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MACHIAVELLISM, KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY, AND THE MELİAN DİALOGUE: A REFLECTION ON MORALITY AND THE USE OF FORCE

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Abstract

This article reflects on Machiavellism and Kantian deontological approach with regard to ethical auestions presented in Thucydides's Melian Dialogue. it concludes that given the context within which the Melian Dialogue takes place and the tragic end of the Peloponnesian war, neither Kant nor Machiavelli would approve the policies of either the Athenians or the Melians. However, ifwe drop that context out of the discussion and assume that we have no knowledge whatsoever about the Peloponnesian war and the conseauences of the Melian expedition, Kant yvould be the ardent supporter of the Melians' argument whereas Machiavelli would praise the Athenian generals for their final decision.

Keywords: *Melian Dialogue, Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, Machiavellism, Kantian deontology, Use of force, Morality.*

Özet

Thucydides'in eseri Peloponnesos Savası Tarihi 'nde geçen Melian Diyalogu, özellikle güç kullanımı konusunda önemli etik soruları gündeme getirmektedir. Makale bu soruları Makyavelizm ve Kantçı açılardan tartışmaktadır. Melian Diyalogu'nun geçtiği andaki genel bir savaş içinde olunduğu gibi tarihsel koşulları ve Melian seferinin sonuçlarını göz önüne aldığımızda hem Makyavelizm'in hem de Kantçı yaklaşımın Atinalıların ve Meloslulların politikalarını onaylamayacağını

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söyleyebiliriz. Ancak, Melian Diyalogu'ndaki etik tartışmaları tarihsel koşullarından soyutlayarak incelediğimizde, Kant'ın Meloslulların, Makyavel'in de Atinalı generallerin yaklaşımını destekleyeceği sonucuna ulaşabiliriz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Melian Diyalogu, Peloponnesos Savaşı, Thucydides, Makyavelizm, Kantçı deontolojik yaklaşım, Güç kullanımı, etik.*

1. Introduction

This essay contributes to the moral discussion in the field of international relations by reflecting on the two main ethical schools, realism and deontological approach, with regard to Thucydides's Melian Dialogue. it reviews what Machiavellism and Kantian deontological approach may suggest on the ethical questions presented in the (in)famous Melian Dialogue.

At some point of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, the Athenians send an expeditionary force of around three thousand soldiers to the island of Melos. The mission of the expeditionary force is to make sure that the Melians surrender and agree to be "profited" by the Athenians. "The Melians," Thucydides summarizes, "are a colony from Sparta. They had refused to join the Athenian empire like the other islanders, and at first had remained neutral without helping the either side; but afterwards, when the Athenians had brought force to bear on them by laying waste their land, they had become open enemies of Athens." (Thucydides, 1972: 400). it is certain that the Melians would lose in a battle against the powerful Athenians unless they receive assistance from Sparta. Although there is not any sign whatsoever of the Spartan assistance, the Melians refuse to surrender. They rather hold on to their hope of Sparta's coming to their help and of their gods' protecting them from the besiege. The Athenian generals send some representatives to negotiate with the Melians about surrendering. Thucydides notes that, "the Melians did not invite these representatives before the people, but asked them to make the statement for which they had come in front of the governing body and the few." (Thucydides, 1972: 400). The negotiations fail and the fighting starts. Ultimately, the Melians have to surrender unconditionally and the expedition ends tragically: the Athenians "put to death ali the men of military age whom they took and sold the women and children as slaves." (Thucydides, 1972: 408)

The policies of both the Athenians and the Melians raise some critical moral questions for the students of international relations. Below we will touch on these questions in three main sections. The first section reviews some basic issues such as the causes of war and human nature that set the stage for discussion in the following sections. The second section reviews Machiavellism and applies it to the Melian dialogue. The third section

discusses the dialogue from a deontological perspective. Finally the article summarizes the conclusions.

Given the context within which the Melian Dialogue takes place and the pathetic end of the Peloponnesian war, neither Kant nor Machiavelli would approve the policies of either the Athenians or the Melians. If we drop that context out of the discussion and assume that we have no knowledge whatsoever about the war and the fate of the Melians, however, Kant would be the ardent supporter of the Melians' argument whereas Machiavelli would praise the Athenian generals for their final decision. As for Thucydides, everything was wrong for him from the beginning anyway; the war was a "tragedy" for the Melians, the Athenians as well as the Greek world in general.

