Thucydides' War as a Violent Teacher

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ABSTRACT: In the beginning of his book The Peloponnesian War, Thucydides gave the account of the Peloponnesian war as the greatest motion ever. He claimed so without giving sufficient explanations. His later analogy, which compared war to a "violent teacher", reveals his insight into the fundamental conflict between nature and law. This conflict as a basic element of human condition is well illustrated by war itself. In this sense Thucydides' opinion about the Peloponnesian war as the greatest one becomes understandable.

KEY WORDS: Thucydides, war, nature, law

The puzzling greatness of the Peloponnesian war

In the opening part of *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides made two remarkable assertions. The first one is the claim on his identity as "an Athenian" in the first sentence of the book[1]. Considering his impartial narration in the whole book, one cannot help wondering what this claim of identity tried to remind its readers. Did it mean to alert the readers that this report of war might have some inevitable flaws on its integrity or objectivity due to the author's involvement? Or, did it simply infer some connection between his actual impartial attitude of narrative and certain characteristic of Athenians?

The other assertion, however, is even more puzzling. It is Thucydides' evaluation on the significance of the Peloponnesian war as "the greatest commotion that ever happened among the Grecians, reaching also … to most nations."[2] This claim appears to be so ambitious, if not exaggerating, that one who intends to treat this claim seriously has to seek Thucydides' textual support onto his confidence. How can he be sure that what he was experiencing was the peak moment in the history of "most nations"? Though he discussed the weakness of the ancient people who dwelled in the Greek region closely following the above assertion, he kept silent about the other nations, which were even unknown to him. His narrations on the war smoothly covered this silence, but the obvious lack of explanation is still disturbing. How can a war--as a

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[1] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War-The Complete Hobbes Translation*, David Grene Ed. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), Book I, Chapter 1

[2] Ibid, I,1

temporary, regionally and ethically limited incidence--have its universal significance secured? Moreover, there is a more urgent question on Thucydides' regard of this war's greatness. In what sense can this war be regarded as a great one, let alone the greatest? Considering Dionysius Halicarnassius' criticism on Thucydides' lack of honorable and fortunate materials in his report, which was merely about the brutish war itself, one question arises unavoidably—what is Thucydides' standard about greatness? All Thucydides wrote about, in Halicarnassius' words, was no more than "an evil argument in hand"[3], without anything noble or wonderful. Besides, as Hobbes commented, Thucydides appeared to have no "affection to either side, and not as a lover of his country but of truth"[4]. He did not end his story with one side's triumph; during the whole process of the war, neither side in Thucydides' narration showed overwhelming advantage of power, nobility or virtue. Then in whose stance did Thucydides think about the greatness of this war? It cannot be the same as common sense, which evaluates the greatness of war according to the winner's achievement in territory, wealth or fame. This kind of greatness belongs to a certain side in war, not the war itself. Thucydides, however, with his unusual neutral stance, appointed no one to carry his praise, but let the war itself accomplish this.

One of Thucydides' explicit opinions of war can prove his admiration. In Book III, Chapter 82, when he talked about the heinous things which happened in wartime, he wrote:

> "For in peace and prosperity as well cities as primate men are better minded because they be not plunged into necessity of doing anything against their will; but war, taking away the affluence of daily necessaries, is a most violent teacher and conformeth most men's passions to the present occasion."

War is called "a violent teacher", rather than a devil or a beast; and what is concerned here is "war" rather than "the war" or "this war." War is admired here as teacher, or the radical and universal form of motion. The Peloponnesian war is the greatest but not the only great one; its greatness is outstandingly different from other wars in degree, not in kind. Moreover, Thucydides' analogy of "teacher" infers his unspoken rationale. First, teaching is a decent occupation; war, with all its brutality, to Thucydides must also possess some decency in its nature. Secondly, a teacher should have something true to teach; therefore, by comparing war to a teacher, Thucydides must have got some insight into war's provision, from which people can learn some kind of truth. A remaining point here is that Thucydides still kept his neutral stance when he admired war as a teacher. It means that what this violent teacher can teach is open to all men in all wars. The lesson of war must be a neutral, or universal, knowledge applying to all men. Furthermore, considering that Thucydides characterized war the teacher only with its "taking away the affluence of daily necessaries", it is fair to say that such universal knowledge will not be some kind of scientific knowledge, such as arts of launching attacks or debating with enemies. Instead, it should be some teaching on the same intellectual level of the possible teaching taught by "daily necessaries" in peacetime. Therefore it is fair to assume that what war teaches is knowledge of the nature. By teaching about nature, war the teacher earns its decency.

