

POLITICAL & SOCIAL THOUGHT

Prudence & Political Realism

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What premises, assumptions, reasons, evidence, and other important considerations lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, it is *information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support and justify accepting the author's conclusions as opposed to other ones.

Reading

Thucydides. (1993). *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature: Selections from The History of the Peloponnesian War* (P. Woodruff, Ed. & Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (Original work from c.400 BCE.)
Excerpts are from "The Plague" and "The Melian Dialogue".

Comment

To help us better understand the events described by Thucydides and connect it with other material we will see in this class, here are some definitions.

- **Prudence:** A general concern with one's own interests and well-being.
- **Psychological Egoism:** The theory that, generally speaking, the primary motive for human conduct *is* prudence.
- **Ethical Egoism:** The theory that, generally speaking, the primary motive for human conduct *should be* prudence.
- **Descriptive Realism:** The theory that, generally speaking, the primary motive for the behavior of nations (and politicians) *is* to maximize their power.
- **Normative Realism:** The theory that, generally speaking, the primary motive for the behavior of nations (and politicians) *should be* to maximize their power.

I do not claim that these are perfect definitions (not everyone uses these terms in the exact same way), but they are sufficient for my purposes in this class.

Questions

1. During the Peloponnesian War, there is a plague in Athens. How do the Athenians behave? Why do they behave in this way? Does this seem to support either psychological or ethical egoism?
2. During their dialogue, the Athenians demand the surrender of the Melians. What is their "persuasive and unanswerable" (p. 102) argument supporting this position? Why are the Melians not convinced?
3. Based on their dialogue, how do the Athenians and Melians each seem to conceive of justice? Do their respective positions seem to support descriptive or normative realism?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses (unless you miss or are late to class, and must then submit a written reading question review).

You do need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting. You may, during the following class, be randomly selected to present answers to these if selected to do so for a verbal reading question review.