Naval War College Review

Volume 26
Number 5 *November-December*

Article 4

1973

Fifth Century Athens

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FIFTH CENTURY ATHENS:

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF THUCYDIDES

The origins of Western civilization can be traced directly to the intellectual revolution of 5th century Athens. While there have been many more such revolutions since then, this was the first in the long history of Western man; it inspired, shaped, and, in some ways, determined all of its successors. Thucydides, a product of the intellectual ferment of 5th century Athens, represented in his history a world radically different from that of his predecessor, Herodotus. For the first time man was portrayed as the sole determinant of his own future, master of his destiny, but where he was alone, no longer comforted by the assurances of divine will and traditional values. This humanist concept of the universe has been the dynamic factor in Western civilization ever since; as Sophocles said, "sometimes to evil, sometimes to good."

A recent lecture given in the Strategy and Policy Curriculum

by

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For the last few days you have been reading one man's unfinished account of a war in which he himself fought over 2,300 years ago. You may at times have doubted the wisdom of the higher authorities who gave you this assignment, and yet you could not fail to be impressed by the intellectual power of Thucydides, the clarity of his exposition, the depth of his political analysis; above all, by the fact that here, in an ancient text, political and military events are described and analyzed with a detachment, a freedom from prejudice and preconceptions, which seems to belong rather to the mind of a modern scientist than of a fifth-century Greek.

What I am going to try to do today is to sketch for you the intellectual background that led Thucydides to the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He was a great and original genius, but he did not appear fully informed out of nothing, like the goddess Athene, who, the Greeks believed, sprang fully armed out of the head of her father Zeus. Thucydides did have his predecessors in historical writing and he owed much to them, but he owed still more to the intellectual excitement that stirred his native city of Athens in the years of his youth and early manhood, the middle decades of the fifth century B.C. They were extraordinary years. What was taking place in Athens was in fact an intellectual revolution, a sudden change in the way men thought about themselves, their relation to society, and their place in the universe.

There have been many more such revolutions since then, but this was the first in the long history of Western man; it inspired, shaped and in some ways determined all of its successors. This

intellectual revolution of the fifth century B.C. was the first documented example of the destruction of an "inherited conglomerate"; the destruction of the whole complex of social, religious, and moral beliefs and attitudes which, built up over many generations and held sacred by all classes, preserve a society's continuity and guarantee its identity. One of the most important effects of this mental and moral upheaval was to produce for the first time in our history the concept of a purely secular universe--a world in which man was cut off not only from the myths and traditions of his past but also from the divine powers which had up to this point answered his prayers and punished his crimes. He was free to apply his unhindered intellect to the problems which faced him, political and otherwise; potential, or at any rate imagined, master of his own fate. He was free, but alone, with nothing to fall back on in case of failure: no traditions to live by, no gods to pray to, no social structure firmly enough based to ward off chaos, anarchy, and its inevitable result, tyranny.

Before this intellectual revolution, the old Athens was a city which, like other Greek cities and for that matter all ancient societies, was fundamentally aristocratic. It was a society which did not dream of questioning the authority of the past, regarded with reverence the governing families which had their roots in antiquity, and lived by a religious and mythical vision of the past, of men, and of gods which governed its thought and action in the present. The old Athenian lived, in fact, in what has been called a "sacramental universe." Everything that happened in it was part of a pattern, an immense, if mysterious, harmony. Everything in it had meaning: the appearance of a flight of birds on the left or right, the sound of thunder out of a clear sky, an earthquake, a storm, a meeting on the road, a fall, even a sneeze. All these things, far from being accidents, were signs, portents of the will of unseen powers that governed the universe. No one but an expert could say for sure what they meant, but everyone agreed they were meaningful. Indeed, the idea that anything at all could be a pure accident, independent of divine will or some pattern of destiny, was inconceivable; the concept of a pure accident did not appear in history until the writing of Thucydides.

In fifth century Athens, in a few short years, under the weight of political and economic pressures and also through a revolution in education, this ancient concept, as old as the human race, of a universe governed and ordered by divinity, was shattered. And for the first time man faced alone and with only himself as a reference point the problems of his personal and social life, master of his own destiny, for better or for worse.

This concept of man's place in the universe, of his freedom, and also of his total responsibility has ever since been the dynamic factor in Western civilization, resurfacing again and again at various times and in various forms, leading, as the Athenian dramatist Sophocles says of it, sometimes to evil, sometimes to good. And it is an interesting fact that time and again in our history the renewal of revolutionary thought has had its close connection with the Greeks. The Renaissance in Europe is in one of its aspects, the rediscovery of ancient Greek literature, art, and philosophy. The religious Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries, which convulsed Europe, owed much of its force to the rediscovery of the Greek text of the New Testament; the names of the reformers, Erasmus, Melancthon, and many another, are the names of the Greek scholars of the day. A Jesuit priest, Gassendi, who influenced Locke, Newton, and Dalton, and so prepared the foundations of modern empirical and atomic theory, was a churchman-scholar who revived the

ideas of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Thomas Hobbes, the great English political theorist of the 17th century, began his career by publishing a translation of Thucydides. Sir James Frazer, whose book *The Golden Bough* made comparative anthropology familiar to every civilized man, was a professor of Greek. And of course, among the names of modern upsetters of traditional apple carts, the name of the professor of Greek at the University of Basel, Friedrich Nietzsche, needs no introduction.

