

# Is War Natural to the Human Condition?

## Voegelinian and Platonic Reflections on Violence, Virtue and Wrongdoing

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The human costs of war are enormous: young people dying in the prime of their lives; countless more wounded, physically and mentally, sometimes for life; natural resources squandered; physical buildings decimated. It is only natural to ask the question: Why create such destruction? Why not instead sit down along the battle lines and play chess or a war board-game ♠ and then decide the outcome of the conflict based on the results? The theme of this panel being mystical and philosophical experiences and the defense of man's dignity through an affirmation of his relationship to the ground of being, we may ask what possible experiential grounding ♠ definable and defensible in philosophical terms ♠ that can be adduced for the organized use of violence between human beings.

Having said this, we know that most, if not all, human civilizations have prepared for and experienced wars. And while the losses have certainly been mourned, and protests have been manifold, the view that war is somehow against human nature, a deep-seated sin, seems to be rare. Admittedly, both Buddhist and traditional Japanese religion have strands that hold war to be against the nature of man, and pre-lapsarian man in Judeo-Christian tradition clearly did not make or contemplate war. But even most Asian cultures have in practice accepted war as a natural occurrence, sometimes to be regretted, and sometimes to be endorsed. And neither

mainstream Judaism nor mainstream Christianity has concluded that war can or should be banished from human society, in spite of the pacifist movements that have always existed at arm's length from the mainstream. In contrast, most societies have erected strict and widespread prohibitions against certain sexual practices, based on their being unnatural, and likewise against certain forms of food and drink and even certain kinds of professions.

The most basic reason for this being so seems to be the ubiquity of war ♦ the simple, albeit regrettable fact that war seems unavoidable, not least because some human beings by nature or by choice are bent on destruction or aggression and therefore must be countered or stopped. Important also is the valor associated with war ♦ the fact that it is a human activity in which courage and self-sacrifice, sometimes even moderation and justice, can be displayed.

The political philosopher at the center of this panel, Eric Voegelin (1901 ♦ 1985), was no stranger to war, as can be inferred from both his nationality and his life span. Indeed, much in his writings can be traced back to the encounter with horrific violence employed for ideological purposes.

Voegelin himself seems never to have questioned the ethics of using force to counteract force *per se*, and he rarely discusses the ethics and laws of war as a separate topic. Yet, I will in the following be using some valuable Voegelinian materials to ask what is problematic about war as a social phenomenon, yet how it is and must remain a defensible human activity under certain circumstances. From there, I will move to a Platonic text that further deepens the connection between ethics and war.

### The Categorization of War in Israel and Greece

In his intellectual history of Israel, *Israel and Revelation*, Voegelin describes how wars in Old Testament times were often conceived of as "Wars of Yahweh ♦, meaning armed struggles in which the god of the Israelites commanded the occurrence as well as the actual playing-out of the

struggle.<sup>1</sup> [1] Voegelin's analysis of the Deborah Song and the accompanying victory over the Caananite general Sisera described in Judges. chs. 4 and 5, summarizes nicely the factors that are common to most wars described as what we would today call "holy wars" in the Old Testament:

- ◆ humans are merely the instruments of Yahweh,
- ◆ humans should not pride themselves on their victory,
- ◆ and the loot is given over to Yahweh, which also means that gold and silver would go into his treasury and all living beings would be slaughtered in his honor (cf. Voegelin 1956: 208).

A rich debate exists today among both historians and theologians on whether the killings, indeed the slaughter, indicated by such stories (cf. also Joshua at Jericho) are to be taken literally (after all, several of the tribes seem to have lived on in the areas in question; it seems thus that the destruction may not have been literal, or at least not total), and whether there is a turning point in later Old Testament history where wars are viewed differently, and peace is more unequivocally held forth as the ideal.

Either way, Voegelin's acute analysis of so-called Holy War or War of Yahweh betrays a view of armed conflict as being ◆ interestingly ◆ both a passive and an active response to injustice, wrongdoing, or threats. It is passive in the sense that human beings do not wage war out of their own will ◆ war is primarily a passive reaction, with God helping the Chosen People to win their right. However, this is also a view of war that incites the whole people to take part (cf. the peasant armies of the period described in Judges), helped by their god, in order to assert their claims. War is an extreme exigency, not something the people should ponder and plan for,

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<sup>1</sup> [1] Maimonides, in the *Mishneh Torah*, enumerates as wars for God the wars against the Seven Nations (i.e., the occupiers of Canaan before the conquest), the war against the Amalekites (reported in Judges and 1 Samuel), and what he more broadly calls defensive wars (Voegelin 1956: 245).

but an event which calls the people to respond in times of extreme danger, often in an improvised fashion, guided and led by Yahweh.

Quite different is the organized sort of military system that resulted from the subsequent erection of the Israelite monarchy. Now, instead of improvised peasant armies, a professional army was created, and the bulk of people could leave war fighting to professional soldiers. Still, however, wars of Israel as described by Old Testament authors mainly (albeit not exclusively) can be subsumed under the rubric of Holy Wars or Wars of Yahweh, although organized and strategically planned in a way different to the experiences recounted by what we presume to be earlier authors.

