The Melian dialogue

Thucydides (see pages 103 and following of the Athens manual) here describes a conversation set during the Peloponnesian War. In 416, during the interlude in the Peloponnesian War known as the Peace of Nicias, the Athenians decided to attack Melos, a colony of Sparta which had remained neutral during the first phase of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides recounts a set of private conversations held between anonymous Spartans and Athenians: most scholars believe the conversation is essentially his own invention, but the arguments presumably reflect those made during Thucydides' lifetime. I provide the headings here.

[Introductory remarks]

Athenians: "You are refusing us a public platform because you fear that the people, if they hear us speak persuasively and without interruption, might be swayed by us. We know that this is why you have brought us here to speak before only a select few. Well, suppose that you who sit here make yourselves safer still. Let us dispense with set speeches; instead, you may respond to every statement of ours which you find objectionable, criticizing it on the spot. Do you think that this is a good way to proceed?"

Melians: "It makes sense to exchange our explanations of our respective positions calmly and quietly, and so we do not object to that. But at this very moment you are engaged in acts of war against us, and these clearly belie your words. It seems to us that you are determined to decide this matter yourselves; if we prove that justice is on our side and refuse to surrender you will make war on us, and if you can prove that you are right you will enslave us."

Athenians: "If you are simply going to speak of your suspicions about the future, or if you have met with us for any purpose other than facing facts and saving your city from destruction, there is no point in our going on with this discussion. However, if this is not the case, then let us proceed."

Melians: "It is only natural that people in our position should employ all sorts of arguments and consider different points of view. But you are right, we have met here to discuss the preservation of our city, and so let us proceed in the manner you have suggested."

[Expediency versus justice]

Athenians: "All right, then, we Athenians will not use fancy arguments to try to persuade you that we have a right to rule because we defeated the Persians or that we are attacking you now because you have harmed us in some way. You would never believe us. And we ask you not to try to convince us that you, although you are a colony of the Lacedaemonians, have never helped them in war or done us any harm. Each side should say what it really thinks and should hope only for what is reasonable, for we both know that in discussions like this one there can be no justice unless both sides have equal power and that, in the end, the strong will take what they can and the weak will give what they must."

Melians: "Well, then, since you want to talk about expediency rather than justice, in our opinion the expedient thing would be for you to respect a principle which works for the common good—namely, that every man who is in danger should be treated fairly and that every plea he makes in support of his cause ought to be taken

1 I.e., Spartans.
seriously, even if it is not entirely convincing. You have as great a stake in this principle as we do since you, if you fall, will incur the most terrible vengeance and be made an example to the entire world."

*Athenians:* "We do not fear the fall of our empire, if such a thing is possible, because ruling states like Lacedaemon are not cruel to those they conquer. We are not as fearful of the Lacedaemonians as we are of our own subjects, who may one day rise up against us. But leave us to worry about that danger. What we want to do now is to show you that we have come here in the interests of our empire and that in what we are about to say we are seeking to save your city. We want to make you a part of our empire, but without trouble, since the survival of your city will be good for us as well as for you."

*Melians:* "It may be good for you to be our masters, but how can it be good for us to be your slaves?"

*Athenians:* "You, by giving in to us, will save yourselves from destruction; we, by not destroying you, will gain your city."

*[Neutrality for Melos?]*

*Melians:* "But why must we be enemies? Would you consider us friends if we declared our neutrality?"

*Athenians:* "No, for friendship with you is more dangerous to us than your hostility. Our subjects would see the former as a sign of our weakness and the latter as proof of our power."

*Melians:* "But aren't your subjects able to distinguish between the free states in which you have no real interest and those which are your own colonies, some of which have revolted only to be subdued by you?"

*Athenians:* "They think that both can make good claims to being in the right, but they also believe that the free states remain free because we know their power and are afraid to attack them. Thus, by conquering you we will simultaneously increase the size of our empire and ensure its security. Besides, we are the masters of the sea and you are islanders, and insignificant islanders at that; thus, we must be especially careful to keep you from escaping us."

