The Melian Dialogue as a Thought Experiment

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Thucydides' rendition of the Melian Dialogue is one of the most famous parts of his History of the Peloponnesian War, and possibly the most famous debate in international relations theory to this day. It has been retold, described, interpreted, analyzed and criticized in a vast number of works on international relations and ethics. The goal of this paper is to present and interpret the Melian Dialogue from a new, so far underexplored perspective, and view it as a thought experiment. In order to achieve this goal, the paper first provides a short discussion of several types and functions of thought experiments in philosophy and elsewhere. Second, the paper presents a short version of the Melian Dialogue. Third, the paper gives an interpretation of the Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment, argues that reading it as a thought experiment is possible, and attempts to pinpoint exactly what kind of thought experiment Thucydides conducted in terms of its function and logical structure.

Key words: *justice, Melian dialogue, morality, Peloponnesian war, realism, thought experiment, Thucydides.*

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Introduction

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*[1] is widely considered as a foundational work in history, political science, international relations, and the ethics of international relations. When it comes to the latter two fields, Thucydides' position is most often identified with the realist tradition in international relations, which holds that the anarchical nature of the international system, and the necessities imposed on state actors by the security dilemma, either drastically limit the scope of the possible application of moral considerations and values in foreign affairs[2] or completely exclude the possibility of their application.[3] Thucydides' rendition of several of the episodes in the war have led scholars to believe that, although there is no such thing as an explicit realist position in his work and the application of the term could be wildly anachronistic,[4] he is nevertheless a kind of realist about international relations. The most famous of these are his explanation of the causes of the war by means of the security dilemma,[5] his account of societal collapse in Athens due to the effects of plague,[6] the Mytilenean Debate in which the Athenians had first decided upon and then overturned the decision to commit genocide against the people of Mytilene,[7] and of course the Melian Dialogue,[8] which provides a discussion of the possibility of applying moral considerations to the international behavior of states, and ultimately results in the genocide of the people of Melos.

In the Melian Dialogue, which is the main focus of this paper, Thucydides contrasts the opinion of two sides in a debate – the Athenians who act and speak as political realists and only wish to consider arguments which have to do with pure political expediency, and the Melians who act and speak as political idealists who wish to consider arguments which invoke terms of justice

[1] References to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* specify the book, the chapter, and the page number preceded by the letter H indicating the title of the work: THUCYDIDES, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Mineola, Dover Publications, 2004.

[2] Cf. Edward Hallett CARR, *The twenty years' crisis 1919-1939: an introduction to the study of international relations*, London, Macmillan Press, 1946, 156; Hans MORGENTHAU, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, 14.

[3] Cf. George KENNAN, Morality and foreign policy, *Foreign Affairs*, 64 (1985) 2, 205-218; Marshall COHEN, Moral skepticism and international relations, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 13 (1984) 4, 299-346, 299.

[4] Cf. Jack DONNELLY, Realism, in: Scott BURCHILL (ed.), *Theories of international relations*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 29-54, 30.

[5] Cf. H, 1.23; Cf. Donald KAGAN, *The origins of war and the preservation of peace*, New York, Anchor Books, 1995, 15; David BOLOTIN, Thucydides, in: Leo STRAUSS, Joseph CROPSEY (eds.), *History of political philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, 7-32, 10; Stipe BUZAR, *Realizam i teorija pravednog rata* [*Realism and just war theory*], Zagreb, Disput – NZCG, 2020, 31.

[6] Cf. H, 2.47-53.

[7] Cf. H, 3.36-49; Michael WALZER, *Just and unjust wars: a moral argument with historical illustrations*, New York, Basic Books, 2006, 9-12.

[8] Cf. H, 5.84-115; Walzer, *Just and unjust wars*…, 9-13; Buzar, *Realizam i teorija*…, 34-37.

and morality. As it was impossible for Thucydides to have actually been at the conference between the Melian and Athenian representatives in 416 BC, and as any accounts he may have heard of it were probably second-hand accounts at best, it is widely accepted that he reconstructed the discussion as he saw fit, and possibly to serve his own purposes and implicit or latent theoretical positions. What is important is that his reconstruction of the discussion provides what a modern scholar might provide if they were creating a thought experiment intended to show the extreme amoral realist and naïve idealist positions. Because of this, the Melian Dialogue can be analyzed and interpreted as though it were a thought experiment. However, there are various types and functions of thought experiments in philosophy and elsewhere, so a primary goal of the paper is to present at least some of them and attempt to categorize the Melian Dialogue within existing typologies. There is special interest in doing this, because the Melian Dialogue is not a wholly made up event, as is the case with most thought experiments, but is a real event to which Thucydides added his own (implicit or explicit) underlying opinions and wrote it, in a sense, as a thought experiment.