2. The Causes of the War

We should first of all discuss the causes of the Peloponnesian war, the failure of the Athenians and the Melians in understanding each other as well as the methodology that Thucydides employs in recording the war. Though scholars have not reached a consensus on the real cause(s) of the Peloponnesian war and on whether Thucydides ever addresses that issue, it is a general belief that "what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." (Thucydides, 1972: 49) Two points should be made clear in this regard. First of all, the international structure contributed to the outbreak of the war. Secondly, human nature played a role both in the process leading up to the war and in the escalation of the war, because without the "fear" of the Spartans, the Athenian power would have peacefully risen and fallen.

In fact, some scholars consider human nature the only real cause of the war. Cornford, for example, argues that "the course of human events is to be thought of as shaped by the wills and passions of individual men or of cities, not as a part of what lies around it and beyond. And what does lie beyond? For Thucydides, the answer is: the unknown." (Cornford, 1965: 71) Thucydides's emphasis on human nature as the most serious cause for the war is evident in his methodology. "By using the *speeches* Thucydides emphasizes the *deliberate* choices made by individuals and the close relationship between the choices and the events of the history. Far from viewing historical figures as driven by forces outside their control, Thucydides sees them as the conscious initiator of events."(Garst, 1989: 6) Thucydides, then, believes that individuals, despite structural forces, are not without choices and they willingly choose going to war. Individuals are not irrational creatures either. For Thucydides, the characteristics of this "value rationality," to borrow one of Max Weber's concepts, are deeply rooted in *culture.*

Greek culture, however, had rapidly degenerated in the course of the war. For example, during the plague "it was generally agreed that what was both honorable and valuable was the pleasure of the moment and everything that might conceivably contribute to that pleasure. No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence. As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshiped them or not." (Thucydides, 1972: 155) Before the war the gods were believed to have prescribed the strong to protect the weak, now they were believed to prescribe "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." (Thucydides, 1972: 402) It was this reasoning according to which the Athenians were acting toward the end of the war and it was this cultural degeneration what Thucydides described as the *tragedy*. Given this tragedy, it is natural that the Melians and the Athenians failed to understand each other. They were neither believing in the same gods nor speaking the same language. Put differently, "words [had] lost their meaning."(Ball, 1986: 626) Then it should not be surprising to hear the following words from the Athenian generals in their address to the Melians: "so far as the favor of the gods is concerned, we think we have as much right to that as you have. Our aims and our actions are perfectly consistent with the belief men hold about the gods and with the principles which govern their own conduct. Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and *necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can* ."(Thucydides, 1972: 404)

3. Machiavellism and the Melian Dialogue

Machiavelli believes that people can have fortune not because they stand for what is right or they keep their promises, but because they are powerful enough to impose their will on the others, who might see themselves equally entitled to that fortune. In other words, "might always makes right." In no circumstances, then, would Machiavelli approve the *Melians'* argument. His view about the *Athenians'* behavior at Melos, however, would depend on the context of the war.

Arguing that Machiavelli does not care for morality would not be correct. Thucydides is concerned about cultural transformation. However, this is exactly what Machiavelli wishes for. Although Machiavelli considers morality critical in social life, he complains about the moral values of his society at the time and wishes them to be substituted by some other values. Isaiah Berlin, for example, argues as follows: "[Machiavelli] is indeed rejecting Christian ethics, but in favor of another system, another moral universe. In other words the conflict is between two moralities, Christian and pagan, not between autonomous realm of morals and politics." (Berlin, 1979: 54) This is why "Machiavelli stands outside the main tradition of European

political thought." (Plamenatz, 1963: 36) Machiavelli is not concerned for asking questions about the relationship between God and man or how an individual may become just, wise, or temperate. Rather he is only interested in advising the prince about the measures he must take to create and preserve a powerful state.

