

War was endemic in Greece, whose greatest historian gives not only an account of one conflict but also an analysis of the effects of war on society which remains, as he had hoped, a treasure for posterity. Thucydides gives his reasons for confidence in his achievement: his work will be "judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future." Human nature, as he sees it, is the key.

In Thucydides' day thinkers were much concerned with the distinction between nature and convention. Convention was a human creation and humans could change it. Nature was permanent, and its laws not subject to change by humans. In Thucydides' view human nature could best be observed in situations of crisis, stripped of all superficial modification by convention. Such critical situations arise from war, and from such disasters as plague and revolution. A situation of this kind was seen on Corcyra during a war-related revolution. "Then, with the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where laws exist, showed itself proudly in its true colours, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy to anything superior to itself." These grim comments on human nature are amplified and stressed throughout Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Human beings are vain and boastful, they cannot stand prosperity, they are ruled by hopes and desires rather than prudence, they are ignorant and credulous and fickle. The main point, however, is that they are always governed by self-interest, and in nature there is no other standard.

Religion gives no standard, and there is no indication that Thucydides sees any divine governance of human affairs. When writing of the plague at Athens he reports that "as for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and bad dying indiscriminately." Nicias met disaster in Sicily: "a man who of all the Hellenes in my time least deserved to come to so miserable an end, since the whole of his life had been devoted to the study and practice of virtue."

Religion, then, provides no sanction for morality, yet Thucydides does use in crucial passages ethical terms like good, bad, virtue, and he recognizes certain standards: "In times of peace and prosperity cities and individuals alike follow higher standards, because they are not forced into a situation where they have to do what they do not want to do." Again he writes: "In these acts of revenge on others men take it upon themselves to begin the process of repealing those general laws of humanity which are there to give a hope of salvation to all who are in distress, instead of leaving those laws in existence, remembering that there may come a time when they too will be in danger and will need their protection." In the Funeral Oration ascribed to Pericles, the historian stresses the respect of Athenians for the laws, "especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break."

One might wonder about the source of these higher standards, these general laws

of humanity. They do not exist in nature, but are the product of self-interest. Like others of his day Thucydides was well aware that human fortune is mutable: he himself had been driven by vote of the Assembly from his position as general to that of a hunted exile, and his city had gone from the heights of power and prosperity to defeat and despair. In a world so changeable self-interest remains basic in human nature, but survival demands a long-range view of self-interest. It is indeed essential for us all to adopt and adhere to some standards of conduct if we are not to revert to our natural state of savagery and barbarism. The laws of society are conventional, they do not alter human nature, but while they exist and are observed they add a new dimension to life which in its natural state is, as described by Hobbes (who himself translated Thucydides), "nasty, brutish, and short." The practices of civilized society, conventional though they be, are infinitely preferable to barbarism.

What then of war? It has been argued with great force by C.N. Cochrane in Thucydides and the Science of History that the historian thought of his work as scientific, and used the method and language of the most highly developed science of his time, namely Hippocratic medicine. He studies the events in history as a doctor studies the symptoms of a disease. He assumes that events, like diseases, do not occur without some ascertainable cause in the material world, and that by study of events the historian can discover the regularities behind them and their true causes. Just as the uniform course of a known disease allows the doctor to predict and sometimes to control its outcome, so the student of history can predict how human nature will react to a given situation. Human life is controlled not by fate or the gods, but by human intelligence and foresight. Lacking these it reverts from civilization to its natural barbarism. Enlightened self-interest perceives that the general laws of humanity alone give a hope of salvation to those in distress, and that whether as individuals or as social beings we should remember that there may come a time when we too, however powerful at the moment, may be in danger and need the protection of these laws. Civilization is conventional, not natural, and it is fragile. Its most pressing disease is war, which forces men into a situation where they have to do what they do not want to do.

When Thucydides wrote about the plague in Athens, he mentions that he had suffered the disease himself and seen others suffering from it. He also notes that the ones who felt most pity for the sick and dying were those who had had the plague themselves and had recovered from it. This might be taken as a text for his whole work: war is a disease of civilization. He had suffered from it himself, and he could feel a profound sympathy for all its human victims. There is, however, more than mere sympathy. There is a clear call to us to use our intelligence and foresight to discover our true self-interest, and to understand war for what it is: a disease of society, and one which may well be fatal for those who engage in it.

