

The *Arete* of Nicias: Thucydides 7.86

A. W. H. Adkins

THE INTERPRETATION of the term *ἀρετή* as used of Nicias in Thucydides 7.86 has been much discussed; and it may well appear that enough ink has been spilt on the question already. In this paper, however, I shall approach the subject from a somewhat different angle, drawing upon what I have written elsewhere. I shall employ the distinction between ‘competitive excellences’ and ‘cooperative excellences’, and also the results of my inquiry into the reasons why fifth-century Greeks held themselves or others to be *ἀξιοί* or *ἀνάξιοί* of *δυστυχία*.¹

In any society there are activities in which success is demanded, and good intentions or great efforts do not suffice, if the highest commendation is to be accorded. Unless we are trying to be consciously epigrammatic, we do not say “X is a good general but he never wins battles” or “Y is a good tennis-player but he always loses.” To be a good general or a good tennis-player it is necessary to win, and to win—at least—more frequently than one loses. Granted, it is expected of a general that he be loyal and conscientious, and of a tennis-player that he abide by the rules;² but one may display great loyalty and conscientiousness and yet be rated a poor general, and many abide by the rules of tennis throughout their lives without becoming good tennis-players. The successful practice of activities of this type I call ‘competitive excellences’, and the words used to commend the successful practice ‘competitive value-terms’. ‘Good birth’ may be included here, since its possession is valued in many societies, and its possession or non-possession is evidently unrelated to any efforts or intentions on the part of its possessor or non-possessor. In such societies the

¹ For the terms ‘cooperative’ and ‘competitive’ see (in addition to what I have written here) my *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford 1960) 6f [hereafter, MR]; “Homeric Values and Homeric Society,” *JHS* 91 (1971) 3–4, and *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece* (London and Toronto 1972) 8f [hereafter, MV]. For *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας* see my “Aristotle and the Best Kind of Tragedy,” *CQ* 16 (1966) 78–102.

² I am here concerned with modern English evaluations. Some societies or groups might set a lower value on rule-observance, provided success was achieved.

possession of good birth is a component of success, even if it be not a sufficient cause, its non-possession a component of failure.³

On the other hand, there are also activities in which success is not the sole criterion and in which intentions are taken into account. If we say that X is a good citizen, we do not (in modern English usage, at all events)⁴ mean that he scores successes which place him competitively at an advantage with respect to other citizens, but—at least—that he cooperates justly with other citizens. Such kinds of behaviour I call ‘cooperative excellences’, and the terms used to commend them ‘cooperative value-terms’.

It is evident that either the same set of value-terms, or two different sets, might be used to commend these two different types of activity. I have endeavoured to show elsewhere⁵ that in early Greece the group of terms which includes *ἀγαθός* and *ἀρετή* was employed, despite some attempts to change the usage,⁶ to commend competitive excellences: the successful defence of one’s group, prosperity, high birth and other associated characteristics; and that other terms were used to commend the less-valued cooperative excellences. However, in the later fifth century some writers occasionally extend the range of *ἀρετή* and *ἀγαθός* to commend cooperative excellences,⁷ without ceasing to employ the terms to commend also all the traditionally valued characteristics. Thucydides has examples of this usage;⁸ and it is this fact which renders it necessary to inquire at some length into the nature of the *ἀρετή* of Nicias, and attempt to determine which of his qualities, in Thucydides’ opinion, rendered him unworthy of misfortune.

When Nicias is put to death after his capture during the final defeat of the Athenian forces in Sicily, Thucydides accords him an epitaph in the following well-known words (7.86): *καὶ ὁ μὲν τοιαύτη ἢ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τούτων αἰτία ἐτεθνήκει, ἥκιστα δὴ ἄξιός ὦν τῶν γε ἐπ’ ἐμοῦ*

³ In Homeric society, for example, all *ἀγαθοί* are of good birth, and it would be impossible for anyone of low birth to be acknowledged to be *ἀγαθός*; but a great disaster might deprive the *ἀγαθός* of his *ἀρετή*, good birth notwithstanding. (For the reasons, and the problems which arise when not only the well-born are prosperous, see MR 31ff, 75ff, MV 10ff, 37ff.)

