Ethics and Morality in the Melian Dialogue

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Ryan Murphy McArdle, my younger brother, who passed away on 10th June 2023 at the age of 38. He will always be loved, and he will always be wrong about Aristotle.

A past discussion of The Wednesday group prompted an inquiry into the nature of good and evil. I came away unsatisfied both with the opinions of the group, as well as my own contributions to the discussion. In order to serve justice to the question of evil, I decided to visit one of the most puzzling anecdotes in military history: the Melian Dialogue. What follows is an examination of the context, the motivations of the players, and conclusions we might draw.

How does morality differ from ethics? What is the nature of good and evil? And how do our answers to these questions fare in complex situations when there is no obvious solution, and in which there are no "good guys" and "bad guys," but rather a nuanced and situational mix of both?

One of the greatest enigmas within ancient political philosophy is the existence of the Melian Dialogue. A signature piece at the end of the fifth book of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, not only is it a complete departure in style from the rest of his work, but it raises these same questions about ethics and morality, and may help us to answer, or at least begin to address them.

Historical Context

The Athenian League came into existence in 449 BC when the Greek world unified together against the Persian invasion. Once established, the League slowly transformed into an Empire, sustained not by fellow city states pooling together resources for a common cause, but by exploitation of said resources to benefit Athens. The other major power, Sparta, watched this with suspicion. In due time, kindled by a small spark in a dangerous climate, Athens and Sparta erupted into twenty-seven year war. The Melian Dialogue (hereafter, Dialogue) details a negotiation between a small Spartan colony island, and the Athenian Empire. The negotiation was a failure, and ended with the slaughter and destruction of Melos.

Identity, Sovereignty, and Ethics

Considering the Dialogue, we need to ask a fundamental question: did Melos have a fundamental right to exist independently, and if so, why? This goes to the very core of national existence and identity, and indeed, individual identity, and comes up regardless of which side we choose. Independence implies some kind of separation, which means that before the Dialogue (and massacre) occurred, Melos and Athens were somehow different, and afterwards, they were the same. If this change did occur, did it violate some kind of right to exist? If so, how, and from where did that right come?

Pinning down the nature of identity is complex and arguably impossible. In some sense, identity is a spectrum where at one extreme, everyone is a unique individual, and at the other, everyone is of the same human race. In Herodotus' time (5th century BC), identity was usually determined by ones family or language, and modern concepts like skin color and geographic location didn't play much of a factor. City states like Athens often claimed to be founded by a god, such as Athena, and thus maintained divine lineage. Likewise, a colony like Halicarnassus (Herodotus' birthplace) was seen as Greek, even though it physically existed in Asia Minor. But this logic broke down during the Peloponnesian war: Melos was a Spartan colony, thus Greek speaking, and yet somehow differed from Athens. Had the Melians spoken a different language, it's worth asking whether forcing their population to speak Greek would have somehow allowed them to avoid being massacred.

This question also highlights the nature of sovereignty. In a lawless world, independence can only be attained by force: that is, the degree to which we are independent is proportional to the ability of our military to defend against an outside military. A sovereign nation maintains the freedom to determine its own laws, language, and religion only through its ability to ward off challengers; we can see physical evidence of this in medieval walled cities. One might argue that the Aegean Sea was part of Melos' military strategy, by virtue of the fact it served as a large moat around their island. Could one reason they were friendly to Sparta have been that Sparta's navy was too nascent to post a threat? We can see the same dynamics play out in our modern day. Was East Germany an independent nation, or a satellite of the USSR? And is Transnistria an independent breakaway country, or just a rebellious state within Moldova? Does a nation decide on its own that it exists and is independent, or must such a declaration depend on recognition from other countries? And does the fact that Sparta allowed Melos to be conquered imply their alliance was one-sided?

Let us take sides with Melos, and assert that they have a right to exist as a sovereign nation. Where does this right come from? It seems to be grounded in tradition and geography, rather than reason. Do the people who were governing Melos when the Dialogue took place have the same right to sovereignty as their ancestors from 700 years before? Does that mean the right is based on some kind of inheritance? If so, does this mean that only the Melians who can trace their lineage back 700 years have this right, or that their rights are somehow "stronger?" And shouldn't we factor in their geographical advantage of being an island, and ask if an inland city-state like Thebes ought have the same right to exist?