There is a story which I was told in Florence, Italy, that after the dreadful winter of 1945, in which the newly liberated population starved and froze, when the Galleria dell'Accademia was finally reopened and Michelangelo's heroic statue, David, that proud version of perfect man, was put on exhibition again, an old Italian professor in the crowd of shivering visitors suddenly shook his fist at the statue and shouted, "You, it's all your fault! You started it all." There is a sense in which he was right, and it would be even more logical for one of us, if more impressed by the miseries than the grandeurs of our civilization, to shake his fist at the proud figures who ride on the Parthenon frieze in Athens.

The Greeks started it all, beginning in Athens, and it was made possible by the Athenian political struggles of the last years of the sixth century which replaced a sort of benevolent despotism with a form of government known as democracy—*demokratia*, power of the people. It was at first a very conservative democracy, in which checks and balances bulked very large and, in any case, the "demos," the people whom it represented, were predominantly the middle class—farmers who fought in the armed infantry, which at Marathon in 490 defeated a Persian punitive expedition, to the astonishment of both sides. But the Persians were bound to come back in greater force and what saved Athens and Greece when they did was the genius of Themistocles. He persuaded the Athenians to use the revenues from the newly discovered veins of silver at Lavrion for the construction of a war fleet, instead of distributing it at so much per head. Salamis was won and after it came the Athenian naval league against Persia, which turned into the Athenian naval empire. The Empire, in turn, changed the Athenian democracy. For the safety of the state depended now, not on the middle-class farmer who owned helmet, breastplate, spear, and shield, but on the poorer citizens who manned the oars of the war galleys. By midcentury, the checks and balances had been removed or substantially weakened, and under the leadership of Pericles, son of Xanthippus, began the great age of Athenian democracy, the age of the building programs that raised the Parthenon and Erechtheum, of the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, and above all, of the intellectual ferment which was to change the history of the Western World. All, in turn, stemmed from the needs of the new democracy. What this new form of government demanded was a new education, or rather, in the sense that education is something that prepares people for an active role in the community, it demanded something entirely new, something that never existed before—what we call "higher" education.

Father, of course, had always taught son his trade; children had been taught their alphabet and numbers and every Greek had learned his Homer; but education, higher education, did not exist. There was no need for it. In an aristocratic society the sons of the great families did not need to be educated to win their place in society; their place was already secure. All they had to do was to measure up to the standards of their fathers. They had to be preeminent in war, for it was their own lion's share they were defending; in athletics, to bring glory on the family

and city at the great Greek games; in music, to play the lyre at the banquets, sing the traditional songs; in manners, to behave with the courtesy which stems from a superiority that takes itself for granted. Homer was their Bible, and the Homer of the *Iliad* above all. Their hero, was Achilles–irresistible in battle, capable of the princely courtesy he showed Priam as well as the inhuman fury he showed against Hector, able to sing the songs of famous men and greatest exponent of the Homeric creed: always to be best and to be superior to the others. In Homer, too, they found the social justification of their position, in the speech of Sarpedon, King of Lycia, to his friend, Glaucus: "Why is it," he says,

> you and I are honored before the others with pride of place, the choice meats, and the full wine-cups? And assigned a great piece of good land by the river, orchard and vineyard and plowlands for the planting of wheat? For these reasons it is our duty to take our stand in the front ranks of the Lycians and bear our part of the blazing battle; so that the men of the close armed Lycians may say of us, "Truly, these are no ignoble men who are lords of Lycia, these kings of ours, who eat the fat sheep appointed and drink the exquisite strong wine, indeed, there is strength and valor in them, since they fight in the front lines."

In the poetry of Pindar we find the aristocratic ideal of education, that of Achilles, reared in the woods by the centaur Chiron; "as yet a boy Achilles did great things: in his hands lifting javelins, scantly tipped with iron, wind-light, he wreaked death in bloody combat on wild lions; he struck down boars; he killed deer without arms or treacherous nets, for he ran them down in his speed."