1. The goals and structure of thought experiments

There are numerous definitions of what a thought experiment is, but since none of them have gathered broad consensus among philosophers, it is better that the concept remain only loosely described. Also, the various types of thought experiments will by no means be exhausted here, but on the contrary, only be given a short glance to serve the present purpose. A thought experiment is an imagined scenario which can serve a number of purposes, such as »conceptual analysis, exploration, hypothesizing, theory selection, theory implementation«, and be used as a didactic device, or even purely for the purposes of entertainment. They are also used in a broad variety of academic disciplines, and by many types of scholars and investigators.[9] Their use in ethics is very common, while they are not as commonly used in political science and the study of international relations. The latter more commonly use case studies, as well as other methods for the above mentioned purposes, but as will be presented later in the paper, some of their case studies have the kernel of thought experiments in them.

It may be stressed that not every hypothetical situation can be regarded as a thought experiment, and that they should be distinguished from thinking about how actual experiments would be done, as well as from various psychological experiments, even though any of them can at times partially overlap

[9] Cf. James R. BROWN, Thought experiments, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thought-experiment/ (24.03.2025).

with thought experiments. They should also be distinguished from simply counterfactual reasoning and argument – thought experiments should have an actual experimental aspect to them. In all cases, however, when conducting a thought experiment one assumes that there is something to be learned about the outside world by imagining storylines which take place in the imagination.[10] Thought experiments do this by showing us how reality refuses to conform to our preconceived notions or expectations and by showing us ways in which both those expectations and our theories about the world need to be changed.[11] They can also be used as »intuition pumps« in order to make some of our intuitions about the world seem more probable, or to lead to a conclusion through intuition.[12]

One of the earliest examples is Lucretius' from *De Rerum Natura*[13] in which he attempts to show that space is infinite with an example that shows the absurdity of the opposite position. If space is not infinite, the argument goes, then it has some kind of boundary, and if it has a boundary then we can toss a spear (or send a rocket, or whatever) at it. If the spear goes through the boundary, then we cannot consider it the ultimate boundary of space. If, on the other hand, the spear is stopped by the boundary, then we must think of the boundary as an object which is itself in space, thus it is not the end of space. However one thinks about it, it turns out that we are unable to think about space as finite.

There are, of course, thought experiments that go in the exact opposite direction from Lucretius', but rehashing them would be beside the point. What his thought experiment reveals is perhaps the most fundamental function of thought experiments. Namely, they do not conclusively prove, any facet of our reality, but rather serve as a test of plausibility for the conceptions, preconceptions, hypotheses, and theories which we hold about the world. They are plausibility testers, and as such they expand our knowledge regarding our concepts and the world. One of the best known such experiments in ethics is Judith Jarvis Thomson's *famous violinist*.[14] In it, Thomson wishes to show that the argument against abortion which relies on the fetus' right to life based on personhood is implausible. She asks us to imagine that a famous violinist has fallen into a coma and the only way to save his life is to sustain him by hooking

[10] Cf. Brown, *Thought experiments…*

[11] Cf. Thomas S. KUHN, A function for thought experiments, in: Thomas S. KUHN, *The essential tension*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977, 240-265, 241, 261; Ana BUTKOVIĆ, What is the function of thought experiments?, *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (2007) 19, 63-67, 63-66.

[12] Cf. Damir MLADIĆ, *Um, svijest i qualia* [*Mind, consciousness and qualia*], Klanjec, Hrvatskozagorsko književno društvo, 2007, 201-215.