But we could turn around and say that Athens also has a right to exist, as well as Persia, against whom the Athenian Empire defends. Does anyone *not* have a right to exist? If everyone has a right to exist, then it follows that everyone also has a right to self-defense, and therefore, Athens was justified in their assault. After all, was it not their argument that Melos could cause others to turn against them and thus destroy their empire? Perhaps justice is a question of population size. Is it reasonable to say that a small country has certain rights, but when they grow in size they lose these rights? If the roles were reversed– a small nation taking on a large one– would our judgement of the situation also be reversed?

Next, if we are asking these questions about rights, we should also ask similar questions about the means used to enforce these rights, namely the law. If sovereignty implies self-regulation, shouldn't we consider how we make these regulations? Some laws are due to geography and circumstance. As a simple example, Italy, a country that has a large water border, is more likely to have laws relating to water pollution, fishing, and maritime commerce than a land-locked country like Switzerland. When a country grows in size, it will enact laws to further self-preservation. Is it better to create laws that are based on some kind of predetermined first principles, such as a constitution or precedent within common law, or in reaction to events and situations as they develop? While common law can claim to be in accordance with first principles, it is also trapped by the assumption that those principles are sound. And if wisdom comes from experience, then logically, laws passed after a series of events would contain more wisdom than laws passed before those events. On the other hand, when a law is passed after an event, it is usually influenced by the context of that event, and may not make sense when a future event occurs.

And finally, since we have cast our "judgement" in favor of Melos, what should follow? We cannot bring back the Melians who were slaughtered, and it does not make sense to punish Athenians who were acting under lawful military orders, especially if those orders were in pursuit of self-preservation. What happens when two countries have laws that directly conflict with each other? The Athenians clearly met with the Melian government in a legal capacity. If we disagree with the laws of another

country, does that make them somehow "unjust?" If we want to argue that the "proper" application of law would have saved the Melians, then we have to ask why there are ways to legally declare war, which often has the same result. If we would agree that brutal slaughter is evil, then we would also need to agree that morality cannot be considered when designing laws.

Idealism vs Realpolitik

In studying questions of history, judgement, will, and outcome, there are two competing narratives: those who believe that there exists some kind of moral or ethical foundation by which geopolitical forces interact, and those who maintain the world to be a series of random chaos without rhyme or reason, only survival. Thucydides falls into the latter camp, often called the first "realist," and is joined by later thinkers including Clausewitz, Bismark, Kissinger, and Mearsheimer in the school of Realpolitik. The Dialogue is brutally harsh, logical, and unforgiving. Ironically, it is one of the few places in his work where Thucydides mentions deities, but only when the Melians invoke the "gods[1]," which the Athenians promptly brush aside. In a realist world, there is no morality, only power; thus there is no such thing as good and evil, only survival of the fittest. In this view, might makes right.

In the introduction to his book *A World Restored*, Kissinger writes that "every statesman must attempt to reconcile what is considered just with what is considered possible[2]." In the same way that "there are no atheists in the foxholes," we sometimes see idealistic academics and fresh graduates enter politics only to discover that some situations defy principle. The "outsider"– not in power– has the ability to express opinions and propose possibilities, and the worst consequences tend to be hate mail. The "insider," on the other hand, often has to make flash decisions in undesirable circumstances, and the result of these decisions could be someone's life. Consider a political pundit on a television show making arguments about a military operation: while they may agree or disagree, suggest alternative actions, or make predictions, it is the military commandeer who must live with the fact that their soldiers came home in body bags. A pundit may retract their statements and revise their opinions, but for the military commander, there is no undoing the consequences of war.

In light of this, we can see a fairly strong argument that, due to the very nature of law and sovereignty, it is not only impossible, but foolish, to attempt to impose a standard of morality onto political and military events. We cannot mandate peace, only force, and a country which refuses, on principle, to engage in geopolitical events, will likely not be a country for very long. One potential conclusion is that morality binds individuals, whereas ethics bind nations. Nations which attempt to impose moral codes on their citizens find that they can only be enforced through authoritarian means, while individuals who abandon morality and follow a code of doing strictly what is legal will find themselves without many friends or family.