Common to both forms of war (improvised and planned), ideally stated, is their status as *provoked*. We may infer that war for the Chosen People is natural, morally defensible, and indeed necessary only to the extent that the Chosen People is actually threatened. Voegelin finds that the armed battles surrounding the death of Uriah at the hands of King David, as they are re-told in 2 Samuel, in essence broke with this basic defensive stance. That war was no longer the Chosen People's defensive war under Yahweh, but warfare incumbent upon an empire's rational administration (ibid.: 264) ♦ optional war rather than defensive war. This leads us to a contrast between holy and political wars, where the latter carry a stronger danger of being fuelled by passion and lust, since they are guided by man ♦s will rather than God's.

When we turn to Greek thought and political experience, as analyzed by Voegelin in *The World of the Polis*, war is as central a phenomenon as in Israelite history, but not primarily in the form of holy wars. Instead, in 6<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> century Athenian writings, we see wars portrayed as actions either against an outside threat (such as the Persians) or against threats to one's power inside the Greek world (most notably the Peloponnesian War).

Whether war is to be avoided when possible in favor of harmony and friendship, for the basic reason that strife and war come into conflict with the balance needed for a happy life (Democritus), or whether war is the "father of all ♦ and the necessary "revealer ♦ of god and men, slave and free (Heraclitus) (Voegelin 1957a: 304-305), is viewed differently by both pre-Socratic and later thinkers ♦ yet, the naturalness and indeed centrality of war to the life of

human beings in society cannot be underestimated, as is clear from Plato's observations in works such as *Alcibiades I*, *The Republic*, and *The Laws*. It is scarcely possible to understand the tasks of statesmen and laws without an attention to the recurring phenomenon of war.

The question we are forced to ask, upon observing the centrality of war to both Athens and Jerusalem, is the following: If war is an unavoidable occurrence in the world as we know it, yet it leads potentially to the slaughter of thousands, the destruction of land, and lingering enmities, how can we conceptualize and regulate war so that it avoids tearing apart the morality of both the individual and the community? In the Israelite context, this question becomes even more acute for people living in an age far distant from the Biblical age of immediate orders from Yahweh ♦ the brutal actions seemingly commanded by Yahweh would be utterly immoral commands if made by a human being in a defensive war.

In order to answer this question, we must identify what is that danger associated with war which leads to moral and political destruction. One way of putting this would be to say that war creates fertile ground for the conceptualization of "Second Realities ♦, to use Voegelin's term (inspired by novelists Robert Musil and Heimito von Doderer), where basic facts about ♦ and relationships in ♦ this world are forgotten or distorted because of the enormity of the aim of the war. Alternatively, we can see war as an activity that too easily transforms its actors into perpetrators of obvious injustices because they can use the defense of "necessity ♦. Maybe the occurrence of war is natural to the human condition, but the implicit challenge posed to us by the classical tales of war (David and Uriah, Alcibiades, the battle of Melos, etc.) is whether and how war can be fought within a framework of piety and discipline.

Voegelin treats both of these possibilities ♦ the creation of "Second Realities ♦ and the dangers of invoking "necessity ♦ in the first two volumes of *Order and History*. The first is subsumed under the heading of metastatic faith: "the vision of a world that will change its nature without ceasing to be the world in which we live concretely ♦ (Voegelin 1956: 452). Voegelin challenges the view of the author of Isaiah 31:

With that knowledge [of God's plan, as communicated by Isaiah] is given the trust, not in the inscrutable will of God that must be accepted however bitter it tastes when it does not agree with the plans of man, but in the knowable will of God that conforms with the policies of Isaiah and the Chosen People. (ibid.: 451)

The prophetic vision of Isaiah gets expressed in a seeming passivity ♦ or we could even say pacifism ♦ that Voegelin compares to later phenomena of Gnosis: a flight from the constitution of the world when one is faced with real political challenges. There are of course many other aspects to the Biblical writings collected under the name of Isaiah that Voegelin treats as part of the Israelite conception of history, prophecy, and salvation. But for our purposes the important point is what Voegelin finds in Isaiah 31, and which he terms metastatic faith: faith in a change of the whole constitution of being. In the face of a need to employ armed force, this can represent a significant danger rather than merely expressing a hopeful faith in a peaceful world. And he sees it as different both from the humble (albeit bellicose) belief in the unknowable plan of Yahweh expressed in earlier Biblical texts, and from the political exigencies of imperial politics, which carry their own, but different dangers.

### Necessity and justice

The other danger, that of the invocation of "necessity♦, is treated in a morally intense passage of *The World of the Polis*, where Voegelin addresses a basic moral tension inherent in any position that accepts the use of warfare as a means to preserving and expanding power, namely, the question whether necessity trumps morality.

The issue is raised in conjunction with Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War.<sup>2</sup> [2]  
Thucydides is famous for his portrayal of the necessity of war ♦ not totally unlike the sense of

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<sup>2</sup> [2] When it comes to the Peloponnesian War we should remember, as Voegelin correctly points out, that the war was known to the Athenians as three struggles: the Archidamian War, the

necessity conveyed by the Biblical authors who understood certain wars to have been commanded by God, with human beings able to withstand neither the command nor the ensuing violence. In Thucydides, however, it is not the one God who commands war, but rather the forces of human nature, which somehow compel the more ambitious and the more powerful to expand their reign. Thucydides does not expect the more powerful, in this case the Athenians, to give up their profitable advances or act against their interest. And the weakness and inaction of the enemies of Athens to a certain extent make the expansion of Athens inevitable and politically defensible.