[13] Cf. Tit Lukrecije KAR, O prirodi [*On the nature of things - De Rerum Natura*], Zagreb, Matica Hrvatska, 1952, 1.951-987; James R. BROWN, Thought experiments in science, philosophy, and mathematics, *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (2007) 19, 3-27, 4-5; Brown, *Thought experiments…*

[14] Cf. Judith J. THOMSON, A defense of abortion, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1 (1971) 1, 47-66.

him up to another person for nine months. A group of music lovers attach the unconscious (and innocent) violinist to that other person while they are asleep. Thomson concludes that the other person would in no way be morally obligated towards the violinist and be forced to keep him attached for nine months, even though unhooking him would result in his death. Her experiment, thus, allows for the clear distinction between the right to life (of the violinist or of a fetus) and the right to those things which are necessary to sustain life. In this way, Thomson is able to accept (though she actually does not) the fetus' right to life, but still maintains the moral right to abort a pregnancy. There are, of course, a number of critiques of Thomson' argument and thought experiment, some of which are rather compelling,[15] and it has even been said of the violinist analogy that it »[…] is something like an undead zombie. Although the zombie gets repeatedly killed, it keeps on coming back«.[16] Of course, the number of her defenders is also plentiful. However, these are beside the point of this paper. For the present purpose, it was enough to show how a thought experiment in ethics can subvert preconceived notions and question the plausibility of an argument.

Finally, there are various taxonomies of thought experiments, but for the present purpose it will suffice to distinguish between how various thought experiments can differ in terms of their *purpose* and *logical structure*. As regarding purpose, thought experiments can be conducted for various reasons and in diverse areas, such as economics, education, history, literature, ethics, the natural sciences, sociology, political science, and theology. Some of them serve specific functions within a theory, while others are used when real world experiments are beyond the capabilities of the researcher.[17] Some serve to help the process of understanding highly abstract situations, others are there for the purpose of conceptual analysis, and others yet for the processes of theory discovery. However, the kinds of thought experiments that have gained the most attention are those which are meant to provide evidence to prove or disprove theories. Such will be the assumed purpose of the Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment.[18]

As regarding logical structure, thought experiments can be classified into two types of *alethic refuters.* Namely, thought experiments have as their intended goal the refutation of »[…] statements by disproving one of their modal consequences.« There are »[…] deontic modalities (*permissible, forbidden*), epis-

[15] Cf. John FINNIS, The rights and wrongs of abortion: A reply to Judith Thomson, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 2 (1973) 2, 117-145.

[16] Christopher KACZOR, Philosophy and theology: Notes on the violinist analogy, *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*, 11 (2011) 3, 579-585, 579.

[17] One imagines philosophers writing to NASA, asking them to help carry their spears to the ends of the universe, and being disgruntled at the lack of reply.

[18] Cf. Brown, *Thought experiments…*

temic modalities (*know, believe*), and alethic modalities (*possible, necessary*).«[19] For instance, such as in the Gettier scenarios in philosophical epistemology,[20] a thought experiment will be designed to refute a proposition by showing that there is something which is ruled out in the proposition as impossible, but is actually possible, and the thought experiment shows it. Gettier's thought experiment shows that justified true belief (a standard definition of knowledge) is not necessarily knowledge[21] – it is a *necessity refuter*. On the other hand, a *possibility refuter* would show that there are other possibilities which need to be taken into consideration, and that the possibility in the proposition is not the only possibility.[22] The Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment seems to be a necessity refuter, and possibly also a possibility refuter, of the propositions and assumptions made by the Melian side in the dialogue.

2. The Melian Dialogue

In 416 BC, which was the sixteenth year of the Peloponnesian war, the Athenians showed up with overwhelming military power at Melos. Inhabiting their island in the Aegean Sea, the Melians, Spartan colonists who had not submitted to Athenian domination, had thus far remained neutral in the war. Before actually doing any harm, the Athenians sent negotiators to convince the Melians to join the Athenian side in the war, while the Melians insisted that the negotiations were not to take place in public view, but would open to participation by a privileged few,[23] which is also why it is highly unlikely that Thucydides would have heard a first-hand account of their proceedings. Given the Athenian presence in force, the Melians begin by saying that the Athenians have come to the negotiations with preconceived views and that they predict two possible results – either they will win the moral argument, refuse to submit and face war, or they will concede to the Athenian argument and submit themselves to servitude.[24] In any case, both sides agree that the debate is about nothing less

[19] Roy A. SORENSEN, *Thought experiments*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, 135; Cf. Brown, *Thought experiments…*

[20] Cf. Edmund GETTIER, Is justified true belief knowledge?, *Analysis*, 23 (1963) 6, 121-123.

