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What makes an idea thinkable? The impact of Sophist philosophy on the politics of the Peloponnesian war

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What Makes an Idea Thinkable?

The Impact of Sophist Philosophy
on the Politics of the Peloponnesian War

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Peloponnesian War is a clash of two Greek superpowers competing for both military superiority and regional influence. Athens and Sparta have different political systems (democracy vs. oligarchy) and each *polis* has a specific political culture (participatory vs. hierarchical). But most importantly, Athens and Sparta differ significantly with respect to their foreign policies. Sparta employs then conventional arguments of power to justify her belligerent policies. In contrast, the reasoning of the Athenian reveals a new approach to foreign policy. Athenian politicians claim that in international relations, Might is Right and that moral considerations do not apply to conflicts of unequal powers. This line of reasoning and its rigid execution throughout the Peloponnesian War provoke resentment and resistance amongst other Greek city states, who claim that Athenian policies violate the long established traditions of Greek warfare. It is the aim of this essay to establish why these Athenian policies known as Political Realism developed in Fifth Century Athens[1] and which historical, cultural and political factors provided the ground for this development.

1.1 Scope

In the course of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians develop a foreign policy that establishes the supremacy of power over moral concerns. This approach to politics is called Political Realism. It is a policy backed by rhetoric, justified by relativism and buttressed by force. Our enquiry explores why and how Political Realism emerges in Fifth Century Athens. Firstly, we are interested in the intellectual, historical and cultural origins of this political philosophy and in the relationship between these factors. Secondly, we aim to understand Athenian Political Realism based on a comprehensive analysis of its intellectual foundations. We attempt to determine the relation between philosophy and

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[1]Throughout the rest of this essay we will refer to the Fifth Century BCE simply as the Fifth Century

political thinking on the one hand, and between political thinking and political action on the other. We will examine the extent to which the ideas that Athenian Political Realism is based on are rooted in contemporary Presocratic and Sophist philosophy, while also establishing how these ideas translate into political actions. Finally, we seek to describe Athenian political culture in order to determine the role it plays in the transformation of politics. Political culture is influenced by the structure and by the characteristics of the Athenian democratic system, as well as by the type of politicians the system produces. We argue that ideas alone cannot bring about a change in foreign policy. In order to have an impact on politics, ideas need to be related to political institutions, the decision-making processes and the political culture of a given state.

Our analysis will shed light on two intriguing questions. These are: *What makes an idea thinkable?* and *What makes an idea realisable?* While the first question is concerned with the intellectual history of Political Realism, the second question relates to the historical context which allows Political Realism to flourish. In chapters 1 and 2 we examine the first question, while in chapters 3 and 4 we look at the second question. In chapters 1 and 2 we aim to reveal the connections between different ideas on the one hand, and the links between ideas and politics on the other hand. We ask: how do new ideas surface? To what extent are new ideas linked to already existing ones? How and in which manner can ideas influence politics? Can philosophical concepts be applied to the political sphere and if so, how are they transformed in the process? Our working hypothesis is that Athenian Political Realism would not have been thinkable without Sophist Moral Relativism which in turn is closely related to Presocratic Philosophy. At the same time, we are aware that the intellectual origins of Political Realism do not explain the ability of Athens to *implement* her realist policies. In order to address this issue, chapters 3 and 4 deal with the historical factors that contribute to the development of Political Realism. We conjecture that both the Athenian political system and the type of politician it produces influence her foreign policies. Athenian domestic political culture determines her relations with other *poleis*. With this two-dimensional analysis, we attempt to give a credible explanation for Athens' pursuit of Realist Policies during the Peloponnesian War.

1.2   Contents

Nearly 2,500 years after its emergence in Fifth Century Athens, Political Realism still influences the foreign policies of many modern states. Indeed, contemporary political thinkers and politicians frequently refer to the Athenian historian Thucydides as the father of Political Realism. But while phrases and passages of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* are routinely quoted, the political philosophy of the text is often ignored as are the historical, cultural and intellectual circumstances. As a result, our knowledge of Athenian Political Realism is for the most part incomplete and inaccurate. In order to address this problem, we propose to study Athenian Political Realism as a comprehensive body of thought.

The Peloponnesian War is widely regarded as 'the product of its reporter'.[2] Although we agree with Finley that the *History of the Peloponnesian War* reflects Thucydides' *perspective*, we assert that it is more instructive to regard it primarily as a product of its historical context.

The second half of the Fifth Century has been described as 'the greatest age of Athens'.[3] Democratic reforms, social and political change and thriving intellectual activity create a climate in which established patterns of life and experience dissolve in favour of new ones. Traditional beliefs and values are questioned as new intellectual currents compete for recognition. This dynamic atmosphere coupled with freedom of speech attracts intellectuals from all over the Greek World to Athens. Amongst them is a group of teachers who educate young men in the art of rhetoric. The newly formed democratic structures create a need for a new kind of education. Athenian democracy requires citizens from all social backgrounds to hold office and to participate in the political life of the *polis*. In order to join the public debate in the Assembly, to propose policies, and to defend themselves in court if necessary, Athenian citizens require the rhetorical skills taught by the Sophists. Although rhetoric in itself is not a new discipline, for the first time it is instructed and employed as a political technique.

Despite the fact that most of the Sophists teach rhetoric, it would be wrong to consider

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[2]M.I. Finley, introduction to Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London, Penguin Books, 1972), p. 9

[3]G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.1

them as a homogenous group of thinkers. We subscribe to Guthrie's view that

to claim that philosophically they had nothing in common is to go too far. They shared the general philosophical outlook described... under the name of empiricism, and with this went a common scepticism about the possibility of certain knowledge, on the ground both of the inadequacy and fallibility of our faculties and of the absence of a stable reality to be known. All alike believed in the antithesis between nature and conventions. They might differ in their estimate of the relative value of each, but none of them would hold that human laws, customs and religious beliefs were unshakeable because rooted in an unchanging natural order.[4]

Within the framework of our analysis, we are mainly concerned with two aspects of Sophist thinking and teaching. On the level of philosophy, we are interested in Scepticism and in the Sophists' questioning of absolute knowledge. On the level of politics, we explore the implications of this philosophy on Sophist teaching as well as on the politics inspired by it. By analysing the link between Sophist Epistemological Scepticism, Moral Relativism and the art of rhetoric we seek to understand the ways in which Sophist ideas influence Athenian political life. Our main hypothesis is that by instructing Athenian citizens in the art of oration, the Sophists contribute to the transformation of Athenian political culture both in the domestic and in the international sphere. As Sinclair points out, the Sophists 'differed widely in their methods, doctrine and subject-matter, but their presence in Athens and their educational activity there demonstrated the connection between politics and culture, the profound influence of the education of the citizens on the nature and value of the State.'[5] The Sophists teach their students how to argue convincingly, regardless of their actual conviction. Applied to politics, this technique serves as an instrument of persuasion and manipulation: it allows politicians to win public support for any policy. As a result, instead of revolving around the content of different policies, political debates resemble rhetoric competitions. And since both domestic and foreign policies are determined by majority votes in the Athenian Assembly, all policy areas are subject to the influence of rhetoric. Through the instruction of rhetoric and

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[4]W.C.K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 47/8

[5]T.A. Sinclair, 'Socrates and His Opponents' in C.J. Classen (ed.), *Sophistik* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), p. 71

its application, the Sophists shape the characteristics of the democratic decision-making process, which in turn influences policy *contents* as well as the general *conception* of politics.

By shaping Athenian political culture, Sophist philosophy has a major impact both on the way the Athenian political system functions and on Athenian foreign policy. Our analysis will demonstrate that the impact of Athenian political culture on foreign policy is twofold. Firstly, in international conflicts, the Athenians use rhetoric to defend their actions. By imitating the patterns of the domestic political discourse Athens aims to convince her adversaries that her policies are advantageous for both sides. Secondly, the philosophical assumptions on which rhetoric is based facilitate the Athenian Might is Right approach to international relations. The Sophists' Epistemological Scepticism and their Moral Relativism provide the intellectual framework for Political Realism in Athens.

Our enquiry approaches Athenian Political Realism from four distinct but related perspectives. Chapter 1 examines the relationship between Presocratic and Sophist ideas. We analyse the extent to which Sophist Moral Relativism can be regarded as a response to Presocratic thinking. Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we will trace the links between Presocratic and Sophist ontology. We ask how we can account for the Sophist rejection of the Presocratic conceptions of Being and what the philosophical consequences of this refutation are. We then consider Sophist epistemology and its relationship to Presocratic ontology. Finally, since ontology and epistemology together provide the basis for Sophist Relativism and Subjectivism, we examine their interplay. It is our hope that investigating the philosophical background of Sophist Moral Relativism will help us understand why and how it emerged.

Chapter 2 deals with the impact of Sophist philosophy on Athenian foreign policy during the Peloponnesian War. We will study the extent to which Sophist Subjectivism and Moral Relativism influence Athenian foreign policy by comparing philosophical fragments with the political speeches recorded in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War.* We seek to know if there is any evidence that the Athenians apply Sophist ideas to the political sphere, and if this is the case, how can we explain it?

While the first two chapters are concerned with the relationship between ideas both on the philosophical and on the political level, the third and the fourth chapters seek a

broader perspective. This is reflected in the type of sources we consult as well as in our overall approach. In chapters one and two we focus on primary sources (i.e. Presocratic and Sophist fragments and extracts from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*). Once we have established the relationship between Sophist philosophy and Presocratic thinking, as well as the connections between Sophist ideas and Athenian foreign policy, we refer to the historical context to substantiate our assertions. Chapter 3 thus analyses the historical, cultural and political context of Athenian Political Realism and addresses our central question *What makes a thought thinkable?* We will examine the way in which Athenian politicians instrumentalise Sophist ideas and seek to explain why the historical circumstances allow them to do so.

Finally, chapter 4 will scrutinise the impact the Athenian political system, its political culture and her politicians have on both the conduct and content of foreign policy. We conjecture that there is a link between the functioning principles of Athenian democracy and the type of foreign policy pursued by Athens. The democratic institutions established by the reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles produce a particular way of conducting politics which requires a particular type of politician. Both have a considerable impact on the domestic as well as on the international politics of Athens.

1.3   Method and sources

As highlighted above, the analyses in chapters 1 and 2 are based entirely on primary sources. It is our view that any further analysis must proceed methodologically from this starting point. We have to make sense of the primary material first, in order to broaden our perspective and to contextualise it. Additionally, for those of us not versed in Ancient Greek it becomes essential to consult and compare different translations of the original sources. By doing so we may gain a thorough understanding of the original fragments, while simultaneously increasing our awareness of the multidimensionality of their meaning. In our study of Presocratic philosophy, we have relied mainly on Waterfield's[6]

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[6]R. Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000)

translation of presocratic fragments, while also consulting the translations of McKirahan[7] as well as Kirk and Raven's[8] translations. When studying Sophist philosophy, our main sources are Freeman's translation of Diels' *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*[9] and Gagarin and Woodruff's *Early Greek Political Thought*[10]. We have also studied the Platonic dialogues in which some of the Sophists are portrayed, including the opening dialogue of the *Republic*. As to how the fragments are numbered, we have decided to use each author's own system.

Like all scholars of ancient Greek philosophy, we find ourselves in the difficult position of trying to reconstruct an entire philosophical tradition from what can be described as very meagre and often inconclusive evidence. In the case of the Sophists, this challenge is exacerbated by the fact that Plato, our main contemporary source, is highly sceptical of the Sophists and therefore likely to misrepresent Sophist ideas. These inauspicious circumstances serve to challenge the analytical skills and creative thinking of any scholar of Sophist philosophy. Given the fragmentary nature of Presocratic and Sophist writings, every scholar will understand the extant sources in his/her own way. Though we are aware of the views of others, we have primarily focused on our own interpretations, supporting them with as much evidence and explanations as necessary. Rather than indicating a disregard for established ideas, our approach is born out of necessity since two important relationships have been noticeably overlooked by scholars in the field. These are: the relation between Presocratic philosophy and Sophist thinking and the connection between Sophist philosophy and Athenian Political Realism.

As for our analysis of Athenian foreign policy during the Peloponnesian War, our primary source is Thucydides' narrative of the events. In the *History of the Peloponnesian War* Thucydides describes the events of the war as well as the policies of the states that participate in it. His aim is to produce an objective account of the historical developments, distilled from various subjective perspectives: 'And with regard to my factual reporting of

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[7]R.D. McKirahan, *Philosophy before Socrates* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1994)

[8]G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966)

[9]K. Freeman, *Ancilla to The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1948)

[10]M. Gagarin and P. Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997)

the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible.'[11] Despite his efforts to establish the facts, Thucydides recognises that his historical enquiry is influenced as much by his own subjectivity as that of other witnesses. This is particularly evident in the case of the political speeches Thucydides recounts to explain the sequence of events: 'in this history I have made use of set speeches... I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.'[12] Although Thucydides' account may not always be fully accurate or objective, it is the only source that can provide an insight into the politics of the Peloponnesian War. We have therefore decided to treat his representation of Athenian politics both as possible evidence of the actual events and as a reflection of what kind of policies would have been thinkable in the second half of the Fifth Century.

While chapters 2 and 3 are based on primary sources, the third and fourth chapter make reference to secondary sources in order to broaden our spectrum of analysis. This contextualisation will hopefully shed light on the connections between circumstances and politics and demonstrate that Athenian foreign policy cannot be divorced from its context.

The rationale behind dividing our discussion into two methodologically distinct parts is the following: in the first two chapters we build our main thesis based on our analysis of the primary sources. Once we have explored the intellectual framework of Political Realism, chapters 4 and 5 focus on the factors that support this framework. This twofold approach will allow us to explain why Political Realism was *thinkable* and *realisable* in Fifth Century Athens.

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[11]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 1, section 22, lines 9-14 (hereafter cited as 1.22.9-14)

[12]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.1-8

Chapter 2

The relationship between Presocratic thought and Sophist Moral Relativism

2.1 Background

In order to understand Sophist thought properly, we ought to study it in the context of Fifth and Sixth Century philosophy. The relationship between Presocratic and Sophist ideas has conventionally been described in rather general terms. Most classical scholars have emphasised the differences in approach, focus and subject matter of the two philosophical currents. However, the extent to which one way of thinking developed out of the other has not been examined thoroughly yet.

The Presocratics are preoccupied with the scientific contemplation of nature. Their aim is to determine the nature of reality and its relationship to sensible phenomena. This quest for stability and an underlying unity in a universe which consists of a superficially mutable and unstable plurality fails on two accounts. First, their individual interpretations of natural phenomena are mutually exclusive. Second, their idea of truth does not stand up to closer scrutiny. As Burnet puts it

Science had done all it could to make the world intelligible, and the result was a view of reality in flat contradiction to the evidence of the senses. Apparently it was not this world science explained but another one altogether. What then, are we to say about this world?... After all, that world is a product of human thinking, and how can we tell that thought is not as misleading

as sense is said to be?[13]

As a consequence of this dilemma, in the second half of the Fifth Century, common sense revolts against the remoteness and the incomprehensibility of the world as the physicists present it and philosophers begin to direct their thoughts towards human life.[14] The Sophists can be credited for shifting the focus of philosophy from nature to men and society. Their methods are empirical instead of deductive and aim to generate subjective knowledge for practical and political purposes rather than pursuing knowledge for its own sake. The Sophistic debate deals with all aspects of human activity; it is a sustained attempt to establish a rational structure or framework within which questions can be answered.[15]

This chapter explores to what extent specific Sophist ideas are rooted in Presocratic philosophy. Guthrie has characterised the fundamental connection between the two strands of thought accurately:

In spite of the shift of interest from natural phenomena to human affairs, there are nevertheless existential connexions between the Presocratic tradition and the new intellectual ferment generated by the Sophists... The Presocratics [are] preoccupied with the nature of reality and its relation to sensible phenomena. This question of the relation between reality and appearance remains at the root of things, and in one form or another constitutes the fundamental difference between rival philosophies [i.e. Sophist philosophy vs. Socratic/Platonic philosophy]. On the one hand we have a complex of ideas whose basis may be loosely summed up in such terms as empiricism, positivism, phenomenalism, individualism, relativism and humanism. Appearances are constantly shifting, from one moment to the next and between one individual and another, and they themselves constitute the only reality. In morals this leads to "situational ethics", an emphasis on the immediately practical and a distrust of general and permanent rules and principles...[16]

Ultimately, our aim is to establish a link between Sophist philosophy and Athenian Po-

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[13]J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato* (London, Macmillan, 1932), p. 105

[14]W.C.K. Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers from Thales to Aristotle* (London, Methuen and Co Ltd., 1967), p. 63

[15]G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 174

[16]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 4

litical Realism. We will therefore focus on those aspects of Sophist thinking that are intimately related to Political Realism. Our central aim is to understand to what extent the Moral Relativism of the Sophists (i.e. what Guthrie calls 'situational ethics') is rooted in Presocratic philosophy.

There are three guiding questions that will help us determine this relationship: 1. To what extent and in which ways have the Sophists built on Presocratic thought? 2. Which Sophist ideas would have been inconceivable without Presocratic ideas? 3. In which respects does Sophist philosophy vary from Presocratic philosophy? We will analyse the connections between specific ideas to identify various areas of continuity and of progress of thinking.

Sophist Moral Relativism rests on four pillars. The first and most fundamental pillar represents ontological reflections: What is there? This is closely related to the second pillar concerned primarily with epistemology: what can we know about it? Relativism is embodied in the third pillar: if there is no secure knowledge, nothing is either true or false. The last pillar establishes man as the measure of all things: without universal truths, there is but individual perspectives. Erecting the first pillar is a necessary precondition for constructing the second and so on. Each pillar constitutes an indispensable axiom of the theory of Moral Relativism. Our task is to examine each individual pillar and its relationship to Presocratic ideas. We will demonstrate that Presocratic thought has an important impact on the more elementary first two pillars. However, with the increasing complexity of Sophist thought as embodied in the third and fourth pillars, Presocratic influence fades. In other words, Presocratic philosophy is crucial for Sophist ontology and epistemology. Although it requires both ontology and epistemology as a basis, Moral Relativism in itself is influenced only indirectly by Presocratic ideas.

2.2   Being - What is there?

Though he is certainly not the only Sophist to reflect on and write about Being, Gorgias' treatise *On Not Being* is indisputably the most comprehensive and most influential extant source of Sophist ontology. Scholars still debate whether Gorgias meant the treatise to be serious or ironic. In any case, his original refutation of fundamental ontological questions

expresses his scepticism towards all knowledge. As de Romilly notes, 'this possibly playful exercise in polemics is thus in line with more serious philosophical critiques, and ... in that it sweeps aside everything that seemed secure or even thinkable, it opens the door to scepticism in all forms.'[17] The playfulness of Gorgias' argument does not obscure the serious content thereof. We agree with Guthrie who suggests that one should look behind appearances and appreciate the philosophical depth of the treatise: 'It is a parody with serious intent, showing that the opponent's own arguments could be used to prove the opposite of their conclusions.'[18] What is interesting for our discussion is that *On Not Being* provides evidence of the extent to which the Sophists borrow from and respond to Presocratic ideas, and thus illustrates the close relationship between Presocratic and Sophist philosophy. In Gorgias' treatise we detect the roots of Sophist Radical Scepticism, which is essentially a reaction to the extreme Rationalism of the Eleatics.[19] Gorgias displays the absurdity of Eleatic logic by inverting it and thus proving what Parmenides, the central Eleatic philosopher, denies; that it is and it is not both exist. By disproving Parmenides, Gorgias dismantles the underlying assumptions of all natural philosophers: that behind the apparent changing and unstable natural world, there is a substance, a non-sensible reality.

Gorgias develops four arguments about Being that are inherently connected to Presocratic ideas. His reasoning reflects not only his familiarity with post-Parmenidan Presocratic thought, but is based on Parmenides' ideas. The purpose of Gorgias' ontological discussion is to exhibit the inaccuracies of Eleatic philosophy. He disproves Parmenides' assumptions using mostly his own philosophical concepts (and to a lesser extent the concepts of Zeno and of Melissus). Gorgias thus reveals the fundamental difference between essential and accidental Being; he opposes Parmenides' self-existent or absolutely existent Being with his own conditional or relative Being.[20]

Gorgias' first claim is that whatever there is, it is not possible for it to either be or not be. Being and Not-Being are the same. As a consequence, 'things no more are than are

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[17]J. de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 97

[18]W.K.C. Guthrie, 'The First Humanists', *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, Vol. 65 (1968), p. 22

[19]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 8

[20]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 193

not.'[21] With this assumption, Gorgias follows in Parmenides' philosophical footsteps while simultaneously disproving his central tenet. According to Parmenides, there are only two conceivable ways of thinking about the world: 'There is the way "that it is and that it cannot not be": This is the path of Trust, for Truth attends it. Then there is the way "that it is not and that it must not be": This, as I show you, is an altogether misguided route. For you may not know what-is-not - there is no end to it - Nor may you tell of it.'[22] For Parmenides, Being and Not-Being are distinct: 'That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be, but not possible for nothing to be.'[23] If we can think of something coherently, it can exist. It is not possible for Nothing to exist, since what is not cannot be thought of. If something does not exist we cannot know it or express it in words, there is nothing to be known or to be expressed; nothing is true of the nonexistent. Gorgias deconstructs the mutual exclusivity of Parmenides' Being and Not-Being by demonstrating that it is in fact possible to think of Not-Being. As a logical consequence, Not-Being, just as Being, must exist. This circular argument leads Gorgias to conclude what Parmenides disputes: things can be or not be, be something or be nothing.

Gorgias' second argument revolves around the coming into being of things. His reasoning is firmly based on the ideas of both Melissus and Zeno and makes reference to Parmenidan philosophy. Gorgias' initial assertion is that 'if there is anything, it is either unborn or born.'[24] He proceeds to demonstrate that neither of these claims is true. In order to prove that it is impossible for it to be unborn, he starts from Melissus' assertion that to be unborn, it needs to be unlimited. Melissus says 'But as it always exists, so too it must always be unlimited in magnitude.'[25] Gorgias shows that it cannot be unlimited because this would mean that it is anywhere. And it cannot be anywhere since what is unlimited is indivisible; it cannot be in different places at the same time (i.e. in itself and in something else). In order to substantiate this point further, Gorgias borrows from the argument Zeno makes about space. Zeno holds that the idea of a local place is absurd;

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[21]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought* fr. 18a, p. 207

[22]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F3, p. 58

[23]McKirahan, *Philosophy before Socrates* fr. 11.6, p. 153

[24]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought,* fr. 18a, p. 207

[25]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F3, p. 84

since everything is in something else. Every place is in another place which is in another place still and so on ad infinitum. Hence whatever is cannot be anywhere, and must therefore be nowhere. But if it is nowhere, concludes Gorgias, it cannot be unborn but must be nothing.

Having proven that Being is not unborn; Gorgias argues that it cannot be born either. His argument reiterates Parmenides' belief that the birth of Being from either Being or Not-Being is inconceivable. In Parmenides' view, Being cannot come into being from Not-Being because the latter does not exist. Furthermore, since Not-Being has no properties, nothing can develop from it. Likewise, Being cannot develop from Being because Being is singular, uniform and thus unchangeable; there is no other Being that Being could be created from. Melissus reinforces the Parmenidan line of argument: 'Whatever was, always was and always will be. For if it came to be, it is necessary that before it came to be it was nothing. Now if it was nothing, in no way could anything come to be out of nothing.'[26] Although Gorgias ultimately reaches the same conclusions as Parmenides and Melissus, his reasoning is slightly different: in his view, nothing can be born from either Being or Not-Being because neither of these can be changed. He agrees with Parmenides and Melissus that nothing can be born from Not-Being if Not-Being is not anything. However, unlike the Presocratics, Gorgias allows for the possibility that Not-Being is something. Ultimately, this has no effect on his overall argument because even if Not-Being were Being, nothing could be born from it for the same reason that nothing can be born from Being. Gorgias therefore concludes 'So if there is anything, it is necessarily either unborn or born, and since both of these are impossible, it follows in fact that it is impossible for there to be anything.'[27]

Instead of adopting Parmenides' notion of Being, Gorgias reveals that his thinking lacks consequentiality. Parmenidan philosophy, despite the distinctness of its approach, betrays the influence of Presocratic Monism. The idea that Being is one and unchanging is reminiscent of the single principle of the Monists. In fact, it can be argued that Parmenides' concept of Being merely replaces the ruling principle or prime matter of earlier thinkers. This would explain Parmenides' insistence on the singularity of Being.

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[26] McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, fr. 15.1, p. 292

[27] Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18a, p. 207

Within the Presocratic frame of thinking, the dualism of Being (i.e. Being and Not-Being) is inconceivable.

Gorgias' third and final claim is that 'if there is anything, it is one or more [in number].'[28] He argues 'that there could not be a one, since what is truly one is incorporeal in so far as it has no magnitude.'[29] As we have just discussed, the idea that the world is made of one substance or one principle is characteristic of Presocratic thought. However, Gorgias' assertion that in order to be one Being has to be incorporeal seems reminiscent of the Pythagorean concept of numbers. According to the Pythagoreans, numbers (which are incorporeal) are analogues of things and constitute the whole universe: 'Since, then, the whole natural world seemed basically to be an analogue for numbers, and numbers seemed to be the primary facet of the natural world, they [the Pythagoreans] concluded that the elements of numbers are the elements of all things, and that the whole universe is harmony and number.'[30] Against the backdrop of Pythagorean thought, it is not entirely implausible that Gorgias' may be arguing along the following lines: presocratic Monism only makes sense if it refers to numerical singularity. But if Being is analogue to the number one, it is incorporeal. And since this would imply that Being has no magnitude, Being cannot be one. Solmsen shows that Gorgias' rejection of the oneness and of the multitude of Being can also be explained without reference to the Pythagoreans: 'Being might be either one or many. But if it is one, it would have to subsist as a body, a quantity, or something else that is divisible and thus would no longer be one; and if many, we must regard the many as a sum of ones, but as the one has been disproved, the many cannot exist either.'[31]

Gorgias thus rejects Parmenides' notion of the oneness of Being: 'And so it should either entirely be, or not be at all.'[32] Implicitly, Gorgias' conclusion that 'if there is not a one, there could not be a many and if there is neither a one nor a many, there is nothing.'[33] incorporates Parmenides' claim that if Being is not one, it cannot be anything. Finally,

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[28]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18a, p. 207

[29]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18a, p. 207

[30]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, T25, p. 102

[31]F. Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 12

[32]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F8, p. 59

[33]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18a, p. 208

we can understand Gorgias' argument as contradicting not only the ontological but also the epistemological singularity. Rejecting Monism essentially means rejecting a singular truth. Whether this truth is embodied in a single principle or in a singular existence (i.e. Being) Gorgias discards both approaches.