*Melians:* "But don't you see any advantage for yourselves in recognizing our neutrality? Once again, since you want to speak only of your own interests and not about justice, we must tell you what our interests are and hope to convince you that what is good for us is good for you as well. Won't you make enemies of the other states who are now neutral? When they see what you are doing to us, won't they assume that you will one day turn against them too? And, if they do, won't you be strengthening the enemies you already have and forcing others to join them who would otherwise never dream of opposing you?"

*Athenians:* "We are not particularly concerned about the states on the mainland. They have their freedom, and so it will be a long time before they start taking defensive measures against us. We are much more fearful of islanders like you who still have their liberty and of subject peoples who are bitter because they have been forced into our empire. These are the ones who might recklessly throw themselves, and us, into some dangerous though foreseeable conflict."
**Melians:** "But surely, if you are willing to take great risks to preserve your empire and your subjects are ready to face dangers to escape it, then we who are still free would seem weak and cowardly if we were not ready to do and suffer anything rather than submit and become your slaves."

**Athenians:** "Not necessarily, if you think clearly about it. We are stronger than you are and so there would be no dishonor for you in submitting to us. The issue before you is not honor, but whether you will decide to save your city by not attempting to resist an irresistible force."

**[Melian hopes: fortune, the Spartans]**

**Melians:** "But we know that in war fortune sometimes intervenes on the side with fewer men. If we yield to you now our hope is gone, but if we fight there is always the chance that we will succeed in defending ourselves."

**Athenians:** "Hope is a comfort in times of danger, and there is nothing wrong with hoping provided that one does not depend on hope alone; for then it may be harmful, but never ruinous. But when hope's 'go for broke' nature induces men to stake everything on her, they don't see her for what she really is until it is too late, in the moment of their destruction. It is only before that moment when there is still time to take precautionary measures, that hopes never fail them. You are weak, and a single turn of the scale might mean your destruction. So don't be deluded by hope. Don't make the mistake made by so many others who, though they could save themselves simply by doing what is sensible and practical, when there are no longer good grounds for optimism place their faith instead in smoke and mirrors, in prophecies and oracles and other intangibles which destroy men by encouraging them to be hopeful."

**Melians:** "We know very well how hard it would be to stand against your power, and against fortune too if she is against us. Still, we believe that the gods will be as kind to us as they are to you, for we are in the right and you, our enemies, are in the wrong. As for our weakness, we expect that our allies the Lacedaemonians will more than make up for it. They will help us because we are their kinsmen and for the sake of their honor. So you can see that our confidence is not so unfounded as you suppose."

**Athenians:** "We expect just as much from the gods as you do, for we are not striving for anything unusual, anything beyond what everyone agrees are the expectations of gods and men in human affairs. Our beliefs about the gods and our knowledge of men tell us that there is a law of nature according to which we seek to rule whatever we can. We did not create this law, nor are we the first to act upon it. We inherited it, and we will bequeath it to those who come after us. Moreover, the action we are taking against you is perfectly consistent with this law, and we know that you and all other peoples would do just what we are doing if you had our power. So much for the gods; we have no reason to fear their disfavor.

Now, as for the Lacedaemonians—we admire you for your simple faith in them, but we do not envy you for your foolishness. The Lacedaemonians are, among themselves, a remarkably virtuous people. But their treatment of other peoples is another story, and a long one too. Let it suffice to say that of all the peoples we know the Lacedaemonians are the most notorious for believing that whatever they like is honorable and whatever advances their own interests is just. This attitude is absolutely inconsistent with your absurd belief that they will come and save you."
Mélians: "But that is exactly why we do trust them to help us. They will look to their own interests, and so they will not betray us; for we Melians are their colonists, and they know that if they betray us they will lose the trust of their friends in Greece and thereby strengthen their enemies."

Athénien: "But don't you see that the self-interested seek safety, whereas doing what is just and honorable brings danger—something the Lacedaemonians prefer to avoid?"

Mélians: "But we think that they would be willing to face dangers for our sake, and that they would even think the risk well worth taking since we are so close to their home in the Peloponnese and because we are their kinsmen and share their feelings."

Athénien: "But the good feeling of those who ask for help is not what induces a prospective ally to give it. What that ally wants is a clear superiority in real power over the enemy. Now, there is no people more intent on this than the Lacedaemonians. They have so little confidence in themselves that they won't even attack their own neighbors unless they have plenty of allies with them, and so it is not likely that they will come to your island when we are masters of the sea."