⁴ The fifth-century usage of *ἀγαθός πολίτης* has certain differences. See MR 198ff, 205ff, 210f, 226ff, MV 111ff, 124ff, 142.

⁵ See MR chapters 1–8.

⁶ See MR 38ff, 78f.

⁷ See MR chapter 9.

⁸ See MR 178f and nn.

Ἑλλήνων ἐς τοῦτο δυστυχίας ἀφικέσθαι διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν νενομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν.

Interpretations vary. *νενομισμένην* is sometimes taken with *ἀρετὴν*,⁹ more frequently with *ἐπιτήδευσιν*.¹⁰ *ἀρετὴν* is usually interpreted as denoting and commending predominantly cooperative excellences;¹¹ and *νενομισμένην* is either held to distinguish the conventional view of Nicias' *ἀρετή* from Thucydides' own view,¹² or understood as simply evaluating Nicias' past life in terms of conventional *ἀρετή*.

Of recent years the immediate response of any reader of Thucydides, faced with any problem of interpretation, has been to turn to Gomme's *Commentary*; and since 1970, with the publication of the fourth volume, it has been possible to ascertain the editors' views of the passage under discussion here. The consultation of the *Commentary* is usually highly rewarding: the work has thrown an abundance of new light on the interpretation of Thucydides, for which all scholars who have any concern with that writer have every reason to be grateful. If I now, in advancing my own views, discuss Gomme's note on the *ἀρετή* of Nicias at some length, I do not do so from any desire to engage in polemic. On the contrary, on this matter as on so many others, Gomme's note is fuller, clearer and more carefully reasoned than any other in print; so that anyone who wishes to offer an alternative explanation must take account of Gomme's arguments in detail.

Gomme's note (p. 463) includes the following: "If Thucydides had really wanted to distinguish traditional concepts of goodness from some more original concept, he could have made the distinction by

⁹ The words *πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν* in fact appear only in **B** and Σ^{Mes} ; but something is needed to complete the sense, and *πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν* is read by all modern editors.

¹⁰ So most recently A. W. Gomme, A. Andrewes and K. J. Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides IV* (Oxford 1970) *ad loc.* [hereafter, *HCT*]. P. Huart, *Le vocabulaire de l'analyse psychologique dans l'oeuvre de Thucydide* (Paris 1968) 451 n.1 [hereafter, *HUART*], argues for taking *νενομισμένην* with both words.

¹¹ So e.g. H. Dale in his translation, *Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York 1861) 510; E. C. Marchant, *Thucydides Book VII* (London 1893) *ad loc.* E. F. Poppe, *Thucydidis De Bello Peloponnesiaco Libri Octo* (Leipzig 1875) *ad loc.*, interprets thus: *in omni vitae genere civitatis mores atque instituta fideliter sequebatur atque ex ea observantia agendi rationem ita constitutam habebat, ut in omnibus rebus probum se praestaret*. This interpretation may include more than the cooperative excellences; but the Latin words *mores*, *instituta* and *probum* pose the same problems of interpretation as does *ἀρετή* if no further explanation is given.

¹² So (apparently) L. Bodin and J. de Romilly, *La Guerre du Péloponnèse Livres VI & VII* (Paris 1955) 158: "par son application au bien dans une entière conformité avec les règles."

writing ἀρετὴν τὴν νενομικμένην . . . In any case, the definition of ἀρετή implied¹³ in v. 105. 4 (cf. n.) indicates that Thucydides would not have wanted to deny the name of goodness to the sustained effort to be just and conscientious in fulfilling one's obligations."

The first half of this judgement denies that Thucydides is contrasting his own view of ἀρετή with the conventional view; and the linguistic argument on which it rests seems entirely valid. There are then two possibilities: (a) Thucydides is praising Nicias in terms of generally accepted late fifth-century values; (b) Thucydides is praising Nicias in terms of Thucydides' own values. If νενομικμένην is to be taken with ἐπιτήδευειν, in the sense of 'sustained', either interpretation of ἀρετή is at first sight possible. Thucydides seems to have taken no precautions, however, against being understood in sense (a), that in which a contemporary reader was likely to interpret the words; and it seems necessary to conclude that the standard referred to is that (or one of those) commonly accepted in Athens at this period. No interpretation yet offered justifies taking ἀρετή, as used of Nicias, in an unusual sense.

