70).

Thucydides himself seemed to share a certain distrust of the capacity of the 'masses' to make reasonable decisions (a capacity which further degenerates in war), neither one strove to stifle debate as a means of warding off these potential problems. Yet Cleon did.<sup>141</sup> The *demos* may have been in some sense 'underdeveloped' in its capacity for critical thought, perhaps prone to being disproportionately swayed by passion, especially in the throes of war, but Athenian citizens were not always seen as innately incompetent thinkers.<sup>142</sup>

For Thucydides, it was the function of the good leader (whether politician, poet, or historian) to make the citizens competent thinkers. His success rested, in part, on the ability to bring out the most noble human qualities in the citizens of a *polis*. A group of people living together in a *polis*, united and inspired by a good leader, was the precondition for realising man's sense of reasonableness, his capacity to discern—in short, his humanity. Thucydides' conception of a flourishing *polis* seems to have something in common with Arendt's public space—it involved a group of people who had to engage with one another and constantly reflect on how best to live.<sup>143</sup> The style in which Thucydides writes (i.e., his deliberate juxtaposition of narrative and argument from many perspectives) and his high ambitions for the lasting use of his text indicates quite clearly his attitude toward discussion and debate. The whole of the *History* seems to encourage it.

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<sup>141</sup> Kagan remarks that this speech "was a breach in the common front that had informally existed between the moderate supporters of Pericles and his own more aggressive followers" (*Archidamian War* Ithaca: 1974, p.159). Farrar also notes Pericles' goal of developing and sustaining "common decision" amongst the citizens, despite their differing needs (*The Origins of Democratic Thinking* Cambridge: 1988, p. 160). The petty attempt to "divide and conquer" then illustrates Cleon's deficiency in the skills necessary to a good leader—he should have the ability to effectively unite a diverse and potentially conflicting population.

<sup>142</sup> One need only read the Funeral Oration to see the faith and confidence Pericles had in the potential of the Athenian citizenship (see especially II.41).

<sup>143</sup> Again, I would like to draw a parallel with Disch's Arendt. In discussing Arendt's understanding of political judgement, Disch emphasises the necessity of public dispute. Such dispute becomes the means of "achiev[ing] a multi-perspective understanding of the particular situations in which I want to act." Ultimately, it is "not abstraction but considered attention to particularity that accounts for enlarged (my "reasonable") thought" (*Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* Ithaca: 1994, pp.152-153). Diodotus himself expresses this viewpoint in his speech at III.42.5-6.

Pericles cites debate and openness as two of Athens' core virtues in his famous funeral oration. A good leader does not mechanically impose rigid laws on the people from without, nor does he allow them to act thoughtlessly on passing whims. He guides the people by illuminating possibilities and encouraging a course of action which, through reflection on experience and principle together, he has the foresight to perceive. A condition for this foresight is attention to and a certain respect for the attitudes and opinions of the *demos* itself (which is distinct from a sycophantic and unprincipled "resignation of all direction to it" II.65). The views emerging out of open debate in the assembly help to balance and counteract the potential dogmatism or narrowness of vision of the leader-- "Athenians," Ober claims, "simply assumed that political truth was dialectical."<sup>144</sup> Public expression of the unique and varied experiences of individuals living together (in a political setting) collide and spark innovation. A good leader can channel these ideas into a definitive course. This is the prime virtue of a well-led democracy--debate and discussion provide the raw material necessary for reasonable creativity, and leadership provides the structure needed to act on this material constructively and wisely. Thus, in stifling debate, Cleon renders barren the very ground necessary for creative action. Because he does not have the skill necessary to unite and guide the people, he cannot use language to aid in revealing options and facilitating progress. Without strong, unified leadership, *poleis* fall into factional strife and lawlessness (*anomia*). Thucydides writes despairingly of this insidious deterioration at III.82ff..

Additionally throughout his speech, Cleon seeks to reinforce the mutual exclusivity of rule either by virtue or by law: "you will prevail because of your strength and not because of their high opinion of you (III.37)...either give up your empire, or practice manly virtues where it's nice and safe" (III.40). This attitude becomes even more evident in Cleon's discussion of the three qualities he sees as

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<sup>144</sup> "Thucydides Criticism of Democratic Knowledge" *Nomodeiktes* Michigan: 1993, p. 82). A related issue arises in Aristotle's *Politics* when he discusses the benefits of *both* judgements of the many and of the one (3.11).

most dangerous to an empire; pity, pleasure in dispute and leniency/humanity (III.40). These are three qualities that Arendt might identify as the preconditions of all free action and progress, and without which, men are reduced to the likeness of robots, mechanically reacting to 'external' stimuli, and thus prevented from acting reasonably and creatively.

*Cleon: Reasonableness and Creativity*

Given Cleon's position as explored in the previous section, it is no surprise that critical thought and reflection are capacities which seem to be particularly abhorrent to Cleon. Deliberation and reconsideration mark the weak, or worse, the unprincipled and 'lawless' man. Here we see that Cleon, Pericles, and Thucydides, while sharing a similar scepticism about the *demos* as a reliable decision making body, and holding a high regard for strong leadership and law, each seems to have a distinctly different idea of how law should be implemented and 'lived' by. In deriding reflection and debate, Cleon implicitly condones a traditionally Spartan way of life, where questions and critique have no place. At the same time, he plays on some prevalent worries in Athens at that time, specifically the fear of being publicly 'fooled' or 'duped' by good speakers. Cleon draws from this fear the false conclusion that if man is vulnerable to being misled by fancy talk, the way to avoid this is through rigid dogmatism backed by punitive, coercive force.

Cleon's anti-democratic stance flows naturally from his understanding of *polis* and empire (discussed above).<sup>145</sup> Under good leadership, both empire and *polis*

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<sup>145</sup> Orwin makes an important point about the complicated role of the *polis* in the *History*: Thucydides' conception of the "right" political structure or the "best" regime or constitution is muddled by the fact that, in dealing with concrete history, specifically with the inter-*polis* events of the Peloponnesian War, he must contend with 'international' politics (unlike, for instance, Aristotle and Plato). His disinclination to posit theories of ideal *poleis* perhaps stems from the fact that an ideal *polis* is decidedly harder to conceive when not understood as a self contained "organism," but rather as exposed and vulnerable to the *poleis* around it – both ideologically and militarily. Athens might have been able to sustain a democracy internally, but externally, she was tyrannical (even in the eyes of Pericles: II.63). Thucydides must not only contend with the

alike should aim to embody those practices which structure the political sphere (whether 'domestic' laws or 'international' treaties). They order community, and regulate discourse about it, but never thwart completely the possibility of change and innovation. Thus, they require constant (re)interpretation, and because of this, they are relatively easy to codify yet extremely difficult to put effectively into practice. Cleon, it appears, was not up to the challenge. He viewed the laws (and public decisions more generally) as all-powerful and permanently binding. With this conviction, he effectively condemned reflection and reconsideration--for ultimately there was nothing about which extended deliberation was necessary. Laws were understood to be external, from 'above'--they embodied the power of he who was in command (at Mytilene, of course, this was Cleon himself). Thus debate had to be portrayed as suspect for it threatened his own power (and pride).<sup>146</sup> To protect himself, Cleon cast anyone who questioned and critiqued political decisions as either weak and childish men or dangerous citizens: "Intelligent people are the downfall of cities...ordinary people don't believe in their own intelligence, and they regard themselves as less learned than the laws" (III.37). By saying this, he avoided making hard choices and guaranteed the extension of his authority.

Cleon, out of fear and narrow self-interest, was stuck on a mechanistic understanding of the world, where 'right' meant that orders dictated from above should result in blind submission below. Political power and strength, Cleon assumed, arose out of consistency and regularity, maintenance of the status quo, *not* out of the establishment of a public space which encouraged critical thought and aimed at allowing people with diverse interests to flourish together.<sup>147</sup> Cleon's attitude underlies a quasi-scientific, strictly logical understanding of the world which values a certain kind of discreet achievement, but completely

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relations between citizen and citizen, but between *polis* and *polis* (*The Humanity of Thucydides* Princeton: 1994, pp.172ff.).

<sup>146</sup> One can assume that Arendtian story telling too, as it provides people with alternative examples of how people live would also be seen as a threat to Cleon.

<sup>147</sup> This is Arendt's conception of action "in concert" (*On Violence* New York: 1969 p.44).

disregards the importance of another kind of activity. It admitted no deliberation, no sensitivity to the force of the particulars upon abstractions. In dogmatically affirming this ideal of power from the top down, Cleon parted company with Pericles, who most certainly was no less a leader.<sup>148</sup> While the latter undoubtedly saw the need for consistency,<sup>149</sup> it was not consistency for its own sake. Consistency, for Pericles was the general result--a likely consequence--of actions which proceeded from reflection and attentive deliberation about what was reasonable for man to do.

### *Final Remarks on the Coherence of Cleon's Argument*

Cleon's argument, though perhaps compelling in the fact that it sets up neat, stark contrasts, has some blatant flaws internal to it. He characterises the Mytilenean revolt as a flagrant demonstration of disrespect, for all the Greek world to see, made even worse given their 'privileged' position among Athenian allies. It was a deceitful act aimed at actually trying "to destroy" (*diaphtheirai* III.39) the Athenians.<sup>150</sup> Cleon blames the revolt on Athenian democracy, the ideals of which he sees as ineffective and weak (the alternative view--attempting the difficult task of good leadership amidst diversity, i.e., reconciling and uniting the conflicting elements of a democracy--was too much for him). Given his simplistic view, he insists that a shift in attitude is required from that endorsed with Pericles 'at the helm'. The harsh punishment of the Mytileneans will serve as an affirmative sign of Athenian force, as well as a public admonition--a

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<sup>148</sup> Both Ober and Forde write about Pericles' leadership. Ober argues that close analysis of Pericles' rhetoric in the Funeral Oration reveals him to a leader who is in many ways inimical to democracy--extolling the ideals of democracy in speech, and rousing the Athenians to feel pride in their distinctive form of government, yet in his actions promoting an authoritative regime ("Thucydides' Critique of Democratic Knowledge" *Nomodeiktes* Michigan: 1993, pp. 92ff.). In contrast, Forde argues that Pericles "consciously strove to make himself transparent to the Athenians" ("Ambition in Thucydides and Plato" in *Politikos II* ed. Rubin, Pittsburgh: 1992, pp. 15).

<sup>149</sup>At II.61, Pericles uses his own consistency to reveal the error in the mindset of the Athenians who have become angry with him. They are overcome with grief, an emotion that distorts much in the same way as the anger (*orge*) which prompted the decision Cleon advocates.

<sup>150</sup> Cleon's sensationalist language describing the Mytilenean revolt is particularly ironic given the fact that it is to precisely such fantastic rhetoric that he directs his most pointed contempt.

*paradeigma* to others. After all, if the punishment is not carried out, what is to prevent other 'allies' from trying similar tactics without fear of negative repercussions?

And perhaps the careful reader must admit that the Mytilenean revolt *did* indicate disrespect for and cause injury to Athens. Joining forces with the Spartans and Boetians further amplified their overt betrayal, especially given their special place in the Athenian alliance. One could even legitimately argue (in line with Cleon) that the calculated action taken by Mytilene--timed to coincide with Athens at her weakest--was an exceedingly malicious exploit, effectively raising it to the level of conspiracy and rebellion (*epebouleusan te kai epanestesan*) rather than mere revolt (*apestesan*).<sup>151</sup> But, if part of what the punishment is aimed at doing is, as Cleon claims, to discourage further rebellions among the allies, the reader need not work too hard to challenge this superficially persuasive argument--for Cleon does it himself. He undermines his own logic (and supports Diodotus' at III.45) by declaring that the Mytilenean revolt itself proved that they "learned nothing from the sufferings of their neighbors who rebelled and were taken firmly in hand" (III.39). If this is the case, then why is this punishment so important if it has proven, on his own account, to be an ineffective deterrent? Indeed, why is setting an example important at all?<sup>152</sup>

The punishment and its effectiveness as a deterrent, while an interesting debate in itself, points to a bigger issue. As Book III goes on to confirm with the events surrounding Plataea and Corcyra, this reactionary, tit-for-tat association amongst Greek *poleis* yields no victor, but only further traps both sides in a destructive causal chain. The way out of this regressive and reactionary behaviour is

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<sup>151</sup> Andrews highlights Cleon's use of *epanastasis* to indicate not merely a revolt (*apostasis*), but a "conspiratorial uprising against the ruler" ("Cleon's Hidden Appeal" *Classical Quarterly* 50.1, 2000 p.48).

<sup>152</sup> It is interesting to note here that the punishment Cleon supports not only seems to be, by his own logic, ineffective, but it has no precedent in Athenian history (Kagan *Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* Ithaca: 1969, pp.116-119; and *The Archidamian War* Ithaca: 1974, p.157).

stymied by Cleon due to his incompetence in deliberation and discernment, and the resulting (cowardly) respect he has for 'external' laws. Though his dogged adherence to abstract law may successfully disguise his deficiency in (reasonable) speech--perhaps even make it look like a strength--it does not stand up so well in action (as seen in Cleon's less than virtuous death, discussed above).

The above discussion of Cleon highlights the importance of both good leadership and a structured *polis* for Thucydides. It is the *polis*, and importantly, not exclusively a democracy, that enables men to develop a discerning capacity which then prepares them for reasonable decision making and creative action. Orwin brings out this point in his discussion of what happens when the order necessary to a *polis* disappears, e.g., in times of *stasis*.<sup>153</sup> Only in the context of a *polis*, i.e., acting with others according to (or fighting against) laws as implemented by a discerning leader, are the conditions necessary for human flourishing to be present. The laws do not, as Cleon assumed, rule absolutely. Rather, in being sensitively applied by a discerning leader to specific circumstances, they structure man's actions and in doing so, render seemingly isolated actions coherent, a part of a bigger picture, or narrative.<sup>154</sup> The role of the leader in a political community is thus complex, and the varieties of leadership the reader finds in Thucydides helps illuminate it.<sup>155</sup> Farrar brings

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<sup>153</sup> *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994, pp.172ff). Kopytoff, in a slightly different vein, writes on the function of culture (here, a condition growing out of shared life in a *polis*), arguing that it achieves order (and thus meaning) through imposing "distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity [of human life]." Without culture, (in this case, without the *polis*) human beings would be confronted with an "endless array of singular things" and thought and reasonable judgment would be rendered impossible. (Kopytoff, I. "The Cultural Biography of Things" p.70 in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Appadarai, Cambridge: 1986).

<sup>154</sup> On the importance of narrative for cultivating and sustaining meaning, see MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue* (London: 1981).

<sup>155</sup> For example, Pericles and Hermocrates had the capacity to discern, and could thus act prudently. Athenagoras and Cleon do not. Euben, in comparing Pericles and Cleon, suggests that with the former, Thucydides presents a leader who "enhances the power of discernment." Pericles is both frank, and inspiring. His speeches are more than merely tactical – they openly address the difficulties inherent in the human world (he speaks after the devastation of the plague, and later to appease the Athenians' rage at having their homes ravaged), yet still reinforces its beauty and potential. Part of Pericles' message rests on developing the human



out what I understand to be Thucydides' conception of good leadership when she describes a leader as one who provides "a purely and persuasively public perspective, interpretive abilities, the capacity for self control and the personal qualities needed to inculcate both."<sup>156</sup> Here we can draw a parallel with Pindar's victor in that he too illuminated new, unprecedented possibilities to those who heard the odes, yet himself grew out of a specific tradition with its own 'local' values and practices. All this indicates that the *polis* is the source of both stability and change--it must continually shift and adjust--both the leader and the *demos* must check each other and fill in where the other falls short.

There is yet a final parallel to be drawn, this time between Hannah Arendt, Thucydides, and Pindar. Arendt paraphrases Democritus in describing the art of politics as that which "teaches men to bring forth what is great and radiant."<sup>157</sup> While this immediately recalls the victor in Pindar as he who performed "radiant" actions which "illuminated" new possibilities and inspired the audience to act, the notion of radiance when applied to a strife ridden political situation invokes another metaphor which is appropriate to Thucydides. The great Thucydidean leader is 'radiant' like Pindar's victor in that he introduced and made accessible to his audience (the *demos*) a world beyond that which was

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capacity to see beyond one's own self-interest and mere material survival, beyond a particular life and the needs of a single individual. Cleon, on the other hand, seeks to increase only his own power, and in this, does not fulfill the potentials of his own species. This narrow perspective reveals a character who is not fully human, for men have the capacity to show compassion and have mercy, but Cleon does not (chooses not to?) exercise it. (A similar idea is expressed by Aristotle who claims that a bad man is far worse than any 'logos lacking' animal could be). Cleon's myopic self-interest, his need to play on 'low level' (i.e., unreflective) emotions such as fear and anger skews his ability to negotiate wisely between abstract and concrete, and leads to actions which are neither prudent nor successful (see Euben, P. *The Tragedy of Political Theory* Princeton: 1990 pp.179ff.).

<sup>156</sup> Farrar, C. *Origins of Democratic Thinking* (Cambridge: 1988, p.168). Thucydides implies that without good leadership, the *demos* simply goes for "more" rather than for what is "good." Finley raises a similar issue, citing both Thucydides and Aristophanes, who imply that populists in ancient Greece were often expansionists (*Thucydides* Cambridge, MA: 1963, pp.165-166) One can perhaps draw a modern parallel – in the US, for instance any talk of value in government is seen as an inherent affront to individual "freedom of choice." Due to this, the (illusorily neutral) market has come to be the unacknowledged arbiter of what is good, which is by default (or deteriorates into), simply *more*.

<sup>157</sup> Arendt *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: 1998, p.206).

known to them in their individual households, and hopefully motivated the *demos* to perform reasonable, creative and noble actions. But he is “radiant” in another important sense as well: the good political leader “shed light” on complicated, muddled situations. This ‘light’ did not always (in fact rarely) lead to a decisive, permanent resolution where all parties were equally satisfied. However, in lieu of such a neat resolution, the radiance of a good leader brought to light the many sides of an argument *publicly*, and encouraged people to see its constituent conflicting parts, rather than just their own. This wider perspective invited the *demos* to reflect on their predicament from a broader outlook.<sup>158</sup> Cleon plainly failed to embody this virtue of “radiance” and discouraged it in others in his explicit contempt for reflection and the belittling of “intelligent men” (*sophoteroi*). Politics, he insisted, should not involve deliberation at all, the *demos* should not “dissect arguments”/“pull a speech to pieces” (III.37), but should simply obey.

## Chapter 11: Investigating Pylos

The following section will look at the events at Pylos in Book IV. I hope to show that these events undermined many pre-war ideals and, more broadly speaking, basic categories of thought. In doing so, this episode forced both actors in the war and readers alike to think and *actively participate* in the situation Thucydides describes. The ideological ‘disruption’ at Pylos forces the reader into what Arendt calls an “unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of reality” where decisions must be made and action taken in absence of past categories and theoretical ideals.<sup>159</sup> In this, the challenge posed by freedom of choice is brought into especially high relief. The issue of human freedom latent in this particular ‘moment’ is further intensified by the Spartans’ peace offer following the battle. This highlights an important human capacity for Arendt which I have yet to

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<sup>158</sup> For an extended discussion on the importance of bringing out (and recording) all sides of an argument publicly, see Disch *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: 1994, pp.204ff.).

<sup>159</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: 1958 p. xiv).

discuss, that is, the faculty of forgiving. I will discuss this concept briefly before moving onto a more detailed discussion of Pylos and the peace offer.

### *Freedom and The Power to Forgive*

In my earlier discussion, I hope to have shown that for Arendt, the precondition for reasonable and creative action (i.e., the realisation of human freedom) is not the certainty which seems to inhere in fixed abstract principles, but the freedom from needing such certainty in the first place. Arendt argues that human beings are free when they are not caught in a mechanical action-reaction relationship with one another--much like a natural causal chain (a mode of interaction to which men are particularly prone in times of war). This can arise from acting dogmatically according to abstract rule/principle alone (or *re-acting*), and often entails using these rules/principles to serve vengeance. She suggests that the escape from the imprisonment of this infinite regress comes through forgiving.<sup>160</sup> Only in the act of forgiving are human beings truly opening the possibility of free *choice*. In forgiving, men stop merely *re-acting* to external stimuli and instead open space to create something new. They can progress into uncharted 'territory.'

Such uncharted territory is both exhilarating and terrifying. For Arendt, it highlights the fact that every action involves a risk, and with each risk taken, men further manifest themselves in the world: "in speaking and acting, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique, personal identities, and thus make their appearance in the human world."<sup>161</sup> This "appearance" exposes men

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<sup>160</sup> *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: 1998, pp.236ff). The relevance of Arendt's "faculty of forgiving" to Greek poetry, drama and history is apparent when one recognises the misfortunes which befall those who make decisions based on bitterness and revenge rather than forgiving. For instance, the suffering of both Achilles and Agamemnon in the *Iliad*, Medea's feeling of *dustalaina* after vengeful feelings lead her to take the lives of her own sons. There is almost a sense of hubris which underlies vengeful feelings, a belief that one's own losses must be registered on a "cosmic scale" and that one's own power can somehow make things right. Below, I will suggest that Athens' abrupt decision to vote against peace after Pylos locks her into a reactive causal chain which is perhaps the first definitive step towards her downfall.

<sup>161</sup> *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: 1998, p.179).

to the praise and blame of others. While one can increase the *likelihood* of actions earning praise, ultimately the many repercussions of each “human performance” are not within the actor’s control. Therefore, the potential for blame (humiliation, shame, dishonour) always looms. Abiding dogmatically by fixed external rules helps to reduce the daunting sense of responsibility that accompanies the personal disclosure inherent individual action. Yet this submission to ‘rules’ limits human freedom and the potential for creative action. Arendt argues that with proper value given to forgiving, men are more apt to risk acting innovatively (i.e., creatively given a sense of reasonableness) because the blame which failure incurs is neither fixed nor permanent (as are abstract rules/principles).

For Arendt therefore, the intrinsic indeterminate nature of all human life renders all people inescapably vulnerable to making mistakes. Too often error is taken to be an indelible mark on the actor, which invokes an inflated sense of shame (dishonour, humiliation, etc.). This can stifle man’s tendency to risk acting freely, that is to say, paying attention to and harmonising abstract principle *and* particulars as best he can. Arendt insists that men must not see the making of mistakes as “irreversible,” for then risking action would be too great. As erring is a fact of human nature, men must learn how to work with it more constructively. This begins with the “faculty of forgiving,” which guarantees them the “constant mutual release from what they do...and [allows them to] remain free agents.” Given this, men must resist the crude power Cleon found by inflexibly sticking to his decision, and learn to value, to actually see *strength* in “a willingness to change their minds and start again.”<sup>162</sup>

The future is transformed by exercising our forgiving faculty – it becomes an arena where men are implicitly encouraged to take risks, rather than to fear them. This is not to imply that all failed outcomes are immediately absolved, and the actors exonerated without punishment or rehabilitation, but it ensures

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<sup>162</sup> *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: 1998, p.240).

that *ultimately men will be forgiven sufficiently for them to be encouraged to try again*. Forgiving for Arendt, and *not* the awesome power to eradicate error, is what unlocks human freedom. Men are free when they engage in deliberate, reasonable action with others, as opposed to mere reaction, when they risk acting creatively, and do not define success in discreet achievement alone. Man's fallibility demands that men be humane, that is, that they accept that as human beings they will err, and given this, they must also be ready to understand and forgive when actions go wrong.

Thus, in continuing to flesh out the conception of a “discerning character” which I seek to develop here, we must not forget that discerning does not free man from making mistakes. Even the man with the most 'finely tuned' capacity to discern is susceptible to error. Thucydides presents men acting *within* a world of other things and other people. This is the Arendtian condition of “plurality,” and by definition, it generates an infinitely complex environment for men, where in every situation, every decision, there is always a myriad of factors beyond their control. Pericles, for example, endowed with an incredible power to both discern and foresee, encouraged the Athenians to leave their homes and cram into the tiny space behind the city's walls. This, one might argue, was a prudent move for the Athenians, one might even argue that it was the primary factor which enabled them to sustain their power in the early years of the war. However, this exodus from the country, though perhaps effective in that sense, had other consequences. For example, it almost certainly exposed more people to the plague than would have been otherwise (II.52).<sup>163</sup> The advice given by Pericles (and chosen by the Athenians) had ambiguous results--both positive and negative repercussions ensued (as is the case with every human choice). Forgiving Pericles for the bad repercussions of his advice effectively released the Athenians (and, had they stuck to his strategy, perhaps would have allowed

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<sup>163</sup> In the *Gorgias* (515), Plato argues that Pericles, whatever his good intentions, had an overall negative effect on the Athenians. In a similar vein, Aristotle, in discussing the origins of Athenian democracy, states that while Solon perhaps provided the necessary preconditions, the resulting democratic government was not his intention (*ou....prohairesin*).

them to prevail in the war). Forgiving is crucial when men admit that everyone will misjudge, misinterpret, and perform actions that have consequences they neither intend nor desire. This must be acknowledged to be an inescapable feature of the human condition to which even the greatest men are vulnerable (though of course for Thucydides, this vulnerability, though common to all men, was not the source of their greatness!).<sup>164</sup>

In arguing that fallibility becomes a real threat to human freedom only when we lose the power to forgive, Arendt provides another framework in which to analyze the work of Thucydides. The human capacity to forgive (as opposed to seek vengeance) is, Arendt argues, that which secures human freedom. In forgiving, men find freedom from the “vengeance, which encloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end.”<sup>165</sup> Therefore, men escape the infinite causal chain of action-reaction--characteristic of animal life--through forgiving.<sup>166</sup> The act of forgiving makes creation (Arendt’s “natality”) and finally progress possible. This willingness to forgive, to forgo the base, animalistic desire for vengeance will be highlighted when I discuss the peace offer at Pylos below.

### *The Novelty of Pylos*

Book IV of Thucydides’ *History* describes the events of the war occurring between the years 425-423BC. This section will focus on the battle at Pylos, the Spartan peace offer, and the Athenian reaction to the offer (roughly chapters 1-

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<sup>164</sup> Recall that Pindar, in writing of the glory of some of the most esteemed and revered men in the Greek world also reveals not only their fallibility but that of even the almighty gods.

<sup>165</sup> Arendt *The Human Condition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: 1998, p.241).

<sup>166</sup> This role of forgiveness runs counter to the foundation of Greek, as well as much of modern Western science, grounded in Newton’s 2<sup>nd</sup> law of motion: “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Scholars have written extensively on the relationship between the scientific and moral worlds of ancient Greece and their gradual integration (see, Lloyd *Polarity and Analogy* Cambridge: 1966, pp. 421ff.; Vernant *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* New York: 1980, pp. 203ff). Indeed, perhaps our earliest extant Greek philosophical writing invokes and in doing so, encourages this general truth about the balance of opposing forces (Anaximander). Given this, forgiveness demands an enormous, ‘paradigmatic’ shift.

23). Pylos was an unusual battle wherein Spartan and Athenian forces clashed resulting in the capture and surrender of approximately 420 Spartan soldiers.<sup>167</sup> Following the surrender, the Spartans make a peace offer to the Athenians, which is turned down. Below, I will examine the series of events leading up to the offer, drawing attention to the peculiar reversal of traditional Athenian and Spartan roles. This will serve as an example of a fundamentally disruptive situation which demands action based on a sense of reasonableness and creativity. Additionally, (as stated above), in discussing the peace offer itself, I will aim to bring out the Arendtian premise that the precondition for human freedom is forgiving.

Finley refers to the Spartan peace offer in Book IV, just after the Athenian victory at Pylos as the “dead center” of the *History*.<sup>168</sup> And indeed, it does seem to mark a distinct turning point in the war. This moment in the narrative is of particular relevance to this project because it overturns traditional Greek identities which might have helped to guide judgement and action. The ‘upheaval’ of the battle, the remarkable surrender of Spartan men and subsequent peace offer, reveal an atypical Spartan voice. The Athenian response to Sparta through these events is also unusual: it highlights the evolution of post-Periclean leadership and the deterioration of those ideals which had once differentiated Athens from other Greek *poleis*. Some of Athens’ actions at Pylos seem to be rather ‘Spartan’ in character, and those of Sparta, reminiscent of the Athenians. Due to this, it requires the persistent involvement of the reader if he hopes to make sense of and gain insight from the situation.

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<sup>167</sup>For a thorough (if controversial) discussion of this battle, see Cornford's discussion of Pylos in *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (repr., Philadelphia: 1971, pp. 182-109). As I explain in more detail below, I disagree with Cornford's main thesis, i.e., that Thucydides' narrative here illustrates the force of Luck or the Irrational as the primary agent determining the course of events. Rather, I argue that it is those men who are attuned to their specific and concrete surroundings, rather than those who maintain abstract principles for the sake of consistency, who prove themselves successful. This is especially important when events are erratic and illogical as they undoubtedly were at Pylos.

<sup>168</sup> *Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: 1963, p.193).

In this conspicuous reversal and upheaval, Thucydides demands the reader's participation, testing his capacity to think critically and make judgements, without having the "banisters" of precedent and tradition.<sup>169</sup> In this case, I use 'banisters' to refer to the analytical support provided by customary perceptions of Athenian and Spartan identities which had so long defined and ordered the Greek world. Prudent action at Pylos could not be determined by an appeal to these general, abstract 'characters' for they no longer adequately represented the unprecedented events going on at that time. Concrete events in the war made these once useful abstractions 'unfit' for effective engagement in the current situation.<sup>170</sup>

Pylos thus presents the reader with a highly unsettling situation, a *kinesis* in miniature. Until this point, the reader has seen Sparta and Athens in terms which, more or less, substantiate the images drawn of them in Thucydides' earliest descriptions of the two *poleis* (Athens at I.6ff, and Sparta at I.18ff). These descriptions carry the two major Greek powers fairly consistently throughout the first books of the *History*--Sparta proves herself to be a mighty yet guarded and cautious land power, and Athens, a daring, naval one. At Pylos, these familiar roles shift, and with this divergence comes, in Arendt's words, "the challenge of an unprecedented event."

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<sup>169</sup>"Thinking without banisters" is a term used by Arendt meant to describe thinking without the guidance of our "traditional concepts...categories and formulas." There are times when current events render our abstractions(derived from past habituation) ineffective. They cease to guide and structure thought, but distort reality and consequently mislead (see Arendt "Understanding and Politics" *Partisan Review* (p.379); also Finley, J.H. *Thucydides* Cambridge, MA: 1963, pp.160-161). Additionally, Disch explores the "banister" metaphor in *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: 1994, pp.143-145) .

<sup>170</sup> Boyd-White suggests that the Corcyrean debate marks a time when the failure of conventional discourse to "fit its [changed] world" results in collapse, "a failure of order and meaning" (*When Words Lose Their Meaning* Chicago: 1984, p.90). Arendt poses a similar point, suggesting that Nazi Germany effectively undermined the conceptual framework that had been prevalent in western thought. The capacity of concrete events and actions to destroy our intellectual categories directly leads to my central thesis – political theory must be allied to history – in doing so we become familiar with the kinds of things man has done, and become trained in being attentive to our actual surroundings.



However, 'challenging' is precisely what one expects from Thucydides. By Book IV, Thucydides has prepared the attentive reader for this demanding situation, where, given the destruction of past categories and definitions, options still must be perceived, deliberations undertaken, decisions made, and finally actions pursued. Cleon's specious reasoning at Mytilene revealed how destructive (and inhumane) abstract theory can be when it alone is applied to concrete circumstances without thought or reflection about what makes the particular here-and-now unique. At Pylos, now acutely aware that theory alone cannot direct action effectively, the reader experiences a situation which shatters past theoretical foundations at the outset. As such, Thucydides demands active engagement of both the actors in the *History* and of the reader himself. Each must exercise the peculiar human capacity to discern what is reasonable, taking into account both the concrete situation and abstract generalisations, in order to determine sensible, prudent action, that is to say, to be reasonably creative.

In analysing Pylos, the reader must remember that when Thucydides describes the war as a *kinesis*, he implies a capacity to disrupt and upturn—it was a force of change and instability. The war *acted on* cities and men not just physically, but in such a way as to disrupt their most basic ideas about the external world and their places in it.<sup>171</sup> This intrusion 'from without' thrust men's ambiguous nature to the fore—they had to both adapt to those interferences they could not control, and shape as best they could, those which lay in their power. The war forced the Greeks to reassess their most basic generalisations and see themselves and their place in the world in a new light. Did the Athenians have the awesome power implied in the abstract theories of the sophists' arguments and the advancements of science? Were the Spartans right in structuring their state so as to produce an invincible war machine? Or, were both merely at the mercy of larger cosmic forces? The answer, though perhaps unsatisfying, lies somewhere in between

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<sup>171</sup> Kitto draws attention to and analyses Thucydides' use of *pathemata* (*Poiesis* Berkeley:1966, p.274).

and Pylos helps to further flesh out this fluctuating 'place'. There, the concrete and historically specific present eclipsed previously accepted abstractions and in doing so compelled the men involved to innovate when making their decisions, rather than merely apply past rules mechanically to a new situation.

What then made Pylos such a distinct break from the past? Broadly speaking, at this point in the war, conventional identities were collapsing. That is to say, general ideas about who the Spartans and Athenians were, where their strengths lay, and what their vulnerabilities were no longer applied to the present situation. The result of this breakdown brought about what Thucydides himself refers to as the most surprising event in the war ("*para gnomen te de malista ton kata ton polemon*" III.40).

#### *The Situation Summarised*

Connor calls Thucydides' description of Pylos (and in fact the whole of Book IV) the "least convincing" section of the entire work, and indeed, there are some conspicuous holes.<sup>172</sup> For example, there is no direct explanation of Demosthenes' role in the war at the opening of Book IV, nor is there explicit clarification of how the Athenians and Messenians coordinated with each other in battle. Later, there is no one speaker named who offers peace on Sparta's behalf, nor a description of the debate which presumably followed the monumental offer. Given these omissions (and arguably many others) together with the emphasis on the role of luck and chance Thucydides attributes to this episode, scholars have speculated about the personal reasons for Thucydides' ambiguous description: perhaps his distaste for Cleon, (and quite possibly for the plainly un-Periclean Demosthenes) led him to be rather vague about the source of the Athenian success.<sup>173</sup> By amplifying the role of luck and chance, the insight

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<sup>172</sup> Connor *Thucydides* (Princeton: 1984, p.108). For further discussion on Pylos through the theme of "focalisation," see Hornblower *A Commentary to Thucydides* vol. 2 Oxford:1996).

<sup>173</sup> Hornblower uses Thucydides' suggestive comment about what Cleon "knew" at Pylos to support the argument that Thucydides was personally opposed to this Athenian general

of these two Athenian generals could not help but be diminished. However, rather than try to put together Thucydides' 'unwritten agenda', I will limit myself, as best I can, to analysing what Thucydides actually leaves the reader given the framework I set out above. For instance, in what way do the 'omissions' train the reader to be critical, reflective--a prudent deliberator? What role might 'holes' play in what I understand to be the bigger aim of Thucydides' work--that is, cultivation of the capacity to act reasonably and creatively given man's inherently limited perspective?<sup>174</sup>

Whether due to luck or foresight, Thucydides is clear that Demosthenes' plan to fortify Pylos was not popular. With campaigns in Sicily and Corcyra (presumably) weighing heavily on Athenian minds, Demosthenes' fixation on this point on the Peloponnese must have seemed random, even blatantly irresponsible given the more pressing and immediate concerns the Athenians

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(*Thucydides* Baltimore: 1987, p. 166). In contrast to his vagueness about Athenian leadership at this time, it is interesting to note that Thucydides' explicit respect for the Spartan Brasidas, even despite his defeat at Pylos (and, I argue, his lack of reasonable creativity there) prevails in his description of Brasidas' success in both Megara and northern Greece. This general of both intelligence and noble character is the image of Brasidas that Thucydides promotes most in the *History*, not the fallen man at Pylos.

<sup>174</sup>Orwin, writing on the Diodotus' speech at Mytilene makes a similar point, stressing the fact that Thucydides "writes not for a popular audience, but only those few whose primary concern is the truth" (*The Humanity of Thucydides* Princeton: 1994, p.162). The find the truth demands effort and work on the part of the reader. Farrar expresses a similar view in her discussion of Thucydides (*The Origins of Democratic Thinking* Cambridge: 1988, p. 126ff). Kitto also advocates this reading of the *History* (that is, one which assumes that Thucydides' "omissions" serve a bigger purpose than personal vengeance). In doing so, he promotes an understanding of Thucydides which takes into account the written nature of the work. Kitto argues that the text was written over a long period of time, and most likely not intended for oral performance (Thucydides himself says that it is "not for display"). Thucydides, Kitto claims, "expected his book to be read and reread" (*Poiesis* Berkeley: 1966, p.289), and cites examples of how actions later in the book recall and demand reference to earlier comments and actions. The fact that Thucydides leaves out certain facts that we, as modern readers expect (e.g., his sources, an explicit account of his method), should not be taken as mistakes or omissions, but as a reflection on who Thucydides thought his audience would be – that is, who human beings were then, are now, and will be into the future. Kitto suggests that the enduring characteristics of man the text hints at through these "omissions" lie in his capacity to "take the factual accuracy for granted and collaborate with him elsewhere – in seizing the significance of these to-and-fro references." Thucydides demanded that his readers use their *imagination* and not solely their "intellect." (ibid. p.349).

had at the time.<sup>175</sup> The fact that Thucydides leaves no record of Demosthenes 'unveiling' his plan publicly suggests that he too was concerned about his capacity to persuade the assembly. This worry is substantiated when Demosthenes sets sail. At this point, Thucydides indicates that even the commanders with whom he left were less than enthusiastic about the proposed fortification. In fact, both Sophocles and Eurymedon seemed overtly disdainful of the plan; it was a waste of time, and quite probably an undue financial drain on Athens (IV.3). However, despite this lack of public support, even without himself being an acting *strategos*,<sup>176</sup> Demosthenes succeeded (with some help from a passing storm) in carrying out the fortification. This aggressive tactic attracted the attention of the Spartans then fighting in Attica, and soon the Athenians were confronted with a belligerent fleet of ships, prepared to fight fiercely for their 'home soil'. The battle ended with roughly 420 Spartan hoplites trapped on the nearby island of Sphacteria, an outcome that prompted a Spartan surrender and peace offer.

What to make of this startling and uncharacteristic offer and the events which preceded it? How did the two sides fare in battle? How was the battle itself conducted? What can we conclude about the Athenian response to the peace the Spartans propose? Again, in attempting to answer these questions, I will seek to draw out the human capacity for reasonable thinking and creative action, even in a time rife with contradiction and inconsistency. When man's abstractions and categories cease to apply to the world he faces, with reference to what criteria

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<sup>175</sup> By this time, the escalating war and the plague had taken its toll on the Athenians and their image in the Greek world. Kagan writes of the Athenians' need to "restore prestige" in Sicily, which was teetering towards Spartan domination. Corcyra, he writes, was also close to "falling into enemy hands" at the time. (*Archidamian War* Ithaca: 1974, p.220) Connor also states with confidence that the fortification of Pylos must have "seem[ed] a distraction." (*Thucydides* Princeton: 1984, p.111) Gomme calls it "a rider to the main decree" (*Historical Commentary on Thucydides* Oxford: 1945-72, p.438). Though Thucydides does not draw direct attention to the insight behind Demosthenes' plan, I hope to show that his actions showed a sense of reason and creativity.

<sup>176</sup> Demosthenes was at this time a "private citizen" (*onti idiote*), and was not therefore acting general of his ship (IV.2). However, probably due to the trust generated from his success in Arcania, he was given 'use' of a ship.

does he deliberate and act? As above, I will assume that 'reasonable' derives from honest reflection on a wide range of *experiences*<sup>177</sup> (i.e., attention to the actions of men and their *poleis*, as well as to the recurring cycles of nature) and the ability to 'spot'<sup>178</sup> the order and continuity inherent in these experiences. 'Creativity' implies the capacity to integrate this broad understanding of human and natural patterns (a sense of reasonableness) with the present circumstances and the individual(s) involved. The result of this integration is a deliberate act in the world--a creation.<sup>179</sup> Success at Pylos went to those who showed both imagination and daring in the moment, yet were also attuned to (and thus simultaneously constrained by) a sense of reasonableness, manifest in the more regular, recurring patterns observed in human lives and nature.

My analysis, in stressing the important role of man at Pylos, contrasts with the view of Cornford, but falls in line with those like Kagan's.<sup>180</sup> The interpretations put forth by these two scholars mark distinctly different understandings of the battle – Cornford, as noted above, understands it to be a situation in which Luck or the Irrational enters and dominates as a discrete force, an autonomous agent.<sup>181</sup> Kagan, on the other hand, locates the primary source of Athenian success in deliberate human action--specifically the 'keen eye' of Demosthenes.