It is characteristic of the aristocratic point of view, in fact, to find education rather suspect. The aristocrat needs physical training, but he knows by instinct–by blood, as he would say–the duties and privileges of his caste. A man who has to learn is by aristocratic definition an outsider. "The wise man is he who knows much by nature, just by being what he is," said Pindar, singing the praises of the aristocratic virtues in the century which saw them go under. "A man can learn, and yet see darkly, blow one way, then another, walking always on uncertain feet, his mind unfinished and fed with scraps of a thousand virtues." This in contrast to Achilles–"the splendor running in the blood has much weight."

But Pindar's words were the swan song of a dying ideal; Athenian democracy had changed the world forever. In a democracy natural aristocratic prowess was no longer enough. True, the old families still dominated Athenian democratic politics, but not by god-given authority. The "splendor running in the blood" had to learn some new tricks. The political officer now had to be elected and persuade the people to vote for him; to influence policy he had to persuade the assembly, and at the end of his term of office he had to account for his actions while in office before his fellow-citizens. But even if he renounced political power, he still needed the persuasive arts, for in the new Athenian law courts, as in the assembly, a man spoke for himself, not through a lawyer. And in Athens the courts, safeguard of the new democracy, sat in continuous session; the Athenians then (as now) being a litigious lot, very apt to go to law about anything at all. In Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* a simple old countryman came into contact with some of the new intellectuals and was shown for the first time in his life, a map. Having asked his instructor to point out Athens, when it is shown to him he says: "I can't recognize it. There aren't any juries sitting." There

can have been few Athenians who did not sooner or later appear in court as prosecutor of (self)-defense. And here again, though birth and wealth did no harm, persuasion was essential. "To the eye of persuasion I give all praise," said the goddess Athens in the tragedy of Aeschylus which commemorated the foundation of Athens' oldest court of law. Persuasion was the oil which made the wheels of Athenian democracy go round.

But persuasion is not an aristocratic talent; the aristocrat has no need of it. Significantly enough, the first Athenian who was master of it, Themistocles, son of Neocles, was from a family no one had ever heard of. "I cannot play the lyre," he told some people who commented once in his lack of aristocratic social graces, "all I can do is to take a small city and make it great and glorious." The fact that he persuaded a popular assembly—not representatives but the people themselves—to forego a distribution of money in favor of a naval program is evidence enough of his power of persuasion, and it is emphasized in the famous eulogy Thucydides devoted to him.

> By his own native capacity, without previous study or subsequent discussion, he made the best decisions in those sudden crises which allow little time for deliberation. He was capable of explaining his own policies and even in matters in which he had no actual experience, he could give an adequate judgment.

Not everyone was born an orator, however, and in a state which placed so high a value on the capacity to speak persuasively, there would inevitably develop a demand for men who could teach the art. It was, of course, soon met. The teachers were the men, most of them foreigners, not Athenians, generally known as the Sophists.

Until Plato in the next century made this word a term of abuse, it was the normal Greek word to describe an expert—a poet, a musician, a craftsman, anyone who was master of a professional skill. And the Sophists, Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and many another famous name, were first and foremost, professionals in the art of persuasion. Protagoras offered to teach, for a price (and a very high one, incidentally), how to make the weaker case appear the stronger. This, of course, was the essence of the art of persuasion; it was the man with the weaker case who needed rhetoric. But Protagoras, like the others, was more than a teacher of rhetoric for it was not enough to teach a man debating techniques; in an expanding and inquisitive society he needed not only methods of expression, but something to express. He needed a knowledge of literature, of political science, of anthropology, of psychology, of history, of all those subjects which now constitute our so-called "liberal" education. "Liberal," of course, does not refer to politics, but is the Latin word for "proper to a free man." This general education of a free man was opposed to that of a slave whose education, such as it was, was merely technical. The education offered by the Sophists was the first appearance in Western history of adult liberal education. Its effect on Athenian society was revolutionary: within a generation it had radically altered the educated Athenian's ideas about the city, the world, and the gods. And it is this system of education which formed the mind of Thucydides.

There exists today no comprehensive ancient text on this system, but the picture which emerges from close examination of scattered works is consistent and convincing. The rhetorical training—this was the core of the educational process—apparently consisted of one method of rhetorical exercise and three main lines of argument, all of them designed for the weaker case. Since the method and the arguments

rapidly became the common mental property of a whole generation of Athenians and were also the base for later political, moral, and philosophical theories of great importance, they are worth describing in some detail.

The rhetorical exercise was called "antilogia," which means simply, "counterspeeches." It is, of course, a method familiar to anyone who has ever been on a debating team or in a law school. The student speaks on both sides of the question; best displaying his ingenuity on the weaker side, where training is needed. The main thrust of the teaching is in fact directed toward developing a capacity for making the weaker cause appear the stronger; the paradoxical, even unjust, immoral or unpopular case as persuasive as the obviously right one. Therefore, the ambiguity in Protagoras' claim—the word for stronger in Greek also means "better," the word for weaker also means "worse"—gave an exact description. The young Athenian who could afford to take the lessons of the master would find himself striving to maintain persuasively propositions that ran counter to all accepted ideas of morality, religion, and political principle.