The second half of the judgement seems to suggest that this usage of ἀρετή commended the sustained effort to be just. ('Fulfilling one's obligations' is unclear, because tautologous: a requirement of any moral standard must be that one fulfils one's obligations under that standard, whatever these may be; but English usage suggests that justice is more in the minds of the editors than is courage.) In general, ἀρετή in this passage seems to be so interpreted, though not all editors or translators explain their interpretations or versions as fully as Gomme.¹⁴ It is from this aspect of the interpretation that I wish to dissent.

In essaying an alternative explanation I shall consider not merely ἀρετή but fifth-century judgements of a person's being held to be ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας or ἀνάξιος δυστυχεῖν in virtue of the possession of

¹³ 'Implied definition' is a difficult concept to employ in ethics at any period, and the more so in the turmoil of values of late fifth-century Athens. Furthermore, since the words of 5.105.4 are uttered by "the Athenians," not by Thucydides *in propria persona*, while all the uses of the word ἀρετή, some incompatible with one another, current at the period appear in Thucydides (see MR 178 and nn.), it seems difficult to argue that any one usage which appears in a speech represents Thucydides' own view.

¹⁴ 'Virtue' and 'every virtue' are uninformative when one is discussing another culture unless further explanation is given of the manner in which the English words are to be understood.

certain ascertainable qualities; and I shall inquire how a late fifth-century Greek whose use of language was not esoteric would have been likely to understand such an evaluation containing ἀρετή, ἀνάξιος (or least ἄξιος) and δυστυχία (or δυστυχεῖν).

In an earlier article I discussed the usage of ἄξιος in fifth-century tragedians and historians, and argued that where one member of a group was evaluating the deserts of another, or an individual was evaluating his or her own deserts, these deserts were normally evaluated in terms of traditional competitive and social ἀρετή rather than in terms of cooperative excellences. In general, only those who belong to a group opposed to one's own are regarded as being ἄξιοι δυστυχεῖν for breaches of cooperative excellences; and since ancient Greeks were little given to supposing their enemies to be just and evaluated their friends' unworthiness of ill-fortune in different terms, examples of a person being held to be ἀνάξιος δυστυχεῖν in virtue of his justice are hard to find. For evidence for these conclusions I refer my readers to the discussion in my earlier article.¹⁵

Outside tragedy, Herodotus always uses ἀνάξιος with reference to the criterion of traditional competitive ἀρετή; and the Plataeans argue similarly in Thucydides 3.59.¹⁶

In our manuscripts, there exists in Greek tragedy one example of a member of *the same* group¹⁷ being held to be ἀνάξιος δυστυχεῖν in virtue of his cooperative excellences. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* 683ff the Chorus laments the lot of Philoctetes,

ὅς οὔτ' ἔρξας τιν', οὔ τι νοσφίσας,
ἀλλ' ἴκος ὦν ἴκοις ἀνήρ,
ᾧλλυθ' ᾧδ' ἀναξίως.

Three points should be made: (a) the *Philoctetes* is a late, and in many ways 'advanced', tragedy, in which other new evaluations are found;¹⁸ (b) to enable the audience to understand the criteria employed, those criteria are stated very explicitly; (c) there is some doubt whether Sophocles wrote ἀναξίως here at all.¹⁹

¹⁵ "Aristotle and the Best Kind of Tragedy," *CQ* 16 (1966) 78–102.

¹⁶ *ibid.* 91–95. Herodotean examples: 1.73.5, 1.114.4, 7.9.1, 7.10.ε.

¹⁷ The same, since the chorus feels a powerful sympathy for Philoctetes here.

¹⁸ See *MR* 189.