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<sup>177</sup> "A wide range of experiences" is analogous to Arendt's sense of "enlarged mentality" (which is, in turn, derived from Kant's "world citizen"). It implies that the capacity to be critical comes from "contact with other people's thinking," which is not merely to empathise, but to actively "move from standpoint to standpoint." The "general" is not a purely "neutral" perspective, but one which holds and attempts to harmonise many particular perspectives (Arendt. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago: 1982, pp.40ff.).

<sup>178</sup> This capacity to "spot" (a term suggested to me by R. Sorabji at a seminar at King's College, London) will arise again in the discussion of Aristotle to follow.

<sup>179</sup> Each human 'creation' is a risk, which is, again, made bearable by the assumption that forgiveness will follow failure. This understanding of action, i.e., as the once potential/private self realising itself in the public world and in doing so, coming into 'contact' (and often conflict) with others' 'selves' is similar to Hegel's conception of the manifestation of one's will in the world as described in his *Philosophy of Right*.

<sup>180</sup> Kagan is just one example of many scholars who find fault with Cornford's thesis (see also, de Romilly and Gomme, Crane, and Doyle (as well as much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship that preceded him).

<sup>181</sup> Gomme makes an important point in noting that Thucydides' use of *tuche* and its derivatives need not be a reference to luck, but contemporaneousness, or fortunateness (*A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* Oxford: 1945-1972, pp.488-489).

Kagan goes further to enhance my own analysis when he focuses on the critical role of “initiative and daring”<sup>182</sup> for this success, and in doing so also echoes Arendt (whose ideas will continue to play a structural role in my analysis). With this basic distinction in mind, I will look first at the battle leading up to the surrender and peace offer, drawing a contrast between Brasidas and Demosthenes: how does each one deal with the breakdown of traditional identities at Pylos? I will argue that Demosthenes shows a willingness to take *reasonable* risks, while Brasidas clings to past abstractions that no longer apply to the present circumstances. Next, I will look at the Spartan peace offer and the Athenian response to it. In what way did the offer mark an act of reasonable creativity for the Spartans, and how did it challenge the Athenians to act likewise? How might this have been an opportunity to break out of a pattern of reactive vengeance, and become an arena for liberated creative, reasonable action?

#### *Upheaval at Pylos – Brasidas*

Through Thucydides’ description of Brasidas and Demosthenes, two distinct examples of the transgression of ‘traditional’ Athenian and Spartan roles at Pylos are revealed. Despite being shown to be an able and brave general at other points in the war (and generally commanding the respect of Thucydides), Brasidas’ orders to his naval officers indicate his inability to be both reasonable and creative in this particular case.<sup>183</sup> He is unable to break from the past, and persists in a destructive reliance on ‘outdated’ generalisations.<sup>184</sup>

Upon arrival at Pylos, Brasidas is described by Thucydides as the “most conspicuous of all” (*panton de phanerotatos Brasidas egeneto*).<sup>185</sup> At IV.11-12, the

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<sup>182</sup>*The Archidamian War* (Ithaca: 1974, p. 231).

<sup>183</sup> Hornblower explores Thucydides (perhaps unjustified) praise of Brasidas in *A Commentary on Thucydides* vol.2 (Oxford: 1996).

<sup>184</sup> Orwin notes also Brasidas’ decidedly “Athenian inclination” towards empire: IV.122-123, 35 (*The Humanity of Thucydides* Princeton: 1994, pp.78-86).

<sup>185</sup> For further discussion of Brasidas, see Cogan *The Human Thing* (Chicago: 1981, pp. 81-85).

reader watches as Brasidas instructs the Spartans to run their ships aground (*anagkasas...okeilai*) as a means of combating the Athenians who held Pylos from land. In doing this himself, Brasidas is seriously injured and drops his shield in the sea. While Gomme calls this a “brave action,” I suggest that it might also be interpreted as a reactive reinforcement of Spartan identity, long conceived as a *polis* of exceptional land soldiers whose highest praise came through death in battle. Brasidas’ orders to “run the ships aground” seems to have arisen at least in part from this basic abstract characterisation of Sparta as land-based fighters, no doubt derived from his past experience of his mother city. Reference to this ‘truth’ encouraged Brasidas to act mechanically at this decisive moment. His orders seemed to promise an insured success. After all, failure to get to land safely might result in death in battle, a feat deserving the utmost glory in Spartan ideology. However, the actual result of the battle revealed this conception of success to be outdated--the Spartans, with a dwindling population could not afford to lose so many men in battle, no military glory could make up for their very real dearth of much needed soldiers. In this, Brasidas’ orders reflect a dependence on inapplicable, ‘passé’ abstractions and a lack of reflection and reasonable creativity.<sup>186</sup>

However, Brasidas was in no easy position at Pylos. The number of plausible alternatives available to him at that time was, no doubt, small. There can be little doubt that the chaos of the fight, the fear and rage at the Athenian invasion intensified Brasidas’ desire to reach the familiarity of land, of home.<sup>187</sup> There, Sparta’s crown jewel--her hoplite army--could fight in a well-known

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<sup>186</sup> Brasidas, however, is no Cleon. The fact that he too seems ‘afflicted’ with a similar sensibility here, might be explained in part by a closer look at the context of each reaction. Cleon discouraged debate at a time when debate was scheduled to happen. There was no immediate enemy threat, and thus presumably, there was at least minimal time to think. Brasidas, on the other hand, acts instinctively (according to past ideas/concepts/categories) *in the midst* of the chaos of a difficult battle.

<sup>187</sup> Note that these are just the emotions that led the Athenians to their hasty and ill-conceived punishment of the Mytilenians. This might indicate one of Thucydides’ ‘lessons’ – the capacity for fear/anger to distort decision-making. This is precisely what Hobbes, translator and ‘student’ of Thucydides, transposed to the ‘state of nature’.

environment. On land, Brasidas had long mastered 'the rules of the game'. However, this need for familiarity in a time of commotion, however understandable, seems to have dictated his orders, and led directly to the Spartan defeat.<sup>188</sup> That is to say, it was precisely Brasidas' reliance on old generalisations which had succeeded in the past yet were inadequate in his present circumstances that resulted in the capture of Spartan men on Sphacteria (as well as his own serious injury). The outcome of the battle--again, a devastating 420 Spartans "trapped" on the island (*apelambanonto en te neso*)--illustrates the obstacles that arise if man is unable to work effectively with *both* what he knows (generally) from experience *and* what he has directly in front of him--inconsistent though they may be. Man's abstract ideas must always be connected honestly to experience. Brasidas' inhibitions at Pylos, his inability to act reasonably and creatively, result in the devastating detention of Spartans on Sphacteria--the troops are literally 'imprisoned' by their past.

The surrender of the Spartan soldiers completes the break with the past. Never before in recorded history do we have the Spartans, a people whose primary virtue is embodied in their military might, and the pride which accompanies it, offering such a compromise, including the actual surrender of men alive.<sup>189</sup> The Athenian reaction to this offer will follow a discussion of Demosthenes' role in the battle: how did he contribute to the Athenian success? How was he, unlike Brasidas, able to reason creatively given this 'new' situation, and how did his capacity to negotiate between abstract and concrete help him to do so effectively?

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<sup>188</sup> In Brasidas' defense, the Spartan position did not offer him many alternatives. Demosthenes himself uses this fact to highlight the disadvantaged position of the Spartans and to encourage the Athenians – when coming off of ships, he says "everything has to be just right" (IV.10). Recall too that Pindar embedded the 'new' deed of the victor in a familiar form (the ode) and further couched it in well-known myths. If it was the assurance of the known that made the risking something new possible, perhaps Brasidas had no choice for he lacked secure grounding in anything well known.

<sup>189</sup> While such a surrender was uncharacteristic of Sparta, a *polis* which placed such value on military honor, demanding soldiers be killed rather than return from battle defeated, their decreasing population, especially those of the Spartiate class, might help explain this turn around.



### *Upheaval at Pylos – Demosthenes*

Upon encountering Demosthenes at Pylos, the reader sees an immediate contrast with Brasidas.<sup>190</sup> The Athenians, long known for their sea power, find their strength on land at Pylos due to Demosthenes' bold encouragement: "If we stand and fight, the ground will be an ally (*summachon*)."<sup>191</sup> This break from tradition indicates that he is able to forego past conceptions about the Athenians (and thus presumably the Spartans), and work with the circumstance in front of him.<sup>192</sup> In this short but effective speech, Demosthenes challenges the reluctant and apprehensive troops now under his command. One cannot help but see his advice in almost direct opposition to that of Pericles, the quintessential Athenian general, who had encouraged the Athenians to give up their land at the start of the war, to forego their farms and beloved homes, and equip their navy instead (I.143). Pericles also discouraged increasing the size of the empire while at war (I.144)<sup>193</sup> Much of Book I, especially the Archaeology and the Pentacontaetia, leads the reader to believe that sea power was essential to success and empire. Athens had been defined, indeed power itself had been defined, by control of the sea – and here we have Demosthenes confidently recommending land as an (unlikely) "ally." Whom do we trust?

At Pylos, the reader finds that both the Athenians and the Spartans face a thorny dilemma--as we saw with Brasidas, the Spartans were literally stuck out at sea.

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<sup>190</sup> For further discussion of Demosthenes' strategy at Pylos, see, Cogan *The Human Thing* (Chicago: 1981, pp. 239-241); in comparison to Pericles, Pouncey *The Necessities of War* (New York: 1980, pp. 117-118)

<sup>191</sup> While Thucydides' understanding of man's role in the cosmos is larger than that of Pindar, his personification of forces other than human (here land) serves to highlight not man's supreme dominance, but as one force among many, able at times to control, at others, to be controlled.

<sup>192</sup> While "allying" with the land rather than the sea is uncharacteristic of Athens, the idea of building forts secured by naval support continued Periclean policy as described at I.142.

<sup>193</sup> As Thucydides' admiration for Pericles is undeniable, this direct opposition to his strategy might be understood to be an indirect indictment of Demosthenes. I believe however, that such a reading would be short sighted. It does not highlight the shortcomings of Demosthenes so much as the demand that men be aware of their concrete, present circumstances, and to let them, rather than past "norms" guide policy decisions.

They were forced to fight from this utterly unfamiliar 'territory.'<sup>194</sup> Demosthenes inspired the Athenians to take charge on land: "After Demosthenes spoke, the Athenians plucked up their courage and took up positions right down on the beach" (IV.11). This situation marks an acute contrast to conventional roles, and highlights Thucydides' ability to make the reader wary of investing too much in 'types' or rigid classifications of men who are (somewhat) free to shift and change *given the right circumstances*. Demosthenes' capacity to stray from what his past generalisations of 'what an Athenian is' (based on a narrow interpretation of her traditional roles and ideals) allowed him to engage with and benefit from the unique elements of his present situation. It was this that helped make him successful at Pylos, and well deserving of acclaim.

Demosthenes' inclination to fortify Pylos however, did not arise out of thin air. While he forewent reliance on old categories of identity, he turned to another source of stability and continuity--nature.<sup>195</sup> The push for fortification rested in large measure on an informed assessment of its natural resources.<sup>196</sup> This concern for resources echoes Thucydides' own attention to natural cycles: he used them to mark time in the *History*, and, more broadly speaking, to offer some continued regularity and consistency given the instability of war. Thucydides' references to the land and nature in the opening chapters of Book IV emphasise this awareness and in this, underscore the strength of Demosthenes' insight at this point in the war. At chapter 1, Thucydides marks time with reference to the "ripening grain," at chapter 2, again, time is measured by the "height of the grain," and at chapter 6, the Spartans run out of food because they invaded Attica too early: "when the grain was still green." These references at the

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<sup>194</sup> The Spartans had, of course, relied on their sea power before. However, it was used to introduce an element of the unexpected (III.30-32). Again, it is noteworthy that the tactics of the Spartans, though presumably a last resort, had their ships ramming into the sea bottom, desperately trying to get to (familiar) land (IV.11).

<sup>195</sup> Demosthenes again uses his experience of the land in aiding Cleon in the capture of the Spartans on Sphacteria IV.30 – a victory which Cleon effectively attributed to himself.

<sup>196</sup> For support on Demosthenes attention to natural resources, specifically forests, see Hornblower *Thucydides* (Baltimore: 1987, p. 158).

opening of the book are significant in that they call attention to the overarching importance nature, and the need to harmonise one's actions with her consistent rhythms, especially at times which are otherwise volatile and unstable.

Thus the reader sees a parallel--Demosthenes' reasons behind his enthusiasm for the fortification of Pylos reiterate Thucydides' own attention to nature--Pylos is important for its timber and stone, and the fact that it was "strong by nature." His reference to natural resources marks both an awareness of the concrete reality at hand, and the capacity to use nature to his advantage, to actively shape his world. Demosthenes was not swept up in the rhetoric of battles far away at Sicily and Corcyra (which proves to be especially misguided, the "gateway" to Athenian defeat). Instead he saw the specific needs of the Athenians here and now, and could ground these particular, concrete facts in the broader, regularity of nature. Later when he was selected by Cleon to help fulfill the "crazy promise" he made to the Athenians, Thucydides reminds the reader that it was the fire on the island of Sphacteria that convinced Demosthenes that the Athenian attack has some potential for success (IV.30). His assessment at Sphacteria derives from his own earlier experience in Aetolia where he had been defeated due, in large measure, to heavy, obscuring brush. The fact that Sphacteria had been cleared out by fire made Cleon's seemingly absurd plan appear plausible to Demosthenes because he could access past experience and ultimately use it in a creative way.

When Demosthenes speaks to the soldiers before the imminent battle, he again reveals an uncanny sense about what is needed in the immediate situation, even if it runs counter to what has been known and done previously. The reader sees him recommend tactics that seem utterly un-Athenian--specifically, discouraging lengthy reflection on and deliberation about what to do (IV.10). Instead, Demosthenes calls for immediate action. However, while the reader is undoubtedly reminded of Cleon, he cannot force Demosthenes into the mould of

the hateful man at Mytilene. To discourage the Athenians from entering in long discussions and debate at this point in the war was necessary given the plain fact that the Spartan ships were already on their way. Lengthy debate at this point would have been misplaced for there was nothing to debate about, there was *no choice to be made*. Action was the only reasonable response to the quickly approaching fleet; Demosthenes saw this and encouraged his men to act on that brute fact. Cleon, on the other hand, sought to prevent discussion and debate on a matter about which there were a variety of possible actions to take. Demosthenes saw the situation clearly as it was, and spoke to the army's immediate concerns, showing them that at this precise point, freedom to choose one path over another was not a real possibility. The fact that Thucydides highlights these two events in close succession, is of course due to the time line of the war itself. But, as with the telling juxtaposition of Pericles' funeral oration followed immediately by a description of the ghastly plague, he sets up an important contrast which brings to light subtle, yet vital differences in political leadership and the recognition of what must necessarily be done, as opposed to situations where there is a choice.<sup>197</sup>

Demosthenes did something else in his speech; he inspired the men listening to him to act. This was achieved in part by first recognising the legitimacy of their fears--with the fast approaching Spartan fleet the Athenians were indeed in a "pinch...surrounded by terrors."<sup>198</sup> In doing this, Demosthenes allied himself with his men, and empowered them by acknowledging their emotional state. However, their troubles were not dwelt upon; once having granted the grounds for fear, Demosthenes worked to raise his men out of it. His encouragement of

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<sup>197</sup> In the following chapter, we will see that distinguishing those areas where man can make a difference and those which are fixed and necessary and thus invulnerable to human conduct, is an important issue for Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>198</sup> This recognition and implicit legitimation of where the 'audience' is psychologically helps create a sense of belonging and solidarity which might serve to empower them to risk acting in a new way. There is perhaps a parallel here with Pindar, who also 'grounded' his audience by referencing familiar customs and stories, before introducing the extraordinary (new) feat of the athlete.

“high hopes” (*euelpis*) seems to break with Thucydides’ more common view that portrayed hope as destructive, often leading to hubris and a false sense of power. However, on closer scrutiny, the reader sees that Demosthenes’ reference to hope was based in reality--the landing would be difficult, if not impossible for the Spartans. A landing like the one the Spartans would be forced to make required that everything “go just right” (*polla ta kairia dei en te thalasse*). Such precise conditions, the reader is now well aware, were difficult to guarantee at any time, much less during war. The true advantage thus lay with the Athenians, despite the small size of their fleet. Their ability to place themselves strategically on the peninsula to make sure the conditions the Spartans required were not met was handled with seeming ease by Demosthenes. This speech, short though it is (another un-Athenian characteristic), is perceptive and sensitive to the here and now.<sup>199</sup>

### *The Spartan Peace Offer*

When the Spartans made an offer of peace to the Athenians after the battle at Pylos, the “upheaval” of the preceding battle continued in that such a proposal was not characteristic of Sparta.<sup>200</sup> In an important sense though, the peace offer did something more. It demanded that a distinct and explicit choice be made. Action was momentarily frozen and both the reader and the Athenians were placed at a crossroads. At this point, the war had escalated, most likely much beyond what either side had anticipated upon entering into it.<sup>201</sup> There had been serious losses to both the Athenians and Spartans, losses which I hope to have

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<sup>199</sup> However, perceptive as Demosthenes was at the time, his strategies do seem to lack a sense of the “long-term.” He is something like an ancient “trouble shooter,” putting out fires, yet not building monuments. But, perhaps through his successes, Thucydides sought to illustrate the varieties of good leadership, and the inability of man to rigidly classify even that character type. Different strengths are important at different times. One might even speculate that Pericles himself would have been defeated at Pylos.

<sup>200</sup> For further analysis of this offer, see Orwin *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: 1994, pp. 181ff.); Crane *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: 1998, pp. 187ff.).

<sup>201</sup> Pericles promised a quick victory at the outset of the war, implying that the Spartans would be unable to sustain a long war (I.141). Roberts notes that until this, wars – even against the Persians – had been “decided in a few decisive engagements” (in *History of the Peloponnesian War* trans. Blanco, New York: 1998, p.xv).

shown above, severely eroded the fundamental identities of the two “superpowers.” Given this, what can we make of the Spartan offer, and the Athenian rejection of it? What tools can the actors (and reader) use to make reasonable judgments given a situation which offers little in the way of “banisters?” To answer these questions, I will again turn to Arendt, specifically to her conception of forgiving as a way to structure and derive meaning from this event.

### *Disruption Continues*

I claim that the Spartan peace offer was ‘disruptive’ like the battle which preceded it for a number of reasons. It continued to play out the atypical behaviour of the Spartans and Athenians: for instance, the Spartan ambassadors open their speech by saying that they will talk at length.<sup>202</sup> Despite insisting that this is “not contrary to their normal practice,” both ancient and modern reader alike are well aware that “wordiness” is not an adjective traditionally ascribed to the Spartans. Additionally, as Finley points out, the Spartan warning against the danger of ceaseless expansion echoes Pericles’ own admonition to the Athenians at the outset of the war.<sup>203</sup> Thus both the length and the content of the speech were peculiarly Athenian in character. The Athenian response was also surprising--in large measure because almost no details about it are reported in the narrative. Had Cleon’s influence crushed the practice of open discussion, once fundamental to democratic Athens? Whatever actually happened following the offer, Thucydides’ *choice* not to describe the debate which might have taken place as to whether or not they would accept the terms of the Spartan offer is revealing. Simply stating that Cleon persuaded the people who were already bloated with an inflated sense of confidence and greed for more (*pleonos*

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<sup>202</sup> While it is perhaps not unusual for a group of ambassadors to deliver such a plea, the fact that Thucydides makes no link to an individual in command at this decisive moment is conspicuous. Although it has been made clear that Brasidas has been badly injured, the fact that such an important speech, delivered at such a crucial moment in the war is delivered by a vague, undistinguished group is conspicuous.

<sup>203</sup> Finley *Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: 1963, p.194).

*oregonto*)<sup>204</sup> to present the Spartans with an 'alternate' plan shows a marked change in Athenian habits.<sup>205</sup>

### *To Accept or to Refuse?*

As stated above, the framework I will employ in analysing this incident seeks to explore the Arendtian "faculty of forgiving" and the corresponding freedom it confers. In order to explore the Spartan offer and the Athenian reaction to it fruitfully, it will be helpful to take a closer look at the speech itself in which the Spartans make their appeal. As noted above, it was a long speech for the Spartans, lengthy because it hoped to drive home a maxim they believed to be a fundamental "truth" of human life: good luck runs out, it is "uncommon" (*adoketos*), and a good future is always uncertain (*amphibolon*). Perhaps they hoped that this "truth" would be taken in light of the recent misfortunes suffered by the Athenians; e.g., the events at Corcyra, their defeat at Aetolia, the relentless suffering from the plague. Understood thus, the Spartan portrayal of the situation--that man's control over the world, especially in wartime, is tenuous--would surely be underscored and their advice heeded.

However, while the Spartan lesson would surely have had resonance under ordinary circumstances, perhaps even be a truth to which the Athenians themselves would ascribe independently, the reader might legitimately question the shrewdness of using such a premise given the psychological state of the Athenians at the time. Against the odds, the Athenians had just triumphed over the Spartans, not only triumphed, but brought about a surrender heretofore unheard of in Greek history. No doubt, this left them supremely confident,

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<sup>204</sup> Kagan points out that, despite the fact that Athens was in bad shape at the time of the truce (recent plague, low rations), such a success might have an inspirational effect which would lead them to believe that they could easily have more (*Archidamian War* Ithaca: 1974, p. 233).

<sup>205</sup> I put "alternate" in quotes because most scholars agree that the Athenian counter offer was realistically no alternative at all, for it could not possibly have been accepted by the Spartans. Kagan details the "inconceivableness" of the Athenian demands in *Archidamian War* (Ithaca: 1974, pp.235ff). Gomme remarks that Cleon's offer was one which Sparta was "bound to refuse" as it was dishonourable (*Historical Commentary on Thucydides* Oxford: 1945-72).

reveling in their unexpected victory. Though undeniably a sound account of the unpredictability of good fortune for men, attributing Athenian success to mere *luck* was surely not a description readily received by the victors. That is to say, even if the Spartan explanation of the situation was accurate, it was remarkably ill-timed and ineptly presented to the Athenians who might rightly have been taken it as indicating disrespect, a final (and in this case, fatal) insult before forced submission.

If we take a closer look at the situation from the standpoint of the Athenians, their victory, surely made all the more radiant amidst the mayhem and agony of war, would not have been seen as the result of a “lucky break.” Athens was, after all, the mighty sea power of the Greek world, the bastion of freedom and democracy, and their daring and skill surely warranted this victory. Pylos might be interpreted as a sign of Athenian power restored to its “true” glory despite the misfortunes she encountered earlier in the war. A “lesson” learned through a comparison with the Spartan experience, specifically from “their present misfortunes” would surely have fallen on deaf ears. No one who has just overcome odds wants to be cast in the same light with those who have just been defeated.<sup>206</sup>

Ultimately, both the Spartan and Athenian interpretations have some merit. Each one drew a distinct yet contradictory conclusion from the same body of ‘facts,’<sup>207</sup> and both sides were overconfident about the validity of their own view—the Spartans about Athenian capitulation, the Athenians about their triumphant future. Given this, why advocate forgiving on the Athenian part? This answer is apparent when we refer back to the effects of forgiving as outlined by Arendt.

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<sup>206</sup> That the Spartans did not see this, illustrates the importance not just of message (content), but of its presentation (form). Further it indicates a certain lack of social ability perhaps indicative of the Spartan tradition.

<sup>207</sup> Thucydides underlies this fact, i.e., that men can look at the same ‘facts’ and find different conclusions, in his descriptions of battles where both sides declared victory (e.g., I.54, I.105). This suggests that his historical method and conclusions are not ‘modern science’ but rather ‘situationist’.



By choosing to decline the Spartan offer, the Athenians locked themselves into the continuation of the war, and thus into an animalistic, reactive (i.e., 'un-free') revenge mode of interaction.<sup>208</sup> They continued the war with irrational ideas about what they could achieve (irrational because narrow, seemingly limited to their own immediate experience). By renouncing the Spartan viewpoint, as well as their own past experiences and the advice of Pericles, the Athenians ceased to be 'attached' to concrete reality, but lived according to the (illusory) abstract image they had of themselves. Forgiving the Spartans and opting for peace would have been a decision based on a multi-perspective standpoint, and thus would have grounded the Athenians more firmly in the actual circumstances in which they were enmeshed.

The Athenian advantage came quickly to an end. Almost immediately after rejecting the offer the situation revealed the extent to which they were caught, forced into a vengeful, re-active stance. As winter approached, the Athenians found that they could not continue to blockade the island through the months of severe cold, yet if they abandoned their posts, the Spartans would be free. Thucydides makes the panic that this realisation has on the Athenians clear: "The Athenians didn't know what to do when they found that their army was in dire straits, while food was getting in to the men [Spartans] on the island. They became afraid that winter would overtake their garrison, seeing that it would not be possible to get the supply shipments around the Peloponnese." Thucydides emphasises the desperate position of the Athenians with the revealing words like "fear" and "regret" (*ephobounto, metemelonto*). Calm, reasonable thought slipped from the Athenian grasp, and a sense of panic and desperate, false hope went on to permeate many of their future decisions.

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<sup>208</sup> This is similar to Athena's warning about the dangers of an endless cycle of revenge avoidable by implementing justice and persuasion (Aeschylus *Eumenides*, 823ff.).

## Chapter 12: Concluding Remarks

I hope to have shown that through a close reading of episodes in Thucydides' *History* (i.e., through immersion in stories displaying particular customs and traditions, animated through the words and actions of unique characters), the reader gains insight into how individual men have acted at a particular time in the past, and for what kinds of reasons. How, for example, did different men in the Peloponnesian War negotiate the complex web of the abstract and the concrete inherent in human life situations--both successfully and unsuccessfully? This exposure to particular, substantive lives and the choices made when such choice was a possibility to guide action, (and *not* merely to neutral abstract principles) expands the reader's own limited perspective and, from this broadened perspective, he can start to generate stability (grounded in a sense of *reasonableness* given the circumstances) firm enough to replace the absolute certainty thought to inhere in abstractions.<sup>209</sup> Through this historical exposure, the reader of Thucydides can begin to fill out what man is as a *kind of* creature, and in this, he can begin to engage in the process of determining what counts as reasonable for himself. Settled and strengthened by a sense of the kind of being he is, the reader will ideally be more able to risk creative action in his own life, not least by distinguishing circumstances where choices to act in one way or another can make a difference, from those circumstances where to act is necessitated and not open to choice. Thus, through immersion in actual life, by giving honest attention to views from varied yet particular, (i.e., partial) perspectives, and not through a retreat into neutral abstractions, people are better qualified to understand where their freedom lies and to use their freedom, being more able to make reasonable choices in the inevitable 'unprecedented'

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<sup>209</sup> This is directly parallel to Arendt's notion of "going visiting" mentioned above – the idea that through exposure to others, we expand our own sensibilities, we gain a critical, though in no sense detached, perspective, and with reflection, we (have the potential to) become prudent judges.

situations that confront each human life.<sup>210</sup> Freedom to choose without a realistic sense of what kinds of things are possible for us and in what conditions is no freedom at all, but veiled constraint. What is possible for men cannot be generated from 'pure' abstract principles, but rather must begin with men themselves—from honest and concerted attention to their history and the varied experiences of others.

It will be important to recognise that in giving up the certainty of immutable, abstractions and instead, relying on varied experience, custom and history we do not lose the ability to access reason, that is, to make reasonable judgments *for us*. My hope is that the reading of Thucydides that I present does not slip out of a false notion of objectivity into a sea of relativism. While we must give up the abstract (and illusory) Archimedean standpoint and replace it with a perspective concerning what has been concretely experienced and judged, we are still reading Thucydides as a normative political theorist. The "should" embedded in his text seems to lie in a demand to cultivate the capacity to be both in a situation and impartial about it (i.e., able to judge it reasonably and act creatively). This idea, I hope to have shown, is well described by Hannah Arendt, who it appears thought she learned it from Thucydides! She argues that human beings can never achieve pure objectivity, nor, she suggests would it be useful to them in the political realm if they could.<sup>211</sup> They can however create a false image of certainty and use it cruelly (and inhumanely, for such certainty *is* inhuman), and the totalitarian ideology which fueled Nazi Germany was just this. Thus, Arendt posits that it is precisely the human susceptibility to blind faith in false,

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<sup>210</sup> As both man and his world are open and indeterminate, that which remains, that which is *permanent*, is the human capacity to effectively deal with "newness" inherent in any age. This comes in large measure from broad exposure to how human beings act and have acted in the past and the recognition of the limits of one's autonomy and responsibility when faced with the *distinction* between what is necessary and what is possible.

<sup>211</sup> The goal of 'neutral objectivity' has fallen out of favour with some modern psychoanalysts as well. Renick, for example, sees it as both a futile and destructive goal in the analytic setting. See, Renick, Owen's article, "The Perils of Neutrality."

immutable abstractions which blinds men to reality, and in doing so, enables them to commit the most monstrous crimes all in the name of abstract Truth.

Thucydides leaves his readers a written record of the realities of the Peloponnesian War *as it occurred from his own concrete, particular perspective*. The events Thucydides describes are selected—he meticulously and deliberately chooses to write about certain experiences and not others. In this, his narrative is not a universal, definitive account of the war. Yet still it represents and preserves an important truth, one which is embodied in a distinct, human viewpoint—objective insofar as it represents an individual’s perceptions of ‘objects’ in the world.<sup>212</sup> Such a ‘truth’ provides the reader with neither false objectivity—Truth—nor the equally illusory ‘neutrality’ thought to be fixed in abstract generalisations. Instead the reader of Thucydides’ *History* gets a recorded account of an objective historical event which stretches his own experience and expands the bounds of his imagination. His engagement with this foreign event cultivates his capacity to discern prudent choices in his own life and encourages reasonable and creative action.

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<sup>212</sup> I use ‘objects’ here in the broadest sense of the word – that is including men, as well as their decisions and actions.

### Part III: Aristotle

My aim in this final section is to return, given this richer sense of man, to the work of a philosopher – Aristotle – in order to reconsider his distinct kind of political theorising. More broadly speaking, I will look at the nature and role of abstract political theory given this broader conception of what man is, and how poetry might benefit his capacity to engage in effective political thought.

#### Chapter 1: Aristotle and Theory

In the opening pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states: “it will be satisfactory if we can indicate the truth roughly and in outline” (NE 1094b20). This statement, anticipating his approach in the work that follows, puts the more traditional understanding of truth on the line. “Rough” is not generally predicated of truth – truth is exact, unchanging, universal. In facing ethical dilemmas, ‘modern’s’ have come to seek clear and precise ‘rational’ (which is to say, neutral) rules which guide choice and action to a clean, indisputable resolution.<sup>1</sup> Neither Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* nor his *Politics*, however, provides such exacting rules to follow. In fact, Aristotle states explicitly that the very nature of ethics and politics prevents either one from yielding principles specific enough to be simply and dogmatically applied across the board – while there are moral truths according to Aristotle, they do not provide a precise guide for each individual’s conduct (NE 1094b15-25). Instead, he insists that ‘the right’ or ‘the best’ in ethics and politics be presented as a broad framework – based on an understanding of the kind of creature man is – suggesting general “rules of thumb”<sup>2</sup> which the well-cultivated, and properly habituated citizen must integrate with the particular culture into which he was born and raised. Both this general framework and an awareness and understanding of one’s own concrete circumstances are

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<sup>1</sup> Much contemporary liberal theory relies on ‘neutrality’ as the precondition for fairness (and thus for justice): “the main task of political theory has been to construct an abstract defence of impartial principles which should regulate the distributions of benefits and burdens of social cooperation” (*Impartiality, Neutrality, and Justice* ed. Kelly Edinburgh: 1998). This is largely the result of post 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy collapsing the separate moral universe of *discourse* into the scientific one.

<sup>2</sup> See Salkever, *Finding the Mean* (Princeton: 1990, p.140).

essential elements of deliberate human action. In harmonising these two, man can actualise his (limited) freedom prudently, he can be virtuous in his actions not by applying arbitrary or mechanical rules, but by engaging his reason and creativity in the particular circumstances in which he finds himself in order to achieve the goal of responsible, right action.

Though Aristotle does not provide anything so certain as Kant's categorical imperative or the utilitarian principle, he uses abstract ethical concepts to guide and frame human action. Aristotle seems to have a firm sense of what man is as a species, and regularly alludes to a human 'best'. Where do these abstract concepts come from? And how does Aristotle relate them to and integrate them with the every day life of individuals? Aristotle is explicit in the fact that his ethical and political theory draws on and incorporates many different elements: an abstract conception of human nature which grows out of his explanation of human psychology and biology, appeals to both common opinion, and recognition of the views of 'experts'. He also pays close attention to the particular details of each individual's actual life (this includes both an understanding of one's own culture and tradition, as well as an awareness of and exposure to others).<sup>3</sup> I will argue that Aristotle's approach (which works dialectically from engagement with the actual lives of men to a general sense of Man and back again to particular lives) can provide us with a stable base for political theorising providing a substantive sense of what living well for human beings entails.

Aristotle's ethical and political theories generate abstractions which are, in some sense, both fixed and flexible. This comes from the fact that his conception of human nature (i.e., what man is as a *kind of thing*), though itself unchanging in definition, gives rise to probabilities rather than necessities

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<sup>3</sup> In examining the work of Aristotle, I must qualify the term 'others.' He did not think it productive or wise to study the communities who are vastly different from "us" (i.e., those of 'barbarians,' or non-Greeks). Aristotle was not an anthropologist – he was looking to discover the best in an already realised 'best' or actualised deliberative political community – *his own*.

when applied to concrete lives – ethics and politics, he claims, are “inexact sciences.”<sup>4</sup> This is the case because human beings are themselves indeterminate, and live their lives making choices about the best actions to engage in/refrain from in a world of contingent events and probabilities. The abstract concepts he uses in both disciplines operate in (and are in fact derived from) a thorough examination of the vast range of possibilities in individual human lives, and the particular choices made and actions taken therein. The political and ethical generalisations which help to guide individuals in making choices about action in this peculiarly human ‘space’ retain a certain fluidity,<sup>5</sup> demanding that men be competent not only in grasping the general concepts, but in applying them creatively to their own indefinite and particular lives.<sup>6</sup> This means weighing and deliberating options, choosing and acting amidst contingencies, and taking responsibilities for those actions once taken.

In this, we see that the actual lives lived by men play a distinct and important role in theorising for Aristotle – active experience *precedes* and continually

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<sup>4</sup> See NE1134b28-31, 1154b24; Pol.1332a38ff. This is in contrast to true or scientific *episteme* (e.g., theology and mathematics) which deals solely with objects which are universal and unchanging. This is discussed further below in the section on Rational Soul and Intellectual Virtues.

<sup>5</sup> “The conception [general (theoretical) background] is not immune to revision even at the highest level; and this revision may come from perceptions embodied in new experience...the general conception is not inclusive of everything that is of relevance – for some relevant features are non-repeatable.” (Nussbaum. *Fragility of Goodness* Cambridge: 1981, p.306), For further discussion of this theme, see also Gadamer. *The Idea of the Good In Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven:1986, p. 167).

<sup>6</sup> This is not to deny that for Aristotle there is a good for man, just that, given the vast world of actual men, it can be manifested in an infinite number of situations and so it cannot be articulated in rules or principles which fit precisely in each situation (See Rorty, A.O. “The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty Berkeley: 1980, p.383). Evidence supporting Aristotle’s belief that there is in fact a fixed definition of man (and thus a distinct good for him) emerges in a number of forms, for instance, through his discussion of the human function (*ergon*): NE 1098a1-15, NE 1110a26, NE 1170a17-21, Pol. 1334b16. His understanding of “human nature” also emerges more indirectly, in statements which assume characteristics of mankind as a whole:

a) “everybody...” (*pantes*): NE 1168a23, NE 1168b9, NE 1174a5, Pol. 1331b39, *Metaph.* 980a22

b) “each person...” (*auto gar malisth’ekastos bouletai t’agatha*): NE 1159a12-15;

c) “no one” (*outhis*): NE 1169b18, *Rhet.* 1378b4, 1388b1

d) “our [human] nature”: (*autai phusikai*): *Poetics* 1448b5

informs ethical and political theorising, for theory is always 'extracted' from practice. Understanding what man 'ought' to do in order to live well does not come from simply conforming to a set of universally applicable rules which can be learned in the classroom – the varying particularities of individual lives are the 'substance' of the human condition, and only through active engagement with these irreducible details can man come to have a *general* understanding of the kind of creature he is. Equally important, through an active and reflective life with others, man gains clarity about himself in *particular* (i.e., his own distinctive personality, desires, temperament). Ongoing engagement – habituation – within a community of others with certain practices/traditions, together with accumulative, honest self-awareness and reflection play a permanent role in man's continued attempt to understand how to live well. This is a continuous and inherently *active* process. While Aristotle's ethical concepts are permanent and enduring, they do not automatically trump any experience/'instance' which falls outside them: precisely because of their abstraction they are imprecise and so cannot be applied mechanically to man's concrete, determinate circumstances. Rather Aristotle's abstract ethical and political concepts require delicate skill in their interpretation and application, constant consideration of the unique circumstances and characters (i.e., the moral habits and dispositions) of each person involved.<sup>7</sup> These particularities (even direct exceptions) are not shed, or deemed superfluous because they fall outside the 'general rule'; rather they themselves dictate how abstract concepts are to be applied, and good application depends on a character who is well habituated (through guided experience) in both those specific cases and general theory relevant to the task at hand. Such responsive and attuned application is difficult, and lacking exact and precise rules but with only general guidelines and sketched frameworks to go on, the margin of error expands and some stability and control is undoubtedly forfeited.

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<sup>7</sup> I will argue that this balancing of abstract and concrete, the activity of trying to discern as best one can the relationship between the two is part of what human virtue is.



While giving this degree of authority to the particularities of contingent human life opens up a degree of instability in the realm of 'pure' theorising, it has some positive effects which I believe help to compensate for the (false) certainty lost. For instance, man cannot merely resort to blind and mechanical rule following when he is engaged in acting well *with and towards others*. This sort of thinking requires only minimal attention to the details of his particular life and thus does nothing to increase his ability to deal with complicated conflict when it arises. Aristotelian ethical and political theory demands that man both pay close attention to and reflect on the multifaceted life he leads with agents of like kinds (i.e., humans) as well as maintain a more general idea of what the good life for man *as the kind of being he is* entails. In encouraging active participation in the value laden elements of his unique life, this kind of theorising confers recognition and significance to man, and this in turn gives rise to motivation and a drive to act wilfully, to be an effective agent amongst others (not a 'tyrant' over things). Ideally, once actively engaged, a sense of self and belonging develops which enables him to explore other ways of life with a strength and security.<sup>8</sup> Foreign cultures, conflict lacking neat resolution, simply making mistakes in one's personal business, all cease to be threatening to man's understanding of the world. Instead, the (sometimes incompatible) variations confronted in living life are understood as an inescapable part of what it is to be human and, if reflected upon and put to active use, become an important stimulus of public discourse.<sup>9</sup> For

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<sup>8</sup> Below we will see that such a sense of belonging came *before* entering the *polis*. It was, according to Aristotle, something one acquired in the household (though importantly, in a household *set in a polis*, i.e., a moral community of a distinctive kind).

<sup>9</sup> Note Aristotle's method of presenting accounts of beliefs which he believes to be mistaken, even dedicating large portions of his analyses to examining them – for instance, other regimes as in, Book 2 of the *Politics*. (However, I would like to reiterate that the degree of "openness" many modern readers have to other cultures was not shared by Aristotle who seemed to have had a more limited definition of what constituted a "civilized" *polis*. I refer here to something like Arendt's (modern and liberal) understanding of the imagination "going visiting." (*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: 1982, p.43); also Disch, J *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: 1994, pp.204ff.). Though I hesitate to call Aristotle a proponent of 'tolerance', I suggest that it is worthwhile to consider the idea that certainty and precision are not the necessary starting point of ethical and political theory, and in fact, might be replaced

Aristotle, men are always reinterpreting the values of others against their own habits; active and honest engagement in this process is what it is to gain a political and ethical understanding of the world with the aim of getting to 'fine' opinion, and *not* relativism. I will argue such an approach to ethics and politics originates in generalisations from observation of values we perceive in the world, to what we, as human beings, in fact *are*.

In what follows then, I aim to show that with Aristotle, we find a theorist whose ethical and political discourses do not simply 'level' human beings so that they can be neatly (linguistically) subsumed under an almighty, yet severely impoverished abstraction to be manipulated with ease in a political 'equation.' Rather, to theorise with Aristotle about ethics and politics demands a rich, complex (i.e., *accurate*) sense of the kind of creature man is.<sup>10</sup> It entails constant negotiation between abstractions (which secure identity) and fluctuating particulars (which fuel discourse and are the vehicle of change/progress). In short, his "inexact" sciences require continual engagement with and commitments to others, and result not in perfect knowledge, but in risking *creative* action (based on the most informed – *reasonable* – opinions about the world we can get hold of). This ongoing process builds on and stretches our understanding of the world allowing us to live life as best we can given the kinds of creatures we are. I believe that the image of man that appears in Aristotle's theory will point towards the conception of man we saw in Thucydides and Pindar – a being who can make

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with critical tolerance (*not* relativism). This might allow compromise and compassion to cultivate expansion in one's understanding of one's character so that one can, through discourse alone, perceive the world from a *different* moral perspective and live that difference in another culture.