Gorgias concludes his ontological investigation with explaining why Being is unchangeable. In his view, Being cannot change because this implies that something that did not exist previously comes into existence, while something that used to be ceases to exist. Being is treated as a property of things rather than as a condition. Gorgias' reasoning reinforces merely what Parmenides wrote earlier: 'It stays in the same state and in the same place, lying by itself, And so stays firmly as it is.'[34] With his treatise *On Not Being*, Gorgias completes Parmenides' half-hearted departure from pre-Parmenidan Presocratic thought. Gorgias challenges the Eleatic assertion of a single changeless Being grasped by an infallible reason. This has wide-ranging consequences for Sophist philosophy. If Being and Not-Being are identical and nothing is, there is no permanent truth to be known and all that is left are various opinions.

The various connections between Parmenides' and Gorgias' conceptions of Being reveal the extent to which Presocratic thinking influences Sophist ontology. The Sophists are familiar with Presocratic ideas and use them as a basis on which to build their own concepts. Despite the fact that some of their ideas overlap, the Sophists ultimately reject Presocratic thought using it as a stepping stone for their own philosophy.

Generally speaking, it is rather difficult to reconstruct the exchange of ideas between the Sophists and the Presocratics in the Fifth Century. Very few Sophist fragments contain cross-references to Presocratic thought as obvious as those in Gorgias' *On Not Being*. That is why his treatise is crucial to understanding the Presocratic influence on Sophist ontology. The comprehensiveness of *On Not Being* allows for a more thorough enquiry than any other Sophist fragment. Though other Sophists also deal with ontology, the evidence is too scarce to draw wide-ranging conclusions. Bearing this in mind, we conclude from our analysis of Gorgias' treatise *On Not Being* that Sophist ontology develops from Presocratic conceptions of Being.

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[34]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F8, p. 60

2.3   Knowledge - What can we know about it?

Epistemology and ontology are inherently related. Essentially, knowledge is about *What-Is* and *What-Is-Not*. All other knowledge is derivative. Parmenides' basic tenet *what can be spoken and thought of can possibly be* illustrates this relationship perfectly. Being cannot be separated from the knowledge of Being and vice versa. This is the starting point of Sophist Epistemology. Protagoras espouses Parmenides' claim in asserting that 'It is not possible to think what is not.'[35] This reiteration of Parmenidan philosophy reflects the predominance of his thought in the early Fifth Century. While the Sophists ignore most of the early Presocratics, they make a point of either supporting or refuting Parmenides' philosophy. Parmenidan thought serves as a common starting point for different Sophist epistemologies. This proves our initial claim: whether Presocratic ideas are rejected or embraced, they are incorporated into Sophist philosophy.

In *On Not Being*, Gorgias contradicts Parmenides' statement, claiming that it is possible to think of things that do not exist, for example chariots racing in the sea. Although at first sight this appears to be a refutation of Parmenides, it merely shows that Gorgias and Parmenides work on different assumptions. For Parmenides, thinking and Being are co-extensive. He states: 'Thinking and the thought that it is are the same. For not without what is, in which it is expressed, will you find thinking; for nothing else either is or will be except that which is.'[36] We can only think of a thing as it is. Being is not existential (we can think of things that do not exist) but predicative (we can know something and think of something only if it has some attribute) and veridical (we can only ever know something that is the case). According to this understanding of thinking, it is impossible for us to think of or to know an entity without attributes. In fact, Waterfield points out that the Greek word Parmenides uses for 'thinking' carries connotations of 'recognition', which implies that what we think of is something out there to be recognised, not a fanciful object such as a unicorn or chariots in the sea.[37] Parmenides' notion of Being makes thinking about something that does not exist impossible. Gorgias, however, who aims to dispose of the concept of Being altogether, purposefully challenges both Parmenides'

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[35]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18, p. 186

[36]McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, fr. 11.8, p. 154

[37]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, p. 50

epistemology and its underlying ontology.

In Gorgias' view, rational thinking and sensual perception are equally fallible: 'just as there is no more reason for things we see to be the case (merely because we see them), so things we see are no more likely to be the case than are things we have in mind.'[38] We have no reason to believe that our mind grasps reality more accurately than our senses. In fact, we cannot rely on either since 'The nature of true things is not evident [to the senses]; so that even if they are the case, these things would not be knowable, at any rate not by us.'[39] With this statement, Gorgias challenges commonly held Presocratic assumptions and Parmenides' philosophy in particular. While most of the Presocratics agree with Gorgias that truth is not accessible to the senses, they insist that it is perceived by the rational mind. Presocratic philosophy is driven by the belief that through the application of proper philosophical concepts and methodology, one can comprehend the true reality of things. Gorgias' claim that everything can be thought (even *What-Is-Not*) but that nothing necessarily exists or is true is a direct challenge to Parmenides' philosophy.

By questioning the attainability of knowledge altogether, Gorgias follows in the footsteps of Xenophanes, the father of Scepticism. In Xenophanes' opinion, it is impossible for us to attain truth: 'No man has seen nor will anyone know the truth about the gods and all things I speak of. For even if a person should in fact say what is absolutely the case, nevertheless he himself does not know, but belief is fashioned over all things [or, in the case of all persons].'[40] Neither with our senses nor with our mind can we gain knowledge of the truth. We might discover the truth accidentally (i.e. 'what is absolutely the case'), but we have no means of establishing whether it is actually true. Belief is all there is.

Notwithstanding the fact that Xenophanes would have difficulties proving the truthfulness of his own statement, he - and this distinguishes him from the Sceptic Sophists - seems to believe that there is such a thing as a truth. First of all he does not deny that there might be a truth. More importantly, his term 'what is absolutely the case' comes very close to describing an objective reality. If we interpret the above fragment in this

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[38]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18b, p. 208

[39]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18b, p. 208

[40]McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, fr. 7.19, p. 66/7

way, Xenophanes is situated between Presocratic and Sophist thinking: like his fellow Presocratics, he believes that there is an underlying truth; at the same time, his Scepticism of the attainability of knowledge makes him doubt that this has any consequences for our knowledge of the world. Finally, the paradoxical notion that there is a truth but that we cannot know it, sets him apart from Presocratics and Sophists alike.

Xenophanes' and Gorgias' Epistemological Scepticism is juxtaposed to Presocratic ideas of knowledge. Though most of the Presocratics doubt the evidence of the senses, their enquiries are nevertheless based on the observation and on the interpretation of natural phenomena. In their view, the rational mind compensates for the elusiveness of sense perception and gives us access to the truth.

Presocratic epistemology is a result of Presocratic ontology and methodology. Given that their main object of study is nature, it is not surprising that most of the Presocratics come up with a natural principle or substance to explain reality. They believe that everything can be reduced to a first principle or prime matter. Nothing exists beyond and outside of this first principle. Consequently, our knowledge is restricted to it. These Sophist epistemologies, which are based on natural principles (Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides and some of the post-Parmenidan thinkers are notable exceptions) are characterised by a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, the senses are considered as an inadequate tool for understanding the world's functioning principles. This conviction is amply illustrated by Anaxagoras, who holds that 'The weakness [of the senses] means that we are incapable of discerning the truth.'[41] On the other hand, the Presocratics derive their first principles from the (subjectively perceived) natural world. This is a major flaw in Presocratic thought: just as perceptions of the natural world differ, so do interpretations thereof. As a result, the Presocratics do not agree on what the first principle or substance actually is. As Guthrie points out: 'Each believed himself to be nearest to the truth, but were there any solid grounds for trusting one rather than another?'[42] This and the rather speculative character of their theories[43] ultimately deal the final blow to presocratic philosophy. Confronted with these deficiencies, post-Parmenidan Presocratics

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[41]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F20, p. 130

[42]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 11

[43]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 15

and Sophists alike dismiss sense perception as an inadequate means to discover the truth.

Against the backdrop of this intellectual context, Parmenides' approach should be regarded as the *tabula rasa* of Presocratic philosophy. His radically new way of thinking manoeuvres Presocratic philosophy out of the impasse in which it is stuck: without the means to determine which of the various interpretations of reality is true, it is bound to stagnate. Despite their emphasis on rational thinking, the attempt of the early Presocratics at providing a coherent answer to the question *What is there?* ultimately fails due to the subjectivity of their various approaches.

The different philosophies of Parmenides, Melissus and the Sophists are a reaction to this failure as well as an attempt to develop theories which compensate for the deficiencies of the philosophy of their contemporaries. They try to answer questions that confound the early Presocratics, while also asking questions which the latter fail to address altogether.

Distancing himself from the methodology of his predecessors, Parmenides establishes a new way to conceptualise knowledge. He introduces deductive arguments and relies on pure reasoning to analyse the nature of logical subjects. This allows him to ask new questions: what conditions must existing things satisfy? Is reality what our senses tell us it is? This approach fundamentally changes the parameters of philosophy. Some Presocratics and most Sophists follow in Parmenides' methodological footsteps. Although Parmenides' philosophy may be subject to a lot of disputes, what is important is that none of his successors can ignore or bypass his philosophy. Within the context of our analysis, his most important legacy is that his ideas allow Sophist philosophy to transcend the confined realm of Presocratic thought.

Besides dealing with Parmenides' explicit ideas, the Sophists also examine the consequences of his thought. In addition to studying the possibility of knowledge, they reflect on the universality and on the communicability of knowledge.

Protagoras discusses the relationship between sensual perception and objective knowledge. The following is attributed to him: 'It is manifest to you who are present that I am sitting; but to a person who is absent it is not manifest that I am sitting; whether or not I am sitting is obscure.'[44] This thought mirrors Anaxagoras' observation 'Appearances

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[44]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 21, p. 187

are a glimpse of the obscure.'[45] And it highlights the considerable influence of Presocratic ideas on Sophist concepts of knowledge and sense perception. For Anaxagoras, the true nature of things is obscure. But if everything is obscure, how do we know that there is such a thing as the true nature of things/of reality? If our senses only perceive appearances, how do we know that there is something behind these appearances? If all we know is that what we see is but appearances, what do we actually know?

Protagoras suggests that although sense perception can give us evidence of things as they manifest themselves (i.e. him sitting) this evidence is not universally valid. Two people, one of which sees Protagoras sitting while the other does not, will not be able to establish whether or not he is sitting. The one who sees Protagoras sitting cannot prove that this is actually the case while the other has no means of finding out the truth without witnessing it. Someone who does not witness the manifestation of a thing has no means of knowing whether this thing exists or not. As a result, it is impossible to establish the true reality of things. Nobody really knows whether Protagoras is sitting or not, though all of us have our own private knowledge thereof.

Protagoras' paradigm addresses one of the fundamental issues of epistemology. Whereas most of the Presocratics work on the assumption that there is a true reality of things, and therefore ask *What are all things made of?* (In Protagoras' example this would translate into: *is he sitting or not?*). Protagoras discards these kinds of questions by giving an unequivocal answer: we just do not know.

This argument is commensurate with Gorgias' final statement in *On Not Being*. Bringing his and the argument of Protagoras to its logic conclusion, Gorgias argues that even if we could know anything, we would not be able to communicate it or agree on it. He asks: 'Even if they [things] were knowable, how could anyone make them evident to another? How could someone express in words what he has seen? Or how could such a thing become evident to someone who has heard the other speak of it, but has not seen it himself?'[46] The essence of his reasoning is that the existence and the properties of a thing cannot be communicated because a thing is (a) not equivalent to the notion of it; (b) one thing cannot exist at the same time in several minds; and (c) two people's notions

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[45]Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, fr. 537, p. 394

[46]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18c, p. 208

of one thing are not necessarily identical. Antiphon makes a similar claim: 'Someone who says one thing does not in fact have one thing in mind, nor does one thing exist for him, neither something that the one who sees best sees with his sight nor something that the one who knows best knows with his mind.'[47] A thing as it is, a thing said and a thing in mind are neither (necessarily) identical nor is there a causal relationship between them. This is where Parmenides' deductive reasoning reaches its limit. We might be able to make a statement about a thing, but this does not presuppose that we have an idea about it and it does not mean that this thing actually exists. Neither the most effective sight nor intellectual capacity can assist us in proving the existence of a thing. Antiphon thus refutes Parmenides' claim that a thing which can be thought must exist, and thereby dissolves the connection between our rational mind/thinking capacity and reality. Whereas the Presocratics rely on the rational mind, the Sophists' fundamental doubt includes thinking itself.

Sophist philosophy systematically deconstructs Presocratic notions of the world. Instead of replacing Presocratic concepts (i.e. the first principle, prime matter or unchangeable Being) with their own, the Sophists reject the Presocratics' entire framework of thinking. If there is no universally valid knowledge, searching for an underlying reality or examining the relationship between Being and Not-Being is a futile exercise. In the Sophist world view truth and reality are uncertain. All we can do is come to terms with the plurality of perceptions, interpretations, and meaning.

2.4 Relativism and Subjectivism

The most significant implication of Sophist epistemology is that there are no universal or absolute standards of knowledge. All knowledge is limited to individual experience; transcendent knowledge is impossible. The criteria of judgment are thus relative, varying with subjects. 'It is our own feelings and convictions that measure or determine the limits and nature of reality, which only exists in relation to them and is different for every one of us.'[48] The existence and the properties of things can only be determined in relation

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[47]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 7a, p. 244

[48]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 184

to the person who perceives them or thinks about them. A thing does not exist as such but is as it is perceived. There is no reality behind nor independent of appearances: being is identical to appearing. Hence Subjectivism implies Relativism and vice versa. Subjectivism is the inescapable consequence of Relativism.

The Moral Relativism of the Sophists, which denies absolute standards of Right and Wrong, is intricately related to Presocratic conceptions of the natural world. Presocratic doubts of the order and stability of the physical world and the rejection of divinity in favour of chance and natural necessity of causes, are seized upon by the Sophists and transformed into the relativity of ethical conceptions.[49]

Sophist philosophy is fragmentary and our understanding of Relativism is dominated almost entirely by what remains of Protagoras' writings. It would therefore be inadequate to classify all Sophists as Relativists. However, a thorough analysis of Protagoras' ideas that takes into account the relevant Presocratic and Sophist influences will allow us to establish the significance of Relativism for Sophist thought.

Protagoras' initial claim is that 'On every subject there are two *logoi* [speeches or arguments] opposed to one another.'[50] These two opposed arguments represent the multiplicity of perspectives on the world. Protagoras suggests that all arguments that can possibly be made about a given subject are equally valid. No statement can be considered either true or false. And in the absence of a universal truth, contradictions between arguments cannot be resolved.

In Protagoras' view, and this distinguishes him from his Presocratic predecessors, it is impossible to determine whether or not there is such a thing as a single truth. While the Presocratics reduce the complexity of the world to a single principle, Protagoras insists that we face the multidimensionality of things because this is the only reality accessible to us. His line of argument about the good illustrates the complexity of Relativist statements:

I know many things that are not beneficialunbeneficial to humans: foods and drinks and drugs and thousands of other things: and others that are beneficial. Some are neither beneficial nor harmful to humans, but are beneficial to horses, some only for cattle, and others for dogs... But

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[49]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 59

[50]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 24, p. 187

so various and many-sided a thing is the good, that even when we human beings use oil, it is good for the outside parts of the body, but the same oil is very bad for our insides.[51]

Protagoras' way of reasoning is reminiscent of Heraclitus' theory of the identity of opposites. Heraclitus believes that things are composed of opposites. And given that everything is relative, even opposites are identical. Heraclitus illustrates this claim with real-life examples. The value of things depends on both the context and the perceiving subject: 'Sea: water most pure and most tainted, drinkable and wholesome for fish, but undrinkable and poisonous for people'[52] or 'Donkeys would prefer refuse to gold'[53] and 'Pigs prefer filth to clean water.'[54] Everything is relative: 'A man is thought as foolish by a supernatural being as a child is by a man.'[55]

Within the framework of Relativism we can no longer make general statements about things but need to be specific about particular circumstances and relationships. Since there are many different truths, both the applicability and the validity of our knowledge are necessarily limited. Against the backdrop of this complexity, Protagoras approaches knowledge rather pragmatically. His argument about good and bad can be summarised as follows. (i) We do not know whether there is such a thing as the good. (ii) We cannot say that a thing is either good or bad. (iii) All we can do is establish whether a thing is good or bad in a particular context and relative to other things. Instead of searching for the universal meaning of the good, we should be concerned with the particular cases of goodness and badness that life confronts us with.

A contemporary unknown source discusses the same problem:

[1] Double arguments are put forward by intellectuals in Greece concerning good and bad. Some say that good is one thing and bad another, while others say that the same thing can be both/that good and bad are the same thing, and that something may be good for some but bad for others or sometimes good and sometimes bad for the same person. [2] I myself agree with the latter, and my investigation will begin with human life and its concern with food and drink and sex; for these things are bad for someone sick but good for someone healthy who needs them...

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[51]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 11, p. 185

[52]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F15, p. 39

[53]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F17, p. 39

[54]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F18, p. 40

[55]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F19, p. 40

[3] Sickness, moreover, is bad for the sick but good for doctors... [6] a victory is good for the winner but bad for the losers...[56]

This unknown author, whose writings have been associated with various Sophists[57], agrees with Protagoras' notion of value judgements and illustrates the implications of Relativist arguments. A thing (i.e. water) can be good for one thing (i.e. the roots of a tree) and bad for another (i.e. the sprouts of a tree). The value of a given thing can only be established with respect to another thing. It does not make sense to say that a thing is good or bad per se. Even if it could be shown that a thing is good with respect to all other things, this would not imply that it is generally or universally good, that is, that it is of a different quality or kind than a thing which is only good for some things.

As this discussion regarding the good and the bad illustrates, Relativism has three important implications. First, neither the existence nor the properties of things can be generally established. Second, reality is not uniform but multi-dimensional and contradictions are impossible. Third, each of us makes their own reality. Let us consider each of these aspects in turn.

1. We can neither establish whether or not things exist at all, nor determine what they are. In fact, we do not even know whether things have a real existence as opposed to an apparent existence. All we can say is that a thing can take on many different appearances. Protagoras is believed to have said: 'Each thing is no more such than such.'[58] This is clearly a reference to Gorgias' ontological claim 'things no more are than are not.'[59] If the existence of things cannot be proven, it logically follows that we cannot determine their properties either. Each thing appears differently to different people and we have no justification for saying that it is as X sees it rather than as Y sees it. Appearances are all there is. And it is impossible for us to transcend these appearances. In this view, Protagoras, just as the Presocratics before him, paints a picture of a world in flux. But in contrast to the Presocratics, he does not assume that things change; instead he

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[56]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, pp. 296-7

[57]Untersteiner points out that this fragment echoes numerous doctrines and themes reminiscent of Sixth and Fifth Century philosophers as diverse as Heraclitus, Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus and Socrates. See M. Untersteiner, *The Sophists* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1954), p. 304ff.

[58]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought* fr. 26, p. 187

[59]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought* fr. 18a, p. 207

asserts that they are multi-dimensional. It is this fundamental change of perspective, which distinguishes Sophist from Presocratic thinking: while for the Presocratics, things are the starting point for their analysis of reality, for Protagoras it is human beings and their individual perspective. In the eyes of the Sophists, it is pointless to ask (as the Presocratics do) whether things really are this or that or how they have changed from one thing into another, because we simply cannot know. Each of us only knows what she sees and that is it. What appears to me is because it appears to me. What I see exists primarily for me, and is different for everybody else. As Protagoras writes: 'Each of us has his own private perceptions, and what appears exists only for that person to whom it appears.'[60]

2. In a multidimensional world where 'Each thing is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you'[61] all attempts at communicating different views of reality to one another are futile. We cannot make sense of the world collectively; each of us is limited to his or her own perspective. In this respect, Protagoras' philosophy reflects Gorgias' epistemological argument about the incommunicability of knowledge. It explains why Protagoras asserts that 'It is not possible to contradict.'[62] If all perceptions are private, it is impossible to contend that something is wrong or untrue and that its opposite is right or true. All perceptions are true because falsification is impossible. Subjective perceptions, by their very nature, cannot be disputed. Since we have neither access to other people's perspectives nor to what these refer to, we can make no meaningful statements. As a result, all communication is reduced to the art of persuasion.

3. In Protagoras' view, Relativism implies the inviolability of individual perspectives. The Sophists replace the objectivity of Presocratic world views and their weak notion of subjectivity with radical and uncompromising subjectivity. Protagoras holds that 'Man is measure of all things, of those things that are, that they are, and of those things that are not, that they are not.'[63] Although the meaning of this fragment has been debated from the Fifth Century up to the present day[64], it is now widely agreed that

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[60] Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought* fr. 19, p. 186

[61] Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought* fr. 17, p. 186

[62] Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought* fr. 25, p. 187

[63] Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, DK 1, p. 171

[64] See Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 171ff.

man refers to each individual rather than mankind as a single entity.[65] As opposed to the Presocratics, Protagoras is not concerned with the existence of things but with the way things are, i.e. their predicates. The existence of things is not uniform and cannot be universally determined. Things exist because we perceive them, i.e. they exist through our perception rather than having an existence independent of us. Things are as we perceive them, both qualitatively and temporally speaking. Things exist for as long as they are being perceived, and they have the qualities that we perceive them to have.

However, Presocratics and Sophists have a distinct view of subjectivity. For the Sophists, both sense perception and thinking are inherently linked to the individual subject, i.e. the person who perceives something or thinks about something. This view contrasts with the Presocratics' rather simplistic conception of subjectivity.

The Presocratics do not seem to acknowledge that the subjective perceptions of individuals may differ. Instead, they establish an opposition between rational thinking and subjective (sense) perception as such. In their view, the world is in flux: things come into being, change and perish. This perception is subjective since it is the result of our human capacity. However, it does not necessarily bear a relation to the objects we perceive. Solely our minds can grasp the truth, which is objective because it lies within the objects of perception.

Parmenides introduces a slightly different form of Subjectivism to Presocratic thinking. His philosophy is based on the assumption that Being and Not-Being are determined by what we as human beings can or cannot think. Hence the existential make-up of the world cannot be understood without reference to our Being (we need to exist in order to think) and our capacity (we need to think for things to exist). Parmenides' Subjectivism is similar to pre-Parmenidan Subjectivism in that it refers to human beings as such without considering different individual perspectives. At the same time, it differs from other Presocratic views because subjectivity is inherently linked to our Being.

Challenging these rather simplistic ideas, the Sophists assert that the subjective perception of things pertains to the individual. Two people can have: (i) different perceptions of the same thing(s); (ii) different perceptions of different thing(s); (iii) the same perception of the same thing(s); or (iv) the same perception of different thing(s). Even if two

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[65]See Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 86

people have the same perception of a thing, this does not prove the existence or the specific qualities of this thing. There is no causal relationship between what we see and what is. The true reality of things cannot be established by perception. We do not know whether there is such a thing as a true reality of things; and if there is, what it is and what relationship it bears to sense perception.

The fundamental difference between the Presocratic and the Sophist approach is that unlike the Sophists, the Presocratics do not seem to regard the potential disparity between individual sense perceptions as important. In their view sense perception is a general aspect of human capacity which produces a more or less homogenous picture of the natural world. The Sophists, on the other hand, emphasise the individual nature of sense perception.

We therefore argue that the 'weak' form of Subjectivism spelled out in Presocratic thought is brought to a radical conclusion by the Sophists. Gorgias exploits the flaws of Parmenidan ideas and by introducing the paradigm of individual perspective changes the conception of thinking as well as conception of subjects.

2.5   Four pillars make a building

After having examined the different pillars which support the theory of Moral Relativism, we would now like to demonstrate how these elements, i.e. ontology, epistemology, Relativism and Subjectivism, relate to the overall framework of Moral Relativism. Just as a house is more than a number of columns held together by a roof, Moral Relativism transcends its individual components. It is a philosophical framework, which prescribes how to make sense of the world.

In order to understand this framework, we have traced its roots in Presocratic thinking. We proceed from the assumption that new ideas develop from previous ideas. Whether new ideas imply a rejection, refutation or reinforcement of prevailing ideas or whether they can transcend their origins, they inherently refer to the ideas they originate from. The contextualisation of Sophist thinking is therefore crucial to our understanding of the philosophical foundations of Moral Relativism.

Moral Relativism is the Sophist response to Presocratic ontology and epistemology.

This response is multi-faceted and can be divided into different interdependent components. By eradicating the distinction between Being and Not-Being, the Sophists destroy the fundamental tenet of post-Parmenidan Presocratic ontology. On the ruins, they build their own theory which is centred on Epistemological Scepticism. If Not-Being and Being are identical, nothing meaningful can be said about the existence of things. True knowledge is impossible and individual claims compete with one another. In the light of this, questions like *What is there?* and *What can we know about it?* are no longer relevant. What begins as a deconstruction of Presocratic ontology eventually culminates in the rejection of ontology altogether. The Epistemological Scepticism produced by this rejection leads to Relativism, which the Sophists apply not only to the sphere of knowledge but also to the world of morals. If there is no single truth, there can be no universal morality either. Experience reveals that moral norms differ from *polis* to *polis* and from culture to culture. And neither the gods nor science nor in fact philosophy can provide one with universal standards to guide one's actions. What is Right and what is Wrong must be determined individually.

Chapter 3

The influence of Sophist philosophy on Athenian foreign policy during the Peloponnesian War

3.1   Background

Our analysis of the relationship between Sophist philosophy and Realist Athenian policy seeks to address two questions. How does the intellectual environment influence the realm of politics? Is there a direct link between philosophical concepts and public policies?

We will show that Sophist philosophy provides the intellectual foundations for Political Realism. In fact, we will argue that Political Realism is the political response to Sophist philosophy. Within the realm of politics, Realism gives an answer to the fundamental question Sophist epistemology confronts us with: how do we make sense of the world knowing that there are no absolute values to rely upon? In a world in which true knowledge is unattainable, there are no universal values to guide our actions. Without objective standards as a frame of reference, various subjective perspectives compete with each other. Nothing is absolute: everything is relative.

What are the political implications of this world view? The *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides illustrates how the Athenians apply Sophist Epistemological Scepticism to the political sphere. Athens uses the multiplicity of meaning established by the Sophists as an instrument of power. In theory, the perspectives of different states perspectives may coexist; but in reality, different world views compete for superiority. In the end, how the stronger party interprets reality will prevail. As an imperial superpower,

Athens can both portray her own views as universally valid and assert them through the use of force. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* demonstrates how Athens uses both methods to force her Might is Right doctrine upon inferior states.

In Athens, the political interpretation of Sophist philosophy has three dimensions. First, there is the dominant role of self-interest in politics. In the absence of absolute values, relative values prevail. And with the self as the only valid frame of reference, individuals and states make judgements relative to themselves. It logically follows that a state's policies are primarily determined by self-interest. Secondly, the lack of a frame of reference has implications for morality. If there is no universal morality, moral judgements only reflect particular interests. Rhetoric and physical force serve as tools to reinforce these interests. Third, without true knowledge, one is forced to be guided by experience only. On the basis of our experience of the world, we can determine the laws of nature on which we ought to act as a matter of prudence.