The Greeks were, in any case, a people naturally inclined to express themselves in antitheses; and this method of training was perfectly suited to their instinctive view of any situation as one with two sides. But now it became the standard method of thinking and of exposition for a whole generation. The evidence for this is writ large over the literature of the late fifth century. We have the so-called Tetralogies of the orator Antiphon, three hypothetical law cases argued out with two speeches for the prosecution and two for the defense, as an example of the sort of high-level exercise taught in the sophistic schools. We have also the paired antithetical speeches characteristic of Thucydides, in which every argument put forward on one side is answered by the other. And on the tragic stage, not only in Euripides, but also in Sophocles, the techniques of the debating school are adapted to the stage. Clearly a generation trained in such methods was not likely to be impressed by mere authoritative pronouncements or appeals to tradition. They knew that there were two sides to every case.

In that same comedy of Aristophanes, *The Clouds,* the old Athenian farmer Strepsiades sends his son to the sophistic schools to learn the new techniques so that he can help his father get out of paying his debts. When he gets him back he is at first delighted. "What a pleasure to see you back!" he says, "Your whole countenance says, 'No.' You're all set to confront and confute, and that 'what did you say' look we all know so well is positively blooming on your face."

The young aspirant needed more, however, than a combative attitude: he was also trained in three typical lines of argument. Two were designed mainly for the law courts, both means to improve the weaker case. One of them is to be used in difficult cases where all the evidence is against you and for the prosecution. For example, a longtime enemy who is at the moment prosecuting you in a lawsuit is found dead, murdered in a deserted section of the city. His slave, mortally wounded, names you as the killer just before he dies. The prosecution delivers a damning indictment. So what do you say?

According to Antiphon in the *First Tetralogy,* you proceed as follows.

> The prosecution claims you should be on your guard against me because I'm a clever man. But their case against me assumes that I am an idiot. For if one of the reasons you gentlemen of the jury suspect me is the feud I carried on with the murdered man, surely it was likely that I would foresee, before committing the crime, that suspicion would naturally focus

on me! It was more likely, in fact, that I would go to any length to stop anyone else I knew was plotting this murder, rather than deliberately expose myself to suspicion by committing it myself. For even if I escaped detection I would have known that suspicion would certainly fall on me, as, in fact, it has.

If that appears to be a weak defense you should hear some of the others. But the point is the method. It is the argument *ek ton eikoton*—from what is usual or probable: an appeal against the evidential appearances to psychological probabilities, to motive, or the lack of it. This line of argument evidently enjoyed wide popularity, for we meet it frequently in the literature of the time.

A famous example is Creon's defense against the charge of conspiracy in Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King.* Creon, who is junior partner in power with Oedipus, is accused of plotting to seize first place. "But," says he, "why should I? As it is, everyone courts me. Anyone who wants a favor from you comes to see me first. I have all the prerogatives of power and none of the dangerous responsibility. Why should I plot to take over your throne?" An example from history is Antiphon's speech in his own defense. In 411 B.C. he had been one of the leaders of an antidemocratic revolution which held power briefly then collapsed. On trial for his life, he made before the court what Thucydides (in Book VIII) says was the greatest speech for the defense made within living memory. Thucydides does not report the speech, but a battered papyrus from Egypt has restored some fragments of it to us; it uses the same argument, from probabilities, which he demonstrated in hypothetical cases in his school.

"I am a professional writer of speeches for other people," he says.

But under an anti-democratic regime in which the law courts would be of no importance, such a profession would not exist whereas in a democracy my profession makes me all-powerful. Under an oligarchy my rhetorical powers would be worthless: in a democracy they are priceless. I ask you, what likelihood is there that I should want an oligarchic government? Am I incapable of working these simple calculations out? Am I the only man in Athens who does not know on which side his bread is buttered?

It was an eloquent plea, but the court was not impressed, for Antiphon, in fact, had been one of the organizers of the revolution—a fact that could not be argued away. He was given the hemlock to drink.

While the appeal to probability may seem a rather desperate measure, the other method of argument taught by the Sophists was for *really* desperate cases, where you had to admit your guilt and try to extenuate it. You are caught, for example, knife in hand, over the dead man's body. Witnesses swear that he did nothing to provoke you. Probability is not going to help you in this one. What do you say?

"Gentlemen of the jury," you say, the dead man was my wife's secret lover. I've been spying on them for weeks. I was waiting to catch them in the act, where, as you know, killing the adulterer would have been my privilege according to the law. This time everything was ready. My wife believed me away on a trip across the bay to Aegina, and I saw that man come across the marketplace to my house. And then, gentlemen, I was overcome with anger at the thought of what would go on in that room before I broke in. I could not wait. I ran forward and stabbed him! Nature, human nature was too strong for me—stronger than the law, stronger

than custom, Nature which rules man as well as beasts, a goddess who reigns even over the gods.