<sup>10</sup> As abstract theorizing follows from attentive experience, i.e., living, acting and reflecting on human life, Aristotle himself required that those attending his 'social science' lectures be older, and thus experienced in life, i.e., already having moral characters/dispositions formed by their own cultures and ready to (re)interpret and analyse the values in which they have been raised (NE1095a3-9). Such experience, I argue, can be (and perhaps, must be) augmented by engaging with one's own culture's historical and literary works which provide a kind of 'guided' experience and an arena for active participation on the part of the reader/observer.

reasonable choices which lead to creative action within the indeterminate, imprecise and imperfect world.

Given all this, Aristotelian political theory demands cultivating a peculiar kind of thought, based on acquiring a broad sense of 'reasonableness' grounded in a sense of belonging to a group which points to a good beyond one's own self-disclosed preferences. This provides the structure and continuity needed for creative action. This understanding requires *experience*, part of which comes through engagement with texts often thought to be outside 'rational' discourse (though I will argue that they play an essential role in developing the capacity to act reasonably). As this conclusion emerges out of my interpretation of some Aristotelian texts, I will begin by making these interpretations explicit. The chapter will be divided into three sections as follows:

#### *Ethics: Definition of Man and Method*

The first section will begin by analysing Aristotle's definition of man as a *kind* of creature – a reasonable (political, mimetic) being – whose 'good' is realised in a life of virtuous activity. As man's access to what human beings are as a species (i.e., abstractly) comes from observation of and reflection on concrete men who vary according to the particular details that characterise different personalities and cultures, the foundational 'data' required to derive ethical generalisations is itself indeterminate – based not on necessities, but on probabilities, on opinions, not facts. A life of virtuous activity demands that man learn to consider and analyse these probabilities so that they can be of use in his particular and contingent life; he must learn to settle on conclusions and take action based on the ongoing interpretation of 'better and worse' opinions, not the rigid application of 'true and false' facts/principles. In this, there seems to be no solid ground from which abstract concepts – and thus ethical theory itself – can spring. Yet for Aristotle, this does not render the study of ethics an incoherent mass of relativism, nor does it reduce it to blind

faith in a single tradition or particular set of 'local' customs. It simply means developing a different kind of thinking, a richer concept of what 'reasoning' about human beings entails.

Examination of just what 'virtuous activity' entails for Aristotle will help to clarify this kind of reasoning. I will argue that for Aristotle, virtuous activity means constantly and deliberately harmonising an abstract idea of Man (itself derived over time given what men, through their culturally distinct, value-laden practices, reveal their common *ergon* and *telos* to be) with those concrete, particular men in one's own contingent and specific circumstances. This is possible given practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is *acquired* through broad *experience* living as men naturally do – in *poleis* – being habituated to live according to laws which aim at a general good and compel practices which promote that good. The ability to balance and negotiate an abstract conception of a 'human' good with those concrete particular desires and needs which make up an individual life cannot be taught or learned by rote. Men develop this 'wisdom' through observation and perception, through the imitation of others, and through independent trial and error. Virtuous activity therefore demands an environment which provides men with laws which, through compelling a certain kind of behaviour and providing 'exemplars' to observe and imitate, orient citizens towards a substantive good. Far from constraining them, this rich 'context', entrenched in values and manifested in the culturally specific practices of a particular social milieu, gives men the framework necessary to become active virtue practitioners in their own right, who may, over time and given wide and varied cultural exposure, become staunch critics of their 'homes'.

I hope to show that practical wisdom is the base of a kind of theory which, far from offering definitive answers to political and ethical dilemmas, has much more to do with how the contingent beliefs and practices of a culture fit together in a stable and coherent value system which is oriented around an

abstract understanding of 'the good life for man', yet remains both "practical and open" – critical – in light of it.<sup>11</sup> Such a dynamic 'system' must educate men competently to sustain a harmony between those abstract concepts which order and thus imbue life with meaning, and those concrete, contingent circumstances which animate it, and motivate men to act. This demands that men continually reflect on and discuss their beliefs and actions, remaining responsive to and active in the situations they find themselves.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a system which is "practical and open" encourages (in fact requires) men to take (reasonable) risks in 'new' situations which demand independent *creative* action (rather than the kind of imitation appropriate to children). Thus I will argue that practical wisdom, for Aristotle, although 'directed' by an abstract conception of what is good for man, is not realised in the mechanical application of rules which 'fall out' of this concept, but requires reasoned creativity, the capacity to blend what is both abstract and concrete innovatively and independently in new circumstances. Ultimately, this will hinge on defining a flourishing human life, which is to say, a life of virtue, as being manifested in *reasonable* choice and *creative* action. Fuller grasp of the way in which reason and creativity are integrated requires an analysis of the method Aristotle uses to arrive at the ethical abstractions he uses and how they are maintained (and extended) given attention to and active participation in the world of concrete particulars.

#### *Politics: The Role of Law in the Cultivation of Man*

Aristotle understood the political organisation of a *polis* to be the necessary precondition for living a human life; without a *polis*, he claimed, man is either "god or beast."<sup>13</sup> A *polis* should be structured by a secure constitution – ideally, a set of laws which define and explain citizens' actions in light of the

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<sup>11</sup> Salkever, S. *Finding the Mean* (Princeton; 1990, p.138). For Aristotle, I will argue, this abstraction is most accurate when 'empirically' – biologically/psychologically derived.

<sup>12</sup>This awareness of one's surroundings and sensitive activity given it (discussed more fully in the section on the *Politics*) itself cultivates friendship, an essential element to living a flourishing life.

<sup>13</sup> Thus his claim that the *polis* is logically prior to the individual.

human good, and aimed at cultivating and realising man's potential for more than mere survival (i.e., sustaining physical life and satisfying personal desires), but for his ability to "live well" (i.e., *virtuously* – to act reasonably and creatively with and for others) and, under ideal circumstances, to be *eudaimon*. More precisely, the *polis* exists in order to provide the environment necessary for proper human development whereby appropriate habits are formed, and good character is firmly established. Good character implies a love for what is truly fine/noble, which serves to empower men by stabilising their desires and preparing them to develop the discerning and deliberating skills which allow for reasonable choice and creative action (i.e., one which is responsive to the relevant and unique details of the particular situation, and how they might 'participate' in finding the right means to a fixed end).

Just as Aristotelian teleology conceives of a 'best' man (in fact, *because* of this) Aristotle posits that there is also a 'best' regime/constitution. That is, the best *polis* is best precisely because its particular laws serve to cultivate the (objective) best in man. In an ideal world of course, the laws of the *polis* are the 'right' ones, i.e., those which correspond to Aristotle's abstract conception of man (as defined by the human species) in such a way as to cultivate fully flourishing *polis* dwellers. However, when doing political theory, Aristotle is acutely aware of the fact that there exists a wide variation in actually existing *poleis* (*Pol.* 1290a5ff), the regimes of which grow out of and correspond to those who are in fact being governed – in practice, clearly, we observe many 'deviations' from the ideal *polis* (*Pol.* 1310a2ff.; 1317a33ff.). Such departures from the ideal cannot be merely suppressed, but instead must come into play in the attempt to understand and improve existing political life: "for what is proper to those who govern themselves in the best way is...to do the best from what is available to them" (*Pol.* 1323a17-19). Whether approaching the ideal or deviating from it, a working regime is for Aristotle, necessary for both

man's understanding of himself and the full development of his nature.<sup>14</sup> We will see that the *polis* is the place where 'stronger' can become 'better,' where 'change' can become 'progress.' It is the environment in which human beings discover, through acting with others, what justice is. It is this *political* interaction that provides the communal and discursive environment necessary to transform mere living into living well.

While the *polis* makes a virtuous life possible, its laws and practices do not simply issue precise orders which, if followed diligently, transport each individual man directly to this end. The *polis* provides the space in which man learns what it is to act for reasons in order to achieve a *common good* – to aim at this common good is not to sacrifice his own, but rather it is to realise what is in fact best for man. Therefore, rather than simply aiming to satisfy his own personal desires, in the *polis*, man is trained to act deliberately *with other men*, taking into account not only his own perspective and preferences, but the different views and varied needs of other citizens as they relate to an overarching, and again, common good. This entails working together and communicating so as to find a harmony – justice – between the different parts of the *polis*. Men begin this process by following rules and imitating others. Eventually, through extensive experience, reflection and critical discourse, an active political life yields a broad sense of reasonableness, which can then inform and guide (and, in a sense, *constrain*) independent and creative action.<sup>15</sup> A good or virtuous life does not come through mechanically applying general laws with no regard for the distinguishing details of the

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<sup>14</sup>All laws, universally/"naturally" right or not, serve to structure human action, connecting actions and beliefs to other actions and beliefs and thus creating a contextual web/network which cultivates a sense of meaning and reasonableness. Thus, Aristotle makes it clear that even bad law is preferable to no law at all (see: *Rhet* 1375b19-22, 1376b9-13, and Bodeus *Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics* trans. J.E. Garrett (Albany: 1993, p.55).

<sup>15</sup> By "independent and creative" I do not mean individualistic action, aimed at a personal/private preference or goal. Rather, "independent and creative action" is action taken in circumstances which are unfamiliar, despite aiming at a common and known end. The creativity and independence comes in the attempt to find the right *concrete* means to that fixed end, which are always particular and unique and thus demand independence and creativity.

concrete situation at hand, nor does man manifest virtue by following his inborn instincts like many 'lower' animals (must) do. To live virtuously as a human being is to make reasonable choices and to risk creative action that aim at the common human end from within and given attention to the contingent and indeterminate elements of one's circumstances. This ongoing process/activity is the peculiar human endeavour.<sup>16</sup>

Given this, we must investigate how the *polis* helps man come to see what sort of life is good for him *as the kind of thing he is* thereby precluding the possibility of judging successful a life directed by the incoherent, disjointed pursuit of his own immediate personal preferences and desires. This raises some interesting questions: How does the *polis* organise men in such a way as to reveal a world of substantive value as opposed to plain fact? If (certain) men emerge from the household to enter the political realm as equals, what is the 'content' of their discourse and the nature of their relationships that results in understanding the good life as opposed to mere life? In other words, what is 'added' to the human interaction in the *polis* which is not present in the household that results in the capacity to conceive good and bad, just and unjust? How does an abstract concept of 'the good life' inform the laws and structure the *polis*, yet also serve the contingent circumstances of human life as it must do? How does man learn to use a standard which is itself indefinite?"<sup>17</sup> What kind of 'space' is a *polis* such that it can create an environment where man, through reason, is both oriented/directed towards a fixed and *general* notion of the human good, yet simultaneously 'trained' to be discerning, able to make the right choices and take the proper (creative) action

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<sup>16</sup> To strive for a life excluding the political element *altogether* would not only be impossible, but in some sense even hubristic, an insult to the gods, for it implicitly assumes that men can be equal to the highest beings in the cosmos. A belief which Aristotle states plainly, is absurd (*atopon*), NE 1141a21.

<sup>17</sup> NE 1137b29-31, here Aristotle cites the example of the lead standard in Lesbian building, which is not fixed, but adapts itself to the stone on which it is being used.



in terms of the *particular* means to this end?<sup>18</sup> If properly performed, reasonable and creative action will yield greater clarification about and result in the fuller realisation of the human good.<sup>19</sup> How then does the *polis* create a space for men where freedom is realised in being constrained by the value-laden ends it promotes? I will aim to answer these questions by examining the role of law.

### *Poetics: Experiencing the Human Good*

The education necessary to realise man's potential for reasonable and creative (which is to say, *virtuous*) action will be the subject of the final section of this chapter, and will in a sense point back to the two preceding chapters on Pindar and Thucydides. Through an examination of the *Poetics*, and given its focus on serious human action, I argue that poetry (in the broadest, and seemingly un-Aristotelian sense of the word<sup>20</sup>) should be seen as an essential element of an ethical and political education. Poetry helps man better to understand and order more systematically the 'illogical' factors that play a role in human life (e.g., passionate, emotional attachments, conflicting desires, diverging loyalties, powerful external forces) – in short, those elements which science (and much contemporary abstract political theory) tries to 'reason away'. However, these 'meddlesome' qualities of human life *are essential to it*,

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<sup>18</sup> Because in any life, this process involves concrete circumstances which are inherently new and contingent it demands some creativity in human action, however, this creativity is always confined to the means, and limited/constrained by the fixed human end.

<sup>19</sup>The possibility that this good might be mis-defined, by a *polis* is addressed in Aristotle's discussion of regime change. While he does not advocate any individual's critique of his *polis*, he does discuss change in regime generally, why and how it comes about (*Pol.*1301a19-1304b17). He notes in this discussion that the virtuous, though most justified in starting a faction that might initiate change, are least likely to do so. Presumably this is because they know that laws, even imperfect ones, provide the stability necessary for the cultivation of virtue amongst citizens. Goldhill addresses the tricky balance between critique and stability in "Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference" (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* vol. 120 (2000) pp. 34-56).

<sup>20</sup> I will use the term 'poetry' to embrace *all* constructed narratives – even historical ones. While this seems at face value to contradict Aristotle's degradation of history in *Poetics* 9, I would argue with, for example, de Ste Croix ("Aristotle on History and Poetry" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* pp. 23-33) and Yanal ("Aristotle's Definition of Poetry" in *Nous* vol. 16 (1982) pp. 499-225) that in referring to history as "less philosophical" than poetry, Aristotle has in mind the kinds of history that are composed of mere annals/lists, and not the rich and evocative kind of history writing we find in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War.

and thus cannot be cleverly obscured or discarded in favour of neat and precise abstract language. Poetry recognises these elements and weaves them into man's sense of himself as a moral character. In doing so, it reveals ways in which human life can come together as whole and unified, meaningful and beautiful, despite its less than 'logical' elements.

Men are born into existing communities governed by distinct standards and values – in the midst of an ongoing discourse. Thus, the difficult task of learning how to act reasonably and creatively requires getting oriented from this spot in the 'middle'. This demands *structured* and *guided* experience of human life, beginning with observation and imitation of older, wiser 'practitioners' in one's own *polis*. However, a human life is not (and indeed cannot be) composed simply of imitative actions. As men mature, they must confront new and 'unprecedented' situations independently. Through exposing men to paradigmatic *human* situations (i.e., those which do not shy away from contradiction and inconsistency, but which present irreconcilable conflicts, and force man to work to identify the extent of his power and responsibility within such a realm), poetry helps to prepare men for these kinds of encounter in their own lives, and even helps them understand how to proceed given mistakes.<sup>21</sup> Reasonable creativity comes from a broad sense of what is possible in the 'history' of human choice making and action – this does not come from within one's own individual psyche, but through wide experience and exposure which poetry helps to provide.

New situations open up the possibility of innovation and progress, but also, of error. Errors, in taking men off their intended paths, threaten to disrupt their sense of their lives as whole and unified, and undermine their sense of their own responsibility. This can result in the loss of agency. The

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<sup>21</sup> The poetic historian must be able to construct speeches that a certain kind of moral character could have made—even if he did not. Thucydides' Periclean funeral oration is therefore 'poetic' for Aristotle (although most of Aristotle's examples in the *Poetics* are from Homer, or later distinguished tragedians).

inevitability of miscalculation (*hamartia*) given the limited scope of man's knowledge and the powerful role of 'external forces' in a human life is made more palatable through poetry because there it is shown in its proper perspective, as a natural part of what it is to be human. The ongoing cycles of "reversal" (*peripeteia*) and "recognition" (*anagnorisis*) in poetry allows man to construe his own errors in a new light – as opportunities for greater understanding and deliberate change. This is not to suggest the absurd conclusion that all mistakes are in fact hidden goods, only that as essential elements of human life, mistakes must be made useful/practical to the extent they can be. Without this understanding, man will surrender under the awesome pressure of disproportionate expectation and responsibility – life will cease to make sense as its causal connections seem to dissolve. All risk becomes far too dangerous if man cannot see errors and the unexpected as themselves contributing to the pattern/structure of his life. For men, life is not a choice between total control and utter predetermination – human beings live somewhere in between: "however apparently fragmented, ill-shaped and even terrible our lives may seem to us in the living, they form a single activity, a patterned, structured whole."<sup>22</sup>

Given this, man must seek 'experiences' which reveal him as he is in all his complexity, acting for the kinds of reasons he does and in doing so, revealing the kind of 'whole' a human life is. Engaging with poetry provides a kind of guided, instructive experience that complements that which is provided by the structure of the law. Through its exploration of life in context, poetry brings to light where man's opportunities are and where his weaknesses lie; the regions over which his reason has little, or indeed, no control, as well as those areas where he can in fact make a difference. Perhaps most important, good poetry uncovers the blurry area in between – the space where man has limited control and limited freedom, but where he must nonetheless see

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<sup>22</sup> Rorty, A. "The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: 1992, p. 18).

causal connections, make reasonable choices, and take creative action. Understanding this place and learning how to contend with it successfully is greatly aided through the active experience of and engagement with poetry.

## Chapter 2: Ethics: The Definition of Man

The world, for Aristotle, is composed of many different kinds of things. Each kind of thing is defined by and distinguished from other kinds of things by its *essence* or nature – those qualities or attributes that make it uniquely what it is. Essences are immanent in their physical manifestations; therefore, while abstract, they are not a part of an independent, transcendent reality – essences are not Platonic forms.<sup>23</sup> Yet unlike their concrete expressions, they are immaterial and do not change: “such things [essences] are neither independent of matter nor can be defined in terms of matter only” (*Phys.* 194a13). To be one kind of thing and not another (or simply to be not at all) is ‘non-negotiable’ – the ‘cosmos’ is as it is, and it is up to human beings to come to understand the kinds of things that compose it as accurately as they, *being the kinds of creatures they are*, can. Aristotle argues that human beings can, and in fact by nature *do* come to grasp essences (i.e., group particulars into collections of like kinds) and can describe them in language.<sup>24</sup> Such descriptions are definitions: “a definition is a statement of a thing’s nature” (*PostAn* 93b28-9, *Top.*101b37), or a linguistic account of what it is to be one kind of thing and not another. Through the medium of language then, Aristotle thought that humans have the ability to express abstract accounts of ‘kinds’ or ‘types’ which articulate permanent and fixed essences.

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<sup>23</sup> Gadamer highlights the distinction between Plato and Aristotle’s understanding of essence: “For Plato, eidetic or noetic constructs...are to be separated from phenomenal existence...For Aristotle, the *physei onta* are inseparable from their *ti estin* (what-it-is),” *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* trans. P.C. Smith (New Haven: 1986, p. 132). For some examples of Aristotle on essence, see: *Topics* 101b20ff, *PostAn.*73a34ff, *Metaph.*1029b13ff.

<sup>24</sup> Coleman stresses the point that “unique occurrences are unknown to us...we can know and name only ‘occurrences’ or particulars which form a class.” (*History of Political Thought* vol.1 Oxford: 2000, p.130). See also, Kopytoff, I. “The Cultural Biography of Things” in *The Social Life of Things* (ed. A. Appudurai Cambridge: 1986, pp.64-91).

Deriving a definition of man comes through the perception, memory, and experience of *men* as they live and act in the world. A definition of man should indicate what a human being naturally is, and given Aristotle's teleology, this also reveals what the best human life looks like.<sup>25</sup> The preliminary general conception that grows out of experience is then improved upon and honed by way of *dialectical* analysis.<sup>26</sup> However, no person born into the world begins this process alone, nor does anyone start at ground zero – rather human beings (thankfully) are born into communities of people and practices through which they inherit the accumulated knowledge of their elders and ancestors. As we will see, examining human beings dialectically given what they are and the 'knowledge base' from which they begin will yield less precise 'results' than, for instance, an inquiry concerning the axioms of geometry.

In either case however, there are different levels of comprehending and defining something – ranging from mere description (identifying the 'that') to causal knowledge (understanding the 'why'/'because').<sup>27</sup> A good ('rational') definition – what Frede terms "an appropriate notion"<sup>28</sup> – does not merely describe man's immediate perceptions of the world, nor does it articulate only those attributes he observes different 'kinds' to have in common: "The whole universal," Aristotle writes, "...marks the *beginning* of art and science." That is

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<sup>25</sup> Aristotle sees the world through a 'teleological lens', and assumes that there is an overarching order and goal to nature or the 'cosmos' (the Greek word itself can be translated as "*ordered* adornment"). Nature, he presumes, does nothing in vain: see e.g., "There is a purpose in what is and what happens in nature" (*Phys.* 199a3-4), "whatever is natural is naturally in the finest state possible" (*NE* 1099b23), "that which comes into being according to nature does so for an end" (*Protrepticus* B13). Thus there is a sense that 'is' for Aristotle, implies 'ought'.

<sup>26</sup>This process will be described below in the section on method.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle describes two kinds of definitions, one tells you "the meaning of [some particular] phrase," and another "is a formula exhibiting the cause of a thing's existence" (*PostAn* 93b30-94a20; also 71b9-13. In what follows, my use of the term 'definition' will refer to the latter). For a thorough discussion of the process by which human beings go from grasping "the that" (specifically in terms of ethics) to the fuller understanding which embraces "the because," see Burnyeat, M. "Aristotle on learning to be Good" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Rorty (Princeton: 1980, pp 69-92).

<sup>28</sup> Frede, M. "Aristotle's Rationalism" in *Rationality in Greek Thought* eds. Frede and Striker (Oxford: 1996, p. 164).

to say, to grasp the “earliest universal from a number of logically indiscriminable particulars” is not the end of human knowledge, but its starting point (*PoAn* 100a6-16). From this shared property, men must go on to derive a more general definition which, given the *common*, picks out the *critical* – “salient and relevant” – features of the kind of thing in question. In terms of humans, such a definition indicates not only what a kind of thing man is, but the conditions necessary to bring about his well being. Having apprehended these ‘significant’ features, men can make enduring connections, relating new experiences to other beliefs and actions (both past and anticipated) and through this process, continually refining and building on their understanding and knowledge. By fitting into this larger ‘web’, a definition serves to *explain* and not simply label and describe the kind of thing it designates.<sup>29</sup>

Though ‘universal’ and abstract in the sense that definitions identify and isolate something common to each member of a kind, the definitions men grasp are *induced from*, and thus dependent on both the particulars which embody them as well as the men who think about them. As compound ‘mixtures’ (i.e., ‘extracted’ from a combination of sense perceptions, memories, experience, and imagination) man’s definitions are *constructed* concepts which can be proven wrong (*DA* 428b10-429a10). They are borne out and sustained by their positions in a larger and already existing network of interrelated beliefs and concrete ‘facts’ which have been experienced, described, used over time by many, and rigorously tested by older and wiser men. While growing out of and representing the external world, *all*

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<sup>29</sup> Frede stresses the point that grasping what it is to be a human being, for instance, is not simply a matter of identifying a quality common to all men and women, rather it is the larger and far more complex ability “to grasp something which figures prominently in the explanation of human beings and their behaviour.” He concludes that “our notions” must relate that common property in question to other properties and experiences in such a way as to form a “coherent and appropriately structured system” which allows men to expand on and further enrich their knowledge of the world. Frede, M. “Aristotle’s Rationalism” in *Rationality in Greek Thought* ed. Frede and Striker (Oxford: 1996, pp. 164-171). For a similar interpretation, see Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp.247-249). For a modern, epistemological perspective, see Goodman, N. *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indiana: 1978).

definitions are 'man-made' linguistic representations which are subject to revision and change. That is, because these abstract concepts are derived by human beings who are neither omniscient nor immortal, they must be continually checked with, and if necessary adjusted to better fit the world as it continues to reveal itself to be. The inherent limitations and indeterminateness of human beings (importantly, *not* that of the natural world itself) makes their definitions 'tentative', and they must retain this 'unconfirmed' and 'open' quality if they are to be effective in organising and explaining the cosmos and man's distinct position in it – this is especially true in terms of ethics and politics.<sup>30</sup>

Given this, what does Aristotle say about the definition of man? Understanding man comes through examination of the human *ergon* (function, work, activity) and *telos* (end, purpose, aim, or its *ergon* realised).<sup>31</sup> The function of some kind of thing must be unique to that kind and make a difference in its *active* life (and thus in its relations to other things). Furthermore, a function does not indicate merely a "special property" (*idion*) which belongs to a category of things alone but "may possibly belong to something else" (e.g., the capacity of men to learn grammar, *Top.* 102a18-31; *DA* 417b1; *NE* 1099a1-5). An *ergon* and *telos* must point out what it is to behave as a particular thing actually and naturally does. Because of Aristotle's teleological understanding of the world, an *ergon* and *telos* not only identify a kind of thing, but also designate its particular good. That is to say, to realise fully one's *ergon* – i.e., to perform one's function – be it that of a tree, a knife, or a man – is to achieve one's *telos* (*NE* 1097b24-30), and this done excellently is one's good. The *ergon* of an eye for instance, is to see, the act of

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion on the "requirement of flexibility" in our abstract concepts, see Nussbaum *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp.298-306). The quality of 'tentativeness' need not destabilise abstract principles, just as 'ruling and being ruled' need not destabilise a democracy.

<sup>31</sup> For more on *ergon* and *telos*, see *Metaph.* 1050a22.

seeing is an eye's *telos*, and the good of an eye is to see well.<sup>32</sup> To determine man's *ergon* and *telos* then not only provides a descriptive (i.e., rudimentary) definition of man, but it also points to what a good human life should look like (the *ergon* and *telos* illuminate not only what man *is*, but what he *should be*).

Aristotle however, does not begin the *Nicomachean Ethics* by stating precisely what the human *ergon* and *telos* are, rather he begins his ethical investigation by presenting a basic (i.e., *descriptive*) account of what, generally speaking, a good is: "that at which every craft, investigation...action and decision aim" (*NE* 1094a1-3). He narrows this to the good for man by stating that the human good will be an *activity*, rather than a product (e.g., a shoe or a house) or a possession (e.g., having, yet not exercising a certain disposition). As political science "rules" or is "inclusive of all the goods pursued in action" (e.g., the peculiarly human activities such as rhetoric, household management, education, warfare), its end will in fact *be* the human good (*NE* 1094b7-9).<sup>33</sup> Generally speaking, he concludes that "we" believe that the aim of politics and thus the good for man is *eudaimonia* – flourishing, or living/faring well.<sup>34</sup> This is Aristotle's first basic assumption about the highest human good and it frames his discourse on ethics.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "...the good of any living thing consists in its possessing and exercising unimpededly, in a normal mature life for a member of its species those natural capacities that are distinctive of its particular life form among all the others." (Cooper, J. "Reason, Moral Virtue and Moral Value" in *Rationality in Greek Thought* ed. Frede and Striker (Oxford: 1996, p.99). See also Bostock, D. *Aristotle's Ethics*, Oxford: 2000, pp.15-20; and Reeve, C.D.C. *Practices of Reason*, Oxford: 1992, pp.123-128).

<sup>33</sup> Understood to be under the aegis of political science – the science of human life – Aristotle can conclude that the best (perhaps even the only) human activity (which is to say the human good) is necessarily performed within the environment proper to human beings – a *polis*.

<sup>34</sup> This approach, that is, to begin with "what is known to us" (*NE* 1095a28-b4) and then to work towards "first principles" by way of induction and dialectic, represents Aristotle's method in his study of ethics and politics and reveals why a good upbringing is so crucial to Aristotle. After all, given his belief that man's definitions (and thus his basis for understanding the world) begin with his perceptions, just where and with whom he starts perceiving (i.e., the conditions of his upbringing) will largely determine what and how he thinks. Whenever theorising, one must begin by agreeing on certain initial premises, embodied in this case by our own experiences (given the practices we engage in) as well as by *ta endoxa* (the tested opinions of the many and wise which are in current use. See for example,



Aristotle attempts to fill in this framework by reviewing some existing beliefs about what *eudaimonia* actually consists in, and quickly finds disagreement. After all, while most people may agree that “living well” is the highest good for man, they have different and often conflicting views about just what it entails: some for instance, claim that it is a life of pleasure, others, of honour, and others still, claim that *eudaimonia* is best achieved in a life of study or contemplation.<sup>36</sup> After taking into account these ‘common’ beliefs, Aristotle looks at the more ‘reputable’ opinions of some other philosophers – ‘the wise’ – and finds those too to be insufficient to resolve his present impasse. He progresses by qualifying his general account of the human good further, stating that it must be something that “we wish for because of itself” (not as the means to some other end) – thus it will be both complete (*teleios*) and self-sufficient (*autarkes*) (NE1097b1-15).<sup>37</sup> Given the disagreement in existing opinions about the specific content or means to achievement of *eudaimonia*,

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NE 1172b35ff). Roche stresses the importance of including in our understanding of *ta endoxa* the sense of “reputable things” (those concepts which “cannot be abandoned”) as well as “common ideas.” That *ta endoxa* must not be taken to be merely common beliefs is essential if one wishes to preserve Aristotelian ethical justification without an appeal to a metaphysical foundation (“On the Alleged Metaphysical Foundations of Aristotle’s Ethics” in *Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Irwin (London: 1995, pp. 71-72); see also Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp.245-63).

<sup>35</sup>From this ‘outline’, the definition of the human good can be developed so as to go from being merely a *description* (which identifies something common to ‘good’s) to an explanatory definition which can be related to other concepts and used in life – that is to say, to help men *become* good rather than simply *know* the good. Whether *eudaimonia* is an “inclusive/comprehensive” end (i.e., one which includes political action *and* contemplation) or an intellectualist one (merely contemplation) is still debated amongst scholars (see, for example, articles by Nagel and Ackrill in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* pp.7-33; also Depew “Politics, Music, and Contemplation in Aristotle’s Ideal State” in *Companion to Aristotle’s Politics* ed. Keyt and Miller (Oxford: 1991, pp. 346-80), Reeve *Practices of Reason* (Oxford: 1992, pp. 138-49).

<sup>36</sup> Roche refers to such beliefs as “surface *endoxa*” i.e., those opinions which “purport to give substantive answers to ethical questions.” These he opposes to “deep *endoxa*” which provide the framework within which those answers are to be sought, e.g., that the good is complete, self-sufficient, and that at which all things aim. (“The Alleged Metaphysical Foundations” in *Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Irwin (London: 1995, p.73).

<sup>37</sup>In Roche’s terms, self-sufficiency and completeness would be “deep *endoxa*.” There has been substantial scholarly debate about what Aristotle means by “complete”/“most complete” virtue. Ackrill argues that complete implies all the individual human virtues (“Aristotle on Eudaimonia” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*). Cooper disputes this interpretation in *Reason and the Human Good* (Cambridge, MA: 1975) and *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: 1999). However, his own position about *eudaimonia* shifts and softens in the latter, and suggests that “complete” is an attribute of/reference to a single virtue and not the “sum total” of all virtues (*Reason and Emotion* pp.222-224).

these features help to illuminate in more detail “a target to aim at” (NE 1094a23) as the investigation continues.<sup>38</sup>

However, as it stands, accepting that *eudaimonia*, or living or faring well in the most complete and self-sufficient manner possible for man, still does not provide information adequate to adjudicate between the different opinions about what actually constitutes the good life. Without this being further fleshed out, Aristotle cannot achieve his purposes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which is not to *know* the good but to *become* good (NE 1179b1-4).<sup>39</sup> Given

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<sup>38</sup>Aristotle’s attempt to discover and justify what kind of life man ought to live may be prohibitively circular (or simply too narrow) to be of use to many modern ears. There is still debate amongst scholars as to the metaphysical criteria he uses (or does not use) in legitimating his ethical beliefs. No doubt, Aristotle assumes a level of agreement that many today would find uncomfortable in accepting. What is good ‘for us’ Aristotle assumes, is based on our common human psychology/biology revealing man to be a kind of thing, with a definitive good. Just as there is rarely debate on what makes a person physically healthy, Aristotle seemed to think ethical and intellectual well-being, for those properly raised, would leave little room for debate: “we do not deliberate about ends, but about means.” He is clear that the proper students for his *Ethics* are those who already share a general sense of the good (*ta kalon*), thus implicitly precluding the possibility that there will be vast disagreement on it – or rather, supposing that such vast disagreement is either inhuman or dishonest/misguided in some way. Ultimately, Aristotle’s aim is not to convince a sceptic, but rather to pursue a discourse aimed at finding (through reasonable discourse and creative action) the means or conditions necessary for men who live in societies/*poleis* similar to his, i.e., an association of a certain moral kind, to actualise a notion of the good that has already been accepted: “We cannot satisfy the sceptic’s demand for external purity; we can ask him to accept our fellowship” (Nussbaum, M. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, p.253). See also Salkever, S. “Aristotle’s Social Science” *Political Theory* vol. 11 (1981) pp.495-503.

<sup>39</sup> This statement is however, potentially misleading – it seems unlikely that Aristotle does not want his ‘students’ to know the good. Therefore I understand him to be presupposing a distinction between higher and lower kinds of understanding, roughly speaking, description as opposed to explanation. His intention is thus that men should *aim* at the latter so that their conscious understanding can consistently make a difference in their lives – this is however, given the discrepancy in natural human abilities and acquired external goods, a ambitious, if not impossible goal. However, given the ‘select’ audience for the *Ethics*, I still maintain that its aim is not merely to *describe* the human good, but to *explain* it in such a way that his students can relate it to and hopefully realise it in actual human life. (This reading supports Bodeus’ view that the *Ethics* and *Politics* are primarily for the would-be legislator). Coleman points out that as the definition of man is fixed, it is not normally a part of ethical discourse which is practical, dealing with choices about things which could be otherwise (*History of Political Thought* vol. 1 Oxford: 2000, p.143). However, she is equally clear that this fixed definition is neither impotent nor irrelevant. Among other things, this “a priori background” increases man’s sphere of responsibility. This becomes clear when Aristotle claims that a *polis* which does not cultivate good character does not excuse man from becoming virtuous. Despite the particular culture one is born into, there still exists some truths about man, and he has within him the tools to access these irrespective of his immediate environment (though

these conflicting opinions, Aristotle has still not seen through his present *aporia*, puzzle or perplexity. As a way out, in order to identify correctly the good life for man given the many differing conflicting *endoxa* that exist, he turns to the human *ergon* and *telos* as an 'external' standard.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle will critique his collected 'data' (i.e., the range of existing beliefs about the good life) by evaluating it in light of his understanding of the natural structure of the human soul.<sup>41</sup> His account of human psychology therefore must discern and characterise the fixed human *ergon* and *telos* in such a way as that he can judge between the conflicting opinions under consideration, and hopefully, to the extent it is possible, "save the phenomena." Aristotle moves from common and reputable opinions to 'empirical' data and back again. This leads to the 'function argument', and it is at this point that Aristotle considers systematically the human *ergon* and *telos*.<sup>42</sup> As the function of man is determined by the nature of his soul, this line of enquiry leads Aristotle to explore human psychology.

### Chapter 3: Psychology: The Human Soul

As a living thing, man is "ensouled."<sup>43</sup> Like plants and other animals, the matter of his physical body is 'permeated' with certain potentialities which when realised correspond to certain activities.<sup>44</sup> Those activities which grow

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Aristotle does concede that this is exceedingly difficult in the wrong or impoverished environment).

<sup>40</sup> There is some debate as to whether Aristotle's appeal to psychology entails/implies a broader appeal to a metaphysical doctrine in his *Ethics*. For example, Irwin argues that such an argument is linked to Aristotle's ontology, while Roche sees the *ergon* argument as dependent on nothing more than appeals to what 'we' say or believe ("Aristotle's Method in Ethics" in *Studies in Aristotle* ed. O'Meara, D. (Washington: 1981); and "The Alleged Foundations" in *Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Irwin (London: 1995), respectively). One could argue that the 'we' does accept Aristotle's ontology as background knowledge in *poleis* like ours – there is no (post-Humean) pluralism (i.e., scepticism) here.

<sup>41</sup> After all, he insists that the human good is not primarily concerned with the goods of the body, but with "the goods of the soul" NE 1102a15.

<sup>42</sup> For discussions on Aristotle's 'function argument', see Reeve *Practices of Reason* (Oxford: 1992, pp. 123-128); Whiting, J. "Aristotle's Function Argument – A Defense" in *Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Irwin (London: 1995, pp.189-205).

<sup>43</sup> DA 412b10-413a10.

<sup>44</sup> It is important here to recognise the broad sense of 'activity' Aristotle employs. Activity is not merely physical nor even practical or political action, but includes the most elevated

out of the natural structure of the human soul indicate the human *ergon* (function, work, activity) and when performed (or 'actualised') they embody the human *telos* (end, purpose, aim). Exercising thoroughly and excellently the capacities (both physical and mental) latent in a human soul over a lifetime is the *natural* (immutable and enduring) human good. What then are the potentials of the human soul? With what capacities did Aristotle think human beings to be naturally endowed?

Aristotle's account of the human soul is complex: it classifies man not merely as alive (for in this respect he is no different than a houseplant, as both lead lives of nutrition and growth), but also as a "sentient" (*aisthetike*) animal who acts in the world given his perceptions of it. However, Aristotle claims that man is a special kind of animal for unlike oxen, or even "gregarious" bees, his soul has something beyond sense perception, beyond even the rudimentary memory and experience which allow one to prepare for and organise one's future at a basic level (as some other animals also have) – the human soul has reason (*logos*).<sup>45</sup> This elusive characteristic – reason – designates man's species.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, he is the only animal whose life *ought* to be manifested in

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kinds of theoretical 'activity' human beings are capable of as well – e.g., contemplating the harmony of the cosmos, grasping geometric principles. Bostock emphasises that Aristotle intended to emphasise the fact that human life is embodied by *action*, and to distinguish activity which expresses a certain disposition/condition from mere possession of the disposition itself, which might remain unrealised as in sleep (*Aristotle's Ethics*, Oxford: 2000, p.19). On the importance of activity in human life, see Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp. 323-324).

<sup>45</sup> As will be discussed further below (notably in reference to Frede), the modern understanding of reason/rationality (itself ambiguous) must be laid aside in order to grasp the many nuances of the Greek word *logos*, which ranges from argument/account, to ratio and proportion, to speech/discourse, and even extends to analogy. Keeping this rich definition in mind, the claim that man is a rational animal takes on some interesting and important connotations – as speech/discourse, reason seems to depend on more than one person, as a ratio, it is a kind of balance or harmony, as argument, it entails persuasion (presumably based on reasonable/explainable premises), and as analogy reason demands the capacity to see one thing as another, to move beyond the strictly literal, yet remain in the bounds of the comprehensible and sensible. All this points away from both a narrow substantive and a strictly instrumental understanding of reason/rationality, and towards a much richer, more complex, non-mechanical yet inherently practical sense, which must work with perception, memory, and experience to enlarge man's understanding of the world.

<sup>46</sup> To expand on the qualities that are unique to human beings, and thus indicative of their nature, Davis points out that for Aristotle: "we are political animals in the *Politics* (1253a2),

actions guided by reason.<sup>47</sup> Aristotle then states man's *ergon* precisely as: "an activity of the soul which follows or implies a rational principle/reason" (*NE* 1098a1-5). If to act (in the broadest sense of the word) rationally or as reason directs is what it is to achieve the human *telos*, then the human good can be determined directly from this. Recall that Aristotle has already claimed that the good of something is the excellent performance of its particular function. Therefore, the human good is: "the active exercise of his soul's activities [the performance of the human function, i.e., activity which expresses reason] in conformity with/expressing excellence or virtue, and if there are several excellences or virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete...in a complete life" (*NE* 1098a15-18).<sup>48</sup> This means that the human good is not to perform *any* activity one happens upon excellently, but rather the human good is excellently engaging those activities which express virtue (through reason) and are "best and most complete."<sup>49</sup>

However, this does not yet provide a good definition of man, for we have not yet grasped the structure of the human soul such that it explains him, clarifies *why* he acts as he does. To say that all human beings possess reason (to a greater or lesser extent), and to add that actions expressing reason in conformity with the highest virtues available to man throughout a complete

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rational animals in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1098a3), and mimetic animals in the *Poetics*" (1448b5) (*The Poetry of Philosophy* Indiana:1999, p.95). He argues that the reader should thus understand how these three important features fit together to give a more complete sense of what human beings are: "understanding our nature as mimetic proves to be an interpretation of our nature as rational, which in turn is the same as our nature as political" (*ibid.* p.4).

<sup>47</sup> Again, Aristotle's teleology pervades his ethics and implies that because man *has* reason, he *should* use it – the cosmos/nature does nothing in vain: "There is a purpose in what is and what happens in nature" (*Phys.* 199a5ff.).

<sup>48</sup> Bostock illuminates the ambiguity of the term 'virtue' in the *NE* (*Aristotle's Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.20). Virtue is complex because there is a sense in which it is used adverbially – excellently/well, irrespective of what is being done, whether it be playing the flute, arguing, or writing laws. However, this is too broad an understanding for Aristotle's use of virtue in other places, for it also has a substantive sense, more akin to the modern sense of the word, i.e., moral excellence, though also extending beyond that to include theoretical wisdom as well. This will be discussed further below in my discussion of ethical and intellectual virtue.

