

12.3. Isocrates / Address to Philip

In his letter to Philip II (338 BCE) Isocrates, one of the great Athenian philosophers and rhetoricians, argued that the Greeks needed to be brought together in a war of revenge on Persia, and that it seemed increasingly that only Philip could do that.

Isoc. 5. Source: Isocrates. *Isocrates*. Trans. George Norlin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.

... I affirm that, without neglecting any of your own interests, you ought to make an effort to reconcile Argos and Lacedaemon and Thebes and Athens; for if you can bring these cities together, you will not find it hard to unite the others as well; for all the rest are under the protection of the aforesaid cities, and fly for refuge, when they are alarmed, to one or other of these powers, and they all draw upon them for succor. So that if you can persuade four cities only to take a sane view of things, you will deliver the others also from many evils.

Now you will realize that it is not becoming in you to disregard any of these cities if you will review their conduct in relation to your ancestors; for you will find that each one of them is to be credited with great friendship and important services to your house: Argos is the land of your fathers, and is entitled to as much consideration at your hands as are your own ancestors; the Thebans honor the founder of your race, both by processions and by sacrifices, beyond all the other gods; the Lacedaemonians have conferred upon his descendants the kingship and the power of command for all time; and as for our city, we are informed by those whom we credit in matters of ancient history that she aided Heracles to win his immortality in what way you can easily learn at another time; it would be unseasonable for me to relate it now, and that she aided his children to preserve their lives. Yes, Athens single-handed sustained the greatest dangers against the power of Eurystheus, put an end to his insolence, and freed Heracles' sons from the fears by which they were continually beset. Because of these services we deserve the gratitude, not only of those who then were preserved from destruction, but also of those who are now living; for to us it is due both that they are alive and that they enjoy the blessings which are now theirs, since they never could have seen the light of day at all had not the sons of Heracles been preserved from death.

Therefore, seeing that these cities have each and all shown such a spirit, no quarrel should ever have arisen between you and any one of them. But unfortunately we are all prone by nature to do wrong more often than right; and so it is fair to charge the mistakes of the past to our common weakness. Yet for the future you must be on your guard to prevent a like occurrence, and must consider what service you can render them which will make it manifest that you have acted in a manner worthy both of yourself and of what these cities have done. And the opportunity now serves you; for you would only be repaying the debt of gratitude which you owed them, but, because so much time has elapsed, they will credit you with being first in friendly offices. And it is a good thing to have the appearance of conferring benefits upon the greatest states of Hellas and at the same time to profit yourself no less than them.

But apart from this, if anything unpleasant has arisen between you and any of them, you will wipe it out completely; for friendly acts in the present crisis will make you forget the wrongs which you have done each other in the past. Yes, and this also is beyond question, that all men hold in fondest memory those benefits which they receive in times of trouble. And you see how utterly wretched these states have become because of their warfare, and how like they are to men engaged in a personal encounter; for no one can reconcile the parties to a quarrel while their wrath is rising; but after they have punished each other badly, they need no mediator, but separate of their own accord. And that is just what I think these states also will do unless you first take them in hand.

Now perhaps someone will venture to object to what I have proposed, saying that I am trying to persuade you to set yourself to an impossible task, since the Argives could never be friendly to the Lacedaemonians, nor the Lacedaemonians to the Thebans, and since, in general, those who have been accustomed throughout their whole existence to press their own selfish interests can never share and share alike with each other. Well, I myself do not believe that at the time when our city was the first power in Hellas, or again when Lacedaemon occupied that position, any such result could have been accomplished, since the one or the other of these two cities could easily have blocked the attempt; but as things are now, I am not of the same mind regarding them. For I know that they have all been brought down to the same level by their misfortunes, and so I think that they would much prefer the mutual advantages which would come from a unity of purpose to the selfish gains which accrued from their policy in those days. Furthermore, while I grant that no one else in the world could reconcile these cities, yet nothing of the sort is difficult for you; for I see that you have carried through to a successful end many undertakings which the rest of the world looked upon as hopeless and unthinkable, and therefore it would be nothing strange if you should be able single-handed to affect this union. In fact, men of high purposes and exceptional gifts ought not to undertake enterprises which any of the common run might carry out with success, but rather those which no one would attempt save men with endowments and power such as you possess.