That speech is not in Antiphon; I had to invent it. But I can assure you that the situation and the sentiments are extremely Greek. This appeal to Nature against law, or custom or convention (the Greek word *nomos* means all three of them) is to be found everywhere in the literature of the period. The nurse in Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus,* is appalled when she finds that her mistress, Phaedra, is in love with her young stepson, Hippolytus; her first reaction is despair, her first thought suicide. But, on reflection, she takes a more practical position. "In human life," she says to her mistress,

> second thoughts are best. You are in love. What's so strange about that? You're not the only one it's happened to! Kill yourself for love? That's a bad bargain for lovers now and in time to come—to die. No, the goddess cannot be resisted if she comes in force. If you give way, she treats you gently, but if you get out of line in stubborn pride she takes you and—before you know it—you're destroyed. She's in the air, in the sea waves; everything that lives is born from her. She is the giver, who sows the seeds of passion and every one of us on earth is born from her . . . And you'll resist? You should have had your father, in that case, make a special contract before he gave you life.

That was a tragic treatment of the theme. But it was not neglected by comedy. In that same play of Aristophanes, the old peasant, Strepsiades, as we saw, welcomes his newly trained sophistic son back with open arms, but he soon has cause to regret the new education. After a quarrel about poetry and music—the old man like Aeschylus, but his son is all for the pornographic plots and shrieking music of Euripides—the son beats his father up. Far from being ashamed of what he has done, he offers to prove that his action was "just." He says,

> What a pleasure it is to be in touch with new and bright ideas, to be able to despise established custom and laws! When all I thought of was horses and racing, I could hardly say three words without making a mistake. But now that my teachers have set me on the new path, I deal in subtle concepts, words and thoughts, quite capable of proving that to beat my father up is justice. Here we go.
>
> You beat me up when I was small, right?
>
> Yes, of course. It was—for your own good, because I loved you.
>
> Well, then, if being beaten up is for one's own good, shouldn't I show the same love to you? You'll answer that it is the custom for the child to be beaten, not the father; but isn't it true that all old men are in their second childhood?
>
> Yes, but the law . . .
>
> The law? Wasn't it made by a man like you and me, someone who persuaded the people in time gone by? Don't I have the right to propose a new law, that children beat their fathers? (I'll remit the return due to you for past beatings; we'll have no *ex post facto* legislation.) Look at the roosters and all the animal world around us—they all attack their fathers. But what's the difference between them and us, except that they don't make laws about it?

The old man has to admit that these arguments have a certain cogency. But when the young man offers to prove, by the same logic, that he ought to beat up his mother, his father has had enough and goes off to set fire to the sophists' school.

The arguments from probability and

human nature were designed primarily for the law court, but the third main argument was aimed at the political assembly: it was the appeal to expediency, to the immediate interests of the audience. This was an argument to counter invocations as to the sanctity of treaties and oaths, appeals to justice, traditional ideals of policy, or constitutional principles by using an appeal to the shortsighted idea of its own interests held by the mass of the audience.

This argument meets us at every turn in the speeches reported by Thucydides. The Corcyreans, who have so far been neutral and now need Athenian help, admit the awkardness of their position but claim that all they need to do is to show "that it is expedient or at least safe to grant our request." This they do by pointing out that they are, after Athens, the greatest naval power in Greece and that Athens cannot afford to let such a power fall to the enemy. "Your policy should be to prevent if possible the existence of any naval power except your own, and failing this, to secure the friendship of the strongest that does exist." They won their case in spite of their adversary's appeals to treaties, former service to Athens, and long-term, rather than short-term interests. The alliance which was ratified was one of the immediate causes of the war which followed.

In the course of that war the island of Mytilene--Lesbos--revolted against Athenian rule. It was reduced by blockade, and the assembly in Athens voted to kill the entire male population and enslave the women and the children. Before the sentence could be carried out, a second debate reversed the decision. Here is the core of the argument of the speaker Diodotus, who pleaded for the reversal of that decision.

> The question before us as intelligent men is not their guilt but our interests. Even if they are guilty ten times over I will not for that reason alone advise killing them unless it is in our interests. Nor would I recommend mercy, even if they were shown to deserve it, unless it were clearly in the interest of Athens .... My opponent's proposal to kill them all may attract you by its superior justice in the light of your present anger.... but we are not in a court of law, where we would have to consider what is just, we are in a political assembly, and the question is--what can we gain from the situation?

It was a good thing for Athens that when Themistocles proposed spending the windfall from the mines on a fleet, there was no one who had been to the school of Protagoras to oppose him.