Mélians: "But they might send their allies. The Cretan sea is large, and you would have more difficulty in intercepting enemy ships than they would have in slipping past you. And, if a rescue by sea should fail, they might invade Attica itself and even the lands of your allies who were left unharmed by Brasidas. Then you would have to fight close to home in order to save your own land and confederacy rather than for a country in which you have no legitimate interest."

[Athénien: conclusion: the danger of honor]

Athénien: "It is possible that the Lacedaemonians may help you, for they have helped others. But you should remember that we Athenians have never withdrawn from a siege out of fear of others. And we are surprised that, though you have said your chief concern is the preservation of your city, not once during this long discussion have you said anything which would lead a reasonable man to believe that your salvation is likely.

Your main points are all related to events you hope will take place in the future, and the power you do have cannot begin to compare with that which you see arrayed against you at this very moment. You really will be demonstrating a complete lack of common sense if, after we have left this meeting, you in your deliberations still do not come up with a strategy wiser than those you have already mentioned.

Don't bring ruin on yourselves out of a false sense of honor, a thing which often destroys men when their pride is threatened by a dangerous situation. There have been many who, even though they were well aware of the likely consequences, nevertheless allowed themselves to be seduced by honor—a mere word, an idea! That it led them into irrevocable disaster was bad enough, but their disgrace and dishonor were made all the worse by the fact that they were brought about not by fortune, but by their own foolishness!

You, if you are wise, will not make this mistake. You will see that there is nothing dishonorable in yielding to the greatest city in Greece when it invites you to join its empire on such reasonable terms, for we will allow you to keep your land and ask only that you pay us tribute. You will see that, given a choice between war and safety, there is no honor in obstinately insisting on war. Safety is achieved by standing up to one's equals, being deferential to superiors and treating one's inferiors with moderation. We will leave this meeting now. We ask that you consider this matter carefully, keeping in mind at every moment that your purpose is the survival
of your country, the only one you have, and that its future hangs on the decision you are about to make."

**[Final interchange]**

The Athenians then left the meeting, and the Melians, after further discussion, determined to remain firm in their resolve to resist the enemy. They answered as follows:

"Men of Athens, our position is unchanged. We will not surrender in one brief moment the freedom which our city has enjoyed for the seven hundred years since its foundation. We will put our trust in the good fortune which, by the grace of the gods, has kept us safe until now, in the Lacedaemonians, and in ourselves. Still, we are willing to be your friends and the enemies neither of you nor of the Lacedaemonians, and we ask you to make a treaty which is acceptable to both of us and then to leave our land."

This was the reply of the Melians, and the Athenians, as they departed, said: "Well, we must say, judging from your decision, that you are a people unique in your ability to see the future as more certain than the present and to regard uncertainties as certain just because you want them to be so. As you have entrusted your security mostly to the Lacedaemonians, fortune, and hope, so shall these play the greatest part in your destruction."

**[The siege of Melos]**

The Athenian envoys returned to the army, and the Athenian generals, when they heard that the Melians would not surrender, began hostilities immediately. They built a wall around the entire city of Melos, dividing the work among the various contingents. Then they left some of their own troops and some of their allies to blockade the city by land and by sea and returned home with the bulk of their army. The force which stayed behind continued the siege.

[Despite several other attacks on their allies,] the Lacedaemonians did not renounce the treaty [the Peace of Nicias]; instead, they announced that if any of their people wanted to attack the Athenians they were free to do so. After this the Corinthians declared war on Athens for their own reasons, but the rest of the Peloponnesians remained at peace.

On one occasion the Melians made a night attack on the Athenians, capturing that part of the Athenian line which was opposite the agora, killing a few men and taking as much grain and other necessities as they could carry. They retreated and made no further move while the Athenians, for their part, took measures to tighten their hold on the city. And so the summer came to an end.

The Melians again captured a part of the Athenian line, a section that was undermanned, and so the Athenians sent reinforcements under the command of Philocrates the son of Demeas and intensified their operations against the city. This led to treachery among the Melians themselves and, ultimately, to an unconditional surrender to the Athenians. The Athenians put to death all the men of military age and sold the women and children into slavery. They then took the land of Melos for themselves, sending five hundred of their own citizens as colonists.