

Advanced Seminar in Political Philosophy: Thucydides

This course will consist of a close reading of one of the most important works in Western thought, Thucydides' *War Between The Peloponnesians and The Athenians*. The work is an account of a war that took place over the course of twenty-seven years (432-404 B.C), a war in which democratic Athens very nearly defeated oligarchic Sparta in a bid to become ruler of the known world. Thucydides intended this work to serve as a guide for future ages, or to be, in his famous words, "something useful...a possession for all time." For this reason, we are not reading the work out of mere antiquarian interest. Instead, we'll carefully examine the deeds and speeches of the war as narrated by Thucydides in order to find solid guidance in the face of permanent problems and issues of political life. Among those permanent issues and concerns are the following: What are the causes of war and the conditions of peace? Are human beings compelled to pursue their own advantage over and against the self-sacrifice that justice demands? What are the causes of imperialism? What are the arguments for and against it? Is capital punishment justified? What (if any) is the proper place of anger in political deliberation? What praise do citizens of democracy and of oligarchy give to these two different political regimes? How do their praises compare to what the book--the course of the war--reveals about those two regimes? Thucydides presents us with statesmen whose belief in or doubt of divine intervention in human affairs decisively affects their actions; what role does religion play in political life? What forms of religion should wise statesmen encourage or discourage in healthy political life?

Thucydides could not have provided us with this kind of guidance if his work were a naively edifying, heroically inspiring, or merely cautionary tale. He presents us with the deliberations of statesmen engaged in actual political life at a time when that life happened to be most revealing of itself. As we read his work, we see the deeds of outstanding statesmen who are engaged in a struggle over the objects of their longing: freedom and empire. We hear their speeches as they attempt to move others to pursue their goals, in accordance with their opinions of what is advantageous and what is just or noble. Thucydides writes in such a way that we become more than vicariously engaged with these participants. He orders and presents the participants' speeches and deeds so that we are deeply moved by them. We become receptive to the participants' deliberations, instructed by their victories and their defeats, their glory and their shame. By examining the careers of outstanding political leaders, and discovering what those careers have to teach us about the greatness and the limits of political life, we are forced to reflect on ourselves and our own lives.