Yet, here a deep moral problem arises. In the words of Voegelin, the Athenian acts of war are understood to be causal effects, brought forth with necessity. But, insists Voegelin, we must remember that causality cannot count as "an argument in the issues of justice and morality." (Voegelin 1957a: 360). And he continues:

the "compulsion to commit injustices and atrocities is still a moral breakdown; and never is it more evident than when the compulsion of interest is erected into the law of action which justifies transgressions of morals and justice. (ibid.)

Voegelin sees here a real tension between forceful action that may even serve the common good, and the same action transgressing moral boundaries, blatantly and brutally. He notes the disagreement between Thucydides and Plato regarding King Archelaus of Macedonia, who for Thucydides is an efficient benefactor for his people, while for Plato in the *Gorgias* he appears as "the prototype of an unsavory politician who rises to power by murder and assorted crimes" (ibid.: 361). As Voegelin points out:

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Sicilian Expedition, and the Ionian War; the three events being conceived of as one war by Thucydides, and generally understood as such only later.

The trouble is that probably both portraits are equally correct; there are situations where the nature of the opposition requires brutal means for the achievement of political ends desirable in themselves. (ibid.)

The point is well-taken, yet worrisome. Do we not believe that General Eisenhower was a better military man than General Harris (who ordered the bombing of Dresden); that the French in Algeria or the Americans in Iraq would have succeeded better without the blatant use of torture; that the firebombing of Tokyo ♦ even if we are admittedly judging in hindsight ♦ was not decisive in winning the war but rather stands as a terrible moral blemish?

In short, how can decisiveness and vision be combined with restraint in the use of armed force? And how can we reach a practice of politics where immorality is not raised to the status of heroics? After all, some actions that are clearly and blatantly wrong *remain wrong* even when used as means to a glorious end. In Voegelin's words, we should beware of ending up with what he calls "the flatness of intentionalist ethics♦":

The means remain means to an end in the order of causality and do not rise to the dignity of morally justified action because the end is valuable; and if they are crimes they remain crimes in the order of morality. (ibid.)

I would like to suggest a transition here from the problem Voegelin encounters in his reading of Thucydides to the solution arguably suggested by Plato. In confronting the undesirable side-effects of talented, decisive, and power-oriented politics ♦ what Thucydides saw as the politics of necessity ♦ Plato suggests that the solution lies in a philosophical education aiming for a unity of the virtues: one where moderation, courage, justice, and wisdom are fostered together, and where the forceful pursuit of political ends by war is directed by virtuous human beings (cf.



Voegelin 1957b: 119). This is even relevant to the Biblical view of war, since the well-known faults of protagonists such as Saul and David (as are displayed in David's case in the story of Uriah and Bathseba) certainly can be traced back to a lack of virtue.

And this is what leads us to the story of Alcibiades.

## Alcibiades

Of all the characters we encounter in Thucydides, Plato, Xenophon, and other authors addressing the state of Athens in late 5<sup>th</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, no one, apart from Socrates, meant so much to ♦ and evoked such mixed feelings among ♦ the Athenian readership as the illustrious Alcibiades. While brilliant rhetorically, intellectually, and militarily, Alcibiades certainly lacked moderation, shown by his involvement in a series of hapless military and political adventures. He famously came close to ending his career with the Athenians interminably when he, amid great controversy, including a blasphemy charge, was relieved of duty before the spectacular Athenian defeat at Sicily. Rather than come to Athens to face serious charges, he switched sides to the Spartans and became, in the eyes of many, a traitor to Athens. However, his involvement in several intrigues (among them, we are led to believe, a sordid love affair) made him fall out of favor with the Spartans as well, and in 411 he again joined the Athenians and was quickly restored to prominence thanks to his military skills. He actually led the Athenian forces towards the end of the Peloponnesian War, which ended in defeat for the Athenians; the final defeat coming as a result of a fleet deployment that Alcibiades seems to have opposed. From what we know, Alcibiades was killed by Persian assassins in 404 ♦ his many intrigues causing him to have had many enemies, this man about whom Aristophanes in *The Frogs* famously said: "They long for him, they loathe him, they want to have him. ♦ 3 [3]

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3 [3] This overview of Alcibiades' life is based mainly on Denyer 2001, supplemented by Gribble 1999; the most frequently cited Greek source for the life of Alcibiades is Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (henceforth *The Peloponnesian War*), which, however, must be supplemented by Xenophon's *Historia Graeca*. Plutarch later wrote about Alcibiades in his *Bios paralleloi* (most often referred to as *Plutarch's Lives*), probably basing much of his narrative about the adult Alcibiades on Thucydides. There were also other Socratic authors, aside from Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, who wrote about Alcibiades, but they seem mostly (as was also the case with Plato) to have made philosophical and pedagogical points, rather than a

Among students of philosophy in our own time, Alcibiades is possibly more famous for his "drunken speech" towards the ending of Plato's dialogue *Symposium*, than for his military exploits and illustrious life. Important for our purposes, however, is the dialogue by Plato bearing his name, which "was held in the greatest esteem in the Platonic school of antiquity",<sup>4</sup> [4] indeed, the neo-Platonist Iamblichus held it to contain "the whole philosophy of Plato, as in a seed".<sup>5</sup> [5] This is most often referred to as the *Alcibiades I* dialogue, since there is also a second dialogue attributed to Plato named after Alcibiades: *Alcibiades II* or *Alcibiades Minor*. The latter's authenticity as a Platonic work has, however, often been questioned (as has, probably mistakenly, that of *Alcibiades I*).<sup>6</sup> [6]

Alcibiades was clearly one of the most talented of all Athenian politicians and generals, and Socrates seems at one time "if we are to believe Plato" to have regarded him as a potentially great student and even a "beloved". This is the relationship portrayed in *Alcibiades I* (henceforth simply called *Alcibiades*), where the young Alcibiades meets the mature Socrates, most probably at some point in the late 430s, around the start of the Peloponnesian War. However, and importantly, Socrates in this encounter stresses that he has never considered himself primarily a lover of the young Athenian's bodily beauty (which would fade anyway), but of his soul, making Socrates a much more stable and lasting lover than the rest of Alcibiades' admirers.

