

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - The Mytilene Debate: A Paradigm For Deliberative Rhetoric



Readings of the speeches inserted in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* usually make reservations concerning their authenticity. To the historian the fictitiousness involved - openly acknowledged by Thucydides himself in his comments about the use of sources (book 1, chapter 1) - obviously poses a problem.

For instance, Johansen[i] comments that the modern reader can only regret that it is usually impossible to distinguish report from reconstruction in Thucydides' account (Johansen, 1984, 275). Depending on the scope of the analysis, the rhetorician, of course, may also regard the fictitiousness of the speeches as a drawback. However, in my approach to the Mytilene debate, this is not an issue. On the contrary, it is precisely the element of fiction that makes it possible to approach the text as I do. I join Michael C. Leff when he says that the most important feature of Thucydides' representation of the debate is "the reflexive turn it takes" (1996, 89). Not only does the account illustrate how political debaters in a paradigmatic rhetorical situation argue "by the book", an illustration with striking similarities to contemporary debates on the issue of capital and severe punishment. It is also a story, in Leff's words, "about the proper conduct of public discourse." What furthermore makes the text intriguing is that, on the one hand, it invites its reader to speculate on the norms for legitimate political persuasion, and, on the other, it is very open to interpretation. You might say about Thucydides what Wayne Booth pointed out about the *implied author*: "Everything he *shows* will serve to *tell*" (Booth, 1961, 20). Only he does it in a subtle way, sprinkling the text with ambiguities leaving the reader speculating as to his true intention.

What, then, does the account of the Mytilene debate tell us about legitimate deliberation? In my answering that, I am primarily going to address Michael C. Leff's analysis of the text[ii].

The situation at the Athenian Assembly 427 B.C. is this: There has been a revolt against Athens in Mytilene on Lesbos, a privileged ally in the Athenian league.

The oligarchic leaders responsible for the defection have appealed to Sparta for help, but the Athenian fleet has arrived first, and under the siege the democrats at the island have forced the new government to surrender to the Athenians. The captured leaders have been sent to Athens, where the citizens at the Assembly the day before “in their angry mood” have decided to put all male Mytilenians to death and to make slaves of the women and children. The next day, however, the Athenians wake up with a moral hangover, and it is decided to reopen the debate on the punishment of the Mytilenians. The two main debaters are Kleon, an influential politician at the time, and Diodotos, an otherwise unknown citizen. Kleon argues against revoking the punishment, while Diodotos proposes that only the captured prisoners be executed, and that the others be spared. At the close of the debate the vote is almost a tie, but Diodotos’ motion is passed. A second ship is sent to Mytilene in pursuit of that dispatched the previous day. Since the first is slow because of “its distasteful mission”, the second ship arrives just in time to prevent the massacre.

It is generally agreed that Thucydides sides with Diodotos against Kleon. Kleon is Thucydides’ villain, the political antithesis to the exemplary statesman Pericles (Romilly, 1963, 156-158, 163ff. Kitto, 1964, 138, 144-145. Hjortsø, 1975, 83, 97ff.). Thus, on the question of how to punish the Mytilenians it is Diodotos’ proposal that Thucydides regards as the right decision. Moreover, the narrative setting suggests a tale of good versus evil with a happy ending where the responsible decision narrowly prevails. But that Kleon is in the wrong and Diodotos in the right does not necessarily mean that the rhetoric they enact is to be evaluated accordingly. The appraisal of Kleon, however, is fairly clear and unanimous. Basically, he represents rhetoric at its worst. We are told of “the violence of his character” in Thucydides’ opening remarks, a violence that permeates Kleon’s whole speech. He is exposed as a thoroughly cynical and depraved politician. His speech is full of extremist views, absurdities and inconsistencies. As pointed out by Leff, the inconsistencies are so blatant that they “suggest a fractured and self-deceptive consciousness” rather than a cunning manipulator’s plan to deceive the audience.

