

Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Book V, 85-116 - The Melian Dialogue
Week 1 Summary, Gov 2710

The events of this passage occur in the sixteenth year of the war, roughly five years after the Peace of Nicias. Melos, a colony of Lacedaemon, refuses to join its fellow island states in submitting to Athens' rule and remains neutral in the Peloponnesian War. However, after Athens begins plundering its territory, Melos becomes hostile. In response, Athens sends a military expedition to Melos. Before attacking and destroying the island, the Athenian generals, Cleomedes and Tisias, send envoys to negotiate with the Melians. The Athenians urge the Melians to enter a dialogue concerning "safety of your state."

The Athenians begin the dialogue by laying out a (the?) classic realist justification for their imminent attack: "You know as well as we do that right is in question only between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." They refuse to offer pretenses of a moral justification for their imminent attack and urge the Melians to likewise refrain from a moral justification of self-defense. Rather, they urge the Melians to "aim at what is feasible" and come to an agreement with Athens based on relative power and the reality of an Athenian army at the gates.

The Melians counter by arguing that the two states share a common interest in retaining the privilege of invoking fairness and morality when in danger. Their justification is that Athens, should its empire fall, would find itself subject to the worst vengeance from its enemies. In that case, Athens - like Melos now - would surely want the privilege of invoking fairness and morality. The Athenians reply that they have indeed come to Melos to pursue a common interest: "the preservation of your country." They suggest that Athens' interest in Melos' submission coincides with the Melians' interest in self-preservation, since Melos would avoid terrible suffering and Athens would gain by avoiding a costly attack.

The Melians reject this view of "common interest" and offer to remain neutral - an offer immediately rejected by the Athenians on the grounds that a tin island state's ability to remain neutral in the face of Athenian power would signal Athens' imperial weakness to its other subjects. The Melians counter that this rejection will cause all neutral states to become hostile to Athens, thereby increasing the power of its enemies. Moreover, the Melians claim that failure to try all means of remaining independent would make them cowards. The Athenians reply is simple: there is nothing cowardly about self-preservation in the face of a greater power. The Melians answer that war would preserve the hope for freedom (since the outcome of war - even between two unequal armies - is never certain), while submission would immediately eliminate all hope. Athens' reply is that hope is the folly of the weak and deluded. Nevertheless, the Melians assert two reasons for their confidence: they are just men fighting against unjust aggression, and they hope for the assistance of Lacedaemon. The Athenians object to the label of unjust aggressors, claiming that they are merely exercising the law of nature that the powerful rule when and where they can, just as others have done before and will do long after the Athenian empire - and just as the Melians would do if they were in Athens' position. They also question Lacedaemon's willingness to risk danger merely to save a small, distant colony such as Melos. Nevertheless, the Melians continue to hope for Spartan assistance, citing their close proximity, common blood, and powerful allies. The Athenians conclude by once again pointing out that the Melians are disregarding the realities of the two states' relative power. They advise the Melians to set aside hope in fortune and Sparta's assistance, as well as their claims of moral rightness, in the name of honorable surrender and self-preservation. They urge the Melians not to "choose the worse" between war and security. Nevertheless, the Melians refuse to surrender, claiming that they cannot willingly give up 700 years of independence. They reiterate their offer of neutrality. The Athenians depart, after ridiculing the Melians one last time for trusting in hope and fortune rather than bowing to the immediate realities.

The passage ends with Athens laying siege the Melos. After several Melian victories, a reinforced Athenian army further presses the siege. With no Spartan assistance forthcoming, the Melians are forced to surrender. The Athenians kill all adult male prisoners, sell the women and children into

slavery, and resettle Melos with a party of 500 Athenian colonists.