In the *Alcibiades* dialogue, as in several other Platonic dialogues, the centrality of war and peace as affairs of the city is displayed. Indeed, through much of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Athens had been involved in war. Yet, those who professed to know about political conduct, the Sophists, rarely discussed the

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historical account of Alcibiades' life. These works survive in fragments, if at all (see Gribble 1999: 214-215; see also Johnson 2003).

4 [4] Steven Forde, in Pangle 1987: 222.

5 [5] Ibid.

6 [6] Even if the *Alcibiades Minor* is to be taken as a Platonic work (as Bruell 2000 seems to do), it does not deal as directly with military matters as its twin dialogue "and in those passages where it does raise questions related to military conduct, it parallels *Alcibiades I* quite closely. We will therefore not treat it separately here, but leave such a treatment for a future study" which the dialogue admittedly merits, be it of Platonic origin or not.

grave questions associated with war in a serious way. The military leaders of Athens, as Socrates saw them, were also lacking in true philosophical reflection about what it means to educate soldiers, command troops, and confront an enemy; Alcibiades, Laches, and Nicias, all of whom appear in Plato's dialogues (and figure importantly in Thucydides' narrative), come across as cases in point. Having Socrates converse with Alcibiades about war and the virtues forces the reader to think through whether Athens could have been led into battle in a more prudent way; whether budding officers should be educated differently; and whether philosophy has a role to play in military affairs. As such, it functions as a sort of commentary on Thucydides' history of the war — possibly quite directly so, as we will come to see.<sup>7</sup> [7]

### Socrates' questioning: war and the soul

In *Alcibiades* we meet a young man who wishes to be a leader of Athens, possibly surpassing even the great Pericles — his mentor, guardian, and relative — in renown.<sup>8</sup> [8] This is at least Socrates' assumption about Alcibiades, and the latter never protests it. Socrates expresses in the very opening of the dialogue, which he himself initiates, admiration and indeed deep love for the young man. But he feels a need to question Alcibiades about how prepared he truly is for this great leadership task, thus expressing a certain skepticism about the fit between the youngster's ambitions and his actual talent and knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> [7] My argument is not premised on Plato having read or consciously commented on Thucydides — we have no proof that he did (although it is likely that he was familiar with Thucydides' narrative). My point is only that the general story of the Peloponnesian War as it was known by the Athenians of the early- to mid-300s, which was surely part of Plato's "cultural background" (or "horizon") when he wrote his dialogues — and of which Alcibiades' machinations and eventual downfall were such an important part — receives a useful commentary in the *Alcibiades* dialogue.

<sup>8</sup> [8] Scott 2000 (esp. 81-85), drawing on Paul Friedländer, shows the parallels between this and other Platonic dialogues in which Socrates endeavors to educate young and ambitious men destined (at least in their own eyes) for greatness, especially the *Lysis*, where Socrates is also engaged in turning around a "beloved" through conversation.

And so Socrates begins his probing questioning of Alcibiades.

The first major issue they need to attain clarity about is what subject matter Alcibiades needs to master, if he is actually to give the Athenians advice on how to run their city and be an advisor ♦ i.e., a politician ♦ to whom the people will listen and whom they will come to obey.<sup>9</sup> [9]

This is where war enters the picture. After having reached agreement on the premise that Alcibiades should address the city on something he knows, rather than something that would be better left to others, the protagonists suggest that the affair which sums up the core of what the city's leaders need to know and master is deliberation about war and peace. It is Alcibiades who, after lengthy, ironic prodding by Socrates, comes to this conclusion. As Denyer (2001: 109) points out, Alcibiades' reply in 107d ("When they are deliberating on war, Socrates, or on peace, or some other of the city's affairs ♦) is casual, and he seems to mention war and peace as two separate topics, not fully realizing the essential, dichotomous relationship between them. However, Socrates' immediate follow-up corrects this mistake:

*Socrates:* You mean, therefore, when they deliberate concerning whom they ought to make peace with, and whom war, and in what manner?

*Alcibiades:* Yes.<sup>10</sup> [10]

Why war and peace? A host of other answers could have been imagined; first and foremost, the management of public affairs and finances in the city. As Denyer (2001: 109) notes, however, Alcibiades' low estimate of affairs having to do with money has already been indicated in the dialogue (cf. 104c),

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9 [9] For a good overview of the opening of the dialogue and the kinds of problems encountered there, leading up to the discussion of Alcibiades' counseling the city, see Bruell 2000: 19-23.

10 [10] 107d (180) ♦ the page references in parentheses refer to Carnes Lord's translation, in Pangle 1987.

and it seems unlikely that the virile Alcibiades would point to financial and organizational affairs as the core of what he would have to know as the city's leading politician.

