

Essay on Thucydides

Due Oct 17

Circa 5 pages

As the semester goes on, your assignments for this course will become progressively less scripted. The idea is that as you do more papers, you are able to determine more fully the topic and format of your paper. At this point in the semester, you have all chosen topics for your research paper. As much as possible, I'd like you to write an essay on Thucydides that will serve to move you further along in your work toward that paper. It sounds as if that is what all of you are already planning to do. So, this set of prompts is to some extent moot, but I'll pass it along as a set of examples of possible essay topics.

1. One way of looking at the Peloponnesian War is as a battle between two educational visions. The Spartan, Archidamus, says that the side will win whose education is most severe. (28) Pericles, in the Funeral Oration, sings the praises of "a more relaxed life," by which he means not idleness but a variety of activities engaging both mind and body. And his plan for Athens, which paid at least as much attention to its aesthetic beauty as to its wealth and power, is in effect an educational policy in itself. Discuss this confrontation of educational approaches.
2. Speeches are prominent parts of Thucydides' history. In some speeches, appeal is made to moral principles (freedom, justice, piety, honor). In others, appeal is made directly to interest. What observations can you make about the ways these appeals function in the speeches? Is it always the case that the appeals to moral principle are high-minded while the appeals to interest are ruthless and cynical? What does Thucydides seem to be telling us about the respective roles of interest and morality in actual human behavior?
3. Thucydides famously speaks of "human nature" as being revealed during the Peloponnesian War. What is Thucydides' understanding of human nature? Do you agree with his vision of what we are fundamentally like? Be sure to examine closely a number of passages in which Thucydides speaks explicitly about human nature.
4. Discuss the (in)famous Melian dialogue. What lessons are to be discerned in it? Pay particular attention to the line of the Athenians that "when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that." (103)
5. Discuss the disastrous Athenian expedition to Sicily. What lessons are to be discerned in it?
6. Woodruff detects an irony in the close juxtaposition of Pericles' noble Funeral Oration and the story of Athens during the plague. Discuss.
7. There seems to be an interesting paradox in Pericles' speeches. On the one hand, he celebrates Athenian individualism and liberty, stating that Athenians allowed each other to live as they see fit in their private lives. On the other hand, he often emphasizes placing the city ahead of the individuals that make it up. Investigate issues of individualism and collectivism in Pericles' speeches.
8. In several speeches there is reference to what we might call "the logic of empire," that is, a (perceived) necessity to act in certain ways because one presides over a variety of other states. See especially Pericles' last speech, Cleon's speech about Mytilene, and Alcibiades' speech in favor of invading Sicily. Is there a real necessity imposed by possessing an empire or is it a purely psychological issue?