¹⁹ Line 685 does not correspond metrically with 701. Dindorf emended ἀναξίως to ἀτίμως, Wecklein to ἀεικώς, Linwood to ἀνοίκτως, taking ἀναξίως as a gloss. See R. C. Jebb, *Philoctetes* (Cambridge 1890) *ad loc.*

How are we to apply these findings to the interpretation of Thucydides' judgement of Nicias? In the first place, it seems impossible to exclude competitive and social excellences from the criteria in Thucydides' mind; or at all events from those likely to be in the minds of his earliest readers. If Thucydides wished to exclude them, he should have been more explicit. Suppose—what is not the case—that it were equally common to use cooperative as to use competitive and social criteria in late fifth-century Athens to determine who was or was not *ἀνάξιος δυστυχεῖν*; suppose that the cooperative use of *ἀρετή* was then as common as the competitive and social use. Even in that case the connotation of the words would be so wide that it would be necessary to make explicit mention of the criteria being used, as Sophocles does in *Philoctetes* 683ff, whether or not the criteria are those for being deemed to be *ἀνάξιος* of ill fortune. In fact, however, the cooperative use of *ἀρετή* is much less prevalent than the competitive and social use at this period;²⁰ and there is only one doubtful example of anyone being held to be *ἀνάξιος* of ill fortune on cooperative grounds. Competitive and social excellences must surely have been in the forefront of the minds of his contemporary readers; and Thucydides must have known that this would be the case.

We cannot escape from this conclusion by claiming that Thucydides does not suppose himself to belong to the same group as Nicias. It would be necessary to claim that Thucydides was regarding Nicias as an enemy, in which case he would be more likely to judge Nicias to be *ἄξιος δυστυχίας* on the grounds of injustice than to accord him a justice in virtue of which he might be held to be *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας*. If we take the judgement to be passed—as “of the Greeks in my time, at all events,” which compares Nicias not merely with other Athenians, but with Greeks in general, would suggest—in the detached manner of one above the battle, my conclusion is unaffected. The historian is able—or should be able—to evaluate the characters of his history without regarding any of them as his personal enemies; and insofar as he achieves detachment, he can evaluate in the relevant terms the services which each performs for his own group. Herodotus puts a similarly dispassionate judgement—presumably a comment of his own—into the mouth of Artabanus, 7.10.ε. It is of armies in general, of whatever country, that he says *οὕτω δὲ καὶ στρατὸς πολλὸς ὑπὸ ὀλίγου διαφθείρεται κατὰ τοιόνδε· ἐπεὰν φηὶ ὁ θεὸς φθονήσας φόβον*

²⁰ See MR chapters 9–13.

ἐμβάλη ἢ βροντήν, δι' ὧν ἐφθάρησαν ἀναξίως ἑωυτῶν, and their unworthiness is evidently reckoned in terms of traditional competitive ἀρετή.

Since Thucydides does occasionally use ἀρετή where the context necessitates a cooperative interpretation,²¹ a cooperative 'flavour' cannot be excluded with certainty from this passage: it may be an element of the 'meaning'. My contention is that it is utterly impossible to exclude the much more firmly established, traditional competitive and social connotations of ἀρετή from any passage where the context itself, or the personal characteristics of the individual of whom the term is used, does not exclude the possibility of understanding it in this manner; and that where the context does not prevent it, such occurrences of ἀρετή are likely to have been interpreted in purely competitive and social terms.

Does the context, or the personal characteristics of Nicias, debar the reader from understanding ἀρετή in the traditional sense here? It has recently been argued that Nicias' "economic background is that of the slave-owning demagogues like Kleon and Hyperbolos rather than that of the landowner Perikles."²² Thucydides would certainly have refused to regard Cleon and Hyperbolos as ἀγαθοί; but it is unnecessary to conclude that, to Thucydides or to other Athenian ἀγαθοί of his day, Nicias and Cleon were socially and economically indistinguishable.

Aristotle and his school are a good source for Greek conservative social attitudes.²³ In the *Politics* (1258b 9ff) Aristotle treats farming of all kinds as constituting the true and proper art of getting wealth, for all money-making from the fruits of the earth or from animals is in accordance with φύσις (1258a 37f). This is contrasted with "that which consists in exchange" which "is justly censured"; for the gain made is not supplied by nature (as in the natural increase of field and flock) but from one's fellows. However, "there is still a third sort of wealth-getting intermediate between this and the first or natural mode which is partly natural, but is also concerned with exchange, viz. the industries that make their profit from the earth and from things

²¹ As in 1.37.5, discussed in MR 178. This example occurs in a speech. There is no equally clear example in the narrative, where one might have confidence that the values were Thucydides' own. But the speeches testify that the cooperative usage was known to Thucydides, at all events.