<sup>49</sup> Merely satisfying one's desires does not constitute a flourishing life: "complete fulfilment of desire is a necessary condition of *eudaimonia*, but not a sufficient one. For, on A's theory, those desires must be directed at worthwhile goals" (Kraut, R. "Two Conceptions of Happiness" *Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Irwin London: 1995, p.88).

life surely *describes* (or labels) the human good (and thus something common to all men or 'universal'), but it does not *explain* observed human behaviour. While reason is indeed natural to Man, men do not act according to it instinctively and automatically. For human beings, what is natural is not necessarily realised: "with us...there is such a thing as what is natural, but still all is changeable" (NE 1134b28-31).<sup>50</sup> Observation reveals that man has the capacity to *choose* to act reasonably, but he is not reasonable out of necessity – indeed, he can choose incorrectly, or indeed, even to choose *not* to be reasonable at all.<sup>51</sup>

This choice defines the realm of human freedom, the uniquely human capacity to deliberately choose to live one way and not another. Human freedom can be better understood through examining the structure of the human soul (psychology), and its relation to action (NE 1176a11). We will see that freedom for Aristotle is not the unimpeded liberty to pursue and act on whatever one desires at the moment, nor is it even a slightly more qualified version: freedom to do whatever one desires provided that no one is hurt in the process. For Aristotle, man's freedom can only be realised in looking beyond his immediate whims and impulses, and seeing instead what it is to be fully and genuinely human – that is, to perform the peculiarly human *ergon* – deliberate virtuous (reasonable and creative) activity. However, this is not to deny the central role of desire in reasonable action – no human action arises from reason alone.<sup>52</sup> In fact, good actions *depend* on desire, but a specific, cultivated, reasoned desire.

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<sup>50</sup> See also *Pol.* 1332b1-3, "some qualities that are by nature, can change by way of habits."

<sup>51</sup> "When Aristotle makes reason the distinguishing mark of men, he is referring to reason, right or wrong" (Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* Ithaca: 1993, p.69). This Sorabji contrasts with the activity of *noesis* which is defined, in part, by its infallibility – it is a 'success-verb.' For further discussion on the human *choice* to be reasonable, see Rorty, A.O. "The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (pp. 6-9); Gadamer. *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: 1986, p. 144); and Salkever, S. *Finding the Mean* (Princeton: 1990, p.69).

<sup>52</sup> "Thought/understanding (*nous*)," Aristotle claims, "moves nothing" (*DA* 432b26-433a9).

This conclusion pushes Aristotle's enquiry further into human psychology. How do men's desire and reason come together to form a harmony – a character with stable dispositions who enjoys doing virtuous actions? At *NE* 1102a28, Aristotle, having assumed reason to be the defining characteristic of man, examines complex human psychology in order to determine the relationship between reason and the other parts of the human soul. He divides the soul in two: one part rational, the other, irrational.<sup>53</sup> Each part of the soul will have different functions and different corresponding virtues; virtues of thought on the one hand, and those of character on the other. These two categories of virtue are distinct from each other in a number of fundamental respects, yet they are also closely related, and even at times overlap. This is due to the fact that Aristotle's division is not so neat as his initial bisection suggests – both rational and irrational parts of the soul are divided again, and with this second division comes a remarkable conception of man and what the good life for him entails. In the following section, I will examine Aristotle's divisions of the human soul and their parallel virtues, both their most distinguishing attributes and their more ambiguous areas of intersection.

### *The Irrational Soul and Ethical Virtue*

One element of the irrational part of the human soul is merely 'nutritive' (*to threptikon*). This part is common to all animate things (including plants). As such, it is a property that is shared by all men, but is not an explanatory ("salient and relevant") feature of the human species. The other part of the irrational soul however is both more revealing of 'human-ness' and considerably more complicated. Aristotle calls it: "the seat of desires and of appetite in general (*holos orektikon*)" (*NE* 1102b31). Its proper virtues therefore will have to do with excellence in these areas. But what does it mean to speak of 'excellence' of desires and appetite? Before exploring this question, let us

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<sup>53</sup> See also *NE* 1139a6.

look first at the relationship Aristotle recognises between desires and appetite, action, and character.

Aristotle believed that a man's appetites and desires are important because they play a major role in determining the kinds of *actions* he chooses to perform: very generally speaking, men choose to act given the *desire* for a particular good, either apparent or genuine. Repeatedly performing certain kinds of actions will in turn determine man's *character* (*hexis*, or "well entrenched disposition"): a person who does just actions, for instance, will be just; likewise, the doer of brave actions will be brave; kind ones, kind, etc.. For Aristotle there seems to be a continuous cycle in human psychology whereby 'agency' develops,<sup>54</sup> beginning with actions based on immediate/inborn desires (usually aimed at pleasure), moving through actions which imitate 'valued' members of one's community (aimed at what that particular community has deemed good), and over time producing a character whose desires, having been shaped by performing these imitative actions (and cultural habituation/education more generally), now acts not imitatively, but independently, with reason and creativity. This process stabilises an enduring identity – a *hexis*, or character – which is *dynamically* oriented towards (though not necessarily consciously understanding) an idea of what a good life entails. Because Aristotle believed that a man's desires were not fixed from birth but could be 'trained' – shaped and moulded given the kinds of activities he engaged in, he insisted that human character too was not predetermined, but rather was established by and revealed through the actions (he was brought up to) and then deliberately chose to perform. Therefore a man's character was for Aristotle, largely up to man himself: "our ethical dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities...it is incumbent on us to control the character of our activities" (*NE* 1103b20-23).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> By 'agency' I refer to someone who, given a situation with more than one possibility for action, deliberately chooses to do one thing rather than another.

<sup>55</sup> The claim that man is responsible for the kind of character he has because he can control the kinds of actions he performs sets up a tension in Aristotle's understanding of ethical



Conceived as indeterminate and malleable, character itself becomes an object of choice – men, for Aristotle, are *voluntarily* virtuous or vicious.<sup>56</sup> Because man is responsible for the kind of person he is, he can be praised or blamed for his character. What then, according to Aristotle, makes a man's character praiseworthy? Here we return to the question posed in the opening paragraph of this section: What makes human desires and appetites excellent? The answer to this question reveals what is distinctive about the human appetite as opposed to that of other animals. Clearly other sentient creatures have emotions and desires, but those of human beings are unique because of their special relationship with reason. While man's appetite does not have reason in itself, it can (and should) *participate* in reason: appetite, Aristotle claims, can "listen to" and "be persuaded by" reason.<sup>57</sup> When informed by

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virtue. On the one hand, man, he states, is free to choose his activities (and thus his character) for he can voluntarily do virtuous actions, or not. On the other hand, Aristotle says that it is man's environment that makes "all the difference" in terms of the character man has (*NE* 1103b24-5). How can these two claims be reconciled? To what extent is man responsible for the kind of character he has? Vernant claims that Aristotle was not concerned by this issue. His point, Vernant says, was: "essentially a moral one, so it is enough to establish the link between the character and the individual seen in the round the intimate and reciprocal link that is the basis for subjective responsibility of the agent" (*Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* New York: 1988, p.69). That is, man is responsible to the extent that his actions have their origins and cause *in himself*, i.e., are not constrained by his external conditions.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle's main discussion of voluntary/involuntary acts is in Book III of the *NE*. For further analysis of this concept, see Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1988, pp. 65-69); Ackrill, J.L. "Aristotle on Action" *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* Berkeley: 1980, pp.93-101). Voluntary acts can be praised or blamed, while those that are involuntary deserve pity or pardon. Roughly speaking, an act is involuntary if a man is compelled by an external force – something that has "its origin outside the person himself" (*NE* 1110b18) – to perform it, or if he does something wrong due, by no fault of his own (i.e., drunkenness) to ignorance of the particular details of the situation, and not because the end ("the universal") has been misidentified (*NE* 1111a1). Voluntary action is defined by "what has its origin in the agent himself when he knows the particulars that the action consists in" (*NE* 1111a22).

<sup>57</sup> Though initially Aristotle states that it is the irrational part of the soul which is divided into two, the fact that the appetitive/spirited part can share in (obey) reason leads him to say at *NE* 1103a2-4 that one should also classify this part as part of the rational soul, though not possessing reason *in itself*. Appetite is thus both rational in the sense that wish (*boulesis*), desire (*epithumia*) and spirit (*thumos*) are capable of listening to reason, yet also irrational, for man's feelings do not inherently possess reason, nor do they automatically obey its orders (as in the *akratic* man).

As will become clearer from the discussion of practical reason below, there seems to be substantial overlap between irrational and rational soul. Bostock for example argues that wish (*boulesis*) itself *has* reason (*Aristotle's Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.34) and Hardie indicates

correct reason/right rule (*orthos logos*, NE 1103b33), man's desires are themselves deemed "correct," and these 'corrected' desires then point consistently to the 'right' ends in specific circumstances (the "mean") so that the ethically virtuous man is: "fond of what is fine and objects to what is shameful" (NE 1179b30-3). To act according to right reason – to be ethically virtuous – therefore, implies that man's appetites have been trained by and through this, permeated with reason so that they aim at the right things, making the agent want (which is to say, actually *take pleasure in*) those activities which are noble/fine.

Because Aristotle understood the penetration of reason into desire to be largely the result of experience, or habit (*ethos*), he calls the virtues or excellences of this part of the soul *ethical* virtues. The transformation of appetite by reason which serves to re-focus man's 'natural' desires so that he is ethically virtuous (i.e., has a stable *character* who, desiring and taking pleasure in the right things, acts well consistently) comes through *habituation* within a particular social milieu of practices and behaviours (which is to say, not through classroom teaching).<sup>58</sup> Therefore, while not fixed at birth, men

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similarly that *boulesis*, when a wish for the highest human good, is "not in the province of ethical virtue" (*Aristotle's Ethical Theory* Oxford: 1980, p.219). Additionally spirit (*thumos*) takes on a more complex, rational role when one examines Aristotle's use of it in the *Politics* 1327b37-1328a6. For an extended discussion on *thumos* and its relation to reason, see Cooper, J. "Reason, Moral Virtue, and Moral Value" in *Rationality in Greek Thought* ed. Frede and Striker (Oxford: 1996, pp. 90-95). In my view, there is a sense in which the appetitive part of the soul extends from the 'upper' irrational part (i.e., the non-nutritive, feeling and desiring part) to the 'lower' rational part (i.e., the deliberating part, discussed below) .

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle does say that there is such a thing as 'natural' (inborn) virtue, but makes a distinction between natural and 'full' virtue; natural being the general disposition one is born with, e.g., some people seem to be born courageous or kind (NE 1144b4-6). Natural virtue is having the right desires but lacking the habituation necessary to secure them (for vicious practices can corrupt inborn character). Additionally, the fragile character with which one is born clearly has no intellectual component, it involves no reason/understanding and thus is vulnerable to poor habituation. Full virtue on the other hand, is a state in which one's natural virtues are permeated and stabilised by reason providing a more profound understanding of why being good is in fact good. This degree of virtue is more secure, experience and reflection have revealed the *reasons* behind it. (Aristotle uses both *nous* and *phronesis* when describing this state, but seems to emphasize *phronesis* NE 1144b13-24). Bostock notes the ambiguity of Aristotle's notion of natural virtue at all, for Aristotle has said previously that all virtues must be cultivated/acquired. He resolves it by positing that Aristotle understood there to be three 'levels' of virtue – the first, natural (an accidental, merely appetitive quality),

are not entirely free to pick their desires (and character) as they choose. The desires men have and the kinds of actions they (want to) do are largely determined by the environment in which they are raised – the cultural practices into which they are habituated. For instance, the man brought up in a *polis* where conflicting values are voiced and openly debated will act differently, will in fact have desires and capacities quite unlike the one who is raised in a place where all discourse is restricted and censured. As *all* (properly termed) human beings are raised in communities structured by certain value-laden practices, the environment into which men are acculturated plays *the* major role in their character formation, specifically in the cultivation of virtue or lack thereof: “it [environment] is of supreme importance” (NE 1103b25). And one brought up with no community at all would fail, in Aristotle’s eyes, to be a human being except in form, and would act like an animal or a god (Pol 1253a29).

While Aristotle did not believe that human beings were born (fully) ethically virtuous, he calls it a state which men are “*naturally* endowed to receive” (NE 1103a14-26). Generally speaking however, young people do not ‘naturally’ enjoy what is truly good/noble – most are born with strong inclinations to pursue those pleasures which promise immediate gratification (which if pursued recklessly over time, cannot contribute to a unified, stable, reasonable life). Therefore, men must be ‘trained’ to see beyond their personal, spontaneous desires and learn to take pleasure in what is best for members of the human species: “we need to have the proper upbringing...to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things.” This comes through repeated, guided (not random) experiences within a community structured by laws which serve to promote certain values endorsing a particular way of

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the second, the acquired virtue which leads to the right actions but without real understanding of why they are good (“in accordance with, but not yet *with* correct reason”), and the final is full virtue, which is virtue with correct reason, with *phronesis* (Bostock, *Aristotle’s Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.86). See also, Burnyeat, M. “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” (*Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty, Berkeley: 1980, pp.69-93).

life.<sup>59</sup> Backed by the force of law, men in such communities – in *poleis* – are compelled (for fear of shame and punishment) to repeatedly perform the kinds of actions deemed good by their community. This means imitating the actions of men already considered to be virtuous. While difficult at first, this repeated, imitative practice in a particular *polis* provides young citizens with a pool of experiences that (ideally) cultivate the desire for the good endorsed by that community: “habit makes them [difficult activities] pleasant” (*Rhet.* 1370a12).<sup>60</sup> This good, though initially merely accepted in the process of guided imitation as a child, over time grows to be a general state of proper orientation which frames man’s character so that he: “knows what he is doing, chooses it and chooses it for its own sake, and...does it from a firm and permanent disposition.” (*NE* 1105a26-33) An ethically virtuous disposition is engendered by older, already good practitioners’ own behaviour to be imitated, and is confirmed by their teachings within the structure of a *polis*.<sup>61</sup>

The concrete good in a specific situation that is desired by the ethically virtuous man is what Aristotle terms the “mean” – a genuine good, yet one which is “enmattered” and thus contingent on the individual involved and his immediate circumstances. The vast variation in people and circumstances make this situation-dependent “mean” impossible to codify in precise abstract terms. Thus Aristotelian ethics aims to establish and promote the kind of character who is able to determine this mean *without* a fixed rule to follow or

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Guidance’ comes through many aspects and at many different levels of *polis* life: the laws set up the overarching structure and provide the conditions necessary for education (hence legislation is the *architectonic* practical virtue, *NE* 1141b25). And it is the wise, whose teachings Aristotle parallels to the demonstrative truths of scientific knowledge, who act as standards for those learning to be virtuous (*NE* 1143b11-3).

<sup>60</sup> A (reason directed) ‘wish’ (*boulesis*) for that which is good *generally* develops by acting on this good *particularly* (the ‘mean’ in a specific situation). On the function of the *polis* as the proper ‘director’ of desires, see for instance, Aristotle’s discussion of Phaleus’ regime: he must not level possessions, but *desires*. *Pol.*1266b28-31.

<sup>61</sup>Note that teaching *follows* habituation, repeated experience: “what Aristotle does insist on repeatedly is that habituation and experience are a necessary prerequisite for teaching” (Sorabji “Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue” *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty Berkeley: 1980, p. 217). A more complete discussion of the *polis* and its role in developing virtue will follow in the section on Aristotle’s *Politics*.

principle to promote. Repeatedly performing actions which promote the right ends in particular circumstances will over time evolve into this kind of character – one who actually takes pleasure in the right things, one who consistently desires what is fine/noble. Ideally therefore, even before understanding abstractly what the good for man is, men come to *enjoy* acting virtuously – for the person of ethical virtue, the right actions are done without internal conflict or struggle (NE 1104b3-8), but as though they were “second nature.”<sup>62</sup> Ethical virtue then is precisely that state in which man’s desires have been directed by reason towards what is genuinely fine/noble (*to kalon*) in such a way that he consistently desires and acts to aim at the “mean” in the particular, contingent situations which make up his life. One might say that in some sense, the peculiar *telos* of the human appetite rests in its being permeated with and steered by reason.

In cultivating a harmony between reason and appetite, men shift from being driven to act on erratic and unpredictable pleasures and pains, to being guided (and stabilised) by reason. Viewing the world through the lens of reason as opposed to appetite alone will point man beyond his individual, spontaneous passions and narrow personal preferences to indicate that as a *kind* of thing (i.e., as a member of the human species) he has a general good.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> NE 1147a21-22, quoted in and expanded upon in Burnyeat’s “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty (Berkeley: 1980, p. 74). The idea of acting on “second nature” will help to illuminate a key difference between the ethical and intellectual virtues – the ethically virtuous person, e.g., Pericles, seems to have acted well almost automatically given his ‘empirical’ perceptions (*empeiria*) of his circumstances, yet could not teach his sons what he knew. He developed habits which enabled him to see and understand his experiences in a certain light, which though perhaps unarticulated, framed his understanding of the world. What Pericles did not have was a unified explanation or theory of what he was doing, therefore, he could not teach (though importantly, he was still a practitioner to imitate). The person who is capable of teaching ‘why’ is Aristotle, as ethical theorist. A good practitioner should not, and indeed cannot be expected to take Aristotle’s job away! See Bostock: “People are brought up to know that this or that is the virtuous way of acting, and they do as a result develop a disposition to act in this way, but they usually cannot supply the ‘reasoning’ which – it is alleged – would show why this way of acting is indeed the right way” (*Aristotle’s Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.44).

<sup>63</sup> Salkever suggests that the grasping of the first principles of ‘social science’ (i.e., the human good as flourishing/*eudaimonia*), requires that we must first recognize that “there is a human good which is somehow different from our spontaneous pleasures and pains...The

This recognition of himself as not merely an individual, but as a member of a group serves to stabilise a man's identity – without this sense, his intuitive/instinctive whims and immediate desires frequently conflict, resulting in confusion, anger and even violence.<sup>64</sup> Having a sense of a general, stable *human* good provides man with the goal towards which his own particular choices and actions aim, thereby providing coherence and unity in his individual actions, and this can dissipate internal turmoil and ward off violent, or otherwise vicious outbursts. The abstract human good that is derived from an explanation of the specific function (*ergon*) of the human species is not something that floats 'above' human life, rather it is a good that man, because of the kind of creature he *is*, and because he functions in the way he *does*, has a responsibility to realise as best he can *in* the particular, indeterminate situations he confronts by making well-reasoned, deliberate choices and acting on them.<sup>65</sup>

This means that the psychological state which constitutes ethical virtue cannot be simply explained and learned as for example, geometric theorems are, nor can people be persuaded through mere argument to actually become good (*NE* 1179b5ff).<sup>66</sup> Ideally, the practices of a *polis* serve to steer its citizens

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indispensable starting point for social science is a sense of the difference between a personality or way of life which is flourishing and one which is not" ("Aristotle's Social Science", *Political Theory* vol. 11 1981, p.498). Recognising and aiming to realise a life of (human) virtue -- flourishing -- has the additional benefit of protecting man from the forces of luck, for the goods of virtue, unlike our individual and immediate desires, are aimed at those ends which are most under our control (see White "Aristotle's Favorite Tragedies" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* ed. Rorty (Princeton: 1992, p.226). This explains Aristotle's insistence that his students be older and experienced, properly oriented towards what is fine/noble and not simply in pursuit of their immediate desires (*NE* 1179b13). See also, Kraut, R. "Two Conceptions of Happiness" *Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Irwin (London: 1995, pp. 82-89).

<sup>64</sup> For instance, Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

<sup>65</sup> This, as I will attempt to explain below, ultimately comes with practical wisdom.

However, the harmony of appetite and reason manifested in the stable and enduring disposition that is ethical virtue is a necessary component to practical wisdom.

<sup>66</sup> The fact that moral virtues are acquired through *habituation* and intellectual virtues through *teaching* (*NE* 1103a15) is an important distinction between these two kinds of virtue. The objects of intellectual virtue are constant and regular (e.g., the stars, mathematical axioms), while those of moral virtue are indeterminate and admit to being otherwise (the substantive lives of human beings living together in differently organised communities). The latter

(forcibly, if necessary) to desire a life that embodies the true good for man. However, Coleman makes the important point that force is only the last result. Citizens are presumed already to be ethical characters from family guidance and imitation (*not* from their having been beaten into it at home). So too, coercion behind the laws is an ultimate threat for those who have not internalised the reasons for acting according to laws, or who have been ill-habituated for a range of reasons.<sup>67</sup> This means that man must be first raised within a community where he can directly *experience* others living according to substantive rules which express ideas of what a good and bad life looks like. Over time, this serves to orient his emotions, if initially uncritically, so that he is *habituated* to act according to reasons in light of an established good, or as the 'virtue practitioners' of his community already do.<sup>68</sup> A community (specifically a law governed *polis*) is that environment that promotes reason to penetrate and inform the appetite – the *polis* is thus a necessary condition for establishing and securing ethical virtue.

Aristotle is clear that ethical virtue, understood as being cultivated in a political community (by definition organised according to an abstract conception of what a good human life should look like, and more concretely, this good realised in the community's *laws* which 'frame' individual best

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require deliberation and judgement given specific circumstances, and deciding what is better or worse, the former, on the other hand requires knowing what is true or false.

<sup>67</sup> Professor Coleman made this point to me in our correspondence about this dissertation.

<sup>68</sup> As this (or any) orientation comes only after experience living as humans do, Aristotle insists that the proper student for ethical discourse is not a young person, but rather someone who has actually participated in "the actions of life" (*NE* 1095a2). Even more specifically, he must *already* be a lover of what is good and noble though not necessarily conscious in the first instance – rather, simply having acquired trained emotions conjoined to certain habitual ways of behaving. Theoretical discourse does not teach the ends of ethics, it presupposes them and then works dialectically to explain, hone and refine them through practice and reflection. The fact that moral virtue involves practical reasoning (*phronesis*), which demands understanding the relationship between particulars and universals (discussed more fully below), also explains Aristotle's respect for the old – they have had experience in particulars (which has given them "the eye") and yields the "origins" for theoretical discourse on ethics and politics (*NE* 1142a10-25). Thucydides also notes the rashness of the young and their inability to control their immediate emotions (II.21). In this light, Cleon's words and actions in regard to Mytilene, despite being an adult, seem manifestly childlike (or the result of ill-habituated desires such as 'natural' anger and impetuosity).

practitioners' behaviour to be imitated) is necessarily informed by theory. However, acquiring ethical virtue is not the same as "pursuing philosophy" (i.e., it is not a theoretical demonstration of truth). Rather its actualisation is actually *being virtuous* – doing good actions in particular situations. While Aristotle says that ethically virtuous people act from a state of knowing (NE 1105a32 – *eidōs*), this is not the same kind of knowing appropriate to 'science' (*epistēmē*, discussed below). The knowing involved in ethical virtue is correct orientation which repeatedly points desires to the right goals so that appropriate actions are taken in *particular* situations. Action is *prior* to ethical knowing and ethical virtue: "The virtues we acquire by first having put them into action"/"virtue results from the repeated performance of just and temperate actions" (NE 1103a30; 1105b3-6). Thus, in speaking of the development and function of ethical virtue, it is the actual conditions of action that are extremely important, while abstract principles (e.g., that the human function is virtuous action informed by reason, or that *eudaimonia* is the highest human good) are "of little or no avail."<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, ethical virtue – acting well because one has developed a stable character which desires the good in concrete situations – *precedes* the capacity to think abstractly/theoretically about the general good for man: "The soul of the student [of philosophy] must first have been prepared by the cultivation of habits for noble pleasures and aversions, just as the land is prepared to nourish the seed." (NE 1095b4). A state of "full virtue" will involve knowing not just that this action is right in these circumstances (i.e., "doing just and temperate actions as the just and temperate man would do" NE 1105b5-7 which is to say, by imitating), but also *why* such an action is virtuous and making a deliberate choice (*prohairesis*) to do it for its own sake.<sup>70</sup> Ethical virtue itself begins with and remains connected to action – the imitation of good actions at first, and progressively moving through this *experience* to

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<sup>69</sup> For example, the man who knows the abstract truth that light meat is healthful, but not which meats are actually light is not able to act on his knowledge.

<sup>70</sup> Reeve argues that full virtue requires *nous*, which provides the 'first principles' of ethics needed to understand the *why* (*Practices of Reason* Oxford: 1992, p.89).



include an understanding of the reasons that they are virtuous, and continuing to perform them in new situations which demand creativity.

A state of ethical virtue does not provide men with principles that can elevate them to an Archimedian perspective, able to judge and anticipate each new, contingent circumstance objectively – indeed, denying the use of such an a priori standpoint was the heart of his rejection of Plato’s idea of the Good (*NE* 1096b26ff). Nor is ethical virtue the acquisition of precise, abstract ethical rules to be applied mechanically to concrete situations ensuring intended results. No ‘level’ of ethical virtue can guarantee the consequences of human action – ethical virtue cannot make men invulnerable to the influence of fortune, or forces outside their control.<sup>71</sup> An ethically virtuous character however, will increase the *probability* that life will go as planned – an ‘appetite’ which has been penetrated by reason and directed towards a stable good is by nature more regular and more enduring than one that pursues only the individual’s passing whims. Furthermore, as itself growing out of direct experience in the variability and unpredictability of human life, the ethically virtuous person will recognise the inherent vulnerability of man, and come to be compassionate and forgiving, able to use error, rather shrink from it. In short, his expectations and goals will be *reasonable*, not insofar as they can accurately predict and control the future, but insofar as they are appropriate to the subject at hand – human beings.

The kind of reason proper to the ethically virtuous person is one which grows out of the discernment of certain *patterns* and *probabilities* in human behaviour which can, given time and reflection, be seen in a larger framework of values, practices and beliefs. The capacity to recognise these patterns is derived and

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<sup>71</sup> It is a truth about human nature that there can never be a guarantee for man that his actions will turn out as planned, no matter how well deliberated, and mapped out. Though Aristotle understood individuals to be responsible for their choices, all human action is inherently a risk. See Vernant, J-P. *Myth & Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1988, pp.32-34); Nussbaum, M. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp. 318-342); Salkever, S. “Teaching the Questions” paper given at Bryn Mawr College, 9/2001 (p.21).

sustained only given extended *experience within the flux of human life*, specifically activity in a *polis*.<sup>72</sup> The ethically virtuous disposition, itself cultivated and developed by imitating doers of virtuous actions ('virtue practitioners'), evolves by continuing to perform like actions in similar situations (at first with little understanding<sup>73</sup>) and results in a general state involving both the *desire* (the internalised impulse) for what is good and the capacity to act virtuously oneself in new situations. As the circumstances men encounter in life are infinite and unique, there is no definitive preparation to ensure success in each unique and open-ended situation, "we are cognitively at the mercy of each new event."<sup>74</sup> To be ethically virtuous implies the ability to meet the challenge of novelty, and this means a distinctly un-codifiable kind of reason – each action entails a kind of calculated *risk*, for it demands being inventive, acting *creatively*, rather than mechanically (which is in a sense, to be not fully responsible<sup>75</sup>) given new contingent situations where external conditions can change even the most well thought out course.<sup>76</sup> And this capacity develops only through experience. In this way the ethically virtuous person goes from being an imitator/rule follower in youth (performing actions as the result of guided, yet uncritical habituation), to an *innovative* reason-er in old age. At this point, the impulse to act on what is noble/fine, the *guidance* of the natural impulse towards the pleasurable

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<sup>72</sup> One might argue that the *polis* itself is not only that which sustains and allows these patterns to be recognised, but is in fact, that which creates them. Thus while there is a best *polis*, any *polis* is necessary to ensure that patterns in human life emerge and are sustained.

<sup>73</sup> Bostock distinguishes this by emphasising Aristotle's claim that man goes from acting "*in accordance with correct reason*" to "*with correct reason*" (*Aristotle's Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.86).

<sup>74</sup> Nussbaum, M. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, p.298). This is not to suggest that there are no recurring patterns in human life, but only to emphasize the fact that understanding the patterns alone (deriving laws, principles, etc., from them) is to deny an important piece of what it is to be human. This piece requires man to be responsive to the individuality and unique-ness of human life.

<sup>75</sup> On the misconception that mastering ethics is like mastering a technical art which, given its precise rules, reduces individual responsibility, see Gadamer. H.-G. *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: 1986, p. 168).

<sup>76</sup> On the importance of creativity and innovativeness, see Gullely, N. "Aristotle on the Purposes of Literature" *Articles on Aristotle* vol. 4 (New York: 1973, pp.167-76); Salkever, S. "Tragedy and the Education of the Demos" in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* ed. Euben (Berkeley: 1986, pp. 274-303); Depew, D. "Politics, Music, and Contemplation in Aristotle's Ideal State" in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics* ed. Keyt and Miller (Oxford: 1991, pp. 347-380); Nussbaum, M. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp 298-306).

initially being imposed so that the noble becomes what is pleasurable, is internalised and works as a fixed motivation in the ethically virtuous person (thus ethical virtue in a sense, makes men more self-sufficient). This is the state/condition of the *phronimos*, explored in the following section.

### *The Rational Soul and Intellectual Virtue*

Before discussing practical wisdom – *phronesis* – which we will see itself depends on ethical virtue, I will examine the other elements of the rational part of the soul. Like the irrational part of the soul, the rational part is also divided in two. This leads to two broad categories of intellectual virtue, each kind with a distinct object and end, thus demanding two kinds of reasonable thought.<sup>77</sup> At 1139a5-13, Aristotle distinguishes these two elements in the rational soul: one part contemplates things which are necessary and unchanging (the *epistemonikon*), the primary virtue of which is *sophia* or philosophic wisdom, and the other deliberates about and leads to action on things which are contingent and admit to variation (the *logistikon*), the primary virtue of which is *phronesis* or practical wisdom (NE 1144a1-9).<sup>78</sup> However, these two parts of the rational soul are alike in that they both have reason *in themselves* (and thus are distinct from the appetitive part of the soul which, as was said, can listen to and obey reason, but does not possess it innately). The most refined kind of knowledge available to human beings belongs to the *epistemonikon* – it considers unconditional, necessary truths –

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<sup>77</sup> Bostock raises an interesting point about the kinds of thinking involved in 'scientific' and practical reasoning: he suggests that while their objects and aims may be different (one about necessary truths and knowledge for its own sake, the other about contingent beliefs/opinions and right desire with a view to action), the actual *kind* of thinking involved in each one is the same (*Aristotle's Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.79) I would argue that while perhaps at its core the reasoning process seems to be the same for both parts of the rational soul, focusing on this parallel threatens to obscure the fact that practical reason needs to take into account both universal and particular, while theoretical reason involves only universals. Additionally, as Lord states: "Theoretical science serves no purpose beyond knowledge itself, or the pleasure that accompanies it; practical science is for the purpose or in the service of action" ("Politics and Philosophy in Aristotle's Ethics" *Hermes* vol. 106, 1978 p. 337).

<sup>78</sup> They are however, 'primary' in different senses: *sophia* includes *episteme* and *nous* (NE 1141a19), while *phronesis* is included in /the foundation of other practical virtues, the most controlling of which is political wisdom (specifically legislative wisdom, or *nomothetikes*).

valid for everything, everywhere, always – and the connections between those truths.

For Aristotle, *episteme*, or ‘scientific’ knowledge generally refers to theology, mathematics and physics.<sup>79</sup> In these disciplines, men can contemplate ‘first principles’ (truths which are apprehended by *nous*), and can thereafter deduce *demonstratively* from them (this is *episteme*, narrowly defined). The actualisation of *nous* and *episteme* together – that is to say, full knowledge of first principles and a grasp of what follows from them – is *sophia*, the highest kind of knowledge accessible to human beings (*NE* 1141a17ff).<sup>80</sup> This “most honourable/exalted (*timiotaton*)” form of knowledge demands no choices be made that result in conduct. The activity proper to, and thus the function of this ‘theoretical’ part of the rational soul is a specialised kind of reasoned contemplation – syllogistic demonstration by way of deduction – about those ‘objects’ which are impervious to human intervention.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The idea that physics, as a part of theoretical knowledge, works with only invariable, necessary truths might strike some as implausible. Hardie explains Aristotle’s inclusion of physics as theoretical knowledge as a discipline which concerns not only invariable ‘universals’, but also what can be true for the most part (*to hos epi to polu*). Thus he states, it is “a kind though not the primary kind of theoretical knowledge” (*Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: 1980, pp.222-3). Reeve raises a similar point in *Practices of Reasons* (Oxford: 1992, pp.81ff). De Ste Croix discusses the issue of those things which exist/are true for the most part as it relates to his understanding of the use of history, and highlights that Aristotle’s distinction between universals and particulars is better understood as threefold (“Aristotle on History and Poetry” *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* ed. Rorty Princeton: 1992, pp. 23-32).

<sup>80</sup> Bostock writes that *sophia*, in Aristotle’s “unnatural/restricted” use of it, is best understood as “the virtue of the theoretical part of the soul” and *episteme* is the kind of knowledge that deals with universals (*Aristotle’s Ethics* Oxford: 2000, pp. 76-77). Both involve the capacity to deduce from first principles the necessary conclusions which follow from them (*NE* 1139b33-35, *NE* 1141a16-20). This process, which moves from permanent and fixed truths to what necessarily results given them as explanation and consequences, is Aristotelian demonstration, and has nothing specific to do with human action. Aristotle maintains that first principles are induced and spotted/intuited by mind (*nous*): “it will be *nous* which apprehends the primary premises” (*PostAn* 100b13). To count as knowledge (true definition), these ‘primary premises’ must be known in the deeper/non-accidental way – i.e., their cause must be known (*PostAn* 71b8-10). At VI.11, Aristotle calls *sophia* and *phronesis* the respective virtues of the two parts of the rational soul – the former concerned with necessary truths, the other with practical probabilities.

<sup>81</sup> Reeve highlights a distinction between “plain” and “unconditional” scientific knowledge and its relation to Aristotelian ethics (*Practices of Reason* Oxford: 1992, pp. 7-22). He concludes that the first principles of ethics, derived from the matter-less, yet definitively human *nous*, do in fact qualify as “unconditional” scientific knowledge (i.e., ethics involves “demonstrable

The fact that the virtues of the contemplative element of the rational human soul are concerned with invariable first principles (and deductions from them) means that they can be “communicated by teaching...and must be learnt” (NE 1139b24-6).<sup>82</sup> Given this, the habituation so fundamental to the acquisition of ethical virtue (i.e., the training of feelings and desires) is largely irrelevant to these theoretical intellectual virtues. In fact, Aristotle claims that even young men who (necessarily) lack the “eye of experience” can excel in, for instance, studies of astronomy or geometry (NE 1142a13ff.). Though growing out of *nous*’s unique perception of and one’s further capacity to engage in induction from concrete particulars to abstract universals, scientific knowledge *qua* scientific knowledge does not employ individual, tangible things – again, its concern is ‘universals’, or the invariable abstract principles of the most honoured disciplines. As *episteme* does not involve influencing/persuading anything beyond a grasp of those ‘universals’ it contemplates and deduces from, its knowledge can be said to be the most self-sufficient and complete kind of knowledge – its objects are the most stable and perfect things in the cosmos.<sup>83</sup>

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principles that are unconditionally necessary” *ibid.* pp. 27-8). While one might grant that there are first principles in ethics, this should not lead to the conclusion that these principles of human nature, as objects of *nous*, join theology, astronomy, and geometry as one of the most elevated objects in the cosmos (NE 1141a20).

<sup>82</sup> However, we will see that the practical virtues of the rational soul do require prior habituation, i.e., proper character development, or most simply stated, ethical virtue (hence Aristotle’s claim that young people are not appropriate students for ethics and politics – they have not yet had the guided experience, and the practice in induction necessary to make more theoretical teaching worthwhile. See Sorabji “Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue” *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty Berkeley: 1980, pp.214-218). Whereas knowledge of/virtue in relation to concrete, particular objects can only be had through experience and habituation, abstract theory/scientific knowledge works with the universal ‘extracted’ (through language) from particulars. This universal, crystallised in language, is unchanging and unaffected by human emotion, and as such, it can be learned.

<sup>83</sup> And, given the discussion below, we will see that unlike practical knowledge (*phronesis*), *episteme* need not negotiate between universal and particular, and thus has no direct parallel to ‘equity’. Reeve, however, argues that there is in fact an ‘analogue’ to equity in the *development* of a science, namely acumen (*agchinoia*). He is careful to distinguish these two capacities however: “whereas equity finds the best match between the universal and the particular, acumen finds the explanatory universal in the particular” (*Practices of Reason* Oxford: 1992, p. 78).

#### Chapter 4: *Phronesis*

The calculating/deliberative part of the rational soul is considerably more complicated for my purposes, for it is here that we find the overlap between the rational soul and human character and action – between intellect and appetite. The ‘excellence’ or virtue of the *logistikon* which relates directly to human conduct is practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, and its full realisation differs from the virtues of the *epistemonikon* in both its object and end.<sup>84</sup> The objects of *phronesis* are not the invariable truths of pure ‘science’, but rather *all* the elements – both abstract and concrete – involved in virtuous human conduct, in reasoned choice and creative action. More precisely, *phronesis* is concerned with negotiating the dynamic relationship between the theoretical concepts which characterise and define the human species (e.g., man is a rational animal, the human end is *eudaimonia* realised in virtuous activity) and the concrete factors that make up a human life (e.g., the culture into which one is born and raised, the specific abilities and attachments one has as an individual). *Phronesis* considers ethical abstractions as they relate to and frame the actual conditions in which man must determine the best means to attain the concrete good (the “mean”) in his environment.

The end of *phronesis* is not the demonstrable knowledge of *episteme*, but the actions which constitute a secure and flourishing, or *eudaimon* life for man, i.e., the performance of reasonable and creative actions which aim at what is fine/noble for man.<sup>85</sup> *Phronesis* is a broad ‘state of knowing’ which is by its very nature connected to human conduct and all the incommensurable elements that go into it, and not the attainment of certain, logically consistent, purely theoretical knowledge for its own sake.<sup>86</sup> This means that unlike the

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<sup>84</sup> In discussing the practical part of the rational soul, Aristotle first distinguishes between virtues corresponding to things made (production) and things done (conduct) – between craft knowledge (*techne*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). My concern in what follows is with *phronesis*, therefore I will not discuss *techne* here.

<sup>85</sup> As the *polis* is that which provides this environment, Aristotle claims that legislation (*nomothetike*) is the “directing” (*architectonic*) form of *phronesis*.

<sup>86</sup> “The person of practical wisdom or prudence – results not in the statement of a rule but in the creation of a metaphor – the metaphor of the mean – whose function is to clarify problems

other intellectual virtues, *phronesis* can effect change in the world. But what precisely does this 'knowing state' involve, and how can it, as an intellectual virtue, effect change? Furthermore, if it is concerned with particulars, specifically about doing well in concrete situations, how does *phronesis* differ from ethical virtue?

At NE 1140b20, Aristotle describes *phronesis* as "a true and reasoned state or capacity to act with regard to human goods."<sup>87</sup> As such, it is a 'compound' state which is capable of making deliberate decisions and "issuing orders" which lead to actions promoting the good.<sup>88</sup> I say that *phronesis* is compound because it includes both ethical virtue (the disposition acquired through proper habituation which orients a man's appetite towards what is good generally and, through repeated imitation of virtue practitioners, sustains an enduring desire for this good so that the specific good in particular situations – the "mean" – is desired and acted upon consistently), as well as the capacity to apply calculative reason towards finding the best course of action needed to attain the particular good that ethical virtue identifies in the situation at hand (NE 1144a28ff). This means that in any given particular situation, ethical virtue gives *phronesis* its end, and calculative reason shows it the best way to achieve it – *phronesis* embraces them both. Unlike *episteme*, *phronesis* operates in the realm of "enmattered" and variable particulars, and unlike ethical virtue, it demands a deeper and broader exposure to and understanding of human beings and the good for man generally. With this

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of personal choice, and not to resolve them" (Salkever. *Finding the Mean*, Princeton: 1990, p.117).

<sup>87</sup> Like all Aristotelian virtues, *phronesis* is fundamentally a *state*, and not a capacity or feeling (NE 1106a12). I understand *phronesis* to be by its very definition, directed towards the actual human good. This seems justified in light of Aristotle's identifying it with not only *logos*, but *orthos logos* (NE 1144b28-9). Note also the shift in his definition of *phronesis* at 1140b6, and then shortly thereafter at 1140b20-1: *phronesis* is qualified further and goes from being concerned with what is bad and good for humans, to being concerned solely with what is good. *Phronesis*, it seems, is "end specific" – its 'orders' though specific to the concrete situation at hand, are legitimated and recognised in light of the (unconditional) human good. This is in contrast with cleverness, wish, and decision, all of which can be well or poorly directed (see Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* Ithaca: 1993, pp.67-71).