Machiavelli distinguishes between the public realm and the private realm and argues that one cannot pursue a moral and a religious life at the same time. According to Machiavelli, being successful in the public life requires adopting certain values other than what his state, Florence, might have at the time. He believes that choosing to live consistent with the existing values of Florence would mean "condemning] oneself to political impotence." (Berlin, 1979: 47) Machiavelli rather admires qualities such as courage and intelligence as well as shrewdness and lying. Therefore he redefines the ends that individuals, and especially leaders, must pursue in life. Those ends are particularly related to establishing and preserving the state, that is, the *raison d'etat.*

This raison-d'etat understanding leads Machiavelli to adopt a utilitarian approach to politics. Provided that it is in the interest of the state, Machiavelli believes that every means to be employed for achieving certain political objectives is permissible. He writes as follows: "it is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good it always justifies the action." (Machiavelli, 1983: 132) From such a utilitarian perspective, Machiavelli argues that the prince must be capable of being both good and evil and of behaving like both "fox and lion."

Machiavelli warns the prince against both relying on the forces of one's allies and honoring promises. The prince must not put his trust in auxiliaries. He asserts that "wise princes have always shunned auxiliaries and made use of their own forces. They have preferred to lose battles with their own forces than win them with others, in the belief that *no true victory is possible with alien arms."* (Machiavelli, 1995: 43) Instead, Machiavelli advises the prince to have his own armed forces. "Present-day princes and modern republics which have not their own troops for offence and defense," Machiavelli argues, "ought to be ashamed of themselves." (Machiavelli, 1983: 168) As for honoring promises, Machiavelli believes that raison d'etat and human nature require the prince to be cautious: "a prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honor his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist. If all men were good, this precept would not be good ."(Machiavelli, 1995: 55)

Turning from this general discussion to the application of Machiavellism to the Melian Dialogue, one can conclude that Machiavelli would not approve the Melians' argument. First of all, Machiavelli's

understanding of morality is not a kind that judges a certain incidence on the basis of who is right or wrong or who is good or evil, but on the basis of who is powerful. Therefore, Machiavelli would agree with the Athenians argument that gods are on the Athenians' side and that "it is a necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can." Holding on to their belief, the Melians address the Athenian generals as follows: "we put our trust in the fortune that the gods will send which has saved us up to now." (Thucydides, 1972: 407) As such Machiavelli would consider the Melian rulers nothing but naive, since their belief in the gods' coming to their help prevents them from taking the necessary measures for the survival of the state. Machiavelli would criticize the Melians for not changing their beliefs consistent with the changing structural conditions as the Athenians did. Interestingly enough, this cultural change in Athens is what Thucydides considers as the "tragedy," and what urged Plato to criticize cultural changes and reminded him of poet Pindar's dictum that "custom is the king."

Moreover, Machiavelli would criticize the Melians for trusting the Spartans and thinking that the Spartans would honor their words. It would be very understandable for Machiavelli that the Spartans did not come to the Melians' help. Because, not helping the Melians was in the best interest of the Spartans. This policy choice of the Spartans is well perceived and explained by the Athenian generals: "goodwill shown by the party that is asking for help does not mean security for the prospective ally ."(Thucydides, 1972: 405) If we do not take into consideration how the Peloponnesian war ended, Machiavelli would congratulate the Athenians for their heroism and intelligence during the Melian expedition. They did what they had to do. For the sake of the state and for the survival of the empire, they had to conquer the island of Melos even if they ultimately had to kill all the males and sell the women and the children into slavery. "Violence must be inflicted once for all," Machiavelli argues, "people will then forget what it tastes like and so be less resentful." (Machiavelli, 1995: 30)

Yet, if we assume that Machiavelli knew how the Peloponnesian war ended, even he would resist the Athenian generals' final decision. As we have argued above, Machiavelli believes that the prince must know when and where to be good and bad, courageous and deceitful. This adds up to the belief that using force in a certain situation may not be in the best interest of the prince. As Klosko argues, Machiavelli "distinguishes between cruelties that are well and badly committed. Well committed are those that lead to the need for fewer cruelties in the future; badly committed do not lessen the need." (Klosko, 1995: 10) Machiavellism, then, argues for an economy of violence. Given that the Melian massacre led to the Sicilian expedition and so to further cruelties and the ultimate defeat of Athens, Machiavelli would probably advise the Athenian generals to add the island of Melos to the

empire through other means than fighting. He would advise doing so not for the sake of goodness per se, but of raison d'etat.