[21] Gettier's and Gettier-type examples for refuting the necessity of the definition of knowledge being justified true belief imagine situations in which a person has justified true belief of a proposition P, but it still cannot be said that they know P. One might, for instance, have a justified true belief that X is the winner of the Tour de France for a certain year, because they watched the race and the award ceremony. But they cannot be said to know that X is the winner of the Tour de France for a certain year because they did not watch the news a week later when it was announced that X failed their doping test, and now Y is the winner of the race.

[22] Cf. Brown, *Thought experiments…*

[23] Cf. H, 3.84.

[24] Cf. H, 3.86.

than the survival of the Melians and their state.[25] As the proceedings get under way, the Athenians insist that any arguments put forth by either side should be based solely on what is currently expedient and practical, because »[…] questions of justice only arise when there is equal power to compel: in terms of practicality the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must.«[26] To this the Melians reply that nonetheless the »principle of common good« should be upheld, and that those in peril should be able to count on »fair and equitable treatment«, because that is in the Athenian interest as well as in the Melian interest, should the Athenians ever lose their dominant position among the Greeks.[27]

The Athenians go on by saying that Melian survival is in both their interests,[28] which the Melians disbelieve because they do not view their interests as compatible, given that one side would become masters, and the other would be enslaved.[29] The Athenians again say that the Melians can avoid a worse fate by submitting, and that they themselves gain from not destroying Melos,[30] at which the Melians reply that they would prefer »inactive neutrality« as a friendly stance towards Athens.[31] The Athenians do not accept, because they believe that friendship with a neutral Melos would be perceived as weakness, and thus retort: »Your friendship is more dangerous to us than your hostility.«[32]

The Melians fail to see the logic in the Athenian argument and stress the difference between those states which already belong to the Athenian alliance, and those states which remain neutral. They also put forward that it is in no way expedient for the Athenians (since they refuse to speak in terms of justice anyway) to attempt to subjugate all of the remaining neutral states.[33] The Athenian response is that their allies indeed see such things as a matter of power rather than justice, but also that they have no need to subjugate all of the neutral states. Namely, they only need to subjugate island states because those are »most likely to take an irrational risk and bring themselves and us into entirely foreseeable danger«, while the mainland states present no danger to them, given that the Athenian empire is a maritime empire rather than a land empire.[34] The Athenians are thus trying to teach the Melians a lesson in geopolitics and realism, while the Melians, presented as what would in the 20th century be called idealists, are insisting on terms of justice and the use of moral language.

[25] Cf. H, 3.87-88.
[26] H, 3.89.
[27] H, 3.90.
[28] Cf. H, 3, 91.
[29] Cf. H, 3, 92.
[30] Cf. H, 3, 93.
[31] Cf. H, 3, 94.
[32] H, 3, 95.
[33] Cf. H, 3, 96, 98.
[34] Cf. H, 3, 97, 99.

The Melians, thus, keep insisting that they should resist submitting because it is a matter of honor, and because they always have hope that in resisting fortune would favor them.[35] The Athenians answer them that there is no dishonor in submitting when the odds are so overwhelmingly against them,[36] and that hope will cause irreversible damage to those who count only on hope and fortune. They implore the Melians not to take the path which has led so many to their demise, and not to turn from »human means« towards »divination, oracles, and other such sources of disastrous optimism.«[37] This Athenian statement appears to be in line with Thucydides' own view of politics, because his history of the war insists on analyzing its human means and ends rather than ever resorting to divine causes or any form of *Deus ex machina*.

After this, the conference culminates in the central arguments of both the Melians and Athenians, some of which deserve to be quoted in (more or less) whole passages:[38]

> »*Mel.* We can assure you that we do not underestimate the difficulty of facing your power and a possibly unequal fortune. Yet, as for fortune, we trust that our righteous stand against injustice will not disadvantage us in divine favour; and that Spartan help will make up for our deficiency in strength — if for no other reason, they will be bound to fight for us out of kinship and a sense of honour. So our confidence is not as completely illogical as you suggest.
> *Ath.* […] We believe it of the gods, and we know it for sure of men, that under some permanent compulsion of nature wherever they can rule, they will. We did not make this law; it was already laid down, and we are not the first to follow it; we inherited it as a fact, and we shall pass it on as a fact to remain true for ever; and we follow it in the knowledge that you and anyone else given the same power as us would do the same. So as for divine favour, we can see no reason to fear disadvantage. As for your trusting fantasy about the Spartans, that a sense of honour, of all things, will bring them to your aid, we can only admire your innocence and pity your folly. Among themselves and under their own regulations at home the Spartans are as virtuous as can be. But their treatment of others is a different story, and a long one, best summarized by saying that of all the people we know the Spartans make the most blatant equation of comfort with honour, and expediency with justice. Such principles are hardly conducive to your rescue, which does now look an illogical proposition.
> *Mel.* But that is the very point in which we can now place our greatest trust — the Spartans' perception of their own interest. They will want to avoid the consequence of abandoning Melos — their own colony. Among the Greeks at large this would brand them faithless in the eyes of their friends and provide ammunition for their enemies.