Leo Strauss gave a thought provoking comment on this war/teacher analogy. He wrote in "Thucydides' Peloponnesian war" that

[3] Ibid, Hobbes, "On the Life and History of Thucydides", p578
[4] Ibid, p580

> War is a "violent teacher": it teaches men not only to act violently but also about violence and therewith about the truth. War is a violent teacher not only of everyone except Thucydides but also of Thucydides himself. Taught by that teacher Thucydides presents the war as it unfolds … In doing this he could not help presenting his own conversion from the peace time view to the war time view or his most advanced education.[5]

Strauss' interpretation on the war/teacher analogy added, or disclosed, another issue within. The adjective "most advanced" is used by Strauss but not by Thucydides himself. It is not hard to understand that there is another kind of education that teaches men not only act peacefully but also about peace—actually, that is everyone's daily peacetime experience. But why is the education of war more advanced, even the most advanced? To answer this question, one needs to start from an inquiry on the two kinds of educations, i.e. the wartime education and the peace time education.

Two kinds of education given by peace and war

According to Thucydides' narration on the history prior to war, peace is always conditional. Thucydides mentioned at least three examples on this. First, in the old time when people living in Greece had not shared the name Hellas, there was no distinction between barbarians and Grecians. People just "became thieves and went abroad under the conduct of their most puissant men … and made this the best means of their living; being a matter at that time nowhere in disgrace but rather carrying with it something of glory."[6] Peace came after war, i.e. after such violent times. Second, the long peace gifted to Athens, due to which Athenians had a unique chance to develop her culture and to accumulate her wealth, was resulted from no desirable fortune but mere the sterility of its soil.[7] Peace lasted long in Attic incidentally only because this place had nothing people would fight for. The third example is different from the first two--the peace between Athens and Sparta prior to the Peloponnesian war was not accidental. It was a man-made peace, which was not an independent situation. It depended on a thirty years' peace treaty[8], which was also a divine treaty. Peace, in Thucydides' narration, is always under the shadow of war. It is either resulted from war's absence by chance, or guaranteed by divine treaties made after wars—not only the thirty years' one, but also the innumerable short ones after every battle.

Therefore, if peace has its teaching, such teaching should be about, first of all, its conditions. Since it would not be an education on unreliable chance, it would be an education based on divine treaties, i.e. on the divinity and the laws. Divinity or gods here, however, as laws' defenders, are subject to the laws. As Plato wrote in Laws, the laws are superior to wisdom of every kind, including that of the gods.[9] Hence the education by peace is mainly the education by laws. The laws sanctified the peace—the former starts and maintains the latter. Law-abiding defines the standard of the justice. Moreover, when Corinthians urged Sparta to wage a war against Athens by criticizing Sparta's caution, the first thing they stressed was Sparta's fidelity in

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[5] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p162
[6] *The Peloponnesian War*, I,5
[7] Ibid, I,2
[8] Cf. Ibid, I,115
[9] Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 5,7-16; also, Strauss, "How Farabi Read Plato's *Laws*" in *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p150

their constitution[10]. Similarly, in Pericles' famous funeral speech, the first thing he praised about Athens was that they Athenians had unique and admirable laws, which made them a pattern to other states[11]. Laws are critical measures of *polis* justice as such.

War, however, is characterized by law-breaking. Laws cannot provide remedy in war time, because the concern about live or die overcomes the concern about right or wrong. As Thucydides wrote, war "conformeth most men's passions to the present occasion."[12] War, as a dark background of relatively temporary peace, teaches men about another way to deal with the situations happening according to people's passions rather than conventional virtues or piety—"sincerity was laughed down… no speech was so powerful nor oath terrible enough to disband."[13] On the other hand, even though people in war abandon their laws and piety, they are not unreasonably violent, not simply enjoying killing. According the Thucydides' thought on war, people still keep their rationality. While in peacetime people put the highes to authority to the divinity of laws, in wartime they also have some position which they can appeal to—they appeal to the nature of man, to the natural need to survive and prosper. What happens in war is no more than that "the nature of man, which is wont even against law to do evil, gotten now above the law, showed itself with delight to be too weak for passion, too strong for justice, and enemy to all superiority."[14] The fall of laws is accompanied with the rise of human nature. War as a teacher gives an education about human nature in the first place.