In this chapter we illustrate how philosophy and politics are intertwined in Athenian foreign policy. We will contrast Sophist fragments with Athenian political speeches. At the beginning of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides explains the origin of these speeches:

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.[66]

Whether or not Thucydides' speeches are entirely accurate is not crucial. What is important is that for him, they are representative of Athenian attitudes towards foreign policy. In this respect, we side with Connor, who argues:

Modern scholars have sometimes contended that the speeches are practically free compositions by Thucydides himself, with no basis in historical fact. Yet many of the speeches are carefully drawn and even individualized - suggesting that Thucydides not only mastered the situation sufficiently to know what arguments would be necessary, but also knew his characters well

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[66]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.1-8

enough to determine the style and approach they would use... My disposition is to admit that
Thucydides normally kept as close as he could to the general line of approach of a speaker, even
though he had to guess about the exact wording.[67]

For our discussion, the degree of accuracy is not as relevant as the underlying political
attitudes and principles revealed by the speeches. Our aim is to understand Athenian
foreign policy as crystallised in Thucydides' speeches assuming that 'by means of his
speeches Thucydides places a situation in a larger perspective, connecting the present
with the past and the future but also relating specific decisions to overriding interests,
general rules, or basic political principles.'[68]

3.2 How Athens instrumentalises Sophist philosophy to shape the international system

3.2.1 Subjectivism and self-interest

Protagoras' philosophy is the cornerstone of Subjectivism. He asserts that 'Man is the
measure of all things, of those things that are, that they are, and of those things that
are not, that they are not.'[69] In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates interprets this doctrine
as follows: 'Socrates: Then does he [Protagoras] mean something like this, that as each
thing appears to me, so it is to me, and as it appears to you, so it is to you - you and
I being "man"? Theaetetus: Yes, that is what he means.'[70] We as individuals are the
ultimate arbitrators of both the existence and of the properties of things. Each of us
creates his or her own reality which is beyond anyone's reach. What I hold to be true
may very well be untrue for someone else and vice versa. There is thus no point in trying
to reconcile different perspectives; we simply have to deal with the fact that we interpret
reality differently. Self-interest is thus a corollary of Subjectivism. In a world where
people know only their individual perspective; they have no reason to pursue any ends

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[67]W.R. Connor, *The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p. 95

[68]Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*, p. 32

[69]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 15, p. 186

[70]Plato, *Theaetetus* translated by M.J. Levett (Glasgow, University of Glasgow Press, 1977), 152a7-10

but their own.

The Athenians apply this Subjectivism to the political sphere. They equate Protagoras' 'man' with the state and compare each man's self-interest to a state's self-interest. Since Relativism induces individuals and states alike to consider only their own interest, the Athenians regard self-interest as the prime motivational force behind a state's policies. In the Fifth Century, this idea becomes the central tenet of Athenian policy and sets new standards in international relations. Thus Sophist philosophy serves as an intellectual foundation as well as a justification for Athenian policy. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* illustrates how Athens spreads the paradigm of self-interest throughout the Greek World. Guthrie notes how seldom the orators of Thucydides, who aim to persuade, see any point in appealing to considerations or right, justice or other normally accepted moral standards: 'it is taken for granted that only an appeal to self-interest is likely to succeed.'[71] At the Debate at Camarina, which takes place in 415/4 BCE, the Athenians claim that ultimately, people follow their own interests: 'We know that when people are frightened and suspicious they enjoy for the moment an argument that fits in with their feelings, but in the end, when it comes to the point, they act in accordance with their interests.'[72] In the Athenian view, rational thinking requires people to act in their self-interest; any other course of action would be irrational.

The same holds for states. In international relations, it is reasonable for states to pursue their self-interest since it is the only way to secure their safety. In fact, it appears that for the Athenians, the state's need of security justifies any policy: they assert that 'no one can be blamed for looking after his own safety in his own way.'[73] The superior importance of security is written into the relations between Greek city states. Once it has been established that acting in one's own interest is rational, states inevitably expect other states to pursue only their own interest. And since it is taken for granted that the self-interests of different states are per se irreconcilable, every state is forced to pursue its interests at any cost not to put its security in jeopardy.

These ideas are reflected in the Melian Dialogue (416/5 BCE), in which the Athenians

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[71]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 85

[72]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.83.15-19

[73]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.83.10-11

assert that leaving the path of self-interest involves unnecessary dangers: 'You seem to forget that if one follows one's self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path of justice and honour involves one in danger.'[74] By giving relative/subjective values (i.e. self-interest), priority over universal values such as justice, the Athenians remain faithful to Sophist philosophy. At the same time, they make a clear distinction between the rules that apply to international relations and those valid for domestic politics. In the Mytilenian Debate (427 BCE), the Athenian politician Diodotus, who holds that it would be in Athens' best interest not to destroy the Mytilenians, says: 'this is not a law-court, where we have to consider what is fit and just; it is a political assembly, and the question is how Mytilene can be most useful to Athens.'[75] In his view, the decisions of a political assembly should not be confused with the rulings of a court of law. Whereas the latter are supposed to bring about justice, the former cannot be expected to meet moral standards. On the contrary, they are driven by expediency. This is emphasised by Diodotus earlier in his speech:

The question is not so much whether they [the Mytilenians] are guilty as whether we are making the right decision for ourselves. I might prove that they are the most guilty people in the world, but it does not follow that I shall propose the death penalty, unless that is in your interests; I might argue that they deserve to be forgiven, but should not recommend forgiveness unless that seemed to me the best thing for the state.[76]

This statement exemplifies how Realist policies combine Relativism with expediency. What is Right and what is Wrong is relative to the state's interest. Any other standards such as just desert or proportionality are subordinated to this one criterion.

However, despite their conviction that states are justified in pursuing policies of self-interest, the Athenians recognise that the extent to which states can actually realise their interests depends on their power position. During the Debate at Camarina (415/4 BCE), Euphemus, an Athenian representative, suggests that the greater a state's power, the more ruthless its pursuit of self-interest. 'When a man or a city exercises absolute power the logical course is the course of self-interest, and ties of blood exist only when they can be

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[74]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.107.1-3

[75]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.44.18-20

[76]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.44.3-9

relied upon; one must choose one's friends and enemies according to the circumstances on each particular occasion.'[77]. In this view, states have no obligations to other states. Even when they enter into relations with one another, they do it purely out of self-interest.

However, how can we explain the existence of alliances? Do they not prove that the common interest of states can override their distinct self-interests? Thucydides, describing the forces gathered in Sicily to either conquer or to defend the island, provides a negative answer to that notion. He claims: 'They stood together not because of any moral principle or racial connection; it was rather because of the various circumstances of interest or of compulsion in each particular case.'[78] Thucydides then lists the various parties involved and explains their respective motivations for supporting one side rather than the other. As it turns out, ethnic ties are a factor in some cases but insignificant in others, many states are compelled to serve in an alliance, and some receive pay or expect quick personal profits from it. In addition to these rather pragmatic reasons, Thucydides also mentions goodwill, friendship and hatred as grounds for joining an alliance. He shows that although the circumstances of interest differ in each case, all states act according to what is in their best interest. Even states which are forced to support others do so because the penalty of not complying is worse than submitting.

Now that we have explored the Athenian view of the supreme importance of self-interest in politics, it is useful to ask to what extent this dogma is shared by other Greek city states. In fact, the Athenian approach to international relations meets fierce resistance by other *poleis*. Their criticism, however, has a very limited impact on Athenian policy and the paradigms of international relations established by Athens. The fact that other states have no choice but to deal with the self interest paradigm demonstrates the Athenian control of the international agenda. States joining the discourse on the rights and wrongs of state behaviour are restricted to the intellectual framework established by the Athens.

Which alternative approaches to international politics do other states propose? The Plataeans, after having surrendered their long besieged city to the Spartans, try to convince their vanquishers that state policies need not be informed by self-interest. Since

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[77]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.85.1-5

[78]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 7.57.3-6

they opposed Xerxes in the Persian Wars, they claim to have been amongst those states which 'instead of meeting the invasion by acting in the interests of their own safety, chose the path of daring, of danger, and of honour.'[79] However, instead of commending the Plataeans for jeopardising their safety in the name of Greece, the Spartans threaten to punish them for having supported the wrong side, namely the Athenians. The Plataeans protest: 'now we are in fear of losing our lives for this very same conduct, for having chosen to do the right thing with regard to Athens rather than the profitable thing with regard to Sparta. Yet the same principles should be made to apply throughout, and it should be recognised that true policy consists not only in safeguarding one's immediate interests, but in seeing to it that a brave ally can feel certain of one's gratitude.'[80] In the Plataeans' view, loyalty towards an ally is as important as a state's self-interest. They ask the Spartans to honour their reliability, rather than condemning it because their course of action was detrimental to Sparta. But the Spartans refuse to recognise the Plataeans' ulterior motives. From their perspective, what is relevant is whether Plataea supported Sparta or Athens. Loyalty in itself is not important; only loyalty to Sparta counts. Their verdict on Plataean policies is determined by Spartan self-interest only. Each Plataean is asked 'Have you done anything to help the Spartans and their allies in the war?'[81] And as each man replies 'No', he is put to death immediately.

While the Plataeans refuse to accept the superior role of self-interest in international relations, the Melians try to uphold universal principles at first but eventually adapt their reasoning to the Athenian world view: 'since you will not let us mention justice, but tell us to give in to your interests, we, too, must tell you what our interests are and, if yours and ours happen to coincide, we must try to persuade you to the fact.'[82] The Melians realise that to confront Athens they need to use Athenian arguments. By submitting to the logic of self-interest they hope to find common ground between the Athenian and their own position. These examples show the influence of the Athenian approach to politics on the relations between Greek *poleis*. Whether or not states subscribe to the paradigm of self-interest, when dealing with other powers they have no choice but to cloak their

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[79]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.56.23-25

[80]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.56.27-33

[81]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.68.12-13

[82]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.98.2-5

arguments in it.

The discourse on self-interest in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* reflects the interplay between Relativism and the power structures of the Greek World. It reveals that the influence of a policy is inherently linked to the power of those who advocate it.

The Athenians exploit Relativism to justify and to sustain their superiority. They are convinced that each state is the 'measure of things' and therefore acts in its own interest. Within a Relativist framework of thinking, this assumption is as valid or as invalid as any other. But since Athens is in a (power) position to impose her version of the truth on other states, it becomes the centre of political discourse and state policy in the Greek world.

As a superpower, it is in Athens' interest to represent what suits herself as a general rule. Hegemons do not need to be concerned with the demand of other states. In the Mytilenian Debate in 427 BCE, the Athenian general Cleon characterises the interests of an imperial power 'To feel pity, to be carried away by the pleasure of hearing a clever argument, to listen to the claims of decency are three things that are entirely against the interests of an imperial power.'[83] And, as the Athenians would argue, any other state in their position would act in the same way.

3.2.2   Relativism and the Might is Right doctrine

Our analysis of the impact of Sophist Relativism on the policies pursued in the Peloponnesian War should not be based exclusively on a comparison of philosophical fragments and political speeches. To understand why certain policies are put in place we also need to consider the complex system of political forces and power structures in the Greek World: policies are not made in a vacuum. They are the products of political culture, historical circumstances, and are instruments of national interest.

As we have suggested above, Athens' power position is the key to an understanding of the policies pursued in the Peloponnesian War. Athens emerges from the Persian Wars (499-448 BCE) as an imperial power capable of shaping the international agenda and imposing its interests through the use of force. Most importantly, Athenian politicians

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[83] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.40.9-11

set the standards of foreign policy and thereby reconstruct the international system in line with Athenian interests.

We have already discussed how the Athenians translate Sophist Subjectivism and the self-referential judgements it entails into the dominant role of state interest. We will now focus our attention on the influence of Relativism on the system of international relations as a whole.

The law of nature

Sophist Epistemological Scepticism is a reaction to Eleatic ontology. Parmenides realises that the 'Way of Seeming' is false and yet he maintains that rational thinking will lead us to the truth. Gorgias and Protagoras radically reject this view; they hold that knowledge is impossible. Gorgias says: '[Anything you might mention] is nothing; if it were something, it would be unknowable; and if it were something and knowable, it could not be made evident to others.'[84] Protagoras explores the consequences of Gorgias' Epistemological Scepticism. He argues that knowledge is relative and private: 'Each thing is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you.'[85]

Without universally valid knowledge we have to act upon assumptions drawn from experience. Philosophic doubt is counterbalanced by fact-facing pragmatism: as a measure of prudence, it is reasonable to expect things to remain as they have always been and people to act as they usually do. As we will see, in the eyes of the Athenians, experience reveals that the weak have always been ruled by the strong. This observation is interpreted as a law of nature, which governs not only the relationship between humans but also the relations between states.

The question whether natural (*physis*) or man-made laws (*nomos*) ought to govern human conduct is widely debated in the Fifth Century. Some of the Sophists are on the side of *physis*,

thinking not so much about *physis* of the physical universe as about the promptings and impulses that were part of man's organisation as a creature. They were interested in the urges that usually were repressed by the rules or laws that society imposed... they... deplored or derided the legal

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[84]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18, p. 206

[85]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 17, p. 186

restraints placed upon human desires to maximise the products of such emotions as greed, power-hunger, lust and cruelty, all of which seemed to be more probable parts of man's natural organisation than the agreements to exercise restraint and reasonableness which were laws.[86]

Burnet describes the wide-ranging consequences that the opposition between *nomos* and *physis* has for morality: 'By... insisting on the opposition between Law and Nature, they [the Sophists] tended to do away with the distinction between right and wrong. If that distinction is not rooted in nature, but depends solely on human laws and institutions, it is valid only for as long as we choose to recognise it. On the other hand, if we appeal from human law to a supposed higher law, the law of Nature, all restraint is abolished.'[87] Ultimately and paradoxically, it is man who defines what nature's law prescribes: 'so beginnt der Mensch nun, die Welt aus dem Bewusstsein seiner selbst aufzubauen: An Stelle der Gottheit ist es der rationale Mensch, der die ethischen Normen gibt, die sich über das positive Recht erheben. Die selbstbewusste Persönlichkeit ist Quelle des rationalen Naturrechts...'[88] In contradiction with Relativist claims, the Law of Nature is as absolute as the traditional divine laws: 'da auch die entgötterte Welt des erkenntnistheoretischen Relativismus ein Absolutes nicht entbehren kann, [wird] bald die Natur gegen das Gesetz, bald dieses gegen jene ins Feld [ge]führt.'[89]

For a number of Sophists, however, the requirements of a city's *nomoi* take precedence over any supposed Natural Laws. The word *nomos* may be translated as law, convention or custom; it is a prescriptive and normative term that refers to the behaviour of humans: '*nomos* as law is legally prescribed norm, and nomos as convention is norm prescribed by convention.'[90] Protagoras is the most prominent advocate of the obedience to man-made laws. In Plato's dialogue named after him, Protagoras tells a myth to demonstrate that man has an innate capacity to develop and live in a society regulated by laws. The *Anonymous Iamblichi*, a fragment of unknown authorship written in a style and on a subject typical of the Sophist period, claims that 'people cannot live without laws (*nomoi*)

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[86]H.D. Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics* (London, Croom Helm, 1983), p. 81

[87]Burnet, *Greek Philosophy - Thales to Plato*, p. 122

[88]V. Ehrenberg, *Polis und Imperium* (Zürich, Artemis Verlag, 1965), p. 366

[89]V. Ehrenberg, *Polis und Imperium*, p. 367

[90]Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 112

and justice (*dike*).'[91]

For the purpose of our analysis, we do not need to further elaborate on this debate as the main issues will be amply highlighted in the course of our discussion of Athenian politics.

The Athenian notion of Natural Law is intricately linked to Thrasymachus' view of justice as expressed in his opening statement in Plato's Republic: 'Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger.'[92] Irrespective of whether or not Plato represents Thrasymachus' views accurately, what is relevant for us is that he seems to have used him to represent views which gain considerable currency in Fifth Century Athens.[93] It is debatable whether Thrasymachus' definition of justice represents a moral judgement or a factual statement. Guthrie defends the latter view convincingly: 'All governments make laws in their own interest, and call that justice. Those are the facts: praise or blame does not enter into it.'[94] We agree, adding only that though Thrasymachus' declaration is probably a descriptive statement, it can easily be turned into a prescriptive one, as is demonstrated by the Athenians. This is the point of intersection between fact and value. Experience provides us with (historical) facts (i.e. the weak are ruled by the strong) but it is our interpretation of these facts that turns them into value judgments (i.e. Might is Right). And this is exactly what Callicles, a central character in Plato's Gorgias does. Apart from his appearance in this dialogue Callicles has left no trace in recorded history. He is represented by Plato as a young aspiring Athenian politician who hosts Sophists in is house but is not a Sophist himself. In his opinion, justice is expressed in nature: 'But I believe that nature itself reveals that it is just for the better man to have a larger share than the worse, and the more powerful than the less powerful. This is clearly shown to be so everywhere, both for the other animals and for whole cities and tribes of human beings: that justice has been decided in this way, for the better man to rule the worse and

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[91]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 7, p. 295

[92]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 3, p. 255. It is widely agreed that this particular statement most likely represents the position held by the historical Thrasymachus. However, the same cannot be said of Plato's representation of his ideas in the rest of dialogue. See Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, p. 120ff.

[93]J. Beversluis, *Cross-Examining Socrates* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 222

[94]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 93

to have a larger share.'[95] For Callicles, nature provides man with normative prescriptions

for human life. 'That which nature reveals not only is but must be... That which is

discovered in the laws of actual events is established as a law of necessity in the sphere of

individual and social ethic.'[96] For Thrasymachus it is a fact that the strong rule, whereas

Callicles believes that it would be right for them to rule. He holds that human laws are

made by a majority of the weak.

Conventions, on the other hand, are made, in my opinion, by the weaklings who form the

majority of mankind. They establish them and apportion praise and blame with an eye to

themselves and their own interests, and in an endeavour to frighten those who are stronger and

capable of getting the upper hand they say that taking an excess of things is shameful and wrong,

and that wrongdoings consist in trying to have more than others; being inferior themselves, they

are content, no doubt, if they can stand on an equal footing with their betters. That is why by

convention an attempt to have more than the majority is said to be wrong and shameful, and

men call it wrongdoing; nature, on the other hand, herself demonstrates, I believe, that it is

right that the better man should have more than the worse and the stronger than the weaker.[97]

Both Thrasymachus and Callicles believe that the *nomoi* of a *polis* are made by a dom-

inant, self-interested party. In line with Callicles, Antiphon contrasts *nomos* with the

requirements of *physis* in the following way:

For the requirements of the laws are supplemental but the requirements of nature are necessary;

and the requirements of the laws are by agreement and not natural, whereas the requirements

of nature are natural and not by agreement. Thus someone who violates the laws avoids shame

and punishment if those who have joined in agreement do not notice him, but not if they do.

But if someone tries to violate one of the inherent requirements of nature, which is impossible,

the harm he suffers is no less if he is seen by no one, and no greater if all see him; for he is

harmed not in reputation but in truth. I enquire into these things for the following reason, that

most things that are just according to law are inimical to nature.[98]

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[95]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, pp. 310-11

[96]Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, p. 330

[97]Plato, *Gorgias* translated by W. Hamilton and C. Emlyn-Jones (London, Penguin Books, 2004),
483b4-d1

[98]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 7, p. 245

Antiphon associates nature with truth. As long as he follows the requirements of nature, man is true to himself. Ultimately, this implies a rejection of life in the *polis*, which is structured by man-made laws: 'So richtet sich der egoistische Wille des Individuums gegen den Nomos, aus dem hemmungslosen Utilitarismus des Einzelmenschen erwächst die Theorie, welche die völlige Verneinung der Polis bedeutet.'[99] Callicles' and Antiphon's advocacy of the supremacy of nature provides the intellectual foundations for the Might is Right doctrine.

Though it is reasonable for the Athenians to adopt this particular view of Natural Law, this does not apply to weaker city states. They do not see why it would be just for them to serve the interests of the stronger. Hence they dispute the validity of Athens' experience and protest against the value judgements that result from it.

The first notion of a Natural Law surfaces at the very beginning of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In 432 BCE, Sparta summons her allies to debate whether Athens has acted aggressively and broken her treaties with Sparta. After various complaints against Athens have been voiced, the Athenian representatives come forward to defend their city's policies:

We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so - security, honour and self-interest. And we were not the first to act in this way. Far from it. It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power. Up till the present moment you, too, used to think that we were; but now, after beginning to calculate your own interest, you are beginning to talk in terms of right and wrong. Considerations of this kind have never yet turned people aside from the opportunities of aggrandizement offered by superior strength. Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation.[100]

It is noteworthy that at this point, the Athenians do not speak of a Law of Nature yet but merely point out that their actions agree with human nature and with the rule that the weak should be subject to the strong. Their emphasis on the facts of nature is enforced

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[99]Ehrenberg, *Polis und Imperium*, p. 372
[100]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.9-23

by rejecting considerations of justice. From Athens' perspective, and this is reminiscent of Callicles' views, value-talk is a rhetorical instrument employed by the weaker party because it cannot pursue its aims through the use of power. For states strong enough to overcome any resistance, morality is secondary. This is re-emphasised later in the speech; when international relations are described in the following way: 'the fact being, of course, that where force can be used there is no need to bring in the law.'[101] Although the Athenians pride themselves on treating their allies fairly by settling disputes over contracts in impartial law courts, they nevertheless stress that it would be in their power to resolve these quarrels by force. Departures from this rule do not change this fundamental truth; on the contrary, they reinforce it. The fact that Athens chooses to treat her subjects as equals[102] is a reflection of her power. Despite the Athenians' attempt to gain credit for what they see as benevolent rule, both their allies and enemies are well aware that Athens does not hesitate to reach her aims by force if she needs to.

Though the Athenians represent the requirements of nature as universal, this does not prevent them from criticising other states for their power-induced behaviour. In the Mytilenian Debate in 427 BCE, Cleon reproaches the Mytilenians for taking sides with Athens' enemies and for acting with calculated aggression. In his eyes the Mytilenians, 'made up their minds to put might first and right second, choosing the moment when they thought they would win, and then making their unprovoked attack upon us.'[103] Although the Athenians justify their own courses of action with Might is Right arguments, they do not consider them valid for weaker states. According to Cleon, the right policy for Mytilene would have been not to revolt from Athens who has treated her subject 'with the greatest consideration.'[104] The Mytilenian Debate reveals the ways in which Athenian politicians use Relativism to their own advantage. The purpose of the Might is Right doctrine is to justify Athenian policies; it is only valid for whom and for as long as Athens pleases. The more powerful can determine what is right, and they are the only ones who can legitimately put might first. In that sense, Mytilene's revolt is wrong because it harms Athenian interests and since Mytilene is weaker than Athens, the Mytilenians have no

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[101]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.77.7-8

[102]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.77

[103]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.39.20-23

[104]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.39.9-10

right to put might first.

In the Melian Dialogue (416/5 BCE), which Guthrie calls 'the most famous example of amoral realism'[105], Athenian advocacy of the Law of Nature reaches its climax. It is difficult to believe that such a dialogue actually took place as 'the setting and the nature of the brief exchanges of arguments are intrinsically unconvincing as the descriptions of an incident. We cannot be absolutely certain that the actual negotiations did not assume some like or comparable form; but it is most improbable.'[106] However, Kennedy ought to be quoted at length in order to explicate the undisputed significance of the dialogue:

The dialogue performs no practical, political function, but that does not necessarily prove its lack of historicity, for its function in Thucydides' work, and perhaps in fact, was intellectual. Things must be talked out first, an attempt at persuasion must be made, the events must be understood, there must be no doubt that expediency is in operation... He wrote it to explain the incident of Melos and to express the specific truth for the comprehension of future readers.[107]

At the beginning of the dialogue the Athenians advise the islanders to adjust their policies to their power position: 'we recommend that you should try to get what is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really think; since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.'[108] At the debate at Sparta in 432 BCE, the Athenians have claimed that it is only human to enjoy power. In Melos, they represent the maximisation of power as the ultimate goal of foreign policy. In their view, it is a fact that the strong exploit their power to the full and this is how it should be. This attitude echoes Callicles' perspective on self-gratification:

For how can a man be happy who is in subjection to anyone whoever? I tell you frankly that what is fine and right by nature consists in this: that the man who is going to live as a man ought should encourage his appetites to be as strong as possible instead of repressing them, and be able by means of his courage and intelligence to satisfy them in all their intensity by

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[105]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 85

[106]Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics*, p. 116

[107]G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 50

[108]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.89.8-14

providing them with whatever they happen to desire.[109]

What at first appears to be a description of reality (i.e. the weak have always been ruled by the strong) in fact carries a prescriptive meaning (i.e. therefore, the weak should be ruled by the strong).

The Athenian emphasis on the conduct of 'practical people' and on the 'power to compel' reveals their Realist attitude. In their eyes, international relations are neither determined by values nor by universal laws; the outcome of disputes is solely decided by power. This Law of Nature is not primordial; it expresses the facts of life.

Towards the end of the dialogue, the Athenians finally reveal the origin of their Might is Right paradigm:

Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.[110]

The initial argument of human nature ('our knowledge of men') is now complemented by a reference to the divine ('our opinion of the gods'). This is not new: associating universal laws with the divine has a tradition in Greek thought. For Heraclitus, all human laws are nourished by the *logos*, the one divine law of the universe: 'Those who speak with intelligence must stand firm by that which is common to all, as a state stands by the law, and even more firmly. For all human laws are in the keeping of the one divine law; for the one divine law has as much power as it wishes, is an unfailing defence for all laws, and prevails over all laws.'[111]

The Athenian reference to the divine is also a response to the Melians' earlier claim that the gods will support them because they stand for 'what is right against what is wrong.'[112] Turning to the gods for support of specific policies or military campaigns is common

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[109]Plato, *Gorgias*, 491e5-492a4

[110]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.105.4-12

[111]Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, F12, p.39

[112]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.104.4-5

practice amongst the Greeks. When the Spartans are about to invade Epidaurus in 419-8 BCE, they turn back at the border because their frontier sacrifices are unfavourable.[113] Omens and oracles guide Greek warfare at all times. Classical armies employ highly paid soothsayers to consult the gods every step of the way. An army cannot move from home or camp, cross a river or engage in combat until it is declared that the signs are favourable. War is banned from sacred places as well as during sacred periods; armies are supposed to stay clear of temple precincts and estates. However, religion is often cynically exploited and its rules stretched to suit military ambitions.[114] Ultimately, military commanders can override religious concerns with an appeal to patriotism, glory or necessity - piety and expediency are effectively combined.[115] Against this background, it is not surprising that the Athenians deem it appropriate to endow the Law of Nature with divine approval.

By representing the Law of Nature as necessary, Athenian thinking betrays the influence on ethics of the natural sciences of the day. Necessity as a cosmological force runs through Presocratic thought, in the Western tradition (Parmenides, Empedocles, the Pythagoreans) with almost mystical or theological overtones, but in Ionian Rationalism it appears as a mindless natural force. This association of necessity with nature is used as an argument by the opponents of customary laws, which they represent as an attempt to thwart natural forces that is rightly doomed to failure.[116]

However, it is clear that the Athenians consider neither nature's nor divine support as essential. Despite the fact that they appeal to something beyond themselves, i.e. experience, the necessities of nature and the divine, it is clear that ultimately, it is their own interpretation that matters ('our opinion... and our knowledge... lead us to conclude'). The Athenians establish their version of reality as a universal truth claiming that they did not make this 'general and necessary law of nature' themselves. However, they know that given the self-interested behaviour of states, only the powerful will choose to act according to the Law of Nature because they profit from it. The Law of Nature will prevail because both the weak and the strong act in accordance with it: the strong do so because it is profitable and the weak are forced into compliance.