[35] Cf. H, 3, 100, 102.
[36] Cf. H, 3, 101.
[37] H, 3, 103.
[38] H, 3, 104-107.

> *Ath.* You seem to forget that interest goes hand-in-hand with safety, while the pursuit of justice and honour involves danger, something which the Spartans are generally loath to face.«

In these central passages of the Melian Dialogue, the Melians are counting on the help of the gods and the Spartans. They believe that the gods will favor them because they are fighting for what is right, because they righteously stand against injustice. The Athenians are telling them that, as far as the gods are concerned, there is no reason to think that they would favor Melos rather than Athens, because the gods seem to be bound by the same rules of necessity and power as human beings – they rule wherever they can, and have no different expectations of humans. Thucydides skillfully excludes considerations of divine intervention into human affairs, not by denying the existence of the gods, but by claiming that the gods are bound by roughly the same laws of necessity as human beings. This way, politics and war, both in their waging, and in their retelling and explanation, are matters that should be considered in purely rational terms.

The Spartans, on the other hand, will not help them because interest, power, and necessity override considerations of honor and justice. Plainly put, Melos is an island, and the Spartans are a land power, and thus coming to the help of Melos against the mighty Athenian fleet is simply not in their interest, nor is Melos in their direct sphere of interest and influence. In the end, the Athenians withdrew from the conference because the Melians would not be swayed by their arguments, and after that indeed inflicted full scale genocide on the Melians, who then lost not only their independence, but their state, their culture, and their very lives. Afterwards the Athenians colonized the island with their own people, and Melos was no more. If interpreted from the Athenian perspective given in the Melian Dialogue, the grim fate of Melos was a result of their lack of rational approach to politics and war. Their doom was spelled by their own folly. Again, it is not clear whether this can be taken as Thucydides' own position, but given his dislike for explanations which rely on divine intervention and his general bent towards practical rationality and argument, this author considers it a safe bet. But, rather than view it as a case study in realism in international relations, the Melian Dialogue can also be viewed as a thought experiment.[39]

[39] Somewhat similarly used in Stipe BUZAR, Do the weak have a right to fight the strong? Moral absolutes and the probability of success, *Studia Philosophiae Christianae*, 60 (2024) 2, 35-50, 39-45.

3. The Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment

In what sense can it be said that the Melian Dialogue is a thought experiment? First of all, the Melian Dialogue recounts an actual historical event, because of which it is usually mentioned as a case study or as part of case studies, rather than a thought experiment, in theories and ethics in international relations.[40] However, Thucydides rendition of the event, although it is the only one we have, is still a rendition rather than an accurate historical account, because he did not bear witness to it personally, and probably would not have had access to a first-hand account. Historians remain free to argue differently, but the point is not as important for the present purpose. What is more important is the nature of his rendition of the event. Namely, Thucydides' Melian and Athenian representatives speak not as though they were merely trying to get the better of their negotiating opponents, but rather as though they were discussing basic theoretical positions regarding the possibility of applying moral considerations to matters of international politics and war. It doesn't automatically read as a theoretical discussion because it is given in the form of a dialogue, but also because Thucydides did not have the conceptual apparatus which we have today when we discuss theoretical positions. The same can be said of many ancient authors. The genius of Thucydides in those passages is that he has the interlocutors speaking as though they were representing the extreme positions in what has in the 20th century become known as the realist-idealist debate. Their positions can be described as extreme because the Melians seem to be putting forth truly naïve idealist propositions of the kind that statesmen are not known for in the practice of international politics, and the demise of Melos seems to be ultimately the result of that naïveté.