These arguments, of course, are not exactly new. Men had certainly appealed to probability and self-interest many times before the fifth century but what was new was the refinement and broadening of such arguments by experts and their use as the basis for a system of higher education. It is only when ideas become general property that they are powerful in society, and they will have their most profound and general effect if they are incorporated in the training of the younger generations. The American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey was distinguished mostly by the muddiness of his prose and the vagueness of his ideas; perhaps for this very reason his work on education became the Bible of the teacher-training establishment in this country. Within a few years our children were learning by "doing in a life situation," which meant that they no longer learned foreign languages, were taught civics instead of history, and instead of learning to write a logical paragraph, they were encouraged to produce a school newspaper.

In ancient Athens, too, the new methods worked deep into the consciousness of the new generation. And of course, they were more than rhetori-

cal methods; each one of them had philosophical, moral, and political implications of great importance. The great Sophists, Protagoras and Gorgias in particular, developed these implications and even though their books did not survive, the few fragments we have are enough to give them an important place in the history of Western revolutionary thought.

The *antilogia*, the working-up of two sides of a question to the stage where both arguments seem irrefutable, leads easily to a conviction that there is no such thing as truth at all; it points, in fact, toward the abolition of 11 absolute standards. This, of course, was truer for the Greeks than it would be for us. We are the weary and skeptical heirs of 2,000 years of philosophical debate and usually manage to dismiss it as hair-splitting and get on with our work. But for the pupils of Protagoras, the demonstration was bright, mint-new and in any case the Greek word *logos* means both "speech" and "reason." The exposure of verbal fallacies was to come later with Socrates and Plato, and even Plato, according to modern analytical philosophers, was sometimes as deceived by words as were his opponents.

This relativism (to give it its modern name) soon became common property. Like all revolutionary ideas, it was worked out by great minds, then peddled by mediocrities, and finally parroted by idiots. We have a surviving example of the second, or perhaps the third, stage in an anonymous work of the late fifth century called "The Two Arguments." "There are two arguments proposed in Greece," says the author, "by those who theorize about good and bad. One side says that good is one thing, and bad another; the other, that they are the same thing, good for some, bad for others and for the individual man, sometimes good, sometimes bad. I belong," he says proudly, "to this second school. I shall draw my arguments from the life of man whose concerns are food, drink and sex. Now these are all bad for the sick man, but good for the healthy man . . .. Sickness is bad for the invalid, but good for the doctor. Death is bad for the dying, but good for the gravediggers and the salesmen of funeral monuments . . .." And so he goes on with one example after another, dealing successively with good and bad, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust, truth and falsehood, in the same simple-minded fashion. We unfortunately do not have Protagoras' own exposition of his ideas, only the famous sentence: "Man is the measure of all things, of the existence of what exists and of the non-existence of what does not."

This sentence, as Plato explained it later, means that the individual man is the measure of all things. If the wind seems cold to one and warm to another, they are both right. Protagoras extended the paradox to social organizations, too; what seems right to one city *is* right, and the opposite proposition, if it seems right to another community, *is* right for it. The extension of the doctrine to the whole human race, "Man is the measure of all things," has of course been, ever since, the classic expression of a proud conception of man's central place in the universe and is one of the fundamental antinomies of Western thought, the other being Plato's counterformulation: "the measure of all things is God."

The argument from probability also had its intellectual repercussions beyond the rhetorical frame in which it was conceived. It produced a tendency to search for psychological motives on the one hand and, on the other, to deduce probabilities from given situations—historical, political, social. It also subjected all things in heaven and on earth to the criterion of human reason. The psychological analysis which it encouraged was clearly evident in the literature of the time, especially in Euripidean tragedy. In contrast to the unself-conscious figures of the Aes-

chylean stage whose actions proceed as much from the divine as from human will, Euripides' Medea vacillates between alternatives as she probes her motives, and Phaedra analyzes the successive stages of her attempts to resist the guilty passion for her stepson. More important, perhaps, was the practice of reconstructing the probable from the given: this had its most striking effects in the fields of history and of medicine. Thucydides, in a brilliant chapter of his first book, reconstructed the history of early Greece by inference from the conditions of his own time and by analogy with other societies; for the rich mythical tradition he substituted a bare framework of "what probably happened" to produce the social conditions of his own time. "Even at the present day," he says [I give a minor but typical example],

> many parts of Greece, Ozolian Locris, for example, Aetolia, Acarnania, still observe the custom of carrying arms . . .. The whole of Greece once used to carry arms, since houses were unprotected and their communications with each other were unsafe —to carry arms was as much a part of everyday life with them as with the barbarians. The fact that these people in Greece still live in the old way points to a time when that manner of life was common to all.

In a similar vein he reconstructs the probable nature of the Trojan War and produces a very different picture from Homer. Thucydides' explanation for the 10 year duration of the war was the shortage of supplies, which forced the Greeks to turn to piracy and agriculture rather than concentrating their forces against the enemy.

