

When Thucydides’ Athenians ascribe their imperialism to “honor, fear and profit,” (1.75.2, 1.76.2), they reveal not the supposed “universal” motives of all interstate actors in Thucydides and beyond, but distinctive elements of Spartan and Athenian “national characters.” Since classicists, political philosophers, and “realist” international relations scholars have all erected theories based on the “universal” interpretation, recognizing the instability, contingency, and ambiguity of the text has far-reaching consequences.

The contingency of the term “honor,” for instance, becomes evident when we note that Thucydides uses it primarily of Athenian motivations. Prominent in the thinking and discourse of Pericles, Nicias and Alcibiades, “honor” is surprisingly neglected by Spartans, aside from the atypical Brasidas. A careful study of Spartan regard for “honor” in Thucydides and other sources, including Plato’s *Republic* 544ff., provides some explanations.

Too few scholars acknowledge or even recognize that English “fear” translates two different Greek words, *deos* and *phobos*. Despite some overlap, *deos* in Thucydides ranges from “dread” to “serious apprehension,” and generally has a cognitive and rational element, while *phobos* connotes less rational behavior. The Athenians’ attention to *deos* here contrasts with the explicitly “phobic” behavior of Sparta at 1.23.6 and 1.88. Different cultures, it seems, exhibit different kinds of “fear.”

Finally, “profit” or “benefit” here refers only in part to Athenian rapacity. This speech emphasizes repeatedly that Athenian behavior benefited not Athens but other Greeks. Only after building this foundation this do the speakers wittily turn to their own self-interest.

In short, the distinctive language of this speech offers not a universalizing justification for all empire, but a barbed and ironic view of Athenian and Spartan self-fashioning. This interpretation has implications not only for philology but for the study of interstate relations in general, since the speakers are conveying not “realistic” calculations of cost and benefit but the values, dispositions, agency and identities of the decision makers. “Ideation,” a term that goes back to Durkheim, emphasizes the role of underlying cultures and collective intentionalities in shaping decisions about war and peace.

Fascinatingly, then, these three words, though routinely associated with generic “realist” thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, turn out to cut across the realist grain, portraying behavior that far from being “universal” is palpably Athenian.

Literature

Crane, Gregory. *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1998.

Lebow, Richard Ned. *The Tragic Vision of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003.

Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*. New York: Norton. 1997.

Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations*. 6th edition. New York: Knopf. 1985.

Strauss, Leo. *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1964.