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Alcibiades, Athens, and the Human Condition in Thucydides' *History*

At 2.65 and 6.15 in his history, Thucydides places Alcibiades at the heart of his account of the Athenians' defeat in their war against the Spartans. While this represents a specific historical claim on Thucydides' part, it is also a critical moment in Thucydides' articulation of his work's largest themes about history and humanity. In this respect, an important feature of Thucydides' presentation of Alcibiades involves the broad analogy his work establishes between Alcibiades and Athens. This analogy between a man and a polis in many ways anticipates Plato's *Republic*, a work which exploits such an analogy at the same time it shares Thucydides' thematic preoccupations with questions about justice, private ambition, the common good, and tyranny.

While Alcibiades has often been viewed as an incarnation of the spirit of imperial Athens both as an historical figure (e.g., de Romilly 1995, 10) and as a figure in Thucydides' history (e.g., Orwin, 1994, 123), and while his special place in Thucydides' history has received thought-provoking treatment (e.g., Forde 1989; Gribble 1999, 159-213), I propose to extend these lines of inquiry by situating Thucydides' Alcibiades in the context of his work's articulation of his fundamental historical principles. At 1.22.4, Thucydides connects the everlasting value he intends his work to have with his work's revelation of a concept according to which events have transpired in the past and will transpire in the future in a more or less similar way. He calls this concept to *anthropinon*, "the human condition" (cf. Hornblower 1991, 61). While at 1.22.4 Thucydides offers no elaboration of the character of to *anthropinon*, this elaboration inheres in Thucydides' account of the war. For instance, the question of the way events have transpired and will transpire becomes a topic for reflection and debate in the speeches of the Corinthians and the Athenians at Sparta on the eve of the war's outbreak (1.68-78), where the Athenian speech insists on the importance of categories like fear (*deos*), honor (*time*), and profit (*ophelia*) as motivations common to all men (1.76.2).

These same categories feature prominently throughout Thucydides' analysis of the outbreak of the war and in his analysis at 6.15 of Alcibiades' role in the final defeat suffered by the Athenians. At 1.23.6, Thucydides presents what he believes to have been the war's "truest cause" (*alethestate prophasis*): he maintains "that the Athenians becoming great (*megalous gignomenous*) and inducing fear (*phobon*) in the Spartans drove the Spartans to war." This growth of Athenian power, discussed in the speeches of the Corinthians and the Athenians at Sparta and reviewed in the Pentecontaetia (1.88-118), forms the context for the Athenians' defense of their record by an appeal to the categories of fear, honor, and profit as motivations common to all men.

In the introduction to Alcibiades' speech in favor of the Sicilian expedition at 6.15, Thucydides gives an account of the Athenians' defeat in the war that centers on the fear the Athenian masses had (*hoi polloi phobethentes*) of the greatness (*megethos*) of Alcibiades' lawless and ambitious personality and lifestyle. The verbal echoes of 1.23.6 suggest a parallel between Alcibiades' greatness that inspired fear in the masses and Athens' greatness that inspired fear in the Spartans. In his analysis of Alcibiades'

behavior, Thucydides reinforces this parallel by emphasizing honor (*doxe*) and profit (*chremata*) as motives of his actions which induced fear in the many (6.15.2), evoking the Athenians' explanation of their motives in acquiring their empire at 1.76.2. Furthermore, Thucydides explains the fear of Alcibiades among the Athenians in terms of their fear of tyranny (6.15.4). In the context of the analogy between Alcibiades and Athens, this recalls the Corinthians' characterization of Athens as a *polis turannos* (1.122.3 and 1.124.3) as well as Pericles' declaration that the Athenians hold their empire like a tyranny (2.63.2) and Cleon's declaration that the empire is a tyranny (3.37.2).

Insofar as the analogy between Alcibiades and Athens, a man and a *polis*, is an important device for Thucydides' investigation of themes like tyranny and the role of the passions in politics, Thucydides' history has a deep affinity with Plato's *Republic*, where in Book 2 Socrates begins to develop an analogy between individual man and *polis* as the methodological basis for his investigation of justice which comes to involve many of the same themes Thucydides treats through his analogy of Alcibiades and Athens. In particular, Thucydides' presentation of Alcibiades anticipates the connections between lifestyles and regimes that Plato develops at length in Books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*. It is characteristic of both Plato and Thucydides that they connect very strongly questions about the human condition with questions about states. In many ways, Plato's *Republic* reads like an intense meditation upon Thucydides' understanding of the dangers Alcibiades posed to the *polis*.