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[113]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.55

[114]H. van Wees, *Greek Warfare - Myths and Realities* (London, Duckworth, 2004), p. 119/20

[115]van Wees, *Greek Warfare - Myths and Realities*, p. 121

[116]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 100

In the Fifth Century, the various written laws of different cities and cultures contrast with unwritten laws, which are either attributed to the divine or to the forces of nature. What the Athenians represent as a Law of Nature falls into the category of unwritten laws. By ascribing the Law of Nature both to the gods and to nature, they hope to endow it with as much authority as possible. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguishes between particular and common laws, which he defines as follows:

There are two kinds of law, one particular and one common. By particular laws I mean those determined by each people in relation to themselves, and these again are divided into written and unwritten; by laws that are common I mean those in accordance with nature. For in fact there is a common idea of what is just and unjust in accordance with nature, which all men divine to some extent, even if there is neither sharing in it nor agreement between them.[117]

The Athenian understanding of the Law of Nature corresponds to Aristotle's definition of a common law. In the Melian Dialogue, for example, the Athenians try to convince the islanders that the Natural Law is universal. They use the idea of a Natural Law that supposedly expresses 'a common idea of what is just and unjust in accordance with nature', to conceal that their Might is Right policy cannot claim universal validity but are in fact an unwritten particular law, 'determined by each people in relation to themselves'. As Jaeger points out,

by making the Athenians justify the right of the stronger through the law of nature, and transform God from the guardian of justice into the pattern of all earthly authority and force, Thucydides gives the realistic policy of Athens the depth and validity of a philosophical doctrine... The principle of force forms a realm of its own, with laws of its own, neither abolishing the traditional *nomos* nor admitting its superiority, but simply distinct and separate from it.[118]

In the non-philosophical practical sphere, the dichotomy between *nomos* and *physis* is replaced by a more complex relationship. Backed by military might, the Athenians establish their own interpretation of how force and justice interact: when two powers are equally strong, justice prevails. When unequal powers confront each other, justice is brought about by force. Thus the Athenians dissolve the contrast between *nomos* and *physis*:

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[117]Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 137b4-9 cited by Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 113

[118]W. Jaeger, *Paideia vol.I* (Oxford, Gilbert Highet, 1939) quoted by Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, p. 324

both justice and force become *nomoi* of *physis*. As Rankin observes,

we entertain belief about the gods; whereas about mankind we can be certain... Note that the word used by the Athenians for "the gods" is not the personalised plural, but the abstract *to theion* "that which is divine", or "the divine". It is impersonal, conceptualised, uninterested. And as a cosmic influence it is all the more easily associated with the "necessary impulse of nature" that urges mankind towards domination. The phrase used by Thucydides to describe this urge is *physis anankaia*, "compelling or compulsive nature" - a phrase which matches the seemingly paradox "law of nature" *nomos physeos* of Gorgias. Aggression is the activating principle not merely of human nature, but also of probably divine nature and cosmic nature.[119]

It has been convincingly argued[120] that given the historical circumstances of Athens' position at the outset of the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians would not have acted any less ruthless without Sophist arguments to support their course of action. In 416 BCE Athens has been at war for 15 years, and the loss and hardship caused influence her policies. However,

By casting this description of the opposed interests of the two contending parties in so distinctly a sophist mould, Thucydides informs us of the theoretical support given by sophistry, an offshoot of the highest Hellenic culture, to deeds of unconscionable barbarism... only arguments of expediency are relevant. The fact that the fate of real people is under discussion (it is not mere talk in some rich Athenian's house) brings the "Melian Dialogue" to an intense pitch of tragedy.[121]

The Athenian line of argument is the ultimate fusion of Relativism with Realism: What is expedient for Athens is represented as universally just with reference to a purportedly Natural Law. The Melian Dialogue epitomises the skill with which Athens applies Sophist Relativism to the political sphere.

The role of power in international relations

The idea that the relations between states are determined primarily by their power relationship is at the heart of Political Realism and a recurring theme in Thucydides' *History*

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[119]Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics*, p. 120

[120]Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics*, p. 120

[121]Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics*, p. 121

of the Peloponnesian War. If power structures are the defining feature of international relations, how are they established? In the Debate at Sparta in 432 BCE, the Athenians provide an answer to this question. Defending the empire they gained in the course of the Persian Wars, they argue that power structures are produced by the interplay of historical circumstances and state policies:

We did not gain this empire by force. It came to us at a time when you [the Spartans] were unwilling to fight on to the end against the Persians. At this time our allies came to us of their own accord and begged us to lead them. It was the actual course of events which first compelled us to increase our power to its present extent: fear of Persia was our chief motive, though afterwards we thought, too, of our own honour and our own interest.[122]

All states seek to increase their influence. They seize every opportunity to improve their power status and are sometimes compelled by the circumstances to augment their power. Power is a relative concept which expresses the relationship between states; it can either be forcefully gained by the stronger party or peacefully ceded by the weaker. Athens alleges that her allies have asked for her leadership and willingly ceded some of their power. Given that these states hope to be protected by Athens, it is in their best interest to do so; the urge to survive overrides all other considerations.

For the Athenians, power is a zero-sum-game; which means that the power one state gains another one (or more) inevitably looses. This view is also held by Critias who regards strength as a relative concept: 'Those who live close by are not sorry to see a neighbour engaged in factional strife: if weaker, they will be less likely to be subjected to their rule; if of equal strength, they will become relatively stronger; and if already stronger, they can now subject them more easily.'[123] In this logic, Athens' post-Persian Wars supremacy is made possible by Sparta's weakness and inevitably results in Spartan inferiority. As a consequence of Sparta's unwillingness to continue fighting against the Persians, Athens seizes the opportunity to take on the leadership of the Greek World. The Spartans are well aware that their rival's power increase is equivalent to their own loss of power; hence they attempt to de-legitimise Athens' ascendancy.

Given that states see the conflict over power as a zero-sum game, international relations

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[122]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.75.4-10

[123]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 26, p. 270

are characterised by fierce competition between states and a ruthless race to the top. Critias' writings give us an idea of the hostile political environment of the Fifth Century. His advocacy of war reveals the fierceness of the power struggle in the Greek World:

I will show you it is good to heed those who are urging war, and second that it is necessary. If we knew how to recognise powers that are by nature hostile to this land, we would have recognised them and taken precautions before suffering any harm; we would have used every device to render them weaker and ourselves stronger, understanding that a power that is hostile by nature will remain peaceful only if it is unable to inflict harm.[124]

During the debate on the Sicilian Expedition in 415 BCE, Alcibiades, one of the designated Athenian commanders, argues accordingly: 'The fact is that we have reached a stage where we are forced to plan new conquests and forced to hold on to what we have got, because there is a danger that we ourselves may fall under the power of others unless others are in our power.'[125] Power is dynamic; it fluctuates between power holders. Rival states have to assess their power status permanently to further expand their power. One state's might is another state's impotence. State power is challenged constantly and needs to be safeguarded against outside threats. In order to prevent subjugation, states conquer their adversaries pre-emptively. The more power a state has, the more energy its leaders need to invest in maintaining the status quo.

In the Melian Dialogue (416/5 BCE), the Athenians explain why an imperial power has to display strength permanently: 'those who still preserve their independence do so because they are strong, and [that] if we fail to attack them it is because we are afraid. So that by conquering you we shall increase not only the size but the security of our empire. We rule the sea and you are islanders, and weaker islanders too than the others; it is therefore particularly important that you should not escape.'[126] The mightier the subdued state, the more Athens gains in reputation and in power. If a supreme power like Athens misses an opportunity for aggrandizement, this is seen as a sign of weakness.

Supremacy is the ultimate goal of foreign policy. Sometimes it is more expedient for Athens to set up alliances than to use force. In the Dispute over Corcyra in 433

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[124]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 26, p. 268

[125]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.18.19-22

[126]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.97.2-8

BCE, the Corcyraeans try to convince Athens that an alliance with their island would be in their self-interest: 'Your [Athens'] aim, no doubt, should be, if it were possible, to prevent anyone else having a navy at all: the next best thing is to have on your side the strongest navy that there is.'[127] Alliances are based on considerations of power and common interest. Instead of building on mutual trust, they rely on fear. This is a consequence of the permanent state of war in the international sphere, which negatively shapes a state's perception of other states and makes fear a prime motive of foreign policy.

During the Revolt of Mytilene in 428-7 BCE, the ambassadors of the Lesbian city describe the characteristics of their alliance with Athens in the following words: 'And in an alliance the only safe guarantee is an equality of mutual fear; for then the party that wants to break faith is deterred by the thought that the odds will not be on his side.'[128] Further on, they add: 'In most cases goodwill is the basis of loyalty, but in our case fear was the bond, and it was more through terror than through friendship that we were held together in alliance. And the alliance was certain to be broken at any moment by the first side that felt confident that this would be a safe move to make.'[129] For states to enter an alliance, the fear on the other side has to be equally strong for both partners. If there is an imbalance of fear, the stronger party will eventually break the alliance. Since each party waits for the other to grow weaker, alliances are unstable and temporary by nature. Van Wees draws a slightly different picture of alliances among Greek states in the Fifth Century. He believes that the success and durability of an alliance depends on the shared interests and the genuine goodwill of both sides. However, he agrees that when interests change or good intentions evaporate, an alliance is liable to be abandoned quite quickly, since few states are both able and willing to keep reluctant allies in line by force. Those who try, like the Athenians, are resented as 'tyrants'.[130]

The level of fear a state induces in other states is the best indicator of its power status. At the Debate at Sparta in 432 BCE, the Corinthians characterise Sparta's foreign policy in this way: 'You Spartans are the only people in Hellas who wait calmly on events,

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[127]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.35.27-30

[128]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.11.7-10

[129]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.12.6-11

[130]van Wees, *Greek Warfare Myths and Realities*, p. 15

relying for your defence not on action but on making people think that you will act.'[131] While the Corinthians claim that this policy will ultimately fail to safeguard the city's security, the Spartan king Archidamus holds that deterrence is the key to a state's power status. Once a state has demonstrated its power and incited fear amongst its allies and enemies alike, it does not necessarily have to use military force to prevent aggression.

States regularly instrumentalise fear in order to keep their enemies at bay. At the launching of the Sicilian Expedition in 415 BCE, Nicias, the Athenian commander, suggests that inducing fear in the Sicilians is more effective than conquering the island:

The best way for us to make ourselves feared by the Hellenes in Sicily is not to go there at all; and the next best thing is to make a demonstration of our power and then, after a short time, go away again. We all know that what is most admired is what is farthest off and least liable to have its reputation put to the test; and if anything went wrong with us, they would immediately look down on us and join our enemies here in attacking us.[132]

When a state is too weak to defeat an enemy, calculated demonstrations of power may produce a sufficient level of fear to avoid open conflict. The psychological instrumentalisation of fear is as powerful a weapon as real military strength.

As a consequence, fear can effectively produce a more stable international environment than mutual respect or trust. At the Debate at Camarina in 415/4 BCE, Euphemus, the Athenian representative, tries to convince the Camarinaeans to join the Athenian alliance. He describes the effects of Athenian dominance on international politics:

you ought to grasp and make full use of everything in our interventionism and our general character which fits in with your interests, and you should reflect that these characteristics of ours, so far from doing harm to all alike, are to the majority of the Hellenes a positive blessing. It is something which has its effect on all men everywhere, even in places where we are not established, because the possibility of our intervention is always something to be considered both by those who fear aggression and those who are actually planning an aggressive move; the former can hope for our help, the latter must reflect that, if we do intervene, their enterprise is likely to be a dangerous one; so in both cases we make ourselves felt: the potential aggressor

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[131]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.69.23-25

[132]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.11.16-23

is forced, even against his own will, to behave reasonably, and those who might have been his victims are saved without having to exert themselves. Do not reject this security which all who ask can have and which is now available to you.[133]

As the Greek hegemon, Athens provides her allies with security produced by fear of Athenian intervention. A superpower's deterrence potential has a pacifying effect on its sphere of influence.

Given that states constantly compete for power, how does the relationship between equal powers differ from that between unequal powers? In the international system, states are ranked according to their relative power. More often than not, the relationship between states is characterised by inequality in strength. As has been demonstrated above, the Athenians hold that the relations between unequal states are ruled by what they call the Law of Nature: 'we recommend that you should try to get what is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really think; since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.'[134]

However, when two powers of equal strength confront each other, it is in their best interest to consider the other parties' objectives and to find a solution which is beneficial for both sides. In the years of the Pentecontaetia (479-435 BCE), Themistocles advises the citizens of Athens to fortify her walls in order to protect the city against outside attack. This puts Athens in a favourable position when confronting her rivals. Themistocles is well aware that 'it was only on the basis of equal strength that equal and fair discussions on the common interest could be held.'[135]

The power structures of the Greek World in the Fifth Century have an impact on both the content and on the success of Athenian policies. Athens instrumentalises Sophist philosophy to strengthen her superiority and to create an international environment conducive to her interests. The political theory which underlies Athenian policies is built on Relativism. For an imperial power, it makes sense to conduct politics based on the

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[133]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.87.14-32

[134]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.89.8-14

[135]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.91.34-35

assumption that the rightness of policies is relative to the state that pursues them. In any case, Athens' power status allows her to pursue any policy she wants. Due to her dominance, Realist politics become the paradigm other states are forced to abide by. For the Athenians, Sophist Relativism serves to justify the status quo while realist policies are used to preserve it.

Moral Relativism in international relations

The Epistemological Scepticism of the Sophists combined with their radical Relativism has far-reaching implications for morality. In the framework of Sophist thinking all moral values are equally valid or invalid and it is pointless to assert the superiority of one over the other. In the *Dissoi Logoi*, an anonymous treatise of uncertain date which shows some resemblance to Protagoras' thinking, an unknown author discusses the concept of Right and Wrong:

Double arguments are also put forth concerning right and wrong; and some say that right is one thing and wrong another, but others that the same thing is right and wrong. And I shall try to support this position. First I shall say that it is right to lie and deceive; one could even assert that it is shameful and wicked to do these things to enemies but not to close relatives. Take parents, for example. If you need to give a drug to your father or mother to eat or drink, and they are unwilling, isn't it right to give it in their porridge or their drink and not tell them it is there?[136]

What is right and what is wrong can only be determined in relation to the circumstances and to the individuals concerned. Moral judgements vary from case to case. Furthermore, they reflect a specific individual perspective which is subjective and can therefore be neither challenged nor disproved. While one person may consider it right to deceive her parents if it is for their own good, another might condemn the same action as wrong. Protagoras describes the philosophical consequences of Subjectivism: 'Each thing is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you.'[137] We live in parallel universes composed of individual perspectives. And since each individual is the sole measure of his values moral disputes are inevitable and insoluble.

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[136]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 3, p. 301

[137]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 17, p. 186

Moral Subjectivism applies to individuals and city states alike. In Protagoras' view, a city is the only judge of her policies: 'Whatever each city judges to be just and fine, these things in fact are just and fine for it, so long as it holds these opinions.'[138] Justice has only a temporary meaning; it is valid until the city changes its views. Justice is not universal; something might be just for one city but unjust for another city. And what seems right in one situation might be considered wrong in another. The author of the *Dissoi Logoi* argues that even breaking into a public building is right if your father is imprisoned in it.[139]

In the *History of the Peloponnesian War* the discourse on morality in international relations is centred on two opposing views. The Athenians hold that there are no universal standards of justice and that the relations between states are governed by the Law of Nature. Athenian allies and enemies alike criticise this approach and try to establish general rules that in their opinion ought to govern a state's policies.

In the Dispute over Corcyra in 433 BCE, the Corinthians claim that states ought to observe the rules of reciprocity in their dealings with one another. Athens should treat Corinth the same way Corinth has treated Athens: 'you ought to behave towards us as we have behaved towards you.'[140] Knowing that Athenian politicians are most receptive to arguments of security and self-interest, the Corinthians add: 'The power that deals fairly with its equals finds a truer security than the one which is hurried into snatching some apparent but dangerous advantage.'[141] They hold that amongst equals, fairness is advantageous to all. Their ideal of fairness is not universal; it does not apply to states of unequal might. Unfortunately for them, this is probably why the Athenians ignore Corinth's appeals and choose to pursue their immediate self-interest: she enters into an alliance with Corcyra despite violating her treaty obligations with Corinth.

At the debate marking the end of Plataea in 427 BCE, the Plataeans condemn Athenian standards of justice: 'If you are going to take as your standards of justice your own immediate advantage [...], you will stand confessed as people who are more interested

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[138]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 14, p. 186

[139]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 3, p. 302

[140]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.42.3-4

[141]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.42.18-43.1

in pursuing your own interests than in judging sincerely between right and wrong.'[142]
Athens' opponents refuse to accept that Athenian politicians have decided once and for
all what is just: whatever suits their own interests. In their eyes, right and wrong and
just and unjust are practical concepts only. It is the facts on the ground that decide
what is morally right for Athens. And this is precisely where the Athenian approach to
international politics differs from that of other *poleis*. The majority of Greek city states
seem to think that there are universal moral values; and the behaviour of states should
be governed by rules based on these values. For example, the Plataeans demand that the
principles of international relations should be applied consistently: 'the same principles
should be made to apply throughout, and it should be recognised that true policy con-
sists not only in safeguarding one's immediate interests.'[143] To them, self-interest is not a
moral principle and therefore not a 'true policy'. These approaches to politics could not
be any more different. And since there is no common ground between Realist and moral
arguments, their advocators inevitably clash.

Unlike the Athenians, the Spartans resort to universal concepts of Right and Wrong in
order to justify their often ruthless policies. In 424 BCE, Brasidas, after having marched
against their city tries to convince the Acanthians to cut their bonds with Athens and join
Sparta's alliance against the Athenians. Faced with their reluctance he threatens them:

I came here to help you and could not make you understand it. I shall lay waste your land and
try to bring you over by force. And, once this point has been reached, I shall not consider that
I am doing anything wrong. I shall consider that I have two good reasons on my side which
force me to take this action: first, I must prevent Sparta from suffering from the money which
you, our friends, will go on paying to the Athenians, if you refuse to join us; secondly, I must
not allow the Hellenes to be hindered by you from throwing off their chains. [...] We Spartans
are only justified in liberating people against their own will, because we are acting for the good
of one and all alike. We have no imperialistic ambitions; our whole effort is to put an end to
imperialism, and we should be doing wrong to the majority, if we were to put up with your

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[142]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.56.8-12
[143]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.56.30-33

opposition to the independence which we are offering to all.[144]

For Brasidas, the ends justify the means. Whether a particular course of action is right or wrong is determined by its ulterior motives. Although he clearly argues in terms of Sparta's interest (i.e. preventing Sparta from suffering and depriving the Hellenes of their freedom), he puts a moral spin to it. Claiming to be acting for 'the good of one and all alike', he adorns his policies with the legitimacy of higher moral ends. The Athenians, however, dismantle their rival's value-talk asserting that 'the Spartans are most conspicuous for believing that what they like doing is honourable and what suits their interests is just.'[145] Indeed, this is the fundamental difference between Athens' and Sparta's approach to politics. The Spartans may or may not genuinely believe in the importance of justice and morality in international affairs. Either way, they use moral principles to justify their self-interested policies. The Athenians, on the other hand, refrain from employing value arguments altogether because they fundamentally question their validity. Although they make use of the concept of justice, they do not ascribe a universal rather a particular value to it, i.e. the fact that it suits their own interests. In contrast to the Spartans, the Athenians openly admit that their policies are guided by self-interest only.

The conflict over the role of moral considerations in international politics culminates in the Melian Dialogue (416/5 BCE). At the beginning of the debate, the Athenians define its purpose. They warn the Melians: 'if you have met here for any other reason except to look the facts in the face and on the basis of these facts to consider how you can save your city from destruction, there is no point in our going on with this discussion.'[146] With this statement, the Athenians communicate clearly that they do not intend to engage in a value discussion about the rights and wrongs of their policies. They assert that each state should seek to maximise its gains given its relative power position. The Melian reply defies this realist paradigm:

Then in our view (since you force us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest) - in our view it is at any rate useful that you should not destroy a principle that is

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[144]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4.87.14-28

[145]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.105.21-23

[146]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.87.2-5

to the general good of all men - namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing [...] And this is a principle that affects you as much as anybody, since your own fall would be visited by the most terrible vengeance and would be an example to the world.[147]

Though the Melians pretend to ignore all considerations of justice, they merely cloak their moral argument under the concepts of self-interest and utility. They argue that it cannot be in Athens' interest to disregard a principle she may profit from in the future. Since power is temporary, all states will eventually benefit from the principle that states in danger should be dealt with fairly and justly. Up to this point, the Melian argument meets the requirements of Political Realism. However, their reference to the general good of all men clearly transcends the boundaries of self-interest and expediency. It betrays the Melians' real conviction: that the relations between states should be governed by principles that benefit the international community as a whole.

It is not surprising that the Athenians only respond to the Realist dimension of the Melian argument. Contrary to what the Melians believe, Athens is not concerned with long term effects but focuses on her immediate interest. What is good and what is bad for her empire is decided now; only facts that have an impact on the present state of affairs are relevant. For the Athenians, the best possible solution to the conflict would be the surrender of the island: 'We do not want any trouble in bringing you into our empire, and we want you to be spared for the good both of yourselves and of ourselves.'[148] The Melians reply: 'And how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters?'[149] The Athenians assert: 'You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you.'[150] The Athenians and the Melians have very different ideas of how their conflict could be resolved. The Melians expect the dispute to be settled fairly. Any solution ought to be equally beneficial for both sides. From the Athenian perspective, the Melians are in a weaker position and therefore have to accept a suboptimal resolution. Where there is an imbalance of power, there is no room for fairness: 'This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame

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[147]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.90.1-10

[148]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.91.10-12

[149]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.92.1-2

[150]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.93.1-3

on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are too strong for you.'[151] This is a question of power as well as a measure of prudence since 'if one follows one's self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path of justice and honour involves one in danger.'[152] Though the Athenians realise that their policies do not conform to conventional notions of justice, they consciously choose to ignore them. Firstly, because they profit from it. Secondly, because they can. From a realist point of view, the path of self-interest promises more safety than any international law could possibly provide. And Athens' supremacy guarantees that she will be able to impose these policies with force.

Athens' approach to international relations challenges Greek traditions and customs. This is amply illustrated by a number of references to the customary laws that seem to have conventionally governed the relations between Greek city states. At the debate preceding the end of Plataea in 427 BCE, the Plataeans justify their resistance against the Thebans, who have seized their city in the period of a religious festival as follows: 'we acted rightly and in accordance with the general law that one is always justified in resisting an aggressor.'[153] This reference to a general law indicates that the international system composed of Greek *poleis* is not entirely unregulated. There appears to be a vague set of rules widespread enough for states to appeal to them in international conflicts. However, what this body of law consists of is difficult to establish.

There are also hints towards the existence of Hellenic law, referred to by Ehrenberg as 'interhellenisches Völkerrecht' and described by Guthrie as unwritten laws based on moral principles believed to be universally valid, or alternatively valid all over the Greek world. 'Their authors were the gods, and no breach of them could remain unpunished. They were already closely connected with the natural world, for to contrast man with nature instead of seeing him as a part of it is a modern rather than a Greek habit.'[154] These notions might be identical with the general law mentioned by the Plataeans. Further on in their speech, the Plataeans pledge: 'we surrendered to you voluntarily, stretching out

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[151]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.101.1-4

[152]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.107.1-3

[153]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.56.5-7

[154]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 129

our hands as suppliants, and Hellenic law forbids killing in these circumstances.'[155]

When Athens is defeated at Delium in 424/3 BCE, a Boeotian herald comes before the Athenians and delivers the following message: 'that the Athenians had done wrong and transgressed against Hellenic law. It was a rule established everywhere that an invader of another country should keep his hands off the temples that were in that country. The Athenians, however, had fortified Delium and were living in it.'[156] The law or general rule that the Boeotians refer to relates to religious customs. It points to the fact that there must have been certain agreements establishing respect for each city's customs. When fully weighed however, the evidence is too scarce to allow us to draw conclusions as to the dissemination and validity of such a Hellenic law.

For our purposes, it suffices to point out that the relations between Greek states in the Fifth Century seem to be somewhat governed by an oral customary or traditional law, which is no doubt uncodified. As the above examples illustrate, this law is believed to be universally valid and is attributed to the gods. This is the fundamental difference between the unwritten laws the Athenians refer to and those invoked by their rivals. Whereas other Greeks regard the moral principles which underlie the unwritten laws as emanating from the gods, the Athenians defend a secular view of these laws which gains ground by the middle of the Fifth Century. Instead of the divine, an impersonal nature is the source behind the unwritten laws, whose decree is nevertheless absolute, and their neglect inevitably punished as the laws of the gods used to be. But they do not necessarily follow the precepts of traditional morality, for under the influence of mechanistic scientific theories the natural world is no longer subject to moral government.[157] The contrast between the traditional theistic and the Athenian secular conception of the unwritten laws explains the refusal of the Greek states to abandon long-established rules of conduct.

Athenian politics run counter to Greek conventions in a radical and uncompromising way. Their policies demarcate the transition from a religious to a secular view of law and spark off intense debates on which rules should govern international affairs.

In our discussion, we have demonstrated that Sophist philosophy and Political Realism

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[155]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.58.13-15

[156]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4.97.10-14

[157]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 130

are intricately linked. Athens' policies become more accessible once we interpret them in the light of Sophist philosophical concepts. The Athenians use the framework of Sophist philosophy to develop a new way of conducting politics. Epistemological Scepticism, Relativism and Subjectivism allow Athenian politicians to justify their self-interested policies. Combined with Athens' super power status, this approach to international politics provides the basis of Athens' dominance and tightens the Athenian grip on the world of Greek city states.

Chapter 4

What makes a thought thinkable?

4.1 Fifth Century sense structure and its impact on political thinking and political action

Thus far, we have related Sophist ideas to political concepts and policies. We have demonstrated that the origins of Athenian Political Realism can be traced to the philosophical ideas developed by the Sophists in the Fifth Century. What is the significance of these findings? We hypothesise that without Sophist philosophy, Political Realism would not have been *thinkable*.

In order to substantiate this claim, we will shed light on it from two angles. First, we will explore the connections between Sophist philosophy and Political Realism on the level of ideas. Second, we will examine the facilitating role of the Athenian cultural and intellectual context. It is our aim to establish which factors contribute to the transfer of ideas from the philosophical to the political sphere. We aim to understand how the intellectual environment influences which policies are thinkable or conceivable, proposed, and put into practice.