The Athenians, on the other hand, are at the other extreme, because their position is not merely a realist position, but an extremely cynical amoral position, of the kind that is rarely, if ever, given voice in statements which politicians give publicly.[41] This also gives rise to the idea that the private nature of the conference is precisely what gives Thucydides the opportunity to present the two sides in such extremes – he is possibly well aware that their state-

[40] Cf. Mark AMSTUTZ, *International ethics: concepts, theories, and cases in global politics*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, [3]2008, 48-52.

[41] Although there are relevant commonalities with more or less all realists (which is why such an attribution is even possible), such as their emphasis on the central role of the state in international relations (statism), their description of international relations as an anarchical self-help system in which states can ultimately only rely on themselves for survival, not all relevant realist authors are as cynical and amoral about international relations as are the Athenians portrayed by Thucydides in the Melian dialogue. As it was mentioned in the introduction of this paper (see especially footnotes #2 and #3), while some authors completely exclude the possibility of the application of moral reasoning from international relations, other authors simply seek to define how it can actually function and what its limits are in the realm of international relations.

ments would have to have been different had the negotiations been conducted in public. Finally, because Thucydides presented the theoretical positions in such extreme versions, the Melian Dialogue seems to encompass the entire spectrum of possibilities regarding the application of moral considerations and values in international relations, from naïve to cynical, in such a way that the spectrum has not been broadened throughout the whole history of the realist-idealist debate. Historical negotiations generally do not have such broadness of perspective, but thought experiments do.

The main point is that the Melian Dialogue can be read as a thought experiment, and mirrors the purpose and logical structure of one. In terms of purpose, it may be possible to read it in various ways, but it certainly finds relevant echo in philosophy, ethics, political science and international relations. It contains an underlying pessimistic theory of human nature, which is best expressed in the Athenian line: »[…] we know it for sure of men, that under some permanent compulsion of nature wherever they can rule, they will.«[42] That underlying pessimistic theory of human nature is the basis of political realism in international relations as we derive it from Thucydides, and as is expressed explicitly in Morgenthau's principles of political realism, and elsewhere in the realist tradition.[43] It does not, however, necessarily obligate one to a strictly cynical and amoral approach, nor is that the case later on in the realist tradition, but it does make it one of the possible positions for a realist to take. Therefore, it can be said that the Melian Dialogue serves purposes such as helping the process of understanding highly abstract situations and theory discovery, but most of all that is serves to disprove a(n underlying) theoretical position which is voiced by the Melians.

In the crucial parts of the Dialogue, the Melians express their belief that help will come to them either from the gods or from the Spartans, or both. They believe that their stand against injustice will bring divine favor, and that the Spartans will help them out of kinship and a sense of honor. The underlying theoretical assumption behind their belief is that gods and humans act out of a sense of honor and/or kinship, because of their belief in a universal moral order in international politics[44] when it comes to matters of international politics and war. These beliefs, and their underlying theoretical assumption, are thoroughly countered by the Athenians, but because the Melians are not convinced by the

[42] H, 3, 105.

[43] Cf. Hans MORGENTHAU, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, 4-15; Damir MLADIĆ, Klasična realistička teorija međunarodnih odnosa i etika [*Classical realist theory of international relations and ethics*], *Obnovljeni život*, 66 (2011) 2, 173-186, 177-180.

[44] For a discussion of the idea of a universal moral order influencing behavior in international relations see: Petar POPOVIĆ, *Prijepori u teorijama međunarodnih odnosa* [*Controversies in international relations theories*], Zagreb, Politička kultura, 2012, 57-63.

arguments, they are utterly destroyed. They did not consider their destruction as a real possibility, yet it was one.

As regarding logical structure, the Melian Dialogue seems to function both as a necessity refuter, and as a possibility refuter. First, when the Athenians counter the Melians by saying that other powers would act as the Athenians do themselves, based on a »permanent compulsion of nature«, they are claiming that the Melians will not receive outside help based on anyone's sense of justice or kinship. The Melian's basic assumptions regarding what drives actions in international politics and war, as is demonstrated by their ultimate doom, is not necessary (*necessity refuter*), and there are other possibilities for action (*possibility refuter*). The Athenians go on to say that the Spartans are indeed virtuous people when it comes to their domestic affairs, but that in international affairs they equate »comfort with honor« and »expediency with justice.« When they say that »[…] such principles are hardly conducive to your rescue, which does now look an illogical proposition«, and that »[…] the pursuit of justice and honour involves danger, something which the Spartans are generally loath to face«,[45] they might as well be saying that the basic theoretical assumptions on which the Melians are basing their conclusions fail the test of plausibility.