<sup>88</sup>Just as *phronesis* is distinguished from mere 'cleverness' because it implies ethical virtue, it is the issuing of orders which distinguishes *phronesis* from mere 'understanding'.

extended experience comes the potential for a more secure grasp of abstract ethical concepts which allows the man of practical wisdom to reason in a creative and independent way, rather than in an imitative and mechanical one.<sup>89</sup>

Looking at *phronesis* in this way, we see that there is more to it than just instrumental reason. *Phronesis* is 'end specific' – its aim is *good*, and not merely effective action. Aristotle is clear that the desire for the proper end which activates *phronesis* grows out of and thus *depends on* ethical virtue: "We cannot be prudent without being good" (NE 1144a31). Lacking the end desired by the ethically virtuous agent, *phronesis*, deteriorates into mere cleverness (*deinotes* 1144a23ff.), the capacity, given any end, to determine the best means to that end, whether virtuous or vicious.<sup>90</sup> As stated above, the

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<sup>89</sup>This is not to say that the *phronimos* must always act according to a conscious conception of the abstract human good. At the same time, *phronesis* is not only appetite "in harmony" with reason – this is ethical virtue. As Hardie rightly points out, the bad man who desires a perverted end may be able to *reason* his way there, and in doing so, harmonize (calculative) reason/cleverness and appetite (*Aristotle's Ethical Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: 1980, pp. 225-228). To avoid this conclusion, he suggests that one must infer that for Aristotle, the 'particular end' desired by the *phronimos* in fact involves (or grows out of) an "intuitive thought of the end" determined by intellect, specifically *nous* (ibid., p. 227). See also Reeve, C.D.C.. *Practices of Reason* (p. 79).

<sup>90</sup> As Aristotle refers to *phronesis* as the primary virtue of the deliberative/calculating part of the rational soul (NE 1143b15), that it could be indistinguishable from cleverness, or "headless," is unlikely (again, see Hardie *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: 1980, pp. 226ff; Reeve *Practices of Reason* Oxford: 1992, p. 79). Hardie notes that identifying *phronesis* with instrumental reason (cleverness) given an end results from too narrow a reading of the *Ethics* (*Aristotle's Ethical Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: 1980, p.226). Similar to Bostock (*Aristotle's Ethics* Oxford: 2000, p.86), he points to the different 'levels' of practical wisdom one can have – from the good sense of an individual who has been 'trained' in ethical virtue, to the understanding of the human end attributable to the good legislator. The concept of *deinotes* is useful in that through it, the reader is forced to acknowledge the ways in which *phronesis*, in its most perfected and complete state, involves, not only ethical virtue, but mind/intellect (*nous*) as well. There is a temptation, given Aristotle's division of the rational soul to restrict the influence of *nous* to the contemplative part of the rational soul. However, upon closer examination, it seems to play a role in both contemplative and practical parts of the soul – it's at the beginning and end. The *phronimos*, or possessor of practical wisdom, is aware of the right end – which, though *sustained* by right desire (ethical virtue), is in fact determined by *nous*: "in practical inferences it [*nous*] apprehends the ultimate and contingent fact" (NE 1143a35ff). *Nous* is involved in practical wisdom because it works with both particulars and universals, it apprehends both "beginning and end" (NE 1143b10). That is, it begins with particulars, but results in 'spotting' the universal immanent in them, i.e., it identifies the universals accurately. The 'universals' spotted by *nous* (which includes the human good) are manifested in the teachings of the older, wiser, reputable men in a community. Therefore,



ethically virtuous man consistently desires the *right* end – the mean – in a particular situation, and does this because he has been habituated to want what is good by imitating older, already virtuous people.<sup>91</sup> Once the desire for the good is a stable and secure part of man’s character, the ethically virtuous man can, with the help of the intellect, come to grasp more consciously and understand more deeply the abstract conception of the general human good (which grows out of what man is as a kind of thing) that frames his ‘trained’ desires. These desires are met because of the other crucial component of *phronesis* – instrumental reason – a capacity which is ‘neutral’ but essential in that it indicates the best means to arrive at the desired ends.

Thus, *phronesis* is a form of theoretical knowledge that is not prior to, but in fact follows from the performance of good actions (and the emotions necessary to prompt them).<sup>92</sup> Only given the *active* experience necessary to secure ethical virtue, can *phronesis* be cultivated and come to play an active role in one’s life. However, dependent though they are on one another, *phronesis* and ethical virtue are distinct, the latter allows man to move beyond imitation, and to act reasonably and creatively in new situations.<sup>93</sup> Both

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they inform the training involved in ethical virtue. Practical wisdom then “must include the intuitive thought of the end as well as the intellectual powers required for the discovery of the means” (Hardie. *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: 1980, p. 227).

<sup>91</sup> The ethically virtuous man’s appetite has been penetrated by right reason (*orthos logos*) implying a fixed orientation towards, though not necessarily a conscious understanding of what is fine/noble (*to kalon*, the abstract good). This results in the consistent desire for what is good in a particular situation (the mean). Recall that human action is triggered by desire, and that it is the appetitive part of the soul which has to do with desire and feelings more generally. Recall too that excellence in character – ethical virtue – means having the right ‘appetites’ (specifically desires ‘penetrated by reason’ so that they are aimed towards what is genuinely good) and not merely directed at attaining one’s most immediate whims (for instance, instinctively avoiding pain and indiscriminately pursuing pleasure). As desires prompt action, ethical virtue is that state which consistently results in good actions (good because these actions are motivated by an enduring disposition possessing the *correct* desires) but not necessarily an awareness of *why* those desires are correct.

<sup>92</sup> This order – action before knowledge – indicates why the *polis* is essential to ethical virtue: without a community, men lose the opportunity to imitate others who are already virtue practitioners, and as a result, have no access to ethical virtue.

<sup>93</sup> At *NE* 1144b28-9, Aristotle equates *phronesis* with *orthos logos*, that which is said to be the guiding principle of those ‘corrected’ desires – the mark of ethical virtue. In this, ethical virtue and *phronesis* are presented by Aristotle as dependent on one another, neither can function properly without a harmony between them: “it is not possible to be good in the true

ethical virtue and *phronesis* are enduring states of properly oriented desires which result in good action, but the latter allows for more independence and autonomy, encouraging innovation and growth.

*Phronesis* therefore might be understood as a highly developed, critical, and reflected upon level of ethical virtue, the primary difference of which is manifested in the capacity to deal not only with decisions which fall clearly into a type, and thus require basic imitation, but with new situations, i.e., those in which virtuous activity demands the reasonable and creative application of principles. But what is added to ethical virtue to result in this capacity for reasoned creativity? Aristotle claims that a more profound understanding of the state of knowing that is *phronesis* comes through observing the actions of those who are already practically wise, the *phronimoi*. From what has just been said, the *phronimos* is the man who is already ethically virtuous, and deliberately chooses to do the best action in his situation. The action of the *phronimos* grows out of both the awareness of what is good generally for humans integrated with a responsiveness to the demands of the particular circumstances at hand. But to ascribe these capacities to the *phronimoi* implies a whole range of related abilities and virtues, all of which come together to form an agent who is “flexible and responsive,” able to negotiate the relationship between particular and abstract/universal.<sup>94</sup> I will attempt to look at them in detail below, beginning with what prompts practical reason in the first place.

To ‘trigger’ the action natural to *phronesis*, the *phronimos* must confront – i.e., *perceive* – a contingent and indeterminate situation in which he can make a difference: “the *phronimos* is trying to solve a problem. He is searching for a

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sense without prudence, nor to be prudent without ethical virtue.” There is a continuous circle whereby *phronesis* and ethical virtue are further actualised and sustained: “they [the virtues] cannot exist without *phronesis*” (NE 1144b20-1).

<sup>94</sup> Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, p.306).

way to act well or achieve *eudaimonia* in this particular situation.”<sup>95</sup> This indicates that *phronesis* is concerned first with the perception of those *particulars* over which he can have some influence – with making decisions about how to achieve a specific good given *these* concrete circumstances, at *this* particular point in time.<sup>96</sup>

How then does he decide which actions best promote the goal established by virtue? Aristotle claims that *phronesis* involves “deliberative excellence” (*euboulia*: “correctness that expresses what is expedient for promoting the [right] end” NE 1142b31-3).<sup>97</sup> In order to deliberate well, the *phronimos* must have understanding (the familiarity required to make sound judgements about things which are variable; NE 1143a1-18), and consideration/equity (the acute sensitivity to the particular details of a concrete situation which might demand ‘tinkering’ with a general rule; NE 1143a19-24.).<sup>98</sup> Like ethical virtue, they involve “things which could be otherwise” – therefore, each one evolves

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<sup>95</sup> Reeve. *The Practices of Reason* (Oxford: 1992, p.69).

<sup>96</sup> “Perception of particular cases takes precedence, in ethical judgement, over general rules and accounts” (Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* Cambridge: 1981, p. 294). While there is undoubtedly a shift when making ethical judgements that increases the force of the concrete particular – a particular situation might demand that a general rule be overridden (thus the need for equity). This does not mean that the universal/general concept in ethics has only a small role to play, human beings need abstract concepts. Nussbaum highlights the fact that human beings are not always “good judges...operating ethically as well as we should” (ibid., p. 304) – it is this human imperfection that gives rise to the need for rules/general principles.

<sup>97</sup> Deliberative excellences (*euboulia*) is end-specific, it aims at the true good. This makes it unlike *deinotes* (cleverness) which is simply calculative reason aimed at any goal (NE 1142b28-31). This well directed deliberation reinforces the central role ethical virtue plays in *phronesis* – it provides the proper, if incompletely understood, end to the part of the soul which deliberates.

<sup>98</sup>This makes the *phronimos* the quintessential equitable/decent man (*epieikes*). For Aristotle on equity, see: NE 1137a31-1138a4; *Pol.* 1267b7; *Rhet.* 1374a18-b22, and for more general analyses, see Brunschwig, J. “The Aristotelian Theory of Equity” in *Rationality in Greek Thought* eds. Frede and Striker (Oxford: 1996, pp.115-55); Sherman, N *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: 1989). This means that equity is *not* an egalitarian/democratic principle. For Aristotle, people are judged and valued differently, according to their worth in/to the community. While this may seem problematic/distasteful to the modern ear, I suggest that recognising the *essential* equality of all human beings and disregarding their *actual* differences (even with the well-intentioned attempt to be fair and give due respect to each person’s ‘dignity’) can cripple those who are, in reality, disadvantaged. Even if we grant humanity’s essential equality (while remembering that Aristotle would not), we must recognise that the equality is *potential*, and it is our concrete circumstances which prevent or cultivate its realisation. Thus, Aristotle’s treatment of people seems to have the benefit of acknowledging and being attentive to their individual and particular situations.

out of experience and cannot be taught to and learned by the very young. Both understanding and consideration imply a level of expertise – an awareness of both “ultimate and particular” (NE 1143a28-9) which transforms mere reason to the *right* reason, vital to the effective work of the *phronimos* who must consistently judge soundly and make good decisions appropriate to the circumstances he encounters.

However the *phronimos* does more than just make decisions, he *acts*. Aristotle claims that *phronesis*, unlike understanding (*sunesis*) and considerateness/decency (*gnomen/epieikes*), must be able to “issue orders” which result in the actual doing of virtuous deeds. That is, the *phronimos* must not only be aware of the relevant ‘facts’ with a sense of what would be decent given their unique qualities, but he must *apply* this sense to his present situation and act. The action of the *phronimos*, informed by his understanding and guided by his consideration, is initiated by a deliberate choice (*prohairesis*). *Prohairesis* does not listen to injudicious passion, nor is it simply the act of deliberation itself. Rather, *prohairesis* is a decision which grows out of a special kind of wish (*boulesis*) – special because it has been penetrated by reason so that it is directed at a genuine good. This good is particular and practical – it aims at the concrete end (the “mean”) in a specific, contingent situation that demands making a choice and taking action. *Phronesis* raises the probability (though never ensures) that man will attain the specific good in the variable situations he confronts.<sup>99</sup> Realising the human good – using reason to act in conformity with virtue – comes through making a *deliberate* choice aimed at attaining a specific good in a contingent situation and, equally important, *performing* the action that follows from such choice.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Nussbaum claims, rightly I believe, that there is always “a gap between being good and living well” (*The Fragility of Goodness* Cambridge: 1981, p.322). Given the kind of creature man is and the world he inhabits, there is only so much even the most virtuous man can do to ensure that his actions will have the results he intends.

<sup>100</sup> See Vernant, J-P. *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1988, pp.55-60).

Thus we see that *phronesis*, though an intellectual virtue, is concerned with concrete, virtuous *action*. The ‘universal’, or abstract sense of the human good the *phronimos* has is important insofar as it is that in light of which he can determine the proper action to take in a particular situation. The *phronimos* therefore has the capacity to integrate an abstract sense of “the good life in general” with the particular, concrete situation at hand, and needs both to determine the right action and the best way there.<sup>101</sup> The sense of the general end suggests that the *phronimos*, though indeed *primarily* concerned with and activated by the particular situation (NE 1142a23-30), does also have a conception of the ‘universal’ end.<sup>102</sup> This abstract conception of the human end however, unlike the abstractions of mathematics and theology, is not rigidly fixed, but is, in a sense, dependent on the contingent situations in which it is manifested and must be recognised: “The situation is a source of illumination; the illumination becomes the source of a new general account to the human good. In this sense and to this extent, the particular is prior.”<sup>103</sup> Given this, the method in ethics will also differ from mathematics, and it is to this method that I will now turn.

## Chapter 5: Method

As in all the other cases, we must set out the appearances, and first of all go through the puzzles, and in this way, we must prove the common beliefs (*ta endoxa*)...ideally all the common beliefs, but if not all, then most of them, and the

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<sup>101</sup> This is not to imply that the *phronimos* must always *consciously* refer to the general human good before making and acting on a particular decision in a situation, but one might expect that some general “set of ideas about how to live” does influence each decision man makes (see Sorabji, R. “Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty, Berkeley: 1980, pp.207-208). Suppose, for example, that one faces a situation which is parallel to circumstances one has already encountered and effectively acted upon, this ‘store’ of knowledge might come into play almost automatically, having been *already* judged in light of a general good. One might argue that *phronesis* should be defined more narrowly, as that capacity which is used in only those situations where one *must* consciously reflect on general good and concrete “mean” – I however see no evidence of this interpretation in Aristotle.

<sup>102</sup> Just as philosophical wisdom *qua* philosophical wisdom does not employ particulars, but needs them to get to the universals it works with, so too does practical wisdom need a sense of the ‘universal’ to get to the ‘correct’ particular though is not itself concerned with this universal in isolation, NE 1144a25-35.

<sup>103</sup>Nussbaum, M. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, p.317).

most important. For if the objections are solved, and the common beliefs left, it will be adequate proof. (*NE* 1145b1-4)

So the thing to do is to make adequate use of what has been discovered while trying to find out what is still missing. (*Pol.* 1329b34-5)

How does Aristotle suppose that men come to form a conception of what man is so that they can competently engage in ethical and political dialectic? Dialectic starts with commonly held *opinions* – existing beliefs about the nature of the world. While dialectic can prove existing beliefs wrong, it does not aim to refute them, but rather to deepen man's understanding of his values, to grasp the reasons behind them.<sup>104</sup> This not only intensifies man's understanding, but allows him to adjudicate reasonably (through persuasive argument based on articulatable evidence) between those beliefs that conflict. Dialectic makes no claim to certainty, its 'answers' are inherently open, acting as footholds in an ongoing process which aims to continually expose and check what lies behind men's opinions. Given that it is an ongoing process, dialectic begins by accommodating incommensurable values (though only in the beginning and not at the end), for rarely can any one belief be renounced categorically; persuasive argument can bring it back to the fore. In this, disagreement and variation amongst men, though undoubtedly difficult, do not pose impenetrable impasses, but rather can act as opportunities to expand and extend one's perception of the world *so that it is more accurate*. This means that Aristotle is not a relativist or perspectivist. There is a fixed truth towards which dialectic moves, and some, i.e., the more experienced and wise, can come closer to it.

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<sup>104</sup> While Aristotle does not have a blind faith in any one society's current beliefs, his aim is not to prove common beliefs wrong solely for the sake of 'winning' an argument (as was the sophists' primary aim). In fact, Aristotle maintains quite the contrary. Common beliefs, he argues, are likely to possess at least some degree of truth for: "men have a sufficient natural instinct for what is true, and usually do arrive at the truth" (*Rhet.* 1355a15). All people, Aristotle claims, "say something true about the nature of things" and though each individual contribution may be negligible alone, together "a considerable amount is amassed" (*Metaph.* 993b1-3) Therefore taking stock of what mankind has passed down is a good place to begin, and especially referring to the most experienced and wise, historically, even cross-culturally.

The process of dialectic requires testing commonly held opinions against further experience, reflection, and counter-opinion so as to make connections between beliefs, phenomena, choice and action. The web of beliefs that results from this process constitutes man's knowledge. As suggested above, this begins by perceiving the 'common properties' of kinds of things (through both direct perception and acceptance of the opinions of others), to apprehending those features which explain and relate objects and thoughts to each other and one's own cognitive and emotional processes.<sup>105</sup> Generally speaking, men come to grasp not merely the 'common properties' of things,<sup>106</sup> but their "salient and relevant" (i.e., connecting) features through a natural process which begins by simply perceiving the world (given life in a political community) and establishing a store of memories given a rich pool of retained perceptions.<sup>107</sup> Memories of perceptions give rise to experience – that which

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<sup>105</sup> In the *NE* for example, Aristotle is setting out the reasons behind why we think certain behaviour is virtuous. He is, according to Burnyeat, explaining "how they fit into a scheme of the good life...[providing] an articulation of a mature scheme of values under the heading of the good" ("Aristotle on Learning to be Good" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Rorty Berkeley: 1980, p.81). Burnyeat argues further that in ethics and politics the understanding embodied by this 'scheme' or web of beliefs "provides motivation for virtuous conduct" (ibid.).

<sup>106</sup> This corresponds to Burnyeat's interpretation of Aristotle's 'the that' ("Aristotle on Learning to be Good" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Rorty Berkeley: 1980).

<sup>107</sup> Frede argues that the human access to essences does not come through a "mysterious quasi-mystical power" which somehow "intuits universals." Rather, human beings are naturally endowed with the capacity to "discriminate perceptively and remember." Human reason acts on these perceptions and memories (i.e., *experiences*) to find, not merely the shared qualities of like things, but "the salient universal in experiential truth." Given the extensive experience needed to forge an understanding of how beliefs and facts fit together, reason will enable men to "characterize reality quite generally." Frede maintains that coming to and understanding universals is the natural (even inevitable) result of living a human life (though it develops to a greater or lesser extent in different people given their natural capacities and circumstances). This means that through perceiving and remembering and the accumulation of rich experiences, together with *reasoned* reflection and induction, man can fit his experiences together into a system/scheme/web. Almost automatically (because of their biological/psychological make-up), men tend to induce general ideas from their experiences and make rudimentary connections about them. Rationality/reason is that capacity which allows men to develop and enlarge this dynamic 'web' of abstract and concrete by continuing to constructively and coherently test and *use* it, connecting more and more experiences and general ideas. Thus, Frede advocates something like a coherence theory of truth/justification in Aristotle, but one which avoids relativism by accepting certain 'empirical' facts about man's psychology (and the 'good' it prescribes) as well as a specific understanding of the function of human reason. Man's psychology naturally endows him with the potential to be

forms the basis of practical, technical, and scientific knowledge. However, perception, memory, and experience (which are predominantly passive) cannot establish the kind of 'high level' definitions that fit into the larger, practical network of beliefs. Alone, they are insufficient to account for man's ability to articulate and derive definitions which *explain* the world in such a way that the categories he forms and connections he makes can be used effectively in deliberating about his own choices and actions. For Aristotle, it is through the *active* application of human rationality/reason to concrete experiences that men can come to know essences and articulate definitions which serve to explain and organize the world in which they carry out their lives.

Aristotle seems to have understood human beings to be biologically disposed to engage in this kind of thinking – i.e., the kind of reasoned/rational thought which forms categories and then makes connections between things. Rational/reasonable thought happens *naturally*, is acquired as men live and act in the world.<sup>108</sup> That is, he suggests that men are naturally endowed with the capacity (and are even unconsciously and automatically inclined) to perceive the world – the 'facts' or phenomena, remember them, reflect on

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reasonable, and through life (given sufficient 'exposure', and time for attentive reflection), this reasoning ability can be actualised. In summary, Frede argues that Aristotle understood reason to be that *naturally acquired* disposition which is cultivated through living life (i.e., through perception, memory and experience) and which serves, given sufficient familiarity with a subject, to fit relevant experiences together in a coherent system that deepens and expands one's understanding of the world ("Aristotle's Rationalism" pp. 157-173 in *Rationality in Greek Thought*). For similar interpretations, see also McDowell "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics" in *Aristotle and Moral Realism* ed. Heinaman (London: 1995, pp.213-218); and Roche "On the Alleged Metaphysical Foundations" in *Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Irwin (pp.65-76). From the perspective of understanding specifically *ta kalon* in terms of coherence, see Cooper, J. "Reason, Moral Virtue and Moral Value" in *Rationality in Greek Thought* (Oxford: 1996, esp. pp.102-13: "the specifically moral value then...is constituted by the order, fittingness and harmony of whatever possesses it"). In his discussion of virtues, Bostock too indicates a similar interpretation (*Arsitotle's Ethics* London: 1995, p.88). These interpretations of human nature, and specifically human reason/rationality supports my understanding of reason not only in Aristotle (examined further below), but also in Thucydides and Pindar as an acquired capacity (and thus needs a certain environment to be well developed) which can negotiate and harmonize our concrete experiences and abstract concepts so as to explain and organise the world.

<sup>108</sup> See Coleman. *History of Political Thought* vol. 1 (Oxford: 2000, pp.131-2), also Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp. 244-245).



them, induce generalisations and draw connections between them. To continually and consciously use (and be open to adjusting) those connections throughout a human life is what it is to be reasonable. This 'web' of definitions forms no 'neutral' theory, it grows out of the inherently evaluative way human beings perceive, explain and use the world around them. Therefore, given the proper environment, men seem to be predisposed to grasp essences and articulate definitions which they can use (in both theoretical discourse and concrete actions) as they work to understand, explain, make choices about and take action in the world.<sup>109</sup>

What effect then does this conception of dialectic and human reason have on ethical and political theory? We have seen that both Pindar and Thucydides presented men as creatures who live amidst contingencies, in circumstances which are often out of their control, nonetheless can act with a *degree* of autonomy in the world. Aristotle too premises his ethics on this observation of human life, and reminds his 'students' that "one must not demand more precision than a given subject allows."<sup>110</sup> In the case of men, beings who can make deliberate choices for a range of reasons to do one thing and not another, exacting precision is impossible – there are simply too many possible variations a single human life can take. These variations multiply when one considers that Aristotle calls men "political animals" – they live together in communities of other 'semi-autonomous choice makers' and therefore in an environment where any one action will necessarily proliferate into a myriad

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<sup>109</sup> Again, Frede argues that this *is* human rationality. And with him, I understand Aristotle's conception of human rationality to be the capacity (and in fact the natural predisposition) to classify objects into groups, to determine causal/explanatory connections between them given attention to the way they interact, and from this, to make generalisations about them which serve to illuminate how the world is and organise it where possible ("Aristotle's Rationalism" in *Rationality in Greek Thought* ed. Frede and Striker Oxford: 1996, pp. 157-173). This interpretation supports the understanding of reason I have endorsed in the preceding chapters on Pindar and Thucydides – that is, as an ability to harmonize and negotiate abstract and concrete so as to allow man to act with a sense of 'reasonableness' in the world, rather than a substantive set of truths or a rule to be mechanically applied. However, in order for men to realise their natural potential for reason, they must live as men naturally should, i.e., in a structured, moral (i.e., evaluative) environment, specifically a *political* environment. This will be expanded upon below.

<sup>110</sup> NE 1094b12-15, 1104a1-5

of outcomes which stretch far beyond even the most well thought out intentions.<sup>111</sup>

The intrinsic indeterminacy of human life does not, for Aristotle, discount the fact that there is a theoretical 'best' for man – man is by nature a certain kind of thing which means that he has a particular way to be best actualised. However, it does lead him to concede that this abstract 'best' is very hard to actually hit upon consistently over a life time, and it takes continuous effort. Dialectic is the mode by which this process of evolving understanding proceeds. The human good is gradually understood through dialectic and it is actualised in a life of reaching for and manifesting this ideal *as best one can in the circumstances*: "we can do fine actions even if we do not rule the earth and sea."<sup>112</sup> Yet given the average human life, there can be no guarantees – men are not gods, despite the fact they have some rather divine capacities. As this is the case, all human action is inherently a risk for men, even actualising the reason natural to them cannot provide absolute certainty about their world. The 'margin of error' generated when dealing with the probabilities and not necessities leads Aristotle to recognize the human need to be compassionate towards themselves and others, to forgive small deviations from the right path when they occur (NE 1109b20). Man must therefore live reasonably and *compassionately*, acknowledging that the process of acquiring

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<sup>111</sup> Aristotle regularly emphasizes the vast range of 'particulars' in men's lives and the impossibility of systematically classifying them all (e.g., NE 1109a24-30, 1110b7, *Rhet.* 1355b10-14). Recall too that the unpredictability of human action because of the uniqueness of each life was an important element of Arendt's ethics as well (*The Human Condition* repr., Chicago: 1998, p.190).

<sup>112</sup> NE 1179a1-5. Davis argues that human beings are in a peculiar position of being inherently "imperfect" in that to actualise the best of their nature, they would have to "jump classes" and become gods. (*The Politics of Philosophy* Lanham, MD: 1996, pp.21-22). As Aristotle calls mind/intelligence (*nous*) immortal (*athanaton*) at DA 430a23 and in the NE refers to mind/understanding (*nous*) as that which is best (*aristo*) most akin (*sungevestato*) to the gods, I would still argue that to conceive of human beings as Davis does is to miss the fact that Aristotle classifies them as beings who have a particular nature which *can itself be perfected* (see NE 1103a25-26, Irwin's translation). It is a human perfection, which is to say different from that of the gods and so cannot be compared to a 'divine' standard. There is an extensive scholarly debate about the role and status of *nous* in Aristotle, but even without taking sides, one can surely posit that he saw men as being different from though capable of knowing about divine (necessary and invariable) things.

knowledge involves acting with incomplete knowledge – one cannot sit down and learn everything and then enter the world fully prepared to act perfectly.<sup>113</sup> The use of human reason and dialectic greatly reduces (though never entirely eradicates) the possibility of error/failure (and its accompanying shame and humiliation). Even the most ‘finely tuned’ man cannot generate substantive knowledge of a fixed and invariable set of ethical truths which, if applied systematically, result in sure consequences. Rather, in developing a broad web of knowledge, man must be *creative* in his actions – he must reflect upon what others have said and done and then himself build on what his experience and has shown. This allows him to be deliberate, to understand (and, if necessary, articulate to others) why he chooses as he does. This understanding gives both himself and the world he acts in a sense of unity and coherence which is strong enough to encourage deliberate (reasoned) and creative action in light of a general sense of what is good for human beings which endures (or rather, itself incorporates) the inevitability of risk and error.

For Aristotle then, human reason in ethical and political matters manifests itself in a particular kind of character who accepts opinions and then dialectically tests them so as to form a web of belief and practice, through which he can act deliberately (with reasons) and creatively with a sense of compassion. Such a character develops and is sustained by operating in a world of constant fluctuation and change. No human attribute (even the quasi-divine reason/rationality) can alter the nature of the cosmos or man’s place in it, but with proper ‘training’ man can activate the potentials he is naturally endowed with to better contend with the ‘piece’ of the world he

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<sup>113</sup> “...you need also to be guided in your conduct so that by doing the things you are told are noble and just you will discover that what you have been told is *true*.” (Burnyeat, M. “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty Berkeley: 1980, p.74). Such truth, however, comes only in *poleis* with good practitioners and good laws that suit men’s potentials for actualisation.

inhabits.<sup>114</sup> Human reason (especially as it relates to ethics and politics) is not omniscient, but: “like the eyes of bats in the blaze of day”, it cannot see clearly all that really is, rather it corresponds to a sense of ‘reasonableness’ which entails a general moral framework and a sense of how to harmonise this with the concrete and particular circumstances one confronts in life (*Metaph* 993b8-10). It is a kind of good sense embodied in an organised and structured perception of the world especially of other moral agents in relation to oneself, honed through dialectic and the ability and sensitivity needed for reasonable creative action.

But how does man’s natural faculty of reason, his ability to harmonize abstract thought and concrete experience together, result in the ability to discern the proper action to take in a given situation? What does dialectic, the discerning tool in the domain of ethics and politics, where human beings lack necessary principles, but are still held responsible for their choices and actions look like in action? How can it be sensitive to the fluctuation and variability inherent in the particular situations which make up human life, and be simultaneously authoritative and stable? In making decisions and acting, men must learn to draw on the evolving web of beliefs, composed of probabilities and likelihood’s (true opinions and not necessary truths) as “banisters” for judgement, choice and action.

As fruitful dialectic works to find a balance (and not negate one of two) between opposing claims, it requires that men be able to argue both sides of a question.<sup>115</sup> No contested proposition will be accepted without honest reflection on and attention given to its alternative: “we must not only state the true view, but also explain the false, since an explanation of that promotes

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<sup>114</sup> It is futile, Aristotle says, to try to change what is natural – nothing can make a dropped stone float up or a fire burn downwards (*NE* 1103a20). Nature can be contrasted to the laws of men in that it has “the same validity everywhere alike” whereas laws change from *polis* to *polis* (*NE* 1134b19-21).

<sup>115</sup> *Topics* 105b1. Evans notes the importance of analysing contrary views in Aristotle’s *EE* 1245b13-18 (quoted in *Aristotle’s Concept of Dialectic* Cambridge: 1977, p.55).

confidence.”(NE 1154a23). So, a dialectical inquiry begins with tentatively positing those opinions men currently have weighed against other factors (views of the wise, and perhaps a broader scope of relevant data) to find a *temporary* harmony and stability. Ethical dialectic is not demonstration, or ‘pure logic’; it must be attentive to the actual human limitations specific to its audience (the shortcomings of their current beliefs) as well as to their particular circumstances, which are open to variation and therefore are not necessary or unchanging. Ultimately the understanding that dialectic develops should cultivate virtuous characters motivated to act nobly.<sup>116</sup>

Dialectic in ethics and politics proceeds from *human perception of the world and the actions that follow from this perception* (and thus the world qualified by the filter of human faculties and indeed those values which position our perspectives). Dialectic in ethics and politics is not about the world itself (which is the concern of pure/scientific *episteme*).<sup>117</sup> However while dialectic is different from these ‘higher’ studies, it must be distinguished also from sophistry in that while its activity “does not reflect an analysis [of Being *qua* being]” it begins from a plausible opinion of what being is (and not whatever opinion might be more persuasive at the moment). It is the distinction between dialectic and sophistry which highlights the fact that not anyone can take on the task of ethical dialectic. The student conditioned to engage successfully in this kind of reasoning has been habituated in the right environment and thus focused in the right direction. He is aware of, and actually already loves the noble and good, but does not understand why this is the case. He has acquired this correct orientation by living in a *polis* structured by the right laws and thus according to what people of the best sort around him commonly believe. Thus, Burnyeat claims that the starting point of the study of ethics is an (uncritical) awareness and love of “the

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<sup>116</sup> “understanding...will itself provide new and more reflective motivation for virtuous conduct” Burnyeat, M. “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” in *Essays on A’s Ethics*. ed. Rorty (Berkeley: 1980, p. 81).

<sup>117</sup> Evans, J.D.G. *Aristotle’s Concept of Dialectic* (Cambridge: 1977, p.6).

'that'.<sup>118</sup> Habituated experience through engagement in the practices of a particular community and becoming aware of the values inculcated therein is a legitimate, indeed the only 'starting point' for ethical discourse and hence, it matters most to be in a community where best practitioners set the standards for habituation.<sup>119</sup>

## Chapter 6: Politics: The Role of Law in the Cultivation of Man

In what follows I will examine the *polis* and its role in cultivating man's ability to flourish, where 'flourishing' is understood to consist in a life of virtuous – that is, reasonable and creative – activity. Specifically, I will look at the law and its role in the development of practical wisdom – *phronesis*. As discussed above, *phronesis* is constituted by a coherent yet evolving system of thought and action oriented around an accurate conception of what man naturally is, and therefore, his ultimate good. The possessor of *phronesis*, the *phronimos*, must be ethically virtuous – that is, because of proper habituation, he must consistently do what is fine/noble for man given the indeterminate situations he finds himself in *because he in fact loves* the (abstract) human good. The habituation that cultivates ethical virtue (a precondition for *phronesis*) comes only through living in a *polis*, which is to say, through actively participating in the practices its laws direct. Because of the guidance provided by law, citizens (should) not only come to know 'rationally' what a good human life consists in, but they should develop the right desires and motives (i.e., those directed at 'living well'): "what is in question is the need for authoritative structures and motives as a means to forming moral virtues, to eliciting those elements of character that can make life desirable."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Burnyeat, M. "Aristotle on Learning to be Good" in *Essays on A's Ethics*. ed. Rorty (Berkeley: 1980, p.71).

<sup>119</sup> Of course, it is not the only way to begin an analysis. Aristotle lists: "induction, perception and others still." It is however the originating point which is proper to ethics (*NE* 1098a32-b4).

<sup>120</sup> Salkever. *Finding the Mean* (Princeton: 1990, p.118). Emotion/appetite and reason must act together in man's deliberate choice (*prohairesis*), which Aristotle claims is "thought combined with desire or desire combined with thought" (*NE* 1139b5). Habituation through law affects both. That is, the right motive/desire, i.e., acting out of a love of what is fine/noble, is

The law is then essential for man's moral development. Only it can cultivate a virtuous disposition, where (roughly speaking) man's reason knows the abstract human good and his appetite and desires long for it.<sup>121</sup> Knowing what virtue consists in is thus secured by an enduring orientation towards and desire for the good (as defined by the *polis*). The laws of any *polis* define and endorse a general idea of what living well is, and aim to instil a love for this kind of life in its citizens through the education it prescribes and the habits it develops. Ideally, men then learn to apply this abstract understanding of 'living well' equitably to the concrete details of their own lives (that is, given a general sense of the proper human end, they learn to determine the means to it in specific, contingent situations). As such, the laws of a *polis* do not offer the same kind of certainty as those of *episteme* (or, to take two modern examples, Kant's categorical imperative or the utilitarian principle). Rather, it serves to "urge people towards virtue and exhort them to do what is fine" (*NE* 1180a6-8), but does not provide explicit steps for applying this general understanding.<sup>122</sup>

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acquired by first being compelled by the laws (fear of punishment), and subsequently developing the personal desire to act as they direct.

<sup>121</sup> The need for more than reason in the form of good arguments based on/employing abstract ideals is apparent in Thucydides' account of Pericles' famous funeral oration: "the greatest gift to the city is not in public speeches, but in daily beholding her power in action, in being *like lovers to her*" (2.43, my italics). A love for the *polis*, its constitution and those values it upholds, is vital to a flourishing city. Both feelings/passions and reason must be integrated, directed towards a common end. For Aristotle, this comes through law.

<sup>122</sup> This is not to imply that the law is a gentle much less passive force, simply indicating the good and hoping that the people will accept it. The law, Aristotle claims, "has the power to compel" (*NE* 1180a22). This compulsion comes through a system of reward and punishment; through sanctions, penalties, corrective treatments on the one hand, and through the praise and respect of one's peers on the other. The desire for praise and the fear of blame seemed to be for Aristotle a (if not, *the*) primary motivation for 'good behaviour'. Though perhaps initially painful, once accustomed, i.e., once *habituated*, the ideals inherent in the law and the practices which fall out of them will become 'natural' to citizens. Their characters, indeterminate at birth, will be formed by the *polis*. This can be seen in direct opposition to the modern liberalist view in which the state should have no say in the moral development of the citizens. Morality is inherently *private* for each citizen to decide him/herself. With this, 'public value', because necessarily 'neutral', comes to be defined numerically and materially, the good = more stuff.

The abstract good of the *polis* is manifested most perfectly in the actions of the *phronimoi*, men whose ability to deliberate well and act appropriately in particular circumstances itself depends on internalising the law through reward participation in the practices and education provided by the *polis*.<sup>123</sup> Because these circumstances are contingent and unique, determining the proper means to the 'lawful' end is not mechanical. It demands more than rule following or rigid application of the law – that is, it calls for responsive attention to the specific details of the circumstances, and the capacity to see precisely how they fit into the *polis*' more general conception of the good. Finding the right particular means to this common end thus entails *creativity*.<sup>124</sup> Developing the capacity to be creative (in this limited sense) is aided through engagement with poetry. As such, an analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* will follow the discussion of law below.

### *The Law and Reason*

"Culture serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world, which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous and presents an endless array of singular things. Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> This internalisation presupposes *experience* which yields the capacity to use justly the general principles in the concrete world he inhabits. The Aristotelian *phronimos* is an abstraction of a particular *kind* of man – like Pindar's victorious athlete and the exceptional leader of Thucydides, he exists between beast and god, but is himself inescapably situated (limited by the experiences his city affords him), and thus is, in a sense, a more humble being than the one portrayed by the two earlier authors.

<sup>124</sup> In "The Philosopher vs. The Citizen" (*Political Theory* vol. 4 (1998) esp. pp.147-56) Villa argues persuasively that Arendt understood the acceptance of fixed principles and rules (and the kind of "mechanical thought" which grows out of them) to lead to totalitarianism. The need to cultivate "independent judgment" and "deepened moral integrity" through *active* thought and continuing questioning was thus, for Arendt, imperative. I am very much influenced by, indebted to, and in accord with this premise, though the extent to which Aristotle would encourage such critique, much less "independent judgement" is undoubtedly slim (especially anything resembling a modern, liberal's understanding of this).

<sup>125</sup> Kopytoff, I. "The Cultural Biography of Things" in *The Social Life of Things* ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: 1986, p.70).



Kopytoff's "culture" performs a function similar to the Aristotelian *polis*, though the structure imposed by the *polis* does not aim only to make things ordered and thus, comprehensible, but has a definitive role to play in *moral* development – it cannot be 'neutral'. The laws of a(ny) *polis* presuppose a particular conception of the human good, and aim to instil and actualise it in its citizens.<sup>126</sup> In positing such a good, the law provides a stable and enduring framework that is essential for the cultivation of reasonable thought and deliberate action. By being raised according to the laws of a *polis*, citizens are gradually 'evaluatively oriented' – they come to understand a particular conception of living well, and their appetites are 'trained' through repeated practice to desire this view of the good life.<sup>127</sup> In light of this general notion, they can, over time learn to connect coherently and integrate smoothly their conduct and beliefs, revealing (and actually *creating*) a sense of unity in both their own identity and the world external to them. Man, Aristotle claims, needs to learn to "connect together propositions in an orderly way" (*NE* 1147a22) in order to understand and effectively (deliberately and with reason) realise 'the good life'. The law provides him with the means he needs to establish this order.

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<sup>126</sup> Many modern, pluralistic democracies claim to be 'neutral' in terms of an overarching, substantive good, suggesting instead that society is better organised when all citizens are granted some basic rights aimed at guaranteeing their freedom to choose and realise their own conception of the good life. This, however, is a false freedom. Stated neutrality in politics does not destroy the fact that *every* political organisation aims at a good (for it is this good, no matter how 'thin', that forms the basis for the organisation in the first place). Failure to make this good explicit leads to 'default' goods guiding (and often distorting) policy decisions. Furthermore, granting rights in a society which claims to be neutral in terms of 'the good' is powerless to ensure that the duties which complement those rights and actually allow them to be exercised, be performed (For further discussion, see O'Neill, Onora. *Reith Lectures*, no. 2, 2002: BBC Radio 4).

<sup>127</sup> This is a long process, indeed, Aristotle says the need to live according to laws lasts a lifetime (*NE* 1180a1ff.). Only given this kind of ongoing 'political' /law guided experience can men's appetite and reason come together such that knowing results in *action*. Without this 'comprehensive' kind of knowing (i.e., knowing which embraces both desire and reason and thus results in *using* the knowledge *NE* 1146b33-35), men can perhaps "string [the right] words together," but will not consistently act well (*NE* 1147a20). This is the root of one of Aristotle's critiques of Phaleas' regime, which aimed to redistribute material wealth on egalitarian principles. Merely equalising the goods amongst the citizens is parallel to knowing words but lacking the desires necessary to realise them. "Desires," Aristotle says, "need levelling more than possessions, and that is not possible without an adequate education under the laws" (*Pol.* 1266b28-31).