4. Kantian Deontology and the Melian Dialogue

According to Kantian philosophy, there are two distinct worlds: the world of phenomena (or the world of appearances) and the world of noumena (or the world of intelligence). The world of phenomena is related to the animal realm of humans where instincts dominate. The world of noumena, however, is related to the intellectual realm where reason dominates. (Williams and Booth, 1996: 78) Kant asserts that, in order for the reason to rule, human beings should behave out of duty, whose specific characteristics would be derived from the moral law or the categorical imperative. In other words, "ought to" cannot be derived from "is," and practice should be preceded by theory. Yet, Kantian deontology suggests that theory and practice cannot be totally separated from each other. Rather they are mutually reinforcing and, therefore, one should not ignore the existing empirical world in the process of establishing theories.

Kant provides three categorical imperatives: 1) maxim-universalizability, 2) the notion of rational beings as having value as ends in themselves, and 3) moral autonomy. An individual, then, ought to base his or her life on the *rejection* of non-universalizable maxims, of treating other individuals as only means, and of depriving other individuals of their moral autonomy. This "ought-to approach" to ethics demonstrates that Kant is basically a deontologist. However, because he believes that theories should not ignore the empirical world, Kant does not totally disregard the consequences of actions. He, therefore, cannot be classified as a pure deontologist. For example, telling the truth is the most basic principle in any situation. However, a decision on a specific course of behavior should be informed by probable consequences of that behavior. The following modern hypothetical circumstance is generally provided to clarify this principle: assume that you are living under an oppressive regime and hiding a friend at home who is trying to escape from persecution. The authorities knock on the door one day and ask if anybody else is living at home. Saying "yes" would be telling the truth, but the probable consequences of this behavior, that is violence and killing, may stop you from doing so.

What, then, Kantian deontology would suggest about the moral questions raised in the Melian Dialogue? If we leave out the context within which the Dialogue takes place, Kant would approve the Melians' decision not to surrender to the Athenians. First of all, the Melians' behavior can be universalized. They were acting out of duty in their endeavor to defend themselves from an open aggression. Kant believes that self-defense is a natural right of states. "The god of morality," Kant writes, "does not yield to

Jupiter, the custodian of violence, for even Jupiter is still subject to fate." (Kant, 1991: 116) The Melians have their own policies developed through customs and experiences; they believe that the gods and their ally, the Spartans, will come to their help and save them from military defeat. Therefore, they address the Athenian representatives as follows: "We are not prepared to give up in a short moment the liberty which our city has enjoyed from its foundation for 700 years. We put our trust in the fortune that the gods will send and which has saved us up to now, and in the help of men- that is, of the Spartans." (Thucydides, 1972: 407) Kant would acknowledge this hope of the Melians for the future and their resisting the Athenian militarism. Moreover, this was a war between the two opposite camps, the Dorians and the Ionians, and Kant believes that perpetual peace will occur through the alliance of like-minded states. The Melian-Spartan alliance was resisting the imperialist Athens, whose name was incorrectly associated with democracy at the time. Therefore, Kant would approve the Melian generals' decision not to surrender to the Athenians but to fight while waiting for assistance from the gods and the Spartans.

Second, the Melians were trying to prevent their citizens from being enslaved. In order to ensure the moral autonomy of their citizens, the Melian rulers first had to defend the island. They were, in a sense, treating the citizens not as a means only but at the same time as an end. The Melians ask the Athenians as follows: "how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters?" The Athenians' answer is interesting enough: "we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you." (Thucydides, 1972: 402) To let the Athenians profit from the citizens of Melos, then, would amount for the Melian rulers to depriving their citizens of their moral autonomy. For this reason, Kant would support the Melian rulers in their decision.