Intentionally deceptive or not, Kleon’s speech is justly condemned, I agree, by Leff as “toxic rhetoric”: “Cleon’s speech is an exercise in special pleading, and it works to subvert the possibility of an effective democratic rhetoric as Thucydides conceives that possibility. Cleon’s rhetoric corrodes civic deliberation not only because it promotes narrowly partisan ends but, more importantly, because it

casts suspicion on any appeal to common interests.” (Leff, 1996, 91)

What, then, about Kleon’s opponent, Diodotos? Is he the positive rhetorical model, according to the deliberative ideal? Leff’s answer is no, for although Diodotos’ cause is worthier and he is a more sympathetic figure, Leff concludes that his speech is just as deceptive as Kleon’s. This is the pivotal point in Leff’s interpretation. He sees the Mytilene debate as the first step in rhetoric’s decline in a war-ridden, disaster-bound society. The tenor of this interpretation is that Diodotos is the victim of a general corruption of the deliberative process. In other words, Diodotos is forced by external circumstances and by the poisonous atmosphere of the situation into a position where he has no other alternative than to use the same kind of deceptive appeal as his adversary. Thus, what Thucydides’ account teaches us is, according to Leff, the tragic lesson of the “limits of rhetorical agency”, the lesson that the “force of events seems to lead [...] to the destruction of the community’s power to direct its own fate” (ibid., 96).

I find this interpretation astute but I disagree with Leff’s appraisal of Diodotos’ argumentation. As I read Thucydides’ account, the two speeches serve as contrasts, illustrating the difference between bad and good rhetoric. I shall explicate this view by applying certain aspects of Perelman’s concept the universal audience to the speeches. As witnessed by the amount of literature on the subject, it is unclear what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) actually meant by the universal audience and, more specifically, how the concept should be applied as a normative tool in the assessment of arguments. Although some of the misapprehensions were resolved especially in Perelman (1984), many confusing points remain[iii]. Leaving this far-reaching discussion aside, I venture to use *the universal audience* as I understand the concept, much in line with Crosswhite (1989, 1995) and Tindale (1999).

My main point is that Kleon’s speech is a clear-cut example of argumentation addressed to a *particular audience* of an unreasonable disposition – “an exercise in special pleading” as Leff had it in the above quotation; by contrast, Diodotos seeks the adherence of the audience by argumentative means that, at least in important respects, are acceptable to his *universal audience*, the constructed incarnation of an audience who appreciates and demands *reasonable* argument.

The crucial point in Diodotos’ speech that makes Leff censure his rhetoric as deceptive is Diodotos’ argumentation as to whether expedience should influence the decision on how to punish the Mytilenians. Since the evaluation of the speech hinges on this, I shall begin the discussion at this point.

Diodotos applies the central *topos* constituting the genre of political speech from Aristotle on (Aristotle, 1.3.5.) thus: “..this is not a law-court, where we have to consider what is fit and just; it is a political assembly, and the question is how Mytilene can be most useful to Athens.” (187) It is Diodotos’ repeated emphasis on this point that commentators are uncomfortable with. Johansen remarks that Diodotos puts forward this highly provocative claim in polemic opposition to Kleon, and leaves it at that (Johansen, 1984, 285).

Kitto, on the other hand, admonishes the modern reader as follows:

Diodotus [...] argues his case solely on grounds of expediency - that is, of common sense. It would be a grave error to argue from this that Diodotus, and the Athenians in general, were cold-blooded addicts of statecraft [...] We have no right to assume that Diodotus felt no emotion. The occasion, in his view, called for reason, not for emotion; he will meet Cleon not by displaying finer feelings but by using finer arguments. In this respect this speech is like Greek poetry and Greek art: the intellectual control of feeling increases the total effect. (Kitto, 1964, 147)

Contrary to this, Leff finds Diodotos’ various remarks devastating to his integrity, debasing the speech into “an elaborate work of deception”:

If we assume that Diodotus’ motive is simple decency, then the speech itself belies that motive. [...] The balance between reason and emotion, deeply embedded in Pericles’ oratory, disappears from public view. Although Diodotus suppresses the topic of the honorable in order to promote an honorable cause, his rhetoric voices a narrowed, one-dimensional consciousness, its strict appeal to rationality disguising the motives that guide it and the sentiments that fuel its persuasive force. Diodotus may be a decent man, but he cannot appeal to decency. (Leff, 1996, 94)

I read Diodotos’ line of argument differently and hence not in conflict with the norms of good deliberation. If you consider Diodotos’ statements in isolation, they appear to be cynical, but in context they take on another meaning. The fact that Diodotos refutes Kleon’s accusation and advocates that the audience *change* their former decision puts his arguments in a different light. What I am getting at is not that an illegitimate move serving a good cause may be excused because Diodotos is striking back at Kleon or forced into it in the heat of the moment. My point is that he does, indeed, try to de-emphasize the emotional factors, but that he is not categorically eliminating any consideration of honour and justice (cf. Leff, 1996, 93-94). When Diodotos for instance makes the request: “Do not be swayed too

much by pity or by ordinary decent feelings. I, no more than Cleon, wish you to be influenced by such emotions" (189), what he is saying is not: Never mind justice or decency towards your fellow beings! His words are to be understood as refutation of Kleon's charge: Diodotos is denying that he wants the Athenians to change their decision solely out of pity for the Mytilenians. He emphasizes that the decision is not just a question of feeling sorry for the innocent Mytilenians. In sparing the innocent and executing only the guilty Mytilenians, he concludes, the Athenians will follow the better course and act wisely. "For those who make wise decisions are more formidable to their enemies than those who rush madly into strong action." (190)

There is, I concede, one passage in the speech that threatens Diodotos' integrity, namely his declaration to the Athenians that even if the common people were guilty "you should pretend that they were not, in order to keep on your side the one element that is still not opposed to you." But he continues: "It is far more useful to us, I think, in preserving our empire, that we should voluntarily put up with injustice than that we should justly put to death the wrong people." (189) I see this as an example of Diodotos overdoing the sophistry of the argumentative game. But is this hypothetical argument obviously unethical? After all, it may only be meant to underscore the fact that sometimes it is wise to spare people although they have wronged you.

I now turn to Perelman and the contrast between Kleon and Diodotos as representatives of rhetoric addressed to the particular and to the universal audience.

This contrast is played out in the meta-debate in the first part of the two speeches. Thucydides here sketches Kleon's and Diodotos' views of the debate act they are performing, thereby dramatizing two traditionally contrasting views of rhetoric.

To Kleon, rhetoric means empty words, pandering to the audience, flattery and competition, in short everything that works against the ongoing debate at the Assembly and the possibility of reaching a right decision. This first part of his speech is one big mockery of the deliberative ideal: Democracy stinks! The citizens at the Assembly are chided as a bunch of slaves who are fooled by any novelty in argument; they do not really care about the matter itself and are incapable of understanding the consequences of their own decisions. The renewal of the debate is a sign of their stupidity since the delay blunts the edge of the anger that motivated the decision of the day before. Along the same line, Kleon

later includes this absurd three-part list of considerations to be disregarded: "To feel pity, to be carried away by the pleasure of hearing a clever argument, to listen to the claims of decency..." (184).

By contrast, the first part of Diodotos' speech is a defence of rhetoric as the means for political decision making. He welcomes the opportunity to reconsider the debate question on the following grounds: "Haste and anger are, to my mind, the two greatest obstacles to wise counsel – haste, that usually goes with folly, anger, that is the mark of primitive and narrow minds." He defends deliberative debate as a democratic principle, insisting that you cannot "deal with the uncertainties of the future by any other medium" than words (185). He criticizes the habit of frightening the opponent, of accusing him of turning debate into rhetorical competition and of having hidden agendas behind every political proposal, and he deplores the ensuing general distrust of politicians. Thus, Diodotos too chastises his audience, but, in contrast to Kleon, he turns his irony into a call for careful deliberation, and he takes his starting point in the belief in free and open debate: "The good citizen, instead of trying to terrify the opposition, ought to prove his case in fair argument" (186).