But I marvel that those who think that none of these proposals could possibly be carried out are not aware, either by their own knowledge or by tradition, that there have been many terrible wars after which the participants have come to an understanding and rendered great services to one another. For what could exceed the enmity which the Hellenes felt toward Xerxes? Yet everyone knows that we and the Lacedaemonians came to prize his friendship more than that of those who helped us to establish our respective empires. But why speak of ancient history, or of our dealings with the barbarians? If one should scan and review the misfortunes of the Hellenes in general, these will appear as nothing in comparison with those which we Athenians have experienced through the Thebans and the Lacedaemonians. Nevertheless, when the Lacedaemonians took the field against the Thebans and were minded to humiliate Boeotia and break up the league of her cities, we sent a relief

expedition and thwarted the desires of the Lacedaemonians. And again, when fortune shifted her favor and the Thebans and the Peloponnesians were one and all trying to devastate Lacedaemon, we alone among the Hellenes formed an alliance with the Lacedaemonians and helped to save them from destruction. So then, seeing that such great reversals are wont to occur, and that our states care nothing about their former enmities or about their oaths or about anything else save what they conceive to be expedient for themselves, and that expediency is the sole object to which they give their affections and devote all their zeal, no man, unless obsessed by utter folly, could fail to believe that now also they will show the same disposition, especially if you take the lead in their reconciliation, while selfish interests urge and present ills constrain them to this course. I, for my part, believe that, with these influences fighting on your side, everything will turn out as it should.

But I think that you can get most light on the question whether these cities are inclined toward peace with each other or toward war, if I review, not merely in general terms nor yet with excessive detail, the principal facts in their present situation. And first of all, let us consider the condition of the Lacedaemonians.

The Lacedaemonians were the leaders of the Hellenes, not long ago, on both land and sea, and yet they suffered so great a reversal of fortune when they met defeat at Leuctra that they were deprived of their power over the Hellenes, and lost such of their warriors as chose to die rather than survive defeat at the hands of those over whom they had once been masters. Furthermore, they were obliged to look on while all the Peloponnesians, who formerly had followed the lead of Lacedaemon against the rest of the world, united with the Thebans and invaded their territory; and against these the Lacedaemonians were compelled to risk battle, not in the country to save the crops, but in the heart of the city, before the very seat of their government, to save their wives and children—a crisis in which defeat meant instant destruction, and victory has none the more delivered them from their ills; nay, they are now warred upon by their neighbors; they are distrusted by all the Peloponnesians; they are hated by most of the Hellenes; they are harried and plundered day and night by their own serfs; and not a day passes that they do not have to take the field or fight against some force or other, or march to the rescue of their perishing comrades. But the worst of their afflictions is that they live in continual fear that the Thebans may patch up their quarrel with the Phocians and, returning again, ring them about with still greater calamities than have befallen them in the past. How, then, can we refuse to believe that people so hard pressed would gladly see at the head of a movement for peace a man who commands confidence and has the power to put an end to the wars in which they are involved?

Now as to the Argives, you will see that in some respects they are no better off than the Lacedaemonians, while in others their condition is worse; for they have been in a state of war with their neighbors from the day they founded their city, just as have the Lacedaemonians; but there is this difference, that the neighbors of the Lacedaemonians are weaker than they, while those of the Argives are stronger—a condition which all would admit to be the greatest of misfortunes. And so unsuccessful are they in their warfare that hardly a year passes that they are not

compelled to witness their own territory being ravaged and laid waste. But what is most deplorable of all is that, during the intervals when their enemies cease from harrying them, they themselves put to death the most eminent and wealthy of their citizens; and they have more pleasure in doing this than any other people have in slaying their foes. The cause of their living in such disorder is none other than the state of war; and if you can put a stop to this, you will not only deliver them from these evils but you will cause them to adopt a better policy with respect to their other interests as well.