But what about other matters close to Socrates' heart, such as education of the young, the proper election of public officials, or indeed the place of philosophy in the city? The historical answer is obvious: The dialogue takes place during the early part of ♦ or right before the outbreak of ♦ the first part of the Peloponnesian War, and the city's leader would have to be seen to master the art of war. Philosophically speaking, we see a view outlined that appears more fully in the *Republic*, namely, that the education of soldiers is essential to the right ordering of the city; and we are also reminded of the *Timaios* and *Critias* dialogues, where a speech by Critias on the ideal city at war ♦ "the most severe test of a city's mettle ♦ (John M. Cooper, in Plato 1997: 1292) ♦ is promised (*Critias*, 108e), although *Critias*, as we know it today, breaks off before we actually get there.

In short, Plato often (without discussing the theme at length) places war-related activities at the center of the city's political life, yet he never displays a Spartan enthusiasm for military discipline as a goal in itself. 11 [11] Preparation for war seems to be an annex to the good and truly peaceful life.

So what is meant by Socrates' summation of the question? First, we are reminded of the need to give advice when the city deliberates about *whom to make war against* and *whom to remain (or become) at peace with* ♦ what much later in the tradition becomes the *ius ad bellum* question; and second, Socrates points out that the manner in which war is fought and peace is made must also be discussed ♦ this corresponds more closely to what we today know as *ius in bello* reasoning.<sup>12</sup> [12] These concerns are quickly related to the term "better ♦: with whom and at what time (and for how long) it is "better ♦ to fight war or make peace. The same is the case, Socrates points out, with wrestling

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11 [11] Cf. *Statesman*: 307e-308b, where we find a pointed criticism of too little as well as too much attention to war-like pursuits.

12 [12] Admittedly, the *in bello* question is primarily related by Socrates to the timing of battles and the length of time one is to fight, if we are to take Socrates' explication in 107e and 108a seriously. So although Socrates unequivocally uses the expression "in what manner ♦ twice, it seems he is thinking primarily of picking the right moment to use force, as well as not staying at it for too long. This is, however, not unrelated to what we would call *in bello* concerns, namely, engaging in war in a proportional fashion, using force only to the extent and for as long as it is appropriate.

and cithara playing: the one who is to give advice on these things must give advice on how to do it "better" (107d-108d). But "better" according to what or as related to what?

This question betrays much more than sophisticated pedantry. While Socrates points, seemingly obviously, to the art of gymnastics and the art of music as the "according-to-which" of wrestling and cithara playing respectively, we ought to remember that these pursuits could have been measured according to other norms. If wrestling were understood to be better or worse according to the art of killing others effectively, we would have been talking about an entirely different pursuit than the one Socrates is describing. Similarly albeit less dramatically we could imagine someone learning the mastery of instruments according to an idea of loudness and commotion, not unlike the way in which very young children approach musical instruments. In that case, the "better" would have been the "louder", not the more harmonious. Realizing that it is possible to err with regard to the standard according to which the "better" is to be judged is crucial for understanding the implications of the ensuing argument about war.

And so, in 108e, we finally get to the right term to use for the "better" in relation to waging war or keeping peace. Alcibiades' initial reply is disappointing: "Nothing occurs to me." Socrates calls his reply shameful, adding that if someone had asked him "What do you mean by better?" in relation to food a third parallel activity thus being introduced, in addition to wrestling and cithara playing he would of course have answered "healthier", which is once again not so obvious, since he surely could have answered "tastier"! Again Socrates indicates, at least to the thoughtful listener (or reader), that several possible answers are thinkable, but that one is surely superior if the pursuit in question (making war, wrestling, cithara playing, or eating) is to be done in a fashion serving life in the city well. This also leads us to postulate that there may be two reasons for Alcibiades' disappointing answer: either he truly does not know what to say, or he is thinking of an answer, but is unsure whether Socrates will accept it such as answering that "better" means "more destructive to one's enemy" (thus, answering according to a standard of efficiency or violence) or simply "stronger" (thus, answering according to a standard of virility and physical strength).

Thus we reach Socrates' suggestion, which effectively reminds us of what we later come to call the just war doctrine, namely, that war is essentially to be measured according to norms of *justice*.

Actually, it is Alcibiades who first mentions justice. Socrates says that a city begins to wage war after accusing the enemy of some affront. Now, one may be affronted in different ways, as Socrates points out, and Alcibiades replies that the city may suffer an affront either justly or unjustly. And so the question comes up: against whom should one wage war, those who behave justly or those who behave unjustly?

*Alc.:* What you are asking is a terrible thing; for even if someone had it in his mind that war ought to be waged against those practicing the just things, he would not admit to it, at least.<sup>13</sup> [13]

The reply is telling in many ways. Firstly, Alcibiades is preparing himself to concur with the suggestion that Socrates will probably make momentarily: that advice about war and peace must indeed be related to justice. But secondly, he says that one must at least *pretend* to wage war justly, that is, against the unjust. Socrates then goes on to saying that waging war against those who act justly would be unlawful, and the proud Alcibiades now more fully joins in and adds that it would be ignoble. Thus, while Alcibiades is initially more concerned with appearance, in contrast to Socrates who throughout his examples has been concerned with substance, they end up concluding together that war waged against the just is both unlawful and ignoble.