Thucydides was not alone in this type of historical reconstruction. Protagoras himself wrote a work which is in its way an even bolder specimen of this type of reasoning. It is, unfortunately, lost, but we know its title. It was called *The Primitive State of Man*, and it seems clear, from the speech Plato put in his mouth in the dialog named after him, that this was nothing more or less than a history of human material progress—man's conquest of the elements, land and sea, his taming of the animals, construction of shelter, and invention of speech. In the famous ode sung by the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone* we have another echo of Protagoras' famous work, giving it a purely secular tone and a forward-looking, hopeful projection. "Man," sings the chorus, "is all-resourceful; resourceless he moves against nothing in the future. He has found remedies for desperate diseases; Death alone he cannot escape . . . "

The result of the emphasis on probability is seen at its most scientific in the works of the fifth century medical writers, especially in the collection of casebooks which has come down to us under the name *Epidemiae*, which means simply "Visits." Each case is carefully and objectively described in these medical notebooks; every gruesome symptom; the weather; the time of year; age and constitution of the sufferer; progress of the disease; and the final disposition which was, in nearly every case, death. The purpose of these detailed records was, of course, the classification of symptoms and diseases and, above all, the establishment of their probable course; on this basis *diagnosis* (a Greek word—recognition of the disease) and *prognosis* (another Greek word—forecast of its probable course) were made possible, and treatment, which for the fifth century doctors was mainly a matter of rest and diet, could be prescribed. In these Hippocratic treatises are to be found the clearest, most competent, and most hardheaded claims for the new attitude which, judging the probabilities of given situations, rejected religious, superstitious, and philosophical principles in exchange for a thoroughgoing em-

piricism. Writes the author of a treatise called *On the Sacred Disease* (epilepsy), "this disease is in my opinion no more sacred than the rest of them. It has the same nature as other diseases, and like them, a cause. It is also curable."

"We may not," says the author of the essay on *Art and Medicine*, "jettison the art of medicine as non-existent or bad research because it does not have infallible accuracy but rather, because of its capacity to advance by reasoning from deep ignorance to a point very near real accuracy, we should admire its discoveries as the product of good and correct research . . .."

Lastly, the emphasis on what is probable, that is the testing of every theory or tradition by human reason, was a dangerous threat to the mythical and religious tradition of previous generations. If it was improbable that Zeus changed himself into a swan to make love to Leda, it was even more improbable that she, in turn, could give birth to an egg, from which hatched out Clytemnestra, Helen of Troy, and the twins, Castor and Polydeuces. "There is, you know, a story," says Helen in the play Euripides named after her, "that Zeus flew up to my mother, Leda, assuming the shape of a swan running away from an eagle—if indeed this story is true. But my name *is* Helen, and now let me tell you the troubles I've seen."

Protagoras wrote another famous book *On the Gods* of which only the first two sentences have come down to us. But it is enough. "About the gods," he says, "I have no means of knowing whether they exist or do not exist, or what their form may be. Many things prevent such knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the fact that human life is short."

The second standard argument, the appeal to Nature against convention, law, and custom had, like most of the ideas so far discussed, both constructive and destructive elements. The emphasis on law as something not natural, but man made, had, of course, profound effects in later political theory. If law was man made, it could be improved, transformed from a dead letter of the past to a blueprint of the future. The implications of this idea for future democratic theory are evident in Rousseau's *Social Contract* and the many interpretations put upon it in modern times as well as in the present controversy about the function of our own Supreme Court.

But the idea of a "natural" law also justified a view of human relations more adapted to a jungle than to a civilized society. In Aristophanes' comedy the young graduate of the Sophists cites the roosters as an example. And in Thucydides "nature" is constantly cited as the authority for power politics. "We have done nothing extraordinary," say the Athenians, in his account of the debate at Sparta,

> nothing contrary to human nature in accepting an Empire when it was offered to us and then refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so—security, honor and self-interest. And we are not the first to act in this way. Far from it. It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong . . .

The same "natural law" is cited by the Athenians at Melos.

> Of gods we believe and of men we know, that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule, they will. We did not make this law, nor are we the first to act on it: we found it already in existence, and will bequeath it to remote posterity. All we are doing is to follow it, knowing that you and everyone else, if they had the power, would do the same.

This emphasis on the validity of man's "natural" instincts (which are defined as his most ferocious and aggressive tendencies) and the corollary rejec-

tion of the "artificial" restraints of society laid the ground for the theory of the Superman who acts "naturally" and makes his own law. Plato, in his dialog named after the great sophist Gorgias, put this idea in the mouth of a man named Callicles and though Plato is writing in the fourth century there is no reason to doubt that he is reproducing sophistic thought of the fifth. "We mold the best and strongest among us," says Callicles,

> taking them like lion cubs in their infancy, and charm them with spells and witchcraft, telling them they must have no more than their fair share, and that this is what is right and just. But I imagine when some man appears who has sufficient force, he shakes off, smashes and escapes from all that we have fenced him in with, tramples underfoot our codes and juggling tricks and laws contrary to nature. Our slave rises up in revolt and is revealed as our master. The full light of natural justice blazes up.