Revisiting the Dialogue with this distinction in mind, and understanding that an act like murder, while morally abhorrent, can be justified legally (and thus ethically) in the name of sovereignty and self-defense, it seems clear that the Athenians attempted, through the Dialogue, to seek peace, and were left with no other choice. If the greatest moral good is preservation of life, and the Melians had the option to submit to Athens and thus save themselves, it follows that the Melians chose to sacrifice their own people to preserve their legal rights. And, as they discovered, having legal rights is not useful when you are dead.

However, the Realpolitik argument doesn't quite work. Were it true that the Dialogue had only two

[1] Although the translation here (Crawley, 1874) is plural, the original Greek, "θείου", is singular in case.

[2] Kissinger comments on this directly in a discussion at Harvard University on 11 April 2012 (timestamped link)

participants, the Athenians and the Melians (and by proxy, the Spartans), then it would suffice. But there was a third participant, not physically present but often alluded to in the debate: everyone else. The debate did not happen in a vacuum. In spite of their military strength, the Athenians had one weakness: their reputation. If others, either existing subject islands or islands not yet visited, saw Melos continue to exist neutrally, they might ask why they themselves could not be neutral. If these questions started, the end might entail a significant loss of Athenian strength, leading to losing the war. Surely the Athenians had this concern in back of mind, and it must have stung. Just as a rich man fears robbers could steal his fortune, the idea of loss of the war, loss of empire, and loss of core identity must have been driving them. And fear is a powerful motivator.

Good and Evil

When we think about morality, we usually think about virtues and vices, which are traditionally contraposed: greed and charity, envy and kindness, and so on. If we consider an action, like murder, while we might agree that it is both unethical and immoral, we should be able to clarify why. Murder is obviously unethical because, at least in most cases, it is against the law. The law also recognizes different degrees of murder, which depend on circumstance, intent, and so on. But why is murder immoral? To answer this, we need to examine why the murder took place. Was it premeditated, or performed in a fit of rage? The answer to this question reflects the state of the murderer at the time of the act, often anger or resentment, which would certainly fall under what we call "vice." In fact, the *absence* of such a state is a sign of sociopathy, and grounds for a harsher penalty.

Emotion, reason, and will are the elements which separate us from animals, and they exist in a harmony. If Aristotle's golden mean is to be believed, then the desirable state of mind exists when this harmony allows us to use our will to regulate both our reason and our emotion. Strong emotions can trigger a strong reaction, which puts our state of mind into disregulation. Fear is a very strong emotion, and can set us into a state where we make rash decisions to ensure our survival. If a crazed man is rushing at us, and we have a gun, we might shoot the man to defend ourselves, even if we otherwise never shoot anything. However, we can use our reason and will to control these emotions, and thus guide our response to given situations. For example, perhaps we quickly recognize that the man is not crazed or rushing at us, but trying to catch a bus he's about to miss. We can use our reason to see that the man is simply running late, and use our will to overcome instinctive emotion, step out of the way, and have sympathy for him. If generosity is a virtue and greed is a vice, we might see them as opposing ends of a spectrum of how we handle fear of loss or poverty. If we have some money, once we spend it, we no longer have that money. So do we give a bit of change to a beggar on the street, or cling to it in fear that we might need it in the future? We can use our reason to overcome this fear, and understand that helping the beggar to get food is a good thing, and then use our will to generously give him the money (or buy him food).

Next, we face a deeper question: is morality objective or relative? To answer this, we should examine how we interact with moral issues. Are emotion, reason, and will objective or relative? Although people might have different reactions to different situations, we should at least agree that everyone (except sociopaths) has the capability to *have* reactions. It follows that we should evaluate our objectivity question based on our capability for reactions, not for the degree to which we react. If everyone has capacity for these things, then would it not follow that they also have capacity for understanding moral truths? Even if there is disagreement as to whether a given action or inaction in a situation is good or evil, we can still recognize that, in order to make such a decision, we must already understand that good and evil exist. Just as, although we recognize that someone might have more fear (cowardice) or less fear (courage) in a situation, we would still agree that fear exists as an objective

emotion, it also follows that, while a given situation might have varying degrees of good and evil, we still must conclude that good and evil exist as objective concepts.

