

Notes on Quiz #6

Civilizations of the Ancient World • Spring 2023

1. Did the Spartans win the Peloponnesian War, or did the Athenians lose it? Explain using examples of what Spartans did right, or what Athenians did wrong, that resulted in the Spartan victory.

This is a subjective question, but some of the things that can be mentioned are as follows. For Athens to “lose” this war, would mean that Athens had an advantage that might have led to them winning, but which they squandered. One argument for this would be the overextension of their strength and resources by extending the war to Sicily. This ended up being a huge catastrophe which permanently weakened Athens’s ability to fight off Sparta. An argument could also be made for Athens losing through disaffection caused by Athens’s ruthlessness toward its allies, as exemplified by the siege and massacre at Melos. Athens was also weakened at the start of the war by the great Plague of Athens, which greatly reduced not only manpower but also many Athenians’ faith in the path they were taking.

For Sparta to “win” would mean overcoming their own disadvantages to defeat Athens through their own agency. Arguments in this line of reasoning would involve the establishment of the base at Decelea in Attica, allowing year-round raising and harassment of Attica’s countryside. Also the deal with Persia in which Persia provided naval help to Sparta, overcoming Sparta’s disadvantage at sea, in exchange for the return of the Ionian Greek states Persia had ruled over before they were taken back by the Delian League. Another, more minor factor is the unexpected ability of a laconic Spartan general, Brasidas, winning over Athenian allies to Sparta, leveraging their disaffection and overcoming their fear of Athens.

2. Who were the sophists? Why would people like Plato see them as immoral?

Sophists taught the skill of arguing a question from any or all positions, as part of the art of rhetoric, in fifth-century Athens. Democracy in Athens created a market for this service, since effectively persuading other voters to your point of view was a valuable ability in a society where ordinary votes mattered. Critics charged that sophists taught the ability to argue a position regardless of truth or morality.

Unlike sophists, who taught a skill, philosophers as a group sought the spread and increase of knowledge and understanding, whether of the physical world or of human behavior. They tended to question received wisdom and superstition in order to develop more rational explanations. Those who taught philosophy, generally, were interested in teaching their students how to question things in order to discover truth; sophists, by contrast, taught their students how to give the most convincing answer regardless of its truth or value.

3. For today you read section 5 of *Clouds*. Who wins the debate that takes place in the Thinkery? How does he win? What do you think the playwright, Aristophanes, is getting at in this scene?

The debate is between Just Argument and Unjust Argument, and Unjust Argument wins. He does so by pointing out that the audience is already largely corrupted by immorality, which Just Argument cannot dispute. By having a character called “Unjust Argument” win, Aristophanes is showing that the sophists’ teachings undermine the morality of Athenians.

EC1. Famous tragic or comic plays from classical Athens include all of the following EXCEPT:

- (d) *Helaiai* by Thucydides, about the murder of Herodotus by a vengeful scribe
[Thucydides was an historian, not a playwright]

EC2. The text refers to the “fundamental incompatibilities between Sparta and Athens” as part of the context for the Peloponnesian War. What “incompatibilities” made Athens and Sparta unable to coexist? How did this lead to war?

Sparta and Athens had incompatible visions of the Greek ideal. Sparta saw all its citizens as peers, equally accomplished and capable, with none standing ahead of the others; the prototype of this was the hoplite warrior, and Sparta bred itself into a society of hoplites to pursue this ideal.

Athens, on the other hand, saw individual accomplishment as more beneficial. Each excelled as best he could, and society was made up of all kinds, with different classes a natural outcome, and greater status according to wealth and property a given.

There was also an ethnic/dialectical difference: the more conservative Dorians, which included the Spartans, did not see themselves as having exactly the same heritage or goals as the more liberal Ionians, which included the Athenians and their eastward allies around the Aegean.

Most of all, Sparta embraced a society governed by the few, with the masses completely without a voice (only the warrior elite were citizens of Sparta). Athens embraced a society of the many, instituting radical democracy in order to give voice to a wide and diverse population. These visions of society simply could not be reconciled.