In other words, Kleon represents anti-rhetoric in several respects. He has a negative view of rhetoric, he speaks contemptuously of the persuasive means that he himself practises, and he is in favour of the sort of pathetic appeal where passion consumes the decision maker so that he is incapable of considering the various arguments. Diodotos, on the other hand, represents normative rhetoric in accordance with the deliberative ideal. He speaks in favour of debate directed at "wise decisions" as he says at the end of the speech, i.e., decisions arrived at through informed debate and the *weighing of arguments*.

In this connection, Romilly notes that Diodotos argues for *euboulia* ('good counsel' or 'soundness of judgment') and the greatest liberty of debate. She points out that words derived from this root (the same as in the Greek term for the political speech, *genos symbouleutikon*) are frequent in his speech and very rare in Kleon's. Diodotos likewise defends sound judgment using the Greek word *synesis* ('prudence' or 'comprehension') – "in Thucydides' view the finest of all qualities" (Romilly 1963, 158). Correspondingly and typically of the absurdities in his speech, Kleon uses the word in a derogatory way **(iv)**. It seems strange to me that Thucydides should have put these deliberative key words in Diodotos' mouth if he meant to portray Kleon and Diodotos as two of the same shady kind.

In sum, I maintain that Kleon's views of rhetoric, and of the persuasive act he is involved in at the Assembly, corresponds to the sort of totally irrational rhetoric that seeks only the adherence of the particular audience and tries to persuade by all means, never mind how unreasonable. By contrast, Diodotos holds a view that is compatible with the normative tradition of rhetoric and respects the principle that it is not enough that a particular audience be persuaded. Good argumentation should also to be convincing in the eyes of a critical audience who recognizes the force of the better argument.

But people often do not practise what they preach. So, let me go on with Diodotos' argumentation in order to point out how his argumentation meets significant criteria of reasonableness in addressing his universal audience.

An important point in understanding Perelman's notion of universal audience is that it is not an abstract construction of an audience embodying rationality independent of time and place as the term might suggest (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 33. Perelman, 1984, 192). In principle, there is a universal audience for each situation (Crosswhite, 1989, 167), and this audience must always be construed from the particular audience (Ibid., 163) – or particular audiences in cases where, for instance, the speaker addresses a complex audience consisting of different groups. It is this pragmatic dimension that makes Perelman's notion rhetorical and, from my point of view, constitutes its usefulness as a normative tool (see also Tindale, 1999, 117-120). To the Mytilene case this means that the debater who wants to get the approval of the universal audience as well as to obtain the adherence of the actual audience must somehow adapt his argumentation to the particular audience, i.e., the actual audience as he imagines it. He cannot ignore their emotions but must relate to them. In other words, if Diodotos is to achieve the outcome he believes in, through reasonable argumentation, he must adapt to the audience[v] and at the same time reach "reasonable man" in his audience. And this is where Diodotos, in my interpretation, succeeds, in contrast to Kleon, who appeals only to the irrational part of the audience.

The manner of Diodotos' adaptation to the audience is crucial to the evaluation. Does he sell out to the audience by denying the very motives he is guided by, or does he remain true to his own convictions?