And so Socrates sums up the discussion so far, showing how war is necessarily linked to justice:

*Soc.:* Then that "better" in relation to waging or not waging war against those we ought or ought not and when we ought or ought not, which I was just asking about does it happen to be anything other than the more just?<sup>14</sup> [14]

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<sup>13</sup> [13] 109c (182).

<sup>14</sup> [14] Ibid. (183).

In other words, questions about waging war ♦ described by Alcibiades himself as the central concern of the statesman ♦ are essentially questions about *justice*. And so Alcibiades has to agree, albeit somewhat grudgingly, that it is about justice that he will have to be a specialist if he is to give sound advice on the city's most fateful decisions, those concerned with waging war and making peace.

The point of Socrates' further questioning of Alcibiades is to inquire into whether Alcibiades is actually able to teach others about justice ♦ that is, if Alcibiades knows justice well enough to teach and advise the city of Athens. The terrible suspicion entertained by Plato throughout the dialogue seems to be that not only Alcibiades, but several Athenian leaders, including Pericles, exhibited a lack of justice in the way that they conducted themselves in the war against Sparta and its allies.

Thus, this dialogue ♦ which more than any other Platonic dialogue, apart from the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws*, makes the education of political leaders its main topic ♦ is premised on a teaching that war and peace are central concerns for a political leader, yet, that they can only be tackled by the man who knows justice.

Immediately following this (admittedly preliminary) conclusion, Alcibiades suggests that the just and the noble (which he now equates) are sometimes bad or disadvantageous (114e-115a). But Socrates counters that just (and courageous and noble) acts of war that result in death ♦ which are Alcibiades' concern here ♦ are not bad in the same sense that they are courageous, noble, and just. It is merely certain *results* of such acts that are somehow disadvantageous. This does not make the acts in themselves less just, noble, or courageous.

It is important to note here that courage and justice are for all practical purposes grouped together (115b), suggesting that true courage consists in pursuing bravely that which is just (reminding us of the unity of the virtues outlined in Plato's main dialogue on courage, the *Laches*). Using the language of later moral philosophy, Socrates sees true courage as pursuing that which is right in spite of unwanted consequences, i.e., a deontological approach, whereas



Alcibiades fears that a consequentialist calculus will force him to reject courageous acts as good because they may result in death. On another level, Socrates strives to lead Alcibiades to the conclusion that it is the consequences for the soul, not for the body, that is at stake in this whole discussion, and that the successful statesman and king has a great soul, which no (inevitably decaying) body can conquer.

But going back to the problem of war, we see Socrates throughout the first half of the dialogue leading Alcibiades in the direction of concluding that the art of war and peace ♦ so central to the security and well-being of the city ♦ is crucially dependent on justice in particular and virtue in general. Now, this is not a trivial claim. As already mentioned, Socrates could easily have avoided introducing war and peace, and once having introduced that theme, he could have led Alcibiades down a narrower path; for instance, to the more technical aspects of strategy and tactics in war. Or, to follow up on Voegelin's observations about Thucydides, he could have portrayed war as within the realm of necessity: the endless and unavoidable pursuit of power by violent means, on which any successful society is based.

We should also note that the suggestions about war and justice have interesting parallels later in the dialogue. After the telling of a "royal tale♦, constructed by Socrates to demonstrate that the most formidable enemies of Alcibiades and Athens are probably much better equipped than he is in terms of knowledge and excellence, the question of what Alcibiades needs to know when he is to confront and advise the city is reintroduced, not once but twice! And bearing in mind that the initial suggestion about war and peace has never been rejected, we must assume that these new suggestions entail parallel or complementary concerns to that of war.

The first of the new suggestions holds that the good counsel of Alcibiades should be directed to the "better managing or preserving of the city♦.15 [15] This management and preservation will be realized through the presence of friendship and concord (*philia* and *homonoia*), since that will safeguard the city against falling apart or moving in entirely different directions on the most important things. Admittedly, Socrates points out several problems with this conclusion, especially the challenge posed by the need of the city for people with *different*

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15 [15] 126a (206).

strengths and kinds of knowledge (cf. the importance of a proper division of labor in the argument of the *Republic*). Thus, total concord neither can nor should be reached. But this leads us not to the abandonment of friendship and concord as ideals, but to a higher and final stage in the dialogue: Alcibiades is led by Socrates to the conclusion that the subject, in which the city's leader must be an expert, is nothing but the excellence of the soul. The whole citizenry must have "a share of virtue" 16 [16] and the leader must instruct them in this above all and (we are led to surmise) himself surpass them in these respects. This is more important than armaments, Socrates says, suddenly reminding us of where we started: with the fact that the leader of the city must be able to give advice with regard to war and peace:

"It is not, therefore, walls or warships or dockyards that the cities need, Alcibiades, if they are to be happy, nor numbers nor size without virtue." 17 [17]

Thus, if we should venture to draw a conclusion as to what Alcibiades must "take trouble with" 18 [18] and eventually learn if he is to be an effective leader that can advise the city wisely, he must be able to tell when it is just to go to war, and when it is just to maintain the peace, based on a kind of management of the city that preserves friendship and concord. This can be done properly only when the leader educates himself and the city in the most important affair of all human associations: the excellence of the soul, which can counteract the "necessity" of violence and the pursuit of power.

Such an education encompasses moderation and attention to knowledge and wisdom, in addition to that spiritedness which Alcibiades already seems to have in abundance reminding

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16 [16] 134c (219).

17 [17] 134b (218).