Then the big question: what is the nature of good and evil? If good and evil are equal opposites, as dualism suggests, then we could map a spectrum in which a given situation might have more good (less evil) or less good (more evil). From this reasoning, we could argue that not only are good and evil objective, but they can exist independently. However, like realpolitik, this framing doesn't fully work. For example, pain cannot exist without health, but health *can* exist without pain. That is, someone can live a long healthy life not knowing pain, whereas someone in pain always has the desire for health. If we define the greatest good as the optimal alignment of reason, emotion, and will, then we might define evil as the suboptimal alignment thereof. To revisit our previous example: when we see the angry man rushing at us, fear overtakes us, and thus emotion overtakes our reason, becoming misaligned. Another way to state this: if there is a proper alignment of our elements to allow for the greatest good, we can then state that when our elements are *not* in these places, that it becomes less good, or more evil. This ultimately brings us to the conclusion that evil is the absence of the good.

The Individual and the State

If morality requires intent and emotion, can such a concept be applied to a government? There are two ways we can approach this question. On one hand, while we can ascribe reason to a state in the form of policy decisions, intent and emotion are very personal and restricted to the individual. In this way, we separate morality as governing the individual, and ethics as governing institutions. Because of this split, there exists a tension between them, leading to difficult situational questions when conflicts arise, such as a soldier being ordered to commit an act which they consider immoral.

On the other hand, we might take a systems view. In the same way that the human body is a system of organs and thoughts governed by an individual, these same individuals comprise different roles and facets of a society, and the ruling structure, be it democracy, monarchy, or otherwise, governs these individuals. While one might argue that a society of individuals cannot have a unified emotional state or will, we should recall that even within an individual, there can be a mixture emotions and uncertainty about how to proceed in a given situation. In fact, many of us have doubts and uncertainties most of the time. It could then follow that a society is closer to an individual than we at first thought, at which point a moral structure *could* apply.

If a state is capable of feeling emotion, what does it look like? Unfortunately, we see it all too often in pitchfork mobs. A mob is a group of people who have temporarily ceded their individuality and are swept into action. We could even argue that a mob is a temporary society which has an imbalance of emotion– usually anger– and not enough reason, or law and order. What is voting, but submitting our desire to a system which will then act on the full results? And if, as Socrates argued, a society can be just, then why not a person as well? If the strata underlying a just or ethical society can be applied to an individual, then it seems the same morality we apply to individuals can apply to the state. In fact, morality and ethics can often look identical: the difference is that ethics are rooted in the structure of the state, while morality is rooted in the individual.

And here lies our answer. If we view the state as an amalgamation of individuals with independent intentions and emotions, then it is clear that morality cannot be applied. But if we view the state as a rigid structure controlled by a central authority, then its actions could be viewed through a moral lens. Consider a Communist society in which concepts like personal property are abolished, and individuals are expected to fully cede themselves to the good of the state. The head of such a state would assume

the persona of an individual, while citizens become mere organs that perform state functions. This also suggests that consequences of immoral actions by such a state could be served to the head, and thus accountability would be possible.

And now we must return to our thesis question: was Athens evil in her action? We already know that her actions were ethical, because the Athenians were operating in a manner consistent with their own laws in pursuit of self-preservation. However, the degree to which we can determine moral judgement depends on the degree to which the citizenry cede their individuality to the state, as well as the remorse said citizens express once the spell has broken and they regain their agency.

If we assume the state was acting as an individual, then killing out of self defense could be considered moral on the grounds that the intent was to survive, not to murder the other party. Fear is a powerful motivator that can easily disregulate our emotions; once we are in a state of disregulation, the ends justify the means, and we will seek survival by any means necessary. If Athens, by now a democracy in name only, had reason to fear that even a single beacon of neutrality could result in their destruction by Sparta, then their massacre could be justified. If, on the other hand, they sought to gain power and ultimately overpower Sparta, this would be undisputably evil.

Conclusion

At their core, although ethics and morality sometimes overlap and even look identical, it is clear that they have different roots. Whereas ethics emerge from the relationship between the governing and the governed, morality, while it has a social component, can seem almost biological in nature. When casting a judgement on actions of a society, we must first define and then separate ethics and morality, because, depending on the circumstances of the actions and the state of the society and individuals within, we may arrive at different conclusions.