Contrary to (much modern) intuition then, Aristotle did not take the 'good' endorsed by a particular *polis* to be a constraint on human freedom but in fact saw it as a necessary condition of exercising it.<sup>128</sup> Living in a 'value-laden' political community, being (morally) educated under its terms and participating in those practices it deems worthy, is precisely that which gives man those (stable, yet flexible) points of reference beyond his own (impulsive and often illogical) personal wishes and desires. A flourishing political life is a *necessary* condition for the development of virtue: "the law," Aristotle claims, "instructs us to express each virtue and forbids us to instruct each vice" (*NE* 1130b24-25).<sup>129</sup> The structure imposed by the laws, grounded in the values they endorse, and manifested in particular customs and practices, guide human 'appetite' and subsequent behaviour in such a way that patterns appear, causal connections emerge (probabilities which can be generalised) into which men's actions and the reasons behind those actions can fit – to be investigated, accepted or critiqued. Public/external, commonly held values develop the (ever-expanding) 'web' of belief and practice that man needs to articulate the reasons behind his own desires and actions, as well as to understand those of others.<sup>130</sup> This broader, public 'viewpoint' (and the

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<sup>128</sup> This depends on one accepting the premise that freedom to pursue one's spontaneous and erratic desires cannot yield a unified sense of self necessary for deliberate agency and thus does not constitute human freedom.

<sup>129</sup> Here virtuous activity and "flourishing" imply at least some level of inter-polis peace – i.e., not the militaristic 'flourishing' of Sparta *Pol.*1334a22ff.), nor even the 'flourishing' of Periclean Athens which placed such great weight on courage and empire. Aristotle is clear that political life should prepare men for leisure (*scholē*) above work and war: "while there is need to be capable of engaging in occupation and going to war, there is more need to be capable of living in peace and being at leisure." The former activities are useful, the latter, noble (*Pol.*1333a42ff; 1337b31-1338a24). Salkever argues that both Plato and Aristotle attempted to counter the potential of the *polis* to have an "excessive commitment to...love of victory and rule" (*Finding the Mean*, Princeton: 1990, p.191). There is a sense in which modern "democratic" societies which revolve around free market economies are analogous to war – a constant competition, but which have no definitive end, only an ongoing attempt for 'more'.

<sup>130</sup> Davis argues that to live according to laws provides, paradoxically, the 'sovereignty' necessary to exercise human freedom: "Freedom to do what one wishes, and do so self-consciously, requires that one articulate the idiosyncratic principles according to which one lives, but this means ordering one's life according to certain principles" (*The Politics of Philosophy* Lanham, MD: 1996, p.103). Though I would argue about Davis' use of "idiosyncratic principles" (which, as private, would seem to provide little support), I too

capacity it cultivates to see and communicate reasons for acting/thinking one way and not another) is a precondition for the development of ethical virtue and the exercise of practical reason.<sup>131</sup> And almost paradoxically, the structure imposed by law is precisely that which equips men with the tools they need to critique the laws and the conception of the good that shapes them – to be a reasonable and deliberate actor, man needs external values to build on and react to.<sup>132</sup> Men can only develop an *abstract* sense of what man is and what is good for him *as a kind of thing* by living, as humans naturally do, amongst other men in a political community.<sup>133</sup>

Just as there is a definition of man for Aristotle, so too is there is a definition of the *polis*. In its most basic terms, the *polis* is a ‘naturally’ occurring community of people united by the shared goal of “living well.”<sup>134</sup> For

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maintain that without some structure to their beliefs, men jeopardise their freedom, for random, unreflected beliefs are more vulnerable to external forces/chance as there is no defence when they are challenged.

<sup>131</sup> The capacity to grasp a common property is one of the things that separates man from beast – men can understand (and use!) ‘universal’ (*kathalou*) concepts, whereas lower animals have only “appearance and memory” (NE 1147b5). Because the *polis* revolves around a range of activities and institutions which aim at the good life generally for all citizens (i.e., “not at some advantage close at hand, but at advantage for the whole life” (NE 1160a22-25) – law courts, public education, festivals, centres of commerce – man can see his actions as an important contribution to, though only a part of, a much larger whole, each part contributing in a different way to the realisation of a common conception of the good life (see Sherman, N. *Fabric of Character* Oxford: 1989, p.133).

<sup>132</sup> That the law educates man so that he can, in a sense, transcend it is apparent from Aristotle’s comment that the law, “having educated rulers for such eventualities [situations that the law does not seem to cover adequately], hands over to them, to be managed and decided by their most just opinion, the things it leaves out. It allows them further to set things right wherever, as the result of experience, *they deem something else to be better than the existing laws*” (Pol. 1287a23ff., my italics).

<sup>133</sup> Over time (and with the privilege of some leisure for reflection), the guided experience a ‘legal framework’ supplies will cultivate practical reason, *phronesis*, which, as discussed above involves a ‘general’ abstract conception of what a good human life looks like which is balanced with a responsiveness to the particular situation at hand. The laws of the *polis* provide the conditions necessary for the development of *phronesis*, because they offer a ‘stage’ in which men can act where rules and practices reveal and in fact, create patterns of human behaviour. Perception of such patterns is the basis for abstract thought – an element fundamental to *phronesis* which can be used in understanding and making choices in the concrete situations which compose one’s own life. The laws of the *polis* illuminate man’s sphere of responsibility, thereby increasing his autonomy and accountability. For further discussion, see Vernant, J-P. *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1988, pp. 45-48).

<sup>134</sup> Pol. 1252b31. However, with Yack (*The Problems of a Political Animal* Berkeley: 1993, pp. 88-108) and Coleman (“Neither the *Ethics* nor the *Politics* is a biological treatise. The *polis* is not

Aristotle, there is a 'best' *polis* (structured by the best regime/laws/constitution – *politeia*): "one system [of government] is by nature the best everywhere."<sup>135</sup> The laws of the best *polis* are best because they are established and designed according to what man by nature is, seeking to provide those conditions necessary for the exercise of his proper function (*ergon*) – encouraging him (sometimes through coercion and force) to perform "activities of the soul in accordance with complete virtue." Through laws (and the ensuing practices, habits, and customs) a *polis* should strive to cultivate all the potential virtues/excellences (*aretai*) in the human soul (citizens should be 'fully stretched'<sup>136</sup>) which means securing the environment necessary for utilising those capacities which are peculiarly human and motivating men to do so. The two entities – man and *polis* – therefore share a distinct and interdependent relationship in Aristotelian thought: the *polis* derives its proper structure from man's essential nature, but men can realise

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an organic body, but like one" *History of Political Thought* vol. I Oxford: 2000, p. 193), I believe it is important to regard the *polis* as 'natural' in a way that is different, not so purely 'biological/organic' than that of human beings, and even further still from the 'natural-ness' of plants: "The Aristotelian *polis* takes its natural character...from human attributes and ends, not from some inherent potentiality for a completed and perfected form of its own" (Yack *The Problems of a Political Animal* Berkeley: 1993, p.90). The "natural-ness" of the Aristotelian *polis* has led to some debate amongst scholars: Davis for instance, argues that Aristotle's ethical and political texts imply a belief that men and their *poleis* are most often (perhaps even always) flawed, which directly opposes his understanding of nature generally. He argues further, and wrongly I believe, that a perfect man would be a god (*The Politics of Philosophy* Lanham, MD: 1996). For Aristotle, men can be "godlike" in being blessed/happy, and in this be worthy of congratulations rather than praise (*NE* 1101b10ff..) But they are essentially different than gods: their lives are embodied by deliberation, choice, actions, friendship, etc.– all things which Aristotle claims are foreign to divinity and which make the human end distinct from the divine one (*NE* 1178b7ff.). Yack addresses the tension created when one questions how consistently imperfect *poleis* can be said to be natural, and thus something which, according to Aristotle's understanding of nature, should come about 'always or for the most part' (*Phys.*197a32). He resolves this apparent contradiction by saying that the *polis*, though natural, is not a "natural whole" for it lacks its own "internal principle of motion." Building on a distinction from the *Physics* (192b30-6), Yack claims that an Aristotelian *polis* does not *have* a nature, but exists *by/according to* nature. The *polis* comes about because of what men are, through the *habits* of men, because someone, at some point *chose* to "put one together" and many continued to perpetuate it. Furthermore, he claims that the *polis* exists not for itself, but for the sake of securing the good life for men and, so long as it secures such a life for *some* of its citizens, Yack argues that it is performing its natural function. Because a *polis* is not a "natural whole" with an "internal principle of motion," nor an end for itself, it cannot be required to fulfil Aristotle's criteria for a 'natural' entity (*The Problems of a Political Animal* Berkeley, 1993, esp. pp.88ff.).

<sup>135</sup> *NE* 1135a5. See also, *Pol.* 1269a3ff., 1282b7; *Rhet.* 1368b8-10, 1373b5-9.

<sup>136</sup> This is a term I borrow from Coleman who used it in a seminar on Aristotle at the LSE.

their proper natures (and in fact, can come to access and understand this nature) only through active life in a *polis*. In other words, a *polis* should grow out of an accurate understanding of what man abstractly is, yet coming to understand this, much less actualising this latent human potential itself depends on participating in *polis* life, and paying attention to others living in concrete, particular *poleis*.

Despite Aristotle's claim that there is a best *polis*, observation reveals that existing *poleis* are based on a diverse range of ideas of what the good life for man is and have been structured accordingly – are they, for example, ruled by laws, by rich men, by men who are almost gods, by labourers or soldiers?<sup>137</sup> Clearly, some political communities will be closer to the 'truth' than others, i.e., some will have laws which grow out of an accurate understanding of what man is, and will aim to realise his distinctly human potential for virtuous activity. Others however, will misidentify the human good to a greater or lesser extent (thinking it, for instance, a life of physical pleasure, or, like the Spartans, courage and strength in war, or perhaps a life aimed solely at individual gain). Is there any hope for citizens of a misguided *polis*? If, for Aristotle, it is of "supreme importance" where man is raised because the desires he has and the abstract ideas he comes to grasp about the proper ends for a human life are derived from his concrete experiences of living life amongst other men, the customs and practices into which he is acculturated, how can a man brought up in a less-than-perfect *polis* come to be ethically virtuous, much less, a *phronimos*?

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<sup>137</sup> In *Politics* III, Aristotle discusses three 'ideal' regime types: monarchy, aristocracy, and polity; and three derivatives from them: tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. The derivatives are "deviant" because in no case do they rule, whether by one, few, or many, with a view to the common good. This is what distinguishes the ideal types: "all regimes that look to the common advantage turn out, according to what is simply just, to be correct ones, while those that look only to the advantage of the rulers are mistaken and are all deviations from the correct regimes" (*Pol.* 1279a17ff.). In both ideal and deviant regimes, the citizen is most simply defined as one "having a share in judgement and rule or office" (*Pol.*1257a22ff.).

We have seen that Aristotle believes that man is responsible for his character.<sup>138</sup> In this is the implicit belief that while undoubtedly very difficult, it is not altogether impossible to ‘transcend’ a bad upbringing. The capacities developed by living in a community structured by laws which provide (public/external) reasons for doing one thing and not another can provide men with the basic tools necessary to act and communicate productively and effectively with others. Laws provide citizens with a common and accessible standard/goal which serves to structure thought, judgement, communication, and debate. Even less than perfect communities neither prevent abstract thought nor fail to ‘train’ desires to follow reason (and not personal preference) – they simply do not cultivate the *best* thoughts or desires.<sup>139</sup> But being raised to act according to laws, even if they are not the ‘best’ ones, performs an essential task in man’s intellectual development: it teaches citizens what it is to act in light of and with others towards a common good, and provides them with explicit, articulatable reasons which can be communicated to and understood by other citizens.

Aristotle’s *Politics* reveals his conviction that a flourishing *polis* requires a secure identity in order to ensure the stability and continuity necessary to cultivate human virtue: “Whatever is lawful is in some sense just” (*NE* 1129b13).<sup>140</sup> Part of this can be explained by the fact that to become virtuous,

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<sup>138</sup> Though the capacity for deliberate choice (the basis for happiness) does depend on some external goods, it does not demand “supreme power” – that is, it is available to most men (*NE* 1176b17-19).

<sup>139</sup> Exposure to ‘better’ communities either directly or through for instance, literature, history, even sophistic debates, *might* serve to re-orient an individual towards a good not endorsed by his particular community (for Aristotle, this ‘exposure’ is limited to better/worse Greek *poleis*, and most surely *not* a random, inclusive selection of any contemporary states, most of which he would deem unworthy of analysis, much less emulation). Again, this is extremely rare and enormously difficult, but possible if one has been given a framework from which he learns how to judge and critique. Generally speaking, it is the specific laws of a *polis* that generate such a framework. Therefore, simply living in any *polis* seems to be insufficient to reveal what is *truly* the best life for man. But the laws’ ability to reveal consistency and structure amidst the indeterminacy of human life perhaps develops in citizens the ‘tools’ they need to reason morally, to argue, debate, and discuss what is or is not just.

<sup>140</sup> This stability however, cannot come from any source, as, for instance, the arbitrary, might-based rule of a tyrannical regime At *Pol.* 1285b33ff., Aristotle reviews the reasons why total

man needs leisure (*scholia*),<sup>141</sup> and leisure is possible only given a certain level of stability. The law provides this. Furthermore, an enduring political structure demands establishing laws that have an existence and force apart from the men who both create and are guided by them.<sup>142</sup> While men tend to feel resentful if they feel another person is inhibiting their choices, Aristotle claims that this is not the case with law. The law, unlike human beings, is impersonal and as such, it can compel without being oppressive (*NE* 1180a23-25). It is “reasoned speech (*logos*) that proceeds from prudence (*phronesis*) and intellect (*nous*) of some sort” (*NE* 1180a22). As individual men are inclined to be motivated by passion rather than reason in their lives, the time-tested, abstract laws of the *polis* provide guidance and a sense of permanence given the contingency and uncertainty inherent in the concrete world.<sup>143</sup> The

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kingship is not properly termed a political community. A kingship is similar (though not identical) to a household (*oikos*) but on a bigger scale in the sense that the father, like the king, does not share his rule. However, unlike the king, the father will keep the good of the entire *oikos* in mind and further, will have the ‘external’ values of the *polis* as constraints on his decisions. A community of people ruled by a single, all-powerful man, while stable in the sense that dissent can be immediately silenced, runs the risk of losing those qualities which are unique to a *polis*: there can be no deliberative choice, no reasoned discourse among equals – brute force is the ultimate arbiter and benefit for the ruler is the primary goal of the community. All decisions are simply up to the king, whether it be reason or emotion guiding them – no outside force can regularly check nor even inform his whims. A ruler can judge nobly only “when educated by the laws” (*Pol.*1287b26-7). In response to the argument that an individual is better equipped than general law to tackle *particular* problems, Aristotle maintains that a resolution of any concrete political dilemma demands a “reasoned” understanding of “the universal” (*ton logon ton katalou*). Therefore, in either case one needs both general and particular, and with a single person in charge, a *polis* runs a greater risk of corruption by overblown, ‘untamed’ passion/emotion/appetite. Even when discussing decency and justice at *NE* 1137a10ff., specifically those situations when the law needs to be ‘fitted’ by decree (*psephismatos*) to a particular case, Aristotle maintains that the fault is not with the law per se, but “the nature of the object itself.” Some exceptional matters make it impossible to legislate by general law, but even those demand a framework from which one can deviate. For further discussion on Aristotle’s understanding of “decrees”, see Salkever (*Finding the Mean* Princeton: 1990, pp. 136ff.).

<sup>141</sup> “It is agreed that a *polis* that is going to be nobly governed must have leisure from doing necessary things” (*Pol.*1269a34) and later, “there is need of leisure both for the generation of virtue and for political activity” (*Pol.*1328b38). To assume, like the Spartans, that virtue comes only in war, is misguided (*Pol.*1334a40ff.).

<sup>142</sup>Laws, though the primary stabilizing force in a *polis*, come from human beings and thus can change. See for example, *Pol.* 1287a24 for ways in which law is trumped by experience, also in his example of doctors in Egypt who could change their treatment if an illness ceases to subside (1286a13-15).

<sup>143</sup> Thucydides also recognised the need for stability and continuity as conditions for life which included more than mere material survival (I.2-7).

continuity provided by law frames the varied communication and interaction within the *polis* and is essential for the development of virtue and the exercise of practical reason in concrete circumstances.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, while laws are the artefacts of men, for Aristotle, they are also *natural* to (and indeed essential for actualising) *human* life.<sup>145</sup> Men without laws cannot be fully human for an unlawful (apolitical) life is reduced to the attempt to merely survive, rather than to live well – i.e., virtuously. As essentially “political animals,” human beings must be citizens.<sup>146</sup>

If there is a right way for a *polis* to be structured, a ‘best’ set of laws (with its following system of education, adjudication, etc.) and if this can be accessed and understood by men, why does Aristotle spend so much time examining ‘alternative’ and imperfect regimes in the *Politics*? Why not merely set out the ideal for less-than-perfect cities to try to emulate? What can this approach tell us about Aristotle’s understanding of abstract law and the cultivation of reason? Aristotle is clear that even if a regime is not absolutely just, all *poleis* succeed at some level if they set out laws to which the citizens are acculturated and subordinate.<sup>147</sup> This, I believe, should not be taken to imply that Aristotle is a relativist. As in his other works, the *Politics* begins with what actually is (in this case, many diverse and imperfect *poleis*). From the particulars, he ‘extracts’ a general understanding, and does not jump (arbitrarily) to a detached ideal of what should be. However, I believe that Aristotle’s investigation of ‘deviant’ *poleis* implies something even more important: his approach suggests a conviction that all human beings require engagement with particular moral ‘content’ (i.e., with other men and their

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<sup>144</sup> Though individual care (e.g., in health, or education, etc.) is undoubtedly preferred, Aristotle is clear that doing what is right for the particular individual requires knowledge of the general/common goals/ends – the universal terms involved (*NE* 1180b13ff.).

<sup>145</sup> Nussbaum identifies the authority of the law in the fact that it is a “summary of wise decisions.” While this in no way undermines its importance and legitimacy, it does indicate the limitations of law in dealing with new situations (“The Discernment of Perception” in *Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Sherman Lanham, MD: 1999, p.159).

<sup>146</sup> *Pol.* 1253a1-18, 1278b17

<sup>147</sup> *Pol.* 1282b10, *Pol.*1337a11



cultural values, historical traditions, enduring habits, and ongoing practices) in order to 'activate' their critical capacities.<sup>148</sup>

Thus the logic behind the *Politics* becomes more apparent – the capacity to critique, analyse, and evaluate soundly one's way of life comes from an examination of a variety of different existing regimes, each with their own specific cultural standards and practices. But any critical analysis must begin by first *living* and *actively participating* in a particular social milieu oneself – we must start from where and what "we are."<sup>149</sup> Over time, an engaged and responsive life shared with others can show men how reasoned speech reveals common goals and ends, and provides the means to express explicit reasons to act for and towards this shared end, rather than simply pursuing personal/private goals. In living with others, men must compromise, but in doing so, they learn to see beyond immediate survival to a long-term sense of "a complete and self-sufficient life which, we say, is living happy and nobly" (*Pol.* 1281a1-3). Aristotle's *polis*, in direct contrast to the modern liberal one, unapologetically promotes a substantive sense of what is good – law is moral. Men must learn to negotiate, listen, observe, and act together not only for "exchange and mutual utility...but about what each other's character should be" (*Pol.*1280a34ff.). By doing so, they move from a myopic concern for their own private preferences to a commonly shared understanding of the human good from which/into which their personal needs/wants grow/fit.<sup>150</sup> This

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<sup>148</sup> These capacities, though general and without definitive content, cannot be developed in a neutral space. The human capacity to be (somewhat) impartial/neutral is the result of being first engaged with specific (i.e., *partial*) ideals and values: "Rules and general procedures can be aids in moral development, since people who do not yet have practical wisdom need to follow rules that summarize the wise judgments of others" (Nussbaum "The Discernment of Perception" in *Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Sherman Lanham, MD: 1999 p.163).

<sup>149</sup> Recall that to act deliberately for (abstract) reasons within a particular external web of other deliberating actors is an essential part of human life, and thus virtue must fit into this mould. By living and acting in a *polis*, men see abstract ideas/reasons actualised – they can see the effects of their actions, both considered and unexpected on themselves and others. And perhaps most important, they learn how to communicate their reasons effectively. Seeing this, experiencing and participating in deliberation, choice, and action in the world *first hand* is the only way to get a substantive sense about what human virtue consists in.

<sup>150</sup> Despite this importance of firmly establishing the common/shared good of the *polis*, Aristotle is quite aware that people will be most concerned with what is theirs – this comes

general sense of what living well is, and the shared attempt by citizens to realise it ensures a level of continuity and stability in men's lives, and provides a context that gives richer meaning to thought and action.

The laws of a *polis* work to orient citizens (through a range of means, and over a lifetime) towards a common good, striving (though rarely, if ever, succeeding completely) to nurture a citizenship who freely choose to act in harmony with the aims of the particular *polis* – whatever those aims may be. By being habituated to act according to law, men learn to be reasonable, to organise their thoughts and particular actions in light of a general sense of living well. This habituation affects the *whole* of their psychology – i.e., being raised under laws directs and cultivates not only their reason, but their emotions and appetites. Through an upbringing and education prescribed by law, people 'receive' an external 'impulse' (or, more bluntly stated, they are forced) to act as the *polis* deems right. Over time, they are habituated to the rules and practices of their society and with luck, are 'trained' in such a way that they desire what it deems good.

Initially this motivation (desire) is not natural, nor is it particularly comfortable for most citizens.<sup>151</sup> To be raised in a *polis* is a process by which an external impulse (provided in the *oikos* by the father and in the *polis* by the laws) is internalised, so that a genuine desire to do virtuous actions for themselves motivates such actions in the first place (rather than fear, or simply a passive/ignorant acceptance of rules): "What you may begin by

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up in his critiques of the *polis* described in Plato's *Republic*: "people care most about what is their own...or only as much as it touches them" (*Pol.*1261b32), see also in the *NE*. Therefore it is better, he says, "for possessions to be private, and to be made common in use" (*Pol.* 1263a38-39). Respectful common use of private possessions depends on legislation which cultivates virtuous characters. Furthermore, being unified by a 'common good' does not eradicate political difference – the *polis* for Aristotle: "a city is made up not only of many human beings but also of human beings who differ in kind" (*Pol.*1261a22ff.), presumably with different ways of manifesting 'living well'. Thus the common good is a general good which is shared by all members of the *polis*, yet not all realise it in a 'common' way. These differences lead to the need for reasonable *creativity*.

<sup>151</sup> "Hence laws must prescribe [the youth's] upbringing and practices; for they will not find these things painful when they get used to them" (*NE* 1179b34-36).

taking on trust, you can come to know for yourself.”<sup>152</sup> A life guided by laws, creates an environment where particular men are habituated to act on publicly recognised – common – values and principles. Communication about how to best realise these values given the inevitability of changing circumstances (for instance, as citizens change in ruling and being ruled) ensures that the *polis* is not a stagnant entity of autmata, but a discursive, reflective community.<sup>153</sup>

While the *polis* governs all citizens by a common set of laws, it is made up of individual men making particular choices and performing concrete actions. This makes even the most ideal law governed *polis* a contingent and variable environment. No matter how fine/noble the constitution, men will regularly confront new situations which do not fall neatly under one law or another. Therefore, while law may indeed point to a fixed good, providing men with *reasons* to act one way or another, men must also learn to be *creative* in their attempts to realise that good.<sup>154</sup> Because “[laws] must be written in universal terms, but actions concern particulars” (*Pol.* 1269a11-12) men must learn not only the word of law, but must understand them in such a way that they

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<sup>152</sup>Burnyeat, M. “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* ed. Rorty (Berkeley: 1980, p.74). As mentioned in the preceding section, this understanding of how a *polis* works depends on certain beliefs about human psychology. Emotions and desires according to Aristotle can be trained, and the *polis’* laws serve to do this.

<sup>153</sup> This raises the issue of whether the “good citizen” must also be a “good man.” Kraut argues persuasively, despite Aristotle’s claim at *Pol.*1276b29 that “the virtue of the citizen must be relative to the regime,” that these two must be seen to have some overlap. He suggests that the good citizen is one who tries to “moderate the defects of [his deviant] regime.” In doing so, he does not fall headstrong into line with defective, yet authoritative practices. Rather he exercises moderation, and uses his “right opinion on practical matters” (which Kraut argues is common to all citizens) to critique and balance out where his regime goes astray – and the net effect of this is *stabilisation* (Kraut *Aristotle* Oxford:2002, pp.368-373).

<sup>154</sup> The direct tie between reasonableness and creativity opens men up to making errors in a way that is different than an error in a mathematical calculation – it involves a risk which is not present in a problem where the variables are fixed. Men must earn some praise for the risk of taking reasonable, creative action itself, and there must be a broader willingness to forgive if such an action leads somewhere unexpected and unintended. This does not mean that all faults are automatically excused, only those which “deviate a little in excess or deficiency from doing well” (*NE* 1109b20). Generally, one may assume that well- thought out, deliberate choice, and one’s best reasoned guess as to what to do in a particular situation will lead to deviations of this magnitude. For a longer discussion on the ‘conditions of pardon’ (see: *NE* 1136a5ff.).

desire, and act on the right things, at the right time, in the right way. This calls for creativity, and thus distinguishes ethical and political discourse from that of pure science (*episteme*), and will be key to explaining why political/ethical theory is improved by incorporating poetry. This difference also indicates why a sense of reasonableness in ethics and politics has its source not in a precise and exacting rule which can be mechanically applied universally, but rather in a 'well entrenched' disposition – a general quality of character which is realised in its ability to use 'universal' laws so that they can fit with, rather than trump particulars.<sup>155</sup>

How can an abstract law be moulded effectively to individual circumstances, in such a way that it both takes into account the particularities of the situation at hand, and maintain the authority of the law? There seems to be a conflict between codified law and those indeterminate men it is meant to govern. On the one hand, law must be fixed (ideally, in accord with human nature) – above and beyond both the forces of human whim and man's raw emotions and passions.<sup>156</sup> On the other, its application must be equitable and compassionate, rather than dogmatic and mechanical. This means that a *polis* must strive to cultivate competent judges, men who do not apply law rigidly, but responsively and thoughtfully. Citizens in general are men who are capable of "deliberation and judgement" (*Pol.* 1275b17-18), and who are justified in holding office because they have been educated/habituated in such a way as to be sensitive to the infinite particularities inherent in life, yet capable of finding a harmony with such particularities and the rule of law. It is precisely such responsiveness to particularities understood in light of the

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<sup>155</sup> A grammarian, Aristotle writes, is not someone who produces something grammatical "by chance or by following someone else's instructions...[but by] expressing grammatical knowledge that is in [him]" (*NE* 1105a22-26). The same is true for virtue. This indicates where 'creativity' comes into play in virtue, i.e., a virtuous person is not simply one who follows the right rules, but one who can apply them appropriately (i.e., *creatively*) in his circumstances.

<sup>156</sup> Yet, for Aristotle, the 'passionless reason' which is the law must be attuned to the reactions the concrete passions of men evoke. Law can only be effective because it has first recognised, understood, and *valued* those emotions it aims to control. Passion may be absent in law, but is a key element in informing it.

general law that results in sound judgement and substantive and enlightening debate and discussion.

If then both the law and the particularities it is meant to organise and guide have some authority, from where can the *polis* derive its stability? Without a rigid hierarchy between the two, is the political realm rendered chaotic, and judgement in it arbitrary?<sup>157</sup> Aristotle is clear about the order in the hierarchy between man and law in the *polis*: “it is preferable that law rule rather than any one of its citizens.”<sup>158</sup> At the same time, he acknowledges the tension that arises if this belief is grasped and applied too rigidly: “all law,” Aristotle claims, “is general (*kathalou*), but in some areas no general rule can be correct,” and again he insists that “some things cannot be embraced under the law” (*Pol.* 1187a20; 1187b20). In any *polis*, it is not the law which judges man’s actions, but *people* (those in political office, e.g., judges) – particular men must evaluate specific actions against the background of the law. Man is at once a member of a species, a certain kind of thing with a fixed *telos* out of which good laws grow. At the same time, each man’s life is unique, more than those common features which have been ‘extracted’ and distilled in law.<sup>159</sup> Practical wisdom implies an ability to balance the two.

To be a ‘fully stretched’ human being, one must observe what human beings do (and have done) and then actually *do* it – a man’s general understanding of human life comes *after* he has himself acted in particular circumstances. Thankfully, each new born does not have to start from scratch. Men inherit the cumulative knowledge of their ancestors, most of which is embodied in

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<sup>157</sup> This tension is highlighted in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses the relationship between decency and justice. At the level of the individual, one can find a similar problem in regards to particular judgements – should one’s present experience change one’s general belief, or should the situation be understood in terms of the general.

<sup>158</sup> *Pol.* 1287a17.

<sup>159</sup> The law “is a general statement and...takes into consideration the majority of cases.”

the laws and customs of their *poleis*.<sup>160</sup> Establishing for and *in* oneself a reasonable and general idea about what man is and (therefore) what is best for him comes *after* 'activity' – i.e., ongoing habituation – in a structured, *political* environment. Actual participation in *polis* life gives man the experience required to stabilise his character (*hexis*), and with this firm 'foundation', he can then start to understand further and 'extract' and articulate abstract concepts and principles about the kind of creature he is. These abstract conceptions of what man is and how he ought to live arise out of man's varied and particular, yet not chaotic *political* experience (it is not chaotic, in part, because laws provide *reasons* for behaving one way and not another and thus provide the necessary structure needed to discuss justice).

Once enshrined in law, these principles/conceptions about how man ought to live are a source of stability – they continue to teach virtue through the practices and institutions they prescribe – training citizens' passions to act *consistently* in accord with right reason. At the same time, once public, they are also made vulnerable, exposed to conscious reflection, critique, and debate, and this reasonable discourse is part of what human virtue is. The law is therefore one of the 'external goods' that man needs to exercise virtue. This is because, for Aristotle, virtue is not embodied by tyrannical rule of brute strength (or some other 'accidental' source of power) aimed at securing individual gain and satisfaction of personal preference, but rather through the use of language, the ongoing attempt to communicate and manifest human excellence through reasoned speech (*logos*) with others.

The huge variation found in human life makes it impossible for any general law (*nomos*) to apply directly to all similar or related cases.<sup>161</sup> But this does not indicate an inherent fault in law.<sup>162</sup> Determining the best course of action

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<sup>160</sup> *Pol.* 1264a1: "there is need to pay attention to the great amount of time and the many years gone by...for pretty well everything has been discovered."

<sup>161</sup> *Pol.* 1269a8, 1282b6, *Rhet.* 1373b30. See also Nussbaum *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981); *Poetic Justice* (Boston: 1995); and *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: 1990).

<sup>162</sup> *NE* 1137b15-20. In fact, Aristotle states explicitly that a law whose scope is intended to be universal but falls short of including a particular circumstance, it the legislator who errs in

does not come from applying even the most just laws mechanically – this would misunderstand both the nature of law and that of the men it is meant to govern. The law needs people capable of using reasoned speech to recognise and incorporate into their judgements those particularities which do not conform neatly to the abstract generalizations of law. Being responsive to and respectful of these subtle, yet significant nuances acknowledges what it is to be human, capable of more than mechanical adherence to rules: “Ruling according to written prescriptions is...a foolish thing to do in any art” (*Pol.* 1286a10). The law however, having been constructed through having given attention to recurring human events over time, should not be denounced for its inability to apply universally – to demand this would be to misunderstand the very nature of law, like demanding that men be immortal. Instead, Aristotle contends that the law must be supplemented by decrees (*psephismatoi*) determined by “decent/equitable” (*epieikes*) citizens (serving as officials in government), who, *precisely because they have been brought up according to laws*, can build on them and innovate creatively when a particular situation demands it: “The law, having educated rulers [*not* legislators] for such eventualities [i.e., situations where the law, as written, does not apply] hands over to them to be handled and decided by their most just opinion the things it leaves out.”<sup>163</sup> However, issuing ‘decrees’ is *not* the norm of a flourishing *polis* – if such a practice were used recklessly and irresponsibly, it would undermine the stability of the *polis*.<sup>164</sup> And it is precisely this stability that is needed to cultivate the kind of prudence necessary to issue just decrees in the first place. In summary, men learn by first living according to fixed laws how to do more than mechanically apply them.

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making the law universal in the first place. The remedy is to do “what the legislator would have said himself if he had been present” (*NE* 1137b23-25).

<sup>163</sup> *Pol.* 1287a23ff; also: 1269a8ff; 1286a7ff; 1282b5ff.. For a discussion on similar issues in the *NE*, see 1137a32ff. and *Rhet.* 1373b17ff. For an interesting discussion on the analogous roles played by “decency/equity” (*epieikes*) in ethics/politics and “acumen” (*agchinoia*) in *episteme*, see Reeve, *The Practices of Reason* (Oxford: 1992, pp. 77-78).

<sup>164</sup> Kraut notes that “it is typical of a tyranny to rule by a series of edicts rather than by a stable system of law.” Justice, for Aristotle, he claims, lies in developing a “stable body of customs and norms, and a coherent legal code that is not altered frivolously and unpredictably” (*Aristotle*, Oxford: 2002, p.106).

The tricky relationship between individual men and general law highlights Aristotle's understanding of virtue as an enduring disposition which involves both a cognitive understanding of and an emotional love for those general ends which define man as a species. This deep rooted psychological-intellectual harmony, cultivated through habituation, yields not only the capacity to judge and act in particular situations which correspond to one's already accepted principles, but also to think *reasonably* and to negotiate unprecedented situations *creatively* (i.e., with reference to established abstract principles (e.g., the law), though not blindly subordinate to them). This capacity for attentive judgement entails not merely knowing "what the laws speak of... but knowing how just actions must be done, and how distributions must be made" (NE 1137a10-15).<sup>165</sup> Education under and respect for (good) laws provides the conditions necessary to cultivate the kind of deeply ingrained character with the capacity to act reasonably and creatively--i.e., for articulatable reasons, perceiving what the right goods are at the right times and seeing the right ways of pursuing them even in situations which fall outside the norm.<sup>166</sup>

A flourishing *polis* then needs the structure of law to educate its citizens to be practically/politically rational, for political rationality (manifested in characters capable of taking reasonable, creative action) can only take root

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<sup>165</sup> Because justice "is found among those who...can have an excess or deficiency of [unconditional goods]" (NE 1137a12-30) man must first learn (often through coercive force based in law and supported through time-tested customs) what the proper 'amounts' of goods are for him generally, and how to determine the proper means of achieving them in particular circumstances. There is a sense in which acting according to the laws of a *polis* is a kind of training/preparation to act in accordance with the something 'beyond' one's own desires. Ideally, this is to act as a fully stretched human being and exemplar of the species.

<sup>166</sup> One might be tempted to argue that a city would be better governed by only 'decrees', tailor-made especially for each unique situation. This would destroy the stability necessary to a *polis* and would lead to the rise of demagogues decrees would start to resemble "tyrants' edicts" (Pol. 1292a23). In speaking of democracy, Aristotle makes this point clear: "where laws do not rule there is no regime (*politeia*). For law ought to rule over everything...and if democracy is one of the regimes, clearly the sort of establishment where everything is managed by decrees is not even a democracy in the authoritative sense" (Pol. 1292a32-36). Nussbaum makes a similar point in terms of ethical rules - "necessary," she says, "because we are not always good judges" (*The Fragility of Goodness* Cambridge: 1981, p.304).



and grow out of a publicly recognised organised web of values, manifested most clearly in established law. In this way, character works in conjunction with the written law, yet also grows from it so as to be able to apply general law attentively and responsively in concrete situations: “flexible, context specific judging is not a concession to the irrational, but the most complete expression of the politically rational.”<sup>167</sup>

Developing this capacity does not come from committing the laws of one’s *polis* to memory, nor can it be acquired by amassing a kind of encyclopaedic knowledge of the laws of many *poleis*. Though study of both is undoubtedly important, it is not, despite what the sophists may teach, sufficient: “...they [sophists] think it easy for anyone to legislate who had made a collection of well-reputed laws. For they suppose it to be a matter of selecting the best ones – as if the selection did not need understanding and as if reaching a correct judgement were not, as it is in music,<sup>168</sup> the most important thing” (*NE* 1181a17-20).<sup>169</sup> The capacity to effectively integrate abstract and concrete – so as to be capable of correct judgement (*to krinai orthos*) and virtuous action – comes first through experience and habituation. This ongoing process (including a continued reflective and critical examination of life) yields a much more profound level of comprehension which allows man not only to theorise about man’s good in the abstract, but to act virtuously in his present circumstances. That is, man learns to be sensitive to the relevant details in his current situation, and act with reasoned creativity. Aristotle claims that to become skilled in legislation demands extended and ongoing experience (*NE* 1180b33-1181a20). While he is clear that legislation “is not a job that can be

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<sup>167</sup> Nussbaum. *Poetic Justice* (Boston: 1995, p.80).

<sup>168</sup> I believe that this mention of and regard for music might be understood as directing the reader to the *Poetics*.

<sup>169</sup> Though Aristotle suggests at the end of the *NE* that a study of the collection of political systems would be useful (*Pol.* and *Constitution of Athens*), he also says that a mere gathering of information will be of no benefit to the man who lacks experience (*NE* 1181b10; see a similar view in Heraclitus on ‘polymathy’ and how it cannot teach insight DK22B40). From Aristotle’s discussion of the “proper audience” for the *NE*, it is likely that his intended reader/listeners had the requisite experience.

done by everyone" (NE 1180b25-27), presumably all should strive to be exemplars in their community, or at the very least, be able to distinguish between truth and sophistry. Thus citizens should seek some understanding of what the good life consists in generally – they should try to attain a sense of “what is good for everybody...advanc[ing] from particulars to general principles” (NE 1180b14-25). Knowledge of political, i.e., human ‘universals’ – even a vague notion that there is something more to life than satisfying one’s own individual preferences – can benefit all men, even if not all can share equally in discussions on the science of legislation/politics, much less be good legislators. Understanding (and *believing*) that there is a general, substantive, common good comes through *political* experience – discourse, judgement, action amongst others – and through this man’s passions and reason find their proper harmony, allowing virtue to take root. Below I will argue that poetry is a form of such ‘experience’, and thus should both precede and continually augment and support ethical and political theory. Aristotle’s *Poetics* then, though clearly a text on and about the art (*techne*) of poetry itself, should also be seen as a work which is closely connected to the *Politics* and *Ethics*, in that engagement with poetry plays a vital role in citizens’ capacity to develop and *actually use* political theory.<sup>170</sup>

## Chapter 7: Poetics: Experiencing the Human Good

What role might poetry, broadly defined, play in political theorising? How might it be especially well suited to serve man, a creature between god and beast, as he strives to flourish as a member of the human species? We have seen that Aristotle understood man to be a creature who is “not simple, but has more than one constituent part” (NE 1154b22ff). On one hand, he is divine in his capacity to grasp and contemplate the simple, eternal facts of the

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<sup>170</sup> Below I will argue that one important link between these texts comes from Aristotle’s belief that a tragedy must represent a “serious” action (*Poetics* 6) – this points directly to his claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that a virtuous human life must consist in serious, not merely trivial/amusing activities (NE 1177a3-5). Another is his emphasis in all three works on *action*. These issues will be discussed below. For an analysis of the *Poetics* as it relates to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, see Hussain, M. *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy* (New York: 2001).

cosmos. He can (and thus, *ought to*) access and study these permanent truths: “as far as we can, we ought to strive towards immortality (*endexetai athanatizein*), and to go to all lengths to live a life that expresses our supreme element” (NE 1177b33ff). A life including contemplation, according to Aristotle, is the best human life, for contemplation manifests the “divine element” in man’s nature (NE 1177a15-25; also DA 3.5).<sup>171</sup> Yet man is also mortal, and like other mortal beings, he is a sentient, appetitive creature with a physical body living on the earth. He is thus subject to the laws of nature, vulnerable to the unpredictable forces of chance, and inclined to indulge his immediate desires and passions.<sup>172</sup> Still, man is held responsible for his decisions and actions.<sup>173</sup> This responsibility arises from his ‘dual’ nature: while forever and inescapably in the physical world, Aristotle believed that man is capable of gaining an understanding of the *objective* and *unchanging* human good, allowing him to stretch his sight beyond his instinctual desires

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<sup>171</sup> I say “including contemplation” (and not simply “of contemplation alone”) because, despite his claim that man should try to be “as immortal as possible,” Aristotle’s distinction between man and god is definitive, and a human life cannot, like a divine one, consist in contemplation alone. Though man has a “divine element” in him, a life according to this alone, would not be human, but “superior to the human level” (NE 1177b27). Aristotle makes this clearer when he states that a “happy” human being “needs external prosperity also, for his nature is not self-sufficient for study” (NE 1178b33-35). For further support of this view, see Broadie who writes “Something might be counted as a glorious good and be also to some extent practicable by us; but that does not make it *our* good, and a *human* end...*theoria*...is best because it is divine” (*Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford: 1991, p.400). The division between man and god is reiterated in different ways throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*: Aristotle says that: “Human beings *become* gods when they are of exceedingly great virtue” (NE 1145a23 my italics). And later he states that no one “chooses to become another” even if it is a god (NE 1166a20). If two things are the same, one cannot ‘become’ the other. Additionally, when speaking of friendship, Aristotle claims that the separation between man and god is too great to account for any such relationship between them, if a friend becomes a god, he says, that friend would cease to be a friend to man (NE 1159a3ff.). In speaking of human nature, he distinguishes the variability of men from the immutability of the divine (NE 1134b28-31). More on this below.