18 [18] The phrase is used repeatedly in the dialogue, see Scott 2000: 91-113.

us of the teaching of the *Republic* that justice exists in the city (and in the soul) that is excellent in terms of moderation, courage, and wisdom. Such a city will, we assume, only go to war when it is just, it will not do so out of fear of consequences or love of money, and it will be courageous in the face of death, knowing that the preservation of virtue stands above the purely physical results of war. Even if this is in no way a fully developed "just war" doctrine of the kind we find in later thinkers (and that we find somewhat more developed even in Plato himself, in the *Republic*<sup>19</sup> [19] ), it is most emphatically a teaching that holds that war cannot be considered apart from justice.

And this leads us back to Thucydides, and to the relationship between Thucydides' narrative and the *Alcibiades* dialogue of Plato.

#### Alcibiades and the Peace of Nicias

The choice of theme and wording in the *Alcibiades* dialogue — the question of what Alcibiades should know when he first addresses the city, and the suggestion that he must master questions of war and peace — is striking in light of book 5 of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.<sup>20</sup> [20] Therein, the (relatively) young Alcibiades appears for the first time as an advisor to the city on the theme of whom one should wage war against, whom one should make peace with, and the manner of doing so. The parallel can be considered more than coincidental, Alcibiades appearing in Thucydides' narrative much as he does in Plato's dialogue: as self-assured and ambitious, eager not to be passed over, and seemingly more concerned with his own standing than with the actual challenges of the city. In the case of the narrative in Thucydides, the concrete challenge is the wisdom of the peace treaty with Sparta, the so-called Peace of Nicias. Alcibiades cannot stand the fact that the peace has been negotiated without involving him, an

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<sup>19</sup> [19] See Reichberg et al. 2006: 24-28; see also Pangle and Ahrens Dorf 1999: ch. 2, and Syse 2002. For a general argument emphasizing the importance of ethics and justice to considerations of power and politics in Greek thought, see Lebow 2005.

<sup>20</sup> [20] The reference is especially to sections 43-61; in Thucydides 1998: 212-219.

excellent and still quite young man whose family has tended to important Spartan affairs in Athens for years.

Thanks in large part to the scheming and cunning of Alcibiades, Athens is gradually thrown back into war, with no one ♦ according to Thucydides' re-telling of the story ♦ *seriously* asking about the justice of the matter, although Alcibiades is very eager to make it seem that Athens has right on its side by slandering his Spartan opponents. It is indeed most conspicuous how Alcibiades, through his verbal gifts, manages to deceive both (or, if we include the Argives, all) sides into thinking that they are acting for the sake of their own city's just and prudent cause. It is as if we see Alcibiades arising from the conversation with Socrates, fully intent on linking war with claims of justice, but doing it in a way that is fuelled by his own ambition and interest, as well as his intense envy towards Nicias.

Placed alongside the Platonic *Alcibiades* dialogue, which in its second half concentrates on extolling the virtues of Athens' opponents, including Sparta, Thucydides' narrative provides us with the suggestion that for all practical purposes it was not just for the Athenians to reinitiate hostilities against Sparta after the peace treaty had been negotiated, at least not in the way it actually happened.

While our concern here is mainly with the opening part of Plato's *Alcibiades* dialogue, where war and peace are discussed, we need (as has just been indicated) to take a closer look at the complex section in the dialogue where Alcibiades is urged to compare himself to the noblest leaders of the Persians and Lacedaemonians (Spartans), by means of the "royal tale" ♦ told by Socrates. Interestingly, the dialogue at this point, without explicitly going much further into the debate about war and peace, seems to suggest that the good and wise ruler will be able to *avoid* war, since he should seek to command respect and inspire allegiance not only from his own citizens, but from the enemy as well (see 124a ff.).<sup>21</sup> [21] In other words, true justice will lead to the rule of true virtue and subsequent harmony

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21 [21] I am indebted to Steven Forde's discussion of the dialogue for this interesting observation; see Pangle 1987: 232. Forde's point is that the victory won by the better statesman in Socrates' royal tale is "voluntary and knowing" ♦ (ibid.) on the part of those submitting to that statesman ♦ it is based on admiration and recognition of greatness. Thus, Alcibiades is not told

(or at least just submission) between enemies, instead of interminable warfare. The virtues of enemy leaders may then ♦ we are led to surmise ♦ be transformed into virtues working in concert with the virtues of the perfect ruler. Indeed, a leader like Alcibiades, thus educated, will "get the better of them by no other thing than by taking trouble and by art ♦ (124b). Taking trouble, in this context, means education. And the art is not the technical mastery of the military profession, but the result of proper education in the virtues, as was also indicated above. That Plato in several other places in his corpus leaves us unsure about whether virtue can actually be taught certainly casts a shadow of doubt on this conclusion. Yet, we are led to believe that the truly just ruler, should he exist, will rule in a way that makes him fully respected among both Greeks and barbarians, which ought to make war at most an exception to the rule. And since the wars that nonetheless have to be fought will always be just, they will also be waged for the sake of achieving a just result, which we must presume is peaceful, and not as a means to perpetuating conflict.

Once again, holding this view up as a mirror to Alcibiades' behavior in book 5 of Thucydides' *History* helps us draw some interesting normative conclusions about the re-initiation of hostilities.