And as for the condition of the Thebans, surely you have not failed to note that also. They won a splendid victory and covered themselves with glory, but because they did not make good use of their success they are now in no better case than those who have suffered defeat and failure. For no sooner had they triumphed over their foes than, neglecting everything else, they began to annoy the cities of the Peloponnese; they made bold to reduce Thessaly to subjection; they threatened their neighbors, the Megarians; they robbed our city of a portion of its territory; they ravaged Euboea; they sent men-of-war to Byzantium, as if they purposed to rule both land and sea; and, finally, they began war upon the Phocians, expecting that in a short time they would conquer their cities, occupy all the surrounding territory, and prevail over all the treasures at Delphi by the outlay of their own funds. But none of these hopes has been realized; instead of seizing the cities of the Phocians they have lost cities of their own; and now when they invade the enemy's territory they inflict less damage upon them than they suffer when they are retreating to their own country; for while they are in Phocian territory they succeed in killing a few hireling soldiers who are better off dead than alive, but when they retreat they lose of their own citizens those who are most esteemed and most ready to die for their fatherland. And so completely have their fortunes shifted, that whereas they once hoped that all Hellas would be subject to them, now they rest upon you the hopes of their own deliverance. Therefore I think that the Thebans also will do with alacrity whatever you command or advise.

It would still remain for me to speak about our city, had she not come to her senses before the others and made peace; but now I need only say this: I think that she will join forces with you in carrying out your policy, especially if she can be made to see that your object is to prepare for the campaign against the barbarians.

That it is not, therefore, impossible for you to bring these cities together, I think has become evident to you from what I have said. But more than that, I believe I can convince you by many examples that it will also be easy for you to do this. For if it can be shown that other men in the past have undertaken enterprises which were not, indeed, more noble or more righteous than that which I have advised, but of greater magnitude and difficulty, and have actually brought them to pass, what ground will be left to my opponents to argue that you will not accomplish the easier task more quickly than other men the harder?...

Therefore, since the others are so lacking in spirit, I think it is opportune for you to head the war against the King; and, while it is only natural for the other descendants of Heracles, and for men who are under the bonds of their polities and laws, to cleave fondly to that state in which they happen to dwell, it is

your privilege, as one who has been blessed with untrammelled freedom, to consider all Hellas your fatherland, as did the founder of your race, and to be as ready to brave perils for her sake as for the things about which you are personally most concerned.

Perhaps there are those—men capable of nothing else but criticism—who will venture to rebuke me because I have chosen to challenge you to the task of leading the expedition against the barbarians and of taking Hellas under your care, while I have passed over my own city. Well, if I were trying to present this matter to any others before having broached it to my own country, which has thrice freed Hellas—twice from the barbarians and once from the Lacedaemonian yoke—I should confess my error. In truth, however, it will be found that I turned to Athens first of all and endeavored to win her over to this cause with all the earnestness of which my nature is capable, but when I perceived that she cared less for what I said than for the ravings of the platform orators, I gave her up, although I did not abandon my efforts. Wherefore I might justly be praised on every hand, because throughout my whole life I have constantly employed such powers as I possess in warring on the

barbarians, in condemning those who opposed my plan, and in striving to arouse to action whoever I think will best be able to benefit the Hellenes in any way or to rob the barbarians of their present prosperity. Consequently, I am now addressing myself to you, although I am not unaware that when I am proposing this course many will look at it askance, but that when you are actually carrying it out all will rejoice in it; for no one has had any part in what I have proposed, but when the benefits from it shall have been realized in fact, everyone without fail will look to have his portion.

Consider also what a disgrace it is to sit idly by and see Asia flourishing more than Europe and the barbarians enjoying a greater prosperity than the Hellenes; and, what is more, to see those who derive their power from Cyrus, who as a child was cast out by his mother on the public highway, addressed by the title of “The Great King,” while the descendants of Heracles, who because of his virtue was exalted by his father to the rank of a god, are addressed by meaner titles than they. We must not allow this state of affairs to go on; no, we must change and reverse it entirely....