Of course, Thucydides provides not only a refutation of a number of statements and assumptions, but provides alternative statements and assumptions given by the Athenians, some of which are questioned in other parts of the *History*. What is certain is that he does provide a discussion of theoretical positions and their refutation, making the Melian Dialogue read as a thought experiment. The Melians lack an understanding of Thucydides' pessimism regarding human nature, because of which they do not understand, from a realist's point of view, that actors do not follow the same rules in anarchical and hierarchical settings,[46] and believe that the Spartans will act towards their international kindred as they would act towards fellow citizens within their own community. That assumption is proven incorrect inasmuch as it is neither necessary nor is it the only possible assumption upon which to base action in the international arena. *A fortiori*, when read as a thought experiment, the Melian Dialogue seems to also serve as an intuition pump for realist assumptions about the behavior of states in international anarchy.

[45] H, 3, 105.

[46] Cf. Petar POPOVIĆ, *Kriza međunarodnog poretka 21. stoljeća* [*Crisis of the international order in the 21st century*], Zagreb, Disput – NZCG, 2014, 21-30.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it first needs to be said that the argument for reading the Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment can be seen as tenuous, because it relies on certain assumptions that cannot be clearly demonstrated as true. Namely, this kind of reading relies on the assumption that Thucydides' own opinion corresponds to the Athenian opinion voiced in the episode. This is not necessarily true, because it has been suggested that viewing the Melian Dialogue in the broader context of the *History* shows that there was nothing necessary (indispensable or inevitable) in the Athenian decision to destroy Melos. Other episodes in the *History*, such as that of Mytilene, allow us to view both episodes in terms of risk calculation rather than action driven by necessity, with the difference that Thucydides offers no such discussion with regards to Melos. In the Mytilenean episode he offers an account of the debate in the Athenian Assembly, where the realist argument takes the day, although with less bloody results, while in the Melian case he only recounts the negotiation and follows up with a short account of the destruction of Melos.[47]

On the other hand, Thucydides' underlying assumptions in much of the *History*, as was noted earlier in the paper, seem to line up with later realist perspectives. The point is that reading the Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment is not necessary, but it is both possible and instructive. It is instructive in at least two ways. First, it provides for a new reading of a well-known episode which adds to our understanding of international relations and the ways in which arguments for various theoretical positions can be approached and contextualized. Secondly, it allows us to see overlaps with examples which were explicitly written as thought experiments, and those which were not, with the Melian Dialogue obviously belonging to the second category. This also leads to a deeper appreciation of Thucydides, given that we usually tend to think of him as a chronicler and historian, but not quite as a political philosopher, because he did not make his theoretical positions as explicit as his famous philosophical contemporaries. Reading the Melian Dialogue as a thought experiment sheds light on its author's philosophical talents and inclinations, especially considering that theories and ethical approaches to international relations did not yet exist, nor was there in his time anything approaching the technical vocabulary with which scholars approach these matters in our time.

[47] Walzer, *Just and unjust wars…*, 5-13.

Stipe Buzar*

Meljski dijalog kao misaoni eksperiment

Sažetak

Tukididova verzija Meljskog dijaloga jedan je od najpoznatijih dijelova njegove *Povijesti Peloponeškog rata* i vjerojatno najpoznatija rasprava u teorijama međunarodnih odnosa do naših dana. Prepričana je, opisana, tumačena, analizirana i kritizirana u velikom broju djela o međunarodnim odnosima i etici. Cilj ovog rada je prikazati i protumačiti Meljski dijalog iz nove, dosad nedovoljno istražene perspektive, promatrajući ga kao misaoni eksperiment. Da bi se postigao ovaj cilj, rad prvo ima kratku raspravu o nekoliko tipova i funkcija misaonih eksperimenata u filozofiji i drugdje. Drugo, rad daje kratak prikaz Meljskog dijaloga. Treće, u radu se interpretira Meljski dijalog kao misaoni eksperiment, tvrdi da se ga je moguće čitati kao misaoni eksperiment i pokušava se odrediti kakav je misaoni eksperiment Tukidid proveo u smislu njegove funkcije i logičke strukture.

Ključne riječi: Meljski dijalog, misaoni eksperiment, moral, Peloponeški rat, pravednost, realizam, Tukidid.

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