4.2 How does Sophist philosophy influence political thinking in 5$^{\text{th}}$ Century Athens?

In order to understand why Political Realism emerges at the time of the Peloponnesian War, we need to relate it to its intellectual, historical and cultural context. At the time, the Athenian intellectual sphere is predominantly shaped by Sophist philosophy. In

the previous chapter we have shown that Political Realism is influenced significantly by Sophist assumptions, concepts and ideas. We will now justify this claim arguing that in fact, Realist policies are Sophist ideas applied to the political sphere.

The impact of Sophist thought on Political Realism is not limited to a small number of philosophical ideas that serve as forerunners to certain political concepts. Rather, Political Realism as a whole is profoundly influenced by Sophist philosophy, which permeates all aspects of Athenian intellectual life.

But how is this transfer of ideas from philosophy to politics actually realised? So far, we have examined the relationship between specific philosophical concepts and particular policies. We have established that a considerable number of Sophist fragments can be directly linked to policies pursued by the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War. In these cases at least, Political Realism and Sophist philosophy are closely related. But is this evidence enough for an inherent relation between the two bodies of thought? With the purpose of further substantiating our initial findings, we will now embark on a more complex task. Since the explicit links between individual ideas have already been established we will now focus on the relation between entire bodies of thought. By treating both Political Realism and Sophist philosophy as intellectual entities rather than as mere groupings of ideas, we hope to buttress three fundamental claims: the first is that Political Realism is the inevitable political consequence of Sophist thinking. Secondly, we assert that philosophy gets translated into politics not at the level of individual ideas but on the level of entire bodies of thought. Having developed out of Sophist philosophy, Political Realism is more than a conglomeration of unconnected policies, it is a political philosophy. Finally, the emergence and the success of Realist policies reveal the influence Sophist philosophy has on Athenian society, culture and attitudes. It proves that in a democracy, politics need to be responsive to a society's sense structure in order to be successful.

Before we begin to study entire bodies of ideas let us consider some preliminary thoughts on the development of ideas. To understand an idea properly, we need to be aware of how it developed. All ideas have a genealogy: they grow out of and are influenced by previous ideas. Even so-called original ideas, which *per definitionem* depart from traditional conceptions, develop with reference to the latter. Their originality is only significant with respect to their intellectual context.

Analysing a single idea's lineage does not necessarily imply tracing the origin of each of its components; rather, it means locating an idea within the context of its family tree. For example, studying the genealogical ancestry of an individual teaches us who his or her closest relations are. We can also learn about the individual's family history preceding his or her life. We can determine the relationships between people and find out where they originated from, how many children they have had and when they died. The same method can be applied to trace the origin of an idea.

However, this family tree model can be misleading as it suggests that ideas develop in a linear and causal way. But in fact, rather than supporting a supposed objective order and a chronological hierarchy of ideas, this model allows for a multi-faceted approach to the development of ideas. There are various ways of deriving and contextualising an idea and competition between different interpretations of such a *genealogical path* can be very productive. We have to bear in mind that there is no single correct way of relating one idea to other ideas. On the contrary, the strength of the family tree model lies in its multi-dimensionality which allows for a co-existence of different interpretations.

We also have to bear in mind that the family tree model does not imply a *qualitative* progression of ideas. Ideas are not necessarily more complex or more sophisticated than their precursors. In order to avoid this logical pitfall, it may be helpful to envision the family tree model as a mosaic of ideas. Every idea adds something to the existing pool of ideas without the new ideas necessarily superseding the old ones. New ideas broaden the mosaic of ideas and diversify the overall pattern.

With this approach we hope to shed some light on the complex relationship between Sophist ideas and Political Realism. It will help us understand the connections between ideas as well as those between clusters of ideas.

The influence of Sophist philosophy on Realist politics is manifested on four levels. On the intellectual level, the Sophists' rejection of Presocratic ontology has a significant impact on how history and politics are conceived. Epistemological Scepticism, the logical consequence of this rejection, is used by Athenian politicians to legitimise their Realist policies. This is done in three ways: Firstly by translating Sophist Subjectivism into Moral Relativism. Secondly by using the Law of Nature as a justification for Athenian Might is Right politics. And lastly by employing rhetoric as an instrument of power.

4.2.1   The impact of the Sophist rejection of Presocratic ontology on historical enquiry and the concept of the political

The starting point of Sophist philosophy is the dismissal of all ontological questions. The Sophists realise that it is impossible to determine the relationship between Being and Not-Being and that the only way out of this deadlock is to declare ontological questions per se as unsolvable. Thereby, they successfully manoeuvre philosophy out of the impasse of Presocratic thought. The implications of this fundamental shift are radical and significant. If Being and Not-Being are indeterminate categories, there are no ultimate truths to comprehend and our knowledge is by definition limited.

The Sophist rejection of what are central philosophical questions in the eyes of the Presocratics is a turning point not only for philosophy in particular but for Greek thinking in general. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War provides evidence of the impact of these intellectual transformations on both the discipline of historical writing and on the conception of the political in Fifth Century Athens. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* exhibits two closely related phenomena. On the one hand the conception of political events changes, while on the other, policies are *conducted* differently.

Against the backdrop of Sophist thought, the study of history is transformed. Just as the Sophists abandon ontology, Thucydides abandons myth. In Herodotus' *Histories*, written in the first half of the Fifth Century, myths and actual events are intertwined, while in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides recounts facts instead of legends and portrays human beings rather than heroes. What distinguishes his description of the Peloponnesian War from earlier historical accounts is that he deliberately puts politics at the centre of his narrative. This is a reflection of the focus on human action introduced by Sophist philosophy. Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides refrains from associating politics with divine intervention and does not represent political conflicts as strife between gods, semi-gods and humans. He claims that his description of political events is based purely on facts. In the introduction to the *History of the Peloponnesian War* Thucydides stresses his reliance on factual evidence: 'And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present

myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible.'[158] Thucydides interprets the accounts of witnesses in a rational way. He establishes causal relationships between events, and ascertains a chronological order. He is well aware of the novelty of his approach. This explains why he feels the need to warn his audience: 'And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past...'[159] For him, the events of the war have an objective reality; they are produced by men and can thus be known by men. Given his own biography, he feels in the position to understand the war adequately: 'I lived through the whole of it, being of an age to understand what was happening, and I put my mind to the subject so as to get an accurate view of it.'[160] Solmsen highlights the centrality of reason in Thucydides' enquiry: 'No ancient historian has the same confidence that by using his reason to the fullest extent he recovers the "truth".'[161] Although rational reasoning and analysis are compatible with Sophist thought, Thucydides' approach nevertheless conflicts with Sophist philosophy. For the Sophists, there is no objective reality which means that there can be no universal knowledge of past events. In Thucydides view, objective knowledge of the past is possible. Through the use of reason, the historian can reconstruct the actual course of events from various subjective accounts. However, the disagreement between Sophist philosophy and Thucydides' historical enquiry is balanced by a more fundamental congruity between the two. In the same way that Sophist philosophy deconstructs the transcendental (i.e. the notion of the universal categories Being and Not-Being), Thucydides discards any transcendental meaning of reality. His insistence that there is no ulterior meaning behind the reality of facts and events reflects Sophist influence and revolutionises the Greek conception of the past.

The Sophist rejection of ontology is reflected in the political realm as well. Yet again, the *History of the Peloponnesian War* illustrates this change. And since Thucydides is

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[158]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.9-14

[159]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.17-22

[160]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.26.23-25

[161]Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*, p. 175

both an Athenian citizen and an Athenian general who writes for an Athenian audience, we can reasonably assume that his perspective is representative of a wide-ranging change in Athenian political culture. He would not have written a rational historical narrative had he not been convinced that his readership would be interested in a factual account of political events. As an Athenian citizen, Thucydides is influenced by the Athenian political culture. As a general, he has the power to shape that political culture. As a historian, he is in a position to reinforce a certain notion of history and politics. Hence studying Thucydides' perspective helps us explore the links between the Sophist abandonment of ontology and the re-conceptualisation of politics.

The Fifth Century is a watershed for the conception of historical and political events. In Pericles' Funeral Oration in 431/0 BCE we find clear evidence that there is a widespread desire amongst the Athenians to know the truth about the past: 'We do not need the praises of a Homer, or of anyone else whose words may delight us for the moment, but whose estimation of facts will fall short of what is really true.'[162] This shift allows Thucydides to introduce a new narrative perspective. With the *History of the Peloponnesian War* this new narrative is firmly established and will go on to influence the subsequent intellectual discourses.

Thucydides represents the new factualism and pragmatism that characterise politics in the Fifth Century. In a world in which questions of existence are no longer relevant, politics need to focus on the practical issues of life. At the beginning of the Melian Dialogue in 416/5 BCE, the Athenians inform their adversaries that their conflict can merely be resolved on the basis of facts: 'if you have met here for any other reason except to look the facts in the face and on the basis of these facts to consider how you can save your city from destruction, there is no point in our going on with this discussion.'[163] They stress that in political disputes, only factual arguments are valid: 'Then we on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done to us - a great mass of words that nobody would believe.'[164]

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[162]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.41.15-18

[163]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.87.2-5

[164]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.89.1-5

Furthermore, the Athenians describe themselves as a 'practical people'[165] who think that political decisions are determined by considerations of power rather than by morality. The pragmatism of Athenian politicians is also reflected in their attitude towards politicians. In the Mytilenian Debate in 427 BCE, Cleon states that 'as a general rule states are better governed by the man in the street than by intellectuals.'[166] In his view, Athenian politics require a certain type of politician. Cleon also asserts that political decisions should be based on facts only. He reproaches his audience for being too easily deluded by political speeches and not being capable of considering the facts that lie before them. These examples demonstrate how the Athenians reach their foreign policy aims. First, they pressure other states into conducting their political affairs according to their own pragmatic standards. Second, they seek to transform international relations by spreading their own political model. The forcefulness with which they pursue these aims betrays their strong belief in the transferability of their own political standards.

The transformation of politics in the Fifth Century is initiated by Athens. In the same way that Sophist philosophers cast aside fundamental ontological questions, Athenian politicians discard non-factual matters in the political sphere.

Yet what is the relationship between the conception of political events and the conduct of politics? There are three possible answers to this question. We could assert that the way politics is conducted has an impact on how it is perceived. This would imply that Thucydides' perspective on the politics of the Peloponnesian War differs from former historical accounts because of the unique characteristics of Fifth Century politics. Then again, it could be argued that Thucydides' distinct perspective as a historian determines his representation of politics. And since we cannot prove the accuracy of his account, it is very possible that his description of Fifth Century politics reflects his own perspective rather than what actually took place. However, the most reasonable answer to the question would be to emphasise the inseparability of political conduct and the conception of politics. Trying to establish which side has a bigger impact on the other will not be fruitful. Instead, we should conceive of both phenomena as two sides of the same coin. Changes in the conception and in the conduct of politics are part of the fundamental

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[165]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.26.11

[166]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.37.21-22

transition processes which characterise the Fifth Century. Neither of these changes can be understood without reference to the broader changes that take place in the *polis*.

4.2.2 The instrumentalisation of Epistemological Scepticism.

The Epistemological Scepticism of the Sophists implies that it is impossible for us to know anything beyond ourselves. As a consequence, our different views of reality cannot be resolved. From Thucydides' account of Athenian policies during the Peloponnesian War, we can reconstruct how the Athenians translate these philosophical assumptions into politics.

The Athenians instrumentalise Sophist thought to advance their city's interest. They subscribe to the view that each individual, and hence each state, has their own distinct perspective. And just as individual views clash on the domestic level, so too do state views clash in the international realm. But while for Sophist philosophy these contradictions are unsolvable *per se*, the Athenians resolve them through force: Athens compels other city states to submit to the Athenian interpretation of politics, i.e. that the strong should rule the weak. Though on the surface this policy seems to run counter to Sophist philosophy, it actually reflects a Sophist way of thinking. The Athenian reasoning is as follows: though theoretically any perspective or policy is equally valid or invalid, one can present one's view as universally valid and the more powerful can force the less powerful to accept their interpretation of reality. This attitude reflects a specific aspect of Protagorean philosophy. Despite Protagoras' insistence that individual views cannot be refuted, he claims that one can convince someone else of one's own perspective. He replaces truth and falsehood with advantage and disadvantage, and the Athenians follow in his footsteps.

Now it could be argued that it is primarily due to the distribution of power among Greek city states that Athenian politicians can pursue their Might is Right policy. We, however, assert that although the balance of power is no doubt favourable to Athenian dominance, it is not the central factor determining the formulation of Athenian policies. While Athenian power makes Political Realism *realisable*, it is Sophist philosophy which makes it *thinkable*. Athenian supremacy is clearly not a blank cheque for any kind of policy.

Why do Athenian politicians employ Sophist concepts to justify their policies? The most reasonable explanation is that Athenian democracy requires them to. Since all political strategies are discussed and voted on in the assembly, Athenian politicians and generals need to argue their case in public in order to gain political support. And since Athenian sense structure is strongly influenced by Sophist philosophy, it is reasonable for them to propose policies compatible with it. This is reinforced by the fact that democratic states need to legitimise their actions. Since domestic conflicts are resolved by debate, democratic politicians are expected to justify their state's external use of force with arguments as well. Finally, legitimising her policies is an instrument of soft power which Athens employs to win the minds of those that will eventually be conquered by force. For all these reasons, it makes sense for Athenian politicians to justify their policies with reference to the intellectual framework of Sophist philosophy. Rather than the policies as such it is the underlying way of thinking which exposes Sophist influence on Athenian foreign policy.

4.2.3 Subjectivism and Moral Relativism

As a corollary of Epistemological Scepticism, all knowledge is subjective. As individuals we are not bound by any external authority; all our judgements are valid because they emanate from our private perspective. Protagoras defines the essence of Subjectivism as follows: 'A human being is measure of all things, of those things that are, that they are, and of those things that are not, that they are not.'[167] He applies the same logic to states: 'Whatever each city judges to be just and fine, these things in fact are just and fine for it, so long as it holds these opinions.'[168] These fragments clearly reveal the political dimension of Sophist philosophy. Protagoras explores the point of intersection between morality and political morality. He applies philosophical standards to politics thereby revealing the inherent association of the two realms.

What about the application of this political philosophy? The Athenians seem to draw several conclusions from Sophist Subjectivism. First and foremost, Subjectivism ensures the validity as well as the legitimacy of their self-interest policies. It provides the ground

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[167]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 15, p. 186

[168]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 14, p. 186

for Moral Relativism which, backed up by force, becomes the ultimate tool of Athenian foreign policy. In putting Might is Right arguments at the centre of their policies, the Athenians treat justice as a relative concept. As long as their policy of dominance is right, i.e. beneficial for Athens, it is justified. Any other claims such as an appeal to universal morality or justice are dismissed as arguments inspired by the self-interest of other states. Hence the Athenians adopt and implement Protagoras' claim that each city determines her own standards of justice and rectitude.

4.2.4 The concept of justice and the Law of Nature

In Plato's *Gorgias,* Callicles, who may or may not have been a historical figure, develops an argument about justice which is closely associated with the teachings of the Sophists. His notion of justice is based on the distinction between nature (*physis*) and custom (*nomos*) and provides a philosophical justification for the Athenian Law of Nature. His argument is set against the backdrop of the *nomos vs. physis* debate of the Fifth Century, which, as Guthrie demonstrates, enters into most questions of the day: 'Discussion of religion turned on whether gods existed by *physis* - in reality - or only by *nomos*; of cosmopolitanism, on whether divisions within the human race are natural or only a matter of *nomos*; of equality, on whether the rule of one man over another (slavery) or one nation over another (empire) is natural and inevitable, or only by *nomos*; and so on.'[169] While for the men of classical times, the *nomoi* applicable to all mankind are believed to emanate from the divine, the Sophists emphasise the antithesis of the two concepts in the moral and in the political sphere. *Nomos* acquires two meanings: the usage or custom based on traditional or conventional beliefs as to what is right or true, and the laws formally drawn up and passed, which codify 'right usage' and elevate it into an obligatory norm backed by the authority of the state.[170]

Both Antiphon and Hippias are advocates of *physis*; they think that nature should take precedence over custom. Hippias, whose views are expressed in Plato's Protagoras, describes the fundamental dichotomy between nature and custom: 'I believe that you men who are present here are all kinsmen, family members, and fellow citizens by nature

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[169]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III,* pp. 55-56
[170]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III,* pp. 56-57

(*phusis*) though not by custom (*nomos*). For by nature like is kin to like, but custom is a tyrant over human beings and forces many things on us that are contrary to nature.'[171] Antiphon establishes the primacy of nature over custom:

Justice, therefore, is not violating the rules of the city in which one is a citizen. Thus a person would best use justice to his own advantage if he considered the laws (*nomoi*) important when witnesses are present, but the consequences of nature (*phusis*) important in the absence of witnesses. For the requirements of the laws are supplemental but the requirements of nature are necessary; and the requirements of the laws are by agreement and not natural, whereas the requirements of nature are natural and not by agreement. Thus someone who violates the laws avoids shame and punishment if those who have joined in agreement do not notice him, but not if they do. But if someone tries to violate one of the inherent requirements of nature, which is impossible, the harm he suffers is no less if he is seen by no one, and no greater if all see him; for he is harmed not in reputation but in truth. I enquire into these things for the following reason, that most things that are just according to law are inimical to nature. For rules have been made for the eyes, what they should and should not see, and for the ears, what they should and should not hear, and for the tongue, what it should and should not say, and for the hands, what they should and should not do, and for the feet, where they should and should go, and for the mind, what it should and should not desire. Thus the things from which the laws dissuade us are in no way less congenial or akin to nature than the things towards which they urge us. For living and dying both belong to nature, and for humans living is the result of advantageous things, whereas dying is the result of disadvantageous things. The advantages laid down by the laws are bonds on nature, but those laid down by nature are free.[172]

Though Antiphon insists on a fundamental opposition between nature and law, he does not go as far as referring to any laws of nature. Rather than developing a notion of natural justice, he refers to the 'requirements of nature', a more general term which seems to express merely a factual condition.

Callicles' argument reiterates the claims of Hippias and of Antiphon while also examining its consequences for life in the *polis*. We have chosen to represent his argument in its entirety (while omitting certain repetitions) in order to expose the conclusiveness of

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[171] Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 5, p. 216

[172] Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 7b, p. 245

his reasoning.

By nature whatever is worse, such as suffering injustice, is more shameful; and it is only by custom (*nomos*) that doing injustice is worse... In fact, I think it is people who are weak - common people - who make the laws. It's for themselves and their own advantage that they make the laws they make... They are afraid of the people who are stronger and have the power to take more than their share, and so to keep them from taking more than their share they say that taking more than one's share is shameful and unjust. Since they are weaker, I believe they are pleased to have an equal share. That is why people say, by custom, that it is unjust and shameful to try to have a bigger share than the common people, and they call this "doing injustice". But I believe that nature itself reveals that it is just for the better man to have a larger share than the worse, and the more powerful than the less powerful. This is clearly shown to be so everywhere, both for the other animals and for whole cities and tribes of human beings: that justice has been decided in this way, for the better man to rule the worse and to have a larger share. What other kind of justice did Xerxes plead when he invaded Greece, or his father, when he invaded Scythia? And one could name any number of similar examples. Now I believe that it was in accordance with the nature of justice that these men acted thus, and yes, by Zeus, in accordance with the law of nature - though probably not in accordance with this law we make. We take our own best and strongest when they are young like lions, and we mould them into slaves, bewitching them with incantations, saying that [everyone] should have an equal share and that this is what justice and nobility require. I believe, however, that if a man is born with a nature that is good enough he will shake all this off and burst through and escape. He will trample on our written stuff and magic tricks and incantations and on all those laws that are against nature. The slave will rise and show himself our master, and the light of natural justice will shine from him.[173]

Callicles seeks to demonstrate that the requirements of man-made law are contrary to the requirements of nature. In his view, true justice is reflected in the natural world and should prevail over the justice established by men. Just as the lion takes the biggest prey, strong men are justified in obtaining a bigger share than they would deserve according to the standard of equality. Callicles depicts man as a self-interested creature who seeks to

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[173]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, pp. 310-11

maximise his benefits. The weak join forces to impose a system of justice on the strong, which guarantees equal benefits for all. Thereby, they obtain more than they would have under the reign of the strong and the strong loose what they would have gained by suppressing the weak. Just as customary justice serves the interests of the weak, natural justice serves the interests of the strong. And since the Law of Nature overrides customary laws, Callicles calls upon men born with a good nature to shake off the yoke of civilisation in order to rule and reap the benefits of dominion. Nature prescribes men to seek the maximum gratification of all their desires and the naturally superior ought to lead a life without self-control or self restraint. Just as *physis* triumphs over *nomos*, Might is Right.

It is noteworthy [174], that the term 'law of nature' which Callicles uses to justify Xerxes' invasion of Greece, includes an untranslatable particle in Greek which signifies that the term is new. This may be if not the earliest surely one of the earlier mentions of a Natural Law in Greek thought.

Since the idea of the Law of Nature plays such an eminent role in Fifth Century philosophical debates it is not surprising that it finds resonance in the political sphere. An analysis of the political discourse in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* reveals the similarity of philosophical and political arguments. Thucydides describes Fifth Century politics as a battlefield on which the conflict between Natural Law and customary laws is fought. Athenian politicians support the Law of Nature and seem to embrace the conviction expressed in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*: 'For by nature the stronger is not restrained by the weaker but the weaker is ruled and led by the stronger: the stronger leads, the weaker follows.'[175]

At the outset of the war, the Athenians claim: 'It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power.'[176] From the Athenian point of view, their power alone is justification enough for their supremacy and for any policy which further strengthens it. This rather biased perspective on justice in international relations is challenged by the advocates of customary law. In 424/3 BCE, shortly after the Athenian fortification of Delium, conflict ensues with

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[174]See Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 311

[175]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, p. 192

[176]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.14-15

the Boeotians due to Athens' alleged desecration of the city's temples. The Boeotians deliver the following message to the Athenians: 'that the Athenian had done wrong and transgressed against Hellenic law. It was a rule established everywhere that an invader of another country should keep his hands off the temples that were in that country. The Athenians, however, had fortified Delium and were living in it. They were doing all the things that men do on unconsecrated ground...'[177] The Boeotians base their claims on a customary rule or law that seems to have regulated the conduct of Greek city states. The Athenians reply that 'they had done nothing wrong with regard to the temple, nor would they do any harm to it in the future, if they could help it; it was not with any such intentions that they had occupied the temple in the first place, but only to use it in self-defence against the Boeotians, who were the real aggressors...'[178] Although on the surface, the Athenians seem to respect what both sides refer to as Hellenic law; they clearly consider it to be secondary to their city's self-interest, i.e. self-defence against the Boeotians. They agree to respect Hellenic law when possible, but indicate that they feel justified in overriding it should the circumstances require them to do so. The Athenians believe that in times of war, even the gods would tolerate the transgression of customary laws: 'it was reasonable to suppose that even the god would look indulgently on any action done under the stress of war and danger...'[179] With (assumed) divine approval, man-made laws can be transcended with impunity. The customary law can thus be overridden by either divine or Natural Law. Whatever arguments they use, it is clear that for the Athenians, their own power and the permanent conflict between states justify any course of action.

The Melian Dialogue in 416/5 BCE shows that in addition to questioning the validity of customary law, the Athenians reject the appeals made by other states to universal laws. The Melians attempt to convince their adversaries that there are rules from which all states benefit: 'Then in our view (since you force us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest) - in our view it is at any rate useful that you should not destroy a principle that is to the general good of all men - namely, that in the case

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[177]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4.97.10-15

[178]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4.98.2-7

[179]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4.98.21-23

of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing [...] And this is a principle that affects you as much as anybody...'[180] These arguments cannot change the fundamental conviction that Athens' foreign policy is based on. As Diodotus, an Athenian politician says: 'Cities and individuals alike, all are by nature disposed to do wrong, and there is no law that will prevent it.'[181] Given this outlook on the nature of states, Athenian politicians rely mainly on the strength of their *polis* and on the only law that they can enforce: the Law of Nature. For Athens, politics is not about justice, it is about usefulness; and the Law of Nature is very useful to Athenian imperial aims.

However, it is noteworthy that within the *polis*, Athenian citizens seem to pledge allegiance to both codified and unwritten laws. In his Funeral Oration, Pericles describes the Athenian attitude towards written and unwritten laws as follows: 'We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break.'[182] While the Athenians understand that obedience to both customary and natural laws is necessary for a polity to function properly, they realise that this does not apply to the international sphere. In the anarchical international system, each state is free to secure its benefit in its own way. There are two dimensions to this. First of all, in a world where man is the measure of all things, he is only bound by his particular idea of justice expressed in his laws. And as conceptions of justice differ from *polis* to *polis*, the concept of justice (as everything else) becomes relative. Secondly, once god-given laws are replaced with man-made ones, moral values come to be seen as merely customary and thus also relative. Laws no longer reflect eternal divine will but temporary human interests. In the absence of universal moral standards what man can impose on his fellows is determined by practicability and expediency.

4.2.5   The use of rhetoric in Athenian politics

The epistemological foundations of rhetoric are provided by Gorgias' claim that knowledge is generally unattainable, relative at best and impossible to communicate: '[Anything you

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[180]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.90.1-9

[181]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.45.7-9

[182]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.19-22

might mention] is nothing; if it were something, it would be unknowable; and if it were something and knowable, it could not be made evident to others.'[183] From a philosophical standpoint, arguments about truth are futile. Just as one's knowledge is doubtful, so too is the knowledge of others. And while one may think that we can communicate our version of reality to others and vice versa, in the end no one can establish the existence of anything. Antiphon describes our fundamental ignorance as follows: 'Someone who says one thing does not in fact have one thing in mind, nor does one thing exist for him, neither something that the one who sees best sees with his sight nor something that the one who knows best knows with his mind.'[184] According to Gagarin and Woodruff, 'Antiphon seems to mean that a single spoken word does not refer to a single object in the speaker's mind or in the real world; no such object could be seen by the person with the best eyesight or known by the person with the best mind.'[185] Neither existence nor knowledge itself can be proven by the mere fact that we can speak about things. Contradicting arguments can be made about everything, including truth. The *Dissoi Logoi*, a compilation of texts written by known and unknown writers in the late Fifth or early Fourth Century, demonstrate how this is achieved:

Double arguments are also put forth concerning truth and falsehood. One of them says a false statement is one thing and a true statement another, but others say that on the contrary, they are the same. I say the latter. First, they are spoken with the same words; second, whenever a statement is made, if things turn out just as was stated, then the statement is true, but if they do not turn out, the same statement is false. For example, a statement accuses someone of temple-robbery: if the act took place, the statement is true, but if it didn't take place, it is false, and the same for the statement of the defendant. In fact, the courts judge the same statement both false and true. Thus it is clear that the same statement, whenever falsehood is present in it, is false, but whenever truth is present, is true...[186]

Although there is a certain conception of truth in this fragment (that is truth is what really happened), the salient point is that, philosophically speaking, a statement can be

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[183]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 18, p. 206
[184]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 5, p. 244
[185]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 244
[186]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 4, p. 303

both true and false, depending on reality. When this reality cannot be established, it becomes impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood.