Therefore, the different educations of peace and war can be reduced to the educations of law and nature. Thucydides' concept of human nature is featured with a continuous possibility to go against laws. This concept has been briefly expressed in Diodotus' speech, which meant to appease people's haste and anger upon Mytilenaeans' betrayal by arguing that the executive force of laws cannot tame the wild nature of man:

> "They have it by nature, both men and cities, to commit offences; nor is there any law that can prevent it… And it is likely that gentler punishments were inflicted of old even upon the most heinous crimes; but that in tract of time, men continuing to transgress, they were extended afterwards to the taking away of life; and yet they still transgress… In a word, it is a thing impossible and of great simplicity to believe when human nature is earnestly bent to do a thing that by force of law or any other danger it can be diverted."[15]

According to this speech, the tension between law and nature cannot be eliminated, because the law-breaking nature is so daring that the force of law is always too weak to overwhelm it. The threat brought by nature against the laws is identical with the threat of war against peace. The divine treaties cannot always keep their validities until their official expiration date; the fact that there is always an expiration date in peace pacts implies that peacetime is always temporary. Peace presupposes war, as law presupposes the natural intention of law-breaking, or in Strauss' words, "just as rest presupposes motion and issues in motion, justice presupposes injustice and

[10] *The Peloponnesian War*, I,68
[11] Ibid, II, 37
[12] Ibid, III, 82
[13] Ibid, III, 83
[14] Ibid, III, 84
[15] Ibid, III, 45

issues in injustice."[16]

Yet the law-breaking feature of human nature cannot be the last word of war's education; the "most advanced education" could not be an education on pure barbarianism or brutishness. The Peloponnesian war was marked as "the greatest commotion that ever happened among the Grecians" not only because of its unprecedented fierceness and destructiveness, but also due to the characteristics shared by the two major camps involved—the Greekness of both Athens and Sparta. The Peloponnesian war is great in the sense that it is the biggest barbarian conflict between two highly civilized cities. Both sides had the awareness of the tension between the nature and the laws; such awareness had been presented in their speeches and debates. Some arguers appealed to the divine laws while some others who were backing the human nature side appealed to "honor, fear and profit"[17] but not to any irrational instinct.

Nature and law: two alternative approaches to pursue the good

The natural inclination to break laws has its own reason, a kind of reason about how to live a good life as a free individual, an individual out of any framework of laws, an individual dwelling in the Hobbesean state of nature. Every individuals tries to find a good way of life, while no one has adequate knowledge about the knowledge of the good.[18] Therefore everyone lives only according to his own partial understanding of the good, which is insufficient even for the basic daily necessities, because many conflicts, or wars, would rise due to people's opposing concepts of the good. In the beginning of his book, Thucydides has noted such conflicts and the subsequent ancient conventions, which could be very brutish. For example, as Thucydides depicted, piracy used to be an honorable job for certain islanders; and ancient Greece people needed to bear arms with them because danger was everywhere.[19]

Laws provide an optional, and a political, answer to people's request for the idea of good. Laws gain their authority from the gods, and they are even in a higher priority to the gods, because the gods give divine prescriptions to the cities while they are looking upon the idea of laws. Divinity seems to be a qualified authority to unify the content of the good; to obey the divine laws seems to be the sole promising way to build a perfect city. However, as Plato pointed out, people had never built a truly virtuous city based on given divine laws, and therefore the laws of city can be judged with a standard supplied by certain poems, rather than other laws.[20] There was nothing higher in this divine scheme, i.e. the whole picture in which the laws rule all, the gods defend the laws and award them to citizens, and men build up cities based on the given laws. When the tangible earthly laws are questioned, the divinity of the whole scheme will be inevitably suspected as well. The occurrence of wars imposes such suspicion into the most urgent position. The laws are broken, and the treaties are breached; any argument trying to justify waging a battle, or to guarantee a triumph by appealing to justice, turns out to appear either hypocritical or naïve. That is because when the laws become ineffective, the standard of justice becomes invalid simultaneously as well. "As for mutual trust amongst them, it was confirmed not so much by