²² J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford 1971) 404 [hereafter, DAVIES].

²³ See e.g. MR ch. 16, and my *From the Many to the One* (London and Ithaca 1970) 209ff [hereafter, FM].

growing from the earth which, although they bear no fruit, are nevertheless profitable; for example, the cutting of timber and mining” (1258b 27ff, Jowett’s translation). The ideal is to live from what nature provides; and in theory at least the farmer could live entirely from the produce of his farm. Nature, however, also supplies to some landowners timber, stone or metals; but they fall short somewhat of the ideal, since though nature gives them their gains, they cannot consume directly what nature supplies in order to sustain life but must exchange it for what is edible and wearable. Nevertheless, they are clearly distinguished from those censured individuals who live by exchange of what nature has not supplied to them (merchants, retail traders and similar persons), by usury or by service for hire. The author of the *Economics* recommends²⁴ that so far as property is concerned one should pay attention to that which is in accordance with nature. He holds agriculture in the highest esteem, for reasons similar to those given in the *Politics*; but “next come all those things which are derived from the earth, such as mining and other arts of the same kind.”

Aristotle in his ethical, political and social thought frequently offers justifications of attitudes, or rationalisations of prejudices, already held by the Greek ἀγαθός;²⁵ and there seems no reason to doubt that the *Politics* and *Economics* here reflect attitudes already prevalent in Greek society. And when the author of the *Economics* adds, forgetting mining, “for husbandmen are the only persons whose possessions lie outside the city walls,” the observation may be relevant in other respects than those mentioned in the text.²⁶ If one’s income is derived from a nasty smelly tannery or a lamp-works in

²⁴ [Oec.] 1.2. Though not by Aristotle, the first book of this work seems to be by a Peripatetic writer.

²⁵ As when he explains why barbarians, women and artisans are inferior, using methods derived from his own philosophy (for which see *FM* 201, 209ff). I am not arguing that all who shared Aristotle’s attitudes would have been able to offer the same justifications for them; merely that the attitudes existed. It is interesting to observe Georgius Agricola (Georg Bauer) some 2000 years later offering very similar arguments in favour of the respectability of mining and investment in mining (*De Re Metallica* [Basel 1556] Bk. I). He cites Thucydides, but not Nicias, as a distinguished miner of the past.

²⁶ The author of the *Economics* (1.2) emphasizes that the healthy outdoor work of farming produces good soldiers. Greek miners were slaves and no similar claim could be made for them; but we are concerned here with income derived from mining, not with working oneself with a pick and shovel. (Agricola, in the context of a different kind of warfare, makes a similar claim for mining, Bk. I *ad fin.*)

the city, one's fellow-citizens are constantly reminded of the fact; but mines are outside the city, and even were mining not respectable, others are not constantly reminded of the source of the mining magnate's income. As the *Politics* and *Economics* tell us, however, ore can be thought of as being, like crops, a product of the earth, so that Nicias and his like had a claim to be deriving wealth from land-owning²⁷ in the respectable manner;²⁸ and what more respectable, what more the hallmark of traditional ἀρετή, than land-based wealth?

That such distinctions appear tenuous to those who do not share the values and attitudes does not render the values and attitudes any less powerful in those societies and groups which hold them. A Greek of the period could have distinguished socially between Nicias and Cleon; and of course Nicias was considerably more wealthy.²⁹ Nicias certainly also performed, and performed lavishly,³⁰ the liturgies demanded of the wealthy man that showed him in Athenian eyes to be an ἀγαθός πολίτης.³¹ Again, in his public life, he favoured the cautious, non-expansionist policy which was the mark of the conservative (and hence of most ἀγαθοί), at all events after the Cimonian period.