And the last of the Sophists' arguments, expediency, was the base of a whole theory of power politics, the appeal to which dominated the minds of the Athenian leaders. In Thucydides' account of the war this theory meets us at every turn, as one speaker after another announces the doctrine of the overriding validity of the State interest. "When a man or a city exercises absolute power, the logical course is the course of self-interest," said the Athenians in the debate at Camarina in Sicily. "Ties of blood exist only when they can be relied upon. One must choose one's friends and enemies according to the circumstances of each particular occasion." And Cleon in Athens declared that "To feel pity, to be carried away by the pleasure of hearing a clever argument, to listen to the claims of decency—these are three things that are entirely against the interests of an imperial power." Not until Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* was anyone to present in such ferocious clarity the imperatives of power. It is of course true that the main concern of all politics are the interests of the State, but raising the idea to the status of an exclusive principle tends to blind people to the distinctions between short-range and long-term interests and the failure to choose the long-range interests is, as Thucydides presents the story to us, the tragic mistake which brought Athens to defeat.

These new ways of thought, then, were both constructive and destructive; but it was the destructive quality which was most immediately effective and apparent. "The major advances in civilization," says Whitehead, "are processes which tend to wreck the societies in which they occur." And this was certainly true of the Athenian intellectual revolution. It brought about the destruction of the inherited conglomerate, the complex mosaic of religious, mythical, and traditional beliefs which had preserved the stability of Athenian society. It was with weakened moral fiber and deteriorating political morale that Athens plunged into the 27-year war, to face the devastation of the land, the losses abroad and at home in the plague, the catastrophe in Sicily, and finally the nightmare of the last years of the war. Thucydides did not live to write the last chapters of the story; it is from other historians that we hear of power-mad demagog refusing one opportunity for making peace on compromise terms, plunging ahead to the final overthrow of the democracy which had called up these demonic powers in the first place.

The democracy was restored, but Athens was never the same. Its optimism was gone, and except in philosophy, its creative energy exhausted.

There was a reaction, of course, against all the new ideas but, as is characteristic of popular reactions, the

wrong man was singled out for punishment. It was the philosopher Socrates, who had certainly played his part in training the young to ask awkward questions, but who rather than teaching rhetoric taught, and without fee, a method of dialectic discussion aimed at restoring the basis of that moral certainty which Protagoras' relativism, and in fact all of the new ideas, had undermined. It was his pupil Plato who in the next century took up the challenge and tried to reconstruct the sacramental universe—the whole man in a context of political and cosmic justice.

From the myths by which men had lived, those stories which operate in a region beyond human critical intelligence and suggest a poetic and religious rather than a scientific explanation of our condition, Plato recreated in fresh terms in some of the most famous passages of his dialogs. But this was not enough. Man had established the claims of the scientific intelligence; and Plato had to recognize them; the dialogs he wrote based his reconstitution of eternal truths on a close intellectual analysis. He tried to combine the operation of the intelligence with religious feeling. It is no accident that he set up the first university. In the grove of the hero Academus in Athens he taught a select band of pupils who lived and worked under him—one of whom was, of course, Aristotle.

The results of the intellectual revolution were of urgent concern not only to Plato, who devoted his genius to an attempt to reestablish the basis of morality and order, but to all other human beings since. For the first time in human history, man had applied his intelligence to the criticism of all inherited beliefs, and in this revolution was born the scientific spirit. The immediate results were disastrous for the city which above all others is identified with the new spirit, but we must not forget that if the intellectual revolution gave us relativism, political Machiavellianism, the doctrine of the Superman, it gave us also the history of Thucydides, the scientific writings of the doctors, and eventually the great systems of the philosophers.

For better or for worse, the human race for the first time awoke from the millennial dream of a mythical, sacramental universe and, as Thucydides does from first to last, faced with clear if desperate intelligence the problems posed by man's limitless capacities and his imperfect nature, his loneliness in a world stripped of the comforts of religion and the guidelines of tradition, a world man thought he could control, only to find himself in the end its prisoner and its victim.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Dr. Bernard M.W. Knox did his undergraduate work at St. John's College, University of Cambridge and holds a Ph.D. from Yale University and a LL.D. from Princeton University. He has served as professor of classics at Yale University and as the Sather Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley. Professor Knox was on active duty with the U.S. Army in the European Theater in World War II, during which time he was awarded the Bronze Star with OlC and the Croix de Guerre; since 1961 he has been the Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies at Washington, D.C.