In rhetorical arguments, truth does not refer to ultimate or universal knowledge but is synonymous with the subjective perspective of the speaker. Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* demonstrates that truth can become an instrument of rhetoric. Before defending Helen, Gorgias makes some general statements about the characteristics of speeches. He claims that a speech ought to be truthful: 'For a city the finest adornment is a good citizenry, for a body beauty, for a soul wisdom, for an action arete, and for a speech truth; and the opposites of these are indecorous.'[187] Revealing the truth (i.e. his version of the truth) a speaker frees his audience from ignorance: 'My only wish is to bring reason to the debate, eliminate the cause of her bad reputation, demonstrate that her detractors are lying, reveal the truth, and put an end to ignorance.'[188] The speaker's claim to truth gives him the ability to change the opinions of his audience: 'It [speech] can stop fear, relieve pain, create joy, and increase pity. How this is so, I shall show; and I must demonstrate this to my audience to change their opinion.'[189] Rhetoric is both a product of Epistemological Scepticism and a method to deal with its consequences. Whether or not reality is what one thinks it is one needs to act on certain assumptions in order to avoid complete paralysis. Arguments with others cannot establish *the* truth; they can merely establish whose truth prevails. All one can do is try to persuade others of one's perspective. Rhetoric is the skill with which one gains a comparative advantage over one's contenders; it allows one to establish one's truth as ultimate truth. Rhetoric is best described as 'the capacity to persuade others; or a practical realisation of this ability; or, at least an attempt at persuasion, successful or not.'[190] It is a mode of communication with a distinct purpose: to get others to do what we want. For Gorgias, persuasion is an instrument of power which can be identified with force 'persuasion, which has the same power, but not the same form as compulsion. When added to speech, [it] indeed molds the mind as it wishes.'[191] Gorgias destroys the traditional polarity between force and

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[187]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, p. 191

[188]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, p. 191

[189]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, p. 192

[190]R. Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 1

[191]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, p. 193

persuasion which prevails in the culture of ancient Greece:

When Gorgias abolishes the distinction between force and persuasion, he undermines the foundation on which rested the basic Greek division between ways of getting people to do things. Why does this matter so much?... civilised Greeks do (or rather should) fall back on it [violence] only as a last resort, and only when circumstances justify the use of force. Greeks, and democratic Athenians first and foremost, are civilised rather than barbarian in part because they try to channel violent tendencies into the persuasive, if competitive, negotiations permitted by logos...[192]

Rhetoric is an instrument used to implement self-interest policies. Those skilled in the art of rhetoric know how to adopt their speech to fit their purpose. Critias describes the effects of rhetoric saying: 'A good character is more certain than a law, for a speaker could never distort it, whereas he often abuses a law, shaking it up and down with arguments.'[193] Arguments are used as weapons by those who are rhetorically skilled to fight for superiority. Whose truth prevails solely depends on the ability of the speaker. As Alcidamas points out, a good speaker needs to train his ability to persuade: 'Now, to speak appropriately, on the spot, on whatever topic is proposed, to be quick with an argument and ready with the right word, and to find just the right speech to match the current situation and people's desires - all this is not within the natural ability of everyone nor the result of whatever education one happens to have had.'[194]

The Sophist theory of rhetoric profoundly influences Athenian politicians. The politicians realise that though it is impossible to resolve contradictions between different versions of reality, one party can try to persuade the other to adopt her perspective. In the international sphere, where the relations between states are determined by their relative power, rhetoric becomes an instrument of domination. In the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians employ both physical force and political arguments to win their enemies over. Rhetoric serves as a means to justify Athenian policies, i.e. to persuade the other side that Athenian actions are right and legitimate. Through the use of rhetoric, Sophist Epistemological Scepticism is instrumentalised to support Athenian Realist policies.

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[192]Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric*, p. 44

[193]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, p. 260

[194]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, p. 277

The Athenians use the notion of Natural Law as a vehicle to represent their own perspective on justice as a universal truth. This is consistent with the primacy of self-interest that underlies Athenian politics:

if you follow my advice, you will be doing the right thing as far as Mytilene is concerned and at the same time will be acting in your own interests; if you decide differently, you will not win them over, but you will be passing judgement on yourselves. For if they were justified in revolting, you must be wrong in holding power. If, however, whatever the rights or wrongs of it may be, you propose to hold power all the same, then your interest demands that these too, rightly or wrongly, must be punished.[195]

Rhetoric also allows for flexible policy-making. What a state deems right today may be considered wrong tomorrow and rhetoric may reconcile contradictory policies. What is more, Athens applies different standards to herself than to other states. For example, while Athenian politicians pursue Might is Right politics ruthlessly, they do not allow other states to do the same. In the Mytilenian Debate in 427 BCE, Cleon argues at first that Mytilene would have been justified to go to war in order to gain power, and later on condemns Mytilene's Might is Right politics. This is a perfect example of how the Athenians conceal their double standards with rhetorical skill. 'Now, to act as they acted is not what I should call a revolt (for people only revolt when they have been badly treated); it is a case of calculated aggression, of deliberately taking sides with our bitterest enemies in order to destroy us. And this is far worse than if they had made war against us simply to gain power.'[196] On the one hand, Cleon pretends to apply uniform standards to state politics, whether Athenian or not (i.e. all states have the right to go to war to increase their power). On the other hand, the Athenians punish other states for pursuing the same policies as them. Later on in his speech, Cleon reproaches the Mytilenians for having put Might over Right: 'They made up their minds to put might first and right second, choosing the moment when they thought they would win, and then making their unprovoked attack upon us.'[197] This example amply demonstrates how Athenian politicians use rhetoric to buttress their power position. Athens unilaterally

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[195]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.40.25-33

[196]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.39.10-15

[197]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.39.20-23

establishes standards of conduct in the international sphere that serve her own interests only and fortify her hegemony.

By imposing their own approach to politics on all other states, Athenian politicians shape the international political discourse and establish the rules of the political game. Athens makes the international sphere hers knowing that no other state is powerful enough to challenge her dominant position. By allowing only herself to put Might first and Right second, Athens seeks to cement the prevailing order forever.

Rhetoric plays a central role in Athenian power politics. The use of rhetoric in political arguments spills over from the domestic sphere that is the Athenian political assemblies, to the international realm. Sophist philosophy influences the Athenian political system and produces a new form of politics. What characterises this new form of politics will be scrutinised in the following section.

4.3 Why did Political Realism emerge in Fifth Century Athens?

As we have seen, studying the intellectual context of Fifth Century Athens enhances our understanding of the roots of Political Realism significantly. Let us now broaden our perspective by taking into consideration the historical and cultural factors that play a role in the development of Political Realism. We will sustain our twofold claim that Political Realism could not have emerged outside of Athens or at any other period of time. It is not a coincidence that Political Realism develops when it does and where it does.

4.3.1 Historical context

Political realism is an approach to politics unlikely to develop without the context of supreme power. Had Athens not emerged from the Persian Wars as Greek hegemon, she would not have been able to develop Might is Right politics. Let us outline briefly the historical context of the second half of the Fifth Century. In the course of the Persian Wars (499-448 BCE), the balance of power in the Greek World fundamentally shifts: The Delian League, an alliance between Athens and other Greek city states, provides

Athens with an extended sphere of influence while Sparta, her main rival is weakened considerably. Victory over the Persians shapes Athens' self-image and nurtures her will to power: 'They had been the leaders of the Greek resistance and borne the brunt of the Persian attack, and their consciousness of strength developed into an urge to dominate the rest and turn their former allies into subjects.'[198] Gradually, Athens expands her power by restructuring the international sphere according to her interests:

During the wars, she had assumed the place of leader of all the Greeks engaged in the struggle against the barbarians, and she had retained that position ever since. She had organised the former allies into a confederation - the Delian League - and gradually, being the only wealthy states as well as the only one with a navy, she had seized the chance of the slightest show of recalcitrance to impose her law by force. The confederation had become her empire.[199]

This move is a real historical revolution since 'for the first time, a Greek *polis* transformed leadership over her allies into direct control and imperial rule. This meant, above all, that the Athenians introduced an amount of military, administrative, and political centralization that was unheard of in the world of Hellenic *poleis*.'[200] Athens builds up a system of political dominion consisting of three components. First, Athenian magistrates are installed in the majority of the cities of the empire. Second, Athens confiscates land and distributes it to Athenian colonists. Third, all important law courts are moved to Athens. However, the Athenian empire is based essentially on her naval power. Raaflaub highlights the inherent connection between the two: 'In fact, naval and imperial power were interconnected: the Delian League provided both the necessary resources to maintain a fleet and the coastal support network that was indispensable to allow this fleet to move freely throughout the Aegean and far beyond, while its existence and the Athenians' determination to use it usually sufficed to keep the empire together.'[201] Due to the contributions of her allies Athens can afford a war fleet of 300 *triremes* (Fifth Century battle ships) and maintain a continued military presence in the Aegean. Athenian naval capa-

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[198]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, pp. 17-18

[199]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 19

[200]K. A. Raaflaub, 'The Transformation of Athens in the Fifth Century' in D. Boedeker and K.A. Raaflaub (eds.), Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 16

[201]Raaflaub, 'The Transformation of Athens in the Fifth Century', p. 17

bilities revolutionise Greek warfare. Conventional hoplite warfare, which is traditionally conducted in intervals of several years, is replaced by naval actions which last for weeks, months or even years. This allows Athenian generals to carry out extensive long-term campaigns to expand Athens' sphere of influence.

But how are these excessive military actions funded? Gomperz explains the intimate link between Athens' military and economic power:

Athens, resting on her sea-power, became the head of a confederacy which gradually transformed the conditions of economic as well as political life. She enjoyed lucrative commercial monopolies; she derived a rich income from the tolls, and from the tributes and judiciary fees of the confederates; and, finally, the confiscated lands of a renegade ally would fall to her from time to time for repartition.[202]

As a major maritime trade hub and with her colonies established throughout the Greek world, Athens develops an economy of empire: 'Greece as a whole in the fifth century B.C. would appear to have surpassed all previous periods in the products of agriculture, industry and trade. But the transformation at Athens amounted to an economic revolution which has been described as a passing from the economics of a city state to the economics of empire.'[203] At the outset of the Peloponnesian War, Athenian power is incontestable. It is based firmly on both military and economic might, the two being dependent. Ultimately, at least in Thucydides' view, it is this very strength which causes the war between Athens and Sparta. As written at the beginning of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 'What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.'[204] At the Debate at Camarina in 415/4 BCE, the Athenians ascribe to the same logic claiming that building their empire was a security measure: 'We therefore deserve the empire which we have, partly because we supplied to the cause of Hellas the largest fleet and a courage that never looked back ... partly because we wanted to have the strength to hold our own in relation to the Peloponnesians.'[205]

In the first book of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes how

[202]H. Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (Stuttgart, B.G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1965), p. 382

[203]Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 15

[204]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.23.27-29

[205]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 6.83.1-6

the steady growth of Athenian power causes alarm throughout the Greek world, especially amongst Sparta and her allies. Initially, they are concerned with the fortification of Athens, which they regard as a sign of the city's ill intentions:

When the Spartans heard of what was going on they sent an embassy to Athens. This was partly because they themselves did not like the idea of Athens or any other city being fortified, but chiefly because they were urged by their allies, who were alarmed both by the sudden growth of Athenian sea-power and by the daring which the Athenians had shown in the war against the Persians.[206]

Soon afterwards, they are told by the Athenian leader Themistocles that they should be 'prepared to recognize that the Athenians were capable of making up their own minds about their own interests and about the interests of the rest of Hellas.'[207] The Athenians 'thought it better that their city should be fortified; it was better for their own citizens and also would be an advantage to the whole alliance; for it was only on the basis of equal strength that equal and fair discussions on the common interest could be held.'[208]

The essence of Athenian politics is foreshadowed at the very beginning of the Peloponnesian War. Through military and economic strength, Athens acquires the independence which allows her to act without considering other states. Since no other Greek alliance is as strong as the Delian League, and no other single state can challenge Athens within this league, there can be no common interest, only self-interest.

Athens' strength can account for her ability to execute Might is Right policies. But it does not explain why the Athenians pursue a particular *type* of policy. Taken individually, neither power nor supremacy produces Political Realist attitudes. Though hegemony may facilitate a ruthless foreign policy, it does not necessarily have to be justified with realist arguments. In our view, it is the interplay of historical with cultural factors that allows the Athenians to apply Sophist ideas to the political sphere.

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[206]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.90.1-6
[207]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.91.24-27
[208]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.91.31-34

4.3.2 Cultural context

The relationship between Fifth Century Athenian culture and Sophist philosophy can be described as symbiotic. Athenian culture provides an environment which allows Sophist philosophy to flourish, and Sophist ideas have a significant impact on Athens' cultural framework. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this work to reconstruct the interplay between Sophist philosophy and Athenian culture. Instead, we will highlight only those cultural aspects which facilitate the influence of Sophist ideas that serve as a basis for Athenian Political Realism.

The Sophists are attracted by the cultural and political climate in Athens, which allows them to develop and to disseminate their ideas:

All these thinkers, with their new ideas, were born along by the same impetus, an impetus that accounts for their common success. But the fact remains that it is in Athens that we find them all. It was to Athens that they came, here that they found a welcome, and here that they exerted a profound influence... Without doubt, the vogue for the Sophists only came about thanks to a catalyst which Periclean Athens alone could provide.[209]

In Athens, the Sophists find the freedom and the intellectual openness that provide a breeding ground for their new ideas. As Wallace points out, 'Democratic Athens did not create the sophistic movement, but certainly welcomed it, elite and demos alike.'[210] The importance of the cross-fertilisation between Athenian culture and Sophist philosophy should not be underestimated. The Sophists absorb and react to contemporary intellectual movements. As teachers, they are in regular contact with Athenian opinion-makers. As orators, they are exposed to the ideas held by their audiences. However, we cannot go as far as Gomperz who equates the Sophists with their audiences by describing the relationship between the two as follows: 'Dependent as they were on their public, they necessarily became the mouthpiece of ideas which, if not dominant, were at least rising into predominance.'[211] To some extent the Sophists *are* the mouthpieces of contemporaneous Athenian intellectual currents. And by asserting that their philosophy could not have

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[209]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 18

[210]R.W. Wallace, 'The Sophists in Athens' in D. Boedeker and K.A. Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 214

[211]Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik*, pp. 415-16

developed outside of Athens, we do attribute a considerable role to Athenian culture. However, it is clear that ultimately, Sophist thought transcends the particular movements of its time.

Value crisis

The most fundamental development of the Fifth Century is the transition from traditional to more modern ways of thinking, which is expressed in a value crisis. 'It was a period of profound social and political changes ... Established patterns of life and experience were dissolving in favour of new patterns. Beliefs and values of previous generations were under attack. The sophistic movement gave expression to all this.'[212] The outbreak of the Peloponnesian War exacerbates this crisis further and initiates a tangible reversal of values. Thucydides describes the Hellenic world towards the end of the Fifth Century:

But war is a stern teacher; in depriving them of the power of easily satisfying their daily wants, it brings most people's minds down to the level of their actual circumstances... To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying that one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence.[213]

This value crisis breeds ruthless and ambitious men such as Alcibiades, about whom Thucydides writes: 'For most people became frightened at a quality in him which was beyond the normal and showed itself both in the lawlessness of his private life and habits and in the spirit in which he acted on all occasions.'[214] In times of war, man's perspective on life is forced to change. Accepted norms are reversed as a matter of expediency. 'In the troubled circumstances of the late fifth century established moral canons were ignored

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[212]Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 1

[213]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.82.18-21; 26-36

[214]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.15.15-18

and men altered the accepted meanings of moral terms to conform to their actions.'[215]
The Sophists contribute to the ongoing crisis of morality by questioning time-honoured
beliefs and values. Their criticism is all-encompassing: 'In principle, nothing was any
longer taken for granted, and the fact that something was commonly practiced did not
in the least protect it from criticism. This criticism ... spared neither the official religion
nor institutions, laws, or conceptions of justice on which the structure of the city-state
was based.'[216] The Sophists' fundamental Scepticism which has been described previously
reflects a critical attitude towards authority reinforced by the social and political life of
the Fifth century. The processes of change at work in Athens have a profound impact
on the way people conceive of themselves and of the society they live in. In a period of
transition, everything and anything can be called into question. On the one hand, this
doubt widens the scope of individual freedom. On the other, it can lead to moral anarchy,
which Guthrie sees as the logical conclusion of Sophist thought.[217]

Humanism

As a result of the widespread critical attitude towards the divine and the mythical, the
Fifth Century also witnesses the emergence of a humanism that puts human beings in the
centre. This change in perspective has an influence on all spheres of life. In politics, the
victory against the Persians increases the confidence of the Greeks. Military success is no
longer attributed to divine will or intervention, but to human capacity instead. With the
growth of Athenian democracy, men see themselves increasingly as responsible for their
city's destiny. The political system empowers citizens to influence domestic political life
as well as the foreign policy of their *polis*.

This focus on human action and human capacity is reflected in all disciplines. In
the realm of historical enquiry, Herodotus aims to produce a rational record of the past
which does not recount mythical legends but represents the human world. Rather than
concerning himself with the founding of towns and the genealogies of heroes, he criti-
cally scrutinises the accounts of eye witnesses in a bid to represent events of the past

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[215]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 94

[216]Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*, p. 3

[217]Guthrie, 'The First Humanists', p. 21

objectively. Thucydides goes even further than his predecessor in attempting to explain political behaviour by analysing the interplay of reason and irrationality in human nature.[218] In literature, the great tragedians Euripides and Sophocles put an emphasis on human skills and technical inventions such as speech, writing, hunting, fishing, architecture, the domestication of animals, medicine, mathematics etc.[219] In the figurative arts, monsters and all animals except the horse disappear in the course of the first half of the Century. They are replaced by the human figure which is captured in its vibrant reality. In brief, as human beings become the centre of interest there are fundamental changes in every field of thought.

According to de Romilly, the trend towards anthropocentrism and rationality begins long before the Sophists arrive in Athens and in fact prepares the ground for their actions and success.[220] She describes the Sophists' interaction with the cultural context of the Fifth Century as follows: 'the Sophists clearly fulfilled an expectation and were part of a deep process of evolution that was finding expression in many different fields at this time. Thinkers and writers in Greece were now tending to allot a greater place than before to human beings and reason... Philosophy shifted its attention from the universe to man himself, and from cosmogony to morality and politics.'[221]

First and foremost, Sophist humanism is a reaction against the natural philosophers. The Sophists abandon the Presocratic study of nature and of the universe in order to focus on the realities and problems of human life. As practical men, the Sophists concentrate on the issues that really matter: how to manage one's own affairs and political matters (indeed, this is what Protagoras professes to teach). They establish the relevance of philosophy for everyday life, freeing it from the inconsistencies and contradictions of Presocratic thought. For the Sophists, putting human beings in the centre has radical implications for the way man conceives of himself. There is no higher authority than the human; man is the measure of all things. Sophist Subjectivism epitomises the trend towards humanism in the culture of Fifth Century Athens; it takes humanism to the extreme.

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[218]See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.45.2-3 and 7-9; 6.24.5 ff.

[219]Guthrie, textitA History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III, p. 18

[220]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 16

[221]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 11

Individualism

It is not just human beings in general but the individual as such that is granted a special place in Fifth Century Athens. Whereas traditionally, the individual is less important than the family, clan or tribe, the reforms instituted by Pericles and Ephialtes put the individual at the centre of the political process. As Athenian citizens, all men are eligible for public office and are free if they so wish to pursue a political career. Sophist teaching reflects these developments and helps to produce the politicians needed by the state. We agree with Ehrenberg that it is primarily the practical side of Sophist philosophy that buttresses the development of individualism: 'Deutlicher als selbst die extremste Theorie (die für sich genommen auch in sehr anderer Zeit möglich wäre) macht es die plötzlich und machtvoll in Erscheinung tretende Praxis der Sophisten, dass nunmehr wirklich der einzelne Mensch in den Mittelpunkt des Denkens wie der Tat gerückt ist.'[222]

However, we should certainly not confuse the individualism of the Fifth Century with that of our own society. As Solmsen points out, the Athenian state still plays a dominant role:

But for the fetters thus removed from the feet of the individual there had been substituted the over-all and binding authority of the Athenian state. The lesser loyalties had been swallowed up in the greater but the individual still counted for little. He was, however, content to do so for the moment. He had great personal freedom, little or no state-interference with his private life or with his efforts to make money for himself and his family or even with his plans to dispose of his gains. He had no reason to resent the paramount authority of a city which so provided for his needs, and of which he felt himself to be a part. When therefore we speak of individualism as manifesting itself about the middle of the fifth century, it is not associated with any assertion of the rights of man, still les an attack on the rights of the polis. Indeed the self-assertiveness of the individual and eagerness for better education were indications of a desire to serve the city, as well as to win honour and distinction for oneself in doing so.[223]

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[222]Ehrenberg, *Polis und Imperium*, p. 367

[223]Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*, p. 70

Cultural Relativism

The cultural relativism prevalent in Fifth Century Athens is induced by increased contact with other cultures and a change of attitude towards them: 'Often adduced as a cause of the new humanism is the widening of horizons through increasing contacts with other peoples, in war, travel and the foundation of colonies. These made it increasingly obvious that customs and standards of behaviour which had earlier been accepted as absolute and universal, and of divine institution, were in fact local and relative.'[224] Although contact with the barbarians is nothing new for the Greeks and their awareness of other people's customs and traditions is enhanced by Herodotus' detailed descriptions of other cultures, it seems that the Fifth Century nevertheless marks a turning point in Greek self-perception. This is due to a number of factors. First of all, the establishment of the Delian League increased personal and commercial intercourse between Athens and distant parts of Greece significantly. As a result, the Athenians become familiar with certain manners and customs of other Greek people. Secondly, the geographical extension of the Athenian Empire means that Athens is more exposed to non-Greeks at her borders. Thirdly, during the Persian Wars, the Athenian tradition to incorporate the cults of vanquished people into her own challenges the autocracy of established faiths. As Gomperz rightly observes, 'the foundation of all criticism is comparative observation'.[225] Being exposed to other cultures raises awareness of human diversity and uniqueness. This can lead to rejection or to acceptance. In the case of Athens, it seems to have encouraged the critical examination of Athenian traditions. The atmosphere of insecurity that results from this introspection provides the fertile ground on which the Sophists can sow Moral Relativism and Athenian politicians can proclaim that every city decides what is right for her.

In this section, we have sought to substantiate our claim that Political Realism is intricately linked to the historical and cultural context of Fifth Century Athens. It is this context which allows the Athenians to translate Sophist philosophy into foreign policy.

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[224]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 16

[225]Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik*, p. 384

Chapter 5

Athens: The relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy

5.1 Background

In order to establish why Political Realism develops in Athens in the Fifth Century we need to examine thoroughly which historical circumstances facilitate its emergence. Having previously highlighted the historical preconditions for Athens' power status, we will now focus on Athenian democracy and its impact on the city's foreign policy. We will show that the Athenian political system gives rise to a specific political culture which in turn produces a particular type of politician, both of which have a decisive impact on Athenian foreign policy.

5.2 Athenian democracy

At the beginning of the Fifth Century, around 462 BCE, Athenian democracy undergoes radical democratic reforms instituted by Ephialtes and Pericles, two eminent public figures. They introduce a series of laws stripping the ancient Areopagus Council of all political and of most judicial powers. In doing so, they limit the extensive regulatory authorities of the Council, which are 'not derived from any formal grant of the people, but have their source in immemorial antiquity and are sustained by general awe and rev-

erence.'[226] The Council's remaining powers are negligible; they include jurisdiction in homicide cases, the care of the sacred olive-trees of Athena, and a voice in the supervision of the property of the Eleusinian deities.[227] From this point onwards, Athens' administration is supervised by the people. The powers of the Areopagus are divided between the Council of the Five Hundred on the one hand and the Assembly and the *Heliaea* on the other.[228] The Council of the Five Hundred becomes the chief executive organ of the people. This paves the way for full democracy, that is the exercise of sovereignty by the majority of the people. With these reforms, Ephialtes and Pericles succeed in translating the 'democratical sentiment among the mass of Athenians'[229] into institutional change. Democratic control and transparency increase at all levels of the political system: in the public administration, in the judicature, and in the executive.

In the administration, the institutions which represent the Athenian people are now in charge of regulating the behaviour of public officials. 'Any magistrate can be relieved of his office in the course of his term if his conduct is found unsatisfactory at a monthly review.'[230] Control is kept in the hands of both the Council of the Five Hundred and the Assembly to prevent the special influence any individual politician may have.

In court, the Athenian people are in charge of all juridical matters: all civil and criminal cases are dealt with in dikastic assemblies.[231] As a consequence, the archon's role in jurisdiction is substantially curtailed. He 'no longer delivers a verdict, but holds only a preliminary hearing, at which the depositions of witnesses are taken and the relevant laws are cited. The whole thing is then sealed up and delivered to the court, where the archon presides but takes no substantive part in the proceedings at all.'[232]

On the level of public policy-making, the introduction of lot and pay is the key element of democratic reform. Both the archons and the members of the Council of Five Hundred are now determined by lot from *all* eligible citizens, rather than from elected candidates. Archonship and membership of the Council of Five Hundred is turned into paid office,

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[226]G. Grote, *History of Greece Vol. V* (London, John Murray, 1849), p. 482

[227]J.B. Bury, *A History of Greece* (London, Macmillan, 1970), p. 347

[228]N.G.L. Hammond, *A History of Greece* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 288

[229]Grote, *History of Greece*, Vol. V, p. 476

[230]A. Andrewes, *Greek Society* (London, Penguin Books, 1991), p. 194

[231]Grote, *History of Greece*, Vol. V, p. 480

[232]Andrewes, *Greek Society*, p. 197

which means that candidacy is no longer restricted to the two richest classes. It is now not only legal but practically possible for the poorer citizens to give up their time to public affairs.[233] In Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Pericles describes the equality Athenian citizens enjoy in his Funeral Oration: 'Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses.'[234] As Guthrie notes, the Athenian democratic system naturally encourages the belief that one man's opinion is as good as another's and that as citizens; all Athenians are equally competent in the art of government.[235] However, Adkins demonstrates convincingly that due to the Athenian value system, Athenians continue to attribute *arete* to those of noble birth and wealth, thereby preventing citizens from lower social strata from acquiring high political positions.[236] Andrewes adds that the poor remain largely excluded from political office for very practical reasons: 'Being a councillor takes a lot of time, and, though the developed democracy pays its councillors, it does not pay them very much. No really poor man would want to serve...'[237] What is true of public officials is also true for politicians; most of whom

at least during the middle decades of the [fifth] century, are relatively well-to-do. The demands on their time are normally sufficient to exclude most poor farmers, day labourers, or artisans of only moderate means from any extensive political career. Pericles and Cimon had extensive estates; Thucydides' mother was probably a Thracian princess; the families of Cleinias and Callias were notorious for their wealth. Even the allegedly poor politicians, Ephialtes and Aristides, were probably poor only by comparison to the often extraordinary wealth of their competitors.[238]

In Athens, a well-established family, a strategic marriage and personal wealth continues to

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[233]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 19

[234]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.3-9

[235]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 19

[236]A.W.H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 141ff.