Nicias, then, can be regarded as an ἀγαθός in the traditional sense. His personal characteristics do not prevent us from thus interpreting ἀρετή in 7.86. Nor does the context. It is true that nine chapters earlier³² Nicias said of himself (7.77.2) καίτοι πολλά μὲν ἐς θεοῦς

²⁷ That Nicias invested in slave-miners is the best-known fact about him; but "there can hardly be any doubt that *the land known to have been owned by the family* [of Nicias] *in the mining area* in the fourth century, together with investments in slave-miners, provided the basis for its prominence in Athenian public affairs" (Davies 403; my emphasis). Davies adds (p.406) "One cannot be sure that these properties had been in family hands in the fifth century, but the probability is high." Davies also observes (p.403) "It is noteworthy that the prominence of the family varies directly with the prosperity of the silver mines"; which suggests that the link with mining was stronger than would be created simply by investing in slave-miners when mining prospered, in other enterprises at other times.

²⁸ At a more recent date, English landowners whose prosperity greatly increased during the nineteenth century from the exploitation of coal mines on their ancestral land would have been affronted by any comparison of themselves with the 'beer barons' and 'pickle peers' of the period; and though Aristotle and the author of the *Economics* distinguish between agriculture and mining as sources of wealth, and prefer the former, neither censures mining as they censure other non-agricultural ways of making a living.

²⁹ See Davies 318ff, 403ff.

³⁰ See Davies 403f, and n.38 *infra*.

³¹ See MR 198ff, 205ff, MV 124ff, 142; and for Nicias' reputation as a wealthy conservative, Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.39.

³² As Huart observes, p.451 n.2; and cf. J. L. Creed, "Moral Values in the Age of Thucydides," *CQ* 23 (1973) 222.

νόμιμα δεδιήθημαι, πολλά δὲ ἐς ἀνθρώπους δίκαια καὶ ἀνεπίφθονα. But Nicias' wealth is mentioned not nine chapters before but in the previous sentence; and this mention would serve to remind Thucydides' earliest readers of Nicias' status as a whole: that he had been socially acceptable and prominent in public life,³³ active participation in which certainly justifies the use of the term ἐπιτήδευσις (cf. Thuc. 2.36.4). Furthermore, he had been a reasonably successful general in his day.³⁴

It seems the more likely conclusion, then, that Nicias is being evaluated in terms of criteria less familiar to us than the editors and commentators suggest. Indeed, Gomme virtually acknowledges as much:³⁵ "No one who has read this history up to the present point is likely to have formed a very favourable view of Nicias. His one consistent characteristic is his obsessive anxiety to preserve his own reputation as a successful general."

We may look with disfavour on this; but in a competitive shame-culture such as that of early Greece it is important, for example, both to be a successful general and to have the reputation of being a successful general; and both are traditionally marks of ἀρετή in Greece.³⁶ Nicias, whether we approve or not, was pursuing traditional ἀρετή.

Nicias, I conclude, is evaluated primarily in terms of traditional criteria of excellence. Since ἀρετή is untranslatable, I cannot offer an adequate rendering of Thucydides' Greek. In paraphrase, what he wishes to convey is that Nicias was least worthy of the Greeks of the time to come to such extreme misfortune, inasmuch as he had sustainedly endeavoured to satisfy all the—primarily competitive and social—demands made upon an ἀγαθός by Athens, and possessed the characteristics of position and wealth which were necessary conditions of being considered ἀγαθός in the first place. Nicias is evaluated as ἀγαθοί characters are evaluated, or evaluate themselves, in tragedy, or as the Plataeans evaluate themselves in Thucydides, when they claim that their—competitive and social—ἀρετή renders them unworthy of misfortune.³⁷ There is no irony in those passages; and there was no necessity whatsoever for the Greeks of Thucydides' day to

³³ See Davies 403f.

³⁴ Even in the last retreat he had shown himself competent. See *HCT ad loc.*

³⁵ *Loc.cit.*

³⁶ See *MR* 58 and *passim*.

³⁷ See my "Aristotle and the Best Kind of Tragedy," *CQ* 16 (1966) 91–95.

regard the judgement that Nicias was unworthy of misfortune in virtue of the possession of traditional ἀρετή as either ironic or bizarre.

