

The Mitylenian Debate

A little background to the debate: Mitylene is a city in Lesbos. All Lesbos with the exception of Mythmna revolts from Athens after the invasion of the Peloponnesians. Mitylene then decides to attempt to unite the island under its rule. Athens, angry at this rebellion, sends a fleet to retake the island. Mitylene appeals to Lacedaemon (Sparta) for help, but the fleet Sparta sends is too slow in arriving. The city is blockaded by the Athenian fleet, and its provisions begin to fail. The Mitylenian leader decides to arm all the commoners in order to undertake a sortie against Athens, but instead the commons rebel against their leaders and force the city's surrender. The debate occurs among the Athenians over the issue of what to do with the population of the surrendered city. A resolution is voted on: the adult males of Mitylene will be killed and the women and children sold as slaves. The day after the passing of the resolution, however, there is some regret at its harshness and the matter is reopened for debate. The two primary debaters are Cleon and Dioditus.

Cleon argues that it is just to pass the resolution. The issue as he sees it is that the Mitylenians have committed a wrong against Athens, and vengeance for that wrong should be exacted as quickly as possible. Any attempt to persuade the citizens to abandon this position is mere rhetoric, which Cleon regards as suspect, preferring instead the tradition of the laws as a guide for political action. He maintains that the Mitylenians have injured Athens by their rebellion -- their offense was obviously deliberate, and in Cleon's opinion, mercy is only due those who do not intend their crimes. In addition, showing mercy to the Mitylenians is tantamount to weakening Athens' position in the eyes of their other subjects, and may undermine the empire. As good rulers, Cleon argues that it is Athens' responsibility to carry out justice and punish the offenders.

Dioditus counters that rhetoric is in fact not opposed to good politics. Instead, a wise city will allow argument to flourish in order to come to a decision through rational debate, rather than haste or passion. He frames the question rather differently than Cleon: what is at issue is not the Mitylenians' guilt, but whether or not Athens has a political interest in punishing them. He argues that it does not, for two reasons. First, the Mitylenians will be more useful alive and busy with commerce than if they were dead and not so economically fruitful: Athens will get more tribute money. Instead of sitting back and waiting for an insurrection to occur in order to punish it, Athens should keep a closer eye this time, not allowing Mitylene to attain the kind of position where rebellion would be possible. Second, Dioditus argues against Cleon, who supports killing both aristocracy and commons alike, by saying that it is inexpedient to kill the commoners. They had no hand in the revolt and killing them will only put the people on the side of future revolts, seeing how Athens treated them this time. The motion is put to a vote: Dioditus' motion carries and the city of Mitylene is narrowly saved from massacre.