[237]Andrewes, *Greek Society*, p. 188

[238]Connor, *The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens*, p. 76

play an important role in politics. However, reforms instituted by Ephialtes and Pericles establish *formal* equality between Athenian citizens. In reality, there may not be equal opportunities to become a politician or to hold office, but at least any citizen may speak and vote in the Assembly, which passes laws, declares war and concludes treaties.[239] The core of politics, (i.e. political decision-making), is taken from the hands of a few officials and given to the people. Particular (and often partial) judgement is replaced by collective decisions: 'The distrust of experts and confidence in the collective judgment of ordinary men was the essence of democracy. [...] political decisions were taken after noisy debate in the primary assembly, which all could attend if they chose.'[240] In practice, only a fraction of those eligible would turn up to Assembly meetings: 'Not indeed that in Athens more than a small proportion habitually attend - at a time when there may have been as many as 45,000 qualified voters, it is rare for as many as 5,000-6,000 to exercise their right - but it is clear that men of all classes do attend. The principle that no one should be denied that right is the essential principle of democratic freedom and equality.'[241] As public participation in the political process increases, politics become more accessible and as a result public opinion is more widely reflected in political decisions.

As the responsibilities of each Athenian citizen increase, more and more people gain experience in the world of politics. Hammond describes the wide-ranging functions of those who serve as councillors:

The 500 Councillors, changing annually and appointed by lot, dealt with an astonishing amount of business: the preparation of the agenda for the Assembly; the scrutinizing, directing, and preliminary auditing of all magistrates; the administration of state finance, buildings, festivals, docks, and naval and military establishments; the selection of citizens to undertake liturgies; the assessment and collection of tribute; and in time of war the preliminary decision on urgent matters of strategy and diplomacy.[242]

The 1400 magistrates carry out a wide variety of administrative duties whereas the 6000 Heliasts deal only with cases affecting Athens and her allies. All citizens are involved in

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[239]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 19

[240]Andrewes, *Greek Society*, p. 202

[241]Andrewes, *Greek Society*, p. 69

[242]Hammond, *A History of Greece*, p. 330

their city's politics. As a result, Athenian society is highly politicised:

the citizens possessed an experience of the details of political and judicial administration which has never been paralleled in an ancient or modern state. Moreover, this experience is spread through all classes in the citizen community by the use of the lot, the rotation of office, and the disregard of property qualification except in the candidature for a few magistracies.[243]

Despite the fact that professional politics and high office remain rather exclusive, the introduction of lot and pay empowers the entire Athenian electorate through political participation. In his Funeral Oration in 431/0 BCE, Pericles describes the political participation of Athenian citizens as follows: 'Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics - this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.'[244] The politics of the city state concern all. And since the people are sovereign, one cannot be a citizen without taking part in the political process. This distinguishes Athens from other Greek city states and is the main characteristic of its political culture.

5.3   Athenian political culture and its impact on politicians

How does the democratisation of political culture affect the political system? First, the nature of public decision-making changes. As the institutions charged with making decisions become more representative of the Athenian public, policies need to be agreed upon by a more heterogeneous group of people. This makes finding a consensus more difficult and turns every decision into a battlefield of competing opinions. Secondly, the new democratic institutions require a specific type of politician. To win political debates, politicians have to be convincing orators trained in the art of public speaking and rhetoric.

Let us contextualise these assertions by examining how the political system functions

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[243]Hammond, *A History of Greece*, p. 330

[244]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.40.6-11

and in which ways it shapes political agents. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* provides examples of the characteristics of public decision-making in Fifth Century Athens. Political decisions are the result of a process of open debate followed by a public vote: 'We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated.'[245] These procedures ensure that all policies are fully supported by the public. However, the quest for consensus is not always easy as public opinion can change rapidly. This is exemplified in 427 BCE, when Athens decides to punish her revolting Mytilenian subjects severely, the public demands that this policy be reconsidered shortly afterwards:

Next day, however, there was a sudden change of feeling and people began to think how cruel and how unprecedented such a decision was... Observing this, the deputation from Mytilene which was in Athens and the Athenians who were supporting them approached the authorities with a view to having the question debated again. They won their point the more easily because the authorities themselves saw clearly that most of the citizens were wanting someone to give them a chance of reconsidering the matter.[246]

In the debate that ensues, Cleon, one of the leading Athenian political figures at the time, condemns frequent changes of opinion as the fundamental weakness of Athenian democracy:

Personally I have had occasion often enough already to observe that a democracy is incapable of governing others, and I am all the more convinced of this when I see how you are now changing your minds about the Mytilenians... when you give way to your own feelings of compassion you are being guilty of a kind of weakness which is dangerous to you... And this is the very worst thing - to pass measures and then not to abide by them.[247]

In Cleon's view, a strong democracy is characterised by the capacity to act:

I am amazed at those who have proposed a reconsideration of the question of Mytilene, thus causing a delay which is all to the advantage of the guilty party. After a lapse of time the injured

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[245]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.40.12-16

[246]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.36.17-19;20-26

[247]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.37.1-4;7-9;15-16

party will lose the edge of his anger when he comes to act against those who have wronged him; whereas the best punishment and the one most fitted to the crime is when reprisals follow immediately.[248]

Cleon is contradicted by Diodotus, probably 'a private citizen whose outrage at the policy makes him stand and oppose it. He becomes a temporary politician and wins his case by the cogency of his cause and the cleverness of his speech.'[249] Diodotus role in the Mytilenian Debate demonstrates that the flexible and simple model of Athenian politics allows individual citizens to have an impact on domestic and foreign policies without the support of the public or of political parties. The ability, capacity and readiness of Athenian citizens to speak up about issues of public concern is one of the major characteristics of Athenian democracy; it ensures that the public voice is always heard.[250] In this vein, Diodotus contradicts Cleon and claims that it lies in the nature of democratic decision-making to reconsider important issues if necessary: 'I do not blame those who have proposed a new debate on the subject of Mytilene, and I do not share the view which we have heard expressed [i.e. Cleon's view], that it is a bad thing to have frequent discussions on matters of importance.'[251] He points to the positive effects of having prolonged political debates: 'Haste and anger are, to my mind, the two greatest obstacles to wise counsel - haste, that usually goes with folly, anger, that is the mark of primitive and narrow minds.'[252] Furthermore, Diodotus emphasises that policies are made up of both words and actions, which are inherently connected: 'And anyone who maintains that words cannot be a guide to action must be either a fool or one with some personal interest at stake...'[253]

There is no doubt that Cleon has a point criticising the frequent changes of public opinion as they can be detrimental to public policy. Due to fluctuations in public opinion, Athenian politics lacks consistency and continuity. For politicians, this means that both their policies and their popularity can be very short-lived. Pericles complains about this

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[248]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38.1-7

[249]Connor, *The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens*, p. 23

[250]J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 176

[251]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 3.42.1-4

[252]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 3.42.4-6

[253]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 3.42.6-8

in his Funeral Oration: 'As for me, I am the same as I was, and do not alter; it is you [the audience] who have changed. What has happened is this: you took my advice when you were still untouched by misfortune, and repented of your action when things went badly with you; it is because your own resolution is weak that my policy appears to you to be mistaken.'[254] Pericles experiences the extent to which political careers are at the whim of public opinion. Every politician's influence depends fundamentally on his public support, which is unpredictable. After the second invasion of the Peloponnesians around 430, the Athenians are indecisive regarding their city's future course of action. This is reflected in their attitude towards Pericles: 'They began to blame Pericles for having persuaded them to go to war and to hold him responsible for all the misfortunes which had overtaken them... they were then in a state of utter hopelessness, and all their angry feelings turned against Pericles.'[255] 'The general ill feeling against Pericles persisted, and was not satisfied until they had condemned him to pay a fine. Not long afterwards, however, as is the way with crowds, they re-elected him to the generalship and put all their affairs into his hands.'[256] Pericles' case exemplifies the fate of Fifth Century politicians whose power is not only dependent on the people but resides ultimately in their rhetorical capacities. On the one hand 'the skilful speaker in Athens has a source of power that frees him from many of the encumbrances of the old style of politics. He can be more independent, he can neglect, even offend, influential groups, he might even dare to bypass the old process of building up alliances through the often aggravatingly slow sequence of discussion, concession, compromise, and coordination.'[257] On the other hand,

through his eloquence a politician can swiftly attain a lofty position in the city - but a perilous one. What rhetoric gives, rhetoric can take away. If that technique can elevate him to the pinnacles of power, it can also abandon him to sudden gusts of popular fancy and plunge him quickly to the depths of obscurity, or to the chastisements of the assembly or the law courts.[258]

But regardless of its influence on the success or failure of politicians, the power of the

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[254]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 2.61.5-10

[255]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 2.59.4-9

[256]Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 2.65.11-15

[257]Connor, The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens, p. 117

[258]Connor, The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens, p. 117

demos is neither omnipotent nor immune to the establishment of quasi-autocratic structures. If a politician wins the hearts and minds of the public, the rule of the people can easily turn into the rule of one. Thucydides describes Pericles' extraordinary talent for controlling the people's will which allows him to become *primus inter pares*:

Pericles, because of his position, his intelligence, and his known integrity, could respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check. It was he who led them, rather than they who led him, and, since he never sought power from any wrong motive, he was under no necessity of flattering them: in fact he was so highly respected that he was able to speak angrily to them and to contradict them... So, in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen.[259]

However,

neither Pericles nor any other politician in ancient Athens can be sure of a lasting and unshaken rule. If one man manages to hold power for a long time, it is because of his ability, his skill, his agility in manoeuvring, not because he is unchallenged. The inadequate surviving accounts of so many political figures, our ignorance of many men of the second rank, the inevitable tendency for the unsuccessful rival to disappear from the pages of history tempt and deceive us. There are no long periods of tranquil dominance in fifth century Athens; politics is regularly and vigorously polycentric.[260]

In addition to the problems highlighted, making decisions in public assemblies has a number of other undemocratic side effects. For example, since a public vote does not allow for differentiated decisions, public speakers have a disproportionately high impact on policies. A speaker's policy suggestions are usually rejected as a whole or adopted as a whole: 'Their [Athenians] reply to the Spartans was the one that he [Pericles] had suggested, both on the main issue and on the separate points...'[261] As a consequence, the democratic ideal of political equality amongst citizens is not fully realised; citizens in the audience do not have the same influence on policies as public speakers.

Another serious problem with decision-making based on public votes is that the majority often pressure the minority into compliance. This is what happens at the launching

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[259]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.35-41; 44-46

[260]Connor, *The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens*, p. 69

[261]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.145.2-4

of the Sicilian expedition in 415 BCE: 'The result of this excessive enthusiasm of the majority was that the few who actually were opposed to the expedition were afraid of being thought unpatriotic if they voted against it, and therefore kept quiet.'[262]

Despite its numerous dysfunctional aspects, we believe that on the whole, the political system of Athens is democratised by the reforms of Pericles and Ephialtes. As institutional structures and political culture change, so do political agents. They have to adapt to new political procedures and find ways to partake in and influence the political discourse. In order to be successful, politicians in Fifth Century Athens need to be persuasive speakers who can convince their audience with personal integrity and rhetorical skills. As Andrewes highlights 'at Athens, no man exercises power longer than he can persuade the assembly that his views are right, and he has to go on convincing the same or a slightly different audience, time after time, without respite.'[263] The fluidity of a politician's power base requires him to establish permanent ties with parts of the electorate:

a political career... would require influence in the various assemblies of the city... He would need some sort of power base, men that would listen to him and men he could rely upon. To win the support he needed he would turn to citizens whose interests and attitudes he shared, to men of the same economic and social class, and above all to those he had known longest and most intimately, his own family.[264]

Also, establishing oneself as a 'man of the people' ensures a broad power base:

in the late fifth century it is possible to acquire political power by direct appeal to the citizenry without the tedious apprenticeship imposed by the system of political friendship, without the slow aggregation of alliances and coalitions. A man can win prominence by offering to protect the interests of the demos, by presenting himself as a *prostates tou demou* ["one who stands before the people"], and through his success as a *rhetor* ["one who speaks"] become the leader of the people, the *demagogos.*[265]

However, politicians must be men of action as well as masters of rhetoric:

Kenntnisse im Bereich der politischen Verhältnisse der Gegenwart und der Vergangenheit, da-

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[262]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.24.18-21

[263]Andrewes, *Greek Society*, p. 202

[264]Connor, *The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens*, p. 10

[265]Connor, *The New Politicians Of Fifth-Century Athens*, p. 119

raus resultierende Einblicke in politische Zusammenhänge und vor allem die Fähigkeit, Folgen etwaiger Aktivitäten richtig abzuschätzen, ferner natürlich die Fähigkeit, seine Mitbürger von dem, was man als das Beste = Nützlichste erkannt hat, zu überzeugen, so dass es auch ihnen als das Beste erscheint, also überzeugungskraft und das heisst: rhetorische Fähigkeiten, schliesslich für den aktiven Politiker sicher auch so etwas wie Entschluss- und Tatkraft.'[266]

Pericles is the perfect example of a politician whose power is expressed in both his actions and in his oratory skills. On his first appearance in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes Pericles as follows: 'Among the speakers was Pericles, the son of Xanthippus, the leading man of his time among the Athenians and the most powerful both in action and debate.'[267] In his reply to the Spartan Ultimatum in 432-1 BCE, Pericles proves his powers of persuasion: 'This is the right reply to make and it is the reply that this city of ours ought to make.'[268]

Given that very few people are born with a natural talent for both action and debate, and given that it is more difficult to convince people of a certain policy than putting it into practice, aspiring politicians focus on their ability to persuade. How are they trained and by whom?

5.4   Rhetoric and Sophist teaching

The main effect of democracy on the Athenian political culture is the broadening of participation in the political process. Before the reforms of Pericles and Ephialtes are introduced, politics is dominated by the wealthy. But as Athenian institutions are democratised, citizens from all social backgrounds enter the political arena. Whether in the Assembly or in the Council of the Five Hundred, whether as public administrators or as private individuals standing trial - citizens have to be able to speak in public and argue their case convincingly. The faculty of persuasive speech is a vital skill for all citizens in all political positions and concerns all political activities and tasks. Bury describes how central speech

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[266]K. Döring, 'Die politische Theorie des Protagoras' in G.B. Kerferd (ed.), *The Sophists and their Legacy - Proceedings of the Fourth International Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy* (*Hermes Einzelschriften* 44; Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981), p. 114

[267]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.139.25-27

[268]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.144.20-21

is to any political process:

The institutions of a Greek democratic city presupposed in the average citizen the faculty of speaking in public, and for anyone who was ambitious for a political career it was indispensable. If a man was hauled into a law-court by his enemies and did not know how to speak, he was like an unarmed civilian attacked by soldiers. The power of expressing ideas clearly and in such a way as to persuade an audience was an art to be learned and taught. But it was not enough to gain command of a vocabulary; it was necessary to learn how to argue, and to exercise one's self in the discussion of political and ethical questions. There was a demand for higher education.[269]

Traditional Athenian education lacks a systematic curriculum. Boys up to the age of 14 are taught a combination of one or many of the following subjects: arithmetic, athletics, music, dancing, reading and writing. This education does not prepare citizens for the political life in the democratic polis. It is the political ambitions of young men of wealth in particular, that create a demand which conventional teachers cannot meet.

And the path to power... lay open to the man whose speech carried conviction and who could claim expert knowledge. Such an education would certainly fit a man for political life at Athens. So if any man, citizen or stranger, was able to provide such an education, he would find in Athens a splendid and lucrative field for his lectures and demonstrations and an audience eager to learn and willing to pay. To political power and material prosperity is added a demand for political education, and in this triple combination we have the soil in which much of fifth century political thought grew.[270]

In the absence of institutions of adult learning the educational gap is filled by a group of teachers who travel about to give general instructions in the art of speaking and in the art of reasoning, and, out of their encyclopaedic knowledge, lecture on all possible subjects.[271] These instructors are the Sophists who charge fees for their lessons. They do not confine themselves to teaching but participate in public affairs and diffuse their knowledge and ideas through written treatise.

But what kind of education do the Sophists offer? 'What the sophists were able to offer was in no sense a contribution to the education of the masses. They offered an expensive

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[269]Bury, *A History of Greece*, p. 241
[270]Sinclair, 'Protagoras and Others', p. 68
[271]Bury, *A History of Greece*, p. 386

product invaluable to those seeking a career in politics and public life generally, namely a kind of selective secondary education, intended to follow on after the basic instruction received at school.'[272] This kind of teaching is a great innovation which challenges the conventional Athenian conceptions of education. As de Romilly points out 'the very idea that intellectual teaching could have a practical use was a totally novel one to Athens. It was, furthermore, an idea that implied social change...'[273] But although the idea that political skills can be taught offers citizens of both high and low birth the prospect of excelling in public life, in reality, only the wealthy have the means to profit from Sophist teaching. 'Their teaching was costly and aimed only at those rich enough to pay for it: the aristocrats, whose families had long been predominant in Athens and who must have been particularly concerned to retain or recover their influence.'[274]

The teaching methods employed by the Sophists vary. They travel widely in the Greek world and teach in different cities. Some of them appear at great festivals to introduce their work to the public. Displays are held in private houses, public spaces or at communal games. A Sophist often gives a display on a prepared theme from a written text and occasionally invites the audience to question him. Most of the instruction is given in small circles, seminars or public lectures. Students have to study and criticise the writings of poets, analyse forms of speech, learn to speak briefly in question and answer exercises and train themselves to defend either side in an argument. Due to the lack of sources, it is difficult to establish the exact scope of Sophist teaching. And since we cannot deal with every Sophist individually, our analysis is based on generalisations which try to capture what the Sophists have in common as teachers of rhetoric. Rankin describes what characterises the Sophists as teachers:

Sophists in this sense were people who professed to teach "wisdom" and "virtue" for a fee. They were a profession, but not a homogenous one. Their main points in common were that they were paid for their teaching and that they based their teaching upon developed uses of language for imparting skill in argument and persuasion. Whether an individual Sophists' claim was to teach *arete* (virtue) or merely some argumentative technique or way of arranging language in the

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[272]Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 17

[273]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 54

[274]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 213

most impressive or convincing style, his concern was with the human realm and the association of man with man in the competitive life of Greek society.[275]

We may gain a more accurate view by studying how the Sophists conceive of themselves. Again, we rely on Plato's account of their profession. In *Protagoras*, Socrates addresses Protagoras: 'While others hide this profession, you advertise yourself openly to all the Greeks, calling yourself a sophist, proclaiming yourself a teacher of education and of arete, the first to believe he deserves to be paid for his teaching.'[276] Socrates has reservations regarding the intentions of these new teachers and is suspicious of their profession for charging fees. In Kerferd's view 'it was not the fact that they charged fees as such which gave offence, it was the fact that they sold instruction in wisdom and virtue. These were not the kind of things that should be sold for money; friendship and gratitude should be sufficient reward.'[277] Thus the Sophists embody the fundamental change in values of the Fifth Century. Earlier on in *Protagoras*, Protagoras justifies his profession as follows:

So if any one of us is even a little bit better at helping others advance towards *arete*, he should be welcomed. I believe that I am one of these, that I do a better job than others do in helping a person become fine and good, and that I am worth the fee I charge and even more, as the pupil himself judges. That is why I have set up this system for determining my fee: when someone has studied with me, he pays the sum I charge if hes willing; if not, he goes to a temple, makes an oath as to how much he declares the lessons to be worth, and pays that much.[278]

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates imagines how Protagoras may have described his task as a teacher: 'the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just. Similarly the professional teacher who is able to educate his pupils on these lines is a wise man, and is worth his large fees to them. In this way we are enabled to hold both that some men are wiser than others, and also that no man judges what is false.'[279] As there is evidence for both views it cannot be established whether the Sophists see themselves as teachers of rhetoric or of both *arete* and rhetoric. While

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[275]Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics*, p. 14

[276]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, p.174

[277]Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 25

[278]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 10, p. 184

[279]Plato, *Theaetetus*, 167c8-d4

Protagoras claims that his teaching makes men better, in *Meno*, Plato represents Gorgias as a teacher of rhetoric rather than of *arete*: 'I especially admire Gorgias for this, Socrates: you would never hear him promising this [i.e., that he is a teacher of *arete*]; in fact, he laughs at others he hears make such promises. He thinks one should make men skilful at speaking.'[280] In Plato's *Gorgias*, the Sophist confirms the assertion that he trains orators: 'Socrates: Then we are to say that you can make others what you are yourself? Gorgias: That is precisely what I profess to do at Athens and elsewhere.'[281] 'Socrates: ... You say that you can make an orator of anyone who wishes to learn from you? Gorgias: Yes. Socrates: And consequently in all matters he will be able to get his way before a mass of people not by teaching but by convincing? Gorgias: Certainly.'[282]

Within the framework of this analysis, we are primarily interested in the teaching of rhetoric and the implications for the political culture of Athens. It is clear that 'all the leading Sophists were deeply concerned with it [rhetoric], in its forensic, political and epideictic branches, both as active practitioners and as teachers, systematizers and writers of rhetorical books.'[283] Although the Sophists 'were not the pioneers of rhetoric, [but] they were certainly ready to step in and supply the demand for it.'[284]

We would like to focus on the link between Sophist teaching and Athenian politics. Because 'behind the art of rhetoric as it was ultimately fashioned lies the art of being a politician, that is, of being a politician specifically as politicians functioned in Athenian democracy.'[285] Behind the intimate association of rhetoric and politics we can see the philosophical foundations of Sophist thought. And since our analysis seeks to establish links between philosophy and politics, we must bear in mind that these links are crystallised in the theory and practice of rhetoric. Rhetoric serves both as a bridge between philosophy and politics and as a vehicle for the dissemination of Sophist thought: 'Rhetoric teaches from the first that what matters is not what is the case, but what appears, what

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[280]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 12, p. 205

[281]Plato, *Gorgias*, 449b1-4

[282]Plato, *Gorgias*, 458e6459a1

[283]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 176

[284]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 179

[285]H. Yunis, 'The Constraints of Democracy and the Rise of the Art of Rhetoric' in D. Boedeker and K.A. Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 229

men can be persuaded of. It is the "art of logos", which is not only speech and argument but also appearance or belief as opposed to fact, and its goal is persuasion.'[286] Rhetoric is much more than simply a new way of conducting politics. It is a fundamental change in the perspective people have on political activity and has a substantial impact on political processes and outcomes. With their teaching, the Sophists contribute dramatically to the transformation of Athenian politics. As foreigners, they are not allowed to participate in Athens' political life; but through their students, they exert a considerable influence on Athenian democracy.

Protagoras highlights the inherent connection between rhetoric and politics:

If he comes to me he won't learn about anything but what he came for. And that is good judgment about domestic matters, so that he may best manage his own household, and about political affairs, so that in affairs of the polis he may be most able both in action and speech. Socrates: Am I following what you say? I think you mean political knowledge [i.e. the knowledge of how to run a polis or city], and you promise to make men good citizens. Protagoras: That is exactly what I proclaim.[287] In order to be good democratic citizens, men need to be capable of participating successfully in public affairs.

As we have demonstrated above, in Athens public speaking is a key political skill:

The chief instrument of government in practically the whole of Greece was the power of the tongue. More than this. It was not merely in the council-chamber and the popular assembly that the efficacy of speech was supreme. In the law court too, where hundreds of jurymen would sometimes be sitting together, words were the universal weapons, the clever manipulation of which was more than half of the battle. The gift and faculty of speech were the sole road to honour and power... It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the art of speech should have been cultivated for the first time in the democratic communities of that age as a profession, and that it should have assumed a prominent if not actually the first place in the education of the young.[288]

In Plato's *Gorgias*, the Sophist describes the power that rhetorical skill confers upon those who are in command of it.

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[286]Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 179

[287]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 4, p. 175

[288]T. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers* (London, John Murray, 1901), p. 382/3

Gorgias: I mean Socrates, what is in truth the greatest good, which confers on everyone who possesses it not only freedom for himself but also the power of ruling over his fellow citizens. Socrates: What do you mean by that? Gorgias: I mean the ability to convince by means of speech a jury in a court of justice, members of the Council in their Chamber, those attending a meeting of the Assembly, and any other gathering of citizens whatever it may be. By the exercise of this ability you will have the doctor as your slave, the trainer as your slave, and that businessman of yours will turn out to be making money not for himself but for another - for you, in fact, who have the ability to speak and to convince the masses.[289]

In *On Sophists* by Alcidamas, we read that in addition to being powerful, skilled speakers are also held in high esteem by their fellow citizens: 'Often events unexpectedly present opportunities, and at these times those who are silent will appear contemptible, whereas we observe that those who speak are held in honour by others for having god-like intelligence.'[290] Given the importance of rhetoric skills, it is obvious that orators will require a special education. 'Now, to speak appropriately, on the spot, on whatever topic is proposed, to be quick with an argument and ready with the right word, and to find just the right speech to match the current situation and people's desires - all this is not within the natural ability of everyone nor the result of whatever education one happens to have had.'[291] Furthermore, rhetorical skills need to be practised:

I am not recommending that one speak offhandedly. I think public speakers should choose in advance their arguments and overall organisation, but the actual words should be supplied at the time of speaking... Thus, whoever desires to become a skilful public speaker and not just an adequate maker of speeches, and wishes to make best use of his opportunities rather than speak with verbal precision, and is eager to procure the goodwill of the audience on his side rather than its resentful opposition, and who further wishes that his mind be relaxed, his memory quick, his forgetfulness hidden, and is eager to achieve an ability with speeches commensurate with the needs of his life - it would be reasonable for him to practice extemporaneous speaking on every possible occasion.[292]

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[289]Plato, *Gorgias*, 452d5-e9
[290]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, p. 278
[291]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, p. 277
[292]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 2, p. 283

Despite being a fervent advocate of rhetorical education, Alcidamas also warns public speakers against losing sight of the purpose of their speech. Political debates should not obstruct political processes or harm public institutions. Public speakers should not be driven by personal considerations but must contribute to the public interest:

I have often thought and wondered, gentlemen, about the intentions of public speakers. Why on earth do they come forth so readily and give us advice, when they bring no benefit to the public welfare but offer a great deal of slander against each other and carelessly throw out arguments that are quite inappropriate to the present situation? Every one of them says he only wants to gain a reputation, but some also demand payment and give their advice to whichever side they think will pay them more. And if someone in the camp does wrong or harms the public interest while getting rich himself, we can see that one on thinks anything of it[293]

In *Gorgias*, Socrates, who is notoriously critical of Athenian democracy, asks Gorgias whether oratory is only about conviction 'Socrates: ... if I understand you correctly, you are saying that oratory is a maker of conviction, and that this is the sum and substance of its whole activity... Gorgias: ... the definition which you have given seems to be quite adequate; that sums up oratory.'[294] Proceeding from this definition, Socrates denounces the adverse effects of oratory on political decision-making.