<sup>172</sup> Crotty writes that for ancient Greeks generally: “the mortal condition is presented as subsuming both members of an opposition. Men are both wise and ignorant, both similar to the immortals and dissimilar” (*Song and Action* Baltimore: 1982, p.2). I will argue that because poetry can capture man’s conflicting qualities at once, it is an important tool for political theory which must build on an accurate conception of what human beings are. See also Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1988, pp.29-48); and Euben *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton: 1997, esp. chapters 2 and 7).

<sup>173</sup> Aristotle not only holds men responsible for their choices and actions, but for the desires which precede them: “appetites for fine things are praiseworthy, and appetites for shameful things are blameworthy” (NE 1175b27-30).

and most basic survival needs, *if he chooses*.<sup>174</sup> It is imperative therefore that men find effective means of seeing and coming to understand their good in such a way that they not only know it, but actually want it, and thus will continually act in ways that manifest it.<sup>175</sup> An understanding of the human good that is integrated with the desire and the capacity to realise it comes through a lifetime of good habit-forming and guided experience, through *critical reflection and discourse with others* – as discussed above, man is, for Aristotle, a political animal.

When Aristotle calls man political by nature, he implies that for a human being to become fully realised – to both understand and deliberately strive to realise his *telos* – he must interact *politically* with other men. That is to say, he must live in a *polis*, ruled by laws that aim at a common good. Only through the process of active engagement in civic life – i.e., *moral* activity – can man observe, imitate, and manifest the human good. I have argued that this good, in general terms, is manifested in reasonable, creative action.<sup>176</sup> Man's capacity for reasoned speech (*logos*) is 'activated' and integrated into his character through participation and accrued experience in those ongoing practices and traditions which are inherent in a shared, law governed life.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> "...whereas all other living things strive for their proper good instinctively, human beings are special in that they choose theirs, using reason" (Gadamer, *Aristotle's Critique of the Idea of the Good* p.144). Similarly, see Hardie: "Man differs from animals not primarily in being a natural metaphysician, or a natural artist, but rather in being capable of planning his own life" (*Aristotle's Ethical Theory* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: 1980, p.26).

<sup>175</sup> Part of this comes in understanding how one's particular life – one's own choices and actions – fits into a world of other 'actors' with different choices and actions. Recognising this inter-connection and differentiation generates a sense of what is good for man generally, and balancing this abstract idea with one's concrete life requires the capacity to think critically about particular and universal, and make reasonable inferences. Below, I will explore the ways in which engaging with poetry helps man learn how to do this.

<sup>176</sup> This means man must learn to be sensitive and discerning; he must hold onto a sense of what is good generally, but must also see what is relevant/significant in his particular situation. This means that his understanding/grasp of the common/general good must so permeate his character that he can use it creatively to act well given his own concrete circumstances.

<sup>177</sup> Ideally, in the attempt to cultivate and sustain justice in his *polis*, man learns to act deliberately – according to good reasons, and with the creativity his particular circumstances demand – thereby realising a harmony in his soul so that his desires and reason work together in order to aim at the good common to all men.

The *logos* that *polis* life demands allows man's soul to achieve its proper order (i.e., he can acquire a virtuous character/disposition where his desires aim where his reason directs). Given the structure of political life, man is habituated to recognise, and actually want a 'higher', *common* good, thus bringing his intellect and desires into accord. This alters the character of his choices and actions; unlike animals, man can know that there is something more to being human than the satisfaction of his own desires/appetites, he can do more than voice what is immediately "advantageous and harmful" – he can also articulate and understand a sense of justice, and furthermore, he can deliberate reasonably as to how to best achieve it and then act creatively in his particular circumstances.<sup>178</sup>

However, while distinct from animals, man is also unlike the gods. Divine intellect is not 'embedded' in the contingent world, and is therefore beyond the influence of contingent external factors that might upset 'rational plans'. Gods, for Aristotle, are immune to error. The inherent fallibility of human beings makes man's good one which requires constant reflection, honing, and development – the good for man is an ongoing *activity* (NE 1102a5-6) pursued, though rarely fully achieved, throughout a lifetime.<sup>179</sup> Above I discussed how the 'guided' experience of being raised in a *polis* – i.e., a community governed by law – provides man with the conditions necessary to acquire and sustain this kind of virtuous activity. Part of this comes from seeing in his own community what a virtuous life actually looks like, and then striving to be like those 'virtue practitioners' he observes. In short, man gains a richer, more

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<sup>178</sup> Aristotle does admit to the fact that there is a 'higher good' for "inferior animals" too (NE 1173a4-6), but presumably because man is capable of knowing/understanding his good, he can choose it deliberately and is thus held accountable for what he chooses to do. For a discussion of animals' *logos*, see Cooper *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: 1999); Sorabji *Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Ithaca: 1993).

<sup>179</sup> "When Aristotle makes reason the distinguishing mark of men, he is referring to reason, right or wrong." This is different from *nous*, which by definition/its very nature is accurate in what it "spots". Sorabji *Animal Minds Human Morals* (Ithaca: 1993, pp.68-69). *Nous*, Aristotle claims, is the divine element in men (DA 3.5). Salkever makes a similar point in noting that for Aristotle, reason is not identical to virtue, nor does it necessarily imply it. Rather he calls the human good a "*prohairesis*" virtue's indispensable foundation but not its universal guarantee" ("Teaching the Questions" paper given at Bryn Mawr 9/2001, p.27).

deep-rooted, and ultimately, a more 'practical' understanding of the abstract human good through paying attention to and *imitating* concrete (and necessarily, imperfect) examples of it.<sup>180</sup>

Given this, I will argue that poetry,<sup>181</sup> as an imitation of action and life, is a vital tool for man in his endeavour to understand and attain his species' good.<sup>182</sup> It is an essential element in a political education, playing a key role in the moral development/character formation of citizens. The issue I will investigate below is then: how might poetry, as defined by Aristotle, help men – creatures between god and beast – to see more accurately, and realise more completely the objective human good? More specifically, how might poetry, like the law, be a necessary condition which aids men not only in *theorising* about, but in *realising* the fixed human *telos* in the concrete and variable

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<sup>180</sup> This again supports the idea that the actual lives lived by men play a crucial role in theorising for Aristotle – we must start from where 'we are'. Active experience *precedes* and continually informs ethical and political theorising, for theory is always 'extracted' from/accessed through practice.

<sup>181</sup> As stated above, I will use the term 'poetry' broadly. Though the *Poetics* indicates Aristotle's respect for Attic tragedy above other kinds of poetry (*mimesis*), I believe that the goals he attributes to tragedy can be achieved through other genres; Pindar's odes, for example, as well as the *History* of Thucydides. Both construct 'plots' (*muthoi*) which encourage the audience to think critically and make inferences. While finding something akin to a 'plot' in Pindar may seem far-fetched, his use of familiar myths, even if disjointed and not fully portrayed, would almost naturally be filled in by members of the audience. This active process of 'filling in' – mental/intellectual exercise – might even be understood as important and beneficial to the audience. Crotty notes the parallel between Pindar's odes and Aristotle's tragic plot, focusing on the fact that in odes, we must look for the "coherence of an action [not an essay]" (*Song and Action* Baltimore: 1982, p. 8).

<sup>182</sup> Halliwell writes that poetry treats "the fundamental patterns of human life" – character (ethos) revealed in action (*The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, pp.32-33). These patterns can only be derived from life with all its contradictions and idiosyncrasies, and thus cannot be captured effectively by abstract theory alone. Poetry (broadly defined) presents (or represents) to man an alternative way to understand himself – one which falls between on the one hand, the generalised (and thus necessarily stark and impoverished) conception of man provided by abstract theory and, on the other, an 'unfiltered' account of the myriad of concrete details of a single, individual life (which becomes an unintelligible chaos when viewed in isolation). Given this need to expand and flesh out our understanding of man, Davis looks beyond the more traditional Aristotelian definition of man as "rational" or "political animal" and uses Aristotle's conception of man in the *Poetics* – a creature who is "mimetic" by nature. The natural tendency to imitate, to represent "this as that," Davis continues, reveals man to be a creature with an "uncontrollable urge to see past the surface of things" (*The Poetry of Philosophy* Indiana: 1999, p. 3). When he imitates/represents, man must look at the many details of his life – "the surface" – and then he must impose order on/find meaning in it (he must make inferences and abstract from life). More on this idea below.

world? In what follows I will argue that given an environment which offers probabilities but no certainty, abstract theory alone cannot prepare man to “live well,” and that poetry is essential for man’s evolving ability both to gain a more profound understanding of, and to actualise the human good.

I have argued that Aristotle understood human beings, as a *kind* of thing (a particular species), to have permanent truths about their nature (i.e., man has a distinct *ergon* and *telos*).<sup>183</sup> Good law builds on an accurate understanding of this nature. However, given the vast diversity and contingency of the human world, man’s nature is manifested in countless different ways. Recall that this makes ‘fixed’ human nature unique: “With us, though presumably not at all with the gods, there is such a thing as what is natural, but still all is changeable; despite the change there is such a thing as what is natural and what is not” (NE 1134b28-31). The ‘changeability’ of men makes those permanent qualities which define man abstractly impossible to use as rigid standards when judging people’s actions – and thus even the most just laws cannot be applied with mathematic-like precision to each and every concrete circumstance. Given this, I have aimed to show that becoming virtuous

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<sup>183</sup> For the human species as object of contemplation see, Rorty “The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle’s NE” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley: 1980, p.379). Like Aristotle, both Thucydides and Pindar too believed in a fixed human nature. Recall that Pindar was reluctant to represent individual men apart from their communities – even the exceptional victors were never ‘cut loose’ from their *poleis* – quite the contrary! – they owed their individual success to the training provided by their communities, and finally to the gods they worshipped and who blessed them. Though Pindar did praise the glorious actions of particular athletes, his aim was not to elevate and isolate the individual victor – this would promote the misguided idea that such an action could be attributable solely to an individual. An essential aim of the odes was to indicate that any success in a specific man’s ability to transcend what was previously known or achievable was ultimately due to his being part of a particular family, in distinct community/*polis*, which itself occupied a particular place within the cosmos. The odes served *equally* to praise the exceptional act of the victor that pushed beyond past boundaries, setting a new precedent, and also to warn of the dangers inherent in disregarding man’s naturally ‘embedded’ nature, which gave him a set of practices and traditions in which to manifest his talent and success. Thucydides’ conception of man was also definitive (if not stated explicitly) – his *History* would be of use to posterity precisely because the actions of men could be seen as roughly repeating patterns. Though individuals in Thucydides were more fleshed out than those in Pindar, they too were closely tied to community, and fell on misfortune when they perceived themselves as too independent, merely concerned with their own, private goods/principles and blind to the relevant details of the world embracing them.

means being *reasonable* and *creative* (i.e., understanding how to deliberate in light of a common good, to choose well, and to perform the action appropriate to a specific situation). This requires ongoing habituation and not simply memorising the 'fixed truth' of law – virtue is not the 'possession' of knowledge, nor is it a mechanical method which, if followed rigidly, yields definitive control and a capacity to make only accurate predictions.<sup>184</sup> Rather, virtue is grounded in a broad understanding of what kinds of things are likely/probable given the *kind* of creatures human beings are. It is manifested in an engaged, reflective process, involving the ongoing activity of harmonising both reason and emotion, balancing an abstract conception of what is good for man with the concrete details of the situation at hand.<sup>185</sup>

Below, I will examine two ways in which poetry, as understood by Aristotle, can aid in cultivating man's virtue, and prepare him to live well as the kind of creature he is. First, I will argue that poetry helps man establish, through concrete examples *with which he can identify*, a broader, more comprehensive understanding of what a good human life looks like in practice.<sup>186</sup> That is, poetry represents, in an engaging and directed/ordered way, the often paradoxical interaction of human reason and passion as man makes choices

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<sup>184</sup> Roughly speaking these two extremes find parallels today in those theorists for whom the 'neutral' method of science is the appropriate model for ethical and political theory (e.g., the rational choice theorists who, in the name of freedom, think a market economy should be the underlying structure of a state/society), and those, who hold fast to a fixed, substantive notion of the human good which allows for no plurality/dissent/debate (e.g., those on the religious right). Both, in different ways, silence discussion, discourage open communication and, stifle human flourishing by making critical reflection unnecessary.

<sup>185</sup> There is perhaps a parallel to be made between the process by which human virtue is cultivated, and the one by which poetry developed: Aristotle claims that poetry progressed to find its proper *telos* through improvisation (*autoschediasmaton* 1448b24); human virtue, I have argued, needs not only reason, but creativity as well. For a discussion on the process of moral education, see Sorabji, R. "Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* ed. Rorty (Berkeley: 1980, pp.214-216).

<sup>186</sup> Poetry plays a role similar to that of friendship in the cultivation and understanding of a good human life – it allows man to see himself and 'humanness' from a vantage point not exactly his own. See Salkever on friendship, "Teaching the Questions" (paper given at Bryn Mawr, 9/2001, p.21)



and acts in the contingent, uncertain world.<sup>187</sup> Without concrete, identifiable examples that illuminate at one and the same time both human strength and frailty, man is too easily inclined to assume that he is simply defined by one or the other extreme of his nature (perhaps in an attempt to avoid the logical/scientific contradiction he seems to embody).<sup>188</sup> Representations which incorporate the opposing pulls of reason and desire through, for instance *hamartia*, or irreconcilable human conflict, or the incommensurability of life's goods, allow good poetry to exemplify some of the *kinds* of conflicts men encounter, and the responses different *kinds* of characters are likely to give.<sup>189</sup> The circumstances portrayed in good poetry are those which engage man's emotions, offer him a choice, and so demand his reason, but suggest no wholly satisfying answers.<sup>190</sup> Poetry, especially tragedy, represents examples of where 'rational choice', construed solely as instrumental reason, can lead

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<sup>187</sup> Gellrich interprets Aristotle to claim that "*poesis* [is the] ability to systematize relationships between character and event, so that the likelihood of a certain kind of person's performing a certain deed is perspicuous. Poetry takes indeterminate, random accidents and makes them into calculable, intelligible possibilities" (*Tragedy and Theory* Princeton:1988 p.111). Gardner makes a similar claim about art generally: it is, he says "essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy" (*On Moral Fiction* New York: 1978, p.6).

<sup>188</sup> Vidal-Naquet stresses the fact that the tragic hero is someone "in between" – one who embodies seemingly incompatible opposites (in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* New York: 1988, pp.349-350). The fact that the human condition is itself embodied by a kind of 'in-between' status makes it difficult to incorporate man's decision making process, and his ethical/political theory more generally, into a systematic and consistent 'logic of man'. Therefore, man must learn to negotiate attentively between abstract and concrete. Aristotle is clear that 'the facts'(concrete) supersede theory (abstract): "any conflict between arguments and perceptible [facts] (*aisthesin*) arouses contempt for the arguments" (*NE* 1172a35ff). However, he discriminates between good and bad facts, e.g., when discussing pleasure, Aristotle acknowledges that there is much disagreement amongst men about what is pleasurable. This lack of consensus does not lead him to the conclusion that there is no definitive answer to the *aporia*. Rather he insists that one must look, as always, to 'the facts' as manifested by/according to the good man: "what really is so is what appears to the excellent person...what appear pleasures to him will also *be* pleasures" (*NE* 1176a17-20; 1176b25ff.). In representing men in their paradoxical natures, poetry helps men to recognise exemplars and understand better their actions.

<sup>189</sup> This means that Aristotle did not think the best poetry was a vehicle for the author's 'inner expression' – his 'poet' was not the quintessential Romantic one. Poetry, though deliberately constructed (and thus creative in a way that history is not), is always constrained by what is necessary and probable (*Poetics* 7 and.9), i.e., by a *reasonable* sense derived from experience, of what people, given their dispositions, are likely to do in certain situations (*Poetics*1454a26-28).

<sup>190</sup> The vital need to use reason to *improve*, if not to solve conflict definitively and neatly is one of the primary lessons of poetry. Poetry offers resolutions which are "practical," though not necessarily "rationally satisfying" (Gellrich *Tragedy and Theory* Princeton: 1988, p.155).

man astray. The audience cannot rely on this kind of mechanical thought, appropriate for those cases that fall tidily under the (necessarily impoverished) 'norm'/universal. Instead, they must use their reasoned creativity, always reflecting critically on the ways in which 'universals' might fail to address all the relevant details of particular situations.<sup>191</sup> Through poetry, man sees that he can, and indeed often he must, choose to act amidst the conflict and ambiguity that 'concrete details' entail, and that his actions do not always yield neat resolution. However, even more important, he sees that such choice while not 'scientific', is not therefore random or without a sound evaluative/normative basis.<sup>192</sup> Aporetic situations call for deliberate, reflective judgement and choice rather than mechanical and reactive answers. They are transformed by poetry into opportunities to flourish as human beings, i.e., to find meaning through reasonable and creative actions that are responsive to both universal and particular.

With Else and Halliwell, I do not believe that Aristotle's aim in the *Poetics* is solely "existential," designed to show that poetry reveals the "secrets of life," or the essential tragic nature of man's existence, e.g., that in some general sense: "suffering is entangled in even the finest strivings of human action."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> For further discussion on knowledge and the relationship of particular to universal in the OT specifically, see Euben, *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton: 1997, pp.179-201).

<sup>192</sup> According to Aristotle's teleology, this 'right choice' will promote what is *natural*. Halliwell argues that for Aristotle, poetry itself grew out of "the discovery of a potential which existed 'naturally' which is to say, it was *not* the spontaneous and arbitrary inventions of individuals" (*The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p.82). However, one who is sceptical of/bristles at the thought of a human *telos*, might consider Euben's idea that through poetry, men can see a kind of truth which is not embodied by "logically consistent truths informed by a rigorous collection of data, but [one which comes through] surprise and disruption...push[ing] us against our interests and inclinations to deeper and wider understanding of who we are and what we know and how these are related" (*Corrupting Youth* Princeton: 1997, p.199). The human good lies first and foremost in a deeper understanding of the ways in which we can get stuck – our limitations – and demands that we continually challenge and analyse ourselves and our beliefs.

<sup>193</sup> Else *The Argument* (Cambridge, MA: 1957, pp.304-306); Halliwell *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p.92) respectively. White, in speaking of Aristotle's treatment of moral luck in the *Oedipus Tyrannos*, understands its emphasis to be *not* on the power of forces outside human control that lead to inevitable suffering, but to man's *response* to such "curve balls." This stretches man's realm of responsibility and control and gives him greater room to

Rather, in part by way of his careful attention to the technical structure of tragedy, Aristotle indicates that human action and life can be, and in fact, *must be* seen as unitary and whole, meaningful, ordered, and beautiful, despite involving profoundly unsettling situations. This understanding can deepen from active engagement with poetry. Through poetry, man can come to be in a better position to find order, structure and even beauty, in his own life. Poetry thus has a practical, and not merely a theoretical (or less, an amusing) aim.

The second part of this section then will explore this more practical side of the *Poetics*, specifically, how poetry might help man, having given him a richer understanding of the human good, to realise it in his actions. The precondition for activity expressing the human good is an ongoing 'conversation' within man himself and with the others of his community and 'tradition'.<sup>194</sup> This 'conversation' is manifested in many different ways, but always involves man's active participation. Broadly speaking, it is the 'habitation' which shapes his character. Abstract theory that is rooted in the axioms of logic cannot provide men with such a 'conversation' for it cannot effectively account for those inevitable contradictions that arise in the specific details of any human life, and so does not call for the same kind of reasoned debate. Therefore, by itself, abstract theory is insufficient for an adequate political education because it cannot teach most men how to *become* virtuous: "Words/arguments..." Aristotle writes, "appear incapable of inciting the many toward becoming gentlemen" (NE 1179b10-11). To be virtuous is to

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deliberately construct his life ("Aristotle's Favorite Tragedies" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* Princeton: 1992, pp.222-225).

<sup>194</sup> For Aristotle, the human good is an abstract understanding of what man at his best is. It is therefore something that men strive towards, not something they attain definitively, or become. *Individual men cannot become Man*. However, they can communicate with one another, use their virtues (practical and intellectual) to deepen their understanding of humanness, and then work together to develop the conditions needed to actualise the human good more completely. Modern social scientists/political theorists who look for "neutral" solutions as ways to avoid conflicts over values are misguided, for they are trying to end a conversation whose continuation, however challenging, is itself a manifestation of what we, as human beings, are.

deliberately choose to perform activities that express man's good. This depends on not just knowing, not even on just doing the right things, but also on actually *desiring* them and engaging in the critical thought necessary when choosing how to realise them.<sup>195</sup> Men are ready to theorise only after they desire what is good. Virtue means a harmony between man's potential to use reason and his inclination to yield to strong, unreflected emotions/appetites. Poetry can aid men in finding this harmony, and furthermore, it helps to develop a distinct sensitivity, an instinct to perceive the relevant details of the situations he faces where he must choose and act in the absence of certainty.<sup>196</sup> Aristotle states that: "it is those who have experience of any particular thing who can judge correctly the works it produces and by what means and in what way these are brought to completion and what harmonizes with what" (NE 1181a20ff.). Poetry supplements 'direct' experience, and where it lacks in providing personal involvement, it makes up in its capacity to distil and impose order and intelligibility.<sup>197</sup>

As discussed earlier with Pindar and Thucydides, it will be important to note that experiencing poetry is not passive. The conflict and paradox that poetry embraces invites discussion and debate (*logos*). Poetry acts as a kind of deliberately designed experience that develops the critical capacities of its audience/participants by encouraging them to be actively involved.<sup>198</sup> Through the 'spectacle' of concrete yet paradigmatic cases which present compelling yet unsettling narratives, men are encouraged to ask questions and think critically, and gradually, to 'extract' from specific stories, a more

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<sup>195</sup> See Aristotle's distinction between the continent, incontinent, temperate, and intemperate characters in NE VII.

<sup>196</sup> Gadamer claims that Aristotle gives us a "target" in his ethical and political texts, but adds that: "taking aim does not constitute the whole of archery...whoever wishes to profit from practical philosophy must be trained for it in the right way...to size up things insofar as it makes it easier to recognize in what direction we must look and to what things we must pay attention" *Aristotle's Critique of the Idea of the Good* p.164).

<sup>197</sup> For further discussion, see Nussbaum *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, pp. 378-391).

<sup>198</sup> Aristotle states that man has a natural inclination to imitate/mimic as a way to learn, and furthermore, he takes pleasure in "mimetic objects" – both of which make poetry an effective (because engaging) medium for an education about human life (*Poetics* IV).

general and profound understanding of what it is to be human, and see ways in which man's good is, or fails to be, realised in his complex world.<sup>199</sup> The ability to abstract effectively/infer from particulars is not a potential that arises in men fully formed at birth, and poetry gives men a kind of training that helps to actualise this complex capacity.<sup>200</sup>

Unlike much of what we today call political theory, poetry does not try to squeeze human life into a mould inappropriate to it in the attempt to find a final and authoritative answer to ethical/political questions – it does not try to make ethics and politics into metaphysics or science. Rather, it represents human life in such a way as to stimulate probing questions which demand effort, but ultimately do no more (and no less) than to open men up to a broader understanding of who they are and what they are capable of.<sup>201</sup> To engage with poetry is to participate in the active process of finding sense and value in a web of varied actions which are not one's own. With these skills developed however, they can then be turned to one's own life. Finding sense in one's own life is exceedingly difficult to do without good models. The 'models' poetry provides are easier for men to engage with because they are concrete without being personal. There is less at stake and thus more freedom to explore/analyse in deliberating/making hypothetical choices in stories that are not one's own (recall that in the *NE* (1169b34), Aristotle says that man is

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<sup>199</sup> Aristotle says that "everyone is moved in passion along with the imitations to which they are listening" (*Pol.* 1340a10-14). However, this "movement," should not be solely a result of a grand theatrical performance. Halliwell notes Aristotle's "equivocal" judgement of 'spectacle' (*opsis/hos tes opseos kosmos*) (*The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p.93). On one hand, he calls it an essential element of tragedy (1450a3-5), on the other, he gives it little attention at the close of chapter VI, and warns later that plot, and not spectacle should do the vital work of arousing pity and fear (chapter XIV, 1453b1-3).

<sup>200</sup> Man is personally drawn into plots by their arousal of his pity and fear, and with luck, he undergoes a catharsis whereby his emotions come into their proper psychic order. Through this, he gradually finds the harmony natural to the human soul, through which he can act and generally, live well.

<sup>201</sup> Salkever, S. "Teaching the Questions" (paper given at Bryn Mawr, 9/2001, pp.14-15). Poetry for Aristotle is not a direct representation of life, the poet must pick and choose the events so that they form a whole, yet always constrained by the standards of necessity and probability (*Poetics* 9). See also Vernant (*Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* New York: 1988); and Euben (*The Tragedy of Political Theory* Princeton: 1990). More on this below.

better able to observe his neighbours than himself). Without examples, the actions which make up an individual human life tend to seem erratic and disparate, rarely admitting to neat resolution or unity. Through poetry, man learns to see himself and his lives as whole and unified: "fiction, like equity, renders the individuality of experience more demonstrable and therefore more knowable."<sup>202</sup> Without a sense of his own life's unity/meaning/order, man is likely to develop a splintered and disjointed sense of self, incapable of performing deliberate, responsible actions (or alternatively, entirely unmotivated to do so). Through the problems poetry raises and the engagement it demands, man can learn to characterise better his life as a single, significant narrative of which he is the primary author. Ironically, this sense of 'self' /individuation is accessible only with the recognition that he is embedded in a history, a place, a tradition that he himself did not choose. Poetry makes man better able to work effectively with both what lies within and outside his power, and through this, it helps him to gain a better understanding of the realm of his responsibility. Through poetry, man can learn ways to re-evaluate and transform those paths that seem to have led him astray so that they are not paralysing, irrevocable missteps, but parts of a life which he can reconsider in light of a bigger 'history' of human action, and value in terms of a good which is his own without being narrowly individualistic. Just as poetry represents concrete and universal, the human good is a good which is both deeply personal, yet common to, and realised with other men.

### *Understanding the Human Good*

In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls the human good "flourishing" (*eudaimonia*). In Book X, he examines *eudaimonia* more closely. There, he (in)famously identifies it with study: "flourishing" he states,

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<sup>202</sup> Eden, K. *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton: 1986, p.54). Redfield, though not referring to the *Poetics* in particular, notes that in Aristotle, we find the attempt to see men as unified, not an "open field of forces" (*Nature and Culture in the Iliad* Durham: 1994, p.21).

“extends just as far as study/contemplation extends” (NE 1178b28ff.). However, this identification becomes somewhat puzzling when applied to man because Aristotle is equally clear elsewhere that a life consisting solely in study/contemplation would not be human: “such a life [of study/contemplation alone] would be superior to the human level” (NE 1177b28-29). Only the gods, who take no part in political action (e.g., making contracts, displaying bravery, exchanging currency, etc.) or production (e.g., building houses, preparing food, cultivating land, etc.), are capable of continuous study/contemplation – to think of the gods doing such things is, according to Aristotle, plainly ridiculous (NE 1178b8-17). The good for man however, must grow out of *the kind of thing he actually is*, and even the most cursory observation of human life reveals that man is more than his ‘divine’ mind. Aristotle says that he requires a “healthy body, food, and other services” (NE 1178b33ff), and more generally, argues that men need a range of external goods in order to flourish. These goods come only from being active members of a functioning ethical community, a *polis* (Pol.1252b271-53a6). Only there can men learn to actualise their reason, to deliberate and judge in light of a common good. In short, only in a *polis* can men act virtuously and, when all material needs are met, can they dedicate time to contemplation. Therefore, Aristotle’s conception of the human good must incorporate political action and production. As he claims that man’s good is a life of virtuous *activity* (“the aim of studies about action, as we say, is surely not to study and know about each thing, but rather to act on our knowledge” NE 1179b1ff.), in what follows, I will assume that for him this means contemplative *and* political.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Human *eudaimonia* is thus better understood as inclusive of, yet not exhausted by a life of study and contemplation. Man’s capacity to contemplate is itself dependent on having first secured his more ‘animal’ needs (e.g., one cannot think clearly when terribly hungry or tired). Man is distinguished from animals by his *logos*, and from the gods by the fact that this *logos* must be integrated with his material/emotional needs in such a way to construct an ordered and meaningful ethical/political life. No matter if one ‘side’ of this nature is ‘better’ or ‘higher’, man’s nature includes *both*, and thus so must his good. See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: 1991, pp. 399ff.), Sherman *Fabric of Character* (Oxford: 1989, pp. 94ff).

What then are the kinds of activity that might exemplify ‘flourishing’ for Aristotle? More specifically, how can poetry help to expand man’s understanding of the human good, specifically, how is it manifested as virtuous activity in the *polis*? Part of what poetry can do is ‘fill out’ the framework provided in the *NE* and *Politics*.<sup>204</sup> After reading these works, the reader undoubtedly has a strong general sense of how he “ought to live.” From the *NE*, for instance, he learns about virtue; both of character, and of intellect, and he knows that for man, virtue lies in acting on the “mean” between extremes. From the *Politics*, he learns that his individual good is properly understood as a *common* one, realised not through acquisition/private preference maximization, but through reasoned speech and action with others. My intent here is not to give a comprehensive account of what these two rich works offer, but rather to note that while the reader has a much better understanding of the good for man *generally* after reading and reflecting on them, he has few examples of what, *specifically*, a good human life might actually look like in practice. At some level, Aristotle’s ethical and political discussions introduce as many problems as they resolve.<sup>205</sup> But, with Salkever, I believe that the ‘openness’ that persists after reading Aristotle’s *NE* and *Politics* must be understood as intentional – after all, Aristotle himself repeatedly calls the *NE* an “outline” (*NE* 1094b2-21), and insists that it is the mark of the wise man who gives his subject matter only the precision its

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<sup>204</sup> The idea of ‘filling out’ works of ethical and political theory is somewhat backwards, according to Aristotle’s own idea of how an education should progress. Those listening to lectures on the *NE* and *Politics*, should not be “youth” (*NE* 1095a3), but men who *already* love the good. This implies extensive life experience, which is part of what I believe poetry can offer. However, as I will argue below, poetry offers a more structured, guided kind of experience than mere life does. Furthermore, Aristotle believes that an ethical/political education is not “completed”, but continues throughout, and is in fact *constitutive* of a good life (*NE* 1180a1ff). This means that engaging with poetry during one’s life, whatever the age/stage in development, is beneficial.

<sup>205</sup> Because neither the *Politics* nor the *NE* yield a precise formula for living well, Aristotle’s ethical and political works raise questions at the same time as they provide answers. Hardie argues that the questions and ambiguities Aristotle raises about the human end, though lacking clear and decisive answers, are nonetheless important and pressing questions, which compel our ongoing reflection and debate (*Aristotle’s Ethical Theory* p.357). This is similar to Salkever’s claim that political theory should aim to be “practical *and open*” (*Finding the Mean* Princeton: 1990, p. 138, my italics); see also his “Teaching the Questions” (paper given at Bryn Mawr, 9/2001).



nature allows. However, this openness is not relativity, but a kind of *clarity*, effective in re-framing man's experience of the world/narrowing his focus so that he is attuned to, and more capable of discerning the right questions to ask given those situations which demand attention, reflection, *structured* debate, but yield no definitive answers to guide action.<sup>206</sup> Even further, I believe that the kind of purposive and fruitful debate that the *NE* and the *Politics* initiate and make possible itself *constitutes* (at least a part of) man's good.<sup>207</sup> Poetry works with and builds on this openness by providing concrete examples – representations of human life – which can act as further 'data' that men can use to hone and enrich their understanding, so that ultimately, 'knowing' is more likely to lead to 'doing'.

For Aristotle, man is (largely) responsible for his life, and not merely the product of factors (internal or external) which are outside his control. If Aristotle defines the human good as virtuous *activity*, then understanding this good fully must involve the capacity to characterise and identify man's actions; i.e., how the deliberate choices he makes relate to and interact with his actions so as to form a unified individual life *for which he can be held accountable*. I have suggested that the *NE* and the *Politics* indicate that human flourishing is realised in developing a virtuous disposition, manifested in the capacity to choose to perform reasonable, creative action – but how does man learn to apply this general idea to life? How does he learn to discern and act consistently on the mean between extremes? In the previous section, I argued

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<sup>206</sup> This again points to a distinct understanding of *logos*, man's defining feature. Aristotle comments that the plays of Aeschylus were a sign of progression in poetry in that he gave speech (*logos*) the leading role (1449a16-18). *Logos* however, does not mean pat answers to life's questions (significantly, Aristotle distinguishes *logos* from *dianoia* in *Poetics* 6, and 19, he says the latter is better left to rhetoric). Neither is it as 'modern's' might have it, solely instrumental, "tied to calculation and material self-interest" (Koziak *Retrieving Political Emotion* Pennsylvania: 2000, p.3). Rather it is itself an end which is realised in man's reasoned speech and performance of virtuous action *with others*. We will see below that one should not understand Aristotle's claim that a tragedy is about 'one action' to mean that it is therefore about the life of a single individual.

<sup>207</sup> Such debate does not require excessive material wealth, or political power and so fits with Aristotle's belief that *eudaimonia* is found in (though perhaps not completely secured by) virtuous activities (*NE* 1176b15-20; 1177a9-11).

that this comes through guided experience, specifically, through living an active life in a *polis* and being educated and directed by its rules and laws. At this point, my claim is that poetry should be understood as a variation of political experience – a guided, structured form, which presents human action in a particularly illuminating way. Unlike one’s own particular activities in the *polis*, poetry presents men with an ‘action’ that is at once concrete and universal. This is because poetry *represents* “people in action” (*Poetics* 1447b30) yet in a carefully crafted way. The ‘constructed’ experiences that constitute good poetry provide men with concrete examples of possible *kinds* of human action, effectively showing them ethical and political thought in practice. Though representing genuine and plausible human activity (and thus necessarily the paradox in man’s capacity for both reason and virtue together with his vulnerability to the external forces of necessity, and the internal pulls of his ‘baser’ appetites) poetry nonetheless suggests that the actions which make up a human life can be woven together so as to come together as unified, meaningful, and *good*. How is this so? And what is the nature of poetry according to Aristotle such that it can provide such an illuminating picture of human life?

Broadly speaking, poetry falls somewhere between the demonstrable truths of *episteme* and the chaotic minutiae of endless particular things.<sup>208</sup> In Book I of the *Poetics*, Aristotle calls all poetry “representation” (*mimesis*). *Mimesis* comes in various forms which differ in three basic respects: media (melody, rhythm, and meter), object (various objects in the world), and mode/method (e.g., music, painting, dancing, spoken word, etc.). Though Aristotle mentions a range of poetic modes, in the majority of the treatise he focuses on narrative and drama, with most attention to tragedy.<sup>209</sup> Again, the work of the

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<sup>208</sup>Poetry represents those truths which are true not eternally and without exception or variation, but “[the] as a general rule” ([*to hos epi to polu*). For further discussion on this term, see de Ste Croix “Aristotle on History and Poetry” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* ed. Rorty (Princeton: 1992, pp. 23-32). More on this below.

<sup>209</sup> Halliwell notes the significance of this narrowing—Aristotle seems most concerned with those modes of poetry which represent human beings making choices and acting in the world

dramatic poet (i.e., his "object") is to portray "people in action who are of a higher or lower character type" (1447b30-1448a2).<sup>210</sup> However, he does not merely report indiscriminately all that he observes – the poet *deliberately constructs* a plot in such a way that it forms a "unified and beautiful" whole, and expresses a "universal" truth.<sup>211</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is

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(*The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, pp.73-74). This suggests that, for Aristotle, the most significant kind of poetry might have had a practical ethical and political function.

<sup>210</sup> In ch. 6, Aristotle makes the claim that tragedy is the imitation not of men, but of life (1450a16ff) and further, that it can lack character (*ethos*) altogether, but cannot lack plot (*muthos/sustasis pragmaton*) (1450a20ff). Belfiore argues that *praxis* in the *Poetics* should not be understood as essentially or necessarily ethical/moral, but merely as an event ("Aristotle's Concept of *Praxis* in the *Poetics*" in *Classical Journal* v.79 1983 pp.110-124). If this is the case, we must note that Aristotle makes some other statements that qualify this bold (and somewhat perplexing) assertion. For instance, he says that the cause of an action are *ethos* and *dianoia* (1449b38ff.). To understand something is to grasp its cause (*Metaph.* 981a15-981b9), and thus, that which gives meaning to an action and increases the audience's understanding of human life involves not just an action/event, but also an awareness of its cause – i.e., the character of the agent performing it. However, this 'cause' (i.e., man's character) need not be explicit in the play – the audience must *infer* from the actions they see *represented* what kinds of character the actors have. A good plot, Aristotle says, is 'whole'/'complete when it has portrayed a *change*, from good to bad character, or the reverse. The 'work' needed to understand such a change is part of what makes poetry effective for political theorising. Thus, while Aristotle is explicit that tragedy can, in its barest form, exist without characterisation, and with no indication of the cause of the actions it portrays, it becomes more fruitful and can promote the understanding which is the basis of ethical/political theory when such a cause (i.e., the moral disposition of the agent) is present.

Aristotle's focus on *praxis* over and above *ethos* (and *dianoia*) might be understood as a way of refocusing the audience from an individual centred view to a broader, more inclusive perspective where man's actions must be seen as they connect to others, and how all these actions can come together in a meaningful way. See ch.14 where Aristotle discusses the tragic situation, involving relations between people, not one person in isolation; also in ch.9, where he distinguishes tragedy from the straightforward, comprehensive chronicle of a single life. Additionally, the tragedies and kinds of plot structure that Aristotle explicitly picks out as exemplary are those which provide the audience with characterisation.

<sup>211</sup> Despite Aristotle's disparaging view of history, one cannot help but think of Thucydides here and his explicit aim to present only what was relevant after having 'filtered through' the raw data he collected (I.22). His aim was a work of "permanent value" – permanent because it revealed patterns (or 'general rules') of human behaviour. (This might be seen in contrast to Herodotus, who claims to have written so that the great deeds of *particular* Greeks would not be forgotten (*Histories*, bk I.) Pindar, though in no way a tragedian, also carefully selected and constructed his odes, using bits of myth and familiar stories which I have argued would stimulate the active participation of the audience, encouraging them actively to build on Pindar's provocative words revealing an illuminating and accurate sense of man, while simultaneously engaging the critical capacities of the audience.

Though I believe that much of what Aristotle thought to be the goals of tragedy could be achieved in modes he disparages, in what follows, unless explicitly noted otherwise, when speaking of poetry I will be referring to tragedy. Tragedy was an exemplary mode of poetry for Aristotle, for it has found its natural form/fulfilment (*ten auten phusin* 1449a15). Aristotle

clear that ethical and political truth is not like epistemic truth; still, it is not relativistic, or lacking in definitive standards.<sup>212</sup> In the *Poetics*, Aristotle starts to indicate what the criteria are for this different kind of truth – i.e., the necessary (*anankaion*) and the probable (*eikos*) (1451a39). The necessary and the probable generate recognisable and recurring (if not entirely certain) patterns in human life, events which happen neither always and without exception, nor randomly, but for the most part and “as a general rule” ([*to hos epi to polu*]).<sup>213</sup> Given this, I believe that those ‘laws’ which govern the contingent world of human behaviour, those patterns which allow man to theorise, to plan deliberately, and (hopefully) live a good life, can be more fully understood through stories or narrative, through a medium that shows him the kinds of situations that are likely to elicit certain kinds of emotions, thoughts, and responses. To do this successfully comes from the reasonable combination of six elements: plot (*muthos*), character (*ethos*), thought (*dianoia*), style/diction/speech composition (*lexis*), spectacle (*opsis*), song (*melopoia*). In what follows, I will focus on *muthos* and *ethos*.

### *Muthos and Ethos*

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gives an ‘evolution’ of poetry in ch.4, and tragedy is presented as a later step in the natural progression of *mimesis*, a process that began with Homer. Else writes that Aristotle saw Homer as the “inspiration” of the dramatic poets (his work ‘contained’ the ideal), and that while tragedy was, for Aristotle, a more advanced form of *mimesis* than epic, the dramatists “learned from an epic how to be dramatists” (Else *The Argument* Cambridge, MA: 1957, p161).