[16] *The City and Man*, p190
[17] *The Peloponnesian War*, I, 76
[18] Cf. Plato, *The Republic*, 505e
[19] *The Peloponnesian War*, I, 5-8
[20] Cf. *Laws*, 5,16-6,16; also, *What is Political Philosophy*, p150

divine law as by the communication of guilt."[21] Also, as the Athenians more toughly pointed out, "in human disputation justice is only agreed on when the necessity is equal; whereas they that have odds of power exact as much as they can, and the weak yield to such conditions as they can get."[22] However, in wartime, the necessities of both sides are rarely equal, hence the possibility to appeal to justice is always lacking.

After it rejects the power of divine laws, war creates a certain kind of necessity. This necessity is not only about the fear for extinction--it is rather an urgent need for a miraculous alternative guidance of action when law's justice does not work. As Thucydides wrote, it is the necessity to "conformeth most men's passions to the present occasion." War as the most radical form of motion, leaves no room for contemplation or hesitation. One must decide what is more preferable among all possible options as quickly as he can. Peace leads necessarily to admiration of antiquity, while war leads to focal attention on the present.[23] Making decisions only based on a consideration about how to survive in the present, necessarily means to reason as individuals freed from convention, laws and the authority of the divine, i.e. as a natural rational beings—no rules, free play. Every player has to concentrate on only one new question: what is good for me right here, right now? Any claim appealing to the previous shared justice comes to be a fraud[24]. As the Mytilenaeans suggested to the Spartans, "if it appear that your endeavor is to make [the Greeks] free, your strength in this war will be much the more confirmed."[25] Justice becomes from the highest end to no more than a fancy excuse.

However, the conversion from peacetime view to wartime view is too radical to be completely done. The concern with justice and divine laws does not disappear in a second after the war breaks out. It keeps stretching people's consideration away from the call of nature. The sense of guilt aroused by abandoning the divine laws haunted everyone all the time. When the Corcyraeans ask the Athenians to protect them from the Corinthians, they needed to emphasize that by doing so the Athenians would not breach their divine treaties with the Spartans[26]. When Archidamus tried to stop Spartans from waging a war, while Sthenelaidas tried to urge them to do so, both of them put their last words onto the divine laws. Archidamus said "one that offereth himself to judgment may not lawfully be invaded as a doer of injury before the judgment be given"[27], while Stheneilaidas said "let us …in the name of the Gods proceed against the doer of injustice."[28] Though the spoken arguments maybe not reveal the truest reason, it still shows that the concern on the divine laws and justice does matter; otherwise there would be no need to claim so. Two more convincing examples are about actions rather than speeches, the example of Alcidas. He was told that "it was but an ill manner of setting the Grecians at liberty to kill such as had not lift up their hands against him nor were indeed enemies to the Peloponnesians but confederates to the Athenians by constrainst, and that, unless he gave over that course, he would

[21] *The Peloponnesian War*, III, 82
[22] Ibid, III, 89
[23] Cf. *The City and Man*, p162; also, Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, Thomas L. Pangle ed. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p88
[24] Cf. *The City and Man*, p239; also, Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, George Schwab trans. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p54
[25] *The Peloponnesian War*, III, 13
[26] Ibid, I, 35
[27] Ibid, I, 85
[28] Ibid, I, 87

make few of the enemies his friends but many now friends to become his enemies."[29] Before he was told so, such a simple thought had never occurred to him or any other Spartan, because Spartans always killed in such circumstances, which was taught by their laws.[30] Even in the late period of the war, the Spartans still believed that their justice is critical to their military success. "Arms should not be carried against such as would stand to trial of judgment, they [Spartans] refused such trial when the Athenians offered it; and they thought all their misfortunes had deservedly befallen them for that cause… the Spartans, conceiving the Athenians to be in the same fault that themselves had been in before, betook themselves earnestly to the war."[31] The concerns on justice never totally fade away as such.