Speculative Postscript

The only element of Thucydides' judgement which might have raised the eyebrows of his contemporary readers is the claim that Nicias was *least worthy* of the Greeks of his day to suffer such a misfortune. Why Nicias in particular? The Greeks had had in Thucydides' day more distinguished generals and politicians who were socially acceptable, any of whom in terms of traditional ἀρετή might have been regarded as less ἄξιος of such δυστυχία. For the form of Thucydides' judgement, it should be noted, does not restrict it to those Greeks who were ἀγαθοί and suffered the extremes of misfortune; it covers those Greeks who were ἀγαθοί, whether they suffered such misfortune or not. What of Pericles? (The problem is not eased by interpreting ἀρετή cooperatively: Nicias was a decent man, no doubt, by the standards of his day, but neither Thucydides nor anyone else represents him as *outstandingly* just.)³⁸

³⁸ *HCT* (*loc.cit.*) holds that "Nicias' character and even his military reputation were secure in the fourth century." I am here, however, discussing the connotation of ἀρετή as applied to him in Thuc. 7.86. Even works written only a little later might be misleading here, since the connotation of ἀρετή changed in fourth-century writers (see *MR* chs. 10–16); but in fact the fourth-century works cited by *HCT*, though interesting, seem not to ascribe cooperative excellences to Nicias as marks of his ἀρετή. The *Laches* discusses courage as an ἀρετή; *Lys.* 18.2ff is concerned to portray Nicias as πολλῶν μὲν καὶ ἀγαθῶν αἴτιος τῇ πόλει γεγεννημένος, πλεῖστα δὲ καὶ μέγιστα κακὰ τοὺς πολεμίους εἰργασμένος, marks of traditional competitive ἀρετή frequently cited by the orators (*MR* 198ff); *Dem.* 3.21 mentions Nicias to introduce praise of the military and imperial glories of fifth-century Athens; while *Ath.Pol.* 28.5 praises Nicias, Thucydides son of Melesias and Theramenes as "the best statesmen of Athens, after those of early times." The company kept by Nicias here suggests that Aristotle's claim that almost everyone would agree with the evaluation is a somewhat partisan statement. In any case, none of these fourth-century writers is concerned with Nicias' cooperative excellences; and if one studies Plutarch's account (*Nic.* 4 and 5), it appears that Nicias' 'generosity' amounted as much to buying off his foes as to assisting the worthy; while his 'severe dedication to public duty' is represented as being in part due to his fear of sycophants, in part a public relations exercise by Hiero; and the account of his 'strict religious observance' is accompanied by Thucydides' disparaging evaluation of it. Plutarch, as *HCT* reminds us, "claims (*Nic.* 1.5) to have taken some trouble to collect material illustrative of the man's character." If the ascribed motives and accompanying circumstances were part of the tradition, it seems unlikely that many readers between Nicias' day and Plutarch's regarded all of this behaviour as praiseworthy; and in the fifth century any that was praiseworthy (save for help given to members of his own group) would merit commendation as ἀρετή, or as a means to the attainment of ἀρετή, solely insofar as it

We may reply that this is an obituary, and that no one is on oath when writing an obituary; but it is still of interest to inquire why the judgement occurs in *Nicias'* obituary rather than elsewhere. Here I must be somewhat speculative, since no rigorous demonstration is possible in such matters.

Modern readers are apt to emphasize the differences in personality and intellect between the cautious, superstitious *Nicias* and the intellectual (allegedly) detached *Thucydides*. The differences are undeniable; but for fellow-members of a society differences of personality and intellect are not the only discernible, nor always the most significant, differences. Social, economic and political factors may have a rôle to play. Now *Nicias'* and *Thucydides'* economic status was similar, and high:³⁹ each must have been among the wealthiest citizens of Athens, a tiny group. 'Group' may appear to beg the question; but it is far from unknown for the possessors of large sums of money and property to feel common interests and sympathies, particularly in societies where the less prosperous have some power. It may be argued that *Thucydides* was linked with the old Athenian aristocracy, and that *Nicias* was not;⁴⁰ but *Nicias*, I have argued, had land and a respectable source of income; and, aristocrat or no, *Thucydides'* wealth was derived in great part from mining also.⁴¹