<sup>212</sup> In *Poetics* 25, Aristotle discusses poetic standards by way of the poet's relation to un-truths. The poet errs, A claims, if he “makes” the “impossible” (*adunata* 1460b24). Though he goes on to say that such fictions may be justified if they serve the “greater goal of the art,” depicting *adunata* is still an error, and should be avoided if at all possible. Butcher (*Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* London: 1902, pp.163-177) writes that poetry deals not with facts, but with what “transcends fact”, not with what “is,” but with what “ought to be.” This, he continues, is distinct from the “actual world.” The probability and necessity that constrain a poem are “internal,” and need no “real” counterpart. While I agree that the people and events that poetry depicts need not have a direct referent in the world (though Aristotle is clear that they can, *Poet.*1451b29-32), I would still argue that the ‘ideals’ of poetry that portray men are ultimately derived from experience in the world. Only from this real experience can poetry draw in the audience, providing examples with whom they can relate, if not precisely identify.

<sup>213</sup> For further discussion on this concept of “the as a general rule”, see de Ste. Croix “Aristotle on History and Poetry” *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: 1992, pp. 23-32).

Aristotle claims that the plot is the “soul” of tragedy (*Poetics* 1450a38). A good plot consists of a series of “serious” (*spoudaios*) actions (1449b23), linked together in accordance with what is “necessary” (*anankaion*) and “probable” (*eikos*), with the intention of expressing what is “universal” (*katholou*) (1451b9).<sup>214</sup> Through tragedy, which is to say, by way of the actions it portrays, the audience sees concrete examples of how serious actions – spoken of in general terms in the *NE* and *Politics* – are actually manifested. Recall that in *NE X*, Aristotle discussed the kind of activities that make up a *eudaimon* life, and explicitly ruled out “trivial past-times” in favour of serious actions (*NE* 1177a1-10). Serious actions aim at goals which are purposive, and follow from evaluative judgements and deliberate decisions about substantive ideas of how one ought to live.<sup>215</sup> One might link Aristotle’s conception of ‘serious action’ to the *Politics* as well, through the activities proper to the citizen. Recall that these were defined generally by Aristotle as those activities which require deliberation and judgement (*Pol.* 1257b13ff.). Man’s capacity for deliberation and judgement play an essential role in his virtue, both during times of leisure and in times of war and strife – in either case, the virtuous man must deliberately choose to act on what is right to do *given his circumstances*. This means neither being steered by any excessive emotion a particular circumstance might elicit, nor rigidly following ‘rules’ that might not take into account all the important details about the present situation.

Broad exposure to what serious actions can actually look like, the kinds of conflicts they tend to raise, and the emotions they are likely to stir, are not however, addressed by Aristotle in his ethical or political treatises, nor would it be appropriate for him to have done so. The descriptions and abstract definitions offered in his ethical and political writing, while surely useful and important for delineating the ‘boundaries’ of issues, do not show men how

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<sup>214</sup> Again, the understanding of universal here is distinct from that in *episteme* (i.e., fixed, necessary and eternal). Rather it is one which is better understood as defined by de Ste. Croix (above).

<sup>215</sup> For more on *spoudaios* and ethical virtue, see Golden. *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta: 1992, p.67 esp. n. 60)

“serious” actions are in fact played out in the world. In poetry, such actions ‘come to life’ (with for example, Antigone, who must choose between her loyalty to her *polis*, or ‘higher’ law; or Orestes, who feels he can avenge his father only by killing his mother, or with Oedipus who must *choose* how he will proceed given the horrible situation in which he deliberately, yet unwittingly put himself). Through poetry, men see dilemmas arise and choices made, and can then view ways that difficult kinds of choices are worked out.<sup>216</sup>

An important insight man gains from tragedy is the realisation that the choices and actions he makes do not always come to neat, happy resolutions, and thus, neat, happy resolutions are not the standards man should seek when judging and understanding their lives. This is revealed through the fact that the tragic protagonists are, generally speaking, good men with admirable intentions.<sup>217</sup> Still, many tragic actors make terrible (and *deliberate*) decisions, and often perform morally repugnant acts.<sup>218</sup> However, tragic agents are not so irrational or demented that the audience cannot make sense of their actions at all – even the unspeakable deeds of Medea represent an enraged jealousy that one might understand, even while being shocked and sickened by it.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> There is a sense in which the viewer of a dramatic performance gets to view human life from a unique place – an ‘embedded’ Archimedean point. He is at once amongst other viewers who similarly have chosen to come to watch the play, yet he is not himself involved in the action he sees. Furthermore, he can see events portrayed from multiple view points, often difficult to do in one’s own life. For further discussion on this point, see Euben. *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton: 1997, pp.186-89)

<sup>217</sup> Aristotle calls the characters in the best tragedies “esteemed and prosperous” men, those who fall between the extremes of “pre-eminent virtue and vice,” men who are virtuous in a way that is not divinely heroic, but “like ourselves” (1453a5-10).

<sup>218</sup> And it is these human decisions that drive the plot forward. Those tragic events which lead to the important goals of “reversal” and “recognition” should not be driven, for instance, by divine intervention, or any other inexplicable forces (1454a33ff.), nor should the actions represented in poetry be in any way irrational (*alogon* 1454b7). The catalyst for change, that which propels the story to the next step, are the events, and when these events stem from men (which in the best tragedies they do), they should be deliberate choices, i.e., people acting according to what is necessary or probable given the particular circumstances and their characters.

<sup>219</sup> In a best case scenario, one might see, for instance, how Medea yields to her jealous passions and think “I can relate to such jealousy, but that is not a good way to react!” One who feels pride in a particular accomplishment might note that part of what led Oedipus

In the “finest tragedies” (1452b31), Aristotle claims that the often dismal fate of the agent should be the result not of bad character, but of a mistake made that was somehow outside his control: “[the tragic character] is a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is not brought about by vice or depravity, but by some error/frailty (*hamartia*)” (1453a7-10). For instance, a good tragedy might revolve around a situation in which relevant facts are obscured from the agent, or perhaps a dilemma which demands action but presents no definitively ‘fine’ choice. However, these situations, though difficult, do not trump man’s responsibility. In a sense, man’s *logos* makes him responsible *by nature*. But then, given this responsibility, and the dire situations in which tragic agents find themselves, in what does the virtue of the character lie? For Aristotle, man is judged by those deliberately chosen actions he performs in life. Similarly ‘character’ in tragedy is “that which reveals moral choice” (1457b7-8). In life and in poetry, a man’s actions are motivated by his desires and beliefs, and thus express his character. As man is responsible for his character, so too is he responsible for his actions and, to some extent, the quality of his life overall. Part of what poetry shows is that despite the fact that bad luck can intervene in human life, it does not undermine man’s responsibility, *nor his capacity for virtue* (though it may limit his capacity for complete *eudaimonia*, e.g., Priam NE 1100a8). White argues that tragedy shows men ways to redefine virtue so that a virtuous character may be seen to be under human control, even if complete *eudaimonia* is not: “fortune does not change the moral status of our character: fortune only provokes us to display it.”<sup>220</sup>

Through poetry, man sees that he cannot base the quality of his life on accident or luck, as animals must. At the same time, he is not immune from these forces, as the gods are. Tragedy, in showing not only the forces of luck,

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astray was his distorted sense that he was a “self-made” man (see Euben. *Corrupting Youth* Princeton: 1997, ch.7), and think a bit more about one’s own background and ties to it.

<sup>220</sup> White, S.A. “Aristotle’s Favorite Tragedies” *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* ed. Rorty (Princeton: 1992, p.224).

but the ways in which men respond to it, reveals the undeniable influence of fortune in human life in such a way that it helps to reconcile it with man's responsibility. Through Aristotle's conception of tragedy, man learns to see that the limitations of human responsibility extend as far as human control, and while man does not control all that comes into his life, he can control his response to what he encounters.<sup>221</sup> Through the interplay between 'external' forces and character, tragedy shows its audience virtuous responses to seemingly unbearable situations, and with this, ways that men generally can display virtue, despite the profound misfortunes they may encounter. Because the forces of chance are inescapable, tragedy teaches man to rest his final judgement not solely on the consequences of his choices and actions, which he makes always with only partial knowledge, but also on how he reacts after learning of his mistakes.<sup>222</sup> Tragedy reduces the extent to which men may feel imprisoned by the forces of luck/chance/*hamartia*, by teaching them to cast error in a light that reveals the possibility of empowerment given the ability to understand the source of, learn from, and use 'mistakes'.

Poetry then helps man to set up realistic expectations, and this entails discerning a sense of meaning and unity which is of a different sort than in a problem in geometry or an epistemic demonstration.<sup>223</sup> Man needs appropriate standards to structure his life, and *reasonable* goals at which to aim. The standards of necessity and probability *are* appropriate and again, point the reader to Aristotle's ethical and political work, building on it and making it clear what kinds of criteria man should look for in the "inexact sciences," where the goal is not certainty, but the "as a general rule" ([*to*] *hos*

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<sup>221</sup> "Aristotle's whole system of ethics posits a high degree of human responsibility which would be severely undermined if too much weight were given to the terrible possibilities of *hamartia*." (Halliwell, S. *The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p.137).

<sup>222</sup> This was an issue in the *NE* as well – men who act badly yet have no regrets are incurable (*NE* 1150a23)

<sup>223</sup> "Despite uncertainty and variability of their subject matter...ethics and poetry still share with all other inquiries a commitment to logic as the result of a concern with causation" (Eden, K. *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* Princeton: 1986, p.37). And the cause of action, Eden goes on to reiterate, are the *ethos* and *dianoia* of the agent.



*epi to polu*).<sup>224</sup> And because poetry depicts human life, its standards are those that should be applied to the lives of those in the audience. They reveal the kinds of things certain kinds of men tend to do given certain kinds of circumstances. Poetry leads the audience to *human* universals, not metaphysical/divine ones. Thus, they are not absolute, but “partake of the nature of the realm to which they belong.”<sup>225</sup>

The actions of a tragic plot, however, do not simply mirror ‘real life’. They must have a distinct kind of unity – they must come together in such a way as to have a clear beginning, middle, and end (1450b27-29).<sup>226</sup> This “whole” comes from a series of actions which when taken together represent/portray a recognisable change (*metaballein* 1451a14). Human life, especially if guided by whim and emotion, rarely forms such a unity.<sup>227</sup> This is reflected in Aristotle’s discussion of plot. A good plot cannot, he claims, consist in one man speaking about who he is and all he has done. A good plot should not revolve around a single individual, faithfully recording a comprehensive chronicle of the actions of one man (1451a15-16). As we saw with both Thucydides and Pindar, all human life is necessarily embedded in communities, with practices and traditions. Almost paradoxically, a single life can take its own form, be differentiated and understood, only when seen as intimately connected with other lives. Its wholeness, like that of a tragic plot, comes from the proper integration of its diverse parts, i.e., those choices made and actions taken as they come from and relate to other people.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Again, for more on [to] *hos epi to polu*, see de Ste Croix “Aristotle on History and Poetry” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* (Princeton: 1992, pp. 23-32).

<sup>225</sup> Else *The Argument* (Cambridge, MA: 1957, p.305).

<sup>226</sup> This unity is necessary for all poetry, whether the plot is a tragic one (either simple or complex), or if it is poetry narrative form (1459a16ff.).

<sup>227</sup> It is interesting to note that when discussing the fact that poetry is more philosophical than history, Aristotle uses Alcibiades (1451b11) as an example of the kind of particularity that does not seem to coincide with the constraints of probability and necessity – those criteria which make human action form a unity and become intelligible. Recall that in Thucydides, Alcibiades was represented as a man who regularly acted independently, with a kind of blind disregard for his tradition, to further his own personal ends and desires.

<sup>228</sup> Likewise, a *polis*, the necessary precondition for flourishing *human* life is a unity, though at the same time, it is by its very nature “composed of dissimilars” (*Pol.*1277a5).

Man can only make sense of himself and his actions by seeing them manifested in and relating to the actions and choices of other men. Just as man cannot understand the human good through standards that are not appropriate to it (e.g., epistemic standards) so too is it impossible to come to understand and evaluate human life by exploring his own psychology in isolation. Therefore, as the plot should represent life, it portrays a sequence of events that involve not only an individual's actions, but human *interaction* in such a way that the individual lives involved can be seen to form meaningful wholes.<sup>229</sup> Therefore, men learn from poetry what they learn from observing life in the *polis* only in a distilled and dramatic – *constructed* – way.<sup>230</sup> In the *Poetics*, this unity and meaning come primarily through the representation of necessary and probable action, and not via characterisation. In speaking of tragedy, Aristotle refers to it as:

the imitation not of people as such, but of action and life (*biou*), and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action. The goal is certain activity, not a qualitative state; and while men do have certain qualities by virtue of their character, it is in their actions that they achieve or fail to achieve happiness (*Poetics* 1450a15ff.).<sup>231</sup>

This disinclination to focus on the agent serves to shift the 'modern' reader from a preoccupation with the particular psychology of an individual (in

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<sup>229</sup> Note that Aristotle explicitly rejects the plot that centres around one individual (ch.23), and praises those which involve relations between "those who are near and dear" (1453b17-22). It is plots of this sort that succeed in arousing the emotions of the audience, and, as I will argue further below, spur them to reflect.

<sup>230</sup> "Poetry must make more sense than much of the raw material of life does...Successfully unified works of art...allow us to experience images of a fictional reality ('events which could occur' ch.9) which has a more lucid and transparent significance than we can readily find in the world around us" (Halliwell, S. *The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, pp.102-103).

<sup>231</sup> While there is some debate amongst scholars as to whether Aristotle in fact wrote the phrase "and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action... achieve or fail to achieve happiness" (Else, *The Argument* Cambridge, MA: 1957, p.254), Else draws attention to the fact that *bios* connotes *human* life – a "career" – as opposed to mere *zoe*. This again links the *Poetics* to the *NE*, where Aristotle says that happiness is realised "in a complete *bios*" (ibid, p.257). The addition of *kai biou* (1450a17) might then work to link tragic *praxis* with moral action, and thus opposing Belfiore's argument, mentioned above ("Aristotle's Concept of *Praxis* in the *Poetics*" *Classical Journal* vol. 79 1983, pp. 110-124).

actual life, this is generally one's own), to the inter-actions of a community, or the individual as he relates to others: "Tragedy involves a plurality of agents" (1449b36).<sup>232</sup> By taking into account the forces outside individual control (some of which are derived from other individuals of the community) man gains insight into the kinds of things that can thwart his 'reasonable' goals.<sup>233</sup> He also sees that his own personality is not simply self-made, but is the accumulation of his actions *amongst others in the contingent world*. This generates a more accurate picture of a human life and how the human good can be deliberately realised in it.<sup>234</sup> As man acquires more experience within his necessarily 'constrained' environment, he, paradoxically, becomes better able to free himself from/critique those constraints. Because the capacity to characterise and see one's own life as unified and whole is difficult (1451a16-19), tragedy might be able to reveal to men ways of imposing order on their own lives so that they too can be seen as unified, and even beautiful despite its being open-ended and made up of the kinds of activities natural science sees as a process, and not as a goal in itself.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> For discussion of Aristotle's understanding of *ethos* and its role in tragedy, see Jones *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London: 1962, pp.32-38).

<sup>233</sup> This is only one piece of what this broader perspective can yield, however. To see oneself and one's actions as 'situated' (i.e., as continually/inherently effected by and related to others), requires that one not only acknowledge and value one's own needs and views, but also those of others. Poetry's presentation of individuals acting among other actors, and within a series of events encourages, not a dissolution of self, but mutual recognition which is imperative for good judgement: "the act of judging reaches its goal when someone who has, as we say, won his case still feels able to say: my adversary, the one who lost, remains like me a subject of right, his cause should have been heard, he made plausible arguments and these were heard" Ricoeur *The Just* p.131. See similar points in Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: 1994, spp.204-221).

<sup>234</sup> Salkever notes that both rhetoric and tragedy, unlike *episteme*, use examples, not arguments in effort to persuade or reveal something to an audience ("Tragedy and the Education of the *Demos*" in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* ed. Euben, Berkeley: 1986, p.293). Similarly, Halliwell highlights the fact that Aristotle distinguishes poetry from other disciplines by the fact that it is a "portrayal/representation" and not an "affirmation" of what is real. Poetry describes and does not attempt to explain reality explicitly (*The Poetics of Aristotle* Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p.71).

<sup>235</sup> Poetry suggests that man flourishes when he learns to make sense of his actions by seeing them as a part of a larger, ongoing dialogue which is manifested not in certainty, unanimous consensus, and control, but in continued discourse and debate amidst contingency, in *reasonable* and *creative* action constrained by what is necessary and probable (*Poetics* 1454a33-8). "No case is simply the exemplification of a rule," Ricoeur writes. Human life is the

Though Aristotle writes that poetry presents “one action,” he does not mean an individual deed observed in a ‘theatrical vacuum’ – this might make things easier, but it would do so at the grave cost of distorting the very nature of human activity.<sup>236</sup> The genius of Homer lay in the fact that he did not, in the *Iliad*, “include all the adventures of Odysseus” (1451a24-25), but chose and selected those actions that were needed to present a whole i.e., a “structural union of the parts such that, if any one of them is displaced/removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed” (1451a30-35); actions which come together to portray a plausible change (*metaballein*) “from bad fortune to good, or good fortune to bad” (1451a13-14). The “whole” that good poetry represents then serves to reveal to participating members of the audience, those things which are likely to happen given probability and necessity (1451a39), i.e., those events which, given certain kinds of characters and certain kinds of situations, happen as a general rule (e.g., how even the most noble motives can lead to bad consequences). This means that the poet must deliberately select and coordinate a finite bit of material which illustrates how a web of actions can come together according to what is necessary and probable to form a meaningful and beautiful whole so as to indicate some ‘universal truths’ of human nature.<sup>237</sup>

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ongoing interpretation of inherited rules/values/beliefs/laws, and the mere act of living an engaged and examined life entails that they be continually tested and interpreted. Each judgement is not a final ending, but creates a new ‘precedent’ to be used reasonably and creatively. Each judgement is an ending, but an ending that opens up a new path: “The suspending aspect of the act of judging at the end of a deliberative course therefore does not exhaust the meaning of this act.” (*The Just Chicago*: 2000, p.129).

<sup>236</sup> Golden writes that a good plot should compel the audience to reflect and judge not just individual action, but “all the evidence in the play” (i.e., the web of events which come together to form a complete action). Plot does not merely record all the actions of one person, but is a careful selection of the *interactions* of many, assembled in such a way as to both correspond to what is necessary and probable, and in this, leads the audience to think critically, to make inferences. (*Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* Atlanta: 1992, p.33)

<sup>237</sup> For a criticism of tragedy (due to the inherent distortion made by the poet in representing actions as unified and whole), see Bittner “One Action” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* (Princeton: 1992, pp.97-109).

The poet does not give the false idea that this “whole” is all there is. Aristotle is clear that there can be, and in fact should be a sense that there is more to the world than those actions depicted in the plot.<sup>238</sup> Finding a beginning, middle, and end of actions from within the ongoing stream of life’s events in life is difficult, but an essential condition for cultivating a sense of personal responsibility and agency. In presenting human life this way, poetry helps the audience to see how they might see their own lives as directed, and because of the pleasure the audience gets from the performance, they are encouraged to put in the hard, critical work required to do this.

### Chapter 8: Realising the Human Good in Reasonable, Creative Action

“Knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to possess and exercise virtue, or become good in any other way” (NE 1179b2-4).

Given the richer understanding of the human good that poetry provides, how might it serve the slightly more demanding aim of helping man to exercise virtue and actualise his good (specifically, by performing reasonable, creative actions)? We have seen that for Aristotle, virtue entails not only knowing what is fine/noble, but genuinely desiring it. This desire for the good not only signifies the proper ‘psychic’ harmony (whereby the ends of reason and emotion coincide), but it serves a practical purpose as well. A ‘well-entrenched’ desire for the good means that man will take pleasure in virtuous activity, and this pleasure will then consistently motivate him to act well. Pleasure also plays a part in the effectiveness/practical function of poetry. All men, Aristotle claims, enjoy representations, and it is through imitation that men learn: “through imitation [man] learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure taken in things imitated” (*Poet.* 1448b5-10). These two points taken together indicate a direct way in which poetry might help

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<sup>238</sup> For example, though he praises the *OT*, he acknowledges that some important events “fall outside the drama proper” (1453b30-34), and also at 1454b2-4, Aristotle looks at the strategy of employing a *deus ex machina*, a tool to be used in events which take place *outside the plot*. This indicates Aristotle’s desire to have that which drives the plot be the work – i.e., the decisions and action – of men.

man to realise his good. To begin, consider the first part of this claim, i.e., that men learn through imitation. As Aristotle claimed that the best poetry represents good men, it provides the audience with exemplars, men with “laudable aims” to learn from.<sup>239</sup> However, when considering tragedy, this ‘direct benefit’ becomes somewhat problematic – surely, the audience does not learn from the *OT* that patricide and incest are virtuous. ‘Tragic exemplars’ are therefore complex in that it is not their particular actions that should be emulated. However, neither is it the case that their actions should be categorically denounced. Rather, tragic agents are ‘models’ to better understand deliberation and choice in the contingent world.<sup>240</sup> Though direct imitation is undesirable (and in fact impossible, as each particular human action is unique), tragic actors reveal ways in which intentions and actions can become muddled, and how important it is (if exceedingly difficult) to untangle and discern the boundaries of one’s responsibility and find meaning, despite the fact that a man’s individual actions can never be extracted and judged in isolation.

The fact that men find pleasure in representations feeds into Aristotle’s understanding of education through imitation and suggests a way in which poetry might help man to realise the human good. The lessons embedded in tragedy demand effort and hard work, and this work might be daunting/overwhelming (or perhaps even incomprehensible) to many if presented in the context of an ethics lecture, deterring men from participating

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<sup>239</sup> Golden argues that Aristotle’s use of *spoudaios* in the *Poetics* should not be translated merely as “serious,” but rather should be understood as “noble” (*Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* Atlanta: 1992, p.67). For further discussion on tragic actors as ethically ‘upright’, see Yanal, “Aristotle’s Definition of Poetry (*Nous* vol. 16 1982, p.504); also Halliwell *Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p 140). While “laudable aims” alone do not constitute a good life, I have argued that such aims *tend to* lead to better actions, and furthermore, if the actions that follow from good aims have unexpectedly bad consequences, those aims, *because they reflect established character*, will tend to produce good responses to unforeseen and unfortunate outcomes.

<sup>240</sup> From actions, the audience learns to recognise and judge character: “tragedy is the imitation of action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities of both character and thought, for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves” (1449b36-1450a2).

and thus preventing them from reaping the benefits of the critical thought it demands. Poetry avoids this trap. As *mimesis*, it is enjoyable to all men (1448b8-9), and the pleasure it brings draws people in, encouraging them to attempt to untangle the complex web of actions portrayed. In short, because contemplating representations is pleasurable, *mimesis* can inspire men (and youth) to participate actively in rigorous and critical ethical thought in a way that theory often cannot.<sup>241</sup> This kind of 'hands on' experience acts as training, a prerequisite for theorising (for some perhaps, a kind of ethical/political theory in disguise) presented in such a way that "it is pleasurable not only to philosophers, but to men in general, whose capacity for learning is more limited" (1448b13-14).<sup>242</sup>

In his commentary on *Poetics* 1, Halliwell notes that for Aristotle, the poet, unlike the natural scientist, does not issue "affirmative" (i.e., explicit, objective) propositions about the nature of life.<sup>243</sup> This idea is strengthened in *Poetics* 19, when Aristotle returns to *dianoia* only to dismiss it as "more

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<sup>241</sup> For poetry as a purely "intellectual clarification," see Golden. *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta: 1992, p.22ff). For variation on this view, i.e., poetry as "clarification" more generally, see Nussbaum *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: 1981, p.390ff.).

<sup>242</sup> This is not to say that poetry can make all men into philosophers, in fact, quite the contrary. To see poetry in this light *entails* recognising the vast variation in capacities and lifestyles of different people, and builds on the fact that poetry is *universally* appealing so that it might benefit a wide range of different kinds of people in different ways. Note that in the *Politics*, Aristotle says that all men – "both the free and educated and vulgar mechanics" – should go to contests and festivals (1342a18-28)

<sup>243</sup> Halliwell. *Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1987, p.71). This is what makes poetry different from early natural philosophy. Aristotle compares the work of Empedocles and Homer 1447.16-20 as an example: though the former writes in verse, he does not represent human life (or some aspect of it), and thus is not properly called a poet. In ch. 6, Aristotle says that tragedy (a perfected mode of poetry) is also not narrative (*apagelia* 1449b24-26): it is not merely a report of what is/what happened, but a *deliberate construction*. In ch.17, Aristotle discusses the deliberate process that poetic composition demands, asserting that the poet must: "put the scene before his eyes...as if present at the very events." The representation, to be effective, must be realistic based on observation and experience. Only this will succeed in drawing the audience in and engaging them with the story. Else writes that Aristotle gives a "wholly impersonal, objectivist view of the poet – Homer above all – as a *maker of structures*: 'Imitation' so defined becomes the closest neighbour to creation: not out of nothing – no Greek ever believed in creation *ex nihilo* – but out of carefully observed 'universal' human tendencies to thought and action" (*Plato and Aristotle on Poetry* Chapel Hill, NC: 1986, p.75). Thus the construction involved in making poems is one which is constrained, yet necessarily creative.

integral to rhetoric" (1456a34-35).<sup>244</sup> Why is this the case? Why would Aristotle hesitate to have characters, or the poet himself express thought directly?<sup>245</sup> Thought directly expressed would conflict with the nature of poetry, which is to *represent* or *portray*. Poetry does not interpret the ways of men, nor does it explain them in direct discourse. Rather it *shows* human life in such a way as to encourage its interpretation, and in doing so, it cultivates practical understanding.<sup>246</sup> The plots are structured such that they give an intriguing view into the motives behind actions, the process of deliberation and choice. Poetry combines rationality with wonder (*thaumaston*) – events happen out of probability and necessity yet are unexpected (*para ten doxan...di'allela* 1452a4). In this, they evoke wonder and suspense, both of which motivate men to engage with and participate in the ideas represented in a way that mere argument generally does not.<sup>247</sup> Men are thus more likely to get actively involved in what the actors (choose to) do.<sup>248</sup>

Furthermore, because the actions in poetry are performed in a context which is limited ("[confined] to a singly revolution of the sun" (1449b13); "easily embraced by the memory"; "the whole is perspicuous" 1451a5-14) they are made more comprehensible than the actions man confronts in life – the audience can learn to trace intention, to action, to reaction and through this, understands better when and how to judge well. Judging well requires

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<sup>244</sup> *Dianoia* was introduced in ch.6 (1450a14) as one of the six elements of tragedy.

<sup>245</sup> "The poet" Aristotle says, "should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator" (1460a6-8). This brings to mind Thucydides, who similarly aimed to be deliberately absent from his *History*.

<sup>246</sup> Poetry encourages men to make inferences by representing not what has happened, but what *may* happen/*could* happen (1451b5-10).

<sup>247</sup> The wonder and suspense however, do not come from fantastical language (language should be balanced, 1458b1-6) or lavish spectacle (1453b1), but from within the plot itself, i.e., from events which "follow as cause and effect" and accord with what is necessary and probable, but which are nevertheless surprising (1452a3-6). The audience is therefore encouraged to engage with, and find importance in *the actions of men*. Gardner writes that through surprise and suspense, the poet tempts the reader/watcher to work – what would he/she choose in those circumstances? (*On Moral Fiction* New York: 1978, p.114).

<sup>248</sup> One might speculate that because many Attic tragedians drew on well known stories, even on actual historical figures, a kind of distanced identification was possible, safer and in many ways easier than looking at oneself, but identification (and thus hopefully, participation) nevertheless.



practice, and actions in the 'real world' are often too close, or too laden with detail to provide the useful, *guided* experience needed to cultivate practical knowledge. It is often difficult for men to get the necessary perspective to see clearly and judge their emotional responses and following actions.<sup>249</sup> The capacity to discern the beginning's and end's of one's own actions is not innate, but must be developed and cultivated through practice. Man must *learn* to see, as best he can, the boundaries of intention, action, and consequence; he must see what kinds of responses seem appropriate in different kinds of situations. The construction of the poet helps him to acquire this ability.

But how does poetry do this and in what does such work and participation consist? *Mimesis*, Aristotle claims, encourages men to exercise and apply their understanding. In contemplating a representation, "they find they are learning, inferring what class each object belongs to: for example this individual is a so-and-so" (1448b16-18). Part of what man must do to understand and realise virtue – in fact, part of what virtue is – is the capacity to make inferences, to understand, for example, what particular action in a given situation would fall under the general class of virtue. There is a (reasonable and creative) leap that must be made when man makes inferences, when he goes from particular to general, and poetry gives men practice in making this leap.<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, because it presents paradoxes and embraces contradiction, poetry helps man to make inferences from precisely the kind of 'data' he finds in living his own life. Poetry reveals a

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<sup>249</sup> Golden highlights the fact that we have little/no distance on our own ideas/emotions, without distance (sense of the general through recognizing others) we cannot judge well and as an example, looks at Achilles before his discussion with Priam, when he is a "seething cauldron of uncontrolled emotions." It is only with the broader perspective Priam provides that Achilles can see his own situation with clarity (*Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* Atlanta: 1992, p.34)

<sup>250</sup> Golden writes that poetry is able to "represent universals that subsume and illuminate numerous particulars" (1448b16-17; 1451b5-11; 1453b8-14) *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* Atlanta: 1992, p.25).

world that has an order and structure that is different from, though not subordinate to that of science and logic.<sup>251</sup>

In discussing the historical development of tragedy, Aristotle claims that it began as improvisation (*autoschediastike*). Poetry thus progressed through *creative* steps which stretched the medium beyond precedents and rules already in place until it eventually found its natural end (1449a10). There is a parallel to be drawn here with man himself, one which takes us back to Pindar's victorious athlete who, though grounded in and attached to a particular *polis*, dependent on its education and training, succeeded because he stretched man's sense of the possible, going beyond what was previously done and known. Progression for both poetry and man involves creative, yet reasonable risk. Tragedy, as the recreation of past epics/familiar stories, embodies a form of reasonable creativity. Using material from the past, poets imagine a *plausible* and meaningful way of depicting it in the present.<sup>252</sup> In an analogous way, men must reflect on and use their past experiences (or in the narrower case of the athlete, his training – but both derived from a community) to help guide them so they can act reasonably, yet creatively (given the novelty of their particular, present circumstances) and construct a life which forms a unified whole.

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<sup>251</sup> For a discussion of alternative forms of 'logic', see Vernant "The Reason of Myth" in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1990, pp. 203-260).

<sup>252</sup> Vernant *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: 1988, pp.242-43).

## Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to answer two basic questions: What kind of a creature is man?, and given some proposed answers, What kind of ('rational') thought is appropriate for political theorising? These questions seem to me to be pressing at a time when much of ethical and political theory has collapsed under a scientific model, deemed successful when it yields precise and definitive answers to the diverse and complex dilemmas inevitable in any human life. Such a model assumes that man is endowed with a keen capacity for instrumental rationality (i.e., straightforward means-to-end reasoning)—undoubtedly important—but it does not address the other kinds of reasoning he needs in order to live well in a world that is often far from 'scientific'. Experience of the human world reveals it to be one of contradiction and ambiguity, where men must make choices amidst competing and incommensurable goods—human beings act (and are held responsible for their actions) in a realm of probability and contingency, though rarely, necessity. However, this does not render man's choices and decisions arbitrary, nor does it imply that ethical and political values are simply relative. Rather I have argued that given man's nature, his potential to become a responsible and flourishing *political* actor is realised through attentive and reflective *experience* (broadly defined). This experience is not 'raw'; men cannot acquire it alone by passively 'absorbing' whatever they perceive to be the case in their pursuit of their own individual whims—rather it is guided, shared, interpreted, evaluated and demanding. Through such experience man can develop the kind of character that is capable of discerning (and eventually explaining) good ends in his circumstances (i.e., he can creatively balance his general conception of what man is *as a species* with the relevant concrete details of his situation). He can then make deliberate choices to act in ways that are *likely* to bring those ends about. In short, men must cultivate not only instrumental reasoning, but the capacity to think and act with both reason and creativity.

This project began with Pindar, by fleshing out a conception of man prevalent at the time he wrote, i.e., a member of a species whose nature lies somewhere between god and beast—between the omnipotent and immortal, and the determined and fleeting. Pindar's odes worked in part by setting up the 'illogical' juxtaposition of both divine and animal characteristics in man. His words showed the audience/reader how seemingly mutually exclusive attributes can, and do, occur simultaneously in the victorious athletes and further, in mankind in general. That is, Pindar portrayed man as a creature in whom opposites exist together, a being who is at once dependent on his family and city, their practices and laws, yet also capable of moving beyond these 'constraints', free to diverge from and surpass that which came before him. The form of the ode, its constituent parts, mirror this 'human' tension—they include references to familiar myths and common history, yet they are composed for, and aim at praising and extolling the particular, *new* action of a unique individual. Furthermore, the athlete who performs the illustrious deed, though dependent on his community and its traditions, is celebrated precisely because he went beyond them, because he exceeded what had hitherto been done/known. It was the breaking with tradition, though slight and always respectful, that brought the victor fame (and with this fame, a kind of immortality; though man is clearly not immortal like the mighty gods, his memory is preserved for posterity through the odes). This delicate relationship—between community and individual, between old and new, between god and beast—reveals an irony in Pindar's conception of man: he seems to need 'constraints' (family, city, traditions, common practices/beliefs—and of course, the political structure needed to have organised games in the first place) in order to successfully move beyond them—'constraints' are the precondition for exercising his (limited) freedom wisely, and initiating the kind of change and progress which is beneficial and illuminating rather than hubristic and arrogant.

Pindar's words express the dissonance that arises because of the conflicting characteristics in man, but his odes did not try to resolve it, for instance, by

establishing a definitive hierarchy between the two. Rather they encouraged and demanded that the audience/reader develop a kind of rational thought which was not dependent on such a hierarchy, nor on coming to rest on a single, definitive answer. Instead, Pindar required that the audience/reader find meaning/stability in his words, yet keep his thought 'in motion', like the melody of the odes themselves. The elements of the odes were not automatically absorbed and understood but were presented in a form that was as challenging as it was beautiful. Pindar's words were often cryptic, his use of metaphor, ubiquitous, his narrative, far from linear, and at times even broken. The hard work that the obscurity of the odes demands, and the motivation that their beauty inspires reflect the effort men need to put into their own lives. Pindar suggests that though every life involves error and missed opportunities, man still has the ability to strive and, with disciplined training to which luck may come to adhere, excel.

Next I examined Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, beginning with the same premise that initiated my analysis of Pindar's odes—the idea that man is a creature whose nature lies between god and beast. I argued that Thucydides' *History* highlighted some of the consequences this conception had on man's use of abstract political theory. The *History* seemed to warn men to be careful of making judgements which relied too heavily on either detached, abstract principles or concrete, historical precedent, and instead demanded that they take an approach that balanced the two. This meant giving up 'scientific' certainty when doing political theory and applying it to lived life, but successfully (I believe) avoided the chaos of relativism as well as the stagnation of conservatism.

I drew on the philosophy of Hannah Arendt to structure my analysis of Thucydides. Like Pindar, Arendt stressed the importance of understanding an individual's actions through human *interaction*. (And as I hope became clear in Chapter 3, like Aristotle, she seemed to believe in the inherently political nature of man.) For Arendt, the notion of an Archimedean

standpoint in political theory, an overarching 'neutral' principle, was illusory. Even more, any claim to have discovered it had shown to be destructive. Claims to have found Truth, ideas that are immune to critique and debate, she believed bred the intellectual laziness which was likely to result in cruelty and oppression. The good choices and sound decisions that distinguish a healthy political community must come from 'within', i.e., from people mindfully engaging and deliberately acting with and amongst others. We must strive, Arendt insisted, not for a single, 'impartial' perspective, but for a broad range of particular, 'embedded' perspectives. This 'fragmented' point of view comes through close attention not only to one's own life as a member of a specific political community, but from exploring the lives of others from different political backgrounds and traditions as well (both contemporaries and historical).

Building on Arendt, I argued that Thucydides' *History* itself encourages and trains the reader in this endeavour—it moves constantly from one perspective to another, portraying the thought processes of different characters, and providing various examples of the reasoning that goes on 'behind' a decision. All this comes with little guidance from the author as to which view should be trusted over and above others. The reader alone must make judgements as he proceeds through the narrative. Gradually, this process develops a sense of who and what man is, the ways he thinks, and the kinds of things of which he is capable. Ultimately, Thucydides' *History* seems to deny the existence of a unified and sweeping political theory, capable of guiding each man's individual decisions. Through close examination of both motive and action however, Thucydides suggests we can start to get a sense of what is *likely* and *probable* for men, as *kinds* of creatures, in different *kinds* of situations.

But, because man can never achieve absolute certainty, every action involves risk, and thus, his success should not be measured solely by the outcomes of his actions, but also by the kind of thought that preceded them—the character of the agent. This understanding encourages man to find a way of drawing

value from, and where possible, transforming those well-intentioned/thought-out choices that get distorted when acted upon/realised into something useful. However, this does not mean that good intentions/the right motives alone determine how we should evaluate human action, but it recognises that much of what man does lies beyond his control, and that sound intentions, though no guarantee of good consequences, are *likely* to bring about desired ends. Therefore we must, Thucydides and Arendt insist, develop characters which are capable of discerning the fragile and often unpredictable balance between general principle and relevant concrete details in a particular situation. Such a disposition can be developed only through experience in a *polis*—an organisation of men living together, according to laws, participating in common moral practices, with some sense of a shared past/tradition. Thucydides shows that the war, in shattering the structure of many Greek *poleis*, thereby destroyed the citizens' and leaders' capacity for reasonable and creative thought and action. Political life gives man the security—both physical and psychological—necessary for this, and reading Thucydides' *History* is a 'supplement' to one's own political experience. An active, engaged reader will cultivate the essential human practice of balancing abstract and concrete that Thucydides and Arendt see as essential for reasonable, creative thought and action.

Finally, I looked at the work of Aristotle: specifically the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Poetics*. I began with his ethical and political theory, which seemed to assume many of the qualities of man I drew from the poetic and historical work of Pindar and Thucydides. With Aristotle, I argued that those characteristics that define the human species should be used as a framework within which to understand and realise man's good in general and each man's good in particular. Though unique as individuals with powerful personal desires and the capacity to act so as to achieve/acquire them, man is also a *kind* of living creature with certain constant characteristics which reveal his species specific good. Given extensive (and again, guided) experience and reflection, these characteristics can be distilled, and the sense of the human

good that emerges can be used to guide and frame one's life. However, those qualities that define man abstractly are manifested concretely in an infinite number of ways given that there are different men in different circumstances. This means that any theory which defines man and his good is necessarily imprecise—even with the guidance of a philosopher, we do not find absolute certainty! Rather we find a general outline (itself derived from experience), that must be used reasonably and creatively. My last task was an analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* given this framework. This pushed the investigation further—through it I developed a stronger sense of just what reasonable creativity entailed; the capacity to draw sound generalisations by drawing inferences from seemingly disparate actions, to find ways of transforming mistakes and missteps into necessary and important pieces of any human life, and to be able to carve out the proper, if dynamic, realm of responsibility, so that one's own actions can be seen as meaningful and worthwhile.

In summary, this thesis has attempted first to examine and 'extract' a conception of man from texts that are decidedly 'non-philosophical' in that they do not set out problems and attempt systematically to solve them. Instead, the words of Pindar and Thucydides form stories, they draw on the traditions and practices of men by way of narrative, rich images, and illuminating metaphor. Furthermore, there is a sense in which these texts are in motion, *alive*—they vacillate from one perspective to another, from clarity to ambiguity, from certainty to suspense, from hope to despondence—and these vicissitudes demand the reader's active participation. This participation renders these poetic and historical texts a kind of guided experience, capable of cultivating the kind of critical thought I believe to be appropriate to political theory—from the varied, and at times contradictory portrayals of particular *men*, generalisations about *man* can be culled, and then become available for critique and debate. That is to say, the activity required to draw out a thorough/"thick" understanding of what it is to be human from works that portray many different aspects of human life I believe is an important part of developing the capacity for reasonable, creative thought.



The understanding of man as a member of a species with a fixed good that is manifested in countless ways in different human lives can be derived from these diverse media. This conception however, does not yield a theory that can be used like a formula (à la utilitarianism)—we cannot follow it precisely when we confront particular problems. Rather given our effort, it can reveal a *reasonable* (general) sense of what man is which can be used *creatively* in the specific (concrete) circumstances we confront. The motive behind examining the work of these three authors sprang from my belief that political theory must begin by knowing, as best it can, what man is, and that we can get to know man—what kind of creature he is and what a good life for him looks like—through experience, through observing what he has been/can be. This thesis therefore, aimed to show that we should not begin political theory with a ‘thin’, impoverished conception of man, but rather we should come to theory ‘thick’ with experience, both personal and through that which we glean from poetic and historical texts. This generates a conception of man and his good which goes beyond mere preference satisfaction. And furthermore, in the process of ‘participating’ in these texts, we are ‘trained’ to engage in the kind of thought necessary to achieve this good, i.e., we learn to be reasonable and creative.

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