The most advanced education of war

The coexistence of both the laws and the nature on the battlefield makes the education of war the most advanced one. Indeed, the first thing war teaches is one alternative approach to grasp the idea of the good, i.e. the approach of natural reason. The outbreak of war compels people to live on without the restrains of the laws, and therefore provided a rare opportunity for them to manifest their violent nature. Yet such an exposition of human nature cannot be qualified as a higher, let alone the highest, education compared with the education of laws. It is because that these two kinds of education are parallel; the radical change of concern into natural reason still was not able to eliminate people's appeal to the divine laws in the war time. A higher education, or the most advanced education, is the education about the tension between these two kinds of appeals—the appeal to the nature, and the appeal to the laws. This tension becomes clearly visible only when the natural reason shows its power violently in the war time.

Such tension, as the call of human nature, is not created but intensely exposed by war. The law-breaking nature is always there. In the peace time, it is represented in some other forms; some forms non-violent but no less destructive to the divine laws, such as the form of philosophical thinking. War teaches about violence, while philosophy teaches about madness or frenzy.[32] They both question the divine laws; therefore question the foundation of the city, of politics. In peace time, the madness of philosophy cannot easily overrule the decrees of the divine laws; philosophers never become powerful kings. They could be sentenced to death as was Socrates, for their preaching of madness by the political power of the city. War, however, the violent teacher, forces people to turn to natural reason and to question the laws and the gods. Thucydides did not believe that the gods avenge injustice and he never mentioned such a case. The laws and the gods, according to Thucydides' attitude, had to be questioned.

In the sense that war presents the tension between the natural reason and the legislative reason, or in other terms, the philosophical reason and the political reason, Thucydides' take on the Peloponnesian war's greatness becomes obvious to understand. The kept question, how Peloponnesian war's greatness can be decided by its bigness, can be solved. Its bigness implies a more clear and comprehensive presentation of the tension; both Sparta and Athens' accomplishment before the war, the climax of the Greekness, presents this tension in the sharpest

[29] Ibid, III, 32
[30] Cf. *The City and Man*, p214
[31] *The Peloponnesian War*, VII, 18
[32] Cf. Strauss, "Alcibiades" in *On Plato's Symposium*, Seth Benardete Ed. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press,2001)

manner. Moreover, the greatness of this war, or any war, also closely related to the ultimateness of the tension itself. All the conflicts defining the extremes of human affairs, such as motion vs. rest, war vs. peace, moderation vs. madness, barbarism and Greekness, all of them derive from the tension between natural reason and political reason. "By understanding the biggest unrest Thucydides understands the limits of human possibilities. His knowledge is final knowledge."[33] War's education, therefore could be regarded as the most advanced education for all the political philosophers, if they obtain such a title only due to their awareness of the tension between political reason and philosophical reason. War's teaching about the tension is the most advanced one, because only in war can this tension be fully seen. No any single political philosopher can show this tension by openly questioning his city's laws and gods. War, on the other hand, is able to push every one into that position with no threat from any kind of violence—war itself is violence. Political philosophers may suffer for their sanity, while wars never will.

As to the first question raised in the beginning, why Thucydides first of all identified himself as an Athenian, the answer may be also connected to his teaching about the tension between two contrary kinds of reasons. Athens is a second best circumstance to present the tension other than the war. Among all the Athenians, there were both the ambassador who claimed to the Spartans that the motives of war can only be honor, fear and profit, i.e. no justice, another ambassador who claimed to the Melians that gods only help the stronger[34]; and, on the other hand, the most admired gentleman Nicias, who was respected for his lawfulness and piety. With an insight about the significance of the ultimate tension, the unsolvable dilemma, between two kinds of reasons, Thucydides must have seen how representative both the Peloponnesian war and the case of Athens can be. Only with an understanding on Thucydides' insight into the classical tension disclosed in Athens and the Peloponnesian war, his remarks in the beginning of his book that this war was the greatest war, plus that his book would be a possession of all generations, would show to us nothing exaggerating, but only the author's deepest wisdom.

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[33] *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p84

[34] The Peloponnesian War, V, 105

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