In assessing this question, one should be careful not to transfer modern values to the universal audience. The notion of universal audience calls attention to the

pragmatic principle that the legitimacy of the argumentation must be evaluated according to the norms and standards prevailing in the community in which the rhetorical discourse takes place. To the modern reader, Diodotos' attitude toward the Mytilenians is undemocratic. We may be appalled by the way Diodotos allows the fate of the Mytilenians to depend on the interests of the Athenians. It would, however, be a foreign thought to rational man in Athens anno 427 B.C. that a direct appeal to expedience in itself should be considered improper. To Thucydides and the Greeks it is perfectly natural that you use power to act in your own interests, especially in a matter of foreign policy (Hjortsø, 1975, 94-95)[vi]. And, frankly, is it not how modern foreign policy works too, only we do not like to admit it? We may expect the political arguer speaking to the universal audience at the Assembly to have common interests at heart, but this only goes for those who participated in the Athenian democracy, i.e., members of the *polis* excluding women, slaves and foreigners. The distinction between citizens and non-citizens was fundamental to the Athenians, and their rights were civil rights – more like privileges, not human rights (Hansen, 1998, 91-92).

The fact that Diodotos does not bestow the same rights to the Mytilenians as to his peers does not mean that he denies them a decent treatment. As I have argued above, his whole point is that it is wise to act decently and punish justly, i.e., to execute only those Mytilenians responsible for the defection, but spare the rest, and that it is unwise to act in the heat of passion, whether anger or pity. Now, had Diodotos chosen to appeal directly to the compassion of the audience, as Leff implies he should have, he would have resorted to the same kind of irrational pathetic appeal as Kleon. Only, in that case Diodotos would have substituted the appeal to *anger* with the appeal to *pity*, and he would have addressed the emotions of the particular audience in the same unreasonable manner as Kleon. But Thucydides saves him from falling into this trap. In arguing as he does, Diodotos does not deny the feelings that prompt the renewal of the debate or disrupt the “balance between reason and emotion” as Leff claims. On the contrary, he meets the audience now that they have slept on it and their anger has subsided, so that they are able to deliberate and weigh the arguments. He does balance reason and emotion by conveying to the citizens that to change the punishment is not “going soft” but that, in listening to their conscience that makes them regret their former decision, they act in the common interest of Athens.

The difference between addressing the particular and the universal audience is not a choice of *pathos* (and *ethos*) or *logos*. It is *how* you use *pathos* (see especially Perelman, 1984, 194 on his enlarged conception of reason). You play unreasonably on the audience's feelings when you, like Kleon, appeal to the passion in a way that inundates the audience with it, unable to consider any other argument. In reasonable emotional appeal to the universal audience, on the other hand, you appeal to relevant feelings and values in a way that *invites the weighing of arguments*. This distinction, by the way, is close to Willard's definition of the rhetorical version of the *ad populum* fallacy as "the use of emotional appeals or aesthetic images that distract the persuadee from reflective thinking about the arguments being made." The fallacious instances, he says, consist in "that they distract attention from matters the analyst takes to be relevant, It isn't that they are logical errors but that they disrupt counterargument." (Willard, 1995, 148-149)

My last point concerns the question of *consistency*. Argumentation deserving the approval of the universal audience ought to be consistent in order to be reasonable. In this respect too, I find a significant contrast between Kleon's and Diodotos' speeches. Both of them try to combine the *topoi* of the *honorable* and the *expedient*. To my mind, Diodotos combines the two successfully, subsuming the first into the second (cf. Aristotle, 1.3.5.). They are joined coherently in the main claim he is advocating, namely that immoral and unjust decisions are not useful but, in fact, harmful to yourself. In comparison, Kleon's argumentation is completely irrational. He wants it both ways. Among his many selfcontradictions, he tells the Athenians that in destroying the entire Mytilenian population "you will be doing the right thing as far as Mytilene is concerned and at the same time will be acting in your own interests." (184) Having once more denied the Mytilenians any right to be treated decently in the previous sentence, this is truly an example of doublespeak that can only be swallowed by members of the audience who are so prejudiced and full of hatred that they are deaf to reasonable argument. The atrocity of collective punishment can never be made into a morally defensible act[vii].