Now, what are we to think of the oratory addressed to the Athenian people and to the assemblies of free men in other cities? Do the orators in your opinion speak always with an eye to what is best, and make it the constant aim of their speeches to improve their fellow-citizens as much as possible, or do they too set out merely to gratify the citizens, sacrificing the public interest to their own personal success, and treating the assemblies like children, whom their only object is to please, without caring at all whether their speeches make them better or worse? Callicles: There is not simple answer to this question as there was to the other, for some speakers are moved in their speeches by a regard for the public interest, and some are as you describe.[295]

We find similar reflections in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which provides us with invaluable insights into Athenian political culture. For example, the Mytilenian Debate in 427 BCE reveals different perspectives on the conduct of political debates.

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[293]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 3, p. 284
[294]Plato, *Gorgias*, 453a3-9
[295]Plato, *Gorgias*, 502e1-503a6

Cleon, one of the most powerful men in Athens, argues against using rhetoric in matters concerning the state. In his view, rhetorical arguments should not be admitted into political discussions, since both the speakers and the audience may mistake them for reality: 'As for the speech-makers who give such pleasure by their arguments, they should hold their competitions on subjects which are less important, and not on a question where the state may have to pay a heavy penalty for its light pleasure, while the speakers themselves will no doubt be enjoying splendid rewards for their splendid arguments.'[296] Cleon claims that the main problem with democratic decision-making is that people are too easily influenced or even deluded by rhetoric. When political decisions are taken in assemblies, people tend to forget that words and speeches refer to the real world:

You have become regular speech-goers, and as for action, you merely listen to accounts of it; if something is to be done in the future you estimate the possibilities by hearing a good speech on the subject, and as for the past you rely not so much on the facts which you have seen with your own eyes as on what you have heard about them in some clever piece of verbal criticism.[297]

Cleon's attitude towards rhetoric is reminiscent of Gorgias' characterisation of the power of *logos*: 'The power of speech has the same effect on the disposition of the soul as the disposition of drugs on the nature of bodies. Just as different drugs draw forth different humours from the body... so too with words: some cause pain, others joy, some strike fear, some stir the audience to boldness, some benumb and bewitch the soul with evil persuasion.'[298] Cleon argues that, politics, instead of dealing with issues, is in danger of being reduced to a competition in rhetoric:

Any novelty in an argument deceives you at once, but when the argument is tried and proved you become unwilling to follow it; you look with suspicion on what is normal and are the slaves of every paradox that comes your way. The chief wish of each one of you is to be able to make a speech himself, and, if you cannot do that, the next best thing is to compete with those who can make this sort of speech by not looking as though you were at all out of your depth while you listen to the views put forward, by applauding a good pint even before it is made, and by being as quick at seeing how an argument is going to be developed as you are slow at understanding

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[296]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.40.15-21

[297]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38.18-24

[298]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 1, p. 193

what in the end it will lead to.[299]

Surprisingly, Cleon and Socrates share a similar perspective on the motivation of public orators, although the latter attacks them from a different angle:

... Now, what are we to think of the oratory addressed to the Athenian people and to the assemblies of free men in other cities? Do the orators in your opinion speak always with an eye to what is best, and make it the constant aim of their speeches to improve their fellow-citizens as much as possible, or do they too set out merely to gratify the citizens, sacrificing the public interest to their own personal success, and treating the assemblies like children, whom their only object is to please, without caring at all whether their speeches make them better or worse?[300]

Cleon insists that public assemblies are not capable of making reasonable policy decisions:

What you are looking for all the time is something that is, I should say, outside the range of ordinary experience, and yet you cannot even think straight about the facts of life that are before you. You are simply victims of your own pleasure in listening, and are more like an audience sitting at the feet of a professional lecturer than a parliament discussing matters of state[301]

Cleon's criticism of the way politics are conducted in democratic assemblies is of particular interest. Comparing the decision-makers in Athens to the passive audience of a professional lecturer, he implies that a political assembly should not be confused with a Sophist classroom. Although young Athenians are trained by the Sophists to participate in speech competitions, Cleon emphasises the fundamental difference between practising rhetorical skills and giving a speech in a public assembly. Even though at first, it seems as if he is arguing *against* the use of rhetoric in politics altogether, what he is really criticising is the lack of realism that rhetoric usually entails. Speeches need to be persuasive but they must not put style before content. A political debate can only be meaningful and productive if those that participate in it realise exactly what it is: a mechanism to make public policies.

Diodotus disagrees with Cleon and argues that the words employed by public speakers

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[299]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38.24-35

[300]Plato, *Gorgias*, 502e1-503a2

[301]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38.35-41

are related to reality as well as to actions:

And anyone who maintains that words cannot be a guide to action must be either a fool or one with some personal interest at stake; he is a fool, if he imagines that it is possible to deal with the uncertainties of the future by any other medium, and he is personally interested if his aim is to persuade you into some disgraceful action, and, knowing that he cannot make a good speech in a bad cause, he tries to frighten his opponents and his hearers by some good-sized pieces of misrepresentation.[302]

He maintains that democratic decision-making can function if political speakers respect a certain code of conduct:

The good citizen, instead of trying to terrify the opposition, ought to prove his case in fair argument; and a wise state, without giving special honours to its best counsellors, will certainly not deprive them of the honour they already enjoy; and when a man's advice is not taken, he should not even be disgraced, far less penalised. In this way successful speakers will be less likely to pursue further honours by speaking against their own convictions in order to make themselves popular, and unsuccessful speakers, too, will not struggle to win over the people by the same acts of flattery.[303]

Just like Cleon, Diodotus is concerned with the hidden motives and the personal interest of the speakers, which he fears may have an unduly influence on their speeches. Public speakers must not betray their convictions. Diodotus argues that they will only refrain from doing so if losing an argument does not mean losing one's honour. In order for the state to benefit from public debates, arguments must be evaluated irrespective of who makes them. Diodotus goes on reasoning that there are a number of other problems with public speech-making. He claims that suspicion of a speaker's personal interest prevents the unbiased assessment of his views: 'Then, too, if a man gives the best possible advice but is under the slightest suspicion of being influenced by his own private profit, we are so embittered by the idea (a wholly unproved one) of this profit of his, that we do not allow the state to receive the certain benefit of his good advice.'[304] As a consequence, public speakers have no choice but to deceive their audience in order to succeed: 'So a state of

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[302]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.42.6-14

[303]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.42.28-36

[304]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.43.2-7

affairs has been reached where a good proposal honestly put forward is just as suspect as something thoroughly bad, and the result is that just as the speaker who advocates some monstrous measure has to win over the people by deceiving them, so also a man with good advice to give has to tell lies if he expects to be believed.'[305] An atmosphere of general mistrust is engendered, in which even patriotic acts fall suspect of self-interest: 'And because of this refinement in intellectuality, the state is put into a unique position; it is only she to whom no one can ever do a good turn openly and without deception. For if one performs a patriotic action, the reward for one's pains is to be thought to have made something oneself on the side.'[306] Finally, after having enumerated the various deficiencies of public policy-making, Diodotus tries to rehabilitate the role of public speakers. In his view, public speakers should be trusted because they have greater insight into matters of public concern:

Yet in spite of all this we are discussing matters of the greatest importance, and we who give you our advice ought to be resolved to look rather further into things than you [i.e. the audience] whose attention is occupied only with the surface - especially as we can be held to account for the advice we give, while you are not accountable for the way you receive it. For indeed you would take rather more care over your decisions, if the proposer of a motion and those who voted for it were all subject to the same penalties. As it is, on the occasions when some emotional impulse on your part has led you into disaster, you turn upon the one man who made the original proposal and you let yourself off, in spite of the fact that you are many and in spite of the fact that you were just as wrong as he was.[307]

By praising the competence of public speakers, Diodotus echoes Protagoras' conviction that some men are better than others at giving good advice. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates represents the view of Protagoras: 'I certainly do not deny the existence of both wisdom and wise men: far from it. But the man whom I call wise is the man who can change the appearances - the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for us.'[308] According to this

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[305]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.43.7-12
[306]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.43.12-17
[307]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.43.17-29
[308]Plato, *Theaetetus*, 166d6-11

notion 'a combination of natural gifts and good training begun in early youth will produce citizens whose advice will be better worth seeking than the average.'[309] Unfortunately, Protagoras does not elaborate on what makes the wise man distinguish good things from bad things. He also fails to explain why citizens should entrust their lives to someone simply because he is the most skilful at 'changing appearances'.

In order to defend the position of public speakers, Diodotus highlights that unlike the people who vote in favour of a particular decision public speakers are held accountable for the policies they propose. They therefore carry much more responsibility and are thus easier to blame than those who merely follow them. With his speech, Diodotus justifies why in a democracy, public issues should be discussed and voted on in public assemblies. For the political process to function, public speakers must focus on content rather than on style in order not to hide their agenda. The audience has four primary responsibilities: it should (i) not mistrust public speakers but rather scrutinise whether the state can obtain good advice from them. (ii) They should not misinterpret every patriotic act as motivated by self-interest. (iii) They should not penalise speakers for losing an argument. (iv) They must be aware that they themselves are responsible for the policies they vote in favour of. If both speakers and audiences abide by these rules, the democratic decision-making process will produce optimum results. Whether or not Diodotus' appeal is eventually successful, we do not know. However, we may conclude from the above discussion that the Athenians are well aware of the deficiencies of the decision-making culture in Athens. The fact that eminent politicians attempt to minimise the adverse effects of rhetoric in public debates, shows the significant influence of rhetoric education in Athenian political culture. Diodotus' 'criticism of the audience as demoralised and Cleon's attack on its bad habits are in no way mutually exclusive. They converge to show how sadly tendencies of recent origin defeat the purpose for which the democratic assembly with its discussion and deliberation exists.'[310] Solmsen adds another dimension to our analysis by drawing attention to the fact that 'Thucydides knew the weaknesses of the contemporary Athenian assemblies from personal experience. He knew the aura popularis and what it was capable of doing. We here read his own bitter recollections of habits that he had observed or indeed

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[309]Sinclair, 'Protagoras and Others', p. 85

[310]Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*, p. 40

experienced. Thucydides loved Athens but was not in love with Athenian democracy.'[311]

As we have shown previously, rhetoric forms an integral part of Sophist philosophy. It is the inescapable consequence of Epistemological Scepticism and Relativism. Protagoras asserts that 'On every subject there are two logoi [speeches or arguments] opposed to one another.'[312] Contradicting statements can be made about every subject without the possibility of resolving disagreement. Whereas in philosophy different arguments can coexist, in politics they need to be resolved. The problem discussed by Cleon and Diodotus is that public speakers do not seem to be interested in reconciling their policy propositions. Instead, they follow the Sophist assumption that subjective perceptions - by their very nature -, cannot be disputed. As a result, political debates are reduced to the art of deception. Rather than aiming for a policy which benefits their polis, politicians use rhetoric as an instrument of power. As Ober points out [313], this attitude reflects the standard ethical code prevalent in Greek culture. According to him, this ethical code consists of two prescriptions. (i) The first is the principle of reciprocity: one should help one's friends and harm one's enemies. The help received from and the damage done by other states should be paid back in at least equal but preferably, in greater measure. (ii) The second principle is that of antagonism: one must seek pre-eminence over rivals in ongoing agonistic contests. The Sophists teach a particularly strong and naturalized version of these standard ethics[314] and equip their students with the practical techniques for securing victory over their rivals. Hence the functioning principles of rhetoric and political arguments are not rooted in Sophist philosophy alone but also reflect the deep-seated ethical attitudes predating philosophical thought. This accounts for both the success of rhetoric and for the way in which it is employed in the political sphere.

The fact that with rhetorical training the Sophists do not only make men skilful at speaking but also diffuse their own philosophy, creates a paradox: on the one hand, the Athenian political system creates a demand for rhetorically able men and thus for Sophist education. On the other hand, Sophist teaching conveys philosophical concepts which actually affect the democratic decision-making process negatively. Rhetoric paralyses the

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[311]Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment*, p. 41

[312]Gagarin and Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought*, fr. 24, p.187

[313]Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, p. 192

[314]Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, p. 192

political process rather than helping it to produce policies. It is this relationship between the political system and Sophist teaching that helps us understand the link between Sophist thinking and Political Realism. Outside this philosophical and political context, Realist policies are not thinkable.

5.5   The impact Athenian political culture on foreign policy

In previous chapters, we have analysed the characteristics of Athenian foreign policy and established a relationship between politics and the cultural and intellectual context of the Fifth Century. In this chapter, we have demonstrated that in Athens, the political system produces a specific political culture and a particular type of politician. It is our assertion that these three aspects have a considerable impact on foreign policy.

The political system creates decision-making processes which combine public opinion with the political leadership of the few. Both domestic and foreign policy issues are discussed and determined in the Assembly, where rhetorically apt politicians try to win public support through persuasion. Politics is inherently linked to rhetoric and this relationship has crucial consequences for both domestic and foreign policy. First, politics is highly unstable. Rather than representing a specific approach to politics, politicians use their rhetorical skills to propose whatever policy they believe will succeed. Likewise, the Athenian public changes its opinion frequently. Second, politics is not necessarily about content. Politicians can use rhetoric as an instrument of power. Rhetoric allows them to persuade their audience of any policy, no matter whether it is in the city's interest or not. Third, the central role of rhetoric in politics favours a particular type of politician likely to undermine democratic rule. In a democracy, the power of persuasion may translate into real power, and thus sow the seeds of despotism.

We have seen that Athenian foreign policy is characterised by Political Realism. On the one hand, Realist policies are inherently linked to Sophist ideas prevalent in the intellectual and cultural climate of Fifth Century Athens. On the other hand, Political Realism is widely accepted and supported because it reflects the principles embodied by

Athenian political culture. The philosophical foundation of rhetoric - the idea that truth is what we can be persuaded to believe in, is mirrored in the Athenian conviction that as long as a city thinks a certain policy is right, it is therefore just. The Athenian public supports Realist foreign policies because they embody the same principles as domestic politics. Furthermore, Athenian politicians use the same rhetorical methods to convince their own Athenian as well as foreign audiences.

The *History of the Peloponnesian War* provides us with various examples of public decision-making on issues of foreign policy. Foreign policy decisions are made on two levels: at home and abroad In the majority of cases, policies are decided domestically. Before Athens deploys generals, soldiers and triremes to the battlefield, their mission is determined by a public assembly. This is the case when the Athenians reconsider their decision to punish the Mytilenians in 427 BCE: 'So an assembly was called at once. Various opinions were expressed on both sides, and Cleon, the son of Cleaenetus, spoke again.'[315] Although all citizens are free to express their views and a number of them certainly make use of this right, Thucydides chooses not to represent the various opinions voiced at the assembly. Instead, he relates only the speeches by Cleon and Diodotus in order to familiarise the reader with the views of the most influential politicians from both ends of the political spectrum. Though his noticeable omissions make it difficult to reconstruct the entire course of the political debate, we may infer the central issues. What is most important for our analysis is that when foreign policy is determined by an assembly, the political process is democratic and transparent.

But foreign policy does not always originate from democratic decision-making processes. Thucydides reveals that during the Peloponnesian War, foreign policy decisions are often made on the battlefield or in direct confrontation with the enemy. The Melian Dialogue shows that the leading Athenian politicians and generals often formulate policies in direct response to their enemies. In this case, Athens' body politic does not participate in the decision-making process; policy formulation is left to politicians.

On both levels, i.e. in public assemblies and in direct disputes with the enemy, Athenian politicians employ rhetoric to argue their point. Rhetoric is a common element of foreign policy decision-making, regardless of whether policies are arrived at democratically

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[315]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.36.26-28

or not.

Hence Athenian foreign policy shares its main characteristic with that of Athenian domestic politics: all decisions made in political disputes are influenced by rhetorically skilled politicians. There are two reasons for the prevalence of rhetoric on both levels; one is political the other philosophical. Firstly, since domestic and international politics are conducted by the same politicians, they use identical methods to influence the political discourse. Politicians such as Cleon or Diodotus acquire rhetorical skills in domestic politics before they are entrusted with foreign policy. The prevalence of rhetoric in the formulation of Athenian foreign policy can be explained by examining the background of the political personnel. Secondly, the use of rhetoric across the political spectrum indicates that the philosophical dimensions of rhetoric are prevalent in the domestic as well as in the international sphere. On both levels, the use of rhetoric is based on the assumption that there is no universal truth. Since there is no truth to be established, the outcome of political processes depends on the rhetorical skill with which political arguments are brought forward. Politicians trained in rhetoric do not believe that there is a single right way of conducting politics. In every dispute, they try to convince their audience to implement their suggested policy. The Might is Right logic of Athenain foreign policy is woven into the mechanisms of rhetoric - both are produced by Sophist Epistemological Scepticism. This explains why the Athenians, despite their military superiority, even bother to engage their enemies in political debates. They believe that might makes right both militarily and politically. Athenian military superiority puts her politicians in a position from which they may dictate the terms of international relations. And the rhetorical superiority of her politicians allows them to justify any policy. Athens contenders are thus defeated on both levels; they lose the physical contest as well as the political battle.

The Melian Dialogue shows how skilfully the Athenians master political debates. At the outset of their encounter, they force the Melians into accepting their rules of debating: 'Suppose that you, too, should refrain from dealing with every point in detail in a set speech, and should instead interrupt us whenever we say something controversial and deal with that before going on to the next point? Tell us first whether you approve of

this suggestion of ours.'[316] Though the Athenians pretend they are doing the Melians a favour by refraining from holding a set speech and by allowing the Melians to interrupt them, it is evident that it is the Athenians who profit from these rules. In fact, they are so convinced that these rules are beneficial to their argument that they threaten to call off the debate if the Melians do not abide by them: 'If, however, you do as we suggest, then we will speak on.'[317] The Melian Dialogue is a perfect example of the dual nature of Athenian power. Athens' Might is Right policies are played out at two levels: on the military level, her superiority brings success at war. At the political level, military superiority is represented as a justification for Might is Right policies. By arguing with rhetorical superiority, Athenian domination remains unchallengeable.

In this section, we have explained why Athenian democracy inevitably produces Realist foreign policies. Our reasoning can be summarised as follows: The Athenian political system engenders a specific way of conducting politics. Policy decisions are made in democratic assemblies in which politicians seek to influence public opinion and the outcome of public votes. In order to persuade their audiences, politicians need to be rhetorically skilled. Athens' foreign policy is made in the same institutions and by the same politicians as her domestic policy. As a consequence, rhetoric is used in domestic and international affairs alike. In both circumstances, it is an instrument of power. In the domestic sphere, public decisions are dominated by those politicians who due to their rhetorical training can convincingly argue their point. In the international sphere, rhetoric serves to *justify* Might is Right policies while conveying a Might is Right attitude at the same time.

In Athens, rhetoric is much more than a political instrument. It conveys a certain attitude to politics which influences not only the conduct of politics but also the content of policies. Without the democratic institutions and the political culture they create, Athenian Political Realism is inconceivable.

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[316]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.85.7-11
[317]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.87.5-6

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is a milestone not only for historiography but also for political thought. The importance of Thucydides' contribution to the study of history is undisputed. He introduces standards to historiography that are valid to this day. The most important amongst those is the necessity of representing historic events objectively and without the distortions of personal judgement. However, it has often been overlooked that Thucydides' work is also crucial for our understanding of political thinking. It allows us to study the relationship between ideas and foreign policy as well as their effect on international relations. By analysing the political speeches and the descriptions of Athenian decision-making processes in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* we can reconstruct the development and the characteristics of Athenian Political Realism. And since this is the first historic text in which politics is described as a distinct sphere, the insights such an analysis provides have wide-ranging implications for political theory.

The political speeches attributed by Thucydides to the Athenians and to their adversaries serve as a starting point of our work. We have explored the policies proposed in these speeches in order to expose the underlying notion of politics and of international relations. We have seen that the Athenian perspectives on power, the relations between states, and foreign policy, differ significantly from that of both her allies and enemies. With the aim of explaining this difference, we have studied the background of Athenian foreign policy. One cannot isolate politics from history, culture or philosophy. In fact it is the interplay of these factors that allows us to answer the question that is at the heart of our discussion: *What makes a thought thinkable?* It is perhaps the most basic and the most fundamental question in the discipline of intellectual history. We have attempted to answer it in the context of a specific foreign policy put in place during a specific historical period. This has been a very difficult task for various reasons: first of all, the extant sources in general and Presocratic and Sophist fragments in particular, are incomplete and

thus not always conclusive. As a result, the evidence supporting our assumptions may be at times a little scarce. Secondly, it is impossible to reconstruct events that took place 2,400 years ago with absolute exactness, especially since we must rely on only one source. Thirdly, we ought to be aware that our understanding of the Greek World is limited *per se*. We interpret Greek ideas, politics and policies from our 20th Century vantage point and inevitably apply contemporary standards and values. We should therefore bear in mind that any historical and intellectual enquiry is limited. But this does not imply that we cannot make meaningful statements about the Greek world. On the contrary: exploring the complex world of an ancient historic period allows us to transcend our own time and culture-bound perspectives. We may assume a new vantage point from which we can see other periods while simultaneously gaining a new perspective on our contemporary world. This is the rationale behind studying intellectual history: without an understanding of how ideas emerged, any discussion of contemporary ideas is futile.

What is so intriguing about Political Realism is that it comes into being as a result of a very complex combination of historical, political and cultural factors. At the same time, Realist policies re-appear in later periods and under different historic circumstances. Political Realism transcends time. Although this is not unusual in the history of ideas, it remains to be established whether the circumstances that facilitate the re-emergence of Political Realism bear any resemblance to its origins. Unfortunately, to explore this question is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, our enquiry certainly provides the ground for a comparative study which would address it. Our analysis of the origins of Political Realism is a precondition for understanding the development of Realist ideas through time.

Our key motive for undertaking this study has been the perception that the discipline of international relations ignores the importance of the historic, cultural and intellectual background of foreign policy. However, we think that the question *What makes a policy thinkable?* is central to the study of international relations. If we can explain why a particular foreign policy emerged in the past, it will improve our understanding of contemporary policies and may even allow us to predict the development of these policies. Furthermore, the awareness of intellectual history enables us to establish connections between ideas and to recognise patterns of thinking. For example, by expanding our

analytical horizon in the way described, we can examine how Political Realism changes over time.

The central conclusion of this thesis is that the Fifth Century witnessed the birth of a set of ideas implemented in the form of Political Realism. The fascinating question is how the two are related. Did Political Realism emerge because historic circumstances facilitated its realisation? Or did Political Realism shape the circumstances so that the ideas it was based on could be realised? Our discussion has shown that with respect to Political Realism, the relationship between cause and effect is multi-dimensional rather than straightforward. Hence instead of focussing on what came first, the ideas or the possibility of implementing them, we should regard both factors as part of the complex system which produced Athenian Political Realism.

In fact, the interplay of different factors often proves to be more significant than the impact they have individually. De Romilly emphasises the role thinkers play in shaping history: 'In the absence of particular material or political circumstances, the influence of thinkers might remain relatively limited; conversely, however, without the thinkers the situation itself would not evolve in such a clear-cut or radical manner. Through their thinking, their analyses, and the meaning or new emphasis that they give to words, thinkers too have a hand in the creation of history.'[318] On the one hand, the Sophists provide the intellectual and moral basis for a certain kind of thinking and for certain actions. On the other hand, they can only formulate their ideas because Athenian culture at the time allows them to do so. As a result, Athenian society uses Sophist ideas to exonerate their self-interested behaviour they thus firmly establish as the mainstream rule of action: 'the Sophists had disseminated ideas from which it was possible for anyone to extract a justification or argument in favour of a practical course of action.'[319]

Considering another element in the complex politics of Athens, one could also argue that had Athens not been at war, Athenian society would not have been receptive to Relativism. Thucydides describes the impact of war: it triggers a reversal of values.

But war is a stern teacher; in depriving them of the power of easily satisfying their daily wants, it brings most people's minds down to the level of their actual circumstances... To fit in with the

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[318]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 139
[319]de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, p. 148

change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying that one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect. To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence, but it was still cleverer to see that a plot was hatching.[320]

Without this transformation of values and moral standards induced by the state of war, the Athenian people would not have supported the Realist policies of their political and military leaders.

For scholars of international relations, it is essential to understand the various factors since it is important to comprehend the birth of an idea that has influenced the foreign policy of states and international relations throughout history and to this day. We conjecture that the longevity of Political Realism is due only partly to the recurrence of analogous historical circumstances. A more plausible explanation is that Political Realism allows for a particular side of human behaviour to be expressed, that is ubiquitous and persists regardless of time and place. Our hypothesis is that when a number of critical factors come together, politicians and states will pursue Realist policies. In the case of Athens, we have shown that her power status, her political system, the politicians produced by it as well as the intellectual and cultural climate of the day facilitated the formulation and the implementation of Realist policies. Taking any of these factors as a starting point, one could argue, that if state acquires a position of supremacy, she is more likely to pursue a Might is Right strategy in her external relations. Likewise, we could assert that in societies suddenly confronted with the beliefs and the values of others, one might expect Relativist attitudes to develop. We could also claim that in democracies characterised by wide public participation, rhetoric will be necessary and almost certainly spill over to the realm of foreign policy. And there is little doubt that in turn, rhetoric will change the way politics is conducted. In this sense, Fifth Century Athens is exemplary but not

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[320]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.82.18-21, 26-39

exceptional. It serves as a template for similar historical situations without being an absolute model. What we have learnt from studying Athenian Political Realism is that the foreign policy of a state is dependent on the historical, political and cultural context. But once a policy is put in place, it transcends this background and acquires a meaning of its own which can be revived at any subsequent point in time.

The fact that Political Realism has remained influential to the present day is inherently linked to the circumstances of its emergence. As we have shown, Realist policies are based on Sophist thinking, which marks the beginning of modern philosophy. As Guthrie observes, reading the Sophists 'one feels that there is hardly a question under discussion today which was not argued out on both sides some 2,4000 years ago...'[321] This is due to the fact that

With the change that came over philosophy in the fifth century, we are plunged into a discussion of questions which are as relevant now as they were when first raised by the Sophists. Whatever we may think of the Sophistic movements, we must all agree that [...] no intellectual movement can be compared with it in the permanence of its results, and that the questions which the Sophists pose have never been allowed to lapse in the history of Western thought down to our day.[322]

Before the Sophists, intellectual enquiry is focused on the natural world while moral contemplation is confined to the religious sphere and to traditional values and customs. The Sophists are the first thinkers to focus on human activity and on society. Their philosophy lays the foundations for a re-conceptualisation of human action. This new approach allows Thucydides to establish politics as a subject in its own right. Therefore, the birth of politics coincides with the birth of Political Realism. Sophist philosophy liberates man from the bonds of religion: 'Man loses his respect for the actual and the given as such, he will accept nothing as true which he has not himself approved, he will act only on the basis of his own judgment.'[323] Thucydides portrays men, people and states as agents shaping their own destiny. Before there is a theory of the state, there is

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[321]Guthrie, 'The First Humanists', p. 24

[322]A. Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature* (London, 1966) quoted by Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol. III*, p. 3

[323]Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p.9

a theory of political action. It has proven to be so important that politicians still abide by it and academics continue to study it to this day.

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