However, if we take the context into account, that is the tragic end of the Melian expedition, the Melians' final decision would not seem that rational to Kant. First of all, we cannot universalize the act of committing a national suicide. Kant is not a naive philosopher; he thinks that perpetual peace will come true in the end, but after a long process of wars. Nature promises us the eternal peace, yet it will bring it through its own laws. "It will require a long, perhaps incalculable series of generations," Kant writes, "each passing on its enlightenment to the next, before the germs implanted by nature in our species can be developed to that degree which corresponds to nature's original intention." (Kant, 1991: 43) Kant's assertion that there can be no distinction between morality and politics applies to the relations between peace-loving nations. According to Kant, *"politics and morality can only be in agreement within a federal union."* (Kant, 1991: 129) The Melians' decision, then, from Kant's point of view, was immature; it was

given at the wrong time. For Kant *"we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves morally mature"* (Kant, 1991: 49) Kant would rather advise the Melians to surrender and pass their experiences to future generations. Although it is not for sure that the Athenians would treat the surrendered Melians justly, Kant would not approve any cruel treatment, for he believes that "rights cannot be decided by military victory." (Kant, 1991: 104) In reaching a decision, then, consequences matter for Kant. The Melian rulers, by not conceiving the devastation of the island, failed to make a sound decision.

Taking the context into account again, one can also conclude from Kantian deontological perspective that the Melian rulers had a cynical approach to their citizens. The Melian rulers not only used the citizens as a means to their own ends but also acted in a way to deprive them of their moral autonomy, for when the Athenian representatives came to the island "the Melians did not invite these representatives to speak before the people, but asked them to make the statement for which they had come *in front of the governing body and the few."* (Thucydides, 1972: 400) The Melian rulers, then, did not let the citizens of Melos to express their own views about the war but made decisions that would lead to their ultimate death or enslavement. This conflicts with Kant's second and third categorical imperatives of not treating individuals as only means and not depriving them of their moral autonomy.

As for the Athenian behavior at Melos, under no circumstances would Kant approve it. Wars of aggression and using unnecessary force are essentially bad for Kant. This is why he proposes that standing armies should be gradually abolished in order for perpetual peace to become a reality. He believes that standing armies are not only the cause of wars of aggression but also they basically deprive individuals of their moral autonomy. "The hiring of men to kill or to be killed," he writes, "seem to mean using them as mere machines and instruments in the hands of someone else (the state), which cannot be easily reconciled with the rights of man in one's own person." (Kant, 1991: 95). He also thinks that the subjugation of one state by another is immoral, since "a state is not a possession. It is a society of men, which no-one other than itself can command or dispose of. Like a tree, it has its own roots." (Kant, 1991: 94) Therefore, Kant would disapprove the Athenians' behavior of both attacking Melos and resorting to violence after the island fell.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, given the context within which the Melian dialogue takes place and the tragic end of the Peloponnesian war, neither Kant nor Machiavelli would approve the policies of either the Athenians or the

Melians. However, if we drop that context out of the discussion and assume that we have no knowledge whatsoever about the Peloponnesian war and the consequences of the Melian expedition, Kant would be the ardent supporter of the Melians' argument whereas Machiavelli would praise the Athenian generals for their final decision of conquering the island, killing the men of military age, and selling the others into slavery. As for Thucydides, everything was wrong for him from the beginning anyway; the war was a "tragedy" for the Melians, the Athenians as well as the Greek world in general.

How can it be possible to break the war-peace-war cycle then? Machiavelli does not believe that this cycle can ever be broken. For Machiavelli, war is something natural in the life of both human beings and states. He argues that wars cannot be avoided, but they can only be postponed to the advantage of enemies. "A prince," Machiavelli concludes, "must have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization, and its discipline." (Machiavelli, 1995: 46).

Kant, however, is confident that human reason will ultimately triumph over instincts. He believes nature will help toward this end. "A philosophical attempt," he writes " to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of mankind must be regarded as possible." (Kant, 1991: 51) However, in this long process, rational leaders are needed. Although Kant says that "out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built," he believes that a *master* who will "force man to obey a universally valid will under which everyone can be free [can be found] nowhere else but in the human species." (Kant, 1991: 46) What distinguishes Kant from other philosophers and political theorists, then, is hope; "the hope for a better world, marked by the fulfillment of human potential." (Williams and Booth, 1996: 81)

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