But even if it be conceded that *Nicias* and *Thucydides* were men of similar economic status, a status so high as to constitute them members of a small economic group; that their wealth was derived from similar sources, and that the sources were socially acceptable; that both pursued a career of public service, and became generals: what then? Possibly nothing; possibly something more. It is not customary to seek for effects upon *Thucydides'* historical writing of his own public career, which had such an abrupt close. *Thucydides* records (4.104–06) without emotion, in a few words, the event which terminated it. He records in the third person an episode in the career of a general who through no fault of his own—to judge from *Thucydides'* narrative, at all events—experienced a military failure and was forced

assisted *Nicias* towards the attainment of success as general and politician (see *MR* chs. 10–13). Certainly none of this evidence renders it any more likely that *Thucydides* was using *ἀρετή* to commend, whether solely or predominantly, *Nicias'* cooperative excellences.

³⁹ See *Davies* 237, 403.

⁴⁰ See *Davies* 231ff, 403ff. *Davies* acknowledges the difficulty of establishing the genealogy of either *Nicias* or *Thucydides* precisely.

⁴¹ See *Thuc.* 4.105.1, *Plut. Nic.* 4.2, and *Davies* 237, 403.

to go into exile. Thucydides may not express his feelings at this disaster—*αἰσχρόν* to himself in Greek terms as well as *κακόν*⁴²—but it is unnecessary and unreasonable to suppose that he experienced none. In traditional social and economic terms Thucydides was outstandingly *ἀγαθός*, and he had manifested his *ἀρετή* also in public service; and so in traditional terms he was, as we have seen, outstandingly *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας*. Yet he passed some twenty years in exile.

Now when Nicias died, and died so pitifully, Thucydides may have been moved by the death of one whom he regarded as more like himself than appears to be the case to us;⁴³ it is not unreasonable that one mining magnate should be moved by the miserable death of another. If Thucydides did think of Nicias as resembling him in important ways, however, perhaps we may venture a step further. We need not suppose that Thucydides himself believed that the possession of traditional *ἀρετή* rendered one *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας*; but whether he believed it or not, the belief was traditional and widely held, as Thucydides must have known; and whatever the beliefs of his maturity, it would be surprising if Thucydides himself had not been brought up in the belief. During his exile Thucydides had an abundance of time to reflect wryly on his situation and on the manner in which it would have been evaluated, if not by himself, by many of his contemporaries. In terms of traditional values, Thucydides was as *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας* as Nicias; and he too had suffered great *δυστυχία*, a chronic rather than acute *δυστυχία*, but no less distressing for that. I repeat that I am not suggesting that Thucydides necessarily supposed that in the case of either Nicias or himself the possession of traditional *ἀρετή* really did render one *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας*; though it is quite possible that he did, and I can see no means of disproving this.⁴⁴

If we suppose that he did not believe any such thing, Thucydides is nevertheless recording a value-judgement in terms quite comprehensible to, and accepted by, his contemporaries. Whether or no we

⁴² See MR 157. The evaluation of Tyrtaeus (11,16 West) remains valid. For the reasons, see MR *passim*.

⁴³ If we remember Aeschylus' epitaph (Paus. 1.14.5, Athen. 14.627), composed by himself and presumably sincere, we may reflect, whether my speculations here have any substance or no, that it is hazardous to assume that members of other societies see themselves precisely as we tend to see them.

⁴⁴ HCT points out *ad loc.* that the judgement formally resembles others in Thucydides in which irony is out of the question, e.g. 8.97.2.

choose to employ the term 'irony' is a minor matter.⁴⁵ But whatever Thucydides' own beliefs and attitudes, if we suppose that he discerned the resemblance I have suggested between Nicias and himself, there arises the possibility of irony at a deeper level. In the judgement of his contemporaries, and possibly in his own judgement, the mining magnate Thucydides was as *ἀνάξιος δυστυχίας* as the mining magnate Nicias. Perhaps in writing Nicias' epitaph Thucydides was not without thoughts of his own. If there is a tight-lipped irony here, maybe it is not entirely at the expense of Nicias.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
May, 1975

⁴⁵ Such a usage would resemble what R. M. Hare calls the 'inverted commas' use of value-terms; for which see his *The Language of Morals* (Oxford 1952) 124ff.