I want to point out that my analysis neither confirms nor refutes Leff's overall interpretation of Thucydides's views on the fate of rhetoric during the war, which I am in no position to judge. Read in isolation, as I have done, the debate is a more optimistic tale than in Leff's analysis. I am a little skeptical as to whether

people tend to learn from history; but in a situation of crisis like the Mytilene debate, one may hope that there will be persons who, like Diodotos, rise to the occasion and turn right what has gone wrong, despite the opponent's pigheadedness. This way the account may be taken as a rhetorical booster to enter debates, also when the opposing view seems below your dignity[viii].

Willard has a point, I think, when he reproaches critics who apply pristine rationality to public discourse: "Anyone can be rational in a hypothetical state of grace - with the luxury of reflection, freed from prejudice, social pressures, time limits, and information shortages. But we live our lives shackled to these frailties. People must be rational, not in their armchairs but *amid* the swirl of society, the clamor of competing advocates. They care about epistemic issues, not in the abstract but in situations, pressed by time, coerced by their emotions, biases, and interdependencies with others." Is not this a pretty accurate description of the conditions at the Mytilene debate? And is it not a situation that the Assembly, in this case, manages fairly well? Willard furthermore proposes that "instead of demanding that one be free of prejudice and other human foibles, and free of organizational distortions and social influence, a theory of rationality should explain how one grapples with all of these things." (Willard, 1995, 156) In my opinion, the concept of universal audience is an answer to such a theory of rationality.

In taking the Mytilene debate as a paradigm, I appreciate especially that it is not Great rhetoric as in famous political speeches from history of a more exalted kind. When, for instance, Leff quotes John Finley pointing out that the idealistic tones of the Periclean Funeral Oration are now missing, my response is: Yes of course, this is hard core political debate, not epideictic oratory! Even so, the Mytilene debate challenges the reader to ask how to discriminate between good and bad rhetoric. The answers may vary - as in Leff's and my evaluations of Diodotos' argumentative qualities. The important thing is to keep asking when the debater argues legitimately and when he steps outside the borderline of reasonable deliberation. I recommend the Mytilene debate, also for educational purposes, as a text that urges this question on the critic.

NOTES

[i] The translator of the debate into the Danish, used in Jørgensen (2001).

[ii] Whereas Leff quotes the Crawley translation, I use the Warner translation. This, of course, may influence differences in our views of the debate.

[iii] For instance, one may object that the notion seems to be especially relevant to philosophical discourse and that it remains obscure to what extent Perelman regarded it as applicable to political argument. Gross (2000, 332), for instance, maintains that while politicians address particular audiences, philosophers and scientists address a universal audience. Regretably, Perelman in retrospect says less about how he himself understood the notion than about what others have understood correctly or misunderstood.

[iv] Hornblower (1991, 424) translates the adjective with 'intelligent' or 'prudent' and adds that it is "normally (though not always) a word of high praise in Th. and his speakers."

[v] I do not hereby imply that there is a universal audience to be reckoned with in all situations. It is quite clear that according to Perelman there are situations in which the speaker cannot be expected to address a universal audience, cf. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, 111). In other situations, e.g., when it is hopeless to gain adherence, it can be appropriate to transcend the situation and address a universal audience beyond the present.

[vi] For a further discussion of Thucydides' and the debaters' views of imperialism, see Romilly (1963).

[vii] White (1984, 72-76) also compares Kleon's and Diodotos' uses of the *topoi* but his evaluation in this respect is the direct opposite of mine.

[viii] Others have reached less optimistic conclusions by reading the Greek in the passage about the outcome of the debate. The Greek word for "nevertheless" is placed oddly in the context, which Hornblower translates as follows: "these were the arguments on each side. They were almost equally strong, but there was nevertheless a struggle between the two opinions; the show of hands was very near, but the motion of Diodotos prevailed." Hornblower believes that it must mean that the decision is taken "irrespective of the reasoning which had been advanced." (Hornblower, 1991, 438) I feel inclined to take this as an example of critics turning more sophistic than the sophists they are critiquing.

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