The dramatic date of Socrates' encounter with Alcibiades in the dialogue bearing the latter's name is well before the events of ca. 419-418 that led to renewed fighting between Athens and Sparta, culminating in the Sicilian Expedition (starting in 415) and the re-initiation of full-scale war (the Ionian War from 414). Alcibiades is in his late teens or around 20 when Socrates first engages him in conversation, thus putting the dramatic date of the dialogue at the start of the Peloponnesian War, a decade before the Peace of Nicias. Nonetheless, it is hard not to associate the dialogue with Alcibiades' dealings during the war itself, since it is set at a time when war (or the prospect of it) must have consumed the thoughts of all thoughtful Athenians, since the subject is brought up so early in the dialogue, and since Alcibiades did indeed become an advisor to the Athenians on that very issue in the period after the Peace of Nicias was concluded. Indeed, the main theme of Plato's dialogue being how ♦ and about what ♦ to address the city if one wants to be its advisor and leader, the link between the dialogue and the events associated with the Peace of Nicias and its disintegration are conspicuous. After all, although Alcibiades seems to have become famous for his familial links, his close ties to Pericles, and

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to defeat or come to peace with the kings of Sparta and Persia by means of warfare ♦ he should rather win them over because of that superior virtue which he currently lacks.

his military exploits well before that date, it is with his opposition to the Peace of Nicias that we first see him appearing before the city to give it advice on how to conduct its affairs. Indeed, this marks his first appearance overall in Thucydides' *History*. That Plato nonetheless chose to set his dramatic date for Socrates' crucial conversation with Alcibiades earlier, can be easily explained by the assumption that Plato's Socrates wanted to influence Alcibiades at a tender age, before it was too late ♦ before he was entirely corrupted by the admiration bestowed on him by the city. Furthermore, Plato wanted to show that while Socrates may have failed in this endeavor, he had no direct *teaching* association with Alcibiades when the latter was involved in fateful and, many would say, immoral affairs. If we want to understand Plato's view of Socrates' social intercourse with Alcibiades at this later stage in his life, we must primarily go to the *Symposium*. And to see how the failure of Socrates to influence Alcibiades played out in real life, we must go to Thucydides' *History*.

Let us add that this conclusion also leads us to a better understanding of an important point for Thucydides: the contrast between Pericles and Alcibiades.<sup>22</sup> [22] Alcibiades certainly follows in Pericles' footsteps in virtue of being his relative, his admirer, and in many ways his pupil, and he molds himself as a general in the proud tradition of Periclean rule. However, Pericles provided a steadfast model of leadership, where there was never any doubt as to his full devotion to the welfare of the city, and where his prestige and imperviousness to bribery and popularity meant that he ruled by virtue of being the city's foremost man. With Alcibiades we are left unsure whether personal ambition, fuelled by flattery, or an unwavering defense of Athenian security constitutes the motivating center of his actions, making for a real contrast between the two.

Admittedly, in the Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades*, even Pericles comes up short (maybe because his philosophic commitment to true justice can be questioned). But Plato and Thucydides stand together in portraying personal good and common good as two ultimately incompatible sources of motivation for

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22 [22] This is raised by Gregory Crane in *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Crane 1998), excerpted in Thucydides 1998: 501-522, see esp. 519, with reference to *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.65. The Periclean account of the (ideal) virtues of Athens is also brought to our attention in Pericles' Funeral Oration in bk. 2, esp. sects. 36-41. This certainly functions, in the context of the whole *History*, as an important contrast to Alcibiades. Thucydides' own (albeit nuanced and many-faceted) condemnation of Alcibiades is at its most explicit in 6.15, which deals with the lead-up to the Sicilian expedition. (I am grateful to one of the journal's referees for pointing out the relevance of Pericles to my treatment of Plato, Alcibiades, and Thucydides, and the importance of Crane's discussion.)

the statesman, thereby pitting Pericles and Alcibiades against each other. If warfare is fuelled by the quest for personal success, it will also be entered into in a way that endangers not only justice between the cities, but the internal justice of the city going to war as well. And according to Plato, we must hold up the possibility that this can indeed be avoided.

## Conclusion

Both the Biblical and Greek sources we have touched on seem to hold eternal peace to be an ideal not belonging to man's life in this world; yet both clearly see that war, even if natural, carries with it the potential of deep immorality and the destruction not only of lives, but of souls. My suggestion ♦ and conclusion ♦ is to view Plato's *Alcibiades* dialogue as a potential philosophical and psychological guide to how this tension ♦ the tension between necessity and morality, between brutality and justice ♦ can be approached, with the crucial events in book 5 in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* standing as a corollary and contrast.

Plato's dialogue about Alcibiades suggests that Alcibiades' chief failure is his unwillingness to make a serious attempt at judging war (and peace) in moral terms. We come to understand that warriors such as Alcibiades are not necessarily lacking in intellect or vigor, but in philosophical seriousness and reflection ♦ Alcibiades is unwilling to investigate his own soul, but is all the more eager to understand how he can reach his goals by manipulation. The latter may have made him a masterful tactician and at certain junctures an admired and successful general, but it also contributed to his own and eventually Athens' downfall. Indeed, when he does go before the Athenians to give them advice on war and peace, he creates conflict, perpetuates injustice, and starts on the path to his own destruction. With the military and political professions even today constituting spheres that are attractive to men and women of great ambition and spiritedness, and necessary to fight the all-too-real presence of evil in the world, there are surely lessons of true interest to us in these dramatic texts ♦ more than 2000 years after they were written.

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